

The harsh midday sun felt blistering against the nape of his neck, Jaune grunting as he hauled another bag of grain into the barn. Arms bulging, he threw the bag atop several others before returning to the cart, only about a quarter of the haul complete. Several fields over, he could hear the cattle being whipped up into a frenzy as his father moved them to a new field with untouched, lush grass, their herd having stripped the previous one bare. Their bellows of excitement were loud, and yet the unceasing call of the cicadas from the surrounding forests drowned them out.

Another typical late spring day on the Arc family farm.

While it was hard work, Jaune enjoyed the physical labor. He'd been working on the farm full time for a handful of years now and it showed in the cut of his physique, his body lean with practical muscle, his shoulders broadening as he approached manhood. He was pushed harder than all the hired workers, set multiple jobs to keep him occupied. His father claimed that as an Arc, he needed to know the farm inside and out, and it was how his own father – Jaune's grandfather – had whipped him into shape. Jaune didn't doubt that, but he suspected his heavy workload was less about that and more about his parents trying to influence his path forward.

Jaune wanted to be a Huntsman. His mother and father, well – they would rather he didn't. They wanted him to inherit the farm when the time was right and everything that came with it, and Jaune wasn't completely against the notion. He loved the farm, he loved all the animals they raised and the products they produced; the meat, the eggs, the milk. He was proud of the land they owned, for owning such a productive swathe of land on Remnant was no easy feat.

But his father was still relatively young, and was in the prime of his life. The farm would not fall to Jaune for some years yet. There was plenty of time for Jaune to do something else with his life before settling down, and that something that he wanted to do was become a Huntsman.

He wanted to help people. The Grimm were the single greatest threat around, constantly testing humanity on multiple fronts. If Jaune could do anything to help, he wanted to do it.

And at the end of the day, being Huntsman-trained would only be beneficial, right? No Grimm would dare attack the farm if Jaune were around to kill it! His mere presence would scare them off!

Jaune snorted at the fanciable thought. He knew it didn't work like that, the Grimm didn't care for a few Huntsman, they'd attack anyway. The only places they steered clear of were the cities because even to the mindless beasts, they knew it was a death sentence. They had *some* sliver of self preservation.

How'd he know this? Well, he'd been reading. A lot. That was how you learned, by taking in the knowledge that others had penned on paper.

Jaune paused with another bag of grain slung over his shoulder, remembering a time when reading was less about learning and more about just the fun of it. In those beautiful memories, there was always someone by his side, filled with laughter and warm amber eyes, but before he could dwell on that, he marched forward and dumped the bag on the pile, and retrieved another.

His last plea to be allowed to join a preparatory combat school had been soundly denied but he wasn't about to give up. He knew that his mother was stubborn and was not used to being defied but while Jaune took mostly after his father, his stubbornness and unbending resolve was from his mom. While he didn't like clashing with his parents, this wasn't something he was going to let go, and they were beginning to see that.

It helped that some of his sisters were firmly on his side. Not all of them, and Jaune understood their reasons. They didn't want their brother fighting monsters, the very thought scared them. The Grimm were not to be underestimated.

But Sapphire and Saphron were all for it, and advocated on his behalf whenever they could. It frustrated his mother, he knew. They were meant to agree with her, not him.

It created a bit of tension within the family. That wasn't anything new, though. Things had never been the same since...

"Master," a familiar voice called, and Jaune turned.

Kali Belladonna had served their family for as long as Jaune could remember. Just as his mother and father's faces were burned into his very earliest memories, alongside his sisters, so was Kali's. She had been here, *always* – and more than that, she had been by his side. Once, he had seen her as family. He still did, truth be told.

But she wasn't.

She was faunus.

To Jaune, that mattered little. She had an extra set of ears, *so what?* But the world didn't agree with him. His parents didn't agree with him. And while Sapphire and Saphron supported his dream, even against the wishes of his folks, they too didn't agree with him on his opinion about faunus.

They were lesser. They were to serve. Their very nature demanded it, they would claim. They were animals, and had humanity not tamed animals for countless generations? Beasts of burden like oxen and horse, hunting companions in wolves that became dogs? And now faunus, to serve them in any way they could.

Jaune didn't see an animal when he looked at Kali, though. He saw a person. A woman. An exotic beauty with kind eyes and a lovely smile, filled with mirth and warmth. She was soft, soothing hands and an open ear, listening to any of his angst, a voice of reason when he voiced his reckless desires.

She meant the world to him, no matter what everyone else thought.

She was also incredibly beautiful with a slim, womanly body and a pretty face. She wore her maid uniform as if it were a gown suitable for a gala, moving with graceful poise. If his eyes lingered, could he really help it?

“Kali,” he greeted warmly. “What are you doing here?”

“My chores have been completed, Master. I thought you may want some refreshments?”

She was holding a tray with a jug of ice cold water and a single glass, as well as a sandwich. Jaune felt his stomach cramp at the sight, ravenous.

“You thought right,” he hauled one final bag into the barn before taking a break. He pulled a few bales of hay over, patting one of them. “Please, sit. And haven’t I told you to call me Jaune?”

Kali set down the tray on one of the bales before sitting down, neatly folding her dress behind her thighs. Jaune sat down opposite her and poured himself a drink, gulping it down greedily, quenching his thirst.

“You’ve been working hard,” she observed, ignoring the last part. They’d had this conversation before but he still tried, even though it was fruitless. So long as his mother was near, he would always be Master, not Jaune.

Jaune nodded as he poured himself another glass of water, this time drinking it slowly. “Yeah, there was a new shipment so dad has me on it while he rounds up the cattle.”

Now that he was taking a moment to rest, he could feel how his shirt was plastered to his chest and back, damp with sweat. Swiping at his brow and brushing back his hair, his hand came away wet.

“You need to keep hydrated,” Kali chided gently. “Pushing yourself in such heat can be dangerous.”

Jaune smiled. “I’ll be fine. I’ve got you looking out for me, after all.”

He devoured the sandwich next, taking the edge off his hunger before pouring himself a final glass of water.

“I did not get time to say this earlier, Master, but – Happy Birthday,” Kali bowed her head.

“Thanks,” he said softly.

Fifteen years old. Another year older. Two more years, and he could apply to Beacon. The closer he got without formal training worried him, and so the milestone was a little bittersweet.

“The chef has been working on your cake all morning,” Kali revealed with a cheeky expression, leaning in. “The house smells heavenly.”

Maybe there was more than one reason he was being kept busy.

Because there were so many of them, birthdays weren't always celebrated with any sort of fanfare. Usually it was just a family dinner and an exchange of gifts, and a nice cake, but there were certain milestones that his mother and father took seriously. For those birthdays, most of the town was invited to partake.

His fifteenth wouldn't demand that sort of attention, but he had seen the spectacle that his older sisters had enjoyed when they'd turned seventeen, the age of majority on Remnant. He also remembered the crazy party they'd thrown for his tenth, another of those milestones his family seemed to think was important.

He was glad that this year would be a quiet one. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy the attention but he much preferred the more intimate gatherings of family.

"Chocolate, I hope?" he asked. Jaune was a simple boy, after all.

Kali nodded. "Of course."

After finishing his water, he got back to work. Kali promised to bring him more refreshments later in the afternoon, for which he was grateful.

When he finished unloading the cart, he moved onto his next job. Cleaning out the chicken coop was a smelly, messy job that no one liked to do, but his father had set it on his list of chores, so it would be done. Opening up the doors to air it out a little, Jaune positioned a wheelbarrow just outside and gathered a shovel before getting to work.

This was a weekly job because that's all it took for the floor to be completely covered in droppings, especially when they had hundreds of chickens. They made sure to layer it with sawdust to make it easier to clean out, but it did little to mask the stench. At least he didn't have the little buggers running underfoot, they'd been moved to an adjacent enclosure to roam and free range, pecking at the grass for insects and worms. Wrinkling his nose, he filled the wheelbarrow several times, wheeling it around to the compost heap to dump it. Here it would compost into fertilizer for the gardens and orchards.

Nothing went to waste.

After he was done cleaning it out, he lay down more sawdust and then began checking the boxes for eggs. Dozens of eggs were placed in buckets, quickly filling up. He would have to check the other enclosure later since some of them liked to hold their eggs until they were in the field, settling down in corners and laying there. The laying boxes that required cleaning were quickly cleaned out, and he placed fresh hay for them to shape into a nest. Finally he checked their water, making sure their troughs remained clean.

Thankfully they were.

After that, he moved onto the next job on his list. He visited the stables to check on the horses, replacing a couple of the salt licks that were near the end of their lives before once again, grabbing a shovel and wheelbarrow. There were stable-hands present but they were busy with their own tasks, so it was Jaune's duty to shovel shit and dump it in another pile, more manure for the gardens when it was ready.

The rest of his day passed in this way, Jaune moving from job to job. The next time Kali found him, it was deep into the afternoon, and he was crouched by one of the fences, removing a broken batten and replacing it with a new one. His final job of the day was inspecting the interior fences for things like that.

It was a fair way away from the house, and so he was surprised when he saw her shadow fall across him.

“Kali,” he said in surprise. “You didn’t have to come all this way.”

“Master,” she greeted. “Did I not promise I would bring more refreshments?”

She did but the walk here was at least twenty minutes, and that was without balancing a tray in your hands. The hem of her dress was covered in dust, as were her shoes. They weren’t exactly made for the outdoors.

“You did, and I appreciate it,” he smiled. “But you didn’t need to trouble yourself. I’m almost done here.”

“Even so, Master,” she bowed. “I thought I should bring this all the same.”

Jaune sighed, standing up. The sun was already beginning to dip down a little, so a little of the bite from the harsh rays were gone, but he couldn’t say he wasn’t thirsty. There was another sandwich, and so Jaune quickly ate it and downed a few glasses of water, quenching his thirst.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’ll escort you back to the house. I’m nearly finished.”

“Master, you don’t have to do that.”

“I want to,” he said firmly. “Wait for me?”

She nodded, retreating to give him some room. When the last of the broken batten was removed, he placed the new one on the fence and fired it on using the batten stapler. A loud crack sounded for each shot, five in total for the number of wires it was stapled to.

"There, done," he said proudly, wiping his face. Packing up his tools, he turned to Kali. "Let's go."

By the time they returned to the house, Jaune was well and truly bushed. Placing the tools away in his father's workshop, he removed his dirty boots at the door.

"Here, let me get those," he reached for Kali's feet and she quickly stepped back.

"Master," she warned.

"You can't go inside with those, they're covered in dust," he explained. "And you're carrying that tray. Let me take your shoes off."

"I can do that myself, Master," Kali was frowning at him now, something he didn't like. "Do not bother yourself with such a task."

"Kali," he said firmly. "Your right foot, please."

She wavered before lifting her right foot, allowing him to grab her ankle and gently remove her shoe. Jaune couldn't help but notice how slender her ankle was, and how dainty her stocking-clad foot was. Delicate, like the wing of a bird.

“Your other foot.”

He tried not to stare, nor look up, focusing on the task. When both shoes were removed, he set them beside his own.

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“Master,” Kali said softly, eyes conflicted. “Your mother would not appreciate the gesture.”

Jaune rose to his feet. “Don’t worry about my mother.”

He knew she would be cross at him, but he didn’t care. It was never wrong to be courteous. That was something she had taught him herself.

“I better go have a shower,” Jaune tried to lighten the mood, sniffing at his arm and recoiling. “Urgh – I stink.”

Kali laughed softly. “I will prepare a change of clothes.”

“Thank you.”

Jaune watched as Kali vanished inside and into the kitchen before he made his way upstairs. She was right, the house smelled heavenly, of freshly baked cake, bread, and a variety of other mouthwatering scents.

As he entered the bathroom, he removed his overalls and shirt, leaving himself in nothing but his underwear. Reaching into the shower, he turned it on and tested the water, keeping his hand under the spray until it went warm before removing his underwear and stepping inside. His tired, sweaty body was enveloped in a welcoming rust of warmth, and he began scrubbing himself down.

While it wasn't a milestone birthday, he was expecting gifts. As he lathered his body and hair, he imagined all the different presents his sisters and parents may have gotten him. The greatest gift of all would be enrollment into a combat school but Jaune doubted very much that was coming but he could always dream.

He heard the bathroom door open, and he saw the silhouette of someone moving by the shower. It could only be one person.

"Master, your clothes," Kali announced.

"Thanks."

He enjoyed the shower for a little longer, simply standing beneath the spray long after everything was rinsed clean, before stepping out, and was greeted by Kali holding out a towel expectantly. It was something she had done for years and Jaune didn't bat an eye, turning and allowing her to dry him off.

She started by vigorously drying his hair, Jaune's head swallowed by the towel as she ensured she got most of the water out before moving to his neck, shoulders and back. His arms were next, beneath his pits and then lower, his butt and thighs, and his legs. When her arms reached around to do his front, he grabbed the towel to stop her.

"I can do the rest," he told her as calmly as he could. "You can go."

Kali hesitated before saying, "Of course."

Jaune turned as he felt her leave, the door opening and closing with a soft click. Looking down, Jaune sighed at the sight of his half-erection, jutting out from his body. Frowning, he patted his chest down before working on his crotch, finishing the unfinished job.

Kali had been attending to him since he was a child, so he felt embarrassed that his body was reacting the way it was. She was just doing her job as a maid of the Arc family. It was rude of him to pop a boner, and it wasn't something Kali needed to see.

Puberty was awkward, and horrible, and embarrassing. Getting taller was cool, and his voice becoming deeper was always appreciated, though he couldn't have done without the year of cracking. This other stuff, though... he wasn't a fan.

Dinner wouldn't be for another couple of hours yet, and so Jaune spent that time in his room, reading up on Grimm. He had a new book he'd ordered through the local book store, one that had cost quite a few lien. Textbooks for combat schools weren't cheap but Jaune saved as much of his allowance as he could to afford them.

If he couldn't get into a school, then the least he could do was study up.

Beowolves and Ursa, he knew about. Those were the Grimm that typically roamed in the forests around their farm. While he had never seen them with his own eyes, he'd heard plenty of stories from the workers who had. Beowolves were large, canine-like creatures with long limbs, and sharp claws that moved in packs. They never attacked alone, and according to Garnet, one of the longest serving cattle hands on the farm, he'd never seen a Beowolf that wasn't accompanied by at least three more. Ursa were larger, bear-like creatures that were much more

vicious than their Beowulf counterparts. They also tended to move in packs but could also be found alone.

Jaune wrote all the important information down in his notepad for later review, and moved on. Nevermore were another common type of Grimm in these parts, and one he could claim to have seen. Sometimes they flew over the farm and were always a potential danger, but they tended to leave them alone so long as there was no negativity drawing them in. Airborne Grimm were always the hardest to keep out since they could fly over any fence, and strike when you least suspect it.

Then there were the Grimm he had never heard of before. Manticore. Lancer. Beringel. Centaur. Countless more. Some more dangerous than others, but all capable of destruction and death. Jaune stared at the pictures of each one, imagining facing down these monsters and felt uneasy but determined.

He wasn't sure how long he remained absorbed in his studying but the next time he looked up from the pages, the sky was darkening outside. Rubbing his eyes, he looked down at his notepad and saw that he had filled several pages with notes. Sitting back, he stretched.

That was when he heard activity outside.

Peeking out his window, he saw that the sitting area out the back had been transformed. A longer table had been set up, as well as chairs, with balloons and streamers hanging from the pergola. He spotted Kali helping to arrange furniture and decorations with the other staff, and was about to turn away when he saw another head of raven hair appear, two prominent cat ears sitting atop her head.

Blake.

Jaune watched as she began placing cutlery on the table, unable to see her face from this angle. He couldn't remember the last time he had looked at her and not seen a scowl, or a glare, or the blankness of someone purposefully shielding their true emotions. She was nothing like the girl of his memories, filled with joy and wonder, her voice often tinged with laughter.

He hadn't glimpsed that girl since *that* day.

The day that had changed everything.

She did her best to avoid him at every opportunity. Blake only ever interacted with him if he purposefully sought her out, or she was given a task by his mother that required her to be near him, which wasn't often. When they did interact, it was always short and to the point, and her politeness was as hollow as her eyes.

He hated it.

It hurt to be treated that way, as if he meant nothing to her. As if all those good times didn't exist. But he couldn't blame her attitude, not when her world had been so brutally turned upside down in the span of a single day.

But that wasn't his fault! She was still Blake to him, always would be. Just as Kali would always be Kali. For him, nothing had changed. If he could just *tell her* that, then maybe things could be repaired...

Jaune sighed, stepping away from the window.

Sapphire knocked on his door when it was time, her eyes smiling as she saw him.

“Happy birthday, squirt.”

“I’m almost taller than you are now,” Jaune deadpanned.

“Yeah, but you aren’t – not yet, so you’re still squirt to me,” she teased, and before he could react, she shoved a wrapped gift into his hands.

“Go on, open it,” she encouraged. “It’ll probably be better if you do it now instead of in front of mom and dad.”

Intrigued, Jaune tore off the wrapping paper and saw that it was a book. It was large and thick, and the cover was a multi-hued rainbow of color. Printed in large blocky lettering was ‘The Mysteries of Dust, and their Applications’.

“Huntsmen use Dust, right?” she explained as he looked at her in surprise. “I’ve been speaking to some of the retired Huntsmen in town. They recommended this book.”

“I thought mom told them not to give me any encouragement.”

“She did. But I told them I was thinking of becoming a Huntress, so they were more than happy to help,” Sapphire winked. “Though they probably saw right through it, it gave them plausible deniability. Isn’t your sister super smart?”

Jaune felt a rush of affection for her, and set the book down on his desk before engulfing her in a massive hug.

“Hey, stop,” she complained jokingly before yelping as he lifted her off the ground, spinning her around. “Put me down!”

“Sorry,” he said, giving her an extra hard squeeze before setting her down. “I couldn’t help it.”

“Since it’s your birthday and I’m so awesome, I’ll let your cheekiness slide,” her eyes held nothing but fondness, and she hugged him back furiously. “Just... hide that from mom and dad, okay? I don’t really feel like getting yelled at.”

“I promise.”

They remained that way for a while before Sapphire reluctantly pulled away. “Mom sent me to get you, dinner is ready. She also told me to tell you to dress nicely.”

That was when Jaune noticed that Sapphire was dressed in a very nice blue dress, the material light, perfect for the warm conditions. The color matched her eyes. “Fine, fine. I’ll be down in a minute.”

When she left, Jaune went through his wardrobe. He settled for a pair of black pants, black leather shoes and a dark navy blue button up shirt. Heading into the bathroom, he made sure his hair was presentable. For Jaune, that meant it was a little less unruly than usual but his hair didn’t like to obey the laws of fashion, resisting all but the most liberal use of product available.

He was ready.

His whole family was waiting for him, and Jaune grinned as party poppers were pulled, showering him in cheap confetti. Lavender and Cerise grabbed an arm each, the twins leading him over to the feast that had been prepared in his honor. The centerpiece was a huge side of roast lamb, the mix of rosemary and garlic making his mouth water. There was roast potatoes, sweet potatoes, carrots, pumpkin, bell peppers, parsnips, and more, with boats of gravy filled to the brim. Bowls of peas and beans were well seasoned with butter and garlic, and the salads consisted of his mother's famous potato salad made with her homemade relish, leafy greens drizzled with feta and balsamic, and some cold noodle salad that Saphron had taken a liking to, as had much of his family, a recipe passed on from a wandering trader.

From Mistral, apparently.

The food tasted better than it looked, and Jaune ate his fill. He was a growing boy, after all, so he went back for seconds, piling his plate high.

"You completed all your chores, son?" his father asked between bites.

Jaune nodded. "I even fixed the broken fence."

"Good lad."

Gifts were exchanged afterwards, and he received a variety of different things; everything from clothes to jewelry, and even a brand new scroll.

"That's the latest model," Amber told him. "We all pitched in for it since we knew you wanted one."

Jaune hugged them all, and was swallowed in a mass of teenage girl.

There was no enrollment into a combat school forthcoming but Jaune didn't let that bother him, not tonight. When the cake was wheeled out, it was a three tier monster covered in chocolate frosting with the twin crescent moons on top, the symbol of their family.

Candles were lit, and his family began singing. Smiling hard enough for his cheeks to hurt, he waited until they were finished before blowing them out and making a wish.

"So, what'd you wish for?" Ivory asked.

His eyes flicked to his parents before darting away. "I can't say or it won't come true."

"Psh," Iris clucked her tongue. "Come ooon, tell us."

Sapphire and Saphron exchanged looks, knowing what it likely was. They'd be right.

But it wasn't the only thing he wished for. Tonight, he was being greedy.

As Jaune cut into the cake and began handing out slices, he caught sight of something. Two yellow orbs, fixated on him. He paused, staring – before realizing just what they were, and who they belonged to.

She was shielded by the bushes, completely hidden – but not her eyes. They glowed in the dim lighting, a soft, honey-amber. The happiness of the occasion faded, leaving a sour taste in his mouth, and Jaune quickly looked down, avoiding her gaze.

The cake was delicious, moist and dense, the richness settling on his tongue, but it might as well have tasted like ashes in his mouth. He ate only a single slice, subdued.

“Jaune,” he jumped as his mother placed her hand on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

He had been. Not any more.

“Yeah,” he nodded, plastering a fake smile on his face. “This is the best, mom.”

She hummed. “I’m glad. Would you give your mother a dance? My husband has been stolen by your eldest sister.”

Jaune looked around and saw them dancing, and only just realized that someone had started playing music. Was he really that out of it?

“Sure,” he hopped to his feet.

He ended up dancing with all of his sisters after his mother, and by the time they were all done and staff began cleaning up, it was late. Jaune hauled all of his gifts to his bedroom before heading back down to the kitchen.

The cake was being divided into sections to fit into the refrigerator. Even with eight children, they had only made a moderate dent in the cake, it was that big, so it was easy for Jaune to cut off a couple of slices and place them onto plates.

He waited in his bedroom until the sounds of people moving around downstairs died down before standing, and making his way to a room he hadn't visited in years. Butterflies fluttered in his stomach in a jumble, his fingers tightening on the edge of the plates he was holding. He could hear soft conversation within and for a handful of seconds, he just stood there listening.

Gathering his courage, he carefully balanced one of the plates on his arm before knocking firmly.

The voices died at once.

Jaune swallowed as he waited with bated breath and after what felt like the longest ten seconds of his life, someone answered the door.

Kali blinked at him, surprised.

"Master?"

Further within, he saw the shock on Blake's face but it quickly faded, replaced by wariness.

"May I come in?"

Kali wavered but stepped back, allowing him to enter.

“Master, you shouldn’t be here.”

“I thought you might like cake.”

Kali stared as he offered her a plate.

“I have a piece for Blake, as well,” Jaune smiled ruefully. “I know how much she likes cake.”

The air felt heavy with tension, Blake’s expression becoming harsh as she glared at him.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Kali repeated softly, her expression torn.

“I can share my cake with whoever I want.”

She hesitated before slowly accepting the plate. Jaune nodded before walking towards Blake, trying to ignore the way her body tensed. He set down the plate on the bedside table.

“This is for you.”

“What are you doing?” she hissed.

"I'm giving you some of my birthday cake," he said. "It's your favorite, right? Chocolate. Like me."

"If you think you can just come in here and give me cake, thinking – *what?* That everything is *fine?*" she looked furious, and Jaune hated seeing such anger directed at him.

In truth, Jaune had no idea what he was trying to accomplish. He was sick of this divide between them when they had once been so close, and he wanted to fix that. He knew that giving her some cake wasn't some magical fix but he had to start somewhere, didn't he?

He just wanted his best friend back.

"I just thought you might like some, that's all," he said lamely. "I remember the first time you had some. You wouldn't shut up about it for weeks. I was pretty sure you liked cake more than you liked reading, which is a *lot*. I used to think about trying to bake you one, I even tried one time."

It was subtle but he saw her jaw waver before it tightened.

"It was a disaster. I got flour all over the floor, and mom found me with my hands covered in butter. She wasn't happy but I told her I was trying to bake a cake for her, and it worked. Probably the only time I've lied to her and she didn't see through it," he sighed. "You used to always tell me that I couldn't lie to save my life."

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Why are you here?"

He shrugged. "I just... want my friend back, that's all."

“Jaune, I’m your *pet*,” it was the first time in years that he’d heard his name fall from her lips, and it almost made him miss the rest of what she said. “You *own* me. We can’t be *friends*.”

“You’re not a pet,” he snapped and then felt bad when she recoiled. “You’re not. And I don’t own you.”

“You do!”

“My family does,” he said roughly, hating how that sounded. But it was the truth, no matter how horrible it was. “But I didn’t – that wasn’t me, Blake. I don’t – all that stuff, I don’t believe in it!”

“But you’re more than happy to let my mom serve you, aren’t you?” she asked sardonically. “You have her running around, following your every whim.”

Jaune felt flustered. “I’m not – that isn’t—,”

“Blake,” Kali said sternly. “That is my job.”

“It isn’t a job!” she almost shouted, barely managing to contain herself. “We’re slaves!”

“And that isn’t his fault,” Kali returned calmly. “He was only a baby when I first arrived. He is the same age as you. Do you think he had any say in any of this?”

Blake opened and closed her mouth, speechless. Unable to form a reply, she instead glared at her lap.

"I'm sorry that I ruined everything."

Once he said it, it was like a massive weight that he didn't even know he was carrying was lifted from his shoulders. Blake looked up at him, confused, and he could even feel the question in Kali's eyes as she looked at him.

"With the stupid ears," he continued. "If I hadn't – If I didn't order those things, we would – mom wouldn't have flipped out, and things would have stayed the same. It's all my fault."

She gaped at him.

"Master... *Jaune*," Kali said quietly, saying his name. "That wasn't your fault. You didn't know."

"But it still ruined everything," he felt his eyes sting but he didn't cry. "If I could go back and make it so that day never happened, I would."

Blake grimaced. "That wouldn't change anything. I'd still be here. We'd still be slaves."

"Yeah," he sighed tiredly. "Yeah – but maybe my best friend wouldn't hate me."

Blake's face twitched, her hands curling in her lap.

“But even if you do hate me, you’re still my best friend. Always,” Jaune met her eyes, holding them. “Forever.”

Her lips trembled before she hastily looked away, reaching for the cake. She then proceeded to take the angriest bite he had ever seen, her chewing slowing down as the flavor hit her, and she savored it.

When she swallowed, he asked, “How is it?”

Blake hesitated before sighing. “It’s good.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

She took another bite, her fingers becoming messy. “...Thanks.”

“Listen,” he said seriously. “I’m trying to become a Huntsman. My parents are against it but I’m not going to give up. I want to help people, I want to protect them.”

“...I remember.”

“And that includes you. I want to protect you, Blake. More than anything.”

"You can't protect me," she said bitterly. "You're being naive."

"That isn't going to stop me from trying," Jaune then knelt in front of her, and she stared at him with wide eyes. "I know things have changed and maybe they'll never be the same again, but I'm not going to give up. I care about you. I love you. And I'll do everything I can to make things better."

He knew it would be overstepping but he couldn't help it, leaning in and hugging her. Blake flinched, stiffening as his arms wrapped around her. There was a moment of tense confusion, her cake awkwardly trapped between them.

"What are you doing...?"

"I'm hugging you."

"I know that, *idiot*. Why?"

"Didn't I just tell you why?"

"...You're such a fool."

Jaune felt her move the cake out of the way and then to his surprise, her arms wrapped around him. She then collapsed against his chest, her face buried in his neck, and while she tried to hide it, he felt the way her body heaved as she swallowed a sob. Fingers tightening in the back of his shirt, they embraced one another for what felt like an eternity, for the first time in what felt like a life time.

When they finally pulled away from one another, she refused to look at him, her cheeks flushed. Likely in embarrassment.

Standing, he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“You have a good heart, Jaune,” Kali said, once again saying his name. “But you have to go. The longer you stay, the more likely someone will catch you here.”

Jaune cleared his throat, nodding. “Right. You’re right. Sorry.”

And then to his shock, she leaned up and pecked him on the cheek. Jaune blushed furiously.

“Go on. Thank you for the cake.”

“Y-Yeah, anytime.”

Jaune didn’t remember returning to his room, it was a blur. It wasn’t until the next morning that he found the chocolate stains on the back of his shirt, where Blake’s messy fingers had gripped him like her life depended on it.