

The bookstore was cool, filled with the unmistakable scent of fresh, crisp paper. Shelves laden with books surrounded her on all sides, towering above her, the aisles mostly free of people at this time of day. Kali slowly made her way down towards the education section, eyes scanning the spines as she debated what subject she should have Blake focus on next.

She was alone. Blake was at home, watching the house, while Jaune was at Beacon, learning to become a Huntsman. It had been years since she'd been out on her own, walking the streets of a city with only her own company to keep. Not since before the Arc family had purchased her had she had such freedom.

It was a false freedom.

The collar around her neck was a constant reminder of the truth, as were the stares. She'd seen more than a few people begin to approach her, outraged, before spotting the colorful tag attached to her collar. Kali hadn't seen many faunus with them, and it was understandable why. Most owners didn't trust their faunus to work independently, away from the home. Not only that but from Kali's understanding, these tags were expensive.

Not the sort of thing the majority of people could afford, even if they owned a faunus of their own.

Jaune had explained it to her a little. That those willing to pay for it could register their faunus with the local council, just as one might register their dog. In doing so, they were provided with a tag, color coded to the area in which the faunus was registered. It meant that so long as they stayed within the paid for areas of the city, a faunus was free to carry out work on behalf of their owners outside of the home.

Simple things like grocery shopping, or purchasing goods for the house. Since Jaune spent most of his days at Beacon, it made sense for him to allow her to keep the kitchen stocked up, and the house running and in order.

It had been her 'job' for many years now. Only now, she wasn't confined to four walls.

But also... Jaune had wanted her to have more breathing room. He hated that she and Blake were stuck in the house, and so he'd been willing to pay out to give them more freedom. Even if it was just the lengthening of the rope, Kali appreciated the gesture.

Jaune was such a good boy.

She was glad that things between him and Blake had been improving. For so many years, there had been this ever growing distance, all because of that one night. Her daughter had grown angry, and when they'd moved here, Jaune had been the recipient of her anger whenever she could no longer contain it.

She understood. Kali could never forget how she'd felt in the early days, those feelings of shame at being property, anger at the indignity of her situation. It had burned – oh, how it had burned – but over time, that anger had faded into a simmer, and then almost entirely, as if it had never existed in the first place.

Perhaps she'd been tamed. But older, wiser, Kali liked to believe that she had matured. Her life was not ideal, but it could be so much worse. Amethyst Arc was a frightening woman, and yet she'd never raised her hand to them, had not harmed them physically, had not instructed her husband to have his way with her.

They'd lived in comfort, for the most part. As comfortable as a slave could be.

It had helped to mellow out the rage, the discomfort, the shame. With Blake beginning to lose herself in her studies, Kali saw that maybe, just maybe, her anger was starting to fade away too.

Her daughter was a smart girl. She'd blown through everything she'd put in front of her, and was rapidly improving. In another life, she'd have made a name for herself, Kali had no doubt. A mind such as hers would have been lauded.

But it wasn't to be.

Kali ran her fingers lightly over the spines of various books, pulling down the ones that appeared interesting. They'd mostly been focusing on Math and History, but there was many more things to learn. Many more subjects to broaden her horizon.

She selected a wide variety from a number of subjects. A book on basic biology, a book on elements, chemicals, and plants. A book about animals, and geography. And even a book about Grimm, something that even Jaune may find useful, or be willing to share with Blake.

She also picked out some basic literature. Stories she remembered from her own childhood, and even more modern stories, ones that looked interesting. All in all, she had about two dozen books chosen, and had to make a few trips back and forth to the counter.

The woman on shift watched her with narrow eyes but didn't say a word, having seen the colored tag. For this neighbourhood, it was green – and she had more than one. Green, blue and yellow, for the areas in and around the suburb in which they lived. One tag alone was rare. To see multiple on one faunus? It spoke of someone with money to throw around.

Amethyst might have been angry with her son, but she ensured that he carried the Arc name in a fitting manner.

Some of the books were expensive. The text books in particular, ones used by high schools and universities. The more basic ones were cheaper, and the literature books were the cheapest.

The worker rang up the price, her voice clipped as she said, "That'll be one thousand, two hundred and twenty lien."

Wordlessly, Kali provided Jaune's bank card before pulling out a small piece of paper, and sliding it across the counter.

"Master would like these delivered to this address," she said, keeping her eyes down.

Though it had been awhile since she'd called Jaune that, the title slipped off her tongue effortlessly, like an old friend.

There was a moment of silence as the worker read the note, signed by Jaune with the address of their home, and then the woman scoffed.

"They'll be delivered this afternoon. Ensure that someone is home to receive them," she said coldly.

Kali nodded, paid, and left the store, feeling daggers in her back from the clerks harsh gaze.

After that, she decided to spend some time outside in the sun. It was a lovely day, the weather mild, the warmth of the sun welcoming rather than harsh. Kali made sure not to loiter in any one place long, though she wandered aimlessly, taking in the sights of the city.

It was Blake's birthday soon. She would be turning eighteen on Friday. She wondered what to get her. Any gift would have to be paid with Jaune's money, as Kali didn't have any. That didn't sit right with her, so maybe she could make her a special meal. Blake *loved* fish. Tuna was her go to, but Kali wanted to do something different. She hadn't had salmon much, though her daughter had expressed her love of it.

A salmon dish – and a cake, of course. She could bake a cake, pretty it up, and give her the type of birthday she'd always deserved but never had.

A group of people drew her attention further down the street, their voices raised. A group were confronting a man who was in the process of hanging up a poster, and they didn't sound pleased.

"We don't want this here," a woman shouted, aggressively snatching at the poster. The man managed to avoid her grab, but one of the other people snatched it, crumpling it up into a ball and tossing it away.

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" another boomed, incensed. "Don't you have any pride?"

"You're the one that should be ashamed," the surrounded man returned, voice strong, unafraid. "Slavery is a disgusting practice. Anyone that condones it is wrong!"

Kali's ears perked up.

"They deserve it for what they did! You think you know it all but you didn't live it! Young and ignorant," one of them spat, literally. The man flinched as he was hit on the cheek, the glob of saliva dripping down across his mouth.

Kali hesitated as the confrontation became more heated, her eyes settling on the crumpled up piece of paper on the sidewalk. She knew she should just keep walking, and give them all a wide berth. And yet her curiosity got the better of her, hurrying forward and snatching the scrunched up poster and darting away before anyone noticed her.

Thankfully, they were all too absorbed in their argument. She got away, though Kali didn't dare stop until she was several dozen feet down the road, her heart pounding as she slipped into an alleyway.

That had been silly of her, if they'd noticed her, things might have become messy, but she couldn't help it. Resting her back against a wall, she opened up the balled piece of paper, spreading it out.

The front contained a colorful picture, the background a muted yellow with a faunus woman in the center, a pair of antlers denoting her type. Across the top, it read, 'Stand Against Slavery', while at the bottom, it said, 'You have a voice. Use it to denounce the horrible practice of voluntary servitude!'

And then, at the very bottom – 'Humans against Faunus Oppression'

Kali blinked at it, shocked.

Her experiences thus far had led her to believe that all humans supported their subjugation. While there had been the rare exception like the elderly lady in Hamersley, and Jaune, they were so small in number to as practically not exist.

And yet in her hands was proof that there were humans out there, speaking up for them, defending them, using their voice. Here in Vale, one of humanity's largest strongholds.

Was it possible that this sentiment was actually larger than she thought? Was it possible that one day... maybe...

Kali closed her eyes, calming down.

She was getting ahead of herself. This was only one instance. Just because there were dissenting voices didn't mean anything. There had been faunus staunchly against going to war with the humans, and in hindsight, they'd been right. It had only made things worse for their people, a far cry from the victory and acceptance they'd all envisioned.

Just because people spoke up didn't mean they would be listened to.

Carefully folding the poster, she stashed it away in her bag. Taking a deep breath, she stepped back out onto the street, and if her steps had a little more spring than usual, so be it.

Kali made her way to the grocery store and did a little shopping. The house was well stocked but there were a few items that needed replacing. It was busier here than the bookstore, and so many more eyes followed her every move.

"What are you doing here alone?" a rough, loud voice demanded, a large man stepping in front of her.

Kali froze, her eyes taking in the security uniform and his mean, beady eyes. He was tall, and overweight, his belly threatening to burst out of his top.

“Shopping for my Master, sir,” she said demurely, lowering her head.

He went to say something but paused, having spotted her tagged collar. There was a long beat of silence, and when Kali chanced a glance up through her eyelashes, she saw that his face was an interesting shade of purple.

“Carry on,” he finally barked, mouth twisted, as if he’d sucked on a lemon. “If you cause any trouble, we won’t be lenient.”

Kali nodded quickly and hurried by.

She needed some spices, so she stopped there first. Garlic powder, onion powder, Mistralian five spice, paprika, and salt and pepper. After that, she moved over to the oil section, picking up a bottle of olive oil and vegetable oil to replenish the stocks. Some fresh fruit, and chicken for dinner, as well as the salmon for Blake’s birthday dinner. Soy sauce, and cooking wine.

Kali was getting ready to move towards the checkouts when something in the corner of her eye prompted her to turn.

It was a faunus, a woman. If Kali had to guess, she was of an age with her with long, raven tresses and bright blue eyes. It was an odd shade of blue, vibrant, immediately noticeable, and Kali found herself freezing on the spot.

Those eyes were familiar...

Pretty feathers were woven amongst her hair, reds and purples and yellows, an exotic look. The longer Kali stared, the more she felt like she knew this woman...

She was an attractive woman, but Kali's eyes widened as she fully took in her appearance. Her cheek was bruised, an ugly yellowish black, and her left eye was swollen, puffy, discolored. Her lower lip was split, a harsh crimson line running through it, cracked.

Kali felt her heart stop dead in her chest.

"O-Olive?" she breathed.

It hit her like a slap to the face. How could she have forgotten?

She knew how.

While it was unmistakably Olive, the way she carried herself was the complete opposite of that once cheerful, vibrant woman. Instead of a smile, her lips were pulled into a harsh line. Instead of joy, her face was worn down by years of fear. She no longer carried that air of determination and hope. She was now no more than a downtrodden, beaten woman – both physically, and mentally.

The marks on her face, they could only be from one thing.

Olive heard her, eyes darting towards Kali. At first, there was no recognition – and then, with dawning clarity, Kali saw as Olive put the pieces together, her eyes widening.

"K-Kali?" even her voice sounded the same, yet different. Filled with unknowable anguish.

They stared at one another, in complete shock. They hadn't seen each other in over sixteen years, when Olive had signed up for voluntary servitude, and vanished without a trace.

Had she been in Vale this entire time?

Kali went to say something, anything, when Olive suddenly yelped. It was only then that Kali noticed the leash connected to her collar, the end of which was held in the hand of an older gentleman.

"Come along, Candy," he said, tugging on the leash harder.

Candy...? What...?

Olive stumbled, almost tripping over her feet. The man dragged her down the aisle, away from her, and with one last fleeting look, Olive vanished around the end of the shelving unit.

Numbly, Kali noticed that her hands were shaking. Breathing uneven, she tried to get herself under control but she felt like a panic attack was imminent. She didn't remember arriving at the checkout to pay, or even the long walk home, but when she arrived, her hands were grasping the handles of several plastic bags.

Setting the groceries on the bench, she almost collapsed. She caught herself on the edge of the counter, and with a shuddering gasp, she felt tears roll down her cheeks.

Olive – sweet, kind, determined Olive. She'd never let anything get her down, always looking to the future, helping those filled with despair in any way she could. When Kali had been told she'd signed up, it had been almost unbelievable.

And now... what had become of her...

The black eye, the bruise on her cheek, the split lip... her owner was beating her. For how long? Years, no doubt. What else was he doing to her?

Kali had a very good idea.

She felt a wave of nausea wash over her, and she gagged violently. All of her fears and insecurities suddenly surged to the surface, buried for so long. Sliding to the floor, she hyperventilated, gasping desperately, clutching at her throat.

That could have been Kali, in a different life. Beaten. Raped. Defeated.

And her daughter...

Kali had always known things could be worse. But to see *it* on the face of someone she once knew, who had been filled with such vigor and zest for life... it was confronting. It was beyond upsetting, and it made her feel vulnerable, alone.

She must have been there for some time, slumped against the cupboards. By some miracle, Blake never came down stairs and found her.

But someone else did.

Kali heard the front door open and close, and after a few moments, Jaune entered the kitchen. He caught sight of her immediately, freezing in place for all of two seconds before he rushed towards her, face panicked.

“Kali?” he questioned quickly, reaching for her. “Kali, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

She stared dumbly as his hands settled on her arms, his face filled with concern. Concern for her. Worried for her.

Unlike Olive, who had been sold to a *beast*, she’d been left in the care of this wonderful boy – no, this wonderful man. With a shuddering sigh, she fell into his chest, Jaune making a sound of surprise. Seconds ticked by, and then his strong, powerful arms embraced her.

She broke.

The stress of almost two decades came pouring out, an unstoppable tide. Kali buried her face against his neck and sobbed, her calm facade shattered at long last. Clutching at his uniform jacket, she cried – *truly cried* – for the first time in what felt like a lifetime.

Jaune didn’t say a word, simply cradling her against his body, gently rocking back and forth. He was so sturdy and warm, a ray of sunshine, and she bathed in his light, soaking it up, chasing away the chill that had settled within her at the sight of Olive’s battered face.

Why was the world so cruel?

When her shoulders stopped shaking, and her endless tears finally dried up, Jaune gently pried her away from his chest. She met his kind blue eyes, drowning in them.

“What happened?” he asked.

And so she told him.

She started at the beginning. Kali had never spoken about her life from *before*. Only with her daughter had she shared anything at all, and even then, it had been vague. But now, it all came tumbling out. Once she started talking, she couldn’t stop.

Kali told him about Ghira, and how he died in the war. She told him about living in Mistral, her paltry savings drying up as the storekeepers price gouged and took them for everything she had. How there had been many other faunus in her position, some with children, some without. How Olive had been a friend, a sister forged in similar circumstances, until even she had given up and signed away her freedom.

And how after all these years, she’d seen her again, and she was but a shell of her former self. Covered in the evidence of her torment. Kali *knew* she couldn’t do anything about it, that she was in no position to make a difference, and yet she still felt wretched for not trying to do something, to help her, *anything*.

If she hadn’t already cried herself dry, she’d have started all over again.

“I’m so sorry, Kali,” he said, one of his hands gentling cradling her cheek. She leaned into it instinctively. “I’m so sorry you had to go through all that.”

He hugged her again, and she squeezed him back. She breathed in his scent, and the turmoil in her heart receded. It did not completely vanish, but the weight of her pain lessened.

One of his hands settled against the back of her head, gently stroking her hair. Kali nuzzled into him, sinking into his warmth, embracing it. When his fingers found the base of her cat ears, she shivered.

Jaune owned her like she was property, but to him, she was a woman, a person; worthy of love, and respect.

Kali felt greedy.

She'd been starved of such for *so long*.

"Come on, let's get up off the floor," Jaune coaxed her up, leading her over to the breakfast table. Pulling out a seat for her, she sat down heavily. "Do you want something to drink? I'll make you some tea."

He then carefully removed the collar from around her neck, placing it down on the table.

Kali watched as he bustled around the kitchen, putting the groceries away as he heated some water for her tea. It wasn't long until he set a cup down in front of her, and when she took a sip, the heat and aroma filled her up. She quickly took another sip, eyes slipping closed.

Jaune had been watching her. He'd picked out her favorite tea, and had made it just the way she liked it, with only a pinch of sugar and nothing else.

He sat down across from her, nursing a glass of water. That's how Blake found them, her daughter pausing in the doorway, at once feeling the remnants of tension lingering in the air.

Her eyes darted back and forth. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Kali cleared her throat. "It's nothing, dear."

"Mom... your eyes are red," Blake hurried over, face pinched with concern. "Mom, what's wrong? Jaune...?"

"She was grocery shopping when she came across something upsetting," Jaune filled in when Kali found herself unable to speak. "An old friend..."

Blake was smart. It didn't take her long to fill in the blanks.

"Are you okay?" Blake asked sweetly, a hand gently rubbing her back. Kali leaned back into her, her heart blooming with affection for her wonderful daughter, and for Jaune.

"I'm fine," she said quietly. "I just... wasn't expecting it."

"I'll make dinner tonight," Jaune announced. "After you finish that, why don't you go have a shower? Or perhaps a bath? Blake, could you run a bath for your mother?"

Blake nodded. "Yes, I – I'll go do that now."

She was lucky to have them both.

When she finished her tea, Kali made her way up the stairs and to the bathroom. The bath was ready and waiting, the room filled with steam, Blake putting the finishing touches on it, sprinkling some scented salts into the water.

She'd even gathered a change of clothes.

"Thank you, Blake," Kali said, fondly ruffling her hair. Blake squirmed, faux outrage on her face.

"Take as much time as you need. I'll go make sure Jaune doesn't burn down the house."

That was a bit of an exaggeration but it made Kali laugh. When Blake left, she undressed and slipping into the steaming water, a satisfied groan escaping her lips. Any remaining tension in her body that hadn't been chased away by Jaune's embrace and the tea seeped from her muscles, and Kali felt like jelly.

She remained until her fingers started to prune, and the water cooled, her skin smelling of jasmine. Climbing out of the bath, she toweled off, observing her body in the mirror. Her skin was pale and free of blemish, with the exception of a single beauty mark positioned high on her inner thigh. Her figure was slender but full, her hips healthy and curved, her breasts modest but heavy, sagging beneath their weight, yet still maintaining the pertness she boasted in her youth. For a woman of her age, she was in splendid condition, appearing much younger than she really was. At a glance, she could pass for Blake's older sister, not her mother.

Nestled between her thighs was a trimmed raven thatch of curls, shielding her mons. Running her fingers through them, she hummed in thought.

Maybe...

She shook her head, finishing drying off before dressing. By the time she descended to the first floor, she'd long caught scent of their dinner. Her stomach growled, a sudden ravenous hunger overtaking her.

Blake was setting the breakfast table in the kitchen, so that is where Kali sat. The bowl Jaune placed in front of her contained his attempt at fried rice, and while it could do with some improvements, it was a pretty good first attempt. A little more soy sauce, and a little more seasoning. Lacking or not, Kali wasted no time in devouring her bowl and asking for seconds, polishing that off in no time as well.

Jaune and Blake watched her, and Kali flushed lightly.

"Hungry?" Jaune asked knowingly.

Kali nodded. "Famished. Thank you... I should be cooking for you, and here you are..."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "Tonight, we'll look after you. Right, Blake?"

Blake nodded in agreement. "He's right, mom. You can just relax."

She'd never felt so loved.