It was sickening the way that her mother doted on him.

“That feels really good, Kali,” Jaune praised as his head rolled back and forth, seated in one of the comfortable chairs in the living room. Standing behind him was her mother, hands massaging his shoulders, painstakingly working out any knots and kinks.

“I’m glad,” Kali said warmly. “Your muscles are very tense. You need to take better care of yourself, Jaune.”

She was even calling him by his name now, as if she hadn’t spent the last decade calling him Master. It was made worse by the fact that he wasn’t wearing a shirt, his torso completely bare. What the hell was she *doing*?

If he’d asked for it, Blake could understand. As much as she hated it, they *belonged* to him. If he ordered them to do something, they really couldn’t refuse. Well, they *could* – but then who knows what he would do if they showed such insolence? But no, her mother had volunteered her services. She was happy to do this.

She just didn’t get it.

And okay, maybe she was being a little cynical. As much as she hated their situation, Blake knew that Jaune wasn’t the type of person to punish them for disobedience. He’d never once hurt them, or even said anything hurtful. He wasn’t *that woman*. That *Grimm* with a human face. He wasn’t his mother.

Blake knew that, logically. None of this – the plight of the faunus, their situation with the Arc’s, the humiliation of being property – none of it was Jaune’s fault. He’d been the one constantly good thing in Blake’s life other than her mother, even when the rug had been pulled out from under all of them, even when his sister’s had pulled away one by one, Jaune hadn’t changed.

He'd been her friend, her best friend. Even after she was forced to step back, to ignore him, he hadn't lashed out at her. One of her fondest memories was the night of his fifteenth birthday when he'd given them cake, bringing it to their room, and falling into his embrace…

And yet… and yet… she was always so *angry*. How couldn't she be? They were *pets*, he'd put a collar around her neck and walked them down the street like they were a couple of *dogs…* it wasn't his fault, she *knew that* but even so…

Her anger needed an outlet, and Jaune was the available target. It wasn't fair but what was? Was it fair that she was his property? An object to be used however he saw fit? Even if he wouldn't do that, it was still a possibility. Was it fair that her entire species was seen as second class? No, it wasn't. Was it fair that her life had been threatened by *that woman* when she'd been nothing more than a child, all because Jaune had shown her love and compassion?

No. Very little was fair in this world.

It was rotten to the core.

Watching her mother just go along with everything only infuriated her even more. At least in this house, they had some modicum of control. Perhaps it was just an illusion that could be shattered at any moment but it was something. They'd been there a week now and he hadn't forced them to do anything, hadn't issued a single command. They were free to spend their time however they wanted.

So why did she *choose* to put her hands on him and massage his shoulders?

“You must be relieved that your first week is over with,” Kali continued to knead his muscles, fingers targeting the spot just above his collarbone. Jaune groaned. “I can tell you’ve been working hard.”

“It’s been pretty tough,” he admitted. “I’m behind everyone else. They’ve all been training for this since they were little, even Ruby. Oh, uh – she’s a girl in my class, she’s only fifteen. She was admitted early because she impressed the Headmistress. Apparently she caught some criminals or something, I don’t really know the details but she is the real deal.”

“She must be very strong.”

“She is. I’m doing okay with most of the theory work. We have normal classes like math and language, so those are fine. History is a little hard,” he grimaced but didn’t elaborate. “Grimm Studies is pretty easy, even though our teacher is… odd. Dust Usage is tricky, I’ve never really used Dust before. I blew myself up in our first class.”

Kali giggled. Blake scowled at the sound, finding it unreasonably annoying.

“Combat Class is the one I’m having the most trouble with,” he said, sounding depressed. “Everyone else is just… so good at fighting. I thought I was pretty good, you know? I’ve been training so hard these last couple of years but… they’ve been doing it so much longer, and it feels like I’m so far behind that I’ll never catch up. I’m the worst in our year.”

“You have to give it time, Jaune,” Kali soothed, leaning down so her words gusted across the shell of his ear. “Anything worth attaining takes time. You started much later than everyone else, so this is expected.”

“I know, I know – it’s just frustrating, that’s all.”

“Maybe you should quit, then,” Blake said loudly, finally revealing her presence. Kali jumped and leaned back, turning to face her while Jaune turned his head.

“Oh, hey Blake,” he said happily. Then her words registered and he frowned. “Why would I do that?”

“You know you’re falling behind and you can’t catch up, so why not give up if you can’t handle it?”

She was being mean. *Why* was she being mean? Even she didn’t know. Seeing them being so chummy just rubbed her the wrong way, and that anger she was always feeling at the world was so conveniently aimed at Jaune.

“I didn’t say I couldn’t handle it,” he muttered, and Kali shot her a look of disappointment. That only pissed her off even more.

Why did she always take Jaune’s side?

Blake huffed. She knew why. It was because she was being unreasonable.

Blake sighed. “What are you going to do about it, then?”

“What do you mean?”

She rolled her eyes. “You need to catch up, don’t you? So what are you going to do about it?”

He hesitated before saying, “Pyrrha offered to train with me, oh – uh, she’s another girl in my class. She’s like… the strongest fighter in the school, and she’s only a first year. Some big shot athlete from Mistral, no one can touch her. She said she’d be willing to train with me and help me out, but… I feel bad taking advantage of her like that, and if I can’t do it myself, what’s the point?”

“You’re being dumb,” Blake glared at him. “If she offered her help, take it. You didn’t force her to help, did you?”

“No, of course not!”

“Then take her up on her offer. Why would you turn down such an opportunity? Because it hurts your ego?” Blake clucked her tongue. “You’d be an idiot to refuse her.”

That look of disappointment on her mother’s face was replaced by a different look, one of approval. Blake felt a little flustered at how good it felt to be on the receiving end of that look.

“What?” she snapped, sulking.

“Nothing,” Kali said happily.

Jaune stood and faced her, and now that he was no longer sitting, she could see his torso clearly. The years of hard work on the farm and training with the sword had paid off, *big time*.

Lean, sculpted muscle depicted that story wonderfully, his shoulders broad and strong, his chest firm, his abdomen tight and defined. His arms were big but not bulky, practical in their build and not for vanity. Blake felt her mouth go dry, for it had been years since she'd seen him this way. Back then, he'd just been a scrawny kid. Now? He was on the cusp of manhood, and looked the part.

"You're right," he said, looking at her with those blue eyes of his. Those beautiful blue eyes. "Thanks, Blake."

She hastily looked away, feeling weird. "Whatever."

"I'm going to call Pyrrha right now," he said, and Blake did her very best not to peek at his chest as he walked by her. She managed that, but couldn't stop herself from turning and staring at his back.

When he left the room, Kali said, "That was nice of you."

Blake huffed. "I can be nice."

"And yet you so often aren't."

"Can you blame me?" she asked sourly.

Kali sighed. "It isn't Jaune's fault, Blake."

“I *know* that,” she suddenly felt tired. “I know. But he is still human.”

She could feel the weight of her mothers gaze. “He can’t help what he is.”

“Neither can we.”

Blake left before her mother could say anything else. She didn’t want to be reassured or talked down. But any semblance of good mood she’d achieved was now ruined. Her eyes found the front door as she entered the foyer but she didn’t approach it, instead turning and heading for the stairs.

She’d thought about running a few times. On the farm, running would have been futile. If she somehow managed to make it off the property, what next? The people of Hamersley knew what she looked like and would return her, where *that woman* would be waiting. If she went into the forest, she’d be torn apart by Grimm in no time. Blake didn’t know what was worse; Jaune’s mother or the Grimm.

Here in the city, those two dangers were absent but it wasn’t so easy. Blake was new to Vale. Where would she even go? There were so many people here, she’d be spotted in an instant. Maybe if she hid her ears, she’d be able to walk around without being noticed as faunus, but then what? She had no money. She didn’t know anyone. She’d just end up under a bridge somewhere, worse off.

As obscene as this house was, this ridiculous show of wealth, it was *comfortable*. Blake hated it, but was also scared to leave it. She had more freedom here, reminding her of her childhood, before everything had gone to shit. The days where she walked by Jaune’s side, thinking she was… what? His sister? Best friend? Equals.

Thinking they were equals.

Those wonderful days that felt like an entirely different life. When she had been *happy*. When she had been carefree.

She missed those days.

Living here reminded her of that, if only a little. She could do what she wanted. She could eat what she wanted. She didn't have to work on the farm or work in the house, though Kali urged her to pull her weight. She almost felt normal.

So long as she stayed inside.

Blake stomped up the stairs until she was on the roof. The view up here was beautiful and whenever she felt particularly down, she'd come up here. It was enough to distract her, gazing out across the city, watching people walk around, living their lives. A life she would never have.

If she could, what would she want to dedicate her life to? Perhaps a useless thought, and it would only make her angry afterwards but she couldn't help herself.

She'd want to make the world a better place. Combat injustice. *Fix* things. The world hadn't always been like this. Blake might not have gone to school but she'd read enough to know that while things hadn't been perfect, they'd been better than this. There might not have been equality, but they hadn't been in *chains*.

A Huntress could help people, change lives – but what could one Huntress do against society? And Blake wasn't as naive as Jaune was. He'd once said he wanted to protect her, but how could he do that on his own?

A sudden siren cut through the din of the city, and Blake looked around in surprise. It didn't take her long to spot the flashing lights, a police car taking the corner at speed and racing down the street. At first, she thought it was just going to pass by but then suddenly, a person came sprinting out of the park. They were dressed in all black with a hoodie pulled up over their head.

A criminal?

Her heart leapt into her throat as the car barreled into the person without stopping, the windshield crunching from the impact as they were thrown up across the front of the vehicle. The person tumbled over the roof and hit the road hard, their hood flipping down and revealing two very prominent horns.

They were faunus.

The damaged police car pulled up onto the sidewalk before two officers got out, their guns drawn. The man on the ground attempted to get up but he was dazed, a trickle of blood running down the side of his face as he clutched at his arm.

"Get down on the ground!" one of the officers shouted. "Now!"

He didn't. He didn't do much of anything, clearly confused, badly hurt from the collision. For a wild moment, Blake thought they were going to shoot him in cold blood but instead, one of the officers holstered his weapon and pulled out something else. That something else was a taser and Blake watched in horrified fascination as it was fired, the faunus jerking with a strangled scream as he was electrocuted. He collapsed to the ground, stiff as a board.

That should have been the end of it but the officer kept going, the faunus man spasming as he was continually shocked. Blood roared in Blake's ears as her heart pounded in her chest, deafening, making her feel dizzy.

They were going to kill him.

They were going to kill him!

"Hey!"

Blake blinked as she saw Jaune appear, storming out of the house in a frenzy. The officers noticed him approaching, and the one with the taser finally relented. The faunus man sagged, unmoving. The officers looked tense as Jaune neared them, and for a wild second, Blake thought the one with his gun still out would aim it at him.

She couldn't hear what they were talking about but Jaune was quickly joined by their neighbors. The woman next door appeared particularly animated, dressed in a dressing gown with sparkling earrings and a tiara, as if she were in the middle of getting ready for a gala.

Whatever they were saying to the police got them moving, the other officer moving in to cuff the downed man before hauling him into the back of their car.

Were people… actually sticking up for that faunus?

When the police finally left and Jaune reentered the house, Blake dashed down the stairs to meet him. He stared up in surprise as she came hurtling down and almost tripped, and if it wasn't for Jaune reaching out to steady her, she may have just tumbled down the entire staircase.

“Woah, Blake – what are you doing?” he asked, alarmed.

“What happened down there?” she gasped for breath.

Jaune’s face turned grim.

“You saw that?”

“Why were they – what did you say?” she could barely get her words out coherently.

Jaune placed his hands on her shoulders, attempting to calm her down. The last time they’d been this close had been the night he hugged her, the night of his birthday.

“It’s okay. They were just…” he grimaced. “The man escaped from his… owners. He was attempting to board a bus out of the city when he was noticed and he ran.”

Blake was filled with dread. This was what she’d just been thinking about. He’d tried to run, to seek freedom, and now… there was no telling what would happen to him. Faunus were animals to them; pets. Would his *owners* even take him back now? Would they put him down, as if he were some rabid dog?

It made her feel sick.

“Why didn’t you stop them?” she asked faintly.

Jaune frowned. “I – I couldn’t. They’re the police.”

“So what were you doing out there?” the anger was building, an old friend.

“I… wanted them to stop using the taser. He was already incapacitated. There was no need for them to keep going.”

“Is this how you’re going to *protect me*?” she asked scathingly, shrugging his hands off.

“What?”

“That other woman seemed more concerned than you did!”

A strange expression crossed Jaune’s face. “That isn’t true.”

“It sure appeared that way!” she almost shouted, cat ears pinned back.

“She wanted them to ‘hurry up and put that mutt in a cage, somewhere she didn’t have to see it’,” Jaune snapped. Blake flinched, surprised at the sudden hostile tone. “This is a good neighborhood, so get that trash out of here. Her words. She didn’t care about that man, she only cared about how ‘unsightly’ their actions were in her precious neighborhood. Threatened to report them if they didn’t do their jobs.”

Blake gaped at him.

“Why do you always have to think the worst of me?” he shook his head. “For once, can’t you just trust me? What did I ever do to you?”

It felt like he’d slapped her.

He turned away and began walking down the stairs without another word. Blake stood there, unmoving, throat tight, trapping any words that may have formed. His words hurt more than she thought they would, her eyes stinging as her anger and frustration mounted, placing her on the verge of tears.

Blake wiped at her face angrily, sniffling. Why’d she say that to him? Why did she always…!?

He’d stepped out there to stop them harming that poor man and she’d somehow turned it on him, as if he was at fault. What the fuck was wrong with her?

Her mother found her there, looking as miserable as Blake felt. She’d seen it play out as well, no doubt.

“Are you okay?” Kali asked.

“Fine,” Blake choked. “I’m fine.”

Kali frowned. “Blake…”

“I’m going to my room,” she turned abruptly and practically ran to her room, slamming the door behind her. Throwing herself down on her bed, she wept, unable to hold back her tears.

She wasn’t sure how long she lay there. Long enough for her tears to dry on her cheeks, for her eyes to feel itchy. Glancing at the small clock on the wall, she saw that it was late afternoon, early evening.

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

The thought of bumping into Jaune horrified her but her hunger wouldn’t be denied. The longer she lay there, the harder her stomach cramped until eventually, she couldn’t ignore it any longer. She wasn’t about to let him see her like this, though. Blake made her way to the bathroom to wash her face, and saw that her eyes were slightly bloodshot, her cheeks blotchy.

She filled the basin with warm water and scooped handfuls against her cheeks and eyes, soothing away any of the irritation. After drying off, she inspected herself in the mirror again. She looked much better, though there was no hiding her eyes.

It would have to do.

When she entered the kitchen, her mother was already there, preparing a meal. The scent of pan fried fish met Blake’s nose, and her mouth instantly began watering. Walking over to the stove, Blake saw two healthy filets coated in a light dusting of flour, the pan filled with melted butter, garlic and herbs. Kali noticed her and smiled.

“Hungry?”

Blake nodded wordlessly.

A salad had already been prepared, sitting on the countertop in a large bowl. Lettuce, tomato, onion, avocado, cucumber, all fresh, with a bottle of balsamic dressing sitting beside it. This last week had shown her that her mother was a pretty good cook. On the farm, the Arc’s had a chef, and Kali only assisted him when required, helping to prepare ingredients. Sometimes *that woman* cooked, and again, Kali would assist. Here? She cooked all of their meals.

Blake thought her cooking tasted better.

She felt Jaune enter the room, the back of her neck tingling, the hairs raising. Blake tried not to show it, watching the fish cook but when she felt him step beside her, it was impossible to ignore him.

He cleared his throat awkwardly.

“So, I was thinking – that after dinner, we could go out. You know, maybe do some shopping.”

When she didn’t say anything, her mother filled the silence.

“That sounds wonderful. We do need more groceries, we’re starting to run short.”

“Right, groceries. That too – but I was thinking that maybe you need some new clothes.”

Kali paused, and Blake turned to look at Jaune in surprise.

“What?” she asked, confused.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean, all you’ve got are your – uh, maid uniforms,” he gestured at their matching clothes. “So I thought that it would be a good idea to widen your variety a bit. That is, if you want…?”

Kali beamed. “That is very thoughtful of you, Jaune.”

He smiled before it faded, his expression troubled. “You’d… have to wear those collars, though. Is that okay?”

It wasn’t okay. It would never be okay. But… if they didn’t wear them, then something like what happened to that man could happen to them. In the eyes of society, they were free to be punished if they did not comply. As much as it pissed her off, as demeaning as it felt, Blake knew there was no other way around it.

And… she would like to get out of the house. As comfortable as it was here, she was beginning to go a little crazy. The roof was a welcome respite but it wasn’t enough.

“Sure,” she said, and Jaune blinked at her. “I’d like that.”

When dinner was ready, they sat at the large table in the dining room. The food was delicious, and Blake's mood improved significantly. Fish was her favorite food by far, and now that they were here, they could eat it more often. That was a silver lining, right?

"Amazing as always, Kali," Jaune complimented.

Kali's cheeks flushed so lightly, Blake almost missed it. She chose to ignore it, instead focusing on the taste as she shoveled another piece into her mouth.

"I'm glad you enjoy my cooking," Kali replied fondly.

When they were all done, Blake helped her mother with the dishes while Jaune ran upstairs to fetch their collars. When he returned, he had an apologetic expression as he put them on each of them, locking them in place. Blake squirmed, fighting the urge to tug at it.

He also had the leashes but he rolled those up and put them in his pocket. "I don't think we'll need these, but…"

Just in case, went unsaid.

Their neighborhood was close to the commercial district which meant they could walk instead of taking a taxi or a bus. The street lights were beginning to flicker on as evening truly settled in, and while Jaune was dressed casually in jeans and a white shirt, he had chosen to bring his sword along. Even though Blake would never admit it, it made her feel a little safer.

It took about ten minutes to walk the entire length of the park, and when they came out on the other side, they were met with a blaze of colorful lights. Billboards hung on the side of buildings, advertising their latest products, signs illuminated the sidewalk promoting their brand, and cars honked as peak traffic had yet to completely wane, clogging the streets with vehicles.

They garnered a few looks as they walked down the street, eyes zeroing in on their ears and then their collars. They weren't the only faunus around; Blake spotted a girl with horse ears sitting on a bench beside who could only be her owner, a woman in her mid-thirties who was tapping away furiously on her scroll. And across the street, she spotted a girl with a dog's tail being led along by an older man.

Blake was pretty sure they were meant to be wearing the leashes in a place like this, with so many people around, but the girl on the bench wasn't wearing one. No one seemed concerned about it, so she didn't bring it up. One less demeaning act she had to endure, the better.

Jaune led them both to a clothing store that specialized in women's clothing specifically. In the window, Blake saw a pair of mannequins showcasing two beautiful summer dresses, one white, the other black, the material thin, breathable.

"You can choose what you want," Jaune said, ushering them inside. "Whatever you like."

"Are you sure?" Kali asked.

He nodded. "Pick more than one. As many outfits as you can carry."

He didn't have to tell Blake twice.

There were a lot of skirts and dresses, but there were also pants, tights, shirts and jackets. Blake had only ever worn dresses, at first the ones provided by the Arc's, old hand-me downs from the girls that no longer fit any of them, and then the maid uniform she'd been wearing for years at this point. So while she did pick a few dresses, she also grabbed some tights, shirts and a nice jacket.

"Go try them on," Jaune suggested. Blake hesitated when she saw the odd looks being exchanged by the staff, going even so far as to point at them and whisper.

It made her nervous but she made her way over to the dressing rooms, pulling the curtain closed so she could try on the clothes she'd picked out. Everything fit well, and Blake took a particular liking to the tights. Admiring herself in the mirror, she turned to the side and inspected the shape of her legs and butt.

"It isn't often we have someone bring their pets with them," a voice said, a woman, Blake overhearing it easily. She wasn't exactly trying to keep her voice down. Blake paused in the middle of taking off her shirt. "Do you like to dress them up?"

"Uh… I guess?" Jaune said awkwardly. Blake could even imagine the shocked expression he wore, even though she couldn't see it through the curtain.

"A lot of guys like to make them pretty," the woman continued. "Something to look at, I guess? Not that you have to try very hard. They're both very high quality, they must have cost a fortune."

"I wish I could afford one," another voice piqued up, another woman; younger. "It'd be nice to have someone clean my apartment for me."

"You're not – *you know*, with them, right?" the first woman asked.

Jaune made an odd sound.

“It’s just that some guys have been caught trying to – you know, date them. Like they’re human girls. Kinda weird, right?” she continued, voice filled with humor. “I think they just get carried away because they use them to satisfy themselves, you know?”

The other woman laughed.

Blake felt humiliated, and angry, and scared. Not for herself, but for other faunus women. The implication was clear. That some men… took certain liberties. It took every ounce of will power she had not to throw open the curtain and rip into them, and she only did that because it wouldn’t go well. Not for her. She felt her hands begin to shake and she clenched them in an attempt at stopping it.

It didn’t work.

“I don’t – that’s not – they just help around the house,” Jaune managed to get out, clearing up the misunderstanding. “That’s all. It isn’t like that.”

“Good. You’re way too handsome for that type of stuff,” all of a sudden, she sounded flirty. “Are you a Huntsman? Only Huntsmen carry their weapons around so openly.”

“Oh, uh – I go to Beacon.”

“Oh my gosh,” the younger woman said. “How is it? I’ve always wanted to know but I don’t have any friends that go there. They’re all at UKV.”

They continued to prattle about useless topics but Blake stopped listening, any of the good vibes she’d been feeling since dinner turned to dust. All it took were a few careless words.