

In the dead of night, staring up at the ceiling, the guilt screaming in her ears as loud as Taiyang's snoring, Raven Branwen wondered if she was a terrible wife.

She knew she wasn't in the traditional sense. She fought alongside him, raised a strong and vibrant daughter, shared quiet moments with him after long days, and stood by him through thick and thin. She loved him—or at least, she thought she did. But he'd also been the only thing she'd ever known, her first and only partner, the two of them bound together by duty, by circumstance, and by the life they'd built in Patch.

She'd wondered, once, if she was missing out.

Actually, she wondered about it a lot, when the world was still and her mind had time to wander. She wondered about it when Taiyang was away on missions, and sometimes when he was right next to her, his arm draped over her in sleep. Then she'd immediately stop thinking about it, burying the thought deep where it couldn't hurt anyone.

She was happy. She loved him, she did. That was, perhaps, the worst part. That she loved him, and even if that love had been a patch over the hole in her heart for years, that hole had now grown so large it could no longer be ignored.

Because of *Her*.

Summer Rose had always been there. A constant presence, a teammate, a friend. Her silver eyes sparkling with warmth and mischief, her cloak as white as snow, her smile as bright as the sun. Raven had known her for years, fought beside her, laughed with her, trusted her with her life. But somewhere along the way, something had shifted.

It wasn't sudden. It wasn't dramatic. It was quiet, insidious, like the slow creep of dawn. Raven didn't notice it at first—or maybe she did, but she refused to acknowledge it. She buried it, ignored it, told herself it was nothing. But it wasn't nothing.

It was the way Summer's laughter made her chest tighten. The way her touch lingered a moment too long during sparring matches. The way her gaze seemed to see straight through Raven's defenses, straight into the parts of herself she kept hidden from everyone, even Taiyang.

She hated it, this feeling, this pathetic, juvenile *crush*. It consumed her, gnawed at her, made her feel like a stranger in her own skin. And it only grew worse every time Taiyang touched her, kissed her, loved her.

Had she made a mistake?

There it was, the question of the hour, month, year, life; the million-lien question that winning might free her as much as it might sentence her.

Taiyang's snoring caught her attention, and she turned to look at him, involuntarily smiling with affection at his half-open mouth, drool pooling on the pillow.

But she loved him.

She loved him. She knew this as certainly as the sun rose in the east. She loved him, but... but the questions plagued her, hissing that if she loved him—really, truly, deeply—she wouldn't think of straying, would she?

But what if she'd made a mistake? Or what if... What if she never found out? What if she never knew what it was like to be with someone like Summer? Would it plague her—Would! Would wasn't right, because it already did.

She was already plagued by the ghosts of what-if past, present, and future, all three coming in to face her the second she realized how she felt about Summer.

---

Raven Branwen loved Yang Xiao Long.

Her daughter, her pride, her joy. Yang was everything Raven had ever hoped for—strong, fearless, and kind. She was a fighter, a leader, and a light in Raven's life. Raven loved her daughter, and her daughter loved her, which is why it hurt all the more when Yang came home to Patch one evening, tears in her lilac eyes, her voice trembling with hurt.

"Mom," Yang had said, trying to stay calm even as her voice broke, "do you have a problem with my relationship?"

Yang had introduced Weiss Schnee as her girlfriend a week before, you see.

"What? Yang, of course not," Raven replied immediately. "I've met Weiss before, and you know I like her."

"That's not what I meant, Mom," Yang said, and it was evident she was struggling to speak. "You couldn't even look at us last week when we were together." Shame. "I noticed. If we were separated, it was fine, but when we were together, you couldn't even look at us, Mom." Shame. "Am I wrong?"

Raven swallowed. "Yang, I—"

"Am I wrong, Mom?" Yang asked, desperate for answers because she was hurt and confused, rejected when she hadn't expected it.

"No, Yang," Raven finally replied, resigned. She forced herself to hold Yang's gaze even though she didn't want to. She had to, now more than ever. "You're not."

"Why?" Yang asked next, and her voice was small, like a child's, her daughter. "Do you—Do you have a problem with me being..." She couldn't even say it and didn't need to, because Raven interrupted just as fast.

"No," she said firmly and truthfully. "No, Yang, of course not, I—"

"Then why?"

Raven fell silent because what did she say to that? Shame, again, burned her, choked her, forcing her to confront her situation. The fact that she'd barely been able to look at her daughter and her partner doing something as chaste as sharing loving looks because, the entire time, all Raven could think was, *"I wish that was me."*

What could she say to Yang?

It was humiliating. There was really no other word for it. Humiliated that she felt that way, humiliated she hadn't supported her daughter properly, humiliated and shamed, and feeling *weak*.

She didn't want to burden Yang like that. Burden her with the knowledge that her mother often wondered if the choices that led to her existence had been the best.

Which they were, because it meant Yang was there, and Raven would die rather than trade her in, but she still wondered, what if, what if, what if.

Yang didn't need to know that her very own happiness reminded her mother of her regrets.

So, she made a choice.

"I'm sorry, Yang, I—I guess it's just difficult to accept," she lied, tears filling her eyes, telling herself the hurt in Yang's eyes would be much worse if she heard the truth. "It's not what I expected for you, but... I'll adjust. Please. Can I have another chance?"

Yang stepped back. "I... I don't know, Mom, I—"

"Please," Raven said, begging now, desperate to do right by someone. "Let me try again, Yang. I want to. I want you to be happy."

"...Okay," Yang replied.

---

She thought of the folded letter hidden away in her desk, the concerned words of a friend telling her, "Sometimes, it doesn't work out."

She hadn't dared act on it. Frankly, she felt she'd never act on it, she didn't want to, she didn't want any of these complicated feelings she'd been saddled with, she just wanted to be happy and content, please.

"Raven?"

She turned around to find Taiyang wide awake, his concerned eyes on hers, and he blurred past her tears.

"Raven," he continued, sitting up and extending an arm, and she leaned in and buried herself in him, because she loved him. She did, gods, she did, she knew this to be true. "Sweetheart, what's wrong?" He rubbed circles on her back. "Is it about what happened with Yang?"

Raven nodded. It wasn't exactly a lie.

"Raven, listen to me," Taiyang said, and the tears came back when he told her with all the confidence in the world, "you're a good mom."

She shook her head, and he gently laughed, affectionate and loving, and damning her all the more.

"You are, Raven," he insisted, and kissing the top of her head, added, "You're a great mom, and an even better wife."

"I love you," she offered, and she meant it, because it was true. It was, she willed it that way, she had to, she wanted to, she did.

"I know," he said tenderly, lying down, her in his arms, him holding her tight. This was home. It still felt like home, most of the time, and Raven wanted to cry in relief. "I love you, too."

They would be fine. She would be fine.

They would all be okay, one way or another, sooner or later.

"Till death do us part."