

The knock on the door startled Sajani and her father. They'd both heard the rumors: a large Rhidayan military force had invaded the wolf people's country of Vharkylia. Only ten years old at the time, Sajani could barely grasp the scope of what that meant. Her father knew where his wife was stationed. He knew exactly where an invading army would enter the country. While the child didn't know all that, she could read the import clearly in her father's disposition. His silver fur was quaking as though there was a breeze in the house.

If the fur wasn't a good enough indicator, the expression on her father's face made it very clear that he didn't want to answer the door. He pushed aside the curtain to see who knocked and hastily pulled it back into place. Sajani could clearly see his panic. He looked into his daughter's eyes and the panic turned to sorrow. He did not cry. She could see the internal struggle as he slowly straightened himself up and turned to open the door.

"You are the husband of Lieutenant Colonel Malita Adida?" the brown vykati that spoke was wearing the robes of a priest of Kali. The brown wolf next to him was dressed only in a simple harness and shorts but managed to carry himself respectfully and solemnly. Sajani knew the second wolf immediately. She'd seen his picture at school. The leader of the wolf nation was sometimes gently mocked for his eccentricities but was almost always respected.

"Yes, I am." Sajani's father responded slowly and formally, motioning for them to enter. "Please come in, gentlemen."

The two entered and stood awkwardly in the entryway. "I am Father LaMarr, from the cathedral and this is Mr. Benayle Ramisa." The child could see that the introduction wasn't necessary. Her father acted as though he either recognized the priest or didn't care who he was. It was hard to tell the difference. There was no way he failed to recognize the other wolf.

Mr. Ramisa caught sight of her standing just to the right of the door and a little bit up the stairs. She wanted to see what was happening but didn't necessarily want to be seen. He approached and crouched down to her level. "You must be Sajani," he said. "I've come specially to talk to you."

With her father's permission, he took her to the next room, still within sight of her father and the priest, and kneeled next to her. He gave her a hug and then said, "Your mother's a hero, little Sajani. She saved thousands of vykati."

The words were nearly echoed by the priest in the hall as he spoke to her father and then that voice quieted and Sajani could no longer hear what he was said in the next room.

Mr. Ramisa paused for a long while, making several false starts. Then he broke down crying and said, "But heroes don't always come home, my dear." She was beginning to comprehend what he was saying. She was afraid, but also fascinated by the wolf who was hurt so much by the loss of her mother.

“I’m so very sorry,” he sobbed, “I couldn’t bring her home for you.” They leaned on each other and wept.

At one point, she looked over at her father. There were no tears in his eyes. He stood stoically as the priest who accompanied Mr. Ramisa explained the details of his wife’s death. Most of it was beyond her young understanding, but she’d come to know it all—the whole country would come to know it.

After a few moments, Mr. Ramisa said, “I need to talk to your father for a bit, but I’ll *always* be there for you.” He looked her directly into the eye as if to make sure she understood and then rose and turned to talk to the other adults.

She’d never see her mother again—never hear her laugh, never hear her say she loved her little fox, never hear their practice swords smacking together during the daily drills she loved so much. She’d never be able to love anyone that much again, she was sure of it.

Taking note of her father’s response, Sajani reigned in her tears and went upstairs to her room. Next to her bed was a vykati doll dressed as a rugby player. It’d been a gift from her friend when they’d moved from Adido to Drtithen. She missed that friend so much right now. Hugging the doll close to her, she went back downstairs, stopping just a few steps from the bottom.

Mr. Ramisa was handing a book to her father. It was in very bad shape. If Sajani’d been caught with a book looking like that, her parents would’ve assumed she’d damaged it and there’d be punishment. No one here seemed to mind what it looked like, although her father seemed a little hurt by it.

“She told her troops, *Kra’la al’ark*.” Mr. Ramisa said.

She’d later learn that the phrase was difficult to understand in other languages, since Vykati’s use of possessives didn’t translate well. It translated, basically, as “This I will defend,” although she saw it as, “This (belonging to all wolves) defend (using all of what is mine, including my life).” It meant that she was willing to die in the defense of her country and all that she loved.

Including her daughter. Even at ten, Sajani knew it meant that.

Her father just stared blankly at the book. He might not have seen her come down the stairs, although she was pretty sure Mr. Ramisa just winked at her.

“My daughter...” her father started.

The wolf leader spoke with confidence. His deep bass voice pleasantly echoed in the hallway. “With your permission, I’d like to see to her future education directly.”

While she didn’t know it at the time, that phrase would be the most unwise the National Alpha would ever utter in her presence. His direct involvement would cause her untold pain and suffering, even beyond what she experienced that day. It would also do almost as much to shape her destiny as did the death of her mother.