

“No,” Sajani nearly shouted. The school had forced her to cut her hair short, but the brilliant copper color of that and her fur could *not* be subdued, any more than the fire that burned within her now. The small classroom of about twenty-five human students went totally silent for a moment. She noticed the human teacher cringe at her accent, as he always did. It didn’t matter. What mattered was that her voice stunned the rest briefly to silence and echoed off the students’ wooden tables and off the black slate boards that surrounded them. To many of them, she knew, it sounded like a bark.

The silence was extended by the loud knocking noise that issued from her chair and table when she rose suddenly. The young vykati was nearing her full height and the small furniture of the room couldn’t accommodate her any more than the students, the teacher, or the lesson plans. She’d finally heard enough about the rest of the world’s opinion of the wolf race and she was going to tell them all exactly what she thought of it.

Mr. Berhaul, the teacher, was a short man with the dark skin and hair of his Rhidayan countrymen. He had a short-cropped van dyke, thick circular glasses, and a kind disposition towards anyone that wasn’t a vykati. He turned away from the black board with an angry look on his face and started to speak. There wasn’t time to get a word out before Sajani let out a vicious howl that froze him in place.

She continued speaking, now that her audience was briefly cowed into silence. There’d be punishment later. The vykati howl was forbidden her. It took more than one wolf to make it effective, but where these people weren’t used to it at all, it’d at least give them pause.

Normally this wasn’t a problem. She hadn’t used it in school before, but what she had to say was important. They would *hear* her. “There’s a huge difference between teaching people to be dissatisfied about *where* they are and teaching them to be dissatisfied with *what* they are.

“Teaching them to be unhappy with where they are leads to change and forwards society in general. It leads to revolution in the face of tyranny and a rethinking of old habits that might be holding us back socially. It binds people together with a goal to better themselves and each other.”

Mr. Berhaul started to say something, so she howled again and again he fell silent. One student ducked under the cover of her table and a few others followed suit. “Teaching people to be unhappy with *what* they are leads to self-loathing and social division. It promotes a feeling of opposition and oppression that inhibits society from moving forward. A person taught to hate what she is will have great difficulty moving forward and rising in the face of adversity.”

Something dawned on her as she spoke those words and she quieted her voice. Speaking in her native tongue she said, “But perhaps, that’s exactly what you want.” After another pause, she added in the Common language, “If you have the courage and foresight to know what you’re doing.”

Strong hands gripped her from behind and she managed to break free and howled yet again. It didn't surprise her that others heard her howl. It didn't surprise her that the people sent to get her were very strong any more than it surprised her that they were easily affected by her howl.

The young copper vykati straightened her back and squared her shoulders. "I'll go to my punishment like a wolf and not a leashed dog." She started to walk forward, but after only a moment strong hands reached out and clasped her by the arm. She turned to face her assailant, looking the large and balding man directly in the eye. She growled and could feel the fur on the back of her shoulders bristle.

That was all it took. The man backed down and motioned for her to walk in front of himself and the three others with him. Again she turned, forcing an appearance of confidence that she barely felt. There was only one place they could be wanting her to go and she knew that path well, perhaps better than any other student.

They walked out the door and started on their way. The hallways of the Bahadhra Girl's School were clean and tidy. Decorated with student-made posters advertising the various social events the school was sponsoring, it had a light-hearted and happy look to just about everyone that walked there. Not to Sajani. The social events reminded her how "outside" she was from the rest of the school. Painfully alone. Different. A wolf pup in a pastola nest. Welcomed in name, but not in person.

There was one other vykati at the school and she could see him just ahead of her procession, emptying a garbage bin into the large dumpster he was using to gather the daily refuse. She saw him pull a newspaper from the bin and set it at the base of his cart. The school's cleanliness was almost totally due to his efforts. Gregor had brown-red fur, a mop of slightly darker hair, and stood a little less tall than Sajani. His clothes were made of cheap tan burlap and *looked* like they'd been hand-made. Sajani knew they were. He was usually working, but occasionally she'd had an opportunity to talk to him. He'd been orphaned at age ten. That alone would have bonded the two together, even if they weren't the only wolf-folk in the school. He was here now because the school had purchased him from the orphanage.

It wasn't an uncommon practice, at least not in Rhidayar. He wasn't technically a slave, although there were some similarities. The work he did for the school earned him a small wage and once he saved enough to repay the amount the school paid for him; he'd be free to go. That amounted to two silver a week, but the school also charged him for his room and board so what he usually got was measured in copper, not silver. Sajani had once helped him do the math on how long it would take him to be free. She didn't remember the exact amount of time any longer, but it was near the sesquicentennial anniversary of his arrival there.

He was about to roll his dumpster down a side hall when he reached down suddenly and picked up a folded piece of paper from the ground.

Sajani and her escort were still another five meters away so she didn't have a clear view of his action. As silly as it seemed, it looked like he had the paper in his hand the whole time and had merely bent down and stood back up. He partially unfolded the paper and looked up at her with what she *knew* was feigned surprise. The nuances of vykati expression would definitely be lost on the surrounding humans.

"Oh," he said cheerfully. "How lucky!" He held the paper out to her and gave a wink that she was pretty sure no one else saw. The fur on his hands was rough and thin from his daily chores. "Miss Adida! It looks like this is yours. Are you missing an important assignment by chance?"

She was worried her entourage wouldn't allow her to stop, but she did anyway. They stopped as well and didn't move to force her forward. They might still be cowed from earlier, but even the young wolf had to admit, they were usually polite and as gentle as she allowed. They were just there to keep the peace—hired on when she enrolled. Sajani looked Gregor directly in the eyes. His eyes were a dark brown. She hadn't bothered to notice that before, but she noticed it now. There was no reason to speak the truth at the moment and the copper wolf felt a sudden desire to impress her fellow vykati. "Oh yes. My essay for Basic History! That's probably it! Thank you so much! I was worried I'd end up rewriting the whole thing!" She then added in Vykati, "What for?"

Gregor nodded once and said, again in their native tongue. "To help you out."

The brief conversation apparently did arouse some suspicion. The balding man she'd growled at earlier asked gruffly, "What're you two saying? Move along now. I'm sure Mr. Trassefil is waiting for you."

Sajani immediately obliged, making sure she didn't spend too much time looking the other wolf in the eye. Gregor returned to his work. "I said 'thank you' and he said, 'you're very welcome.'" She lied. The answer didn't seem very convincing to her but seemed to pacify him. Why would they be suspicious of her now? She often spoke to Gregor in the wolf language.

Absent-mindedly, Sajani placed the paper in one of the front pockets on the vest of her brown and orange school uniform. As she had countless times before, she attempted to shift the pleated skirt she wore to drape properly above her knees. Most of the time, the fact that it dragged on the back part of her digitigrade legs and hung over her knees didn't bother her, but she always felt a little self-conscious about it when she was around Gregor...around other vykati, she corrected herself. Gregor was just the wolf she saw the most.

They turned down another hallway. This one was used by faculty so lacked the bright posters they'd passed earlier. Instead it was mostly white walls with an occasional bulletin board covered with bland looking memos and schedules. The interspersed wood doors on either side led to windowless

offices and had the names of administrators and teachers written in block letters over the top.

The principal's office was at the far end of the hallway. Unlike all the previous doors, for some reason this one was metal. Baldy pushed the door open and shoved her inside, closing her in the room while leaving himself and the three other escorts safely outside. His action was sudden enough there wasn't a chance to resist, or she would have.

If the hallway outside was bland, the office it led to was sterile. The three back walls of the room were covered from floor to ceiling with bookshelves filled to capacity with leather-bound books. Normally that number of books would have produced a variety of colors and rectangles, but these didn't. Each book was exactly the same size and color as all the rest—brown with two red stripes near the top and absolutely no words on the spine of any of them. Sajani didn't need to turn to know that the wall behind her was stark white with four framed diplomas on it. Like the books, all four were exactly alike in shape, although the words they contained were different.

The desk was cedar and might, at one time, have been somewhat ornate or at least looked good. Most of its polish had come off and left the reddish wood looking dull and waxy, like a stone might after years of exposure to human hands. The top of the desk contained a blotter and a small lamp covered with a green shade and bearing the insignia of the school in brown and orange. *Who thought that'd be an attractive color combination? Maybe humans see colors a little differently than vykati?*

Mr. Trassefil was much shorter than the vykati youth. He was cleanshaven with a round face that'd have probably come across as jolly if he ever bothered to smile. His hair, eyes, and skin were naturally dark, but for some reason unknown to any of the students or faculty, he tried to bleach his hair on a regular basis. The result being that it went straight and brittle, giving an appearance like there was a lump of orange straw on his head. It must've been a couple of weeks since the last bleaching because there was a stretch of black and oily hair sprouting from the middle, where his hair was parted. He wore a stern expression—as usual. She'd never seen him look any other way.

The principal pointed forcefully at the single mahogany chair before his desk. Like all the chairs at the school, there was no way to gracefully get her tail positioned comfortably, so she raised her chin in defiance and refused to sit. Her rebellion put a scowl on his face, "You dare..." he began.

"I do!" Sajani growled loudly. She held his eyes and bared her teeth.

"Such insolence will *not* be tolerated!" he said evenly. "I was going to wait to find out why you'd been sent here but, based on your current (and very usual behavior for a dog like you, I might add) actions, I see no reason to wait for your teacher to give his report." His eyes continued to meet hers, but she refused to back down. "Twenty-five demerits, a month on bathroom cleaning duty, and no outdoor privileges for the next four months."

“For standing up for myself? For being proud of what I am?” Their eyes were still locked.

“You, just like the rest of your awful race, are no more than a filthy dog. If your ‘Mr. Benayle’ wasn’t paying so much to have you here, we’d never stoop to the level of being an obedience school for trained circus performers like you.”

The world narrowed and the vykati was no longer aware of anything other than the threat she perceived before her. She tried to leap at the principal, but apparently the muscle outside had heard her growl and entered. They’d taken the opportunity to come up behind her while she was distracted, and four large humans managed to thrust her to the ground and pin her. She tried to howl, but baldy clasped his hand over her snout and held it there painfully tight. Trassefil stood and walked around his desk with a smile on his face. She could tell now why he never smiled, it was more frightening than it was comforting. He bent a knee to come near her level.

“A week in the doghouse...I mean a week of ‘confinement’ should help you better see what you really are.”

Confinement? Was this a prison now?

No, came the melancholy thought. It wasn’t a prison *now*. Spiritually and mentally, it’d always been a jail of sorts. Now it’d be that physically as well.



Alone. It wasn’t the location that was the problem. Sajani could feel the panic rising from inside her. Stomach churning, belly tightening, and face going numb, it was horrifying. A scream stayed on her lips but refused to be released. She couldn’t get rid of it. Alone. Like she was in that childhood dream.

The panic didn’t ebb, but she did find herself more aware of her surroundings. Why did a school even have a room like this? Less than two meters cubed, the cement room had a steel door on one side and a small barred window, less than ten centimeters squared on the other. No furniture. A rusted bucket sat in one corner, giving off a smell that advertised its purpose. There were two bowls to the right of the door. One held water and one held some sort of kibble that she refused to try to identify. The ceiling was too short for her. When they first threw her in there, she panicked and tried to stand, hitting her head on the light bulb hanging from the ceiling, nearly breaking it.

She didn’t cry. Something deep inside her told her that “they” wanted her to cry. They wanted her to be distraught. They wanted her to feel like she was inferior. She knew she wasn’t. Her mother had saved a nation and someday, she’d be just as capable of doing that as her mother had been. The people in her country revered her...well mostly. They pacified her for the sake of her parentage. The panic began rising again, so she tried to turn to her memories for company. The only one that came to mind was a conversation between

her father and Mr. Ramisa six months ago. The same discussion that ultimately landed her where she was now.



She'd been out with friends. They'd opened the pastola pens of a farmer that'd earlier yelled at one of the group for cutting through his fields. Pastola are flightless ugly birds a little larger than a chicken. They have gray feathers and a large hooked and pointed beak. Vykati are the only ones that bother raising them for food, since they tend to be a lot more independent and vicious than any other domesticated animal. She'd been the one that opened the pen and set them free and they'd managed to get away without anyone seeing them. It'd probably be days before the farmer managed to get them all back in their pens and he'd have a few scars to show for it, but that's what he deserved for not letting Gladdi walk through his onion fields. The constables' whistles that sounded as they were leaving were unexpected. The farmer had never called the constables before.

They held a rushed conference. It was decided that they'd split up and return to their homes. If they were fast enough, they could claim they'd never been anywhere near the farm. That'd worked countless times in the past.

It did bring her home a few hours sooner than usual. She opened the back door quietly, stepped lightly through the doorway, and closed it slowly behind her. If she was careful, her father would have no idea when she arrived, and she'd be able to claim she'd been back much longer. The voices coming from the living room were a surprise. They rarely entertained guests. Her father liked his privacy and was very annoyed when the press or random well-wishers showed up unannounced—something that happened fairly often. Based on what was being said, the discussion had just barely started.

Her father was speaking, "I've no idea what to do, Mr. Benayle. She's completely out of control and doesn't listen to me at all anymore. It's almost like she blames *me* for her mother's death."

The vykati leader's deep bass voice was unmistakable. "Please, if you can't bring yourself to call me Ben, then Benayle is fine..." he started.

"Why?" her father's voice demanded. "Because what my wife did somehow makes me equal to the National Alpha? I'd rather no one knew me as her husband. I'd disappear completely if *she* didn't look so much like her mother. It's impossible to hide..."

Sajani didn't hear the next part of the discussion. Her father was wrong about her blaming him for her mother's death. She didn't do that. She despised the fact that he seemed so ashamed to be the husband of the woman that'd saved the nation. Why? People venerated her and constantly overlooked her shortcomings because of her mother. She got away with just about anything and no one dared challenge her for fear of disgracing the soul of Malita Adida. Her father could be the next National Alpha if he wanted, she was sure of it, if he'd just be willing to take pride in what his wife had accomplished.

The conversation apparently returned to its original topic. She focused back in on what was happening in the next room. Her father was speaking again. "...she's probably putting foxes in someone's pastola coops or some other vandalism."

Mr. Ramisa's voice was calm and reassuring. "Then perhaps it's time she went somewhere else."

"What do you mean? Are you saying I'm not worthy of raising my daughter?"

Again her father was answered with the leader's usual calm demeanor. "Worthy? Of course you're worthy, but perhaps you need some time away from the problem..."

"And now you're saying my daughter is a problem?"

"No," Mr. Ramisa continued evenly, "*you're* saying your daughter is a problem and you need help dealing with her. Isn't that why you wanted to talk to me?" There was a brief pause and Sajani guessed her father must have simply nodded. "I think she needs some time away from the people that revere her. I think it's time she had a chance to learn that not all humans are the murderers she sees them as."

There was a long silence followed by a deep sigh from her father. "I can't say it won't be a relief to have her away for a bit, as harsh as it sounds. I love my little fox, but it's so hard..." he let out a short sob. Was her father crying over this? He hardly ever cried.

The wolf leader's voice was soothing and calm. "Do you trust me?"

Sajani couldn't hear his response.

Mr. Ramisa continued. "I'll take care of the details then. Let your mind and spirit rest. I'll see she's treated well and, if you want, I can even arrange for you to move somewhere quiet for a little while. Would that help?"

Again, there was no audible response.