

One moment and her life changed almost as much as it had five years prior. The copper wolf did smile slightly at the memory of Mr. Ramisa saying, “treated well.” While she didn’t appreciate where the wolf leader sent her, she did know enough about him to know he’d be furious about what happened today. Too bad there was no way to let him know. She didn’t have the money to send letters. No chance to go outside and drop off a note either.

A note. That reminded her of what Gregor had given her. It helped pull her mind away from being alone. Sajani reached into her vest pocket and pulled out the folded note. She carefully straightened it out and read the neat and clear writing it contained. All it said was “Trust me.” Trust Gregor? Trust someone the way her father trusted Mr. Ramisa to arrange her future education? Trust someone to not betray her or even unwittingly put her in some hellish predicament or another? The young vykati didn’t trust the wolves she called friends. She knew, they all knew, that if one were caught, they’d do and say whatever they needed to say to get out of trouble. Implicate anyone. Tell the authorities whatever they wanted to know so long as they’d go free.

Trust was a weakness. A luxury that Sajani felt positive no one could afford. Here she was alone in a damp and filthy place that was a prison cell in all but name and someone she’d only been able to have passing contact with prior to this wanted her to *trust* him? The smell of the nearby bucket came to the front of her consciousness. To her, it smelled like she imagined trust would smell. It also made her realize that it wouldn’t be a good thing to be here when she had to make use of it.

Trust might not be a possibility, but hope was shining brightly before her. No, she couldn’t bring herself to trust Gregor, but she could hope that he’d be able to help her. Hope was allowed. At the moment, it might even be necessary. Hope could keep that awful loneliness at bay.

Her philosophical distraction kept her from hearing what was going on around her, but she returned quickly to the present when the door squeaked and ground as it opened. She pulled her knees up to her face, looking away from the door, and waited for the visitor to leave.

There was a quiet laugh that made her think her visitor was relishing her misery, but that thought vanished when the person spoke in her native tongue. “You... you didn’t wear... wear a skirt very often be... before you came here, did you? It’s a good thing you’re facing away or I’d be really embarrass...”

“Gregor!” Forgetting where she was, she attempted to leap to her feet, only to have her head hit the ceiling hard. She could smell blood immediately but didn’t care. She wanted to embrace him, but he had to lean over slightly to fit in the room as well, so the hug ended with the two knocking noses and looking away in embarrassment.

He handed her a handkerchief and said, “Maybe you can get your head to stop bleeding. This idea won’t work well if one of us has blood all over her face.”

She placed the cloth on the top of her head and applied a little pressure. That gave a chance to focus out a little more and she noticed that Gregor had changed clothes since she last saw him. He was dressed in a dark blue shirt and wearing what vykati called pants and most other races called knickers. They were black and stopped just before the second bend in his leg. On his back was a fairly large bookbag that looked very new and mostly empty. His fur was combed and freshly cleaned. It wasn’t that he was often dirty, but he did look much more tidy than usual. Hefting a small brown paper sack in his left hand, he said, “I brought you a change of clothes. We don’t want to be seen outside while you’re in that uniform. I’ll wait on the other side of...”

Unable to see much further past her current situation, she missed his point. “Outside? I’m not allowed to go outside for another four months, I’m not even supposed to leave this room for another week! Are you trying to get me in more trouble?”

Gregor just shrugged off her comment. “We’re going back to Vharkylia. We’re not staying here. You’ll have to trust me.”

His comment added new depth to the note he’d given her. There was that pesky word again. Her stubborn streak chose that moment to show itself forcefully. “I don’t trust anyone!” she countered. “My own father allowed me to be sent here...”

Gregor didn’t allow her to continue her tirade. “Then don’t trust me, but at least follow me. This is my one chance to get back home and I thought I’d be nice and save you from this place as well.” He dropped the paper bag on the floor and started to leave.

Escape? He was going to help her at that much risk to himself? He was almost a slave here. Legally, he could be killed if he was caught trying to leave without paying off his debt. No one was that selfless. There had to be a catch. “And what do you expect in return?”

The answer was *not* what she’d anticipated. “Nothing.”

The single word was said quietly and humbly enough that she was mostly convinced it was sincere.

His voice was always kind, but now it seemed to have an almost pleading kindness to it as he added, “Just hurry. If I have the main baths closed off too much longer people will get suspicious.” He started out the door. “I’ll leave it unlocked. Just step out when you’re ready.”

The door squeaked and ground closed. Once again, she was alone in her cell. *He said he’d be right outside the door*, she told herself. *I’m not alone.*

She checked the cloth on her head. It looked like the bleeding had stopped. It couldn’t have been a very deep cut, probably more like a rather large scratch. Now that she had a few moments to think about what led up to

it, she felt like her dignity had taken a much harder hit than her head—and it wasn't just the embarrassment of forgetting the low height of the ceiling.

Hopefully he wouldn't expect a formal apology. She opened the bag and poured its contents on the floor. Something heavy fell from the bag before a few cloth bundles plopped out. The heavy object made a light musical sound as it hit and drew her attention. It was a small necklace, gold colored if not made of the metal itself. A small locket hung from it and like most neck jewelry made for the wolf-folk, it had a leather backing on it to keep it above the fur and prevent it from pulling. The locket was a bright metal, probably not silver because it had a very bright shine to it—maybe nickel. The locket formed a safe, about two centimeters wide and tall, but no more than a centimeter deep. The door of the tiny safe had a little keyhole in it, about the size of two pin heads stacked. She lightly tried to open it, not wanting to break anything, but the door stayed closed. There was no way she could see to open it without breaking it. The copper wolf took a moment to place it around her neck and fasten it. She'd ask Gregor about it when she had a chance.

There were three pieces of clothing on the ground where she'd dumped them: a short-sleeved red shirt with a V neck, a set of matching ankle wrappings and, a pair of tan shorts. The style wasn't far from how she dressed back in Vharkylia, although she usually preferred more subdued colors than the red of the shirt and wrappings.

To her surprise, they all fit perfectly. That realization caused no small amount of apprehension. How did he know her size? Was this endeavor really safe? What exactly was she getting herself into? Her paranoia made her check the door to make sure it really was closed, and no one had been peeking in on her as she changed. It was. The door couldn't have moved at all without her hearing it. Gregor seemed kind enough and the thought of staying seemed worse than just about anything she could imagine happening from escaping.

Sajani shuddered as the door made its complaint and resisted moving once again. On the other side, just across the hall sat Gregor. His back was to her.

“Are you ready?” he asked without turning to look at her.

“Yes...”

He must have noticed the hesitation in her voice. “Don't worry. I haven't been stalking you and measuring you with my eyes or anything sick-minded like that. But I *am* in charge of the school's laundry...”

The sigh of relief that came from the she-wolf was loudly audible. “Oh.”

There was an awkward silence when Gregor didn't turn to face her.

“And the locket?” she asked timidly. Why did she feel so out of sorts? She was the daughter of a national hero. There was no reason for her to be shy.

“You...You're finished... you're finished getting dressed?” Gregor asked.

“Yes, but...”

The red-brown wolf turned to face her and smiled. It was a friendly smile. He didn't even look at what she was wearing, just looked her patiently in the eye and said, "I know you don't trust me, but on this, it's better if you just wear it. It'll keep up the appearance I'm trying for. Wealthy vykati don't travel without some form of jewelry, or so most humans believe. I'll pretend to be your brother."

"Our accents don't match, let alone the geography of our fur..."

Gregor pressed his finger to his lips. "Humans won't know and vykati won't care," he said off-handedly. "I'm happy to tell you all about what we're doing, but like I said, we really do need to go."

"But how did you get all this..." she started.

"One last thing," he interrupted. Slipping back into the room, he quickly picked up her discarded uniform and placed it in the paper sack, which he then carried out with him. As he came back near her in the hall a smile crossed his face and he said, "That was my room for my first two years here."

*And he was smiling about that?*

She wanted to ask him but didn't have the chance as he motioned for her to follow and started down the hallway. She followed after only a brief pause. The corridor they were moving down was part of the cellar. It had cement walls and metal doors. Sajani knew what some of the rooms were. One was the laundry room. She'd worked there a few times as punishment. Another was the pantry. There was no way to count the number of hours she'd spent there peeling potatoes and dicing vegetables.

Gregor turned to face her when they got to the end of the hall. Motioning for her to keep quiet, he whispered, "I'll go ahead and check to make sure no one's in the hallway outside the bath on the main floor. If it's all clear, you'll hear me open the door and wring the mop. Once you hear that, come right up and go straight into the baths. Don't hesitate. There's not much time." He went up the stairs before she had a chance to protest.

All of this was happening faster than the copper wolf wanted. Up until today, the faculty had shown some disdain and antagonism, but it was the first time she'd ever been told so plainly exactly what the staff thought of her and her kind. What had changed? It was the first time she'd used her howl, but that still didn't seem enough to cause so much animosity.

Thinking as she was, she barely heard the sound of the door opening and mop being wrung. She started right up the stairs, nearly tripping on the first step. She was worried, given Gregor's method of signaling her, that the floor might be slippery, but it wasn't. Walking as quickly as possible without making too much noise, she went right past the fold out warning that the bath was closed for cleaning. Entering the room, she closed the door quickly behind herself.

Just on the other side, Gregor was waiting for her with a smile on his face. After he locked the door the smile faded slightly and gave way to a worried expression. "Sometimes the staff uses this area between classes and ignores

my sign, but never this late in the hour. No one else has a key. If...if you were... were worried about me knowing the size of your... your clothes, this...this is going seem really weird, but I *am* the one that empties the garbage in the dormitory when you're in class, so don't read too much into it." He handed her a familiar leather purse holding her personal grooming kit. "You're the only she-wolf here or I'd have just put one together from the lost and found. Mine wouldn't be enough, if I even had one." He looked at her confused expression and added, "I'm going out the back window now. I'll close it behind me, but you should have no problem opening it and climbing out when you're done."

"Done...?" she started to ask.

"Done cleaning... You'll want to wash...tidy yourself up. You have about fifteen minutes before the next class gets out. I didn't originally plan on it, but you really need to clean that cut. I'm glad we have time." he stopped himself short and continued. "Should be just enough time to get the blood out and get... clean... get your fur cleaned and brushed down. No offense, but you look like you've been tossed around..."

"I *have* been tossed around..." she started.

"Yes, well we can't have you looking like that or people will get suspicious or scared. Neither is good for us. I'm just glad we didn't have to use the attic window so you have a chance to clean up."

She started to say more, but he turned and jumped up on a sink in the far corner and shimmied out a small etched glass window. "I'm going to get rid of this uniform where they can't find it." He told her as he lowered himself. The bag with her clothing was the last she saw of him as he quickly closed the window. His hazy outline then disappeared as he left the area. Sajani felt a little more confident this time about whether he might be watching her. Panic began to rise in her, but she kept it in check by reminding herself that Gregor was waiting nearby.

She turned her attention to cleaning up. The bath area was fairly modern, especially for this part of Rhidayar. There were three sinks with slightly warmed running water (whether by magic or flame, she didn't know). The small window that Gregor climbed through was centered over the furthest sink. There were two tubs standing out horizontally from the opposite wall, also with running water. The space on the side nearest the door held a small partitioned off area for a shower. Towel racks for the tubs stood empty, but the one for the shower held a towel. There were no curtains between any of the bathing areas. A common sticking point between her and the other students was her fur clogging the drains, but the truth was she always cleaned up after herself and of the many times her punishment included cleaning the baths, she'd never found anything clogging the drains other than long black hair.

The first thing to do was get her hair trimmed down a little. She took a pair of sheers from her purse and carefully evened out her bangs. Not wanting

to live with the short hair the school required of her, she just trimmed slightly around the side and ears and left the back alone. It'd take years to get it back to the length she liked, but now was as good a time as any to start.

There weren't many things she'd enjoy more than soaking in one of the tubs for an hour or so, but there wasn't time. It'd have to be a quick shower. Carefully removing and folding her new clothes, she placed them gently on the edge of one of the sinks. She started to remove the necklace but found herself reluctant to do so. Was there some kind of geas or other magic on it? Something trying to prevent her from removing it? The thought worried her, so she quickly moved her hands up to the back of her neck and released the catch. Nothing stopped her or compelled otherwise, so she removed it slowly from her neck and placed it on top of her clothes and stepped quickly into the shower.

She rushed through the cleaning and rinsing of her fur, using a minimum of soap to ensure that it'd come out of her fur quickly. With her hair as short as it was, it took no time to get that clean. As she rubbed her fur and hair dry, she was grateful Gregor had thought of such a small detail as having a towel ready for her. It was even one from the faculty baths and not one of the nearly threadbare ones reserved for students. It took three of those to dry her fur and hair, but this one nice towel was more than enough.

Once mostly dry, she started to replace the towel on the rack, but instead smiled mischievously as she dropped it to the floor. Stepping towards the sink where she'd set her grooming kit earlier, she took to the task of straightening up her fur. There were four different combs and three different brushes in her purse for cleaning and grooming her hair and fur after a bath. She settled with a tight comb for her hair and a loose comb and brush for her fur.

Turning to the sink next to her, where she'd placed her other belongings, she took the locket up in her hand. It was at that moment that she realized why she'd been hesitant to remove it before. The only magic about the thing wasn't what was in it, it was in why it was given. Outside of gifts from her father, everything was given to her, not because of who she was, but because of whose daughter she was. Either that or it was gifted because the giver wanted something from her, if nothing other than acknowledgement from the daughter of a national hero.

While she knew that Gregor knew about her and her mother, there was no way he didn't with how entranced he was with reading newspapers, he didn't give her the locket because of that.

She shook the thought from her mind. There had to be something he wanted from her. That was the only explanation, but if it meant not being at the school anymore, then that was where she'd start. She could always leave him later, once she was free of this place. Nothing compelled her to stay around him.

The locket was back around her neck and she was just putting the second ankle wrap in place when the bell signaling the change between classes rang.

She grabbed her purse, climbed up on the sink and pushed the window open. The window looked like it'd been cleaned recently, a foresight of the other wolf she was sure, so it wasn't hard to shimmy backwards out the window without getting her clothes dirty. As she lowered herself on the other side, she couldn't help but notice that it was very quiet behind her. She closed the window making sure that it latched to stave off suspicion and then turned quickly.

The alley was *not* a clean place. There were overflowing garbage cans lining a goodly portion of it and the smell nearly shouted that they hadn't been cleaned in months, even the ones that had been emptied. There were very dirty windows along the walls with the one she'd just left being an obvious exception.

A feeling of betrayal overcame her as she realized: the alley was empty. There was no sign of Gregor anywhere.