

Just as the nameless street vendor had said, there was a coffee shop two blocks down the road. There were a dozen or so round metal tables, most with four chairs randomly placed around them, outside the door to the shop. The glass of the shop's windows was painted with ads and prices and the whole place gave off a cheerful atmosphere. Or maybe it was just that being outside the school and free was raising her spirits. One table sat a little further down the street than the others. She took that to mean it was the one where she was supposed to sit. Being late afternoon, the shop wasn't busy. A single human customer was at a far table, reading a newspaper and sipping a cup of coffee.

No sooner had she seated herself, when a lively lady vykati emerged from the shop. Her fur and hair were a bright golden color and she wore a black skirt and black shirt under a full apron with huge lace sides. When she began talking, Sajani realized that the server's Varkyl accent was even stronger than her own. "Whakineygetcha?" she asked quickly.

The poor teenager had no idea what to say. She had no money and was sitting outside a shop with a meal she'd purchased somewhere else.

"Ah, ya gots pastilla firm dat steet vendah? Sow gode. Ya nade sumtin ta dink wit dat?"

Was that what she sounded like when she spoke? Sajani wondered. Probably not, since she could barely understand what the server was saying. It'd been years since she'd heard anyone speak like that.

Without waiting for an answer the server said, this time with no trace of an accent other than the most common vykati accent, "One large ambarella juice. Got it." With a wink, the lady turned and returned back into the shop.

Since the server seemed to be okay with it and because she was so very hungry, Sajani opened up the bento box and pulled out one of the forks that lay just inside it. The food was as good as it smelled. Even if she hadn't been away from her native cuisine for the last six months, it would have still rated high on her list, she was sure of it.

Eating gave her some time to think. Wouldn't it be easier to just walk out of town? Why all the secrecy and doubletalk? It was like Gregor didn't want to be seen with...her...Oh...She had to stay away from him until they were far away from the school or it'd look like she was helping a slave escape. The fact that the slave was helping her escape was moot.

The time to think raised some more questions, but she found herself preferring to just think on what Gregor was doing for her. There was only one way these people were being paid...Gregor was paying for this from the money he scraped together trying to buy his freedom. Her hand went to the locket. That alone could be half of what he'd earned, easily. It was true that he benefited greatly by escaping the school, but she still didn't see how taking her with him benefited him. She wasn't naïve. She could think of several ways

it *could* benefit him, but none of them fit how he'd been acting so far. There were already a couple of times where he could have merely turned his back for the sake of modesty, but so far, that hadn't been enough for him. Privacy wasn't something she'd had easy access to over the last six months. It was quite a shock coming from a home where she was the only child.

But Gregor valued her privacy so far, even more than she did herself.

The server placed a drink before her, reminding her that she was supposed to be eating. Apparently the accent had returned. "Eedup dare Mist Raweena. Itza loang waiz tada inn." Then with a flick of her golden tail the server returned to the store. As she did so, the human with the newspaper threw some coins on the table and walked to the curb. He waited for only a few seconds before looking at his watch and walking quickly away.

Returning to her meal, she ate almost all of it. Since Gregor was paying for this, she definitely didn't want it to go to waste. She washed it down with the ambarella juice—iced ambarella juice. How much money did Gregor spend? He couldn't have that much. Hopefully he didn't mean for *her* to pay for this?

Just as she was finishing up, a coach pulled up to the curb about where the human had been waiting earlier. There was nothing special about it. It was just a standard cab, probably sent to pick up that other customer once he finished his business in the area. It did have a vykati driver and a vykati footman, black and white fur respectively. They matched the two horses pulling the rig.

As the server was returning to her table, Sajani realized...That was four vykati in a two-block area. She never saw more than two on her previous, longer, outings. What were...

"Hairette ez Mist Roweena. Tab" The last word was spoken with no accent.

She *was* supposed to pay for this?

The shocked look on face must have been very apparent, because the server winked once at her and motioned casually to the paper she'd just placed on the table, then with a much more cosmopolitan accent she said clearly in Vykati, "Trust me." With another flick of her tail, the server turned and returned to the shop.

Well, it was pretty obvious what she was supposed to do next. She even had a pretty good idea what purpose the cab served. Lifting the "tab" she wasn't surprised to see nothing concerning her drink. It was written in Vykati and the handwriting looked like it'd been scratched at some point.

That's your cab.

Be sure to leave that food. Your brother will want it.

She felt a little heat around the sides of her mouth when she realized what she should have seen earlier. Two forks. Leave the food... *I'll blame it on*

*nerve*, she thought. One strip of pasta and about a fourth of the rice and mung beans. Hopefully Gregor would forgive her. Of course if he didn't, she found herself adding quickly, what did that matter to her?

As she got up from her seat and turned towards the cab, the footman jumped down from his perch on the back bumper and opened the door for her. Both him and the driver were dressed typical of cabbies in the small city: looking like a cross between a vagrant and a beggar. The footman bowed slightly as she got close. "Let me guess," she said sarcastically in their native language, "I'm supposed to trust you?"

The sarcasm was casually returned. "In this city, trust no one," but he added in an almost whisper, "except me. You can trust me."

She entered the cab and sat down on the cloth seat cushions. It didn't have the leather interior she was used to and the seats were missing the space between the base and the back that made it easier to place a vykati's tail, but it was clean. It was also the first coach she'd ridden in since her arrival six months previous. The school wasn't far from the train station. She didn't remember exactly where the two were in relation to each other, but she did remember that it was a very short trip. Perhaps that was where they were going. Perhaps they could just get on a train and go...but no. She realized quickly that a train would cost much more than her "brother" had. Cabs were expensive enough, but it didn't take much to figure out why she was taking one. Her fur color did make it rather hard to hide. Good thing vykati didn't need a passport to get into their home country or this would have been much more complicated. But wait...she'd needed a passport to get into Rhidayar. What if they checked at some point? What if they wanted to make sure she was here legally? She went digging frantically through her purse. That was the last place she'd seen the passport. Oh, there it was. The teenager felt so relieved. Even if it did give away her identity, it opened up some possibilities. Then she happened to glance down at the name at the bottom. That *wasn't* her passport. At least not the one she had when she arrived. It was stamped the same, but the name now read "Ralina Camar Adida." It still listed her father's name as her contact in the country, but now he was listed as her uncle. The change seemed surreal.

Perhaps all of this was only a dream. Perhaps.

If it was, she saw no reason to be glum about it. Enjoy the dream. In the morning, she'd wake up and find that she was still at that boring school. She'd still be alone no matter how many people were around her. Until then, she'd enjoy the sense of freedom and enjoy how it felt to be a little pup again—where someone else took care of all her worries.

If it was a dream, she wished there was a way to make the air look cleaner, but other than that, it was an enjoyable trip. She spent most of her time looking out the window and trying to count the number of fellow vykati she saw—there were two.

She had no idea how much time had passed, but it had to be a good amount. It was early evening when they stopped, and the factories and storehouses of the city center were replaced by quaint homes, made of wood with colorful wood shingles. They all looked the same, but that was fine. It was good to be where the air was cleaner. She could smell the difference.

The footman opened the door for her and motioned to the door of a small two-story inn. There was a stone path that led from the curbside to the paneled double door entrance. While the building was larger than the surrounding homes, it managed to somehow be more bland. The sides were painted white with white paneled windows to either side and above the door. The roof shingles were a very dull tan and the sign over the door said simply "Inn."

"Your brother said he'd meet at your room in about a half hour. They're already expecting you..." the footman said and then both said together, "Trust me." That brought a smile to both of their faces. The cab employee again bowed slightly and hopped back to his place on the rear bumper. Before he'd even landed the cab driver shook the reins and the coach continued down the street.

The copper wolf tightened the grip on her purse and entered the building. The inside was a little more ornate than the outside. There was some mahogany trim in places, but the walls were white and the tiled floor was a muddy brown.

There was a neatly dressed vykati with brown behind the plain wood counter. She smiled at the young wolf when she entered. "Don't say it!" Sajani said quickly. "Can we just assume that you're the person I'm supposed to talk with about a room and skip the whole trust issue?"

The lady nodded once and smiled. "I think I might know what type of books your brother likes," she said pertly.

Gregor wasn't her brother, but Sajani had no way of knowing if the hotel worker knew that. "Reservation for Adida?" she asked.

"Yes..." the woman said slowly. "There was a bit of a miscommunication with the *human* owner and I can only give you one room for the night." The look Sajani gave wasn't lost on her. "It's a suite of sorts, so the bedroom does have its own door. I feel bad because your brother's notes were very insistent that you have separate rooms."

Yes. If Gregor hadn't been insistent, she would've been. A thought that perhaps he'd set things up this way did pass through her mind, but it was dismissed immediately. She let it pass.

The lady handed her a set of keys. One key was larger than the other. The worker pointed to the big key. "This key unlocks the main door and the other one goes to a safe in the bedroom."

Sajani looked at her quizzically.

"It just comes with that room. Perhaps it'll make more sense when you see the place."

The younger wolf nodded once and took the keys.

“Your room is just up the stairs. It’s the third door on your right.

As Sajani turned to leave, she remembered her manners. “Thank you.”

“You’re so welcome,” came the sincere reply.

It wasn’t hard to find the room, although the stairs squeaked like a family of mice lived under them, Sajani was grateful that the pine floorboards of the upper level seemed sturdy and properly in place. Unlike the lobby area, this part of the hotel looked well maintained and expensive. At least the doors seemed that way. The trim and wall color were the same as it was below, but the doors were expensive redwood and paneled. Hers was the third door on the right. The key fit fine and the lock had obviously been maintained recently. She could smell the oil.

Once inside the room, Sajani had to admit, the presence of a safe made a lot more sense. This wasn’t a standard hotel room. It was closer to an apartment—a very expensive apartment. Being alone in an unfamiliar place made her nervous, so she tried to keep her mind occupied by exploring the place.

While there wasn’t a stove, there was a place to prepare food and a large kitchen sink. Stained wood cupboards with beveled doors, some with glass centers, stored place settings. She went and checked behind the doors. The ones without glass were empty with only one exception. One hid an icebox! It even had fresh ice in it!

The rest of the apartment was as posh as the preparation area. There was a small round dinette set with four matching chairs and a sitting area with a coffee table, two leather sofas and four end tables. One of the sofas had a stack of sheets and a pillow on it. *Probably for me*, Sajani thought wryly. *I didn’t pay for this.*

The bed in the bedroom was pretty plain, although it was sized for a vykati. She knew. She checked. It was soft, but not suffocating and had four feather pillows, a felt comforter, and satin sheets—she’d checked that too. The safe was under a counter and mirror that served as a vanity just outside the bathroom. And the bath! The tub in there was big enough for even the largest vykati and maybe some friends! Hot and cold running water! (She checked.)

In all the enthusiastic discovery she’d been making, time must have passed quickly. She heard the key being used on the main door. Now she didn’t have to keep trying to distract herself. There’d be someone else here shortly. She rushed to the front room anxious to show Gregor all the new things she’d discovered. Someone had to be told about it and he was all she had!

Gregor didn’t have the smile or even a look of relief to see her safe like she’d expected. Instead he had a rather grumpy look on his face. “Thanks Sajani,” his voice was dripping with sarcasm. “A whole pastola strip, a whole mung bean, and a whole grain of rice. I didn’t even need the fork. I’m glad

you were so gener...ous..." he stopped and a look of awe and wonder replaced the grumpy frown he had earlier. "How'd you ever afford a room like this?"

His brief complaint wasn't enough to quell her enthusiasm, since now he seemed to be thinking a little like she was. "I know!" she almost squealed, saying the response she'd planned based on what she thought he'd say. Then she realized what he really said. "I didn't pay anything for it. The lady at the front desk said you'd reserved it. I'm hoping it's paid for, because I don't have any money."

Gregor stepped in and began looking around, still in a state of wonderment. "Actually you do," he said while inspecting one of the leather sofas and the sheets and pillow stacked on them. "You have twelve gold." He moved over towards the dinette and kitchen area. "I also pick up the mail and know what the staff likes to do with the money some parents send. I had to leave one gold in each or they'd have been suspicious."

Her father had been sending money? Three gold a month? It wasn't a fortune, but it definitely would have made her stay a lot more comfortable. "And what if I asked my father why I wasn't getting any money?"

Like I said, 'some parents.' You're signed up for three years, so they just make sure no letters mentioning the money go out. Your dad didn't mention it in any of his letters or they'd have left the coins in or completely failed to give it to you." He was now opening the cupboards and sighing when he discovered that most contained nothing. He did seem impressed with the icebox. "When you got home, they'd blame it on the mail service."

The thought made her angry on two counts. "And why didn't you give me the money?"

His answer quickly defused her. "The first time they saw you spend it they'd know someone was taking money before they could steal it. Who happened to be doing that wouldn't be a huge assumption." On his way back to the sofas he pulled out a small pouch and handed it to her. "If I had the money, I'd have just mailed it back to your dad. International mail is *expensive*." Once he was back in front of the sofa with the sheets stacked on it, he started to unfold them and arrange them to make a bed there.

*It's hours to nightfall, he hasn't even seen the whole apartment yet and he's getting my bed ready for me?* "You haven't even seen the bedroom yet! You'll love it in there!"

Sajani wasn't sure about the confused look he gave her, but he did walk slowly over to towards the bedroom, stopping just outside the doorway. He looked up.

"Huh," he said casually. "Why's there a chandelier in the bedroom, but not one in the sitting room?" He turned back to the sofa, presumably to finish the task he'd started.

There was a *chandelier* in there? How'd she miss that? Running up to the doorway, she looked in. It wasn't a very big one, with maybe a total of five

electric candles on it, but there were lots of crystals dangling to refract the light. It was fancier than anything she had at home.

She looked over at Gregor who was just finishing laying out the sheets and said, "You didn't need to do that. I could have done it."

He shot her a very confused look. He suddenly seemed nervous "Wh...Why would *you* m...make *my* bed?" There was a moment where his face reflected the revelation he'd just received. "Oh, uh, your bed...It's in there." He said pointing to the bedroom door. "I figured you'd need...I mean, I thought you'd...you'd want to use the bath."

"But you paid! You should have..."

That comment seemed to quell his nervousness. "This? I couldn't afford this! I paid half-price for two single rooms. I thought that maybe they weren't good enough for you, so you paid the difference to upgrade."

She laughed. "With what money?"

He joined her amusement with a chuckle, "Well, it wasn't a very long-lasting thought."

There was an awkward silence for a long moment. Despite how often people had given her things by virtue of what her mother had done, it still didn't feel right to take the only bed, but it also didn't feel right to argue with someone that had given up his life's saving to get her out of a bad situation.

"I..." she started, looking down at her hands. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm sure the sofa will be..."

"Not that," she interrupted testily. She was still looking at her hands so didn't see the crestfallen look on Gregor's face. She continued quickly. "Thank you for getting me out of there. I've wanted out almost since I got there, but after today I didn't..."

He laughed sarcastically, and she looked up at him. His eyes were downcast as he said, "Not sure how thankful...I mean, before you decide how...how thankful you should be for that, maybe..."

She knew. It was the first thing she'd been really thankful for in about five years. "I am. I know my social skills could use a little work, so don't make this any harder..."

He laughed again, then looked down at his feet for a moment. There was a little hesitation as he said, "Well...Maybe...Before you go any further there is something I should tell...something you should know." He paused for a moment.

So this was it. Now he'd finally tell her what he wanted out of this whole deal. Maybe the single room *was* a setup. Maybe...

He continued, saying the words quickly "The reason you were in that cell was because I set you up for it."

Well, at least his confession wasn't what she was afraid it'd be. "How?" was all she could get out.

He looked down at his feet and began shuffling them across the floor still standing in place. "I forged a memo to your teacher from the principal. And

then forged one back. Mr. Berhaul thought those rude things he said about vykati were part of the official lesson plan and Mr. Trassefil thought that you'd threatened to bite another student." He seemed truly sorry.

A setup? And done by the quiet and polite janitor? Oh, and he *forged* documents? Sajani thought it was possibly the funniest thing she'd ever heard. She laughed loudly.

"You...you don't mind?"

She tried to stop laughing gracefully, but she ended up letting out a loud snort that sounded like half sneeze and half hiccup. That set them both laughing. Gaining just enough composure, she asked, "How'd you know I'd react that way?"

His laughter stopped for a moment and his face gave an expression of intense concentration. Then he started laughing again—louder this time.

She didn't see what was so funny and she said so.

"You're serious? You honestly don't know?" He was slowly reigning in his laughter.

"No?" she asked.

That brought the laughter to a quick stop and a very serious and almost philosophical expression came to his face as he sat down on the couch. "There was *no* way you'd let that comment pass or be calm enough when you got to the principal's office to hold your tongue."

He was right. It was pretty rude... and she was pretty easy to set off.

"I had to find a way to get you out of class and to a place where we could leave without notice. My old room seemed like the perfect place and I'd already heard the staff say that you were destined to go there the first time they could justify it."

Once it was said, she knew it was true. She'd never heard anyone say anything directly like Gregor had, but the way they treated her daily told the whole story.

"Ok, so really there's nothing to forgive. You got me out of there and I'm very grateful." There were still a lot of questions on her mind, but she didn't want to badger him. She now had a pretty good idea of how her passport got changed at least. "So, what now? It's not very late and I doubt it's a good idea to be seen so close to the school."

He nodded. "Yes. Even with our 'cover story' about you being related to yourself, it's best if we keep a low profile until we're out of Bahadhra." He paused a moment and then changed the subject, "I never could think of a way to ask before, but do you even *have* cousins?"

It could be a rather touchy subject among family members, but there was no way he knew that. "No." she opted for a short answer, but apparently her face betrayed her.

Fortunately, Gregor had a better grasp of social customs than she did. "Sorry. I didn't mean to pry." He then began digging through his bookbag. "I knew there'd be a bit of a wait here tonight, so I brought some books." If it

was possible for a vykati to blush, Sajani felt like her traveling companion would have. “I, uh, *borrowed* them from a student that seems to at least not totally hate wolves.”

Now it was her turn not to pry. He passed a book over to her. It was an adventure novel of some sort and the cover depicted the deck of a ship being washed over by huge waves as a small group of vykati sailors tried to stay aboard. Getting a book like that was a stroke of luck. Most of her classmates liked romance novels. Sajani didn’t mind romance stories, but they often involved someone that just had to look pretty or handsome. She preferred books where people actually *did* something. Was there such a thing as a romance adventure? “Looks good,” she said truthfully, “but you said, ‘books’”

He smiled. “*I did* and I knew you’d notice so I saved this one for you. That server at the coffee shop had read it and offered it to me.”

Just from his description she had a pretty good idea of what it was, and she was right. He handed her the seventh book in the *Prequel to Alpha* series. It wasn’t new like the books her father sent. As a matter of fact, it was pretty worn, or ‘loved’ as her mother liked to say. The cover showed the title character (who had brown fur and got his clothes from a thrift shop) charging a cannon with his ax out. One of the cannons had just touched off the fuse and it was anyone’s guess if the hero would get out of the way in time.

“I can’t wait to read it!” she said truthfully as she turned towards the bedroom. “Anything that needs to be done tonight or can I start reading?”

Sajani was too excited to notice the sad smile that crossed Gregor’s lips. He looked at his feet yet again. “You...you might take the chance to...to wash your clothes. I know you hardly wore them today, but this is probably the last place with running water for the next while. I planned on washing mine in the sink. Other than that, I figured you’d enjoy a long soak in the tub.”

She knew she would, but there was still one thing worrying her. “I hate to ask,” she said shyly.

Gregor waited for her patiently.

“um...You *will* be out here all night, won’t you? You’re not going anywhere else?” She tried to not be shaking when she asked.

Sajani could tell her question surprised him. “I’ll be here if you need me,” he said, adding with concern, “Are you ok?”

The panic receded. She was able to stop shaking and answered in a mostly calm voice, “I’m fine.” She debated whether or not to tell him, afraid that maybe he’d laugh at her. Ultimately she decided that after the scare in the alley, it might be better if he knew. Looking down at her hands she said quietly “It’s just: I...don’t like to be alone.” There was a feeling of total and complete relief that passed through her when Gregor didn’t laugh.

Instead he got a very sympathetic look on his face and said. “I’ll sleep right outside the door if that’s better.”

“No,” she answered with a weak smile. “Knowing you’re... knowing someone is out here is enough.”

She didn’t look back as she hurried through the bedroom door and closed it behind her. She could take a nice long bath and read. Now that she knew he’d be out there, it was going to be a relaxing evening.