

Chapter 4: Holiday at the Lake (Part 1 of 2)

“Put your hands out where I kin see ‘em,” the voice continued.

There wasn’t an argument. The two youths obliged.

“Now turn slowly so I kin see ya.”

As Sajani turned, a deep brown vykati came into view. His eyes were dark—almost black—and he was wearing a leather outfit that was patched with rabbit fur in places. There were two very old-style muskets in his hands and a sword without a scabbard dangling from his belt.

There was also a very bemused smile on his face.

“Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh!” he was laughing in a way that was loud enough to be shouting “It’s not quite as much fun to scare kids your age as it is to scare the humans that come around here when they shouldn’t, but... Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh! It’s close enough to make it a better day than it was!” He thrust his muskets into his belt and stretched out a hand to them in greeting.”

The handshake and cheek rubs that followed were stiff and unsure. And silent.

The old vykati newcomer wasn’t put off by that. He continued jovially, “Name’s Blade. Well it’s not really, but you can call me that! Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh!” Since Gregor was the second one he greeted, their hands were still grasped. He looked the youth in the eye and said, “And ya are?”

Sajani had been silent, since her companion seemed to always know what was happening and what needed to be said. He was strangely quiet now.

“I...I...” he stammered quietly.

Supposing that perhaps Blade had come across somewhat intimidating and noting that he was still very much in the young wolf’s personal space, Sajani answered for them both. “He’s Gregor and I’m Sajani,” she said simply, hoping that it came across as friendly. “We’re heading west and didn’t really expect to come across anyone here.”

The old wolf’s demeanor changed instantly, and his face became very serious. “Aye that. If ya’re looking to leave Rhidayar, I kin help ya. Helped a few afore you. Not sure how ya ended up at my lake, but ya’re a couple a lucky pups to have come this way. If ya hold to such a thing as luck.”

“We managed this far,” Sajani said defensively. It looked like Gregor wanted to say something but couldn’t seem to get it out.

Blade released the young man’s hand and turned towards her. “Those packs are sitting a little too high and light to have much in them. I can see from the way this one’s sits,” he motioned to Gregor, “that it’s got a few books in it, but not much else. Yours is blankets.”

Sajani was impressed, but still felt a need to show him that he wasn’t completely right. “I have two canteens.”

“Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh!” The loud laugh returned. “Well, ol’ Blade did miss that. Ya got one on me, Miss.” He quieted again. “But it’s five days, at least, from here to East Oasis and a week from there to the port. Ya’ll need

more supplies than that. Those blueberries ya had for lunch don't grow much further west of here, once the ground slopes towards the desert." He pointed to her hands. She looked down and could see a small smudge of blue on one of her fingers.

Sajani looked over at Gregor again. He started to open his mouth but closed it immediately.

Blade leaned towards her conspiratorially. "I think that one might be a bit shy," he whispered.

The copper wolf let out a small giggle that sounded well beneath her age. Gregor? Shy? Possibly intimidated. "We'd be grateful for any help you can offer, Mr. Blade."

"Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh! Just Blade." He spit to the ground. "Formal don't work well for me. Ya'll see Jonny and Greg, True help has no formality."

Given that she'd never been called that by anyone older than six, Sajani held her composure well. She didn't know what Gregor thought of the shortening of his name. He didn't say anything, but then again, his face was still pretty unreadable.

Blade approached the young man. "I've no ice for that swollen lip of yars, but I do have some herbs that'll help. Might help that bruising too. Must've been some fight."

Gregor seemed to find his voice again, "Th...Thank you, sir."

"Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh! Sir is it? Ya're a prim one, Greg. Really prim." He got a little more serious. "I kin get ya stocked up, but it'll be two days before the venison dries, so ya have time to spend here. Let's head to my cabins and we kin do some more of this 'formal talk' ya keep trying on me."



Approaching from the side, they could barely see Blade's cabin. It looked like a small hill with a steep bank that faced the lake. Other than the single chair in front of it, there was nothing to show that someone lived there. At first Sajani just thought it was a place that Blade liked to meditate or sit, being how it did have a very nice view. Once they got closer, she could see the short door and a window opening. There was no glass, but there were sturdy shutters to cover it along with some rather thick curtains. The sod roof was the reason it blended in so well. When Blade motioned a little beyond it, she noticed that there were three such buildings, this being the closest.

"This one's the one I abandoned years ago when the...Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh! Never mind its history," he winked at her, "It's my special guest house and'll be perfect for ya Jonny." He pushed open the door (there was no handle) and she peeked inside. Considering where it was at, there was little dust. A bed with a rope mattress sat in one corner with a large wooden tub next to it. Blade reached in just past the door and pulled out an aluminum bucket. Ya kin fill the tub with lake water, if ya want. Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh!"

That tub isn't the first thing to get some water, she thought.

“Ya kin get started here Jonny, I’ll get Greg settled in the root cellar. Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh! Or he kin stay in my house if he don’t mind my snoring. Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh!” Blade sniffed and spat.

As the two men were walking away a creeping panic overtook the copper wolf and she took a few hurried steps to catch up with them. “I uh,” she said rather clumsily, “I’d like to get a little better acquainted with the area before I get started.”

Blade looked thoughtful for a moment. “Alright Jonny. We’ll grab some food and then finalize those sleeping arrangements. What ya say there Greg?”

Gregor looked over at her and scanned her face. He gave a slight nod and a look of resolve came over him. “If it’s alright with you, Blade I’d rather not be left alone at night.”

The young wolf’s eyes never left hers when the old vykati said, “Putting up with my snoring it is, then. Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh!”

Sajani frowned.

Gregor nodded once to her and said, “Actu...Actually Blade, I am a rather light sleeper. I think...I think I’ll sleep outside Sajani’s door, if you don’t mind. I’ll feel less alone there.”

The she-wolf knew that he’d do exactly what he was saying he’d do. She didn’t worry at all about what he suggested. And she really didn’t want to be alone.

Blade turned and sized up the two youths. “Less alone, eh?” There was a long pause as he looked back and forth between the other wolves. “No business of mine where ya sleep. The ground’s plenty soft just a little to the side there.” He led them to the building that was furthest out, presumably the one he called the root cellar. The front wall had only a door in it. “I’ll just grab a bit from here,” he told them quickly, “and we kin settle and eat out here on the grass.”

He wasn’t in the little outbuilding long, but it was long enough for Sajani to look Gregor in the eye and say quietly, “Thank you.”

The other youth merely nodded and said quickly. “You’re welcome.”

Blade returned with his arms piled with sacks of dried food. Sajani could identify them just by smell: fish, turkey, blueberry, raspberry, cherry, and apple. This would be a welcome meal. “There’s a bit to spare. I’m a little low on the meats. Haven’t seen much turkey this year and I’m not much on fishing...”

They took the sacks to the grass above the root cellar and spread it out before them. Had it been served to Sajani a year ago, she’d have said it was nearly the worst meal ever. Here in the open, free and in good safe company, it was by far the best she’d ever eaten. And she was sure that she’d think of it that way for years to come.

When they were done Blade said that he had some traps to check, and he’d rather do that alone, but there was probably enough daylight left to get

cleaned up. He looked at the mud splattered clothes the younger wolves were wearing and didn't say anymore.

Sajani had been worried that Gregor might be too tired to help her. Once they got started she realized that he was exhausted but insisted on helping anyway. She started by tearing down the curtains.

Using one and a handy fallen branch, she crafted a make-shift mop/duster. She wasn't too worried about the overall cleanness, she just wanted to make sure there was a place for her clothes to dry and she didn't get all covered in dust after she bathed.

Despite his sleepiness, Gregor was a big help. At first she wondered why she wasn't sleepy, since she'd stayed up very late the previous night, but she soon realized that she *would* drop off to sleep if she stopped moving for more than a few seconds. Her desire to be clean overrode her desire to sleep.

As they were hauling the water up to the tub, she asked Gregor if he wanted to use the bath first. She could wait over by the root cellar until he was done and had a chance to get wrapped in his blanket. He then pointed out that only one curtain was left dry.

Sajani laughed, "Then we can put the tub outside, I can lock myself in and you can bath first out here."

"No," he insisted. "I can always just go for a swim in the morning, clothes and all." His last words were slightly slurred from fatigue.

She was pouring the last bucketful of water into the tub. Turning to where he was, she started to say, "I don't want you to drown if you fall asleep." The first three words were as far as she got when she noticed that he'd fallen asleep sitting up against the wall.

Turning towards the door, she almost left him there, but instead she reached into the house where she left her bag and pulled out a blanket. Not wanting to disturb him, she tried to lay the blanket over him as best as possible. Once it touched him, however, he gripped it tightly and said softly but clearly, "Mom! Paw! Where are they taking me?" He lowered himself to a lying position and wrapped the blanket around himself. His eyes never opened.

How often does he have that dream? She wondered.



If Sajani had dreams that night, she didn't remember them. She awoke fairly well rested. Her clothes were much cleaner, but still damp. She dressed anyway and put her necklace back on. She looked down at it briefly and then walked to the door and out into the early dawn. Gregor was there leaning against the wall, the blanket neatly folded next to him. Now that she was cleaned up, he looked *messy*. There was mud all over him and his clothes. His lip was very swollen.

Her distaste for his appearance must have been visible because he said, "I'll get cleaned up in a bit and remind Blade about that salve he mentioned."

"Did you sleep well?"

That question made him very nervous for some reason. “Um,” he looked down at his feet. “Y...Yes...um...”

She waited patiently.

“You...you brought the blanket?”

Was that what was making him so nervous or was he just making small talk? His insecurity was apparently contagious. As soon as she began to talk, she found herself unable to express herself. “I...I...I didn’t want you...I thought it might not be...might not be fair for me to have one and you to go cold...I put it over...I put it by you so that you could have it.”

That eased the tension between them noticeably. Gregor smiled and said, “Thank you.”

A cheerful voice spoke up near them. “Ya two are something else.” Blade said. “Something else.”

Neither had any idea what he meant by it.

The old vykati continued, “Ya’re in luck, if ya want to call it luck. Got a boar yesterday. With a little salt we kin have something like bacon. The rest will dry well and maybe let me send ya with a little more than I thought originally.”

The idea of bacon for breakfast did sound wonderful.

“Oh,” Blade was quick to add, “And a few wild pastola eggs. I’ll add some potatoes from the root cellar and it’ll almost be like a real *formal* breakfast. Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh!”

Sajani rolled her eyes and Gregor laughed.

“I heard that eye roll,” Blade quipped, “No idea which said it, but I heard it. Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh!”

The younger wolves joined in his laugh.

“Oh!” Blade burst out suddenly while looking directly at Gregor, “That salve! I’ll get it for ya and then ya kin tell me all about the glorious battle where you earned that lip and bruises. I kin make breakfast and listen.



Sajani ended up telling most of the story. Gregor tried, but had a bit of trouble organizing his thoughts. It was obvious that he was pretty proud of his role in it and he was quick to remind Sajani when she left out details about what she’d been doing. She was pretty sure she didn’t leave out any of his heroics.

Blade really enjoyed hearing all about it. He laughed his loud (and quickly getting annoying) laugh through a lot of it and complemented both on their accomplishments.

Once the salve had been applied, making it look like Gregor had rolled his head in a bucket of grease, Blade started on breakfast. He used a few cast iron pans over a fire pit near his house and breakfast was soon done.

Blade pulled the pans from the fire and looked around quickly. “Might have made a small oversight,” he said calmly. “Don’t have any plates or

forks.” It was pretty obvious that he was putting on an act, but Sajani didn’t care. She was hungry and the food smelled heavenly.

So they ate with their hands once the pans had cooled enough. It made the breakfast even better somehow. When they were done Blade pulled out a blackened cloth from his back pocket and wiped the pans down.

“I have more traps to check,” Blade told them when he was done. “I’ll be back around dinner time and then out again to check more traps.” His expression got really serious. “I picked up a little news from a fellow trapper last night. Nothing to worry ya young ones or I’d not leave ya here alone, but if ya do happen to hear a loud sound like a gong coming from any of these buildings, ya take off as fast as ya kin straight west.” His voice regained some of its usual casualness, but there was a worried expression on both the young wolves faces. “Now, ya’re free to move on any time ya want of course. But O’ Blade’s taken a liking to ya and I’d rather ya waited for the last of those supplies to finish drying. Then I can pack enough for you to get you to East Oasis and a bit beyond.”

Sajani and Gregor both stayed silent, a worried expression across their faces. That didn’t seem to bother Blade at all. He just rose up and walked off towards the lake.

They waited until he was well out of earshot before speaking. Sajani started. “What was that about?”

Gregor shook his head slowly. “I’m not sure, but I...” he stopped short for a moment. “He seems to know what he’s doing.”

Sajani nodded. Despite the scare when they first met, Blade proved to be friendly and likable. “Those supplies will be a big help.” Sajani said truthfully.

“I meant to stick to the roads and go from city to city, but things didn’t work out that way.” He sounded a little down on himself.

That bothered Sajani. “It was a good plan and you’ve been improvising nicely. We’ve been lucky.” Once the words were out of mouth, she remembered what Blade had told them when they first arrived.

Gregor remembered too apparently, “I’m not so sure I take much stock in luck.”

“What do you mean?”

The young man was quiet for a long moment, “I’m not sure how to word it without sounding...I don’t know...preachy, or um...flirting maybe?”

Sajani tried to laugh his comment away, but the laugh didn’t sound real to her. From what she’d seen so far, Gregor would probably choke on his own tongue if he tried to flirt. The voice that came from inside of her was almost startling. *Would you mind if he did?* She couldn’t find an honest answer to that, at least not one she wanted to hear.

The other wolf apparently noticed her hesitation, “Don’t worry about it. I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable or anything.” There was that slow sadness to his voice that she recognized from a few times before.

His comment made her feel bad. “No,” she lied. “It’s not what you’re thinking. I just...” She wasn’t really that good of liar, despite her recent escapades. Her “friends” usually tried to keep her from speaking when the need arose. She just what? Wanted to hear him say something nice about her? That wasn’t in the list of things she could bring herself to say. “Go ahead. I won’t laugh at you or anything. I promise.”

That reassurance was enough for him. “Since you showed up at the school, I’ve felt like there’s only been one direction I can go, almost like a puppet on strings. I’d been planning an escape. Manfred was already trying to find other people to help me when you showed up. But since you arrived...”

There was a very long pause. Part of Sajani wanted to prompt him to continue, but she was afraid of sounding eager...or placating.

“Since you came to the school, I stopped wanting to escape...oh,” he let a small whine, “that’s not it...I still wanted to escape, but only if *you* could come too. I...It’s really not that important.” His eyes were glistening.

She wanted to know where he was going with that. She felt a slight burning in her cheeks and nose when he said he didn’t want to go without her. She was flattered, but that wasn’t where the conversation had started. Part of her almost asked him to continue, but at the same time, she didn’t want to see him upset. “It’s ok,” she told him. “We’ll have plenty of time. If you ever want to talk about it again, I’ll listen.”

He smiled at her...and changed the subject so suddenly it made her mentally dizzy. “I’m going to go clean up,” he told her.

She rose and started toward where she was staying. “I’ll get the bucket to fill the tub. It looks like there might be a small waterfall that feeds into the lake. I can go check that out while...”

“I meant I’m going to jump in the lake and splash around until my clothes and I are both clean. “

That was a relief. She didn’t want to go on a hike by herself. “I’ll wait here and...” *and what?* “I’ll keep an eye out for wolf-eating fish or something.”

His smile grew still wider and he ran down to the lake and splashed his way along until the water was over his head.

There was a sort of simple pleasure in watching him enjoy himself in the water. When he came out, he looked happier than she’d ever seen him. She felt happy too. They laughed when they realized that the curtain she’d used to dry off the day before had fallen in the dust while still damp. With no other way for him to dry off, he lay in the grass over the root cellar with his arms and legs spread out, turning from front to back periodically.

To pass the time she found a book that wasn’t too badly water damaged. It was the same one she’d seen two nights previous, before he’d given her the *Prequal to Alpha* book. She read it to him. It was the first time she’d read a book to someone else. Her parents used to read to her all the time.

Once Gregor's clothes and fur were dry enough, they both agreed that it wasn't worth going further into the book, so they instead went looking for that waterfall she'd mentioned earlier. The way the cliffs were arranged at that end of the lake, Sajani had been pretty sure there'd be a large waterfall.

It wasn't that she was wrong. It was large if you considered anything taller than her large. It was about three meters high. It did give off enough spray that if you sat in just the right spot (it took them awhile to find out where) you could see a small rainbow coming off the water.