

Chapter 6: Crushed (Part 1 of 2)

Sajani awoke just as the sun was cresting the horizon. She stretched and put on her necklace. Looking over at where Gregor was sleeping almost made her burst out laughing. She'd have woken him up if she did, so stopped herself. His blanket was spread wide behind him with none of it covering his body. Lying on his back with his legs spread out and one arm on his chest and the other stretched to his side, he had a big smile across his face and a little drool on his mouth. Between his legs his tail was twitching and occasionally wagging. His hair was untied and lying around his head like a dark halo. It wasn't the first time she'd seen his hair like that, but given everything else about the situation, it was funny.

She looked up from where he was sleeping and turned to watch the sun rise. Sitting cross legged on the grass, she was filled with happiness and gratitude—not normal feelings for her prior self. Sure there was a long walk ahead of them, but they'd made it a good distance and were pretty well off. They had a good supply of food and would be able to fill up their water here.

The terminator had just crossed over her, filling her with the sun's warmth, when Gregor's voice came from behind her. "It's always the most hopeful part of the day for me," he said quietly. "Night comes and you're full of the memories of the day and regretting things. But then the sun rises the next morning and it's a chance to forget everything else and start new."

"That sounds really familiar," Sajani told him.

"It should," he responded, "It's from book 5: *Waylaid and Alone*. Camissa is about to leave Yanebel and take their kids with her when she stops to watch the sunrise."

Sajani was remembering now. "She tells him that it was something they always did together, but it'd been so long..."

"I cried when she left," Gregor admitted.

The copper wolf laughed. "I didn't. He'd be really difficult to live around. Leaving him freed her."

"I suppose in some ways," he confided, "it makes sense that you would side with her and I'd side with him, but..."

This was the first time she'd even considered that there might be another point of view. "What?" she asked.

"You're a lot more like Yanebel than I am."

She thought a moment about his statement but couldn't really see what he was talking about. "I'd counter that with you being a lot more like Camissa, but you're not *anything* like her."

Her companion laughed. "That definitely isn't an aspiration of mine."

She wanted to ask him why he thought she was more like Yanebel but figured that'd just lead to a lot of stammering and embarrassment. Maybe it would come up again later. "Should we get some breakfast before we go, or eat on the way?"

He smiled, "Let's eat here, unless you have a preference?"

"Tastes like flavored dust either way."

They pulled the hard tack from their packs and sat down to eat. "How much pastola do you have left?" she asked.

"Not much," he answered. "I should spread it out, but the turkey seems so bland and I never really cared for fish. I can eat it, but if there's another option..."

That opened up an opportunity. "I can eat fish," she said, "I'll trade you the fish for my turkey."

"Deal," he said, tossing a few bags her way and digging in his pack to see if there was more. "Since we're getting into food preferences, any fruit you want to trade?"

There *was* something that wasn't being eaten. "I'll trade my dried cherries for whatever you want. I can eat them, but Blade missed a pit on one and I nearly choked. Been hesitant to eat them since."

"I'd rather have cherries than apples so we're good there."

They spent some time rearranging their packs. When they were done they realized that they hadn't actually eaten anything and the food was now all put away.

They laughed for a good while.

"We don't have to have breakfast right now, do we? Maybe we should get started and stop later," she suggested.

Gregor didn't answer. He just put his book bag on his back and started walking down the river. She followed suit



Benayle was never thrilled about having to visit places of government. With the people of his own country, he was slowly training them to be less formal. He tried to convince them that they could be themselves when he was around.

That couldn't happen when it was someone else's government. The Rhidayan Embassy was formal: cubed. People talked slowly and purposefully. People walked slowly and purposefully.

Couldn't they see he was in a hurry? He hardly noticed the richly upholstered furniture and thick carpet. At last he arrived at the ambassador's office.

And...they took a while to formally announce him. Once the door was closed behind him, he let out a sigh of relief. The diplomat laughed. He was dressed much more appropriately than the last time they'd seen each other. He wore a very expensive white suit. It looked like it'd be hot wearing that in the *winter* and to make it seem worse, the coat had a collar that was buttoned up all the way to the Ambassador's neck. The brown and red sash was still on his shoulder.

Mr. Rahala was laughing at him. “It’s much easier for me to get in to see you than it is the other way around, but you weren’t in your office when I stopped by and I couldn’t find that new secretary of yours. Did he get fired already?”

“Oh, no,” Benayle responded. “I think he’ll work out nicely actually. He’s left to take care of some *family* business. I’ve been trying to see you for the last few days, what has you so busy?”

The diplomat picked up a piece of paper from off his desk and handed it to Benayle. “There’s a lot of information coming through *unofficial* channels and I’ve been busy gathering it and trying to figure out what it all means. I’m sure you won’t recognize any of these names.”

The Alpha read down the list:

Manfred Tills
Callise Fantoba
Toby Banks
Fren Basker
Redrose Matra

Benayle returned the paper to the desk it came from. “No,” he said truthfully, “Not a single one.”

“Not surprising,” the ambassador said carefully, “They all have two things in common. They’re all vykati and they’re all charged with aiding and abetting the escape of an indentured servant.”

“Is it Sajani and the other wolf?” Benayle asked.

The human nodded once.

“Serious business,” the Alpha said solemnly. “I don’t need to tell you my feelings about your country executing vykati.”

“No, my friend, you don’t,” the Ambassador said graciously. “I’m hoping we can find a peaceable solution.”

“For now, let’s see what we can do about ensuring a civilized incarceration and a fair trial.”

“I’m happy to work with you on that,” the diplomat said, “Unfortunately, there’re a lot of factors that are out of my hands.”

His words startled the Alpha. “What do you mean? We’ve worked through cases like this before.”

The diplomat shook his head. “So far, I can’t even find out where they’re being held. I was lucky to get this much information. It came from...another source. To be honest, I was hoping your inside assistance had information for you that I didn’t.”

“No. I don’t have any way to really get in touch with him, but there’s only a few reasons they’d block data from one of their own.” The concern in Benayle’s voice was palpable. He knew exactly why *he’d* do something like that. The reports he’d received the last few days didn’t calm his worry.

The Ambassador moved up to the vykati and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I don’t think that attacking *you* is their aim...”

That didn’t sound good. “Talk to me, Handamar!” Benayle said almost forcefully. He turned and placed his hands on the ambassador’s shoulders. To some humans his actions might have been threatening, but the leader hoped his friend would understand that it was being done out of real concern.

And if it was intimidating, that was ok to.

The diplomat seemed unshaken but did take his hand off the leader’s shoulder. Looking Benayle in the eye he said, “I won’t lie to you. There *are* some troops moving towards our southern border for ‘training.’ That hasn’t been hidden from me, so I doubt it’s intended as a strike.”

Once that bit of information was out, the Alpha calmed tremendously. The diplomat was being open with him. He was aware of the movements the ambassador was talking about. According to his Minister of War, with some consultation from the Ministry of State, he’d been advised that the movements were very much *defensive*. Cavalry and infantry weren’t moving. It was mostly small battalions of artillery, engineers, and support. After releasing his hold, Benayle turned away and began pacing. His advisors suggested that Rhidayar was either doing drills or was simply moving troops as a result of new leadership wanting a different setup: change for the sake of change or the solution to a problem that didn’t exist. “What else are they hiding from you?”

“That’s the thing. It all has to do with the same incident. It all comes down to the search for Sajani and that escaped servant.” There was no doubt the ambassador was both frustrated and worried. “Every time I try to get information about where they are or even, like I told you, the people implicated in it, I come up against a brick wall.”

There was silence for a moment. Benayle stopped pacing and said quickly, “And you’re sure that’s what all this is revolving around?”

The diplomat nodded, “I was hoping you knew of some strategic significance to Sajani.”

The Alpha placed a hand under his snout and thought for a moment. When he added the defensive troop movements to the equation... The final pieces of the puzzle clicked into place. He spoke slowly, with a surety to his voice that had literally calmed millions in the past “There isn’t. They’re not after her. They’re after that servant.”

“All this to catch a slave?”

“No. All this to prevent a war.”



Orange had been right. There wasn’t much to glean about what was going on. Farnsbeck had been prepared to wait to get information. Important knowledge was never easily earned or digested, but he hadn’t expected it to take this long. From what he’d been able to gather the last two days, there wasn’t much to know. The Rhidayan government was acting like something

major was happening, but on the low level, the level he needed to look for his charge, there was nothing. The police in the area weren't even searching for anyone.

Well, lunch was an option, although much longer on a diet of Rhidayan cuisine and his stomach might revolt. How could humans survive with so little meat in their diet? He stopped at a coffee shop and sat outside at a table that had been moved slightly away from the rest. There was only one other guest: a human reading a newspaper. The place seemed cheerful enough, with brightly painted windows advertising different coffee blends.

The secretary pulled a small calendar from his pocket and looked it over for a moment. When he was done, he placed it on the empty seat next to him.

A small Rhidayan man came out of the shop and approached him. He was young, less than twenty, and wearing black shorts and a black shirt. Over those was a full apron with large lace sides. It looked way too large for him. He greeted the faux human. "Good afternoon, sir. What can I get for you?"

Farnsbeck looked over at the window, but nothing looked really appetizing. "Is there a special today?"

"Uh, yes sir..." the young man looked nervous and started searching in his apron pockets. When that failed, he searched the pockets on his shorts and managed to find a small slip of paper.

The humanized vykati waited patiently.

"The special today is chicken masala, served with a Jzianrhun latte."

Farnsbeck wanted to ask what a Jzianrhun latte was but thought better of it. "New?" he asked sympathetically.

"Yes, sir. And the server I replaced isn't here to help train me, so it's been a bit harder than usual."

The agent studied the window some more. The fact they were serving something with chicken was hopeful.

Apparently nervous, the server felt like he had to fill the silence with something. "I'd heard of vykati up and disappearing before, but she's the first one I actually knew."

That was hopeful. Any information at this point... *First, gauge his loyalties*, the secretary thought calmly. "Good riddance," he spat, "The fewer mangy dogs here, the better."

The server looked a little crestfallen for a moment but managed to find some courage. "Oh no sir," he said defensively, "Callise was a very nice person. She'd already been helping me get this job when she disappeared."

Mostly safe then. "When? I might not miss her, but I was under the impression the wolves were at least allowed to stay."

"Less than a week ago. I hear she's not the only one, but she's the only one I knew."

"Odd, but not really my business...Well, I think I'll take you up on that special. I'm curious what a Jzianrhun latte is."

The server looked a little embarrassed, “I can go find out,” he offered helpfully. “I know it’s something new.”

“No that’s fine,’ Farnsbeck countered helpfully. “I’ll find out when it gets here.”

As the server was leaving, the faux human felt a slight breeze. “I hope that doesn’t mean rain,” he said aloud.

The server returned almost immediately with the drink. Farnsbeck thanked him and took a sip. He then nodded to let the young man know that it was fine, so the server left.

The secretary was hardly a coffee connoisseur, but it tasted like the drink was a rather bland espresso with too much milk and not enough sugar. Oh well, it didn’t hurt to try it.

The meal that followed was much more to his taste and he enjoyed it immensely.

When he was done, he picked up the pocket calendar he’d set down earlier. Opening to the current date, he read the words, “Where it started” at a time about an hour from then. *Took long enough!* Farnsbeck placed his payment on the table allowing for a sizable tip. There was just enough time to clean up at the hotel and maybe relax for a moment in his true form. Walking in those human legs was tiring.



This time as they walked, Sajani felt a lot less awkward about talking. Gregor listened patiently. If he did mind she was sure he’d never say anything. She started with stories about some of the things her and Westa had done together. She’d just finished talking about how they’d once put glue inside a really old and badly damaged pair of spats that Mr. Ramisa kept wearing, when Gregor asked, “The name of your friend sounds kind of familiar. Was she ever in the papers? That’s the only place I can think of where I’d have heard the name.”

Sajani nodded, “She danced with the Vharkylia ballet for a few years...”

“Oh,” Gregor said quickly, “I’ll admit, even though I usually read the paper from front to back, ballet was never a strong interest of mine. She performed the lead in Halifaux’s *Wolf Unchained* a few years ago. Made quite the sensation and then disappeared.”

Sajani laughed. Gregor was so transparent. “Isn’t a strong interest huh?”
If wolves could blush...

“Well...I...” he started.

“How long did it really take before you recognized the name?” Even though Westa was a friend (whether the feeling was reciprocated or not, she didn’t know.) something about Gregor’s interest upset her. Nothing like Mr. Berhaul’s comments had, but she wasn’t exactly comfortable with him knowing the acolyte.

“Other than a passing article here and there, never heard of her at all,” he said very quickly.

Sajani laughed, “I believe you’re an even worse liar than I am...” she started.

“Notlyingatall,” he said, the words blurring together.

His actions told a story. It was a story that she didn’t like, but she’d never admit that to him. Teasing was a good way to vent her frustrations. “I take it the paper had a picture...”

“Well, maybe...” he said cautiously. “I’m sure I don’t remember.”

“And how long was that picture on the wall in your room?” *And here it comes*, she thought, *he’s trying so hard to answer quickly...*

“Well, I never hung it on my wall...” he stopped short. “I mean, if I ever even *had* a picture of her...”

Sajani burst out laughing, hiding how much it bothered her. “You had a *crush* on Westa?”

Gregor was silent for a long moment as Sajani continued to laugh and taunt him. He looked like he was about to say something a few times but stopped himself. The copper wolf continued her teasing mercilessly. At last he said, “The only other vykati I saw back then, was Manfred. Occasionally, he’d be working just outside the school and I’d see him when I went to get the mail. He managed to get newspapers from Drtithen once in a while and gave them to me.” There was a loneliness to his voice—one to which the copper wolf related far too much. “She was in there a few times, once with a picture. I’d never seen a vykati that beautiful, at least not since I was old enough to care.”

His confession didn’t upset her any more than she already was, but it didn’t calm her either. “So if they haven’t cleared out your room, that picture is still sitting somewhere in there or did you bring it with you?”

He laughed. “No, I got rid it a while ago.”

What? How was she supposed to keep teasing him if he said something like that? “Really? Why’d you do that?”

That started him stammering and stuttering. “I...well, I mean...There was no way I could. I...I...I didn’t feel like it was right.” He took a deep breath and somehow managed to get control of himself. Softly and shyly he said, “you arrived.”

That comment almost hit her physically.

Gregor continued, “I got rid of it when you arrived. And before you ask, no, I didn’t have a crush on you. I don’t feel worthy of even thinking about you that way. Once I met you, keeping that picture seemed childish and narrow-minded.”

She couldn’t look directly at him while he was saying that, which was fine because she was pretty sure he wasn’t able to look at her either. What he said contained plenty to think about, but she didn’t want to face that just yet.

“How’d you meet Westa?” he asked quietly.

It was close enough to a change of topic that she grabbed it without thinking. She regretted it immediately, although she knew he didn’t know

there'd be any issue when he asked. "Her father and Mr. Ramisa are friends. Those are the two that came to our house to tell us that my mother died." That was by far the easiest time she'd ever had facing that memory.

He looked over at her and smiled consolingly. "I find it funny that you *know* the real-life Yanebel."

Sajani smiled back. That was a much more graceful change-of-topic than the last one. "I think you'll be disappointed to meet him. He's very...tame. I'd be surprised if he even owns an ax."

"And what makes you so sure that I'll ever meet him?"

"Well, I admit, I'm not very keen on introducing him to my friends," she said half sarcastically, "but I think I can make an exception for you."

He must have been excited to meet Mr. Ramisa, because Sajani could see his whole disposition change. He nearly glowed.

"Thank you for that," he said happily.

The copper wolf made a mental note to introduce the two as soon as possible. Anything that made her friend that happy...



"That was the worst hand-off in the history of our profession," Farnsbeck accused as soon as the bricks had finished closing behind himself and Orange. "I all but saw you."

"Do you mind?" his associate whined. "I finally have some information and all you can do is judge me?"

Farnsbeck said, "I'll excuse you this time, since no one seems to have figured it out."

Orange glared at him.

The secretary continued, "I did get a small lead for you, but before we get to that, what do you have?"

His fellow agent sighed deeply, "At least you found something. All I can say for sure is that Brown must be really afraid. The local sniffs were told to turn it over to top, and top's been told to leave it to the local sniffs."

That didn't bode well for getting any information. Farnsbeck asked, "Then who's tracking?"

Orange got a pained look when he answered, "I wish I knew. Other than the outsiders I mentioned last time, Brown seems to be keeping very quiet and not even trusting his own." The shorter agent paused and looked up at the faux human. "What'd you learn?"

"Not much more than you I'm afraid," Farnsbeck said. *And that is very embarrassing*, he thought. "A wolf named Callise disappeared just after our pair left. I'm hoping that finding out about her might lead to someone that can find out about my quarry."

Orange gave him a skeptical look, "Last name?"

"Wasn't offered and I didn't pry," the vykati responded. "But there aren't many in the city. Hopefully that's enough."

The human sighed deeply, “Adds an extra step, but I’ll see what we can find. Plan on two days?”

“Yes,” Farnsbeck said quickly. “Signal if you find anything. I’ll do the same.”



The two rivers met fairly close to where they’d started, so it was definite that they’d wandered north and needed to adjust. That just left them trying to decide how far south they needed to go before turning west. East Oasis was a pretty small settlement. Its only purpose was running caravans across the desert to the port city of Nashtalli. And missing it was a very real possibility—one that would leave them in the desert longer than they could afford to be. Gregor said that he’d read about there once being roads that ran north and south through it, but after those kept getting buried in sandstorms, the government stopped trying.

“Then how do the merchants get there?” Sajani asked.

“The map didn’t have any roads going from the Yanames River to anywhere near East Oasis. The city just sits there with nothing connecting it. Like you said, there have to be some roads or at least well-worn paths. To get from Bahadhra to there they’d have to go around the mountains. We’ll see what there is.”

“A road would make it easier,” Sajani agreed, “but we probably don’t want to stay on one anyway.”

“So now we just need to figure out how to guess twenty-five kilometers.” Gregor said.

Her first thought was to count their paces, but without knowing how far her pace was, that wouldn’t mean anything. The next thought was to assume what she’d been told was the average speed of a walking vykati and see how many hours it would take to go twenty-five kilometers. Since they had no way to time an hour, that wouldn’t work either.

In frustration Gregor said, “You know what? We’ll be guessing with any method we try. I think I can estimate distance better when I’m more rested, so let’s just go for a swim, and call the day a vacation from walking.”

Sajani crossed her arms across her chest and glared at him. He knew she’d never...

“Wow, you’d think I’d just asked you to go skinny dipping or something. Fine you can stay on the shore. I’ll just swim around a bit to cool off.”

She felt a little foolish for her original assumption. “No... swimming does sound fun...and then I won’t be quite as far...”

He smiled and dropped his pack. Motioning for her to follow, he ran down to the edge of the river and splashed his way into the water.

The copper wolf dropped her pack next to his and smiled. She did take the time to remove her ankle wrappings before going into the water. It was a little colder than it had been at the last stop, but not too frigid. She started by

challenging him to a race, feeling pretty confident that his time as a janitor didn't give him a chance to practice swimming.

He didn't just *win* the race...he won by far enough that she felt like there was no point to racing again. He was a gracious winner though, so she tried to not be a bad loser. "Where'd you learn to swim like that?" she asked. "Did the orphanage have a pool?"

He laughed. "Nah, I think my parents started me swimming before we'd even left Vharkylia."

"And even after five years with no practice, you're still very good at it."

He beamed at the compliment and then dived down, she guessed to hide how it made him feel.



That night Sajani dreamed.

She was running on all fours through an open field. She had no idea what was on the far side of it, but knew it was something that she wanted very much. After a little more running, she could see a fence ahead and before it was a table. Though still far from it, she could smell the contents. The table was covered with food: fried pastola, baked apples, roast beef, candied cherries, pork, and fish. She realized that she was very hungry and tried to run faster.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw two wolves start charging towards her. They were real wolves, but larger and with very intelligent eyes. One was brown with white streaks and the other was white with brown streaks. They barked and snapped at her and she was forced to change direction. Every time she tried to turn back towards the table, the two would cut her off and snarl.

She stopped and rose to her feet, but the wolves weren't happy about that either. Their hackles rose and they growled loudly. Dropping again to all fours, Sajani began running. As long as she continued on a path parallel to the table, they left her alone. Maybe she could go back to where she'd been. It'd at least been safe there, but the two wolves didn't allow that either. They kept herding her away from the table and from where she'd started—away from the food she wanted and the safety of where she began. She was so hungry.

Gregor...her mind became aware that she'd been traveling with him. Where was he? Why wasn't he with her? She called out his name, but before his name was off her lips the white wolf growled very loudly, drowning out the sound. She tried to yell for him again and again, but each time the white wolf growled to cover her cry. If Gregor wasn't there or couldn't hear her, then that meant she was alone.

It surprised her that she seemed okay with that. There was no panic. That peaked her curiosity and she thought as deeply on it as she could while running. All those years of phobic reactions wouldn't end that suddenly. *I must be dreaming*, she thought. Perhaps she could take some control of what was happening. *If I'm dreaming then let these wolves have voices*. She

stopped and this time the pair did nothing to keep her moving. Instead they took on the form of vykati of the same colors. The white was a female and the brown was a male. They looked...familiar.

“Who are you?” she asked.

The female answered, “I am Ramisi.”

The male said, “I am Gajini.” They both paced and circled around her, like she was prey. They were now smiling.

These were the Aspects of Governance. Mr. Ramisa...his last name was a variation of the female’s name.

The brown wolf continued, “Do you know who you are?”

The copper wolf held her head high and proud, “I am Sajani Adida.”

“Adida is your mother’s name. If you take that away...” the white wolf said. Her voice was like water rushing over stones and it was hard to understand her. “Do you know who you are?”

The repeated question made her angry. “Why are you asking this?”

The white wolf repeated their earlier question yet again, “Do you know who you are?” They never stopped moving, circling around her.

Sajani tried to run once again but found she could not. Her feet moved, but she covered very little distance. It was like she was running in deep mud.

The brown wolf spoke. His voice echoed as he said, “You may not choose your own path. It is not for you to decide.

“Why not?” she screamed. “I want that food. I’m so hungry.”

“The choice is not yours,” the female whispered in her ear, “because of who you are.”

Finally, she understood the depth of the question, “But I don’t know who I am! I thought I knew. I thought I was important because of what my mother had done, but that wasn’t true. People didn’t value me, they only valued what they could get from me. I was petty and self-centered, but I don’t want to be that person anymore! I want to be worthy...” She couldn’t finish the sentence.

“It is not your choice,” the white vykati said.

“Your path is set,” the brown wolf continued, “because of who you will be.”

She was crying now. Lost and confused. Where was Gregor? He’d know what to do. He’d know what to say. “Then tell me who I will be and maybe that’ll help me know who I am!”

Both Wolves stopped pacing right in front of her and turned to face her simultaneously. Their eyes were on the same level and their faces close together so that it looked like all four eyes were part of the same face. The outer two eyes were brown and the inner two now glowed a brilliant white. “It is not for you to decide. You *will* be the pirate queen,” They said. The Wolves disappeared, leaving her alone in the field.

Sajani awoke.

Those last six words faded quickly from her memory and she wouldn’t remember them, but she never forgot the rest of the dream.



She was looking up at the night sky. The larger moon was a new moon and the smaller one was full and bright. Her parents had once tried to teach her the constellations, but she could only remember a few now. The great hunter was clearly visible as was his intended prey, the wolf. She sat up on her blanket and kept looking. She could see the giant wings of the black dragon, although its snout was just below the horizon. Between the dragon's wings there was a set of stars that some called the axe and some called the scale of justice. She usually called it the axe, if for no other reason than it was easier to say.

As she looked across the dark expanse the question from her dream came back to her.

Do you know who you are?

It was just a dream, she told herself. *The Aspects don't have time for someone like me.* She enjoyed the silence for a moment.

Who are you? The thought came unbidden and startled her. The voice was not hers. "I don't know yet," she whispered, "but I *am* searching."

Laying back down on her blanket, she drifted into a dreamless sleep.



Sajani told Gregor all about what she remembered of the dream the next morning as they ate. There wasn't any specific reason for her doing that. It was vivid enough and her memory of it complete enough that she felt like it was something that she should share with him. There was a slight fear that he might make fun of her, but given his usual disposition, she didn't think that was very likely.

The excitement he expressed over it wasn't expected. He asked a few questions as she told the story, wanting to know specifics, like where the streaks were on the Wolves (she didn't pay much attention) and what the Wolves sounded like (Um, they mostly sounded like vykati?). He was very disappointed that she couldn't remember the answer regarding who she'd become.

"I knew it," he said triumphantly when she finished, "I knew you had to be someone important!"

Sajani laughed. She saw the whole thing as just a dream—a very vivid dream. It was all based on things that she'd been worrying about. Like any other dream it seemed to be trying to resolve conflicts that she couldn't resolve consciously. "I'm no more important than you are. It was just a silly dream." Her mouth and nose felt warm as he stared down at her with a slight smile. "Let's clean up and get moving."

They'd both started putting the packs back together when he looked up at her suddenly. "You just watch. The next time we get into a real bind, there'll be some simple solution just waiting for us to pick it up." He looked

away and stood. After a moment he said, “I think if we start now, we should reach twenty-five kilometers about the time we’d usually break for lunch.”

Sajani laughed, “And what time is that?”

He smiled, “About the time you or I get hungry.” Her judgmental look wasn’t lost on him. “Hey, it’s the best we’ve got.”

His method made her laugh a little, “So why didn’t we use that method going from lunch to dinner yesterday?” She could already imagine him stammering when she asked it. The swim had been a welcome distraction and the fact that he wanted to spend some non-traveling time with her was pretty transparent. She’d worried for a moment, about halfway through their swim, that the whole thing was a ploy to see her in wet clothes, but as they exited the river, he faced away from her, grabbed his blanket and handed it over without turning his head. She’d refused it. It was about an hour before he’d even look at her.

“I wanted...Just thought that maybe we could...That it might be fun to spend some time...”

She decided to spare him. She wasn’t completely heartless. “I had fun too,” she told him.

He stopped stammering and just smiled.

“We both needed a break.” While the copper wolf wasn’t an expert on expressing her feelings, she did have to wonder a little bit about why it was so hard for Gregor. It did occur to her that he tried much more often than she did. “It’s good to spend time with a friend.”

The only time Sajani had ever seen him look so happy that he almost glowed was when she told him that she’d introduce him to Benayle.

“Y...yes. It is,” was all he managed.

It was enough. It was good to have a real friend.