

Chapter 6: Crushed (Part 2 of 2)

Benayle waited patiently in the part of the palace complex housing the Ministry of State. He could tell that his presence there was making the staff very nervous. The area just outside Lady Mishil's office was expansive, with a hundred desks evenly spaced around the room...ten rows of ten. The ceiling was high and mostly covered by a huge crystal chandelier. Its glass prisms extended out on long cords that went to each corner of the room.

With the number of people, one would think it'd be very loud, but it wasn't. The workers sat at their desks silently writing. Some were probably already assigned to working with the Rhidayan Embassy regarding the current situation. There were a few, he was told, that were assigned to answer his mail if it came from a foreign country. Those rare times a worker left his desk, it was to hold a very hushed conversation with a single coworker. There were never more than two gathered anywhere. He did overhear a conversation that was very close to where he was sitting. The two were discussing a change to the standard issue of lockpicks. Was there a *standard* for that? Supposedly the new ones were cheaper, but of higher quality. That was rarely possible in the Alpha's experience, but maybe the government had been lucky.

The door to Mishil's office opened and her personal secretary stepped out. She was a very plain looking brown wolf in a stiff black suit, wearing a pink open collar shirt. She spoke with a Varkyl accent that Benayle was pretty sure was being faked. "Lady Mishil'll saya now, Mista Bee nail." He was led through the secretary's office and past another door that led to a large conference room. Leather chairs were set around a large table made of black wood. There were landscape paintings on the walls. Benayle knew the locations of a few. Mishil was standing near the door and motioned for him to sit in the chair closest to him. As he was being seated, she sat in the chair beside him.

"Sorry," she apologized. "We found a listening device in one of our offices this morning, so we have people thoroughly checking everywhere else. My office hasn't been cleared yet." She folded her hands in front of her. "Now, what can I do for you?"

The old wolf smiled at her. "I'd like you to check into something for me, but I need to make sure that no one else knows about it."

The she-wolf laughed. "I'll *have* to trust some people to do the research. It's not likely I'll be able to gather it all on my own."

He was hoping she could find it out herself but realized that it was unlikely she'd act alone. "Of course, but I need to make sure that the people working on this have no idea why they're working on it."

"It might have been a little easier if we met some place neutral. Ears are already turning knowing that you came in here."

"I was just here last week," he said defensively.

Mishil's ears flattened and she frowned. "Trust me, that makes it worse. You came in last time just before a flurry of things started coming down from Rhidayar. I can't keep up with the gossip, let alone the gossip about the gossip." Her ears perked up again and she smiled at him. She said sarcastically, "At any rate, since you do ask so little of us here, I suppose I can put in a little time to help you out."

"Oh, good," he said happily. "I need you to look up any information you can find on a vykati living in Rhidayar."

"Phew!" Mishil sounded relieved. She pulled out a small notebook and a pen and prepared to write. "There's not many. It can't be too hard. What's the name?"

"Gregor," Benayle replied cheerfully.

The notebook snapped shut. The Minister's relieved mood vanished. "You *have* to be kidding me. The pup traveling with Sajani? He has no last name, no records. The paperwork at the orphanage had been thrown out. Besides, what difference does it make? Him being with her will probably end with her getting killed for helping a slave escape."

"I..." Benayle began. His ears fell. "I can't tell you?"

The she-wolf crossed her arms and glared at him. "Well, I suppose we're even. I *can't* tell you anything and you *won't* tell me anything."

If his usually laid-back approach was failing (and it definitely was), he had no problem with showing a little force. "Look," he said quietly but sternly, "I don't have to tell anyone anything. I'm entitled to my secrets. You, however, work for me. Like you said, I don't ask much, so in exchange for that paycheck you get twice a month, I'd say it's not asking much for you gather a little information."

Mishil's ears fell very low and a look of total disbelief came across her face, "Are you..." she started, "threatening to fire me?"

Benayle laughed and it dispelled most of the tension in the room. "Are you crazy? You'd be close to impossible to replace."

Her ears came back up, but the look of disbelief stayed.

"I *am* saying that with as little as I've asked since having you appointed, the least you can do is trust me enough to look a few things up." He tried to continue sounding a little stern, but by the time he was finished he was smiling and talking cheerfully.

His Minister noticed the change and relaxed a little. "I had things looked up already. I told you all of what we found," she said slowly. "Is there a specific piece of information you're looking for?"

That's much more like it, Benayle thought. Now he just needed to figure out exactly how much could be told. "I don't necessarily need to know much about him, although that's a possibility. I need to know what he knows or what he has with him. He's very important to the Rhidayans for some reason and I need to know why."

A frightened look crossed Mishil's face. "Oh no, Ben. You can't...They wouldn't..."

Well that might ruin everything, but better to know where he stood. "Wouldn't what?" he asked pointedly.

"The troops movements—all defensive so far. And you coming into my office wanting to know about this escaped slave." A light seemed to be dawning in her mind and that might not be good. "What can that slave possibly know that'd make them afraid we're about to attack?"

He stared at her a long moment, trying to size up if he could trust her. It seemed too early to reveal anything, but if his hand was forced... "I need you to keep very quiet about that, do you understand?"

She nodded once quickly. "The Council and the Lords: if they find out that slave has information that Rhidayar thinks will lead us to attack..."

"They might not wait to find out the specifics. They might assume Rhidayar is right." Benayle was hoping Lady Mishil would be very trustworthy about this.

She stood and poked her head out the door. "Abali," she said, "Get me last month's report from Blade." That said, she closed the door behind her and sat back down. "I do have a report from an operative that made contact with them. It's very touch and go with him and we're lucky to get a report a month. There wasn't much to it, but I'm happy to check it again. He mentioned that Sajani was wearing a locket of some kind, but I can't see how that's important."

"Anything might be important" He was interrupted as the secretary opened the door just long enough to drop a file folder on the table and retreat back out. The folder was huge.

His dismay at the size of the file must have shown. "There's only two pages on them. He's a kind of listening post..."

"It's probably better if I don't know the specifics," he interrupted.

The Minister leafed through the papers and pulled out two. She scanned them quickly. "There's not much more. He mentions the locket, the fact that Gregor was treating Sajani very well, separate sleeping arrangements, he insisted on sleeping just outside her door..."

Benayle smiled. "I thought her father said she'd outgrown that, but I guess not."

"Pardon?" Mishal said quickly.

"Oh, she had some problems with sleep terror right after her mother died. Makes sense she'd want someone outside her door."

The she-wolf smiled and said, "That's funny. I'd have thought that he was the one insisting, being male and all, but the earlier comment on him treating her well makes still more sense this way." She was talking slowly as she continued to read through the pages. "Blade gave them about ten days of food and showed them the direction to East Oasis."

"Nothing else?" he asked.

“Not in the report, but I can tell you we have an experienced agent in East Oasis. If we’re lucky, Sajani and friend will meet her.”



The day was bright and sunny. Sajani wished it wasn't. The area by the river didn't have any large plants, bushes or trees, so the sun was beating down directly on them. It was slowing her. She stopped and sat down.

Gregor noticed and came up beside her. “Are you okay?”

She nodded as she started removing her ankle wrappings. “Little too hot for these,” she explained. “I think I have a better use for them.” Rising and walking over to the river, she dipped both wrappings in the water and then handed one to Gregor.”

He looked slightly confused until he saw her tying hers around her neck. It cooled her a little. Following her lead, he did the same. When he was done, he held up his hand suddenly. “Do you hear that?” he asked.

At first Sajani had no idea what he was talking about, but after she concentrated, she could barely make out the sound of water rushing. The river so far had been calm. Looking way ahead in the distance, they could see a place where it looked like the landscape ended. It was so close to the horizon that, up until that point, they assumed it was just that—the horizon.

Part of her wanted to run forward and see the distance of the drop, but her muscles didn't allow it. Gregor ran ahead a few paces but stopped and turned to look at her. “Part of me wants to run,” he said. His voice sounded worried.

“We'll get there,” Sajani answered. “It's probably better we don't change our pace, or we'll get hungry sooner and travel further.”

Her companion actually sounded discouraged when he said, “Not that it matters. Unless that's a really short drop ahead, we'll lose time going down or getting around and have no idea how much further we have to go.”

His discouragement made Sajani uncomfortable and when she was uncomfortable there was only one thing to do. “If what you said earlier is true, there'll be a rope or an elevator to take us down. The Aspects won't let a little cliff stand in my way. I'm going home and I'm going to tell my father exactly...” She continued teasing for a while. It felt strange trying to encourage him and cheer him up. She wasn't used to that.

It worked. Gregor smiled and got his pace back up to normal. “I'm not counting on it,” he said. “Scaling a cliff isn't anything like reserving a hotel room or having a window open where no one'll see you leave.”

“What,” she taunted, “you don't think I'm anyone special anymore?”

That caused a lot of stammering, just like she thought it would.

“You'll see, there'll be a rope on the edge waiting for us.” Deep down, Sajani wished she could bring herself to believe it. Gregor was smiling and moving ahead. That was what was important.

When the comments about the rope stopped being very effective, Sajani changed tactics. It wasn't that Gregor was going to stop or even slow them

down much. It was that she hated to see him discouraged. “Ok, so maybe not a rope, maybe there’s a picture of Westa there. Will that get you moving?” It didn’t get the reaction she was expecting.

He smiled and said, “Nope. I threw that in the furnace because I found something better.”

The furnace? A now all too familiar warmth came to her mouth and nose as he said that. “I...” she started. She wasn’t sure what to say, but that comment seemed to beg for a response of some kind, sarcastic or otherwise. “I just thought...I mean. I’m glad that you think...”

A very broad smile crossed her companion’s face as he said, “And now we’re even.”

The sound of the rushing water was now as loud as someone talking conversationally. Looking out over the roiling water, she did worry a little bit about how far that drop might be.

She found out soon enough. As they approached the edge, they could still not see the land rising up past the cliff. Was the drop that huge? How could they possibly get down something that big? A few more steps and it all made sense. The waterfall was only (did she just think “only”) about fifty meters high. To either side there were cliffs that curved and stretched out before them. Beneath the waterfall the ground slopped down quickly, causing the river to move very fast for as far as they could see. The other side of the cliff also had a lot of trees. While that would be good to shelter them from the sun, it would make it really hard to keep to a solid direction once they left the river.

Gregor pulled her from her thoughts, “Huh,” he said curiously, “There’s your rope.”

There was indeed a rope there. It was tied off to a large boulder and very soiled. It didn’t look very new either. “Not sure I’d trust that,” Sajani said suspiciously.

Her companion brought himself close the edge and attempted to look down. “Some Aspect or other has a rather sick sense of humor,” he said wryly as he started pulling up the rope. There was only about five meters to it.

Sajani wanted to laugh, but it never surfaced.

Gregor continued, “And looking down at the river from here, I’m thinking we should have crossed over much sooner, where it was calm.”

“Can we just go back upstream and cross?” Sajani asked.

“It’d make it harder for us to estimate the time. Bad enough we have to work our way down the cliff.” He let out a long sigh before continuing. “We’ll explore around and try to see a way down on the other side. Then we’ll hike back to the conflux, cross, and try again tomorrow. Maybe if we at least know how we’re getting down before we get there...”

He lead them to the side cliff and they looked out over the area surrounding the falls. The cliffs on the west side of the river were sheer. The

spray from the waterfall made a good portion of it damp. There was no way down that, at least not down and alive.

Discouragement and hopelessness overtook her. They had food, but just enough to get them a little past East Oasis. It could take days to find a way down and days to get back to the river. If they didn't run out of food, they'd run out of water.

Sajani's eyes wandered over to the east side of the river. A zig zag path wound from near the top of the falls to the ground. It was impossible to tell if it was continuous, because there were large boulders throughout the cliff. It was every bit as damp as the other side, but it at least looked hopeful. She pointed it out to Gregor.

That perked him right up. "See?" he said cheerfully. "There's a way. I knew it!"

"It's on the wrong side of the river," Sajani said without emotion. "We'll have to cross where the water is..."

"If we hurry now," Gregor supplied, "it won't throw our timing off by too much."

How can he possibly see a miracle in this? Sajani wondered. The rough way down the cliff seemed perfectly normal. He was seeing a miracle and she was seeing...a way down a cliff. The voice that spoke in her mind next was the same voice that usually supplied cynical responses to her thoughts. She recognized that mental voice as her own. *It's not what he's seeing. We're both seeing the same thing. The difference is: he's looking. I'm not.*

Her companion noticed that she wasn't following and motioned for her to hurry. She smiled at him and stepped quickly towards him. Yes, it was just a path down, but she decided it was better to leave him happy. No reason to squelch his simple pleasure.

It turned out the rope was right above the path down. Not surprising considering the best place to put a rope would be over the best place to go down. Gregor insisted on gathering the rope and taking it with them. The part that was strung around the rock did add another five meters to its length, but the rope looked very worn and weak. He put it over his shoulder.

Sajani looked solemnly at the way down. "I hope you don't mind heights," She told Gregor.

He shook his head. "I'd say we should tie ourselves together," he began, "but with how that looks, that'd just mean that if one slips, we both fall."

It wasn't much of a path either. The mist from the waterfall kept everything very wet and slippery and after only a few minutes the fur of both wolves was thoroughly soaked. Having wet fur wasn't too bad though, given the current temperature. Going down involved a lot of jumping, sliding, and backtracking. Several times it involved climbing a short way up a large boulder and sliding down to the next ledge. The wet surface was an advantage for that as well. The rope might have been useful in a few places—if there was any place to tie it off.

They were three-quarters down when what little path they had ended very abruptly. They had slid down a large rock to where there was barely enough room to stand. That ledge was formed by another large boulder wedged into the cliff. When that rock ended, there was nowhere to go. Gregor was leading, with Sajani always keeping just a few paces behind him. Her companion turned to her and said, "We'll have to make our way back and see if there's another way." Sajani didn't have a chance to respond. His gaze had turned to the large rock they'd slid down only moments before. "Oh," he said a little crestfallen, "that's not really an option is it?"

Sajani eyed the distance to the bottom. It looked like the rope might be long enough. She began looking around for a place to tie it off. A tree would have been nice. In searching, her sight stopped on Gregor who'd just taken the rope from his shoulder and was tying a large knot on one end. He knelt to the ground and started digging in the mud at a space between the rock their path was on and the one that intersected it. "With a little luck..." he told her.

"I think we used that up long ago," she told him cynically. Since he ignored that comment, she went over to see exactly what was happening.

There was a small space between the two rocks that Gregor was digging at, but she still had no idea why he was trying to expose the rock. "If we can find a way to wedge the knotted end between these two stones," he began, "we might be able to use the rope to climb down."

"I don't..." she started. "I don't think that'll hold our weight will it? It looks pretty worn."

Gregor answered, "Since there's nothing breakable in our packs, we can toss them down to save weight and then go down one at a time. If we don't spend too much time on the rope, hopefully there won't be enough strain to break it." By this point, he'd exposed a part of the rock they were standing on that rose slightly above the rock that made up the cliff. It took him awhile to work the rope between the cracks and Sajani worried that his actions would further weaken things. Eventually, it was secured. He tested it by giving a couple of good pulls and handed it to her. "Put as much weight on it as you can to test it out."

Holding the rope close to her so that it went taut, she leaned back as far as she could. The knot held in place. They dropped their packs unceremoniously down the cliff. When hers made a loud cracking sound on impact, they remembered that the canteens in hers were breakable.

They laughed for a moment before she started down. Both pretending to ignore the fact that they'd need those canteens when they got to the desert. "I was never very good at rope climbing in gym," she confessed as she carefully approached the cliff edge.

Gregor distracted her just a little by saying, "They don't *have* ropes in the gym at the school in Bahadhra. Did they have them in Vharkylia?"

The height wasn't a problem as she started over the cliff and made her way down about a meter. The problem was the lack of trust she had in that

rope...and the method of securing it. She was glad she didn't have human shaped feet. Her feet managed to get some decent traction on the wet surface. "Yes. I hated it and told myself every time we had to climb them, that I'd never choose a career that had to use rope." She lowered herself a few meters more.

"So, let's see," Gregor continued, "Sailor and mountain guide are out..."

Another few meters. She added, "...raising any kind of livestock...but it isn't just the rope stopping me from that. For a short while I wanted to be a ballet dancer like Westa." Another few meters. She laughed, "I've thought more about what I don't want to do than what I want to do."

"I haven't given a future career much of any thought at all," Gregor told her. "It's weird, but I get easily distracted whenever I start thinking about it."

Sajani lowered herself to the ground. "There's no hurry," she reassured him. "My father...My father always says that whenever stuff like that comes up. Everyone assumes I'm going to be a soldier, but he...he..." Not only could she never remember a time when he'd assumed that... "now that I think about it, it's been a long time since he's even asked what I want to be."

"Huh," Gregor responded. There was a brief moment of the now too familiar awkward silence. He asked, "Ready for me to come down?"

Sajani stepped away from the rope and answered, "Yes."

She stood nervously as he started his way down. He wasn't doing anything wrong, but it looked like he'd never climbed down a rope before. His movements were nervous and twitchy. Figuring he needed to concentrate, she kept quiet.

He was about four meters from the bottom when she heard a quick and loud sound like a rock slamming into another followed by the rumble of several rocks tumbling down. Looking up, she saw the rope had whipped away from the cliff—the knot still tied on the end. Gregor toppled backward and hit his head on the cliffside. At that moment his body was upside down and still rolling. His feet came down past his head and brought the rest of his body parallel to the cliff with his face still inward. He held that position as he slid down the cliff and landed in a heap at the bottom.

Sajani smelled blood. Not surprising. Gregor, in typical fashion said in a very pained voice, "Ouch. That could have gone better."

"Oh my," Sajani worried, "Oh my... Are you alright?" She knelt beside him and started examining the damage. The back of his head had a pretty big scrape on it and was bleeding lightly. His nose was too.

Gregor laughed weakly. "I'm doing great," he said sarcastically and with a noticeable amount of pain in his voice.

The fur on his hands had been worn and they were badly scratched. His shirt was almost completely torn down the front, but all his limbs seemed to be at the correct angles. "Stay put," she ordered.

Her friend didn't say anything, not even a sarcastic sigh.

Picking up the ankle wrapping that had fallen off his neck, she ran over to the nearby falls, cleaned it, and brought it back dripping wet. She knelt so that she was balancing on her feet and moved the cloth towards him to begin cleaning up his wounds.

He backed up a little and said, “No...I...I’ll take...I’ll...” Raising his hands toward the cloth, he tried to take it from her.

“Stop it,” she insisted. “I’m trying to help you.”

The attempt to move back continued, as did the stuttering.

“I’m not taking that as an answer,” she told him forcefully, waddling closer to him. She grabbed the back of his neck with one hand and pulled his head towards her. The intent was to get into a position where she could clean the blood off his snout, but he happened to squirm in an odd direction and they ended up hitting hard against each other’s noses. She could feel her nose start to bleed.

A horrified look crossed Gregor’s face as they backed away from each other, “I’m so sorry,” he started.

Sajani didn’t let him finish. “Then just let me help you and we won’t have to worry about getting hurt.” She lifted the ankle wrapping that was around her neck up to her snout, placed it tightly over her nose, pulled it to her mouth and then bit on both sides to hold it place.

“I’m not comfortable...” he started.

Ignoring what he meant, she interrupted. Between the fact that her nose was covered and she was having to talk between her teeth, she sounded very odd, but forced out the words anyway. “Of cous ya’re not combtable. Dat was quite a fall.” She was pretty sure she knew a way to end the argument. “Now, let yar frien helb you.”

It worked. He said simply, “okay” and put his hands to his side.

She leaned towards him again and started by wiping the blood off his snout. The mist from the falls helped. His nose bleed couldn’t have been too bad, because it’d already stopped. The wound on the back of his head was pretty minor too and easy to clean up. There was a small cut up near his chest—his shirt having taken most of the damage. The blood was dabbed off his fur easily. When she was done with that, she checked to see if her nose had stopped bleeding and returned the ankle wrap to its place around her neck. She sidled over to his side. “Lean forward a little and let me check your back.”

He did so dutifully. The back of his shirt showed a large splotch of blood. There were a few tears, but none large enough to give her room to work, so she tried to figure out how best to approach getting to the wound.

“There’s a bit of a cut back here,” she started, understating horribly, “so don’t panic when I move your shirt to get to it.”

His response was predictable. “Don’t worry about anything under there,” he started. “I’ll be fine.”

That wasn't an option, so she grabbed the shirt from the middle and pulled up. It came loose from his shorts and revealed his back. He straightened when she did that but said nothing. There was a large gash in the middle of his left ribs. It looked like a small object had pierced the skin. Feeling along the bone around it, she was glad that it seemed to have hit right between the bones, rather than breaking anything. She felt along it, gauging the damage and then started applying pressure.

"What wrong Sajani?" Gregor asked. "That doesn't feel like just a little cut."

It wasn't as deep as she was worried it might be, but it was still bleeding. Even though she knew there was no way for him to see if she was lying, she told the truth. "It's about six centimeters long and deep enough that it's still bleeding. Nothing that can't be fixed with a little time and pressure, though." *How much time and how much pressure*, she wondered? A thought came to her. "I've got an idea that might make this a lot easier," she told him. "Let's start by getting this shirt off. It's not really covering you anyway." He didn't argue as she carefully lifted it over his head and helped him free his arms. "You won't be too differently dressed than Mr. Ramisa," she said comfortingly. She brought the shirt over to the water and quickly cleaned it up.

While she was doing that Gregor said, "All the pictures I've seen of him, he was wearing a shirt. Not at all like Yanebel dresses."

Sajani laughed, "Well, no...he doesn't go around looking quite like that, but he doesn't really bother much with his appearance other than being clean and combed. The papers usually catch him at formal events, although even for those he never dresses appropriately." The shirt was clean. As she headed back to him she said, "Here, I'm going to put this on the cut, then just lean back until you're laying on it. Hopefully the ground is flat enough here." She placed it and helped him as he slowly leaned back. After finding a nice place, she crossed her legs and sat down next to him.

Gregor laughed. "That's funny. I suppose he at least goes dressed appropriately to things like funerals. I can't..."

Sajani interrupted. "When he came to my house after my mother died, he was wearing a light harness and shorts. Only a little more dressed than you are now." It was odd to think of that time as being at all related to something humorous, but at the moment she found it that way.

"You don't seem too upset about that," Gregor noticed. "I'd be at least a little disappointed, if not offended."

"He's a hard person to stay angry with," she admitted. "I should be totally furious with him for sending me to that school and I was for a long time, but somehow, I came to realize that he didn't mean any harm by it—that he thought he was doing something good."

"Did he write and tell you that or something?" Gregor asked.

“No,” she admitted. “It’s just that...I’ve never seen him angry or even wanting to hurt someone. He’s not at all like Yanebel. When you’re around him, he makes you feel like you’re important.”

“That’s the kind of person I want to be,” Gregor told her.

It’s the kind of person you are, she thought. And not at all like the type of person I am.

A small grunt came from Gregor as he tried to rise and he said, “How long...”

He didn’t get far before Sajani placed her hand firmly on his shoulder and pushed him back down. “Longer still.”

“Yes sir,” he said laughing.

The gentle mist from the waterfall was soothing and she realized that she had gone a long while without worrying about Gregor seeing her in wet clothes. He didn’t stare like some males would. There was also the fact that he usually looked her in her eyes, even when her clothes were dry. It made her feel a little bad for being paranoid of him earlier.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she continued with the prior conversation, “I’m sure Benayle has plenty of faults, but I don’t see him often enough to know.”

“If Yanebel didn’t have faults, Camissa wouldn’t have left him,” Gregor said. “Most of us try to hide them.”

Sajani couldn’t picture a Gregor with faults at first, but once she thought about it, he wasn’t really hero material. He was easily distracted, often indecisive...

Do you know who you are? a voice inside asked. She didn’t really like the answer. *I’m selfish and petty, a thief, a vandal, often uncaring, I have a hard time forgiving...* The voice interrupted and asked again. *Do you know who you are?* A more definitive answer came to her. *I’m someone that has no business judging others.*

They talked for awhile after that. He’d tried to get up a few more times. Those times she allowed him up and took the shirt back to be washed. She put it back on the wound and helped him get settled again. Each time it seemed to be bleeding a little less. On the last time she realized that having him lay back on the cut was probably making it bleed worse than if she’d had him lay on his stomach and applied pressure.

As she took the shirt away from the wound a final time she asked, “Ready to move? It’ll be a shame to leave this nice cool spot, but we better be going.”

She’d intentionally not mentioned the problem with gauging their distance from the conflux, but Gregor apparently had that at the top of his list of worries. “No way to know how far we’ve been or how much further we need to go,” he said sadly. He tried to stand but faltered when he put any weight on his right foot.

Sajani heard a quick intake of breath come from him and looked over. “What’s...?”

“It’s not broken,” he reassured her. “It’s just a little tender.”

She stood and came up close to him. When she offered support, he shrugged her off. “Don’t be silly,” she scolded. “Let me help you.”

“I can get it,” he told her as he tried to walk forward. As soon as there was any weight on his right foot again, he stumbled.

She reached out and steadied him. There was no way for him to stop her. “Here,” she told him, “you can lean on me. I’ll support you.” The difference in height made it a little difficult for her to get her arm under the smaller wolf’s right arm and still be able to get it around his back and under his left arm, but she managed. There was no protest from Gregor about it either. He brought his right arm behind her and placed it on her shoulder. “Alright,” she told him, “take it easy and lean on me.” They moved over to their packs. Sajani tried to help Gregor get his settled, but the weight was just a little too much for him to allow him to keep his balance.

Sajani silently worked the packs so that she could wear both and put them on her back. Once she had a chance to dry them out, they’d be a lot lighter. The two vykati got back into their places and started off.

Walking that way was painfully slow. Every few minutes, Gregor would ask to stop and rest. Other than that, he didn’t say much. She tried several ways to cheer him up—even telling stories about her and Westa—but nothing seemed to improve his mood. Their clothes dried and the area near the river became lightly wooded. The additional padding provided by a thick layer of pine needles seemed to make it easier on Gregor.

When they stopped for lunch the two ate in silence. The area where they ate was nice. There was a gentle breeze and that, harmonizing with the sounds from the river, made it seem like a very peaceful place. They were eating silently while sitting on a fallen log that was covered in moss.

When they were mostly through eating, Gregor spoke, “The only time when Yanebel summons his ax, it nearly knocks him unconscious, but he stays on his feet and fights his way out of the jail.”

A slight smile crossed Sajani’s face. She was pretty sure she knew where that was leading. “...but he manages to get to safety where he collapses from exhaustion. Is that a little how you’re feeling now?” It was tiring for *her* and she had the use of both feet.

Gregor nodded. “Yes. I feel like I’ve summoned the ax, but there’s a long way to go until we’re safe.”

While it made sense for him to be tired, the level of exhaustion did worry her. Was there something still wrong with him inside? Had he lost more blood than she realized? She removed his blanket from his pack and handed it to him. He seemed barely conscious of what she was doing but took the blanket. Lowering himself to the ground, he started to stretch out and lay his head down.

Sajani stopped him. She grabbed him by the shoulder and lifted him up. “Stay sitting up for a moment, let me look in your eyes,” she told him. Once she said it, she realized that it could be taken two ways. The fact that he said

nothing and pulled himself over and looked at her worried her still more. She grabbed him by the muzzle and looked at his eyes. Both pupils were the same size. Next she rubbed the fur on his forehead back and looked at the skin. It was very red. "You need to stay sitting up while you rest," she told him.

"Ok," he said plainly and worked his way so that his back was a little straighter.

She pulled the blanket from his weak grasp and wrapped it around him. Tucking it carefully behind him, she tried to get him straightened up again. He was still conscious and helped a little. Something told the she-wolf that this would be a common activity for the next few hours.

After he'd gotten settled yet again, he looked up at her with his eyes only half open and said, "It's good that I have a sister as nice as you." He relaxed and his eyes finished closing. The even pace of his breathing assured her that he'd just drifted off to sleep. He needed it.

Once she was sure he was settled and safe, she realized: Gregor had never mentioned a sister before.