

Chapter 8: The Long Road (Part 1 of 2)

The area around the bridge was wooded and clear, but Gregor warned that there was some desert between them and East Oasis. "I'm sure we have enough food," he told her, "but the water will be tricky..."

They smiled at each other and said in unison, "Book Two!" They laughed. Sajani said, "We can rest here for the day, nap as we can, and then start travelling at night, just like..."

Gregor finished, "...just like Yanebel did crossing the Great Desert in Dargaleck. We can dig a hole to shelter us from the sun during the day."

That led to a long discussion about whether it was faster to dig two holes or one and how ridiculous the book was when it came to Yanebel surviving with only one waterskin. "He goes a week on that one container," Sajani giggled.

Gregor had originally tried to defend the book but didn't take much convincing before he was agreeing with Sajani. "If we make it about twenty-five kilometers a day and use only one skin a day..." he began.

A thought occurred to Sajani, "That water is going to taste awful by the seventh day."

Gregor laughed at her. "I'm way past caring," he told her. "I think I'd eat a raw lizard if I had to by this point..." After a brief pause he added, "...and probably enjoy it."

The copper wolf found that funny and laughed hard. Her companion just looked on and smiled.

The male wolf's foot had healed noticeably. He soaked it while they ate breakfast. Today's breakfast was more cherries and some peaches. The fruit had dried a little, so was kind of spongy and now, in addition to tasting like river water, it tasted a little like the cloth bag that was holding it. Sajani tried to tell herself that she should be grateful to have any food, but it was hard for her not to feel sorry for herself.

They passed the first part of the day swimming. Sajani challenged Gregor to another race, but he still managed to win that...and the next four attempts. After losing so many times, she gave up. Between the water relaxing their muscles, the physical exertion of playing, and the heat of the day when they got out, they found themselves ready for a nap. They ate lunch and then curled up in the shade to sleep.



Farnsbeck finished his spell to check he was still going the right direction. He was heading straight towards East Oasis but had no way of knowing what direction the two youths had taken. Blade would have pointed them the right way. He had to have faith in the trapper.

It seemed like a good time for lunch. He reached into his pocket and began looking for his spoon. Unable to find it, he pulled out the other

occupant of his pocket: a short brass and wood cylinder. Once that was out of the way, finding the spoon was easy.

It was a normal looking soup spoon made of a dull gray metal with a wood handle. Holding it near his mouth, he tapped it once with his free hand and it filled immediately with what looked and tasted very much like paste. After he'd eaten a few mouthfuls, he placed it upside down in his mouth and tapped it again. Water came up out of the spoon, just enough so that he could swallow it easily. One more tap and the water stopped. That finished, he returned the spoon to his pocket and reprimanded himself yet again for not asking Blade for at least a little food.

Another steed was summoned, and the agent started off again, hoping he'd get to them before their pursuit did. Like him, those people wouldn't know exactly where to find the two and would be banking on them heading to the nearest settlements. He had the advantage there. He knew which one, but that didn't prevent a random bounty hunter from getting lucky.



The first test to Kunterik's words came that evening when three members of the Drüthen council showed up at Benayle's office. He'd been trying to avoid the place, but small annoying things kept surfacing that required him to go there. His chair had just barely announced his presence when there came a loud knock on his door.

He answered it to discover three vykati dressed in very expensive clothing. The gray male was in a brown suit with a long coat...a little odd for Drüthen this time of year, but the Alpha wasn't one to talk about other people's clothing eccentricities. He introduced himself as Representative Modette and turned to introduce his two companions: Representatives Falwith and Zimona. The two women were also dressed in brown with silver and white fur color respectively. They both had their hair up in a fashion that was fairly popular in high society. It made them look like they'd had their heads stuck in a hole. Had they coordinated colors before coming, or was that just a common color this time of year?

Benayle recognized the name of the first two. Modette was the chair of the Council Military Affairs Committee and Falwith was the chair of the Council Intelligence Committee. He started by acknowledging the position of the first two and then added, "I'm sorry, Representative Zimona, but I'm afraid I haven't heard your name before. What committee are you representing?"

The politician looked very offended as she said, "Budget."

"Very well," Benayle said politely, "I'd offer you seats, but I'm afraid I don't usually receive guests in my office. If you want, we can meet in the reception area. There are seats there."

Zimona was quick to reject that idea. "Privacy before comfort, sir. We've been hearing some disturbing news lately and wanted to make sure you're aware of what's happening, since you seem to be failing to act on it." The

three of them looked at him expectantly. Modette had an amused smile on his face and winked once at him.

Ah, the leader thought to himself, *what “act” would Farnsbeck use in a situation like this?* The idea made him chuckle silently. He only had one act.

“Well, sirs, perhaps if you could elucidate some specifics I can...”

His words upset Falwith. “Don’t be a fool. There’s no way that your Ministers of War and State have failed to update you on the situation near Altaza. Now come to the point. What do you plan on doing about it?”

Benayle smiled. “Nothing,” he said happily.

The two women began speaking angrily at once, but the Alpha didn’t bother trying to understand what they were saying. He began speaking and they eventually quieted when they realized that they weren’t being heard. “As I’m sure you’ve heard from Lord General Adibee, the Rhidayan forces massing near Altaza are mostly defensive units. Rather than escalate the situation, I’ve decided to stay ready and alert, but not move any additional forces into the area.”

That answer was not well received. Modette kept his composure much better than his fellow representatives. He spoke: “And aren’t you at least a little concerned about those movements?”

Ah, that’s where it would get tricky. “I have some of my best people at the Ministry of State working on that as we speak,” he lied. It wasn’t too big of a lie. “As it stands, our three divisions in that area still outnumber them. You can rest assured that we’re more than capable of defending this country with such numbers.”

“You’d better be right, Mr. Benayle.” Falwith said sourly, “We’ll continue watching this unfold. You may hold the reins for our military, but we hold the strings to the purse...and you’re continued employment.”



When Sajani awoke, Gregor was already by the river soaking his foot. It was getting near dusk and would be safe for them to start moving again soon. She put her necklace back on and started towards him. As she approached, she noticed that Gregor had a short stick in his hand and was using it to draw something in the sand near the bank. It looked like he must have brought up some water to dampen it. Their one canteen was near him and that would’ve worked for that purpose. Curious, she quieted her footfalls and walked more slowly.

When she was within a few steps, she recognized what he was drawing...it was her—her head anyway—and he’d tried to draw her hair long, even though he’d never seen her that way. Her bangs were a little longer than she liked, and her hair was resting down on her shoulders, or would have been if he’d drawn that far. He was mostly concentrating on drawing her face. Fascinated, she watched for a long while. He seemed particularly obsessed with her eyes. While she’d been watching, there were four times she’d seen him erase them

and pour a little water over to smooth the sand again. At last he seemed happy with things and sat there admiring his handywork.

Sajani was flattered. First of all, she didn't know Gregor had any artistic talent—it'd never come up. Secondly, if he was going to spend a few hours drawing anything, it was nice that he thought of her. She decided to tell him it was appreciated. "I usually keep my hair in a ponytail and parted on the left, but..."

He startled when she spoke and reached to erase his work, but she grabbed his hand and stopped him.

"No," she chided him. "I'm flattered. I wish I could take it with me."

"You weren't supposed to see that," he said miserably.

"Why not?" Sajani asked. "I've had lots of artistic friends, and none have ever bothered to draw me. Seeing things as I do now, I'm pretty sure they didn't like me enough to try."

"Well," he said shyly, "I think... What I mean is..."

She put her hand on his shoulder to stop him. "I wasn't lying when I said I'm flattered. You did a really good job, especially on the eyes."

He continued stuttering until she took her hand off his shoulder, then he said carefully, "I was afraid if you saw this, you'd be mad at me."

It didn't take much to figure out what he meant by that. "The picture of Westa?" she asked. "This is different." She struggled trying to find a way to comfort him and let him know that she appreciated his effort. "Why'd you draw this?"

He started to answer, but she stopped him quickly.

"And before you answer, I want you to know that you're my friend. The first real friend I've had in at least five years. You're safe telling me the truth." She realized that there was a slim chance that the reason he drew her picture was the same reason he'd kept the one of Westa, but given what she knew about him...

He looked down at his foot. "I woke up with my foot hurting again...I'm afraid...afraid that with how much it's slowing us down, we won't be able to get to East Oasis before we run out of food. I wanted to draw something comforting. I don't remember enough about my parents to draw them...and the next best thing..."

Was her. The thought warmed her. "And that's not at all why you kept Westa's picture?"

He looked very ashamed when she asked him that. There was no need for him to answer. "Childish and narrow-minded," had been his words before.

She laughed, "Please don't answer that," she told him. He looked very relieved. "Well, I think it's a good time for breakfast... dinner... what do we call it now if we're travelling at night? Breakner? Dinfast?"

Gregor chuckled, "Breakfast. Otherwise you'll end up hurting yourself trying to name the other two meals."

Sajani helped her friend to his feet and guided him back to where their packs were sitting. Once he was settled on the ground, she opened his pack and started pulling out the fruit. They ate some cherries and peaches, then she went to the river and filled the waterskins and canteen. She did pause for a long moment to get a last look at her picture. As she stared down at it, she realized that the hairstyle wasn't the only reason it didn't look quite like her. The problem was in the expression. The Sajani in the image looked kind and sympathetic, not at all like she appeared in reality. It was almost like he'd put a little bit of himself in there.

When she returned, Gregor was trying to heft his pack on his back. She helped him and made sure the straps were loose enough to allow her to get her arm around him. "You ready?" she asked him.

He nodded once.

Putting her pack on and getting to where she could support Gregor as she walked, the two started on their way back up to the road. It'd been decided that the road would be easier on his wounded foot and keep them going the right direction. At night, it wasn't likely any humans would be traveling it and if they did, their lights would give plenty of warning before the two were seen. Once to East Oasis, they'd have to be seen in order to find the help they'd need, but it didn't seem like a good idea to advertise any more than needed.

They hadn't gone far when an idea struck the copper wolf. "Would you say that we're going about half our normal speed?" she asked.

Gregor seemed a little confused by the question but answered. "Not sure, but there's a way we can make a pretty good guess."

His suggestion was encouraging. "How so?"

"Well," her companion began, "I wouldn't trust myself to time an accurate minute, but I can count with a roughly consistent space of time between numbers."

Sajani could see where he was going. "So you count as I help you walk a set distance and then you count while I walk the same distance..."

Gregor was still confused, "Then you'll have your question answered, but I don't see what good it'll do."

"Average walking speed is five kilometers an hour," she told him. "If we know what percentage of that speed we're walking now, then we'll know about how much we can expect to travel in a day...especially now that we're on mostly flat ground."

She helped him hobble off the road and they picked a couple of random trees to measure from. It took them a count of nineteen to get between them. When Sajani walked the same distance, the count was eight.

"Couldn't be a nice round ratio, could it?" Sajani laughed when they were finished. After doing the math, she said, "That's forty-two percent."

Gregor smiled at her, "You were close with your guess of half then."

"So if we assume," Sajani said, "that we get in ten hours of travel a day..."

"That's probably a low estimate too," Gregor supplied.

“Then that’s 20 kilometers a day, which would mean we have seven days left to go 180 kilometers.”

Her math definitely made Gregor look discouraged. “I suppose we can ration out the food and get another two days out of it.” He said glumly.

“But...” Sajani added, “If we rest for two days, and that allows you to be able to walk close to our normal speed...”

Her friend caught on quickly, “Then we’d only need to go less than forty a day to get there before our food runs out.” His enthusiasm fell quickly however, “That’s a pretty big ‘if.’” He said glumly.

Sajani realized that too, but still held to her idea stubbornly. “We haven’t gone that far. We can go back so we can soak your foot regularly. Hopefully between that and keeping it elevated, it can really heal. It’s been slowly getting better as it is.”

Gregor nodded. “Too bad we didn’t think of that a few days ago...” he said sarcastically.

“Well we didn’t,” she countered. “Our main worry was getting to East Oasis. Now we have an exact distance and a good guess on speed.”

As they were hobbling back to the river Gregor suggested, “About the only thing to do while we wait is swimming.”

Sajani wasn’t sure that was such a good idea. “You should rest as much as possible.”

Gregor smiled, “Two days of boredom with periodic silliness,” he said sarcastically.

The copper wolf could feel a little warmth on her mouth and nose as she said, “You could always finish that picture of me.”

Her companion laughed, “I meant to erase that before we left.”

There didn’t seem to be a good answer to that without sounding a little conceited, so she stayed quiet. It didn’t matter.

“A bit vain are we?” he teased.

It would have been funny, if it wasn’t so true. Since Altaza there were pictures of her mother everywhere. A little less each year, but still a lot. It was true that none of her friends had ever drawn a nice picture of her, but with how much she looked like her mother, it seemed pointless. Her image was already all over the place.

Adida is your mother’s name, Ramisi had said, if you take that away...

Do you know who you are?

“Are you okay, Sajani?” Gregor was asking. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it seriously...”

There was no way he meant anything hurtful, she knew that. “Oh, it’s not that,” she lied. “I suppose you can get rid of it if you really want.”

He smiled at her. “I’ll finish it for you. It’s the least I can do with how much you’ve supported me these last few days.”

“I’d like that,” she said honestly. “Drawing looked like it made you happy. I didn’t even know...”

Gregor brightened, "I'm pretty sure I drew a lot before the orphanage, but I used it to pass the time there." There was a sort of melancholy contentment to his voice as he remembered. "The children there didn't really want to do much with me."

Somewhere deep inside the she-wolf, she hurt—just a little. That was something very new to her. Nothing he was saying affected her. There was no reason for her to be bothered by it. But it hurt. A part of her even wanted to cry.

Her friend knew nothing about her struggle, so continued. "Once I got to the school and could borrow some of Mrs. Klaston's art books, I was able to actually learn what I was supposed to do."

"I've only seen the one, but it looked very good to me." Maybe she could hide her feelings by being sarcastic. "But then, of course it looked good. It was a picture of *me*!"

Gregor smiled and laughed and stuttered for a bit.

"How'd you get supplies? Or did you just use standard pencils?" The school provided her art supplies for Mrs. Klanston's class. Sajani had been told many times how expensive they were and that she wasn't to waste them or bite them. Not that she'd ever chewed on a pencil, but for some reason the teacher always brought that up.

"Scrap paper from the classrooms and charcoal from the fireplaces," he answered. "The first time one of the staff found a picture of mine, all my art was taken away and burned. I think they were afraid I might use it as a way to make money. I hid my work from then on."

Sajani knew a little more about that than he did apparently. She'd heard it directly from one of her teachers about her own work. "That wasn't it," she told him sadly. "They'd probably be happy if you could just pay your debt and leave. They don't want a vykati to amount to anything."

The clearing where they'd camped was now before them. She guided Gregor to the river and settled him so he could soak his foot. This put them right next to the picture. Its eyes were looking straight at her. Why had he put his compassion, his sympathy into her expression? She almost asked, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

"Can you give me the canteen, please?" Gregor asked. "It's a good way to keep the sand here wet."

She pulled it from her pack and then watched as he started on the drawing again. He'd apparently noted her passing comment about her hair, because he shortened the bangs and put on the ponytail. As he worked, they talked. Gregor was very curious about what she knew of Mr. Ramisa. There was no shortage of stories to tell. Since Gregor only got news from Vharkylia occasionally, he'd missed many of the columns with his best "misspeaks" of the week.

"So he's at this formal dinner with Lords Foxworthy and Tribbet," Sajani was telling him, "and they serve caviar. When he picks up a fork to eat it

someone comments that he's not using the proper utensil. He looks over at the person and says, 'If you're going to eat something that looks like fish eyes and literally came from a fish's rear end, it doesn't matter if you use a fork, a spoon, your fingers, or your snout, it'll still taste like...'" She couldn't bring herself to say the last word in front of Gregor. He caught on anyway and they laughed heartily.

"See?" Gregor said between gasps, "You say he's nothing like Yanebel, but I can totally see the wolf in the book saying something like that."

That much was true, but she didn't want to admit that her personal hero was anything like the National Alpha. Mr. Ramisa had sent her to that school. Yanebel would have never done something like that. She needed a distraction from that line of thought, so she looked over at the picture Gregor was working on. He'd finished the face, sketched out the body and was working his way down. "What am I wearing?" she asked. It was hard to tell, since he'd barely worked down to her stomach. The arms were swinging an ax, she could see that.

"Well, eventually it'll be armor," he told her. "If I can get that level of detail in sand."

"And what's with the ax?"

"It's Yanebel's ax," he told her. "I thought I'd draw you a little like... a bit of..."

Well, it wasn't hard to figure out where he wanted to go with that. "Like I was the hero in those books?" It felt like her mouth and nose were on fire, but in a good way.

He nodded once.

She realized that he might not be trying to embarrass her, but the cynical side of her wanted revenge. "But Yanebel doesn't *wear* any armor," she told him.

That set off even more stuttering and stammering than she thought it would. It took her awhile and many apologies to get him steady again. In the end, she felt very bad about it.

"I'm sorry," she said once again. "I just wanted to..." She wanted to embarrass him, she admitted to herself, and she had. "You'd never do something like that to me. It wasn't right I..."

Gregor sighed, "I forgive you."

Honestly, she'd never doubted that he would, but it was still a huge relief to hear him say that. "Thank you," she told him truthfully. If there was some way to get into his mind and see exactly what he was thinking, she'd like to believe that she'd be safe seeing it.

But he kept his thoughts to himself.

"Please," she told him, "keep drawing. It doesn't have to be this if I've made you too uncomfortable to finish. But drawing made you so happy..."

He picked up his stick and began again.



The picture was done about the time the sky started glowing before dawn. She very carefully said nothing as he worked, although he'd talk periodically, mostly to himself about what he was doing. He scooted a little away from the picture to look at it and then, like a small child, his tail began wagging.

It turned out really well...embarrassingly well. Sajani wasn't sure she was comfortable seeing herself in armor and carrying a weapon.

It is not for you to decide.

She startled awake, having not realized that she'd dozed off briefly.

Gregor noticed. He was sitting cross-legged near her—having alternated having his foot in and out of the water. “You alright?” he asked.

“Oh...yes,” she answered. “I'm fine. Just dozed off a second. Probably time to get some sleep. Get us switched all the way over to this new schedule.”



Sajani woke before Gregor. It was still very light and warm, probably sometime around early afternoon, she guessed. Looking over at her companion, she saw that he was curled up tightly, so that his tail touched his nose. His blanket was in a pile next to him. Seeing him like that made her smile.

With no travel plans for the day, she tried to figure out what they could do to occupy their time. She started by stacking a bunch of rocks on top of each other by the river. It gave her something to do until Gregor woke up, although it would definitely not be something to work on together. The stones were about a meter high when he called out to her.

“Am I allowed to move myself, or are you going to insist that I not even walk on this foot?” He was obviously trying to be sarcastic but failing. She *had* been pretty insistent that he stay put and keep his foot elevated while they slept.

As she approached, she took a good look at his right foot. The swelling had gone down noticeably. Staying put seemed to be the right choice on helping it heal. “How's it feel?” she asked.

“Great. The best it's felt since I hurt it.” He sounded sincere. “I think I can make it to the river by myself.”

Sajani rolled her eyes. “You're a horrible patient,” she told him, “There's no reason why you should put extra weight on it. I'll help you over.” She put her arm around him and helped him down to the riverside.

“Wow,” he said with awe in his voice, “When did you have time to make that?” He motioned to the pile of stones she'd started.

“I woke up a little before you and got bored.”

“So that's how we're passing the time today?”

She rolled her eyes again. “No,” she said sternly. “We'll have to find something that you can do sitting.”

“Singing?” he suggested.

She didn't know he could sing. “I'd rather not traumatize the wildlife.”

“I think I sing very well...” he started.

Sajani laughed. "You probably do," she told him, "but I don't." That wasn't true. The truth was she was too self-conscious.

"Compose poetry?"

She was going to strain an eye muscle if she kept rolling them. "Are you serious?"

"Sure," he told her. "I've tried my hand a few times. Nothing spectacular, but maybe with some help..."

"I think I'd be more hinderance than help," she said dead pan. Her previous doubt that such a wolf as Gregor could exist resurfaced, Poetry, music, art...

"Well, what about a game? Do you know any games that we can play while sitting? We can probably manage chess or checkers using rocks on a board drawn in the sand."

Well he sure was putting in an effort at any rate. She did remember a game. It wasn't one she'd played in while. She used to play it with her parents, but after her mother died, she stopped. Three players worked better than two, but it could be interesting. "I know a word game," she told him.

He seemed pretty eager to do anything as long as it wasn't sitting around. The rules were simple. One person started by saying a word and then the next person had to come up with a word that meant *almost* the same thing. Using possessives wasn't allowed and exact synonyms didn't count. So if you wanted to have a game last forever, you'd use a number and each progressive number would count, but you couldn't use "dozen" to follow "twelve." If they couldn't find a close match or gave an invalid one, they got a point. The person that ended with the least points won.

It turned out to be a good choice for keeping Gregor entertained and a bad choice if she wanted to win. They played four games up until one had ten points. Every time she got to ten first and he never ended with more than three.

He was a good winner and for the most part she tried to be a good sport. After the fourth game she told him, "Well, unless you want to throw the next game to make me feel better, let's find another game."