

## Chapter 2: Desert Caravan Part 1 of 2

Sajani woke to the sound of soft giggling. A female voice said, “He was just on the other side of the tent wall. When he woke up he tried to say something, but just stuttered at me.”

Hearing someone making fun of Gregor, especially when he was doing something as a favor to her, provided a sudden need for the she-wolf to explain her friend’s purpose. She didn’t want to admit her fears, but her desire to defend Gregor overrode that. “I sometimes have problems with nightmares,” she said softly. The laughing stopped. “He stays close so I can sleep.”

She opened her eyes and looked at the three women who were sitting on the cots. One was Malanda and the others were two gray vykati that she didn’t know. The larger had long white hair that sat down to her shoulders and was dressed in a work outfit of sky-blue cotton. The smaller had black hair tied back in a short ponytail. They both had their eyes wide in wonderment.

The human was laughing loudly. “Oh...well if that’s case, friend, he was on the wrong side of the tent. These cots are just small enough to be nice and cozy.” She kept laughing, not realizing that she was the only one in the tent that thought it was funny.

The larger of the two vykati looked over at the copper wolf and said. “One wolf?”

Sajani nodded.

The other wolf asked, “Both of you?”

“Yes,” the youth said, barely loud enough to be heard over the laughter.

“Look, Malanda,” the first vykati said. “I’m sure this is really hilarious to a human, but for us, it’s very serious and personal.”

“What?” the human said, still laughing. “I know you at least..”

The second wolf interrupted. “And that’s my choice. She’s chosen something different and that should be respected, not ridiculed.”

Malanda’s laughter slowed as she looked back and forth between her two tent-mates. “You’re serious?”

Sajani consoled herself by realizing that the kind woman who helped her out yesterday probably didn’t mean any harm. Even humans that worked around vykati constantly, like Malanda did, had trouble knowing all the nuances of the culture.

The second vykati put a hand on the human’s shoulder and gave a meaningful look to her vykati friend. “Come on, Malanda,” she said, “Let’s see about some breakfast. Talandie’ll help Sajani get ready.”

Talandie waited for the other two to exit and then sat down next to the copper wolf on her cot. “I’m sorry,” she said softly placing a hand on Sajani’s knee. “It’s a pretty foreign concept to humans. In their culture someone with the level of commitment you two have are considered prudish.”

Sajani hadn't realized it hurt enough to make her cry. The last measure of respect she had for her father was his total commitment to that ideal. It was why, when she was old enough to understand it, she decided she would hold to the same standard as her mother and father. Her friends would sometimes, if they were the only ones around, make fun of her, but it never hurt like this. "I shouldn't let it bother me," she said angrily.

"I suspect," Talandie said cautiously, "that it wasn't what she said about *you*, that was the problem."

That made even less sense. Malanda had been making fun of her. Who else would the insult hurt?

"I'll take you to get some breakfast before we start tearing down everything to move," the older vykati offered, "but first I just wanted to tell you something."

Sajani waited.

"East Oasis said you two had been on the run for over a week...Someone that can stay that committed while you're both alone most of the time...I hope you have a lot of respect for him. You know what it's taking for you to stay focused and I suspect it's at least that difficult for him."

Sajani smiled shyly. "He's a true friend."

"I think you'll find eventually," Talandie said with conviction, "that he's even more valuable than that."



Gregor caught up with her at breakfast. The place was a lot more crowded this morning, with almost all the seats full. She'd saved him one and waved to him once he was through the line. Her tent-mates had already left, but she'd waited.

"Pastola eggs and bacon—like we had at the lake." He smiled at her. "Add sausage, ham, and hash browns—you have the best breakfast I've had in the last five years." He didn't waste any time and started right into his food.

She watched him while he ate. She never really sat and watched him like that. While he was eating with enthusiasm, she also noticed that his table manners were flawless: carefully chewing his food, never speaking with his mouth full. He even managed to keep his muzzle shut while he chewed: not an easy thing to do for a vykati. Sajani was usually content to just make sure hers opened as little as possible.

"We got really *lucky* this time didn't we?" he said between bites.

She rolled her eyes. "Not this again."

He laughed and took another bite.

She decided to not encourage the topic so said nothing.

Once his mouth was empty he said cheerfully, "Well, if they'll let us travel with them, we're as good as home. Their guide, Alonzo, says that they'll be meeting a cargo ship at Nashtalli and it can take some passengers."

His comment worried her slightly. She'd been under the impression that they'd at least let them travel with them through the desert. She told Gregor her worry.

It took him a moment to finish chewing and then he answered, "Yeah, Alonzo says that the caravan leader will meet with us this morning and the decision is entirely hers. She's usually nice, he says, but she's not big on adding extra expenses if she can help it."

Well, their luck had been stretched really thin, so it wouldn't surprise her at all if they ended up abandoned in the desert. At least they'd gotten some food and decent rest out of the deal.

"Oh," he added with excitement, "He also says at least one copy of book seven is floating around here and," he was now positively beaming. "He got me a newspaper—it's only a couple days old."

If that wasn't the last bit of luck they had left, she'd be surprised.



She'd helped the others tear down the tent and get it packed, just as Gregor and Alonzo showed up. "It's time to meet the *vhemato*," he said cheerfully. Her friend snickered and the guide reached into a pocket and pulled out a gold coin, which he tossed to the other male. "Remember," the older wolf said in a conspiratorial tone, "no fair telling her." He turned and beckoned them to follow.

On their way, Sajani whispered, "Tell her what?"

Gregor smiled and whispered back. "He calls the lady in charge *vhemato*."

"And?" she asked.

"You don't find that funny?"

Of course she didn't. "I don't know what that means."

"Sorry," he said quietly, "I thought since you learned Rhidayan, you'd know."

She waited impatiently for him to enlighten her.

"It's an archaic way to formally address a slave driver. I read it in a book."

They both laughed. The comment did worry Sajani a bit though. Considering that they were now at the mercy of that person, the title wasn't promising. The prospect of being left behind scared her.

They were led to an open space in the camp where there were a few camels and horses waiting for passengers. The merchant they'd seen yesterday was seated on a very regal looking horse.

Sajani was unimpressed and had already convinced herself that this meeting would end with them alone in the desert. She didn't give the merchant a chance to speak. "Wow look who's on her high horse," she said spitefully. Gregor nearly choked.

"Excuse me?" Farleesha answered. "I was under the impression..."

The copper wolf didn't let her finish. "Here are the two fugitives you caught, ready to be turned in for the reward. I'm told it might be as high as twenty gold, so you won't be wanting to waste any time getting your money."

Gregor was next to her stuttering and stammering.

"Look, pup!" Farleesha said sternly—making the last word sound like a deep insult. "I don't know what you've been told, but let me start by saying the current reward for your capture is up to two hundred fifty gold..."

That stopped Sajani in her tracks.

"You're lucky these people that work for me are as loyal as they are, because that amount is something that even impresses me. I've been more than kind. I made sure you were clean and rested before this meeting, because I didn't want you to feel like I was lording over you."

Gregor tried to say something again but couldn't get the words out. Sajani was still stunned. She wasn't usually so flippant, not even her old self, but the thought of being left in the desert was frightening. Now it looked like she guaranteed that verdict.

"I'm going to give you one more chance, little girl," Farleesha said angrily, "to start over and get this right."

She looked over at Gregor. This might be more the realm of a nice person like him, not a grating personality like her own. He motioned her to go ahead.

Taking a deep breath, she tried again. "May I travel with you?"

The merchant paused for a long while and that scared her. She finally answered. "I am Farleesha Qistara, and you?"

When she said start again, she apparently really meant it. "Sajani Adida," she tried to get the defiance out of her voice but failed.

"Welcome to my caravan Miss Adida and friend," she said graciously as she gave a nod to Gregor.

She motioned to one of the workers and pointed at a camel. They were going to let her ride a camel? That did improve her mood. Not all the workers got to ride. A good number, her tent mates included, had to walk. She tried to get up on the camel. The human that the merchant had motioned to was trying to help her, but his accent was so thick, she couldn't understand him. While she was struggling, Farleesha said something, but she missed it.

Gregor just hopped up on the camel like he'd ridden one since he was a toddler.

The worker was trying to give her a place to put her foot, but every time she started to put her lower paw there, the man would point at the ground and say something. After a few times of doing this, he let her place her foot. Once she was up on the beast, she realized exactly what the human had been trying to say. She was now face to face with Gregor. They bumped noses. He started stuttering softly, but she just wiggled around until she was facing the right way.

"What brings you to Rhidayar?" Farleesha asked.

Just as she was settled Farleesha started the caravan forward. The sudden movement of her mount surprised her and she started to slip off. Gregor helped her get her balance.

That question made her think of her father's ambivalence about sending her off. She was angry enough that she misspoke slightly, but since it reflected badly on her paw, she didn't mind. "My father sent me to school here."

Farleesha's next question showed that Sajani wasn't the only one that lacked tact. "We only do business here because Benayle lowered the tariffs to encourage merchants to import goods and increase trade. Why would *you* be sent here?"

If she'd been in a better mood, the copper wolf might have found that funny. With how she felt at the moment, it was impossible for her to keep quiet. She found herself completely unloading on the merchant. "My father did it because *Mr. Ramisa* suggested it. He seemed to think that some time away from my own people might help me trust humans. Like a school that locks you indoors all day and never lets you go outside after hours was a good idea. They didn't even have a desk I could sit at without hurting after a few minutes."

The merchant's next question worried Sajani slightly, but she quickly realized that where Farleesha might insist on taking her was exactly where she wanted to go. "And where are you going from here?"

"Back home. I want to look my father in the eye and tell him that I'm not *that* easy to put off."

"Well Miss Adida," the older vykati said politely, "you'll find that I'm more than happy to help a fellow traveler. I only have a few requirements in exchange for that aid."

Great, now they really were going to get dumped in the desert once Farleesha found out they had no money. "I'm sorry. We have no money." She wanted to be able to say that her father would be happy to pay but realized that it might not be the complete truth. Normally lying like that wouldn't have bothered her, but Gregor's morals seemed to be contagious.

"Money is *not* the problem," the merchant reassured her. "I expect you to work while you're with me. Everyone works while we're in the desert."

Sajani didn't know what to say to that. She'd never held a job. Despite the forced labor at the school, she hadn't developed any kind of work ethic.

"I'll pay you for your work. I don't really have a need for two untrained hands, but I'd feel guilty forcing work on you without compensation."

And she thought it was hard to believe someone like Gregor existed. An honest merchant that wasn't trying to squeeze her employees dry? (zzzWhat next? A talking, singing mouse that has his own amusement park?)

"The working together leads me to my next requirement: you'll treat the other people here, myself included, with respect. It's hard enough to get humans and vykati to work together without *someone* having a bad disposition."

It was pretty obvious who that was directed at and it wasn't Gregor.

"And lastly?" Sajani asked. She was feeling more than a little humbled.

There was a long pause. "My last requirement," the merchant said with authority, "is directed at you two specifically. You're wanted and there's a hefty reward out for you. When I tell you to do something, no matter how crazy and insane it seems, you need to do it without question. You'll need to *trust me*."

It'd been a while since she heard those words. They still bothered her, but not as much as they had. She'd learned to trust one person. That thought warmed her.

"Am I clear?" Farleesha asked.

It wasn't in her nature to give the response she knew was wanted, but there was only one answer that would keep her on that camel. "Yes, Miss Qistara."



"So," Farnsbeck asked Magenta, "how often do caravans come through here?" They'd checked the gates as discretely as possible and there hadn't been any talk about a pair of vykati being captured. Now they just needed to double check the local area and figure out how to get to Nashtalli. They'd hope that Sajani and Gregor also found a way there.

"Our best bet," Magenta told him, "was the vykati caravan that left two days ago, but I doubt we'd be able to find them without hired help. Hopefully the pups ran into that one."

Farnsbeck still worried. The reward was now substantial. "I just wish I knew if they were safe. Even if they met up with other vykati, they might get sold out. Who's running that caravan?" He had confidence in his compatriot's local knowledge.

Magenta shrugged. "You mean who *owns* that caravan," she said with emphasis. "Don't know her first name, but she's the owner of Qistara Imports."

Not the largest company in the country by any stretch, but a fairly well known one. "So as long as her employees stay loyal..."

"Exactly," his partner said. "She's known for being pretty honest."

That wasn't encouraging, per say. "Being a good person won't get those two past the dock authority, let alone customs."

His concern wasn't shared by the she-wolf. "Honest in Vharkylia," she amended. "She'll pay full fees to her home nation, but rumor is that she has the Nashtalli customs manager on her payroll. She does seem to make a bit more than her competition on these runs."

Farnsbeck smiled. "Well, let's hope our quarry met up with her."

"Now we just need to decide what we're doing," Magenta continued. "There are some markers to show the way through the desert, but bandits like to tear them down and one wrong turn can be pretty deadly."

Farnsbeck sighed. "I might chance it if we can't find them around here in the next two days."

His companion looked worried. "Don't see why we should bother waiting around. We can't go back into the town..."

That made him smile. "I thought you were supposed to be pretty good at disguise?" The rumors he'd heard were colorful to the say the least.

Magenta rolled her eyes. "Humph. Sure, with some time and the disguise kit back at my..." She stopped suddenly and slapped her palm to her forehead. "Okay, so I'm an idiot. You have spells that'll do that. Why didn't you say something sooner?"

It wasn't like he'd forgotten what he could do. "I was saving spells for if we had to fight to get those two out of trouble, but now that we're pretty sure they're not in town..."

"I can get a bath!" Magenta exclaimed. After only a moment she added, "...and so can you."

"I was more thinking of getting some food and supplies. The spell won't let us be that far apart. You'll have to stay in sight." Maintaining an illusion like that wasn't easy. He'd originally planned on just going in alone, but there was no way Magenta would let him do that now that the idea was in her head.

She walked up close to him and put her arms on his shoulders, "Then we'll have to get a private bath."