

## Chapter 2: Desert Caravan (Part 2 of 2)

It'd been a very long ride. By the end of the day, Sajani decided that she'd rather walk than ride the camel. Gregor helped a lot, but the discomfort from the moving camel was complicated by the discomfort of having her companion right behind her the whole time. True, she'd helped him walk for days, but that was easy to justify as needed help. Part of her enjoyed it very much, and that bothered her. Gregor was able to talk off and on, but most of the time, especially after the camel would make any sudden movement that required him to keep her from falling off, he'd stutter and stammer and not be able to say much.

They'd talked a little about it at lunch and decided that they didn't want to offend Farleesha by turning down the mount. Now that the ride was over for the day, she'd convinced Gregor that they should just tell the merchant they were happy to walk.

Alonzo approached them right after they dismounted and laughed at them. "Look at you two walk," he joked. "Try not to let the *vhemato* see you."

Gregor worried. "She won't be offended that we had so much trouble will she?"

That made the guide laugh a lot. "No. She had you two ride the camel as revenge on the copper one. There was no way you'd not be sore after a day of riding."

Gregor thought it was funny. Sajani didn't. While she felt like she'd definitely deserved some sort of recompense for her harsh words, it seemed more than excessive. A change of topic was in order, "What work are we supposed to be doing?" the copper wolf asked. "She said we needed to work."

Alonzo smiled at her. "The *vhemato* will be pleased to hear you asked. I'll be sure to pass that on."

Did that mean he was watching them and reporting?

The guide continued, "I'll take the quiet one with me and he can help assemble some tents. You," he said pointing at Sajani, "should get with Malanda or Talandie. They'll be setting up a tent for tonight and they usually have a few other *needs*."

At a guess he was referring to things like getting a bath. She was hoping there might be some time to get her hand claws trimmed and filed.

"And," the guide continued, "once that's done, Messy might have some dinner ready. Nothing as fancy as yesterday, since he won't have all day to plan like he did after the sandstorm."

A voice came from behind them. "Ah, there you are," Farleesha said happily. "I see you enjoyed your camel ride."

Alonzo made an attempt to shorten her ridicule. "I was just telling them *vhemato*, to help the others with the tents..."

The merchant interrupted politely. "Thank you for seeing about that, but I have a job set apart for them tonight. We'll have them work with the others tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am," he responded. "You'll also be happy to know that the copper one asked specifically for work."

"No," she said with noticeable shock. The merchant turned to Gregor and asked, "is that true?"

The sudden attention started her friend stuttering, but he managed to say, "Yes."

"Fair is fair," Farleesha said reaching into her pocket. She tossed a gold coin to the guide. So when Alonzo said she'd be happy to know that, what he really meant... The merchant motioned to the two young wolves. "Follow me," she said briskly.

The area around them was a flurry of activity. People were unloading some of the wagons, taking the animals off for feeding, putting up tents, and moving food and water. The amazing part of it was they were all actually working. Almost all anyway, they came across a male vykati with brown fur that was leaning against a water barrel that he'd just finished unloading. He was sweating, possibly from the heat, but most likely from the work he'd just finished.

Farleesha pointed at him and said briskly, but not unkindly, "Get back to work Brack. There'll be time to rest when we're set up."

Gregor leaned over and whispered in Sajani's ear. "*Vhemato.*"

She laughed lightly.

The teenagers were led over to a wagon holding several crates. There was a man in expensive clothes standing next to it and the pair was surprised that the merchant didn't say anything about his inactivity. They soon found out why.

As they approached, the human walked a few steps to meet them. "Miss Qistara," he said amiably, "thank for sending these two to help." The human put out his hand in greeting. The three newcomers shook hands as Farleesha made the introductions.

"Sajani and Gregor, this is Mr. Talinga. He's a consultant that we retain on some of our runs, specifically when we're working with magic items. Mr. Talinga, this is Sajani and Gregor."

The human smiled wide showing off very white teeth. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'll need your help cataloging some of the..."

The merchant interrupted. "Before I go," she said quickly. "Were you able to find the countermeasure?"

The consultant's smile ended abruptly. "No, I haven't," he said seriously. "I'm pretty sure it was just placed hurriedly in a random crate. It'd be hard to lose something that large."

The merchant turned to go, but looked back over her shoulder and said, “Let them know what it looks like.” She walked quickly off. Sajani noticed that brown wolf’s tail was twitching nervously.

Mr. Talinga spoke again once she was gone. “A crate of magic items broke in the storm. We put the items from the broken crate in with the rest of our stock, wherever they’d fit,” he said animatedly. “I’ll need some help matching them up with...Ah who am I fooling?” He laughed heartily. “You two looked new and lost so I told the lady I needed some help. Mostly, I’ll be going through the boxes and checking off each item on our purchase order. All you’ll be doing is moving things from a box, setting them aside as I mark them and then putting them back in the box when I’m done.”

Gregor tried to say something, “What about the...the counter...”

Sajani helped. “What about this countermeasure she was talking about?” She hastily added, “Farleesha might ask us about it.”

The human smiled his broad smile. “Almost all of the things you’ll be moving are cheap little knickknacks—things that common people like to have around the house, but don’t really do much.”

“It sounded expensive...” Sajani started.

The consultant nodded. “It is *very* expensive. I’ll probably send one of you to tell her as soon as we find it.” He changed his mode of speaking and sounded a lot like he was teaching a class. “Pirates will sometimes make use of some rather powerful magic when they attack merchant ships. The most common is called a jana array. It stops a ship from moving. In high winds, it can fracture the masts.”

That didn’t sound good. Sajani wasn’t sure which was more frightening, pirates attacking a ship or a ship losing its sails in the middle of the ocean.

Mr. Talinga continued. “A countermeasure, the one she’s talking about anyway, cancels the effects of a jana array. Unfortunately, it also cancels just about all magic on board. The ship you’ll be meeting up with in Nashtalli had to use the one it had and will need this replacement.”

Great. So the ship they’d be travelling on had already been attacked by pirates once. Did that make it more or less likely to be attacked again?

“What...What does...” Gregor began.

“What does it look like?” Sajani finished for him.

The consultant shrugged. “Probably the plainest looking major magic item you’ll ever see. It looks like a bronze pipe about a meter and a half long. It goes down a hole near the helm that leads to the ship’s rudder. The arcane energy...” He stopped a moment before continuing. “It works better that way,” he finished with a smile.

After a few more basic instructions, the three started into their work. It was very easy and Sajani felt a little bad knowing that her tentmates were working much harder. She did have to admit that it did go faster with the two of them moving things back and forth. Gregor suggested to her (he didn’t talk

to Mr. Talinga for some reason) that they leave the first box of items out and then they could move the second box into the first box, saving some time.

The countermeasure they were looking for was in the last box. Instead of sending one of them to find Farleesha, he told them to just finish up the last items and get the things from the first box put away. Gregor was just nailing the last crate closed when the merchant showed up.

“Did you find it?” Farleesha asked desperately.

“Yes,” Sajani answered excitedly.

That answer visibly calmed the newcomer and her tail stopped twitching. “Messy’s got dinner ready in the mess tent,” she said happily. “Come on and we’ll get it while it’s still hot.”

That invitation was, surprisingly enough, extended to all three. At first Sajani felt sure it was just offered to the consultant, but when she and Gregor hesitated, she motioned for them to come with her. The copper wolf smiled at her friend and they rushed to catch up.

On the way over the merchant was surprisingly chatty, asking questions about Sajani and Gregor, mostly polite things like their age and where they were from. The copper wolf was happy to answer, although Gregor was having trouble. It was at that moment that Sajani finally figured out why people kept thinking he was shy. He *was* shy. Even before they left the school, he only ever talked to her, so it hadn’t been noticeable.

The cafeteria tent wasn’t that crowded yet. Most people were still working, so the four of them were able to get their food and sit right away. Sajani was a little surprised to see that the merchant didn’t sit by herself, but instead sat among her employees and talked to them. She knew everyone by name and introduced them to Sajani and Gregor as they came by.

“You know,” Sajani whispered to Gregor. “I think Alonzo means ‘*vhemato*’ as a compliment.”

Her friend nodded.

A moment after that a female vykati with silver fur and wearing a basic blue dress came by and was introduced to them. The she-wolf got all ecstatic. “The daughter of Malita Adida! I never thought I’d meet...” She continued on, obviously much more thrilled to meet the copper wolf than the other way around.

It was a pretty common thing to happen to her and not that long ago she loved the attention. Now though, it wasn’t the same. She felt embarrassed, in part because she realized that there was nothing that she’d done to deserve it. Gregor was a much better person and deserved the attention, even if it would make him stutter.

Sajani managed to look politely attentive and thanked the other wolf for the compliments. She went to give her usual response but found that it didn’t sound the same. The words were almost hollow now. “I’m proud to be the daughter of...” She amended her rote speech, “It’s an honor to be the daughter of someone as amazing as my mother.” Now she felt like she needed

to add more. “She was an even better mother than she was a...” Sajani’s voice cracked. The copper wolf noticed that Farleesha was giving her a quizzical look. No matter. This was something that she really needed to say. Taking a lesson from Gregor she said quickly, “She was an even better mother than she was a soldier.” Once the words were out, she found herself better able to control her emotions and she smiled at the lady that’d addressed her.

The vykati in the blue dress smiled back and said, “I can tell you really loved her.” The she-wolf looked at her expectantly.

The teenager felt like she needed to say something nice to the lady, so added, “Thank you. I’m glad so many people think well of her.”

“If the paintings I’ve seen are accurate, you look just like her.” The lady seemed almost as nervous as Sajani felt.

“I like to think so. Thank you for the compliment.” The words weren’t coming naturally to her, but she wanted to appear nice and gracious in front of Gregor. If she kept trying, maybe it’d eventually be real.

“Would you mind,” the admirer asked politely, “signing something for me? I have a friend that won’t believe me...she probably won’t believe me even with that...”

That was a first and it really shocked the copper wolf. People asked her for things all the time. Usually, they wanted her to introduce them to people—often people she didn’t know. Some asked for product endorsements, but those required her father to sign off and rather than even ask, she’d just refuse. There were even a few attempts to get her to endorse political actions. Those were referred directly to Mr. Ramisa, who handled them rather bluntly.

Farleesha, seeing her hesitation, handed over a napkin and a pen. Sajani signed her name and offered it with a smile. That satisfied the lady in the blue dress, who thanked her and wandered off to get her dinner.

Shortly after she’d left, Sajani realized that she hadn’t been paying attention when they’d been introduced and couldn’t remember the wolf’s name.

The merchant had watched through the whole exchange and motioned for the young wolf to listen. “I’m impressed,” she said. “I didn’t expect that gracious of a response.”

Sajani could feel warmth around her mouth and nose. “Well, I’m sure you’re much more practiced with things like that than I am. You have money and all I have is my looks.” It’d been meant as a tease, but it obviously wasn’t taken that way. Farleesha frowned and went silent.

Dinner continued and when they finished, Farleesha abruptly excused herself and wished them a good night before heading off. Gregor walked with her over to her tent. To their surprise a cot was already set up on the outside for him. Talandie was waiting by it and smiled at them, waving. “We got your cot set up for you,” she said.

That caused her companion to stutter until Sajani said “Thank you” on his behalf.

“And there’s a couple more surprises for you in the tent.” The older vykati was talking very fast and her excitement was almost contagious. She motioned for the two youngsters to enter.

Everything looked about the same. The other vykati tentmate and Malanda were in there sitting on their cots. Over where Sajani slept there was an outfit laid out waiting for her. It was a similar style to the one she was wearing only in a very nice forest green. The choli was fancier, with black lace and cording decorating it.

“The others set up while I altered it, so it was a group effort. It was pretty close to the right size, but I noticed with the one you’re wearing was tight in a few spots, so I let it out as much as I could.”

Sajani picked up the clothes and looked them over, wishing there was a mirror, but held the clothes over her to give her friends an idea of what it would look like.

Malanda spoke up, “And while we were getting things set up, Zantalla figured out how to change the shower partition. You seemed to really enjoy that yesterday so she got it fixed up. Not only will you have a bit more privacy, the rest of us will get less wet,” she laughed.

“Have you had a chance to clean up yet?” Sajani asked. “I’d hate to take all the water.”

Zantalla laughed. “If you go to sleep as early as you did yesterday, we’ll have plenty of time.”

The copper wolf didn’t have to be told twice. “It’ll be nice to not smell like camel.” She grabbed her grooming kit and a handy towel and headed into the partition. Her fur was all the way wet down and she was covered with soap when she realized she’d forgotten something. “Thank you!” she said loudly and sincerely.

While she got cleaned up Gregor sat with the three tentmates. At first he kept stuttering, but she noticed that after a little while he was able to get some words out. By the time she finished cleaning up, he was mostly talking, albeit very softly and shyly.

She joined in the conversation while she took care of her grooming. At first she wanted to hurry and be out there, but after a moment, she decided that she wanted Gregor to see her with her fur and hair properly done. She didn’t bother with her hand claws, but she did make use of almost every comb and brush.

To her surprise, the clothes fit perfectly. Sajani made a mental note to tell Talandie what a good job she’d done. When she stepped out, the three other women in the tent greeted her.

Gregor looked totally shocked for a moment before a slow smile came across his face. “You look... I can’t believe... That color...”

She smiled back at him. “Thank you,” she told him, hoping to end his embarrassment.

It worked. His smile got wider.

The five of them went on talking. Or rather, Sajani, Malanda, and Talandie talked about fashion and gossip while Gregor and Zantalla discussed animals and food. It felt good to talk about some of the same things she did with her old friends, but with people that actually seemed to like her.

After only a couple hours though, Sajani became very tired. The camel ride had worked muscles that she didn’t usually use. She looked over at Gregor who nodded once and got up to go to his cot outside. Her tentmates stayed up much later, but it didn’t matter, the copper wolf was soon asleep.



Farnsbeck waited while Magenta packed. They’d gone back to her apartment to find that it’d been broken into. Nothing of value was taken and the she-wolf was pretty sure they didn’t discover the hidden passage.

“Probably just looking for paperwork,” she said slowly. “Like I’d keep anything here. It is pretty funny that they rifled through just about everything but left the necklace and money.”

He wasn’t so sure. “A piece of clothing would be enough if they happen to know someone with the right spells or abilities.”

That led her back to rifling through her drawers. “Nope. I know exactly how many outfits I have and nothing’s missing.” Since she didn’t have any luggage, she was just tossing her things into a leather satchel she’d purchased after they finished at the bath house. Farnsbeck had a matching one with a single change of clothes that he’d purchased on the same shopping trip. He didn’t want to get anything, but Magenta insisted.

His thinking was interrupted when a piece of paper was slipped under the door. He saw it, but his companion heard it and turned to retrieve it. “Oh good,” she said once she’d read it. She tossed it over the Farnsbeck. “That one stop on the way over paid off. We’re in luck, plushfur.”

The note read:

Two iron eagles flying at six o’clock.

The black wolf smiled. “Yes, we are. I wanted one more day to look for the pups, but this might be our best chance to cross to Nashtalli.”

Magenta closed her satchel and slipped on her sandals. “We going as security or commoners?”

That was a good question. One way would cost them money but draw less attention. “Do you have a preference? I’m all for earning instead of spending.”

“I’ll buy then. The food’s usually a little better and we’ll have a private tent, maybe a shower.”