

What Once was Eden

Chapter 3: Starting the Competition

Sajani awoke feeling happy. The rest of the tent was still asleep, so she put on her necklace and went outside to see if Gregor was awake. He wasn't. Her companion was sleeping on his cot, curled into a fetal position. His hand was near his mouth, so it looked a little like he was sucking his thumb. It was possible he was. She didn't check. Instead she stood and watched him for a moment.

A feeling of contentment came over her. They were safe. It'd been fourteen days since they left the school and it seemed like months. He'd done what he said he'd do and made it possible for her to go home. In a couple weeks, they'd be in Vharkylia and she'd go off to jail. That didn't bother as much as it did when she'd first learned of it. After being around Gregor, she came to realize how much she'd hurt others by what she was doing. The time in jail was deserved. Not liked, of course, but she'd come to terms with paying that debt.

And when she'd come out in two years, where would her friend be? Would he have found someone? Someone like he deserved? Part of her hoped he would, but most of her hoped he'd be there when she was free.

At some point Farleesha had come up behind her. When the merchant spoke, Sajani jumped. "I'd heard he did that for you, but to be honest, I didn't believe it." She added quickly, "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

The copper wolf didn't turn to face the caravan leader. "Yes," she said quietly. "He's a good person."

"From what little I've seen, yes. He is."

"He deserves to be around other nice people." Sajani said regretfully. She was unsure why she was telling Farleesha what she'd been thinking, but it seemed to come naturally.

The merchant didn't say anything in response. Instead she just placed a hand on Sajani's shoulder and said, "You can grab some breakfast early if you want. Messy should have something." Patting the copper wolf on the shoulder a couple times, she turned and headed away towards the cafeteria.

Sajani sat and watched Gregor for a few minutes and started feeling bored. She was going to just shake his shoulder but decided to wake him the same way she had the last time. Placing her hand on his head, she tousled his hair and rubbed between his ears a few times, then pulled back before he woke and got embarrassed.

He wagged his tail before he opened his eyes and rolled over on his back. "Oh," he said cautiously. "Was I having that nightmare again? It didn't seem like it."

Sajani smiled. "Nope. I got bored and didn't want to go to breakfast by myself."

He smiled and she felt warm around her nose and mouth. “Okay,” he told her, “Let’s get something to eat.” If being woken early bothered him, she knew he’d never let her know.

As they were leaving, Zantalla was just leaving the tent. The older wolf smiled at them and looking at Gregor asked, “You ready for today?”

Gregor got a very wide grin on his face. “Oh yes,” he said happily, “I’m really looking forward to it.”

“I’ll get the saddles ready before breakfast then,” Zantalla said cheerfully.

The exchange made Sajani feel a little left out and bothered, but she didn’t want to seem like she was intruding. It shouldn’t upset her if Gregor talked to someone else. It didn’t bother her last night.

Her friend didn’t seem to notice anything was wrong and that made her crankier. “This is Zantalla’s first trip across the desert too. She turned seventeen last month and got this job. She lived in Tubacano and Farleesha hired her there.”

“That’s nice,” Sajani said wistfully. The other she-wolf apparently looked older than her age.

The mess tent wasn’t very crowded. It was still pretty early, so they had their choice of food and seats. Like dinner the previous night, the meal was basic: hard boiled eggs, bacon, sausage, cheese and bread which Sajani used to make a sandwich. Gregor started into his food before noticing what she’d done.

“That’s a great idea,” he said cheerfully and began slicing his egg and putting things together.

“Something my parents used to make all the time,” the copper wolf said slowly. “I think they got it from when they were in the Wolf Pack.”

“You alright?” he asked carefully. “You seem a little slow this morning. Did you get enough sleep?”

“I’m fine,” she lied.

He gave her an honest look of deep concern. “If you’re not feeling well, I’ll cancel my plans for today and stay with you.”

That comment had Sajani’s undivided attention, but she didn’t want to show it. “What plans are those?” she said carefully.

“One of the stable hands is sick, so I was going to borrow his horse and help Zantalla monitor the teams while we’re moving,” he said amiably, “but if you’re sick too, I’ll stay back. It’s been a long time since I’ve ridden a horse, so I’m not sure how much help I’ll be.”

“Your family kept horses?” she asked, trying to divert her attention from the part about him helping Zantalla.

“I don’t think they were ours,” he said hesitantly, “but we did go riding a few times. It came back to me when we got on the camel yesterday.”

“I didn’t know riding a horse and riding a camel were that similar,” she said testily. “Seemed pretty different to me.”

He smiled at her gently. “We rode camels too. Probably when we came to Bahadhra.” The concerned look returned. “Are you sure you’re alright? Zantalla was saying there’s a bug going around. Her coworker will be on one of the wagons. You can probably get a lift with him if you’re having troubles.”

That did nothing to improve things. “I’ll just stay with Talandie and Malanda,” she said monotone. As an afterthought, she forced a smile at him.

He seemed placated, but only momentarily. “Are you not hungry? You’ve hardly touched your food.”

The truth was, she was really hungry. She just didn’t feel like eating. “You can have it, if you want,” she offered.

He reached across the table and took it off her plate. “I’ll tell Zantalla that I’m still sore from yesterday and we can walk together. That way if you’re sick, I can...”

Sajani decided it might be time to put on a bit of an act. She’d feel guilty if he cancelled after how much it he’d been looking forward to it when he first woke. She straightened up and smiled. “I’m fine. Go have fun today. My tentmates and I’ll probably be talking about clothes and the latest plays. You’d be bored.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Zantalla enter the tent. “I’ll go lay down for a little bit. I think I might have gotten up too early.” She got up and started to leave.

Gregor nodded once. “Okay. The caravan’s not too big. Find me and let me know if you need anything.” He noticed the other she-wolf and smiled, motioning for her to come sit with him.

As Sajani was leaving she saw that Zantalla had a copy of book seven in her hand. Looked like Gregor’d already managed to find someone who was nice and had similar interests. She’d hoped it would take a little longer, but the least she could do was try to be happy for him.

Her other tentmates hadn’t left yet. Talandie was brushing her long white hair while Malanda sat and talked. “You have breakfast already?” the gray vykati asked. “We were about to head out.”

“I was just going to lay down for a bit,” Sajani said moodily.

“Are you okay?” the human asked. “You’re looking a little down.”

“Fine,” Sajani said softly. An idea occurred to her. “Could you please bring a little food back for me? I, uh, was feeling a little tired, so I left breakfast early.”

“Of course,” Talandie said as they were leaving. “Hope you’re not sick.” The two left.

As they walked out, Sajani realized a problem with her plan. Looking around the empty tent, she could feel panic rising. She breathed deeply and tried to get control, but it wasn’t working too well. Laying down on the cot, she curled up and held her knees. The copper wolf just started rocking herself back and forth gently when a voice spoke from behind her. She startled.

“Is Zant here?” It was Farleesha.

“No,” Sajani answered quietly.

“Are you okay? You’re not sick are you?” the merchant asked politely.

Between the panic and feeling sorry for herself, that was just enough to get her angry. “Why does everyone keep thinking I’m sick?” she nearly shouted. “I’m fine. I just want to be left alone.”

No you don’t, her cynical voice responded. *You never want to be left alone*. It sounded like Farleesha had started to leave and turned right back around, so Sajani rolled over and was about to yell some more when she saw Gregor. He had a wrapped napkin in his hands and Sajani could smell it was eggs and bacon. His eyes were wide and he looked slightly frightened. Apparently her expression was pretty hostile.

“I’m sorry. Maybe I should have knocked or...whatever you do before you go into someone else’s tent,” he said cautiously. “I heard Malanda telling Messy you needed some food, so I offered to take it to you.”

Sajani forced a smile. The panic was departing and so was a little of her self-doubt. Just because he found someone compatible didn’t mean he’d forget his friend. She should have known that. “Thank you,” she said politely. “I guess I was hungry after all.”

She turned and put her feet on the ground to give him room to sit next to her, which he did. Gregor handed her the food and she started nibbling at it. He stood back up almost right away and pulled something from his pocket. It was book seven. “Zant found two copies and picked this one up this morning. She’ll bring the other one when she gets back from breakfast.” He sat back down, and she reached over and gave him a quick hug. The stuttering started but didn’t last long. “I told her I was going to walk with you today, since you weren’t feeling well.”

That made Sajani feel really guilty. “I’ll be fine,” she said. “You didn’t have to do that.” To hide her embarrassment, she kept eating.

He smiled widely at her. “You helped me when I was hurt. I can walk a day. Besides,” he added quickly and shyly, “I’ve gotten pretty used to having you around. I’m not ready to do a whole day away from you.”

That earned him another quick hug and earned her some more of his stuttering. Since they had some time, she started reading the book to him. It’d be awhile before she got to where she’d left off back in Bahadhra, but she didn’t mind doing that for Gregor. Reading improved her mood immensely. After only one chapter Zantalla appeared. When she saw that they’d been reading, she said happily, “Oh, don’t stop reading on my account. I’m happy to hear it.”

Shortly after that, the other two tentmates arrived. “Pack quietly,” Zantalla told them. “I want to hear Sajani read. She reads so well.”

It was a good thing she was reading. It hid her embarrassment.

“I’m fine with that,” Malanda said, “but once the tent is down, she’ll have to stop or Farleesha won’t be happy.”

Gregor laughed and whispered in her ear, “*Vhemato*.”

The other two vykati heard him. “What’s *vhemato* mean anyway?” Talandie asked.

“It...uh...it means...,” Gregor started.

Sajani rescued him. “It means caravan leader in Rhidayan,” she lied. That got her a funny look from the human, who the copper wolf now suspected also knew the meaning. “Isn’t that right, Malanda?”

“It...uh...it means...” She stopped when she realized she’d just repeated Gregor’s words. Quickly, she finished, “It means caravan leader in Rhidayan.”

That got a laugh from Gregor and Sajani, but the other wolves just looked a little bewildered. “Right,” Zantalla said slowly. “I’m sure it does.”

The copper wolf had just barely started reading again when Farleesha’s voice came from outside. “Hey,” she said directly. “Less reading and more packing. We have to make it to the well by nightfall.”

Everyone but Sajani laughed. The copper wolf put the book in pocket and started packing hurriedly.

“I better get to work too,” Gregor excused himself. “Alonzo has me assigned to a tent, even if I don’t spend much time there.”

As soon as he was out of earshot, Zantalla turned to Sajani and asked, “Is he for real? He wouldn’t take a free ride at all once he thought you were sick and now he’s worried about working on something that’s not his responsibility.”

The copper wolf nodded once and smiled. “Looks like it. If he’s just trying to show off, he’s been able to keep up the act all the way here.”

Zantalla smiled at her. Sajani had no idea what her expression meant, but she wasn’t comfortable with it.



Magenta was angry and there was no way Farnsbeck could see to get her calmed down. “When they said six, I figured that was when they’d be waking up, not when they’d be leaving,” she repeated.

They’d found out the time of departure the day previous when they talked to the caravan leader and she’d been complaining about it almost constantly. She’d manage to talk the price down from 75 gold to 50 gold and got them their own personal tent with a shower. It made him very happy, but apparently waking up early wasn’t something she liked.

The male wolf had been using the same tactic almost the entire time: he kept a smile on his face and his snout firmly shut. They’d stayed at their tent overnight with the intent of sleeping in a little later, but the tent did have to be taken down before they could leave. Apparently it was high on the list of things to do before departure, because that’d been at four thirty.

“I never get up that early,” Magenta said again. Since Farnsbeck had started counting that made these one hundred and sixty-two times. There

might have been at least twenty more, but she didn't talk much during breakfast.

He decided it could be time to break his self-imposed vow of silence. "Nice little wagon, don't you think?" he asked. They were riding in a small wagon with a cloth canopy and netting. It kept the inside as cool as possible in the midday. They were pretty sure their driver didn't speak Vykati, so they at least could have private conversations.

She looked at him like she had absolutely no desire to hear him be cheerful.

Perhaps a different tactic. "I'm curious," he said. "Anything interesting your earrings have picked up? Seems like the perfect place to catch the local gossip."

"Nothing business related," she said testily.

Well, it wasn't for lack of trying. "I like that outfit you picked for today. Your dupatta really brings out the blue in your eyes." She was wearing a loose robe and head covering—both in a deep navy color.

That at least got a smile. "If I thought you were serious, I'd be flattered, plushfur, but thanks for trying." Her voice was neutral, but she did look a little happier.

He had been serious, but there was no way to convince her.

Instead he just pulled his hat down over his eyes and leaned back. It was going to be a long trip.



As Benayle was sitting down at the palace cafeteria, he noticed a small group of wolves at a nearby table looking at him. One pointed his way and they were holding a whispered debate. It looked like it was pretty heated. An older female in the group noticed him looking, so he smiled pleasantly and waved. They didn't return either friendly gesture, instead they just looked away.

It wasn't the first time he'd witnessed something like that. It happened periodically as far back as he could remember, but it definitely was happening more often lately.

A pleasant voice he recognized spoke from behind him. "I was hoping to find you here." He turned to see Princess Zarlay standing with a food tray behind him. The red wolf had white hair and was wearing a nice green dress.

Benayle stood suddenly, nearly knocking his seat over. "Your Highness. I'm surprised to see you." He offered a slight bow.

Zarlay laughed lightly. He hadn't seen her do that very often since her parent's death and suspected it was forced. "I try to eat at least three meals a week here. It's something my mother...It helps people see that I'm a normal wolf."

Well, he'd never noticed her before, but he did know that the King and Queen showed up periodically and often sat with him, so it made sense, even if he'd never seen her.

She took a seat by him and he returned to his chair. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" he asked sincerely. It was obvious that she'd sought him out.

The princess carefully unfolded her napkin and placed it on her lap and then took a bite of food. Benayle knew exactly how the cafeteria food ranked in terms of goodness and was impressed when the she-wolf didn't flinch. Eventually she answered. "Just two small items of business."

The Alpha looked around and noticed that the princess' personal bodyguard, a huge umber furred vykati named Annalace, had taken a seat at the table right next to theirs. "I'm happy to do whatever I can for you," he said honestly.

Zarlay smiled. "I'd like to set up a time to meet with you privately about a rather important matter."

Something about what she was saying was very troubling, but the old wolf couldn't quite place what that might be. "I have an opening right after this, if that's alright," he began.

"No," the princess said quickly. "I'll meet with you tomorrow at one o'clock."

That was strangely specific and not usual royal behavior, at least not for vykati royals. He did have a minor meeting he was supposed to attend, but it'd be pretty easy to put that off. "That's fine," he told her, "and your other business?"

The princess showed quite a bit of hesitation, but eventually said, "Since the death of my parents, I haven't been able to do much as far as my official office goes..."

Benayle gave her a sympathetic smile. "No one here should be expecting much of you. You're entitled to your grieving. Let me worry about..."

"And that's the problem," she interrupted. "I'm hearing many people saying that you're not taking care of anything but have been ignoring major incidents."

"I'm aware that there are quite a few people not happy with my current decisions, but I assure you, your highness. I'm still very active and working." *Working at doing nothing, but still working hard at it.*

"I honestly don't care," Zarlay said stiffly. "I just want to be able to tell people that I've spoken to you about it. Hopefully now they'll leave me alone."

Benayle wanted to ask for the names of the people that were pestering her but knew such a request would be taken the wrong way. He wasn't after retribution, but he did want to tell those people to leave the princess alone and face him directly.

He was very worried about her. She'd taken the death of her parents very hard, but he was confident that with a little prompting, she'd grow to be a great queen.

Those words said, the princess rose from her seat, threw her food in a nearby trash bin and left. It gave the old wolf a little to think about, but honestly, what she said wasn't new.



The *vhemato* was being vehement. "I'm not having sick people walking. You'll get on that wagon and you'll like it," she said harshly.

"I'm not sick, I'd rather just walk. Gregor's walking. If I'm sick, he's probably caught it too," Sajani argued.

Gregor looked really embarrassed but didn't say anything.

"Then he'll ride in the wagon too," Farleesha said.

While the copper wolf wasn't upset that Gregor would be there with her, getting on the wagon felt like losing the argument. "I'm fine," Sajani said. "I was just a little slow starting this morning.

Alonzo came up behind her, placed his hand on her shoulder and whispered, "I've seen her hold a caravan for a whole day. Please, *kalura*, just get on the wagon."

Farleesha had said something else, but Sajani missed it. Since the guide was being so polite and because she wanted a chance to ask Gregor what *kalura* meant, she got on the wagon. Her friend had been waiting to see what she did, so as soon as it looked like she was going to comply, he took a seat on the opposite side of the driver. Taking a large red handkerchief from his pocket, the teamster wiped the sweat off his face.

The wolf at the reins was an older vykati. Farleesha had introduced him as Jackal—probably a nickname. His fur was gray and white and he had long black hair tied off in the back. He smiled at the two pups as they hopped up but didn't say anything.

Sajani didn't waste any time, "So Gregor," she asked, "what's a *kalura*?"

Her friend just looked confused, but Jackal laughed. "Let me guess," the older vykati said gruffly, "Alonzo said that to you just now?"

The copper wolf nodded.

"Yeah," Jackal said casually, "heard he was calling you that. Little surprised he'd say it directly though."

Gregor shrugged his shoulders.

The old vykati continued, "'bit of a legend here in Rhidayar among the nomads. See, there's supposedly this little fox that roams the desert at night, stealing food and attacking the unwary. 'said it's as angry as an adder and vicious as a wolverine. 'take out a grown adult with one bite.'"

Gregor laughed loudly and Sajani glared at him. "I think it's a pretty neat name for you," he said defensively.

“sure he meant it as a compliment,” Jackal said. “Alonzo’s not one to be insulting really. You should be honored. You and the *vhemato* are the only two I’ve heard him give nicknames.”

“My friend, the *kalura*,” Gregor said happily.

Him saying it like that almost made her feel okay about it. It did hurt a little, but not that’d she want to admit. Her mother’s nickname for her when she was very young was “my little fox” and the memory stung.

“Can I call you that?” Gregor asked. “I think it fits so well.”

Well, if it made him happy, that would take the sting away soon enough. “Sure,” she said with resignation.

Jackal laughed. “one that can tell off Miss Qistara and keep standing deserves a name like that,” he said in awe. “though, I suspect you get away with it ‘cause of your age.”

Sajani made a mental note to not push her luck with the merchant.

While they were waiting, Zantalla rode up. She was on a chestnut mare and sitting like she’d been riding a horse for years. Gregor said that she had and seeing it now made it almost believable. “Hey Jackal,” she said nicely, “want to take Blanca here and monitor the teams. I’ll drive for you.”

“Heck,” Jackal said with a touch of embarrassment. “know I’d do that and gladly, but Alonzo’s pretty picky about the teamsters...”

“Already checked,” Zantalla said confidently. “He’ll let me on today so I can get in some practice. It’s supposed to be a pretty calm ride to the well.”

“mighty nice of you Zant,” Jackal said gratefully. “be nice to ride for a day.”

The other she-wolf removed a saddle bag and switched places with the teamster. Once Sajani realized where the newcomer was going to sit, she tried to get next to Gregor, but Zantalla plopped herself down right between the two.

“Got your book, Sajani?” she asked. “It’ll be a great chance to read.”

The copper wolf knew exactly what she wanted to do with her book but reined her temper. Gregor leaned back and looked over at her. He smiled and shrugged. If Zantalla noticed, she didn’t say anything.

Alonzo came by and checked over the team briefly. He marked something on the clipboard he was carrying and then looked up at the three on the buckboard. Sajani wasn’t sure what the expression he gave meant. He said, “Zant, you sure you want to be sitting next to the *kalura*? Might be dangerous.”

Sajani was definitely feeling dangerous.

The other she-wolf smiled and said, “Sure.”

Under the pretense of inspecting the wagon’s load, the guide jumped up next to the copper wolf. While he was checking the ropes he whispered to her, “You be a good *kalura*. No hunting innocent wolves.”

Sajani pretended to not hear him.

He jumped back down and said, “Only a few more wagons to check and we’ll start out.”

“Do you have the book?” Zantalla asked again.

“No,” Sajani lied, “I left it packed.”

“Well,” Zantalla said cheerfully, “you’re in luck.” She reached into her saddlebag and pulled out a second copy, which she then handed over.

At least this’ll pass the time, the copper wolf thought to herself. She’d just found her place when she heard Gregor stuttering in a whisper. Looking over she saw that Zantalla had one hand on his shoulder and had tried to whisper something to him.

Well, if the other she-wolf thought she could hold a secret conversation with him, she’d have to first figure out that she couldn’t be touching him.

Sajani started reading and by the time the wagons moved, she was absorbed enough in the story that she no longer felt like ripping out Zantalla’s throat—giving a good hard bite on the wrist might be enough.