

Chapter Six: Coming to Terms (Part 1 of 3)

Getting up the next morning was more of a chore than Sajani wanted. Just like the past two days, she felt fine physically, but not any other way. Today was worse though. She awoke shivering in the heat. Her legs were up against her chest with her arms wrapped around them. For the first time in years, she had her old childhood nightmare...three times. Talandie had come and woken her the first time, but after getting soundly (and accidentally) hit in the snout by a startled Sajani, both the other occupants left her alone.

She went to put on her necklace but stopped herself. She should probably return it to Gregor, if she managed to see him at all today. The locket went into her pocket instead.

Talandie and Malanda were still asleep, but there was enough of a predawn glow that she was pretty sure she could get some breakfast. As she was leaving the tent, she tripped on something. Or someone. Gregor was there in front of the tent exit, sleeping. Looking down at him, she could see that he was covered in sand and quaking slightly. His tail started twitching and she heard him whisper, "Mother...paw where..." His hands came to his closed eyes and covered them. That was all Sajani needed to hear. There was no way she'd let her friend suffer that dream when she could wake him from it. She placed her hand on his head and began to gently rub between his ears. He calmed immediately, and his eyes started to open.

"It's okay friend," she said softly. "It was only a dream." Sajani meant to pull her hand away as he woke, like she usually did, but found it hard to take it from him. She left it there and continued to rub softly.

Gregor took his hands from his eyes and looked up at her with a very relieved smile. He curled up tightly and said, "Oh thank you." He sounded like he was about to cry. She assumed he meant he was happy to be woken from his dream, so what he said next came as a surprise, although it shouldn't have. "I was so worried you'd never want to talk to me again..."

That brought a smile to her face. Only Gregor... "I'm the one that should have been worried. I..." She swallowed hard. "I'm so very sorry. I shouldn't have been so mean..." Her friend had been a big influence on her. Now she was regretting she didn't have enough practice with apologies. She stopped rubbing his head and started nervously picking at his fur. "I didn't...I'd never do anything to hurt you." She wiped an errant tear from her face with her free hand and smiled at him. "I'm so glad you're here. I'd have slept so much better had I known..."

He stretched out and rolled over to face her. That made it too awkward to keep her hand on his head, but that was alright. He'd not only come back; he'd still been able to talk when she was doing that. He smiled broadly and said, "I could never leave you."

She returned the smile. “You forgive me?” Knowing him the way she did, it should have been an assumed, but after yesterday, she needed a lot of reassurance.

“I do,” he said happily. Looking her up and down briefly, his smile stopped and he asked. “Your locket?”

She smiled and reached into her pocket to pull it out. “I was worried you’d want it back.”

He reached his hand out for it, which made her shudder slightly, but she handed it shyly to him. He rose and stepped behind her to put it on her himself. When he was done, he stepped back before her and looked her directly in the eye. “I do have one small favor I wanted to ask of you this morning though.”

Sajani didn’t hesitate, although part of her screamed that her answer might not be safe. “Anything,” she said and at the moment she definitely meant it.

“It’d mean a lot to me if you forgave Zant too.” No stuttering. No nervousness. He either assumed she’d agree or didn’t care how she answered. Knowing what she did about him, the latter was very unlikely.

She lowered her eyes and started to say something.

Gregor said quickly. “She says she’s sorry.”

That statement hurt deeply. After all that, he went to her first? She could feel her lip quivering and her hands clutching and unclutching, but she was unable to stop herself.

“Ouch,” Gregor said suddenly, “I botched that, didn’t I? Farleesha told me to be very careful, but I figured she was just giving in to the whole *kalura* myth or something.”

His comment calmed her just a little. At least he was showing concern for her feelings.

“Let me back up and start at the beginning. Can I do that?” he added sarcastically, “Is it safe?”

She smiled and held up her hands. “I filed down my claws and everything.”

“Wow,” he said. “Those look amazing. You’re the first and (up until we got here) the only lady vykati I’d ever seen do that. I’m pretty sure my mother didn’t.”

It wasn’t necessarily considered a high society task, More than half the she-wolves she knew didn’t bother. “So,” she said shyly, “you were about to tell me...” she realized she was missing something. “Thank you for the compliment by the way, but you were going to give me the whole story.”

He smiled, “Yes, I was and will. When I got to the place I was assigned for walking yesterday, Farleesha stopped by and had me walk with her for a while. She gave a long lecture about lots of things, most of which, to be honest, I didn’t understand.”

Sajani laughed. It sounded a little hollow to her, almost like he was lying...more likely she wasn't getting the whole story. "About the dangers of taunting a *kalura*?"

"No," he said. Not much was said after that other than stuttering and stammering, which answered her question just fine.

She smiled wide at him and said, "We'll say it was about interpersonal relationships and leave it at that?" She trusted Farleesha was just trying to help him sort through feelings.

He looked very relieved and said, "Y..y...yes. That was it." His voice returned to normal. "She also told me that I wasn't allowed to see you or Zant until after I talked to her the next day...today...this morning?" He shrugged and continued. "I told her that I was really worried about you for the night and she just shrugged and said you'd be fine. She said she made sure you wouldn't be left alone."

What he was saying made her feel warm all over. She smiled wide.

He must have noticed because he was beaming. "But once my tentmates were asleep I snuck out. I bumped into Zant who was also wandering around for some reason and we talked for a bit. She apologized to both of us and I..." he was looking her right in the eye and paused. His face became very serious. "That look..." he said cryptically. He shook his head quickly and continued. "I told her where I was going. She said...well, that's not important. I came to your tent and was barely asleep when someone grabbed me by the ear and started dragging me away." It bothered him still obviously.

"Who would..." Sajani started.

Gregor's eyes got wide and he said, "Farleesha!"

The merchant's voice came from behind her. "You ignored me last night and you ignored me again as soon as I was gone. I should make sure you three stay separated for the rest of the trip." Her voice sounded almost as angry as it did when Sajani was being rude to her at their arrival. Almost.

Her friend's voice didn't waiver. "I promised I wasn't going to leave her alone and I meant it."

The memories came back to her. At one point he'd said he couldn't promise that because she wouldn't believe him, but yesterday... That earned him a quick hug.

"Fine," said an exasperated merchant. "She's obviously not going to bite you."

Gregor was emboldened. "And Zant?"

"Absolutely not!" Farleesha insisted, pointing at Sajani, "As I was walking by her tent last night, I *heard* her say she was sharpening her claws."

Her friend's eyes squinted, and his ears dropped slightly. "You did?"

This camp was entirely too small. She smiled mischievously and said, "I did actually say that." Stepping over to the merchant she held out her

hands to show off the claws. “I misspoke. I’ll admit I was pretty angry yesterday and that’s probably why it slipped out, but you can see from my hands, I didn’t sharpen my claws, I filed them.”

Gregor looked relieved and smiled again.

Farleesha looked down carefully at her claws. “Fine,” she said. “No one that spends that much time on her claws is going to chance scratching anyone.” She stormed off.

Gregor was smiling broadly.

“You know,” she said slowly, “that didn’t really help me look any better. She’s still thinking I’m a bad-tempered wolf with a grudge against any kind of authority.”

Gregor got an innocent look on his face, “You’re not?”

Sajani knew he was joking, but the truth was somewhere close. “I’m trying to not be,” she amended. Her ears dropped and she looked down at her feet.

Her friend smiled. “Well,” he said without commitment, “you were that way when we left the school, or my plan wouldn’t have worked.”

That earned him a weak and shy smile. Now that she had a new perspective on things, she realized that the school hadn’t been the problem so much as being forced to go there. A lot of the trouble she landed in and a lot of the harsh things said to her were a result of things that she did in defiance of the school rules. She had no regrets about leaving with Gregor, but that was because of who Gregor was and not what the school was like.

Her friend started to say something but began stuttering suddenly. She glanced up and saw him looking over her shoulder. About that time both of them were grabbed in an enthusiastic embrace and Zant’s voice rang out happily. “I’m so glad we can be together again!”

Sajani had to admit that she felt like that included her as well.

The gray she-wolf released them and turned to face her. Putting her hands on Sajani’s shoulders, she said, “And I am so very sorry. It was very wrong of me. Gregor explained everything.”

Sajani gave the other a quick hug and the two parted.

The male wolf cleared his throat and so Sajani looked up at him. He was motioning with his eyes towards Zant. He didn’t really expect her to...It hadn’t been *her* fault. The motioning turned to a pleading expression. Well, to make Gregor happy anyway. “I’m sorry too,” she said quickly. Her friend smiled.

Zant put her arms around the other two vykati and said happily. “I’m glad that’s over. Let’s go get breakfast.” Gregor stuttered the whole way.