

Chapter Seven: Bucking the Truth

(Part 1 of 4)

The three wagons they were assigned belonged to Marc, Jackal, and a huge black vykati named Aynst. The last of those three was almost as chatty as Messy, which was good, because the cook was on his wagon. Mostly Gregor and Sajani stayed near that wagon and talked with those two. The black wolf was a huge fan of the *Prequal to Alpha* series and could almost quote the first six books. With a common interest like that, it didn't take long for Gregor to be able to speak without stuttering. The three talked about that for hours, taking periodic breaks only when Farleesha came by and asked them to ride out to check on things. After a few requests like that Aynst asked them. "Did you know that when we first found you, Farleesha thought you were harimou?"

That led to a discussion about book two, where Yanebel was talking to a human about a possible sighting of the cryptid people. After a few comments, Gregor asked, "Wouldn't she be the first vykati to have seen one?"

"None have seen one?" Aynst said skeptically. "That can't be right."

"Well, even Yanebel never sees the one Flannin is talking about," Gregor answered. "And I read in one of the books at the school that almost all the sighting have

been by someone either drunk or insane and none of those were wolves.”

“Cats running from the dogs, you think?” Aynst asked.

Gregor shrugged, “Could be. You ever hear Benayle mention one?” he asked Sajani.

The copper wolf laughed sarcastically. “It’s not like that. He usually talked to my paw and when he did talk to me it was just checking to make sure I was alright.”

Aynst leaned away from her and stared. “You talk to Yanebel...I mean, like... like he was another person? You sound so casual about that.”

Sajani rolled her eyes. “He’s Mr. Ramisa, not Yanebel. I doubt the two are the same.” She hoped that the subject would change, but it didn’t. “About the only other thing I ever heard him talk about was a few times he’d mentioned funny stories that didn’t get in that weekly column.”

“Tell us one,” Gregor encouraged. “Did you ever actually see any of these happen?”

Sajani smiled. There had been one time... Nothing much was happening and the two were just riding their horses slowly along side the wagon. A story might help pass the time. “Before I came down to the school, there was a big party held at Lord Riteyai’s mansion to commemorate the fifth anniversary of Altaza.”



Sajani was glad the three days of coach rides, dust, and cheap meals were over. Mr. Ramisa had been very polite and kind but was usually silent as they traveled.

He was also very... cheap. He always took the two cheapest rooms. She was allowed to pick what she ate, if the inn was fancy enough to give a choice. Of the six places they'd stopped to eat, only two offered a selection and all the choices were less than eighty silver.

Her assigned room at the Riteyai palace was huge. While the copper wolf couldn't be positive it looked like the ceiling was high enough and walls far enough apart that she could fit her whole two-story house into it. The bed was about the size of her bedroom.

She'd planned on just getting a quick bath before the party that night, but the staff wouldn't hear of that. It took three just to draw the bath and there was never less than that assisting her at any given time. She'd felt a little exposed when it first occurred to her the purpose of the people in her bathroom. The ceiling in that room wasn't quite as high, and it was half the size of the bedroom. There were at least a dozen female vykati in there.

Once she was in the tub, it was very easy to enjoy the experience. Servants would just gently prod her to get her to move where they needed her. The scent of the soap was amazing. A little like violet and blueberry, only sweeter.

The bath was followed by a quick massage and drying. The combing and brushing took at least an hour and included some soft oil that dried very quickly but left her fur softer than she'd thought possible. Then they worked on her hand and feet claws—doing a better job than she could do herself. Those were then oiled lightly.

She'd brought a nice dress for that evening, but apparently Lord Riteyai wanted to make sure no one that would look down on her choice of clothes. The dress he had put out for her was laced with gold and rubies and was a subdued gray. She hadn't thought of wearing something in the national colors, but it did seem very appropriate. Once the dress was on, servants came to make minor alterations to it.

As she went to exit the room, she was a little worried about finding her way back, but Lady Kiama, Lord Riteyai's wife was waiting just outside the door along with four other servants.

"Is our guest of honor ready?" she preened.

Sajani put her chin up and smiled. "Thank you, Lady Kiama for your hospitality. The bath was refreshing and the dress is very lovely." She bowed to her host. Mr. Ramisa had made sure she knew the proper things to say. He told her that saying them was optional—he'd certainly never felt the need. The shocked look on the noble's face said she did something a little off, but the look passed very quickly.

Lady Kiama motioned to her side and Sajani stepped next to her. The two began walking down the long

hallway. The noble explained a few important matters to her as they walked. “As the central guest for the commemoration, you’ll be escorted into the ballroom by Lord Riteyai. Given your status, you are not required to take his arm—it might even look better if you didn’t.”

Sajani nodded. She was a little unsure of the comment about status, so she asked about it. Mr. Ramisa, she was sure, would have told her not to worry, but at the same time, she didn’t want to embarrass him if possible, especially at something that was held to honor her mother.

“As the Guest of Honor, my dear, you bow to no one.” That explained the look given to her earlier.

Lord Riteyai was at the base of the stairs, waiting for her just outside the ballroom. Mr. Ramisa was standing close and she heard him say, “I’m sure it’s just an oversight, but...”

The noble motioned towards Sajani and the Alpha turned to look up at her. A broad smile crossed his face and his eyes sparkled. “You look simply amazing, my dear.”

Lord Riteyai nodded and smiled. He motioned for her to stand beside him and the two walked slowly into the ballroom. As they passed through the high and wide arch that led there, a servant to their right pounded a very ornate silver staff into the floor. It made a ringing sound and the crowd of richly dressed people turned to face her.

The servant announced loudly, possibly with the help of a spell, “Miss Sajani Adida. Daughter of Colonel Malita Adida graces us this evening as our Guest of Honor.”

Mr. Ramisa had given her a short speech to memorize—nothing major or fancy and she had every intention of giving it. She took a couple of steps forward and started to bow. Realizing her mistake, she attempted to rise quickly. Unfortunately, part of her dress had caught in the fur of her lower leg. Since she was moving so quickly that threw her off balance and she fell forward. Had she not been trying to get the dress loose, she might have been able to get her hands out in time to prevent her snout from hitting the floor directly. Her nose started bleeding.



The three other wolves with her (Zant had ridden up early in the story) laughed. Gregor did stop quickly and apologized.

Aynst said between laughs, “I thought this was an embarrassing Benayle story.”

Sajani grinned. “It is. I’ll get to it.” She winked at Gregor to let him know that his laughter didn’t bother her. Zant’s did, but his didn’t. “You kind of need to know why I ended up following Mr. Ramisa around for the next part, although I’d have at least heard about it even if I hadn’t been there.”



There was, not surprising given her audience, no laughter—just the sound of nearly one-hundred important people gasping at the same time. That was a blessing. Several servants and a few of the attendees started towards her, but it was Mr. Ramisa that reached her first. He pulled a gray handkerchief from his coat pocket and helped her put it on her nose. He spoke to the servants and others that were now crowded around her. “She’s fine. I’ll just take her somewhere quiet for a moment and we’ll be right back.” A few of the servants tried to insist that they be allowed to help her, but she shook her head. At the moment, she really didn’t want anyone around her.

The Alpha guided her through some service doors that led to the kitchen. It was very busy and warm in there. There were a few disapproving looks, but once the servants identified them, they were left alone. The looks on their faces said clearly, “What is the proper way to expel the National Alpha and the daughter of Colonel Adida from one’s kitchen?”

Lord Riteyai entered a moment later and approached them. “Are you alright Miss Adida? Are you hurt?”

She shook her head. “Jus my pribe” she said. She might have said more to reassure him but hearing how she sounded with the handkerchief on her nose made her a little more self-conscious.

Satisfied, the noble backed away and loudly addressed the whole room. “Give them whatever help they request.” That statement brought an odd half smile

to Mr. Ramisa's face and his eyes brightened. Before leaving Lord Riteyai turned to her and said kindly, "Not to worry, Miss Adida. There's not a person present that hasn't had some embarrassing fall or another at a formal event."

When Lord Riteyai was out of earshot, Mr. Ramisa said. "It's these awful clothes. Does anyone that designs stuff like that actually try to *wear* it?" She was close enough to him now to notice that his suit was well worn—and most likely not by him.

Sajani smiled and checked to see if the bleeding had stopped. It was still flowing freely. She'd worry about the dress after that was done.

"Doing okay, my dear?" he asked politely.

Sajani wasn't sure she trusted that smile, but she nodded once.

"While I'm here in the kitchen there's a minor oversight on the part of Lord Riteyai to which I need to attend." He told her. After that, he rose and said in a rather loud voice to all present. "As I'm sure you heard, Lord Riteyai specifically said to give us whatever we request." He spread his arms out and gave a slight bow, which earned many disapproving looks from the servants. "I need a large mixing bowl and a good spoon for stirring."

A cook stepped forward and handed him a bowl and large spoon. It didn't look like the servant wanted to do that.

Emboldened by that success, he started naming off ingredients. “Three and a half cups of unsweetened cocoa, Six cups of standard flour, a half dozen eggs, some warm water...”

Almost as fast as he named them, the ingredients were placed on the table and measured. Partway through the list one of the cooks said politely, “Sir, if you’re making a cake, may I suggest...”

Mr. Ramisa looked at the lady vykati and asked, “Are you the one that normally does the cakes for events like this?”

“Yes sir,” she said primly. “I’m not sure why there were none ordered for this...”

The Alpha cut her off. “If you made the cakes for the last ball I attended here, I have a pretty good idea why you weren’t asked again.”

It was a good thing Sajani was still holding her nose. It stopped her laugh before anyone heard it.