

Chapter 3: First Moves Part 2 of 2

Benayle waited patiently as the Minister of State, Mishil Foxworthy, looked through her files. “I’m sorry Ben,” she said patiently. It sounds like you really wanted to believe this fellow. I have no record of any Mr. Farnsbeck anywhere, not even as an alias. Should I send someone to *retrieve* him?”

The Alpha sighed deeply. It was too much to hope that someone had finally hired a *useful* personal secretary, let alone someone that could be so useful in a timely manner. “I suppose there’s not much choice.”

“And where will we find him?”

“My office,” he answered glumly, “He was posing as my personal secretary.”

That instantly changed the demeanor of the Minister. “Oh! Is that what this is about? I suppose I should have seen that sooner. Then I have really good news for you Ben.”

His ears perked up and a smile crossed his face. “You sent him?”

A chagrined expression crossed her face. “Not me personally, no, or I might have figured this all out sooner, but I can tell you that you should enjoy his services while we can spare him. This assignment was meant to give him a very well-deserved break.”

That lowered the leader’s spirits again. He’d feel bad sending Farnsbeck out if that was the case.

His mood didn’t go unnoticed—not surprising given her job. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen your ears drop more quickly or lowly,” she said with a touch of surprise in her voice.

He told her where he planned on sending Farnsbeck.

“That *is* too bad,” Mishil said with diplomatic sympathy. “We’d hoped to give him a break.”

Benayle nodded. “Anyone else to recommend?”

The Minister shook her head slowly, “Plenty, Ben.”

“You look and sound like you don’t want to spare anyone.” Maybe sometime in the future he’d find someone that could do jobs like this for him. It was the first time he personally needed someone with that skill set, but it would be convenient to already have someone lined up if there was a future need.

Mishil smiled at him. “Oh, it’s not that. Believe me, I have quite the long list.” There was another hesitation.

“But...” he prompted.

“Your ‘Farnsbeck’ is by far the most qualified.”



Just as Sajani was returning from the bedroom with the comforter and sheets, the door finally came free of the wedged sofa and a human burst in

and fired a musket at her. The shot missed but it startled her. She and Gregor jumped through the window about the same time she managed to get the sheets in place to keep them from being cut.

Constable whistles again sounded from either side of the two wolves eliminating any other choice but to run over the solarium. If this were a *Prequel to Alpha* book, there was almost a 100% chance that glass would shatter as soon as Yanel set foot on it and force the hero to fight his way out.

Good thing this isn't a book, Sajani thought to herself as she and Gregor ran down the gable and over the solarium. They tried to mostly keep to the wood spanning between the glass panels. Their running upset the people inside, who jumped from their seats. Screaming could be heard even outside the glass.

“Stop!” someone shouted from behind them.

There was no way they'd obey. They kept running towards a tree line about twenty meters in front of them, not even stopping when a musket shot went off behind them. It was followed by the shattering of glass as their pursuit fell through the solarium. That helped and they made it—bruised but not bleeding—into the forest and then ducked behind a tree.

They said nothing but took a moment to put on their bookbags. Sajani noticed that hers was full, but also very light. *It might be blankets*, she thought. That was all the break they took and then they were running again. Gregor guided them at a slight angle from the direction they'd originally entered. A little way in, a thick undergrowth appeared. Both dropped to all fours and kept running. Running like that made it hard to dodge trees, but also made it harder for others to see where they were.

Given the backgrounds of the two youths, they managed to keep running for quite a distance—powered more by fear than strength. Sajani ran out of energy first and came to a stop, breathing hard. She called out to Gregor who stopped and returned back to her. He was very winded as well.

“Can't...go...further,” she gasped. Her mouth was dry, and the words were difficult to form. She swallowed hard.

Between deep breaths Gregor nodded once and said, “Hopefully...we lost...them.” No sooner had the words left his lips, he began to cry. “I heard them...say they arrested...Redrose. She must have...stayed past her shift...to make sure we...got away ok this...morning. She'll...she'll.”

Just from those few words, Sajani could guess how Gregor knew in advance that people were coming for them. She also knew what he was trying to say at the end. “I know,” she answered. She wasn't even sure how to sound sympathetic, but she tried. “It means that we...have to get back to...Vharkylia. Or what she did is pointless.”

Neither said any more as they tried to catch their breath. They were both lying on their sides and facing each other. The weather had been

uncharacteristically dry, so while there were some leaves and soil on them, it looked like it might be easily scraped off their clothes.

Gregor's sobs had mostly quieted when they heard the sound of a dog howling. It was ecstatic, like it'd found what it was looking for. Looking into each other's eyes, it was obvious that they had the same thought. Both leaped back to all fours and began running again.

The stream they came across was unexpected, but welcome. It was small, maybe about thirty centimeters at its widest—probably much wider when weather wasn't so dry. Both had the same idea but stood and turned different directions. Gregor started down the stream in the direction that lead back to Bahadhra. "This way!" he hissed.

Sajani quickly saw the wisdom of his choice and followed. After slipping several times while running, she abandoned all sense of decorum and dropped again to all fours. As she did so, she noticed that Gregor must have done the same earlier. The water was cold and made her feet and hands ache. It also soaked into her leggings and splashed up onto her shorts and shirt. It was a lot slower running in the water, so they didn't get winded nearly as fast.

Just as Sajani was losing the feeling in her hands and feet, she noticed that they had come back to a residential area. The undergrowth disappeared first and allowed them to see a few homes. These were a little more colorful and expensive than the ones around the inn. All of them had sturdy fences on the forest side. The stream continued towards the homes before disappearing under a wide culvert. Gregor stopped so quickly that Sajani nearly ran into him, turning off to the side just before they'd have collided. She leaned back so she was crouched low and balancing on her feet. Gregor did the same and they looked at each other. Both were winded.

He was the first to speak. "Think we lost them?" he asked.

There wasn't quite enough energy to speak, so she settled for just shaking her head. The stream was pretty narrow and if their pursuers bothered to look, they'd see the muddy areas the wolves' feet had churned up.

"Let's get some water while we're here," Gregor suggested.

The thought of drinking water coming down from where they'd just run upset her stomach.

He noticed her expression. "Better muddy water than no water. Maybe Redrose..." he stopped short.

Sajani sat silent for a long moment. She wasn't sure where he'd been heading with his comment, but she didn't want to force him to think of something that bothered him so much. Eventually, she did figure it out. "I'll check my pack," she said simply.

Gregor nodded, a grateful expression crossing his face.

The bag contained, like she originally thought, two thick wool blankets, now slightly damp. That didn't bode well for Gregor's books. Wrapped between the blankets were two small canteens, which she began carefully filling in the shallow stream. When she was done, she lapped up a good

amount of water. Just a few hours before she'd never dream of drinking water that way, but now, she didn't mind at all.

Her traveling companion looked like he was still dwelling on the fate of his friend. She decided to see if she could break up his cycle of hurt by distracting him. "A little water got in my bag," she started, "Are your books ok?" She didn't hear his answer. Mentioning books reminded her of the one she'd been reading the previous night. It was probably somewhere around the bed—knocked aside when she pulled off the covers. If that was the only loss, she'd have counted herself lucky. Her purse—passport, grooming kit and all—was still on the vanity where she'd left it. It'd be right next to where she left the pouch of money Gregor had given her.

His voice intruded on her self-pity. "Are you ok, Sajani?"

"I...I left your book behind," she stammered.

Gregor laughed. "I think there're much more important things to worry about."

Sajani continued, "...and my purse with my passport..."

The other wolf's mouth dropped slightly and his eyes got a little wider. "That's...something we'll figure out. We can..."

"And my money."

Gregor's mouth closed and he looked down at the ground. What he said next made Sajani wonder, once again, if it was possible for there to be a real person like him. "I'm sorry about that. I'll try to make it up to you somehow."

"It was our passage home!"

"No!" he insisted. "I never planned on using your money. It was always *your money*. Once we got to port, it'd have still been your choice on how to use it. I'll admit, I hoped that you'd see fit to help me out despite all the trouble I've caused you, but it was never my plan to use your money!"

"Then what was your plan?" she said with a lot of exasperation. He'd told her this morning, but she couldn't remember.

"We'll have to rely on the kindness of strangers and slowly work our way back home. Once we get past the desert, we can follow the coast south."

Rely on the kindness of strangers? Was he crazy? Why hadn't she seen the big hole in this plan when he mentioned it this morning? "That's a very naïve plan," she said bluntly, "you're assuming that the rest of the world thinks like you do—well they don't!"



"You're ok doing this?" Benayle asked again. "You don't have to take this job if you don't want to take it."

The two were alone in the Alpha's office, so Farnsbeck was acting like his "real" personality. It occurred to Benayle that even what he was seeing now might not be real. The way Mishil talked about the agent, he could assume just about any role.

“Honestly Benayle,” Farnsbeck said wistfully. “I love my job. It’d be a lot of fun to work for you, but I have to admit, I’ll enjoy myself doing this as well. Is there transport available?”

Benayle nodded. “The transport is old, so it’ll take a couple of days to get it powered and ready, but that’ll be much faster and less noticeable than traditional methods.

The secretary nodded once and paused briefly. “I hate to bring up such a crass thing while carrying out a noble cause, but I’ll need access to some funds.”

“There’s 2,500 in the strongboxes by the door and porters should be arriving shortly to help you carry it.”

The perfect demeanor seemed to drop for just a moment but resurfaced very quickly. “I’ll take a fraction of that. Even if I can get it changed over for notes, it’s awkward and suspicious to carry that much around. But I have to ask...The government is that adamant on finding her?”

Benayle’s eyes misted just slightly as he replied. “That’s not Vharkylia’s money...It’s mine.”



Sajani’s words seemed to stun Gregor. After a moment, he shook his head slowly. “I guess we’ll find out. Even if they weren’t sure if we left together before, those men we fought at the inn know we are...” he paused a moment. “Good fight back there by the way. We made a great team.”

His compliment caused her to smile. She quickly forgot her earlier words. “Where did you learn to box? You dropped your guard for a moment there, but it was obvious you’d trained some!”

“My father,” the melancholy smile on his face would have spoken volumes to most people. “Same person that taught me the war howl. And who taught you to at least recognize boxing moves *and* do a war howl?”

If Sajani had been paying attention, she would have noticed that her smile mirrored his. “My mother taught me the war howl. My father...” She really didn’t want to talk about her father.

“Onto happier topics,” Gregor said quickly, “I wasn’t able to afford a map, but if my memory is correct, this little detour has brought us fairly close to a lake. With a bit of luck, we might be able to fish up some food.”

“With what? You’re not hiding a fishing pole in that book bag.”

“I planned on just swimming around with my mouth open,” he teased.

That got her to laugh. Laughing like that felt so different that it made her wonder when she’d laughed last. Aside from sarcastic and cynical laughs, she realized it *had* been a long time. She allowed herself to laugh a little longer than she might have otherwise. It took her a moment to realize that Gregor had stopped laughing and was looking thoughtfully at her. His glance wasn’t in any way hostile or inappropriate, but it did pique her curiosity. “What?” she asked.

“Uh...I uh...” he stammered looking quickly away from her. “Sorry, I was just... I mean I got to thinking and wasn’t paying much attention to where I was... I mean... paying attention to what I was...”

He’s really embarrassed about something, Sajani thought. She bulled forward anyway. “Seriously. What?”

He looked down at his feet and said softly. “You should laugh more often.”

Sajani missed his point completely and replied a little sharply, “I’ll laugh when I want to. I don’t need anyone telling me if I should or shouldn’t.”

Gregor kept looking down at his feet. “It’s not what...never mind.” He looked up at her again, his prior embarrassment slipping away, “We can follow the tree line north for a bit and then head back west again. It should run us into a larger stream we can follow to the lake.” The wolf turned from her and started walking with his head not quite up.

“I hate to question your navigating skills,” she said shyly, “but you do know that Vharkylia is south?”

Gregor answered plainly, “So’s our pursuit.” He started forward and she followed.

For some reason she felt a little humbled by what had just transpired, though she had no idea why. She started going over everything that’d been said, trying to figure it out.

After a few times of repeating the conversation in her head she realized she *had* said something that was a little inaccurate. It wasn’t that she felt bad about it, but she did feel like it should be clarified and corrected. “I’ll try to...um...” she wasn’t sure if Gregor could hear her, so she walked quickly up to be closer to him.

He glanced over when she came up beside him.

Once he was looking at her, it became very hard to speak. She wasn’t even sure if what she wanted to say would make any sense. “I, um...I wanted to tell you...”

He waited patiently, turning his gaze back forward and walking steadily.

“I just wanted to say...I’ll try to laugh more and that...I...I” she hadn’t had this much trouble speaking since she was a child. “I do *respect* your navigating skills.”

Her words seemed to bring a smile to his face and for some reason, that made her want to smile as well. “You don’t have to even try to use the word if you don’t want to. You’re still walking with me and that means something.”

She smiled back at him. There was no way to express how grateful she was that he understood what she couldn’t bring herself to say. (zzzThat should be the conclusion of the trust issue until her final statement)

Now that the words were out, there didn’t seem to be much else to discuss. They both kept quiet, listening to see if they heard any dogs following them. So far, fortunately, it was only occasional bird song and the pleasant breathing of the wind through the trees. The area where they were walking

was mostly downhill and very grassy. This was especially true just inside the tree line where they did most of their walking. The houses on their right were eerily quiet. They did see a woman out hanging laundry. She had a couple children running around her and playing happily, but for the rest of the five kilometers or so they walked, everyone was either inside their home, at school, or at work because they didn't see anyone else.

"Maybe they've been told to keep clear of here while they're looking for us?" Sajani asked.

"Possible," Gregor said quietly, "but it's not like we're dangerous. We're just trying to go home."

There was something a little off with the way he said the last word and it took Sajani only a moment to figure it out. "Where is home for you?"

He looked down and his sad smile returned. Sajani didn't notice. "I suppose you could say it was in Bahadhra, but when I talk about it now, I'm just thinking of Vharkylia in general. Not sure what I'll do with myself when I get there."

The silence continued. Sajani had many questions but was self-conscious about asking them. After a moment, she discovered that she didn't really have to ask. With how fast things came out, it was like Gregor had been holding things in for years and anyone even showing a passing curiosity was enough to burst the dam. That was in fact, what was happening.

"I don't remember much about it—home that is. Not sure why really, but my memory is pretty clouded around the time my parents died."

No surprise there, Sajani thought. There were a few times from her life that she wished would be clouded.

He began walking a little faster and his hands became more animated. "I was ten when they died. I'd like to say I miss them and that the memory of them hurts, but I've forgotten so much. I do have a nightmare sometimes where strange men and women storm into our house and drag me away from them, but the details are so vague and my memory so sparse, that I'm sure it's just something in my mind trying to cope with being away from them." He stopped for a moment and looked over at her. She also stopped and returned his gaze, but only for a moment and then she looked away, feeling embarrassed but not knowing why.

His gaze turned towards his feet, which he shuffled around for a moment before continuing to walk forward. There was a humble silence to his words as his narrative continued. "My clearest memories are all at the orphanage. I was the only wolf there and the other kids liked to taunt me until I bit or clawed." He gazed over at her again and smiled. She managed to return his glance briefly before she again looked away. "Not all that different from what you went through at school really, only being a little older, you were able to not bite or claw."

His last comment caused the sides of her mouth to warm and she gave out a nervous laugh. "Not like I didn't want to bite them."

“At any rate,” he continued, “they were pretty anxious, once I was old enough, to sell me off. I was twelve. That’s when I actually learned that I had a full name. Up until when they had to fill out the legal documents to sell me, I thought I was just ‘Gregor.’”

Sajani laughed. It did feel good to do that sometimes. “It’s a more common name for humans than it is for wolves,” she said simply. “Is that the name your parents gave you, or was it a nickname from the orphanage?”

The sad smile returned and this time Sajani noticed it. “It’s my name...the one my parents gave me.”

She was about to say something else but thought better of it. *Time for me to just walk and feel awkward again*, she thought sarcastically. She thought she should be perfectly at ease around the only other wolf with whom she’d had regular contact for more than half a year, but things kept making her feel out of sorts and shy.

Gregor interrupted her thoughts, “We can start heading west now and wrap around south once we get to the stream. From there we’ll follow it to the lake.

“Which way is west?” she asked. At some point the row of houses had stopped and the tree line had slipped away and left them in the forest. She wasn’t sure exactly what direction she was facing.

Apparently, Gregor wasn’t either. He pointed to their left and arced his hand back and forth about 30 degrees. “Somewhere about that direction,” he said smiling.

Sajani laughed. “Your navigation skills just lost a little respect in my book.”

He responded with a shrug. “It’ll get us to the stream...”

“//it’s there,” she joked.

He smiled at her, “If it’s not, the coast is to the west...”

“Which west?” She pointed one direction and then moved her hand to point to several other options.”

She had been trying to get him a little riled, but it didn’t work. It was getting near lunch time though, so maybe if she tried again in a few hours...

“Most of those will get us there. Take your pick.”



Sajani wanted to tell herself that she was disappointed that Gregor had been right about the stream, but if she was being honest with herself, she was more relieved than disappointed. She tried to still give him a hard time by attributing it to luck.

His only response was to remove two apples from his bookbag and toss her one.

The copper wolf found it difficult to come up with topics of conversation. Most of the stories she had about her recent past were either depressing ones from her time at the school or stories about her latest misdemeanor lifestyle.

She didn't want to depress him with one or make him think less of her with the other.

Up until yesterday, their only topic of discussion had been the books they'd shared and the newspapers he read. With all that was going on, those books seemed a little too close to home for comfort. Mostly they walked in silence.

A lively discussion did start up when they found the blueberry bushes. Should they empty out a canteen to hold them? Could they wrap them up in a blanket and carry it like a sack, or would that crush too many and leave the blanket unusable? In the end they just rested, ate their fill and continued on in silence.

They came to the lake early in the evening. Shadows were beginning to form, but the sun still had a few more hours before it met the horizon. The view as they crested the gradual slope they'd been following most of the day was beautiful. The lake was large: about a kilometer and a half in length and a kilometer in width and mostly surrounded by low mountain peaks. The water was clear and calm, with only a few ripples from the occasional breeze. It was difficult to believe that something so pure and clean looking was less than a day's walk from the city.

It looked like Gregor was about to say something to her when he was interrupted by the sound of two musket hammers being cocked followed by a voice saying in gruff Vykati, "Stay were ya are, villains. I don't like visitors and I've got some hungry lead in these two muskets."