

Chapter 5: Important Beliefs (Part 2 of 2)

The ranch was a sizable one. The jungle had been cleared for a very large area to allow the horses to move as they wanted and the hills were covered with a soft grass that grew easily in the humid and wet climate around Drtithen. Benayle had been told that the horses raised by Claw Ghenis were considered very high quality, although he personally had very little to go by: he didn't really care much for riding. Or horses.

He did know that the breed on this ranch was known as a Vharkil Gray. Not all of them were that color, but most were. They weren't as fast as the Rhidayar Sha'ir, but they'd outpull a Zenache Traublar without much trouble. They stood a little taller than most other breeds and, like most things in Vharkylia, tended towards a more wild temperament that seemed to only respond well to vykati—too big for dwarves and too mean for humans. The breed had caused enough problems in Rhidayar that it wasn't even legal to keep them there anymore.

Benayle's two companions had done most of the talking. Lady Mishal was dressed in a brown riding outfit that, in the Alpha's opinion, looked rather silly and uncomfortable with its domed hat and tight pants.

Rass "Claw" Ghenis was an average height gray vykati wearing a black suit, burgundy shirt, and a black shoestring tie. He'd been dressed up to meet with the Minister of State and the National Alpha and hadn't expected Mishal to ask to go riding—in his defense, Benayle hadn't expected it either.

Mishal was talking about the recent events in Rhidayar. "We're trying to figure out if we're missing something."

Ghenis spoke slowly and carefully. He was much older than Benayle and still bore some wounds from when his infantry unit had defeated the invading Rhidayan army five years earlier, shortly after the tragedy at Altaza. "I'm not sure," he began, reining in his horse and prompting the others to stop as well, "why you'd think I'd know anymore than the two of you."

Benayle laughed, interrupting whatever Mishal had been about to say. "That's my thought too, Claw," he said truthfully, "but Mishal seemed to think it was a good idea."

His comment earned him a glare from the lady vykati.

Ghenis laughed lightly. "Then why bother coming here? It's obvious you," he nodded at the Alpha, "don't like horses much."

He'd been trying to look enthusiastic. Dropping the façade came naturally. "I don't," he said with a smile. "I'm sure these are very high quality, but it's not something I ever much cared for, even when I traveled more." After a short pause, he came to the point. "You are knowledgeable about military tactics and so I wanted to ask you how you'd feel about gathering some information for us—more on the inside of what's happening." His comment earned him a glare from Mishal, who wanted to be the one to bring

up that topic. If it got him off the horse faster, Benayle didn't care who breeched the subject.

Claw gave him a long stare and turned his horse back to the house. "It'll be best if we get you off that horse," he said nodding at Benayle. "And a move to Rhidayar will mean you're asking my wife as well as myself. She'll want to hear about this."

Benayle began to explain, but it was soon obvious that the older vykati wasn't paying attention. Apparently when he said it'd discussed be with him *and* his wife, he meant it.

A servant took their horses when they arrived back at the stable and nodded to Ghenis' stern instructions on their care. From the stables, the old soldier escorted them to the front door of his home. The house was typical of vykati dwellings with a little bit of influence from Jzianrhun. It was single story and rambling with a low roof made of brown tiles that funneled the rain to the sides. The corners were turned up slightly. On top was what looked like a rectangular gazebo a meter high. The house proper was gray with red trim around the windows—a nod to the owner's patriotism.

They passed through a sparse entry area with two archways to either side of the door and entered a worn wood door that led to a cellar. Benayle could hear some familiar noises rising up from there.

The lowest level of the Ghenis house was an elaborate silversmith shop. There were three workbenches with different tools at each. All had a small smelter on them. The sound of air rushing out of the area, probably magically induced since there didn't seem to be any fans running, explained why the area was staying cool. Behind the center workbench was a distinguished looking elderly she-wolf with brown fur and wearing a leather apron over a very expensive and fancy green dress.

She didn't look up from her work but started speaking as soon as the last of them had stepped off the last stair. Her words had a slight quiver. A voice that was once majestic and melodic was aging gracefully. "One moment," she told them, "I think I finally have this just right..." She suddenly slammed her tools and the object on which she'd been working down hard on the workbench. A very incongruent profanity escaped her lips. "I almost had the last detail on that Randia spoon copied perfectly."

The mention of the name of the famous silversmith caused Benayle's ears to unintentionally perk up. No one seemed to notice. "May I?" he asked, stepping forward and holding out his hand expectantly.

The old she-wolf looked a little protective of the spoon, but when she got a closer look at the Alpha, she relaxed noticeably and handed him the spoon.

Benayle took it carefully. Looking around the work area he spied a jeweler's eyepiece which he picked up without asking. He used it to study the end of the spoon's handle carefully. He could hear someone behind him shrug—probably not Mishal. "I'm amazed," he said slowly, never taking his eye off the spoon. "It's been a few years since a real Randia has been seen on

the market.” The Randia family was respected throughout the world for their finely crafted silver. A spoon like the old wolf was holding was easily worth a few hundred gold. A full set of dinnerware went for hundreds of thousands. Lord Riteyai had a tea service that he spent two hundred and fifty thousand gold purchasing.

Returning the spoon and eyepiece to Mrs. Ghenis, he said calmly. “I know nothing about silver, but that carving in the end looks like it was done after the metal had cooled.”

The she-wolf looked very offended but used the eyepiece to examine the part in question. “How...?” she began.

“Can’t help you there,” he said honestly. “I’m sure it’s a closely guarded secret.”

Mishal was smirking at him and Ghenis had his mouth partway open with a stunned expression on his face.

He got a slight smile and his eyes sparkled as he asked: “Why’re you trying to make a counterfeit Randia anyway?”

That started a heated discussion between the two Ghenises. He apparently felt like the work his wife was doing was wrong. She defended her stance by assuring him that she planned on putting her own mark on it so that people would know it was fake. Things were going down from there quickly. There was no shouting and the tone being used was civil and calm...and very passionate.

Mishal came up from behind Benayle and whispered to him, “That was the only way you could think of to turn their attention to something else?”

The Alpha chuckled. “So, I might have run further than I needed.” He cleared his throat and the couple turned to face him. Their argument having been defeated by their desire to be good hosts and pay attention to their guests. “I’m so terribly sorry,” he lied. “I didn’t mean to bring up such a controversial subject. I’m sure you both are people of very high integrity or we’d never have sought you out for such an important assignment.”

“Assignment?” Mrs. Ghenis asked.

“Perhaps, my dear,” Claw said slowly, “we should start with some introductions. You recognize Mr. Benayle, I’m sure. The lovely young lady behind him is Lady Mishal, our current Minister of State.”

Benayle nearly laughed at someone calling Mishal a “young lady.” Sixty wasn’t old for a vykati, but it wasn’t young either.

“Mr. Benayle. Lady Mishal. This is my wife, Therie Ghenis,” the old soldier finished.

They exchanged polite nods.

“Plush fur,” the old soldier said to his wife, “They want us to move to Rhidayar.”

Benayle meant to give an explanation, but all he got out was: “To Xahusha...”

The matron cut him off. “Then we’re going to Rhidayar. I’m no more likely to shirk duty than you are.” She pointed at her husband.

“Perhaps,” Benayle began, “you should first hear...”

Again, he was cut off. “Do you think that his assignment to Fort West was to him alone? I knew exactly where my soldier husband was going and I went with him in spirit, since I couldn’t in person. When Vharkylia needed us then, we were there and this time will be no different.”



They reached the river about mid-afternoon. It was wide—about thirty meters across and where they were at, it was calm and slow moving. It wound lazily around the plain, mostly heading south, but occasionally drifting to other directions as well. Gregor showed surprise that it was as close to the lake as it’d been. “I’m afraid that might mean we’ve wandered north again,” he told her.

“Can’t we just follow it?” Sajani asked. That seemed like the safest way to keep a supply of water.

“Well...,” Gregor began, “yes? But it’ll be much longer, and we’ll end up going through some rather dangerous places before it heads to the border of Vharkylia. We don’t really have enough supplies to do that. East Oasis is closer than Zandahara, the next closest city up the river.”

“Provided we haven’t already worked our way too far north?” She was starting to worry a little bit.

Gregor didn’t help. “I suppose. I’m not sure where we are other than along the Yanames River.”

It’d been a while since the copper wolf had eaten and between that, feeling lost and confused, and Gregor’s admission that he had no idea where they were... “So we made it this far, only to die of starvation lost and alone?”

Her companion sat down on a large rock and started pulling food from his bag. “I’ll figure it out. I think it’s a good time to eat. Did you want fish or turkey? I think I’m...”

She didn’t let him finish, “I think you’re lost, so it doesn’t matter what we eat!” The outburst embarrassed her. She wanted to run away but couldn’t bring herself to go far from the only person she had left in her life. Instead, she turned her back on him and sat down on a rock with her arms crossed.

Pride prevented her from turning around when she heard his footfalls come close behind her. There was a sound of something being set beside her, but she turned her gaze up to keep from seeing it. After another moment the footfalls retreated.

She might not have seen what he set next to her, but she could smell it: dried venison and a little dried pastola. There was food in her pack, he didn’t have to...the thought squelched itself before completion. Changing her perspective just slightly brought a warmth to her face. No, he didn’t *have* to give that to her. He *wanted* to give that to her.

Slowly she reached her hand down beside her and picked up the food. It was just as bland and dry as it had been the previous day, but this time she was much more grateful for it. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, "I shouldn't have yelled at you. I'm worried and afraid. There's so much further to go and..."

Gregor's voice was calm and reassuring. "It's alright," he said, "I understand." A slight edge entered his voice as he added, "I wish you wouldn't, but I do understand."

Sajani finished her food and was still a little hungry. They rationed their food carefully, trying to get by on as little as possible. If they could keep going at the same rate, it'd mean they had twelve more days of food. That was more than enough to get them to East Oasis.

Gregor was back to his usual cheerful mood, or at least was very good at pretending. "This might be a good place to clean up. It's the last water that shows up on the map until East Oasis, and while I'm sure we'll be dusty and looking like mud elementals when we get there, it'll be a little less bad."

Sajani managed a smile. "Going to just swim around again, or are you going to take getting clean seriously this time?" She turned as she was saying that and was happy to see that her comment brought a smile to his face.

"I always take getting clean seriously." He'd put a hand on his chest to emphasize what he was saying. "You just don't like to have fun cleaning up the way I do."

She laughed. "You have fun your way, and I'll have my serious fun another." A thought occurred to her. "You might want to get your blanket cleaned up too, while you're in there." She started taking the rolled blanket off the bottom of her bag. Standing up, she began to shake it off.

"Then what will I use to dry..." he looked over at her blanket meaningfully. "Never mind."

She looked down at the mud caked blanket in front of her and they both laughed.

It was fun watching him as he splashed around in the river. He never bothered with trying to scrub himself or his clothes, he just swam around. Sometimes he'd dive down and stay under just long enough that she started to feel alone and panicky then he'd burst up and both of them would take a deep breath at the same time. When he came up from the river, she had to admit, he looked clean.

"I'll drip dry here for a bit and then make my way north, while you get cleaned up." He was patting the water out of his clothes.

Sajani could feel a slow panic rising in her.

She was about to say something when Gregor said, "That won't work, will it?"

She was too embarrassed to answer.

There was a barely perceptible sigh before he said, "How far should I go?" There was maybe no more than two meters between him and the river's edge.

Sajani said quietly, "Right there is fine." Rising from where she'd been seated, she made her way carefully towards the river.

Gregor stood, turned and put his back to her. As she was getting ready to go into the river he asked her, "Can I ask you a somewhat personal question?"

That sounded ominous, but she was confident that, coming from him, it wouldn't be anything too horrible. "Sure."

"Why do you have so much trouble being alone?"

Ok, so maybe it could be a really horrible question. She paused while she tried to gather her thoughts. Hopefully, like many times before, he'd take her silence as not wanting to answer and retract his question. It must have been something he really wanted to know because he didn't take it back. "It comes from when I found out my mother died. Benayle and a priest, Father Lamarr, came to see my paw and I." Her voice was shaking. *Please, please take back the question*, she thought. "I heard Benayle tell my father that my mother told her troops, 'Kra'la al'ark.'" Gregor remained silent. Why did he even need to know? Why did she feel like she had to tell him? She'd *never* told anyone about this. "That night I saw her in a dream. She was lying near a big stone building that looked like a church. She whispered, 'Sajani'et al'ark' and then her eyes closed. I looked around and I was alone on a mountainside, there was no one else there. I shouted out for help and no one answered." There were now tears in her eyes and it was impossible for Gregor to *not* know she was hurting. Why did he let her hurt like this? Why did he insist on an answer? "I had that same dream, sometimes multiple times a night for months after that." Why'd he pick this of all times to ask his question? While she was half dressed? *Perhaps*, a voice inside her said cynically, *that's why he picked it*.

Gregor's back was still to her and as he spoke, she felt positive that he wanted to be near her and comfort her. *That wouldn't be as embarrassing as it could be, but still...* "I'm sorry you experienced that. I'd try to tell you that I'll never leave you unless you want me to go, but after what's happened so far in your life, I doubt you'd believe me."

While she was thrilled to hear him say that, she also knew he was right: believing anyone that said that wasn't an option. Her experiences so far didn't allow it.

Whether he meant to or not, Sajani was never sure, he answered most of her recent questions when he said, "Maybe now that it's out in the open and you've faced that fear, you can start to heal."

She continued to ready herself for her bath, then grabbed her blanket and stepped out into the water. There was more caked mud on her fur than she thought it could hold and her hair was every bit as disastrous as Gregor had implied earlier in the day. Her clothes at least washed pretty easily. It was almost an hour before she stepped out of the water. Since nothing was dry,

she opted to wrap her blanket around herself. At least, being wool, it kept in some heat.

It looked like the warm day had mostly dried Gregor's clothes. With a little luck there was enough warmth left to dry hers

The other wolf spoke, "I have an idea. The Nasine River joins with the Yanames about 25 kilometers north of the point where we're supposed to head straight west towards East Oasis. (I'm guessing on that by the way and hoping that map was to scale.) We definitely didn't drift to the south, so that would mean that, at worst, that intersection is twenty-five kilometers north from here."

Sajani was pretty sure he was coming to a point with all that, but she also had to wonder a little. "How much did you study that map?"

"Let's just say that prior to you showing up, I didn't have much to do in the evenings."

Sajani laughed. "So what are you getting at?"

"If we find where those two rivers come together, we'll know how far south we have to go before turning west."

"And how are we going to know how far to go?" She hated to be a (she smiled a little to herself as she thought it) wet blanket, but it was an important question.

"We don't really, but we'll have a better idea than we would by just wildly guessing."

That much was true.

"Are you ready to go?" Gregor asked her.

She shrugged even though he couldn't see it. "I suppose I can go like this."

The young wolf turned to face her and stopped suddenly. His eyes got wide and he quickly turned his back to her again.

Sajani made sure that the blanket was covering her all the way and then laughed.

"Ok," he said calmly, "I suppose I could have reacted better, huh?" He turned to face her, but since wolves don't blush, she had no idea if he was embarrassed still or not.

The she-wolf laughed again.

"I thought you just meant your clothes were still wet."

That made her laugh some more. "They are!"

At first she thought his response was sarcastic, but after only a moment, she realized he wasn't completely joking. "Here I am trying to make sure that you never feel like I'm taking advantage of you, and you hardly seem to care."

Well that certainly *wasn't* true and there was no way she'd let it pass without comment. She went straight from laughing right to righteous indignation. "Well, that's not fair at all," she said sharply. "First of all, I do care—a lot! Secondly, you aren't the only one that's been trying to keep in

line! I've been trying to give you the same courtesy. Or maybe you haven't noticed?"

He was visibly stunned by her words. "I..." he began. He was looking down at his feet.

"Most of my friends before I went to school didn't care who they slept with or how they presented themselves! Well, I cared! It's one of the few things that kept me from ever feeling like I was really a part of their group!" She managed to calm herself slightly. "Maybe it was those years of being watched over by a future priestess of Indira. Maybe it was knowing how devoted my parents were to each other. From the time you first took me out of my cell, I worried that maybe you wouldn't see things the same way I did. I was afraid there was something you expected from me in *exchange* for rescuing me."

"Sajani, I'd never..." Gregor began.

"And if you were paying any attention at all, you'd realize that neither would I. One wolf. One mate." Now that the words were out, she felt herself calming quickly. Tears were close, which was strange because she felt much more indignant than she did sad.

Gregor looked up at her and opened his mouth as though he was about to say something then quickly lowered his eyes and turned his back to her.

Still feeling a little upset that he hadn't noticed her efforts, she accused, "Well fine, turn you back on me. I'll..."

"It's not that Sajani," Gregor said quickly.

She looked down at her blanket. It hadn't come open much while she was lecturing her companion, just wide enough to embarrass someone like the wolf beside her, but not wide enough to expose her. Seeing him respond that way made her feel a lot better.



To save both further embarrassment, they decided to wait until morning to find the conflux. About a dozen meters from the river there was a grassy open space—still a little damp from yesterday's rain, but not damp enough to get through even one layer of blanket. It would make a good place to sleep.

Since it was awhile until sunset and when not moving it was incredibly awkward to stay silent, they talked. The thought of making a small fire came to them, but between the recent rain and the fact that neither really knew much about starting a fire, they decided against it. Sajani offered some consolation to their inadequacies, "It'd probably just advertise where we're at anyway," she said morosely.

It didn't seem to affect Gregor's mood at all. "Yanebel could start a fire with his ax."

"If I have any complaint about the books," the she-wolf said succinctly, "It'd be that he relies way too much on that ax."

The other wolf laughed. "Well, he still has to know how to swing it and he *does* sometimes fight with words instead."

Sajani smiled, "The only time I can think of is in book three, when he's standing trial in Rhidayar."

Gregor got a little defensive, "There're plenty of other times. You probably just remember that one best because it's his most amazing escape ever!"

The she-wolf knew from prior conversations that the two had totally different reading styles. "It'd have been even more amazing if you knew he could summon his ax sometime *before* he did it."

Her companion stayed on the defensive. "It still was awesome!" he said excitedly. He grew thoughtful. "And I memorized a good part of his speech from his trial. It helped me get through many hard days."

That revelation surprised Sajani, not because he memorized a passage in the book, but because she'd memorized it as well. "It helped me a lot. It kept me hating *where* I was without hating what I *am*."

Gregor laughed lightly, "You memorized it too?"

"I did!" she said enthusiastically. "I even quoted it to Mr. Berhaul."

The look of shock on the male wolf's face made her laugh. He managed to say, "Was that on the day we left?"

Sajani smiled. "Yes. It was the last thing I ever said to him." There was a warmth that passed over her as she remembered. It was the perfect parting message.

Gregor's smile showed exactly how he felt. She could see veneration in his eyes. He echoed her thoughts. "I can't think of a better thing to say at a time like that."

His expression and his words brought a little heat to her mouth and nose. She laughed a little to herself. *He can't flirt when he wants to, but he sure can flatter without trying*, she thought. The inside laugh was apparently showing in her smile.

"It's good to see you so happy," her companion told her.

It's good to be this happy, she thought. There wasn't a hint of her usual cynicism to go along with it. She was free of that school and traveling with a friend who valued *her*. The conversation earlier in the day, while she felt like she could have handled it a little more diplomatically...well someone else could have at any rate...it resolved the whole issue of Gregor possibly wanting to use his help as leverage to get her to compromise her morals. It also brought to daylight a principle that she often felt ashamed to admit. Her friends certainly didn't live by it.

One wolf. One mate. It was a kind of slogan used by some elements of vykati society. For the most part, the wolf race was fiercely monogamous. Most of those that didn't agree with the sentiment at least respected it. For those that lived by that principle, what was true before marriage was also very much true afterwards. Sajani knew it was something her father believed, even if he'd never specifically told her. Because of this, she knew he'd never remarry.

Her traveling companion had been saying something and she missed the first part of it. "...that we'd get back to Vharkylia and you'd forget..." he apparently noticed her distraction.

"Sorry," she said sincerely, "I was just thinking of how good it feels to be away from the school and no longer having things weighing me down."

Gregor laughed. "I won't remind you of how far we have yet to go."

She ignored the paradox of his comment and changed the subject. "What'd you think of book five? Did you ever finish that before we left?"

That discussion lasted well into the night and when they finished talking, they made their way to the clearing, wrapped themselves up in their blankets and slept well.