

## Chapter 2

*There's no reason to panic, Sajani reassured herself. He got you out of the school, provided a way to hide where you came from, and gave you a huge boost to return home. You can do this alone.*

*But I don't want to be alone, a hidden voice said. I'm tired of being alone. I'm afraid to be alone.*

The second voice caused her to look down at her hands in shame. Fear began to set in. *It might not be so bad, she told herself. You should be used to being alone by now.* The thought did nothing to calm her. She'd been a different kind of alone for a long while it seemed. Never fewer than twenty students around her at any given time for the last six months, but she was almost always alone. What little free time Gregor had was usually spent reading newspapers he salvaged from the garbage. He once told her that the school allowed those, but he had to be much more secretive with the few books he managed to find. He'd always politely put aside his paper if she approached, but she only did that when she was most desperate for company. The paper seemed to be such a rare pleasure for him that she didn't want to intrude.

Her father often sent her books and letters. The books she read, but the letters she ignored. There was no way she could forgive what he'd allowed to happen to her. If she'd ever bothered to read them, she'd know that they usually contained mundane things, just small talk and hopes that she was doing well. He'd end by pleading for her to write back. He also told her why he sent the books he did. She probably would have been slightly pleased to know that he did it as a small revenge for allowing Benayle to send her away.

The books were part of a series called, *Prequel to Alpha*. They were a fictional account of a wolf named Yanebel, an obvious anagram of Benayle, and his adventures before he rose to be a great leader of Vharkylia. Yanebel was much more forceful and vicious than how she envisioned the real National Alpha. The books' hero was an expert with the ax and used controlled rage to put down his enemies, not like the near pacifist and diplomatic double talker she saw in Mr. Ramisa.

It was very common knowledge that the wolf leader despised the books. He often said that the "based on a true story" on the cover had no business being there.

Her father had sent her six of the books so far, with a promise (that she never read) to send one a month until she had all ten. Each book had been read and enjoyed and then passed on to Gregor in secret. She knew he read them but had no idea where he hid them afterwards. Offers to return the books when he was done had been consistently refused. They reminded her of home, and she didn't want that.

For a brief moment, she wondered what the protagonist of the books would do in her situation. The thought made her shudder. Imprisoned by

cruel humans? The ax would have been soaked in blood and there was no way he'd slide out a back window. He'd walk out the front door, dripping in the blood of his enemies.

Definitely not her style. For starters, it'd take *weeks* to get that gore out of her fur and she didn't even want to think what it would do to her carefully trimmed and filed hand claws. That thought brought her hands into focus and she again became aware of her isolation.

She heard a voice coming from the end of the alley repeating in Common, "Fresh fried pastola or steamed vegetables. Meat for the wolves and veggies for our kind human friends."

Street vendors were a common sight in Bahadhra, although very few offered meat, let alone pastola. There'd been no way she'd stoop to eating the dog food provided in the cell, so she was already hungry, and it'd been months since she had any meat: the school didn't serve it. She was just starting to dare to cautiously move forward, though she had no money, when the vendor spoke out in Vyhati, "Don't be afraid Miss Adida. Your friend has everything very well planned, *trust me*."

*Ug.* Was that to be some sort of password for the next series of events? She supposed Gregor had no way of knowing in advance how much the phrase grated on her. Was she supposed to answer something back? Unsure and hesitant, she advanced down the alley until the vendor and his cart came completely into view.

The street outside the school was dirty and the industrial haze that fell over the city made it seem much later in the day than it was. Outside of the vendor and a few old buildings there wasn't much to see. While the girls' school had probably been built during a time when this was a very nice neighborhood, it wasn't exactly "nice" anymore.

The vending cart was polished steel and very clean. It had an elongated umbrella above it and a sign that said, "Cutting Edge Meats and Vegetables" in Common across it. There were three covered and steaming bins across the top and just enough counter space to allow service and a cash register. A delicious smell permeated the area. The vyhati working the cart had very light gray fur and white hair that he'd grown long, not a common style for male vyhati. He was looking at her with his green eyes wide and welcome. The smile that crossed his face on seeing her was broad and sincere. He said, again in Common, "Ah there you are, Miss Ralina. Your brother said you'd be by..."

Sajani interrupted in Vyhati, "I think you have me mistaken for someone else."

The vendor answered in their native language, "Ah, no... Trust me," the phrase again made her cringe, "You are Ralina Adida, niece of the hero of Altaza and often mistaken for your cousin Sajani. Your brother Gregor was just here but said you needed some time and privacy."

Sajani stood there speechless while he spoke.

He continued, “Ah well, don’t want to raise suspicions if someone’s watching, so now might a good time to say something like, ‘that’s exactly what I wanted’ in Common.”

As she obliged, he reached to a shelf at the bottom of the cart and picked up a large bento box already folded closed. The conversation continued unabated in Common. “Ah, there you go. One large order of fried pastola with jasmine rice and mung beans. I’ve put a couple forks in the box for you.”

Leaning out to touch cheeks with the vendor, she gladly accepted the box. It smelled delicious. As his cheek came into contact with hers, she heard him whisper quickly to her. “Two blocks directly behind me. Sit at the furthest table outside the coffee shop. Eat what you can but leave the remainder there when you leave.” He moved back away, but she stood frozen for a moment. “Ah, no need to worry,” he said jovially. “Your brother paid in advance.”



It wasn’t common to have visitors at the farm, Harmah thought wistfully to herself as she rose to answer the polite knock that came to their door. It was especially rare so far from harvest. Her husband had been out at the fields most of the day, repairing a collapsed irrigation culvert. If they were after eggs like the last few callers, that was too bad. Those were owned by the Co-op as soon as they were laid and sent early each morning off to the city. As she neared the door, she prepared herself to say, “Sorry, but we’re out of eggs.” There’d been no need to say it though. She was glad she hadn’t when she was greeted by the smiling figure of the National Alpha standing on her doorstep.

Mr. Benayle was wearing a nice but very worn white shirt, open at the collar, and baggy brown pants that looked like they might be a size too large for him. He waved at her and spoke in a very polite and deep voice, “Mrs. Narsh, I presume? Do you have a moment? There’s a small bit of business I wanted to discuss with you or your husband.”

Did she have a moment for the leader of her nation? What kind of ridiculous question was that? If he’d wanted the eggs that weren’t hers to give, she’d have given them to him without question. Not sure at all what to say in such a situation, she stepped to the side of the open door and motioned for him to enter.

Benayle shook his head politely. “I have ‘followers’ that get upset when I enter strange buildings, so it’s probably best if we just discuss things out here.”

While the request made no sense to Harmah, she was glad he wouldn’t see the untidy inside of her home. It wasn’t exactly messy but, she’d been busy with various farm chores all morning and the breakfast dishes were piled in the sink. Words still weren’t coming to her.

“Is that okay?” Benayle asked.

The she-wolf nodded.

“I wanted to let you know about some recent developments in the area. I hope you’ll find it good to hear.”

Harmah wasn't the talkative type normally and this situation left her with very few things she felt comfortable saying. "Yes?" was all she managed.

"It's my understanding that there's been a bit of vandalism on your farm lately."

Well that gave her plenty of words to choose from. She started with the pups that were insisting on running across their onion fields, treading down the delicate stalks. There was the whole mess with the three times the pastola pens had been opened and the amount of time that was spent fetching the birds back. She detailed the wounds the birds caused in the process and how many birds and eggs were lost because of it. And oh, there was much more than that. She kept going for a long while.

Benayle stood patiently on her doorstep and listened to everything she said with a sympathetic expression on his face. When she finished, he said simply, "You'll be glad to know that we caught every last one of those responsible. It honestly only took catching one to find the rest. They all ratted out each other in order to get their jail time and community service reduced."

"Typical of their kind." Harmah spat.

The Alpha returned a saddened expression, though the farmer had no idea why. He spoke simply, "I realize that there's no way to undo the damage they caused..." he reached into his pocket and pulled out a large sack. She could tell from the look and sound of it that it was full of coins. "but I wanted to do what I can to help reimburse you for your lost commodities." He handed her the sack and waited patiently while she opened it.

They were gold coins. More than she could make in years of farming.

Seeing her amazed expression, the alpha sighed and turned to leave.

Words almost failed Harmah again, but she did manage a single word, "Why?"

The alpha turned back to face her. His eyes were wet and glistening and his voice nearly cracked as he spoke. "Let's just say that, in a small way, I feel responsible. Can we leave it at that?"