

Chapter 3 Part 1 of 2

The office of the National Alpha of the dynast nation of Vharkylia was a lot like the wolf to whom it belonged in that it gave off a very specific, very calculated appearance. There wasn't much to it really. A table that was pushed against the same wall as the entrance was equipped with blotter, ink, and quills. Boxes were on top to hold paper and other projects, but there wasn't much to the ensemble. The chair before it was cushioned. It was widely known to the other inhabitants of the building that it squeaked very loudly when sat upon. Loud enough to be heard for quite a distance—it was a good way to know those few times when its occupant was in the building.

Today there were a few things different than usual. Normally, the aforementioned table and chair comprised the only furniture in the room. Benayle was just putting a fourth chair into place and examining the room carefully. He'd added two chairs near his desk and one near the door. Mentally going through his rather lax schedule for the day, he was pretty sure that should cover everything.

There was plenty of time, so the wolf sat down on the chair nearest his desk and smiled when it let out its usual loud complaint. Reaching down to the brown cloth spats he was wearing, he began rubbing his ankles. While the set had looked fine at the thrift shop, he wondered if the cleaning he'd given them before he put them on had changed something or if there was something about the weave... He started unwrapping the one on his left leg.

A polite knock at the door put a quizzical look on the old wolf's face. Not bothering to finish removing the offending article of clothing he stood up and answered his door. He noted that the door squeaked when he opened it and made a mental note to fix that. People knowing when he was in wasn't a problem, but it was a lot more fun if no one knew when he was leaving.

On the other side of the door was a very serious looking wolf with black fur and wearing a well-pressed black suit with a white shirt and a crimson satin puff tie. His hands were before him and clasping some sort of brown cloth. Benayle thought he might have seen the man somewhere before.

"Oh, hello," the leader said congenially. "Is there something I can do for you, Mr..."

"Farnsbeck," the other wolf answered. His voice had the slow rolling accent of the people of Riteyai. "and it is I who has come to help you. I suppose it'd be too much to expect you to recognize me?"

That briefly put the old wolf out sorts, but not for long. "Well, you do look familiar..." he started.

The expression on the suited wolf didn't change. "I'm happy to hear you say that sir, considering I *am* your personal secretary."

Well, the Alpha did know he had one of those, if he could only manage to remember his name. "What happened to...?" he began.

“Treffe, sir. He decided to finally pursue his dream of being an *artiste*. I was hired as his replacement.”

Benayle stepped away from the door and motioned for the secretary to enter. He had managed to notice that the easels and paintings that once cluttered the outer office were gone and the person that usually spent his time in there painting was too. Once the worker was inside the office, the old wolf closed the door.

“Hmmm...” Farnsbeck said slowly. “Time to oil your door again I see.”

That comment made Benayle decide that he wanted his chair to complain *particularly* loudly. If the *door* bothered the new employee... He sat down rather hard on it waiting for the secretary to say something.

There was a long pause before the other wolf said sternly, “Really, sir? I already know you don’t *like* that oiled.”

“Well...” Benayle said aloud as he thought to himself, *Wow. I don’t think this one’s going to last more than a week.* “What was it you wanted?”

“Two things, actually sir,” the secretary drawled. “I brought you these.” He held out his hand to show a pair of cloth spats. “The ones you have seemed to be bothering you this morning, so I took the liberty of picking some up at *Southlands* today. Mr. Graft was more than happy to wash them for me once I told him they were for you.”

Bought from his favorite thrift shop and even cleaned in advance? Ok, so maybe this one might make it a few weeks. He took the spats and began trading them out for the ones he was wearing. While still working on that he asked, “And the other business you wanted to discuss?”

Since the response came from a voice he didn’t recognize—a more playful and accent-free voice, the Alpha looked up immediately. It was the same secretary that’d been there the whole time, but now he was smiling.

“Will that do for the people that come in or would you rather a different act?” After seeing the look on Benayle’s face Farnsbeck began laughing. It was a contagious laughter and the leader joined in quickly. “Oh, that expression! It’s much better than the look of disappointment you gave when I first told you who I was.”

Benayle had never met this wolf prior to today, but it looked like they’d get along very well. With a chuckle still in his voice he asked, “And what’d you do before this? Were you an actor or something?”

Farnsbeck returned to his prior persona, “Ah, sir, that would have been a rather distasteful line of work for someone of my upbringing.” He then returned to what Benayle was already thinking of as the secretary’s “real” personality. “I worked for the Ministry of State, but unfortunately I had to leave that job. I became a little too well known in Zenache if you take my meaning. My superiors felt you could use someone with my particular ‘talents.’”

There'd be time later to check on what the secretary was claiming—and he'd *definitely* check. For now, there was other business with which to attend. "I have some guests arriving shortly..." he began.

"Any minute now, I'd say," Mr. Farnsbeck finished for him. "Should I put on my original act for them or are Father Lamarr and his daughter Westa above such shenanigans?"

Benayle didn't keep a calendar on his desk or anywhere else for that matter. This wolf was *good*. If his references checked out, he was definitely a keeper. "Give them the whole spiel. They're close friends, but it might be better if only the two of us know your stock in trade."

No sooner were the words out of the leader's mouth than a knock came to the door. Farnsbeck gave a sly wink and answered the door already back into his stern and straight demeanor. "Your ten o'clock appointment sir. Father and Westa Lamarr. If you have no other business for me...?"

"No. Thank you Mr. Farnsbeck," Benayle returned as formally as he'd ever said anything. He made a mental note to actually talk to his secretary more often.

With that, the employee walked stiffly out the door.

The leader turned to his new guests and politely touched cheeks with them in greeting. The older of the two had brown fur and wore the plain brown cloth robes of a priest of Kali, the Aspect of justice. His daughter had the same brown fur and many similar facial features as her father. She was also very beautiful, even in the sterile gray robes of an acolyte. A few years back she'd been a member of the Vharkylia Ballet. Benayle often regretted her abandoning a short and brilliant career, but she wasn't the first to give up fame to take on the cloth.

The Alpha showed the two to the seats before his desk and the guests sat quietly. Not really sure what to do with himself, he chose to stand looking out the office's only window. The busy street below reminded him of how long it'd been since he'd been able to get outside the city. Well, outside for long. There was that trip to the farm just yesterday.

His guests were waiting patiently for him to speak. "I feel like it's perfectly safe to assume that both of you know Sajani Adida?"

Both of the seated individuals spoke their assent, but the Alpha kept staring out the window. He knew the answer before he asked the question, but it started them thinking down the correct path.

He continued, "And you are aware that last week she was found guilty *in absentia* for 14 counts of vandalism and one count of petty theft?"

Looking out the window, the vykati leader didn't see the younger of the two guests look down at her hands at hearing the question, but he did hear them both say that they were indeed aware. Father Lamarr spoke calmly and patiently, "Yes. It's a sad and tragic thing. Veiled blood couldn't even spare her name. The pelt, the resemblance to her mother...So much potential..."

Benayle pulled himself away from the window and kneeled before his younger guest. Taking her hand in his, he looked her directly in her downcast eyes and asked, "You're her friend. Where'd I go wrong?"

Westa didn't pause. She started speaking as soon as he'd finished his first sentence. "*Was* her friend," she said sadly.

Realizing that his gaze was making things difficult for the young lady, he rose and returned to the window.

Westa continued, "...and I can truthfully say that it wasn't anything you did. It's what our nation did."

Her answer confused the leader. "I do believe that went right past my ears," he said candidly.

There was silence as the acolyte took the time to assemble her thoughts. "I can count on one paw, without using my thumb, the number of times where I saw people actually hold her accountable for her actions. I can't begin to count the number of times people let her get away with things rather than challenge the daughter of *our war hero*." The last three words were spoken respectfully, but also with a touch of regret.

Benayle was sure he was beginning to understand.

Westa continued, "People noticed. The wrong people especially."

The Alpha turned to look at the girl. Her head was still bowed, and she was wringing her hands.

"And those people don't have the same values I do," she finished, her voice cracking slightly. Her earlier comment about her friendship with Sajani came painfully into focus.

Turning again to the window Benayle sat thoughtful for a long while. No one said anything. He'd been so convinced that he was about to do the right thing, but now he was very glad he'd asked these two to come today—to verify his decision or, like he suspected was about to happen, tell him how stupid it was to even think of doing it. Better to be direct. "I wanted both of you to give me your opinion on a major government decision." He allowed that to sink in for a moment but couldn't see their reactions because he was still facing the window. "I planned on using my position to pardon her." There was no way he could look into their faces when he said it, so he didn't see the slight nod that the father gave to his daughter. He was prepared for laughter or derision. Instead he heard light footfalls as Westa walked slowly to where he was standing.

"I'm not sure why you'd think my opinion means anything. There's already no shortage of opinion on it. You'll be both a hero *and* a villain no matter what you decide."

Benayle nodded, but still didn't meet her gaze. At least if she was going to tell him how crazy of an idea it was, she was going to do it gently.

Westa continued, "It's funny, because my parents and I were discussing this very thing over breakfast this morning. It's not an easy decision and we talked a lot about how we're all grateful we aren't in your position." Another

long pause. “That said, we don’t want you to feel like you have to do what we suggest. It’s an honor to be asked, but ultimately, I’m afraid, *you* will bear the burden of its repercussions, no matter what you chose.” There was resolve, self-confidence, and faith in what she said next, “We both believe you should pardon her.”

He looked over at her, trying to decide if what she was saying was some kind of joke—a cruel (and totally out of character for the young acolyte) tease making fun of him for even considering letting Sajani off the hook.

It all made sense, however, when she added a final word.

“Once.”

He gave a weak smile to the younger wolf and then motioned to her father to join them all at the window. “That’s pretty close to my thought as well. Once. Show her there are people that actually care about her and want her to start fresh. I just hope that if I’m clear enough about it being a single chance, she’ll make use of it.”

Father Lamarr repeated what his daughter said earlier. “There’s no winning answer. Some scream to condemn her and some scream to exonerate her.”

Benayle finished, “And neither side knows or loves her.”

The priest continued, “There isn’t likely to be any argument on what to do the second time, no matter what her mother has done.”

Benayle placed a hand on the shoulders of his guests. “Thank you so much for visiting with me this morning. I thought there’d be a lot more discussion and debate, but really all you showed me is that I’m not alone in my thinking...” He was interrupted by a polite, but urgent knock at his door. “Yes?” he said loudly and clearly enough to be heard outside.

Mr. Farnsbeck poked his head in and behind him Benayle could see a human that he recognized. The secretary was back in his formal mode, “So sorry to interrupt, sir,” he said slowly and carefully, “but the Rhidayan Ambassador is very insistent he be seen right away.”

Nodding to the two guests still in his office the leader said politely, “So sorry to have to cut our visit short,” he then added under his breath, “sometimes my job is rather inconvenient.” Taking a deep breath, he continued at a normal volume. “I’m sure Mr. Farnsbeck will be happy to show you out.”

The two left silently with sympathetic looks on their faces and were replaced by a short, dark skinned human wearing sandals, shorts, a loose-fitting shirt and a very ornate brown and red sash over his shoulder. Benayle motioned him to the chair by the door, but the human refused.

Once the door was closed safely behind them the ambassador bowed deeply and said in a very thick accent, “My apologies, but there wasn’t a chance to change once I got the message...”

“Phht!” Benayle interrupted. “Like I’ve ever cared before now.”

The ambassador stood straight mid-bow. His prior formality dropping unceremoniously. How often did people put on faces when they worked in government? He tried not to change too much from situation to situation, but sometimes it was necessary.

"I wasn't sure. With how formal your new secretary seemed, I thought maybe you were trying to turn over a new leaf," the diplomat replied. His accent was mostly gone.

"Yes," Benayle lied slightly, "The final choice of employees isn't always mine to make." He continued unabated, "But I'm sure you're not here to discuss my country's hiring practices..."

The ambassador gave a sarcastic grin. "Officially, I'm here to bring over some urgent extradition paperwork. It must be much more urgent than usual, given the speed with which it arrived. Unfortunately, someone seems to have accidentally spilled ink all over the document and it might take a few days to get the proper..."

"I'm guessing it's someone we both know. Accidents like that never happened to strangers before now." Benayle commented wryly.

"Sajani Adida," the diplomat cut to the chase. "She's wanted for questioning regarding the escape of an indentured servant, a fellow vykati. Um..." he seemed out of sorts for a moment, but only a small one, "*If* she's actually helping him, by the way, that'd be a capital offense in my country."

He was aware of that, but since there didn't exist any similar status to an indentured servant in his country, the assumption wasn't presumptive.

The ambassador continued, "My government is pretty sure she's heading this way and wants you to apprehend her if we can't."

"At the moment, she's wanted here for crimes as well."

"I thought surely you'd already pardoned her..."

Benayle wondered if perhaps Mr. Farnsbeck and the ambassador shared contacts.

"But," the ambassador was quick to add. "Such a situation *does* complicate her extradition tremendously. And let us not even think of how much time it might take if her conviction were to be appealed..."

That was an excellent and timely suggestion that the wolf leader was sure he could use to his advantage. Another idea struck him at that same moment.

"Yes, I seem to remember some paperwork being done in that regard. It's probably too late to stop the appeal from going through, but perhaps..." the old wolf smiled conspiratorially at his guest. "Perhaps I should send some 'assistance' north. Someone that's more culturally attuned to these fugitives." He'd have to make one quick stop at the Ministry of State to check some credentials, but that wouldn't be a problem, especially this early in the day.

The diplomat looked hopeful. "I'll get together the necessary travel papers..."

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary, Mr. Rahala. The person I have in mind won’t have any trouble navigating your country and I think it’s probably best if he comes less than formally announced.”

The look on the ambassador’s face spoke volumes. Benayle knew exactly what it felt like to be caught between duty and friendship. “I must remind you that foreign agents that are not properly registered with my government can be arrested and the death penalty is a very real possibility.”

The old wolf laughed a little on the inside. He honestly had no idea how good a spy the person he was sending had been, but something about sending him felt very right. “I can assure you, ambassador, that the person I’ll be sending does *not* work for our Ministry of State.” *At least not anymore*, the wolf chuckled to himself.



Sajani woke calmly, happily, and more comfortably than she had in months. Reaching over to where she’d laid out her clothes the night before, she checked to see if they were dry. They weren’t but were close enough. Since she didn’t feel like getting completely out of bed just yet, she put on her clothes while still lying down and then pulled the sheets and comforter back over her. As she did that, something fell off the bedclothes and onto the mattress in front of her. It was the book from last night. She had no idea how late she’d stayed up reading, but she was more than halfway through the book.

Seeing the novel brought back memories from the previous day. She perused the thoughts happily. There was something about being free from the school that made her feel exhilarated, not just relieved to finally be out of there. In some ways it was a little like the main character in the novel she was reading: an excitement for doing something that she felt was really right, even if others thought it was wrong.

It’d be fun to talk to Gregor about it today, well not about the novel because he hadn’t read that yet... The thought gave her some pause. She could have spent, perhaps, a little time talking to him yesterday before she started reading. He wouldn’t have minded that she hadn’t though. Gregor never minded about much. Yesterday was the first time she’d seen him at all grumpy and that didn’t last very long.

Her necklace was sitting on the nightstand. She picked it up and quickly fastened it behind her. A thought struck her when she was halfway to the door: Gregor had mentioned last night that he was going to wash his clothes...

She debated back and forth with herself for a while before she decided on a plan. She opened the door slightly and called out, “Is it ok if I come out now? Are you decent?”

She thought she heard something like a “yes” so cautiously opened the door.

There’d been no need to worry. Gregor was sitting at the dinette eating sliced fruit and drinking a glass of water. “Good morning,” he said cheerfully. His face then became a little somber and he added, “Sorry if I was a little

cranky when I first came in last night. I was so busy getting everything ready yesterday morning that I skipped breakfast and even though it's not an excuse for me yelling at you..." Something on his plate suddenly became very interesting.

"I didn't know the food was for you until it was too late." Sajani said with a shrug.

That seemed to appease Gregor. His smile returned, and he looked up. "There's some breakfast for you on the counter. Not much, but I sliced up some fruit I'd brought. Nothing to drink but water I'm afraid. Sorry. I tried to get a canteen, but it ended up being a choice between breakfast without a drink or a way to drink with no breakfast.

His comment worried her. "You're out of money? Why didn't you use the money you saved for me?"

There was a confused look on his face as he answered. "I couldn't spend your money. It's *your* money."

Is this wolf for real? Sajani found herself thinking. "What else are we supposed to do with it?"

"If it's ok with you—and don't feel at all pressured because I do have other plans just in case—it's just enough to get both of us passage from the nearest western port back to Drtithen."

Sajani was beginning to fill with apprehension. Yesterday had been so well planned that she just assumed things had been worked out up to the point where she told off her father for sending her away. Now she was at least *involved* with helping a slave escape. At worst, she'd be executed and at best (since they *had* been rarely seen together) she'd end up back at the school staying in Gregor's old cell for another two and a half years. To add to it all, she honestly wasn't sure which would be worse!

At some point Gregor stood and brought a plate of fruit over to the table for her. He motioned to the chair next to where it was sitting. "Eat. I know this is very difficult for you and I'm sorry that I assumed you'd want to go and didn't ask you about it first."

She took the proffered chair and he helped her slide it up to the table. The sweet fruit did improve her mood a little. A glass of water was set before her and she drank most of it at once. Her voice came out quiet and subdued. "I did want to leave," she said as she set the glass down. "If you *had* asked, I'd have told you that. I'd have just hoped that you had everything all planned out and gone without question. I'd tru..." She couldn't bring herself to say it. If he knew what she was about to say, Gregor didn't show any sign. "I'd have hoped."

He sat down across from her. At some point he'd finished his fruit and water. "My biggest worry was getting you out of the city with as few people seeing you as possible. *I* can blend in. People can't tell most vykati apart, but your fur color is less than one in a million."

She knew that was true, but there was no way she'd hide it. She was the daughter of Malita Adida. The world owed her much for that. Thinking that reminded her that there was no reason for her to have her head down. Eating some more fruit and taking a gulp of water afterwards she spoke confidently, "You said you have plans once we get to the nearest port. What about until then?"

Sajani could tell that Gregor noticed her change in mood. He seemed to share her confidence. "Mostly, we rely on the vykati we meet until then. Humans are hit and miss when it comes to helping us out, but most wolves have suffered at least a little discrimination while here and will do what they can while not asking any questions."

Sajani raised an eyebrow. "You sound like you have experience with this. Is it your first time trying to escape?"

"Yes," he answered honestly. "But the original idea came from Manfred—the street vendor near the school. He helped me find the others that worked with us."

"And they helped supply some money for us to get this far?" The cab ride would have been pretty expensive, she knew from experience. That and the hotel would easily take most of what little money she'd calculated him to have. Sajani was also hoping that if there was some money involved, it might be a lot less rough than it was looking now.

Gregor gave her a sad smile and shook his head. "They were able to give small discounts. The hotel did the most. Since it wasn't a weekend, she could do more."

That made sense in some ways. "So we get what money we can as we travel..."

Now the other wolf gave out a melancholy sigh. "I'm sorry," he said and she had no idea what he was apologizing for this time. "I keep forgetting that we grew up in two totally different places. If the vykati left in this country have any money to spare, it's going towards getting themselves out of here. The border skirmish wasn't that long ago. Almost all the humans will act civilly in public, but there are few that wouldn't take an opportunity to harm a wolf if the chance presented itself."

Or take an opportunity to say how vykati should despise themselves for what they are, she thought cynically. Mr. Berhaul hadn't even questioned the lesson plan.

Gregor got up from the table and said, "Redrose—the nice lady that you talked to yesterday—probably is off shift, but she said she'd leave a newspaper and something to help us out at the front desk. I'll be right back."

After he left Sajani returned to her thoughts about this whole adventure. She could hear the stairs groaning as Gregor went down them. The other lodgers must have left before she woke up, because she didn't remember hearing anyone on the stairs this morning. She *had* slept late. It was nice of Gregor to not mention it.

That was all the further her thoughts went because she heard rushed footsteps coming up the stairs followed quickly by Gregor bursting into the room. He was breathless, and his eyes had a half-crazed panic in them. Dropping a bookbag to his feet, he latched the door and started moving one of the sofas in front of it.

Sajani didn't ask. She jumped up and helped him wedge it in front of the door. They'd just started moving the second sofa when she heard several sets of footsteps coming up the stairs. Gregor found his voice. "They have Redrose." No explanation and there was no time to ask because just as fists began pounding on the door, the window behind them shattered and in stepped a very intimidating looking human. He stood just a little shorter than Gregor but was very broad shouldered. He had too light of skin to be a native of Rhidayar and wore a brown corduroy suit, and white shirt. How his derby hat stayed on his head as he came through the window was a mystery. Coming in through the window had cut him in a few places, but he didn't seem bothered by it. The man went for Gregor first, making a typical human assumption and going for the male.

Sajani took that opportunity to rush forward to the dinette and grab a chair. As she turned back to the fray, she noticed Gregor manage to dodge one punch only to be hit squarely in the jaw by a follow-up. The punch looked strong enough to have knocked him out, but his fists stayed up near his face and his eyes remained alert.

By this time Sajani had placed herself in a position behind Gregor's opponent that allowed her to get maximum swing on the chair she was wielding. It must have been made of very expensive material because it stayed completely together. That made it hard for her to get in another swing. While it managed to knock the hat off, exposing almost white blonde hair, it also stayed slightly tangled around the man's head and neck. Oh, and it also made the human very angry. He spat the common rude remark humans made to female vykati and tried to turn and face her.

About this time, a musket fired, and the wood around the door's lock shattered. Hands, pale human hands, forced their way through the still mostly closed door and began feeling around the entry trying to find what was blocking it. It'd take them a little while to get enough leverage to move the wedged in sofa and that gave Sajani an idea. "Take the chair!" she told Gregor in their native language. He reached out and grabbed it by its outstretched legs. The pressure the two wolves had been able to keep on it prevented the human from getting out of its center, at least for the moment. It wouldn't take long for even a very stupid person to figure out to push up and crouch down in order to get out.

The she-wolf turned back towards the dinette. There were three more chairs there if she needed them. As she started forward with the next weapon, she noticed that the human had managed to get out of the chair and had turned to face her. *That's right*, she thought grimly, *don't mind gender. Male*

or female, a wolf will eat you alive. The move wasn't a smart one, since it meant turning his back on his opponent. Gregor gave two swift punches, one to the jaw and one to the neck. His opponent was obviously dazed by it.

Sajani wanted to cheer her friend on but knew there were more important matters with which to tend. The hands from outside the door had managed to gain leverage and were starting to move the door forward. That progress was stopped, and the hands retreated behind the door when she smacked them with the back of the chair. Her success helped her think a little more tactically than was her norm. She started a war howl and was surprised when Gregor picked up on it and continued.

The panic in the eyes of Gregor's opponent was obvious. Hopefully it had a similar effect on the ones outside the door, but that was unlikely. The human before them made an attempt to flee, but between Gregor's fists and her chair, he didn't make it far before he collapsed.

He hadn't even finished hitting the floor when Gregor thrust the bookbag he'd entered with into her hands and picked up his own from the front of the other sofa. "Looks like they thought we wouldn't get a chance to go out the window," he said breathlessly. The back part of his lip was swollen on one side and Sajani guessed there were a lot of places that'd show bruises soon if he didn't have fur to hide it.

They rushed to the window and looked out. There was a long gable under them that stretched the length of the inn and a little beyond it was a solarium. They could see through the glass that there were several guests eating breakfast. The glass of the room's window hadn't been evenly shattered, and both were fearful that an attempt to use that egress would end with some very deep cuts.

At the same time as the door started moving again, the shrill sound of constable whistles piped from both sides of the inn. Was that reinforcements or were they responding to the musket shot?