

## Chapter 4: Holiday at the Lake (Part 2 of 2)

Benayle knew that he needed to rush back to his office when he saw the time but couldn't quite remember why until he got there. Seeing his Ministers of State and War just outside his office reminded him—they'd called for meetings earlier that morning. It wasn't a common thing for him to forget things like that, especially on such short notice. What was very uncommon was for him to schedule meetings that overlapped. The Alpha usually had a fairly good idea of who would be in his office at a given time, but sometimes forgot to mentally check.

He caught the amusement his mistake caused just before they realized he was within earshot. Lady Mishal was saying, "...not as funny as the time he was supposed to be at the court building, his office, and up in Riteyai all at the same time. We'll just be glad..."

Benayle interrupted. "It happens more than most people know; I just usually manage to correct it in time. That particular incident was an over-zealous secretary assuming that I'm at all predictable." Lady Mishal was still dressed as she had been for his earlier meeting with her. The Minister of War had been an intimidating figure in his youth. Lord General Adibee Fys stood a proud two-and-a-quarter meters tall. His fur was a pure gray but had once been black with fiery lines of red in places. In his wolf pack uniform, he was still intimidating to some.

The two ministers smiled as he hurriedly opened his office door and motioned for them to enter. After all were seated and pleasantries were exchanged Benayle said, "Sorry about double scheduling, but there isn't much one of you can say that the other can't hear. Am I right?"

Both nodded.

Mishal said, "It turns out, our reports are related. They both involved things happening in Rhidayar."

That was interesting. Was there going to be a pattern in the coming weeks? "I received some information from there just yesterday," he said. Since Mishal already knew, he told Adibee what he'd learned from the ambassador.

"I doubt it's related to what we're reporting, but it does make things a little more urgent on getting Sajani out of there." Mishal said.

Benayle waited.

"The Rhidayan king has been summoning most of his key advisors in rapid succession, but from what little I've been able to find out, he's not telling them much."

That wasn't enough to make Mishal insist on talking to him, Benayle knew. He told Mishal that. "We can go weeks without speaking and then suddenly I have every Minister in my office on the same day. Usually just because I need some information and the people that can answer it are spread out."

Mishal responded. “And that could very well be what’s happening. We haven’t been able to find out why he’s asking his questions. What little we’re hearing about what he’s asking is...well...”

The Lord General interrupted. “It’s very worrisome. He’s asking for exact numbers about our forces in Altaza, Falcon, and Fort West.”

There were a few reasons that those numbers might be requested. It was possible that the king was just making sure the terms of the treaty were being kept.

“And,” Adibee continued, “he wants exact times and numbers on unit mobilization and deployment for his own army.”

That was alarming. “He wants another war? So soon after we beat him last time?” Benayle asked.

Mishal’s voice was soothing and calm. “It’s not uncommon for him to get numbers like that. He’s done that at least three times since Altaza.”

Adibee spoke loudly, “It’s not the same Mishal.” There was a weight to his voice—a burden that he alone seemed to be shouldering. Mishal motioned her hands consolingly. She looked over at Benayle directly. “You’ve asked for similar numbers at least twice since...”

The Lord General’s voice thundered. “Right after Altaza and a year later. It’s not at all the same. This time their king asked at least one general to prepare maps.”

The difference in the two Minister’s personalities was making Benayle wish he hadn’t made this scheduling error. “Maps do need to be updated...” he began.

“Maps of the pass at Altaza.” Adibee said loudly.

There was silence in the office briefly. Benayle sighed deeply. “What do you suggest?” That was the wrong question. Both advisors began talking at once—both increasing their volume to be heard over the other.

The Alpha let loose a howl that got the attention of the other wolves. “One at a time please,” he said softly once the others were quiet. He turned to his Minister of State. “Mishal?”

“For now Ben, I suggest we wait until we know more...” she began.

It was a good thing that her plan was so simple, because the Lord General didn’t allow her to finish. “Step up naval missions on the northern border and move the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry division up to Alaza. It’ll be crowded, but...”

Benayle motioned Adibee to silence. “I’ll take that under consideration...” he began.

The Lord General shouted and Lady Mishal leaned a little away from him. “What’s there to consider? They’re getting ready to attack.”

Benayle smiled at his Minister of State when she rolled her eyes. “If we assume they’re going to war and they see our response and assume we’re going to war...” Benayle said quietly, “then we’re all going to war, no matter what was meant by these meetings. I need to know more before I risk that.



It was either further than they expected or Sajani and Gregor spent too much time enjoying each other's company. Neither talked much, the unspoken agreement being that silence was fine. Sajani found that it was comforting just being around someone that had no expectations of her or her past. She wasn't sure what Gregor could possibly like about being around her. He was kind and giving and...she was... she was...or rather, she *wasn't*.

*But I can change, can't I?* she pleaded with herself. *I can use what I see in him as a pattern and I can match it.*

The cynical side of her spoke up. *It won't be easy and it'll definitely take a long time. There's so much different between you and him, why bother? Why not find someone that's easier to match or better yet wants to match you instead?*

She didn't have an answer to that.

When they returned, Blade was waiting for them. "How was the waterfall?" he asked.

Gregor tried to answer first but kept stuttering, so Sajani spoke. "It was nice. It's good to take a break every now and again."

"Oh! Ho! Ho! Oh! Oh!" the trapper laughed. "Wasn't nearly as lucky as I was last night. Just a rabbit, but first thing tomorrow we'll start getting you packed."

They ate a dinner similar to the one the previous night and when they were done, Sajani started getting the tub full again. Gregor helped and then rolled up in his blanket outside her door. Just like the previous night the bath was cold and soap-less. Yet somehow it felt like she was cleaner than she had been in a long time.



The morning was chilly and Sajani awoke shivering slightly. She dressed and put on her necklace, making a silent reminder to ask Gregor about it again. The original reason for wearing it was now pointless. Perhaps she should give it back.

Blade was true to his word and gave them enough dried meat and fruit to last awhile, if they were careful. He also gave them some extra waterskins.

Fitting all the provisions in their packs meant that the blankets had to be rolled and tied to the bottom and the soiled books had to go. They weren't sure what to do with them exactly. Burning seemed sacrilegious, as did just leaving them to the weather and elements. In the end burying them seemed the least offensive option. Blade laughed over and over about their dilemma, but neither cared.

The last of the provisions had just been packed and their bags placed on their backs when the sound of a very loud gong came from the house where Sajani had stayed.

Blade spoke quickly, "Damn! We need to go now. I'll take ya to the western peak and show ya which way to East Oasis before I head back here to head 'em off."

“Them? Who?” Sajani shouted.

Time seemed to be still for a long moment as the trapper replied, “There’s some in this country that’d love to be able to say they killed the daughter of the woman that defeated their general five years ago. Now, let’s move!”

It seemed futile to argue. There was no threat they could see, but the trapper seemed very convinced. They made their way up the western peak. It didn’t take long. It just seemed like a very long half hour. When they reached the ridge and looked back down, they could see a group of four humans cautiously approaching the houses. One cast a spell and the middle house burst into flame. The other two followed. Fortunately they didn’t look up to where the three were standing.

Blade pointed to a place angled a little way off from the ridge. “Ya need to go that way.”

When Gregor spoke it startled Sajani. “Come with us,” he said, “Maybe we can outrun them.”

The older wolf shook his head. “Ya’ll definitely outrun them if I can stop them.”

“It’s four to one!” Gregor shouted.

Blade shrugged, “I’ll let them shoot first then. It’ll be a little more challenging. Now go! Stop bein’ foolish.”

“You stop!” Sajani cried. “You don’t have to do this for me, Blade!”

“Silly little girl,” the old wolf quipped back. His face became a snarl and it looked like he meant every word he was saying. “Do ya really believe people do anything for a spoiled puppy like ya?” He spat at her feet. “We do what we do fer your mother! We owe ya nothing! We owe her everything!”

The words hurt. As much as she wanted to deny it, she couldn’t. She lowered her eyes and was turning to leave when Gregor passed by her. His words surprised her.

“You shouldn’t speak to her like that!” he shouted. “You have no idea what she’s been through!” Did he just defend her? Yes. Yes, he did.

“I know she hasn’t been through a tenth of what her mother did. Now get out of here! They’ll be here any moment.” The old wolf spat at the ground again and pulled his pair of muskets from his belt. “Ya know where you need to go, now go!”

Gregor looked at her and she nodded once. Together they straightened, turned away from the trapper, and started down the mountainside. They were well out of sight of where he’d been when they heard the volley of musket shots. There were a lot more than two.

As they moved along, running as fast as they dared, Sajani couldn’t get Blade’s words out of her head. *We owe you nothing. We owe her everything.* She turned for a moment to look back and Gregor, sensing she wasn’t following, looked behind to find her. “He was right.” Sajani said slowly.

The explosion shook the mountainside and the morning sky briefly burned bright back the way they'd come. The smell of smoke burned their noses. They both looked on as parts of the mountain rained down on them. "Blade..." Sajani whispered. They turned and started moving again. There was no way they could afford to go back, even if they could do anything.

There was no trail and the way down the mountain was steep and sandy, with a few bushes spread out and an occasional pine. Running was impossible, but they forced themselves to move as fast as possible. More than once, one or the other of them would slip and end up sliding down the mountain's sandy bank. It covered them both with dust.

Without the book bags, they could have probably made it twice as far, but the extra weight bogged them and when they got to a large plateau about halfway down the mountain, they both stopped and rested.

Pulling out a waterskin, Sajani took a long drink and then handed it to Gregor. She tried to rub the muddy dust from around her lips. The loss from earlier in the day came back to her, but it was tempered by the realization that all the kindness he'd shown was for the sake of her mother and not for her. He'd shown his real feelings as they left. So in addition to the sting she felt from his loss, she also felt the sting of the truth he'd spoken.

Gregor looked on sympathetically but didn't say anything for a long while. "I'm sorry he said that to you," he said at last. "It was wrong of him..."

Still looking down at the ground the copper wolf quietly interrupted, "Maybe wrong as in not a polite thing to say, but what he said was true."

Gregor opened up his bag and looked briefly for something in it before he said, "I guess there wasn't room for it, although I don't remember taking it out."

He was met with a quizzical look from his companion.

The young man continued, "But what he was talking about is who you *were*, not who you are or who you can be."

What he was saying worried her. She'd very carefully kept her recent past a secret from him, but the implication of what he was saying...She kept her gaze down and said nothing. Maybe he was just talking and not really knowing.

"I wish I still had my newspaper."

Sajani laughed cynically. "Not a good time to stop and read. We really should be going soon." She made like she was about to rise but found that she was still very tired.

"You know a person named Gladdi?"

The question stopped her. It was a name she'd rather not hear from him. Sure, her and Gladdi had been friends, but...

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you...We can talk about something else." His voice was very apologetic. "Or not talk at all..."

It was too late to drop that topic. She had to know what he wanted to say. "She was an...associate of mine" she immediately felt bad for saying that. Just

because she wasn't a good liar didn't mean that she never lied. She'd lied plenty of times to many people and never felt bad about it. This time was different. "Ok," she added quickly. "We called each other friends, but to be honest, I'm not sure I'd want to be around her anymore." That was true.

"Well," Gregor said cautiously. "She definitely wouldn't want to see you. She agreed to testify against you at your trial."

Had she heard that correctly? She looked up suddenly but couldn't meet his gaze. The statement nearly blinded her. She knew nothing about the trial he was talking about, but it implied he knew at least something about her time before she came to the school.

He gently explained to her the basics of the article: she was to be tried *in absentia* for 23 counts of misdemeanor vandalism and two counts of petty theft. Gladdi wasn't the only one that was to testify against her, that was just the only name he could remember. The rest of her crowd was too: all to get a reduced sentence. The newspaper had already condemned her.

"Well," she said tartly as he finished, "Thank you for bringing that up. I guess we're even now on harboring criminals."

There was a long pause. She still wasn't able to look at him.

"I'm so sorry," his voice was cracking. In a pitiable voice he added, "I didn't bring it up make you feel bad. I'd never deliberately hurt you."

She believed him, but it still hurt.

"It's alright," she said quietly, "you had to know sometime. You'd have probably learned when we got to Drithen, with or without my friends getting caught. I didn't want you to know. I made a point of not telling you. But you deserve to know exactly what type of person you're helping." There was another long pause and that caused her to look up.

Gregor's face was firm and determined. "I don't care," he began. His look was kindly and his eyes showed a level of acceptance. "You aren't the same person you were when you arrived at the school. That person was afraid and uncaring. You befriended the school janitor. No one ever bothered to do that. You listened to me talking about news that you cared nothing about. And the books? Would the petty thief have done that?"

"I was desperate. I had no idea what I was doing and didn't care so long as I wasn't alone!"

"But it was the right direction! And as long as you keep moving forward, you're leaving that person behind."

"That person will still do jail time when she gets back," she told him cynically.

He paused for a moment and then told her, a definite ironic tone to his voice: "Actually, the article ended with a rather weird statement. It said the office of the National Alpha was still refusing to comment on rumors that you'd be pardoned."

“Considering he’s part of the reason I’m here, I’ll not hold my breath” There was a measure of self-loathing in her comment, but by this point, now that the horrible truth was out, she didn’t care.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised you know Mr. Benayle.”

She’d hated this topic before that comment and that statement took it over the edge. There was no way she wanted to talk about Mr. Ramisa right now. “Look,” she said more sternly than she should, “Can we not talk about this? I’m embarrassed enough you found out without talking about the fact that I know the old wolf.”

Gregor was quick to appease her. “Ok,” he said politely, “But can I say one more thing? I feel like I’ve really botched this whole conversation.”

The “No!” almost escaped from her mouth or at least she thought that was what she was going to say, but instead she heard herself saying rather angrily, “Fine, but hurry. We’ve rested long enough and should be moving again.”

He spoke firmly and with a level of self-confidence she’d rarely seen in him. “I just want you to clearly understand: even knowing what you’ve done, I still consider you a friend.” He grabbed his bag, slung it over his shoulder and started walking down the mountainside.

The hurt didn’t go away, but she did feel warmer inside. With any luck, that’d be their last conversation for a while.