

## Chapter 5: Important Beliefs (Part 1 of 2)

Truly fast travel was something that only governments could afford. The amount of resources required to get the materials to the proper places was astronomical, especially if it was to a place ruled by a different government. On top of that, in most cases, the transportation was “single use only.”

All things considered, Vharkylia (and Farnsbeck for that matter) was lucky that there was such a setup in Bahadhra. There’d once been a vykati embassy there, but like most diplomatic edifices in that country, it’d been abandoned shortly after the battle of Altaza.

Farnsbeck took a moment to dust himself off. The alley the transport had placed him in was filthy and dusty. It reeked of industrial waste. Taking a moment to look around, he noticed that most of the barrels around him were marked as chemical waste... that would put him just outside the Almarada Chemical Plant. The clerk in charge of arranging his transportation had no clue exactly where he’d be once he came through. The exact location was lost when the embassy closed.

First things first, however. He pulled a small blue mask from his vest pocket and carefully placed it over his eyes. He tied it behind the back of his head. It looked like the mask was designed for a human, but the wolf ears did a good job of holding it in place. Once he was sure it was secure, the secretary raised both arms straight out to his side with his palms facing downward. He closed his eyes. As he did so a brief crackle of arcane energy flowed over the mask. For the next few seconds clumps of darkness gathered around him and obscured him from view. Slowly the light returned to the area around his body and in place of the black wolf there was a human with light hair, blue eyes, and pale skin. He was wearing the exact same clothes the vykati had been.

Part of him wanted to quickly find an inn and get settled, but the practical, business side of himself realized he needed to let his contacts know he was here. He started with one of the chemical barrels next him. Placing a single gloved finger on the side of it, he drew a quick picture: a **K** with a horizontal line through the middle.

Tightening his gloves, he straightened his hat to adjust for the difference between wolf and human ears and started out to the street that crossed the alley. It was early afternoon and the grimy city was covered with a thick layer of smog. When would humans bother to control that better? It wasn’t that Vharkylia was smog-free, but they at least made *some* effort. A brick on the corner of the building at the edge of the alley received his next mark. It might be days before someone noticed it and figured out where to find him, but maybe if he was lucky...

The secretary continued down the sidewalk, occasionally stopping to examine some oddity around him: a shop sign, lamp post, or a notice on a public bulletin board. He didn’t see the small Rhidayan in gray pants, a loose

white shirt, and sandals a few blocks behind him carefully stopping to trace over his marks and then continuing on quickly.

It was when he'd made about his tenth mark that the wolf decided that should be enough for the day. He stopped and prepared to cross the street. There was a hotel that looked presentable enough to house him. As we waited to cross, however, he became aware of something in his peripheral vision and aborted that idea. Instead he dabbed at his cheek with a handkerchief and then continued slowly down the sidewalk. His pursuit wasn't even trying, it seemed, and it wasn't long before the small man was only a few steps behind the wolf.

Farnsbeck turned quickly and grabbed the person following him by the arm. The faux human was about to say something nasty when his face suddenly lit up and he nearly shouted, "Oh, it's great to see you! I almost didn't recognize you!"

"Shush you, Cyan," the Rhidayan hissed. "You always were the loud one."

"Good to see you too, Orange." Farnsbeck returned amiably. "We'll have to find somewhere we can catch up."

Orange motioned him to follow and led him to an alley just a couple of blocks away. A large dumpster was at the entrance and the two quickly ducked behind it. The Rhidayan pressed a hand to a brick and arcane energy surrounded an area at the base of the wall. The light from the magic was very faint and faded rather quickly, but once it was done the bricks and cobblestones began to rearrange themselves. They eventually formed a doorway that the two men stepped through. The bricks and stones quietly rearranged themselves back to their original positions.

Inside was a small brick room with a cement floor. The only light came from a small lantern in the far-left corner.

"We don't have much time," the shorter man said quickly. "The room fades after five minutes."

"It won't take long, I need you to gather some information for me..."

Orange didn't allow him to finish. "You think I've no idea why Gray is sending an agent this way? I've been waiting here for someone to show up. You'll need this." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small object. Once it was in view it began to expand until it became a file folder. There were only a few sheets of paper in it. "I'll admit, I'm surprised Gray sent *you*. Rumor was you'd been caught and killed."

"That rumor was less than accurate. Caught, but..." he started looking through the folder. Its contents made no sense to him. "I think you grabbed the wrong folder. This dossier is for a vykati named Gregor. I need your current report on Sajani."

Orange was nonplussed. "No, Cyan. You're the one barking up the wrong tree." He was speaking very quickly. "There's no way possible for Brown to care less about what happens to your copper wolf. She can go back to

Vharkylia if she wants. But Brown is convinced that if that indentured servant with her gets back to your country, Gray will have all he needs to get Oil and Water to let him go to war. Brown has no desire to have his rear handed to him twice in five years.”

Farnsbeck was a little disappointed to hear Orange say that, but he didn't show it. “Gray won't sacrifice his people. What he threatened before was done in a rare moment of anger.”

“I know!” Orange hissed.

That statement redeemed him in the vykati's eyes. It was good to know the man wasn't that out of touch with what was happening in Vharkylia.

“But Brown won't believe that. Whatever information that slave has is a closely guarded secret. Brown's even hired a few foreign bounty hunters. He wants that pup dead and if your copper wolf happens to get in the way of that, she'll be going with him.”



The warmth from Gregor's comment soon faded. There was something about being told that he considered her a friend that bothered her. Her friends from before she came to school in Rhidayar, she'd just learned, had all betrayed her. Was he trying to encourage her by saying he was her friend?

Thinking about the type of people she'd used that word to describe made her realize: Gregor couldn't mean it the same way she did.

What other friends did she have? There was Westa. The ballet dancer turned priestess was a lot older than she. At first, Westa had been no more than a babysitter, but for a while, a very short while, they'd enjoyed doing things together.

And that was exactly how her relationship with Gregor would go, she knew—staying a friend. Outside of being the daughter of someone important, she had nothing to offer—unless he needed lessons in being self-centered or how to shoplift without getting caught.

Her pity party was progressing nicely when the weather decided to throw gasoline on the fire. It started to rain. It brought her out of her reflection. She removed the blanket from her pack and wrapped it around her.

Gregor turned to face her. Just before he spoke, thunder rolled across the mountainside. “I wish we could find a cave or something, but I haven't been that lucky so far. At least it's a warm rain.”

Sajani didn't see his last statement the same way he did. To her it was indifferent, not positive. As they continued down, they checked every rock cropping to see if it could at least shelter them from the rising wind. About evening near the base of the mountain, where it started to even out to meet the plain below, they decide that continuing to look for shelter was pointless. Instead, they made their way to one of the last ledges and opened their packs.

Sajani took a very long drink from one of the waterskins. She handed it to Gregor who also took a long drink. Dinner that night was served

immediately after. There was something to be said about a cold meal served on a cold and wet night and none of it was complimentary.

Maybe there was a way to get her mind off the cold and dampness. Discussing fashion and shopping was out, so she went to her usual standby with Gregor: books. "It's a little like the time in book four when Yanebel is on his way to confront the bandit king and it starts raining and there's nowhere for him to go."

Her companion smiled, "It is, but we're missing a few things, like a bedroll..."

"And an ax!" Sajani finished enthusiastically. "But it's the same in that we're all braving the elements."

Gregor smiled broadly, "I think of myself as pretty faithful, but I doubt I can stop rain with a prayer like he did."

Sajani rolled her eyes. "Oh please, like there's some easily tapped magical force out there that can change the weather to match our whims."

Those words seemed to almost physically strike Gregor. "You don't believe in Ahj or the Aspects? I didn't know that."

It was more complicated than that, and normally she didn't have any desire to justify her beliefs, but now...He'd understand wouldn't he? He wouldn't think less of her? Part of her wanted to lie and tell him that she *did* believe: that the only reason she'd said that was because it seemed like a major case of *deo ex machina* in a book. Just a few days ago, she'd have lied. A week before that, she wouldn't have cared what he thought. The truth was best. "I believe in Ahj and the Aspects, but I don't believe They care about *me*. I don't understand how an all-powerful Being can have the time or inclination to oversee the wants of the whole population, let alone take care of those that have gone before. They certainly didn't do anything to answer my father's and my prayers about keeping my mother safe."

There was a look of consternation on Gregor's face as she said that, like he was trying to decide between two choices he didn't want to make.

"What?" Sajani asked.

"Can I call on a promise you made previously?"

What was that supposed to mean? Rolling through her prior conversations, she couldn't think of anything that she would have promised, especially anything important. "Sure," she said with half-conviction.

"Good. So no laughing at me or thinking that I'm just saying it to flirt with you?"

Oh, *that* promise. The copper wolf wished there was a way to back out and save them both whatever embarrassing thing Gregor wanted to say. A small part of her, however, wanted to hear something that he seemed to think would woo her. "I promise," she said, hoping she didn't end up regretting it.

As soon as she said that, Gregor began, like he wanted to get the words out before he could reconsider. "As far as this whole trip goes, I don't think that the Aspects do care much about what happens to me, but from what I've

seen They care a lot about what happens to you. On my own, I can't possibly hope to live up to what's been expected of me so far. Not that I'm incompetent, but there's so much working against us." He let out a sigh and said, "I'm not sure how to say this and not feel totally awkward...My original plans had fallen apart before I'd even set foot out the door (or window) many times before you showed up. Looking back on it, I'm sure that it was because I wasn't supposed to go unless you were going with me."

*So, I'm some kind of lucky talisman,* she thought cynically. *I just happened to show up in time for a real plan to surface.* Luck. It all came down to luck.

"A couple of months after you showed up, I decided that you'd probably want out too. That's when Manfred came across Redrose. Through him, we were able to talk back and forth about arranging the hotel." He paused again, looking shyly down at his feet. "Once I decided that you might want to be in on what was happening, everything changed. I went from constantly being blocked, to everything falling into place. Somehow, though you might not think so, you're a very special person. Some power, Ahj or the Aspects, thinks you're important."

His cynical companion wasn't convinced. "So you managed to arrange the hotel to hide out in. By adding me to the mix you also halved what you could afford to do. Also, I'd hardly brag about how well everything's gone so far."

"And yet, we're here..."

"In the rain..." As soon as she said it, she realized that the rain had stopped at some point in the discussion.

"The setbacks we've had are way beyond the ability of either of us to handle, but somehow, like Yanebel, we keep coming through. That has to mean something to you."

Oh, it meant something to her. It meant that they'd been using up all their luck and it was bound to run out any time. That's not what she said though. "Maybe someday I'll be able to see it like you do."

"I hope you do. I hope someday you'll see how really important you are." He immediately got flustered, "To the Aspects that is," he stammered. "How...how important you are to Them."

*Well, if that was flirting, I should be safe for quite a while,* she thought sarcastically. A change of topic seemed to be in order. "Did we want to camp out here or should we see if we can go a little further? There's a nice sandy spot over there. It might not be too soggy if we sleep on our blankets."

A very worried expression crossed Gregor's face and he looked around frantically. "There's not much space to it."

From where she was standing, it looked like it was about four meters square, but she knew what he meant. She was confident that he'd continue to be the gentleman he'd been so far. Was it her that he worried about? Gentleman didn't describe her and it wasn't just the generative that was the

problem. She tried to quell his worries. “We’ll sleep on opposite sides with our backs to each other. Will that work?”

He nodded. His face straight and not showing any emotion.

The thought came unbidden, and by the time Sajani started to suppress it, it had already completed its message. *Whoever he marries will be so lucky to have someone that loyal and dedicated.*



The National Alpha was beginning to think that he was spending more time in Mishal’s office than in his own and he wasn’t sure what that said about either place. He let out a long sigh. “I’d hoped,” he said in a very tired voice, “that it was good news.”

Mishal gave him a very sympathetic look. “I’m so sorry Ben,” she said honestly. “I don’t know what it all means yet, but it’s not the sort of thing I want to happen on my shift. My predecessor was good, but after Altaza...”

The Minister of State before her was Lady Relant. The public outcry over what many saw as her inability to predict the future (as if she could) led to her resignation and eventual suicide. Benayle still felt horrible about it, but no amount of reassurance or encouragement seemed to be enough. “You’re keeping me apprised of the situation, any blame will fall directly on me.”

Mishal looked worried. “What are we to do Ben?” she asked.

“There’s not much to do,” he answered. “I’ve instructed the Lord Admiral to emphasize patrols to the north and keep all our transports in either West Port or Drtithen. What Rhidayar’s navy is doing...”

“All of them though?” Mishal said skeptically. “Ben, what could force them to recall *all* ships to their home ports?”

Not much, he knew. “Has Zenache been doing anything? Is the threat from there maybe and we’re just an added worry?”

The Minister shook her head slowly. “They’ve sent an envoy to speak with you. She’ll be arriving in five days. Other than that, their reaction is more paranoid than aggressive. They’ve put a naval blockade in place on the seas to the south but aren’t stopping any ships from passing. Their troops are holding steady but preparing to move if necessary. Don’t take this the wrong way Ben, but those are the exact things we should be doing.”

It’s what he wanted to do, but deep down, he knew that it would only escalate things. It was safe for Zenache because as far as Rhidayar was concerned, they weren’t the threat. The Rhidayan ambassador was out the last few times he stopped by (or so he’d been told). Normally that’d be a worry, but he trusted Handamar. Or at least, he really wanted to trust him. “If I’ve learned anything from my time there and in my current position, it’s that they’re not naturally aggressive so much as afraid. I want to show them that I’m very confident in our ability to meet their threat...”

Mishal started to interrupt, but he continued. “Moving troops and escalating our presence on the sea only gives them more cause to worry. Fear will cause war, whether it’s our own fear or theirs.”



In order to keep out the moisture, the blanket had to be folded into thirds which left nothing to cover her while she slept. It was a warm night, but the dampness made it seem a bit cooler. After awhile of trying to sleep on a soaked blanket, with her fur and clothes thoroughly wet, Sajani began to shiver slightly. She turned over onto her back, making it so that the clothes that'd been exposed to the night air were now right up against her fur. That was cold. What little sleepiness was left in her vanished and she found herself wide awake. There were no stars to see tonight. The sky was still cloudy and ominous. She lay there for a few minutes, listening to the wind in the pines and to the soft rhythmic sound of Gregor breathing.

She was wet, cold, and miserable. There was just enough desperation to her thoughts, that she found herself thinking in ways that even her prior self avoided.

Sure, it was cold, but there was a nice warm place less than four meters from her. She could just inch over there and lay so her back was against his. Nothing intimate, just warmer. In the morning, she could claim she'd rolled downhill.

It wasn't the realization that the area was as perfectly flat as you can find outdoors (if anything it was uphill) that made her change her mind. What stopped her was knowing that he'd probably sleep on the rocks rather than compromise himself that way. There was also what he might say or at least stutter trying to say, the next morning. *And he'll be disappointed in me*, she thought. That terrified her, but she didn't dwell on why. *Maybe if I stay over here, he'll thank me in the morning, or at least say something nice*. While she wouldn't remember having that last thought when she woke up, she did sleep much better once it came to mind.



The two wolves were aware that they were pretty dirty when they went to sleep the previous night. Waking in the dawn light, after a night of sleep on wet soil, that thought was increased exponentially. Crusting and damp clothing set over muddy and wet fur wasn't a nice thing to wake up having.

Sajani tried to make light of it. "Is there such a thing as a mud elemental?" she joked. "If there is, I think we might be able to pass ourselves off as one." Looking once again at her companion's brown on blue and black clothing, she added, "You might have enough to pass as two."

"Shush," Gregor said while laughing, "Or I'll find a way to show you what your hair looks like."

"So," she quipped, "instead of its usual copper with little strings of brown, it's probably..."

The other wolf didn't let her finish. "Brown. Nothing but brown and barely like hair at that. More like a stringy mop that's been used to pick up spilled grease."

She felt her hair and realized that he was probably right. “I *knew* one bath a month wasn’t enough, but I thought I’d conserve water.”

They both laughed.

“There’s a river between us and East Oasis,” Gregor said after a moment, “but I don’t know how far.”

“I’m curious,” Sajani asked, “why didn’t you just bring the map, instead of trying to memorize it?”

He answered immediately, “It was one of the classroom maps.”

That explained everything. Those maps were huge. And would definitely be missed. “Mrs. Farlow’s geography classroom?”

Gregor burst out laughing, “That place. I avoided that as much as I could. How’d you ever get through a whole class in there? It smells like...like...”

“Someone was pouring coffee in her schnapps?” Sajani supplied.

“Exactly,” he said still laughing heartily.

It occurred to the copper wolf that she enjoyed hearing her companion laugh. “So what one did you use? Not that it matters. I’m just curious.”

The tide of laughter was just ebbing for Gregor. “I used one in the attic. It was right outside my room. I think they put it there to taunt me.” The laughter was now completely stopped. His voice was even, not sad, but not really showing the emotion he had just seconds before. “It was a map of Rhidayar *and* Vharkylia.”

There was nothing inherently painful about that, Sajani was sure, the first few times it was seen. Knowing what she did about the school’s staff, she didn’t doubt that it was put there on purpose. *You see this? This is where you’ll never go!*

“Were you born down in Rhidayar?”

“No,” he said simply, “I’m pretty sure I was born happy, although maybe a little down when they slapped me to get me to start breathing.”

Sajani rolled her eyes, seeing a virtue to slapping her companion about then. “In Rhidayar?”

“I...,” he started hesitantly. “I’m not sure. I think I was born in Vharkylia and moved later.”

There was a moment while Sajani searched through her prior conversations with Gregor. Hadn’t he said he went to the orphanage at age ten? How could he not know where he was born? It didn’t seem right to ask, so she stayed silent.

Keeping quiet proved to be a bit more difficult than it had when they first started out. There was an amount of simple joy to be had in finding out new things about the wolf with whom she was traveling. The problem was that when she learned new things about him, he wanted to know more about her. Usually, she had to dodge questions about her recent past and stick with things that happened more than five years ago.

As she walked, she was reminded of the locket she wore. Now was as good a time as any to ask about it. She caught up to where he was. He smiled

when she came aside him but didn't say anything. For a moment, she was tempted to take his hand. She worried that he might yell at her, although she knew he wouldn't.

"You know," she started, "there's really not much point of me wearing this locket anymore."

Gregor stopped suddenly. She took a couple more steps and then looked back at him. There was a look of total disappointment on his face.

*Ok, she thought, not the best way to start that conversation.* "I didn't mean it that way! I meant that you gave it to me to keep up appearances and there's no one out here to care."

The expression was replaced by a look of relief, followed by a smile as they both started walking again. He kept his eyes forward and spoke quickly, like he was worried he wouldn't get all the words out in time. "I care. I think it looks rather good on you."

That caused a small amount of warmth around her mouth and nose.

"It certainly looks better on you than it would on me."