

Chapter 7: Running River (Part 1 of 2)

It was a very long few hours, Sajani was sure. She used some of the time to make sure the waterskins were filled. One of the two canteens she'd been carrying had cracked, so they weren't as short on containers as she feared. Every once in a while, she'd go over to Gregor and check the skin on his forehead to make sure it stayed a soft pink. Once he'd fallen asleep, he had less trouble staying upright and only had to be straightened once.

It was still early afternoon when he woke with a start. There was a very worried expression on his face when he asked, "What happened?"

Quite a few snide comments crossed her mind, but she settled with a simple, "You were really tired, so you took a nap." A brief worry surfaced when she realized that she didn't know how far back he meant that question.

The worry dissipated when he said, "Oh, last I remember, we were eating lunch and I was thinking we'd rest for just a moment before starting off again." He started to rise, but had trouble getting his feet in a good position. Sajani took his hand and helped him up. Once the packs were in place and she had him supported, they started walking again.

A few hours of sleep had apparently helped the muscles in his foot relax and recharge a little. He didn't have to lean on her nearly as much as they walked. After a few minutes of hobbling along she got up the courage to pose the question that'd bothering her since shortly after their last stop. "I didn't know you had a sister," she said.

Gregor shook his head. "I've never had any siblings. What made you think I do?"

Suppressing a laugh, Sajani told him what he said before he fell asleep.

That put Gregor in a brief fit on stuttering and stammering, so the copper wolf decided to drop the subject. She had some idea why a comment like that would make him so nervous but didn't dwell on it. Like him, she had no siblings. Some people told her that she was missing out, but something inside her whispered that it was just as well she didn't. She wouldn't wish a life like hers on anyone.

With Gregor able to take more weight on his foot, they made it a bit further between stops and managed to walk further than she'd originally feared when they first discovered his injury.

When they stopped for dinner, they also agreed to make camp there. While the river above the waterfall had been windy and lazy, this one part of it was rough and mostly straight. The area was a flat space that was raised slightly above the river. It was dotted with pines and, like most of the area, had a very pleasant feel to it.

As much as she didn't want to admit it, the food was getting to her. The one thing that they both liked, the dried pastola, had run out the day before and now they were well into the things that were neither liked nor disliked.

The somewhat soggy food bags were pulled from their packs and after a brief going over of the few possibilities, some food was removed and eaten.

About halfway through the bland repast, Gregor spoke up, “Huh,” he said. “What’s this?”

Sajani looked over and saw him pulling a small package from one of his bags. Unlike the light cloth food bags, this package looked like it was made of oiled leather and tied off with a piece of twine. She walked over to him and sat balanced on her feet as he opened it.

They laughed when they saw it. Five wooden matches were sitting neatly in a row partially tucked in a makeshift pouch on the inside of the package. All five were completely soaked and part of their heads had rubbed off on the leather.

“Guess Blade thought we might want some fire,” Gregor chuckled. Their laughter died as they remembered what became of their benefactor.

Sajani cleared her throat. She wasn’t sure what she felt about Blade. He had been helpful and harshly truthful. A diversion from those thoughts seemed in order. “So what’s our topic for tonight?” she asked. “I think we’ve completely worn out discussing any more *Prequel to Alpha* books.”

“I won’t argue with you,” Gregor said candidly. “I don’t feel much like thinking and talking, but I’d love to hear the story behind those twenty-three counts of vandalism.”

“Are you serious?” she gasped. *Why would he want to hear about that?*

“Yep,” he said shortly, “You don’t have to if it bothers you, but if doesn’t...well, I’m curious.”

“Curious to know what a terrible person you’ve been helping out?”

“No,” he said carefully. “I’m curious how much you’ve changed. I want to know who you *were*.”

She gave a forced laugh. There were a lot reasons to not tell him anything. Had he worded that last part on purpose or was it really what he wanted? “You’re just saying it that way,” she told him, “because of that dream I had.”

Gregor looked over at her and smiled. “No,” he said, and he sounded very sincere. “I worded it that way because it’s what I want to know.”

It was a little hard at first, because she worried about how Gregor would judge her, but after a little while, she realized that even if he was, it was better for him to know. Something inside her had a desire to *not* hide from him and she built on that as she talked.

It was only about three stories in that she looked over and noticed he was asleep. After a long while of introspecting and self-doubt, she was asleep as well.



The rising sun fell on the small clearing, illuminating the tall strands of grass throughout it and warming all that it touched. There was no breeze this morning, so its effect was immediate and energizing to the landscape. Birds took to flight, singing happily as they glided along the still air. In a few places

around the clearing, small purple flowers bloomed and bees quickly began working on and around them. The two vykati wrapped in wool blankets lay about two meters apart with their backs to each other. Those two wolves continued to sleep. The world might be waking, but they were not.

The male wolf had spent so much energy the day previous hobbling along on his injured foot that he'd been completely depleted of energy by the end of the day. The she-wolf near him had been carrying the weight of both packs and supporting the wounded male. Energy had been completely used for her as well. So they slept. Nothing seemed to exist that could pull those two from slumber.

Gregor, the male, began twitching and moving his feet as though he was running. His hands came up near his face and began pushing out as if he were trying to force someone away from him. Sweeping randomly, his tail moved constantly. When he shouted out, "Where are they taking me?" his companion woke with a start and looked over at him.

It was obvious that he was still asleep, but it was taking a moment for Sajani's mind to register much else.

Gregor's hands came up to his eyes and cupped over them. Heavy sobs issued from his mouth.

Now that she was fully awake Sajani rolled herself over to where he was and gently shook his shoulder. "Gregor!" she said loudly. "Gregor! Wake up! You're dreaming!" She rolled herself upright and balanced on her feet, kneeling next to him and continuing to shake his shoulder. Apparently all that was happening in the dream was preventing him from noticing her.

The she-wolf placed her hand on the male's head and gently rubbed between his ears. If active motions didn't wake him, maybe... After only a moment, he stirred and his eyes started to open. Sajani quickly removed her hand, not wanting to embarrass him, and spoke again. "It's okay," she told him, "It was only a dream."

A sigh escaped and he said weakly, "I...I...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

That made the copper wolf laugh. The look he gave her when she did showed that he was still waking and not fully aware of what was happening. The day was bright and progressing and it was obvious that it was time to be awake and about. "Only you, Gregor...", she said with a contented sigh. A small lie seemed in order, "I was already awake."

Her companion looked relieved. "Oh, thank you for waking me up. How'd you know I was dreaming?" He rolled over onto his side and looked up at her.

Sajani wasn't sure how to answer that, so just stared back at him for a moment. There didn't seem to be a way to tell him without embarrassing him.

"I said something in my sleep didn't I?"

She nodded. "I think you've had that dream once before since we left the school, but not as active as this time." Rising to a standing position, she gave him what she hoped was a sympathetic smile.

He pushed off the ground to get on his feet and stood, brushing a little dust off his chest and shorts. Something on the ground in front of him suddenly became very interesting as he said, "I have that dream...It's something that comes up about once a week."

"It's the one you were telling me about? The one where you were taken from your parents?"

Gregor nodded, "Someday I hope it'll finally allow me to remember what became of them. I'm sure I know. Eventually, I'll come to terms with it enough..."

Sajani placed a hand consolingly on his shoulder and started to say something, but her action made him extremely nervous and he started stuttering. Removing her hand, she told him, "I hope so too. At least I know what happened to my..." Fortunately, she didn't have to finish the thought.

A nod came from Gregor as he said, "I..." There was a moment while he composed his thoughts, "You're a very brave person. You've faced that fate for years, while I've had to hide from mine."

There was a perfect quote for that, "Courage isn't something that can be compared or scored," she told him, "You can't know the depth or size of another's fears. What might be frightening to one might be ordinary to another. The courage needed to face the former is much greater than what's needed to face the latter, though the event be the same."

"Is that from one of the *Prequel* books?" Gregor asked.

Now it was Sajani's turn to find something really interesting at her feet. "Well, no..." It should have been obvious that he'd asked. She could have saved herself the embarrassment.

There was admiration in his voice as he asked, "It's something you made up just now?"

There was a small purple flower near her feet. She distracted herself by picking it up. "Oh no. That's not the sort of thing I could come up with..." The petals of the flower were very small and soft and very easy to pull off...one at a time. "My father used to..." *he still does*, she thought guiltily. "...he'd write me letters. When he found out about the dream...the nightmare I had about my mother's death, he wrote that to me."

Gregor leaned over and turned his head so that he could look directly at her. "Well, it's a good thing to know. I'll try to remember it the next time that silly dream comes along."

She looked up and he followed her gaze. "Well, it's over for now and I'll try to wake you sooner if it happens again." There was something odd about how Gregor was standing. She looked down.

“Thank you,” he said enthusiastically. “Now I think we should have some breakfast and...” He waved his hand in front of Sajani’s face as she stared down at his right foot. “Are you alright?”

“Are *you* alright?” she echoed. “Your foot...”

He dismissed her worry with a wave of his hand. “It hurts a little, but I noticed that I can put a little weight on it without much trouble. We’ll see how it is when I get the pack...” He looked down at his foot. “Oh...” he said.

His foot was noticeably swollen.

“It doesn’t hurt much. Maybe if I soak it in the river for a bit...”

He started walking and Sajani noticed that he was able to put more weight on it than he had yesterday, but she still worried. “Let me help you...” For once he didn’t argue, whether because he’d been faking the walk before and seriously needed the support or because he was now willing to take her help, she didn’t know. Either way she was grateful for the lack of resistance on his part.

Once he was settled by the river and keeping his foot submerged in the water, she rose and got him some breakfast. It looked like another day of limited travel, but she tried not to worry too much. They still had just enough food to get to East Oasis.

Provided they could find it.

After she got Gregor eating, she went back to her pack to get something for herself. She was just down to fish, venison, and fruit. Turkey and venison were the only meats in Gregor’s pack. Seven days of food and at best seven days of travel... She’d read about traps in a few books. Maybe between what she and Gregor had read they could figure something out...Then they’d have some meat...and still no fire to cook it. The thought of eating raw squirrel didn’t excite her. Like most vykati she had no trouble with meat quite a bit rawer than what humans liked, but...

If it came down to that, she’d do it, she decided stubbornly. Westa’s family was friends with a group of feral vykati. She’d gone with them once to visit and the dinner that was served was very...well, it was awful really, but she’d eaten it. She’d never look at rabbit the same after that.

The memory of that dinner did make it easier to eat her own food. Dried fish reminded her a little of taffy: it was chewy and didn’t take well to vykati teeth, often getting stuck tightly. Once she’d eaten a good amount of that, she had some apples to get rid of the flavor and finished with some peaches. She liked the sweetness and often used that as a small reward for getting through the rest of the meal.

Once finished, she looked up over at her fellow vykati. Gregor was sitting on the large rock where she’d settled him and splashing his feet in the water. The water was calm where he was sitting—a small pool to the side of the rushing river. While she was watching him, he picked up a rock from the water behind him and threw it sidelong. If he was trying to skip rocks, he’d have to find much calmer waters...

There was another large rock near his. She walked over and settled herself. Neither seemed interested in saying much, so she picked up a rock and they took turns watching each other throw. After a moment, she volunteered, “Caught any fish yet?”

“There’ve been a few that nearly jumped in my mouth while I’ve been sitting here, but nothing caught so far.”

She laughed and looked down at his foot. “Your foot is looking a little better,” she said optimistically.

The mentioned foot was pulled from the water so they could better examine it. It did look a lot more normal than it had before breakfast. He told her: “Standing seems to be what made it swell. I think I’ll give it a little longer and then we’ll set out again.”

She wanted to tell him that they should wait—maybe spend the day resting, but she knew they couldn’t. “Where to today?”

His usual optimism was being stretched thin, she could tell, “We follow the river. It’ll eventually take us to a town—Paschil. We can go back on my original plan and go from town to town from there.”

His “eventually” worried her. “How far?”

“I don’t remember exactly,” he said quickly, his eyes fixed on the pool in front of him.

She heard what he said...and the “further than seven days” that it implied. “Let me know when you feel up to moving,” she said in monotone. “I’ll make sure the packs are ready and the waterskins are where we can get to them if we need to leave the river.”



The black vykati was curled up on his bed, sleeping a little like a dog. Not many of his race slept like that, and even he avoided it in most cases, but the amount of time he’d spent in human form the day previous had put a lot of strain on his back. Sleeping like that helped stretch the muscles out again. Looking at the sunlight pouring in from the window, Farnsbeck noted that it was a little later than when he usually woke. He better get ready before his breakfast arrived.

The room he was staying in was plain and unadorned but very clean. Crimson carpet covered the floor. There was just enough room for a bed, a nightstand and a chair. He’d wanted to stay at a more expensive place, but guilt overrode his pride. Benayle had given up his own money for this, and the least he could do was find a decent hotel at a fair price in order to conserve that money.

The vykati dressed quickly but decided to wait a bit before putting on his mask. His back would appreciate it.

It wasn’t a very long time, unfortunately, before a polite knock came to his door. “A moment,” he said just loudly enough to be heard. The mask was out of his pocket and on his face by the time he finished speaking.

Farnsbeck opened the door to allow a short Rhidayan native to push a small breakfast cart into the room. The cart held a small covered serving tray, utensils, a napkin, and a large glass of orange juice. “Sounded like you woke a little hoarse,” the server said congenially. “Doing okay this morning, sir?” The cart was placed before the only chair.

The faux human made a point of clearing his throat. “Yes,” he said roughly, “I awoke a little dry in the mouth this morning.”

“Would you like more orange juice, then?” the server offered helpfully.

“No thank you,” Farnsbeck said flatly as he handed the man a single gold coin.

The server took the money gratefully and started to exit the room. He stopped with the door open and reached down to pick up a newspaper that was just outside. “Oh, I must have missed it when I was on my way in,” he said cheerfully. “Here’s your paper sir.”

Farnsbeck gratefully accepted the proffered news and thanked the server as the door closed. Now that he was alone, the mask came off and the agent returned to his natural form.

He sat on the room’s only chair and carefully tucked the napkin into his shirt. The meal consisted of oat cakes, eggs with potatoes, and a bowl of fresh strawberries and kiwis. No meat. But the orange juice was very freshly squeezed and the strawberries were perfectly ripe.

Refreshed and cheerful, the vykati opened up the paper and started thumbing through the pages quickly—only looking at the top outside corners. Ah, there it was, written in block letters above the page number: the words, “and again.” All the way on page 14? Why so late? *Oh well*, he thought casually, *more time to relax. Maybe there’s time to get in a matinee.*



In his younger years, Benayle had been a somewhat devoted follower of Kunterik, the Aspect of ferocity. Devoted meant that he prayed when he remembered—most especially when he needed something. During that time, there’d been a few of what he liked to think of as “convincing arguments” regarding the existence of a higher Power. Because of those small reassurances, his faith hadn’t wavered nearly as much as his devotion.

As he grew older he found himself in need less and less often and as that happened, he prayed more and more infrequently. Eventually, he stopped altogether. He still attended services at the cathedral and maintained a good friendship with one of the priests there. When he needed comfort or advice, he’d turn to Father Lamarr. That’s exactly what he had tried to do today. The priest wasn’t there, but the initiate at the door was more than happy to find the priest’s daughter. Perhaps a little too happy.

They were sitting in the nave of the cathedral while they talked. It wasn’t the most private place, but it was quiet. Light drifted in from the tinted windows behind the dais. It made Westa’s fur look more gold than brown. It probably did the same to his.

They talked for a bit before he brought up his worries about Sajani and Rhidayar. When he was done, Westa gave him a very honest look of confusion, “This is the second time you’ve asked my advice and it makes me wonder...Do you really understand how you get answers from the Divine?”

There was a good fifty-year age difference between them, so even though it was said in a kind tone and didn’t show a trace of arrogance, he almost found her response belligerent. “I thought that was your job.”

“Well, that *does* answer my question,” she laughed.

“How does it?” he asked innocently.

The priestess stopped laughing and regained some composure. “There are times when a vision is granted and things are revealed directly, but that’s not often. It’s never happened to me and I wouldn’t be surprised if it hasn’t happened to any the clergy that work here. There are spells that can mimic a vision and even give accurate information, but those are well beyond me and of course, not even available to you.”

He let her continue.

“For the rest of the time, you have to listen very carefully to what your heart and marrow are telling you *and*,” she added, “you have to know something about what you’re asking.”

Benayle could tell that someday this acolyte would make a fine priest. For now, he had to admit, he did find her lecture kind of annoying. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’d have to have some knowledge on tactics and military matters to hear an answer to your question. The Aspects don’t just hand down a scroll that says, ‘here’s your answer,’ but They will search what you know and help you find the answer you need. They’ll also let you know when something is the correct answer.”

The leader suppressed his annoyance by admitting that she was right. At the very least it made sense. “So there’s not a very good chance They can even tell you what I need to know, since you know very little about what can be done?”

“There’d be little better chance with my father of course, but really this sounds like something you need to decide on alone. We’re happy to give advice on things like forgiveness or some social problems. There are priests here that have studied war and tactics and the answer can probably come to them...”

Benayle nodded, “...but I don’t know them. I have no way of trusting them.”

Westa nodded.



Even with Gregor’s foot feeling better, it was still slow going. Now when they’d stop to rest, he’d put his foot in the cold water. She was still supporting him, but he had been able to carry his own pack today. They kept to the same walking pattern they had for the previous day.

The further down the river they walked, the wider and shallower it became, although because of how steep the land was here, it still moved quickly. To pass the time, Sajani brought up her earlier idea of making traps and they discussed and debated about that.

Of the five they could remember, four took some kind of twine or thin rope. The rope they had seemed like it might be a little thick, although both admitted it might be worth trying. The fifth trap was the one they thought might be the most hopeful, although it seemed like it would be a lot easier with a sharp object like a knife or Yanebel's ax to make the parts.

"We'd have to rub the sticks together to make a groove, I think," Sajani suggested. The type of trap they were discussing was a freefall trap that was supported by three very carefully placed sticks.

Gregor smiled, "I don't think wood or large rocks are going to be hard to find." Between the trees and the boulders around the river, there was no shortage.

"I guess we can keep an eye open for the right kind of sticks. I wish these trees would drop something the right size to make something more useful..." She wanted to make a kind of sledge, but neither had any idea how. Instead she settled with looking for a proper walking stick. Branches that long and thick enough to support the weight of the male wolf seemed to be an impossibility.

Even if he did have additional support, it'd be better if she was still holding him. He was prone to stumbling and she suspected was hurting much worse than he was admitting.

Both were just starting to consider lunch when Gregor suggested, "The river here is shallow enough. I think we might be able to get across."

It was shallow and very wide there. The water was also white and rushing. "Does it matter if we cross anymore?" Sajani asked. "Aren't we just heading to that one town now?"

Gregor sounded a little discouraged. "It's better if we can find some sign of where to go to get to East Oasis. I hate to mention it..."

"Don't..." Sajani interrupted. "I know what you're thinking, but we don't need to say anything. Hold onto what hope we have."

He nodded weakly. "This looks like a perfect spot," he said pointing to a bit of a rise that made for a natural bridge. The water beyond it was swifter and deeper, since the river narrowed quickly just after the ridge. They started picking their way across. Many of the rocks were slippery and the swiftness of the river didn't help when it came to keeping traction, but with how shallow it was, they were managing.

They were only five or six meters from the opposite shore when Gregor lost his footing. Both went down at the same time, but Sajani fell to the upper side of the ridge and Gregor, the other. She tried to hold onto him, but the water was too forceful, and he slipped away from her. There was a brief attempt to shout his name, but water filled her mouth and burned her lungs.

A little way from her, moving quickly down the river, she could see Gregor. He kept trying to right himself, but the water kept tumbling him. She dropped to all fours and took off running to the near shore turning quickly to try and get near him.

If he hadn't been struggling and trying so hard, the river would have definitely taken him far faster than she could run. At first she thought she would just jump in after him, but quickly realized that, even with a hurt foot, Gregor was a much stronger swimmer than she. "Gregor!" she shouted, hoping to let him know where he could find help. "Can you get closer?"

She heard him say something but couldn't understand it. Running as fast as she could, glad for the extra support that running on all fours gave her, she managed to get a little ahead of him and waded out as far as she dared. His hand was stretched out in her direction and she rose and tried to grab for it, but he was just out of her reach and passed quickly down the river.

Back to the shore she ran and again got just ahead of him. This time, before she got to where she'd intercept him, she took the ankle wrapping from off her neck and when she realized that he would once again be just out of reach, flung it out to him, holding its loop firm in her grip.

The sudden jerk as he managed to grasp it nearly pulled her from her feet, but instead of allowing herself to fall towards him, she grabbed the cloth with both hands and kicked away from the current, knocking herself backwards. It worked and both fell onto the river bank. Her tail hurt from the landing and Gregor fell on top of her legs, but she let out a sigh of relief realizing that they were both free from the water. The male wolf was coughing and sputtering loudly, but she didn't care. She reached down and hugged him tightly. "You're alive!" she cried. "I thought...I thought..."

After a moment, she realized that he was still coughing badly, so she released him and tried slapping him on the back to get some of the water from his lungs. He had just stopped coughing and looked up at her with a grateful smile on his face when she realized: if she was able to hit him on his back... "Your bag..." she gasped.

"You saved me," he said gratefully, "I'd rather have my life than my pack."

Sajani cynical side picked that time to show itself. "Without that food, it might not matter," she told him.