

## Chapter Seven: Running River (Part 2 of 2)

Meeting a third time in the same location really bothered Farnsbeck. It was getting likely that one of them or both had been seen at that alley. He was about to chide his fellow about it but decided there was an even bigger lapse to address. “You couldn’t even switch out that paper? You had to take it and then wait for the server to go into the room?” he sighed deeply. “You’re getting lax, Orange...”

The comment didn’t seem to faze the other agent. “And you spend your time being far too critical. Now calm down, I have some...”

“And what about finding another place to meet? Haven’t we worn this one out yet?” Farnsbeck continued.

The short man rolled his eyes. “Let me do my job, alright? There’s plenty about the workings around here that you don’t know. This is probably the *only* safe place for me to meet you.”

Bahadhra was a good-sized city, so Farnsbeck was very skeptical, but he decided to not say anything.

Orange straightened. “I have their last known location: Lake Whanusah—about ten kilometers out from the city.”

That was promising. Very promising. If he was lucky the two had managed to meet up with... “Are they still there by chance or perhaps close by?”

His associate eyed him suspiciously. “Why’d they do that?”

In his excitement, he’d tipped his hand a little early. He put on a straight face and shrugged, “Sounds like a secluded area. It might be a good place to hide out until things calm down.”

“I do know they’re moving,” Orange said hopefully.

“Where?”

The fellow agent looked a little down about the answer, “I have no idea.”

*Then what’s the point*, Farnsbeck wondered? “What *do* you know?”

“For now,” Orange supplied straightly, “not much, but I do have a contact on the inside...”

“That won’t help me now,” Farnsbeck said testily, “I need to get to that lake.”



“Gregor’s face was stoic...and drenched. “We’ll...we can do this.” He was still catching his breath. “We’ll have to cut back on how much we eat, but...”

Sajani started crying again. The relief of Gregor being alive was replaced by the fear that they might not live to properly enjoy that.

Her friend quietly rose to his feet, briefly placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and then starting hobbling down the riverbank. He was about ten meters away when Sajani figured out that he wasn’t stopping.

“Are you crazy?” she yelled after him. “What good will it do?”

He didn't answer, he just kept walking.

"We should just conserve our energy. Maybe we can make the food last long enough for someone to find us." What was he doing? He'd just barely been saved from drowning...

"When you find someone, let me know. I'll be going down the river." His voice was confident and sure.

How could he be that way after all that'd just transpired? How could he possibly think that they...

She gasped when she saw him stumble. She tightened her pack and ran quickly up to him. He'd regained his balance and continued before she got there. Stepping into his stride, she put her arm out to support him, which he gratefully accepted. "You're crazy, you know," she told him, "We should be settling somewhere to set traps and gather what food we can. There's only enough for three more days. It's at least seven to East Oasis."

"And yet," he said smiling slightly, "you're here walking with me."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Don't read too much into that. The Aspects watch over small children, widows, and fools. I'm hedging my bets on that."

His grin got wider, "And which one are you?"

"I'd smack you upside the head, but you're already hurt enough," she said tartly. Things were worse now than they had been just two days ago when she was trying to cheer *him* up. "What's got you so hopeful? Did you hit your head...Let me check your eyes again. I want to make sure you don't have a concussion."

He dutifully stopped and let her examine his eyes. Both pupils were still matching.

"Heat stroke maybe?" she asked.

That got a good chuckle from him. "Believe me. I just drank enough water to last me a couple days, even at this temperature."

So calm and peaceful in the face of certain death from starvation. How was it even possible? It didn't hurt to ask. "Why so calm? How can you be so sure of yourself?"

There was a long pause.

*If I can fake being upbeat, he sure can,* she thought to herself. *It has to be an act. But he walked on his own...he didn't try to talk to me. He didn't even say anything...*

"I suppose," he was saying slowly, "it comes down to two things." He stumbled badly when he said it and it took a while to get him back balanced and walking again. For a moment it looked like he'd forgotten what he was about to say.

"What two things?" she prompted. It was a serious question. Normally Gregor was so transparent that even when he was just trying to keep her from being discouraged, she could see through it. This was different.

"Well," he said carefully. "To start with, I'm alive..."

She was very grateful for that. The panic she felt when she realized that she might end up out here alone was horrific, but still not as bad as how worried she was that she might lose him.

Continuing, he said, “and, like I mentioned earlier, you’re still walking with me.”

That wasn’t quite enough to get her spirits up as much as his, but once she stopped and thought about, she was very glad he was alive and that she was still walking with him. It made their hopeless journey a little more bearable.



The two most important things to do, Benayle noted as he entered his office, was lock the door behind him and *definitely* not sit on his office chair. As he knelt on the floor, he noticed that perhaps it was time to have the carpet cleaned. He was pretty sure it was a lighter shade of brown than what was showing now.

*Great, he thought to himself, I’m so out of practice, I can’t even stay focused while I kneel.*

For a brief moment, he was afraid to pray aloud, but that quickly passed. He’d never cared what others thought before and he wasn’t about to start now.

“Kunterik be with us as we fight for what we love.  
Place Your Spirit within our hearts.  
Give us strength to fight the battle.  
Grant us endurance to survive to the conflict’s end.  
And may we only know peace, when the fight is done.”

Well that got him started at least. He still had it memorized from decades ago. And now what? All those years before when he prayed he just asked his question or said what he wanted. There was no special way to say it.

It worked then. It’d work now. “Tell me how to prevent this war that threatens Vharkylia.” He waited for an answer, but none came. He didn’t give up though. He stayed there on his knees in the middle of his office and waited some more. The light from behind the curtains eventually dimmed and his office became dark. Turning on the light was *not* an option. He’d wait as long as it took. There was no way he was standing until his nation’s future was safe.

Eventually, he fell asleep.



They did have to stop a lot—more than they had before the river accident—so travel was very slow. Sajani found it hard to talk about anything, afraid that her sour mood might show itself too strongly. Since he was usually out of breath, Gregor didn’t say much after that first bit. They’d somehow managed to walk through lunch and were almost to a point where they’d have

to stop for dinner when her companion looked up and squinted into the distance. She'd been concentrating so much on helping him keep his footing that she didn't notice until he said simply, "Huh."

The act of moving forward took up almost all her consciousness this late in the day so all she managed was a monotone question. "What?"

In response he pointed down the river.

She squinted into the heat trying to see what he was talking about. When she did see it, she immediately dismissed it as a mirage. With a flippant tone to her voice she said, "Just a mirage, I'm sure."

"Don't you think," he asked, "it's a little odd we're seeing the same thing?" There was a brief pause before he added, "Provided we're both seeing a bridge over the river."

Her cynicism was obvious as she said, "Probably just a trick of the horizon."

"Could be right," he agreed glumly.

When he said that, she immediately felt bad for discouraging him. Sure, it probably was just a trick on the eyes, but she could have allowed him a little hope before reality caught up.

But as they continued forward, the image didn't change. A little further and it became obvious that it really was a bridge. They could clearly see the lattice supports on either side and in the middle and a plain railing spanning across it. Since they were slightly above, they could even see that there was a dirt path running across it and a sign to one side.

They continued forward in silence, not daring to speak—both afraid that words would be more than enough to dispel the illusion and they'd be back walking along their hopeless trek. The bridge didn't disappear. It became more and more clear and their hopes rose. Silence prevailed until they were nearly under it and then Gregor burst out laughing.

The sudden noise did nothing to frighten away the bridge, although it did startle the copper wolf. Her senses were clouded, and it took a moment to notice that her companion was pointing as he laughed. Following his direction, her eyes rested on the cause of his mirth—it was his pack, sitting soggy and triumphant, wedged between part of the bridge's trellis. It was even closed with his blanket still attached. Relief washed over her and she found herself laughing as well. She helped him pull it from the wooden supports and then they carefully climbed up to the side of the road to rest. Somehow, they'd managed. Somehow, they'd passed through the impossible and were in a position to allow hope.

And if the discovery of the badly soaked pack wasn't enough, there was the sign next to the bridge which clearly read, "East Oasis 180km."

"Oh, it's ya Cyan." Blade started to rise slowly from the seat in front of his small cabin. The sod above it was charred and the whole place smelled of burned wood. "I thought ya were still working up in Zenache."

Farnsbeck removed his mask and walked right up to the old wolf, gripping him in a bear hug. “Ya old dog! I missed you! I’m down here on business.” He’d changed into some more appropriate clothes for travelling, leaving his suit and tie with Orange, who reluctantly agreed to see them donated to a needy vykati. Still in his customary black, he was wearing shorts, a button up shirt, and a broad-rimmed hat. The hat fell off when he changed to his real form.

The old wolf smiled a broad smile and returned the hug. They touched cheeks briefly and then separated. “Business huh? I bet you’re here looking for something akin to copper?”

Farnsbeck had been about to ask the old trapper how long he’d been stationed there but stopped short. “You could say that. There’s not much profit in gold right now. Any leads on where to prospect?” Why were they bothering with a cant when there was no one else to hear them? *Blade must be worried about something.* The charred roof wasn’t the only thing that was off. Farnsbeck’s glance moved over to a set of small mounds barely visible from where he was standing. Before his friend could answer his first question, he quickly asked, “Got a few new roses blooming?”

“Aye, the neighbors seem to like them. Planted them about a week ago, about the same time I heard rumor of a vein of copper straight down the mountainside, over near East Oasis. The neighbors that saw the roses weren’t interested, but they have lots of friends that are.”

A week ahead and lots pursuing? That was all the younger wolf needed to hear. Hiding his nature and skills suddenly became unimportant. With a wave of his hand a horse made of shadow appeared next to him. He jumped atop of it and reigned it towards the other side of the mountain.

“Ya trying to give yourself away? The neighbors’ll see you.” Blade warned.

“Then you’ll have to plant them some roses.” He kicked the sides of his summoned steed and rode quickly up the hill.

The first order of business was inspecting Gregor’s pack. The news wasn’t bad, but not really good either. The time in the water had almost completely rehydrated the fruit, but the meat was mostly unaffected. Of course, it all tasted like river water now, but that could have been worse—it could have soaked in still water instead of moving water.

They took some time to wring out the storage bags and tried to arrange things between the two packs to allow things to dry as much as possible.

“Looks like we’ll be eating fruit for the next couple days,” Gregor said stiffly. “No way to get it completely dry again.”

Dinner was cherries. Fortunately, the ones left were completely without pits. Sajani carefully checked each one before eating it. When she was done she rewarded herself with a couple of rehydrated peaches. Even with the slightly algae flavored river water as a background flavor, eating the softened

fruit was better than chewing on the normal dehydrated variety—or maybe it was just enough of a change to be welcome, she wasn't sure.

"If the river wasn't still running so fast through here," Gregor volunteered, "I'd suggest we get cleaned up before starting on the road."

Sajani felt a little heat around her nose and mouth. "Not a really private place to clean up anyway."

Gregor laughed. "We can go a little down the river and see if it's any better. Maybe it narrows a little and tapers off."

The copper wolf shrugged. The day had been a whirlwind of emotions and she was ready for it to end. *A bath might be nice*, she thought. *I shouldn't discourage him by being so apathetic.* "Okay. You feel up to walking any further?"

His foot was still pretty swollen, but he smiled when he said, "If you can keep helping me, I can keep walking."

They each took their packs and she put her arm around him to steady him. As they started to walk Gregor said quickly, "I'll be honest, I'll miss this when my foot is better."

His comment made her face go warm. "Shush you. Don't read anything into it. I'm just helping out my friend."

"You're a good friend," he said sincerely. "There's no way I could survive without you."

That made Sajani laugh. Did he really not see it? The discussion he'd had with her days before came back to her and she realized: no, he didn't see it. He was concentrating so hard on being right, that he didn't see he was wrong. "Still so focused on everything happening because I'm here?" she asked.

"Well," he started, "The pack..."

"Would've been there whether I managed to save you or not," she finished. "And if I couldn't save you, I wouldn't need it."

The male didn't answer.

"But then," she said sadly, "I'd be alone..." A way to misinterpret what she was saying occurred to her so she added, "Not like that's the reason I ran after you and tried to save you. I wasn't thinking about being alone. I was worried about losing my friend."

An awkward silence fell between them.

She continued, "You don't need me..."

"There's no way I could survive out here alone..." he started.

"Let me finish..." she said testily. "You don't need me anymore than I need you. Forget about the Aspects trying to force some sort of crazy destiny on us! Life doesn't work like that. If it did, I'd still have a mother. You want to believe that I'm someone important and you attribute every good thing that happens to us to that. Maybe you should start looking at it the other direction. Maybe I came to that school because *you* needed me to be able to escape. Maybe you're the one that's important." *You're important to me*, she

thought, although she couldn't bring herself to say it aloud. There was more awkward silence, but she was glad that she'd let that out.

After a long moment, Gregor said hesitantly, "I suppose..." he began, "...it could be that both of us are important. I'd have an easier time believing that than believing that everything is happening solely to allow a slave to go home."

Sajani made a mental note to make sure his servitude was paid off when they got back. Not that she felt like she owed the school anything, because she didn't. She wanted to make sure her friend's conscience was clear and that he could finally start thinking of himself as an honorable person, since that's how she saw him. He would get what he deserved when they got home, as would she. He would grow up to be a great person and she'd...she'd spend her time in jail.

Gregor speaking brought her out of her focused state. "Sajani?" he asked.

"Oh," she said suddenly, "Sorry. I was just thinking about how much I look forward to spending some time in jail when I get home."

"You'll see," her friend encouraged, "Mr. Benayle will have pardoned you and we'll be able to..."

"I honestly hope he doesn't," she interjected. "I'm not innocent. I really did those things and some they didn't convict me of, I'm sure. I'll pay that debt." A change of topic seemed in order. "How are you holding up? Do we need to rest?"

"I'm fine," he assured her, "but that guilt you're carrying looks like it's hurting you."

"Of course I'm carrying guilt," she said sarcastically. "I just told you: I'm guilty. I really did those things."

"I've forgiven you," he said humbly. "Doesn't that mean anything?"

She couldn't think of any way to answer that. There was no way to tell him how much it meant to her. But that didn't absolve her of guilt.

"And that pardon would mean that Mr. Benayle forgave you. Doesn't that mean anything?" he pressed.

That was all it meant: that he forgave her. It didn't do anything to make things right to the people she'd hurt.

Looking around her, she noticed that the river had calmed substantially. It'd gone narrow and deep and the land was more level than it had been in days. The bridge was still visible, but only just barely. "This looks like a good place to rest and soak your foot some more," she told him.

A sympathetic nod was all she got as a response. She helped him over to a rock where he could sit while he kept his foot in the water. Once he was settled she said, "There's plenty of time before night. Relax and then we'll worry about getting cleaned up and finding a place to sleep."



Benayle awoke outside his office, sitting on a leather sofa. It must have been something that Farnsbeck added, because he didn't remember it. The secretary's desk there was neat and orderly, with two small stacks of paper in

the upper corner. The fact that someone was behind it came as a complete surprise. The brown female vykati was dressed in a smart business suit with a soft blue shirt and a black shoestring tie.

“Ah, Mr. Ramisa,” the lady said. Like his previous secretary, she spoke with a slow Riteyai drawl. “I’m glad to see you awake. The National Alpha has been very anxious to meet with you.”

Confusion clouded his mind. Had the Council and Lords managed to replace him? Why else would he be outside his office with a strange secretary standing watch over the door? His inaction during the rising troubles must have been too much for some. He settled with the concept as quickly as he could. It had to have been a very quick change of leadership, but the nature of his people meant that could and did happen.

He was out a job. A lot of it, he wouldn’t miss, but he worried much about a sudden change of leadership in the middle of what was quickly developing into a national crisis.

The secretary interrupted his self-pity. “I don’t suggest keeping him waiting Mr. Ramisa. He’s *not* a patient wolf.”

He stepped through the door and into what had been his office. Nothing was changed. The letter he’d been drafting before he went to the cathedral was still on his desk. He could read the first part of it from where he was standing. There wouldn’t have been time to change much.

From the far corner, a huge vykati stepped from the shadows. He stood at least a full meter taller than the former Alpha and his body was covered with golden tan fur. There was a set of four long streaks of bright red fur on his right flank, looking like the slash of a huge creature. He had to be a feral vykati, because no civilized one would wear a loin cloth.

The new Alpha spoke gutturally and showed a mouthful of sharp teeth. “Why are you afraid?” The question was followed by a growl. “You reek of fear.”

It seemed like a silly question. Benayle couldn’t think of anyone that wouldn’t be at least intimidated by such a large and vicious looking wolf.

Carefully sizing up the situation, he decided honesty was the best approach. “Yes, I *am* afraid.” He managed to say it in his normal voice.

The other wolf’s fur bristled, and he growled again.

Benayle continued, “but I don’t allow that fear to control me.”

The large vykati let out a vicious howl. He brought his nose close the old wolf and sniffed deeply. As he pulled away, he growled again. “You’ve gone soft. You speak from both sides of your mouth.” Another howl came from the feral vykati and then he shouted, “Answer my question!”

The former leader nearly caved but managed to stand firm. “I’m afraid my country will fall. I fear the hearts of our people will fail. You are, I’ll admit, a very fearful visage, and that’s probably why you replaced me. I fear you.”

The new Alpha lowered his head until it was right in his face and growled, then spoke each word softly and forcefully. “More double talk? That is *what* you fear, not *why* you fear.”

The answer came to him. It wasn't culturally common to ask the question like that. Usually it was hard enough to get a vykati to admit fear. Honesty had gotten him this far. He spoke confidently. “I fear because there doesn't seem to be a way to save this country. I fear because I can't see a way to avert this war. I fear because I wasn't strong enough to lead our people through a trying time.”

A smile crossed the feral wolf's face and it was terrifying. “Yes,” he said. There was an anger to his harsh and pitiless voice. “Yes. It will take real courage to avert this war. In the end Vharkylia would still stand, but it will have lost much.”

So his replacement thought the same way he did? Where had they even found such a wolf? “Then we are of one mind,” Benayle said in a very relieved voice.

His answer angered the other vykati, “Do *not* suppose,” he growled, “that I want this solution. It goes against all that I am. I want to fight. I want to kill!”

“It's what we are,” Benayle said sadly, “It's both a strength and a weakness.”

A growled shout echoed through the office. “There is no weakness in me!”

The former leader had no doubt that statement was true on many levels.

“And that is why,” the huge wolf quieted and continued, “you must do this for me.” The statement ended with another growl.

“I can't,” the old wolf said sadly, “You're now leading this country. My own people have turned me away.”

“You're wrong,” the large vykati answered, a low rumble to his voice, “We both lead this country. Once, I alone led, but no longer. You showed our people that we can both lead.”

It all made sense suddenly. It was something he should have seen much sooner and would have, if he hadn't been so self-absorbed. For all those times they'd walked together, for all those times the Great Wolf had come to his aid... Though Benayle had never before seen Him, there was a time when they were rarely apart. “You are Kunterik,” Benayle said plainly looking the huge vykati in the eye, “I *know* you.”

The Feral Vykati howled loudly but returned to a normal volume and said almost sadly, “I am that part of Ahj, yes.”

One does not bow before the Aspect of Ferocity. Benayle straightened. “How will we get our people through this?” There was now confidence to his voice. The fear dissipated. He might not see the path, but with Kunterik to guide him, he'd walk it blindly if necessary.

The Wolf growled, “I told you, I cannot do what must be done. It is not my nature. You must have the courage to do it for me.”

“And what’s that?” He was sure that his courage wouldn’t fail him as long as he was doing what was right.

“Nothing,” the Vykati let out a howl that resonated with agony and frustration.

That had gotten him this far, but Benayle had no idea how much longer that’d work. “Eventually, I’ll have to tell the Lords and Council the truth. When that happens, I don’t see how their reaction will be any different than if I told them now.”

“You doubt *me*?” the other wolf howled.

Never. “I trust you,” the Alpha said honestly. “I don’t trust the Council and Lords. I can only walk blindly so far. Eventually I’ll have to see the path you want me to follow.”

His response brought a frightening smile to the Aspect’s face. His voice calmed and for a moment there seemed to be a touch of mercy to what was said. “You will know the path when you get to it, but for now, you must do and say nothing.” The smile remained but a fierceness entered Kunterik’s eyes and they began to glow an otherworldly blue. His next words grew gradually louder. “There will quickly come a time when you will have to fight and claw and bite and tear and shred...in order to keep doing *nothing*.” What was said echoed forcefully through his head.

He understood. With those final words, the Aspect was spirited away as if on the wind—the glow of His eyes remaining for a few seconds afterward.

Benayle found himself kneeling on the floor of his office, alone and resolved.



A single word was echoing through her head and it made so sense. The word was “nothing” and Sajani awoke to a feeling of complete loneliness. She looked over her shoulder to where Gregor had been sleeping and saw that his blanket was still there, but he wasn’t. She could feel panic rising. *Where is he?* she thought tightly. *Why would he leave me alone like this? He knows...*

She was so nervous and desperate that she didn’t even bother looking around to find him. She started shouting, “Gregor! Don’t leave me alone! Where are...”

His voice came from not very far away. He was speaking slightly louder so that she could hear him, and his tone was kind and reassuring. “I’m by the river. I woke up and thought that maybe it’d be good if I soaked my foot a little during the night.”

The panic subsided, and she found herself drifting back off to sleep.