

A Ship Called Hope Part I: Fugitive's Trust

Chapter 10: Oasis (Part 1 of 2)

The sign read “East Oasis 100 kilometers.” It was about the middle of their nightly walk and, it was very encouraging. “We might get there tomorrow,” Gregor said excitedly. “I’m almost anxious enough to walk all day. We’d get there before it got dark again.”

Sajani sighed. “I’ll need a rest I’m sure. I’m glad it means only one day in the open. Since we’re ahead of schedule, maybe we should stop early to dig our holes.” The last time this had been discussed, she was very firmly in the “two holes” camp. Gregor was positive that working together they could dig a big enough hole for both.

Her friend smiled at her. “Are we debating that again?” he asked.

“No, we’re not,” she said firmly. “It’s moving the exact same amount of sand either way.”

“I was hoping we could get some kind of snergee by working together.” It was the first time he’d used that word in his argument—the first time she’d even heard it.

“Snergee?” she asked.

“You know. Two pieces of wood can hold more weight than the total of the same wood holding weight separately.”

Sajani rolled her eyes. “Synergy,” she corrected.

Gregor seemed excited to know that. “Is that how you say it? I’ve only ever seen it written before.”

That made Sajani wonder a little about how her friend had managed to learn anything. “You seem to have learned a lot on your own. Did you borrow textbooks, or is it all from the newspapers?”

Gregor beamed at her compliment. “I learned about Vharkylia from the newspapers Manfred brought me. There’s all kinds of neat stuff: laws and procedures, criminal investigations, agriculture, social functions, traditions...”

“And the rest was from textbooks?” Sajani asked.

Her friend nodded, “And from the books that occasionally made it into the lost and found.”

The copper wolf smiled. “I never really read the newspaper. My father stopped getting it shortly after...”

What Gregor said next surprised her, “I don’t blame him.”

There was a stunned silence while Sajani assimilated what he’d said. “Why?” she finally managed. “Not that I’m questioning your opinion,” she added quickly, “but what difference would it make to you if he read the paper?”

Gregor's eyes turned down and his ears soon followed. "I've only had the paper for the last year or so, but I've never seen one that didn't call for war. There're still many that want to attack Rhidayar and they..."

She could tell what he wanted to say was painful, but she wasn't sure if it was painful for him or for her. After a few moments she almost whispered, "What do they do?"

There was frustration in her friend's voice as he said, "I can see why your father wouldn't want to read it. I understand..."

Sajani gave him time to gather his thoughts.

"...they call for war to avenge your mother. They want to go to war in her name."

The mother that'd raised her was a warrior—someone that faced her own fears when her country asked it of her. But the mother that raised her was also a kind person—someone that loved her daughter and showed that love freely and often. What *would* her mother think of a war in her name?

She'd spent the last few years of her life living like she was the daughter of a national hero. What it meant to *be* that daughter wasn't something she'd considered. What would her mother want? More specifically, what would her mother expect of her? *Adida is your mother's name. If you take that away...Do you know who you are?*

"Sajani?" Gregor asked. He sounded worried. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. It's always bothered me and I just assumed that you'd understand..."

The copper wolf gently patted her friend on the shoulder a few times. In a voice that was detached and distant she said, "I don't know what my mother would want of *me*, let alone my country."



The argument on how many holes they'd dig wasn't settled the way Sajani wanted it. She'd managed to get Gregor to agree to separate holes, but after she'd only gone down about ten centimeters, she hit rock. The next two attempts met the same fate.

When she went over to see how Gregor was doing, he'd already expanded his to be about one by three meters. There was nothing but soft sand where he was at. After about an hour of work she was ready to believe her friend's synergy argument (or *snergee* as they now called it.) The hole only went down a little less than a meter or so, but it was enough to keep the sun off them for most of the day. They placed their blankets over it and weighed down the windward side with rocks—most of them from Sajani's prior attempts to dig.

The hole was spacious enough. Once she was inside, Sajani realized that she felt a lot safer with Gregor there than she would have in separate holes. Claustrophobia maybe? Another reason to never be a sailor. They sat opposite of each other with their backs to the smaller walls and talked for a little bit, but both were obviously tired. Gregor fell asleep midsentence and Sajani fell asleep so quickly afterwards, that she didn't notice.



Sajani awoke feeling a little like she had a fever. She was sweating heavily. For a moment she was worried that she'd gotten sick, but after only a moment's thought, she realized the place where she'd been sleeping was very warm. And smelly. Hopefully there'd be a way to get a bath at East Oasis.

Gregor was still sleeping, leaning up against the far side of the pit they'd made. The blankets were still over them and that was probably why it seemed a little warm, trapping the heat in there. She decided to pull the blankets down. It looked like it was late enough in the afternoon that they'd still be in the shade. What she didn't remember, was how they were being held in place.

Her friend awoke with a start when three good sized rocks fell down on him. "Ah! What?" he exclaimed. Looking over at her, in true Gregor fashion he asked loudly. "What'd I do? Whatever it was, I'm sorry. I promise it won't..."

Sajani looked at him with quiet admiration and endearment. "I didn't remember they were up there. I'm the one that's sorry."

He smiled at her and laughed. She felt forgiven yet again. "Did you want to get an early start today?" he asked her. "I'm really excited to finally get there."

"I am looking forward to a bath," she told him, "but I think we'll be better off waiting for it to cool a little more." She pulled a waterskin from her pack, took a long drink and handed it to Gregor. Like she'd predicted a few days earlier, the water was starting to taste a little like waxed leather. It was also very warm and didn't really quench her thirst.

He nodded his agreement as he took a small drink, turned down his mouth slightly and stuck out his tongue. "Ug," he said under his breath.

"Better drink as much as you can stand anyway," she advised. She realized that she was still worrying over him like she had when he was hurt and made a mental note to realign her thinking now that he was healed.

Her companion put the waterskin to his mouth again and took a long drink, frowning the whole time. "Well," he asked, "what should we do to pass the time? Up for a game of 'yes and no?'"



Farnsbeck awoke to his pit mate gasping for air. She'd risen and was clamoring out of the hole. "Ack!" she complained. "I can't handle the smell anymore. It was bad enough when it was just you, but now I'm starting to reek too!" With her feet just barely in the hole, she lay with her arms at her side and taking deep breaths. A slight breeze was catching her long black hair and making it frizzy. "Give me your spoon," she ordered.

Her partner didn't move. "We'll need that water for drinking," he insisted.

She dropped back into the hole and reached for him, “If you can’t breathe, water doesn’t matter. Give me that spoon or I’ll take it right from you pocket.” There was a very serious look on her face.

He put his hands up in defense, but that was a mistake. She was too fast for him. “Aha!” she said victoriously, holding the spoon up. She had a dagger in the other hand. Where the weapon had come from, he didn’t want to know.

Looking down at his trousers, he could see a small hole near the base of his pocket. “We don’t even know if it makes enough water for both of us. Give that back!”

She ignored him, put the dagger back wherever it’d come from, and tapped the spoon so that water started coming out. There wasn’t much, but it was enough to wet her skin and allow her to rub it clean. She washed under her arms and rubbed her face clean. Next she got her arms and feet. The last thing she did before tapping it off again was run it on the inside from the top of her choli through the bottom.

Farnsbeck realized he probably should have stopped her, but he found it amusing, so let her go. When she was done he smiled at her and said, “Finished? I’m not sure I want to drink from it now.”

She shook her head once and said in a very serious tone, “Oh no plush fur. We aren’t done yet. You’re next.” The spoon was held out for him to take it. Just as he was about to grasp it, she pulled it away from him. “You need to promise me you’ll use it to clean up.”

He rolled his eyes at her and threw his hands up in the air. “I’m not about to waste water.”

“If you’re not going to clean yourself, I’m going to do it for you and we both know which will waste more water,” she said insistently.

“Fine,” he said in desperation. “I promise I’ll use it to get cleaned.” He was surprised she believed him.

He grabbed the spoon. “And you said I was too trusting,” he smirked. The spoon was put right back in his pocket. Too late, he realized that was a mistake.

This time he didn’t even see her come close enough to grab it, but there it was sitting in her hand. She tapped it and started moving it over his head. He tried to move out of her way, but his back was against the sand and she was stronger and more agile.

If he wasn’t so worried about not having enough water, he might have enjoyed it.



Sajani and Gregor managed four games before both got bored. It was still a little warm but had cooled substantially from when they’d first awoken. They had breakfast and forced themselves to drink more water. It was at least a couple of hours until dusk, but they decided to move anyway.



Farnsbeck took his turn keeping watch while Magenta slept, waking her just as night was falling. It would have been a very long night, but the silver she-wolf insisted on talking most of the time. He stayed silent and listened as she told him things about local history and politics. She tried a few times to get him to talk about his real identity, in the same breath as she refused to reveal any of hers.

It was a clear and pleasant night. The light breeze from earlier in the day continued. The town was just far enough away to allow the stars to be vividly seen and two half-moons were shining brightly. They'd already finished off most of the food—only a few dates were left. He was a little hungry but didn't want to show the spoon again. There were a few times it had to be brought out since what he now thought of as “the spoon incident.” It was too hot to go even a little while without water.

“I still can't believe it. After three years of being stationed here, my cover is blown,” she whined yet again.

“Might not be,” he repeated what he kept telling her, “We don't even know if mine was for sure. We just know someone recognized there were vykati in that apartment. A good cover story and...”

“Damn it Cyan,” she interrupted, “take the hint. I'm going with you, so quit trying to dismiss my excuse.”

Was that what this was all about? He supposed he could be flattered. “I'm not really used to working with others,” he admitted. “But I won't deny that the company will be at least a little appreciated.”

“Oh well, thanks. I guess. Good to know I'm a slight improvement over nobody, plush fur,” she said sarcastically

He really didn't know what to say to that. It wasn't that he was socially clueless, it was just that he didn't want to exaggerate.

The silence was again too much for the she-wolf. “I was so tired of that role. There were just enough agents coming through that I could keep the locals away, but there were more than a few times I had to show my dagger.” She shuddered.

Sometimes it was possible for an agent to pick his own cover, but usually it was very situational. “We do what we have to for the greater good,” he said softly. There were many roles he'd played that he wished he could take back. He started this line of work to protect his family and when that failed he kept going—trying to compensate for that initial failure.

“Oh, don't you get me wrong there, plush fur,” she said staunchly, “I enjoyed some of the attention—from a safe distance. More what bothered me was...” She stopped suddenly and pulled her knees up to her face. The wind began to pick up, and as it did, he noticed that Magenta was holding her ears.

“Are you alright,” he asked. “You look like you're hurting.”

She didn't answer, but after a moment she removed both earrings and looked up at him with a worried expression. “Sand storm.”

Poking his head out of the hole, he looked back in the direction of the city. A huge cloud of dust was heading straight towards them. He didn't blame her for pulling off the earrings. Ducking back into the pit, he suggested. "Maybe we should get closer to the road; if you can't be listening," he was already having to raise his voice to be heard over the wind.

As he finished speaking the cloud of dust came over them. Even down in the hole, the sand stung his face. Some got in his eyes and he was forced to put his hand over them while he tried to blink the dirt out.

He could barely hear Magenta speaking next him, "I can hold it a little further from my ear and not have the sound hurt as much. Hopefully they'll seek shelter instead of trying to go through this."

"Might depend on how close to the city they are," he yelled back "If they think the best shelter is there..." The storm had blocked their light source, making it very difficult for them to see.

The she-wolf nodded and put an earring up near her jaw. Suddenly she began climbing up out of the hole. He heard the rush of flame and saw her jump so that the spell impacted directly in her chest, knocking her back. She removed her mask and shouted out to him. "Sajani is here, but it looks like our friends found out before we did," she shouted. "I'll hold them. You see if you can get the pups to safety." She took a moment to point a direction and then started running towards the source of the spell that had struck her. The dagger was out again.

A small part of him wanted to go with her, but he had a duty to protect the young wolves and bring them home safely. Magenta could usually handle herself. As he started in the direction the she-wolf had provided, a spell came from behind and struck him. Very briefly it froze him in place, but he managed to work through its effect and continue forward. Visibility was low, but not as bad as it could be. The glow from the moons was reflecting off the blowing sand and giving it a fog like quality that allowed him to see about ten meters in any direction. Given that, he was very lucky to see the two young wolves. They'd been walking down the road, all but advertising their presence.

Waving his hands at them, he started to tell them to follow him, but before the words were out, three glowing spheres of arcane energy, came from behind and struck him. He turned in time to see two Jzianrhun women running towards him.

The young male wolf shouted. "Run!" but Farnsbeck didn't have time to see where the two went. The words of the spell were off in an instant and he felt the shadows shift and move. He now stood behind his opponents, who had stopped and were looking around.

Thrusting one hand into the air and whispering some words of power, the area immediately around him exploded with light, knocking one of the two women to her knees. The other put her hands over her eyes and yelled out something in her native language.

When the light vanished, both were stumbling around like they'd been blinded. He followed up his last spell by pointing a finger at the space between the two. Fire flew out from him and burst into a massive ball of flame, enveloping both enemies briefly. When the spell was done, the two assassins lay on the ground unmoving.

"Sajani! Gregor!" he called out in the human dialect of his native language. There was no answer. Looking back towards the city, he could see brief flashes of light through the dust. His best chance of finding his mark was with the help of Magenta. He'd have to help her first.



The two young vykati had seen the dust storm long before it hit but had also just passed a sign that said East Oasis was only 5 kilometers away. They decided their best chance was making it to the town. To stay on target, they took tuns holding still and facing exactly forward, based on where the road had been before it became covered. The other would walk forward as the one in back would direct. Just before the forward wolf would disappear into the storm, the one that stayed back would shout to stop and move up. They repeated that an uncountable number of times when the human showed up in front of them. He had light skin and hair and was dressed all in black. He looked a little familiar, but since most humans looked the same to Sajani, that didn't mean much. It looked like the man was about to say something when three spells struck him from behind.

Gregor had been in the lead. He turned to her and shouted, "Run!" as if she needed to be told. Let the humans fight amongst themselves, the two abandoned their set course and began running randomly to the northwest.

After a short while, they slowed. "What now?" Sajani shouted to be heard over the wind. With East Oasis unsafe, there didn't seem to be many options.

"We'll want to find some shelter," he yelled back, "but we probably want to be someplace where they won't be able to see us from the town when this stops." He started moving again and she followed.

Depression came over the copper wolf. Since leaving Blade, everything was dependent on reaching the small town safely and with that goal now out of reach, there didn't seem to much point of going further. Her familiar cynical voice spoke, *You wanted to know what your mother would expect of you? I can tell you. She wouldn't want you to quit. She didn't surrender when the odds were against her.*

It didn't make her feel any less depressed, but it did increase her desire to keep fighting. "Someone was attacking that human..." she started.

The loss of their goal must have upset Gregor, "Do you think so?" he said angrily. "Thank you for making sure I didn't miss the obvious."

She was tempted to say something insulting back but managed to think better of it. His temper wouldn't last long, she was somewhat sure—hopeful at least. "Is it possible that the man we saw was fighting on our side? He looked like he was trying to say something, not attack."

Her guess about Gregor's temper'd been correct. He calmed noticeably. "You're probably right," he shouted over the howling wind. "But we're not really in a position to risk finding out."

She nodded.

"If he lived," her companion said sadly.