

# *Fugitive's Trust*

## CHAPTER 10: OASIS (PART 2 OF 2)

“I really appreciate this,” Benayle told Ghenis for the fourth time. The older vykati was helping him up on one of his horses—a huge gray charger that the Alpha had been assured was quick, steady, and calm even under fire. The stallion was named for the wolf leader, but there was no way Claw would mention that without prompting. “My followers can be rather persistent. At a guess, they’ll try to take one of your horses.”

The former officer shook his head slowly. “None of these will take well to bareback riding and the tack is in a side shed.” He was hesitant to let someone with such open dislike for horses take one of his best, but while Benayle clearly showed that riding wasn’t a favorite pastime, he also demonstrated a noteworthy amount of knowledge and experience.

Benayle reined the horse to face the older wolf. “You think you can distract them for about five minutes?”

Ghenis laughed. “I don’t need to distract them. They’re not taking one of my horses and you’ll easily outrun them mounted.” He wished that Benayle would tell him something more about what all this was about, but the Alpha had been in too big of a hurry to say much. Given what he’d heard of the wolf leader, it could be nothing more than a strong desire to be alone.

Or it could be something really important. No way to know.

Benayle turned the horse towards the door and gave a light slap of the reins to the sides of the huge animal’s neck while kicking back into the flanks with his feet. The horse responded by taking a few cautious steps to clear the exit and then took off at a full gallop. The tails of the two streaming out gracefully behind them.

Just as they left a dark gray wolf in a brown pants and a somewhat formal looking white collared shirt came from the south entrance and ran up to him. There was no introduction, rather the new wolf pulled a wallet out of his back pocket and showed a gold badge to the aging wolf standing there. “Move away old fellow,” he said indignantly, “I need to commandeer one of these horses.”

Ghenis leaned down heavily on his cane and placed his snout right up to the badge, giving the appearance that he couldn’t see it well. “Hum,” he said with a quacking voice. “What’s this? Not seen anything like that afore. You some sort of officer?”

“I’m with the Ministry of War,” the young wolf said curtly, “I need to follow that wolf!” he pointed after Benayle.

“Ah, hum,” Ghenis said slowly, keeping his voice quaking. “I suppose you can use Ol’ Leadshot.” He motioned to a nearby stall where a blue-gray mare was placidly eating some oats from a trough. “You might be wanting a saddle, though. Those are...”

The impatient bodyguard didn’t bother letting him finish but pushed Claw aside and tried to climb up on the proffered horse. He managed to get on the horse’s back for only a moment before the beast reared and dumped him forcefully on the ground at Claw’s feet.

The army officer didn’t waste any time. There was the sound of chiming metal as he pulled a sword from out of his cane and pointed it down at the fallen wolf’s chest.

“What’re you doing?” the angry protector screamed. “This is official Vharkylia business. You’ll be in so much trouble with the owner here when he finds out...”

Ghenis cleared his throat and in his normal voice said quickly. “First, my young pup, I *am* the owner. Second, if you try to take one of my horses again, you’ll have to answer to my good friend, Adibee Fyss. I’m sure you’ve heard the name before.”

The younger wolf stayed on the ground and frowned. “You’ll cost me my job if I can’t follow after him!”

Ghenis laughed and sheathed his sword, reaching out a hand to help the other wolf up. “Tell you what,” he said amiably as he helped the bodyguard to his feet. “I’ll give you a note to deliver to Drithen. You leave our illustrious leader to his business and pass on my regards to Adibee and in exchange I’ll see that you’re transferred instead of fired.” It wasn’t like Claw wanted to get the pup in trouble, but the comment on his age and social position had been briefly upsetting. From what he’d heard from Adibee, no one would’ve been able to keep up with Benayle, even without the help of a horse and friend.

“I don’t believe you,” the bodyguard said skeptically, “but if there’s even a chance you’re not lying, I’ll take it.”



The current ride was supposed to supply the wolf leader with a much-needed break from the intrigue and masks of his usual daily work, but it wasn’t turning out that way. He became aware of someone following him shortly after leaving the cleared pastures of the ranch.

Whoever or whatever was pursuing Benayle for the last half hour wasn’t on horseback but was still managing to keep up. An irrational

fear came over the wolf leader and he dug his feet into the flanks of his horse. The stallion responded by giving out a snort and a whiny and managing to move just slightly faster than before.

The pursuit responded by running much faster. The cadence of its feet increased and Benayle could hear deep breathing as it closed in on its quarry.

The wolf leader tried to get the horse to move faster still, but the poor creature was already showing signs of tiring. Realizing that he was running out of options, Benayle pulled back hard on the reins, causing the horse to stop suddenly. As he turned his mount to face opposite of where he'd been running, the creature that'd been chasing after him burst through the bushes.

The Alpha tried to laugh but found himself shuddering instead as Kunterik came up beside him and growled.

"Ah," the Aspect said deeply, "That is more as I remember you. You never seemed to be looking for a fight, but you also never shied from one." The Great Wolf rose from all fours and looked down on the brown vykati and his horse. "You still reek of fear though."

Benayle shuddered but managed to look up at the Aspect of Ferocity. "Are there any you meet that don't?" he managed.

Kunterik laughed deeply and smiled in a way that made it possible for the vykati to see every tooth in the giant mouth. "Oh yes," He said and slowly nodded, "but that requires someone to be much dumber than yourself. Some are not smart enough to know they are in danger."

"I trust you," Benayle said, trying to return the smile although he was sure it looked forced. "I don't fear you because I feel like you'd hurt me, I fear you because you *could*."

The Aspect laughed and that caused Benayle's horse to shy away. Kunterik's brow furrowed slightly as He reached out and gently took the horse by the bit. The animal calmed instantly, pulled his head from the Aspect's grip and began munching quietly on some grass. A low rumble of a growl came from the massive Vykat's chest and He looked back to Benayle and quoted. "Ferocity that is not tempered by common sense and mercy serves no purpose other than Destruction, which is not My realm."

The quote Benayle easily recognized as coming from a book considered Holy by the Vykat. He managed a real smile as the Aspect said it. "I've heard those words from you once before," he said calmly. The fear he felt earlier was dissipating.

Kunterik nodded slowly. "The path you are treading is unlike anything we have walked upon before. Even in times of calm and

without a need to fight, your inner fire kept you moving forward. Always ready, you were, to take up ax and charge if you felt threatened.”

It was true. That fire was being squelched now. His people were in danger and hardly a day went by when the fur on his shoulders didn't bristle and his mouth anticipate the taste of blood. “Inaction can only carry me so far,” he said candidly. “War is approaching and there seems to be nothing I can do...”

The Aspect roared, but whatever He'd done earlier allowed the horse to stay calm. The same wasn't true of Benayle. The Voice of a Demigod echoed throughout the jungle and all life within its range fell silent. “You? You will not! You cannot!”

The Alpha was visibly shaken by the outburst. He didn't dare say anything more. Long ago, when Kunterik had spoken to his mind and marrow rather than to him personally, he'd often been interrupted by outbursts similar to this one.

The voice was much quieter when He resumed. “Not alone. You cannot do this alone. Neither can I. Even together, we might not be able to stop this war.” The mighty vykati let out a resounding howl that echoed through the forest.

Again, Benayle was shaken by the noise, but he held his peace. He did wonder however why the Aspect had made his horse immune, but not himself.

Kunterik continued. “You are not alone in your burden. You must say the words and I must help them see. Perhaps then, they will listen.”

“What words?” Benayle asked in frustration. “What can I possibly say that'll prevent them from vengeance? They are wolves! Whatever sin Rhidayar has committed can't be forgiven or overlooked with a simple speech. I can keep them in the dark only so long, eventually all this has to come to light.”

The eyes of the Great Wolf turned to him and there was a sadness within them that Benayle would never have thought possible in one so ferocious. “You must take care of the time and place. When the time to speak comes, you must decide how to act.”

That answer only brought about more frustration. “What will I say? I can't change what we are.”

Still in a state of melancholy calm the Aspect repeated. “You must take care of the time and place. When the time to speak comes, you must decide how to act.”

The wolf leader dropped from his horse and kneeled before his Master. "I trust you. I've never doubted you. Please," he pleaded, "please, tell me what I must say."

"You will know the words when you see them."

See them? Were they to magically appear before him? If it was a simple matter of reading what needed to be said, why not just give it to him now?

The Great Wolf laughed slowly and quietly. It was terrifying. "Another will give you the words. I will give our people the meaning."

Benayle wanted to say more, but at that instant he found himself back up on his horse, the reins in his hand. His mount turned to face him and then looked back ahead expectedly.

There was no one else around them.



Farnsbeck took in the battle before him in an instant. Magenta was fighting off at least five attackers. Three were slashing at her with swords and two were standing back firing crossbows. His partner was badly wounded, with at least three bolts protruding from her legs and torso. It was difficult to see how much other damage there might be through the blowing sand. There was a small comfort: two bodies were at her feet.

He started with a temporary heal on her. It wouldn't last long but it'd give him a chance to use his minor healing to compensate. The spell made a noticeable difference. One of the bolts even dropped off from her torso.

Magenta's dagger was everywhere at once but was mostly blocking the attacks she wasn't able to dodge. "About time!" she shouted without turning to look at him.

His spell caught the attention of the two humans with crossbows and they turned to attack him. The first shot missed, but the second managed to drive itself into his right arm. Those two had to go. The next spell off his lips managed to freeze one of his opponents in place. It was supposed to get both, but apparently one managed to resist.

It didn't matter. Her companion's arrival was just enough of a distraction to allow her to toss her dagger into her left hand and get a set of throwing knives hidden in her belt. A wave of her arm sent all of them at the enemy. Most if not all hit, and the man fell slowly to the sand. The dagger was tossed back into her right hand and she continued parrying as though nothing had happened.

One of the attackers broke away and headed towards him. Before he cast his next spell, he chided her. "Was there poison on those?"

I'm surprised you'd stoop to that level." He looked directly at his attacker and summoned arcane energy. His form shimmered and changed into that of a monstrous many tentacled creature with oozing skin and a mouth full of dagger-like teeth. The creature let out a roar that sent his attacker running. Almost immediately after, he changed back into his human likeness.

"Stoop?" Magenta shouted, sounding very offended. "I'll have you know it not only took a lot of skill to make that poison, putting it on those tiny things wasn't easy."

Farnsbeck stepped over near the she-wolf, hoping that he could distract one of her enemies. It worked. The woman attacking nearest him turned to face him and Magenta took advantage of that to cut her dagger quickly across the enemy's throat.

About that time, the man that'd been frightened managed to find his way back. Farnsbeck pointed a finger at him and spoke a word. Lightning shot from his fingertips and hit the man squarely in the chest. He fell to the ground about the same time as Magenta's opponent.

"Good timing there, plush fur," she said happily as she returned her dagger to its mysterious spot. "But you seem to be missing a couple of things." The temporary heal took that moment to wear off and she nearly collapsed. He reached out to support her and helped lower her to the ground.

A few healing spells later he answered, trying to keep loud enough to be heard over the wind. "I'm afraid I lost them." He explained what happened.

"Oh," Magenta yelled back, "We'll see if they made it to the gate. The guards there'll be busy if they did."

The male wolf nodded. "If not, we'll have to wait until the storm ends to go looking."



The vykati merchant wasn't happy. Three tents destroyed. Two horses and three camels missing and four barrels of water lost during the hurried unloading. Dust storms weren't uncommon, but Farleesha had never lost this much to one before. She was confident they didn't need to turn back, but the expense bothered her. The brown she-wolf was dressed in a tan button-up cotton shirt and shorts. It was an expensive outfit, but the Rhidayan cotton breathed well in the hot air, and the additional cotton stores she was hauling with her would turn a good profit in Vharkylia—once she got it cleaned up and the sand removed.

The wind was howling outside her small tent. Sand and dust came swirling in when one of her workers entered. Alonzo was a slightly built vykati with silver fur. He was dressed similarly to his employer, but his clothes were made from the tougher and wiry cotton of their home country. The male wolf acted as her guide through the desert. He'd made the trip countless times before and was well worth the moderate amount she paid him.

"We have everyone in the tents now, *vhemato*" he told her, "We managed to keep all the people together at least."

While the monetary losses hurt, Farleesha was grateful that none of her people were missing. "Good. There's at least that. Any sign of the missing animals?"

He shook his head. "No, but they usually don't go far. If we wait a little once this lets up, they should return to get food and water."

The merchant nodded once quickly. "I know you've been busy. Have you had a chance to eat?"

A smile was the first part of his reply. "Not yet. There's still some work to be done to secure the tents..."

"It'll wait," Farleesha assured him. She turned to a chest near her and opened it, removing a single bottle. "Here," she offered him the drink. "It's some starfruit juice. There's plenty of bread and cheese in the main tent. If you're that worried about the tents being secured, get Marc to check on them, but if you don't take the time to eat now..." she got stern, "I know you. Get something before you start again."

Alonzo smiled. "I'll get to that right after..."

"No!" Farleesha insisted. "If it's that urgent, tell me what needs to be done and I'll see to it myself. I've already eaten."



The winds were just beginning to die down as the dawn came. Sajani looked out over the desert. Sand. There was lots of sand and that was about all there was to see.



Farnsbeck had used the last of his spells to heal himself and his companion. She'd lost a lot of blood and was in much worse shape than she was letting on. She was having difficulty breathing and her skin was a pale blue. They were sitting back in what was left of the hole they'd dug—about ten centimeters. At least the wind had stopped.

He'd forced her to get her mask back on. They were almost in view of the town and he didn't want to chance someone seeing a

couple of vykati in the sand. She looked up at him and smiled weakly. “Those that live by poison, die by poison,” she said softly.

He wasn’t a medical expert, but he was hoping that she’d pull through. Pulling his spoon from his pocket, he placed it in her mouth and tapped it lightly. She drank for quite a while before stopping.

Dehydrated with the skin showing signs that she was having difficulty getting air... “Do you feel cold at all? Having problems with chills?” he asked.

She shook her head, “Don’t I wish, plush fur.”

“How’s your balance?”

“I didn’t know you studied poisons,” she said, “but since you’re interested, it’s an adder leaf suspension.”

Well that wasn’t good. Without an antidote, there wasn’t much he could do. He didn’t have a spell for that. “Ironic they’d use a poison from a plant in Vharkylia.”

She laughed lightly, “Way of the Rose use it because...” She coughed a few times and didn’t bother finishing.

“Yes, well I’ve never heard of thistle rasp growing this far north.” The plant was rare enough in their home country. There weren’t many options—only one option really. It came down to who stood the best chance of finding the pups.

Magenta’s smile broadened. “You’re a keeper, plush fur. I didn’t know you were so well versed in poisons.” Her coughing resumed. Once she’d regained control, she continued, “Then you know how this story ends.”

She had the best chance of finding their quarry. It’d take a while for him to learn to use her earrings. With those she could stay in human form at night and still be able to see. Her hearing would be far better than his. He remembered the look of desperation on Benayle’s face when he received this assignment. He’d failed his own daughter and son. There was no way he’d allow his current mission to fail. “It doesn’t end,” he told. “You just have to rewrite a little.”

Placing his fingers on her forehead, he began chanting. Magenta realized right away what he was doing and tried to stop him, but the poison had been in her system for too long.

“Damn it, Cyan!” she attempted to shout. “No! I know what your kind does. I know this con. Don’t do it!”

He continued. This particular caper was a dangerous one.

“Stop it!” she kept trying to shout. “You’re doing the wrong trick. It’s not worth it.”

There was no way he'd stop. The best chance at succeeding at this mission rested on her. They were too close to abort now. The shadows gathered around them, coming when he called.

"Please," Magenta pleaded softly, "It's not worth the risk. You heard wrong. This poison isn't fatal. I'll be fine."

The shadows rested over her and briefly melded into her before jumping suddenly into him.

"No!" she screamed, "You shouldn't do this!" Her last statement was made at full volume. Her strength returned.

The poison was now in his body and it hurt. "I haven't lost any blood. I'll be fine. Find Sajani if you can." His voice was weak and strained. How'd she manage to look so strong? He pulled out the spoon and took a long drink. When he finished, he was still very thirsty but knew more water wouldn't help.

She hadn't budged. "Why? Why Cyan?" She swore at him.

As Farnsbeck sat there looking up at his companion, his mind had trouble focusing. Adder leaf made it so the victim felt like he couldn't breathe, so it seemed as though he was drowning. How long had she held out? Why was it so much more effective on him? Looking into Magenta's face he decided that she did look rather pretty in human form. He told her so.

"Great," she swore some more, "Now you're hallucinating."

He handed the spoon to her. "I'll wait here," he said weakly. His vision was going very blurry. It slowly closed around him until all that he could see was her face.

"Like hell you will," she snarled at him.

And that was the last thing he heard before the world grew dark.