

A Ship Called Hope Part 1

What Once was Eden

Chapter 1: Oasis (Part 2 of 2)

Both the young wolves were very tired. Gregor was concerned that if they tried to camp too close to the city, they'd be discovered and Sajani was too worried to argue.

They'd just crested a dune when her companion turned around, took a couple of steps back, and ducked. "Get down!" he told her.

She didn't argue, despite how cranky she was. "What?"

"There's a caravan ahead," he told her. "But I don't know if it's safe for us to go there."

"Do we have much choice?" she asked testily.

He looked down at his hands. "I suppose not, but we should probably check it at least a little."

A quick nod showed her agreement.

The male wolf crawled towards the peak of the dune and looked over. Sajani stayed back and brooded. They had one more day of food. The water was almost all gone. The storm had drained them so much they drank more than usual. It didn't matter if they went into East Oasis or jumped on a caravan, the end result was the same.

Gregor stood watching for a minute or so and then jumped up. "We need to go. They sent out riders." He took off running.

She paused for a moment, unsure of what to do.

"Human riders, Sajani," he said fearfully.

She followed even though it seemed pointless. "Why bother? We can't outrun them."

"Maybe if we can get over the next dune before they get here, they'll figure what they saw was just their imagination." He dropped to all fours, so she did as well.

It was a little easier to run in the sand that way, but it burned her hands.

One of the humans saw them and let out a shrill whistle. They both kept running. At least the enemy would have to work for the reward. It didn't make much difference. The sound of the running horse was right next to her when strong hands reached down and grabbed her by the shirt, pulling her up over the saddle. She couldn't see what happened to Gregor, but guessed he'd been captured as well when she heard the other horse stop suddenly and then follow behind. They'd made good their escape for a long way. If she was lucky, she'd live to try again. It was unlikely that Gregor would get a second chance. The rider was a gruff looking woman in light cotton clothing and wearing a broad leather hat. The copper wolf wanted to struggle, but not only was she very tired, she also was afraid of falling off.

Once the horse stopped, she found enough energy to shout and try to get off the horse. “Put me down you nasty snake!”

The woman laughed, grabbed her by the shirt and shoved her off. Sajani barely managed to keep her feet. Somehow Gregor was already off his horse. The two riders circled them and then rode off.

The caravan looked like it’d seen better days. The tents had taken a beating from the storm. They were all upright, but they were very dusty and worn.

As the riders were leaving Sajani swore after them. It wasn’t normal for her, but it seemed appropriate. Then she glanced over at Gregor. He looked very disappointed and that upset her.

A vykati with silver fur approached them. He was wearing a tan shirt and shorts and was thinner than usual for their kind. He smiled, “Well,” he started, ‘there’s a bit of reward for you two.’

Sajani tried to charge at him with the intent of scratching his eyes out, but Gregor grabbed her quickly and held her back. “We won’t go quietly, pig” She spit at him.

A calm female voice spoke from behind them. “Is this who I saw, Alonzo?”

“It’s the two they were looking for in East Oasis, *vhemato*,” the silver wolf said respectfully.

Once he was done speaking Gregor started laughing. It wasn’t a very loud laugh and he stopped when everyone turned to look at him. At that point he suddenly found his feet very interesting.

“Send them to the tents to get washed up,” the *vhemato* said sternly. “I’ll meet with them when they’re presentable and had a chance to rest.” The vykati woman had brown fur and was wearing tan clothes similar to Alonzo’s only more expensive.

“We won’t take well to being prisoners, I assure you,” Sajani warned.

The other she-wolf laughed. “I don’t take prisoners, especially not vykati pups. You get yourselves cleaned and rested. We’ll talk in the morning.” The merchant turned and walked away.

The wolf named Alonzo called out to a nearby human woman and told her, “Take this one to your tent, Malanda. Get her cleaned up and give her a cot.”

The Rhidian woman looked her once over and got a sympathetic look on her face. “I think we can find some clothes for her too.” She turned to the young she-wolf and asked, “What colors do you like? Red kind of outshines your fur color, I’m thinking of something in a darker color, maybe even black.”

She was about to answer when she overheard Alonzo talking to Gregor. “Come with me honored guest and tell me how you know what *vhemato* means.” The human with the copper wolf rolled her eyes when he said that.

Those two started off and Sajani looked over at Malanda. The worker was dressed like most of the others: in a button-up cotton shirt and shorts. Hers were a dark blue. "Black is fine," she tried to say politely. "And for the record, I didn't pick this color."

The human laughed and pointed to where Gregor was walking. "He did?"

Sajani nodded. "How'd you know?"

"Shy people tend to either pick really dark colors or very bright colors. Not much in-between."

The copper wolf wondered what made the human think Gregor was shy.



The tent was a shared tent. It looked like three women usually stayed there, judging by the cots, and there was plenty of room for a fourth. Malanda showed Sajani a towel, a wooden tub, and a water faucet that came in from outside. The bath area was partitioned off and while not really private, it was better than she'd had in months. Once the kind woman was sure the wolf was situated, she went off to get a cot and some clothes.

At first Sajani was a little panicked by her leaving, but she kept telling herself that there were plenty of other people just outside the tent and that helped keep her mostly calm while she cleaned up.

The water was already warm. She lapped up a long drink while the tub was filling and then set about trying to get clean. Her fur was full of sand and it took a long while to get washed out. Having soap made a difference, but also made it so that it took longer to rinse.

She'd just finished drying off, wrapped the towel around her, and stepped through the partition when Malanda arrived. The human had her arms full carrying a wooden box, which she set down quickly on the dirt floor. She seemed happy to see the she-wolf. "Sorry to take so long," she apologized, "I had to get with Farleesha about the clothes. You're a bit taller than the two other vykati women in the tent, so I wanted to get her advice on sizing and fashion." The woman seemed to like to talk.

"Thank you," Sajani said politely.

"First," Malanda said happily, "Let me give you this." She reached into the box and pulled out a leather satchel.

Sajani opened it to find a very nice grooming kit. Five grades of comb and four brushes of varying coarseness. There were two sets of scissors. The she-wolf had no idea what the difference was. There was also a nice set of claw trimmers and four different files. The kit was obviously new.

"I'll be very careful with it and make sure it's returned in good shape." Sajani promised.

"Oh no," the human told her, "It's from Farleesha. It was part of our stock, but she said you can have it."

"I'll be sure to thank her," Sajani said softly. Her old kit had been expensive, and this was much higher quality.

"And it was really hard to match your fur color, so I went and consulted with Farleesha to see what she thought and to find out what people are wearing in Drtithen this time of year."

Did this woman ever breath or did she just keep talking?

Malanda reached into the box and pulled out some clothes. They were a soft umber color. "If they don't quite fit, we can either have Talandie alter them or try some more. Farleesha says you can pick out three, so if you don't like this color, let me know and I'll see what else I can find."

"Thank you," Sajani said softly.

"I'll just get this cot set up while you get dressed and then we'll see about getting you something to eat." The human pulled a cot out of the box and started assembling it.

First there was getting her fur and hair situated. She rushed through it, not so much because she was in a hurry, but because she didn't want to keep the nice lady waiting. There was no mirror, so she didn't bother trimming her bangs. She also didn't bother with her hand claws, because she wanted to be done sometime before the next day. Malanda finished setting the cot up and sat patiently waiting, humming to herself.

The clothes mostly fit. They were a little tight, but that often happened when people picked out clothes for her. It was a nice outfit made of a very light cotton. The pants were a modified version of the Rhidian salwar, cut to fit the extra bend in vykati legs and the top was a button up choli. The outfit also came with a leather belt which she tied off carefully.

When she was done the human looked her up and down and said, "Beautiful. I'm sure it's good to be clean and out of those other clothes."

Sajani nodded as she put her necklace back into place. "I'll get them cleaned up later. You mentioned..."

Malanda interrupted. "I hope that by cleaned up, you mean burned." The woman laughed heartily.

Since the clothes were a gift from Gregor, she had no intention of burning them. They were cheap and been through a lot, but... She didn't argue with the lady.

"You mentioned some food?" Sajani prompted.

"Yes, I'll take you over to our cafeteria. Farleesha calls it a mess tent. She served some time in the Wolf Pack you know?"

Sajani just smiled. This woman seemed to like to talk and it was good to finally hear a voice other than Gregor's. The thought of her companion made her think of some of the discussions they'd had over the last week. That made her feel guilty. Gregor's voice was fine, and she'd never tire of it, but it was still nice to hear someone else.



She met up with Gregor at the mess tent. He'd been waiting for her and hadn't eaten yet. There were new clothes for him as well. Dark brown shorts with a slightly lighter brown shirt. The tent was mostly empty of people, so there were plenty of places to sit. They approached the counter and were greeted by a very tall vykati. His fur was white to match his apron. "Ah, our little delinquents," he said cheerfully. "There's a bit of lunch leftover. I haven't started on dinner yet. Should I just fill up a couple plates for you, or do you want to pick and choose?"

They both nodded and said, "Fill up a couple plates." Then all three laughed.

As the cook was filling the plates, he chatted happily, "'names Messy. And yes, just like the word for a mess. I'm sure my parents had something else in mind when they named me Messanderel, but if they wanted a serious name, they should've picked something shorter.'" He continued to fill the plates while they waited and then said, "There you go. Some sweet and sour chicken, jasmine rice, mashed potatoes and some baked apples. I'll bring over a couple of blackberry turnovers for you. Couldn't fit them on the plate."

The two youths said "thank you" at the same time, which produced a little more light laughter.

Partway through the meal, Gregor looked over at her and said, "You know..." he paused a moment. "This could be, I mean if you wanted to call it..." he found some resolve. "It's the first time we've had a real meal together."

Sajani smiled at him. "We'll call it a date," she told him. Outside of the cook, who was minding his own business, they were the only ones there. It was her first real date and suspected it was for Gregor too.



It was still very early, but now that she was in a safe place for the first time in more than a week, Sajani felt exhausted. During one of the few times that Malanda stopped talking, the copper wolf said, "I'm very tired. I probably just need to get caught up on some sleep now. Is it ok...?"

"Of course," the human answered. "I'll loan you my pillow. I can pick up a spare and we'll change back tomorrow." After getting the young wolf situated to go to sleep, Malanda turned to leave. Sajani felt very vulnerable but wasn't ready to share her exact worries with the human. "Um," she asked, "Can you do me a small favor before you go?"

As expected the nice woman smiled and said, "Of course."

"I was kind of hoping," she started. "I didn't get a chance to tell Gregor something. Can you see if he'll come here for a second?"

Before Malanda could answer a voice came from outside the tent. "Are you in there Sajani?" Gregor asked.

“Wow,” the human exclaimed, “He must read minds or something.” She rose and started walking out of the tent. “I’ll give you some privacy,” she said with a wink, “but remember, it’s a shared tent.”

A moment after she left, Gregor entered. “I uh, was just getting ready to sleep when I realized... Are you going to be okay? There’re plenty of people here, so I thought you might be fine, but I wanted to make sure.”

Sajani was amazed he managed to say all that without stuttering. She really didn’t want to be a bother, but at the same time, she didn’t want to go to sleep without some reassurance. “I was kind of hoping...” she started.

Gregor smiled. “My cot’s outside. I’ll set it up right outside the tent.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“Which cot is yours?” he asked. “I’ll make sure I set mine nearby.”

She showed him. Sleep came before the noise of him setting up his cot stopped. It was a dreamless and much needed sleep.