

A SHIP CALLED HOPE PART 1: WHAT ONCE WAS EDEN

CHAPTER 4: DECEIT AND MISCOMMUNICATION (PART 1 OF 3)

Around mid-afternoon, Farleesha rode up to their wagon. Gregor and Sajani were taking turns reading. It'd been the she-wolf's turn, so she was sitting up a little more than usual. There was a strong look of concern on the merchant's face. "Ok, you two fugitives," she said, "it's time to live up to your promise. We're coming on the well a little earlier than expected. Alonzo says there's at least two other caravans there, so you'll need to go into hiding for a bit."

The copper wolf set her book down and started to get up. Keeping this promise definitely benefited her and she planned on doing all she could to keep her word.

She froze, however, when the caravan leader said quickly, "I've got two boxes for hiding. You'll be in..."

Gregor interrupted her. "Um," he said loudly, "uh, that's...that's not...that's bad."

They could visibly see the anger rise in the merchant's face. "You'll do exactly what I say or you're going to get caught. There's plenty of people looking..."

Gregor forced out a few more words. "I can't..." he started. "I can't handle...I can't do that."

Sajani saw the look of bewilderment on Zant's face. The copper wolf motioned for him to be quiet, hopefully in a way that Farleesha didn't see.

"You'll both fit in one box, but I assumed..." she turned to Sajani. "Are you okay with that?"

The copper wolf nodded but couldn't bring herself to say anything. It occurred to her at that moment, that as shy and honest as Gregor was, he had little trouble with confronting the merchant and lying on his friend's behalf. Her face grew warm.

"I'll have to change up a few things. Alonzo and I'll come and get you. Zant can slow the wagon when we get back so you can jump off and we'll ride you over to the cargo."

Gregor and Sajani both nodded and the merchant reined her horse away and prodded it to a gallop.

Zant still had her look of confusion. "I thought Sajani was the one..."

Gregor spoke quickly. "No," he said, "I'm the one..."

Lying to the merchant and now to Zant? Sajani felt bad enough about that, she corrected him. "He isn't," she said bluntly. "I am."

That caused Gregor to look at his feet.

"He tells people that because he knows I don't like to admit it, but he didn't know that it'd come up when I was talking to you our first night with the caravan." Somehow facing the fear of telling people, seemed to lessen her apprehension from moments before.

“Wow Gregor,” Zant said with enthusiasm, “it’s so sweet that you’d do that for a friend.” Even though it came out as a sincere compliment, the copper wolf still had to suppress the urge to kick the other she-wolf in the tail. Sajani reminded herself, yet again, that Zant was a friend and having a close friend would be good for Gregor.

The praise seemed to embarrass the male wolf more and he tried to stammer a response.

Sajani interrupted. “He’s a good friend.”

The stammering stopped and he smiled at her. His tail started wagging a little bit, which made the two ladies grin, but neither said anything.

Farleesha and Alonzo rode up and the wagon slowed just enough for the two wanted vykati to jump off. The adults helped them up on their horses and they rode down a few more wagons. Messy was standing on a moving cart and reached out to help the youths over, one at a time.

Once they were clear, Farleesha looked over at the cook and asked, “Got them okay, Mess?”

The white vykati nodded and said, “You bet, Miss Qistara. I’ll see they stay out of sight.” As the merchant rode off, he turned to Sajani and Gregor. “Since no one is going to be searching our cargo, we just need to make sure you stay out of sight.” On his wagon was a huge crate surrounded by a few smaller ones. The lid of the large one was sitting to the side. “Up you two go,” he said cheerfully. “I’ll place the lid back on and hold it with a single nail. It’s going to get really hot in there, but we’ll get a tent set up right away and get you out...”

He was interrupted when Alonzo came riding up. “Change in plan. There’re soldiers there. We might be searched.”

“We’re not ready for that,” Messy complained. “I can put some holes in here for them, but...”

Alonzo interrupted. “Farleesha is getting with Talinga so the guards will be able to see anyone that sneaks in, but we’ll have to go with the plan we had for Nashtalli. I’ll get the textile wagon to pull off and when you come to it, do the same to switch them over. The rest of the caravan will slow down. Get them in and catch right back up.” He didn’t wait for a response, he rode ahead and disappeared.

“That’s not good,” the cook said wringing his hands. He turned to the teamster driving his wagon—a human that Sajani thought might be named Marc. “You heard that?”

The man nodded once and said something that she didn’t understand.

An expression of panic came over the cook. “The magic...things... we don’t have them. They can’t go in there without it. They’ll fry.” He placed his fingers in his mouth and let out a shrill whistle. The driver of the team before him turned. “Hey Jessop,” he called, “Tell Talinga we need the magic stuff for the pups’ hiding place.” The message was being relayed.

“What’s...what’s this...” Gregor started.

Sajani finished for him, “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Your hiding place is in a crate with some bolts of cloth. We put air holes in there, but you’ll need these little...things...I think they’re necklaces.” He kept wringing his hands and looking worried. “They keep you a little cooler but not much. They’re popular with farmers and rich ladies who go to fancy social events.”

Marc turned and looked at them. He spoke to Messy, but Sajani couldn’t understand him.

When he finished the cook turned to them. “They’re pulling off now. Marc’s going to stop quickly. I’ll help you two off the wagon, and Marc’ll start right back up again. The fewer that stop, the less chance of it being noticed.”

Sajani looked over at her friend. He was standing still with a look of resolve on his face. He’d think a new person talking to him was incredibly scary, but he didn’t look frightened now. Once she thought about it, she realized that even when they’d been in bad situations in the past, he faced them unshaking. Kind *and* brave.

The three wolves jumped from the wagon as soon as it stopped moving and hurried towards the textile wagon in front of them. As they clamored up, Messy told the teamster, “You can start again,”

The brown vykati driving didn’t budge. “Alonzo wants to make sure there’s a reason for us stopping, just in case we’re seen,” he told them.

The cook didn’t hesitate but stepped right up to the large central crate. Messy tried to remove the lid. It was nailed shut and he couldn’t seem to get it lifted. “Argh,” he said loudly, “I can’t...”

Gregor stepped over the buckboard and put his claws under the lid. It looked like he barely strained when the nails slid free and the top began rising.

“How...?” Messy began.

“I had to unload the supplies that came to the school. They were too cheap to give me a crowbar when mine broke.” There was a very broad smile across his face. Sajani beamed.

“The air holes are drilled here,” Messy instructed, pointing at the lower part of the box that was nearest to the two youths. “They’re under these special cloth labels that Miss Qistara had Malanda make.”

Alonzo rode up next to them and handed off a small envelop to the cook. Messy took it without question and the guide dismounted and stepped near the right front wheel. The wiry vykati pulled out a hammer and took several wide swings at one of the spokes, breaking it and then pulling out the remnants. “Carpenter will be by shortly,” he told them. Looking up at the open box, he smiled and held up the hammer. “Not sure how you got it open without it, but you’ll need it to close the box,” he said quickly as Messy took it from him. Alonzo then jumped back up on his horse and rode off.

While all that was happening, Messy opened the envelope and removed a set of necklaces. He handed one to each of the pups. "Put these on," he said quickly, "There's a space partitioned off with some wood beams." He began removing bolts of cloth and setting them carefully next to the crate. "Ok," he ordered, "in you go. I'll cover you and then I'll have to nail this back shut or it'll look suspicious."

Even knowing that she wasn't going to be alone, Sajani could feel panic rising.

Gregor must have noticed. "You can do this," he told her. "We've made it this far. You can't call it all luck."

Not that again. But the argument did distract her briefly. "You hop in first," she told him. Hopefully it'd be a little easier if someone she trusted was already in there.

Gregor climbed in. The partitioned off area the cook was talking about was very small. There'd be just enough room for both of them to sit there almost touching. Her friend sat with his back to the corner and she climbed in and sat down so she was facing him.

"Too bad there's not enough light to read," she told him.

Messy looked down at them and said, "There should still be some light coming through the cloth once I close this. Maybe you can read." He smiled at them. "I don't envy you," he said truthfully, "but this'll be better than being caught." The cook started piling the bolts above them and it grew much darker.

Sajani reached out and grabbed Gregor's hand. There was more light than she thought there'd be, but she was still frightened.

"We'll...We'll...be fine," he reassured her.

The copper wolf smiled at him and released his hand.

"Is there enough light to read?" he asked.

That made her realize that she now had both copies of the book. It made her feel bad that she'd lied to Zant earlier. The copy in her back pocket was impossible to reach, but she managed to get the one out of her front pocket.

Just as she finished, hammering started up. It sounded like they were working on both the crate and the spoke. After a moment of that, they heard Messy's voice through the cloth. "We have company coming. Be sure to keep quiet."

She looked over at Gregor. He smiled at her and nodded reassuringly.