

CHAPTER 4: DECEIT AND MISCOMMUNICATION (PART 2 OF 3)

The work on the wheel continued. After a moment they could hear approaching horses. When the hoofbeats stopped they heard voices speaking near them.

“Not a good time to be a pack of dogs passing through,” a new voice said with disdain.

Messy answered cheerfully. “We’re all pedigreed and properly papered. Most are even house broken.”

“Well it’s safe being you at least,” the first voice said with a slight chuckle. “We’re looking for four dogs: copper, silver, brown, and black.”

Messy laughed lightly, “Well,” he said slowly, “being a merchant caravan, we have plenty of silver and copper, even some gold,” he added quickly, “but none will come when you call it.”

That got another laugh and Sajani could tell there was more company than just the speaker she’d heard. “Well,” the first voice said, “unless you’ve been swimming in paint, you’re safe at least. Mostly we came to make sure you were alright. A stopped wagon, even this close to the well, usually means bad news.”

Messy stayed cheerful. “Just a thrown spoke,” he said amiably, “probably we’d be fine for that short a distance, but Miss Qistara doesn’t like us to take chances.

“Hmm,” the first voice said, “I think I might have heard of that one. Has a decent reputation...for a dog.”

Sajani was surprised at how well the cook kept his humor. She wanted to shout and she wasn’t the one being addressed.

“An even better reputation with the dogs themselves,” Messy managed.

“Well, you’re a good-tempered beast,” the voice said slowly. “There’s an inspection station at the well. You’ll have to have your cargo checked to make sure there’s no stowaways before you can get any water. They’ll also check the passports of any dogs that might match the colors we’re looking for.”

The cook sounded a little concerned when he said, “We have a few that’re natives. They won’t have passports.”

“Your boss can take it up with the captain when you arrive. If they’re the wrong color, we’ll probably have to hold them for a few days while it gets sorted out.” The voice sounded disinterested and distant.

“Miss Qistara won’t be happy about that, but at least I won’t be the one to face her,” Messy said. It sounded like his humor might be getting a little stretched, but that could also be how annoyed Sajani was getting from listening to the conversation.

“The big worry is apparently the brown one. The other three are just wanted for questioning,” the voice said. “They’ll talk to your ‘Miss Qistara’ when she gets to the well.” After a brief pause he added, “Looks like your wheel is fixed. Good luck to you.” They could hear the horses slowly retreating.

Messy’s voice came from right next to the cloth. “You two alright in there? You might end up there for a little longer than I originally planned.”

Sajani had been doing fairly well at controlling her panic, but when the cook said that a feeling of dread came once again to the forefront. She might have let out a scream if Gregor’s stuttering didn’t bring her back to the moment. “We’re alright,” she said.

Gregor quieted.

"Those necklaces working at all?" Messy asked. "They looked like cheap drugstore imitations."

There hadn't been much time to think about the temperature. It was surprisingly pleasant. That had to be some kind of magic. "I wish I had one of these weeks ago," she said truthfully.

"Don't know much about it," Messy said, "but from what I understand, they don't last that long. Talinga said something about them only working for a couple of hours. I hope I misheard that."

"Thank you, Messy," Sajani said sarcastically, "for making it so much easier to keep calm in here."

Gregor frowned at her and offered a sympathetic look. Easy for him to do. He had no problem with small enclosed areas.

"I'm sorry, *kalura*," Messy offered. "I didn't realize... Kind of surprising in some ways. I didn't know you had any fears."

Sajani's nose and mouth felt warmer from the compliment.

Gregor laughed and whispered to her, "I was surprised enough at the whole 'alone' thing. You sure didn't show any fear dealing with the school staff."

Now her face felt like it was on fire—in a very pleasant way. "Should we start reading?" she asked.

Gregor nodded and Sajani opened the book. She frowned. The words weren't really visible. It was possible to see that there was writing but reading more than a few words at a time would be painful. The book was handed over to Gregor. "I can't quite read it. You're closer to the light though, so maybe..."

Her friend took a look and nodded. "I think I can. Where did we leave off again?"

Sajani remembered that very well. It hadn't been a good stopping place. "Yanebel had just heard the canons firing and was starting towards the battle," she said.

Messy intruded. "Are you reading a *Prequel to Alpha* book?" he asked.

Gregor answered. "Y...yes. We...We're..."

"We're on book seven," Sajani finished.

"Ah," Messy said, "I just finished book six. I tried to borrow seven from Pul, but Zant got to it first."

That made Sajani feel a little guilty.

"That's okay," Gregor offered. "We can start at the beginning." When Sajani shot him a look he added, "That way we don't get ahead of Zant. She's been so nice since we got here, I'd feel bad having..."

"Okay. Okay," Sajani said testily. "We can start from the beginning."

He smiled at her and Messy said, "Thanks, *kalura*."

They didn't get far anyway. The wagon stopped after only a few pages and Messy said to them. "More soldiers." There were no horses this time, but they could hear the humans approach over the sand.

"That's an awfully big crate you have there," one of them said.

The wagon shook slightly as someone jumped up on it.

They heard Farleesha's voice. Sajani couldn't see where she came from. "It's our most valuable stock—some of your fine Rhidayan cotton. Much lighter and softer than what we grow at home."

Another voice spoke. It was soft and slow and oily. "The same can be said about just about everything in your country, dog."

"There's no reason to be insulting," the merchant responded equably. "We're cooperating with you nicely even though we have no idea what this is all about."

The oily voice returned. "I think you know precisely what this is about, b..."

He was interrupted by a high-pitched voice. A female human was clearing her throat. It was very close to the crate, so probably the person that'd jumped up earlier.

"You have a problem, sergeant?" Oily asked.

"Oh no sir," the female coughed a few times. "I think I just swallowed a bug is all."

"As I was saying," the officer continued. "You know exactly what's going on. A vykati caravan leaving the day before several criminal dogs are sighted just outside town...Seems a little convenient don't you think?"

Farleesha wasn't shaken at all. "Not really. They'd have to know their way through the desert and be fast to find us. Convenient would be showing up the same day we left."

"And now, you seem to be completely ignorant of there even being criminals in the area. Not a good practice for one that travels over land in a foreign country." Oily sounded like he was right in someone's face.

The merchant wasn't phased. "I never said I didn't know about the criminals, although I wasn't aware that 'several' meant the same as two in your language."

The woman that'd spoken earlier laughed.

"You have a problem, sergeant?" Oily asked.

"No sir," she said respectfully, "but it makes sense she wouldn't know about the other two if they left the day *before*..."

There was a short pause. Sajani wished she could have seen the look on Oily's face. Something told her it might be slightly amusing.

He responded. "Very well. Sergeant Singh: see that this and any other crates large enough for stowaways are thoroughly searched. Check the passports of any dogs that happen to have the correct fur color."

"Yes sir," Sergeant Singh said crisply.

Apparently Oily had to make a parting shot. "This one has brown fur, make sure she's checked...especially well."

"I'll be sure to check her very thoroughly," the sergeant said quickly. She then added "as well as any *male* vykati with brown fur." Another pause and then a laugh. "Male vykati with brown fur *and* under the age of twenty."

At a guess Oily was out of earshot, because Farleesha joined the laugh. The merchant said, "Copper is copper, but brown is quite the spectrum. Anything more specific? Although, I'm pretty sure there's no males with brown fur *and* under the age of twenty."

"How've you been?" the sergeant asked. "I haven't seen you in a few years."

Sajani looked over at Gregor with her eyes wide.

Her friend smiled and whispered, "Luck."

Sajani rolled her eyes at him.

"Haven't done much to get the business any bigger," Farleesha confided. "It's a manageable and very profitable size as is."

"Still do these trips twice a year?" the sergeant asked.

"The company does, but I only go once a year anymore. Too many other things keep me occupied," the merchant answered.

Sajani felt a bit embarrassed when the sergeant asked, "Whatever happened with your boyfriend, Grackin? You still with him?"

"No." The merchant didn't elaborate.

"Okay," Sergeant Singh said slowly. She then returned to a normal tempo and timbre. "Let's get this crate checked. Happen to have a crowbar?"

"No." Farleesha repeated succinctly.

"Well," the human said. "I'll have to ask you to get one. Captain Barfwell will probably at least look over here to make sure I opened it."

Farleesha's question mirrored Sajani's. "Barfwell? And doesn't your job require a crowbar?"

"Bartwell," the sergeant amended, "but he deserves the nickname his troops give him." After a quick pause she added, "So far, everyone's had one handy, so I didn't bother bringing one."

The merchant addressed the cook. "Messy," Farleesha said. She didn't elaborate.

"Happy to help out Miss Qistara," the cook supplied. "I'll see what Alonzo did with the hammer I borrowed earlier." The cart shook a little as he got off.

"That's a lot of cloth," Sergeant Singh mentioned. "I'm curious though, why such a big crate? Wouldn't a bunch of smaller ones been easier to move?"

Farleesha laughed. "We usually do, but the sandstorm got into a lot of our stock and cleaning it forced a lot of rearranging."

The soldier didn't let that go passed her ears. "So you lost a day. I was wondering a little about the timing. How far out were you when the storm hit?"

Farleesha didn't answer. Sajani and the merchant might have been worrying about the same thing.

"Hey there friend," the sergeant said congenially. "I'm not trying to pry or anything..."

The copper wolf was shocked by a truthful answer. "A day," Farleesha said, sounding slightly stunned. "We were only a day out. It came on as dusk was falling."

Sajani cringed. That just undid the merchant's earlier argument that they were too far out to have met up with the missing wolves.

Well then," Sergeant Singh said enthusiastically. "Something tells me this crate is hiding something."

Farleesha wasn't a good actor. "I have no idea what you mean by that," she said in monotone.

"Well," the sergeant said, "here comes that white wolf with a hammer. Shall we see what's inside?"

The merchant didn't answer. After a moment the sound of something metal prying into wood could be heard.

Sajani looked over at Gregor. He seemed very calm and she knew there was no way she could say the same about herself. The squeak of nails being pulled out could be heard all around them and light trickled in from above.

There was a whistle that had to have come from the human. No wolf could whistle like that. "That's..." the sergeant began, "a lot of cloth."

"Already damaged a little from the sand," Farleesha said wryly. "Please be careful with it."

Sajani could hear the sound of cloth being moved.

“Just need to be able to see to the bottom of the crate,” Sergeant Singh said. “Then I’ll be able to tell the captain I saw the bottom. He can assume I meant all of the bottom.”

The cloth continued to move. Fortunately, the sergeant was starting on the opposite side of the box from their hiding place, but the box wasn’t that big. Getting to the bottom would mean exposing at least part of their partition.

At this point, Sajani decided that it was perfectly acceptable to pray. It might not do any good, but it sure wasn’t going to hurt. Her mother had been partial to Kunterik, so she knew the mantra.

“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.”

She said the words very softly but felt like they needed to be spoken aloud. He saw Gregor mouthing the words with her. “Don’t let us be caught.” It wasn’t much of a prayer, but it was something.

The merchant was afraid too. “Are you sure that’s necessary?” Farleesha asked. It was obvious she was trying to sound casual, but to Sajani she sounded worried. “It’s just a lot of cloth. It’s gotten enough sand in it as it is...”

Their hiding place became completely illuminated and Sajani turned to see a Rhidayan soldier with very dark skin looking her directly in the eye.” A sly smile crossed the woman’s face and she said, “Ah. Now that’s exactly what I was looking for.”

It didn’t surprise the copper wolf that her prayer hadn’t been heard.

“Please Randalar,” Farleesha pleaded, “let me explain.”

The woman turned to face the merchant and said sternly. “There’s nothing to explain.”

“Please,” the vykati lady said, her voice cracking, “They’re only pups. They just want to go home...”

“Well,” the sergeant said stiffly—they could feel her jump down from the wagon, “You can take all this cloth home if you want.”

“I’ll never forgive myself,” Farleesha cried.

There was a moment of silence before the sergeant said, “You’re sure getting all worked up over a load of textiles. I saw the bottom. You’ll probably want to load that back up yourself. I’d hate to damage anything.”

A slow realization dawned on Sajani. Maybe the prayer had been heard. Maybe they hadn’t been seen at all. Was it possible for a prayer to make someone invisible?

Was it possible for a prayer to stop the rain? her cynical voice asked. But what about her mother? Those prayers had never been heard. *Was it possible for Vharkylia to stay safe and still have your mother live?* the voice asked. The copper wolf terminated that thought before she could dwell too much on it.

The merchant changed her disposition. “I don’t know whether to hug you or kick...” Farleesha began, relief building in her voice.

"I'll take the hug," the sergeant said cheerfully. "Kicks from vykati are much more painful than the ones from humans. I think it's the way your legs and feet are shaped."

"Is it too late to give you both?" Farleesha asked. "I'd hate to only pay half-price."

"I think our debt is more than settled," Sergeant Singh said. "You might," she added, "want to make sure some of the merchandise gets moved to a gentler place before you get it all packed up. Out of sight of course, but it looked pretty fragile."

"I'll keep that in mind," Farleesha said calmly.

"Don't move it until I'm done here though," the sergeant said amiably. "I'll need you to gather all the vykati together for me. In the meantime, I'll search the rest of your cargo, although I'm sure there's nothing to find in any of it."

The voices faded as the merchant and the sergeant left.

"Well," Messy's voice came from about them. He was looking down at them. "I was wondering about that. There was no way she didn't see you there?"

Sajani shook her head and Gregor stuttered. "I made eye contact with her," the copper wolf said. That meant it was impossible for them to have been invisible, so maybe it was just...

Gregor was staring right at her. As if he was reading her thoughts he said, "You can't call that all luck."

Messy winked at her. "I'd say Kunterik had a hand in that," he said in an awestruck tone, "or did I mishear that mantra?"

She didn't have to admit anything. It was just a coincidence that the one person that came to search the wagon happened to be a friend of Farleesha's—a friend that owed the merchant a favor and had enough sympathy to...

Gregor was still holding her gaze and possibly reading her thoughts. "I want to hear you say it, Sajani."

"Say what?" she asked innocently.

He didn't answer, but she knew exactly what he meant.

"On its own," she started, trying to word things very carefully, 'you can call something like that luck.' Her gaze happened over to Messy who was watching the whole exchange with rapt attention.

"But..." Gregor prompted.

Sajani let out a long sigh. She still didn't completely believe, but if it'd make her friend happy. "Along with everything else that's happened since we left the school, it's way too much to call it just luck." Her voice was more resigned than pious.

Gregor and the cook beamed.

"The chapel at Altaza is dedicated to Kunterik. Your mother did that. At least that's what the tour guide was saying when I was there." Messy said.

It looked like he was about to say something more, but Sergeant Singh's voice rang out, "Hey! White wolfman! Quit talking to the bolts of cloth."

Messy ducked away from the box.

Gregor suggested: "We can start reading again? Messy can warn us if someone gets close."

Their near capture was still close to her nerves. "I think maybe we should just lay low for a while. I don't want to push my..." If she said that word, he'd give her a hard time, she was sure. "...deific intervention," she concluded.