

WHAT ONCE WAS EDEN

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

“You know,” Farnsbeck told Magenta happily, “it’s so much nicer to make this trip in this form than it is wearing the masks.”

His partner’s mood still wasn’t improved. “Yeah,” she said sarcastically. “It’s not hot enough with just these clothes. We can have these clothes *and* our fur.”

The guard on the buckboard laughed—must be the one that spoke Vykati. The human was more cheerful than the she-wolf, so Farnsbeck decided to try a conversation with him instead. “I’m a little curious, Mr. Guard,” he began.

“You can call me Rakesh,” the man said amiably.

“Rakesh,” the male wolf started again. “Where did you learn to speak my language?”

The human seemed happy enough to talk. “I grew up in Xahusha. Some of the people I played with there were vykati. I learned a bit there and then spent a year at a school in Tamaar.”

“Xahusha I know,” Farnsbeck said. “Right on the border. One of the more wolf friendly cities here. Where’s Tamaar?”

The human laughed. “I get that question all the time here, I’m surprised you’d ask though. It’s a little south of Drtithen, near the coast.”

That was a bit of a shock. “Really? You dared go to school in Vharkylia? That’s pretty bold.” Most of the vykati in the cities were pretty neutral to humans, as long as they didn’t cause trouble. Outside the cities though, unescorted humans were often killed.

“Not as bold as the vykati that go to school here,” the human offered. “You wolves usually just want to be left alone. Most Rhidayans won’t leave wolves alone.”

Farnsbeck looked over at Magenta. She had a smile on her face. “That’s very kind of you to say,” she told the guard. “But humans don’t have things like our hunter’s right tradition.” Hunter’s right allowed a vykati that caught a non-wolf committing a crime—anything from stepping on a flowerbed to killing someone—to execute whatever punishment the wolf felt was appropriate. For most feral vykati, that meant just killing the human. Even in the civilized areas, many crimes, if committed by a non-wolf, were a capital offense.

“Yeah well,” Rakesh said defensively, “there’s an easy solution to that...don’t be a criminal. In the cities most wolves will only claim that right if they physically catch you where another wolf can see it.”

That much was true, but outside the cities... “You have a very...enlightened point of view on that—especially for someone that was howling before the moon rose to have us turned in for a bounty—one that isn’t even for us.”

The human laughed. "There's a simple solution that," he repeated. "Don't be a criminal."

"That bounty is on a copper colored female and a brown male," Magenta said defiantly.

The guard turned to face them. "Haven't heard of that bounty," he said and he sounded truthful. "But the bounty I heard was for a black male and a silver female."

That was news Farnsbeck didn't want to hear.

Rakesh continued, "I'll admit, the description said the female was wearing yellow, but considering it also said the male was all in black and wearing a hat, I'd be willing to bet there's a yellow outfit in your luggage."

His comment had Magenta smiling broadly. The male wolf wasn't sure he wanted to know the reason. "I don't suppose you'd believe we're innocent," Farnsbeck said hopefully.

The human paused for a moment. "I might," he said finally, "but it's not for me to decide. The notice I saw didn't mention a crime. Just said you were to be taken alive for questioning. Pretty big reward for not being guilty of something." He turned back around and didn't say anything more.

Magenta was still smiling broadly and that was getting annoying. "What has you all happy?" he asked.

It was amazing how fast she was back to her normal mood. "Mishal can't say anything about me leaving," she said with a smirk.

That was her big worry this whole time? What their boss would think if she left East Oasis? In his experience, Mishal gave her agents a lot of leeway. If Magenta said that she was worried her identity would be compromised, that would have been enough. "You've been brooding for three days because you were worried Mishal might be upset?" he asked.

"Look, plushfur," she said in a tough voice. "I did worry. I felt like I needed to go, but a big part of me kept feeling like I was deserting my post."

It wasn't any of his business how she felt or why she left. She was much more pleasant to be around when she was happy than when she was worrying, but that still didn't make it worth putting his snout in it. There was no surprise that feeling a little better meant she'd talk more.

"And," she said with a touch of exasperation, "it meant I'm not doing anything wrong by trusting you."

That made no sense to Farnsbeck. "Trust me for what? It's not like I'm keeping a secret for you or anything."

A grim smile crossed the she-wolf's face. "You said you felt like this mission was really important..."

"It is," the male wolf said defensively. There was a rare moment of emotion that he squelched as he thought about his meeting with Benayle. He tried to keep his voice neutral, but it cracked just slightly. "You didn't see the old wolf when he was giving me this assignment, or how easily he was willing to part with 2500 gold." Some of what she said earlier came

back to him. “When I was recovering from the poison, you said that it wasn’t as important to you as it was to me.”

“Whoa there plush fur,” she said cautiously. “I still don’t think it’s worth your life...or mine either, but somewhere deep down, I know it’s important that those pups get home.”



After what seemed like a very long wait, and probably was, Farleesha returned and whispered a greeting, asking if the two were alright. Gregor tried to answer, but it was Sajani that ended up telling her, “We’re hungry, but doing okay.” Messy had left a little while ago, so maybe dinner’d be soon.

“Do you need a new set of necklaces?” she asked. “Talinga wasn’t sure how long they’d last.”

She felt fine. Looking over at Gregor she whispered, “Staying cool?”

Her friend nodded once.

“I think we’re good,” she said, “but depending on what time it is, it might not hurt to have a couple extra.”

“It’s cooling off,” Farleesha said. “I’ll see about getting some food for you. Randalar’s almost done. We only had two wolves that fit the description of what they’re looking for. She says they’ll have to go before her captain, but she can probably talk him into allowing them to come back soon.”

Sajani wasn’t sure why she was being told all this, but part of her was glad to hear everyone was fine.

“I.I forget,” Gregor said suddenly, “were they...were they looking...gray?”

Sajani automatically translated for him, just in case the merchant didn’t understand. “Gregor wants to know if they were looking for gray wolves?” No sooner had she said it did she realize why he’d ask. She wanted to kick herself for relaying his question, but she shook her head at her friend to let him know that they weren’t.

Farleesha answered. “No, just you two and a silver female and a black male. Not sure what that’s about.”

“Good...then,” Gregor started. “Zant...”

There was no way Sajani was going to translate that, but unfortunately, Farleesha heard him. “She’s fine,” the merchant told him, “I’ll let her know you were asking.”

Through a supreme effort, the copper wolf managed to not glare at the male wolf. She kept telling herself that Zant was a friend and there wasn’t a problem if he made sure his friend was fine. He’d do the same thing if it was her that might be in trouble, she was sure of that.

Gregor did look very relieved.

He smiled broadly when Farleesha said, “Oh hi Zant. Gregor was just making sure you were alright.”

Sajani rolled her eyes, but fortunately her friend didn’t see that.

“I brought some food over from Messy. He was worried my friends might be getting hungry,” Zant said.

“The crate’s still open and you can see where they’re at to hand it to them as long as you’re subtle,” the merchant said. “Once it’s dark and there’s a tent set up, I should be able to let them out.”

A shadow fell over the two boxed wolves as Zant came near and set the food near the edge of their partition. “That was very nice of you to check on me Gregor,” she said sweetly. “Enjoy the food.” The cart shook slightly as she jumped back down.

The male wolf didn’t say anything, which was just as well. Sajani wasn’t in a mood to speak on his behalf. He reached up and grabbed the food the other she-wolf left. It was cold roast beef and bread—probably hadn’t been able to set up the cafeteria. Sajani was still very grateful for it. Her time of worrying about food had made a difference.

Gregor handed her half of the contents and then said, “That was nice of Zant to bring us food.”

“It was,” Sajani said. She did mean it. It occurred to her that there were quite a few nice people in the caravan and she was pretty sure that she wasn’t one of them. She remembered something she’d thought about while they were at the lake. Her friend deserved someone kind and nice and while she wasn’t really either of those things, at least in her own mind, maybe she could change. Zant wouldn’t make a bad pattern to go by. The only difficult part would be suppressing her constant desire to kick the she-wolf.

She needed a distraction and the book came to mind. “Want to read some more?” she asked.

Gregor frowned. “I’m not sure where to start,” he told her. “I don’t want to get ahead of where we were with Zant and with Messy not here...”

Sajani managed to hide her frustration. “I can always tell you more stories about Mr. Ramisa,” she sighed. “That’ll at least pass the time.”

He smiled at her. “I’d love...I’d love that,” he said happily.

For a moment she thought he was going to say something else, but it didn’t surprise her that he didn’t.



They’d finished the food. She’d just about run out of stories and was honestly thinking of just making some up when Zant returned. It’d been so much fun to watch Gregor laugh that the time passed very quickly. They felt the wagon shift slightly and then heard the other she-wolf whisper. “We’re moving the wagons to where we’ll be making camp,” Zant said. “Farleesha is going to have people get a tent set up for you as fast as possible.” They could hear the reins shake and the wagon began moving

forward. A few bolts fell down on top of them, but they weren't heavy enough to be a problem.

Wherever they were going must have been pretty close because after only a few minutes, the wagon stopped and they could feel Zant jump down. After hearing some chains being arranged, they heard the sound of the horses being led off. Gregor looked over at her and asked, "Are we totally alone again? I'm surprised they keep leaving us like that. You'd think they'd have someone watching constantly."

It didn't make sense to Sajani at first either, but when Messy had left that first time, she'd had time to think about it. "There probably is someone watching out for us, but if they stay constantly by a crate of cloth, that might look suspicious."

"Maybe that's why it's left open too," Gregor suggested. "So it doesn't look like they're in a hurry to close it."

Sajani shrugged. She'd guess that was just someone being lazy, but it was possible that there was some thought to it.

It'd grown dark before anyone contacted them again. It was Zant. They felt her jump up on the wagon just before they heard her whisper, "Your tent is ready. It's the small one right in front of the wagon. Give me a few minutes to leave and then hop out and get in there quickly one at a time. You'll be on your own until morning when Messy comes to get you." There wasn't time to respond before they felt her jump back down from the cart.

Gregor motioned for her to go first. After a few moments, she climbed her way out. The tent was a little smaller than she expected, but she ran over and ducked into it quickly. Inside were two cots on opposite sides, and in between them was a water barrel like the one she'd used as a shower. There were two towels and two boxes. One she recognized as hers so she guessed the other was Gregor's. Inside her box were her old things: book bag, blanket, the pillow Malanda got for her, and waterskins as well as her grooming kit, her umber outfit that she'd received her first day and a new one. It was a little hard to tell at night, but it looked like it was black or maybe dark gray. It wasn't the same style though. She'd seen some people in Drithen wearing similar clothes: shorts with a button up blouse. It was cut a little lower than she was used to, but it wasn't indecent or anything.

Gregor arrived as she was placing the clothes back in with her other belongings. "You should get cleaned up first," she suggested. "I'm probably going to take a lot of water."

Her friend laughed. "What I don't use for cleaning, I'll use for drinking."

She was pretty thirsty too. "No partition," she sighed, "but I...I'm confident you'll be proper."

Her comment got a good laugh from Gregor. "Well," he said happily, "I trust you too."

It wasn't what she said, but she let it slide. "There were new clothes for me in my box," she said politely, "was there something new for you too?"

He took a moment to look through. "Huh," he said. "There's some new stuff here too. I don't remember ever owning this many outfits."

Sajani had left more uniforms back at the school than she had clothes now. When she'd arrived, they'd taken all her clothes from her and insisted she wear nothing but the outfits they provided. Unlike their insistence that she keep her hair short, it was the requirement for all of their students. She had no idea how much had been left at home. Her father gave her a generous allowance for... The thought was almost suppressed. There were always two purses on the kitchen table on the first day of each month. One was labeled "Food," and one was labeled "Clothes." The food purse held twenty gold and a note that said, "I love you." The other one contained thirty gold. She'd forgotten all about the note. Her friends average monthly allowance was five gold, so it was very generous. He'd explained the first time they'd been left there.



The silver wolf that was her father looked so old and tired. His clothes were worn and wrinkled, and he walked very slowly as he came down the stairs. His movements were sure and strong, but the speed gave the impression that he'd aged very quickly. Sajani was pretty sure he was only in his early sixties—still young for a vykati. She saw him most days, but this time felt different. He called her name and smiled at her.

Back then, she still mostly respected and even loved him, so she waited patiently as he finished going down the stairs and made his way to the kitchen table. He arrived and sat down carefully on a chair. Once seated, he pulled a couple of small tan purses from his sweater pockets and set them on the table. Both were clearly labeled as "food" and "clothing" with embroidery in black. "Oh, my little fox," he began. "I love you."

That was how he started most conversations with her. "I love you paw," she returned. There was still a little meaning behind her words.

"I have a big favor to ask you," he told her. "I'm happy to compensate you for it though."

As far back as Sajani could remember, almost all the things required of her came down to either picking up after herself or taking responsibility for her actions. This was new.

"I've noticed that you seem very comfortable being outside and around other people. I..." he paused and seemed to be gathering his thoughts. "That's very difficult for me right now."

It would be a few years before she'd equate that statement to his shame of being the husband of her mother. "What do you want me to do?" she asked. At the time, she was a little worried about him.

"I'd like it if you could pick up the groceries for us. I'm not comfortable going to the store." Even back then, she knew of his discomfort when strangers would approach and want to talk to him about his wife.

"I can do that," she said. There was a little exhilaration to the thought of taking on the responsibility.

"I'll leave a list," he told her. He did—for the first few months.

The purse labeled "clothes" intrigued her. Someone needed to be getting clothes for him. He dressed like they were poor. She was too young to understand exactly their social class, but she knew that Mr. Ramisa brought by fifty gold a month—a fortune by her standards.

He smiled at her. "I'd hoped you'd say that, my little fox."

"And the other purse?" she asked.

"It's for you," he told her. "Don't spend it all if you can help it and try to save some. Make sure you get clothes and other necessities as you need them..." There'd been more of what he said, but it was lost to time.



Sajani realized that she'd missed something that Gregor had said, so she asked, "I'm sorry, what was that?"

He smiled and said, "I was just saying that I don't think it matters who goes first, the second will have less water. You read more than I did though, so I say you earned it."

Part of her wanted to argue—part of her usually wanted to argue—but she knew it was near pointless. Gregor would insist, even if it meant not getting a shower. "Alright," she told him, "but it'll be my friend's turn to go first tomorrow."

As expected that didn't get an argument. Instead he laughed and said, "Fair enough." He found a comfortable position on the cot facing away from her.

About halfway through cleaning, she heard a part of the tent get lifted and turned to see a gray wolf hand push a piece of paper into the tent. She had a pretty good guess whose hand she'd seen. Gregor had his back to it.

"What was that?" he asked. He sounded like he was a little alarmed, not surprising considering the rest of the day.

"Zant just passed you a note under the tent," she said, trying to keep calm and neutral. "You might want to hug the wall and get it before it gets all soggy." Sajani was very proud of herself for keeping herself from sounding mean.

Gregor rose and carefully followed the wall, keeping his back to her. He reached down and picked up the note and read it. As he was working his way back to his cot he said, "I'm pretty sure this is to both of us."

"What's it say?" Sajani asked. She'd be very surprised if it was to both, but so far even she had to admit Zant had been friendly to her as well.

"It says, 'I miss you. Stay strong.'"

Only someone like Gregor would think that included her.