

WHAT ONCE WAS EDEN

CHAPTER FIVE: COMPETING FOR HOPE (PART 1 OF 3)

Sajani woke to hear voices talking nearby. She recognized Gregor's voice almost immediately. It took a little more consciousness before she recognized Messy's. Gregor was saying, "Thanks Messy, I'll wake her up and we should be ready in a few minutes."

The haziness was just leaving her mind. It was still dark, but that wasn't a surprise at all. "I'm awake," she said, trying to sound alert. It came out more lazy than vigilant.

She heard the cook laugh. "She usually wake up this well?" he asked.

"This is one of the few times she's slept later than me," Gregor started, "but she was sick yesterday..."

"I'm *not* sick," Sajani insisted. Now she was all the way awake. She looked up in time to see Gregor shrug.

Messy was laughing.

Her friend looked at her and said politely, "She was very helpful when I sprained my foot, but she doesn't seem to want to let me help her in return."

That made her feel a little bad, but not too much. Part of her didn't want that debt to be paid. As long as he felt like he owed her...

"It's not that," she said testily. "It's that I'm not sick." She sat up on her cot and put on her necklace.

"Well," the cook said gratefully, "it's none of my business. I'll leave you two to sort it out. Farleesha had a couple extra pillows and blankets for the box. I'll pick those up and get them situated and then be back to help you into the crate." The white wolf left quickly.

Gregor smiled at her. "He brought us some breakfast. Eggs, bacon and orange juice. We'll only have to be in the box until we're out of sight of the well, so that's good." He handed over some food wrapped in a cloth napkin and a large full canteen.

Sajani was grateful for that. "Did he bring a couple more necklaces?" It might not get that hot in there, but the little magic jewelry had made things a lot more tolerable."

Gregor patted his pockets and then pulled out a couple of the rather cheap looking necklaces. "Yes," he said enthusiastically, "and he mentioned that they cost ten gold each."

That was more than both would make while working for her, especially if she deducted the days they spent in hiding. She almost worried that maybe they'd still end up alone in the desert, but then remembered the trader's reaction when she thought they'd been captured. "I need to make sure I'm a lot nicer to Farleesha," she said carefully, looking down at her hands.

“Oh yeah. That reminds me. She arranged to have Zant drive our wagon for us.” He sounded very excited. “So we’ll be able to keep reading!”

Sajani set the food and juice down on the ground near her and put her head in her hands. Taking deep breaths, she tried to quell the anger she was feeling. It felt like the merchant betrayed her. *Zant is a friend*, she told herself. *She’s been very kind*. Unfortunately, her cynical side decided to join the conversation. *Especially kind to Gregor*, it added.

Her friend’s voice was concerned. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“There’s nothing wrong,” she said quickly.

He came over near her and crouched so that his feet were all that was touching the ground. “You know,” he said and there was a hint of annoyance to his voice. “I try to be especially patient with you, because I...you’re the first person...” he let out a short sigh and continued with deep resignation. “You’re my friend.”

She looked up and smiled at him. She felt the familiar warmth around her nose and mouth, but this time, she welcomed it.

“So, I’d really appreciate it,” he said slowly, “if you wouldn’t lie to me.”

That required a little careful deniability. “I’m not sick,” she reassured him.

He gave out a long sigh, rose, and returned to sitting on his cot. “I wish you’d tell me. We’re mostly away from Rhidayar with good friends surrounding us and taking care of us. For the first time in almost two weeks, we’re safe.”

“And hiding in a crate,” she said sarcastically.

He laughed. “That’s more the Sajani I’m used to,” he said contentedly. “I’d rather be hiding in a crate surrounded by friends than be alone surrounded by humans who thought I was nothing more than a dumb animal.”

Why didn’t she just tell him about her feelings of jealousy towards Zant? What could possibly go wrong? Her cynical voice had an answer for that. *You can know for sure that he feels more comfortable and compatible with her than he does with you*. At least as long as he didn’t have to answer directly, she could hold onto some hope. *Although*, she reminded herself, *he deserves someone better than me*.

They both heard the sound of someone lifting the side of the tent and tossing something inside. They both knew what it meant. Gregor brightened. “Another note from Zant,” he said cheerfully. “It’s nice that we’re not being forgotten.”

Sajani managed a weak smile. “It’s very kind of her,” she said. At least she could say that truthfully. Kind to whom was another story, but the words were all honest.

Gregor picked up the note and read it. He handed it to her, but she didn’t look at it. There wasn’t a need. Her friend told her what it said, just like she

knew he would. “Nothing new. Just that she’ll be driving our wagon this time and we can read together.”

That made her curious, so she opened the note and read it. It was a little more exclusionary than he interpreted it.

I’ll be driving your wagon again today. We can read more of that book together.

Thinking about how he was seeing things did make her smile. Maybe it was the fact that he didn’t have much social interaction since he was ten that made it so that he automatically felt like every wolf would be included. Whatever the reason it was something she really liked about him.

He’d been eating, but he stopped when he saw her reaction. “That’s better,” he said totally misinterpreting what she was thinking. “I saw that smile.”

She picked up the food and took a few nibbles. Dinner last night had been pretty light, so she was very hungry. That seemed to embolden her friend. His smile grew deeper and he leaned over to pick up the orange juice.

Somehow she managed to return his smile and they finished their breakfast in silence. Eating together quietly reminded the copper wolf of the first few days after they left the school—how awkward the silence had seemed then. She kept feeling like she needed to say something and couldn’t always come up with courage. Less than two weeks, and it was already so different.