

WHAT ONCE WAS EDEN

CHAPTER 5: COMPETING FOR HOPE (PART 2 OF 3)

Messy entered just as they were finishing. He was cheerful and smiling broadly. “Time for the *kalura* and her *kastil* to get in their box,” he said happily.

Sajani laughed. “*Kastil*” was the Rhidayan word for butler. It wasn’t at all how she thought of him and she wasn’t really sure why others would see him that way, but it still made her smile.

Gregor thought it was funny too. He pulled the tent flap open, bowed slightly, and motioned for her to exit. “Allow me to get that for you Lady Sajani,” he said with a hint of a Riteyai accent.

Her response came naturally enough that she almost felt guilty. She raised her snout slightly, squinted in a way that was considered fashionable for certain areas of Drtithen, and walked imperiously out the tent. Gregor followed behind with a smile and Messy had trouble breathing, he was laughing so hard.

The wagon was still right outside their tent, although at some point, it’d had a water barrel added to it. Her friend ran ahead of her, hopped up on the cart and reached into the crate. Pulling a pillow from inside, he made a big deal of fluffing it before bowing again and saying, “Your divan awaits, my lady.”

That was too much for Sajani and she stopped her air and laughed. “If that’s a divan, then I’d hate to see what you call a reed mat on a stone floor.”

“Why Lady Sajani,” he said still in his pretend accent, “surely you mean to say a down mattress on marble tile?” He broke his character too and smiled at her.

As she was climbing up into the crate she told him, “You know,” I’m not really sure *kastil* fits. What’s the Rhidayan word for ‘paladin?’”

That caused a fit of stuttering for which she wasn’t prepared.

Messy answered for him. “It’s ‘*melik*,’” he said, “and if the *kalura* had a champion, I suppose it might be a little like your friend there.” He paused a long moment and then added. “Maybe stutter a little less.”

Gregor quieted and climbed into the crate next to her. He smiled. What he said really surprised her. “You...” he started. “You really deserve someone better than an escaped slave.” It was spoken softly enough that she was pretty sure Messy didn’t hear it. “But,” he added, an escaped slave as your butler might not be *too* bad.”

The wagon shook a little as the cook jumped up on it, so she didn’t dare reply, even if she could figure out what to say. He sounded serious enough. It’d never been his style to joke in that way before. The lid was placed over them and though she was pretty sure Messy would be able to hear her she placed her hand on his shoulder and dared to say, “Slave, *kastil* or *melik*,

I'm still walking with you." It wouldn't make much sense to the cook anyway. They could feel it when he jumped off. At about the same time, they could hear the sound of someone hooking the horses onto the cart.

He responded calmly and surprisingly clearly. "Thank you."

Since he seemed able to keep speaking, she left her hand there and asked by way of testing things. "And where are you leading today? I'll have confidence in your navigation, I promise."

"I was thinking we'd go for a bit..." he started, still speaking clearly.

The wagon shook as someone climbed up and they heard Zant's voice. "I'm here, but Farleesha made me promise to not have you start reading until we're out of sight of the well. Horses are almost in place."

"Go for a bit, what?" she prompted.

His only response was all stuttering again so she removed her hand. It didn't seem to help.

A thought came to her, "Is it Zant that's making you nervous?" she whispered softly enough it wouldn't be heard.

Gregor got a very pained expression on his face and nodded quickly.

She tried to give a sympathetic smile. So he didn't want to express his feelings about the person driving the wagon? It wasn't even the most logical possibility for what he was saying, but she skipped right to that wrong one.

"There," he whispered suddenly. "That look there. It's the one you've been having these last two days. I've never seen that expression on you before. What's it mean?"

A partial truth might work. She hoped. "It's what happens when I think of being in jail for two years." *And not being around you*, she thought.

The look he gave her clearly said he didn't believe her. She didn't want to lie to him. Especially if it hurt the way it looked like it did.

An answer didn't have to be given because Zant said suddenly, "What's this about jail?"

Before she could say anything Gregor stuttered out, "No... No... Nothing. It's... It's... just a little like... a little like..."

Sajani put her hand on her friend's shoulder again. Her intent was to get him to stop speaking, but that's not what happened.

"It's a little like being in a jail," he said clearly.

All of her felt warm. She reached over and gave him a quick hug. While she was near him she whispered. "My *malik*." She was hoping he might respond but wasn't surprised when he didn't. Releasing him quickly, she returned to her side of the crate. "Actually," she began, "we were also talking about what'll happen when we get back."

"Why would Gregor be going to jail?" Zant asked.

Sajani was a little surprised the other she-wolf would think that. "He's not," she said sadly. "I am."

The response was nearly screamed. "What?" Zant yelled.

A distant voice, it might have been Farleesha's, said. "Hey there, stop talking to the cloth."

Sajani continued her explanation. Gregor had a slight smile on his face. Was he happy that she was admitting she'd be away for two years. Was he happy to know that Zant would be told that she'd have no competition from the copper wolf? "I did some things—things I really regret now, before I went off to school. My friends...well, they testified at a trial while I was gone, and I'll be serving a couple years in jail when I get back."

About that time, the cart started moving. That seemed to give Zant the courage to start speaking again. "How dare you?" she hissed.

That was a rather confusing response. "I said I regret it," Sajani responded morosely. It'd taken a while to feel like that, but she really did.

"Not that," Zant said stiltedly. "I heard you were calling Gregor your *kastil* this morning. That seemed infuriating enough, but now it's worse. What right do you have, a common criminal, to think of a nice person like him as nothing more than a servant?"

Gregor started to say something but was stuttering. She did her best to interpret for him. "I did no such thing."

"Don't lie to me," Zant hissed. "Malanda heard your little play acting as she was passing by your tent this morning."

With what little she knew of the human, Malanda probably found it amusing.

Gregor's stuttering intensified, but he didn't raise his voice.

Neither did she, though she had a strong desire to scream. "Messy made a comment and we were having fun with it."

That didn't seem to satisfy the other she-wolf. "Okay, so maybe you didn't start calling him that, but you gave people the impression. You had to be doing something..."

The direction of Gregor's stuttering seemed to change, but Sajani was no longer able to figure out what he wanted to say.

"I treat him like a friend. His friendship is important..." the copper wolf started defensively.

"Important to making *you* feel important maybe," Zant said. "Don't you get enough attention for being *Miss Adida*? Do you really have to stoop to driving attention from a nice person that deserves it?"

That was a little too personal. True, she'd often thought that she didn't deserve Gregor's friendship, but hearing that from someone else was a totally different colored pelt. Sajani tried her best to foster a friendship between Zant and her friend. Someone else would have done a much better job, she was sure, but that didn't mean she wasn't giving an effort.

Gregor was still trying to say something, but she could no longer hear him. "At least I don't have to tear someone else down to help myself feel better. You've only just met me and somehow you're completely qualified to tell me exactly how I should or shouldn't act."

Now both the she-wolves were starting to raise their voices. “I know when someone is too caught up with herself and takes for granted the friendship of someone else.” Zant persisted.

At the same time she was saying that, Sajani was saying, “At least I don’t feel like I’m the only person worthy...”

Gregor’s voice was sure and loud. “I’m right here. Maybe you should ask me what I think.”

Something in Sajani snapped. She turned to Gregor and said, “I don’t care what you think!”

Zant also responded, but she said, “No one asked you!”

Both of the she-wolves realized their mistake immediately and things went very quiet. A horse rode up near them and Alonzo’s voice said. “You need to keep it down until we’re just a little farther out.” The sound of his horse retreated.

Sajani looked over at her friend. There was a single tear on his cheek and his eyes looked quickly away from her.

Great, she thought to herself, I only had one friend and now I’ve proven I don’t even deserve that.

The two she-wolves quickly learned the consequences of their actions. Apparently when Alonzo said they only needed to stay quiet a little longer, he was very serious. Either that or he’d heard the exchange and thought it was better to get the *kalura* out of the box. The latter ended up being the most correct.

Sajani heard the chains on the horses clank like someone had grasped them and the wagon slowed. She heard Alonzo’s voice saying, “Okay Zant, I’ll be teaming this wagon for today. You take my horse over to Marc and tell him I want him to ride checking on the other teams. He’ll take that horse.”

“I can just team here,” Zant began.

Alonzo didn’t let her finish. His voice was harsh. “You won’t be teaming any wagon. Jackel was already on backup for Marc’s wagon. *You’ll* be walking with the rest of your tent.”

The wagon shook hard like someone was getting off at the same time someone was jumping up. A moment later a little light entered their box. Not a lot, just enough to show that dawn had broken recently. Sajani couldn’t bring herself to stand, but that was okay since Gregor jumped up immediately. He spoke very clearly, but also quickly. “I think I need to be on another wagon, sir.”

She saw Alonzo’s face appear above her. He spoke to Gregor. “Messy’s already on his way. You’ll be walking with him for the day.”

Her friend nodded as he clamored out of the box and he was soon out of sight. She felt and heard him jump down from the wagon.

Sajani looked down at her feet, but still managed to ask. “And where am I going?”

“Out of the box, for starters,” Alonzo said in almost a growl.

She complied but kept looking at her feet and hands. There was no way she could meet the guide’s eyes. Sajani started to get down off the wagon, but the male wolf stopped her. “Whoa there,” he said. “Messy had already said you might be sick, so the *vhemato*’s orders are very specific.”

The accusation of being ill didn’t even phase her.

“I’m supposed to allow you to ride a wagon and,” he paused briefly, “I’m to make sure the *kalura* doesn’t bite anyone.”