

What Once Was Eden

CHAPTER 5: COMPETING FOR HOPE (PART 4 OF 4)

When the caravan stopped for the night, Alonzo personally led her over to her tentmates. Talandie and Malanda tried to politely greet her, but she stayed quiet and looked down until after Alonzo left. Zant wasn't there. The two others mostly stayed quiet, only speaking to give basic instructions on what needed to be done. The tent went up pretty quickly. Once that was done, Talandie came up to her and placed her hand on Sajani's shoulder. "I know it's been a rough day for you," she said, "but it's our turn to get the cafeteria set up."

Sajani just nodded and started towards the central part of the camp. The gray wolf didn't release her shoulder, so she had to stop quickly.

Talandie said gently, "We'll cover for you, if you want. Maybe you should just get cleaned up and lay down."

"I'm *not* sick," Sajani said angrily.

The other she-wolf managed a smile. "So we've been told," she said simply, "We can bring your food to you later, but a little rest might help..."

Sajani wanted to agree but couldn't. "Not if I'm alone," she said quickly and sadly.

The hand came off her shoulder and Talandie turned to face Malanda. They seemed to be talking with their eyes. "I'll just...run ahead," the gray wolf said vaguely. "Malanda will take you there." The other she-wolf hurried off and the human came up next to her. It wasn't like Sajani needed directions. Malanda said cheerfully, "I really like that dark gray on you. I was thinking originally black, but this adds enough contrast without being too bleak."

"Thank you," Sajani said gruffly. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to say to that. After that the human seemed to abandon any attempt at conversation.

When they arrived at where the mess tent was being unloaded, she saw Talandie standing a little way off wringing her hands. Her ears were down, and her tail was twitching. After a moment it all made sense. The gray wolf spotted something and started walking quickly away from the approaching pair. She walked up to Zant, who had just wandered into the area. Talandie began talking quickly. The younger wolf looked upset and shook her head once, but Talandie placed one hand on her hip and pointed out with the other. Sajani got into range just in time to hear the older wolf say angrily, "...you can take it up with Farleesha then."

Zant looked Sajani in the eye and scowled before walking quickly away in the direction that her sister had pointed. The copper wolf was pretty sure that her only expression had been confusion, although given only a moment more she would have gladly scowled back.

Messy's voice came from behind, "If you don't mind Malanda," he said with his usual cheerfulness, "I can use the *kalura's* help getting my equipment into place. There's some that're not too heavy but require someone tall to move."

More than requiring height, it required that she not be around anyone other than the overly cheerful cook. The tent was assembled around them as they worked and when they were done, Messy walked with her back to her own tent.

Sajani could hear her friends talking cheerfully inside, but felt like if she did walk in, there'd be a sudden awkward silence. She really wanted to talk to Gregor—say she was sorry. With how he looked when he left, she was pretty sure it wouldn't be nearly enough. Perhaps it was better this way—walk away now and the hurt of leaving him when they got to Drithen would never happen.

She started to go looking for Gregor anyway when Alonzo's voice spoke from off to her side. "Where are you off to, *kalura*?" he asked.

There was nothing spiteful or suspicious about how he said it, but Sajani was still reluctant to answer. She looked down at her hands and said quietly. "I wanted to see Gregor. Can you tell me where to find him?"

Alonzo got a very sympathetic look on his face and answered. "I'm sorry. The *vhemato* was pretty clear. You three are to be kept apart until she says otherwise."

He hadn't mentioned that before. Not surprising really, since it would have made her even more temperamental and moody. She looked down and started into the tent.

Alonzo added politely, "I'll arrange for you to meet Farleesha tomorrow morning and put in a good word for you."

Sajani ignored that and prepared herself to meet the ladies inside. Tonight would be the first night where Gregor wasn't nearby while she slept in almost two weeks. It shouldn't be a problem though. There were other people there still.

Talandie and Malanda both greeted her enthusiastically.

Sajani responded by saying, "hi," in a dull monotone. She wondered if those two were just being nice out of fear. Seemed unlikely. Malanda had been so kind when she first showed up. It surprised the copper wolf a little that Talandie was being so civil. It was her sister that people were saying Sajani had tried to bite. Well, she hadn't actually heard anyone say that, but she felt like they were.

The human didn't give up. "There's plenty of water if you want to get cleaned up. And oh," she perked up even more, "Farleesha brought something by for you. I put it in your box."

It probably wasn't a snake, so Sajani stepped near her cot and took a look. Sitting on top was something black made of cloth. She reached down and lifted it out. It was a dress—a very nice and expensive one. It wasn't something

one would wear to a really formal occasion, but it was something nice for going to church or a special event.

Malanda mirrored her thoughts, “Not something you’ll wear out here, but I’m sure you’ll find a use for it at home.”

Once I’m out of jail, she thought. “Not sure why she gave it to me, but I’ll try to remember to thank her.” Sajani tried to sound grateful. Gregor would want her to be grateful... That was the wrong thing to think. Now she felt worse.

“She didn’t say,” Talandie said in what sounded like a forced tone. “Farleesha showed up just after lunch. She handed it to me, said I needed to get on a wagon and alter it to fit you, then put it in your box. I tried to make her understand that I’d do a bit better job when we were stopped, but she was very insistent.”

After the fight? That was interesting. “Thank you,” Sajani offered. She meant it sincerely but knew it probably didn’t come out that way. “I’m sure it’ll be very well sewn. You did a great job on the rest.” She did manage a smile and it was returned by the other two.

Malanda finally did a little to resolve the tension. “I understand you’re worried about what happened earlier today, but we’re your friends. We’re not here to judge. We just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Might be a little more comfortable if Zant’s sister wasn’t here looking at her. Sajani managed another smile, this one more sincere. “Thank you,” she said, “I was a little worried others thought I’d gone rabid and was biting random people.”

There was a little bit of a pause and then Talandie said, “You didn’t bite anyone?”

Malanda’s eyes when wide and Sajani nearly burst into tears when the other vykati started laughing. “I’m joking!” she said. “No one thinks you bit anyone.”

Sajani tried to go from near crying to laughing and it didn’t work. It wasn’t funny to her, but she’d hoped to at least not look totally offended.

Malanda looked over at the gray wolf and chided her, “It might be called a good effort to cheer her up, if it hadn’t failed so spectacularly.”

Talandie came over and gave her a hug, “I’m sorry,” she said honestly. “I meant to lighten the mood, not horrify you.” Malanda came over and joined the hug. It made Sajani a little nervous, but it did help her feel more accepted. The gray wolf continued. “I know I’ve wanted to bite my sister sometimes.”

That earned an honest smile. “I didn’t really want to bite her.” Sajani said and then laughed. “Who am I kidding? If I couldn’t bite her, I wanted scratch her, but that doesn’t mean I would have.” Her friends joined her laughter and the hug broke up and the three returned to their cots.

“So,” Talandie suggested, “do you want to take the first shower?”

“No thanks,” Sajani said. Her spirits were rising slowly. “I was just going to spend the evening sharpening my claws.”

The eyes of her friends went very wide when she said that and at first she had absolutely no idea why. There was a long silence before she figured it out and corrected herself. “*Filing* my claws,” she amended. “I haven’t done anything with them since right before I left about two weeks ago.” She held her hands up where the other two could see them. “They look terrible and rough.”

Talandie nodded her agreement and once Malanda saw that she nodded as well. “We’ll leave you to that,” the gray wolf said.

It was a lot less awkward after that. Still a bit tense, but not like it was when Sajani first entered. Going through the routine of trimming and filing her nails helped sooth her at least. When she was done, she borrowed some nail oil from the other vykati and admired her shiny hand claws.

That task done; she lay herself down on her cot. Her friends had long since finished getting cleaned up and were playing a quick game of incant. Perhaps if they hadn’t been playing, they might have noticed that she quietly cried herself to sleep.