

# *Hopalot and Hungry Fox*

*Reg Down*  
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Hopalot was unhappy. He was terribly hungry. It had been raining for five days and he was stuck in his burrow, hunched up on his straw bed, trying to keep warm. Hopalot didn't like rain. That was why he hadn't gone out. He hopped to the entrance, hoping the rain had stopped. He stuck his twitching nose out. Instantly it was wet. He wiped it with his paw and went back to bed to wait some more as his stomach growled ever louder.

The reason why Hopalot didn't like rain was his ears. When he was outside, every few minutes he had to sit on his hind legs and raise his ears high. He'd turn his head this way and that, listening for Hungry Fox. That's what his mother had taught him.

"If you don't look and listen for Hungry Fox," she said, wagging her paw at him. "then Hungry Fox won't be Hungry Fox. He'll be Full Fox! And we don't want that, do we?"

Hopalot nodded and did what he was told. But this is where the rain came in, and why Hopalot didn't like to nibble grass on rainy days. As soon as he sat up and raised his long and furry ears the rain ran into his ear holes. Hopalot didn't like this one bit. He didn't like the feeling of cold water trickling into his head. He didn't like the way the world suddenly seemed quieter and far away. That was not good. No, it wasn't. So Hopalot didn't feed on grass and dandelions when it was raining. No, he didn't. Not if he could help it.

The other rabbits thought he was silly. "Just shake your head and the water is gone," they told him. But Hopalot didn't like to shake his head. When he was small his little sister warned him about shaking his head. "Be careful, Hopalot. Shake your head too hard and your floppy ears will fall off and fly away like butterflies!" That's what his sister had said, and that's why he didn't.

But Hopalot was hungry. Very hungry. He hopped to the entrance for the hundredth time. Just then his stomach growled. It growled louder than ever before. Hopalot poked his head out and cautiously looked around. Already his head was wet, but there was no one to

be seen. Not even the crows or wild geese were waddling on the meadow. Hopalog went outside and nibbled grass ravenously. He kept his ears flat and didn't let in the rain. Bit by bit he wandered further from his burrow.

Suddenly he felt the ground tremble under his feet. Instantly he sprung into the air and spun around. Hungry Fox was running towards him! He was almost at Hopalog's burrow, blocking his way home. Off Hopalog raced across the meadow, his white tail bobbing up and down and Hungry Fox hard on his heels. He dodged left, he dodged right, he zipped under a fence, but the fox kept up with him and flew over the fence with ease. Hopalog plunged into a hedgerow, fleeing through the bushes and branches—but the fox stayed on his fluffy tail. Back into the meadow Hopalog raced, making a beeline for his burrow. He could hear Hungry Fox breathing heavily behind him. Closer and closer the fox came, gnashing his teeth. Hopalog leaped and dove head first into his burrow just as Hungry Fox snapped his jaws shut—SNAP!!!

Hopalog was safe. He collapsed panting onto the floor in the darkness, his heart pounding as he thanked his lucky stars. After he caught his breath he noticed that the burrow was dark, much darker than normal.

"I wonder why it's so dark?" thought Hopalog, hopping towards the entrance. "I can't see a thing."

He ran straight into Hungry Fox's snout. Hopalog leaped back in fear.

"Help!" mumbled Hungry Fox.

Hopalog fled as fast as his hoppety legs could carry him to his bedroom at the far end of the burrow. He stayed there for a long time. Finally his heart settled down.

"What did Hungry Fox mean when he cried for help?" wondered Hopalog. "That's a strange thing for a fox to say."

He waited some more, just to be sure that the fox had left, and retraced his steps to the entrance. There was still no glimmer of light and no breath of fresh air. The smell of fox was strong as Hopalog crept forward, peering into the dark.

"Help!" mumbled Hungry Fox miserably.

"Help who?" asked Hopalog, staying a safe distance back.

"Help me," said Hungry Fox through clenched teeth. "I'm stuck."

"You? Stuck?" said Hopalog.

"Yes," whined Hungry Fox.

Suddenly the fox struggled fiercely and Hopalot fled back to his room. He waited. Patiently he waited.

"It must be nighttime by now," thought Hopalot at last. "Hungry Fox is surely gone."

Cautiously he crept back to the entrance. Hungry Fox was still blocking the doorway.

"You really are stuck, aren't you?" said Hopalot.

"Yes," said Hungry Fox. "I was playing tag with your tail, but you cheated and ran for your burrow."

"I'm supposed to run away from you," said Hopalot. "You're Hungry Fox!"

"Oh no," said Hungry Fox. "We were playing tail tag. When my nose touches your tail then it's your turn to chase me! You cheated and fled down here just as I was leaping towards you. My nose followed your tail, and my head followed my nose, and now I'm stuck in your burrow and can't get free. See, I can hardly open my mouth because my jaw is jammed shut."

Hungry Fox struggled and struggled again, whining pitifully. "Help me, Hopalot," he whimpered. "Help."

Hopalot felt sorry for Hungry Fox. He rushed forward and pushed on his nose. He pushed and pushed, but the fox's head stayed stuck.

"Ouch," said Hungry Fox. "Your nails are scratchy on my delicate nose, Master Hopalot. Here, let me grin and you can push on my white teeth—they are hard and firm."

So Hopalot pushed and pushed on Hungry Fox's front teeth, but the fox stayed stuck.

"It's no use," said Hopalot. "I am not strong enough."

"What are we going to do?" asked Hungry Fox, sounding even more miserable.

"I don't know," said Hopalot, scratching an ear with his hind leg.

Hungry Fox and Hopalot pondered a while.

"Perhaps you can pull my tail," said Hungry Fox at last.

"I can't get outside," said Hopalot. "My burrow is new and I only have one doorway."

"Then dig another!" snarled Hungry Fox.

Hopalot leaped back in shock.

"I mean, please dig another doorway, dear Hopalot," said Hungry Fox sweetly. "I'm in such a fluster and annoyed with myself."

So Hopalot went down the burrow a ways and began to dig another passage. It was slow going.

"Hurry up," said Hungry Fox. "My tail is soaked with rain and freezing cold."

Hopalot hurried as fast as he could. He scratched and dug until his paws ached. Finally he came to grass roots and knew he was close.

"Almost there," he shouted to Hungry Fox. "Just a few minutes more."

"Lovely," said Hungry Fox. "You are such a sweetheart for helping your playmate."

Hopalot dug the last few inches and broke through. It was morning and the sun was low and red in the sky. The rain had stopped but the grass was cold and wet. Hopalot stepped outside and looked around. Six feet away was the fox, his head and neck completely down the burrow. Hopalot went over.

"I'm going to pull your tail," he said, putting his hand on the fox's shoulder.

"What?" said Hungry Fox. "I can't hear you."

"I'm going to pull your tail," shouted Hopalot.

"Okay," said Hungry Fox from inside the earth. "You pull and I'll push with my legs."

So Hopalot grabbed Hungry Fox's tail and pulled. He pulled and pulled while the fox pushed and pushed—but his head wouldn't come out of the hole.

"Now what?" asked Hopalot.

"I don't know," moaned Hungry Fox. "Please stay close, dear Hopalot. You are my only friend."

Hopalot sat a while. Now and then he nibbled grass because he was hungry—but he felt so sorry for poor Hungry Fox that he stopped for guilt. By and by another rabbit appeared at the bottom of the meadow. Soon two more joined him. They were Hopalot's neighbors who lived in an old quarry.

"What are you doing, Hopalot?" they shouted. "Are you crazy? That body and tail belong to Hungry Fox. He's got his head down your burrow."

"He's stuck," said Hopalot, running to them. "We were playing tail tag and I cheated by diving down my burrow. Hungry Fox dove after me and now he can't get his head out. I'm trying to help him."

"Help Hungry Fox!" cried the other rabbits.

"Yes," said Hopalot. "I pushed his nose, and when that didn't work I pushed his sharp and glistening teeth. Finally I had to dig another doorway and pull on his tail—but that didn't help either."

More rabbits emerged out of the quarry to see what all the fuss was about. Hopalot had to repeat his story. The rabbits stared at Hopalot in wonder and awe.

"Come help me pull him free," begged Hopalot, but the other rabbits shook their heads.

Hopalot went back to Hungry Fox.

"I'm going to pull your tail again," said Hopalot. "I want to show my rabbit friends that you are harmless. Perhaps they'll come to help."

"Good idea," said Hungry Fox. "You are such a clever rabbit."

So Hopalot pulled and pulled and Hungry Fox pushed and pushed—but still he stayed stuck.

Meanwhile, the other rabbits hopped closer and closer out of curiosity. They began to believe that Hungry Fox really was stuck and that they were safe from him.

"See," said Hopalot, patting Hungry Fox's flank. "He's quite tame and won't hurt you. Come pull."

So all the rabbits grabbed Hungry Fox's tail and pulled. They pulled and pulled and pulled—but Hungry Fox stayed stuck. They stood around him in a circle and scratched their heads, not knowing what to do.

"How about I fetch Rover, the farmer's dog," shouted Hopalot at last.

"Oh! Oh!" cried Hungry Fox. "Why would you do that?"

"I've seen Rover play tail tag with you, just like you play tail tag with me," said Hopalot. "Rover is much stronger than us. He has a huge mouth and strong jaws. He'll grab your tail and pull you out in a jiffy."

"Oh no, I don't think so," said Hungry Fox quickly. "Rover is so dimwitted that he does not play tail tag properly. He always chases me but never lets me chase him."

"But you never let me chase you," said Hopalot. "What's the difference?"

"That's because you have never let me catch you," said Hungry Fox. "You are too sneaky. I'll tell you what: you can chase me all you want as soon as I am free. How about that?"

"Okay," agreed Hopalot. "But what are we going to do to set you free?"

"Dig me out," said Hungry Fox. "It's the only way. Get your wonderful friends to help."

So Hopalot started digging away the dirt around Hungry Fox's neck. "Come on," he called to his neighbors. "Come help!"

Soon the rabbits were digging around the fox's neck. Bit by bit they dug deeper and deeper. Now and then Hungry Fox wiggled and pulled.

"I think it's working," shouted Hungry Fox. "Keep digging, my tasty friends."

"Tasty!" cried the rabbits, jumping back.

"No, no," said Hungry Fox. "I said hasty, not tasty. I'm impressed that you folk are digging so hastily. Keep digging!"

So Hopalot and his friends kept digging. Soon they saw the tips of Hungry Fox's ears.

"Almost done, Friend Fox," they shouted. "We can see your ears. You'll soon be free."

"Oh, yummy! I can't wait to eat," said Hungry Fox.

"Yummy!" cried the rabbits, leaping back again. "What do you mean?"

"I didn't say yummy," said Hungry Fox quickly. "I said: Oh, bunnies, I can't wait to be free!"

But the rabbits didn't hear Hungry Fox. They were listening to Rover running across the meadow towards them. "Bow-wow! Bow-wow!" he barked.

The quarry rabbits scattered back to their warren. But Hopalot stayed. He wasn't afraid of foxes and dogs any more. He knew that they only played the game of tail tag.

"What's that I hear?" cried Hungry Fox anxiously.

"It's Rover the farmer's dog come to play tail tag," said Hopalot. "He'll be here in a second."

Hungry Fox whimpered and pulled mightily. He struggled and shook. With a painful yelp his head popped out of the hole.

"You're it!" shouted Hopalot as Hungry Fox took off like a rocket. Hopalot chased after him as quick as lightning and Rover chased after both of them. Round and round the meadow they raced, the fox yelping, the dog barking and Hopalot flying between them. Hungry Fox must have been weak from spending the night with his head in the burrow for Hopalot caught up to him easily. He leaped forward and bit Hungry Fox's bushy tail.

"Ouch!" yelped Hungry Fox, thinking it was the dog.

"Gotcha!" shouted Hopalot, running away. "I'm it—come and get me!"

But Hungry Fox ignored Hopalot and kept on his way. Over the fence he leaped and through the hedgerow with Rover hot on his heels. Soon they had vanished from sight.

"Spoil sports and party poopers!" shouted Hopalot after them, shaking his fist angrily.

The next day, when Hungry Fox came by to play tail tag, Hopalot refused to play any games. He wouldn't even come out of his burrow to talk in a civilized manner as Hungry Fox suggested.

"You don't play by the rules of the game," said Hopalot, moping in his room. "I'm not playing with you anymore."

And he didn't.