

Fridolf's Dilemma

“And we mourned very... much at Alpha’s passing.” Beta’s expression showed that she had trouble getting the words out as her cold, icy tone rang out across the tundra. Many of the listening wolves knew that Beta and Alpha had a big fight the night before he was killed and they pawed their snouts nervously. At least some of them suspected Beta of killing her mate, but were too scared to speak out. She was in a position of power and she was known for being very strict. Also, they didn’t want another inexperienced leader replacing her or, wolf gods forbid, that young upstart Fridolf. Where was she, anyways?

The young upstart Fridolf in question was silently fuming at the back of the pack. She was a young general and would be second in command to Beta. That is, if she hadn’t been stripped of command by that (insert choice of obscene insults here). The last Fridolf had seen of her mentor and deeply trusted confidante, Alpha, was after another unsuccessful hunt. Alpha and Beta had been arguing while they walked into the forest together. A few minutes later, there was a howl. Fridolf and a few older wolves came running. Beta had claimed a tiger had killed Alpha, whose bloody and clawed body was splayed out on the grass, but Fridolf knew she was wrong for two reasons. For one thing, tigers only lived at the summit of the mountain and never came down. Also, there was no smell of a tiger anywhere near the site. But both the elderly wolves sense of smell and logic was failing them, so they believed Beta. Beta then seized control of the pack and unofficially made herself the new alpha.

The pack was holding a funeral for their leader. They were in a clearing where the snow gleamed and reflected the sunlight like a mirror maze. It was nearing the end of winter and the wolf pack looked like a mound of gray fur as they huddled together. The pack wolves differed in size, but they were all dark grey and very strong.

After many more lines that Fridolf knew Beta wasn't sincere about, Beta called Fridolf to the front. "And now... our inexperienced used-to-be general. Would you care to state your defense as to why we shouldn't exile you?"

Fridolf was raging inside. Wolves only survived because they were with the pack. Exile would be a slow death from starvation or worse. She longed to tackle Beta and throw her off the nearest cliff. No one would be able to stop her... except the entire pack waiting not five wolf-lengths away, many of whom were stronger and faster than she. Fridolf decided to hit on a soft spot with the other wolves.

"Alpha thought I was a good leader. Take that how you will." she said.

A lot of murmuring began in the crowd. They all knew that Alpha was very wise and was a good judge of character. His biggest success was when he showed the other wolves how to slightly muffle their footsteps. Hunting success rates had gone up higher than the sun at midday. Since Alpha had trusted her, shouldn't they trust her too?

"Give her a chance. A challenge!" suggested one wolf from the crowd.

Beta growled. "I will not-" then a smile started to form on her face. "Okay! Your challenge is to bring me a tiger. Alive!"

Fridolf howled. "You've got to be kidding me! That's impossible! What's the real task?"

Beta shrugged. "Take it or leave it. Go into exile, or get killed doing the task. I couldn't care less which one you pick."

Fridolf rolled her eyes. She didn't need Alpha to tell her that Beta was lying about not caring. Wolves loved spectacles. Should she take exile? At least then, she would have a chance, though a miniscule one, to find another pack before she needed to eat again. Wolf packs were very territorial and only the ones that were bloodthirsty invaded the space of another pack, so other packs would only be found far away. The pack Fridolf was talking to was very strong, and no pack had fought it for years.

There were rumors of two-legged animals called "humans." other wolves had domesticated and joined them. Fridolf sniffed. *Traitors*. But they might be Fridolf's only chance.

But a few moons before he departed the world, Alpha had told her. *If anything were to happen to me, promise me you will do your best not to let Beta take over the pack, or at least try not to let her stay in control for long. It would go to the dogs! Er... cats, I mean.* Fridolf shook her body to get the snow out. She couldn't let Alpha down.

"Fine. I accept." she said.

Beta scratched behind her ear and beamed. "Great! Off you go now. We have important things to do."

As Fridolf stalked away with her tail between her legs up into the mountains, she looked back and saw Beta taking a nap.

Fridolf found a clearing where the smell of tiger lingered. The snow hanging off the evergreen trees were at varying heights. There were plenty of leaves and branches lying abandoned on the brown dirt like tombstones.

Fridolf contemplated, but ideas ran away from her. How was she going to do this? What had Alpha said? Let them make the first move? No, the tiger would just tear her to bits. Use your strengths? Fridolf wasn't fast or strong, but she was smart. How would that help in a fight? Unless...

What if she didn't have to fight? She just had to bring it in alive. If she could snare it, that would work. But how? Wolves were good at digging, so Fridolf decided to dig a pit. This took many days, and Fridolf grew hungry. But she persevered, as all wolves did even after being starved for several days. She had little sleep and grew extremely fatigued.

At last, when the pit was about twenty feet deep and ten feet across, Fridolf started dragging branches over the mouth of the pit. For what she had in mind, she had to make sure it was strong, but not too strong.

She then proceeded to put leaves and dirt on the branches until it was indistinguishable from the ground around it. Marking it with a scattered circle of branches around the edges, she went back to the pack.

A few hours later, she returned with a stolen deer from the pack's food stores. She placed the deer in the middle of the pit and sat next to it. She steeled herself. She would have to time this perfectly. Then she howled.

Just like Fridolf predicted, a tiger came running, attracted to the scent and alerted by Fridolf's howl. It stalked her for a while. It took all of Fridolf's willpower not to run

away. She had to act as oblivious to the tiger as the air was to the earth. She caught glimpses of the great beast, a half-hidden massive tank with orange fur. To calm herself, she breathed slowly, in and out. In and out.

Suddenly, the tiger pounced. Fridolf's ears twitched as she heard the tiger. She leapt out of the way just in time. The branch structure was built perfectly; it was strong enough to hold a scrawny wolf, but not strong enough to hold a big tiger with all its momentum. The makeshift tarp covering crumpled underneath the tiger and it fell into the pit, howling with outrage. And so, she walked back to the pack with a big grin on her face.

Beta snarled. "No. You're lying! You are a weakling and I refuse to believe that you are capable enough to do what no wolf has ever done in living history."

Fridolf smiled and started to lick the dirt off of herself. "Come and see. There's no harm in doing so."

Beta growled again. "You could be trying to get me onto the edge of a cliff and push me off or some other trap! I don't trust you, Fridolf, and I never will." The ferocity she said this with was enough to make the toughest of armies back down.

"Captain paranoid." Fridolf muttered under her breath.

One of the other pack members stepped forward timidly. "I don't see how she would trap you. I mean, she's so scrawny..."

As Fridolph glared at the wolf that had spoken up, Beta contemplated. "Hm. Okay. I will go and if Fridolph was lying, it would be a shame if she had an... *accident*. Let us go."

Fridolf dreamed about the night before. How Beta had been so shocked when she saw the tiger in the pit. How when Fridolf had returned to the pack, Beta had mysteriously “decided” to stay up in the mountains. The pack was so surprised and awed that Fridolf had actually captured a mountain that they unanimously promoted her to the new Alpha. A female had never *officially* been the pack alpha before, but then again, no wolf had ever captured a tiger.

Fridolf felt extremely accomplished. Who of all wolves would have thought that her, an underweight youngling, would have captured a tiger? She felt like she had unlocked a new part of herself, one that worked in perfect sync with the environment around her and grew a lot smarter. She fell asleep peacefully that night, this time as the pack Alpha.