

WHAT ONCE WAS EDEN

CHAPTER 1: STRANDED (PART 1 OF 1)

The Uvall Desert in Rhidayar is the second largest desert in the world of Terah. It makes up a little over eight percent of the nation's land and would be completely unpopulated if the rest of the continent didn't make such heavy use of the western shores for trade and transportation.

Two young vykati—a brown male and a copper furred female—were just outside one of the major shipping towns, East Oasis, and were surveying the damage from a recent sandstorm. Their plan had been to take refuge in the small town and hope to find fellow wolves that could aid them in crossing the desert. That plan was shattered when they learned that the town was already aware of their fugitive status.

“So now what?” Sajani, the copper wolf, asked. It didn't look too hopeful. She was pretty sure they could find the town again if need be, but both had decided that wasn't a safe idea.

“I read once that the caravans follow a set of stone markers to find their way to the next oasis.” Gregor said hopefully. “If we can find one of those, we should be able to make our way.”

“Three days of food and a little water,” she complained. “Maybe we'll be lucky and run into a caravan.” He'd begun walking so she followed him. “So how big are these markers?”

“No idea,” he said cheerfully. “I'm sure we'll know them when we see them.”

“If we see them,” she added.



Representative Modette was waiting outside Benayle's office when the Alpha returned from breakfast. The two had just sat down and exchanged greetings when the politician came straight to the point. “Lord Riteyai has requested that the Lords hear opening arguments on his intention to declare war on Rhidayar. There isn't a sponsor yet in the Council for a matching declaration, but it's only a matter of time.”

This wasn't news to Benayle. Riteyai had contacted him personally before speaking to the Lords. The noble had been directly responsible for the creation of the Alpha's position and while they disagreed and argued sometimes, their relationship so far had been built on mutual respect. That respect was wearing very thin at the moment.

Benayle's only response was to smile at the representative.

“You seem awfully calm, considering your country is about to go to war,” Modette said. There was a chill to his voice.

“Do you still trust me?” the leader asked.

“Yes,” there was no hesitation in his response, “but the amount of support I can offer is growing thin. I have a responsibility to my constituents and they’re very frightened right now.”

The old wolf wished there was something he could do to calm those fears. “Are you a faithful person?” he asked.

“I attend two services every weekend—one for Gajani and one for Sajah. I represent a farming community and it’s a good chance to meet up with...”

Benayle politely interrupted. “I’m sorry,” he apologized, “but perhaps I wasn’t clear enough. I’m not asking if you’re a religious person, I’m asking if you’re a faithful one.”

Modette took a moment to think, “I believe,” he said, “but much more than that, to be honest, is a bit beyond me. I haven’t witnessed anything that shows faith can make a difference.”

Benayle nodded once and said quietly and firmly, “I’m not a religious person. Outside of weekend service, I hardly pay any attention to the requirements of our creed.” He paused and gave the representative a chance to speak. When that opportunity wasn’t taken he continued. “*I am* a very faithful person. I believe there are forces at work trying actively to keep our people safe.”

His words angered the other wolf. “And you’re banking all of our safety and continued freedom on nothing more than a base ‘feeling’ that may or may not be real?” the politician shouted. “Sir, that isn’t nearly enough for me. I need to know something concrete.”

The Alpha kept his calm. “In our last discussion, you said that you trusted me.”

“And I do,” Modette admitted, “but I can’t put my trust in something that can’t be seen—in a feeling someone else may or may not have. I assumed you had some information that warranted your inaction, not just a nebulous desire.”

“I have both,” Benayle said firmly. “I’m basing my decision on what I know. Our best hope—a hope I’m backing up with faith—is to not act on what’s happening.

The tension the room noticeably decreased. “Then you have my continued support,” Modette said with conviction, “but if this ever comes down to a matter of blind faith, I’ll throw my support to our military strength, rather than rely on someone else’s feelings.”



The first thing Farnsbeck saw when he opened his eyes, was Magenta. She’d taken off her mask and that made his first conscious sight a rather pleasant one. “You’re awake!” she said with relief. “You gave me quite the scare.”

“My dear,” he said calmly. “That poison gave *me* quite a scare. With how long you had it in your system, I figured I had a few hours.” The effects of the poison seemed to be gone now. He did still feel rather weak. They were sitting in the sand. She hadn’t moved him, although she had removed his mask.

She looked a little embarrassed when she answered. “Earrings. They slow the effect. Can’t cure it though.” Her normal personality started to assert itself. “You’re an idiot! Why’d you do that? I’d heard casters like you could take on a poison like that, but I didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to try it.”

He mostly ignored her. “I take it you didn’t find Sajani and Gregor,” he asked. He’d tried to make his voice sound awake and well, but instead it came out as exhausted and irritated.

“What? I wasn’t about to leave you here alone to die. As long as you were breathing, I had no intention of leaving.”

Farnsbeck sighed heavily. “So, my mission would have been better off if I *had* died?”

She just scowled at him.

He tried to rise but found that his muscles failed to cooperate. “Well, we best start looking for them. Did you at least keep an eye on the gate?”

Her scowl didn’t vanish. “An ear anyway. But they might’ve entered at any of the other gates without me knowing.

The male wolf managed to rise enough to lean on his elbows. “I suppose the masks are off to protect us from the sun?” He decided that he didn’t really care for his companion’s expression. “I’m fine,” he told her, hoping to placate her a little. “I was pretty sure I could fight off the poison.”

“Right,” she answered sarcastically. The look on her face didn’t change. “I’m glad you’re better.”

“That’s not what your expression is saying,” he answered mischievously. “I’d swear you were trying to hurt me with a look like that.”

She let out a light laugh, and the scowl turned into a shy smile. “You had me really worried there, plush fur. I was afraid you’d gone insanely noble or something.”

“Nah,” he lied. “I was fine. I was just hoping to not waste any time on finding the pups. I figured you’d set out looking right away.”

“This job isn’t that important to me. Apparently, I don’t take it as seriously as you do. I wasn’t about to leave a friend to die.”

Normally, he wouldn’t have been willing to sacrifice like that, but between how desperate Benayle had been and how much he was enjoying Magenta’s company, the decision had come pretty easily. “Well, let’s hope they didn’t try to enter the town,” he told her by way of changing the subject. “We’ll circle around to the west side and see if we can locate them.” He tried again to stand but couldn’t. He put his hand out towards the she-wolf. “I don’t suppose...”

There was a little worry that she'd not be willing to help after what she was claiming he put her through, but instead she gave a knowing smirk and helped him stand.



Farleesha was mentally totaling her losses from the storm. The tents weren't a huge loss. People would just be a little more crowded at night. All the horses and two of the camels had returned. Alonzo insisted that if they just waited the full day, the last camel would find its way back. He'd *named* his camels and been going around moping the last few hours over...what was that camel's name again?

They'd lost a crate of cotton. It shattered open when the wind threw it into another stack of crates. That'd also broken a box of minor magic items. Cheap stuff that the simple wolves liked. They were heavy enough that not much, if any, were lost. So, the loss was a few gold for the camel, a few gold for the tents, 200 gold for the wages for an extra day in the desert, and about 250 gold for the lost cotton. Somewhere out in the desert, some crazy nomad was going to stumble across a bunch of bolts of top grade Rhidayan cotton only a little worse for the wear.

The merchant was watching out over the horizon. There was nothing better to do. Alonzo all but refused to move until he knew for sure that his beloved...whatever the camel was named...was returned safe. She supposed she could force him to get moving again, but he was an excellent guide and a good person.

It was still very hot, so she wasn't certain that what she saw was real. As she was scanning the desert, it looked like a couple of creatures, possibly sentient but maybe just large predators, crested one of the distant dunes. They were only there a moment and then disappeared from sight.

"Alonzo!" she called out for her guide. The camp was pretty small, so it wasn't too long before he came up beside her.

"Yes, *vhemato*?" he said respectfully. Someday she'd get a straight answer out of him on what that meant. It was a Rhidayan word, but not a common one.

She pointed to where she'd seen people. "Send a couple riders to check that dune. I thought I saw someone. Don't want to be caught unaware by a predator or a bandit."

He called out to a pair of humans that were walking by: "You two. Get your horses and go check over there," he pointed at the dune. "the *vhemato* thinks she saw a harimou." The two humans rushed for their horses.

Farleesha chided her guide, "That's not at all what I said. Now they're going to think I'm crazy." Harimou were a mysterious race of cat folk that supposedly lived on the Western Continent. Their existence was heavily debated.

Alonzo laughed, “I figured that’d get them to hurry. If I told them it was bandits, they’d probably refuse to go.”