

ONE: Odd One Out

In the hallowed halls of the stronghold of Hydyraen, housed an organization of the sinister shadow vulpine. The shadow vulpine is a malevolent species who commit crimes of all shapes, sizes, and varieties upon the nearby settlements, travellers, and merchants of the innocent denizens of the continent of Nyethra. Thievery, murder, hostages, ransacking; nothing was off limits for them. It would be no exaggeration to call them heartless, evil, any negative label would easily work. As long as they existed, hope was something that was nearly impossible to have for any of the victims in this relationship. Their numbers are unknown. Hydyraen itself was not the biggest stronghold on the continent by a long shot, yet many speculate that hundred, maybe thousands of these dastards exist within its underground halls. It does not help that the shadow vulpine also harbors the ability to use one of what are called the Seven Forces of Life. The elements that make up life as they all know it. Naturally, the one they are refused to display as they carry their deeds out is Darkness. Because, of course, there is nothing but darkness that reside in their hearts.

Their leader is one that is spoken of in recent legend. He rose up from out of nowhere it seemed, taking charge of Hydyraen when it had fallen into disarray after a disastrous run in with opposing forces attempting to bring them to justice. Their old leader, who was called Skymae, was killed in battle, and hope for the shadow vulpine continuity was compromised, and hope for their opponents was temporarily rekindled. However, when an overpowering presence proceeded upon them, the tables had returned to where they once were. A shadow vulpine with enormous strength, not once before a part of Hydyraen, had swooped down and struck down the adversaries without effort. It was at that point that the Council within Hydyraen proposed that their savior would lead them for years to come. The mysterious character agreed to aid them in their quest for power and oppression over Nyethra and took charge forthwith. When asked for his name, the mystery character had only laughed and said. "No one knows my name. Not even I do. But they call me, Arcane."

It's been a short time since Arcane took over. About a couple weeks to a month. It was hard to keep count of the days being trapped perpetually underground with very little if any sunlight at all. In that short time however, the changes were noticeable immediately. The attacks were fiercer, more coordinated, and all that much more unprecedented and unstoppable. Arcane and the other shadow vulpines had ransacked the nearby settlements of Deltania and Lyrion down to almost nothing whatsoever. Arcane, within such a short amount of time, became easily the wealthiest creature in all the land. All attacks on the stronghold had failed. Any forces that dared

come knocking were knocked back effortlessly by Arcane's iron paws. It truly seemed like dark days were descending on Nyethra, and it looked as though there would be no hope for anybody anymore.

Aero is the name given to one shadow vulpine in particular, living under the new regime set up by Arcane. The shadow vulpine was... well it couldn't be said that he was a shadow vulpine at all. Yes, Aero had the biological components of one. Gray fur. Red eyes. Menacing appearance all around. His actions and personality though? Absolutely not. Aero hated the idea of fighting for such a thing at all so much he refused to set paw outside Hydyraen for a plethora of reasons. These traits were considered heresy and an aberration to the true nature of the shadow vulpine. Aero was constantly bombarded with threats and mockery as a result of being the odd one out.

Aero had spent his whole life underground. He never once saw the sun firsthand. He has never known the world outside the halls of Hydyraen, only the biased stories from his... comrades. Ever since Arcane took over, Aero became increasingly more frantic over the situation that had presided over him and the continent he was growing more desperate to help out. Trapped in Hydyraen with no way to get out and escape kept him firmly in place for so many years. Well, there was one way out, but the only way Aero could do so was to join the fights. And since all shadow vulpines are specially tracked using that strange Force, rebels like him would never make it past the forest they're buried under. And since he never once used his power, Aero knew that his skill in combat was practically nonexistent completely. What's worse is that now that Arcane has taken over, Aero fretted constantly over the distinct possibility that Arcane was to address his pacifism and force him to cooperate and join the forces of evil whether he liked it or not.

As the pacifist fox walked down the halls of the stronghold to meet up with most if not all the other foxes for the daily meeting with Arcane, he held the routinely action of walking in a slow motion, slumping and straggling behind the rest, trying his damndest to not be noticed by too many of them. Aero used the shadows the other shadow vulpines would to avoid detection from their targets, and used them against them. Aero consistently knew this would never actually work since hiding from a shadow vulpine is like trying to control time. It was simply impossible. And yet, Aero remained ignored most of the time. Most of it. There were always those few instances where other vulpines would target him specifically... It never ended well for him.

Aero breathed heavily, but silently as he dodged fox after fox, slinking low to the ground to remain as inconspicuous as possible. He paid all attention to his surroundings, on constant high alertness and even more constant worry over his status in the field of stealth. Was he being noticed? He desperately hoped not.

With all that his heart had left to muster, Aero hoped there would be a day that he could finally escape the hell he's been trapped in. In fact, he wished that he could

turn around right there and run away. Run through the exit, even through the locked gate, and run as far as his legs could carry him, even through the unfamiliar land that is Nyethra. But he knew he couldn't. He knew it was impossible. How would he get through the gates? And what about him being tracked? That was most certainly imminent if he were to just up and vanish. He wished he would up and vanish...

Thinking about this was all Aero was able to do these days. Just fantasize about the things that would never come. Ever. He knew it was hopeless. He knew there was no chance, but... something constantly compelled him to continue thinking about the impossible. But why? And this reason was something he could not fathom. It could never be because there actually IS a chance, is there? No! That is preposterous! As impossible as the prospect of leaving itself!

Aero was suddenly lost in thought again. This always happened. And Aero realized that he was when reality was suddenly slammed into him in the form of him walking face first into the back of one the shadow vulpines in front of him. What Aero had failed to realize was that they had reached the central hall in Hydyraen where Arcane awaited them and had mistakenly brought attention upon himself as a result. He cursed the very second he let his mind wander yet again. He staggered backward to try to get away, but the vulpine he bumped into was far too quick for him. Aero had no chance to identify her as she turned around with much swiftness and snarled in Aero's face, causing him to recoil backwards even further. Aero felt something stop him from behind. To his dismay, it was another shadow vulpine. This one took the opportunity to take an already off balance Aero and knock him to the ground with astounding force. Aero felt the negative energy that burned within the Force of Darkness so he immediately knew that the fox's hands were reinforced with it. Aero was hit square in the jaw, but the energy had also blurred his vision and muffled his hearing in a black fog so that both became completely indistinct. The landing caused him to bite his tongue and he tasted blood. Before Aero even had the chance to begin getting to his paws, he felt a different one plant itself onto his back to prevent him from doing so. The fox who was stepping on him was saying something, but the fogged up hearing made it impossible for Aero to discern what it was. He could only assume it was something quite nasty. Aero tried to fight against the leg that had him clamped to the ground, but that only made it press down on him harder and for the voice to grow louder and angrier. The force on him was so strong that Aero felt his spine beginning to crack. Somehow through the deafness, he could only vaguely hear it. What the hell was happening!? No matter how brutal the shadow vulpine can get on the surface world, they rarely harm each other to this degree, no matter the animosity between them! Was Arcane's influence getting that much stronger...? It couldn't be. Could it? No. Aero really thought that the fox would kill him as he laid there.

Suddenly, without warning, the paw on his back disappeared with a loud commotion above him. Almost on cue, Aero's vision and hearing began to return, but slowly and gradually so he still had no idea what was going on now. He could hear what he could assume was snarling going behind between two or three foxes. As a pacifist, Aero hated it when there was fighting going on, especially near him. He'd avoid it if he could, but he was kind of involved already! But wait... isn't one of the foxes fighting in his defense? If so then could that mean that another fox around here has a heart as well? Aero had become convinced that Arcane was capable of corrupting every last fox there could be. Even a supposed god of light itself could be swayed by his charisma! But if there was just one other, no matter how impossible it seemed... for some reason it filled Aero with more hope than he's felt in a long time.

The fighting above him was beginning to subside. There were some presumably exceedingly vulgar words being exchanged by them and then. Silence. There was not any commotion anymore. Aero suddenly became apprehensive over how much attention that brought to them... As he noticed his savior looming over him, he felt his ear droop and burn in shame.

"Get up. You look like a fool," his savior said in a harsh voice. Her voice was still muffled, but at least Aero could make it out now. But that did not change the embarrassment he felt as he tried to drag himself to his paws. The vixen, whose patience was now assumed to be nonexistent, grabbed his arm to yank him upright. Aero got a look at her then and recognized the old and weary face of Shade. Shade had an interesting history with the shadow vulpines being one from the outside and all. She was refuted to be the only shadow vulpine to have completely escaped captivity in Hydyaen and lived a temporary life as a free fox. However, how she ended up back in Hydyaen is a mystery. A recent one at that. Many predict she was caught by Arcane, but no one knows. She refuses to reveal any answers.

Aero saw a fire in her scarlet eyes. She was angry at something, but Aero had a feeling it wasn't him. Was it Arcane, perhaps? Or even herself? "Are you okay?" she asked, suddenly looking away.

Aero initially had no idea what to say, like his voice had vanished. "I uh... yeah," he said shakily. "Th-thank you," he instinctively bowed his head slightly.

She turned and looked at him. The fire was still burning in her eyes. "I see that you aren't the social type. What's your name?" she asked.

"M-my name? A-Aero," Aero responded.

Her reaction was the last thing that Aero expected. The fire in her eyes vanished and was replaced with a flash of shock and surprise. They also widened along with her jaw dropping slightly down. "Wait, YOU'RE Aero?" she asked incredulously. Her quietish voice turned loud to accompany her shock. Many nearby foxes stared and demanded her silence.

"I-I uh... I, yeah. I am, ma'am," Aero said, fumbling for words.

Shade was pointing at him with a shaking finger. "You-- But you--!" but now it was her turn to falter.

Aero had no idea how to respond to this vixen. Why was she of all creatures surprised to hear his own name? Why would she care? How? Yet there was no denying that she clearly was. "I'm sorry, but does my name mean something to you?" he asked.

Before Shade could answer, the loud and ominous voice of Arcane boomed out above them all. His voice always rose at the end of each meeting. "Alright my brethren! Disperse at once and show Nyethra our might!"

And with that, the foxes of Hydyraen began to disperse in all directions towards the nearest exit to the central hall. They were all pushing and shoving each other out. Unluckily, Shade was caught up in the mess as she called out, "Yes! Yes it does! Meet me at the--" but the crowd had grown too loud and Shade far away.

Aero cursed that he couldn't keep up. Even though he was following Shade out, somehow it seemed like the foxes were pushing him back. "Wait!" he called out. "Meet you where!?" It didn't take much longer for him to completely lose sight of her. He called out her name and for a brief second, thought he heard her respond, but there was no way Aero was going to be certain at all. He fruitlessly tried again and again to call her name, but got exactly what he expected. Silence. After a couple minutes, Aero realized that he was alone in the central hall.

'What does Shade want from me? What could possibly be remotely interesting about someone like me? Could it be that--' but his thoughts were interrupted.

"Mister Aero."

The voice sent subzero chills down Aero's spine. He knew that voice and he hated every bit of it. It made his fur stand on end just thinking about it. He turned his head to face the owner of the voice with his heart beating in his chest.

Arcane.

The tyrant walked out the doors with a growl, not even looking at Aero. "Come with me. We need to talk."