

THREE: Distrust

The East Wing of Hydyraen. Somewhere within this side of Hydyraen was where Shade lives. ...But where exactly in this wing does she live? The living quarters often spread out in different directions, and Arcane failed to give Aero her room location. Aero could not tell if he did that on purpose or if it was a simple oversight. Then again, he should have figured that she'd be down here somewhere, but should have realized that his subconscious question asked for her room. If only he had not been too diligent in dodging Arcane's potential manipulation so he could pay attention to his own thoughts.

At the bottom of the stairs that descended into the quarters, the fork that led in three directions was met. Left, right, forward. Any one of them would be just as correct as the last, which would not be very much.

"What do you think you're doing down here?" came an aggressive female voice from just around the corner.

The suddenness of the voice caused Aero to yelp and jump forward gracelessly. That voice was a strangely familiar one. Shade? No. It sounded like the snarl Aero heard from earlier. Damn it. It was the shadow vulpine he bumped into earlier. Aero believed her name was Uukai, or something along those lines...

"You!" she exclaimed. "I know you! You're the one who impudently bumped into me this morning!" Aero saw that her lips were drawn back in a snarl, and ears folded furiously. Aero was nervous that she was going to start another fight right there... with no Shade to rescue him.

And Uukai confirmed it. She was the one that initiated the conflict that morning. Aero did feel bad for intruding in her space like he did, even if it was by accident, but certain words were echoing in his mind. Those being Arcane's words telling him to take charge and defend himself. That's when he thought that maybe he should follow that advice? Take charge for himself? There was apparently enough power in him to do so...

"Hey! Is someone awake inside that head of yours?" Uukai tried to get Aero's attention by also waving a hand in front of his face. Anger in her voice vanishing momentarily as she became distracted by Aero's own distraction. Yeah, Uukai was prone to that as well, Aero remembered. He remembered when she in particular bullied him in their youth and she'd get distracted. Usually by her current mate, Isrir. Who now that Aero thought about it, was the vulpine that pinned him down earlier too.

"Oh uh... sorry," he said, still distracted.

"For...?" Uukai tilted her head. "Dozing off or bumping into me this morning?"

"Um... both." Aero replied, looking around for Shade or otherwise, an excuse to leave the vixen.

"Hmm..." Uukai's eyes narrowed as they examined Aero. The look on her face was that of confusion, as if she couldn't discern what Aero even was. Aero felt himself backing away a few paces.

"What are you doing?" he asked nervously.

"Normally shadow vulpines like you are supposed to be would take charge, like my mate, Isrir, did. I must ask you, Aero. What are you? Are you sure you're a shadow vulpine or... something else?" Uukai asked. There was a hint of concern in her voice. No. It was suspicion. This was the last thing Aero wanted someone to feel of him. It always was the last thing...

"Um... uh..." he stammered, hoping he wouldn't say a certain few words. "I don't know..." And he said them. He felt a chill in his fingers as he did so and berated himself mentally for being such an incomprehensible idiot.

Uukai huffed. "Well you had better figure that out soon unless you want to be eaten alive by other shadow vulpines like Isrir. Like me," she added in an attempt to intimidate him. "You still have not answered me though. What is a reynard like you doing in the vixens living quarters? You belong back in West Wing. Or are you just a little vixen hidden inside?" she asked in mockery.

Aero backed up again, feeling the back of his paws hit the stairs. "I'm looking for Shade," he said cautiously.

Uukai stopped and stared again. "Shade? You mean that vixen that chased Isrir off of you this morning?" she suddenly looked even more suspicious.

Aero gulped. "Y-yes," he said.

Uukai shook her head. "That slippery vixen is up to something no good, I just know it. She escaped Hydyraen a long time ago, so she can't be one of us, truly. That makes her untrustworthy. She's back here for a reason. And then there is you. A fox who refuses to raise a paw to fight. You both defy our ways of life. Whatever you want with her is most likely nothing but trouble. Whatever it is, I will find out. And I will report you both straight to Arcane. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he has eyes on you both right now," the vixen growled threateningly.

Aero was strangely unfazed by that threat. "Yeah, whatever. Just tell me if you know where she is."

Uukai spat. "Even if I knew where she was, I most certainly wouldn't tell you anything. She's probably somewhere spying on us, recording our secrets to exploit our weaknesses. As long as she lives, I am convinced she'll be a direct threat to our kind. If I were you, I'd stay away from her," the vixen snorted and then proceeded to walk past Aero and up the stairs, tail swishing in irritation. She deliberately stomped on Aero's own tail as she ascended the stairs.

Ignoring the pain that was on his tail, Aero thought for a moment what she meant by Shade potentially spying on them. She wouldn't be anywhere where she'd be

noticed easily if everyone was suspicious of her. She must be somewhere the vulpines would know well and somewhere she wouldn't be noticed easily. Where though? Argh... but right now most of the vulpines are out in the field; pretty much anywhere would be enough at this time of day. Then Aero remembered where he used to go a lot to hide. Somewhere that is only visited usually once a day by one fox other than himself. The underground gardens in the South Wing. It was also rumored to be where exactly Shade snuck out thanks to an opening in the surface that let light in. It was the only time Aero ever got to see any semblance of sunlight in his life. Though that was in the ceiling, dozens of yards up and the size of a paw. How anyone would fit through there was anybody's guess.

Aero dashed up the stairs to make his way towards the garden. He knew the route by heart now. He travelled there so many times, his own body took over and instinctively followed the hallways to South Wing. He only hoped that he was choosing the correct location to meet Shade. As he did, he hoped that no one would catch or meet him along the way. He was again thankful for the timing due to the stronghold inhabitants being absent for the time being. These feelings... just like old times. Though now they were all for a very different reason. To find Shade and hopefully escape. Soon after that he would make Arcane and the other shadow vulpines pay for all that they have done to Nyethra, despite Aero knowing about it. The very thought of all the pain and torment that has been inflicted over the countless years that have passed... was all that Aero needed to realize that he would have to fight back, even if he did not like it. One day it will all end. He knew he would be among the ones to bring Nyethra to peace. These shadow vermin... they weren't his brethren. Not by a long shot. They never were and never will be. Arcane thought Aero was on his side. He couldn't be any more wrong. Aero isn't who Arcane thought he was. Unless he did know, the slippery bastard. Even so, Aero knew that his tricks would no longer work any longer. It is time to take back what belongs to him... His freedom. His life.

The garden entrance was hidden well behind the stairs that led down to South Wing. It was a strangely convoluted way to get down there due to the fact that there couldn't be any tunnels leading through the shaft that the light shines down on. This was why there weren't very many visitors to these gardens. It was a small little cavern. It held enough crops to feed maybe a hundred vulpines. Most of what else they have come from spoils from raiding towns and merchants. The gardens were only there to serve as a lifeline, in case something were to happen. He looked around the gardens. The shaft of light shined down and illuminated the cavern. It shone of warmth and hope. To show Aero that hope was still somewhere above. There was nothing quite as comforting as this. Such a sheer wall though, that carried the light. How in the world did Shade get through that and the hole that let it in? It was a mystery alright and he wondered if she would ever reveal that. As well as why she returned in the first place...

"Hello there, hotshot."

The voice startled Aero and made him nearly jump out of his fur. He temporarily forgotten why he was there by taking in these familiar sights... made him think he was a cub again... stumbling upon this room when running and hiding from Isrir... he shook his head violently. "Sh-Shade?!" he hoped. He didn't grasp at what the voice sounded like.

Sure enough, when Aero asked for her name, she revealed herself from the other wall. The wall that the light could not reach so easily. "I'm surprised you knew where to find me," she started. "I didn't think you heard me when I was being pushed out. Though did it take you a while to figure it out? You sure took a while," she observed.

"I uh... ran into a few faces," Aero said nervously. "Including Arcane himself."

Shade was suddenly alert and interested. "You have? What did he want with you?" she asked curiously.

"He said he saw that fight you, me, Isrir, and Uukai were in earlier this morning. He first said that I should really try to defend myself and take charge with the power I apparently have... so that this wouldn't happen again," he started. But Shade interjected then.

"He what!?" she exclaimed. "Aren't you a pacifist, though? I can tell by just looking in your eyes that you hate conflict..."

"I don't know if all problems can be solved peacefully... especially when concerning these guys," Aero said regrettably.

Shade nodded. "It's unfortunate, I know. You do have to know when to fight," she replied. "But everything must be attempted peacefully first."

Aero shook his head. "The way Arcane worded it made it feel like he was trying to convince me to do more than just defend myself. That whole taking charge via retaliation business sounds so fishy..." he said.

"No doubt. He's trying to get into your head. He knows that brute force and threats, and other garbage like that can't work on everyone. Cunning manipulation and mind tricks are another one of his many facets. He's trying to turn you into one of them," Shade stated worriedly.

"Well it won't work!" Aero declared. "I will never be one of them. Ever."

Shade sighed. "I'm relieved to hear that, Aero," she said.

Aero's ears perked hopefully. "Oh? Why's that?" he asked.

Shade's gaze on him turned serious just then, jarring Aero. "Are you sure you want to know?"

Aero nodded firmly. A senses of confidence and certainty flooded to his fingertips. It was a wondrous feeling that was very unfamiliar to him.

"Okay, I'll tell--" Shade started, but gasped when the sound of a door opening shut her up. "Damn it, the gardener is here already?" she breathed.

"What?!" Aero breathed as he and Shade ducked for the dark corner in the caverns. "What is he doing here so early?"

"The weather on the surface might be changing," Shade whispered. The light isn't as bright as usual today."

Aero took a look at the shaft of light pouring down in the cavern and noticed that it was duller than he was used to. Was a storm coming in? "You're right," he observed. When it was to get dark this early due to the weather on the surface, the gardener tended to the crops early before then.

The gardener was a short vulpine in stature, though he did not look that much else different from everyone else. Some of these foxes don't have too much to distinguish each other from easily other than their voices. He came in with various gardening tools and began tending to the crops in the center of the cavern.

"Only one of him for all that work must be hard," Aero whispered. "He's going to be here a while isn't he?" even though he already knew he would.

"Maybe not," Shade replied with a shrug. "Right now, we must make sure we stay hidden until he leaves."

"It's a good thing he's hard of hearing and seeing," Aero remarked. He knew this from how many times he's been in this room. So many times that he should have been caught, but never have due to the gardener's limitations. Ever since Arcane took over, he has been doing worse and worse. Arcane cared very little of the handicaps he had and just wanted him to fight. An easy way to kill someone, that's for sure. Just thinking of that angered Aero, even if the gardener was still not a friend. "I can't believe Arcane is just that heartless and cruel," he said under his breath.

Shade did not know exactly what made him say that, but she nodded in agreement. "He really is..."

"So you do not approve of what he's doing either?" Aero hoped.

"Are you kidding me? Of course I don't," she said. "That's what I was going to tell you just now," she added.

"Really?" Aero breathed, sighing in relief. His thoughts were confirmed. Shade was definitely on his side.

Shade nodded. "Why else would you think I wanted to escape from Hydyaen in the first place?" she asked.

"G-good point," Aero stammered, unable to suppress feelings of desire to escape like she has. "Though, why have you come back?" he tilted his head. This was the mystery she refused to reveal to anyone. Why did Aero think she would tell him?

"To look for a shadow vulpine named, Aero," Shade answered plainly.

What!? Aero was right then rendered speechless. "To look for me!?" he echoed loudly. It was that second that Aero forgot the reason they were keeping their voices low and he gasped, slamming a paw to his face in utter shock and horror. His voice echoed along the cavernous walls for a few seconds. He looked over towards the gardens to see that the impaired gardener's ears were perked and he was facing their direction.

"Who's there?!" he called. When he got no answer, he started striding his way right towards Aero and Shade. "I know I heard something!"

"Shade!" Aero hissed as he swung his muzzle to face her. "What do we do?"

Shade shook her head. "Don't worry Aero, just use the shadows," she said.

"Th-the shadows? Shade what do you mean?" Aero breathed. The gardener was getting closer. Aero knew the guy probably wasn't a threat, even to him, but didn't want him to know they were there. It'd be a one way ticket to Arcane and then there would be an investigation, then who knows what? Aero surely did not want to know what!

"You're a shadow vulpine. You are one with the shadows," Shade replied calmly. She closed her eyes and two seconds later, a dark aura surrounded her until... she became that aura. The aura darted away along the walls so quickly, so seamlessly that Aero lost sight of her. Aero stared wide eyed as she reappeared on the other side of the garden, close to where the door was. She looked at him and beckoned him over. Aero shook his head, not sure what to do. The gardener was only yards away and getting closer. Aero did not know how close he would have to get to finally notice him, and he did not want to know. He looked down at the shadows and closed his eyes and tried to focus on... something.

Nothing happened.

To no avail. Panicking, Aero started to make a run for it, when he heard a clatter on one of the other walls. He looked over to see that Shade had thrown a rock at the wall to his left. The gardener noticed and started in that direction. "Reveal yourself! Grr... how dare you toy with someone like me! If I had all my health and youth back, I'd rip you apart!" he growled. "I'd rip all of you apart!"

Aero took that as cue and darted along the right hand wall towards Shade and bolted out the door she held open. He continued to run even after exiting, up the stairs and around the bend that led into the start of south wing. He stopped at the foot of the stairs there and panted.

"Or maybe you aren't so one with the shadows..." Shade said in dismay. "At least we made it out," she shrugged.

Aero panted. "Wh-what was that you just did down there?" he asked incredulously. Could all shadow vulpines do that!? He'd never seen it before! Is this what made them so adept at attacking others?!

"It's called the Shadow Smoke technique, Aero," she said. "And before you ask, no, not every shadow vulpine can do that. In fact I think Arcane and I are among the only ones who can do so," she added.

"Wait what!? Th-then why the hell did you think I can do it too!?" he exclaimed, even more incredulous than ever.

There was a flash of regret in Shade's eyes, as if she said or did something she shouldn't have. Her expression changed to reflect that as she fumbled for words. "I-I--" she stuttered. "I can't tell you that, and if I could, there is no time at all now," she said.

Aero was about to open his maw to interject when he heard the gardener's voice again. "--not crazy. There was someone in my gardens and when I find out who they are, I'll rip them apart!" Aero and Shade both dived further down South Wing to dodge him as they saw his for move toward the stairs. "I'll let... Arcane rip them apart that is..." he added in a regretful tone as he started up the stairs.

"This is bad," Aero said. "If Arcane finds out what we're up to, it's game over!" he fretted. "It's bad enough that he doesn't trust you one bit, now this?"

"Don't worry Aero, that gardener does not know it was us. Although, you're right. Arcane has always been suspicious of me. Actually... the other day I caught him the other day talking to Isrir. He said that he did not trust you either, for your blatant pacifism."

"What!?" Aero breathed. "Me too? But why would he trust me in keeping an "eye on you"?" he asked. "Because Arcane also told me to do that as well!"

Shade's expression turned to a dark worrying. "I don't know Aero, but I can tell you one thing. It's no longer safe for us to be here."

"It never was, but it's getting worse," Aero breathed apprehensively.

Shade nodded. "Yeah. Which is why we're going to escape soon. And you're definitely coming with me."