

FIVE: Suspicion Rising

Shade coughed and choked loudly at the dinner table. This resulted into her spitting out half a chicken leg, much to the disgust of Aero and many nearby foxes. "Arcane is what!?" she exclaimed, still coughing loudly. All the shadow vulpines, or at least, the close-range assailants, have returned for the day and are gorging themselves on their evening meals, most of which were stolen from farms on the outskirts of Deltania. The farming town that was on the mouth of a river of the same name, close to the coast of the Qosta Sea was a very popular target for how much food the settlement is able to grow and raise. From what Aero knew, Deltania was a few days travel from Hydraen, so only the long range assailants went there. That, and Deltania always grew at least double the food it needed because they knew they did not stand a chance against the shadow vulpine forces.

Shade, unfortunately, was choking on her share immediately when Aero revealed to her what Arcane told him just before the meal began. "Why the hell is he joining us!?" she yelled.

Aero shrugged. "He said I needed a guide because it's my first time out, and since he doesn't trust you..." he said guiltily.

"That's so stupid! I know the area so much better than--!" Shade started.

Aero interjected. "He doesn't trust you, remember? I just said that..."

Shade pounded the table with an exasperated sigh. "Bah. Then why, of all foxes in this damned place, does it have to be Arcane himself?! Why!?" she demanded.

Aero dipped his head solemnly. "Your guess is as good as mine. But I have a strange feeling that he's on to us. Especially considering the way he talked to me earlier," he said.

"Why would he feel that way, especially now?" Shade responded.

"Everyone is so suspicious of us right now. Uukai, the vixen from earlier is especially suspicious. The gardener might have recognized me, among other things," Aero explained.

"This is getting far worse than we thought," Shade said grimly. "We need to run before something bad happens. It's more dangerous than ever to stay here. Though I'm surprised you're gaining a lot of suspicion too, Aero," she added. "What have you done to earn their wariness?"

Aero shook his head. "It's what I haven't done that probably earned it," he said. "My mannerisms, my actions, pacifism, refusing to fight or fight back. That's probably doing me a lot of harm. Though I have to wonder... why are they addressing it now of all times? Because you're in the equation too? I don't understand this at all."

"I don't either, Aero. Though one thing is for certain. We need to remain on our toes way more than usual. That, and we need to find a way to evade Arcane. Because if we want these goals to come into fruition, the last thing we need is Arcane breathing down our necks the whole damn time," Shade said in a low voice. "The Guardian I mentioned is aware of what we were planning to do so we can't exactly back out now. And I seriously doubt he can help us against the shadow vulpine head honcho by himself. If it were any other shadow vulpine, this wouldn't be nearly as big an issue, but... it is. Do you have any ideas, Aero?"

"Hm... maybe if we could distract him long enough to give us time to flee, and the Guardian can then help us..." Aero started.

Shade shook her head. "I'm afraid our best bet for any of this is to make sure Arcane does not or cannot come with us at all. If we disappear too soon after his attention being on us, it will be for nothing. He'll track us within a few hours. Whatever happens, we must be alone tomorrow," Shade said adamantly.

"Well what are we supposed to do?" Aero demanded. "Just go up to Arcane and tell him that he can't go with us? He'll slit our throats if we defy his wishes!"

Shade hit the table again and growled. "Damn it. We're stuck. We may have to hang out here a bit longer." Just as Shade said that, two shadow vulpines loomed over the both of them. Without even turning around, Aero knew who they were.

"So it's true. Asswipe is hanging out with Shade the traitor!"

Aero turned around rolling his eyes. "And so what if I am, Inferior?"

Isrir glowered down at him. "Hm... getting better, but you'll have to do more than that to rebuke me effectively. ...Hey asswipe!" he suddenly added. Before Aero could react, Isrir pushed Aero's head forcefully into the table, causing him to receive a face full of food. "That was for this morning!"

Uukai burst out laughing. "Look at him. Always starving himself like that? He really must be hungry!" had they noticed Aero's hesitation to eat food that was stolen? What else do they know?

"Oh you remember seeing the gardener was upset about something earlier? I have a hunch that it was because of these two!" Isrir stated. What the-!?

"Oh riiiiight. He wants to rip whoever was down there apart. Too bad we'll beat him to the punch, eh?" she gave Aero a noogie, ruffling his head fur to uncomfortable positions. Empty threats. How many times did they say anything like this but did not act on them? Too often for Aero to count.

"We'll see how they like the real world once they're out, huh?" Isrir smirked. "Though Shade the traitor here knows exactly what I mean."

"The only thing wrong with the real world are shadow vulpines like you and Uukai, Isrir," Shade responded warily.

"Oh? Getting a little feisty aren't we?" Isrir sneered. "You may have beat me this morning, but now that you can't surprise me, I'll show you just how strong I am!" he said as a dark aura covered his paws. Oh great, is Isrir really going to instigate another fight at a time like this?

Shade sighed. "Not here, Isrir. You know how everybody hates when fights break out during meal times. After all, are you going to really let all that work go to waste?" she looked at him with a smirk of her own, as if she knew she was exactly right.

Isrir's aura faded out as he glared at Shade with eyes of magma. "I hate it when you asswipes have a point. Fine. We'll settle this dispute later, shall we not?"

"Cowards," Uukai spat. "Only cowards would have come up with an excuse no matter its validity."

Shade only shrugged. "Whatever you say, you two. Now, goodbye," she shooed them with a hand gesture as if to demean them. It was effective as a new look of shock and fury flashed across Isrir's face.

"Just listen here, Shade," Uukai snarled. "If you dare try anything funny, you will wake up without your tail," she spat before she and Isrir strutted off.

Once they were out of sight, Aero let out a sigh of relief. "Oh Lords, I thought they were going to start another one at a time like this."

Shade shook her head as she handed Aero a cloth to clean his face with. "Sooner or later it will happen again, and with much more malicious intent as well. That's why we need to leave as soon as possible, but..."

Aero gulped. "We can't for a little while longer can we?" he flattened his ears.

"I know you don't want to and believe me when I say that I don't either. But we may not have a choice. Anything that will lead us to our escape is exactly what I will do. I assume that you are the same way?" she placed a hand on Aero's back.

Aero pictured the pained and anguished faces of any victims he would possibly see the following day, as well as him being the direct cause of said anguish. It filled him with so much anguish of his own, that their future pain may as well be his own. "I-it's me only shot at freedom," he struggled to say. "I don't have a choice. But then again. I never did."

Aero slept terribly that night. He was too busy fretting over the next day to calm his mind enough to do so. It was only as he lied down to enter dreamland that it had dawned on him that Arcane was liable to have him and Shade perform despicable acts the next day. Of course, since it was his first day out, surely Arcane should cut him a little slack? Though considering Arcane, literally anything could happen. Anything except anything good that is. To think that Aero had spent his entire life avoiding hurting anyone no matter what. To think that was potentially coming to an end. Since

he knew he had shadow vulpine blood in his veins, he wondered if a first true act of violence would completely sway him to their side? Would it warp him? Defect him? Change him completely? Was his blood just dormant until his first act? There was no saying and no certainty. Although wouldn't something have happened when he punched Arcane earlier? Maybe, but that was more of a fluke than anything. Aero knew he was overthinking the situation, but every time he didn't, something he never would have expected would happen. Aero felt the need to think about everything lest he wished for something unimaginable to happen! Would one time really be enough to do something? Maybe. Maybe not. Would it depend on the act performed? Theft. Vandalism. Destruction. Assault. ...Murder. Could be anything for all he knew. Killing was the last thing Aero was willing to do, but if it came to that... ...It couldn't though; being his first time out, would they really be this demanding? Perhaps Arcane could if Aero really did have as much power as he said! His thoughts grew more and more frantic as the night progressed. His mind became a hurricane of pure dread. What was for certain, however, Aero mustn't let anything bad happen of any kind. He wasn't sure how he or Shade would do so, but they'd be damned if they couldn't.

Eventually, sleep did overtake Aero and his mind was transported elsewhere. However, where it was then was not much better from the looks of it. He saw himself in another creature's body. He couldn't tell what it was, but he felt lighter on his paws, he noticed his tail was much thinner and longer. His eyesight was significantly better. Where was he though? Above him wasn't a stone ceiling. It was a light blue with white dotted around it. There were stones everywhere though. However they weren't clean cut like in Hydyraen. Was this somewhere on the surface? How could he dream of somewhere he's never been before? What could this mean?

Before Aero could grasp at the situation any further, he noticed three figures behind him. He noticed with dread that two of them were Arcane and Shade. The third one? Horrified Aero because he realized that it must have been himself, as a fox again. Him and Shade looked totally different though as in... they were completely savage. Bloodlust shined in their eyes. There was no semblance of mercy or compassion whatsoever. Arcane pointed at him. And with that cue being made caused Aero's fox self and Shade to pounce on him with vicious snarling that echoed around him. That sound. It came from everywhere and nowhere, but it did not change how chilling it was. Aero was sent flying backwards with the two warped and brainwashed foxes on top of him. Their paws were enhanced by the increasingly familiar dark aura that fogged Aero's senses. His sense of comprehension was distorted so that he no longer could recognize their faces. Their emotions. Their thoughts. To think that they were his own. This was how he felt. This was his power. Aero the cat's heart began to race. It was all he could feel at that moment. Even their blows grew more numb as they continued. Aero feared for his life. As the assault raged on, he noticed the third figure,

which he could only assume was Arcane, was holding something up triumphantly. Was that...? His blood platinum scepter! But he could worry about that now; not when his life is invaluable in comparison. But how was he to get out of this? There was no way... were these foxes going to kill him? Aero wondered that as his subconscious became enthralled with the black smoke that infiltrated and hampered his senses. Now that it has penetrated his very mind, Aero wondered with what was left of his control over it just how much more he could take... He could only accept his fate and will the pain to ebb away. Though now there wasn't very much pain left to feel. He could feel nothing; his vitality was draining away. His vision was a cloud of smoke; he could no longer even tell where he was, who was attacking him. It was now in resemblance to the worst panic attack one could ever experience: with his own mind attacking itself. He wasn't aware of his consciousness anymore. He could feel no pain anymore. His vision was gone as well. What had happened to him? Was this nonexistence? Was this death? The eternal void...?

And without warning, he was sitting upright, gasping for breath. It was morning, Aero knew from his gut. Not long until Arcane was to give his usual morning speeches about their reign over Nyethra. Feeling weak and exhausted, a hundred times more than when he fell asleep, Aero dragged himself to his paws and tried to stretch. His entire back snapped uncomfortably into place. He must of moved around a lot as he slept... His fur was not in better shape. It was messy and unkempt to further evidence his suspicions. Dream. That was just a dream. It wasn't real at all. Of course not. He wasn't a cat. He was a fox. Besides, how could he see himself in that dream? Was that a spiritual representation of Arcane's start as an evil overlord? Maybe... but why did Aero see that!? Live that, to be correct! To warn him that is who he'd become upon his deeds Arcane will put him through that day? None of this made any sense to him... All he could do was breathe, straighten his fur, and curse the day that he was discerned to be a shadow vulpine in the first place. He forced himself to take steps towards the door and out of his quarters in West Wing. He forced himself even further to leave towards the center of Hydyraen where Arcane waited, just as he did the previous day. And the previous day. And the previous day... since he was able to walk for the first time, really. He hoped Shade was there to help him cope...

He disregarded the strangely cheerful shadow vulpines around him as he went. He only could address them with envy that they were happy, and he was not, even if it was all for very wrong reasons. To be happy once in his life. Seemed impossible, even if Shade was right there with him, trying to help. Was it really possible to get through this? No. Aero couldn't afford to feel doubt. There had to be a way. And he and Shade were going to find it.

Up ahead he saw a familiar figure walking down the hall slowly, ears and tail drooped in exhaustion. It was Shade. It seemed that she failed to have a decent night

as well. Despite that being an obvious bad thing, it made Aero feel less alone. He jogged up to catch up to her. When he looked into her eyes, he noticed how dark and dull they had become. There was no spark or fire of any kind. It made her look like an entirely different shadow vulpine from before.

"Aero," she choked out. "I had a horrible night last night," she confessed. "It was so odd," she added before Aero could agree with her. "I felt fine at first. Ready to deal with today's challenges in any way I can, since I've been through worse jams than this. But when I did sleep, there was this dream that I had. It was of something I never thought possible... I was living in the perspective of a creature that I had assaulted in the past due to the shadow vulpines' enforcements against my will. When I was around your age and just... starting out. But this time... both you and Arcane were there with me instead... it was... so horrible. So jarring... why would I dream something like that?" she asked worriedly.

Aero felt his eyes widen at the confession. "B-but Shade..." he breathed. "I dreamed something like that too!" he said, remembering his dream with a flinch.

Shade's eyes had a flare of momentary shock. "You have? Then these dreams must be signs," she stated firmly. "Though of what, I can't tell you I know. What I do know, is that we cannot let these dreams come to fruition here in the present day. Not by us, and soon we'll stop it all altogether."

"A sign..." Aero repeated with a thoughtful look. "A sign from who, I wonder..."

Shade put a hand on his shoulder. "Someone I'll explain in due time. Right now we need to figure out-- HEY! Would you watch where you're going!?" she suddenly screeched when a fox had bumped into her on the way past. It was quite obvious that it was completely intentional.

That fox turned around and spat, clearly not caring in the slightest. "Sorry," he retorted before turning around and continuing his pace.

"Isrir," Shade muttered with a loud growl.

"He's still upset about losing to you, I bet," Aero tilted his head curiously. "Or maybe it's because of all that distrust of us." He couldn't help but let out a meek smile.

"Yeah," Shade nodded.

"We should hurry up or we'll be late. Arcane'll cut our tails off if we are," Aero observed as the hall, just several yards ahead, was becoming very full as it usually had every morning.

"Right."

The two of them proceeded through the doors and were met with the usual uproar of hundred of voices ringing around the hall. Most of the conversation was of the successes that were pulled yesterday. Including the successful pillage and transport of Deltania's culinary goods, and a ransack on a nearby caravan in Ryandan Forest on the banks of the Vrangar River.

Aero realized that since he and Shade were among the last to arrive, they'd be among the first to leave. He hoped that when Arcane ordered their dismissal, they could dodge him altogether. Wishful thinking, but Aero still hoped.

Almost every shadow vulpine was there it seemed. Had all the long range assailants returned already? Aero had not expected that for a couple days... Arcane must have found a way to increase efficiency there too. As Aero looked up at him in the center of the hall, he wondered just how much power that tyrant possessed. Arcane stood up.

"Welcome back home and good morning my friends, my family!" he called out with his loud, foreboding voice. "I am satisfied to hear that your raids were all a success and it has served to the prosperity of our society. As I am satisfied to acknowledge that our deeds have shown Nyethra that we are far from down and out. That we can bounce back and become stronger than ever before! However, there is one thing that still bothers me," he added. Aero felt a shiver in his spine so cold, it froze him. He realized that Arcane was looking directly at him. Oh no... he wasn't going to address his pacifism was he? "We must take our attacks out into the night! Much, much more often than we already have! To show them the true meaning of shadows... and how much formidable we are when we use them..."

Aero gasped. "What!?" he growled, only to be drowned out by uproarious cheering around him.

"Oh no..." Shade murmured. Somehow, Aero was able to hear that.

"Nyethrans all around are standing too proudly thinking they're safer at night! Let's show them that can never be allowed to be the case! We will NOT subject to ridicule! We ARE shadow vulpines, am I right!?" Arcane roared as Hydyraen continued cheering in approval.

"I can't believe this," Aero said in a low voice, not hearing himself. How was he able to hear Shade, but not himself? He looked over to Shade, but she was staring down at her paws.

"Let's go, my brethren! Let's show Nyethra what it truly means to be covered in eternal shadows! They'll fall in daylight; we'll make sure of that! Let's expand beyond the forest in the south. The fields in the north! No distance will be too daunting for us! Let's work together to conquer all of Nyethra!" Arcane boomed.

No... was THAT what Arcane was building up to? Total domination? To Aero, that didn't fit him too well at all. Why now of all times? He could have just started this plot as soon as he took over. He never seemed interested in domination before this, just money and valuables. There had to be something more than that that he wants. But what..?

As Arcane called for all the shadow vulpines to disperse, he looked over to Shade, still frozen shut to the ground. She returned his with a simple look of

determination. Aero nodded in understanding. Once Aero was able to move, they turned to leave the hall.

"So that plan was all for naught," Shade stated simply.

"I don't think so, Shade," Aero replied encouragingly. "What would we have done differently if Arcane announced all this before?"

Shade sighed. "Probably not much," she said, as if she wasn't even talking to Aero. "One thing's for certain, Arcane's gotten much too powerful. If he's going to expand the shadow vulpine reign over further regions deeper into Nyethra, we're in huge trouble. We need to get back to the Guardians, now," she added urgently.

"Then let's go. S-somehow," Aero replied shakily.

"Y-yes," Shade nodded.

But before they could take another step forward, a familiar, bone chilling voice interjected. "Aren't you forgetting someone?"