

SIX: Broken Dam

"Damn it all," Aero muttered under his breath as he felt the ice cold presence of an enigma behind him.

"What did you say?" Arcane asked as the cold aura behind Aero grew even colder.

"N-nothing!" Aero replied too quickly, body stiffening up instantly. He really hoped there was a chance that he and Shade wouldn't encounter Arcane at all. Though he knew those hopes were dashed without a second thought.

"Both your furs are messes. I'd think that you two would know how to take care of it. Especially, you, Shade. Or have you gotten too old to do so on your own?" Under normal circumstances, that'd be an insult alright, but for some reason, Arcane was cheery and clearly joking. This is nothing like he usually was. Aero remained on guard.

"We didn't sleep well," he claimed, through gritted teeth. He hoped that Arcane would not know the reasons why.

"You two are excited for the outing today I presume? Aero I can understand, but why you, Shade? A shadow vulpine of your age and experience knows every nook and cranny of Nyethra right?"

Shade and Aero looked at each other. "Uh..." Shade was clearly unable to address Arcane's demeanor as much as Aero was.

Arcane immediately noticed their lack of a response and stopped laughing. "Oh come now, I'm sure you two are feeling the way you are for the wrong reasons. What can there be to be nervous about?"

Aero and Shade exchanged glances of apprehension.

"Well, the thing is..."

"Uh... You see..."

Arcane interrupted both of them. "Oh I get it! You're worried you'll screw things up, am I right?" As Arcane said that, Aero had a nagging suspicion that Arcane knew the real answer. The thought of that proposition sent chills into his tail. Nonetheless, Aero and Shade went with it.

"Yes, that's it!"

"It's that obvious, isn't it?"

"You need not worry! Shade, I know you're rusty and old, but I have faith you still have it in you, and Aero? With your power, there is simply no worry at all, my friend. Now. Shall we get going?" Arcane clapped his paws together.

Despite what was liable to take place, there was a part of Aero that felt genuine excitement. This was going to be his first time on the surface. He'd been trapped

underground for so long with only a vague idea of what the sun was truly like because of the hole in the gardens. Fresh air and real sunlight. Aero wondered what it was like.

Within minutes, Arcane had taken them to the huge gates that separated them from the world above ground. It was large, forebodingly ominous, and symbolic of what kind of prison Aero was born and raised into. A large padlock kept it shut. "You are the first vulpines out for the day," Arcane noted as he went to unlock it. A few loud clangs later and the door swung open. "Well, it's time," he said. There was something almost nostalgic in his voice. Aero wanted to know, and didn't want to know simultaneously. "Let's go." Arcane said.

Aero could only nod with a mystified look on his face. He crossed the gates for the first time. At first, it was the same as usual. A long narrow hallway. The stone bricks under his paws soon gave way to dirt however. It wasn't often Aero walked in dirt. The gardens were the closest he ever actually got. This dirt felt far rougher and grittier, to his surprise.

"The tunnel is getting narrower!" Shade called from ahead. "You'll have to crawl out from here!" Sure enough, as Shade said that, Aero felt the dirty ceiling brushing his ears and then forcing them flat. Aero wondered how so many foxes could get in and out of here so quickly like they do. There must be more than one entrance hidden in the shadows... Aero had to get on his hands and knees if he wanted to follow Shade and Arcane out of the tunnel. It took a few more seconds for Aero to see the light up ahead. With that cue, the tunnel began to slope upwards. Aero was sure to savor every second of his first seconds outside. He couldn't believe that they were coming at last! As Aero was able to stand up again, he was suddenly dazzled by a bright white light that overwhelmed his senses. A light that teased him to what was to be revealed to him. Was this the real sunlight? So inconceivably bright... Was it to blind him? Aero felt the air moving around him. The wind... It felt so good... It took a moment or two for his eyes to finally adjust to the world around him and what he saw took his breath away. Green. Green everywhere. A sprawling plain laid in front of him. Flowers and tall grass waved a greeting in the zephyrs that coaxed them to. Was this the Windfall Steppe he'd heard about? White puffy clouds above in the vast blue sky blew lazily past. Aero heard a rustling behind him and saw a large forest stretching from left to right. The Ryandan Forest. Hydraen's entrance sat on the edge of both these impressive marks of nature. As Aero stood, staring at the forest in front of him, he noticed that to his right, he saw very distant peaks of stone with clouds hovering over them. Those have to be the Thunderstruck Mountains.

Beautiful, is it not?" Arcane said as he looked at Aero.

Aero shut his gaping muzzle the second he realized it was gaping and shook his head back to reality. "Yeah, it really is," he said in awe.

Arcane sighed as he looked around. "Yes... and to think that this is only a part of our territory. All of it will be ours someday..."

This was Nyethra... Or rather, a small part of it. Aero suddenly felt the urge to explore as much as he could of this world. See all the wonderful sights. Know all the places to go in this vast land. But he painstakingly knew, that he could not just yet. Aero took a step forward and was enthralled at how the grass felt. After nothing but stone under his paws his whole life, there was nothing better at that moment than the soft, cool feel of grass on his pads. The only taster of this feeling he had ever had was of again, the gardens, from accidentally stepping on the crops, but that? That was nothing compared to this...

Shade sighed as she took in a breath of the fresh air. "I remember the feeling of the grass the first time I came out here. It was the best thing at the time... really makes me wish we didn't live a life trapped underground all the time."

Arcane shook his head. "But you do know why exactly we cannot do that, right, Shade?"

Shade let out a longer sigh and looked down. "Yes, I do know that sir, but I still don't like it. I don't think anyone does, to be honest."

"Tell ya what? If we can find a way to effectively channel Light Forces, what if I tried to grow grass underground throughout Hydyraen?" Arcane offered.

"A shadow vulpine, using the Force of Light? Surely you jest, sir," Shade said. "But I'd love that if we could..."

Aero stared at Shade. She was saying things like this despite this being among her last days in Hydyraen? That made no sense to Aero. Of course if she spoke otherwise, it'd tip Arcane off...

"Aero look over there," Arcane pointed to the left. Aero swiveled his head over to that direction and waited for Arcane to continue. "Over that way in the Vrangar River. What I will have you do will be placed over there. You're new to the ways of our arts, so we'll start you off easy. Well, easy for you considering how strong you already are, but... you'll know what I mean when we get there," Arcane explained.

Aero wondered what Arcane meant by "easy for him", but he at least had serious doubts it'd be anything seriously terrible. "So what will you have me do?" he asked cautiously.

Arcane stood and thought for a moment. Then, "Yesterday, Isrir informed me that a family of beavers recently moved onto the river shortly downstream and are blocking it with their dam," he explained. Aero could already see where this was going. "I want you to destroy it." That was predictable. "That sounds easy right? Well, beavers build their dams with the utmost architectural strength that rivals anyone else in all of Nyethra. By building their dam, they're also blocking the river. So I want you to kill two birds with one stone. Destroy the dam, but make sure the wreckage still blocks the

river. If you destroy the dam and the river is freed, sure a family's home is destroyed, but you just saved Nyethrans that live further downstream! We cannot have that on our reputation! So use your powers in such a way that the river remains blocked after the destruction, clear?" Arcane explained.

Aero's mind was reeling from what Arcane had just instructed him to do. Destroy the dam and make sure the wreckage still blocks the river. That's bad. Maybe evil, but outright diabolical? Maybe not. ...Okay it's not the worst that could happen at least. Aero was aware that dehydration issues will result from a dried up river further downstream, however. He did not know who or what lived downstream, but he knew he was about to inflict on them a lot of suffering, which was much worse than destroying someone's home in his opinion. He had to know what lived downstream... "Do you know what's downstream?" he asked.

Arcane answered him plainly and simply. "A desert."

Aero felt his stomach drop into his tail. Oh great. A desert with a water shortage problem. NOW it was diabolical. It just figures that'd be the case. Arcane set it up like that on purpose, didn't he?

"Any more questions?" Arcane asked gruffly.

Aero shook his head stiffly.

"Excellent. Follow me," he said as he turned and strode off towards the river, giving him and Shade a beckoning motion. Aero and Shade followed Arcane through the grass. As they went along, Aero became mesmerized by the environment around him again, particularly how bright the sun shone in the sky. He also felt its warmth radiating through his fur as the cool, crisp air blew around it softly. It was a wonderful day to be outside.

They had reached a dirt trail that ran parallel with the river. Aero noticed that there were several paw prints imprinted in the dirt. Upon taking a closer look onto them, Aero realized that while most of them were clearly vulpine, the rest were of other species. And judging by how sporadic their placements were...

Arcane burst out laughing. "Ah, looks like somebody got a hold of a cat!" he said in good spirits. "Speaking of them felines from last night, right Aero? It looked like they refused to cooperate with our clan..." he added when he pointed out tufts of fur that belonged to both species lying all over the path. Some of it was blowing away in the wind. Aero felt worried and sick. He looked at Shade, who shared the same sentiments. It was reminiscent of their dreams, alright.

Arcane tsked. "If only they would have cooperated. Now look at the mess they made our foxes make... it's going to warn future travellers down this road... Shade? Would you kindly clean this up? The wind is not doing the job fast enough!"

Shade nodded curtly and began sweeping around the trail with her tail and paws. No Forces? Aero thought that there would be an easy way for her to do so than

that... His mind went to the dream he had the previous night. Something like he saw then, clearly happened here some time ago. Not the same, obviously, but the connections still worried him.

As Shade returned, Arcane set off towards the river once more. The second Aero stepped to the other side of the path, he heard the faint sound of moving water. There was nothing else it could be other than the river.

"Hm... normally you can hear it from that trail... It seems the dam has begun to stall the river much sooner than I thought. While it's good to cause a drought downstream, it's bad for us because we might flood. What a dilemma..." Arcane said as Aero saw the large, long snake of water in front of them. It was not moving very fast at all...

"So will you c-- I mean... what are we going to do about it?" Aero asked, nearly asking Arcane if he was to cancel the assignment.

"Hm... Well, I'll have to send someone up here to reroute the water to the Qosta Sea, since that isn't very far away... Still, that's a lot of work just for this one goal... Bah. We'll take the risk. If it comes to it, we'll just have someone counter the rising waters themselves when it gets too high..." Arcane said.

Aero looked further down the river and saw exactly what Arcane was talking about several dozen yards downstream. It was a massive heap of twigs, branches, and logs stretching across the river, woven so intricately well that Aero wondered how the hell anyone could build anything quite like it. Several small-ish brown, sturdy bodies were adding to the structure. They must be the beavers. Beyond them was a much shallower riverbed that had very little water being relieved out of it. Aero took a step forward to get a closer look. Arcane stopped him, however.

"Stop, Aero. We must do the deed from here. These beavers are much stronger than they look. Those huge flat tails of theirs can stun a fox very, very easily. And their teeth? Huh. They're designed specifically to cut down trees with ease, so if you get anything vital between them and you're immediately dead. You never want to fight these guys paw to paw without armor or something along those lines. We must use our Forces to our advantage," Arcane explained. As Aero nodded, Arcane went on a tangent. "Damn beavers. They have no set territory, so they'll end up anywhere along a river in a forest. Nobody likes how their homes block such a vital resource such as the rivers. Even we are no fan of them either..." Arcane shook his head.

"I-I see," Aero replied. "So... how do I use these Forces anyways?" he asked.

"It's a bit trickier than using the Forces of Darkness or Light, I'm afraid. What you do is you draw it directly from nature itself. Wind is by far the easiest of the four core elements because it's everywhere, so why don't you try that one?" Arcane suggested.

"Focus on the air around you... make its power your own. Draw it to your paws.

Concentrate it. Condense it. Shape it the way you wish it to and unleash it!" Arcane said

loudly. "Oh and don't try to summon it any other way right now. Only the most powerful of sorcerers and sorceresses can do so, no matter how powerful you or I are," he added.

Aero nodded again, biting his lips when he thought about what he was going to do. But what's even worse is disappointing Arcane right now. He focused on his hands and the air that surrounded them. The cool breeze ventilating his fur and pads. He focused his mind on that and willed that to become a part of his own power. It did not take too much longer for silvery wisps, tinted a light purple color, to appear along the pads on his hands. He glanced at Arcane, who looked momentarily impressed. Aero realized that a lapse in his concentration was fatal for this power and he focused once more as the wisps began to fizzle out slightly. It was as if his mind had become one with the wind. And that, he was certain, was what had to happen if he were to succeed in creating this power. Once he determined that he had the right amount of the Force in his control, he began to picture in his mind, what he willed the power to take shape as. Several circular blades of wind. That sounded ideal for this grueling job... So Aero bent his fingers, focused his mind. Made the power he wanted it to be. Aero opened his eyes and saw several blades of purple wind floating around his arms and hands. They were rough, rugged, and very clumsily shaped. But they looked acceptable enough to send flying. He momentarily took his mind from the newly formed wind blades and looked towards the dam. He flung out his arm into the general direction of the structure, and right on cue, the blades were hurled at it. They zigzagged, wobbled, and generally flew through the air awkwardly and without coherent direction. Some flew in many directions, into the forest, where they landed in trees with a loud buzzing sound. A few were felled where they stood, not even remotely expecting to die that day. But a little more than half scored their mark and with a similar buzzing sound, sliced through the dam almost effortlessly. The beavers stopped working and stood up tall, as if to try to figure out what just happened and what the sound was, as the structure did not break apart immediately. Presumably when one of the beavers took one wrong step as they started to inspect their home, the dam began to collapse under them. The tremendous force of the weight of all that wood moving at once shook the ground under the foxes' paws as they stood and watched. The beavers, now panicking, flung themselves into the river to try to get out of harm's way as the splintering wood fell around all of them. Aero noticed that a few of them were not fast enough and disappeared under the torrent of wood. The entire interior of the dam was collapsing in on itself, but the exterior design kept most of the wood in that one spot, but the home was undeniably ruined. The beavers that made it to either of the banks of the river looked at their wrecked work and just... did not move... It took several moments for them to disperse into the forest slowly. Even from where Aero stood, he could feel

their sadness and disappointment. As if... it were his own... since he was the one who caused this to happen...

Arcane burst out laughing, ruining the mood as Aero knew he would. "That was fantastic, Aero! I knew you could do it! Well done! You're a natural! My, you've got so much potential, you could even make a leader of Hydyraen out of yourself if you keep this up!" he howled. Aero felt a firm hand on his back hit him in congratulations as its owner chortled on. Leader of Hydyraen?! Not a chance!

"I-it was nothing," he lied. Of course it was something! He just destroyed a family's home! Even if it was an impediment, it still meant something to someone! And worse, it still didn't change the fact that the river was completely blocked! He did not even want to think about what that may mean for creatures that lived in the desert that was further downstream... There was nothing out of this that he enjoyed in the slightest, but in a way... it gave him hope. His suspicions of being swayed by his first truly terrible act were clearly false if he still felt this way now. Still... he did not want to get his hopes up too soon...

There was a sudden rustling sound nearby that jolted Aero back to reality and caused Arcane to stop laughing. All three of them looked in the direction of the forest, where it had come from. "What was that?" Arcane demanded what they all wanted to know. Though there was no response from anyone. Aero thought the beavers may have found them, but nothing emerged from the foliage in the forest that became disturbed. Wait a minute... could that have been...?

"Probably nothing interesting or important," Shade shrugged. But Aero guessed she thought the same thing he did. It was probably the Guardian he and Shade were supposed to rendezvous with by now.

"In any case, I still have the urge to continue admiring your strength, Aero," Arcane said. "How is it that you've become so strong out of the gate like that? They came to you so naturally, without any sense of struggle whatsoever!"

Aero couldn't help but flush when his leader flattered him. This was the absolute extreme opposite he expected to hear from him! "Honestly, sir, I'm just as surprised as you are!" he said. No he wasn't. He was way more surprised than he was.

Arcane sighed as he looked towards the ruined dam. "My only wish was that I could have seen the looks on their faces. But as I said, getting close to them without protective armor is absolutely suicidal. Beavers are surprisingly resilient to our Forces too, so they really are formidable foes. So!" he clapped his hands together. "Shall we spend the rest of the day showing Aero around this region?"

As the day continued, Arcane showed Aero many more of the landmarks that surrounded the area around the entrance to Hydyraen. He included the names of trails, some of the best places to hide in wait for ambush, as well as other means of taking advantage of the environment. Aero also learned that the vast majority of names of

places in Nyethra were named in an ancient language that was mostly unused now. For instance, Ryandan Forest was named for the Old Nyethran name for "Vulpine Forest". Aero had no idea that was really what that meant...

"Awru en Craara. The Path to Being," Arcane said as they reached the trail that they had just come from.

"Path to Being? Why is it called that?" Aero asked curiously.

"I have no idea," Arcane stated too simply. Way too simply. So simply that Aero had a feeling that Arcane did actually know why it was named that and why it was important for him to hide that fact. "Well," he started to change the subject. "It's getting late. We should head back to Hydyraen."

Aero felt a pit in his stomach turn into a void. Go back to Hydyraen? But there was nothing more Aero wanted than to stay on the surface where the sky was always so beautiful to look at... among so. Many. Other. Things! But he nodded sadly as there was no arguing with Arcane, especially when it came to remaining above ground against his will.

"Damn it!" Arcane suddenly cursed. "I had forgotten to send vulpines to steal food today! Looks like we'll have to ration what we have left carefully... Maybe tomorrow I'll train you two on doing that then," he said.

Shade winked at Aero as she spoke up. There was a strange spark in her eyes and for some reason, he really liked the sight of it. He knew that she had a new plan. "Actually sir, I already know how to do that. I can go tonight and train Aero in doing so," she offered earnestly.

"You!?" Arcane did not hide his incredulity. It was common knowledge that Arcane distrusted Shade, but did he know that Shade knew that? Aero could see a conflict burning in the tyrant's eyes as he considered what to say to Shade in response. "Hrmph. Alright. I suppose we need night volunteers to fill up the larder anyways," he said, almost with completely open reluctance. "We're counting on your success, alright?"

"Yes sir," Shade replied.

"Good," Arcane said as he disappeared into the tunnels that lead back to Hydyraen. He called to them from inside. "But you'd better get some food and rest before you go. Remember to ration yourselves though. We don't want to strain the larder any more than it already has."

When he was out of earshot, he and Shade went back into Hydyraen with clear reluctance of their own. But as they went, Shade's eyes shone with approval of her own. "Well done, Aero! You handled that way better than I ever could!"

Aero was glad Shade could not see him blush. "Yeah well... doing it was easier than I thought. But don't get me wrong; I still hated the hell out of doing it, but... I had

to unless I wanted Arcane to make it hell for us. I felt that me doing so was what hinged us between leaving and not," he said.

Shade was growling now. "We should have left by now, dammit!" She snarled. "If only Arcane had not been the one to come with us!"

They had left the tunnels and were then inside the gates. Aero looked at Shade and said, "Yeah, I know we should. But we cannot right now, can we?"

Shade shook her head. "Not when Arcane ordered us. We have to wait."

"Well if you wait long enough before you stop standing on my tail, then, you'll be more than just tailless yourselves by morning!" snarled a loud, foreboding voice right in Aero's ears.

Aero yelped in surprise when he realized that the ground he was standing on was not the hard stone floor, but the soft fur that was someone's tail. He leapt aside in horror as he realized who it was.

"Thanks, asswipe," snarled Isrir as he walked past. As he walked past, he spat in Aero's face and stamped his own paws down on Aero's tail, causing him to yelp loudly and then strutted off.

Aero was fuming. He was fuming much more than he usually did whenever Isrir violated him as such. It was before his consciousness registered it that a dark aura began to form in his hands again. Too late did he realize that he fired an aura straight into Isrir's back. It sent Isrir flying several yards forward in the air. He landed hard on his muzzle. Aero heard a crack as Isrir's nose broke instantly on the stone floor. He heard Shade gasps simultaneously. He wondered what Isrir would do in retaliation, but his own unimaginable fury made Aero not care in the slightest. This time. He was ready for anything. He watched as Isrir slowly got to his paws, clutching his face. Aero saw blood dripping into Isrir's hands and onto the ground below. Isrir's body swerved and faced Aero. The eyes in the hostile shadow vulpine were on fire. There was nothing but pure undistilled anger in them. And... one other emotion that was attempting to hide behind it, but failing. What was that...? No. Aero knew what it was. It was fear. Something Aero always had himself, was now reflected back at him in his usual assailant's eyes. It was right then, that Aero had remembered what Arcane had told him the previous day. Retaliate and show them his power... he had done just that... He had done exactly as he sworn he wouldn't. Isrir stood there, blood pouring from his face, panting in anger. But instead of retaliating himself, he turned back around and walked away, with a quick pace.

As Aero watched him, the realization sunk even further into his skin. "I-I--" he struggled to say. That was when he felt Shade's hands on his shoulders.

"I know," she said as sympathetically as she was in shock. "This is why we need to escape Hydyraen for good." She looked up and past him. "And that is exactly what we are going to do. Tonight."

