

SEVEN: Escape

Night had completely taken over Hydyraen after Aero and Shade had their meal in silence. They hoped they would be able to eat in peace, but had expected they wouldn't. They had a strong feeling Uukai would confront them for hurting her mate the way Aero did. But she did not come. As much as Aero wanted to know why, he most certainly was glad she did not. Aero could only assume that she was likely tending to his wounded face. Which meant she was liable to pay them back later. Aero was glad that it was time to escape now more than ever. It was time to claim the freedom he was previously destined to never have.

Shade requested Aero to meet her outside the Central Hall around midnight. Arcane really had made it easy for them to leave by granting them an assignment that they'll never undertake. It was almost as if he wanted them to leave. But that doesn't sound right... Why would he do something like that? Well, at least they did not have to worry about being caught without an alibi.

It was roughly twenty minutes from midnight when Aero sat up in bed, completely restless and anxious to sleep even a wink. Such restlessness led to impatience. It built up until he found himself dashing from his room earlier than he needed to. He ran swiftly and as quietly as he could to not disturb slumbering foxes through the West Wing. He ran up the stairs far too carelessly; he felt the stone stairs intercept his paws on nearly every step. He simply did not care. He did not care anymore about any pain he felt in anything. The pain in his toes only amplified as he forced them to keep moving through the dark halls. The Hall wasn't too far away; he wondered if Shade was there already. It was still earlier than she had instructed him after all. He slowed to a stop just outside the large doors. And when he did stop, his paws screamed at him in protest. With nothing left to focus on other than the time for Shade to show up, Aero noticed it instantly and dropped to the ground, clutching them with pained gasps. That was the last time he was going to rush things like THAT again...

"Hey hotshot. What happened to you?" That was the voice of Shade. She had also showed up earlier than she said.

Aero jumped to his paws and winced. "Nothing," he said quickly.

"You are fit to go r--"

"Yes, I am," Aero interjected when Shade brought up such ludicrous doubt. No matter what happened to Aero, even if he lost a leg, he was still going.

"Alright then," Shade shrugged. Then she looked in the direction where the gates would be. "Well, I suppose there is not much left to do, right? The Guardian I mentioned knows that we're going to leave in just a few moments. Are we ready then?"

Aero nodded firmly. "This place is all I've known. Let me learn somewhere else."

Shade dipped her head. "Let's get the show on the road then," she said as she started ahead. Aero followed closely.

Hydyraen seemed like a different place at night. It always had. Nobody was around. The halls were dark. The only light there was from dying embers from torches that lined the walls. As foreboding as Hydyraen usually was, at night, it was... eerily peaceful. Especially knowing that these were the final moments that Aero was to spend down there. It was a feeling so foreign, in a place so familiar, that it sent chills into Aero's spine.

Just ahead in the dim light, Aero saw the outline to the underground gates that led to the outside world. He knew that once he crossed them, he was a free fox at last. He counted the distance to freedom. His heart pounded as each step meant a subtraction to the distance. The second he crossed them, he felt instantly different. In a good way. But he knew that those steps were just the beginning. He may be out of Hydyraen now, but as long as he remained in shadow vulpine territory, he knew he wasn't safe yet. He feared for how long that stretched for... He and Shade ducked down as the tunnel narrowed down before it would open up.

Upon surfacing, Aero was only able to look around the Nyethran night before he was surprised by a sudden loud commotion nearby that broke the previously serene silence that surrounded him underground. He looked around wildly for the source before he saw them. Two foxes were fighting with various Forces right inside the forest. He recognized Isrir right away. The shadow vulpine had bandages around his nose from earlier. Though the second fox's identity was unidentifiable. From the darkness, Aero knew that even that fox's fur color was different. In the dark it seemed maroon. Though since it was dark, Aero knew it really wasn't. No doubt that he was not from around here. Was that...?

The mysterious fox interrupted his thoughts by summoning a bright flash of lightning to attack Isrir with. The flash was so luminous that it made Aero cry out in surprise and shock. Isrir responded with the dark emotions that the shadow vulpines were so adept at using. The manifestations of darkness and light seemed to coalesce together in a dazzling display of power that blinded Aero and made his head hurt. The power behind both Forces sent him and even Shade staggering backwards despite being several yards away. When the power faded away, he watched in horror as both the foxes that were fighting crumple to the ground with a thud each. Shade instantly responded with a scream.

"What's happened!?" Aero yelled as he and Shade went up to them.

Shade was barely holding herself together. "Our Guardian! Isrir must have known what was going on, so he was out here to meet us, but he came across our Guardian instead! Oh Aero... I think they're both dead..." she said with a shaky voice.

"Dead?" Aero echoed, barely able to breathe. He looked down at the Guardian's surprisingly handsome face. His golden colored eyes resonated with nothingness. No light. No darkness. Pure, undistilled nothingness. Even his fur, which Aero found was a brilliant orange color, was starting to fade out. There was no sign of life whatsoever any longer. Aero backed away, trying not to be sick, but he stumbled over the limp legs of his cubhood enemy, Isrir. Like with the Guardian, there was no more signs of life left to discern. Horrified, he looked at Shade. "H-how could this have happened?"

Before Shade could respond, there was rustling in the bushes a little deeper in the forest. Aero jumped and Shade was on guard. Another fox? A shadow vulpine?! Aero expected it to be Uukai, ready to avenge her fallen lover, but instead of her imposing voice, he heard a young male cub's voice calling out. "Hey, Master? Are you alright? Have you found Miss Shade and Mister Aero yet?" Another fox that looked just like the Guardian, only much younger had emerged from the bushes, looking concerned. He was a cub, but judging from the looks of him, he wouldn't be one for too much longer. He gasped, aghast at the sight of the older Guardian. "Master! Wh-what have they done to you!?" he looked over to Shade and Aero and glared at them. "Y-you! What did you do!?" he exclaimed. There was very obvious fear in his eyes, yet they shone with defiance. Aero was surprised at the prospect that something that young may attack him... that is until Shade knelt down to address him.

"Storm Cesia Tharo... Is that you?" she asked. There was warmth in her still shaky voice.

The cub backed down, looking shocked. "Wh-wha...? H-how do you know my name?"

"It's me!" Shade put a paw on her chest. "Shade!"

"Shade?" The cub narrowed his eyes, trying to recognize an obviously familiar name to him in the dark. "That's really you? W-wow... you look different already... And..." he looked behind Shade, right at Aero. "That's Mister Aero?"

Shade nodded. "It's us alright."

"Whoa, I thought he'd be as old as you, Shade! He's not too much older than I am!" he said.

"You..." Shade said warmly. Then she looked at the older, late Guardian. "I cannot believe Plazma is dead now. I'm sorry about him, Storm," she said solemnly.

Storm shrugged. "I did not really get to know him... though now I wish I did..."

Shade dipped her head. "We always wish that right when it's too late," she said in a low voice. Aero saw something in her eyes. Recollections? She shook her head, clearing them from Aero's view. "I guess we'll need to find you a new mentor when we get back to Castla nu Craara," she said. "We should get going; very soon, shadow vulpines are going to notice what happened."

"We can't just leave these two here like this though," Aero said.

"Good point. You take care of Isrir. Storm and I have some catching up to do with an old friend..." Shade said quietly.

"You knew him?" Aero asked.

"Not as well as some others, but yeah, I knew him," Shade said simply.

"I'm so sorry," Aero said.

"I've had worse losses," Shade said flatly. "But thank you anyways..." she added as she and Storm began moving the Guardian deeper into the forest.

Aero looked down at Isrir. He felt a strong twinge of satisfaction. So this was the fate of someone who had tormented him his whole life. Now that he was dead, Aero felt like his dues were finally paid. Isrir got what he deserved... Aero grabbed Isrir by the ankle and dragged him parallel to the edge of the forest. Within a moment, he reached the bank of the river and he was surprised at what he saw right there.

It was the ruined dam.

From up close, he saw the fruits of his labor earlier that day. Wood of all sizes lay upon each other in a twisted, mangled mess. On one side of it, the river lay trapped, unable to move. It was nearly overflowing the banks. The other side had barely any water at all. There were puddles and mud, but not much more. For a moment, Aero considered leaving it that way so Hydraen would flood. But he knew that Arcane was planning for that, and that downstream inhabitants would suffer immensely. Aero decided he'd kill two birds with one stone. He thought of the pain and misery Isrir inflicted on him. The anger and anguish he'd feel as a result of it. He thought of the decade and a half long of abuse he suffered. How it was all he'd known. A dark haze crossed his vision as he kicked Isrir, mercilessly off the riverbank and onto the ruined dam with so much force, that Aero saw what looked like blood splatter as Isrir slammed into the splintered structure. He did so with so much force, it seemed like it was enough to knock the dam loose enough for the river to start cracking the rest of it apart. Several seconds to minutes passed as the dam shifted, cracking and splitting from the weakness Aero created. It was going to give way any second. Until it did. The dam gave one last crack of life before it completely broke apart. The river realized it was free and instantly flooded the drying bed it was locked out from. The torrent washed away immense amounts of wood and debris as it did. For a brief moment as the river raged with freedom, Aero thought he saw a gray hand above the water as if it were fighting to stay afloat in the turbulent water. Aero immediately wished that Isrir did struggle or suffer. Aero was breathing steam at the fact he didn't. After all he went through, and Isrir was out like that? That's not justice at all... He turned away, angrily. As he did so, he was surprised to find Storm and Shade looking at him with extremely worried faces on their faces. Aero was only barely aware of the feelings he had... but he could not care any longer. "Come on," he muttered. "Let's go home. Our real home."

Dawn began to chase away the darkness over Ryandan Forest. Aero was stiff as a board as he dropped from a tree just above the path they were on. He groaned as he stretched his aching body. He heard many of the bones snapping in and out of place as he did so. "Foxes weren't meant to sleep in trees," he muttered. The three of them were forced to sleep in the trees that night when shadow vulpine patrols responded to the dam breaking apart. They found Isrir's body washed up on the shore a few miles downstream and they immediately called for an investigation, spearheaded by none other than, Uukai. Shade acknowledged Aero's actions last night as throwing a wrench in their plans. While that may be, Aero also felt obligated to undo his atrocity the day before somehow. Or... at least a part of it. That, and he said that Isrir deserved what he got. Shade had told him to stop thinking like that... he was growing more vengeful... less of a pacifist... different. Aero agreed, but there was nothing that was changing the way he was now feeling.

Shade had dropped from the trees shortly after Aero, and she was closely followed by Storm, who failed to land on his paws, and instead landed on his backside. He grunted as he landed, kicking up dust.

"Are they gone?" he asked as he stood up and dusted himself off.

Aero shrugged. "With Arcane having opened the gates permanently, there was no telling for sure."

"Let's just keep on our guard," Shade stated.

Aero was growling. "Arcane knew the whole time what we were planning to do, didn't he?" he asked. "If so, then why has he made it so easy for us to leave? That makes no sense to me!"

Shade shook her head. "I try not to question everything Arcane does. If I did, I'd never stop asking. Although... I do think I should tell you that I believe Arcane is trying to target the Guardians," she said.

Storm gasped. "He's what?! But why!? Not even the biggest baddy would target our home, would they?"

"Arcane wants to conquer this world and drown it in darkness. Currently the only forces that stand a chance against him alone are the Guardians, among a few other organizations throughout Nyethra when together. He won't even hesitate to attempt to disintegrate the Guardians sometime in the future as long as they remain in his way," Shade replied darkly.

"Please tell me you're joking!" Storm cried out incredulously.

"So, if the Guardians are defeated by the shadow vulpines, just how bad can the situation get?" Aero asked, confused.

"Oh it matters way more than anything you could think of, Aero," Shade growled. "We have authority over what makes life, life. After us, we only have the other forces throughout Nyethra who could fight. But there aren't nearly as many of them as

there are Guardians. They'll be swamped... annihilated... And without us, the Seven Forces will become erratic. Impossible to control with either side of Nyethra containing one at a time. It will lead to the ruin of our world. Even Iridescence herself can't stop it."

Aero's brain hurt immensely. "Whoa wait a minute. Nothing you say makes any sense?! Other sides of Nyethra?! Others who can help? Seven Forces... ruin of the world? Iridescence? Just what is all of this?" he growled.

Shade glanced at Storm, who returned her gaze with golden eyes. "We'll tell you. But not right here, and not right now. We're still in hostile territory. We don't want to be overheard. Let's clear the forest first. Then we'll talk."

However, they did not get very far at all. Just several moments later they had encountered another shadow vulpine who was patrolling the forest. The shadow vulpine noticed that one of the foxes' fur was different from the others and was instantly "curious" about it. Guardian fur color sticks out like a sore paw in shadow vulpine territory...

"Where are you?! Show yourselves! I know you're around here..." the shadow vulpine said in an eerie and haunting, taunting voice.

The refugees and Storm had to dive behind a large berry bush to try not to be spotted. Several long, agonizing moments went by and the vixen that was searching for them did not give up. If there was another thing Aero had to find to hate about the shadow vulpine, it was their persistence. The position Aero had been sitting in behind the bush was so uncomfortable, that he involuntarily shifted his legs. The vixen, of course, heard it. Aero froze and Shade glowered at him. "Found you," said the vixen in a voice so eerie that chills spiraled into Aero's tail. He heard his pawsteps get closer with each slow step she took. Storm began trembling beside them in fear, which in turn, caused the bush to shake slightly, and thus, made them obvious.

"Oooo..." cooed the vixen in a somehow, even eerier voice as she approached. "Afraid, are we? Well how about I amplify that fear then... it's this bush, right?" As she asked that, Aero saw the gray fingers of a shadow vulpine grasp the bush above them.

Something came over Aero. He was not sure what compelled him, but he yelled out and sprang from the bush. The vixen was surprised when Aero drove her back and pushed her to the ground. He knocked the wind out of her when he pinned her to the ground forcefully. He heard a pop that must have meant that he also dislocated her shoulder. She was obviously going to be immobilized for a few moments... Aero stood up and watched as the surprised faces of Shade and Storm emerging from behind the bush.

"I never thought you'd attack anyone like that, Aero, judging by your previous demeanors," Shade said.

Aero looked down. "I had to defend us somehow, you know," he said. Though he knew she had a point. Ever since Arcane had made him destroy the dam, Aero realized he was growing increasingly more violent. Already, he could feel himself changing. Was Arcane really that influential...? He hoped a change in his life such as this would subdue these primal urges...

"You're a pacifist though?" Shade prompted, adding to the confusion.

"Even if I really am not anymore," Aero started. "If I ever do have to be fight, it will solely be for the sake of benevolence."

Shade chuckled. "Well aren't you noble? As much as I wish things could be resolved peacefully, is that truly possible anymore? Could we even risk that? With Hydyraen being one of many malevolent societies in Nyethra, it's too hard to tell," Shade said.

"So foxes are not the only hated species in Nyethra?" Aero asked.

Shade shook her head. "Well no... but none are quite as hated except maybe the kobolds in the desert downstream from here. You know, the one Arcane mentioned?"

"I see," Aero said. "Well I most certainly hope I can help regain the fox's reputation in this land," he said with weak confidence.

"Foxes have sustained such a bad reputation for countless generations. Long before the Guardians had even existed. Doing so would be tremendously difficult," Shade warned him.

"I don't care. If it's not justified, I will fight it," Aero vowed.

"Hey, Mister Aero?" Stormed padded up to him. "Do you hate who you are?"

Of all questions the young creature could ask, this was one of the last ones he expected to hear. And it was one that Aero had trouble thinking of an answer to. "No Storm," he said plainly. "I hated who I used to be. It's who I WILL be that matters the most," he explained. He looked around and noticed the sunlight's position above the trees. "How much time have we wasted here? We really should be going."

Shade nodded as she looked up. "Yes, you're right. So!" she clasped her hands together. "Onwards! Your new life awaits!"