

EIGHT: Explanation

Thankfully, the travelling foxes had no more close encounters over the following couple of days as they traversed the remainder of the Ryandan Forest. Aero was glad that they were nearing the edge of the forest at last. Not even just because shadow vulpine territory ends with it, but after all that time of seeing nothing but trees all around him, it wore him down. For some reason, being in the forest for two days drove him crazy more than a decade and a half underground. Aero thought it was because of his thirst to see all sorts of the new things he was about to see. But at last, the trees began to thin out on the third day of travelling. Aero could even see what looked like sand up ahead.

Shade stopped them shortly before leaving the trees. As she sat down, she said, "Well, let's deliver onto my promise." There was an unidentifiable tone to her voice.

"Hm?" Aero's ears perked up. "Promise? What promise? Why have we stopped? The desert is right over there, right?" he sat down as well, but he still questioned it. Aero subconsciously hoped the desert wasn't too long. He desperately hated the heat more than anything else. Except maybe Hydyraen and its inhabitants.

"You've forgotten... I did tell you right? That I'd explain everything once we've reached the end of Ryandan Forest?" Shade tilted her head.

"Oh right!" So this was it. Aero was about to learn about the life he was destined to lead from this point forward. Eagerness tingled in every part of his body, from ear tip to tail tip, to his fingers and toes. Without waiting for another moment, the questions burst forth, quicker and more ferociously than the river had breaking the dam the previous night. "Well? What are the Seven Forces of Life? What's Castla nu Craara? Who's Iridescence? What's life like there? Wherever it is... What's your leader like? What does a Guardian do? Besides... guard something, I guess..." There were so many questions. Aero knew it was futile to even try to name them all.

"Aero, slow down! I know you really want to know everything, but give me time to start," Shade said. She looked over suddenly and saw that Storm was as restless as Aero was. But his attention was focused on some bugs that were flying around. Aero's mind was filled with longing as he saw him. To be a cub again... and to live a proper cubhood. It saddened Aero that that will never, ever be. Storm eventually sat down, especially when Shade gave him a dark look, but he still moved around impatiently. Shade let out a sigh of exasperation. "Cubs." She said flatly.

Aero shrugged. "Maybe it's best to let him embrace his youth while he can. You know that I wasn't ever able to myself right?" he said in his defense.

"I know, Aero. I haven't either. But what's happened before is over. The past is passed. It does not matter. And even if it did, it should be used to motivate you. Let it

inspire you knowing that you've made it. There is no use in brooding over what would have been. Just focus on improving your future," Shade stated simply.

Aero nodded. "I know what you mean, but I wish I had a past that I can say I was proud of."

"You already do Aero. Just knowing you survived Hydyraen for as long as you have is proof enough, right?" Shade put a hand on his shoulder. "Same as me, as well, you know."

"I suppose you're right," Aero conceded.

"But you are right too. One's cubhood does not last forever. Once it's gone, it's gone..." There was a brief instance of longing in her eyes before she shook it away. "But enough about that. Let's get back on track. Listen carefully, Aero. The information I have is extremely important. Ready?"

Aero nodded solemnly.

"Alright. As I have already stated, the Guardians is a society of foxes bent on benevolence towards all of Nyethra. We live in a stronghold, though it's more like a citadel, far to the south of here we call Castla nu Craara, which translates to the "Haven of Being". Once we cross the desert down there, you'll be able to see a massive mountain range in the distance. The Myunae nu Eira. Or more simply put, the "Spires of Sky". It's within those peaks and valleys that Castla nu Craara awaits you.

"As I've also told you, the Guardians hold authority and safeguard the Seven Forces of Life," Shade continued, but Aero interjected.

"Tell me more about the Seven Forces of Life," he said impatiently, head already reeling from just the location of the Guardian home.

"I was getting to that," Shade said coolly. "And as I was about to say, you have actually already used two of the Seven Forces," she said.

Aero looked down at his paws. "I have?" he echoed curiously.

Shade nodded. "The Forces of Wind and Darkness are two of them. Remember the dam and Isrir? That's when you used them. Basically, the Forces we refer to are what many others call the elements that make up nature as we know it. The other five are Fire, Water, Earth, Thunder, and Light, naturally. You with me so far?"

"I suppose so," Aero said as his mind attempted to follow.

"As I said, the Guardians are responsible for keeping all Seven Forces in balance. We keep them safe from any and all threats that may harm them. If even one Force is knocked into an imbalance sufficiently enough, it can spell disaster for all of Nyethra. No. The entire world. It's an incredibly delicate balance. It's likely all too easy to destroy us all by altering one of the Forces.

"Guardian apprentices like Storm train for one particular Force that they were deemed to be the most adept at handling. That's the Force that they are destined to govern the most over above all others. In his case, it's Thunder. And for mine, it's

Darkness, naturally. Although it is still extremely common for Guardians to guard six of them and not just one, but..."

"Six? Why not all of them?" Aero scowled.

"Good question, Aero. I was just about to go into a tangent for that. Every Guardian is born with a weakness for the powers they have. One of the Seven Forces of which is decided at birth that they cannot ever use. In fact, it's so much of a weakness, that it's said that the Forces we cannot use are to one day end our lives. Thus we named them our Bane Forces. Though it's customary for us to keep it hidden until we're inaugurated as apprentices..."

"So how do you reveal it?" Aero pressed.

"It's a part of the process itself actually. New apprentices need to bathe in the ethereal waters of Iridescence, more about her in a bit, to receive her powers and become one of us officially. The waters wash away the barrier that hides the identity of our Banes away and reveals it," Shade explained.

"How?"

Shade looked over to Storm, who was jumping around nearby. "Storm get over here!" she called. Storm stopped and did as she told. He looked at her curiously as she continued. "Show him your paws, Storm."

Storm looked confused. "Huh? My paws? Why?"

Shade only said two words. "Bane. Force."

Storm blinked at her before he understood "Oh! So you're telling him about Bane Forces!" Storm realized. "Okay." With that, he swiveled his head to face Aero. He waved at him as if to say hello. It was then, now that Aero got a closer look at the Guardian's paws, he noticed the pads were a deep, emerald green color.

Aero was astonished. "Wait, what!?" Before he could continue, he looked at Shade, who was showing him hers. They were dark purple. "Whoa... How have I not noticed this before?" he wondered.

"We uh... try to keep this hidden as much as we could, especially in hostile territories. In trade for the amount of power we have, we have to show our enemies our glaringly obvious weaknesses," Shade started awkwardly. "We have the power to keep the fabric of nature in one piece, but once an enemy knows what can smite us, we're in trouble. So... what we've done in response is that we've developed items that help us against each of the Bane Forces by imbuing it with its powers." With that said, Shade reached into her bag and pulled out two scarves. One purple, the other, green. "Force Scarves. They're essential for our survival and will protect us from what we're vulnerable to. Though again, in doing so, we made our weakness even more obvious. But it shouldn't matter, key word being, 'shouldn't'. But it's because of this, that we have to decide very carefully whether we'll need our Scarves in a given location or conflict or not," she said.

"So which Forces do these Scarves represent?" Aero asked curiously.

"Storm's Bane is the Force of Earth. Mine is Wind," she said apprehensively. Then she continued before Aero could address it. "Yesterday at the dam, I felt my heart pounding when Arcane made you use Wind on the dam. It's not uncommon for a Guardian to outright fear everything corresponding to their Bane..."

"Oh wow, I did not know that. I'm sorry," Aero said apologetically.

Shade shook her head. "Don't be. I'm pretty sure Arcane told you to use that one just to spite me."

"What a filthy creature. Preying on other creatures' fears... He'll pay alright," Aero stated with a growl.

"Plazma, that fool," Shade suddenly said. "His Bane was Darkness... why was he not wearing his scarf? It might have saved his life..."

Storm looked down and sighed. "It was taken from him by the kobolds in the desert. They wanted it to enhance their strength," he explained.

Shade gasped loudly. "Damn! The kobold bandits are rising again already!?" she exclaimed. "That's bad. We're about to cross right through their territory. Storm, I'd highly advise you to put on your Gnome Scarf before we get into the desert. For obvious reasons," she added.

"D-definitely," Storm's voice quavered slightly.

"That's what Storm's scarf is called?" Aero prompted.

Shade froze, as if she were unsure how to answer. "Well I am assuming you're going to want to know what all the scarves are called..." she started slowly. "Guess you'll have to know sooner or later. As I've forgotten to tell you, each of the Seven Forces that are governed by us Guardians are spearheaded by one Guardian each. An Arch Guardian, is what they're called. Each one has their name changed to reflect that status. As you just heard, The Arch Guardian of Earth is Gnome. The names of the scarves, correspond with them. Sylph for Wind... Salamander for Fire... Thor for Thunder... Nereid for Water... Sylph for Light... and..." she stopped.

"And?" Aero pressed.

"...Shade for Darkness," Shade finished.

"Wait. What did you just say? So you're the head of the Guardians that govern over Darkness? Or am I getting that wrong?" Aero cried incredulously.

"No you got that right, Aero. I am the Arch Guardian of Darkness," Shade confirmed. "But as I was saying, it is extremely important a Guardian wears their scarf in an environment full of their Bane. I took a risk by not having mine in the Windfall Steppe for example. And Plazma paid for it dearly by not having his here in Ryandan Forest. N-not that he had any control over that, but..." she trailed off.

"So Guardians can detect their Bane through the color of their paw pads? That's weird; I wonder what mine is..." Aero wondered.

"You'll find out when you formally become one of us, but we need to reach Castla nu Craara first," Shade said. "So you can take a dip in the Waters of Iridescence." Aero remembered. "Oh! Iridescence? Could you tell me more about her?"

"Iridescence is our Goddess of Tutelage. She lived here on Nyethra countless generations ago as a philosopher that would eventually create the Guardian organization. She did so by rallying up foxes from all over the world to thwart a cataclysmic event that rendered all Seven Forces permanently unstable throughout the world. Iridescence is the Guardian that everyone looks up to for guidance in the most dark and confusing of times. She's called Iridescence because it's said that her white fur shines with the light of every color there is. On top of that, it is said that she was the only Guardian there ever was or ever will be that can use all Seven Forces at will, giving her no weakness at all. Nothing but incredible strength. Today she is the Guardian of the Guardians, watching over all of us in the Ethereal Sky," Shade explained.

"Wow... that's incredible," Aero said breathlessly. "We never had anyone like that in Hydyraen, obviously. Just a tyrannical leader who's greedy as hell."

"Yeah, that's why our leader, who is named Fielra, is motivated by the opposite reasons. In fact we strive to be the polar opposite of the shadow vulpines. The light to their darkness. But our war with them is not going well... and that is why we need your help, Aero," she said.

"I can tell... just by all their gloating from their successes in Lyron and Deltania," Aero said in a low voice.

"It'd be easier if Castla nu Craara wasn't so far away from Hydyraen. In fact, Fielra has already started organizing members and stationing them in various towns throughout Nyethra for this reason. It will severely diminish our population at Castla nu Craara, but we'll have coverage and protection over all of Nyethra eventually. Unfortunately, these plans won't be ready to be put in place for months. But we are working on it," Shade said. "Well," she said. "That's all there is for you to know about the Guardians for now. Satisfied?"

Aero nodded, even more excited than ever. "I definitely am! I cannot wait to get there!" But then he remembered. "The desert. We have to cross it, don't we?" he fretted.

"Yeah, why? Worried about the kobolds?" Shade prompted.

"Well, kinda. But I'm more worried about the heat and stuff. I really, really hate the heat," he said worriedly.

"Oh really?" Shade asked, interested. "Do you think your Bane might be Fire?" she prompted unexpectedly.

"Fire?" Aero echoed. It made sense. Ever since he was a very little cub, he hated the heat, was apprehensive towards fire, especially the torches that lined the halls of

Hydraen, and always feared the stories shadow vulpines told of their arseny. "I suppose it's possible... is there any way to find out for sure without the water stuff?"

Shade shook her head. "Not if you don't want to kill yourself trying to find out for sure," she said. "We'll have to play things carefully until we know for sure."

Aero was disappointed, but he understood. "Alright then. But I will be fine in that desert right?" he was still apprehensive though.

"It'll take only two days to cross! Stick by us and you'll be fine, Aero!" Shade assured him. "Storm!" she called to the cub. "Put on your Gnome Scarf! We're going in!" she tightened the Sylph Scarf that she had put on her neck just then.

As Storm donned the emerald scarf of his own, Aero looked ahead to the foreboding dunes outside the forest.

"Fear is natural," Shade said. "But we all know you'll be fine!"

"Says you," Aero muttered. "You both have scarves helping you out."

"I promise you," Shade said solemnly. "Let's go, okay?"

Aero let out a long, worried sigh. "Okay. Let's get this over with."