

NINE: Separated

Sometimes the sands in the Kyobode Desert were soft. At other points in it, the terrain was as hard as the stones under Hydyraen, only much warmer. It was as though the terrain were bipolar and in refusal to decide what sort of composition it wanted to have. However, the desert was quite decisive in the temperatures it wanted to run. Very hot, and very sweltering. Aero cursed the day he was determined to have so much fur on his body because it most certainly helped absolutely nothing. The heat, the sun, the strain. All of it drained his energy to nothing in no time at all. They'd been in the desert for maybe a few hours. Aero could not tell the exact length of time despite the sun shining brightly in the west. All Aero could tell was that night was not too far off, but they still had a while to go.

Storm was an anomaly. He seemed to be enjoying his time in the desert despite being blatantly surrounded by his Bane. He seemed nervous in the forest, but now? Anything but. Was he feeling safe wearing that scarf? Was that what these things could also do for someone like him? Storm was cheerfully kicking up sand as he went, much to the dismay of Shade.

"Do you mind, Storm?!" she growled. "It's going to take weeks to get this sand from my fur! Iridescence almighty! Plazma really did have his paws full when he was assigned to be your mentor..." Shade was obviously not amused at this, but Aero couldn't help but give a little laugh of amusement. Maybe Storm was also trying to make this trip a little more bearable for him.

Storm was still bouncing around a lot however. After a while, Shade just conceded with a sigh. "What am I going to do with a cub like you, Storm...?" she said. Then she turned her attention to Aero. "You doing alright, Aero?" she asked.

Aero was surprised at how calm he was at the hostile environment around him. Was it the feel of the soft sands under his paws? Storm's merriment? Or maybe he was just overreacting? Whatever it was, Aero felt more secure than he probably should have been. Still, at that moment, his mind was focused on the sands. "I'm actually not bad. I think it's the sands; they feel so nice, like that grass did before," he said.

"Yeah well, as you can tell, the desert isn't always sandy. A lot of it is pure, solid sandstone. And in the heat, that won't feel good on your paws like the sand does," Shade replied.

"I do not look forward to that..." Aero said stiffly and tight lipped.

"I can't wait until the river comes back again. The feeling of the water after all this hot sand is simply sublime," Shade said. The river that they were following had trailed off further to the west shortly after entering the desert. Aero wanted to follow the river, but Shade said that the river was a hotbed for kobolds to hang out. Either

decision wasn't safe, but Shade insisted as long as they keep heading southbound, they'd be okay. Aero had accepted with plenty of hesitation.

Shade suddenly stopped, causing Aero to bump into her. "Huh? Shade? What is it? Why have we stopped?"

Shade did not look at him. Instead she was looking around. "Something is not right here," she said suspiciously.

Aero felt worry rising in his stomach. He felt the same way as well. Yet he still asked, "What? What do you mean?" he tried to keep his voice from sounding shaky.

"Isn't it... just a little too quiet to you, Aero?" Shade prompted.

That was it. Aero felt the fur stand up on his back when he realized that Shade was right. It was so much quieter than it was a moment ago. The only sound that could be heard was a slight breeze blowing through the sands. But why though...? Then it hit him harder than anything he's experienced. Before he could voice it, Shade beat him to it first.

"Wait a damned moment! Where the hell is Storm!?" she yelped.

The older cub was no longer following behind them. The sounds he made as he playfully trudged through the sand had stopped a moment ago. Aero noticed that where he used to be, several yards back, was a shallow rut in the sand that veered off to the side alongside strange looking footprints.

"Storm!?" Aero called out in surprise.

Shade cursed loudly. "Damn it! I let my guard down!" She veered off towards the path the kobolds had left behind with a loud growl of anger.

"Shade! What's happened?!" Aero demanded as he followed as closely as he could.

Shade pointed to the footprints in the sand. "Isn't it obvious!? Storm's been taken by kobold bandits! I knew something was off... I completely let myself forget that we MUST keep vigilance at all times. They sneak up on you... before you even know they're there, they take you away... They're even stealthier than shadow vulpines, at least here in Kyobode Desert. They're also incredibly ruthless. They'll do anything to get what they want from travellers through the desert. If they do not get what they demand, it never ends well for those they capture. It ends up in a knife filled death..."

Aero gasped. "Storm doesn't have anything of value does he?" he asked anxiously.

"That's just it. He doesn't! He does have a Thunder Gem to help him train, but they're useless to those who cannot use the Force of Thunder, and kobolds cannot even fathom the gems let alone use them. Storm is in big trouble..."

Aero panted as he felt his energy becoming tested even further. No matter the strain, there were more important matters for him to pay attention to. "Then why did

the bandits choose to abduct him and not one of us?! They should know a cub would normally not have anything of value!?"

"I don't know," Shade answered fretfully. "Probably because they know he's a Guardian while we look like shadow vulpines. These territories are incredibly hostile to Guardians after all... that, and cubs are easy pickings for these creatures."

"Then why would they--!?" Aero started, but growled to stop himself. There was no time to wonder why; the only thing he knew that must be focused on was finding where the bandits took Storm! "We have to find them!"

Shade nodded. "There are no arguments here! They headed west, away from the river!" she pointed in that direction. Aero could vaguely see paw prints of creatures he could not recognize. Between them was a small rut that was quickly filling with sand that had to have been from Storm being dragged away.

Aero looked in dismay as that direction held an endless landscape of sand and desert ahead. No landmarks like the river to let him know where he was. He hoped that this endeavor wouldn't land them lost... No. All he had to do was head due west afterwards. He'd hit the river eventually, right? Right? Again, there was no time for ponderance. He had to help Shade find Storm and there was no hesitation allowed on that fact! Shade had already ran several yards ahead of him and Aero was struggling to keep up with her. The terrain was not what he was used to. After years of stone and nothing but that, sand was completely alien to his paws. They just sunk into it, past his ankles with each step, making it nigh impossible for him to move quickly, let alone catching up with Shade.

"Hey Shade! Wait up!" he tried to call for the vixen who had rescued him, but she was already too far ahead for her to hear him. The wind was picking up. Sand was being kicked in all directions. Into Aero's face as well as the trail he was trying to follow. "No, no, no, no, no," he muttered to himself, as he had hoped this wasn't going to happen. Shade was already disappearing over a dune ahead of him. Because of the sand, Aero couldn't determine just how far away it actually was, but he was fearing the worst. Aero tried calling for her again, only to find himself spitting out sand that had blown into his maw the second he opened it. There was no way to get her attention anymore. He scrambled to the dune for what seemed like an eternity, and as he expected, the older vixen was nowhere to be seen. Just an endless expanse of sand and desert lay ahead of him. He couldn't see the forest to the north or the distant mountains to the south anymore. It felt like he was truly lost now.

Aero was trying not to panic as he racked his mind for ideas of what to do next. Should he continue searching for Storm, and now Shade, possibly getting more lost? Should he stay put and wait for friend or foe? Or should he head back towards the river, if he could even find it again? He shook his head violently. His only real hope was to find the two foxes he lost. Last thing he needed was to be found by another kobold

or two all by himself. He forced himself to move forward, despite the fact his legs were beginning to tire from having to push through sand as much as they have. Sand blew into his eyes, making them stream and somewhat blinded him. But he pushed forward. He felt he had no choice. He wondered briefly if his Bane was actually Earth and not Fire considering how badly it was affecting him now.

Suddenly it felt like one of his paws was being conveyed forward much faster than the rest of his body. Aero fell backward as the sand under one paw gave way and then tumbled down the other side of the dune. He closed his eyes and maw shut instinctively to not get any of the grit into those orifices, but they found their way into his nose anyways. Upon landing at the bottom of the dune, Aero was coughing and absolutely coated in the dust. He swore he would never want to set paw in this desert ever again after all this.

Aero lost track of how long it's been since he lost track of Shade. Every time he tried to gauge where the sun was in the sky, his eyes met a dusty and sandy fate. The wind and blowing sand did not seem as badly as it did at first, thank gods, but it was still tremendously difficult for Aero to gain his bearings within them.

Aero stopped suddenly. He could feel something moving from under his paws. Something wasn't right... He looked down. No it wasn't quicksand. It was far too dry for it to be quicksand. He heard cracking sounds from under him. And felt subsequent shifting sandstone. It took him a moment to process what was happening. But before he could confirm it, the entire ground under him gave way and he fell straight down. As he fell, he felt chunks of sandstone smashing into his body painfully. It wasn't a long fall, though it felt like one. He could see the light fading as he fell, the source of which getting further away. A sharp pain in his back made him scream out as he landed hard, but it did not last long because that gave the opportunity for the sand that fell with him to gag his mouth shut. The same chunks of sandstone that attacked him on the way down began to bury him alive. It didn't take long for the pummeling sandstone knocked Aero completely unconscious as a shaft of light from above ground spilled onto where he lay buried.