

Resilience

For hours the disoriented fox walked through the woods. His feet dragged in the dirt while his body moved on its own. He didn't bother to try to see in the dark, it didn't matter to him. Morning had to come eventually, that would be enough to light the way. His wings slowly returned to ashes and his arms dangled back and forth as he moved. The lower half of his body dried out and he felt cold. Had it not been for the moon and its children to light the night, Zen would have cowered at the thought of being surrounded by total darkness without a glimpse of light to guide his half opened eyes. The natural sounds of the forest pleased him, soothing his troubled mind. The cold winds blew in the night, tingling his fur as he walked, completely unaware of the presence of predators.

Up atop a tree an arrow lay ready, pointed at the foxes head. A small but inaudible whisper traveled between a group of three bandits as they watched the zombie fox sway back and forth. The arrow was sheeted and instead a small dart was loaded. The bandit aimed carefully and through the air launched his small yet poisonous weapon. A direct hit on Zen's neck caused him to stop moving. Motionless he stood until his body began to take on the full effect of the dart; he fell to his side and slept.

He awoke again to what seemed like inaudible sounds echoing. His body was being dragged through stone. The ground felt cold and broken. He could feel the cracks of the ground through his fur. His vision made out a pattern of tied ropes around him. His body still felt numb and his neck hurt, but Zen made no attempts to resist whatever was happening.

"This kid is lighter than he looks," said one bandit.

"I wonder how much he's worth," said a female voice, looking down at their capture for the night.

"Who cares, he should bring in a few bucks, if not sold he'll get use to labor. We'll put him to good use," the first bandit responded.

A cage opened, the creaks of the iron bars proved that it was old but still doable for a prison. The net came off Zen and he was thrown into his cell, hitting the hard unforgiving floor.

"If he's a normal kid he won't make much, if he's magically we should be able to swindle some cash out of him," the woman said.

“Agreed, let’s tell the boss.”

The man closed the cage and locked it before walking off with his torch. The numbness in Zen’s body wore off and he was able to move more freely.

I should have known I’d wake up in yet another strange place, Zen thought, raising his head to look around, attempt to care where he was.

His cell was small but all three corners were thick stones, old, decaying, and dirty. In his corners were a little bit of hay and one or two dried up bones from previous prisoners who probably starved to death. Zen sat on his tails but didn’t stand. Obviously he wasn’t outside anymore. Small moans and groans filled the dungeon, all weary voices with a hint of pain in their lungs. Zen looked through the bars in his cell and across from him was another man who looked to be asleep. Strangely, his cell was the only one with a bed. Zen crawled closer and saw a few more cells outside his own. One person for each cell and each one was either crying, sleeping, trembling, or praying.

“Hey boy, you new here?” asked a voice from the cell directly across from him. Apparently the man had woken up. A full grown husky whose face gave the dominate impression of being exhausted. Blood shot eyes, bruised face, no scars apparently, but it looked as though he was put through work, or worse.

The fox nodded.

“Those sick bastards,” he cursed. “It’s bad enough me and my crew was captured; now they’re bringing in children.” His voice was strong like a warrior, but the exhaustion he carried on his shoulders made his atmosphere of authority less admirable.

“Well,” he continued, coughing. “Let me welcome you to fort Martalius, a once glorious place for war veterans now in the hands of filthy bandits. My men and I were hired to clear out this place; this was once my home for a few years back in my army days so I was more than happy to do so. Unfortunately, the bandits had greatly enchanted gear. We weren’t prepared for it.”

“Oh shut it Maurice,” cried another inmate, apparently one of his men. “You’ve been telling that story every time a new face comes in. You already know he’s going to die just as quickly as he came in so why bother.”

“Quiet Darven,” growled the husky, turning his attention back to Zen. “Don’t be scared kid, you’ll be fine. As my tired cohort said, my name is Maurice.” He stood up for a moment to brush off the dirt than placed his back against the wall and slid down the ground. “I expected backup but it appears we’re on our own.”

“Why don’t they just kill us already?” Another inmate shouted, appearing to have snapped. “If we’re not tortured than that necromancer will harvest our organs for something. I don’t wanna be an undead. LET ME OUT!” The fellow screamed, pounding against the iron bars, sobbing hysterically as he slid to the ground with his head on the railing.

“Jarvice calm down,” cried Maurice, his voice calm and worried. “If you keep it up they’ll take you away next. I-I promise you, we’ll get out of this.”

Zen couldn’t make out the person due to his cell begin farther down and adjacent from his own, however, the man had a young but broken voice as he cried. It was clear these people had been here a long time.

The rest of the prisoners broke out into a unified cry decreasing the moral of their leader’s words. As much as Zen wanted to feel sorry for them, at the moment, his heart wasn’t in it. Even if he escaped here, he knew he’d only be hunted down again and his friends would be put in danger because of him. Plus he had nowhere to go. If he stayed with people they’d get hurt even if they weren’t close, if he stayed alone they’d find a way to track him. The last thing Zen wanted was to feel the burning blade of Richter’s sword in his heart again.

Zen cursed himself for thinking so selfishly but he couldn’t arouse his spirits enough to communicate with Maurice. He still didn’t know where exactly he was. For all Zen knows, Richter may have found him again and is on his way. The depressing atmosphere and decaying room didn’t awaken his spirit either. Zen curled up and looked at Maurice. The husky had already put his head back into his knees, slightly weeping to himself. He had lost faith himself but didn’t want his men to see it, but they knew. Zen looked at the depressing faces and a small fire of anger arose in his belly. Despite his half opened eyes, neutral face, and depressing mind set Zen stood up and grabbed the bars.

Let me think, Zen thought to himself. These men have been torture, imprisoned, and killed. I've been locked in a temple, running, experimented on, and killed. They've been here longer than me but I've had a short life thus far in this world. They don't come back from death as easily as I do. It's not fair for them. I...should help.

Zen sighed and grabbed the bars tightly, trying to think of something positive to get himself motivated to help. Zen wasn't going to let these men suffer regardless of his own feelings, but the thought of escaping just to die or be hunted again almost made Zen slid back to the ground again, caring less about all this.

"The bars are too strong my friend, you can't break them," said the husky, raising his head to observe, eyes a bit red. "Not only is your strength not enough to match them, but they have magic against us. Plus this entire place seems to be filled with some sort of device that neutralizes magic except by the bandit's gear and the necromancer. I know because one of my friends a week ago tried it and he explained that magic will only work for the necromancer and any other bandit in this fort. Bless his soul," he said, looking up to his ceiling on that last statement.

After a night in the woods, a walk through the dark forest, a capture, and imprisonment, Zen's curiosity finally came to the surface. Maurice saw a flick of change in the foxes face but looked at him a bit confused as to what he was thinking.

Zen bent down on his knees and stared at the husky across his cell, eye to eye. The dog returned it as if worried.

"What is it my friend, if you have something to say, say i- Ow!" He said cutting off, holding his head from a sudden headache he had. "Ohhhh," he said groaning.

"Mr. Maurice," Zen transferred over successfully. "My apologies, I'm still new too it."

"What- The hell?" He said, looking around his cell to find where the voice in his head came from.

"If you'd kindly look across your cell you'll find me."

He did as instructed, looking at the fox with surprise and shock.

“Hello.” Said Zen weakly, waving a paw.

Maurice shot up speechless. He couldn't find the words to say. Forget that, he didn't have a first thought.

“How did you do that?” He asked aloud, gaining a few stares to his cell. He looked back around and silenced himself as to no longer arouse his men. He pushed his maw through the bars and held them tight.

“How did you do that?” He thought, hoping the fox would reply.

“A natural talent I suppose. Anymore questions?”

The husky was dumbstruck at how calm the fox was to a serious conversation.

“YES I HAVE MORE QUESTIONS!” He attempted to shout in his mind, which Zen responded by holding his head with one hand. “How are you able to use magic like that? Who are you? Can you help us?” He asked.

“I've been using it since I came to this world and...” he trailed off, not wanting to reveal who he really was for fear of putting him in danger if they escaped. “I'm a fox. I think I can help but I'm not sure.”

“What?” said Maurice looking more confused than ever. For a moment his mind raced with questions until he looked around again at his comrades who were looking more depressed than before. He was stuck, he wanted to say there may be hope but his morals and pride told him not to ask help from a young fox who could potentially die by helping them. The fox looked weak to him. However, he could use magic. “My friend... do you have more magic to use.”

Zen looked at him then turned around for a second. The husky stared in confusion. Zen held his hand out and thought to himself. It was slow but the orange orb reappeared in his hand. It appeared out of thin air surrounded by floating ashes that continued to encircle it. Zen attempted a grin and made it disappear again.

“Yes I do apparently,” Zen responded as he turned back around to Maurice.

Maurice’s eyes grew wide with hope. He closed his eyes and Zen knew he shouldn’t disturb his thoughts so he temporarily blocked his telepathy until Maurice opened his eyes again.

Maurice didn’t want to get a child involved in something too dangerous; but he knew he didn’t want his men to suffer anymore. What’s more he was in no condition to battle, no matter how much he set his mind to think otherwise. His men were exhausted and unarmed as well so the fox would be on his own in this fight. Maurice gritted his teeth at this situation but he had no options to go by. He calmed down and his face became tranquil, he opened his eyes. Zen reestablished his telekinetic network and waited for his response.

Maurice stood up and looked at Zen. His face was firm but he held back some tears. A part of him wanted to believe he and his crew could be saved and that made him too happy for words, but he still had to put a person’s life in danger. He still didn’t know if a child could even handle something as big a task as this. He swallowed his pride, slowly descended to the ground, and bowed his head, both to hide his face from crying and to pray.

“My friend, please help us. Now that we can speak privately I can tell you. We’ve been in here for what feels like months and slowly my friends have all died in here. I don’t want you to die here but I’m desperate. If you feel you have the power, I beg you, please save us and I’ll be in your debt.”

It was with that gesture and those words that the depression Zen felt in his body began to lighten. His tense body calmed down, his mind was clearer, and his resolve returned. The look of determination appeared in the foxes eyes.

I guess I’ll deal with Richter when the time comes. Everyone be safe, Zen thought to himself.

“Maurice please stand up,” Zen said.

Maurice sniffed then rubbed his eyes before raising his head. An invisible glow surrounded Zen as the husky felt he had made the right decision. He smiled and stood up clearing his voice.

“Maurice I’ll get you and your friends out. I want you to stay here and rest, I’ll return soon.”

Maurice heard the fox’s words but was still baffled as to how Zen could pull it off.

Zen walked and stood in the middle of his cell. He may have told Maurice he would get him and his friends out but he didn’t have much of a plan for how that would work. Not dying was by default a good strategy and one doesn’t need concern. He needed to know how many were inside this fort. He focused. Maurice couldn’t make out anything Zen was doing but felt he shouldn’t disturb the fox and narrowed his eyes to observe. Dark ashes began to appear from nowhere and surrounded Zen’s eyes once again. When it was finished, Zen could not only see people through walls but he could see the heat in their bodies. From the physics books he looked over, this was perfect for detecting people. He made a completely 360 and looked around. There were 8, including Maurice, there were in the prison room behind bars. Above them were 10 since no one else was on this floor. Above them were 4 more and above that floor was 2. Only 1 person was at the absolute top of this fort.

The figure was covered in a cloak so Zen couldn’t make out any details. Unlike the rest of them, the cloaked figure was outside, possibly on the roof. No one else was outside as far as Zen could see. Overall the fort wasn’t as huge as he expected. A three storied fort with a basement where he was. He’d need to get passed 16 people before he could get to the hooded figure at the top. Zen’s eyes began to strain and he stopped looking. His powers were still a bit disturbed by the devices Maurice mentioned but by an insignificant amount. The only question was how he was going to take them all down.

Zen thought of something and decided to go by instincts. He walked to his cell and grabbed the bars. Ashes began to surround it and the bars changed. Soon the bars began to rust away and disappear. Zen was free. Maurice marveled at this and was about to shout until Zen put a finger over his lips, indicating to keep quiet. Everyone was sleep and there was no reason to wake them.

“Be careful,” Maurice whispered his eyes ablaze with hope.

Zen tip toed down the hall, up some stairs, and approached the locked door. Quickly he vanquished the door lock and opened it silently. While Zen was about to face his toughest challenge yet, Maurice prayed.