

Magic-Bearer, pt. 2

A Story in Arvos

by Cerine Hero

Erin struggled to keep pace with Mito as they ran back out of the city's waterways. It was still dark, but she trusted the mustelo's judgment of where to set their feet. Erin was worried about Cerine, who had stayed behind in order to buy them enough time to get out. The scalehounds had come out of the shadows around them. With a lucky blow, Mito had knocked one into the water with her staff, giving them room to run, and Cerine held the tunnel entrance. It didn't sit well in Erin's stomach that they were leaving her behind, but she didn't have much time to think about it. The vixen knew better than anyone but Zaress what the scalehounds could do, and she had the scars on her calf to prove it. Trying not to imagine any more, she gripped Mito's paw tightly and tried her best to run.

The old brickwork of the waterway shook around them and the lapping water below their walking platform rippled as a roar, shockingly powerful, reverberated its way up the tunnel. Mito paused, turning about and looking in the direction they'd come. Erin looked back, too, clutching at the marten's arm in fright.

"What was that?" she asked. "The scalehounds don't roar..."

"I don't know," Mito replied. "I think we should go faster, though."

Mito grabbed Erin by the forearm and pulled her along. They were almost to the bridge over the waterway. From here, they'd only need to make a couple turns and climb the steps back up to the street level in the south district. Mito took two steps across the bridge, but the water beneath it churned. She quickly twisted back and shoved Erin, knocking the heavy fox backwards onto her butt in the dark.

Before Erin could say anything, the scalehound that had fallen into the water broke from the surface, scales glistening wet in the gloom. Its claws grasped the bridge and it tried to haul itself up, nipping towards Mito's legs. The marten gripped her staff in both paws and smashed it down hard against the scalehound's head and claws, but it wouldn't be as easily dissuaded this time. It snapped forward but caught a mouthful of metal staff. It bit down and thrashed its head from side to side. Erin's breath caught in her throat as Mito lost her balance.

The scalehound let go of the bridge and plunged back down into the water, dragging staff and marten with it. Mito disappeared below the surface as water splashed onto the walkway around Erin. Panicking, the vixen rolled herself onto her paws and knees, peering over the edge at the dark water for any kind of sign of her.

"Mito!" she screamed, her chest hitching and heaving. "Oh gods, no... Mito! Where are you?"

Something bubbled in the water a short way downstream. Erin pushed herself up to her feet and was beginning to head for it when the scalehound splashed from the water once again, scrabbling to pull itself up onto the walkway. There was no sign of Mito. Gulping, Erin watched the scalehound warily, trying not to let the panic pushing upwards through her throat come out as a terrified scream. She was already leaving Cerine. She couldn't abandon Mito, either, but... she can't fight that thing. Her paw went to the knife at her hip, but she saw what Cerine's sword had done to the one before.

She had to run and leave Mito behind, too. Erin scrambled across the bridge as the scalehound finally managed to get its footing on the walkway, charging after her. Black scales, wet and shivering droplets of water like a cloud, glistened as the scalehound struggled to take the tight turns in the waterway. Erin did, too, but she could grip the stonework with her claws to keep from plunging into the water. There was still nothing sign of Mito anywhere.

Erin panted, running as hard as her legs could take her. She could see the glow of waning light from the entranceway just ahead, but she glanced back. Purple eyes were just behind her at the edge of sight. She scrambled forward, fear overtaking her exhaustion. The scalehound almost had her tail, but she dipped up the stairs, taking them two at a time, and the draconic monster went skidding aside without its prize. But it recovered, scrabbling its way up the stairs behind her, fangs dripping with

saliva.

The streets were still abandoned as Erin charged out of the top of the stairs, crunching through fallen snow towards the grocer's store. There was a doorway in the alley for deliveries, but its lock held firm even when a couple hundred pounds of vixen crashed against it. The frightened fox banged the heels of her paws against the door, looking over her shoulder as the scalehound climbed out of the waterway entrance and began slowly stalking towards her. Its claws sank into the snow with each step, and a long, scaled tail swept back and forth hypnotically. Erin backed down the alley and pulled her dagger from its sheath. The leather-wrapped grip was cold and rough against her palm. She'd practiced with a couple weapons with Gray and Sarelina, but she'd never been in a real fight. The vixen kept backing up, holding the knife in front of her as she frantically tried to think of another option. The scalehound ignored her threat and kept coming, its breath steaming the air in front of it.

Erin found herself at the front corner of the buildings, where the alley ended. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that the front door to the grocer's shop was open. If she could get in, slam the door shut...

The scalehound didn't give her a chance. It surged forward, jumping through the air. Erin screamed and curled herself into a ball, and the scalehound missed, soaring above her and landing awkwardly in the square behind her. Terrified, the vixen dropped her dagger and ran partially on her paws and feet both towards the door, getting inside but not having time to shut the door. She fell onto her back on the wooden boards and scoot herself away until she bumped against a produce crate. A couple onions bounced to the floor to either side of her, and one landed in her lap. Desperately, she grabbed them and pelted the scalehound with them as it followed her inside. On her third throw, she bonked it square between the eyes, making the monster hesitate and shake its head.

In that fraction of a second, motion burst out from behind the merchant's counter by the door. An arm shot out, unerringly straight, and something shiny and curved pierced the scalehound's neck. Gasping, Erin pushed herself completely against the crate behind her. She watched as the felis lady emerged from behind the counter, her paw gripping the weapon tightly as the scalehound thrashed and bled. Her eyes were tight and focused, and she kept a balance between keeping the blade plunged into the scalehound but not being close enough to get caught in its death throes. Eventually the creature went still, and she whisked the weapon away, out of sight.

It took Erin a moment to believe the creature was really dead. Her heart was still thundering, and her paws were numb. She swallowed hard as the sad-looking, white cheetah walked over to her and extended her not-blood-soaked paw. Her eyes regarded the fox with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. Erin took the outstretched paw, cautiously, and climbed up to her feet. She looked down at the cheetah, unsure what to think.

"Who... are you?" she asked, instinctively backing away and putting some distance between her and the dangerous felis.

The cat shook her head. "No one of any concern. Did this thing come out of the waterways?"

Erin nodded, gesturing faintly in the direction of the entrance. "It did. There were a bunch, and we had to... oh no. Mito! And Cerine. I have to go!"

"Where are you going?" the felis asked, watching with a furrowed brow as Erin cautiously picked her way over the top of the dead scalehound in the doorway.

"I know someone who can help," the vixen explained, her breath short and thin. "Thank you, and... I'm sorry about your shop."

"Wait."

The felis hitched her long dress up to her knees and stepped over the dead scalehound. She fished inside a pocket and withdrew a long, red ribbon. She motioned for Erin's paw, and the fox warily held it out. Deftly, the felis tied the ribbon around Erin's wrist.

"There," she said, giving Erin's paw a squeeze. "A good luck amulet, to protect you. I believe you may need it."

Without another word, Erin turned and ran out the door. She charged down the empty streets as quickly as she dared, heading back in the direction of the guildhouse. It was a long trek, but she had to get to Zaress.

She could only hope that Cerine and Mito would be okay in the meantime.

Her head felt like a fuzzy rock at the end of her neck. Groaning and straining, Cerine woke up with aches all over. There was a sharp pain on the side of her neck, and when she reached to touch it, her fur was crusted with dry blood. She couldn't remember much beyond drinking the dragon's blood elixir. After that, her memories were clouded and wispy. That was a side-effect she hadn't worked out yet, like the loss of control. Knowing that, she'd told Mito and Erin to make a break for it before drinking the elixir. With any luck, they'd be out of the waterways and relatively safe. Mito had the sense to go find Zaress. Erin probably did, too, but Cerine didn't really know how the other fox would really deal with a crisis situation. If she was anything like her – and she was – probably not that well, at least not until she got used to it. But Cerine wasn't in a position to worry about them just yet. Sitting up and grunting, Cerine glanced about.

It was dark, wherever she was, and she could barely see her own paws. That wasn't unusual; her paws were black, but she could barely see her pink forearms, either. Her clothes were tattered and torn, and barely hanging onto her body. The result of the elixir, if she had to guess. It had probably tripled her muscle mass, though she didn't remember it happening. There were tears along her sleeves and down the thighs of her trousers, and the chest of her shirt was tattered to ribbons. It being dark was a blessing in disguise, since she could do little to cover up.

The vixen was pretty sure she was in a metal cage. A handful of spread furs, and she'd rather not know from where, lined the bottom of it, but they weren't enough cushioning to make the iron bars along the bottom very comfortable. Cerine stood, balancing her feet on the bars beneath her, and reached out with her paws in the dark. She found one side of the cage in front of her, and did a quick walk around the perimeter until she found a hinged door. The fox ran her paws around it, finding the lock. Just testing her luck, she pushed on it. Nope; solid. She went back to the hinges and tested them. Sometimes these iron cages and doors were made with half-pin hinges, and could be lifted out of their frames. She gripped the iron bars and lifted, and she was right! The door shifted upwards from its hinge barrels and... clanged loudly against the top frame above it, long before it could be lifted enough to actually come free from the hinges. Cerine dropped it back down and swore. It would work, but only if the door was open, first.

“That would not help you very much,” a voice called out from the dark, getting closer with every word.

Cerine strained her large ears, fanning them forward. She could hear the tapping of claws against stone, and the echo of sounds against bare rock. This was some kind of cavern, probably further underneath the city than she understood.

“It would have been preferable to being in here,” the vixen shot back, moving back half a step from the cage's bars.

“Truly?” the voice asked. It was deep, but feminine, and dripping with enough caustic sarcasm to melt the lock on the cage. “Lost in the dark, unarmed, surrounded by my pets, and without any of your potions and bombs? How far do you think you would get?”

Cerine furrowed her brow. Upon hearing the unarmed comment, her instinct was to rub her thumb against her ring finger. Her magic ring was missing. “How do you know me? Who are you?”

A small flame gushed out from the dark, very far away from Cerine. Even though it was small, it was painfully bright against the fox's eyes and she averted her face as she blinked away tears. When she could look again, there was a candle sitting atop a wooden table, shedding a small puddle of light a few feet around itself and up the stone wall behind the table. It illuminated the shapes of several objects on the table. From here, Cerine could recognize a couple things, like her alchemy satchel and her ring.

Only a dozen feet away, and yet completely useless to her. The figure who was speaking to her had moved away from the light, and only the faintest edges of her body were lit by the tender, tiny glow.

"I have had my eye on you for quite a while, magic-bearer," she said, her voice taking on a condescending tone. "Ever since you returned to the city after awakening Vellinax and restoring to him some measure of his former power."

Cerine squinted. "What do you mean by magic-bearer?"

She jumped back when something small, light, and hollow landed at the edge of the cage. It was barely illuminated in the glow from the candle, so Cerine knelt down, stuck her paw through the bars, and rolled the object over. It was the desiccated "body" of a leshy. The fox retched and threw it away. Fey didn't really die, but the little fruit, with its face still in it, was unnerving to her.

"You bore trapped world-magic," the voice explained, "and the fey attempted to release it from you in a ritual. My knowledge of the event is incomplete, but I can surmise that Vellinax took the world-magic back for himself. This is a monumental thing you have done, or at least, you have been involved in." Her voice suddenly seemed to shift, becoming more strained and distant. "The return of the world-magic to the dragons is a great thing, indeed."

"What do you want with me?" Cerine asked. "That dragon – Vellinax – took all of the world-magic. You'll have to take your complaints up with him."

"My master wishes to know if it was all truly siphoned away," the voice replied. "And I am not one to question his wisdom. He is old, and is far more powerful than any being in your city above."

Cerine inhaled deeply. A dragon? Literally *underneath* the city. How long had it been there? Maybe the city had been built on top of it. Though part of the city, the dock district and the southern side, was at sea level, much of the city was structured up a hillside, with the upper district and the Veiled Citadel at its peak so they could look down on all the people they subjugated. These tunnels must have been here long before even the waterways were constructed.

The vixen shook off all her thoughts and turned her attention back to the voice in the dark. "Who are you, then, if you serve this dragon in the dark?"

There was silence for a moment, and then Cerine heard a shuffling as the figure stepped towards the cage and into the reach of the candlelight. She was tall, taller than Cerine and even Zaress, though that was mostly because she had a long, sinuous neck. She was fat, too, and wore little in the way of clothing, so even in the dim light Cerine could see umbral scales glimmering darkly. A pair of violet eyes, seeming to glow, stared down at her. She was a drake.

A flash of recognition passed Cerine's face. She recognized her! Just before she'd lost consciousness, the dragon's blood elixir had broken down, and she saw this woman standing above her. The fox touched her neck again, where she'd been jabbed by something. In her mind's eye, she saw a claw, dripping with silver liquid.

"I saw you," Cerine gasped. "In the tunnel... you... you canceled my potion. How did you do that?"

The scaled woman grinned and walked over to the table. Beside the leather satchel were a number of alchemy devices, barely illuminated by the candle. It was an assortment of crude ones, using raw manual power instead of more modern tools. She saw a rough-hewn mortar and a coarsely-shaped pestle, a few stone bowls she could only assume were for sorting, and a large ceramic jug. There was notably no burner or any other heat source, but that probably wasn't an issue.

Thrusting a claw into Cerine's alchemy satchel, the drake picked out a potion at random and swirled it. "As I said, I have been watching you, magic-bearer. I studied your habits from afar and through my scouts. To my delight, I learned you were an alchemist." She dipped a claw into a pack strapped to her own thigh, and when she pulled it back out, it was coated in that silver substance again. Then she stuck her finger into the potion bottle until her claw touched the liquid. Immediately, all the color in the potion faded away, and the suspended ingredients in the potion settled to the bottom, leaving clear liquid. "It is very clever to base all of your creations on a similar solution base so that you

can create a universal counter-agent. But I think you never considered that someone could use your own trick *against* you, did you?"

Cerine rankled, her fur rising up at the back of her neck and down her spine. "So you're an alchemist, too?" she growled, keeping her temper in check. "Did you poison the district?"

"I did," the drake replied. "All to get you to come to me. Don't worry. Now that you're here, I won't need to keep lacing the water supply with deathleaf. Those sickened will recover. If your wish was to heal everyone, then you have succeeded. Congratulations." She turned her back to Cerine, and the vixen caught a glimpse of wings emerging from her shoulder blades. Cerine blinked. Drakes didn't have wings. But the fox held her tongue as the drake rooted around some more in her satchel and inspected her various alchemical items. "I have studied alchemy for years. It has many direct and flexible uses. A couple I've learned from you! And crafting a humonculous... I am impressed. It has been ages since any have succeeded in such an endeavor." She wagged a finger over her shoulder. "Nearly fooled my scalehounds for a bit, too, until I trained them to ignore the scent of chocolate."

"Those creatures are yours?"

"Yes, my little pets. I can talk with them. I send them out, and they report back to me. Sometimes temperamental, and hard to keep in check. Especially when they are hungry. To be honest, I expected you to bring your own pet drake with you. I needed to change plans rather quickly when you decided to throw yourself in harm's way for the sake of the mustelo and your humonculous. You and my scalehounds... well, one of you was going to get hurt. And I could not take the risk that it would have been you.

"In addition to my mundane pursuits, I search for power in all of its forms. I peer into the magic of artifice, and I study the nature of world-magic on behalf of my master. The only form of magic that eludes me is the gift of the divine. But I believe that even if I were to offer Yma my prayers, she would not hear them."

"Yma?" Cerine repeated. "You're a fire drake?"

"I am." The drake turned and regarded Cerine with her violet eyes. Her wings flexed slightly in the dark. "Or I was. My master was once one of the chief flesh-smiths among dragonkind. With his work, the drakes were forged. In return for my loyal service-" again, the venom in her voice belied her words "-he has rendered unto me what secrets of evolution he still possesses in his diminished state. These growing wings, and the gift of speech with lesser dragonkin. With the restoration of world-magic to his withered form, he will be capable of great feats, and I will be showered with blessings you cannot begin to imagine."

Cerine crossed her arms under her chest. "So you've traded away the freedom your ancestors won for another form of service, except this one is based on promises of reward after you've done all the work. What does the rest of your clan think of that?"

"You think yourself very clever, little fox," the drake told her, clearly annoyed. "So much in common between our kinds, but not ourselves, I believe, if you think I am servile to anyone." She reached down to the table and picked up the ring. Turning it over in her claws, she said, "A small bauble of artifice. The smell of magic on it is faint, but it is there. What does this little device do, I wonder?"

The drake squinted her eyes and there was a glow as the sword hidden inside the ring suddenly burst into being, landing in her outstretched paws. "Ah! A hidden weapon. I am certain this ring can hide a great many things. But forgive my manners; this belongs to you."

She gripped the sword in one hand and slid the blade through the gaps in the bars. Cerine stepped backwards, out of its range, but the drake had no intention of pushing it all the way through. Suddenly and sharply, she twisted the sword about, snapping it into two pieces with a gut-wrenching squeal of metal. Both halves of Cerine's sword tumbled to the floor. The blade landed softly among the furs while the crossguard and grip clattered noisily on the stone. Then, with a grin, the drake slid the ring into the pouch at her thigh.

Cerine swallowed hard, looking at her broken sword. It wasn't anything special, but it had been hers. She looked up at the drake, her fangs bared. But what could she do?

"Sit tight, fox," the drake told her. She turned to leave, walking out of the reach of the candlelight. "I must inform my master that you have awoken. We will see how he wishes to deal with you."

Cerine narrowed her eyes and sat down on the fur-covered iron bars at the base of her cell. She couldn't do much more than that. At least she still had the candle so she could see, somewhat, while she pondered what had happened to Mito and Erin.

It was getting late. Snow was falling, turning the darkening sky into a cloud of purplish gray. Bundled up in a hooded, fur-lined robe, Zaress stood in the doorway of the guildhouse, watching the snowflakes fall down and gather between the buildings. There wasn't a soul to be seen with the weather turning bad and night fast approaching, but still, the drake stood in the doorway, with her wide back pressed against the wood of the frame while the wind tugged at the edges of her robe.

Sarelina emerged from the kitchen, feeling the draft all the way across the guildhouse. She saw the drake standing there, keeping watch, and sighed. Taking off her soiled apron, the horse walked over and put a hand on Zaress's shoulder. The drake heard the ungul's hooves against the wooden floor long before she arrived, and didn't budge when she was touched.

"It's late," Zaress grumbled, swishing her muscular tail beneath the robe. Her heavy frame tensed and she squinted as the wind shifted and snow blew against her face.

Sarelina shook her head. She crossed her fit, but softened, arms around her chest and stood next to the drake. "They will be fine. No news is not necessarily bad news. They may have decided to hole up somewhere in the south district instead of wander home in the storm."

"She could have sent Mito as a runner," Zaress countered.

"Maybe she couldn't, or didn't think of it."

"I'm going to go find them."

Sarelina grabbed Zaress's sleeve and held firm. "You are not. Not in this weather, and not alone. What will you do, knock on every door in the district asking for a pink fox? When there's a sickness about? And you remember what happened when I found you, way back then."

"You don't have to worry about me," Zaress growled.

"It's my job to worry about you, because you worry about everyone *but* yourself." Sarelina took the drake's elbow and tugged. "Come in out of the cold. I know you hate it. I'll make you something warm to drink. I think I have a filet of saltfish still, too."

The promise of fish put a chip in Zaress's scowl. She nodded and started to turn away when she caught a glimpse of something from the corner of her eye. Sarelina was already heading away when the drake took two steps out into the snow-covered street.

"Zaress?" the horse called, furrowing her brow. "What are you doing?"

The drake saw something, for just a brief moment. She didn't see any details, but it was a flash of warmth amidst the dark and cold. She couldn't see it now, but she knew what she saw. Ignoring Sarelina, Zaress trudged out into the snow. It felt like she was walking on needles with her bare feet, but she headed towards where she had seen the flicker of warmth. Snowflakes prickled at her cheeks and muzzle, and she pulled her robe tight. With the ambient temperature plunged so low, and a blanket of snow on the ground, her thermal sight helped her less than her color sight, and it was only through that that she was able to spot the bundle of clothing laying face-first on the snow and the footprints leading up to it. Doffing her hood, Zaress knelt down beside the fallen figure. She immediately recognized Sarelina's leather overcoat and started to shake the figure and rouse them.

Erin leaned up, groaning. Half of her facial fur and her hair had snow stuck to it as she sat up on her knees, huffing and puffing for breath. Steam ringed her face as it escaped from both sides of her muzzle. After catching her breath, the vixen looked over at Zaress and her eyes widened. She grabbed

the drake's robe in her paws and began stammering rapidly, without saying much.

"Erin," Zaress hissed, clamping a hand around her muzzle. "Breathe. Then talk."

When she let go, the vixen continued to talk at a rapid pace, but more coherently. "Zaress! You have to come quick, Cerine and Mito, they're--"

"What?!" the drake gripped Erin by the shoulders. "What happened?"

"Those dragon monsters... scalehounds... they came out of the waterways. Cerine was going to hold them off so Mito and I could run... but Mito, I- I don't know where she is."

Zaress snarled and jumped to her feet. Rage and pain clouded her thoughts. "Get up. Take me there."

"I have to catch my... breath. It's so cold. My legs..."

The drake grabbed Erin by the coat and heaved her off the ground. Slings the fat vixen over one shoulder, Zaress ran at full speed through the streets in the direction of the south district. Erin jiggled on top of her shoulder the whole way through the cold and the snow. Zaress made better time than the fox had, running as if she wasn't heavily burdened, but it was well into night when they got to the gate to the district at the old wall. The drake set Erin down on her feet. The fox was a little dizzy, but none the worse for wear, and she led Zaress to the waterway entrance behind the grocer's shop.

"We went in here to find the source of the sickness," the fox explained, pointing down into the waterways.

Zaress nodded, casting her robe off and throwing it into the snow. The cold was bracing against her skin and scales, barely covered by her normal attire. Without waiting for any more explanation from Erin, the drake bounded down the steps. The chubby fox followed as best she could, stumbling a bit in the near-total darkness. Zaress had no such problem.

When they got to the bridge over the canal in the waterway, Erin stopped them. "This is where I lost Mito. The scalehound pulled her into the water. She must have--"

"No."

"...What?"

Zaress looked back over her shoulder and shook her head. "We're looking for Cerine first."

"But--"

"*No!*" Zaress snapped, harder than she really wanted to. Erin's face flushed brighter in the dark as she was admonished. The drake paused and breathed before continuing. "Mito would agree. She wanted to protect Cerine. *And* you. We find Cerine first. Then... we can look for Mito."

Erin's shoulders slumped. She looked towards the flowing water underneath the bridge and swallowed hard. Squeezing her eyes shut and pushing tears away, she looked up and pointed deeper into the waterways. "That way. There's a broken bit of wall that connects to some tunnels. That's where Cerine held them off."

Zaress nodded. She wanted to comfort the fox, but she didn't have the right words. It was all she could do not to fall to pieces, herself. If she didn't keep moving forward, doing something, she didn't know what she would do. Terrible dread had built up in her chest as they traveled to the district. Between Erin running back and then returning to the district, it had been so long already...

They found the entrance to the tunnels and Zaress climbed through, looking around with her thermal sight. It didn't help much; whatever had happened here was a while ago, and even though the waterways were warmer than the surface right now, they'd still whisk away any excess heat. She stepped around the tumbled bricks of the waterway wall and something nearly invisible and made of glass shattered underneath her foot. Zaress jumped backwards, nearly into Erin. Fortunately, the tough skin on her foot was hard to cut, and she was unharmed. She knelt down, picking up a sliver of curved glass.

"That's from a potion bottle," Erin told her, squinting and leaning close.

Zaress noted the brownish residue on the glass and sniffed it. It was dried blood. Dragon blood. Specifically, if she had to make an educated guess, *her own* dragon blood. Cerine had used the

insurance after all. The drake jumped up to her feet quickly. Hope was mingling painfully with the dread in her heart, and her breathing became wilder.

“She's alive,” Zaress said, dropping the glass. “Or she was. But she's not here.”

“Then... she has to be down in the tunnels, somewhere.”

Zaress charged down into them, barely waiting for Erin to keep up.

Unbeknownst to either Zaress or Erin, while they were so focused with finding Cerine, they were being watched from a second-story window above the waterways entrance. A silent figure looked on, curiously, as the rebels charged down into the waterways in search of their friend. Well, one of them, at least. The drake and the... *fox*... didn't check their surroundings well before going in. If they had, they would have noticed the set of boot prints in the snow leading towards the waterway entrance before abruptly stopping outside the grocer's shop.

The figure turned away from the window and stepped across the room, gracefully avoiding the dead felis sprawled on the floorboards. A small candle on a nightstand in the bedroom above the storefront illuminated a chair propped against the wall, with a waterlogged and slightly frosty marten tied in red ribbon by her wrists and ankles sitting on it. The mustelo glared with mismatched eyes at the figure as they knelt down to eye level.

“Now,” the figure purred, tilting their head slightly to one side, “if you value your friends, tell me what you know about the fox. The brown one.”

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