

Magic-Bearer, pt. 1

A Story in Arvos

by Cerine Hero

The darkness was oppressive. It clung to the walls of the chamber like liquid, and lapped in waves around the small pools where guttering braziers provided more heat than light. This umbral expanse was larger than it seemed, as sounds echoed strangely from invisible angles in the rock ceiling above or reflected from hanging pillars of stone sooner than expected. But for its denizens, the warmth from the few embers highlighted the contours of stone in this deep wilderness.

A figure almost as dark as the gloom surrounding her walked along a natural arch of rock that rose in a gentle arc across the wide cavern. The slope was low enough that she could ascend, clacking the hardened end of her magic staff against the stone, without needing to employ her wings. They were still a bit small, and not too strong yet, but they were still growing. Though, they were only mildly of any use against her large, softly wobbling frame. She was obese, and she didn't care. Her draconic strength meant the weight was insignificant.

Jemisha ascended to the peak of the arch and turned, looking into the den of her master. In that blackened corner was little but frigid, blinding cold. Her thermal sight ceased to function just a few feet away, and she felt a chilling breeze blow against her skin and scales as a titanic bulk shifted in the dark. She could see little of the mountainous creature within the cavern beyond the negative void of its presence in her vision. Her own claw, clutching the wooden shaft of her staff, was the brightest thing around.

“My child,” a voice said, its timbre and depth reminiscent of a glacier cracking and splitting, “I have felt the change. A new wind blows from the south. Vellinax has recovered some of the lost world-magic.”

“I have felt it too, master,” Jemisha replied, lowering her long neck down in obeisance. “He was spotted in the skies to the south not long hence. He seems to have much of his youthful vigor returned.”

The impermeable darkness twisted and uncoiled. Jemisha could hear dull scales shifting across worn-smooth stone beyond the range of her sight, and tattered, rotten wings beating the stagnant cave air. “A new age of dragonkind will begin. I must have share in this miracle. What do you know of how Vellinax came to recover some of his power?”

“I sent scouts to Vellinax's domain,” Jemisha answered. She stuck her claw into a pouch at her hip, pushing aside various bottles and packets to withdraw a decaying, hollowed-out fruit – the 'corpse' of a leshy. “Some of the *locals* were able to tell us that a pink-furred fox was used in a ritual to release the world-magic, but beyond that... nothing more than fey gibberish. Then they returned to the city, it seems. I have had scalehounds already searching for the scent.”

“Find that one; bring them to me,” the voice commanded, and slowly, the cold breathing came closer to the arch. A scaled snout and burning violet eyes appeared in the light of the dying embers. “And *alive*. If any world-magic still lingers within them... it belongs to me.”

“Yes, my master.” Jemisha bowed once again and turned to leave. As she descended the curving arch of rock, she inwardly grumbled. It was a shame the old, senile dragon had learned so much already. That would make things so much harder for her.

The next couple months at the guildhouse were a bit strange. They'd added two new members this year, and while Mito was a bit quirky at first, Erin was something different entirely. The chocolate vixen was whip-smart, but she needed her paws held for a little bit as she got her feet under her, and her self-confidence was understandably non-existent. Trying to differentiate what she knew from what was the leftover fog of Cerine's memories was a challenge for the humonculus for a little bit.

Cerine, despite at first introducing her “clone” as an artificial being, quickly moved to squash any further discussion of it. Erin was a person and a member of their circle as much as herself or Gray.

No one had any objections with that, though for her part, Zaress seemed to steer clear of the new fox. But when she was asked about it, she simply said that Erin's resemblance made her feel awkward. And they all agreed that if anyone asked way too many questions about it, then Cerine and Erin were from the same village – a true enough statement, and one no one in the city could contest. Fox villages were notoriously hidden, and hard to separate from myth.

As time passed and winter approached, Erin made some changes to distinguish herself from the pink fox. She began wearing her hair in a braid most of the time, and developed her own fashion. She had most of Cerine's tastes, though, so it mostly boiled down to wearing more greens than blues, in order to accent her own fur. She had no training in alchemy, but had a head for figures, so she worked with Sarelna on the group's finances in between helping out in the kitchen.

Erin sparred with some of the others in the training room in order to be more useful to the group. Like Cerine, she lacked much in the way of fighting skill, particularly since she was wider than doorways. Her weight made it hard for her to really practice, so she began with Gray helping to lead her in exercises, and the vixen dropped weight rather easily. Cerine guessed it was because of her more “unusual” biology, but the immensely obese fox was able to slim down to... well, less so. When she found a size she was more physically comfortable with, she still weighed more than three of Mito, two of Cerine, and a little more than Zaress. When the snows began to fall outside, there were no complaints about having an even cuddlier and soft bed-warmer about – or at least Mito and Gray thought so. Zaress made no overtures to be romantic, or even casually intimate, towards the chocolate look-alike, and Cerine and Erin had fallen into a comfortably close dynamic, like friends who had known each other for ages.

“So you were big... before, right?” Erin asked Cerine one day, watching out the private room window as flurries of snowflakes were whipped against it by blustery winds. She was sitting in front of the other fox's bed while Cerine was on the edge of it, brushing her hair and beginning to put it back in a braid for her.

“I was,” Cerine told her, running the comb through her hair. “I'm pretty sure I told you that, though.”

“Oh, right.” Erin looked down. She was wearing only her smallclothes after her warm bubble bath. Her chocolate-brown, black, and tan fur looked and felt luxurious again. She could bathe every day, if possible, but during winter it was hard to get enough warm water inside. Pushing against her heavy belly and bust, she ran her claws over her left leg. The fur in a couple places had obvious, but narrow, gaps from the scar tissue after her encounter with the scalehound. “Those first couple days are still a blur. I don't know if I'll ever actually remember them much.”

Cerine noted where her paws were trailing to and nodded. “May be better if you didn't. But why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering... how'd it feel, for you? Because you've been different sizes.”

The pink vixen cleared her throat, as if she was in on some reference that Erin wasn't. “Aha... yeah, you could say that. Well... I guess it was pretty complicated. It was a *little bit* awkward being the biggest person in the city, by far, but everyone here has no problem with it. As you know. Except Sarelna, but she has problems with most stuff. As far as physically, I enjoy it, but I'd never had to stay that way. A bit eye-opening, I guess, not being able to drink a bottle of fission and shrink back down. But I think mostly, I didn't like not being useful to everyone else. Nothing wrong with being large, but it didn't work for the jobs we do. Again, you know that, that's why you slimmed down some.”

Erin gave her belly a pat, and the bare fur rippled under her paw. “Yeah. I guess I understand. It just feels... right to me, though. If I really think about it, I can almost feel like I knew how it was when you were thin before, but not really. Not in any way that matters. I think I'd freak out if I didn't bounce when I walked! I wouldn't know how to do it, like I'd just fall over.” She tilted her head, feeling like Cerine was almost done braiding her hair. “And yeah, I want to help everyone out, too, but... I do kinda miss being really big, honestly.”

"If you want to try it again temporarily, let me know," Cerine told her. "Alright. Hair's all done. It looks so good like this. I'd do mine, but... nah, this is your thing."

She helped Erin up to her feet, and the chocolate fox wobbled a bit as her half-dressed figure bounced around. Smiling, she quickly turned around and planted a thank-you kiss right on the end of Cerine's muzzle... before realizing what she'd done. She and Cerine were frozen, widening blue eyes staring directly into widening green eyes.

"Oh, shit!" Erin cursed, jumping backwards with a jiggle and covering her muzzle as her face burned bright red. Cerine just shifted her weight on the bed, straightening up her spine. "I'm sorry, Mito usually does my hair for me and I just kinda forgot and wasn't thinking and—"

"Erin," Cerine said, holding out a paw and laughing slightly. "It's fine. Weird, but fine."

"Well, I still feel bad!" Erin pouted. She planted her paws on the sides of her head and groaned. "I don't feel bad because of you, though, because you are amazingly pretty and stuff, just—"

Cerine put her paws up, her brow furrowed. "Hang on. You think I'm really pretty?"

"Um, yes?" The chocolate fox blinked. "Just talking, you know, between us? You are way prettier than I am."

The pink vixen scoffed as she crossed her arms under her chest. "There's no way."

"You are!"

"No, I mean... I think *you* are prettier than *me*."

Erin's face blushed all over again, and she cleared her throat. "R-really? I don't... know what to do about that. Except not believe it."

Cerine just laughed. "I don't either. That's ridiculous."

There was a knock on the door and it opened. Zaress leaned in, looking at Cerine sitting on the edge of the bed, and then the red-in-the-face chocolate fox standing nearby. She narrowed her eyes but didn't ask. "Cerine. Sarelma wants to talk to you."

"Thanks," the pink vixen replied. "Quick question: Which of us is prettier?"

Zaress just shut the door.

"You're having a beauty contest with your reflection? Is there a better exercise in futility you could be doing?"

Cerine put her paws on her hips and made a theatrical show of rolling her eyes. "You're all going to make this a thing now, aren't you?"

"For what it's worth," Sarelma told her, adjusting some papers, "that wide-eyed but gormless expression she always has is endearing. But not attractive. Perhaps in a few years she could catch up with you."

"I am *somehow* not flattered by that," Cerine said. "Anyways. Zaress told me you wanted a word. Is it another job?"

Sarelma nodded, wiping her hands on her kitchen apron. Cerine wondered how long it had been since she'd seen the horse outside of the kitchen or dining hall. "I just got a message by carrier. People have been getting sick in the south district. They've ruled out it being contagious, but they don't know what's causing it, so some of my contacts sent word that they want your help specifically. You turned a couple heads a little while back, helping with the furbright outbreak."

"I actually didn't do that much with that, but alright," Cerine replied. "I guess it's nice to be getting some recognition. But I'd really like to meet some of these contacts you keep talking about one day."

Sarelma shook her head. "No chance. Staying compartmentalized is how we survive. But you can be assured I'm saying only kind things about you. And furthermore, don't bite the paw feeding us. This job in particular is paying more than normal, and we need it since our group only seems to be growing of late."

"Alright, I get it." Cerine licked her fangs and considered who to bring. Gray was already out —

a couple days ago he was asked to help provide some medical care for another group that suffered some injuries. Cerine had sent him along with some regenerative serums, so everything would be fine with that. Still, it was a bit odd not having their only masculine presence about the guildhall. Well, there was Zaress, who practically counted as more of that, herself. Hard to believe she actually missed the tigyote's comical surliness.

As far as the others were concerned... "It'll be nice to have Mito with me this time. I think she's a bit more familiar with that end of the city than the rest of us. And this seems like an opportunity to take Erin along. I've been hoping to show her more first-hand what we do, and this sounds like a good chance."

"No Zaress?" Sarelma asked, raising an eyebrow.

"The three of us will already be a crowd," the vixen explained. "I don't want to draw *too* much attention."

"Fair enough. I doubt she'll regret having to stay home under a blanket in this weather."

"Also a point." Cerine wiped her paws and slapped the counter with both of them. "I'll tell them and get things ready."

Sneaking over to her lab, the alchemist rounded up her usual things: hip satchel, assortment of non-lethal explosives, and some utility potions. She also picked up her silver ring from the desk and slipped it on. With a thought, she conjured the sword magically held within it, turning it around so the light caught the edge of the blade. It was getting a bit worn-down, especially after trying to strike that scalehound. If she'd thought of it before now, she could have had Sarelma sharpen it, but oh well.

Since she was needing to investigate possible poisoning, Cerine rooted around in one of her cabinets for some testing supplies to stuff into her satchel, too. It was possible she could identify the cause out there, but more than likely she'd need to come back to her lab to do proper tests. And that was what the empty bottles were for.

As Cerine continued digging around for her things, she felt a burly shadow fall across her. The vixen craned her neck all the way back to look up at the drake looming over her. Green, slitted eyes studied her, and she felt a pair of strong hands wrap around her waist, holding her trim middle as she stood up.

"So you're going somewhere?" Zaress asked, and her tone made it clear the answer wasn't actually a surprise.

"Yes." Cerine leaned back against her, feeling the drake's full chest behind her neck and shoulders. "We're going to the south district to investigate some sick people."

"I'm coming with you, Ceri."

Cerine pushed off of the drake and turned around, but the hands held firm to her waist, just running tenderly over her body as she spun. "I understand, but this one's gonna be alright. We're just going to talk with some people and figure things out. Shouldn't be dangerous at all. And even so, Mito will be there. And Erin."

"Erin doesn't count."

The vixen leaned around Zaress's bulk, checking to make sure there was no one at the lab door. Then she hissed under her breath, "Okay, that's fair. But I need to bring her along sometime and this is as bland as they get."

Zaress sighed, lowering her swollen shoulders. The drake shook her head lightly and her gaze went off into the distance for a moment before looking back. "It's something else. I don't like it."

"Are you still worried about that scalehound? That was months ago."

"Yes."

Cerine finally nudged her way out of Zaress's hands and walked over to a locked and sealed shelf in the corner of the lab. Taking off the note that threatened any nosy, lockpicking martens with pain of losing cuddle privileges, she unlocked the grate and removed a cylindrical bottle full of swirling red-brown mixture. "If it makes you feel better, I'll take this. As insurance."

“Did you finish testing that?” Zaress asked, instinctively rolling her right shoulder and tucking in her arm against her side.

“No,” Cerine replied, tucking it into a padded pocket on the side of her satchel, “but if we're in a situation where I *need* it, then it won't be that big of an issue.”

The vixen walked over to a rack near the door to the lab and pulled her gray, wool coat off one of the pegs before throwing it over her shoulders. She walked back over to the drake and let the bigger woman button it up for her as an apology for being left home. Her pink tail jittered and wagged as the drake did a poor job of keeping her fingers on the buttons instead of the fox's flat tummy.

“Tell her I will have her mustelo hide if anything happens to you,” Zaress explained, her voice low and rumbling. “And I mean in a way it won't come back. Same for Erin.”

“Don't be mean to Erin.”

“No... I meant tell Mito to watch out for Erin, too.”

“Oh, that makes a lot more sense.” Cerine pulled her satchel over her shoulder and let Zaress fix her hair. “Mito's taken good care of us so far. I trust her.”

“I do, too.” Zaress inhaled and reached down, holding Cerine by the cheek. She pulled the fox in and kissed her. Cerine purred and returned it, laying her paws on top of the drake's chest. “Be careful.”

Cerine nodded and they left the lab together, with the fox splitting off to go up the stairs towards Erin's room at the end of the hall. She knocked, turning the wooden knob and letting herself in. The chocolate fox was laying in her bed, with the sheets haphazardly tugged up over her chest.

“Oh... sorry,” Cerine apologized. “We've got a job to do, and I want you to come along with us. Have you seen Mito? I haven't seen her since this morning.”

Slowly, beside the big vixen, a pair of round ears peeked up from between her and the mattress, and then two mismatched eyes peeked over the edge of the sheet towards the pink fox. Cerine narrowed her eyes and turned to see the clothes stacked on the floor nearby.

“Ah. Well, hurry it up.” Cerine turned to leave but then looked back. “And why are you bothering to hide it?”

The winter air outside was crisp, and their breath steamed in front of their muzzles as they walked. Snow had begun to accumulate lightly on the streets, enough to chill their padded toe pads and crunch as they walked towards the south end of the city.

“I don't think you're letting Erin have a fair say.”

“Erin getting a say isn't relevant.”

“Ummm...”

Mito was in front of the foxes, walking backwards as quickly as the two taller girls were forwards. Instead of her usual, lightweight and practical clothes, the marten had opted for a dull gray body suit from her shins to her neck, completely covering her arms. Layering it was a pair of belted trousers and her trademark green jacket, where her collapsible staff was neatly hidden. Adding in her customary boots and gloves, the only fur she still had exposed was on her head and the tips of her fingers, which was quite a sight for the notoriously fur-bearing marten. Cerine had on her woolen coat, and Erin had on a large, soldier's leather overcoat she borrowed from Sarelina. Somehow it fit her!

The marten raised up her paws, gesturing as if she was encompassing both of the foxes together. “I still wanna get snuggled down between your bellies. Just comfy snuggles! Fox fur is *the best*. And you feel so nice with the extra weight, like buttery soft pillows. And now there's two of you, so come on. I *need* this.”

“I wouldn't mind,” Erin offered, looking over towards Cerine, “if it was just cuddling.”

“Why am I outvoted on this?” Cerine sighed. “Can we table this for later? We're here.”

Mito perked her ears and whirled about. Sure enough, they were at one of the official entrances to the city's southern district. The city's original northern wall was... “preserved” in all of its crumbling

glory here as a delineation between the old town and the newer constructions. They were far away from the wealthy manors on the higher side of the hill. The Veiled Citadel's tallest towers barely peeked over the rooftops here, as well, which they all found perfectly fine.

Someone had pinned a handwritten sign into the rotten mortar of the wall by the gate with thick parchment and a piton: "DANGER: Sickness." Underneath that, in another, rougher handwriting, it said: "Go home!" It was hard to tell who wrote the note, but Cerine could at least rule out the Veiled Way. It had none of their grandiose, crimson writing or symbols. Or any red thread. They cared little for the goings-on in the lower part of town, anyways, far from their sanctioned markets. Likely, it was put up by a concerned citizen.

Of which there were strangely none.

Mito walked halfway through the gate first, looking around. In the oldest district in the city, the buildings were tightly packed together, and in many places simply ran together into large masses, with narrow, winding streets between them. In some areas, the buildings were up to three stories high. In this area, the population density was particularly high. And yet, there was no one to be seen. The fallen snows on the street were clear of any paw- or hoofprints, either.

"Where is everybody?" the marten asked, looking back at the vixens and raising an eyebrow. "You said they figured out it wasn't contagious, right?"

"Maybe not everyone knows it," Cerine replied, walking into the district with Erin on her heels. "I was hoping to talk to somebody and figure out what they know, but..."

Mito scratched her head. "I mean... I don't even see a sign that the Way's Crimson Priests have been here. If there's a sickness, how come they aren't coming to grift a bit of gold out of everyone?"

"That's a good point," Cerine said, narrowing her eyes.

They all stood quietly for a minute before the brown fox shuffled her feet in the snow. "The center of the district would have shops, right?" Erin offered, patting down her long coat and shaking snowflakes out of her hair. "Maybe someone will be there."

Cerine nodded, lifting up her left paw and adjusting the ring about her finger. In front of them, Mito took the lead, reaching back beneath her jacket and loosening her hidden staff in its holster. Noticing the both of them fiddling with their weapons, Erin gulped and pat the side of her overcoat at her hip, feeling the bulge of a sheathed dagger underneath.

The south district felt like a ghost town. There had to be people around, in the homes, but no one came out to see the visitors. All down Cerine's spine, she felt her fur prickling as the sensation of being watched continued to gnaw at her. They had to be afraid of something more than just the illness. It was the same all the way to the center of the district, where a number of streets converged around a fountain that was dedicated to the place the city's original well was dug. At least, that was the best guess. Time had eroded the statue monument and its plaque down so much that it was hard to tell what it originally depicted. The figure was still distinctly canin in shape, and holding a now-broken ewer that would have trickled water into the fountain below, if it wasn't all frozen. Maybe it was one of the other canin gods, but Cerine wouldn't know. Foxes had their own beliefs.

Erin was right, though: This part of the district was full of storefronts in the buildings surrounding the small plaza. The midday light was already beginning to vanish here, however, as the buildings were all tall around the central space, and the winter sun was already beginning its sleepy descent to the horizon. And yet, despite being a busy time of day, it was still deserted.

Cerine walked onto the covered porch of a general goods store and tried the handle. It was locked, so she rapped on the window and tried to peer into the dark store. There was no movement whatsoever. "This is getting creepy," the pink vixen said.

"You shouldn't be here." The voice came from the opposite side of the plaza, and Mito whipped around first, one paw behind her back. Standing outside of another shop was a white-furred felis woman, wearing a long, simple dress and a scarf. She must have come out of the store while they were all looking the other way.

Cerine stepped past the others and out into the open. "You're the first person we've seen since we got here. We've come to see about the sickness. Do you know what's going on?"

"Did the Way send you?" the felis asked. On closer inspection, the catfolk was actually a cheetah, with fur so pale as to look white in the snowy weather. She had raven-black hair, however, and black stripes along the sides of her muzzles, running down from her eyes, that gave her a permanent forlorn, downcast look. "You don't look like you're from the Citadel."

Mito tapped on Cerine's arm and pointed at her satchel. "Hey, show her the thing. The flower thingy."

"Shh," Cerine hissed. Erin just blinked in confusion. "No, we heard about it from a concerned citizen. I'm an alchemist, and I work in medicines sometimes. This is my bodyguard and my, er... apprentice."

"I see," the felis replied. "Well, come in out of the snow, at least, and I'll tell you what I can."

Cerine nodded to the others and together they crossed the plaza to step into the grocer's. The marten was in front, but she stopped abruptly as she began to push the door open and enter. The pink vixen nearly bumped into her, and then she looked down at what Mito was looking at. The lock on the door had been splintered out of its latch.

"Oh," Cerine called out, "your door is broken."

"Yes, someone broke in yesterday," the cheetah explained. She waved them all inside. "With everything happening, I haven't been able to get someone to fix it."

The trio slipped inside, with Erin shaking snow off her hair and ears and Cerine approaching the felis behind the counter. While they talked, Mito wandered the store, examining different things.

"You picked a bad day to come," the cheetah explained, leaning her paws on the counter after taking her scarf off.

"Nah, I'm used to it," Cerine answered, wringing her damp hair out with her paws. "We got a lot more snow up where I am from, originally."

"No... the disappearances." Everything got quiet as the cheetah explained, "The sickness has been hitting the area for a few days now, but last night, several people, mostly dogfolk, went missing. Either went outside and weren't seen again, or snatched out of their homes. Now everyone is locked inside, afraid."

"You don't seem to be," Mito chipped in from the other side of the store.

"No," the cheetah answered, working her tongue around the inside of her mouth. "I don't scare easily. As that intruder yesterday learned."

Cerine shook her head. "That's odd, but... one problem at a time. Do you know much about the illness? What are its symptoms? Who is contracting it?"

"The best I can tell you is it isn't especially severe," the cheetah explained. "No one has died yet. But there's no rhyme or reason to who gets infected. Some people in a family may, others not. And from what I've heard, people have been having difficulty breathing, or weakness. Some older folk have struggled to stand or get out of bed."

"That's actually really helpful," Cerine told her, rubbing under her muzzle in thought. "Okay, I may have an idea..."

Cerine walked out of the store, with Mito following just behind. Back inside, Erin continued to look around, admiring the objects pinned to the walls. She stopped to look at one, a framed portrait of a felis man beaming and smiling out in front of this very store. The cheetah walked over and stood beside Erin, looking up towards the taller vixen.

"Who is this?" Erin asked, pointing.

"My husband," she replied, before quickly adding, "late husband, rather. This was his store. I just try to do what I can in his stead."

"Oh." Erin rubbed her paws together uncomfortably. "I am sorry for your loss."

"Don't trouble yourself. Shouldn't you be helping your master? You are her apprentice, aren't

you?”

“My mast-...?” Erin blinked and her plump jaw hung open. “Oh! Yes. I should go help her, I’ll go do that!”

Outside, Cerine removed her alchemy satchel and placed it on the rim around the fountain basin. She was taking out some testing supplies from the satchel when Mito hopped over, sitting on the rim with her back to the frozen water. Cerine gave her a sharp look and the marten reached back, pulling her tail away from the ice.

“So... you’re thinking it’s the water?” Mito asked.

“Yes. And I have a suspicion I know what it is, too. It was above freezing yesterday, so this water should be fresh enough for testing.” She took out a small glass vial, another vial with white powder, and a small chisel. “I just hope I’m wrong.”

“Deathleaf?”

Cerine looked up from where she was chiseling away small chips of ice and scooping them into the empty vial. She narrowed her eyes. “How do you know what deathleaf is?”

The marten held up her paws defensively. “Don’t give me that look! I was a burglar. I never hurt anybody or used poisons, but I knew some people who did. Deathleaf toxin was pretty popular, because you could nick someone with your knife and they’d go limp, paralyzed. Like they were dead. I mean, it could kill, but... I didn’t know exclusively nice people, you know. But I remember a big thing about it was you couldn’t just crush up the leaves and use them. Someone had to know how to make it.”

Cerine nodded, warming the vial with the ice between her paws so the flakes would melt. “Deathleaf attacks the nervous system, yes. Low toxicity can cause what the lady was describing, higher doses total muscle paralysis, and then eventually organ failure. And yeah, that last part about having to make it is the thing that’s worrying me.”

“How come?”

Cerine swirled the water in the vial and then tipped the testing powder into it. “Because deathleaf powder doesn’t dissolve in water on its own. An alchemist has to create a suspension for it first. And I was *really* hoping this outbreak had a natural cause...”

They both – and Erin, who walked over from inside the grocer’s – watched the powder dissolve into the water as Cerine rocked the vial back and forth. They held their breath, and slowly, the water began to change from clear to a revolting, murky greenish-brown. Cerine’s ears tipped low and she swore.

“Is that bad?” Erin asked, unaware of the context. “It looks really gross.”

“I want to find the water’s source,” Cerine explained.

Mito jumped up. “Down into the waterways again?”

“Unfortunately.”

The cheetah walked out onto the front area of the grocer’s again, winding her scarf around her neck. “There’s a waterway entrance the next street over, behind my shop.”

Mito gave the grocer an askance look, but Cerine stood up and placed her things back into her satchel. “Thank you for your help. We’ll be looking around, but don’t wait on us. If you want to go home, feel free.”

Cerine led the three of them around to the where they were instructed, finding the entrance on the far side of the street. They were in plain view of the alley that ran between a couple of the buildings, the grocer’s being one of them. The hatch entrance to the waterways under the city looked just like the one near the guildhouse: Diagonally-leveled, about six feet wide, hinged on both ends so the metal doors could swing outward. And they were swung outward already.

As the vixen dug around in her pack for an alchemical torch, Mito turned and looked back towards the grocer’s store. “That lady didn’t feel right.”

“How so?” Erin asked. “She seemed a bit prickly, but okay.”

“She wasn’t from around here,” the marten explained. “It was how she stood and how she

talked. She grew up in money.”

“A lot of people who grow up in money wind up down here,” Cerine said, activating the paw-held torch by whacking the end of it against the stonework. The round stone affixed to the dowel began to glow brightly. “But... noted. She knew way more than a local grocer should.”

Cerine led them down the narrow steps into the waterways, letting her torch illuminate the way forward. Behind her, Mito hopped down easily, while Erin had slightly more trouble, her bigger frame and bulky coat dragging along the stone walls. With every step down to a story or more below street level, Cerine regretted not bringing Zaress along slightly more. Her heat vision would have been invaluable now, especially since the fox hadn't quite figured out how to create something for that herself. And if they were now on a hunt for another alchemist, well, there was never a reason to not have the big drake around, then. Unfortunately, if they went back to the guildhouse to get her, it would be dark – and very cold – long before they could get back, and they would have to wait until morning. Cerine didn't relish leaving the district to deal with more disappearances tonight if she could help it.

At least the waterways were always a relatively consistent temperature, being sheltered from the weather. The water ran fluidly in the channels between the walking paths, and while it wasn't warm by any stretch, it was at least not bitterly cold like above. Erin unbuttoned her bulky coat and adjusted her tunic underneath around her belly while she brought up the rear of the group. The round fox tested the dagger in its sheath once again, just to be sure.

Cerine followed the flow of water upstream in the dark, turning a corner and winding her way generally northeast, towards the docks district and the center of the city. The waterways were designed to flow water through and out of the city, starting with the docks and then outwards towards the west. Whoever dumped treated deathleaf solution into the water was in this direction.

“We're headed kinda towards the guildhouse, aren't we?” Mito asked, dragging her paw along the wall beside her.

“A bit,” Cerine replied, “but we're still a long way off.”

They crossed an arch over the waterway and turned a corner, and Cerine's light began to shine on something odd. The group entered a bigger, circular cistern, with water pouring down through an iron grating from another level above, likely from the high, northern side of the city. The cistern was likely to help control overflow during rains. But behind the makeshift waterfall, the wall in the back of the cistern had been torn down, with stones laying on the walkways in either direction. As Cerine stepped closer, curious, her torch's light jumped down another tunnel behind the broken wall, one made of natural stone, not bricks.

“More tunnels?” Erin asked, green eyes widening in the dark. “If someone poisoned this cistern here, they probably came in through that way.”

“I think you're right,” Cerine agreed. She put one foot into the natural tunnel and saw something glint in the light at her feet. She knelt down and picked it up. It was a flat, ebony scale, from some kind of reptile... and it looked much too familiar. Narrowing her eyes, Cerine tucked her light rod into her muzzle and dug in her satchel's pockets for the scale she'd pried from the scalehound back in the fall. Holding them together, it was obvious that they were a match. “Oh, no.”

“Cerine!”

The vixen looked up, spitting the torch out into her paw and holding it aloft. Dark shapes were advancing down the tunnel ahead of her, violet eyes glowing like embers beyond the reach of her light. Erin let out a squeal, and the pink fox glanced back to see another hound stalking forward along one side of the cistern towards them, growling low. Its wicked claws went *tick-tack* on the stones. But they didn't attack yet, like they were trained and waiting for a signal.

Cerine stood and took one step back, trying to quickly formulate a plan. Her sword was useless – or, at least, *she* was useless with a sword against them. She doubted Mito could fight three of them with her staff, even if she could manage to hold her own for a bit against Zaress. And Erin was mostly a big bundle of not-very-helpful-for-this. The vixen quickly wracked her brain for everything she had in

her satchel... and she remembered the experimental potion she promised Zaress she'd bring.

"Mito," Cerine said calmly, belied by the rapid beating of her heart.

The marten was almost against her back, staff extended and clutched defensively in her paws. She was already nudging Erin to move in closer with the end of it. "Yes?"

"I need you to get Erin back up to the surface," Cerine told her. Keeping her eyes on the scalehounds approaching from the wide, natural tunnel, the vixen fished in her bag for a vial of fission and handed it to the marten.

"What's this for?" Mito asked, tucking the small bottle of silver liquid into a jacket pocket.

"What about you?"

"I'm going to do something dumb," Cerine explained. "When you find me, I need you to inject me with that. Use Erin's knife."

"I don't like this plan."

"Too bad. Go!"

Mito lunged forward, leaping over the cistern and past Erin so she could spring on the scalehound before it had a chance to react. Whirling her staff about in a wild arc, as much as she could manage in the underground space, she cracked the metal end of it square into the scalehound's temple and sent it sprawling sideways. Armored against swords, maybe, but scales didn't afford too much protection against a metal staff. The scalehound spasmed from the whack to its head and fell over into the water, where it began to thrash wildly, throwing waves of water in every direction. Mito then turned back and grasped Erin's paw, pulling her along back down the waterway.

Once they were gone, Cerine grasped the bottle in the side of her satchel and shrugged the strap off. The scalehounds would pounce any second, so she wasted no time opening the cork and downing the bottle's entire contents. The potion had a dark and metallic taste to it that lingered on the tongue long afterwards. It was because of the blood. Shortly after their first encounter with a scalehound, Cerine wanted to start experimenting with an even more powerful elixir of vigor, mixing it together with some other ingredients and some of Zaress's dragon blood to see if she could achieve that level of strength in a non-drake.

Her wool coat burst into pieces.

Muscles expanded, doubling in size once and then twice beneath pink and white fur. The slender vixen rapidly grew to a hulking size, stretching her tunic and trousers to their limits. Raw rock walls echoed with the sounds of seams popping along her corded, powerful thighs and over her massive, widening shoulders. Cerine's paws expanded in size, her shiny black claws growing thicker and longer. The same happened to her feet, and inches-long rippers grew from the ends of her toes. Cerine inhaled deeply, puffing out a chest packed with thick, heavy muscle, and she roared. The sound was deafening in the confined space, rattling the walls and sending ripples through the water. For all the incredible power surging through Cerine's veins, filling her bloated biceps and swollen traps with borrowed dragon's blood, she couldn't control it. Her eyes turned into narrow, vertical slits, and her thoughts seemed to recede into the back of her mind, put away for the time being in favor of unfathomable, boiling rage that steamed like wildfire under her skin. That was the problem with the potion she hadn't worked out yet, and why she'd ordered Mito and Erin away, because she wouldn't be able to tell friend from foe.

The titanic, massively-muscled berserker of a fox leapt forward onto the scalehounds, tearing her clothes more in the process. The scalehounds tried to snap at her, but a swift swipe of her paw bashed one away. Her keen claws screeched across the hound's scales, but didn't find purchase. The other coiled back and then pounced, but Cerine snatched it from the air with her paw. The scalehound doubled her weight normally, but with the extra strength her potion gave her, along with the increase in mass, she easily hurled it back down the hallway.

Another scalehound, appearing from the waterways side, leapt onto her back, trying to claw her. Cerine spun and slammed it against the wall, cracking scales and sending it tumbling to the floor. The

other hounds were recovering now, trying to hem her in in the tunnel between the three of them. But they were cautious of the vixen's powerful arms and large claws, and tried to circle in order to get around to her vulnerable sides.

Two sharp cracks echoed down the tunnel from below, and the scalehounds retreated. Cerine advanced on them anyways, snarling through her bared fangs. Bloodlust consumed her; she couldn't help herself. She charged into the dark after the two scalehounds in front of her, only barely able to see anything the further she went. The mutation to her eyes only gave her so much vision in dim light – she didn't actually have a dragonkin's thermal sight.

So she was surprised when she barreled directly into a tall figure standing in the middle of the tunnel. Reacting instinctively and aggressively, the fox tried to simply bowl the other person over, but they were unyielding. Whoever it was, they were tall and very full-figured. Their body was soft, but had a bit of the same textural feel as Zaress. A pair of glowing violet eyes glared down at Cerine from atop a long, curving neck.

Cerine reared back to swing a clawed paw at the figure, but as soon as she swung, they grasped her arm and locked the elbow before *twisting*. The vixen yowled as her huge muscles were wrenched, and she dropped to one knee. Then something glittered like silver in the dark. In the back of her mind, she realized it was a very familiar shade of silver. A clawed finger, coated with the silver, lashed forward and jabbed the fox in the neck, and the substance got into her bloodstream.

The boiling heat in her body evaporated almost instantly, leaving behind a cold void. Quickly, Cerine's muscles dissolved back to their normal size, and her brain began to shake off its fog. She'd just been injected with fission, breaking down the potion in her veins... but how? Who would know how to do that?

The figure let her go, and the slender vixen fell onto her rump, looking tiny and scrawny in her stretched-out clothes. Cerine clutched the side of her neck and put pressure against the small puncture wound. She looked up, blinking, at the figure who had just so soundly beaten her, while the scalehounds reappeared from behind them, moving to encircle the fox. The figure knelt down, moving close enough that Cerine could see their face even in the near-total darkness. It was a drake, with black scales and purple eyes.

“Greetings, magic-bearer.”

The drake reached into a pouch strapped around her belly and threw a cloud of sparkling powder into Cerine's face. She gagged against it, but couldn't resist inhaling after all of her exertion. The world spun and her head went weightless. The rest of her body followed a moment later, and she slumped backwards onto the stone floor of the tunnel.

* * * * *

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