

## **A Marten's Tale**

### A Story in Arvos

by Cerine Hero

Morning sunlight shimmered through what was left of the stained glass window, painting patches of color on the wooden beams. Warm air carrying the salty smell of the sea blew in from the east. It filtered through the open gaps in the window and ruffled the ratty blankets piled up in the corner. As the breeze blew, the fraying ropes that once held the bronze bell up in the bell tower began to sway.

Something shifted underneath the blankets in the corner. A dark nose peeked out into the light and then a paw followed it. Slowly, the figure beneath the blankets sat up, and the covers fell away to reveal a slender, brown-furred marten. She blinked and rubbed her mismatched eyes before yawning deeply. Standing, she wrapped one of the blankets around her body and walked over to the multi-colored window.

“Good morning,” she told the city below. Rooftops and streets stretched well into the distance, all the way to the quays in the harbor, where the urban sprawl gave way to the glittering ocean beyond. She remembered when there would be white sails billowing in the wind and magnificent ships crowding the harbor. Now it was mostly empty. What few ships remained docked had tightly furled sails. The marten's shaggy tail wrapped tightly around her leg and she looked north, towards the Veiled Citadel, wrapped in red cloth. She sneered a bit and then stepped back.

The stained glass window, at least the parts that remained, depicted the image of a stern-faced but kindly wolf. He had a thick beard that trailed from his muzzle down to the front of his armor. The parts below had mostly been smashed with rocks at some point, but guessing by the framework remaining, the wolf had been resting his paws atop a shield. It was the sort the marten had seen knights use, with the flat top and rounded bottom. She didn't know what those were called, but she knew the wolf's name: Koleo. Having his firm gaze looking into the bell tower while she was asleep made her feel safe.

Taking her leave of the window, the marten tossed her blanket back into the pile in the corner and gathered her clothes. She pulled on a light shirt that covered to her midriff and some belted pants she'd torn back to the mid-thighs. As she buckled the belt and adjusted her shorts around the base of her tail, her stomach began to grumble, right on cue.

“Alright, let's see what we've got,” she said, rubbing her flat tummy. She sat, cross-legged, on the old timbers with her back to the hole in the floor where the bell and its ropes used to be. In front of her was a small coffer, and she popped it open with her claws to check how much food she had.

Not much. She knew that, but still couldn't help feeling a little disappointed anyways. There was a bag of dried berries and a heel of wheat bread left. Gods, she could do with some cheese. Or a few pieces of smoked strider... At least then she could make a proper sandwich. Flattening down her round ears, the marten sprinkled a few of the dried berries onto the bread and began to eat, washing it down with a swig of water from her waterskin. Breakfast was taken care of, she supposed.

But now she was out of food, so it was time to get out and get up to mischief. The marten dug into her blankets and found her gear, stashed away neatly. Soft leather boots, some hardened bracers, and a metal rod the length of her forearm, with thicker caps on the ends. She tucked the rod into a pocket on the inside of her faded green jacket and pulled it on. Brushing her brown hair out of her collar, the marten reached out and grasped the rope hanging over the open pit. She sprightly wrapped herself around the rope and slid all the way down, the wind whipping through her hair as she fell.

The great hall of the old temple was large and open, and the rustling sound of the marten's boots and gloves sliding along the rope echoed off the stones and wooden pews. This place used to be beautiful, in its own spartan, utilitarian way, once. But the icons of the old religion had been torn down and broken. Most of the pews along the sides of the hall lay shattered, and the stone altar was chipped

and cracked. The intricately woven rugs on the floor were slashed to bits. The marten looked out over the iconoclastic carnage every day when she came down from the bell tower. She didn't know much about the old faiths, but still, she felt a little twinge of longing for when this place was full of wolves and other canin folk, handing out food and taking in people who needed shelter for the evening. They gave her stew sometimes, even though she wasn't one of them. She liked them.

Booted feet landed on the top of the cracked bell just inside the tall doors at the mouth of the temple. The marten let go of the rope and hopped down to the floor. Her feet barely missed the broken pieces of a shield laying on the ground. She looked back over her shoulder at the doors. They were sealed tight by bands of red cloth inside and out, signifying the authority of the Veiled Way. No going out that way. Fortunately, the adventurous marten knew other ways in and out.

She strode across the great hall to the back, shifting aside a propped-up piece of pew to reveal a hole in the wall where rain had worn down the ground and the stones collapsed. The marten wriggled through the gap and climbed out into the temple's lichyard, gravestones jutting up out of the earth in every direction like worn-down teeth. Touching some of the stones as she passed, she opened the rusted iron gate and peeked out into the courtyard beside the temple.

There was a commotion near the temple's main steps and she instinctively ducked back behind one of the stone pillars beside the gates. Peeking out, she saw an old wolf standing on the lowest step of the semi-circled terraces in front of the temple. A pair of arbitrators, with red cloaks draped over their armor and veils masking their features, were standing before him. One of them had their sickle in their talons. The curved metal implement gleamed coldly in the morning light.

“What have we told you about preaching, old dog?” the arbitrator with the bared weapon said, holding the bladed edge inches from the unflinching wolf's face. The crowds in the courtyard were busy trying their best to ignore the interaction unfolding in front of them.

“Koleo will not be silenced, not by the likes of you,” the wolf said defiantly, his paws clasped together in front of his stomach in a show of peaceful resistance. “He will howl until you are undone, and the Veil is torn down, and-”

“I'm tired of listening to this,” the armed arbitrator scoffed, waving their talon in the air. “Wrap him up.”

The second arbitrator took a length of red cloth from their belt and stepped forward. Ignoring the wolf's continued preaching, they wrapped the crimson band about his wrists and tied it. The cloth then began to take on a life of its own, multiplying in length and encircling the wolf over and over. His arms were soon completely captured, and the cloth extended to completely cover him from ear to toe, wrapping his tail to his thighs. The ribbons of red cloth didn't stop until the old wolf priest had been completely covered, like a funeral shroud. He still stood upright for a moment, but then slowly tottered over, unable to catch himself. He thumped hard against the stone steps and the marten winced, watching from her hiding place.

“To the Citadel with this one,” one of the arbitrators mumbled. The pair of them knelt down and grasped loops of cloth hanging from the shrouded wolf and lifted him off the ground, carrying him towards the north.

As the arbitrators went on their business, the marten finally emerged from the lichyard. She was fortunate to have never caught their attention before. Mostly she ran afoul of city guards, not members of the Veiled Way. The black-armored and veiled arbitrators frightened her. They frightened everyone, given how the crowd was now letting out a collective sigh of relief to see the backs of their cloaks. It was a shame what happened to the priest, but he was breaking the laws. That's what they were all thinking. The marten wished she could do more.

She put the incident out of her mind as she made her way through the city, weaving through crowds to the eastern markets. The market was set up in a long street running parallel to the docks, but set back a couple blocks, behind the warehouses. There was an arcade along one side of the street, with permanent storefronts sheltered from the elements, while the opposite side of the street hosted all

variety of stalls and carts and wagons from outlanders hoping to come in to peddle goods and wares. It was noisy here, with the sounds of haggling and hawking cutting over the top of the clang of metalwork and the shuffling of feet.

The marten slipped easily into the crowd, her blue and green eyes darting about as she searched. Her gold pouch was bone dry, so that left her with two options. She could swipe a bit of food from a vendor, or lift a few gold pieces off someone who looked like they had enough to spare. If it was up to her, then it would be the latter. No one noticed a few coins missing here and there. So she just needed to find a decent mark. Unfortunately, very few people shopping the eastern market were *rich*, not like the upscale showcases in the highcity, but she couldn't blend into the crowd up there.

As she wandered aimlessly, letting her eyes drift from person to person, her gaze caught a glimpse of color that drew her attention. There was a flash of pink through the crowd, but figures bunched together and cut off her line of sight. The marten squeezed around a group of catfolk, standing and talking in the center of the avenue, and found the person she'd seen a moment ago standing at an herbalist's stall.

She was tall and pretty, with white hair done up in a ponytail and pink fur. The vixen wore a long, buttoned coat, but the marten was more interested in the heavy leather bag she wore at her hip. Given her dress and the depth of the conversation she was having with the herbalist, she was probably an artisan or a sage of some kind. There could be any number of goodies in that bag. The curiosity was too much for the marten to resist. Putting up her hood, she sneaked closer, pretending to shop at the fruit vendor beside the herbalist's cart.

The fox pointed to a bag full of some plant parts on the cart while she talked with the herbalist. "Is that leviathan vine root?" she asked. "Okay, I need about half a pound of that. My stock got ruined, unfortunately. No, rats. Actual rats. Well, they *were* small... they're not now. Oh, hellscap spores? It has shrinking properties, but it's too toxic. I don't want to hurt them if I can help it. Unless I mixed it with saltshell dust... That could work. Yeah, I'll take some of that, too. Uh, do you have a lined bag for the spores? I don't have mine on me; I'll pay for one."

The herbalist turned around to fetch a bag to put the spores in, and the vixen was distracted looking at all the herbs and reagents in stock. Now was as good a time as any she was going to have. The marten slipped away from the fruit stand and, pretending she wasn't watching where she was going, bumped into the vixen. While they were stumbling, she darted a paw underneath the flap of the satchel on the fox's hip, grasping for the first thing she could find. Her fingers closed around something solid and round and she fished it out, tucking it behind her leg.

"Sorry about that," she told the vixen, her hood still up over her face, and she disappeared into the crowd without waiting for a reply. No time to stop and ogle her prize, she needed to put plenty of distance between her and the fox. The marten wriggled her way through groups of people, either slipping by with barely a brush or eliciting only mild annoyance. She glanced back over her shoulder at one point, checking for any glimpse of pink behind her, but she saw nothing. A grin began to spread across her face.

The marten slipped across the street and ducked behind one of the columns supporting the arcade. She shook off her hood and finally exhaled. Her round ears were hot from the blood pumping through them. Brushing back a lock of hair with one paw, she held up her prize and took a look at it. It was a glass bottle, spherical with a long neck and a cork stopper in the end. Inside the glass swirled a green, opaque liquid that seemed to churn without any outside agitation. Her heart sank a little bit upon realizing what she had. She'd hoped for something more obviously valuable – there was no telling what this potion was, so trying to pawn it off quickly at another vendor in the market before anyone was the wiser wasn't going to work. So much for that.

She was about to just set it down by the column and go looking for more opportunities when a curious thought crossed her mind and a hungry grumble shivered in her belly. Glancing around and seeing no one was paying the little, lonely marten any mind, she popped the cork from the neck of the

bottle and gave it a sniff. Her nose wrinkled immediately. It was strong! But still... she couldn't resist a quick taste before tossing it.

She took a light swig. The liquid was thicker than she expected, and it rolled down her throat more like syrup than anything. It tasted... indescribable. Whatever it was made from, it wasn't food. The marten covered her mouth with the back of her paw to cover an abrupt gagging fit. But as the little bit of potion began to settle in her stomach, she started to feel odd. Like the taste, it was something she couldn't describe. It was like a weight settled on her middle. The marten grimaced and put her free paw on her stomach to try to massage away the feeling. Her fingers pressed into a soft roll of fat.

The potion bottle almost tumbled from her fingers as she looked down in shock. Her paw wasn't lying – bulging out past her chest was the curve of a chubby belly. One blue and one green eye widened until they looked ready to fall out of her head. Cupping her paw underneath her new belly, she felt it continue to grow in both size and weight, until it hung slightly over the waistband and belt of her shorts. The rest of her body gained excess flesh, as well, with love handles spilling over her sides and her breasts pulling her top tight. All of her clothes were snug around her body now – a feeling she'd never known before!

A ripple of excitement flitted up the marten's spine as she kneaded the belly with her fingers. This was... *different*. And it was exciting. Her fingers and toes were trembling with anticipation as the rest of the potion swirled in the bottle. She wanted to tip back the entire potion and see what happened to her. Licking her muzzle, she started to lift the bottle up when a shout reached her ears.

The chubby marten whipped around and saw the vixen pushing her way through the crowd, pointing at her. Her heart started to pound with adrenaline and she took a couple steps back, gauging her next move. Well, no way to play dumb, the evidence was plain as day right on her bare belly. And she wanted the potion, so... time to run for it. Slapping the cork back into the bottle and thrusting the neck of it into her muzzle, the marten bolted down the arcade, zipping around confused bystanders.

“Hey!” the fox yelled, scrambling up the stairs to the covered pathway under the arcade. “Get back here with that!”

It was hard staying focused when every movement the marten made caused her chubbier figure to jiggle and bounce. Her belly felt like a thick weight swinging in front of and beneath her as she ran, and her clothes were practically falling off. She grabbed her belt in her paws and held on for dear life to keep her over-burdened shorts from sliding down.

The fox wasn't particularly quick – an artisan for sure, so not as fit as she was – but the marten was struggling to stay at speed with her bigger body. She needed a distraction. Skidding on her heels to slow down, she pivoted and took off into an alleyway between two buildings. There was a kink in the alleyway where the buildings met, and the marten squeezed herself around the corner. Reaching into her jacket, she grabbed the metal rod and clicked it. The caps shot outwards, extending the rod into a six-foot quarterstaff.

She pressed her back against the wall and waited until she heard the pounding of paws down the alleyway. Then she thrust the lower half of her staff outwards, tangling the vixen's ankles as she ran past. The fox shouted and stumbled. She had the presence of mind to wrap her body around the satchel at her side, but nonetheless, she crashed down hard onto the paving stones.

“Sorry,” the marten told her, mumbling around the bottle in her muzzle. She spit it into one paw. “I hope that didn't hurt. And thank you!” She swirled the bottle teasingly. “This is going to be fun.”

She didn't wait for a reply. Tucking her staff under one armpit, she ran again, and the fox grumbled as she rolled onto her feet and got up to continue the chase. But the marten was already around the next corner before the vixen could catch up.

With her white hair loosed from her ponytail and fluttering around her, the vixen charged around the corner and stopped short as she reached a dead end between the buildings. There was nothing to hide behind in the narrow space, and the wall came to a solid, brick terminus just a few feet ahead. The marten peeked down from the roof shingles above, watching as the vixen exhaled sharply

and thumped her fist against the far wall. She took a moment to compose herself and fix her hair before turning and storming back out of the alleyway.

The marten sat upright on the roof shingles and smiled. She exhaled slowly, feeling her pulse return to normal. Collapsing her staff and returning it to its pocket, she stretched out on her back and rubbed her new belly while she got her breath back.

Today was getting interesting.

The hole in the side of the Kolean temple seemed to have gotten a lot smaller since this morning. With her claws scratching at the dirt in the lichyard, the marten slowly squeezed herself through the opening, feeling her bare belly dragging underneath her. Her hips squeezed into the old stones and her wiggled her way left and right, feeling herself slowly slide through the tunnel. Good thing she only had a sip from the potion!

The marten popped free and climbed to her feet inside the desecrated temple. She nudged the broken pew back into place and then scampered her way back towards the bell. Holding the potion bottle in her muzzle once more, she climbed to the top of the six-foot-tall bell and then grasped the rope. Usually climbing up the rope was only a mild challenge for her, but today it was a bit of a feat. The chubby marten stopped halfway up, hugging the rope, to catch her breath before hauling her heavier body the rest of the way. She scrambled onto the wooden scaffolding at the top of the bell tower and tossed herself down on her bed of blankets, exhausted.

Even though the sun was only beginning to set, it was getting dark inside the bell tower. The only window was the stained glass one facing to the east, and through the half-broken depiction of Koleo, the stars were twinkling over the harbor. She wanted to enjoy her treat before the light went out completely.

The marten set the potion gingerly into her coffer, pushing her lute aside, and started to disrobe. She tossed her clothes into a pile next to her blankets, shedding her outer gear before taking off her inner garments. Drumming her paws on her belly, making the fat ripple across her middle, she reached out and grasped the potion bottle again. The cork popped loose easily, and bracing herself for the taste and sludgy viscosity, the marten tipped the potion to her lips and drank down as much as she could get out of it.

It was only seconds before her body began to react to the brew. Fur and fat began to push against her paw as she ballooned outwards. Her silhouette rippled as blubber piled onto her figure, swelling out hips and midsection wider and wider. The marten's jaw dropped, squishing her burgeoning double chin against her plump neck, and she lifted up her growing belly with both paws.

She'd never been big before. She'd never been anything different than what she was every day. So this was... exhilarating! Her tail wriggled furiously behind her, betraying her excitement. Stretching out on her back in her pile of blankets, the marten jiggled her heavy frame and chirped quietly at the feeling of her weight bouncing all over her. She enjoyed every ounce of heavy, soft fat as she grew to a well-fed, obese size, squeezing her fingertips around the rolls that formed on her side.

Eventually night fell fully over the city, and as the crimson-red fires in the towers of the Veiled Citadel illuminated the skyline, the marten in the old temple's bell tower snoozed soundly, gently rubbing her heavy tummy.

“So explain to me why you even *had* that with you in the first place.”

Cerine grimaced and crossed her arms underneath her chest, inhaling deeply. The pink fox squinted before answering. “I forgot it was in there. It's not like I was planning on taking a day trip out to the market, grabbing some reagents, picking up a few fish for dinner, and getting fat for the walk home!” She exhaled sharply and toyed with the buttons on her coat. “Thank you for coming out with me today, though.”

The huge drake beside her shrugged. Brown scales rippled on her muscular shoulders. The

vixen had come back out to the market for a second day in a row, since the incident the day before had distracted her from the business she was there to do. But Cerine had a mild ulterior motive, secretly hoping that she'd run into the marten thief again – and this time she had Zaress to help. The green-eyed drake stood head and shoulders above most of the crowd, and she lazily watched out for any chubby, brown-furred martens.

“So I got the leviathan root and hellscap spores,” Cerine mused, mentally checking off her list as they walked down the main avenue. “That was when I checked my bag and noticed the potion was gone. Alright, after that I was going to pick up some filter cloth. I ran out of that the other day. They have that in the weaver's shop down here.”

Zaress tapped the fox on the back with her knuckles. “Looks like your incident yesterday got some attention.” She pointed back up the market street and Cerine followed her gaze. A couple armed guards, wearing coats of scale armor and carrying halberds, were patrolling along the market avenue. A captain in a cloak was canvassing the customers and shopkeepers for information. At least it was just guards and not arbitrators.

“Damn,” the vixen cursed. She looked the other way down the market street, but didn't see any more of them. “Alright, we'll grab what I need quick and then get back to the guild house.”

They made their way down the cobblestone street, ignoring hawkers wanting them to come and look at the items they had laid out. The fox squeezed her left paw tight and rubbed her thumb around the silver band on her index finger. If guards were lurking, that probably meant that the thief was nowhere to be found.

But she was wrong. Just ahead of them, a brown-furred marten strode alongside a horse-drawn wagon. She nicked a round loaf of bread from the back of the wagon and then immediately turned to walk in another direction, smiling as she tore off chunks and gobbled them up. Cerine stopped dead in the middle of the street, staring in shock. It was her – but at the same time, it *wasn't*.

Zaress, not noticing that the fox had stopped, bowled directly into Cerine's back. Her breasts thumped the back of the fox's head and she almost knocked the vixen over, but a darting claw snatched the strap of her satchel and easily tugged her back upright.

Cerine flailed backwards with her paws to get the earth drake's attention. “Zaress! It's her! Right there!”

The drake squinted and tilted her head to the side as she spotted the marten wearing the old green jacket, just like Cerine had described. But she shook her head. “No, that one is skinny.”

“I know!” She pointed at the marten all the same. “Same outfit, same hair, two different colored eyes. She was about thirty or forty pounds heavier after she nabbed my potion, but that's her.”

Zaress shook her head. “Well, unless she found a way to slim back down overnight, that's not her. Come on. We need to get your things and get going.”

“I am swearing to you that that is her,” Cerine hissed, glancing furtively at the crowd around her. “And I want to have a word with her. Not just for stealing my potion, but I am *really* curious how she un-did the effect...”

The drake's face tightened and she shook her head. “Alright, fine. How do you want to play it?”

“You loop around, she doesn't know you. I'll confront her. If she runs, be ready, but I came prepared today.”

Zaress nodded and stepped away into the crowd. It was a while before Cerine couldn't see the huge drake anymore. Inhaling deeply and adjusting the strap on her satchel, she started to walk purposefully towards the marten. She left her satchel unclasped for easy reach, in case she needed to grasp something in it quickly. The thief didn't see her approach, busy snacking on her meal, until the vixen was practically on top of her already. Cerine was tall, and she loomed over the smaller marten. The brown-furred thief halted in her tracks, eyebrows shooting upwards as she realized what was happening. She offered a big, friendly smile, but her mismatched eyes also cut left and right, scanning for escape routes. The crowd, pressing in around them in the market, ignored them both entirely.

“It did hurt, just so you know,” Cerine told her, crossing her arms.

The marten shrugged, still smiling. “I did apologize.”

“You've got something of mine,” the vixen continued. She held out her left paw, the silver ring on it shining in the morning light. The marten's eyes zipped to the jewelry immediately, but then she took one paw off her loaf of bread and started to reach behind her back. Cerine's black ears perked up and she shook her head. “Don't. There's guards combing the market.”

Recognizing the sound advice, the marten spared a glance into the crowd before nodding in agreement. “Well, I don't have your potion. I drank it.”

“You did not,” Cerine replied, pointing at her bare – and very athletic – belly. “You'd be well over five hundred pounds right now if you did.”

“Fancy that,” the marten told her, her grin turning wide and mischievous. She started to backpedal into the crowd. “I'm not. So hey, it was nice seeing a cute face two days in a row, but we're gonna stop meeting like this. See ya, Whitehair!”

“I'm not through with you-” Cerine started to say, but the marten slung the bread at her and bolted. She reflexively covered her face and then shouted. “Zaress! Where are- dammit!”

The pink fox rushed through the crowd after the marten, chasing her down in the market for the second day in a row. She bounced off people carrying large sacks of grain or buckets of water suspended across their shoulders while the marten easily zigged and zagged and even effortlessly slid underneath larger folks' legs. Cerine had a hard enough time keeping on her tail when the marten was overweight, now the little thief was a hopping, bouncy blur. The only thing keeping her from outright gaining on the vixen was the thickness of the crowd.

Rushing up to the arcade, the marten swung around one of the columns and jumped over the top of a large chest a couple porters were carrying. They stumbled, and the chest fell to the ground, spilling a shower of gold coins onto the steps under the arcade. Shouts of alarm and delight were raised as folk piled in greedily on the fallen coins, and Cerine had to swing wide around them to give chase. She barely kept the marten in view as she bounded up the steps and rushed down the arcade in pursuit.

There was bellowing somewhere behind her as the guards came to investigate all the commotion. Glancing over her shoulder, Cerine spotted the horns of the guard captain, a massive unguled, as he demanded to know what was going on. The minotaur was shoving people aside and ordering everyone to disperse.

She and the marten were nearing the end of the market row, but the onlookers were pressing in and gawking at the commotion behind them. The end of the street was marked by an intersection with one of the city waterways, and an arched stone bridge crossed over it. Beyond lay the mostly-unused warehouses along the oceanfront. The marten reached the footbridge first, scampering up to the height of the arch and turning to check on Cerine. She had a good lead, and there were scant people still ahead of her now, so from here out it was open running. The vixen wasn't going to catch her. Putting on a smarmy grin, the marten blew her a kiss as a tease.

Cerine reached into one of the pockets in her satchel and grasped a small, almost egg-shaped object. She hurled it towards the marten and it shattered at the thief's feet, splashing a gooey liquid all over the stones nearby. Less than a second later, the glue rapidly started to turn to foam, expanding outwards in a flash and growing as tall as the thief herself. The marten just barely managed to dodge the inflating sphere of sticky foam by swiftly rolling backwards.

“You missed!” she taunted, waving good-bye to the fox and jumping back onto her feet. She spun on her heel and slammed face-first into a solid wall of muscle. The marten staggered backwards, looking up at a brown and tan figure bristling with scales and white desert attire. Before the marten could react, the drake seized her by the jacket, lifted her off the bridge stones, and squished her into the bulk of the ball of sticky foam. The thief wriggled and bucked, but she was stuck fast, fur and all, into the glue. “Wha- hey!”

Cerine climbed up to the top of the bridge, panting heavily for breath. She rest one paw on the

railing along the side of the bridge. "Much... better. Now we... can talk."

"Let me go!" the marten growled, still trying to wriggle out of her clothes to try and free herself, but her thighs and lower back were glued, all the same. "I told you, I drank your potion."

"It's not about that," the vixen told her. "You can undo my potions, and I think you owe me an explanation at the very least in repayment."

Zaress's muscular tail whip-cracked behind her. She nudged the vixen's shoulder and nodded towards the market street. "Ceri. Company's coming."

"Arbitrators?"

"Guards."

"Bad enough. We need to go."

The marten struggled to look around and squeaked. "H-hey! Don't leave me here!"

Cerine looked around, deciding on a plan. The guards, led by the minotaur captain, were pushing their way through the crowd. They must have been told that she and the marten were the cause of the commotion. Feeling her heart race, she glanced towards the warehouses, but then turned and peered over the side of the bridge. The waterway was full, but slow-moving. Just a few yards past the bridge, the waterway disappeared underneath the city block.

The vixen pointed at the huge blob of now-hardening sticky foam. "Zaress. Follow me." She then wrapped her satchel up tight and threw herself over the side of the bridge, splashing into the water below.

"Where's she going?!" the marten squealed. She watched helplessly as Zaress wrapped her arms around the ball of glue and broke it from the ground, easily hefting it and stuck marten both onto her shoulder. "Hang on! Wait! I can't swim like this!"

Zaress ignored her, planting one foot on the stone rail and leaping over the side. The guards shouted for her to halt, but she plunged into the waterway below. The water rushed over both her and the marten, and the sticky foam started to rapidly dissolve, flooding the water with opaque, murky goo.

Cerine's head broke the surface, her long hair plastered onto her soaked coat. Despite the weight of her clothes, she swam into the tunnel mouth of the waterway and into the dark. There were narrow walkways for maintenance in the waterway, and the soaking wet vixen slapped her arms onto one of them, hauling herself up out of the water. Liquid streamed out of her fur, hair, and clothes and spilled over the walkway around her.

Turning, she looked around for Zaress, but could only see an expanding blotch of gray in the churning water. Her breathing quickened, but just as she began to get worried, the drake's head and shoulders exploded out of the water beside her, with the marten tucked between one arm and her chest. The thief sputtered and hacked out a mouthful of water while the earth drake climbed onto the walkway beside the vixen. Her brown hair was dripping wet and clinging to the side of her face.

Cerine fished into her satchel, finding it half-full of water, but she grasped a short wooden dowel with a round, thumb-sized stone fixed on the end of it. As she struck the head of the rod against the wall beside her, like a tindertwig, an alchemical coating on the stone began to shine as bright as a torch. The light radiated into the dark passageway, sending rats and other small critters scurrying away from the glow or into the water. The vixen held the rod out in front of the group and led the way deeper into the waterways beneath the city. There was bound to be an open area up ahead somewhere.

"Can you put me down now," the marten asked, hanging limp by her midsection in the drake's grasp.

"Nope," Zaress answered, flexing her shoulders.

Cerine glanced back. "You know, by drake clan standards, Zaress is being extremely generous. The earth clan has a very dim view on thievery."

"And we saved you from the guards," Zaress reminded her.

The marten huffed. "It doesn't count if I was only in trouble with the guards in the first place because of *you*."



“Somehow I really doubt that,” Cerine mused, shaking her head.

They walked through twisting corridors in the waterway, with the sound of burbling water beside them ever-present in their ears. Cerine made her best guesses about which path to take, but eventually it paid off – they found a side passage away from the dank main artery that opened up into a larger, round room. There was a locked iron gate blocking their path.

“I can pick it,” the marten offered. Zaress ignored her, grasping the chained lock and, with a flex of her thick bicep, snapped the metal links with a noisy wrench of metal. “Or... you could do that, I guess.”

They filed into the bigger room. There was another exit on the far end, but this was good enough for now. It was dry, and they could sit to take a breather and dry their clothes. They could let the heat above die down, too. Zaress set the marten down while Cerine poured the water out of her satchel back in the hallway.

“Don't go anywhere,” the drake told her, still holding the broken chain links in one hand. The marten eyed the swinging chain warily and nodded in agreement.

Cerine came back to the center of the room and set the glowing stick down. Reaching into her satchel, she produced a leather bag and opened it, emptying a chalky powder onto the floor. She reached into the satchel again and sighed.

“My tindertwigs are all wet,” she groaned.

“You're going to start a fire in here?” the marten asked, squinting. “The smoke...”

Cerine waved a paw. “It'll be fine. Zaress?”

Nodding, the drake knelt down beside the pile of powder. She inhaled and then blew a narrow stream of fire onto the dust. It immediately ignited, crackling merrily and filling the chamber with warmth and unsteady orange light.

“Smith's powder,” the vixen explained. She waved her paw over the top of the fire. “Burns clean, even when wet, and doesn't give off smoke. Great when you need some heat indoors. Or in a sewer.” Cerine stood up and pulled the strap of her satchel off her shoulder. As she began to unbutton her coat, she looked to the marten, who was still standing at the edge of the light. “Come on. We need to get dry. Take your boots off, at least, or you're going to get pawrot.”

The marten eyed the both of them for a moment, and glanced down the dark passageway behind her, leading further into the sewers. Relaxing her shoulders, she came over and sat down beside the small fire. She shed her wet jacket, dropping it beside her with a soft clunk as her collapsed staff fell to the stone floor. Then she pulled off her boots while Cerine removed her coat, exposing a white, laced tunic that clung to her fur underneath. Only Zaress remained completely clothed, being only lightly dressed in the first place with her belted half-tunic and waist wrap.

Cerine sat cross-legged near the fire to warm her fur and clothes, and she looked across it at the marten. Inhaling deeply, she nodded. “So. I was frustrated before, back up in the market. I apologize for-” she gestured towards their surroundings “-all this. I'd like to... well, can we start over? No more rancor?”

The marten watched them both for a moment, her eyes shifting back and forth between the vixen and the disinterested drake. Slowly, she nodded.

“My name is Cerine,” she said. She held a paw out towards Zaress, who snorted softly. “That's Zaress. What's your name?”

“It's Mito,” the marten answered.

Mito wasn't sure what to make of the fox and her pet drake anymore. At first, she thought that the pink vixen was just going to string her up and hand her to the guards, but... things were getting a lot more complicated than that. She realized something was amiss when Cerine warned her not to take out her staff in the market. It was illegal to bear weapons – even a quarterstaff – since the Veiled Way had taken control of the city. And they'd taken her with them instead of leaving her to be captured. Now

they were sharing a fire while they hid from the guards. She wasn't about to trust them yet, though.

The fire crackled between them, slowly consuming the small pile of powder. As Mito glanced across at Cerine, admiring how the wet tunic clung to her figure, she could make out the outline of a black brassiere against her white fur. She turned her gaze away to keep from staring.

"You're no friends of the guards," she said, crossing her arms across the top of her knees. "What are you? Smugglers?"

"Something like that," Cerine replied. She glanced towards Zaress, as if she was confirming something with her, and the drake shrugged. The vixen reached into her satchel and took out a round piece of glass with a gold band encircling the rim. Mito had seen one of those before – it was a sage's glass. As Cerine held it out, flat side facing the marten, the image of a yellow-bulbed flower floated inside the glossy surface. Mito stared at it blankly, not understanding the significance. Cerine raised an eyebrow and nodded as she put the sage's glass away. "Hm. Okay. Yeah, we're not on good terms with the guards or the Veiled Way. So don't worry, we're not going to give you to them or anything."

"That's good," the marten replied, smoothing one paw along her tail to wring out the excess water. "So are you an alchemist or something?"

"I am." Cerine nodded. "And Zaress is, um, my bodyguard, I guess. Speaking of, I want you to look at this." She reached into her satchel and took out a small vial, much smaller than the one that had made the marten fat. Barely an ounce of a shiny, silver liquid rolled around at the bottom of it. "This is something I call fission. It's a different kind of potion; I use tonic suspension in many of my potions and this... nevermind. Point is, this potion reverses the effect of my other potions, like the one you drank. And this is the *only* way I know how to do that. So I'm really curious how you were able to do it without this."

Mito stared at the vixen for a bit. She ran her tongue over her teeth and tensed. Tell them about *that*? She wasn't sure. Her eyes darted to her jacket laying nearby. She could grab that and run, hiding out in the dark somewhere until they gave up looking for her. The marten could hide out down here for a very long time if she needed to. She turned and looked down the passageway behind her and then her heart sank.

Zaress noticed it, too. Her big, folded ears went upright. "Ceri!" the drake hissed. There were flickers of light far down the hallway, coming from lanterns. The guards were scouring the waterways for them.

Cerine jumped up to her feet. "Dammit!" she swore. With one swift kick, she scattered what was left of the burning powder, putting out the light and spreading smoldering embers across the floor. She threw her coat over the top of the glowing rod and the chamber was all but completely dark once more.

Mito groped around in the dark for her jacket and pulled her staff out of its hidden pocket, holding it close to her chest. Cerine's paw wrapped around her arm and she pulled her close. Mito caught the scent of strawberry underneath the more overpowering tones of waterway stink in the vixen's fur.

"What do we do?" she asked, watching the distant lights move about down the passageway. They didn't seem to have noticed the firelight before it was snuffed out. In the dark, she felt eyes on her and looked back. Looming above her and Cerine both were two red coals, barely visible against the gloom. It was Zaress's eyes.

"We wait here," Cerine explained. "Zaress can see. She'll handle it."

Mito listened to the drake's heavy footsteps as she strode out of the chamber and headed down the passageway. Then it got deathly quiet, with only the sounds of her own pulse and Cerine's rapid breathing filling her ears. Cerine's claws dug into her arm as they pressed their backs against the wall of the chamber, watching and waiting. Then they heard it: a clatter of metal and a meaty splash. Someone shouted in alarm before being cut off. The lights flickered and shook down the passageway.

A cadre of guards were no match for an angry drake. Or at least Mito guessed.

After a minute of chaotic noise, it got quiet again. The lights went out. Cerine and Mito waited in the dark, making their breathing as shallow as possible until they heard a sign of Zaress returning. Heavy footsteps thumped down the passageway, but they sounded wrong. A figure stepped into the chamber with them, breathing deeply. Mito fought down every instinct she had to just yank her way out of Cerine's grasp and run. But where would she go?

There was a squeak of metal as a box lantern was unshrouded in the stranger's grasp. The dim light filled the chamber, underlighting the guard captain's features. The minotaur's horns glimmered darkly and he snorted as he saw the vixen and marten huddled against the wall.

"Found you," he grumbled. "Evading arrest. Assaulting officers of the peace." He glanced at the staff clutched in Mito's paws. "Unlawful possession of a weapon. My, busy little reprobates, aren't you. And you came down here, into the sewers, with no witnesses. Give me the thief, canin, and I'll consider taking you to the arbitrators alive. Though what they'll do with you, who knows."

In defiance of his "promise," the minotaur reached down to his belt, hooking the lantern to it and grasping the handle of a wicked-looking warhammer. The lantern light shined around the broad iron hammer head and the sharp spike protruding behind it. Mito clicked her staff and extended it, but Cerine put her paw on her chest, holding her to the wall as she stepped forward.

"Stay behind me," she whispered. Mito looked up at her, her jaw hanging agape. The vixen took two steps out and raised her left paw. With a flick of her wrist, the silver ring flared with light and a long, thin sword materialized in the fox's grasp. She held it out, steadily training the point towards the minotaur. Light from the lantern flickered along the sword's edge and reflected in her stony blue eyes.

Mito couldn't believe it. The vixen – someone she barely knew – was interposing herself between a murderous captain of the guard and her. Despite his words, she knew what the minotaur had in mind. Her heart pounded in her chest and her knuckles went white as she clutched the staff.

The minotaur swung first, a weighty blow from his hammer. Cerine ducked sideways and stabbed with her sword, but it bounced from the ungu's armor. She barely parried the backswing, and Mito's ears flattened against the crash of metal. The vixen's arm shivered from the glancing impact and she staggered backwards. Mito could tell that, despite the fox's bravado, she was no warrior. The minotaur had her on the defensive immediately, whirling his hammer in wide arcs with the intent to smash the sword from her grasp. Metal clanged and sparks flared in mid-air as pieces of the sword were chipped away.

Cerine spotted an opening and made for a wild slash, but the minotaur caught the sword on his bracer and pushed it up high. He pivoted and kicked out a hooved foot, blasting the wind out of Cerine's belly and knocking her to her knees. She gasped for air, dropping her sword. The wicked warhammer glinted in the light as the minotaur cocked back to swing. Muscles rippled and he arced the weapon in for a killing blow.

She didn't know why, really, she did it. She just had to. Mito slammed into Cerine's shoulder, pushing her aside just in time. The hammer struck her in the temple instead. Her head snapped around and pain exploded in her brain. Everything went dark before she even hit the floor.

"Mito!" Cerine screamed, rolling back onto her knees and grasping the marten's prone form. Mito lay unmoving on the floor. Tears welled in the fox's eyes and she looked up towards the minotaur.

"Shame," he chuffed, spinning his warhammer and raising it up. "Well, one to go..."

As the minotaur tensed to swing once again, he stopped short. Tan fingers grasped the hammer by the shaft, locking it in place. The minotaur whirled around in shock, coming nose-to-nose with an extremely angry earth drake. There was wrath in her eyes. He tried to get away but Zaress grasped his horn in her other hand. Turning, she wrenched him up and over her shoulder, flipping him completely over her body in a single, fluid arc. The minotaur flew up... and then down. His body crashed against the stone floor with enough force that pieces dislodged from the ceiling and dust rained down throughout the chamber. He did not move anymore.

Cerine pulled Mito onto her lap and gingerly inspected her head. She was on the edge of panic. Leaning down, she placed her ear beside the marten's nose and listened. "She's breathing. Barely."

Zaress knelt down beside the vixen. There was a cut on her arm and across her snout, but she would be alright. "We need to leave, Ceri. More will come looking for them any minute."

"I can't leave her here." She started to lift the marten. "Help me. We have to get her to the guild house. Gray can--"

"Gray can't help, Ceri."

The vixen felt a sudden, intense flash of anger, but she bit it down. "Just help. Please."

Zaress stared into the fox's eyes. Cerine glared back, unblinking, until the drake exhaled. Wrapping her tan arms underneath the marten's body, she lifted her up gingerly, cradling her head against her bicep and breast.

After collecting all of their effects, the vixen and drake climbed out of the waterways and rushed across the city, keeping out of sight as best they could, until they reached the door of the old alchemy guild house in the trader's quarter. The place used to be lively, but with the rise of the Veiled Way taking over businesses and running others out, before they overtook the government, the area was a ghost town now.

Cerine banged her fist against the door until the window slit opened and a pair of eyes peeked out. She held up her sage's glass with the image of the flower in it and the door swung open. Gray stood in the doorway. The well-muscled coyote-tiger's brow furrowed as he looked into Cerine's desperate face and then the lifeless marten cradled in Zaress's arms.

"Get in," he said simply. Cerine slipped in and then Zaress hunched forward to get underneath the doorway. Gray shut the door and bolted it back, turning to look at Cerine. "West hall dormitories, set her on one of the beds."

"Thank you," Cerine told him, squeezing his paw. The striped hybrid nodded. They did as he said, taking Mito to one of the disused dormitory rooms. Apprentices used to stay in these rooms as they trained, but those days were over. Zaress laid the marten down on the mattress and then stepped away, letting Gray come in and kneel down beside her. Cerine hovered nearby, chewing on her knuckles.

The coyote-tiger was a – former – acolyte of Koleo, at least before the Veiled Way came. He gingerly inspected the marten's head, particularly at her temple, and checked her vitals. "Severe blunt trauma. Comatose. It's not good."

"Can you do anything?" Cerine asked.

"Not here I can't," Gray answered, shaking his head. "I cast one spell, we'll have the entire Citadel on us in minutes. You know that." He squinted, touching Mito's face and looking at her. "I know her."

Zaress inclined her head. "You do?"

"Yes. I remember, from before the Veil. She would come around the temple when we had kitchen days. Sometimes she'd ask for food, but if there wasn't a lot to go around, she'd give it to someone else and go hungry." He sighed and stood up, turning to face Cerine. "We can't do anything for her, Cerine. She could go anytime. Best I can do is make her comfortable."

Cerine shook her head vigorously, her white hair flying about her shoulders. "No. We can take her outside the city, outside their magic detection. Then you could heal her."

"We can't just *go* out of the city, Ceri," Zaress told her, putting her hands on her arms. Cerine shook the drake off.

"Tomorrow, then!" the fox shouted. "We'll make plans. Figure out a route." She wiped her eyes and looked at the marten. "She saved me, Zare. I have to do *something*."

Gray and Zaress shared a sympathetic look and the coyote-tiger shrugged his shoulders heavily. *Humor her*, the look said. "Okay," Zaress said. "We'll see what we can do in the morning."

Cerine knelt down beside the bed. She tucked a pillow underneath Mito's head and held her paw

firmly. Her pulse was weak underneath the vixen's fingers. Zaress and Gray left the vixen to watch over the marten, pulling the door shut behind them.

"Is that the one she was talking about from yesterday?" Gray asked, walking down the hallway with the drake. "The pickpocket? What is she?"

"A stray," Zaress replied, shaking her head and running her fingers through her hair. "You know how Cerine gets sometimes. So what do you think? Really?"

Gray inhaled slowly and ran his tongue over his teeth. "Day or two. Maybe. She got hit good. Either way, she's not going to wake up. *Maybe* we can get her out of the city, but even that would be a risk." He reached out and touched Zaress's arm tenderly, inspecting the cut. "Come here. I can take care of you, at least."

Sea birds honked in the harbor outside the window. The sun was already rising up into the sky in late morning. Cerine's eye opened slowly. She'd stayed up as long as she could last the previous night, until she finally passed out on her knees, with her face resting on the blanket in front of her. Sitting back on her butt, the vixen massaged her paws into her face firmly to force herself awake and then she checked on Mito.

There were no martens in the bed. Cerine was up on her feet instantly, adrenaline burning away any lingering grogginess. Spinning in circles, she checked the whole room, but Mito was nowhere to be found. She threw the door open and ran down the hall in her wrinkled clothes to their rooms. She, Zaress, Gray, and the others all stayed in the old guild's suites. Grabbing the doorknob for Zaress's bedroom, she slung the door open and looked in. The drake, naked save for the bandages on her arm and snout, sat up irritably in her bed, eyes half-lidded. Gray leaned out from behind her, equally bemused.

"She's gone," Cerine said, ignoring how they were in the same bed.

Zaress slumped her muscular shoulders. "Ceri, I'm sor-"

"She's *gone*. Where the Hell is she?"

"Wait... *what*?"

Cerine turned and ran back down the hallway, staring into the empty dormitory room in disbelief. She held the sides of her head, trying to figure out what on earth had happened. Unless Zaress and Gray were pulling a cruel trick on her – which they wouldn't – no one else would have come into the room.

Over the sound of seagulls outside, Cerine swore she could hear... music? Someone was plucking at a lute. Her ears perked and she looked around, trying to track where the sound was coming from. It was outside and maybe... up high? Cerine furrowed her brow and headed to another part of the guild house, climbing up the ladder to the roof. She pushed open the trap door and looked out, finding the source of the music.

Mito was sitting on the edge of the roof, fully dressed in her jacket and a faded bandanna. She worked a lute with her paws with a practiced ease, playing a delightful tune to complement the morning. Beside her sat her telescoping staff and a wooden coffer. Even though she was struck by disbelief, Cerine walked unsteadily behind her.

"Mito?" the vixen asked. The marten kept playing, but she craned her neck back, looking up at the stunned fox and smiling. "How..."

The marten pat the edge of the roof beside her. Cerine slowly sat down, her legs dangling over the side next to Mito's as they both looked out over the sea. With trembling paws, she reached out and gingerly touched the marten's temple, feeling where she'd been smote with the guard's warhammer. Underneath the fur, the skin was smooth and perfect. There wasn't even a bruise.

"You said you wanted to know how I slimmed back down after drinking your potion," the marten explained. "And it's the same reason I'm sitting right here now."

"I don't understand," Cerine said, shaking her head.

Mito pointed at the sun. "Every morning, right when the sun comes back up, I turn back to normal. Just like I am right now. I don't have a single clue as to why. All I know is when I was really young, I stole an apple from a food cart and a guard chased me. I went up onto the rooftops, but he was good, he followed me. I tried to jump to the next building but... I missed. Hit hard and broke my leg. Spare you the details. But I crawled myself into a hiding spot and just waited it out. The guard never found me, and I cried myself to sleep from the pain. Morning came, and I woke up to find that I wasn't hurt at all. That was the first time I ever really noticed it. Ever since then, it's been the same. Bumps, scrapes, bruises, cuts, you name it. I've gone weeks without food or water. I go hungry, but I can't starve. I wake up all the same, every day. Nothing changes.

"So when I got that potion of yours and it made me big, that was... amazing." Mito offered her a huge grin and her blue and green eyes sparkled while the ocean breeze ruffled her dark hair. "I've never put on so much as a pound in my *life*. I literally can't. I'm not a good judge, but I guess I really did get about as big as you said I was." Raising an eyebrow, she gave Cerine a playful look. "That potion... was for you, wasn't it? Why else would you have that fission thing in your bag?"

Cerine's face flushed bright red and her ears fanned out to the sides. "I... uh... that's not the *only* thing I make, okay! But... yeah. I just forgot it was in the bag."

"You got any more?"

"I can make some. Is that why you came back?" The vixen hooked her thumb at the coffer behind them. "And... brought your stuff?"

Mito shrugged mischievously, playing a chord on her lute. "Well, that and something else. You guys fought the guards, and you said you weren't friends to the Veiled Way, right?"

Cerine was a little hesitant, but finally she nodded and answered. "That's right. Me, Zaress, Gray, there's some more of us, too. The daffodil I showed you, in my sage's glass, that's our symbol. We do what we can to help people the Veil is hurting."

The vixen was taken aback when the marten leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I want to help you," Mito told her. "Because you're good folk. You took care of me. And I want to say I'm sorry."

"And you want to get more potions?"

Mito's fangs flashed out as she smiled. "Yeah, uh... is it just fat potions, or...?"

Cerine grinned, tucking in one of her legs and hugging it to her chest.

"I've got plenty to show you."

\* \* \* \* \*

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