

When he heard that Marian was to be married to Prince John, Robin Hood naturally assumed that it was time to play the hero again and rescue her from his clutches. It was far simpler to get into the castle when the guards were run ragged by the lion for what he undoubtedly believed to be his oncoming perfect day. Barely able to keep their eyes open, they were unable to see the fox as he swiftly bounded up onto the staircase leading to Maid Marian's room and...

That was where it all went wrong. Robin knew his vixen love to be a modest girl. The Marian sitting in front of the mirror was wearing a corset hugged so tight to her body that it pressed her breasts together and made them appear to be larger than they were. Robin did not have a problem with that aside from finding it odd. Marian had never attempted to call attention to her bosom (unlike some of her servants...), but she was perfectly allowed to dress in that fashion. After all, she was in love with an outlaw. When you threw one convention of royal society out the window, bodily modesty could follow. He did not give a farthing that she was attempting to make herself look larger in the chest.

The fine dress spread out across the bed, and the jeweled locket she was rubbing her paws over, though... Marian never wanted for the ostentatious. Nor did she ever have large stacks of gold coins on her dresser. It disturbed Robin greatly... when he whispered to her, she turned and screamed for the guards. She denied their relationship to his face and said that she never wanted to see him again. He asked for a reason, waited long enough that he was unable to get away from the prince's guards in time, so awe-struck by this sudden change of heart. What had she said to him?

Why... "I can't live on a thief's salary when I could live on Prince John's vault instead!"

That was that. The whole mission had been a fool's quest. The fox had gone to save a lover that had already spurned him in her heart for gold, and he paid the price for it. Somewhere along the way down he had lost his hat, and they had not been kind enough to give it back to him, of course. It was probably sitting in the castle's refuse heap right now, perched on top by the Sheriff as a vulgar joke at his expense. There were likely to be many more of those as his stay in the keep's dungeons...

Prince John was doing his best to give him the royal treatment, of course. He moved all the prisoners in this wing to cells on the other side of the castle as soon as he heard he had captured Robin. So thoughtful of him. Robin would be able to sleep well without anyone else to talk to other than the Sheriff. Ol' Bushelbitches was currently sitting with his chair propped against the door out of the prison and snoring loudly.

It did not matter if the wolf was the only other person in the dungeon, though. Robin knew that his Merry Men would be planning to spring him out of jail as soon as Prince John put out the royal proclamation that he was to be hanged. Gloating fool would not be able to keep his mouth shut over a victory this sweet... Yes, even if he was only supposed to be in jail for a few days, Robin figured he would make things easy on the lion and bust out early. Let all those guards he paid enjoy the feast after the wedding and head over to Sherwood Forest to...

No more thinking about the marriage. Robin Hood screwed his eyes tight and shook his head back and forth against the meager straw-covered cot that served as his bed in the cell. Maid Marian was a lost cause now. From the way she spoke to him, she adored gold as much as her new love. Their childhood together, all that they experienced, it was... No more thinking about that either. It was time to get focused on getting out of here. At any time, Little John would burst through the door and send the Sheriff flying. The bear would hand him a sword and yell for him to hurry as the wolf tried to recover from his slide, legs flailing in the air as he tried to conquer his bulk and pull himself upright. Robin could make the escape much easier for everyone involved if he started to plan ahead with the sudden free time he had. What was on hand? There was a small bowl in the corner that was supposed to serve as... He did not even want to touch that. Prince John had left him with his green tunic, perhaps he could pull some of the thread out of that and do something with it... He was running out of ideas here...

"Wuzzat?" The Sheriff suddenly blurted out as Robin heard the door knock against his chair. The corpulent canine was soon back to his sleep, though, snoring again as Robin heard something scratch against the prison's stone floor. The sound was moving towards him...

"Having a spot of trouble there, Robin Hood?" Sir Hiss, the prince's advisor, poked his reptilian head in between the leftmost bars of Robin's cell and laughed softly to himself, both eyes close tight in uncontrollable mirth. "Perhaps now that you're not tied down in Nottingham, when you escape from here you can move further up the islands. Maybe disappear into Scotland and bother the highlanders there?"

He wanted to play that game, did he? "Did you get kicked down here by Prince John? What did he do to you this time, I wonder... try and tie your tail into a bow? Stretch you out and slap your middle around like the strings on a mandolin? There must be some reason you're not celebrating with him..."

That got the snake frowning. "For your information, he swore he would never injure my tail again. I'm still nursing a bit of soreness there..." He lifted his whole head up as if to look as regal as a royal advisor could before upturning his chin. "I see that you're not willing to talk to me. I'll leave you here to rot, I think..."

"Oh, don't be such a child, Hiss." Robin Hood laughed. "You came down here to gloat over me, you can take a little ribbing in response, right? Though... I have the feeling you're here for more. Step into my room, we'll be able to talk in private."

"We're already talking in private, the Sheriff isn't going to wake up unless you make the effort." All the same, Hiss slithered between the bars, giving a surprised sound as that rounded cap on his head popped off. Turning back, he tried to grab it with his tail and pull it through the bars. When that failed, he placed it upright on the ground and started to crawl up onto Robin's cot, curling up on the bedding. "I want to hear how you plan on escaping. Nothing sssspecific, of course, I'd be foolish to expect you to come quietly to the gallows." He gave the fox another one of those hissed out little laughs.

Robin was struck by how... brash the snake was being. "Do you do this with all your prisoners, or is this just a special occasion since I'm such a skilled hostage?"

"I must admit, I have a bet with some of the guards that you'll escape from here before you hang." Hiss cracked a gapped-tooth smile at him. "I want you to set my heart at ease. I have quite the stack of gold on the line..."

What was better? Lying to him and saying that he was going to fly out of the castle in the next few hours, or honestly telling him that he had no plan? On the one hand, it was more than likely that keeping his mouth shut would foil any defenses Hiss was trying to set up with this idiotic trick of his... On the other, the Merry Men could handle it, right? Besides, he would not give too much away, would he? He needed something to cheer him up, and the look on the snake's face would be priceless...

"I have four words for you." Robin Hood leaned back and rested onto the cot, almost shoving Hiss off the cot with his boots. "Friends in high places."

The snake clung wide-eyed to his leg, starting to slither over and up it before he managed to talk again. "C-careful! You almost knocked me off the bed!"

"You want me to outline my plan for you, and work my mind on something as dreadfully important as keeping it secret from you at the same time, you're going to let me get comfortable while I think..." Robin reached up to pull his hat down, only to remember that it was momentarily gone.

... What was Hiss doing right now? The snake was slowly working his way up Robin's body, currently moving from his stomach up onto his chest. "You should find somewhere else else to perch. My chest isn't any place for the royal court to sully themselves with."

"Oh, I can go bathe after this..." Hiss leaned forwards, and instinctively Robin knew that he was about to try something on him, but the fox could not look away fast enough. Out of the corner of his vision, Robin saw light blue and green rings burst to life in Hiss' eyes... and with that, the fox slowly turned his head back to make eye contact with the snake. At first, Robin did so because he wanted to make sure that Hiss was trying to hypnotize him. Before he did anything stupid like send him flying across the room, he needed to make sure that the snake was taking that serious action against him... but as his eyes filled with the same rings, and his head rested back down into the straw, and his mouth opened slightly, the fox no longer knew why he was staring into Hiss' colorful rings. Only that it was

important to keep staring... his ears perking up as Hiss wrapped gently around his neck, as if bracing himself.

“Your plan is foolish. Just waiting for the Merry Men is liable to bring you to the gallows.”

“What...?” Robin felt a response coming, but he quickly ate it down and brought out another one. “I... who said anything about the Merry Men coming for me? This is a large and well-guarded castle. They won't be able to...”

“You were thinking it, don't deny me that.” Hiss grinned to the fox, his eyes shimmering with those colors. “Look at that worried face. You can't hide anything from me. I have a better idea for you, but you're going to think it's yours. Do you understand?”

Robin did not know what was going on, but... he nodded and listened, eyes widened and filled with those same rings. “Yes...”

“You think it will be easier to work on a back-up plan. You will figure out that you can use the Ssssssheriff. Talk to him. Befriend him. Try to gain his trust.”

Even in his trance, Robin's muzzle curled into an open-mouthed grimace. “Do I have to...? He's an idiot...”

“Idiot, maybe, but he's the key to your freedom...” Hiss nodded. “Do you want to hang? You'll decide on this plan eventually and go through with it, and nothing other than this plan will come to mind. You'll not remember a thing about this conversation we've had. The idea will come naturally in... ohh... maybe a few minutes after you awaken. I'm going to leave now. Good luck, Robin.”

The last few words were tinged with another laugh as the snake slipped himself off the fox and then exited through the bars again. Robin laid in his bed, groaning softly to himself as he stared past the stone ceiling into nothing, his brain suffused with rings... and then, as he came out of the trance, the memories started to flood in.

He had batted Hiss off his stomach and sent the snake to the floor, and then gave him a sharp retort. The snake fumed and complained to him for a few seconds before slithering back out of the cell and leaving him to his thoughts. Which, now that they were pushing themselves into his mind, were giving him a rather interesting plan... He trusted the Merry Men, yes, but this would be a way to help them free him sooner, or even break out himself if it went well!

Robin got off the bed, walked over to the bars, and tapped his knuckles on it, waiting... No, the Sheriff was still snoring. Perhaps he needed to be more forceful... “Sheriff!” He yelled out.

The fox heard the wolf give out a loud yell, and then there was a loud, weighty thud. When the Sheriff walked in front of the bar, he was readjusting his feathered cap and frowning. “Now why'd ya holler for? You woke me out of mah nap...”

“Sorry to bother you...”

“Don't apologize, now, y'all ain't never sorry.” The wolf rubbed at a bruise on his arm as he spoke. “Keep goin', I'm listenin'.”

“... I don't feel safe here.” Robin affected a plaintive tone as he spoke. “Do you know what it's like to be caged like this? At any moment, I fear that someone could come in and...”

“Hurt you? Well, wouldn't that be something...” The Sheriff said. “Not any skin off my backside if someone comes in here and hurts you.”

This was just as difficult as Robin expected it to be. He fought back the remark that the Sheriff had more than enough backside to spare on his behalf and tried to sound... vulnerable, helpless. All his self-trained acting skills were coming into play. “But... if someone were to slip past you and grab the keys from you, they could get right to me! And if I was found slain in my cell, well, Prince John would probably have his whole evening ruined...”

The Sheriff blinked. “Come again now?”

“Well, I wouldn't want to put a damper on his marriage...” Don't mention to who, Robin chided himself. It still hurt too much. “... on his marriage day by having his prized outlaw found sprawled out on the floor in a...”

"Okay, okay, if yer gonna be a baby about it I'll sit here and keep watch!" The Sheriff left Robin's view for a few moments to drag his chair to the wall facing the cell and sit down. The wood creaked loudly as he rested down into it and sighed. "I was havin' a really good dream, too... never gonna get back to that..."

A few minutes passed as Robin thought about what to say to the Sheriff. How did you befriend a man who hated you? Maybe this plan was not a good one after all... then again, when he thought about it, no other way of escaping came to mind. "... Do you usually sleep around this time?"

"Only when I'm on the job." The wolf snorted out. "Not that someone who hasn't worked an honest day in his life would know anything about that..."

"Perhaps you'd be catching me more often if you weren't dreaming of smoked hams."

"Perhaps I wouldn't be catchin' you at all if I wasn't getting' my sleep." The Sheriff sat up a bit straighter in his chair, his stomach settling on his knees. "Why don't ya stop talkin' to me fer a while, I wanna think to myself without you yammerin' at me."

"You don't feel like gloating to me right now?" Robin grinned, but inwards was starting to get nervous that he was about to shut himself off from precious talking time. "This is a rare opportunity for you, Sheriff."

"The gloatin' can come in three days." The Sheriff answered. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to appreciate you silently. Ain't your friar friend ever taught you the value of silent reflection? Meditation or whatever?"

"Well, this is a rare opportunity for me as well." Robin stated, shrugging as he did. "When else am I going to ask my hated enemy why he's so focused on stealing from those who can't afford it when he's already stealing money from his employers for doing such a lousy job at..."

"You know, I really resent that. I really do." The wolf stared at him. "Do you know what it takes to maintain a village like Nottingham? I deserve every cent that I get from my job."

"I don't believe you can think that." Robin laughed. "I really, really don't. Are we even speaking of the same place? They can barely afford food."

"Well, maybe they should work somethin' out with another town. That's not my job." The wolf bemused.

"Why is your job so hard?"

"Well, collectin' taxes is a tough business. Everyone, and I mean everyone, doesn't want to give you the money you're supposed to collect. You gotta make up for the ones that you can't shake any gold out of, and you gotta worry about yourself too. After such a stressful day, don't I deserve to come back home and say that I've made a fair share of coin fer my troubles? Dealing with the peasants here is such stressful work, I'm liable to come down with something on occasion of just followin' my duties."

Robin could barely believe that Prince John had appointed this man Sheriff of anywhere and not his court jester. He could give any buffoon a run for their money with his world-view. "Are you trying to have me pity you when there's little children you're stealing dinners from to live the high life? Hahah, you're really something else."

"... Yeah, I am." The Sheriff burst out laughing and shook his head. "Gotta say, yer makin' me think a lot about my job in ways I don't usually do. It's a shame I don't have more people tryin' to make me out as some cruel tyrant. Does wonders fer my self-esteem."

"You're entitled to your opinions, of course." Robin said. "Even if they are vile. I'm just going to be back to stop you when I get out of here."

"If you get out of here, you mean." The Sheriff wagged a finger at him. "I'm not gonna let you get out of my eye. Let's keep talkin', this is helping me know where you are at all times."

The fox and wolf dueled over the subject for what eventually turned into hours... although duelling was a bit of an overstatement. A soldier could not duel with a child, after all. Robin had the verbal complexity of the former, and his opponent had the cruel simplicity of the latter. It began more of a game between the pair. Robin sought out entertainment from trying to piece apart the Sheriff's

utterly ridiculous views on why it was okay for him to take as much money as he could from Nottingham's inhabitants. Yet, the Sheriff only seemed more bolstered in his faith of these absurd views the more Robin pointed them out to him. When he started to get in a bind, the wolf waved the question away with his hand, shaking his head and saying "You just don't understand, now" or something to similar effect. In this way, the day quickly passed on.

Eventually, dinnertime came for the pair. Robin expected some scraps from the wedding feast, at the very least. Some uneaten portion of beef, or perhaps some cake if John was feeling vindictive enough to torture him with irony. What he received from the boar guard was a bowl of grains steeped in water. Barely a meal at all. What the Sheriff received from two servants was a table spread out with a huge hunk of mutton, wine, a wedge of cheese, and a full loaf of bread. Soon enough, the pair were all alone again.

The fox looked down into the bowl and wrinkled his muzzle. "I wouldn't feed this to someone I hated."

"I would, but I think you could do better than gruel fer right now." Robin heard the Sheriff grunt as he sat up, walking over to the bars with the cheese in his hand and pushing it through the bars. "Starvin' men don't talk as much."

The fox got up from where he was sitting in his cell and walked over. Nothing funny, he was just going to reach for the cheese and take it. Once he did, he returned to his spot and bit into it, swallowing a large mouthful of it. "It's good."

"Best part of the job!" The wolf licked his lips and dug into the mutton, holding it in both paws and focusing on his meal for the time being.

Robin rolled his eyes and went back to his own food. There was a lot here... maybe he could hold onto some of it for later... It was too good not to immediately devour, though, and he did so before he could stop himself. The amount he had been given felt like a full meal... was this what the Sheriff ate like every day? The fox could not help but start thinking of how many days this single wedge would feed a family of five. Maybe it was good that he was talking to the Sheriff. He could use all this against him later.

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"Now, we do not have as much time this morning as I would have hoped." Hiss' eyes, full of beautiful rings, drew Robin's attention the second the serpent woke him up by crawling onto his chest. "The Sheriff is coming in early to watch over you. I'm quite fortunate that I even have this private time with you... lisssssten now, Robin! Yesterday I overheard you talking to the Sheriff. You've built up a strange relationship with him, haven't you?"

The fox did not know how to answer that, so he just decided to give a slow nod and a pant as he kept staring.

"Good, that's what you need to do. You're on the right path." Hiss nodded back to him, which got the fox nodding even faster against his bedding, until both of them were rocking their heads in time. "I think that you could go a step further. It's important that you get out of here. Important enough, I think, that you can compromise to do so. Agree with him... at least, for right now. Let your convictions grow... slack. There's just too much tension between you two at the moment... it's defusing, but you want it to defuse faster, and..."

Sir Hiss raised his head up, pausing for a moment, before returning his gaze back to the thief's own. "When the Sheriff wakes you, you will imagine all of this as a dream. Nothing more, nothing less. Remember what I ssssaid. Loosen your convictions." With that, the snake quickly slithered off Robin's chest. Everything was a blur for the fox, up until he heard the sound of the cell door slamming open and the Sheriff's shoes impacting the stone floor near him.

"Mornin'!" The Wolf leaned over Robin, and suddenly the fox noticed the smell of sizzling meat and fresh eggs in the air. "Don't tell me you're still asleep, now. I wouldn't have expected you to be so

lazy.”

“Early to bed, early to rise... This is actually a little later than I usually get up.” Robin sat up in his bed and stretched out. He was far too late to snag the Sheriff’s keys, however, as the wolf quickly pulled away from him. Blast, there went that plan... “It feels later, anyways. It could still be nighttime, and you could be playing tricks with me. Is... is that your breakfast?” He stared past the Sheriff’s sides and, with some difficulty, was able to see a table.

“Hee hee hee, yup!” The wolf licked his chops and rubbed his stomach. “Yours too, actually. Figured we could have some more of those talks over breakfast. Y’all wanna out and sit down for a while? It won’t do us no good to be hangin’ a skeleton.” From the spread the guards had laid out, it looked like Robin was quite safe from that. Salted beef, scrambled eggs coated with cheese, sausages, bacon, and bread were all laid out for the two of them. “C’mon now. Food’s gonna get cold...”

The fox took a seat in front of the Sheriff at the table. “And, of course, this was all paid for by taxes...”

“Maybe, maybe not.” The Sheriff grinned at him as he grabbed his food, his plate wide. “You’ll never know, will ya?”

Robin shrugged and filled a plate full of food, digging into it as quick as he could. He was not entirely sure when an opportunity to eat like this again would come up... “It is good, no matter where it came from. Another benefit of your hard work, right?”

“One of the humble few plesantries I get.” The Sheriff said. “Though, between you and me, I like to ride this as far as I can...”

Robin laughed at that, though he was not sure this time if he was laughing with the Sheriff or at him. Probably with him, he was not that stupid. “I couldn’t tell.”

As he kept talking with him, the fox found that the wolf was more self-deprecating than he expected. As Robin ventured further and further away from talking about the Sheriff’s job, he rapidly started to refer to himself as how he really was. A bit of a slob. Lazy. Unnecessarily cruel at times. Robin could appreciate that kind of honesty. It was only when he tried to argue about the Sheriff that his idiotic mindset reared its head again. So... Robin eventually stopped trying to argue with him over it. What was the point when he was not going to be able to change the Sheriff’s views?

The fox eventually just let those comments roll over him. The peasants were a hassle. If the Sheriff wanted to believe that, alright. His job was a pain. Maybe from the wolf’s perspective, it was. Robin would let each statement sit as is, or even try to pull the conversation back towards the Sheriff’s personal life. As the wolf cleared his plate, though, he pulled the conversation back towards his job, despite Robin’s actions...

The Sheriff was bringing himself into a rant by the time that he was getting seconds. Robin himself had already finished breakfast, but looking over what was left... it would be a waste to leave it out to cool. If it had been paid for by Prince John’s taxes, that just meant it was more riches to steal back. Even if he was full, this was an opportunity he could not pass up. Steal from the rich, give to... hmm. Robin shoved a piece of bacon into his mouth while grabbing more food and listening to the Sheriff go off about his work.

“... Do ya see what I mean?” He asked.

Robin gulped down his bacon loudly. “I didn’t hear what you said, sorry.”

“Well I’ll be happy tah explain it again.” The wolf said. “I know that this will probably take a bit of thinkin’ on your part, but we can go over whatever you don’t believe. The poor are the greedy ones in Britain, not the rich.”

“Excuse me?”

“Lemme explain. Poor always gotta pay their taxes. Rich gotta make sure the poor don’t get invaded, gotta make sure that they can make coin so they pay taxes. That’s hard work! Rich have to tell them what crops to plant, what they can hunt, where they can go... you don’t control that, and ya get problems. The reason that Britain’s still around is that the rich control the poor. The poor can’t see the

bigger picture, but the rich can.

“When the poor don't pay their taxes, though, they aren't puttin' in their fair share. You know what I gotta deal with when I collect taxes? Nobody really wants to do it. It's an endemic! I think that's the word...” The wolf rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “Endemic? Endemic. Yeah. The poor don't want to pay taxes. And, now, I don't blame 'em... I wouldn't want some guy comin' in and tellin' me that I have to give them my gold. I'm always the bad guy. People don't like the bad guy. People don't want to help the bad guy. Even if they can pay, it's always...”

The Sheriff affected a poor falsetto and clasped his hands together while fluttering his eyelashes. “But sir, the children have baker's leg and we've nothing to eat but porridge for the last month and a half, don't be cruel!” The wolf grimaced and went back to his normal voice. “And then they'll tell little Bill once I'm gone that it's okay to grab the big sack of gold that they've hidden with the sheep feed. This'll happen to me every time I go to a house. That's what collectin' taxes is all about. People don't want to give you their gold. They're greedy, and they don't see that the country that takes care of them, the people that need them need their help. It's a wonder I get anythin' at all done.”

“That...” The fox paused, his eyes wide. “That makes a frightening amount of sense. How many times has this happened?” He asked timidly.

“Well I...” The wolf grinned. “I lost track. I never thought I could find someone who actually understood how terrible my job can get at times.”

Robin was still a little shocked as they finished up breakfast and he was brought back into his cell. He did not feel like talking when the Sheriff left him, but eventually, as he laid on his cot having a crisis of identity, it simply... passed. He agreed with the Sheriff that the poor were greedy and the rich deserved all the taxes they took. That did not mean he needed to stop helping the poor. If they were so greedy, then why were they not rich instead? The wolf's statement made sense, but it did not have to change his entire life. The least moral people still deserved his help if they were suffering... that thought worried him even further. The rich of England were more moral than the poor?

Robin barely had time to reflect on his sudden empathy for John and his court before the Sheriff was back with lunch. The spread this time was about as large as breakfast, and even though Robin did not feel hungry at all anymore, he still ate with enthusiasm. Delicious spiced meats disappeared off his plate faster than he could bring himself to talk. The fox was wide open to hearing what the Sheriff wanted to ask him...

“Now...” The Sheriff said right before he bit down into the massive chicken leg he held in his paw. Chewing loudly, he continued. “Prince John's been in a really good mood ever since he begun plannin' his honeymoon. Don't take this as me getting' soft on ya, Robin, but I think you could be more useful alive than dead.”

Robin ignored how his belly was groaning in protest to focus on the more important matter of his own life. “I don't understand.” He started filling his mouth again as soon as he finished speaking.

“I reckon I could talk tah John and have your execution delayed for another week or two while he's travelling to London to present his new wife.” The wolf grinned deviously as he spoke. “But it ain't gonna be easy. You gotta do somethin' for me too, Robin.”

Robin leaned back in his chair. For once, he was... actually afraid of the Sheriff. It was never like this with him. He was an obstacle, but a slow and stupid one. In this position, he had something Robin could not get away from: a price. “Why do you need me to do anything? I thought you were starting to like me...”

“I do, I do!” The Sheriff exclaimed. “I'm not gullible, though. I guess we can call this a... bondin' experience? Figure that'd work out. I wanna help ya, Robin, but I need to know that you can scratch my back before I scratch yours.” He pulled out a map from his pants and handed it over to the fox. Robin took it with one hand while using the other to shove some bread into his mouth, leaving the hunk of dough in his maw as he looked it over. “We don't want Lady Marian bein' harassed by any of your friends and havin' all her fine new weddin' presents stolen from her. I want ya to point out the

safest route a carriage could take out of Sherwood Forest.”

Robin stared over the paper back to the Sheriff. The wolf gave an exasperated look back to him. “Now c'mon! I figured this was fair! It's not like you're betraying the Merry Men...”

“It is.” Robin stated back after swallowing. “It's exactly betrayal.”

“Well then it's a small betrayal! Nobody's gonna get arrested, I'm just askin' for you to give me one good day for Lady Marian and her new husband, and then you get to live another week...”

“Don't put it like that!” Robin snarled before looking down at his plate. “This is for John. I'd be doing this for John, not for her.”

“Now that ain't right either. They're married now.” The Sheriff said. “salmost like they're one and the same.”

Robin stared at the map for at least a minute before pointing his finger to a road on the paper. “We don't look at this route as much as we should. Avoid all the others, try not to make too much of a scene, and they'll be fine.”

“See? Now, that wasn't so hard, was it?” The Sheriff yanked the parchment out of his paw and stuffed it back into his pants. Robin was not exactly sure what the Sheriff said to him next. He was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that the words sort of congealed together. The fox caught something about being kept company every day while the castle was vacant, but that was about it.

What captured Robin's attention more was eating. That, and how unworthy he was to his own reputation. He felt all the more cowardly for admitting to himself that he would never tell his followers what he had done if he ever got out of the castle walls. They deserved to know who ruined a full week of possible bounties in Sherwood Forest, and yet... He was sure they would understand. That was the worst part about it to Robin. They would understand, and he still felt too ashamed of himself to tell them.

Robin was unaware of how many plates he had eaten when the table was cleared and he was brought back to his room, but it was enough that he felt engorged enough to have to loosen his tunic's belt a notch. When he walked, his middle sloshed and churned. He clucked at it with both paws, rubbed over it gently, and tried to get the sick feeling to abate. It would not lessen, not after a whole half-hour of massages.

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The chair creaked gently as Robin sat down into it, his cheeks spreading into the wood and stretching his already abused tunic. He had been asking for new clothes for a month now... he could barely breathe in the one he had on anymore. He did not even wear a belt anymore. Every so often, as he moved, he heard something rip or tear around the back... Rags would be more comfortable than what he had on now.

His stomach rubbed against the table as he scooted in and grabbed for a leg of mutton, shoving it into his mouth and biting down into the meat, his slightly rounded cheeks bulging out as he filled them full of food. He was so hungry... there was only a few hours between dinner and lunch in the Sheriff's routine, but lately the wait was starting to feel like ages to Robin... Maybe they were starting to torture him now. They did not require rack nor whip nor maiden, only the elements to get under his skin...

At least when food came, it was in such great amounts that he would be able to eat to his fill. The fox looked to the wolf on the other side of the table past the bottles and pans between them. “Hey, Sheriff? I've always been a bit curious about something...”

“What's that?” The Sheriff asked.

“You talk with a strange accent. I dare say I've never met anyone in England that spoke in such a fashion.”

The Sheriff laughed so hard at that that he almost choked on what he was eating at the time, and had to quickly drink some port to clear his throat. “Y-y'all're tellin' me you've never met a Welshman



before?”

“Well, no, I haven't...”

The wolf wiped away a tear from his eye and giggled harder. “You spent far too much time in the forest. Hoo...”

Robin chuckled to himself, adjusting himself in his chair to get more comfortable. His middle rested down slightly onto his knees as he moved. “So, what do you want me to do today to get another stay on my execution? Shall I give you a few more stash locations? Tell you who we were planning on distributing our loot to? Something else perhaps?”

The Sheriff shook his head. “None of that'll be necessary anymore, Robin. We're gonna let you go.”

“Let me go?” The fox asked. Why was he becoming worried again? “How? Why? King John's wanted me dead for ages, and now he just wants to let me go?”

“The King doesn't see you as a threat anymore. Nobody does, Robin.” The wolf grinned. “I don't either. I kinda like ya a lot. Yer one of the best friends I got. You're not a jerk to me like Hiss is. If I could just...” He twisted his paws together, one on top of the other, around an imaginary snake neck “... I'm gettin' away from my point. I'm the one that asked John if you could go free. I think ya suffered enough down here. He agreed, too! Ya got several conditions, though.”

Robin filled another two plates and pulled them in front of himself. “I don't really have any options, do I? This is really just a formality at this point. I've been in here for too long, and I'll do anything to get out. Name them.”

The Sheriff cleared his throat. “Ahem... well, ya would have to renounce all your former crimes before the king...”

“Pride has never been one of my greatest vices.” The fox said.

“You'll never be gettin' your bow back. You can understand, right?” The Sheriff asked.

“Of course. I'm probably a little rusty with it now. You don't want me to turn your bottom into a pincushion.” Robin left out that the Sheriff's rear had the look and consistency of a pincushion already thanks to his clothing and its size.

“You'll need a real line a' work too... part of the guard. How's that sound?”

That was the only condition to give the fox some pause. He... if he chose such a position, he would soon be put into a position where he had to betray his friends. They would soon fall into the same position he was: trapped, locked in a cell, and at his mercy. Robin would become their jailor, and would be expected to show them little mercy.

It was only a momentary dilemma, however. Some time ago, he had already made the decision without being asked. At some point in the recent past, morality had started to lose its luster. A virtuous life had become less and less valuable when compared to more simple and easy pleasures. A good pair of clothing, which he desperately needed at the moment. A delicious and large meal, which he already had three times a day and yet wanted more of. The means to support himself, and only himself, without giving into that virtue which once plagued him like a foul habit: charity. The answer was set in stone, and if the Merry Men were pleading for him not to listen to what the Sheriff was offering him, Robin would have ignored them.

Besides, where were they now? Robin had waited for them to at least make some sort of attempt to rescue him. None had come. If anything, he was not betraying the Merry Men. They had betrayed the fox, and left him to rot. It was only the work of his one true friend, the Sheriff, that had kept him alive during his captivity. If the Sheriff wanted his aid, well, Robin would not spurn his only friend's offer. He gave a fast and eager nod, which sent the Sheriff to grinning again.

The wolf clasped his hand onto the fox's shoulder. “Well then, let's get set to workin' on makin' you a free man. ... By the way, what was Hiss doin' in here earlier?”

The fox tilted his head, looking at him in confusion. “Beg your pardon?”

“I passed him slitherin' up the stairs on the way down here. He got all squirrely when I asked

him what he was doin' in the dungeon and made up some kind of excuse about how he wanted to check up on you. Did he come visitin' you or somethin'?"

Robin's pupils became unfocused, and his eyes were glassy for a moment as he responded how Sir Hiss told him to respond. "It was nothing... He just wanted to make sure I didn't escape from you..."

"Stupid snake... thinkin' I ain't competent at my job..." The Sheriff shook his head. "I'll lay you up at my house for until you get a bunk in the barracks. You keep away from him for a while, you got that?"

Robin became lucid again soon after. "Oh... oh, yes." This was not the last piece of advice the fox would be taking from the Sheriff. There was far more that the new royal guard was going to be agreeing with in the future...

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"Hurry it up, we don't got much time before they move again!" The Sheriff hissed back to Robin.

The rotund fox panted as he tried to keep up with the Sheriff, his gut jiggling around in front of him with every fast step (well, fast for him) he took. It threatened to pop a button off the purple shirt he was wearing. He would need a fitting for another uniform after this... A frown spread across his jowls. He hated getting prodded with calipers by the tailor. His last fitting was the month before, as well...

He tried to duck down into a crouch next to the wolf, only to go into a sprawl as his round calves gave out underneath him. The Sheriff caught him at the last moment before he fell into the bushes. "Ya almost gave us away, ya oaf!"

Robin reached up to his blue coif and adjusted it to fit his face. The cloth rubbed against his fleshy neck as he did. "If it was not for me knowing where the Merry Men live, you would not be here."

"Sorry. Jes'..." The wolf looked at the massive pile of loot several feet away from the brush they were hiding within. "I get antsy when ah know I'm about to hit paydirt."

Robin smirked, his eyes drawn into little beads. "I know what you mean. Once we finish here, the King's liable to reward us handsomely... what do you say we pocket some of our gains after we close the net on the bandits just to ensure he doesn't take everything?"

"You're learnin' well, Robin." The Sheriff grabbed onto a branch, ready to pounce even though the two of them were too large to do anything but body slam into someone if they jumped out. "Ready?"

"Oh, am I..." The fox pulled out a club strapped to his massive back, rear wobbling around as he tried to stay hidden behind the bush. "Little John always said he could wrestle me down to the ground if he wanted to. Let's see if he's still so sure of that..."