

Hammers and Highways

By: RaddaRaem

Letting a worn leather rein slip free from his fingers, the fox papped a snowy 'gloved' hand against his cheek. Soft rolls of white fur pressed up against his right eye courtesy of the calloused digits rubbing against his facial fluff.

"Best not be wearing that frown when we roll into town, lad."

The fur's shoulders drooped forward in response. "Yessir." Rolling his sapphire eyes, the vulpine twirled his left hand about its wrist. The remaining rein, held firmly between his clenched fingers, gently slapped against the backside of the equine pulling him forward.

It snorted in acknowledgement of the prompt to pick up the pace, but the draft horse continued to plod along at a leisurely trot. Wooden wheels creaked noisily along the dilapidated road and kicked up clouds of dust anytime one of the ancient cobbled stones littering the path was either dismantled or displaced. Wild grasses stretching up as high the wagon wheels swayed gently along the sides of the road. Their green coloration retreating down the stalks and away from the tips burnt yellow.

With a sigh, the pine green tortoise leaned over and gently slapped a rough and scaly palm against his aide's muzzle, "I know you were rather fond of where we were, but that's simply the life of a merchant!" Sidling up besides the timid teen in training, the reptile extended out a hand. Curling his stubby nailed fingers round the reins, he eased them out of the lad's grasp.

Groaning, the fox hunched forward and rest his head between his knees. A whiskered snout bounced side to side between his legs, courtesy of their wagon's rocky ride. Twitching his nose, the fox's itchy cotton pants tugged painfully at the mixture of orange and white fur upon his face. "It wasn't like we were wanting for business." Trembling black lips curled back as he swallowed down the first welling barbs of homesickness that made his throat clench.

"We've been through this song and dance before, Timor." Eyes half lidded, the tortoise shook his head and pulled down his cap. Long pointed flaps of chocolate colored fabric draped down along the sides of his face; the hat's pointed visor blanketed his wearied eyes in a shroud of shade. "Markets change just as surely as the seasons do. As do tastes. What's lining our pockets one day could be cluttering our shelves the next." Bouncing and rattling in his seat the merchant's amber colored shell clonked and tunked against the back of their shared bench, the black ringed ridges of his carapace knocking free splinters with every impact. Behind him, the leather tarp covering the wagon bed flapped and tussled.

Timor dragged his hands to his knees and pressed up, the back of the bench pressing into his spine. He pulled at his shirt's collar, the vulpine's sweat stained teal wardrobe slowly peeling off his frame. "I know, I know." The fox's teeth clacked together, his eyes still focused on his feet. Padded toes, lacking in color much like his cheeks and hands, twiddled against the grooves his digits had worn into his sandals. "Wickham? Does it... does it ever get any easier?"

Biting down on his pale weather-beaten beak, the shelled reptile relaxed his grip on the reins driving them forward. "Bidding goodbye to newly made friends and haunts?" A puff of hot air billowed

from his nostrils. "In time, it'll sting less and less as you toughen up and grow familiar with the prospect. Though seeing a place you called home, for however long, dip down over the horizon never really stops being a painful sight and sensation to stomach." Exchanging gazes with the fox, Wickham shot him a reassuring smile. "You're off to a fine start, lad. We've only set up shop in a handful of towns now, but I'm proud each departure has hit you hard." Wagging a stumpy finger side to side, the tortoise carried on, "It means you actually care about the people we do business with."

Tail gently wagging side to side, Timor forced a smile. Lifting up his head, he focused his attention on the road once more. Squinting his eyes in the oppressive afternoon sunshine, the fox arched his brows at the sight that greeted him.

As if on cue Wickham pulled back on the reins. Their mottled work horse neighed softly while it slackened its pace. Back of their hands pressed against their respective foreheads, the merchant and merchant in training cautiously regarded the figure on approach.

A lone and bushy tailed figure meandered before them, a polished glint shining off their back in the late summer sun hovering high overhead. When the horse drawn wagon neared the solitary traveler it became clear this was a uh...

Panting, Timor pulled at his collar, having begun to swelter in the intense heat. Goodness gracious this was a, ahem, rather shapely figure that the duo was approaching.

The fox's reaction prompted a playful ribbing from the tortoise besides him. "Come now Timor, I've taught you better than that! You should know by now that any merchant worth their salt always waits to cast judgment until they can check if the merchandise displayed up front is just as high of quality as what's stored in back. Or vice versa in this case." Stifling his laughter, a wrinkled smile crept up along Wickham's beak.

"Hey it's not like that!" Shades of red burned through the vulpine's white furred cheeks while he ashamedly tucked his tail between his legs. Much as he wanted to retreat into the shadows cast by his hood, Timor was suffocating inside the veritable cloth furnace.

Stalks of wild grasses stretching from the road out to the forest of pines dotting the horizon swayed imperceptibly in the weak breeze, squelching any hopes of a reprieve from the scalding rays of the sun. Reluctantly, Timor tossed back his hood.

"Oh? My mistake then! I could have sworn you were ogling her wares." Chuckling, the shelled reptile playfully patted at his apprentice's back. "Aye, but it does raise the question of what's a lass doing out here all by her lonesome?"

Her long puffy striped tail swished side to side. Save for the splash of white fur on her tail tip, alternating rings of rust red and brown painted her bushy appendage,. Crimson hair rivaling the sun's rays in fiery intensity ruffled atop her noggin; the lass' locks knotted round a squat twig, a perky ponytail swinging in tune to her step.

Unable to help himself, Timor's eyes followed the firm but gentle curves of the mysterious girl's toned arms and legs. Even though it should have been an ordeal to tear his reverent gaze away from her form fitting olive green skirt and shirt, his focus was drawn towards the hammer slung round her back.

Its handle was as tall as she was, its sepia glaze positively glowing under the sun's shine. Resting atop the handle, and brushing against the tops of her perky ears, lay a colossal stone hammer head. It sported two flat square faces, nicks and shallow chiseled scars cutting across their broad surfaces.

Those tufted ears composed of equal parts cream and red fur flicked about atop her head, twitching at every creak of the wagon wheels and plod of horse hooves creeping up behind her.

Wrinkles creased along his forehead, Wickham cupped a palm underneath the fox's slackened chin. The tortoise raised his arm up slowly; Timor's teeth clacked together when the upper and lower halves of his jaw pressed together. "Might be prudent for this old merchant to handle introductions, eh?" Clearing his throat, the shelled reptile bid hello to their fellow traveler. "Ahoy there lass!"

She turned her head towards the greeting's source. "Hello to you too," the edges of her lips curled upward into a gentle smile, "you two!" With a wave of her hand, hammer girl casually regarded the horse drawn wagon and its occupants rattling up beside her. "What brings you along this quiet and forgotten trail?"

Wickham continued tugging at the reins until their beast of burden's gait matched that of their acquaintance. "The lust for coin, truth be told!" the tortoise answered with a hint of pride in his voice.

"Ah! Merchants I take it?" Crossing her arms about her chest, her bosom gently heaved under the support of cream colored 'gloves' extending up from her fingertips to her rust red forearms.

The teenage fox swallowed hard. He silently cursed his eyeballs, the blasted things dipping their gaze down towards her neckline no matter how much he willed them to otherwise. A stinging whap against his back rattled them about their sockets.

"Timor!" Wickham's beak practically nipped at the fox's ear while the tortoise angrily whispered. "Lad, I was merely teasing before. That wasn't a go ahead to leer at her feminine attributes! Treat her like you would a customer!"

"Y-yessir." Making an effort to adhere to the sentiment carried behind Wickham's words, Timor tilted his head up until his line of sight met with hers.

Even though he expected to see a disapproving frown or glare directed back at him, the fox was greeted by that same pleasant smile from before. His cheeks smoldered from the rush of blood to his face due to the poor merchant in training's tongue refusing to unsheathe itself from his maw.

Cocking an eyebrow, she directed the same inquiry from before at him. "Merchants I take it?"

Muzzle clamped tight, the vulpine's vocalizations failed him. He simply nodded his head up and down in confirmation, actually managing to maintain eye contact. Crumbling under her soft and reassuring gaze, the shy fox flipped his hood back up.

"What am I doing?!" Timor screamed aloud in his head. Two distended tips of fabric poking out of his hood vanished at the sound of hammer girl's giggling. Ears flat against his skull, he managed to part his lips wide enough to let out a sigh. "Guess I've always had counters, stalls, and stands between me and the maidens, huh?" He mentally reminded himself.

Rolling his eyes, the tortoise carried the conversation that his aide could not. "Wickham and Timor," he laid a heavy hand on the fox's shoulder and shook him side to side, "at your service!"

"V'sara." Extending out her hand to the timid Timor, she patiently waited for him to return the gesture. She watched his brilliant blue eyes flicker in the shadows and smirked at his shrinking away from her gesture. "Heh, I don't bite!" At that she saw him crack a nervous smile, his pearly whites shining through the darkness. V'sara continued holding out her arm even as her shoulder grew stiff. Her limb locked her limb in place while it gradually grew heavier and heavier.

"R-right." Leaning forward, Timor clasped his hand round hers. "It's a umm... pleasure to make your acquaintance Vis.. Vas..."

"You can always call me Sara, for short." A simple flick of her wrist was all it took to initiate a handshake, the fox's entire arm slinging up and down from the simple gesture.

Wickham shook his head side to side, laughing to himself through clenched teeth. That apprentice of his was something else. "So V'sara, what is it that brings you out here in turn?" The tortoise eyed that hammer of hers curiously. Its intimidating presence contrasted sharply with the lass who wielded it. Furrowing his brows, the tortoise couldn't quite settle on what she was. "Be she a raccoon dog or a red panda? A mix between the two?" Nubby fingers stroked at his coarse and scaly chin while he pondered.

Clouds of dust stomped up wherever V'sara's feet touched the ground; the bottoms of her boots crunching intermittent cobblestones and half buried bricks beneath them. "I don't really have a reason, to be honest." With a shrug of her shoulders, she tossed her arms out to her sides. "Not yet, anyway."

Timor and Wickham exchanged confused glances.

"My wanderlust got the best of me, I suppose. I felt like taking a stroll a few weeks back..." V'sara counted off on her fingers just how long it had been. A few weeks sounded right. "...And never settled on a stopping point! Just been meandering from town to town as of late, drinking in the sights and sounds to my heart's content."

Wickham nodded to himself in understanding, bobbing up and down in his bench seat while the wagon wobbled beneath him. "Aye, sounds like you cast roots as shallow as the boy and I do. Never calling any one place home for long," the elder merchant thought aloud.

"Birds of a feather?" V'sara finished for him.

"You could say that," the tortoise replied with a knowing grin. The reins tethering the mercantile duo's wagon to their work horse bounced in Wickham's relaxed grip. He snorted in amusement as Timor scooched up beside him.

"Hey, Wickham?"

"Timor, take off your damned cloak." The boy's antics had long since become cringeworthy. Risking heat stroke to mask his embarrassment and flustered feelings for their newly met acquaintance was absolutely unacceptable. Now, granted, the tortoise was currently decked out in a thick jacket that wouldn't be in season until snow blanketed the ground. Yet Wickham still felt himself shiver from time

to time! That could be attributed to the temperament of his blood though, not from some terrible timidity.

"You're making a right fool of yourself," the shelled merchant grumbled. Papping a hand against the boy's head, he ripped down the fox's hood. Much to Timor's consternation Wickham dug his fingers into the neck of the fox's attire, tugging until the troublesome cloak had been peeled off and tossed atop the leather tarp stretched across the wagon bed. "Now, you were saying?"

Pursing his lips, the merchant in training stifled an embarrassed sigh. "Gah what is wrong with me today?" he mentally moaned. "Well, I was thinking."

"Mmhmm."

"I mean, I know we just only met," Timor wrung his hands together nervously.

Here we go, the tortoise smirked.

"But mayhaps Miss Sara could accompany us until we reach our destination?" Timor turned to his side, hammer girl's ears perking up at the mention. "O-only if you're okay with that and she's okay with that."

"I certainly wouldn't want to impose!" V'sara promptly replied, her smile having yet to fade. "It's your wagon, so I'll defer to your judgment."

Hook, line, and sinker, Wickham mouthed to himself. The tortoise cast a glance at the woman walking beside them who was contentedly taking in their shenanigans. "I've no objection to it. Can't say I mind the company." Slinging an arm around the fox's neck, Wickham pulled his apprentice close. "Now lad, next time at least make an effort to sell our wares before you invite someone into our home on wheels. You're a merchant for goodness sakes, don't be letting opportunities to do business saunter by."

"O-oh! Right." Next time then, for sure. Extending a hand out their temporary companion the fox felt his cheeks flare once more as she took his palm into her own.

"Appreciate it, Timor." Steadying herself with his grip, V'sara leapt onto the bench besides him, hammer and all. The work horse neighed at the sudden surge of weight. For an instant the wagon tilted to the left, its two right wheels lifted up into the air before slamming back down with a thud. "Sorry about that!" V'sara hastily apologized, the wide eyed fox and tortoise unsure of how to react.

Timor and Wickham felt the bench seat lifting up, both of them skittering along the splintered incline towards their guest. The merchant's aide felt as if he would spontaneously combust when his leg brushed against her own.

V'sara eased her mighty weapon's sling over her right shoulder, carefully swinging the hammer head out and away from her gracious hosts. Fingers curled tight around its handle she leaned back into her seat. "Goodness it's been a while since I've been spoiled like this." Her posture decayed as she allowed herself to slump further and further down along the back of the wooden bench, her eyes closed for the duration. "If there's any way you two would like me to repay your kindness in turn, I'd be happy to oblige."

"It's no trouble at all, lass." Friction locked the tortoise in place along his raised bench seat. "We don't put a price on common decency here."

"Even so," creaking open an eyelid V'sara arched a brow at Timor, "wouldn't sit right with me to leave you fine folks empty handed. It's not much, but might I interest you in a tale or two I've picked up along my travels to pass the tiii-iii-" Bringing a hand up to her mouth, the lass covered an ear splitting yawn. Her left bicep and triceps clenching while she wielded her weapon with a single arm.

"Didn't realize until now just how long it's been since I rested my legs." Her open palm slapped against her thighs, V'sara yawning again while she tapped her knees together. Those tufted ears of hers swiveled to the side with the fading of her smile. Looks like she'd have to make good on her promise another time. "Not to press the boundaries of your hospitality, but would you mind if I took a quick nap?"

Timor's eyes darted to the sun bleached tarp stretched taut over the open wagon bed. "Not at all!" Pulling it back to reveal their stock of goods, the vulpine hurriedly brushed aside their wares to make room.

"Thanks again, the both of you." Climbing into the back of the wagon, V'sara's thick and fluffy tail brushed against the fox, much to his eternal delight. The wheels groaned painfully in her presence, practically squealing when she laid her hammer at her side. Beneath her, stained wooden planks riddled with notches threatened to buckle free. Their protests faded in time as she became stationary once more and laid flat against the mattress of wood with her arms curled behind her like a pillow. Eyes closed, she brought a hand up to her neck. Slowly, rhythmically, V'sara thumbed at a thin red cord wrapped around her throat.

"Well aren't you eager to please?" Wickham teased, landing a soft punch at Timor's shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah," the fox bashfully replied, eyes resting on his feet once more. Hmm... maybe once he worked up the courage he could interest her in a new sling for her hammer? Leather was what they primarily wheeled and dealt in after all. Armor, belts, saddles, and boots currently surrounded Miss Sara in her impromptu sleeping quarters. Heck, even that very tarp was one of their products!

Cocking his head to the side, Timor couldn't help but grin at his teacher. That was one of the first lessons he had learned from the tortoise. "A true merchant lives by their own wares. If they don't place their own confidence and trust into their merchandise, how can they expect their customers to?" Timor's jaws parted wide, Miss Sara's yawns apparently infectious.

"Hey now you're not going to leave a tired old man to fend for himself now, are you?"

"No no, I-" Against his will the fox's mouth forced itself open. Spread painfully wide, the muscles in his cheeks strained. "I'm sorry, sir."

Eyes on the empty road ahead, Wickham let out a defeated gust of air from his nostrils. "Go ahead and get a wink or two in Timor, I'll still be here when you awake." Permission granted, the fox teetered over and rest his head against the tortoise's shell. Sighing contentedly, he nuzzled into the smooth slopes of the carapace's ridges. "Pleasant dreams, lad," Wickham chuckled to himself as he whipped the reins against their horse's rear.

“Timor.” Reaching over, the reptile’s hand patted worriedly against his aide’s chest. “Timor, rise and shine lad.”

There was a hushed sense of urgency in the voice that carried to the fox’s ears. Pulling his eyelids apart, crusty patches of sleep flaked off his eyelashes. “Wickham?” Timor groggily inquired, “Something wrong?”

“Aye,” the tortoise replied, his voice strained and barely above a whisper.

Shaking a dull lead weight off his limbs, Timor forced himself cognizant. On the horizon, ribbons of orange, pink, and red stacked atop one another; a signal for the setting of the sun. Blinking rapidly, the fox picked up three silhouettes in the periphery of his vision, huddled round a campfire further up along the road. He gulped at the flickers of flame glinting at them in the distance.

“Do you understand the danger here?”

Eyeballs pushing against the sides of his sockets, Timor nodded at the tortoise. Those reflections of light twinkled at the silhouettes sides, not their backs. Their weapons were already brandished. “No one draws their weapon without an intent to use it.”

His breaths slow and controlled, Wickham carried on. “Stay alert. Acknowledge them but do not engage them.”

Timor’s tongue scraped against the roof of his mouth. He choked on his words, a feeble wheeze of air was all that escaped the fox’s maw. “...Understood.” Timor clenched his teeth together, the edges of his lips pulling taut while the muscles in his cheeks began to strain. “What about Miss Sara?”

“Wake her if you can.” Like the beating of a metronome, Wickham’s heavy heart throbbed in his chest. “The less surprises the better.” He felt his body grow heavy after each exhale, his extremities growing numb as he drew shallower breaths. This was a lesson he was hoping he wouldn’t have had to teach the boy so soon. “Just remember Timor,” the tortoise’s limbs trembled, flakes of leather peeling off the reins twiddling against their horse’s behind, “no cargo is ever worth forfeiting your life over.”

A palpable sense of dread coiled around the fox’s shoulders. It was... frightening, seeing his teacher like this. “Miss Sara!” Words rendered a raspy whistle by his bated breaths, Timor’s head whipped back and forth between the silhouettes before him and the wagon bed at his back. He reached back towards her, a musty heat wafting up from the accumulated stockpile of leather shields and gloves piled along the sides. “Miss Sara, please, wake up!”

V’sara’s ears flicked at every mention of her name, but Timor’s panicked pleas did little to rouse her. Grunting softly, she nestled the back of her head into her forearms. Lips pulled back, the fair lass’ teeth ground together at whatever unpleasant images cascaded across her dreamscape.

Cursing under his breath, the shelled merchant worriedly watched the shadowed figures rise to their feet. The tortoise dragged his knuckles against his scaly sun-beaten brow. Beads of sweat accumulating on his brow were wiped away. *Dammit.* “It’s always possible they’re merely mercenaries setting up camp for the night,” he tried to reassure himself. “In the middle of nowhere... the closest

warring kingdoms halfway cross the continent.” Wickham’s neck retracted into his shell, a defeated sigh drafting out from his beak.

If they stopped, slowed down, or sped up, those blokes would react. Running was a gamble in and of itself that hinged on far too many unknowns. Did these strangers have horses of their own loitering in the brush? If no, the risk might be worth it. The mercantile duo’s destination wasn’t that far off now. If yes though, would their pursuers be irritated or amused by the chase? And how would that color the shakedown that followed?

“What can I do?” Wickham mouthed to himself. Thoughts, tyrannical in their numbers, swarmed about his head like a cloud of gnats. What few he could focus on raised terrible specters in his mind’s eye. Each and every one always focusing on the possible harm that could befall his aide or mysterious acquaintance. Perhaps... perhaps it would be best to relegate himself to the reality of the situation, in exchange for everyone’s safety.

“Timor, pull up the tarp.”

“But-” Three figures sauntering towards the road registered at the edges of the fox’s vision; their forms solidified in the fading glow of the sun. “You saw Miss Sara’s hammer. She can help!”

“Lad, you’re asking that she risk life and limb to fight our battles for us. We barely know the lass, and she in turn us!”

“I didn’t mean-”

“I’m sorry lad, but we can’t let our attention falter for even a moment.” Wickham flicked his wrists, and a gentle crack of reins and a subdued neigh echoed across the plain. Their horse continued to plod along at a steady pace as if nothing was amiss. “I know you’re worried for her safety.” Weapons drawn, a hulking blue lizard flanked by two bulls approached. “But if we can’t even keep ourselves out of harm’s way, how can we expect to do the same for V’sara?”

Exhaling gently, the fox propped up his posture. “Understood, sir.” Back turned on the advancing trio, Timor leaned over his bench seat and did as he was told. He pulled tight the edges of the leather tarp over the mouth of the wagon bed. Splaying frays of rope draping down from the beaten fabric were knotted, courtesy of some fast fox fingers, around the rusted metal rings that creaked against the side of the wobbling wooden rectangle.

“Good evening, gentleman!” Wickham cleared his throat.

One of the bulls flanked the merchant’s poor draft horse, blobs of caramel and white hair spread across his broad back and chest. It was almost as if an artist had let too much paint soak into the bristles of their brush and flecked the remainders onto the portly bovine.

The tortoise’s voice cracked and began to falter. “Apologies for any dashed hopes, but business hours are closed!”

Slivers of yellows and oranges cast by the waning glow of the sun wrapped around the accosting bull’s polished horns. “A shame, that,” he snorted. Clad only in a tattered patchwork of burlap pants, he twiddled his hooved fingers against the edge of a dull, chipped blade.

Lips curled down into a frown, Timor couldn't stand the sight. Wise old Wickham shrunk back into his seat as the other bull lumbered forth to flank their horse opposite his peer. Adorned with the same attire and equipment, this one's hunchbacked body was instead colored with blobs of black and white. A copper ring hung down from his wide flat snout, swinging forward with his every exhale. How dare they do this to his teacher! "T-the lot of you strike me as a savvy sort," Timor began. Even as Wickham firmly pressed a hand against the fox's chest, stubby fingers clenching at the sweaty shirt matted against his torso, Timor carried on. "Yet this..." he fumbled for the right word, "line of business doesn't strike me as a sustainable one."

Both bulls cocked an eyebrow at that, turning their attention to the verbose vulpine.

If Wickham wasn't going to be a smooth talker, then... well then Timor would just have to step up and do it for him! "Just think about it. If travelers were to vanish or have their entire stock pilfered while travelling through this twilight land, what do you think would happen?" Gesticulating with his hands, the fox awaited an answer from his engaged audience. The cattle exchanged confused glances before shrugging their shoulders at Timor. "Why, people would stop moseying through here altogether! If that came to pass, what would happen to your business model?"

At the merchant in training's prompt, the caramel mottled bull tapped his blunt blade against his chin. "We'd have less folks to fleece?" Biting at his lip, he turned to his black blotted compatriot. "Innit that right?"

"Think so?" Hooved fingers, organic rocks practically, clacked loudly at the bovine's nose ring. Its garnish had begun to fade, splotches of faded metal littered across it. "What are you implying there, fox?"

"W-well, now, we're all busy people here." Timor's neck bulged, the vulpine swallowing hard to force the welling lump down his throat. "My teacher and I came to peddle our goods and you, fine sirs, came to errmm... acquire them." At the very least he wasn't choking on his words. Things could be worse. "We'd be happy to provide you a sample of our wares, in exchange for safe passage along this winding road. A-and of course we'd be mindful not to let others know of the," the fox's fingers grasped at the contrails of air snaking between his fingertips, "...unexpected toll along the road."

Hand cupped around his muzzle, the black cow leaned over the ever indifferent work horse's back. Elbow resting against its mane, he tried to catch his fellow's attention. "Boris! Psst!"

Letting out a soft moo, Boris congregated with his companion. "What? Whatta you want Cleese?"

"Whatcha think of that boy's spiel?" Cleese flicked the back of his thumb against his nose ring. "I think he has a point."

"That he do, but it don't really matter what we think now does it?" Tossing his neck to the side, Boris gestured towards the sky blue lizard trudging over. Boris pulled back from the bull's huddle and raised his voice. "Whut say you, Liam?"

Looming a good head and shoulders above his cronies, two scaly blue ridges extended out from the back of his head like horns. The lizard's thick and bulging arms swung down at his sides, countless

scars and slices branded his limbs. Dirtied bandages wrapped around his wrists extended all the way up to his forearms. "I say you two prattle on too much."

"You hafta admit, pickings have been slim lately." Cleese twirled his short sword about in the air, tinkling it against one of his nubby horns. "Winnowing down the field probably ain't the best course of action given the circumstances."

"I'll take my chances." Sword dragging along the ground, pebbles and dirt caught in a sizeable horizontal chip in the tempered metal. Pointed fingers curled tight around the wooden hilt, Liam thrust his weight behind his right arm and swung up. A cloud of dust kicked up at merchants, their bouts of coughing masked the stinging sound of leather cracking.

Wickham was the first to open his eyes, his jaw agape at the sight before him. The reins connecting their wagon to their work horse hung down uselessly from his hands, draped along the ground. "It was a good effort, lad." Their wagon continued to roll and wobble forward for a spell before coming to a complete halt.

His face boasting a mask of disinterest, Liam slapped a thick and calloused palm against the horse's rear. It reared up at the stinging prompt and neighed loudly before it bolted down the road without a moment's hesitation.

Batted around by the equine's antics, Cleese collapsed into a heap when the maned ground he was leaning on took out from under him. A frustrated moo rattled around in his maw, the copper ring hanging from his nostrils scraping against the parched earth.

"Both of you," Liam brought his sword up once more, its tip poking against Wickham's beak, "out of the wagon."

Silently, the fox and tortoise scuttled along their simmering wooden seats and dropped down from their raised bench. With a blade at their backs their feet scuffed against the ground, reluctantly allowing themselves to be shepherded to the side of the road.

"Eyyy we coulda used that horse!" Boris interjected while he pulled Cleese back onto his feet. Grunting at the lack of acknowledgement, the light brown spotted cow dusted off his friend's back.

With his back to the bulls, Liam barked out orders. "Cleese, scope out our haul. Boris, get over here and help keep an eye on our guests. I don't want any runners."

Shaking his head, the hunch-backed cow tossed a dismissive wave in the lizard's direction. Cleese circled round the wagon, stomping his hoofs and kicking up plumes of dust to make his displeasure known. "Smarmy cuss." He methodically sawed at the knotted ropes holding down the tarp, fibrous shavings collecting upon his all but useless sword.

"Wickham." Ears splayed out, the fox snuffled. "What do we do about-" Timor's inquiry ended abruptly as a pinprick pressed against his sternum. Boris slowly shook his head side to side, gently tapping the tip of his blade against the fox's ribcage.

"Trust me boyo, best iffing you keep hushed. For you's and the turtle's sakes." His rock hard thumb pulled back on his weapon's cracking hilt, relieving the pressure on the fox's chest.

The last of the ropes severed, Cleese wiped the sweat off his brow. "Alright, now lessee what you two were packing." Standing atop his hooved tiptoes, he clenched the edge of the tarp in his grasp and tossed it back.

Narrowing his eyes, Wickham glared at lizard before him. He could only hope that V'sara-

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!" A high pitched shriek rang out from the wagon that rattled the eardrums of everyone present.

Exchanging panicked looks, Timor and Wickham felt their throats tighten while they held their breath.

"Cleese!" The looming lizard immediately yelled out, refusing to take his eyes off their hostages. "What's going on over there?" Growling, Liam swatted at the back of Boris' noggin; the bull having whipped his head back towards the source of the disturbance.

"M-m-m-mooooooooohhhhh no." Hands clamped tight around his muzzle, Cleese prayed to whatever deities he had yet to cross that he hadn't woken her. This was... this was V'sara, no doubt about it. Another pathetic moo escaped from between his clenched fingertips. Trembling, the cow recoiled at the very sight of the hammer beside the soundly sleeping lass.

"CLEESE!"

"It's n-n-nothing Liam!" Sinking his teeth into his lips, the cow sucked in panicked gasps of air through the gaps in his pearly whites. "T-they be loaded with leather, probly more than we can carry."

Scowl plastered across his face, the blue lizard rolled his eyes. Those bumbling bovines were hardly worth the trouble. "Start unloading it then, I shouldn't be having to ask you in the first place!"

"Yeah, yeah." Muttering to himself, the cow tossed a couple more covert curses at the lug. His flash of anger faded quickly however, once his attention came to refocus on just whose proximity he was in. "Come on now Cleese, you can do this." Heart pounding its way out of its chest, he could hear its rhythmic thump pulsing in his ears. "Nice and easy..." Slowly, ever so slowly, the bull's eyes sunk in their sockets. In between worried glances at that weapon of reckoning, the cow came to focus on a small leather shield propped up near V'sara's poofy tail. "No need to rush," he told himself over and over as bullets of moisture collected on his forehead, "just take it nice an' slow."

V'sara rolled onto her side, the girl's jaws parting painfully wide while tiny beads of water collected around her eyes. Smacking her lips, a gentle groan rumbled out from her chest.

Cleese's heart skipped a beat, his own peepers growing wide at even the subtlest of movements. Sweat continued to accumulate upon his brow, a multitude of salty streams pouring down his face. "O-o-one at a time is all ya need." The shakes overtook his body, the bull's outstretched arm quivering uncontrollably. "Almost... got it..." His palm hovered over the shield, finally within his grasp. In an almost mechanical fashion, Cleese curled his fingers one by one.

"S-see?" A nervous smile crept up along his visage. In the corner of his eye, V'sara continued to noiselessly nap away. "This wunnit too bad!" Warm tanned leather brushing against his cold rocky fingertips, the cow took that as his cue to clench those digits tight. "Aha! Beautiful, an' there's our first prize." Exceedingly proud of himself, Cleese started to reel back in his catch.

“Good evening, Cleese!”

The cow’s heart stopped cold while his pupils wobbled in their sockets. Back and forth his nose ring bapped gently against his broad pink snout while shallow and disjointed breaths circulated through his nostrils.

Stretching her arms up above her head V’sara tossed her neck side to side, eliciting loud sharp cracks from her stiff joints. “Mmmphhh that was a good nap.” She rubbed a finger along her eyelashes, flicking away the accumulated sleep.

“H-h-h-hul-hullo, V’sara.” His thin tail laid flat against his backside, the cow having gone completely still.

“Goodness, it’s been a while hasn’t it?” Propping herself up on an elbow, she raised her brows with her eyes still half lidded. “Now,” she pointed an accusatory finger at the bovine, “you wouldn’t happen to be trying to abscond with something without having paid for it, would you? We both know you’ve had trouble with that in the past.”

“Noooooooooooo.” Cleese splayed out his fingers, letting the shield tunk to the wooden wagon bed below.

“Just checking!” Ruffling her fingers through her hair, the lass combed out a mild case of bedhead.

Moo after pathetic moo escaped from Cleese’s lips, his veneer crumbling in V’sara’s very presence. Shuffling to the side, he extended his black and white mottled arms out to grab hold of the tarp he had pulled back prior.

“So what’ve you been up to since last we met?” Chuckling to herself, her tail flopped against the makeshift wooden mattress while she watched Cleese drag the covers back over the exposed wagon bed. “Don’t tell me those old habits of yours have reared up again!” In response the sky went dark. The fading orange light of the setting sun now filtered through a tan leather canopy, glimmers of red and yellow peeking through the splits and tears in the fabric. “Awww they have, haven’t they?”

Blubbering to himself, the cow creased the edges of the tarp along the raised and splintering wooden planks surrounding her. “It was nice catching up, Cleese!” V’sara’s cheery tone called out from inside the covered wagon.

“Cleese.” His blade still poking against Wickham’s beak, Liam turned his head towards the bull. “Explain,” he hissed through bared teeth.

“N-n-no. No.” Furiously shaking his head side to side, the black and white bovine gingerly dropped to his knees and deposited his weapon on the ground.

Liam’s cheek raised, pushing up with it folds of scaly skin that pressed against the bottom of a twitching eyeball. “That wasn’t a request you dimwitted sack of steaks.”

“Hey now, there’s no need for that.” A cream colored arm poked out from beneath the tarp, lifting the fabric up with it as V’sara rose to her feet. Flinging her arm above her and off to the side, her sunbaked bed cover flapped onto the well-worn trail below. “I’d be happy to oblige in his stead.”

“WAAAARRRRRAARRRGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” Screaming, the hunchbacked cow wasted no time in taking advantage of the momentary distraction. Hoofing it down the road opposite of where the merchants had originally been heading, he was surprisingly limber for his size.

Smirk spread wide across her muzzle, V’sara couldn’t help but laugh watching him skedaddle towards the horizon.

“Ahem.” Liam coughed into his fist, the lizard’s other heavy hand resting on the tortoise’s shoulders. Swiveling the shelled reptile about face towards the new arrival, the surly ruffian scraped the edges of his pointed keratin fingers along Wickham’s carapace. Boris followed suit, nudging Timor to stand between himself and the unexpected challenger.

V’sara’s smile curled down into a scowl at seeing the plight facing her newly made friends. “I don’t believe we’ve met.” She knelt, the wagon wheels beneath her creaking when she lifted her massive stone faced hammer. Looking down at the two thieves that remained, the lass narrowed her gaze.

Deafening silence was the response provided.

“Hmmp.” Fingers curled tight around the glazed handle, she hoisted the squat hammer head over her shoulder. Rolling the polished wood along the crook of her neck, monolith of stone twirling behind her, V’sara jumped down from her perch. Her boots left significant impressions in the bone dry earth, crunching pebbles and half-buried bricks to a fine powder that circled round her ankles upon touch down.

“Timor. Wickham.” She nudged her wrist into the wooden grip blazing red in the setting sun, the tip of the hammer swinging forth past the side of her head. As it did so, V’sara caught the handle against her open palm. Twisting her arm out and away from herself, the colossal stone hammer head continued its arc forward, slamming into the ground with a meteoropic impact that sent vibrations rumbling up through her boots. “These wouldn’t happen to be friends of yours, would they?”

Unimpressed with her display of strength, Liam simply called out the name of his remaining underling. “Boris.”

“Yeah?” Head cocked to his side, the brown blotted bull awaited his orders. None came. “Wellllllll... whut?” Blinking rapidly, Boris turned his attention to the timid fox for guidance seeing as Liam refused to provide any. Timor could only shrug at his captor’s prompting. “Well whaddaya want?!”

Leaning against her hammer, V’sara’s tail curled around the handle. “I take it the answer’s no?”

Hot bursts of air gushed out from the bovine’s pink snout in frustration when he was finally able to put two and two together. “Durnit, you coulda jus’ out and out asked me to in the first place!” he yelled at the apathetic lizard. Boris was starting to regret not having followed Cleese’s embarrassing lead. “Alright missy.” Shoving Timor off to the side as he plodded forward, the fox stumbled along until Wickham caught his flailing form in his scaly grasp. “Let’s get dis dun and over with.”

“One on one?” Eyebrow cocked in disbelief, V’sara shook her head. “That doesn’t seem like a fair fight.”

“Heh, ol’ Boris too much fer you to handle?” Swagger in his step, the bull sauntered forward. “Need me to fight wif’ one hand behind me back to even the odds even?” Swinging his sword side to side, the curved metal was barely fit to cut the air. “Sure you ought to be swingin’ round dat hammer of yours, feh, betcha that thing is just fer show.” Dismissing V’sara with a wave of his hand, Boris wrapped his hooved little fingers around the glossy handle.

Arms crossed about her chest, V’sara bemusedly watched the bovine present his argument as to why the fight would be lopsided in his favor. Groaning, Liam pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingertips.

Right hand draping down at his side, the bull’s blade dragged along the road. “Just some fancy show-” Pulling up with his left hand, the thing wouldn’t budge.

“Eh? Hold on hold on hold on.” His fingers slipped free from around his weapon’s bandaged hilt, the rusted over piece of metal long past its prime. Both hands now wrapped firmly around the hammer’s wooden grip, Boris lifted up. “Nuffin more than... some cheap showmanship!” Cheeks puffed out, the bull balanced himself on the balls of his feet trying to move the damned thing. Arms strained and bulging, it felt like his limbs were going to tug themselves right out of their sockets! His shoulders sunk lower towards the earth the harder he tried to pull up! “Alright that’s a... a right impressive bit of showmanship!” For all his bluster and putting on airs, the cow ended up being able to lift the stone hammer head just up past his ankles before his muscles gave. It collapsed into the road with an ominous thoom, tiny hills of displaced dirt resting against its surface after having embedded itself into the path yet again.

“If you’ll excuse me,” V’sara politely inquired, shooing the bull back a couple paces to give her room. Twirling her left arm inwards, knuckles facing towards her, she grasped the warm handle between her fingertips. Twisting that same arm out and away from her, the hammer head scraped away the topsoil and clay layering the road during its ascent.

“May huv bitten off more than I can chew,” Boris gulped, both arms hanging down uselessly at his sides.

Standing half a head taller than the cow, the long shadow cast by V’sara’s weapon swallowed up the bovine whole. It continued its counterclockwise rotation, swinging away from the bull and allowing the blinding rays of the setting sun to shine in the hammer head’s looming absence. The lass clasped both hands around the wooden handle, tucking her limbs against her left shoulder. Ready to let loose the energy coiling up in her biceps, the edges of her lips curled into a gentle grin. “Say hi to Cleese for me!”

With that, she swung.

One instant Boris the bull was there. In the blink of an eye he was gone, replaced with a thunderous clap that accompanied a burst of air that blew everyone’s hair, provided they had any, and the nearby wild grasses onto their sides.

“MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Rendered a majestic mooing missile, Boris’ surprisingly aerodynamic form sailed across the countryside. Squinting her eyes, V’sara could just barely make out Cleese’s speck of a self about to vanish below the purple star stamped curtain that was the horizon.

Hmm... it looked like Cleese had stopped. Wait, nope, he was still at it! Crazy cow had leapt up into the air for some reason, perhaps in surprise at Boris honing in towards him?

Giggling to herself V'sara couldn't help but watch as the two collided together, the both of them tumbling over the edge of the horizon and out of sight. "Bullseye!"

"Why did I even bother..." Liam arched his fingers, his stiffened muscles reluctantly contracting as he clenched his fists. Wait. He grabbed at the humid air whisking through his digits. There was supposed to be a tortoise and a fox there.

"Aye lass, appreciate the distraction!" Tottering forward, Wickham dragged Timor by the cuff of his sleeves. In an effort to pick up the pace, the fox curled his arms under his teacher's and carried him along.

V'sara's ringed tail arced in waves behind her, the hammer holding lass releasing a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. "No worse for wear, I hope?"

Huffing and puffing, Timor dropped Wickham at her feet. "Some..." the vulpine tapped against his expanding and contracting rib cage following the burst of exercise, "some frayed nerves, but we'll live."

"Glad to hear it! Now then, I know I told you... woop! Hold that thought." She leapt forward, swinging her hammer across the length of her body. A square stone hammer face caught against Liam's brandished blade, snapping it in half where there had been a noticeable chip running parallel to its hilt. A spray of sparks and clang of metal announced its parting, the shattered sword bouncing off the ground and vanishing in foliage lining the road. V'sara continued to twirl about in the air, carried along by the sheer weight she tossed around with every strike.

Dumbfounded, Liam stared down at his hands. Coherent thought returned as the stinging lick of sparks that burned at his nose began to fade. His attempt to get the drop on those garrulous idiots had failed spectacularly, the lizard's efforts leaving him more or less unarmed. Swishing his wrist to and fro, it was hard to come off as threatening when wielding nothing more than a sword hilt. Perhaps, just this once, he should have deferred to those cows questionable judgment.

"Now, I mentioned I'd repay your kindness by recounting a tale or two, right? To pass the time?" Wickham and Timor nodded, unsure of where this was going. V'sara sauntered towards Liam, a sense of defeat having settled on his broad shoulders. "Would you two mind if I went about and weaved a new one for you instead?"

"And what's this fresh yarn of yours about, I wonder?" Wickham pondered aloud. Patting at Timor's back, the poor fox was still trembling.

"Oh, nothing much." Bouncing on the tips of her pointed boots she breathed in deeply; her taut toned stomach expanded and contracted with air. "Just a little ditty about stopping a highway robbery." Arms held out behind her and to the side, V'sara let the weight of the hammer swing down towards her feet like a pendulum. At the bottom of its arc she pulled up, adding her strength to gravity's own. "It goes a lot like my other stories, to be honest!"

No curses, no threats, or regrets spilled forth from the lizard's maw. Acknowledging the situation for what it was, he grit his teeth together and clenched his jaw shut.

The hammer cracked against the underside of Liam's chin, the dazed and confused lizard's forked tongue hanging out from the side of his mouth. Unable to contain itself to just Liam's limp form, the force of impact caused a shockwave of air to spread out from his feet. Pebbles and dirt were carried away in ripples on the wind. V'sara's blow rattling his very skull, Liam was hardly aware of the fact that his feet lifted off the ground. Or that he was spinning through the air far above any tree canopy, high enough even to startle a flock of low flying geese.

Staring slack jawed at the sight, Timor and Wickham could scant believe they were watching their troubles fly off into the sunset. Returning the favor from before, the fox cupped the tortoise's jaw in his palm and gently pressed the upper and lower halves together.

"Short and sweet," Timor was the first to break the silence, "but to the point." He didn't know whether it was terrifying or awe-inspiring that such a sight even had the potential to become dull and routine for Miss Sara.

"You know, you two could've just woke me up at the first sign of trouble!" Clenching the cracking leather reins between her fingers, V'sara pulled the wagon forward at a steady clip in a race against the sun. "I'm no stranger to danger." Leaving wispy clouds of dirt in the wagon's wake, the gush of air rushing past spun them into dust devils that twirled across the beaten path.

"Apologies, lass!" Bouncing back and forth in his seat, Wickham was continuously doling out apologies to his aide from all the bumps and bruises they were racking up on one another. "But you looked so peaceful whilst you slept. Who were we to interrupt your nap?"

"Awww well that's awful sweet of you!" Hair whipping back along her shoulders, that nap certainly had done her a great deal of good. "Say, isn't that your horse?" The trio peeled by a confused equine, their drive-by having interrupted its nibbling at the stalks along the road. Neighing in distress at having been shown up, it trotted after them.

"Ehh... he'll catch up eventually. Probably." Tapping at his furred chin, Timor could swear that the gap between them was widening. Turning back towards the front, the fox felt his face flush red at the sight of the lass' backside. "Thanks again for the lift, Miss Sara!"

"No problem, Timor! Figured my legs could use some stretching after laying about the whole of the afternoon."

Tail wrapped around his waist, the vulpine hugged it close for warmth. His cloak having flown off right when their trip practically resumed, Timor too shy to speak up about the fact. "So umm... how long do you think you'll linger in town? Once we get there, I mean."

Reaching over, Wickham gave his trainee a playful knock on the chin.

"Hard to say." The wagon creaked and rattled beneath V'sara's passengers. "At least a couple days, long enough to see you two set up shop and peruse your selection." She nuzzled her chin against her shoulder, smiling back at the flustered fox.

“G-good to know.” Much like her yawns, those smiles of Miss Sara’s were infectious. “Might I uhh... once we’re all settled I mean, maybe I could interest you in a new sling for your hammer?” He felt a nudge at his shoulder and shooshedly laughed it off. “Wickham!”

“Atta boy.” A knowing grin spread wide across his wrinkled mug, the tortoise leaned back into his seat. Laughing to himself, the proud old tortoise basked in the fading glow of sun.