

SHADOWPLAY IN SHERWOOD

an adventure of Robin Hood



UENK PulpWorks

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AN ADVENTURE OF ROBIN HOOD

A story by UENK

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PROLOGUE

SILK AND SWEAT

The silk sheets were soaked through with sweat, stale wine, and the heavy, cloying scent of burnt wax.

Robin stared up at the timber rafters of the command tent, his chest heaving as the last echoes of frantic breathing faded into the damp night air. Beside him, tangled in the purple fabric, lay two young noblewomen from the valley, fast asleep. Their hair was matted with sweat, silver ribbons coming loose from their braids. One of them shifted, her bare arm draped heavily across his bruised ribs, murmuring something unintelligible into the bolster.

He didn't move. He couldn't.

His skin felt cold, clammy, and hollowed out.
A half-empty glass vial of poppy extract lay on
the low oak table beside the bed, catching the
amber flicker of a dying oil lamp.

Down in the clearing, outside the thick canvas
walls, a sentry's heavy boot crunched against
the wet mud, followed by the muffled,
drunken laughter of outlaws celebrating a raid
that hadn't happened. They were cheering for
the myth. They were cheering for the
invincible hero of Sherwood who conquered
everything in his path.

Robin turned his head, looking at his own
reflection in the polished brass base of the
lamp.

The face staring back was hollow, ringed with
dark exhaustion and a deep, festering self-
loathing. He reached out with a trembling
hand, his fingers hovering over the glass vial,
knowing full well that tomorrow the machine

would demand another performance, another
lie, and another piece of his soul.

CHAPTER 1

THE MARKET SQUARE SHOT

The crowd smelled like wet wool, unwashed bodies, and stale barley beer.

They wanted a miracle. They always wanted a miracle, pressing inward until the wooden barriers groaned under the weight of the poor. Robin stood on the raised timber platform with the midday sun hammering down the back of his neck. His tunic, dyed that specific, aggressive shade of olive-green Tuck insisted upon for the balladeers, felt three sizes too small. It constricted his ribs.

Around him, the village elders and the Sheriff's bailiffs whispered behind gloved hands, treating him like a prize stallion before a county fair.

"Make the shot, hero," muttered a greasy-haired minstrel leaning against the scaffolding, his lute case banging against his knee. "The crowd's paid for a legend. Don't give them a stutter."

Robin didn't look at him. He couldn't.

His right hand was shaking. Not from the cold; it was July, and the air hung thick and greasy with midges, but from the thin, bitter film lining the bottom of his pewter flask. Three drops of poppy wine. Just enough to stop the tremor in his index finger, just enough to blur the edges of the screaming mob into manageable grey smudges.

He reached back, drawing the heavy yew bow from its sling. The string made a dry, humming snap as it cleared the leather.

Across the muddy market square, seventy yards away, a willow wand had been driven

into the earth with a silver penny lashed to its tip. To any other man, it looked like a toothpick. To Robin, through the grey chemical haze creeping behind his eyes, it looked like it was breathing. Expanding and contracting with the rhythm of his own erratic pulse.

A heavy silence dropped over the square. The thousands of coughs, arguments, and crying infants died down into a collective, damp intake of breath. They were leaning forward. Waiting for the symbol.

Robin raised the bow.

His muscles locked, heavy and sluggish. The bowstring dragged against his cheek, smelling of horse grease and sweat. His knuckles turned white as he fought to anchor his draw, but the tip of the arrow danced in erratic circles around the target.

God damn it.

His stomach heaved. The crowd blurred into a shifting wall of expectant faces. Friar Tuck was standing near the stocks, nodding slowly, his lips moving in a silent, theatrical countdown meant to hype the spectators.

Robin closed his left eye. He forced his breathing down, pushing past the panic clawing at his throat, and let the poppy wine pull a heavy blanket over his screaming nerves. The world narrowed down to a single point: the glint of the silver penny in the afternoon glare.

He lost.

The bow sang a flat, brutal chord. The shaft tore through the stagnant air, hissed over the heads of the front row, and struck the willow wand with a sharp *crack*.

The silver penny spun off into the mud.

For half a second, there was dead quiet. Then the square erupted. A deafening wall of roars, stamping boots, and hurled caps rose toward the timber eaves. People surged forward, clawing at the wooden rails just to touch the hem of his olive-green kolder.

Robin lowered the bow. His arm felt leaden, hollowed out.

He didn't wave. He didn't smile for the minstrels sketching his profile from the tavern windows. He just stared down at his own hand, watching the long, slow tremor return to his fingers the moment the applause hit his ears.

CHAPTER 2

THE FRIAR'S MACHINE

The ink was still wet on the broadsheet when Tuck slammed it onto the oak trestle.

"Look at that line," Tuck grunted, his heavy thumb smearing a dollop of fresh lamp-black across the illustration of Robin's bow. "The Northern Barons eat this up. We've secured three casks of silver coin from the Bishop of Lincoln's disgruntled cousins alone. All it cost was a couple of extra verses about you weeping over the orphans of Nottingham."

Robin didn't look up from his whetstone. *Scree-ch. Scree-ch.* The steel blade grated against the wet grey stone, throwing off tiny, grey metallic curls.

"They aren't orphans," Robin said. His voice was flat. "They're farm kids whose barn was

burned down by the Sheriff's outriders last Tuesday."

"Details." Tuck waved a chubby, ink-stained hand, pacing across the cramped floorboards of the command tent. The heavy canvas walls billowed inward with a damp draft of wind from the forest floor. "Details don't buy crossbow bolts out of Flanders. Details don't pay the scouts watching the Great North Road. You want to feed the camp? You want to keep your neck out of a hemp noose? You need a brand, Robin. People don't die for a localised tax dispute. They die for a symbol."

Tuck picked up a parchment scroll, squinting at the ledger scrawled in his own neat, greedy hand.

"Next week, the balladeers are hitting the southern fairs. We're pushing the 'Defender of the Poor' angle harder. Less mud, more shine. I've had the tailors adjust the shade of your

tunic. Brighter green. Shows up better in the torchlight during evening recitals."

Robin stopped scraping the blade.

He stared at his reflection in the dull, oiled metal of the broadsheet layout lying among the candle stubs. The artist had drawn him with a jawline carved of granite and eyes burning with righteous fury. A spotless hero staring into a glorious dawn.

Not the man who spent every morning vomiting bile into a bucket behind his camp cot. Not the man whose hands shook so violently without the poppy resin that he couldn't thread his own bowstring.

"You're selling shirts, Tuck," Robin whispered.

The friar paused, his quill hovering over a tally sheet. He offered a thin, tired smile that didn't reach his small, sharp eyes.

"I'm keeping us alive, my boy. Now stop whining and sign off on the new ballad. The couriers leave for Lincoln in an hour."

CHAPTER 3

THE OLIVE-DRAB UNIFORM

The mud of Sherwood didn't care about geopolitics. It sucked at the polished boots of the French envoy just as greedily as it did at the bare heels of an outlaw runaway.

Monsieur de Valois adjusted the lace at his collar, his nose wrinkled against the heavy stench of woodsmoke, wet horsehide, and unwashed wool. Behind him, a delegation of Highland Scots in heavy, plaid mantles leaned on their broadswords, their breath pluming in the damp morning chill. They had ridden hard past the burning timber mills of Nottingham to get here.

They weren't looking for an outlaw. They were looking for a symbol with a pulse.

Robin stood by the central fire pit, shifting his weight from one aching foot to the other. The olive-green kolder felt like a lead weight stitched to his shoulders. Tuck had insisted on double-layering the wool across the chest so it held its shape for the foreign sketch artists sitting quietly on dry stumps at the edge of the clearing, charcoal pencils flying across parchment.

"We require guarantees, Loxley," de Valois said, his French accent dripping like spoiled grease through the smoke. "King Charles does not fund ghosts in the underbrush. If the supply lines through Calais are to remain open, Paris needs to know its coin is buying a front, not a retreating mob."

"We aren't a mob," Robin muttered. His voice was too low, cracked with the stale residue of morning poppy wine.

"Then act like a commander," the Frenchman snapped, stepping closer, his hand resting on the pommel of an ivory-hilted dagger. "Put on the show. Wave the bow. Let my scribes sketch the defiance in your eyes. Because back in Paris, the court is losing its appetite for a rebellion that only burns down local granaries."

A cold sweat broke out along Robin's collarbone. He could feel the eyes of the entire camp on him, the scouts sharpening blades by the racks, the ragged women hauling firewood, and, worst of all, the foreign delegates waiting for their investment to perform. He wasn't a man anymore. He was a billboard dressed in forest green, nailed to a tree in the middle of a proxy war.

"Tell Charles his iron will reach the northern border by Thursday," Robin said, forcing his chin up, though his jaw muscles twitched. "Just make sure the gold clears the Flemish

banks before the Sheriff's outriders hit our southern perimeter."

De Valois studied him for a long, quiet second, then offered a tight, mocking smirk.

"See that it does, hero. The crown hates a disappointing return."

CHAPTER 4

THE FLEMISH IRON ROUTES

The grease on the crates smelled of old tallow and salt marsh.

Robin cut the hemp lashing with a short-bladed hunting knife, the fibres snapping with a dry *thwack*. Inside the damp pine box lay four heavy steel crossbows, packed tight in dried reeds. No English smith could forge steel like this. The prods were thick, dark, and cold to the touch, tempered in the furnaces of Bruges and hauled across the North Sea in the bottom of a smuggling cog with a false bottom full of salt fish.

"Ten crates tonight," muttered Van Houten, wiping his wet nose on the sleeve of a heavy wool coat. The Flemish smuggler spat a glob of dark tobacco juice into the forest muck, eyeing the shadows of the tree line with permanent

suspicion. "That's the last of the lot from the Sluys shipment. But the price has gone up, Loxley. The Sheriff's patrol boats are crawling over every inch of the estuary."

"The price was agreed," Robin said. He ran a gloved thumb down the polished stock of a crossbow, feeling the dense, heavy weight of foreign hardware.

"Agreed in silver, sure. But silver doesn't buy silence when the King's tax-men start asking why a dozen Flemish cogs are unloading crates of war-gear in a private cove." Van Houten leaned closer, smelling faintly of sour wine and unwashed wool. "You want to play the great rebel leader for the French court? Fine. But men don't fight a proxy war with broadsheets and green tunics. They fight with iron. And iron costs blood or coin."

Robin reached into his leather pouch, his fingers brushing the small glass vial of poppy

extract before closing around a heavy leather purse of minted silver groats. He tossed it.

The smuggler caught it out of the air with a practiced snap, weighing it in his palm before biting the edge of a coin.

"Pleasure doing business with the legend," Van Houten grunted, turning back toward the muddy trail where his mules stood shackled in the fog.

Robin stood alone in the dark clearing, listening to the heavy creak of timber and the slop of hooves fading into the mist. He wasn't a liberator anymore. He was a fence. A high-stakes broker moving contraband through a criminal underworld, keeping a ragged band of cutthroats and runaway serfs armed just enough to keep the proxy war bleeding.

He picked up a heavy steel bolt, its iron tip gleaming dull and lethal in the torchlight, and

wondered how many more shipments of
Flemish iron it would take before the weight of
it crushed him completely.

CHAPTER 5

FLIGHT IN SILK

The canvas walls of the command tent muffled the rain, turning the downpour outside into a thick, wet hum. Inside, it smelled of burnt wax, heavy oriental perfumes, and sweet, boiled poppy.

Robin sank deeper into the looted cushions of purple silk. His boots were off, exposing wool-socked feet that twitched against the thick Persian rugs, prizes hauled from a merchant caravan three nights ago. Around him, the tent glowed with the amber light of four brass oil lamps, casting long, distorted shadows across the embroidered tapestries that lined the poles.

A young noblewoman from the valleys, her hair braided with silver ribbons, leaned over

his knees, laughing at something he couldn't quite remember saying.

"Tell them about the ambush at the ford again, Robin," she murmured, her fingers tracing the thick leather seam of his belt. "Tell them how the Sheriff's men broke."

Robin blinked, his eyelids feeling like lead. The faces surrounding him, three adoring acolytes of the local gentry who had sneaked past the pickets just to breathe the same air as the legend, swam in a warm, amber haze. He raised a silver chalice to his lips, but his hand shook so badly the cheap red wine slopped over the rim, staining the silk on his thigh.

He forced a grin. It felt like cracking dry clay.

"They broke," Robin whispered, his voice raspy. "They ran like sheep when the arrows hit the mud."

The women giggled, leaning in closer, basking in the reflected glory of a man they thought they knew. None of them saw the small, dark glass vial hidden beneath the folds of his tunic. None of them noticed the way his thumb compulsively rubbed the chipped cork, seeking the familiar, bitter sting of the resin.

They saw a hero resting in luxury.

Beneath the haze of the poppy, Robin stared past their smiling faces at his own reflection in the polished brass base of a lamp. The eyes staring back were hollow, ringed with dark, exhausted purple. A wave of cold, sharp self-loathing hit him behind the ribs, cutting straight through the drug's warm blanket.

Fraud, a voice hissed in the back of his skull.
Murderer. A drug-addled puppet hiding behind a green kolder while kids die in the ditches.

"More wine, my lord?" the woman asked, her fingers brushing his cheek.

Robin swallowed the bitter metallic taste rising in his throat, forced another hollow smile, and reached blindly for the vial.

CHAPTER 6

ASH AND QUARREL

The canvas flap dropped back into place, cutting off the chatter of the departing nobles. The silence that followed felt heavy, smelling sharply of stale wine and spent candle tallow.

Marian stood by the brazier at the back of the tent. Her cloak was damp with the midnight fog, and she didn't look at the expensive Persian rugs or the looted silk cushions scattered across the floorboards. She looked straight at Robin.

"Get up," she said. Her voice was flat, stripped of all warmth.

Robin didn't move from his pile of cushions. He kept his fingers curled tightly around the dark glass vial hidden in his palm. "They were

just paying their respects, Marian. It's part of the machinery. Tuck says."

"Tuck can go rot in a swamp," Marian snapped, taking two sharp steps forward. The toe of her boot kicked against an empty silver chalice, sending it clattering across the oak floorboards. "And so can you, if this is what you've become."

Robin flinched, the poppy haze splintering under the sudden, cold edge in her tone. "We need the gentry's coin. You know how much the Flemish steel costs."

"Don't talk to me about steel!" Marian's voice cracked, the raw fury breaking through her tight control. She pointed a gloved finger toward the tent flap, out toward the dark, sprawling mud of the encampment. "Down by the lower trench, young Wat is sitting with a shattered knee because your 'brand' needed a glorious victory on the Great North Road. And

what are you doing? Hiding behind scented candles, drowning yourself in poppy extract while a bunch of simpering county girls stroke your ego!"

Robin pushed himself up, his head swimming, the synthetic warmth of the drug wearing thin against the spike of adrenaline. "I'm keeping this rebellion alive!"

"You're keeping *yourself* numb!" Marian shouted, stepping right up to him. The smell of woodsmoke and rain rolled off her wool cloak. She reached out, her hand flashing forward with shocking speed, and knocked the small glass vial straight out of his grip.

It hit the rug with a dull thud, unbroken, rolling into the shadows near a brass lamp.

Robin stared down at the spot where it had vanished, a sudden, blind panic clawing at his throat. "You shouldn't have done that."

"Look at me, Robin." Her voice dropped, turning fierce and desperate. She grabbed the front of his wool kolder, bunching the green fabric in her fists, forcing him to meet her eyes. "Where is the man who cared about the people in the valleys? This isn't a war anymore. It's a theatre. You're playing the tragic hero in a play written by Tuck and paid for by the French, while you rot from the inside out."

"And if I stop?" Robin snarled, his own temper finally snapping as he jerked back from her grip. His chest heaved. "If I stop playing the legend for one damn second, the whole thing collapses! The Sheriff hangs us all by sundown!"

"Then let it collapse," she whispered, her eyes shining with unshed tears in the amber lamp-light. "At least we'd die as ourselves. Not as ghosts in green wool."

She turned on her heel before he could answer, pulling the tent flap aside. The cold night air rushed in, carrying the distant, mocking sound of a sentry coughing in the dark. The flap fell shut, leaving Robin standing alone among the silk and ash, staring at the empty floor where the bottle had fallen.

CHAPTER 7

THE ICE KINGS OF COMPROMISE

The mud of Sherwood stuck to velvet slippers. It was an offensive sound; a wet, squelching suction against imported Flemish wool that made Lord Cushyn wince with every step.

He picked his way carefully past a stack of curing hides, holding a scented linen handkerchief to his nose. Behind him strode Heer Wyckoff, his heavy gold rings catching the pale, filtered light of the canopy. The real estate baron didn't mind the mud so much; he was too busy calculating the board-feet of old-growth timber in the surrounding oaks and mentally subdividing the clearing into taxable leasehold plots.

They found Robin sitting on a damp oak stump outside the main command tent, his

fingers idly scraping dried mud off his boots with a hunting knife.

"Magnificent setup you have here, Loxley," Cushyn said, his voice smooth, unctuous, and entirely out of place among the woodsmoke and the smell of unwashed outlaws. He flashed a smile that revealed too many teeth. "A bit drafty, perhaps. But authentic. Very... rustic."

Robin didn't look up from his boot. "If you're here to sell more broadsheets, Tuck is down by the stew pots."

"We aren't merchants, my boy," Wyckoff rumbled, stepping forward and dropping a heavy leather pouch onto the stump with a solid, metallic thud. The gold coins inside clinked against each other. "We're realists. And right now, the Crown is looking to clear its ledger of expensive little nuisances in the greenwood."

Robin finally raised his head. His eyes were bloodshot, the shadow of the previous night's argument with Marian still hanging heavy under his brow.

Cushyn produced a tightly rolled parchment secured with a broad red wax seal, smoothing it out over his knee.

"Full royal amnesty for the leadership," Cushyn recited smoothly, as if reading off a shipping manifest. "All bounties rescinded. You, Little John, the Friar, all cleared of treason. Property rights restored in the upper valleys. A clean slate."

Robin stared at the seal. "And the villages? The people whose homes the Sheriff burned last month?"

Wyckoff let out a short, dismissive laugh, adjusting the heavy fur collar of his tunic.

"Markets fluctuate, Loxley. Rebuilding takes capital, and capital requires stability. Which brings us to the small print."

Cushyn tapped a manicured fingernail against the bottom of the parchment.

"The Sheriff stays in Nottingham Castle," Cushyn said, his tone dropping its false warmth, turning clinical and sharp. "He manages the tax collection, the crown keeps its administrative structure intact, and you and your inner circle quietly retire to private estates across the channel. Everyone gets a payout. Everyone wins."

Robin looked from the smooth, smiling face of the networker to the cold, calculating eyes of the land speculator. They had packaged a surrender and called it peace.

"And if we say no?" Robin asked quietly.

Cushyn smiled, refolding the parchment with meticulous care. "Then the supply lines from Flanders dry up by Friday. The French court shifts its gold elsewhere. And the Sheriff brings down five hundred heavily armoured knights into these woods before the first frost. It's simple arithmetic, really."

CHAPTER 8

SABOTAGE IN THE SHADOW

The parchment with the red wax seal was gone, but its poison remained.

It leaked through the camp like damp rot in tent timber. By Thursday morning, the central clearing felt different. The scouts didn't meet Robin's eyes when he walked past the armoury. Little John was leaning against a beech tree, sharpening a broadhead with short, angry strokes of his whetstone, whispering in low, jagged fragments with three of the senior bowmen.

"They're taking the deal," Little John muttered, not looking up as Robin approached. "Wyckoff's clerks spent the entire night down at the lower tavern. Handing out land deeds for the southern fenlands, sealed in

the Sheriff's name. Half the boys from the Nottingham brigade are packing their gear."

Robin felt a cold prickle of sweat crawl down his spine. "Who?"

"Does it matter?" John spat, throwing the whetstone into the dirt. "Stutely took a pouch of silver. So did Miller's lads. They're calling it a 'strategic withdrawal.' They say you're losing your mind in that silk tent of yours anyway."

Robin didn't answer. He turned sharply on his heel, his boots churning up the wet mulch as he stormed toward the supply stores.

The heavy canvas sheds smelled of spoiled corn and wet canvas. He pulled back the flap of the primary ammunition cache, his breath catching in his throat.

The crates of Flemish steel were half-empty. The heavy crossbows, smuggled at such great

risk across the North Sea just days before, had been replaced with stacks of waterlogged pine logs painted to look like hardware from a distance. Someone had traded the lifeblood of the rebellion for a collection of paper titles and royal pardons.

"Looking for your leverage, Loxley?"

Robin whipped around.

A junior scout, a kid named Hal who had barely seen seventeen winters, stood in the dim doorway, holding a heavy iron ledger under one arm. His hands were shaking, but his chin was stubbornly raised.

"Cushyn says the war's over, Robin," Hal mumbled, his voice cracking slightly on the name. "We get the amnesty. The Sheriff stays, sure, but... nobody else has to die for a lost cause. You can't shoot a treaty with an arrow."

Robin took a slow step forward, his hand dropping automatically toward the hunting knife at his belt. The air in the shed felt thin, suffocating.

"You traded our iron for a piece of paper, Hal?" Robin's voice was dangerously quiet.

"I traded it for a future," the kid fired back, stepping backward into the shadows of the tree line. "Which is more than you've given us since you started living like a king in the mud."

Before Robin could close the distance, a loud crash echoed from the centre of the camp. Shouts erupted near the mess tent, followed by the sound of splintering wood and drawn steel. The internal rot had finally broken the skin, and Sherwood was tearing itself apart from the inside.

CHAPTER 9

THE BESIEGER IN THE TREEHOUSE

Outside, the forest was burning.

The heavy, acrid smell of pitch and burning pine drifted up through the floorboards of the high oak platform, stinging Robin's eyes.

Down in the valley, the Sheriff's outriders had spent three days ringing the outer perimeter with torches and siege engines, turning every secondary camp into a smoking crater. But the smoke wasn't what kept Robin awake.

It was the silence at the base of the ladder.

A heavy iron bowl of salt pork and dark rye sat on the rough-hewn table. Robin stared at it, his thumb nervously turning the chipped glass vial in his palm. His skin felt too tight for his bones. Every shadow stretching across the canvas walls looked like a notched crossbow.

Every creak of the straining oak boughs sounded like footsteps climbing toward his door.

Heavy, slow steps hit the lower rungs of the ladder.

Robin's hand whipped out, snatching his hunting knife from the wood. He half-crouched, his breath coming in shallow, ragged hitches, muscles locked tight in a cold sweat.

The hatch lifted with a groan. Little John's broad, scarred face appeared in the opening, dark with soot and sheer, unadulterated exhaustion. He held up empty hands, staring at Robin with a look that mixed profound pity with cold disgust.

"It's just me," John muttered, his voice gravelly. He hauled his massive frame through

the hatch and dropped heavily onto a wooden stool.

Robin didn't lower the knife. His eyes darted from John's face to the wooden bowl on the table. "Did you check it?"

John stopped. A slow, heavy anger settled into the lines around his mouth. "What?"

"The food," Robin snapped, his voice cracking slightly at the edges. "Did you taste it, John? Did you use the silver spoon?"

"I tasted it, Robin," John said quietly, leaning forward so the candlelight caught the thick sweat glistening on his forehead. "It's salt pork. Just like yesterday. And the day before that. Nobody's trying to poison you. They don't have to. You're doing it to yourself."

Robin didn't blink. His pulse hammered like a trapped bird against his ribs. "Cushyn's men

are still out there. Hal took the ledger. For all we know, the whole camp has taken the Sheriff's silver. You could be carrying a packet of nightshade right now just to clear the board."

John stared at him for a long, brutal second. Then, slowly, he shook his head, stood up, and walked over to the open hatch.

"Eat it yourself, Loxley," John said over his shoulder, his voice flat and hard as iron. He dropped down through the opening, the rungs creaking beneath his boots as he climbed back down into the dark.

Robin stood alone in the suffocating heat of the platform. The knife felt heavy and useless in his trembling hand. He looked down at the dark, grey meat on the table, swallowed the metallic taste of terror rising in his throat, and reached blindly into his tunic for the poppy vial.

CHAPTER 10

THE PR TOURNAMENT

The banners strung across the scaffolding of the tournament green fluttered in the sharp autumn gale, dyed a blinding, arrogant crimson.

Lord Cushyn paced back and forth across the wooden viewing platform, his velvet slippers crunching softly against spilled wine stains. Beside him, Heer Wyckoff leaned heavily on his gold-tipped cane, his eyes locked on the packed, mud-slicked arena below where knights in heavy plate armour battered each other for the amusement of the gentry.

"He won't show," Wyckoff grunted, a thin cloud of steam pluming from his lips in the cold morning air. "The man is hiding in the

oaks, rotting away on poppy resin and paranoia. His little rebellion is a spent candle."

"He *will* show," Cushyn replied smoothly, flashing a sharp, confident smile as he adjusted his heavy fur collar. "We planted the broadsheets across every village from here to Lincoln three days ago. We made it about his pride. We reminded the peasants that their great hero is sitting silent while the crown dictates terms. Vanity is a powerful leash, Wyckoff. He cares more about the brand than his own pulse."

High above the camp, hidden inside a damp, shadowed timber lean-to at the edge of the wood line, Robin stared down at his own hands.

They wouldn't stop shaking.

Without the poppy extract, his entire skeletal frame felt like it was wired with raw, exposed

copper conducting lightning. Cold sweat soaked through his linen shirt, matting the fabric to his chest. Every joint ached with a deep, bone-crushing lethargy, accompanied by a relentless, nauseating vertigo that made the cheering crowds below tilt sideways.

"You shouldn't go down there, Robin," Marian said quietly from the doorway. She stood with her arms tightly crossed over her wool cloak, her face pale and lined with exhaustion.

"Cushyn's traps are laid out in the open. It's a staged execution disguised as a festival."

Robin didn't look at her. He reached out with trembling, clumsy fingers, grabbing his heavy yew bow from the leaning rack. The wood felt foreign, impossibly heavy.

"If I stay here, the myth dies anyway," Robin whispered, his voice raspy and thin, stripped of any authority. "Tuck's broadsheets are

already printed. The whole valley thinks I've turned cowards' hide."

He forced his boots onto his feet, biting down hard on the inside of his cheek until he tasted copper, driving back the wave of nausea. He had to stand in front of the crowd. He had to prove he was still the icon.

Dragging his boots through the freezing autumn mud, Robin stepped out of the tree line and walked toward the blinding crimson banners of the tournament arena.

CHAPTER 11

THE PUBLIC HUMILIATION

The roar of the crowd sounded like a physical blow.

Robin stood on the elevated timber shooting platform, the autumn wind whipping the green fabric of his tunic against his ribs. Seventy yards away, across the churned mud of the tournament green, a gold-painted target mocked him under the harsh midday sun.

His fingers were ice. Without the poppy resin to anchor his nervous system, his entire right hand jerked with a violent, rhythmic tremor.

"Draw, hero!" someone shouted from the lower stands, a metallic edge of mockery slicing through the jeers.

Robin forced his fingers around the hemp bowstring. He pulled. The wood resisted, groaning under his strain, but his shoulder muscles locked tight and uncooperative. The arrow didn't just waver; it danced in jagged, frantic circles across open air.

Just breathe, he told himself, tasting the sharp copper of his own bitten cheek. *Just pull*.

He released.

The shaft didn't even reach the target. It tumbled end-over-end through the damp air, plunging deep into the mud a full twenty paces short of the straw butt.

A sudden, suffocating silence dropped over the arena, instantly replaced by a wave of harsh, jeering laughter.

From the royal box above the archway, the Sheriff stepped forward, his heavy velvet cloak

sweeping behind him like a dark wing. He didn't look angry; he looked profoundly, publicly amused. He raised a hand, signalling the heralds to silence the crowd.

"Look upon him, good people of Nottingham!" the Sheriff's voice boomed across the yard, sharp and dripping with theatrical contempt. "Look at the great defender of the greenwood! Not a hero, but a hollowed-out addict shaking in his own boots, sustained entirely by stolen coin and foreign pity."

The Sheriff gestured down toward Robin with an open palm.

"He can't even string his own bow without a vial of opium to steady his pulse. The legend is a ghost. A cracked idol standing on clay feet!"

Robin stood frozen on the platform, the blood ringing in his ears. Down in the VIP gallery, Lord Cushyn didn't hesitate. He smoothly

adjusted the cuffs of his velvet coat, exchanged a cold, knowing smirk with Heer Wyckoff, and turned his back on the stage. Without a word of protest, Cushyn stepped forward and extended his hand directly to the Sheriff in a crisp, finalizing shake. The brokers had cut their losses; the brand was officially dead.

Robin looked down at his own trembling, empty hands, realising too late that the stage had never been his. It was just a trap, and the curtain had finally fallen.

CHAPTER 12

THE NIGHT OF THE LONG ARROWS

The fire didn't start with a warning. It started with a wet, heavy thud against canvas and the sharp stench of burning oil.

Robin jerked awake on his camp cot, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm against his ribs. The walls of the command tent were already glowing an angry, flickering orange. Outside, the night tore open with the screams of dying men, the thunder of armoured hooves, and the brutal, rhythmic *crunch* of iron-shod boots smashing through wooden barricades.

"Up! Get up!"

Little John burst through the tent flap, his face smeared with soot and blood, clutching a heavy iron-headed mace. "The Sheriff's men!

They've flanked the lower trenches from the marsh road. The whole camp is on fire!"

Before Robin could grab his boots, a massive oak timber supporting the tent ridge snapped with a deafening groan. Flaming canvas collapsed inward, showering the floor with sparks and burning embers.

Robin scrambled backwards, coughing as the thick, acrid smoke filled his lungs. He grabbed his yew bow from the rack, but his fingers were slick with cold sweat, the tremor returning with a vengeance.

"Where's Marian?" Robin shouted over the roar of the flames.

"She's heading for the western creek with the supply mules!" John yelled back, ducking as a heavy iron-tipped cross-bolt punched straight through the canvas wall, burying itself deep into the oak table beside them. "We can't hold

this position, Robin! The whole place is overrun!"

They burst out of the burning tent into a nightmare of mud and steel.

The forest clearing of Sherwood had turned into a slaughterhouse. Heavy iron-clad knights on armoured destriers trampled the mess tents, swinging broadswords at anything that moved. The Merry Men, disorganised, terrified, and betrayed from within, were shattering in all directions. Some threw down their weapons and fled blindly into the dark, tangled undergrowth of the deep woods. Others were cut down where they stood in the mud, pinned beneath the hooves of the Sheriff's cavalry.

"Fall back to the creek!" John roared, grabbing Robin by the shoulder and shoving him hard toward the dark shadows of the tree line.

Robin stumbled through the muck, his boots sliding in blood and wet leaves. He looked back just once: the great green banners of Sherwood were burning into black ash, and the brand he had spent years building was being ground into the mud under iron heels.

CHAPTER 13

THE STONE FLOOR

The air inside the cell smelled of wet lime, cold damp stone, and stale sweat.

Robin curled into a tight ball on the rough woollen pallet, his teeth rattling so hard his jaw ached. Every inch of his skin felt like it was crawling with live insects. Cold sweat poured down his temples, soaking into the coarse blanket beneath him. Without the poppy extract, his body was screaming, tearing itself apart from the inside out with violent cramps and a burning, unbearable fever.

"Drink," Marian whispered.

She knelt beside the pallet, pressing a wooden cup of bitter herbal broth to his lips. Her hands were steady, though dark circles stained the skin beneath her eyes. She had smuggled

him out of the burning ruins of Sherwood under a cartload of salted fish, dodging the Sheriff's outriders all the way to the edge of the desolate fenlands.

Robin jerked away, gagging as a wave of nausea hit him. He knocked the cup from her hand, sending dark liquid splashing across the grey flagstones.

"Kill me," he gasped, his voice a hoarse, shredded whisper. "Just... make it stop."

"No," Marian said quietly. She didn't yell. She didn't pity him. She simply picked up the empty wooden cup, set it aside, and pulled another heavy wool blanket over his shivering shoulders. "The monks don't allow screaming here, Robin. And they certainly don't allow opium. You sweat it out, or you die on this floor."

The Carthusian monastery offered no comfort, only absolute, crushing silence. Day after day blurred into a nightmare of chills, hallucinations, and agonising muscle spasms.

When the worst of the fever finally broke, leaving him weak as a newborn lamb, the labour began. There were no broadsheets here, no cheering crowds, and no admiring nobles. There was only the brutal, rhythmic grind of heavy stone.

In the grey dawn light, Robin hauled massive blocks of damp granite alongside silent, cowed monks, his blistered hands bleeding against the rough rock. He dug irrigation ditches through the heavy marsh clay until his back felt ready to snap. Every muscle burned. Every breath scraped his raw lungs.

Yet, as the weeks bled into one another, something shifted behind his eyes.

The chemical fog slowly evaporated. The paranoid hum in his skull went quiet. Stripped of the green kolder, the titles, and the endless performance, the blurred edges of his mind sharpened into absolute, cold clarity. For the first time in years, Robin wasn't playing a part. He was just a man, standing on a cold stone floor, sharp and ready for blood.

CHAPTER 14

THE SILENT SHADOW

The broadsheet fluttered from the tavern wall, pinned into the damp oak timber with a rusted iron nail.

In the woodcut illustration, Robin of Loxley was depicted as a bloated, broken phantom collapsing into the mud, weeping over a shattered bow. Below the image, the ink was fresh, detailing the grand poetic elegy composed by the king's official minstrels. They celebrated the death of the myth with grand flourishes, spinning romanticized ballads about the final, miserable collapse of the greenwood outlaw. Lord Cushyn and Heer Wyckoff had funded every word of it, distributing the pamphlets from Nottingham to London to assure the gentry that the nuisance was buried.

Inside a low-ceilinged, soot-blackened smithy fifty miles away, nobody was reading poetry.

The air tasted of hot charcoal, sulphur, and unwashed iron. Robin stood over the forge; his bare forearms corded with muscle and crisscrossed with white, fading scars from his labour in the fens. He wasn't wearing the olive-green kolder anymore. His tunic was a plain, dull shade of charcoal grey, stripped of all emblems, ribbons, and theatrical flair.

He pumped the heavy leather bellows with a steady, metronomic rhythm. *Hiss. Roar. Hiss.*

A thick bar of dark Flemish steel glowed a blinding, angry orange in the centre of the coals.

Little John sat on an overturned anvil nearby, oiling the action of a heavy crossbow with a heavy rag. There were no crowds here. No adoring young nobles, no sketching artists,

and no trailing reporters looking for a headline. The bloated, performance-driven circus of Sherwood was gone, burned to ash.

"The word from Nottingham," John rumbled, his voice dropping low as he worked a steel pin into place, "is that Cushyn and the Sheriff are hosting a victory banquet at the castle next week. Celebrating the final clearance of the southern trade routes."

Robin didn't look up from the fire. His eyes were cold, fixed entirely on the shifting colours of the heating metal.

"Let them celebrate," Robin said. His voice was level, completely devoid of the old performative swagger.

"They're travelling light," John continued, testing the trigger mechanism with a sharp *clack*. "Just their core guards and the brokers. No broadsheets. No fanfare."

"Good."

Robin reached out with a pair of long iron tongs, lifting the glowing bar of Flemish steel straight out of the coals. He laid it flat against the anvil. Raising a heavy, double-handed hammer, he brought it down with a brutal, ringing crash.

Clang.

Sparks showered outward, dying instantly against the cold stone floor. There were no PR stunts left. No grand symbols designed to feed the masses. Just a compact, terrifyingly efficient cell sharpening its teeth in the dark, waiting to strike.

CHAPTER 15

THE BANQUET OF THE SLAUGHTER

The Great Hall of Nottingham Castle reeked of roasted capon, spilled claret, and unearned triumph.

Long oak tables groaned beneath the weight of silver platters, piled high with rich meats and exotic fruits hauled from southern ports. At the high table, Lord Cushyn laughed loudly at something the Sheriff muttered, his velvet sleeves brushing against a fresh parchment treaty sealed with thick royal wax. Beside them, Heer Wyckoff carved a thick slice of spiced boar, his rings catching the harsh, yellow glare of a dozen iron torch-brackets.

They were celebrating the new exploitation pact, carving up the marshlands and forest borders into tidy, lucrative leaseholds now that the greenwood ghost was dead.

None of them noticed the heavy iron service door at the back of the hall easing open.

Robin stepped inside, moving with a silent, heavy grace. He wore no bright green kolder today, no theatrical flourishes, and no badges of a beloved icon. Encased in a functional, dull-grey harness of hardened Flemish steel, he looked less like a romantic hero and more like a walking executioner. The dark metal absorbed the torchlight, throwing no reflections, casting no grand shadows.

A royal guard, half-drunk on spiced ale, leaned lazily against a stone pillar near the dais, his broadsword resting loosely in its scabbard.

He didn't see the dark figure detach from the shadows until the iron-gloved hand clamped over his mouth, cutting off his breath. There was no theatrical challenge, no grand declaration of vengeance. A short, brutal

thrust of a Flemish steel blade beneath the ribs, a brief shudder against the cold chainmail, and the guard slid silently into the rushes.

Robin lowered the body without a sound.

Across the hall, the laughter of the elite rose over the sound of lute music. Cushyn raised his silver goblet in a toast, clinking it against the Sheriff's iron cup as they sealed the treaty in blood and gold.

Robin adjusted his grip on the heavy crossbow, resting a cold steel bolt in the groove. The theatrical era of Sherwood was long dead. This was pure, unadulterated math.

CHAPTER 16

NO MORE DEALS

The heavy oak doors of the banquet hall groaned and splintered open, echoing with a sharp, final crack across the stone floor.

The lute music stuttered and died. The laughter evaporated from the room in a single, collective intake of breath.

Lord Cushyn dropped his silver goblet, the red claret splashing across the white linen cloth like fresh blood. He scrambled backwards against the high carved chair, his hands raised in frantic, shaking protest. Heer Wyckoff pressed himself so hard against the wall that his lace collar caught on an iron torch-bracket. Beside them, the Sheriff rose slowly to his feet, his hand clawing frantically at the jewelled pommel of his ceremonial broadsword.

"Wait," Cushyn choked out, his voice cracking with blind, desperate panic. "The... the land deeds in the south. The whole treasury of Lincoln! We can write you into the charter, Loxley. Whatever titles you want. Just name your price!"

Robin didn't stop. He walked out of the shadows near the entrance, his dark Flemish steel harness catching the cold torchlight. No green kolder. No theatrical posturing. No poppy wine to steady his pulse. His breathing was slow, even, and absolute.

"I don't deal with brokers," Robin said.

He raised the heavy steel crossbow. The mechanism clicked with a dry, lethal snap.

The first bolt took Cushyn square in the chest, lifting the networker off his feet before he could choke out another syllable, pinning him hard against the oak panelling.

Wyckoff screamed, scrambling blindly toward the side exit, his gold rings clinking against his belt. The second bolt caught him dead between the shoulder blades, dropping him face-first into the spilled platters of roasted meat.

The Sheriff drew his sword with a frantic hiss of steel, his face mottled red with fury and terror. "Guards! Kill him!"

There were no guards left to answer.

Robin slotted the third and final bolt into the groove, drew the string with a smooth, effortless heave of his shoulders, and sighted down the cold iron rail.

"There are no more broadsheets, Sheriff," Robin murmured.

He lost.

The shaft took the Sheriff directly through the throat, silencing the command before it could form. The man dropped his sword, clutching at the dark iron protruding from his neck, and collapsed heavily onto the stone floor among the remains of the feast.

Silence swallowed the hall.

Robin lowered the crossbow. His hands were completely steady. He turned on his heel, leaving the bodies of the corrupt elite where they fell, and walked back out into the cold night air.

EPILOGUE

THE FREE MAN

The bonfires in Nottingham lit the night sky a dirty, sulphurous orange, casting long, jumping shadows across the cheering crowds gathered outside the castle gates.

They wanted a king. They always wanted a king, roaring his name into the damp air, demanding that the legendary archer step out onto the stone balcony and accept the crown left vacant by the bleeding elite. They wanted another symbol. Another brand to worship, another banner to follow into the mud.

Robin stood in the dark shadow of an alleyway just beyond the torchlight, his breath pluming white in the freezing air.

He didn't look up at the castle. He wore no green kolder, no silk trim, and no heavy iron

harness. Just a plain, weather-beaten wool cloak that smelled of woodsmoke and rain. His hands were steady, resting comfortably at his sides.

"They're calling for you," Marian said softly, stepping out of the dark brickwork beside him. She pulled her own hood down low, watching the distant mob surge against the timber barricades. "The guilds want to mint new coins with your profile. Tuck is already drafting a fresh batch of broadsheets about your triumphant return."

Robin let out a short, quiet breath that sounded almost like a laugh. He reached up, feeling the smooth, polished yew wood of his bow slung securely across his shoulder.

"Let them," Robin said.

He turned his back on the roaring city, stepping away from the bonfires and the

shouting throngs. Marian fell in step beside him, her boots crunching softly against the frozen mud of the northern road.

They walked into the dense, silent embrace of the deep woods, leaving the myth behind them in the smoke, finally, truly free.

