

The full truth about Robin Hood



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Chapter 1 - The Man in the Rainy Hollow

The rain fell like liquid dirt from the sky. Thick, heavy, cold—as if God himself had pissed on the forest. Sherwood was no fairytale forest. It was a rotten gut, and everyone who entered it smelled of wet dog and bad decisions. In one of those accursed hollows he stood—Robin, without a plumed hat, without a hero's smile, only with a bow as old as his bone-weariness.

He had dreamed last night that he was dying. Not heroically, not in battle, but with his shirt open and his stomach empty in a stinking trench. This wasn't a nightmare—it was a preview. So he set out, bow in hand, stomach empty, his head full of long-overdue bills.

The path was a brown tongue of mud, licking its way through ferns and brambles. Every step sucked you deeper in, as if the earth wanted to keep you. It smelled of mushrooms and horses and old wood that had cursed too many times. Rain crept down his neck, into his boots, under his fingernails. He was a sodden knot of hunger and determination.

To the left, stuck in the bushes, was a piece of torn burlap sack. Customs revenue from the day before yesterday, of which he had only heard the wind. Today he would hear the coins. No heroic song, just the harsh clack that told him: You're buying yourself another night, idiot.

He placed the quiver against a mossy trunk, stroked the feathers, and checked the string. The wood of his bow was smooth where his hand had greeted it a thousand times, when the world showed no other respect. He wasn't a lover of shooting, more of a record-keeper of distance. A bow is a bill with blood toll. Draw, hold, release, pay.

He knew this ravine. Two wagon ruts, as deep as drowned eyes. To the right, an oak tree, crooked as a broken finger, beneath it a buried cross, scribbled by some priest. A warning to the ghosts, so they'd get drunk here and move on. The ghosts did him the favor. The living rarely did.

He heard them long before he saw them: the dull clatter of hooves, the jingle of loose chains, the impatient snorting of horses that hated the forest as much as he did. A carriage, heavily laden. Two guards in front, one behind, and in the middle, the belly of the empire, bulging with silver. He didn't see them yet, but

in his mind, the official was already there, his face fat as an offended moon, his fingers soft and clean of other people's money.

Robin felt the familiar, ugly fluttering behind his sternum. Fear is not an enemy. Fear is a dog you keep short. Let it bite, but not you. He breathed—once, twice, three times—and nocked the first arrow.

The carriage turned the corner, out of rain and into more rain. The lead rider had shoulders like a sack of turnips and eyes that had seen too much without becoming any the wiser. The second rider was younger, his teeth too clean for this area. Behind the carriage trotted a man with the face of an executioner, indifferent and tired.

Robin stepped out of the darkness of the greenery. Not theatrically—simply as if he'd always been standing there and the world seemed to revolve around him. The rain turned his hood into a black snout. His voice cracked.

"Get off the wagon. Slowly. One at a time. I don't want to see any heroic crap."

The younger one grinned. People with clean teeth believe in miracles. "A beggar with a stick," he said, and that was almost touching, because he truly didn't know death.

The arrow went off like a curse. It hit the grin, took it with it, and nailed it to the back of the head. The body fell backward from the saddle, its arms still flailing as if they could grasp the rain. There was a wet sound, the forest devouring it.

The lead rider drew his sword. The second arrow pierced his shoulder, deep enough that his arm hung from his body like a wet rag. He remained in the saddle, cursing, spitting blood and rain. The man behind the carriage drew his crossbow; Robin saw the line, calculated it, heard his own voice, somewhere far away: now. The third arrow struck the crossbowman in the collarbone; he screamed, released the string, and the bolt flew into the woods, probably killing some lowly idiot.

The horses shied. The carriage jerked. A head appeared in the window: round, pale, a mouth like a wound. "In the name of—"

"Hold the name, I don't have room for it," said Robin, stepping forward. The bowstring still vibrated in his hand. He smelled the sour breath of the horses, the iron-grease scent of the chains, the dull sweat of the men who had just realized that this wasn't going to be a ballad.

The injured rider gritted his teeth against pain. "The money belongs to the king," he exclaimed.

"Then let him get it himself," said Robin. "Bring him an umbrella." The rain muddled his words, but they hit home.

The official climbed awkwardly out of the carriage, a package wrapped in expensive fabric. His fingers trembled like rabbits. "You don't know who—"

"I know what," Robin interrupted. "With silver. And with lies that weigh more heavily when stuffed into sacks." He grabbed the first bundle, felt the cold of the discs through the wet fabric, that specific coldness of money that never belongs to the one who carries it.

"Murder!" screamed the still-living crossbowman, breathing shallowly. "You murder—"

"I'll settle the score," Robin said. "For you, for him, for those at home." A flash, somehow without light, flashed through his mind: Marian behind the bar, sleeves rolled up, jug in hand, that face that simultaneously promised him everything and nothing. "And for me," he added more quietly, so quietly that no one had to hear it except the forest, which would give it away anyway.

He tied the horses to the oak tree, quickly and practically. The rain made every knot a grumpy animal, but he knew their teeth. Then he brought the injured man to the ground and roughly tied off his wound. He didn't like letting men bleed to death if it wasn't necessary. Blood attracts ravens. And gossip.

"What's your name?" he asked as he pulled.

"What's it to you?" the man growled, grimacing.

"Nothing," said Robin. "But maybe you can tell your wife tomorrow." He tightened the knot. The man gasped, closed his eyes, and stayed.

The official remained silent. His was the kind of silence that is rich, chock-full of threats that will only be fulfilled later. Robin turned to him. "You're going back to Nottingham. You tell them the forest was hungry today. You don't tell them what you have in your doublet." He reached out and pulled out a small leather case. A seal, red as an angry apple. "You don't tell them you also collect privately. We'll both keep our little indecencies, okay?"

The man swallowed. Agreed.

Robin pushed two sacks into the shade of the bushes and the third back onto the wagon floor. "A lesson, not a war," he muttered, more to himself than to the rain. War was expensive. War made widows. He had enough faces staring at him at night.

He left the men behind, alive, broken, and capable of telling stories. He took the narrow path that clung to the ravine like a scar and dragged the loot into the forest, which accepted it with gritted teeth. Twice he stopped and listened. Only rain. Only his breath. Only the forest, pretending to be empty.

Beneath a fallen beech tree, he hid two sacks deep in the rotten belly of leaves and broken wood. He didn't mark anything. Marks are invitations. He memorized it where everything one mustn't lose is located—right there, between hunger and fear.

He took the third sack with him. It was as heavy as a wet dog. He briefly considered tearing it open and throwing the coins into the mud, just to see if it was still free. But freedom is a word that likes to mock you. He moved on.

The path spat him out near the tavern, whose sign bobbed back and forth in the rain like a drunken preacher. The courtyard was empty except for a chicken and the shivering of an old cart pretending to be a boat in a storm. Through the open window, warmth crept like an animal. He smelled soup, smoke, wet straw, and the sweet sting of beer.

Marian stood behind the counter, her hair in a bun, her sleeves up, her hands faster than the customers' eyes. When she saw Robin, she raised an eyebrow. No smile. She was saving money, and that made the rare ones too expensive.

"You look like you've been wrestling with heaven," she said.

"Heaven has begun," he replied, placing the sack on the counter, and the wood responded with a tone that made everyone's heads spin, at least internally.

"Tell me two nights, four meals, and the debts of Tom the blacksmith."

"Tom can use his tongue," she said, but her fingers were already on the knot.

"What's that out there?"

"A bad dream that wakes other people up," he said. "Not for songs."

She opened the bag a finger's breadth, enough to see the cold, gray truth. Her eyes remained dark. No glitter. "You're trouble, Robin."

"I bring silver for trouble," he said. "And today I win."

"That's what men say right before they lose." She tied the bag back up and shoved it under the counter as if it were a sick dog. "Are you eating?"

"If you have anything that tastes like food." He sat down at the table in the corner, where the wall protected his back. The rain drummed on the roof like a flat drum. A man by the fireplace played with a knife, another counted silent curses in his hands. A boy mopped the floor with movements that were more like stains. The tavern was a belly that digested anything, as long as it paid for itself.

Marian placed a bowl before him—stew that looked like a bad decision, but smelled like salvation. Bread hard enough to have an opinion. A mug from which warmth rose. He ate slowly. Food was the only prayer he still took seriously.

"You have to be more careful," Marian said as the first spoon disappeared. "The sheriff has brought in men who don't distinguish between orders and blood."

"The sheriff brought in men who can count," Robin said. "And today I messed up their count." He looked at her. "Did you hear anything?"

"That a new cart is due to travel the Westway tomorrow morning. That a monk from York wants to bless the forest. And that the rich widow from Edwinstowe has lost her heart." A barely visible twitch around her mouth. "To her chest."

"It would be a shame if the heart traveled unaccompanied," he said. "And the monk should bless the rain so that it drowns us."

She snorted. "Legends grow faster than weeds. This afternoon, someone here sang that you single-handedly killed five men—"

"He should count his teeth," he interrupted. "Five is two too many. And if he sings again, he'll sing with a gap in his teeth."

"Legends feed stomachs," she said calmly. "Mine too."

He remained silent. She was right. Lies sell. The truth costs money. He took a sip, letting the warmth creep into him like a brave little animal.

The door opened, letting wind and water in. Two travelers, soaked, with faces like tired boots. One stared at Robin for too long before lowering his gaze. The other beckoned to Marian. "We're looking for a man," he said. "He's wearing green, they say. Quick with the bow."

Robin smiled without showing his teeth. He hadn't worn green for a long time when things were serious. Green reminds you of what you can lose.

"A lot of men here," said Marian, pouring. "And everyone hurry when the bill comes."

"This one is..." The man hesitated, searching for the word, but couldn't find one worth her wages. "Special."

"Then you're in the wrong woods," said Marian. "Our men are common sinners."

The travelers looked around, found nothing but rain and long shadows, and sat down. Robin finished eating, wiped his bowl clean. There's a certain silence after a meal, in which the world outside decides whether it needs you again today. In that silence, he heard hooves outside the door, heavier, more orderly. He felt no need to turn around. The dog under the table growled briefly and then gave up.

The door opened a second time, wider, more purposefully. Three men in the half-baked finery of a sheriff—armor brighter than the faces inside. The one in front wore a cloak that contradicted the rain and therefore looked ridiculous. He wiped water from his eyes, his gaze drifting.

"Good people," he said in a much friendlier voice. "We're looking for highwaymen who looted a carriage today."

"You're late," said someone in the back corner, and received an elbow in the ribs from his friend.

The man in the cape smiled, as if he'd made the joke first. "Late is better than never. We look into the pans of guilt and the pockets of innocence. The sheriff loves order."

Robin felt something inside him lift his shoulders. Order is a code name. For hunger in uniform. Marian was already stepping forward, her hands visible, her voice healthy with boredom. "You can look at whatever you want. But you'll only see what's always here: rain, soup, men without talent."

"We were told of a man who was wet and smelled of the forest," said the pompous man.

"Then you're looking in the wrong area," she said. "The whole forest smells like a forest."

He walked over to Robin's table without looking, stopping as if his boots had decided the direction. He eyed Robin with a polite disgust that is well paid for. "Name?"

"Hungry," said Robin.

A few laughs, muffled like wet matchsticks. The man let them in. "And your last name?"

"Even hungrier."

The man nodded slowly, as if it were an acceptable response in a book someone else was reading. "Lift your hood."

Robin didn't do it right away. He let the moment breathe, as one does with a fish before slitting its throat. Then he raised it, slowly, revealing a face softened by the rain. No feather, no ballad. Just eyes that mattered more than they said.

The man didn't see anything, or he saw enough and didn't like it. He snapped his fingers. The two behind him began feeling tables, lifting bags, glancing into bowls. Marian stood like a wall that needed no weapon.

"When you're done," she said, "someone will mop the floor. That someone isn't me."

The men found what they were looking for: a farmer gave them an old hunting arrow, a merchant gave them a knife that had seen more bread than blood. Nothing that could be neatly packaged into a report. The leader sighed. "Then tomorrow," he said, sounding more dangerous than today. "The forest only spills its secrets when it's full."

"Give him the cloak," Robin said quietly, "perhaps he'll be warm inside."

The man raised his eyebrow. Marian coughed, as if to bury the sentence. It worked.

The door closed behind the tidy boots. The room released a breath it had been holding. Someone laughed too loudly. Someone else recited a prayer they didn't know.

"They'll be back," Marian said. It wasn't a warning. Just a weather report.

"So is the rain," said Robin. "Neither of them knows when it'll end."

He stood up and placed two coins on the table—too many to seem superstitious. "For the knot I tied earlier," he said, and she understood which one he meant: the knot that kept men out of carriages and words out of people's throats.

"Sleep in the back," she said curtly. "The ridge will keep the roof airtight if it likes you."

He walked through the narrow corridor, where the wood bore the stories of the years. A room, if you could call it that: a bed that didn't so much collapse as it did with bad memories, a window that made the rain count, a hook for nothing. He took off his boots. The musty smell of the soles mingled with that of the damp blanket. He placed the bow next to the bed, so that his hand could find it blindly.

He thought of the ravine—of the younger man's stupid, wet courage, of the older man's silent pain, of the official who was surely already formulating a version of the truth that would please him. He thought of the hidden silver breathing beneath a beech tree as if it were alive. He thought of Marian and the sentence she hadn't said: This isn't life, Robin. This is a pause between two bills.

His body knew what he needed: sleep, which falls like a sack. But his mind wanted to go through the forest one more time. He imagined the West Road rattling tomorrow. A wagon that makes the widow happy because she can feed fear with silk. A monk who threatens the rain with his cross. A sheriff who gathers men like wood—dry, flammable, obedient.

"No ballad," he muttered into the blanket. "Just work."

The first signs of weariness came like a thief he let in. He heard the tavern carrying on below him: voices trying to be louder than the rain. A chair scraped. Somewhere, someone laughed at a secret no one wanted to keep. His fingertips felt the edge of the arch as if it were a vein in his own arm. And then

everything subsided: the noise, the hunger, the bills, even the rain, which didn't let up but became less important.

He fell asleep like a man who hadn't planned it.

He dreamed of a rainless ravine, dusty and hot, and of a boy stealing an apple because he wanted to know what guilt tasted like. The boy was him, and the apple was bitter, and the man who caught him wore a cloak that was already too clean. The dream turned into something else: a hand holding his, warm and small, and a voice saying, "You're late." And a second voice saying, "You're not coming at all." And then rain again, explaining everything without using a word.

When he awoke, night was still there, but the tavern had become quieter. The rain had turned to a drizzle, as if it had learned compassion. Behind the wall, someone snored who hadn't slept all week. He sat up, heard the cracking of his bones, as if they were saying: You are not the one they sing about.

He stood up and went to the window. The yard shone. The cart was a dark shadow, the dog had curled up in a puddle that wanted to adopt him. A thin, damp silence hung over the forest. He rested his forehead against the cold glass. "Just work," he repeated. "Just work."

And somewhere out there in the wet, black-green belly of the forest, the oak tree lifted its crooked spine and memorized the names. The ravine waited, as paths wait: without patience, but with the certainty that everyone who isn't dead will return.

Tomorrow, someone would travel the West Way thinking that money was armor. Tomorrow, a monk would bless the air so that it would belong to no one. Tomorrow, men in clean armor would say they loved order, meaning: "Hold still while we take." Tomorrow, the forest would say the same thing it says today: "Come here if you're brave, and stay if you're foolish."

Robin lay back down, pulled the blanket up over his chest, as if it weren't a blanket, but a resolution. He closed his eyes, and the bow breathed beside him. Outside, the rain continued, slow, unperturbed, patient, like an accountant with a perpetual calendar.

The truth about Robin Hood didn't begin with a trumpet. It began with a wet ravine, two dead laughs, and three sacks of silver, none of which warmed up. It began with a man calculating—with his stomach, with the fear of others, with the price of the night.

And she would continue, because bills are never alone. Tomorrow. On Westweg. Under a sky that has once again drunk too much. Under trees that hear everything, retain everything, and reveal nothing except the one who listens.

He fell asleep again, more deeply this time, and the rain continued to write on the margins of the chapter. Right where the ravine narrows, and just beyond it, the first betrayal awaits.

Chapter 2 - Sherwood stinks of rain and betrayal

The liquor came first. Clear as a lie and twice as strong. It burned down his throat as if it wanted to erase the entire previous night. The cigarette that followed was twisted, tasted of hay, tar, and false promises. Robin took one drag, two, and blew the smoke toward the ceiling, where it caught in the beams like a ghost too lazy to haunt.

Outside, the rain had stopped, but Sherwood still smelled like someone had left a bucket of wet dog food in a latrine. This forest never dried. It sweated rot, breathed steam, and hummed softly with the insects that never got enough. The ground remained soft as a rotten tooth. You stepped on it, and it gave way, as if it wanted to keep you.

Marian placed the mug on the table, hard enough to make it ring. "The sheriff's men asked for you," she said, as if it were the weather. "Good morning," Robin grumbled. "Did they leave tips?" "Just promises. And they stink longer."

He pulled up his hood, slung his bow over his shoulder, and picked up his quiver. The room smelled of smoke, stale beer, and warm bread—and underneath it all, waiting. It was the kind of waiting that makes the walls listen. Marian looked at him as if she had something in her eye that she couldn't figure out. "Be careful on the Eastern Path," she said crisply. "Too many

strangers with too few questions." "Strangers without questions aren't strangers," he replied. "They're calculations on legs."

He stepped outside. Sherwood stood there, dark green, damp, with that kind of stillness that wasn't empty, but full. Full of glances, of breath, of intentions. The path was a brown thread that ran into the thickness of the forest and disappeared where the trees huddled closer together than greedy neighbors. Above him, the treetops hung like a moody sky. Drops broke from leaves, fell heavily, hitting his hood, his neck, his jaw. He tasted the forest, and the forest tasted back.

Every tree knew its name, but never said it out loud. That was the rule here: you know, you don't say. But in the last few days, Sherwood had started whispering. Not voices—more like that feeling when you enter a room and the air feels different, as if it had just laughed at you.

Will stood in the first clearing—slender fellow, hands like hooks, a smile that stuck to you. "You're late," he said. "The liquor was on time." Will spat into the bracken. "Did you hear?" "Everyone wants me to hear. Say it." "Someone's talking. In Nottingham. Loudly. About you. About yesterday." "Name." Will shrugged his shoulders as if they'd just rusted. "No one says it. But he drinks at the Blue Cockerel, and he's suddenly buying rounds." Rounds meant sudden money. And sudden money rarely came from honest soil.

"Maybe just a loudmouth." "Bloody mouths open doors, Robin. And the sheriff has loud boots."

Robin let the word sink in. Betrayal. In Sherwood, that didn't always mean a knife in the back. Sometimes it was just a sentence in the wrong ear, and that was worse because you heard it a thousand times when you tried not to think about him at night.

"Keep your eyes open, Will." "Your eyes, yes. Your tongue, no." "Good," said Robin. "Tongues take work."

He continued on, deeper into the stream, along the stream that smelled of iron and old stories. Where the path split, Tom, the limping blacksmith, sat on a tree stump, pretending to rest. His eyes pretended otherwise. "Sheriff's men on the Eastern Fringe," Tom muttered without looking up. "Counting paces. Pretending to be hunters. But they're clerks in mail." "How many?" "Enough that I counted twice." "And us?" Tom scratched his beard. "Enough that you should count three times."

Robin nodded. "Have you heard from Ralf?" "Ralf with the clean hands? Only they're cleaner than last week." Clean hands were worse here than bloody ones.

Back at the tavern, he heard it before he even pushed open the door: the room held its breath. It wasn't a crash, it wasn't panic—just a hum beneath the hum, like a string out of tune. Marian wiped with a rag that spread more stains than it removed. Beside the fireplace squatted a bard everyone called "Pipe Jack." He had the kind of face you'd want to kick and the kind of voice you'd pay to sing somewhere else. He fell silent as Robin filled the room.

"Keep singing," said Robin. Jack lowered his lute. "I was just having a break." "Then play it to the end."

Marian put the rag down. "You want to know," she said quietly. "I already know. I want to hear it." "Ralf was in town. He drank like a fish and laughed like someone who thinks no one is talking about him. He talked, too. About roads, about times, about loot that's heavier at night than by day. They filled his jug, and he emptied it with words."

Robin looked at Jack. "And you? What did you sing?" Jack raised his hands. "Only what they want to hear. Otherwise they won't pay." "Then sing me the truth," said Robin, and his voice was so flat that even the smoke in the beam stopped. Jack swallowed. "Ralf told a man a time. Westway. Dawn. Widow's carriage. Two guards and a driver with a lame leg." "And who did he tell that to?" "Someone who smelled like a scribe and looked scared." "Name." "He didn't say it. But he had the kind of fingers that never hold wood."

Marian put down a cup. "It's not the first time Ralf has drunk too much." "Drinking is forgiven," said Robin. "Talking isn't."

The boy—the one with eyes like jackknife blades, the one they all called Sprat—stood in the doorway, pretending to be air. "I can find him," he hissed. "You can get burned," said Marian. "It's freezing here," the boy said defiantly. Robin nodded at him. "Just eyes. No teeth. If you see him, come back. Silently." The boy nodded, slipped out of the shadows, and was gone, like water on sand.

"You won't catch Ralf in the tavern," Marian said as the door closed behind the boy. "He's learned when wood listens." "Then I'll catch him in the forest. He always listens."

He took the north path, where the light crept through the canopy in thin threads. Drops hung everywhere on the tips of thorns, blades of grass, cobwebs. Each drop waited for the next step. A squirrel grumbled because it knew no other trade. A raven disturbed the silence. And between trunk and trunk, something colorless: the shadows of men who believed themselves invisible.

"Come out," said Robin calmly. "I hate surprises when I don't have a cake." Two figures emerged from the undergrowth. No sheriff's leathers, no clerk's face. Farmers, perhaps. Or hunters. Or the kind who claim both until the knife speaks. "Bad day to meet you," said the taller one. "Are you alone, Robin?" "When I want to be alone, I go to the monastery." "The sheriff's looking for you," said the shorter one, his voice scratching at doors. "Says he likes order." "Tell that to the rain," replied Robin. "It likes chaos."

The taller man took a step forward, hands visible but not empty. "They say you only take the rich man. It's a nice fairy tale. Children sleep better with it." "Children sleep on their stomachs," said Robin. "Me too." "And today? You'll take us?" "Only if you're mine." The men looked at each other, didn't find it funny, and turned away. They disappeared so cleanly that only the grass knew where they went.

He continued walking, following the scent of damp fern and old resin. Traces everywhere. Shoes too big for his feet. Hooves that didn't belong on this ground. A piece of wax on bark—smooth as a candle. Scribe are afraid of the dark.

He knelt, running his fingertip over the prints. Three pairs. One heavy, two lighter. The heavy one left its mark on the inside of the heel. That's what men with smart boots and little ground did. He smiled without warmth. Ralf, you idiot. You drew them a map.

Late that afternoon, with the forest humming at half volume, he called his men together at the river's bend. No parade. Just faces. Will, Tom, the woman with the blackened hands, whom everyone called "Rit" because she rubbed more than she talked. Two old men who knew the forest better than their sins. And Jack, the bard, whom no one had invited, but who always showed up when words smelled of coins.

Robin stood in the mud circle, his hands open. "Someone's talking. In the city. About us. About paths. About times. I want to know today, not tomorrow." Silence. Then Will: "It was Ralf. It was him yesterday, it is him today, it will be

him tomorrow if we don't trim his tongue." "I don't trim tongues in a circle," said Robin. "Tongues are trimmed in silence, so they don't grow back."

"He has a wife in Mansfield," Rit interjected. "And debts to two men who collect fingers." "I owe them too," said Tom. "I still only talk to my wife. And she only talks to God. And he doesn't listen." Jack shuffled his foot. "I heard him. He said the widow's carriage would be to be taken at dawn tomorrow on the West Road. He was laughing. He's been laughing wrongly these days." "Maybe he's laughing because someone tells him to laugh," Will growled. "Maybe he's laughing for two purses."

"Sprat's looking for him," said Robin. "When the boy comes back, we'll know."

He looked at the faces. Tiredness in the wrinkles. Hunger in the cheeks. Hope somewhere behind the teeth, where it doesn't bother. "Listen," he said. "Tomorrow the widow will be on the West Road. She's rich because her husband died and God is sleeping with her. The sheriff knows that. We know it. Someone told him—or he guessed well. Whatever." Will breathed heavily. "So we'll let it go." "No," said Robin. "We'll take it. But we'll take the one who talks too much first." "How?" "We'll let him lead."

Glances. Then this slow, dirty understanding. "You want Ralf to lead the Westweg tomorrow morning," said Rit.

"Exactly," said Robin. "He's showing us his sheriff. And we're showing him our forest."

Sherwood didn't get dark. It grew thicker. The night here wasn't a curtain, but a blanket lying on your shoulders. Every step made a different sound. Moss sucked, roots whispered, water laughed softly over stones that had already heard everything.

Robin wasn't asleep. He lay in the small room above the tavern, listening to the last cups clinking together downstairs. Marian was one movement, then another, then just the hiss of a candle. He turned the bow so the string vibrated against his fingers. Ralf. The name stuck like resin. Men talk for three reasons: fear, greed, stupidity. The order is arbitrary. He thought of words like knives. Of knives like words. Of both behind his back. Then he fell asleep, briefly, deeply, without dreams, like someone whose throat is held by time.

The morning smelled of wet cloth and cold iron. Fog hung low and stubborn between the tree trunks. Sprat had returned as the sky was beginning to sample its first colors. The boy stood at the back entrance as if he had no

shadow. "Ralf is sleeping in the old charcoal burner's hut," he whispered. "Not alone. There's another one. A stranger. Smells of ink." "Does the stranger have a weapon?" "Yes," said Sprat, grinning thinly. "A quill."

Robin stood up, all his muscles crunching. "Well done. You eat twice." "I'll eat three times if you have breakfast." "Then eat three times," said Robin. "Today we're being generous."

They gathered at the edge of the woods. Will, Rit, Tom. Two old men. Sprat was sneaking around. Jack wasn't allowed to go. "I'll sing you a warning later," he promised. "Sing us silence," said Marian, pressing a pouch into Robin's hand. "Dried meat. And a look that says: Come back." "I like your looks," he murmured. "Pay them," she said, turning away before it got too soft.

The hut clung to the hillside like a bad secret. Thin smoke crept from a hole in the roof, as if they were afraid to wake the forest. Robin signaled. Two to the right, one to the left, Tom with the limp stayed in the middle. If you knew Tom's footsteps, you couldn't hear him anymore.

He didn't kick the door open. He pushed it. Doors in Sherwood scream when you force them. Today, only those inside should scream.

Inside, it stank of old fire and wet fabric. Ralf jumped up, his face like a startled fox. Next to him was a man with pen-like fingers—long, white nails, ink in the grooves. "Good morning," said Robin, as if he had a key. "Which of you sings better? I like listening to music early in the morning."

The clerk turned pale as wax. Ralf blinked and attempted a smile that could only be straightened with pliers. "Robin—" "Don't talk," said Robin. "Or just tell the truth. I'll just take those today."

Will pulled the purse from the clerk's coat. It was heavier than it looked. Inside was a seal, red wax, clean, expensive—and a purse that didn't rattle because the coins were so tightly packed they were embarrassed. "Sheriff's clerk," Rit said disdainfully. "The kind that doesn't bleed when you cut it. It just drips ink."

Robin looked at Ralf. "Why?" Ralf raised his hands. "Just talk, Robin. Just talk. I wanted—" "Money," Robin helped. "Freedom. A bed without rain. Fingers every ten. Say one, say all. But tell me, not him." Ralf swallowed. "They said it would be better this way. For everyone. Fewer deaths. If they know where you are, they won't shoot around in the forest. They'll take you clean. I thought—" "You thought wrong," Will said through his teeth. "I thought," Ralf continued dully, "you'd be faster than them. I thought I'd lay the cards on the table and

you'd secretly exchange them. And I..." "...get coins that feel cold on the tongue," Robin said. "And your hands stay clean while others make them dirty." Ralf looked at his fingers. They were clean. Too clean. "Where did you meet?" The clerk began. Robin just raised his hand, and the words died on his gums. "Where, Ralf?" "On Westweg, where the old birch tree leans over the road. Dawn. I should... wave."

"Wave," Robin repeated, as if it were a new, ugly word. "Fine. You wave. But to us."

Will took a step forward. "Cut out his tongue and hang it on the birch tree. Then it will wave for him." "No," said Robin. "A man who speaks once speaks twice. Without a tongue, he speaks with his eyes. And the gods like that."

He leaned toward Ralf. "You're going now. You're acting like everything's normal. You're meeting the people you're supposed to along the way. You're waving. And if you wave the wrong thing, the forest will get you. Not us. The forest. It remembers names. Including yours."

Ralf nodded, too quickly, too often. Tears sprang to his eyes, like rain that had gone the wrong way. "I... I'm doing it right." "Today," said Robin. "Today you're doing it right."

They left the clerk sitting, his hands tied, his mouth free. "Write something down," said Tom. "Write: I lived because they let me write." The man trembled. "The Sheriff—" "Loves order," said Robin. "Me too. Today you'll put your butt in order on this stool. Tomorrow you'll put your story in order. And if you're smart, you'll put your feet in order far away from Nottingham."

The West Path was a scar through green flesh. To the left, the birch tree, old, white, with dark scars. Its trunk leaned over the path as if listening for confessions. Fog crept low, and the air held its breath. Every bird was somewhere else. Every butterfly had taken a vacation.

Robin placed the men at the edges. Rid to the right, behind brambles with thorns, like a bad mood. Tom to the left, half-way behind a fallen trunk whose interior smelled like old organ pipes. Will moved forward a bit, as still as if he were made of forest. Sprat stayed high up, in the branches of a beech tree that liked him. The boy had a piece of mirror on a rope. When he turned it, it flashed once—signifying "equal." Twice—"not alone." Three times—"wrong."

Ralf stood by the birch tree. From a distance, he looked like someone who wanted to pee and couldn't find a bush. Robin watched his back. Backs lie less than faces.

Time crawled by. The morning turned gray into another gray. Then the clacking of iron tires on hard-packed earth. A carriage, muffled, cautious. Horses, tired. The clicking of belts that someone had oiled well. Behind the fog, shadows stirred, long and narrow.

The mirror flashed—once. Once more. And then, after a breath, a third time.

"Wrong," Robin murmured. He felt his heart beat more quietly—not faster. Softer. That's the right beat when the forest is up to something.

The carriage appeared. Not the widow's carriage. Wrong color, wrong cut. A carriage in disguise, and bad. In front sat a man who had learned to drive so he could sit somewhere else. No one beside him. Behind him were tarpaulins that didn't smell the way they should. No silk. No perfume. No widow. Something was moving beneath the tarpaulin that wasn't a bolt of fabric.

Ralf raised his hand. He waved. It was the right kind of wave. Slowly. Broadly. With his whole hand, not just his finger. The tarpaulins twitched. Two helmets. One coughed. The cough of someone who wanted to grow old in the office and died young in the forest.

Robin raised two fingers. Will understood. He let the first arrow fly into the tarpaulin as if freeing a dove. Screams. Metal, the metal, startled. The driver squirmed, the carriage jumped, the horse shied as if someone had told it a story about wolves. Rit was already standing up, determined as bad weather. A rope flew, wrapped itself around a wheel rim, the thing faltered. Tom stepped out of the shadows, his limp a mere rhythm.

Three men in armor, which glittered beautifully in the city and cracked like ridiculous skin here, crawled out of the carriage. One held an order in his hand that no one wanted to read right now. "In the name—" he began. "Leave the name in the office," said Robin, stepping forward, and his arrow robbed the paper of its dignity. The man stared at him. It was that look that doesn't believe in you and then suddenly does. He saw Ralf, saw the birch tree, saw the forest. And he saw that it was already written.

It didn't last long. Arrows make short work of anyone if you're a good count. One started to flee, ran into Rit, and found himself with a knee in the stomach.

The third stumbled over his own bravery. When the fog swallowed the rest, everyone who should have been standing was still standing.

Ralf stood by the birch tree like a rope without a tree. He looked at Robin as if he had really hoped someone else would come. "I waved," he stammered. "You did," said Robin. "Today you did it right."

He stepped closer, so close he could taste Ralf's breath—beer, fear, cheap mints, masking the truth. "You arranged a meeting. You showed them the way. And today you showed it to us. It's that simple." Ralf nodded, and his eyes narrowed, as if he were reading writing smaller than his conscience. "And now?" Robin looked at the birch tree. Its bark bore old names, carved into it, forgotten. "Now you give me your knife."

Ralf hesitated a heartbeat too long. Will was faster. The knife landed in the dirt where it belonged. "You're going back to Nottingham," Robin said calmly. "You sit at the same table. You drink the same crap. And if anyone asks, you say, 'I was waiting. The coach didn't come.' You don't get asked why. They think you're too stupid to know. Stupidity is a cloak. Wear it." Ralf stared at him as if he had a choice between drowning and freezing to death. "And if they don't believe—" "Then you'll walk faster than they can run."

"You'll let him go?" Will's voice was ragged. "After all this—" "I'll let him live," Robin said. "So he can look in the mirror in the morning and know who owns his neck. That's more work than any rope."

Rit pulled back the tarpaulins. Underneath were crates. No silk. Arrows. Bolts. Shackles. And a sack full of blank seals. "They didn't just want to catch us," she murmured. "They wanted to catch gossip. Clamps on tongues." "Sherwood isn't an office," said Tom. "Others do the stamping here."

Robin stepped back, looking into the bright, cold face of day. The fog lifted as if it were better weather. "Away with the wagon," he said. "Horses free. Crates to the old beech tree, deep down. We'll distribute. Tonight, Marian will count."

Ralf walked. Not too fast to appear suspicious, not too slow to feign courage. Just straight ahead, as if the path were leading him, not him leading the way. Sprat flashed the mirror. Once. No alarm. Just: seen.

By evening, the tavern smelled of fire, wet leather, and the laughter of people who don't know their laughter is counted. Marian leaned against the bar, her hands steady, her eyes even steadier. Robin put down a bag. "For Tom. For the

widow by the river. For the children of Edwinstowe. For the monk... oh, me later." "I don't count for Heaven," said Marian. "Me neither." She opened the bags, didn't look, but knew what was inside. "Have you sorted it out?" "I've been putting it off. Sorting things out takes time." She nodded. "Ralf?" "Alive. And breathing cleaner than yesterday." "Is he under your roof?" "Under the birch tree's," said Robin. "The birch tree doesn't forget." "Nor we."

Jack started singing a song in the back, one with too many rhymes. Will wasn't listening. He sat in the shade, drinking in straight gulps. Tom laughed once, short, like a heel. Rit counted along, shallowly, with his fingertips, as if coins were grains and time were a mill.

"The sheriff is coming back," Marian finally said. "Today he sang, tomorrow he'll take the baton." "Let him come," said Robin. "The forest listens to him. And if he plays wrong—" "—the wind will whistle at him," she finished with a tired smile.

He drained his cup. "Sherwood stinks," he said. "Of rain and betrayal," she said. "And of us," he said. "Always has."

Outside, the rain began again, finer, more persistent, like a government official. An old worm growled in the beams. The dog under the table dreamed of bones he would never get. Robin stood up, and the chair made that noise tables in Sherwood make when they know someone is about to say too much again.

"Tomorrow," he murmured, more to the wood than to her. "Tomorrow the forest will smell different. Maybe worse. Maybe better. But different."

"Morning," said Marian. "Don't bring me songs. Bring me numbers."

He nodded, reaching for the bow, which was more familiar to him than his own shadow. Outside, the night waited, with hands of leaves and a tongue of mist. Sherwood breathed. Rain fell. And somewhere, between the birch and the ravine, the forest wrote down the names it wanted to keep. One of them was Ralf. One was Robin. One was the word that would happen tomorrow.

Today it smelled of betrayal. Tomorrow it smelled of reckoning.

Chapter 3 - How to Become an Outlaw

No one is born with a bow in their hand. You come naked, screaming, and hungry—and if fate has a particularly bad day, you end up in a hut that doesn't warm you, and in a family that doesn't feed you but exploits you.

Robin was born on a day when Sherwood was shrouded in gray. The sky was a single, unbroken swamp, and the forest smelled of wet dog, mold, and iron. His mother worked in a blacksmith's yard, hauling water and shoveling coal until her hands were like old leather thongs—cracked, calloused, bloody at the edges. His father was a ghost in human form—supposedly out "for work" during the day, often drunk or missing in the evenings. When he did come, he smelled of beer, smoke, and strange beds.

The first theft wasn't born of courage, but of a rumbling stomach. An apple, as big as a fist, shiny red, from the cart of a merchant who was busy screaming in another customer's face. Robin grabbed it. His fingers were small, but fast. He ran as if the devil himself had breathed into his back. In a side alley, he bit into it – the juice burned on his tongue like a sin you immediately want to commit again.

Two streets away, he received the first blow of his life from a man too old to remember his own hunger. The back of his hand was hard as wood, and the slap echoed between the houses.

The lesson stuck in my mind: **You can take anything – if you're fast enough.**

At nine, Robin knew how to disappear in a crowd, walk in the rain without slipping, and hold knives so they wouldn't slip from his hand. At twelve, he learned that the law doesn't seek truth. It only seeks the guilty.

A merchant from Nottingham swore that Robin had stolen a bag of silver from him. It was a lie – Robin hadn't stolen it, but had found it on the pavement, right in front of the tavern. And he might even have returned it, if he hadn't already had the taste of bread in his head.

The city guards beat him anyway. No questions, no evidence—just a club, a boot, and the sentence: **"You fit the picture."**

They put him in the dungeon. Stone floor, colder than any winter night. Dark, damp, stank of urine, old blood, and the last breath of those who had lain here too long.

He lay there, feeling every bone against the floor, hearing the rats in the corners, and thinking about the apple. The next morning, they let him out—without apology, without explanation. He knew now: The law doesn't exist to be just. It exists to rule. And when you're down, you stay down—unless you learn to be faster than their boots.

In the alleys, he met men who called him "brother" without knowing his name. Men with the same hungry eyes, but with hands that were faster than their conscience. These weren't friends. Friends lend you money and ask how you're doing. These men lend you a knife and ask if you've used it.

His first real break-in was a warehouse on the outskirts of town. Three sacks of grain, two crates of wine, and a drawer full of coins. The plan was simple: in, out, share.

But in sharing, you learn the real mathematics of the road: one disappeared with the wine, the other with the silver, and Robin was left with the grain.

He dragged the sack through the rain, eventually stood in the mud, smelled the wet grain—and knew he couldn't eat it, couldn't sell it. That was the second lesson: **Only trust someone you can put a knife to their throat first.**

Sooner or later, the sheriff would hear his name. And when he did, he didn't see the boy from the blacksmith's yard—he saw an opportunity. A thief, young, unprotected, with a sliver of reputation—perfect for showing people that the law "works."

One morning, wanted posters were hanging in Nottingham:

"Robin of Locksley—theft, breach of the peace, riot. Wanted—dead or alive."
Half lie, half made up, quite useful.

The first time he saw his face in charcoal on paper, he laughed. The second time, he tore it up. The third time, he realized: He'll never be able to go back to the city without someone trying to betray him for a coin.

From then on, his name was no longer just a word. It was a weapon—and it no longer belonged to him.

The forest was not a refuge. It was a test. He didn't sleep the first night in Sherwood. He lay beneath a fallen beech tree, his bow on his stomach, his knife in his hand, and listened to the forest breathing.

It smelled of mushrooms, of damp earth, of something long dead and yet still lying there. Every movement in the undergrowth was a question: "Are you prey

or hunter?" The ground drained the warmth from his bones until he thought he would freeze to death in his sleep.

By morning, he had understood: There are no spectators here. Only players. And you're in it, whether you like it or not.

He lived off what he could find—and what he took. A lonely merchant lost a few coins. A hunter found his quiver empty.

He learned to cover his tracks:

- Walk in the stream bed if you can.
- Never sleep in the same place twice.
- Build your fire small enough so that the smoke disappears into the fog.

After a week, he looked like someone you wouldn't ask for directions. After a month, he smelled so bad that even dogs hesitated. After a year, he knew: **He was no longer a man in Sherwood. He was Sherwood.**

He never wrote them down. He rarely spoke them. But they became bones in his flesh:

1. **Run before they think.**
2. **Don't trust anyone who has clean hands.**
3. **Speak little, listen much.**
4. **Give the poor just enough so that they don't forget your face.**
5. **Never walk the same path twice – unless you want to be followed.**

He stopped saying his name. Others said it for him. Mostly quietly, sometimes loudly. And at some point he realized: "Outlaw" wasn't a label you could remove. It was a second skin.

He was no longer Robin, the blacksmith's son. He was Robin, the hunted. Robin who takes. Robin, the one you put in stories to keep children awake. And one evening, by the light of a small fire, he realized he no longer hated the name.

He was no hero. No thief with a heart of gold. He was a man who had no other choice – and who had learned that that was enough.

It was a night that tasted of iron. The rain had turned the ground to black mush, and the moon hung low like an old, bloody eye. Robin crouched in a hollow, his back against a root, his bow in his lap. In front of him, not twenty paces away, a man sat by the fire—one of the city guards. He still wore the mail

the city had paid for him, warming his hands as if he'd forgotten he was out there hunting someone.

The man hummed softly, a snatch of a song played at weddings in Nottingham. He must have been thinking of home. Robin watched as the embers painted his features: a tired look, a beard more groomed than the heart behind it. His helmet lay beside it. His sword was still in its scabbard, half in the mud, half on a piece of cloth to keep it from rusting.

Robin could have simply walked away. He could have let the man sleep, let him disappear back into the city in the morning, to his children, to his wife, to the beer mugs in which he would forget the forest. But he didn't.

He stepped out of the shadows. The man jumped, his eyes wide, his mouth already open for the scream. "Don't," Robin said quietly, "otherwise you'll be quieter than you think."

The man saw the arrowhead, and his breath caught. "I... I'm just doing my job." "Your job," Robin repeated, as if hearing the word for the first time. "Your job is to hang me on a gallows I didn't order. For thefts I didn't commit, and for the ones I did, and it's none of your business."

The man shook his head. "I don't choose who I hunt." "And I no longer choose who I kill."

The arrow flew before the man knew whether it was a threat or not. It struck below the chin, and the embers cast a red shadow before the body slumped to the side. The fire hissed as a drop of blood fell into it.

Robin pulled out the arrow, wiped it on the corpse's cloth, and put it back in his quiver. He felt nothing. No anger, no joy, no relief. Only this dull, sated knowledge: **That was necessary.**

He looked at the forest. "All right," he murmured. "I'm in."

And in that moment, the word "outlaw" was no longer just a curse others had placed upon him. It was an oath he signed himself—with arrowhead and blood.

Chapter 4 - Marian only refills if you pay

The morning in the tavern smelled of stale smoke, fresh bread, and sweat that had already lied yesterday. The door hung crooked like a poor alibi, and from the beam above the bar hung bundles of herbs that looked as if they were about to burst into frustration. Among the herbs: Marian. Arms rolled up, eyes sharp as a freshly sharpened blade, hair in a bun that wouldn't mess with anyone but gravity. If there was such a thing as God in Sherwood, he wore aprons and counted change.

"You stink of forest and bad mood," she said as Robin pushed in like a weather forecaster with legs.

"I'm the rain in the house," he grumbled.

"You're the mud on the floor." She put down a cup. "Liquor. Not out of friendship, out of self-defense."

He tipped over. It burned like an honest sentence. "What does honesty cost these days?"

"That you keep your mouth shut while I'm counting." Her fingers flitted over coins as if they had their own eyes. "And that later you don't look like heaven owes you something."

"Heaven is in debt?"

"Only with fools. Not with you. You're just unreasonable."

Sprat, the boy with eyes like open blades, was cleaning a knife in the corner that already knew too many stories. Will sat at the table, pretending to be furniture, and Tom the blacksmith clinked his mugs so quietly that it sounded like he was thinking.

"Rules," said Marian without looking up.

"Rules for what?"

"For today. For you. For everyone in this room who still wants to borrow some air." She closed the drawer. "First: No one steals from my guests. Except me. Second: No dead messengers. Those who bring news leave alive. Third: No one lies in my bar—"

"—except you," Robin helped.

"—except me," she confirmed. "Because I can and you know it."

"And what does breaking the rules cost?"

"Plus ten percent and one tooth."

"Tooth from whom?"

"From the one who doesn't get it. Often you."

He grinned. "Then I'll drink slowly."

"Do that. And are you eating?"

"If there's anything that will survive my life decisions."

She placed a bowl before him, simmering with stew, as if he'd spent the night with bad company. Bread, hard as principles, went with it. Robin ate, and the tavern breathed. People came in, others out, and everyone wore the forest like a second skin: dirt, fatigue, temper, the need for warmth, for alcohol, for a lie that fits.

The bard Jack sat by the fire, plucking a lute that sounded remorseful. He raised his head, saw Robin, and acted as if he had suddenly forgotten the strings.

"Sing, Jack," said Marian. "But don't sing me a hero. Sing me bills."

"I... I have a new piece—"

"If it rhymes, it costs double," she interrupted his rhyme.

"Then I'll whistle," muttered Jack, whistling something that looked like it was whistling to itself.

The door burst open. Three men pretending to be four. Clean coats, too-clean boots. One wore a hat that, in this neighborhood, meant only two things: either he was stupid, or he wanted to prove it.

"Good morning, honorable people," said the hat. The audience responded in the traditional language of the poor: with eyes that looked away.

Marian put the rag aside. "What would you like?"

"Respect, warmth, and a backroom conversation," said the hat.

"Respect and warmth are expensive. Entertainment is out." She smiled thinly.
"We're just doing liquor and food today."

The hat placed a hand on the counter as if signing it in. "I speak for the Lord of Edwinstowe."

"Then give him my regards," said Marian. "He can't hear well here."

"He sends word that security in these troubled times... well, let's say... must be organized. Protection, my lady. Protection against robbers who are causing trouble in this forest."

"Then tell your master not to sit in the forest and cry. The forest doesn't have tissue duty."

The hat made the smile droop. "Our protection is reliable and our prices are fair."

"Fair is the word men use when they mean 'too expensive.'" Marian wiped the counter so thoroughly that his reflection looked offended. "There's already protection in here."

"Whose?"

"Mean."

The hat clicked its tongue. "The voice said the famous Robin would be here."

"Votes go a lot. Mostly to where they're paid." She nodded toward the door.
"Now you come with me."

The Hat leaned forward slightly. His two shadows pushed their coats so that metal was visible. "The Sheriff will be pleased if this... institution cooperates."

Marian raised an eyebrow. "The sheriff? The one who loves order? Great. Then hopefully he'll bring new chairs, fresh windows, and a dry roof soon." She leaned forward as well. "And if he teaches you to threaten more quietly, I'll buy him a beer."

The hat swallowed a joke or a shred of dignity. "We'll be back. With paper."

"Bring some ink, too. I like to dress in black."

The three of them turned away. One of them bumped into Jack, who dropped a wrong note that sounded right. Will quietly counted to five, Tom to two, Sprat to zero.

"Protection," said Marian after the door had spat her out. "Protection is blackmail with a please-thank-you."

"They play with paper," said Robin. "We play with wood and string."

"Paper burns faster," she said. "Wood keeps you warm. I prefer wood."

Robin drank. "And I prefer they look for another hat tomorrow."

"You prefer many things. The question is: do you pay for it?"

"With arrows."

"Arrows are like bleedin' coins." She took the empty cup from him, refilled it, and set it down. "It's a good thing you're not dying today. I need someone to roll the barrels."

"I won't die before I roll your barrels. That would be disrespectful."

"Die however you want, but not in the main room. The stains will never come out."

The morning crawled across the floor like a drunk groping for his bed. Sprat disappeared to steal news. Will went out to arrange silence. Tom disappeared because he knew hammers don't sing alone. Jack stayed because cowardice sits better in chairs.

Around noon, the widow came in from the river. Her face was wrinkled like a map with the streets torn out. She placed coins on the counter, one by one, as if they were being examined. "For the sack of flour, Marian."

"You always pay on time." Marian pushed a piece of cheese toward her. "This is a discount."

"I don't like discounts."

"Me neither. I'll take it anyway."

The widow took it. "It smells like trouble."

"Then the trouble has taken a bath today," said Marian. "Go out the back."

She walked out the back, no questions asked. When Marian said "go," you walked out. Period.

Robin watched her go. "You're scattering alms like a priest who doesn't believe in God."

"This isn't charity. This is inventory maintenance."

"And I'm what? Decoration?"

"You're the crack under the doorframe through which the wind whistles. Useful when you want to get the smoke out."

"Keep flattering me."

"Later. When you don't smell like a wet dog."

"I smell like the forest."

"The forest smells like wet dog."

The door opened, cautiously this time. One of Marian's regulars: a porter with shoulders like two loaves of bread and eyes like two bills. He nodded, went to the bar, put down three copper coins, and received a beer and the right to think about nothing for ten minutes. That's how the tavern worked: money for respite.

"Afternoon," said Marian, pouring a farmer a drink. "If you lie today, keep it quiet."

"Why?"

"Because I get a headache when stupidity roars."

Towards the second pitcher, Ralf appeared in the doorway. Ralf with the too-clean hands. Ralf, who had learned yesterday how to wave correctly when he'd waved incorrectly. He looked as if his shadow had been washed: brighter, smoother, more cowardly.

"Ralf," Marian said so kindly that knives clinked. "Sit down. But not there."

"I just wanted—"

"—don't attract attention," Robin helped. "Then don't. Breathe less."

Ralf sat down. Jack whistled a little song about men who were born stupid and died dearly. Marian placed a glass of water in front of Ralf, who looked offended. "Drink. And don't say anything clever. That'll be noticeable."

Ralf nodded, drank, and remained silent without a word.

The afternoon sun pretended to know what it was doing there and cast a narrow yellow beam onto the floor. Dust danced inside it like little lies. Robin pushed the bowl away, stood up, and went behind the counter where Marian was moving barrels.

"I'll help you," he said.

"You always help me when you want something."

"I want you to stop being strong tonight."

"That costs extra."

"I'll pay in cash."

"I only take coins, no promises." She grabbed the barrel's edge, he grabbed the other. Wood creaked, planks sighed, the floor decided to hold for now. They rolled. "The sheriff's guys are coming back," she said through gritted teeth.

"They like your smile."

"They like that it doesn't belong to them."

"They like it when everything belongs to them."

"Then they should hang themselves in the sky. It belongs to all idiots."

One barrel on the pitch. Another. Marian wiped her forehead, leaving a trail of flour and sweat. "It's packed tonight," she said. "Half the neighborhood wants to forget what happens tomorrow."

"What happens tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow everything will happen again."

Dusk seeped in like a bad rumor. Men, women, a monk who drank only water and smelled like wine; two woodcutters who carried their arms with pride; a whore with tired eyes and wit in her mouth; three young men who wanted to feel heroic and only made it as far as the door. The tavern welcomed them all, stirring, cooking, and serving up a lot of noise.

Marian was everywhere. At the tap, at the pan, at the door. She cashed, she measured, she threatened, she laughed. A man put his hand on her arm—a reflex, a test, a mistake. Her expression didn't change; only her wrist. The man found his fingers at an angle that God hadn't approved.

"In my house," she said calmly, "don't touch anything unless I pay you."

"I—" He wanted to try humor.

"—you're about to breathe through your ear."

He let go. The tavern carried on as if nothing had happened. Because there was always something going on here.

Robin held the corner that the wall offered him. Observed. Calculated. In the noise, he sensed the fine cracks: A woman who laughed too quickly. A man who drank too little, watched too much. Two people who didn't know each other and pretended they were brothers. The forest had ears; the tavern had eyes.

"You're looking for work," Marian said without looking.

"I'm looking for trouble."

"Work is trouble that pays on time."

"Then say it."

"The three from the hat. They're coming back. With papers and the request that I sign, exchanging my dignity for peace."

"You won't sign."

"I never sign. I make crosses on my back."

"So?"

"So tonight, someone walks in the back while everyone in the front is singing. They think I'm busy. I'm always busy. But never blind."

"When?"

"When Jack tries the third wrong rhyme."

Jack raised his lute. "I heard that!"

"Then rhyme less and listen more," she cut him off.

"Plan?" asked Robin.

"A plan is no plan." She gestured with her chin toward the kitchen door. "Back room: bag of sand, rope, and the good knife I only use when calculations get too difficult."

"Invoices are my hobby."

"Your hobby is dying. Don't do it in my kitchen."

The night was full of excitement. Voices, laughter, arguments, jokes that were already dead, and a few new ones that were misbehaving. Jack got to the third rhyme and messed it up as if he'd promised. Marian nodded barely perceptibly. Robin slid off his chair, pushed past two drinkers who were pouring an old enmity into new beer, and disappeared through the kitchen.

The kitchen smelled of grease, herbs, and runny soup. The back hallway smelled of wood, wet leather, and intent. Halfway up: a window that looked like an excuse. Outside: rain, which had started again because it was bad at stopping.

A shadow at the back door, then two. Whispers that knew it would soon be too loud. Robin placed one hand on the knife, the other on the latch, the third on his breath. The wood vibrated under the quiet footsteps.

The door opened, slowly, carefully, with the respect of people who've never been beaten by a frying pan. Two men slid in. Soft boots, soft voices, hard intentions. The one in front raised his head, saw nothing, sniffed. The one in the back had paper in his vest, as sure as his belief in paper.

Robin stepped forward sideways, letting the knife speak—not deep, not lethal, just clear. "Stop. Take off your shoes. Otherwise you'll learn to fly."

"Who—" The one in front broke off as a sack of sand hit his legs from the darkness. He went down, cursing in a language no one here liked. The one in the back reached for something that looked like courage; Marian was already there. A pan in his hand, not born to cook. The sound that followed met a wall of wood and noise and found no witnesses.

"Paper," Marian said, and her voice was something better obeyed. "Show me."

The one in the back picked out a seal with trembling fingers that looked important. Marian held it to the stovelight, read it, and laughed toothlessly.

"Confiscation," Robin read along. "In the name of order. And other fairy tales."

"Nice seal," said Marian. "I'll make a medallion out of it. Or put it in the soup."

"You're making a mistake," gasped the one in front, searching the ground for his face. "The sheriff—"

"—loves order," they both chorused. Marian took the knife from him and threw it to Sprat, who suddenly hung from the shadows like a spider who loves bad company. "And I love it when people pay in cash."

"What... what do you want?" The one at the back held his head, where Pfanne had been playing.

"Less drama," Marian said. "More tips. And that you leave like people who remember doors."

"And if not?"

"Then we'll hang you with your own paper. It'll probably say how high."

"That... that is—"

"—Legally interesting," Robin helped. "But we write differently here."

They didn't bind them. They left them their dignity in small, shameful pieces: shoes in hand, hats backward, paper in mouth. Sprat opened the back door like one chases an animal from a house. Rain took them. The courtyard grinned in the darkness.

"I don't like dead people in the kitchen," Marian said as she closed the door. "They spoil the meat."

"They were already corrupted while alive."

"You can season life." She put the pan down as if it were nothing. "Go to the door. I'll tap. Today, everyone wants to forget what they remember on the way home."

They returned to the music of voices. Jack had stopped rhyming and started playing true. Will drank silently, his chin full of shadows. Tom laughed once as if he'd hurt a nail. Ralf sat so that no one would ask him. The widow was gone; her seat smelled of cheese and dignity.

"Announcement," Marian called into the room without shouting, yet everyone heard. "Today, there's a discount on honesty. Those who tell the truth only pay half."

"I loved you," one cried.

"Too late, too expensive," she retorted. Laughing. "Next."

"I watered the fish yesterday."

"Tell your fish to learn to swim. Next."

"I cheated on my wife."

"Then pay double and take water."

"I—"

"—Quiet," she said, and the sound was quiet. The tavern sat down like a dog.

Later, as the pitchers grew flatter, the voices deeper, and the jokes worse, Marian leaned against the bar. Robin stood beside her, glass in hand as if in excuse.

"You should sleep," she said.

"You should tell me what you really want."

"I want a roof ridge that stays watertight, two benches that won't kill anyone, and a winter that only takes place outdoors."

"And me?" he asked.

"You want to be a hero and not pay for it."

"I want history not to lie."

"Stories lie because people pay. Are you lying?"

"As little as possible."

"This is too much."

He drank. "You're keeping me here."

"I'll keep everyone who pays."

"I pay with arrows."

"I don't do bookkeeping with them."

"I pay with silence."

"I've had enough of that." She turned to him. There was something in her eyes that didn't pass through doors. "Pay with time."

"Time is the most precious thing."

"Exactly." She leaned forward, smelling of fire, flour, and what she wasn't saying. "Stay today, when the noise is gone. Roll a barrel with me through the silence."

"I..." He searched for a joke. It didn't find one. "I'm staying."

"Good. And tomorrow you go."

"Why?"

"Because I won't lose you if you're not here."

He nodded, as if she'd given an order he liked. Someone at the other end of the tavern started an argument that sounded like coins. Will stood up, Tom stood beside him, Sprat laughed softly like a thief. Marian went over, sorting out the world with her index finger and eyebrow. The argument forgot that it wanted to be an argument and went home.

The night grew thin. One by one, the people fell from the tavern like leaves from a bad tree. Jack grabbed the lute and kissed it as if they were getting married tomorrow. Will nodded into the room. Tom said, "Tomorrow." Sprat stole a curse from someone and put it in his pocket.

Then it was quiet. The kind of silence that counts sounds. Outside, it was dripping. Inside, the wood breathed, tired and content. Marian and Robin were left. Two cups, a barrel, a table that had heard too many stories.

"So," said Marian.

"So," said Robin.

They rolled a barrel that pretended to have bones. The wood rubbed against the floor, the floor crunched in his speech. They turned it on, loosened the bungs, and tested it. "Good," she said. "Holds."

"You too," he said.

"Until it's enough."

"Is it enough?"

"Never."

She leaned against the barrel, looking at him as if she were handing out a prize. "Why are you doing this?"

"What?"

"Breathe and get angry. Cut stories apart and yet remain within them."

"Because I can't do anything else."

"And why can't you do otherwise?"

"Because the world pretends to be straight, and I see the dents."

"So you knock on it."

"Until it sounds."

"She does sound broken."

"Better broken and honest than smooth and lying."

"Glatt pays the rent."

"The soul pays for honesty."

"She rarely pays on time." She held his gaze. "You owe me three barrels, two quiet nights, and a week without blood."

"I'll pay in installments."

"I hate guessing."

"Not me. They let you live."

"I live like that too."

"I know." He looked away, then back again. "And if I tell you that—"

"—say it tomorrow," she interrupted. "I've cleared away enough truths today."

"I can wait until tomorrow."

"You can't. But you try. That's what counts."

They cleared glasses. Each pitcher was a separate day. Each plate was proof that people were hungry and that things were about to get better. Outside, the rain pushed one cloud onto another as if they were chairs.

Before leaving, he paused at the door. "Marian?"

"Hm?"

"Your rules. I like them."

"You like it because I wrote it for you."

"Do you have?"

"Any rule that doesn't kill you is for you." She rapped on the counter. "Now get out. Otherwise I'll start something I won't finish."

He nodded. "Tomorrow."

"Morning." She smiled toothlessly. "And don't forget: If you bring me trouble again, bring coins so I can give him a room."

He stepped outside. The courtyard smelled of rain, wood, and the remnants of noise. The forest stood there, large, dark, awake. Behind him, he heard Marian slide the bolt shut—a sound that said: It's safe here. And at the same time: Go.

Robin pulled his hood down. The path took on his boots. Somewhere in the trees, a raven cackled. Somewhere in the belly of the night, someone wrote a wanted poster. Somewhere in Marian's drawer, coins clinked, exchanged for dignity today.

Sherwood stank. Of rain, of betrayal, of old jokes and new rules. But a place that smelled of Marian at least smelled of something that stopped when you turned around.

Halfway to the shadow, he stopped and looked back. Light lay like warm breath in the window. He raised two fingers to his forehead, the gesture of a man who salutes no one except those who deserve it.

"Numbers," he muttered into the rain. "I'll bring numbers tomorrow."

And the forest answered in its language: Drip. Drip. Drip.

The next morning, hats would come again, with paper and smiles and the kind of politeness that hides knives under the coat. The next morning, Marian would still have the frying pan handy. The next morning, Robin wouldn't die, but he would have to earn it again. That was the balance.

But tonight, the tavern belonged to the wood, the barrels, the rules—and a laugh that escaped Marian briefly as she counted the cash register and realized that while the world wasn't right, the evening was. For now. For here.

And that was, damn it, enough.

Chapter 5 - The gang is a patchwork

The tavern was so crowded that evening that the stench was overpowering. Beer, smoke, leather, sweat, and somewhere in between, the smell of old cheese—presumably Will. Marian stood behind the bar, polishing a glass with a cloth that was more aged than many of its guests.

Robin sat at the end of the bar, his back hunched, his feet stretched out, as if he owned half the room. In truth, he didn't even own the cup in his hand—Marian had already warned him three times to finally pay.

"You call them *your*" Gang," Marian said, swirling the glass. "Gang sounds like discipline. Like people who stand up at the same time when you say so."

"They do," Robin replied, "just not all in the same direction."

"That's not a plan. It's a bunch of cats, and you're too drunk to answer the door."

"They work."

"Just like a chair with three legs works—as long as you sit still and don't move."

Robin took a sip. The stuff burned like the first day of winter, but stayed warm in his stomach for a long time. "Do you want to meet her?"

"I know her. I don't like her."

"Me neither. But they stay."

"Until they find something better."

"Then I hope they search for a long time."

"Will," Robin began, "can end any argument with a joke. Or with a knife. Usually both."

Will was one of those people who always stands too close. His grin was wide, his eyes cold, and both came at once. He could put his arm around you and discreetly pull your wallet.

He once told Robin that he'd learned "how to cut properly" at the butcher's. Robin hadn't asked whether he meant meat or people.

His humor was dry, his knife sharp. A dangerous combination, but in this gang, it was practically a requirement for employment.

"Tom has a limp, but he'll still run away from you if he wants to."

He was as broad as a barn door, had hands like blacksmith's hammers, and his breath smelled of a mixture of beer and coal dust. He could turn a bent nail into a blade that would inspire respect at the first cut.

When he laughed, it sounded like a blacksmith's hammer hitting metal—loud, harsh, and not exactly friendly.

"Sprat is fast. Too fast. Climbs before he thinks."

The boy was so thin that you'd think he could walk through the raindrops. His eyes were razor-sharp, and he saw everything—except his own stupidity.

He had a knack for locks, windows, and anything that stood between him and someone else's property. Trust? None. He rarely slept in the same place twice and never without a knife under his head.

"Rit only talks when it's important. And when she talks, you should listen."

She was strong, tough, and could say more with a glance than Jack could in a ballad. Her hands were as hard as cobblestones, her posture as steady as a brick wall.

She held the bonds together—not out of affection, but out of necessity. Any thread can cut if you pull on it too hard.

"Jack is a louse with a lute."

He could invent stories so absurd that no one believed them—and that was often what saved their lives. He sang when there was money, and remained silent when it brought in more.

Half of his ballads ended with Robin as a hero—the other half with him lying in the gutter. Both were lies, but entertaining.

"Ralf is like a boot full of water – useful but uncomfortable."

He was the one sent when doors needed to be opened or a false trail laid. But he was also the first to disappear when things got dicey.

"Why don't you throw him out?" asked Marian.

"Because it still runs," Robin replied.

They sat in the corner of the tavern – a circle of wood, beer, and survival instinct.

“We need a plan,” Robin began.

“We need more beer,” said Will.

“We need money for more beer,” said Tom.

“We need a better leader,” Jack grinned.

“We need someone to be quiet,” Rit growled.

Sprat scraped the knife against the table leg. "I need something to eat."

Ralf drank and pretended he wasn't there.

"There's a warehouse job," said Robin. "Nobleman, wine, lots of eyes."

“I’ll take the eyes,” said Will.

“I’ll take the wine,” said Tom.

“I’ll take the money,” said Jack.

“I’ll take what’s left,” said Sprat.

"And I'll take all your heads if you screw up," said Rit.

Plan: Jack sings outside, Will takes care of the back door, Tom picks the lock, Sprat goes up to the roof, Ralf holds the road, Robin pulls out the wine.

Minute one: Will "accidentally" stabs a guard. Jack sings anyway, but now everyone's listening because they want to see if things get worse.

Sprat disappears onto the roof—ten minutes away because he finds a chimney interesting. Tom breaks the lock and the door, so loudly that half the neighborhood lights candles. Rit covers everyone, her arrows flying so close to Robin that he swears she was trying to annoy him.

Ralf returns as they're already hauling two barrels. "Road secured," he says. No one asks how.

At the end, three barrels of wine, a sack of onions (Sprat) and a copper kettle (Tom).

Beer, wine, smoke. Robin leans back.

"You are a patchwork quilt – full of holes, stinking of smoke and sweat."

"But warm," says Rit.

"Warm isn't enough when it's raining."

"Yes," Marian chimes in. "If you don't have anything else."

Robin raises his cup. "To the patchwork quilt."

Will grins. "As long as you're the one wearing it."

"And as long as you don't sell it," says Robin.

They drink. Cheap beer, fake friends – and the knowledge that no one stays warm alone.

Chapter 6 - The Sheriff Wears Polished Lies

Nottingham's market square stank that morning of damp straw, cold beer, and the unspoken insults of the traders shouting at each other. Between the stalls, on a small wooden platform, stood he—the man Robin preferred to see from thirty paces away with an arrow:**the Sheriff of Nottingham.**

His armor was so shiny it was blinding in the sun. Polished metal, smooth edges, no sign of battle or weather. As if he had taken it yesterday from a chest where it had been waiting for years for its perfect appearance.

The face beneath was freshly shaved, smooth as a liar who had just found his best line. He smiled, but the smile was so empty that one could have parked an entire army of false promises in it.

Robin stood in the crowd, his hood pulled low, his gaze narrowed. He twirled a piece of string in his hand, like other men twirl a coin—to keep his fingers busy while they think.

"Citizens of Nottingham!" began the Sheriff, his voice like the horn of a merchant trying to sell you rotten meat. "Today I proclaim... Safety! Order! Prosperity!"

Robin thought: What you're saying is that you like to hear yourself talk.

"Thanks to the brave work of my men," the sheriff continued, "Sherwood is safe again! The gang of the infamous Robin Hood... has been smashed! The forest belongs to the honest citizens again!"

A few people clapped—those who were either paid or too hungry to understand they were being lied to.

Robin grinned under his hood. Smashed? I was still standing with both feet in your wine cellar last night, friend.

The truth was: The forest was as safe as a sack of rats—and Robin was the biggest rat in it. But the lie sounded better if you wrapped it in gold foil and sold it in a marketplace.

Next to the sheriff stood his men:

- **Sir Ethelred**, a council member with so much belly he had his own shadow, and so little brain he never noticed it.
- **Master Holt**, the scribe whose pen lied faster than a priest could say "Amen."
- Two guards who looked like they had been helmeted before they had even finished thinking.

Robin knew them all. He'd witnessed Holt write an "official report" in which three stolen loaves of bread became "massive plunder"—and how Ethelred overate at a banquet to the point of falling asleep mid-conversation.

"And to make sure this... scum... never sets foot in our honorable forest again," cried the sheriff, "I'm offering a reward! Thirty silver pieces for any information that leads to Robin Hood!"

The crowd murmured. Thirty silver pieces was more than many saw in a year. Robin smelled the trap before it was even spelled out. They would set up decoys—fake farmers who would "just happen" to spend the night in the forest, supposedly passing through. And when Robin showed up to "help," he would fall into a net they would set up so proudly that it would be heard from here to York.

He let them do it. Two days later, he stood at the edge of the forest, the sun at his back, and saw just that: three men in ragged clothing, with a cart full of sacks supposedly containing grain. One of them could barely pretend to be asleep—his hand was too close to the hilt of his sword.

Robin didn't approach them. Instead, he detoured, reappearing an hour later from the other direction, and this time he was a different man. He had blackened his beard with ash, hidden his bow under a tarp, and carried a sack full of scrap metal he'd stolen from Tom's workshop.

"Merchants," he said to the men, "on your way to York. What is your price for the cart?"

The leader narrowed his eyes. "Not for sale."

"Then sell me what's inside."

"Grain."

"Does it taste like iron?" Robin reached into the sack and pulled out a rusty chainmail hood. "Because this one does."

Their faces slipped from their grasp like ice in summer. Robin smiled thinly, dropped his hood, and when they bent down, he had already drawn their swords from their scabbards.

"Greet your boss," he said, and disappeared into the undergrowth before they realized they were now left with empty hands and even emptier heads.

That evening, the sheriff sat in his hall, the lights flickering on his shining armor, and told his guests how he had "cleansed" the forest. The men laughed at the right times, the women nodded, and no one asked why the "cleansed" wilderness still whispered stories of arrows coming out of nowhere.

Robin knew: The Sheriff didn't have dirty hands because he never did anything himself. His armor was clean because he never got into the dirt. And his lies were polished to a shine because he employed half a court every day to clean them.

Before Robin returned to the woods, he left the sheriff a gift: an arrow, shot cleanly into the center of the platform, exactly where the sheriff had stood two days ago. He had tied a piece of parchment to the shaft. It read:

“If lies were silver, you would have been king long ago.”

The sheriff would be furious. Robin walked away grinning, and the forest swallowed him up—so quickly that only the faint creaking of the bowstring remained.

Chapter 7 - When blood is thicker than beer

The tavern was as full as a tavern barrel about to overflow. Smoke hung in the air like old promises, and the smell of beer, sweat, and boiled cabbage made it clear: this was no place for the faint-hearted.

Robin sat on the edge of a table, legs stretched out, watching Will and Tom stare at each other as if they were trying to drill holes in each other.

“Say it again,” growled Tom, his hands already on the table, his fingers wide like horseshoes.

Will grinned crookedly. “I said, if you ever say again that the redhead *you* meant, then I’ll stuff your own limp down your throat.”

The clinking of wood on wood – Tom had slammed his mug down on the table, beer spilling over, dripping into a puddle that looked like old blood.

“She smiled at me,” said Tom.

“She smiled at you,” Will replied. “Big difference.”

“I’ll break your—”

Robin stood up. “Before you redecorate each other’s faces, could you perhaps wait until we’re not sitting in the middle of a tavern full of people who would rather see us dead?”

“He started it,” said Will.

“He kept going,” said Tom.

“You’re both idiots,” said Robin. “But you’re my idiots.”

Later, when the two made up again – or at least drank together – Robin sat at the bar with Marian.

"You're lucky they haven't killed each other yet," she said, placing a cup in front of him.

"That's not luck. That's... an old rule."

"And what would that be?"

"You can share gold, but not blood. Blood is either your enemy or your shield—and sometimes both."

Marian raised an eyebrow. "That sounds like one of those sayings you later realize is nonsense."

"Maybe. But I had another gang before this one. We thought we were inseparable. Then a sack of silver came along. After that, no one asked how the others were doing."

"And you?"

"Me? I was the one who survived."

Three days later, at the camp deep in Sherwood, Sprat came running—so fast he almost tripped over his own feet.

"There... down by the stream... someone... half dead..."

Robin stood up, followed him, and found a man he hadn't seen in years: Alaric. Half of his face was blood, the rest dust.

"Robin..." he gasped. "They... they have him... my brother... in prison..."

"Who?"

"The sheriff. Wants to... hang him... in three days..."

Robin looked at Rit, who stood silently, her bow loosely held in her hand.

"Why are you here?" asked Robin.

"Because I know that you... once... said... if I need you..."

In the evening, they sat in a circle. The fire crackled as if it were about to laugh.

"So?" asked Robin. "We'll get Alaric's brother out."

Ralf shook his head. "For free? No."

"It's a question of loyalty."

"It's a question of payment."

Jack threw a piece of wood into the fire. "We're risking heads for a man who isn't even part of the gang? Sounds like a shitty song."

"He saved my life once," Sprat said suddenly.

Everyone stared at him.

"What?" he said. "I have a past, too."

Will leaned back. "I'm game. If only to see what Ralf looks like when he's scared."

Tom grinned. "I'll go with you—maybe there's something metallic in that prison I can use."

Rit just nodded.

Robin looked around. "Good. Whoever doesn't come with us stays. Whoever comes with us knows that we're not going for gold. We're going because..."

"...because blood is thicker than beer?" Jack scoffed.

"No," said Robin. "Because sometimes it's thicker than silver."

The night was cold. Nottingham was asleep, except for the rats and the men who lived like rats.

Rit and Sprat climbed over the wall like two shadows. Will crept to the back door, while Jack played his lute in an alley to keep a guard busy—unfortunately, the wrong guard.

Tom got stuck in the gate because he didn't want to take off his chainmail. Ralf suddenly appeared, whispered, "I've got the key," and disappeared again before anyone could ask where he got it.

They found Alaric's brother in a cell that smelled like a dead dog. Two guards later, he was free, even before the alarm went off.

Back at camp, Alaric sat by the fire, his arm around his brother.

"I owe you..."

"Forget it," said Robin. "I'll take it in beer."

They drank late into the night.

"You know what's weird?" asked Will.

"That you're still standing?"

"Nope. That beer might be thicker than blood after all. Blood puts you in danger, beer just puts you in bed."

"Wrong," said Robin, raising the jug. "Sometimes both are the same."

The fire crackled again. And this time it didn't sound like it was laughing—it sounded like it was listening.

Chapter 8 - The Night Devours Its Children

Sherwood at night was no fairy tale. It was a black, damp maw that swallowed every sound and threw back only the echo of your own heartbeat. No birds, no rustling. Only the smell of moldering leaves, old rain, and the sharp, metallic chill that hangs in the air before a thunderstorm.

Robin led the way, bow drawn, his gaze cut deep into the shadows. The gang followed, scattered loosely like bad cards on a tilted table. Every step soaked into the mud.

"I hate the forest at night," Jack whispered behind him.

"The forest hates you too," muttered Rit.

They heard it first—the muffled clanking of chains, the dull pounding of hooves. Then they appeared: a column of guards with lanterns, their light flickering through the darkness like stray fireflies. Among them: people, bound, in rags.

They weren't robbers or soldiers. They were children. Thin, pale, their faces sunken like old pots. A few teenagers, maybe sixteen, but most barely old enough to hold a knife properly.

"What the hell..." Will muttered.

"Penal transport," Tom growled. "I've seen something like that. They send you to Nottingham to work. Whoever survives is lucky."

Robin felt an old knot tighten in his stomach.

He had been fourteen the first time he had seen such a thing. He had hidden behind a tree root and watched as the guards beat two boys for walking too slowly. One of them was dead the next morning.

He had vowed to himself back then that he would never just stand by again. Today was "never again" night, and the vow tasted of blood and anger.

"We have to intervene," whispered Rit.

"That's at least ten guards," Ralf hissed. "And there are seven of us—and only five of them are sober."

"I'm sober," said Will.

"Then you're useless today," growled Jack.

"We can't just..." Ralf began.

"Yes," Robin interrupted. "We can. And we will."

Sprat whispered, "I'm in." His voice didn't sound heroic, more like he was afraid of having to look at himself in the mirror later.

Robin spoke quickly:

1. Will and Tom block the path ahead with fallen branches.
2. Rit shoots at the lanterns – darkness is her friend.
3. Jack makes noise at the back to cause confusion.
4. Sprat climbs onto the wagon and unties the shackles.
5. Robin himself covers the retreat, arrows ready.

"Understood?"

"No," said Ralf. "But that's never stopped you."

Rit's first arrow struck the leader's lantern, and the light died with a hiss. Will leaped from the undergrowth, shoved a branch into the hooves of the lead horse—the animal neighed, the guard cursed.

Sprat was already at the wagon, darting like a squirrel between ropes and rusty locks. A child stared at him until he raised his knife. "Move before I change my mind."

Tom hit a soldier with the shaft of his hammer so hard that even the helmet sounded offended.

Jack sang in the wrong place—right behind a guard—and promptly got a punch in the ribs. "That's part of the song!" he gasped, backing away.

The children ran in all directions like startled chickens. Rit shot arrows just past the guards to keep them busy. Will threw a burning lantern into the mud – it burst, and the smell of burnt oil rose.

"Into the forest!" roared Robin, and the group plunged into the darkness.

They ran, stumbled, cursed. Behind them, guards shouted, dogs barked, hooves pounded. But the forest swallowed the sounds, just as it always swallows everything that stays there too long.

The children sat huddled around the fire, spooning thin soup and holding the bowls as if they might disappear from their hands.

Robin sat a little way off, his gaze fixed on the flames. The image from that time played in his mind—the boy who hadn't lived to see the morning.

Will approached him. "Was it worth it?"

"Ask me tomorrow," said Robin.

"Tomorrow we'll drink," Will replied.

Robin nodded, took the jug, and drank. "Sometimes the night eats its children," he said quietly. "And sometimes the children bite back."

The fire crackled. And this time it sounded like an approving laugh.

Chapter 9 - The Priest Who Counts Sins

The bells of St. Mary's hammered like a baker taking revenge on the dough. Nottingham put on its Sunday face: half-clean, half-reverent, all deceitful. Children had lice scratched out of their hair, men washed their first two fingers, women tied handkerchiefs tightly as if to bind thoughts. The sky hung flat and gray over the rooftops like a wet rag.

Robin stood beside the well, hood pulled low, cloak that might once have been brown. He smelled of smoke and forest and a night without sleep. The crowd pushed toward the church door, a tough animal with a hundred feet. Fur collars in front, felt behind. Money went to God first, poverty followed like a dog waiting to be kicked.

"Pious man?" A beggar held out a hand that had more edges than fingers. Robin pressed two copper coins into his callus. "Buy bread, not forgiveness." The beggar grinned hollowly. "Forgiveness keeps you full longer. They say."

The church door stood open like a greedy mouth. Inside, it smelled of cold stone, warm wax, and people pulling themselves together today. Above the altar, gold leaf gleamed, unwavering for many nights.

He appeared like a showman: white linen, fine brocade overlaid, rings that clinked with every gesture. A face that saw too much and felt nothing. His mouth formed grace like a baker forms doughnuts—round, greasy, sweet enough to make you forget they were just dough.

"My children!" His voice was like oil slowly trickling into the ear. "The Lord tests the humble, the Lord exalts the benefactors. He who gives is loved; he who obeys is heard."

Robin counted quietly in his head: one for the lie of love, two for the lie of obedience, three for looking to the front row where the fur collars sat and nodded because their money was already nodding before them.

The priest took a breath. "In difficult times, we must draw closer together. The forest is full of temptation, the streets full of robbers. Whoever gives in the name of the Lord—"

"—gets in the name of the priest," Robin murmured. Someone next to him giggled, then he coughed as if he had swallowed the giggle.

The sermon continued like a long rope that could strangle someone. Sin here, indulgence there, mercy at the price of the day. The poor received promises, the rich received receipts.

When the mass ended, they filed past the collection. Silver clinked twice, copper a hundred times. The priest smiled with each silver clink, as if someone had placed a secret in his ear, meant only for him.

Later, as the church drew breath, Robin slipped into the shadows of the aisle. He inhaled incense that burned like old pepper and lost himself in dark corners that God had long since abandoned.

"Confession is open," a voice whispered from behind the wood. The confessional was a box that preserved hypocrisy. Robin pushed open the lid. Inside, it smelled of mouth, of wine, of words spoken too often.

"What sins oppress you, my son?" Oil splashed.

"Better count the ones I don't have. It's faster."

"Pride." A sigh of relief. "The Lord abhors pride. But he loves repentance. And sacrifice." "Sacrifices of silver?" "The Church must live." "It lives quite well. I can see that on your fingers."

A brief silence. Then that quiet laugh, which showed more tooth than heart. "You sound like someone who'd rather spend the night in the woods than in bed. I could... offer advice. I know the names of the guards. I know the blind corners in Nottingham. The Lord guides me." "The Lord's name is Holt, and he's a clerk for the Sheriff?" Silence again. "The Sheriff appreciates order. So do I. Order is grace with boots."

"What's the cost of not being on your notes?" Robin asked. "Depends on the sin. Murder? A pound. Blasphemy? Half a pound. Robbery? We'll find a range that's appropriate to your soul." "And if I say I only steal from those in your front row?" "Then I'd advise you to confess more deeply. And donate quickly."

"I could also send an arrow through your mouth." "Then you wouldn't get any indulgence." "But calm down."

"My son," he whispered, "we are all sinners. Let us practice business—pardon—grace. Bring me names of your... friends in the woods. The sheriff pays well. The church keeps quiet. Your soul will—" "—an account." Robin slid the lid shut. "I'll pray later. With fire."

"The Lord forgives the angry," the voice cried. "If they pay."

That afternoon, Robin sat at the kitchen table with Marian, who had already seen more blood than soup. Marian chopped onions with the thoroughness of a tax audit.

"Clerical air in your coat," she said without looking. "You were at God's bank."
"At God's pawnbroker." "Same house. Different door."

He spoke concisely, without masking his anger with spice. Marian listened as she always listened: with eyes that count.

"He has books," said Robin. "Names, sums, sins. Indulgences like water in jugs."
"Then fetch the water into the forest," said Marian. "People are thirsty."

Will appeared, his grin crooked, his eyes bright. "We're not blowing up the church. It'll echo badly." "No one's blowing it up," Rit said from the doorway. "We take what's burning and leave what's burning. Paper burns better than gold."

Tom poked his head in, sooty and sweaty. "I'll make you a key in two hours that appeals to offended locks." Sprat was already hanging from the roof batten. "Window. South side. Three lead stitches, two nails, a crack. I'll fit through. You won't." "That's why you're coming with me," said Robin.

Jack tinkled the lute as if it were a remote control. "I'm singing a mass that no one wants to hear. Everyone's looking at me, but no one sees you. That's art." "Art is when you don't fall flat on your face this time," said Marian. "And if you do, fall behind the church, not in front of it."

Ralf stood in the shadows, tossing coins into the air with his eyes. "What's the payoff?" "A trial by ordeal," said Robin. "Distributed in copper." Ralf wrinkled his nose. "Morality doesn't fill stomachs." "No," said Marian, "but it fills my pots when the rich panic and donate to avoid ending up on slips of paper. Play along."

Ralf looked at the floor, which agreed. "I'll get you a map of the sacristy. Get it for me from the doorman. He drinks like the truth."

The church slept with its mouth open. The moon hung over the tower like a gentle threat. Rain had licked the stone clean; the courtyard smelled of wet ash.

Sprat was up first, a shadow with fingers that found purchase everywhere. He felt for the window until it sighed. "Done," whispered the glass. Robin crawled after him. Stone was cold, cold is honest.

Inside, it was as dark as behind closed eyes. A votive light fought with the air. A holy image watched her with that expression of people who are no longer surprised by anything.

Rit stayed at the window, bow half-drawn, eye on shadow. Will and Tom edged through the side passage, as quietly as two men can be, breathing impatiently. Jack stood outside by the wall, humming an off-key tune that made guards uneasy, thinking they knew it.

"Left," breathed Sprat. "Chest. The lock is laughing." Tom knelt, stroking the metal as if it were a stubborn horse. He inserted the tool he had made from an old horseshoe. The lock no longer laughed; it swallowed.

The chest smelled of iron and greed. When the lid opened, Robin saw the coldness of the silver, the indifference of the gold. Beneath it were silk, chalices, and a cross that seemed heavier than its meaning.

And then the books. Three of them. Thick spines that promised to betray everyone. He opened the first one. Names, finely inscribed in a scribe's hand: Ethelred of the Mill—indulgence for marital infidelity—two pounds, four shillings. Second line: Master Holt—embezzlement—six shillings, a prayer. Third: Anonymous (council member) — perjury — one pound, a donation to the poor (not made).

"Hot," said Robin. "Take it," said Rit. "All of it," said Tom, and his hands were already in the money.

A sound in the corridor: leather on stone. A man who thought he was being silent. Will was faster, his hand over his mouth, his knife on the truth. "Sleep, brother," he whispered, and the man slept, still breathing like a mysterious tree.

"Out," said Robin. "Jump in front, Tom money, I books. I'll go in back. Ride—" "—see everything," she said.

They flowed back through the window. Glass sighed once more, night taking her shoulders.

Down by the churchyard stood a small hut where the gatekeeper lived. Ralf hadn't lied: The man had been drinking his way to God for years. He was now snoring to people who weren't there.

"Books to me," Marian said hours later in the back room. The stove spoke warmly, the pots murmured in agreement. "I read and you rage." "I can do both," said Robin, tipping a small mug. The brandy was honest, like a slap in the face.

Rit quietly leafed through it. "Look here," she pointed. Priest—private cash register—entries without receipts. "He's taking ten percent for Paradise," said Will. "That's a service charge." "Fifteen," corrected Sprat, who could do math when it made him angry.

Jack's tongue was out as he copied the prettiest part. "If this could be sung..." "It's printable," said Marian. "Not in heaven, but on every door."

"We'll write," Robin decided. "Short, clear, painful. Names, sins, sums. And a greeting to God." "You write ugly," said Marian. "Not you. You write like a blade." She took the quill. "Then I'll cut tonight."

The city woke to a morning that couldn't decide whether it wanted rain. Even before the first bakery rubbed its door, notes were hanging on fountains and posts: bold letters that didn't smell of writers.

THESE MEN ARE BLESSED – WITH YOUR MONEY.

Below is the list. Ethelred. Holt. Two council members. Three merchants. A knight who had traded slaves and was now paying for candles.

At the market, laughter froze in people's throats. Women held baskets higher as if they were shields. Men read aloud for men who couldn't read, emphasizing differently depending on whether they themselves were afraid of ending up on a list.

The priest reached St. Mary's with a face that hadn't yet invented color. Two guards at his sides suddenly looked small. He tore down the first piece of paper and encountered two more. He tore, he tore, the city nailed down.

"Blasphemy!" he cried. "Accounting!" someone shouted back. "Shame!" "Finally!" snorted the widow from the river, whose name was not on a piece of paper, but in Marian's head.

Master Holt, the clerk, suddenly developed a cough. Sir Ethelred suddenly felt pangs of conscience that looked like sweat from fear. A councilor tore off the slip of paper with his name on it, stuffed it in his mouth, and chewed the paper, digesting what he was doing for the first time in his life.

At noon, the sheriff stood in front of the church, polished as always, and announced a reward: "For information on the criminals who have desecrated the holy church." His eyes fled as he said this. Perhaps he had seen himself on the list.

The crowd didn't respond with cheers. The crowd responded with their eyes. That's worse.

The priest rang the bells as if noise could cover ink. He preached. He sweated. His hands trembled, but not while blessing; they trembled while counting in his head, which didn't add up.

"The Lord sees everything!" he cried. "Then he sees your books too," cried a voice that sounded like Sprat's uncle. Laughter threw pebbles into the sermon. The priest almost drowned in the holy water he himself drew.

Two days later, when the notes had already gathered dirt but still read like fresh wounds, Robin confronted him in the cloister. No spectacle. Just shadows, stone, two people, both of whom knew a god: one in a mirror, the other in silver.

"You," said the priest, and it sounded like "filth." "I," said Robin, and it sounded like "enough."

"You committed sacrilege." "I was doing accounting." "You turned people's hearts against the Church." "The Church turned its hands against their hearts. I only made light."

"What do you want, robber?" "That you give to the poor what you have taken from them. That you strike through the names you have deliberately soiled. That you don't sell confession like garlic." "And if you don't?" Robin stepped closer until he could count the wine on his breath. "Then I'll hang the remaining pages on your tower. And when the wind reads them, all of Nottingham will read them."

A tremor ran across his round face, as if the world had caught it cold for the first time. "I... I serve the Lord." "You serve a pot. It boils when you put money

under it." "You're a murderer." "Not today. Today I'm just the hand that pulls off the cloth."

The priest looked at the door as if God stood behind it. No one came. Not even the clerk. "What do you want?" "Market tomorrow. You distribute bread. You sell the chalices no one needs and buy wood. Winter devours children faster than hell. You make a list of those you're compensating. Not before God. Before everyone." "And you?" "I'm counting."

He pressed his lips together as if trying to swallow another word. "And if I do that?" "Then I'll burn the copies Jack's making." "And if you lie?" "Then I'll lie better than you. Today."

The next morning, the market smelled of damp straw and waning anger. In front of St. Mary's stood a table on which lay bread that was too warm not to arouse suspicion. Next to it was a barrel, from which logs peeped like horse's teeth. The priest stood behind it, white, silent, shorter.

"For the widows and those without firewood," he said. His voice suddenly sounded like someone standing on gravel.

"And the list?" Marian cried, suddenly where she had never been before. He raised a piece of paper. Names. Amounts. "I'll... return it."

"Slowly," said Will. "Faster than yesterday," said Rit.

People approached cautiously, as if the bread might bite. They took it, weighed it in their hands, ate it, and didn't cry. Some cursed, some remained silent. The bells remained silent.

Robin stood in the shadow of a shopkeeper and watched. Jack stood beside him, holding the lute like a chastity belt. "Are you singing?" asked Robin. "Not today," said Jack. "Today the city is buzzing."

Ralf appeared, his mouth full of observations. "He's doing it. Not out of love." "Love is overrated," said Robin. "Actions pay in cash."

In the evening, the tavern smelled of soup that consisted more of bones than meat. Tom pushed wood onto the fire like arguments. Sprat held a loaf of bread, which he didn't steal but received.

"You've eaten the priest," said Will. "I just took his cutlery," said Robin. Marian put down some cups. "Bless you on paper. May it cut as long as it needs to."

"And if he starts again?" asked Jack. "Then we'll start again." Robin drank. Brandy warmed his soles.

Rit looked at him with that look that doesn't ask questions because she already knows the answers. "Why all this?" "Because my mother sold her last bread for forgiveness," he said, his voice suddenly as rough as the wood of the table. "And because she was still hungry."

Silence settled in. You could hear the rain drumming on the windows like someone who wants to get inside and knows there's no room inside.

Late at night, when the tavern consisted only of chairs, shadows, and the breathing of a dog, Robin stepped out the door. The courtyard was steaming. Night hung over Sherwood like an open eye.

He thought of the priest who would preach again tomorrow—perhaps more quietly, perhaps more wisely, perhaps just more cautiously. He thought of bread, which is grace on the right days. Of lists that weigh more than gold. Of arrows that change less than a line of ink on the right wall.

"He counted sins like coins," he muttered into the rain. "Now he's counting people. It's a start."

The forest rattled. Maybe it was just the wind, maybe it was saying: More of this. Robin pulled up his hood. "Already on the way," he said to the nothingness, which answered him like an old friend: with silence that is true.

Chapter 10 - Arrows fly, words cut deeper

The morning lay heavy on Sherwood like a wet blanket that no one had washed. Fog hung between the trees, piling up in layers, creeping under clothes, into joints, into the head. Robin lay in the damp leaves, smelling earth, old leaves, the acidic residue of rain. His fingers on the wood of his bow, the string on the horn edge, his gaze through the clearing where the cart track stretched his weary back between the beech trees.

To his left, Rit: motionless, pressed flat into the ground as if breathing from the bark. To the right, further back, Marian: hood down, knife at his belt, her profile like a drawn threat. Even further back, Jack, his breathing too loud even in the fog. Will swore quietly, like a man trying to curse politely. Tom pressed his chin into his collar, his limp resting—it was only noticeable

because his patience was limping. Sprat was somewhere up in a beech tree, invisible like an excuse.

"I hate waiting," Will whispered. "Waiting hates you too," Marian muttered. "That's why it's taking longer." "We could—" "We couldn't do anything," Robin cut him off. "Breathe. Aim. Think. In that order."

The fog thickened the silence. A droplet broke free, fell for what felt like an hour, then struck a leaf with a noise that was louder than it should have been. The air had that taste of metal and the change in weather. Robin pushed the bow slightly, searching for the point where the path would break away from the curve. Every muscle had known for some time what it was about to do. That's the disgusting thing about experience: the body is already guilty before the head makes the decision.

They came like bad news: they announced themselves, and yet you still hoped it was a mistake. First, the dull pounding of hooves. Then the wooden groan of heavy wheels in wet tracks. Then the first shadow emerged from the fog: a rider, leather shining with damp, eyes dull. Behind him, a wagon, its tarpaulin tightly lashed, and behind that, another. Above the first, the sheriff's banner fluttered, green and white like a clean bandage over a rotting wound.

Six guards in front, four in the rear, two riding beside the center cart. Between the carts, men with spears, trying to appear determined. One yawned. A mule driver scratched himself—that was the most human thing about the entire column.

Robin raised two fingers, lowered them slowly: right away.

Rit tensed. Her breathing was so shallow that the fog seemed offended because it had nothing to flow around. Will strained his patience. This was more difficult.

"Not yet," Robin whispered, more to himself than to the others.

The convoy was now exactly where the path narrowed: on the left, a plate of roots like half a wall, on the right, a depression filled with water, black and a dull reflection. The perfect place. The wrong morning. The right mistake.

"Now."

Rit's bowstring sang first, short, bright, hard. The arrow wasn't a question. It was an answer the rider in front wasn't prepared for. He fell backward, as if

someone had pulled the time from under his saddle. Robin let go. His arrow bounced into the middle box of the front wagon. Wood burst, coins splashed into the mud like cold fish, clinking, rolling, and getting stuck.

"Rain of money!" Sprat snapped so quietly that only the beech tree heard it.

Will and Tom burst out of cover, two dark shadows that suddenly had edges. Will carried his knife like a smile, Tom his hammer like an opinion. Marian crawled sideways, with the patience of a cat that's already decided it's time to eat today.

"Formation!" yelled someone in the column, who had never learned that words are slower than arrows. Rit's second shot took the command from his throat.

"Beautiful," murmured Jack, "like nature—" He slipped from the damp trunk on which he had heroically intended to stand, shot as he fell, and struck a lantern hanging from the end of the cart. It swayed, gurgled oil, and kissed the torch of a guard who was waving his arms too frantically. Flame. A fine, sinful hiss. The rear cart suddenly became temperamental.

"That was planned!" coughed Jack, flopping on his butt. "Then keep planning," hissed Marian. "Take cover!"

The first hand-to-hand combat stank of leather, wet horse, and still-warm metal. Will leaped to a rider's side, half-pulled him from the saddle, cut the strap at his knee, and when the man fell, he didn't even spare the curse. Tom went for the charioteer, heaved him down like a sack of grain, and dropped him in a puddle, playing mercy. Sprat was under the tarp before anyone could say "stop." With two short, cold cuts, a crate was open, Silver grinning at him. He grinned back—and left it there. "Later," he hissed.

Robin kept his distance. Two guards tried to pull the wagons closer together to form a bulwark. The first arrow took away the desire to steer from the rear wagon, the second clamped the front wheel with grating honesty.

"Damn," growled Ralf, "that's more than ten." "I'll learn to count later," said Robin, and shot a man in the wrist who was just trying to get smart.

A horse reared, kicking air. A spear suddenly lost interest in his job. A man called for his mother in a voice no one had used for years.

The fog ate the scent of blood with its wide mouth.

Then something else sang. Not Rit's bow, not Robin's. A tone, cooler, narrower, with a kind of calm that you hate. The arrow came from the right, ever so slightly off-center, clean, close. It grazed the skin on Robin's neck, leaving a red line that felt as if someone had written a truth into his flesh.

Robin jerked his head around. There he stood, half-visible between the trunks: a man in dark leather, hood pulled low, posture like a well-built bridge. Not a single unnecessary muscle moved. He tensed, released, tensed, released – as if the world were an exercise and he was the teacher.

Robin shot back. The arrow hit a trunk where a shoulder had just been. "Not bad," Robin shouted. "Nor you," came the reply, quite calmly, with that slight tone of weariness that belongs only to people who rarely get it wrong. "Name?" "Later." "Or never." "Depends on who dies today."

They no longer just shot. They spoke with arrows: narrowly missed, deliberately, testing, probing, disrespectful greetings made of wood and feather. The man was not a lackey. The man was a profession.

"Stranger," murmured Marian, who also saw him. "York goods. Expensive." "I like expensive targets," said Robin, letting the next arrow come in so that it grazed the other's hood. A strand of dark hair fell free. The man didn't flinch.

"Reinforcements!" Ralf gasped. And indeed, a horn blast sounded out of the fog, one that thought it was courage. "Time," Rit said crisply, blowing out a lantern on the second wagon. Smoke rose, disorientation sank. Tom threw his hammer, striking the edge of a shield, so that the hand beneath it decided to choose another profession. Will disarmed with a scream and kept the knife.

Jack scrambled to his feet, gripped the lute differently—like a club—and tried to "entertain" a staggering soldier over the head. It sounded hollow. The soldier looked offended. "Artist's bad luck," coughed Jack, jumped backward, caught his heel on a root, cursed, and suddenly was back down. "You're a song about pain," growled Marian, pulling him by the collar into the bracken.

Sprat had meanwhile loosened two straps on the front of the wagon. The harness was now a question without an answer. The horse, sensing its new freedom, took a step too far, and tipped the wagon over. The load screamed into the crates.

"Two wagons!" Ralf shouted. "We can pull two, but not three if the reinforcements—" The horn blew closer. "—now," Ralf finished unnecessarily.

Marian was at the back of the middle wagon. Her knife was a sober piece of persuasion, made of thick leather. She pulled out a folder, heavy, sealed in red. The sheriff's crest: three lambs that looked like insulted coins. "Letters of order," she said, and her eyes turned the color of intent. "Pocket it," said Robin, without looking. "If it's a trap, I want to read it."

"Those who can read die wiser," said Will. "Those who can't read die more often," Rit retorted.

The stranger was back in the corner where he wasn't welcome. He had been waiting for Robin, or for the right corner. Arrow – Robin dived. Arrow – Rit pushed a piece of bark between them. Arrow – Marian heard him coming before he arrived and was already gone.

"You're annoying," Robin shouted, shooting at the ground in front of him. Dirt splattered like mockery. "I get paid for this," he said, his tone remaining polite. "Money stinks." "Not when you recount it."

They paused for a breath, as if both had the same thought: We could kill tomorrow, too. Then the stranger shot at Ralf's hand, which was just too eagerly reaching for a second folder. The arrow stuck in wood instead of fingers—just barely. "Cheeky," Ralf gritted, "he wants to trade." "He wants you to steal like a grown-up," Marian murmured.

"Get out," Robin growled, and that wasn't a suggestion. Tom threw the hammer onto the tarpaulin of the burning wagon, letting the embers eat away at him, where it no longer helped anyone. Will urged on a horse, which suddenly realized it was allowed to be a hero. Sprat jumped from the running board and landed on Ralf's back, who cursed but ran anyway.

The stranger's gaze traced Robin's path as if he were a problem to be solved. He didn't shoot. He held the arrow to his cheek, then let it fall again. "Not today," Robin cried. "Almost today," came the reply.

They tipped onto the side path, which only existed if you knew it. The fog took them as escape money, and the forest cashed in.

Behind the second hill, Robin had everyone kneel briefly. "Count." "Ten fingers," said Will, examining his hands with honest doubt. A gash on his arm that acted as if it were worse. Tom was bleeding from his ear, laughing about it because he only needed an ear to laugh at. Rit had a scratch on his shoulder that was as neat as if it had been drawn by a scribe. Marian wiped his cheek

with the back of his hand, the red line like a thin line of anger. "Nothing." Jack held his ribs, counted silently to five, and forgot why. Sprat had grazes on his knees that looked like pride. Ralf looked at the arrow embedded in the wood of his prey, trying to wean the arrow off respect.

"Alive," said Robin. "That's enough."

"Not home yet," Rit warned. "Home is where Marian counts," Will said. "Home is where I pull your ears," Marian corrected, and moved on as if she had the forest lease.

In the camp, the fire growled solemnly. The smoke was friendly, smelling of wet wood and the promise of meat that didn't exist. Coins lay in a damp pile like fish that had forgotten why they flowed. The folder lay beside it, red like a fresh no.

"So?" Ralf narrowed his eyes. "We'll sell the letter. It's hot. Hot brings price." "We'll read it," said Marian. "Words sometimes weigh more than your pans." "Words don't pay debts," Ralf snarled. "Wrong," said Robin, sitting down and picking up the folder. "Some words buy you time. You can't buy time with anything else."

He broke the seal. Splinters of wax fell like small sins.

The smell of parchment rose—ink, glue, the cold, greasy dignity of office. Marian slid closer, her shoulder brushing Robin's, and suddenly the whole camp smelled of soap, blood, and metal. He read, loud enough for the fire to hear:

"To the magistrates of Nottingham and the surrounding area. By order of the Sheriff: Arrests are to be made immediately..." Rit blinked slowly. Will gritted his teeth, not agreeing. "...persons with connections to riots and theft, namely:..." He paused. The first name was a joke: some innkeeper who laughed too loudly. The second, a merchant who had gone to the right door at the wrong time twice. The third—Robin fell silent.

"Go on," said Ralf eagerly. Robin didn't read any further. He just looked. His eyes narrowed, then smoothed, then blanked, the way he did them when anger became a tool.

"Who?" Rit's voice was flat as silk on a table. "No one you know," said Robin. "Bullshit," said Ralf. "Say the name. We—" "Shut up," Marian snapped, her hand already on the handle. "If he's silent, there's a reason." "Reasons don't

pay me," Ralf spat. "Today, yes," said Robin, his voice pure and unwavering. "We plan first. Then we talk. Then we kill—if necessary. In that order."

Jack raised his hand. "I'm for killing, but later. My ribs are hurt." Will snorted. "I'm for drinking, then planning, then killing, then drinking again, because otherwise it'll get too dry." Tom nodded. "Order acceptable."

Robin rolled the parchment, slid it into the folder, and placed his hand on it. "Words are arrows," he said quietly. "They fly farther. They hit longer. And once you send them, you can't get them back."

"That's poetry," grumbled Will. "Simplify it." "We're not finished," said Robin. "The stranger in the woods—he's not part of the usual stable. The letter—that's no coincidence. Someone wants more than just us. Someone wants heads I won't give up."

"And who is someone?" asked Sprat. "Someone who thinks he's safe behind paper." Robin looked into the fire as if the man in the black leather were sitting there. "The other shooter. Find me his name."

Later, when the noise had died down like wet coats, Robin remained sitting by the fire. Marian came quietly and sat down beside him without asking. She handed him the cup. "Your neck," she said. "Show me."

He raised his chin. The red line was clean, thin, bold. Marian ran two fingers of herbal juice over it. It burned like honesty that comes too late. "Whoa," said Robin. "Wimp," she said, blowing air. "That one's got it in for you. Not us. For you." "You hardly notice it."

"I notice everything." "I know." He looked at her, and for a moment the forest had no trees.

"The name in the letter," she said then. "I know it?" "Yes." "Tell me." "Not yet. If I say it, something will change. And I don't want to have the same enemies as yesterday for just one more breath."

She nodded slowly. "Breathe fast. The world doesn't stop."

Ralf stood at the edge of the camp, looking at stars that weren't there. Sprat emerged from the shadows beside him. "Stop sucking names," the boy hissed. "It gives you cavities." "I suck prices," said Ralf. "If the letter burns the sheriff, his enemies will pay. If it burns us, we'll pay. I don't want to pay." "Then be quiet." "Quiet makes you poor." "Loud makes you dead." Ralf grinned

crookedly. "Or rich. For a short time." "I like long," said Sprat, unexpectedly serious. "For the first time."

Rit stood at the edge of the clearing, her bow in her hands, not drawn. She looked into the forest, not through it. The wind had shifted. Somewhere, a branch rattled like crockery. The corners of Rit's mouth moved as if she were counting without a voice.

"He'll come back," she said as Robin stepped beside her. "The stranger?" "Or someone with his arrow." Robin nodded. "Then we'll talk again. In wood."

Rit pointed with his chin at the folder Robin held under his arm. "Words cut deeper." "And bleed longer," he said.

They slept badly. Morning came undecided, as if he knew no one had ordered it. Marian had wrapped the folder in a cloth and shoved it under a beam. Will snored as if practicing for an argument. Jack lay half-lying on the lute as if on a pillow that didn't like him. Tom growled in his sleep. Sprat disappeared twice, reappeared twice, each time with an expression that said: I was never gone.

Robin stood before the birds decided whether to sing today. He nodded his bow without aiming, just to test the feel. Wood, string, breath. "Some arrows fly long before they land," he said into the half-morning. "Some words are already out before you think them."

Marian stepped behind him. "Then think quickly—but tell me first."

He nodded. Slowly, as if he still had a score to settle.

"Today," he said, "we'll find the Man in Black." "Without breakfast?" "With anger." "It's low in calories," she said. "I'll pack you some bread."

He took it. He would forget to eat it.

On his way out, he paused at the door, picked up the folder, and looked at it as if it were an animal staring at him. He thought of the seal breaking. Of the names sticking like arrows into his back, even as he was still standing. "Words cut deeper," he repeated, this time without a stage. "But arrows strike first."

He entered the forest. It welcomed him as always: without questions, without consolation, only with the sober realization that everything that goes in will sooner or later come out again—as hunter, prey, or story.

Behind him, Marian pulled the bolt: a sound that meant later. In front of him, Sherwood breathed, and somewhere out there, a man in black leather flexed the bowstring and smiled, knowing that today they would speak again—in wood, in skin, in the truth that fits between two breaths.

And above it all stood a line, narrow as a scar:

Arrows fly. Words cut deeper.

Both will find you. Neither will forget you.

Chapter 11 - Legends are born when no one is looking

The morning in Nottingham began as always: too early, too wet, and with too much noise for too little content. The alleys were muddy, the water collecting in puddles so black you'd swear they had no end. An old man was sweeping his doorway as if trying to sweep the filth from the city. The baker's wife set out her bread, still steaming, and shouted the price as if it were a curse. Children ran barefoot, their feet already blue with cold, but faster than any thought of work.

Somewhere a rooster crowed—too late, as if he had overslept. A dog chased a cat, both disappeared around a corner, and shortly afterwards, all that could be heard was a clattering noise that sounded like pots falling over.

Nottingham was alive. Nottingham coughed. And Nottingham had no idea that the gang was long gone.

Before the town had even opened its eyes, the gang had vanished into the forest—quietly, invisible, like thoughts one doesn't want to think. They had gathered in a small hollow, close to trees that stood like old men with bent backs. There was no grand plan, no epic goal that bards would later sing about. Today it was just flour, salt, a few salted fish—things that don't get songs, but ensure that you don't wake up with an empty stomach the next morning.

"Three minutes in, one minute out," said Robin, tracing a line in the damp ground with his boot. "And if someone sees us?" asked Jack. "Then smile," growled Marian, "but with your mouth closed. Otherwise they'll see your teeth and know you're lying."

Rit knelt and sorted her lock picks, each tool in its place, like a surgeon before an operation. Will and Tom stood still, examining the heavy sacks as if they had

already felt the weight on their shoulders.

None of them expected fame. Fame was for people who were dead or stupid—often both.

The castle was old, not bad, but old—like a watchman who's done his job too long and is now only half-listening. "Two minutes," murmured Rit. "You have thirty seconds," whispered Robin back. "Or the night watchman will come and want to tell you his life story." "Then he'll get a happy ending," she hissed.

The lock clicked open. Inside, it was cool, smelling of dust, old grain, and a hint of mouse pee. "Flour on the left, salt on the right, meat in the back," Will muttered, as if he were an inventory manager. "And where's the wine?" Jack asked. "In the tavern, in your dreams," Marian growled.

They worked quickly. Two sacks on their shoulders, out through the side entrance, back in again. A broom fell over—so quietly that only they heard it, and yet everyone froze. "It was the wind," said Rit. "We're inside," replied Robin. "No wind."

Jack wanted to impress, so he picked up two sacks at once. He tripped, and one burst. A cloud of flour rose and settled over him like snow. "I'm a ghost now," he whispered. "Then get lost," hissed Marian.

Outside, the fog waited like an accomplice who took his job seriously. They glided through the alleys, their loads heavy, their breath visible in the damp air. No scream, no alarm. Only the creaking of wood and the quiet squelching of boots. In the forest, they hid the sacks under tarpaulins.

"That's it?" Jack asked incredulously. "That's it," said Robin. "That's not how you die."

By afternoon, Nottingham was a city full of storytellers. "Robin Hood has stormed the storehouse! Alone!"

"I heard he had a sword made of flames!" "And killed ten guards!" "No, twenty!"

An old man swore he saw it with his own eyes—from his window, in the rain, without glasses. A child claimed Robin had a bear on a leash. A market woman said he had fallen from the sky.

Robin listened, standing in a dark corner, his hood pulled low over his face. He had to laugh. I wasn't even alone, he thought. And the only thing that died was Jack's dignity.

A potbellied, bearded innkeeper recounted, "He jumped from the roof right into the wagon and knocked two men off their horses!" The blacksmith next door added, "And he spat in the sheriff's face!" A drunk promised to write a song before he even knew how it would end.

No one mentioned Rit, who opened the castle. No one spoke of Marian, who guarded the entrance. Legends had no extras—only heroes.

In the office, the sheriff raged. "He's becoming a danger," he growled. "If the people believe in him, they'll stop believing in me." His advisor, a thin man with a face like an old quince, suggested portraying Robin as a coward. "We'll say he flees every fight. That he threatens women and children." "And?" "And if no one believes it, at least we'll have talked."

Irony: The more the sheriff hated him, the more people wanted to know who this man was.

In the evening they sat around the fire. "I heard you spit fire," grinned Jack. "I heard you fly," laughed Will. "I heard you smell like a bear," said Rit. "And I heard Jack looks like an idiot when he's lying in the flour," said Marian.

Robin puffed on his pipe. "Legends are like sharp knives—good when you wield them, but they also cut you." "And?" "And sometimes the knife cuts even when you don't have it in your hand."

Later, Robin crept alone through a side alley. There stood a boy, barely twelve, in chains. Two soldiers held him. "New recruits for the army," said one. "He's too small," growled the other. "He's growing," laughed the first.

Robin stepped out of the shadows. Two quick movements, and the chains fell. "Who are you?" asked the boy. "No one," said Robin, and left.

Nobody told a song about it.

Marian saw him coming back. "That was worth more than all the sacks combined." "No one will know," he said. "That's exactly why it counts."

At the edge of the woods, Robin thought he saw the stranger from Chapter 10—just a breath away, black against the fog. Maybe it was just a tree. He drew the bow anyway, because it felt right.

On the way back, he heard a ballad carried by the wind: "Robin Hood, the great hero..." He smiled crookedly, wiped mud from his jacket, and pulled his hood

down. "Legends aren't born when arrows are flying," he murmured. "But when no one's looking."

The forest was silent. It had already seen too many heroes.

Chapter 12 - The Price of Fame

Fame stinks. Not of roses, not of incense—fame stinks of old beer, cold sweat, and other people's fear. Nottingham was full of it. It hung over the alleys like fog, but stickier, and every breath tasted of rumors.

"It was him, I saw it!" – says someone who never sees anything. "I know him personally!" – says someone who doesn't even know himself. "He buried the gold in the moor, by the old beech tree!" – says someone who has never walked to the old beech tree.

Robin walked through the buzzing like a swarm of hornets. Hood down, hands free. He heard his name pronounced ten times wrong, and one right—that one hurt the most.

It was no better in the forest. Strange faces among the trunks, quiet feet, shallow stares. Men with knives that were too clean, women with stories that were too smooth. Everyone wanted something: protection, money, a place by the fire—and above all, proximity to fame, so that some of it would rub off on their filthy coats.

"This isn't the home of holy legend," Marian growled as the third troop in two days appeared at the clearing. "Those who stay pay. Those who lie bleed."

The first squad paid. The second lied. The third bled.

"We are fighters," said the leader of the would-be outlaws, a tall man with a beard that looked like a dead polecat. "We stand with you, Robin. Against the sheriff. Against the rich. Against injustice."

"For work, you mean," Will muttered. "That guy has hands like cheese."

"Names?" asked Robin. "Why?" grinned the tall man. "There are many of us."

"Many die faster," Rit said dryly. "That spreads the grief among several families, saves on funerals, but doesn't make you any better."

"We just want..." The tall man searched for a word. He couldn't find one that didn't sound like begging. "To be there."

"Fame to go," said Marian. "Slogan: You do nothing, we do everything, and in the evening you tell stories in which you are heroes."

Will leaned on the crossbow. "Show your palms."

The tall man showed them. Clean, soft, cuts so fresh they were still acting. "You started being a man yesterday," Will said. "Today you want songs. Wrong order."

"We're not here to mock you," one of the group snapped. "Yes, we are," said Marian. "Mostly."

"Two stay," Robin decided. "Those who at least sweat honestly. The rest disappear. No names, no stories. Whoever comes back tomorrow will come without teeth."

Two remained. They reeked of fear and honest stupidity—better than lies. The rest vanished with the offended expressions of people who thought fame was a cloak they could borrow.

The next day, new paper hung in Nottingham. Seal red, words black, reward silver: One hundred silver pieces for what remained of "Self-proclaimed Robin." Fifty for a reliable tip. Ten for a lie that sounded good enough to waste time.

"One hundred," Jack whistled. "Even my innocence didn't cost that much."

"Nobody bought them," said Marian.

With the bounty came new faces. Not just hunters—innkeepers, maids, tinkers, farmers with hungry, childlike eyes. Every bowl became an ear, every jug a spy, every polite question about the weather an opportunity to feed a family.

"Reputation is a shield," said Rit, "but also a target."

"We need different ways," said Tom. "New paths, new places, new hands in the city. The old ones are tired of money."

"I know two more who aren't tired," said Ralf, who was standing at the side, counting with his eyes. "Extra charge."

"Everything costs extra," said Marian. "Even breathing."

It rained during the night. The drops drummed on the tarpaulin roof like little bookkeepers counting debts. The fire crackled in a language everyone knew: Burn. Keep warm. Don't eat too fast.

"We need to be quieter," Marian said. "Smaller. Fewer actions, more hunger—I know. But better hunger than the gallows."

"Legend feeds us," Jack countered. "People bring bread because they've heard stories."

"They also bring betrayal," said Rit. "And betrayal has more calories."

Will put his feet closer to the fire. "First we had breakfast because no one knew our names. Now everyone's trying us on like shoes at a market. If we fit, they go with us. If we don't, they throw us at the sheriff."

Robin was silent for a long time. "The name has grown bigger than the man," he finally said. "And the man no longer fits in."

Marian looked at him, hard and precise. "Your name will protect us or consume us. Decide what you use it for."

"I use it to open doors."

"Then keep it closed when we're through," she said.

The message came via a baker who smelled too honest to be a liar: A sheriff's transport, a small squad, valuable cargo, bad timing. An invitation.

"Trap," said Rit.

"Maybe," said Robin. "Maybe not. Fame has made us great—perhaps a low blow will suffice now."

"We'll only take half the gang," Marian decided. "No full performance. No song."

They walked at dusk. Fog hung on the ground, as if trying to preserve everything that might happen. The path was narrow, the trees dense—the perfect place to make other people look stupid.

The transport arrived on time. Too on time. Two wagons, four riders, two foot soldiers—and faces that thought too clearly. "Now," whispered Robin.

The first arrow hit the wheel. The second hit the reins. The third... didn't. It was stuck in a shield that rose up like a ready-made answer.

There was a rustling to the right. There was a rustling to the left. Then they rushed out of the trees: not the sheriff's men, but the would-be outlaws from the other day—plus three new ones who looked like debts.

"For glory!" roared Polecatbeard. "For Robin Hood!"

"For your bounty," Marian corrected.

There were too many of them, too loud, too stupid. And they had the sheriff at their back, who was as punctual as a morning cat. Arrows flew, words crunched, the wood of the wagons sang, and suddenly everything was crowded: swords, sweat, mud.

Will fell, got up, fell again—grinning bloodily. Tom blocked a blow with his hammer head, the steel shrieking in offense. Rit unloaded three arrows faster than the rain could fall. Jack hit a lantern—this time intentionally—and steamed up the wet undergrowth.

"Retreat!" Robin yelled as the sheriff's horn approached. "Now!"

They escaped, but the night had taken its toll. Will had a notch on his upper arm, so neatly drawn it looked like writing. Tom limped worse than usual. Jack wheezed as if he'd argued with his lungs and lost. Rit was quieter than usual—and that's very quiet.

Back by the fire, Marian laid out the bandages like cards: one for Will, two for Tom, three for Jack. "You're breathing," she said to each, "so don't complain."

"They didn't want to kill us," Rit said. "Not right away. They wanted to tie us up with stories and then take us to the sheriff."

"Fame makes ropes," Will murmured. "And knots."

Ralf, unharmed as always, cleared his throat in a cashier's tone. "The good news: Not everyone wanted to betray you."

"The bad news?" asked Marian.

"Most of them do."

Robin stared into the fire until the heat burned and his eyes watered. "Tomorrow there will be fewer of us," he said. "Less noisy. Less there. We're moving to the northern part. New paths, new eyes."

"We need people in town who won't hold out their hand for silver," said Rit. "Marian has three," said Tom. "Marian has ten," Will corrected. "She just doesn't know who to yell at first."

"I'll shout at everyone," Marian promised. "One at a time."

For the next few days, Nottingham became a jumble of notices: new wanted posters, new rewards, new lies. The sheriff claimed Robin had looted the church (partially true, but not as stated), threatened children (lied), and kicked a dog (this dog had bitten Robin, but facts are poor ballads).

"He's trying to turn you into a monster," Jack said. "So monster hunters will show up."

"Monsters are easier to sell," said Ralf. "Heroic stories are easier too. No one lives in between."

"We live in between," said Rit.

Robin walked alone at night. The forest was a long, cold corridor, where memories hung on the walls like old jackets. He stopped at a root he'd known since he was barely taller than an arrow. Then he was air. Now he was name.

He thought of the past, when no one said "Robin" and meant it. When he stole bread because otherwise, people would eat their own hands. When the forest was a belly, not a theater. When fame was a word for people who lived in books—and he was paper that no one wrote on.

"The price of fame," he murmured. "Is that you never pay it—the others pay it too." He thought of the two newcomers who were allowed to stay. One had sung today while mending the tarpaulins, quietly, off-key, but with heart. He was genuine. The other had only carried the sack when someone was looking.

He was a legend.

He didn't hate either of them for it. But he noted it in the book he would never write.

"We're closing the tavern tomorrow," Marian said later as she stacked the chairs. "For one day. I need peace and quiet from the noise."

"The sheriff will send eyes."

"Send it back. With a blue border." She placed her hand on the back of his neck, cold with soap, warm with anger. "Listen: You are not the story. You are the reason someone wants to tell it. That's not the same thing."

"The reason will be shot," he said. "The story too—if it's bad." She let go of her hand, as that said too much. "Let me say no tomorrow. To everyone. To you too."

"I'm late," he said. "You come alive," she said. "That's the condition."

The trap that caught them the second time was a more cowardly one. No forest, no car, just a backyard in Nottingham, a window meant to be a signal, and two boys who looked like they hadn't eaten in days. "Help us," they begged, and that was a word that worked too often.

Will stepped forward, gave the first man half a loaf. The second reached for the knife. Marian grabbed his hand, twisting it until the lie cracked. "Not today," she said. Shadows moved over the roof edges. Too many. Ralf's tongue became nerve, his gaze became cash register. "Distraction," he hissed, and was already gone, bending something that wasn't his.

They came out the way you come out when the world has just decided to keep you in: bruised, short of breath, angry at everything that works. A rock hit Jack on the shoulder, and he sang a note that had no note. Rit nocked an arrow and didn't let it fly. "Not worth it," she said.

"The city is tipping," Will gasped. "Not toward us. Away from itself."

"Fame turns the wind," said Robin. "But the wind has no friends."

The days that followed were small. Small thefts, small acts of help, small nights. No noise. No song. The legend continued to dance outside, touring taverns and kitchens, while the man in question chopped wood, stitched wounds, and changed paths. Children waved to them when they thought no one was

looking. Men nodded when they thought it was dark enough. Women gave bread when they thought their names would be forgotten. "We're back where we started," said Rit. "And one step further," said Marian. "Now they know our names."

On the seventh evening, they sat by the fire, and no one spoke. Not out of anger, not out of emptiness—out of respect for the day that hadn't killed them. The wood crackled. Sparks rose until the night swallowed them. Jack counted quietly, as if they were coins. Tom sharpened a blade that had said "later" many times before. Will blew on the notch in his arm, which now itched like an old mistake. Rit tied up the quiver and laid it down once more, as if he needed to learn to lie still. Ralf wrote numbers on air.

"The price of fame," Robin finally said, "is that it doesn't belong to you. It belongs to those who tell. So you'd better not tell."

"Or tell it so well," said Marian, "that her lies sound boring next to it."

He nodded as if she'd handed him a knife. Maybe she had.

"Tomorrow we'll split up," Robin decided. "Will, Tom, Jack—North Path, Old Mill, just look, don't die. Rit, Ralf—town, quiet, just ears. Marian—"

"I'm closing the door," she said. "And whoever I open it for won't close it again."

"And you?" asked Will.

"I'll find out how much I am right now," said Robin. "And whether it's worth not buying me today."

"Bring your name back safe and sound," said Rit. "It's old," he said. "But it still holds."

At dusk, just before the forest devoured the sky, Robin stood alone at the edge of the clearing. He smelled rain that hadn't yet fallen and snow that was far away. Sounds came muffled, as if afraid to attract attention.

He thought of the boy with the chains. Of the baker with the honest skin. Of the polecat beard who wanted to nail fame to the walls. He thought of the folder from the letter. Of the man in black. Of the name he hadn't yet said. He thought of Marian, who could close doors like other people close wounds.

"The price of fame," he said to the trees, "is that you pay it, even if you don't buy anything."

The forest responded in its own way: A twig cracked because it had to. A bird flew up because it was awake. The wind acted as if it didn't know where to go.

Late, when the fire was only glowing, Marian placed the blanket on his shoulders without asking. "I'm not cold," he said. "You're lying," she said.

He placed his hand on her forearm. "Tomorrow." "Tomorrow," she said. "And don't bring me glory. Just you."

He laughed toothlessly. "Fame will find me anyway." "Then we'll run faster," she said.

He stayed awake long afterward, until the embers looked like small towns in the distance, and thought that legends are born in broad daylight when no one is looking—and paid for at night when no one is listening.

Then he slept, the bow beside him, the name over him, like a blanket that warms and suffocates.

Chapter 13 - Marian sets rules

The rain came in thin sheets, so patient that it sapped the spirits of every neck. The clearing was a compromise of mud, cold smoke, and silence that pretended to be peace. The gang huddled around a fire that looked like a dog about to fall asleep. Will rubbed the notch in his arm, Tom sharpened a blade that had long since said "enough," Jack blew scales into the wet, Sprat searched for a last crumb of bread in a bag that smelled only of bread. Ralf stood at the edge, as always, counting the world.

Marian stepped in front of the circle. She didn't care about the wet hair on her neck, just as she didn't care about anything that didn't work. She downed the last sip of schnapps, tilted the jug like a judgment, and said, "No more of this nonsense. From today on, things will be different."

"So charming in the morning," murmured Will.

"All I hear is sparrows," she said. "If you want to talk, put your hand down when I'm done."

"There are too many mistakes in us," Marian began. "Too much coincidence, too much 'it'll be okay.' Too much fame, too little brains. And yes, I mean all of you. You too, Robin."

Robin sat on his stool, his hood pulled back, his eyes like arrowheads. He just nodded. "Then put up signs."

"I make rules," she said. "And whoever breaks them leaves. With teeth, if they're lucky."

Tom stopped sharpening. Rit didn't even raise an eyebrow. Jack held his breath, out of pure curiosity, the way one would watch a cart accident.

"Let's begin. Rule one."

"No one lies to oneself," Marian said. "Not about paths, not about guards, not about wounds. Whoever lies endangers everyone. And whoever endangers everyone only talks through soup afterward."

"My soup is thin," Jack interjected.

"Good for talking." Marian didn't look at him, speaking into the rain.

"Remember that backyard in Nottingham? Two guys, chains on their wrists, and suddenly ten shadows on the roofs. Why? Because one—" She flicked her chin at Ralf. "—knew more than he was saying."

Ralf opened his mouth, then closed it again. "I have..."

"...calculated," she finished. "With probabilities, with prices, with my patience. From now on, you tell us everything you smell. No maybes, no lateres. You are useful when you speak, and expensive when you remain silent."

"And what if I'm wrong?" he asked.

"Then you're wrong out loud," she said. "You can check out loud."

Will grinned. "I like rule one. Finally, everyone is as honest as their knives."

"You start with rule two right away," said Marian.

She approached the storage rack: two sacks of flour, a strand of salted meat, three bottles pretending to be medicine. She lifted one sack and dropped it. "This one was heavier yesterday."

Sprat stared at his lap as if there were an excuse there. "I... just—"

"—Hungry," Marian helped. "I am too. Every day. And I don't rob my own kitchen. Anyone who tries to steal our supplies should ask. Anyone who steals is out. Without a backpack."

Jack gently raised his hand. "What about... small samples? For art?"

"Your art eats after the work. Not before."

Sprat raised his head, his eyes as bright as wet slate. "I'll pay you back double."

"You'll pay it back today," said Marian, throwing him the empty breadboard. "Get what's missing from the city. Alone. No heroic deeds, just bread. If he doesn't come back, he'll save us food in the future."

Robin wanted to say something, but didn't. Sprat nodded, stood up, and disappeared into the rain. His back was thin, like a line in an overly long sentence.

"Hard," Will muttered.

"Hard is when you don't have a bite tomorrow," said Marian. "I prefer hard in the now."

"Thirdly," she continued, "we're no longer taking anyone who only comes when things are over. Whoever wants to sing can carry. Whoever wants to tell a story can bleed. Whoever wants a name should do something that doesn't smack of fame, but of work."

Jack started a joke, then dropped it halfway. Tom nodded once. Rit looked out at the rain, unfazed.

"We're turning off the tap," said Marian. "No wannabe heroes. No polecat beards with clean hands. The two who stayed yesterday are staying on probation. Anyone who prefers collecting stories to wood can go."

"We need people," Ralf interjected.

"We need hands, not necks," Marian said. "Raise hands, necks speak."

"Fourth: No one tells the outside world what's happening inside. No victories, no names, no paths. No songs about today. Songs about yesterday are allowed if yesterday never was."

"Is this addressed to me?" Jack smiled crookedly.

"You in capital letters," said Marian. "Your mouth is precious when it sings numbers. If he sells us, I'll cut out the rhyme and sew it into your pocket. Then at least it'll jingle."

Will snorted. Marian looked at him, his laughter extinguished like a spark in the rain.

"Fifth: When we're in the thick of it, one person speaks. One person. No choir, no democracy, no—I thought it was wise. Anyone who doesn't like the order can complain to me later, not between arrow and knife."

"Who is that one?" asked Tom.

"Depends," said Marian. "Forest? Robin. City? Me. Confined space? Rit. Metal? You. Idiots? Will."

"I'm honored," said Will.

"I feel threatened," said Jack.

"Good," said Marian. "Danger keeps you awake."

"And what if you're wrong?" Robin asked calmly.

Marian turned her head. The rain clearly outlined her anger. "Then I'll wear it. Up front."

"And what if I'm wrong?"

"I wear it too," she said. "Because I allowed it."

He nodded. She had pulled the hook of vanity out of his cheek before he knew it was there.

"I have something too," he finally said. "Rule six."

"It's from me," said Marian. "And it means: No one dies in the kitchen." She held his gaze. "I won't let you bleed to death in my tavern anymore, got it? If you want to die, do it outside. I'm not going to undo life decisions again."

Will raised both hands. "I vote for No One Dies. Universal."

"Okay," said Marian. "That's rule six. No one dies without my approval first."

Will sat up, broadening his shoulders as if the world were a shirt to be filled out. "Freedom, Marian. We're here because we don't like other people's rules. If you write a decree, we'll be the same assholes as those in Nottingham."

"Wrong," said Rit, her eyes still in the rain. "Their rules keep you small. Ours keep you alive."

"I'd rather be free and dead," growled Will.

"Not me," said Jack. "I'd rather be free and drunk."

"Freedom is not a feeling," said Marian. "Freedom is a bill. You pay it with foresight, with discipline, with breath. Those who don't understand the bill pay with blood. Usually not their own."

Will remained silent. You could see two knives wrestling in his head. "What about decisions in the field? What if things tip over?"

"Then you'll fall over with dignity," she said. "And not because you're shouting 'freedom' on principle when you should actually take cover."

Tom raised the blade and examined the edge. "She's right." "You're a blacksmith," Will grumbled. "You love rules, because otherwise metal gets fussy."

"I love when things last," said Tom. "And people."

Marian reached into the box of bandages that had become bandages and pulled out a thin roll of leather straps. She walked over to the second newcomer, the soft-handed one. "You."

He looked up, eyes like three raindrops. "I... brought wood."

"And half of it was wet," said Marian. "Get some dry stuff. Learn it. Today. And whoever sees you strolling will pull the belt over your head. We're walking here—we're not posing."

He swallowed. "Yes."

"Say yes, Marian."

"Yes, Marian."

"Say I'll do it right."

"I... I'll do it right."

"Okay," she said. "Surprise me."

The boy disappeared with a speed no one had expected. Rit watched him, nodding barely noticeably. "Maybe he'll stay."

"Maybe not," said Marian. "I'm not building a church. Maybe. I'm building a kitchen now."

"Next part," she said. "We share the night. Two are always asleep. Two are always awake. Two are on the move. The rest aren't here. They're somewhere the Legend isn't looking. If we have a goal, it only knows who has to do it... and me."

Ralf cleared his throat. "Trust is good, Mar—"

"Shut your tongue," she said, without looking at him. "And learn this: trust isn't a feeling. Trust is a habit. You stop cheating on me, and I'll get used to leaving you sitting by the fire. Deal?"

Ralf raised his hands. "Deal."

"Good. Then rule seven: Whoever says 'deal,' delivers. Whoever doesn't deliver is the deal."

Jack whispered, "This is going to be a saying."

"This will be a practice," said Marian.

The rain didn't stop. It just got smaller, shittier, more personal. Marian stepped closer to the fire, holding the knife in her hand, not as a threat, but as a punctuation mark.

"I want to make something clear," she said. "I'm not here because I like giving orders. I'm giving orders because, without someone, you'll run into every other trap like cows into an open gate. I don't want to discipline you. I want you to breathe when I open the door again."

"There are doors?" asked Jack.

"There are rules," she said. "And behind good rules are doors. Behind bad rules: walls. The sheriff builds walls. I build doors."

"And Robin?" asked Will. "Building something?"

Robin looked into the embers. "I'm building grounds."

"And I'll build the bars," said Marian. "So they'll hold."

"We're rehearsing," Marian said suddenly. "Now. No spectators. No sniggering. You—" she pointed at Will, "block the way as if riders were coming. Tom, clamp the wheel with nothing. Rit, lights out with rain. Jack, noise from the right that sounds like it's coming from the left. Ralf, stand there and wonder what you missed. Robin—"

"—count," he said, already standing up.

It was as if someone had tipped electricity into the clearing. Will, in three easy steps, threw wet branches, stones, and rope together to make it look like a trap. Tom stuck wooden wedges into mud that suddenly felt harder than teeth. Rit blew arrows that hit only air—yet extinguished the lanterns burning in his head. Jack screamed so honestly you thought he was dying. Ralf stood there and saw everything—really everything—for the first time, not as a price, but as part of the bill. Robin counted: "Five, four, three, two—"

"—one," said Marian. "Enough. You're alive."

She smiled. Briefly. Without teeth. It suited her.

"These are the rules," she said. "Write them on your hands, on your heads, on your boots. Read them in the morning when you cast your first curse. Read them at night when you hope to read them again tomorrow. Those who break them will learn something about pain they didn't know before."

"How long are they valid?" asked Jack.

"Until you prove to me you have better ones," said Marian. "Or until I get tired. Guess which comes first."

"Never," said Robin. It didn't sound like flattery, more like statistics.

Marian put away the knife. The rain splashed politely. The fire lay down and pretended to snore.

Later, Robin and Marian sat under the canvas, right where the rain was still audible but no longer wet. Their ankles touched, not out of romance, but because the space was small and the world was big.

"Does all this apply to me too?" he asked.

"Especially for you," she said. "You're the name they remember. If you lie, everyone lies. If you raid the kitchen, the forest will eat us. If you take fame without risk, Jack will have fever dreams. You keep the rules. Otherwise, they'll keep you."

"I'll hold," he said. "As long as you pull."

She looked at him, that look that closed doors and left hearts open. "I'm pulling. And if you fall, I'll fall later. So one of us can clean up."

"Sure," he said.

She tapped the post once. "We'll start earlier tomorrow."

"Earlier than today?"

"Yes. Before the rain."

"The rain always comes first."

"Then let's see who knocks louder."

The forest took their voices as collateral. Clouds hung over the clearing like dirty blankets. And beneath them now stood something that had been missing yesterday: a sentence that held.

Marian's Rules— burned into minds, tested in mud, washed down with liquor. No gospel, no law. Just bars. But good bars save houses.

And anyone who didn't believe it could try it out tomorrow. In the kitchen. Or outside. Where the rain washes away names and leaves only rules.

Chapter 14 - The Boy Who Grew Too Fast

The morning smelled of wet wood and old excuses. Sherwood held his breath like a boxer between punches. Robin was already awake before the birds decided whether to sing. He stood at the edge of the clearing and flexed the bowstring, just for the feel. Wood. Fiber. Breath. Routine against what goes wrong later.

Then he appeared. Shoulders too narrow, steps too fast, eyes too wide. A boy whose childhood had been eaten away by hunger. "I'm looking for... Robin," he said, as if the word carried weight. "Then look more quietly," Marian growled from behind Robin, without looking. "How old?" "Fourteen." "He looks seventeen and lies like twenty," said Will. "Perfect for trouble." The boy placed his feet together. "I can run. I can shoot. I can keep my mouth shut." "Two out of three is enough for me," said Marian. "We'll test you. Name?" "Call me Finch." "Bird that sings too loudly," muttered Jack. "Great."

Marian pressed a rope into his hand. "Wood. Dry. Enough so we don't freeze today. Don't fall into the stream, don't marry the forester. Go."

The boy nodded and disappeared into the greenery. "It's burning," said Will. "All that grow too fast burn." "Then put out some water," said Marian.

Fink returned an hour later. The rope cut his fingers, his back was soaked, his shoulders hunched. But the wood was dry, clean, in neat bundles. "Do you know what detour means?" Marian asked. "Yes." "Use it. Avoid wet valleys. You're not here to cough heroically." The boy nodded and did something rare: He listened.

In the afternoon, a small group set out: Marian, Will, and Ralf. Bread, rumors, and pins to stick into maps. Fink went along because he was so quiet that no one noticed him—until he spoke.

A spy with scribe's hands stood at the corner of Gerbergasse, dropping sentences like breadcrumbs to pigeons. "Only half watch tonight," he whispered. "South Gate, one man. The other is drinking." "Who sent you?" asked Marian. "A friend of the poor." "Then he'll surely miss you."

Fink took a step too close, his eyes gleaming. "We could—" Marian turned his head away from the man with two fingers. "We couldn't do anything if you kept opening your mouth. Rule one: You don't know anything until I say you do."

You're not here to grow in the city. You grow in the forest. Slowly. Without witnesses."

Later, he asked quietly, "Why do people talk so much?" "Because they hope their own words will save them before their actions betray them," Marian said. "Learn it the other way around."

That evening, Robin set up a clay figure—a crooked pot on a pole, a face that had already lost. "Show what you can do," he said. Fink took the bow, drew—too fast, Robin thought—let it go—too cleanly, Robin thought—and the arrow stuck in the pot, where a tooth would have been, if clay had teeth. "Again," said Robin. The second arrow struck the first. "Instinct," murmured Rit. "Dangerous." "Talent," murmured Will. "Handy."

Robin stepped close to Fink, wordlessly took his wrists, twisted them slightly, and set his feet. "Not fast. Early. Early means your body knows before you want it. Fast means you want it before you know it. Remember that."

The third arrow missed. "Good," said Robin. "Now you learn."

The days grew shorter and louder. The bounty turned faces into traps. The air was filled with the scent of boiling stories. Fink clung to the edges of everything that happened. He carried wood, cleaned arrowheads, listened like a dry sponge. And sought out glances. Every nod of praise was a sip of liquor, every rebuke a stone in his stomach.

"I want to go out with you," he said. "No," said Robin. "I'm ready." "You're fast," said Rit. "That's not the same."

He nodded, swallowed, and pretended to understand. Ambition left tracks in his eyes like wheels in mud.

Destination: a small wagon train from Nottingham, cloth, salt, two crates whose weight sounded interesting. Two guards in front, two in back, a lantern burning too proudly. Plan: Rit takes the lantern, Will the wheel, Tom the reins, Jack the noise, Robin the gaps. Fast in, faster out. No names. No ballad.

It ran until it stopped. The rider at the back suddenly had nerves that worked. The one at the front screamed "Stop!" in a voice that didn't believe it, and was dangerous for that very reason. And out of the hedge burst Fink. Too early, too sharply, too much "I want."

His arrow struck the lantern. The glass shattered, the oil ran, the flame consumed air. Darkness descended upon the scene, as if someone had turned off the sky. A horse reared, a man cursed, the chest slipped. Rit laughed briefly—surprised that she was laughing—and took out two targets in the half-shadow, so cleanly that the night said thank you.

"Out!" yelled Robin. "Out, out, out!" They tore whatever cloth they could grab and disappeared into the trees. The smell of warm oil and stung iron lingered behind them.

At the fire, Fink was suddenly the man. Will slapped him on the shoulder with an open hand, too hard for friendship, too soft for mockery. Jack tried to find a rhyme with "lantern," gave up, and called him "arsonist." Robin said nothing. Neither did Marian. The silence was a reckoning that would come later.

For two days, Fink walked as if he were wearing short boots: just a child, but already trying to walk like a man. He gave advice even though no one asked. He began sentences with "We should" and ended them when Marian looked at him.

Rit watched him, counting silently. Tom said nothing, but his sigh took on a sharp edge. Ralf weighed the boy with his eyes like a merchant weighs bad plums. Will laughed—too loudly, too often, like someone who has a hunch he doesn't like.

"Hush," said Robin one evening while binding arrows. "Fame is sweet. You'll lose teeth before you know it." "I only—" "Exactly," said Robin. "Only is the most dangerous word we have."

Marian placed him in front of the crate of supplies. "What's missing?" "Two loaves of bread. An onion. Half a pound of salt." "How big?" "Onion: fist-sized. Bread: baked yesterday. Salt: coarse." She nodded. "You see. Now learn to see before it's missing."

"Can I come into town with you tomorrow?" "No." "But I—" "No means no," she said. "I'll let you. But only when you don't need it."

At night, a boy Marian knew brought a message: small transport, fast route, hardly any protection. Far too clean. "It stinks," said Rit. "It smells like sheriff," said Ralf. "Or like wannabe outlaws who finally want some silver," said Will.

Robin made the announcement. Small, quiet, brief. "Fink stays in the camp," he said. Fink nodded—too quickly. The "yes" sounded like "I'll do it anyway."

They walked. The forest was wary, the air as dry as bad bread. At the edge of the ravine, everything was as it rarely is: exactly as it shouldn't be. A lamppost was too central, a carriage too orderly, a voice too friendly. "Not now," whispered Marian. "Never now," said Rit, already backing away.

A twig snapped on the right. Fink. He jumped to the edge, arrow already half-way out, mouth already cheeky. "Back!" hissed Robin. Too late. The first bolt struck the tree next to Fink's head, the second scraped his sleeve, the third would have been his stomach – Rit threw herself between them, the arrow took her shoulder, and the night took the rest.

And then there was noise, honest, rude noise. Will yelled, Tom pulled, Jack threw, Ralf disappeared and suddenly reappeared, knocking over the path behind him. Robin shot until the counting stopped.

"Get out!" again. "Get out, now!"

They made it. Barely. Rit staggered, Will bled, Fink stared at his hands as if he'd just gotten them.

Back by the fire, they sat down because standing was too much. Marian rinsed Rit's wound with schnapps, as romantic as a bloodletting. "I have—" Fink began. "Stop," said Marian. "Later."

Later was when everyone could breathe again. "Say it," she said. "I thought... if I—" "Wrong thought," she said. "I wanted—" "Wrong will." "It's my fault," he whispered. "Right," she said. "And now comes the hard part: bearing guilt without being destroyed by it."

Will looked into the fire. "It reminds me of myself. Only dumber." "So were you," said Jack. "I still am," grinned Will crookedly. "I'm just better at being lucky."

Robin raised his hand. "Rules one through seven. Today. For him. From him." Fink took a breath. "No lying inside," he said quietly. "No stealing from one's own loot. No glory without risk. Nothing outside. One speaks in the heat. No one dies in the kitchen. A deal means delivering."

"Good," said Marian. "And rule eight: Those who grow faster shrink more later. Starting tomorrow, you'll take it slow. Everything. Talking. Pulling. Thinking. If I notice you running, I'll tie your boots together."

He nodded. He meant it. For the first time, he looked fourteen again.

The next day, she made him walk the path to the spring five times, until his feet knew the stones like teeth. He rubbed arrow shafts with grease until his fingers looked as if he'd lived in a kitchen. He learned knots that weren't pretty, but held. Tom showed him how to sharpen a blade without slicing the life out of it. Rit let him hold the bow without shooting. "The string isn't for playing with," she said. "It's a promise. You only break it once."

In the evenings, he sat quietly. No one praised him. No one needed it.

Two days later, the boy who had brought the false news showed up. He had bruises that looked like a conscience with fists. "They... forced me," he stammered. "The clerk Holt. He... he said he'd cut my mother's rations if I didn't—" Marian listened until he finished, and then a bit more. Then she gave him bread. "Next lie, cost you teeth," she said. "Not this time. Run."

Fink watched him go. "I would have..." "You wouldn't have anything," said Marian. "You're learning. And learning means keeping your hand down when your heart wants to leap."

Robin gave him a task that wasn't brilliant: marshaling. No heroes, no arrows. Counting who's coming. Giving signals when things go wrong. He stood in a ravine where the wind sounded old. He counted pebbles, threads on his sleeve, his own heart. When three men came along, pretending to want mushrooms, he gave the signal. The gang shifted like water. No fight. No song. An avoidance. In the evening, Robin just nodded at him. It was enough.

Late at night, Finch and Robin sat at the edge of the clearing. The fire was an eye blinking tiredly.

"When do you know you're ready?" asked Fink. "When you don't need to know," said Robin. "When you go because it's time—not because you want to be seen."

"Fame..." "...is a bill," said Robin. "You always pay. Sometimes with skin, sometimes with people. I don't pay with children anymore."

Fink nodded. It sounded like he understood. Maybe just tonight. Maybe forever.

At dawn, when the forest acted as if it were new, Fink got up before Marian whistled. He went to the spring without running. He came back without posing. Rit wordlessly handed him two arrows. "For the pocket. Not for the sky." Tom threw him a leather cloth. "For your fingers. So you can keep them." Will

slapped him on the shoulder, just right this time. "Only idiots grow fast. Good idiots grow right."

Marian watched as he stacked the wood—neatly, evenly, as if he'd finally understood that warmth is no accident. "You stay," she said. "Under supervision. Under rules. Under yourself."

Robin stepped beside her. "It will," he said. "Or it will break," said Marian. "Then we'll be there when it breaks."

The forest took a breath. A bird decided to sing. The boy no longer looked seventeen, or even twenty. He looked like fourteen who didn't want to die.

And sometimes that's all a gang needs: a kid who wanted to grow up too fast - and changed his mind before the gallows did it for him.

Chapter 15 - Taxes are the polite form of robbery

The messenger was so thin the wind almost devoured him. He wore the crest like an excuse and the scroll like a miracle. Marian took it from him, broke the seal with a fingernail that had seen more than his entire face, and read. "Half the rate," she said. "For road maintenance and public safety." "Road maintenance?" Robin snatched the parchment. "Means the sheriff wants to ride his butt on smoother pavement when he comes to collect your last chickens." "And 'public safety' is the assurance that nothing remains of the public," Will grumbled. The messenger raised his mouth. Rit placed two fingers on his throat and politely shoved him out of the camp. "Your path is back there. Run before the truth steals your shoes."

The rain hung like threads. The fire coughed sparks. Robin held the parchment over the light until the wax melted like lies. "Taxes are robbery," he said. "Only with a please-thank-you voice. In a robbery, someone comes along with a knife and says 'Money.' In a sheriff's, someone comes along with a quill and says 'For your health.'" "With a robber, you know what's going on," Tom growled. "Yep. The sheriff will give you a receipt so you can file the theft away if you get nostalgic later." Jack raised his mug. "To the gentleman highwayman." "Gentleman?" Robin laughed without joy. "The only gentleman thanks you before lying to your face."

"It's a criminal system with a church window," said Marian. "The priest tells you that God loves you, and the sheriff settles the score." "And the king?" asked Sprat. "He writes 'order' over it. Because 'robbery' looks bad on banners," said Will. Ralf scraped a piece of wood with his knife. "It's efficient," he muttered. "You don't need a thousand knives when you have a thousand receipts." "Even the plague is efficient," said Rit. "Nobody asks if it's polite."

He saw the man again: tabard, smile, trousers too clean for honest work. "In the king's name," he said. "For your safety." "Whose?" Robin had asked. "Yours, sir." "I need a roof that's watertight and a knife that cuts. The king didn't bring me either." Back then, he paid. Today, he would have given the guy stones, carefully weighed, with a receipt.

They went into town to observe civility. A widow: puts a chicken on the scales, her hand trembling, the tax collector presses the bowl down a little. "Unfortunately, too light." A farmer: pushes a sack of seed into someone else's fingers, swallows dryly. "There's still enough left, right?" Two children: watch as their father scrapes the bowl empty. Public safety says the sign. "The only thing certain is that you're starving," says Robin's bile. "They call it the law," he murmurs. "It is the law," says Marian. "It's just not fair."

Back at camp. Map in the mud. Stones for wagons. Twigs for guards. "We collect the tax," says Robin. "And return it. Anonymously. Quickly. No heroic posturing." "All of it back?" Will raises an eyebrow. "Everything." Jack raises a hand. "And the administrative costs?" Marian drops the answer like a knife. "We're not administration. We're correction."

Rit: "Route along the river. Bridge, two wagons, four riders. Holt, the clerk, signs lists. He likes ink more than blood." Tom: "Trap on the cart wheel—a wedge in the mud that looks like a fluke." Sprat: "Side path open. If it crashes, out through the bramble ditch." Ralf: "And if a second column follows?" "Then we'll give them paper and chase the ink out of their souls," says Marian.

Morning. Fog like clotted breath. Hooves dull. The carts squeak as if apologizing. Rit takes the light from the front lamp. Tom jams his wheel. Will knocks the politeness out of the senior officer. Robin steps forward. "Tax inspectorate. Sherwood, not sheriff." "In the name—" "—of your last resort, shut up." It doesn't take ten heartbeats. No carnage, just honest, dirty work. Clerk Holt clings to the lists like his backbone. Jack pulls them from his fingers, smiling like a dentist.

The fire is on the shore. Listen to it. The hissing sounds like ink praying. "A receiptless world," murmurs Robin. "The only world where the poor breathe," says Marian.

Rit looks into the flames. "Paper is cheeky. It won't burn until it's safe." "Like officials," says Will.

At night, in a city that pretends to be asleep: A bag in a window where the cold lives. A bag in an apron whose wearer has stopped believing. Two bags under a door behind which a man takes the child's hand so it doesn't count what's missing. No one sees them. No one will believe it tomorrow. So much the better.

The next day, a new leaf hangs: bounty doubled. Reason: "Violation of sacred property of order." "Sacred is what's theirs," says Jack. "What's ours is unholy until they take it," says Rit. Robin spits in the mud. "Time for a reconsideration."

Night. Side window of the office. Holt is sleeping with his mouth open, as if he'd just yawned a lie. Sprat flips the bolt. Tom takes the lock on the safe personally. Marian reads the thick book: names, sums, penalty surcharges. "Punishment for poverty," she says. "Interest on hope," says Robin. They don't take coin. They take copies. List of the worst crimes: receipts that weigh more than horseshoes.

Dawn. On wells, doors, and posts: notes.

**"THIS TAX IS ROBBERY – JUSTIFIED BY YOUR SWEAT OF FEAR.
THESE NAMES HAVE TAKEN MORE THAN ANY GANG."**

Among them: Councilor A, Butcher B (who presses the scales), Priest (indulgence fee), Holt (joy of processing). The town reads. The town swallows. The Sheriff rages, polishes, roars, and the more he roars, the quieter those who just paid become.

"We're the good thieves now," Will quips. "We're the returnees," says Marian. "We're giving back what's theirs." Ralf weighs his words. "We're... an unofficial administration." "Wait," Robin raises his finger. "Administration builds offices. We build breaks. They won't need us tomorrow. That's the plan." "And if they do?" asks Jack. "Then we've failed," says Rit.

Rumor: Special transport "for the church." Golden chalices in the sack, Bible verses on the wagon board.

"That's a tax with a halo," Marian growls. "Disgusting." Plan: At the crest of the hill, where the path becomes a slide. They put soap (yes, soap) in the water

hole. Car one slides, car two tries to help, slides better. "In the name of the Lord!" gasps the priest on the box. "He's busy right now," says Robin, takes the bag, and gives him a sermon: "You say God loves the poor, and you bill him. Today the master is on leave. Requests for reimbursement go to Sherwood." Chalice? Melted down later, into nails and knife points. Gold that finally works.

Later in Marian's back room. A merchant with a clean debt. "I paid twice last year. Once to the sheriff, once to the priest. I... I don't want heroes. I want to survive the winter." Marian: "Heroes are expensive. We're cheap: Just say no when they come again. Loudly." He nods, as if no one has ever allowed him to possess the no.

The sheriff has the guards inspect the bridge. Polished armor. Brightly polished lies. Robin stands up in the ferns, watching an old man knead his cap. "You're welcome!" calls the sheriff after collecting the money. "For your safety!" Robin places an arrow in front of his boot, deep in the beam. On the shaft: a note. **"THE ONLY CERTAIN IS THAT YOU NEVER HAVE ENOUGH."**

The sheriff looks up. Robin has long since left the forest.

They don't share at the fire. They distribute. A list is on the inner box: who got what back, who needs wood, who needs grain. No names, just symbols. "You're turning into a civil servant," groans Will. "No," says Marian. "We're turning into consciences. And that's rarer." Ralf sits down as if it hurts. "I did the math..." "Not out loud," begs Jack. "...and it works out," Ralf finishes. "If no one steals." Sprat puts down his knife. "Then no one steals."

The priest stands in front of a half-empty church on Sunday. "It is more blessed to give than to receive!" From the back: "Then give!" He sweats, his weight heavy, his words light. After mass, he finds no silver in his chest, only a note: **"GIVE: 100%. TAKE: 0%. PRAYER: OPTIONAL."**

He sits down. For the first time, the bell tower sounds like a cough.

"What if we win?" Jack asks later. "All taxes gone, everyone free. And then?" Silence. Robin spins the cup. "Then someone will want order. Then someone will come along with receipts and say 'for your good.'" "Cynical," says Rit. "Experienced," says Marian. "That's why we don't leave anything standing that can be turned into an office. Not even the legend."

"We're getting old," he says. "Old is when you do the math without a knife," she says. "And us?" "We're right in the middle of it: knives with a knife." He smiles crookedly. "I don't want to become the king of refunds." "Then you

won't," she says. "Always say that nobody will need you tomorrow. Work for it. Period."

Fink: "Why do people pay? They know it's unfair." Robin: "Because fear has interest. Because hunger causes calculation errors. Because hope gets tired." Fink: "And us?" Robin: "We are the calculation help. Today. Tomorrow you'll be someone else's help. Without a receipt."

They sit. No one sings. Not out of sadness, out of respect. The rain plays the drum, the fire the bass. One doesn't drink to forget—one drinks to avoid overdoing the right thing.

Fast convoy, six riders, fake crates (stones), real fury. Rit: two lanterns out. Tom: wedge. Will: shoulder. Jack: noise that sounds like three people. Robin aims at the buckle of the captain's moneybag—rips it off. The leather says bad luck. "Public safety!" the man wheezes. "Buy new words," says Robin. "These are expired."

Late. The bottle half empty, the head half full. Robin sits with the copies of the list they've saved. Not to rule—to know who to help first when it snows again. "The only difference between robbery and taxation," he says, "is whether you say please—and whether you can still look them in the eye afterward." Marian leans against the post. "And?" "I can still do it." "Good. Then continue tomorrow. And stop when you can't anymore. Sooner, not later." He nods. The forest nods along—as if some wind were tipping its hat.

Dawn. A farmer finds a small, heavy bag on his doorstep. No note. No crest. Just weight. He lifts it, and for the first time in weeks, he stands up straight. In the distance, invisible, a gang moves through wet bracken. No one waves. No one sings. Taxes are the polite form of robbery—but politeness lost today. Tomorrow again. Until "please" once again means: May I help?, not "Give it here."

Chapter 16 - The King Who Never Comes

Sherwood in late autumn smelled as if someone had forgotten summer in a wet sock. Threads of rain hung between the branches, every puddle a mirror that said: *You look worse than yesterday, friend.*

At the edge of the market, three farmers were squatting under a roof that had already finished work in the morning.

"The king will be back soon," said the first, his voice like a hiccupping prayer. "Bring order," nodded the second, as if he had ever found order. "And then everything will be fine," breathed the third, who looked as if he had already stopped saying "fine."

Robin chewed on a wrinkled apple that had more wrinkles than his conscience. "Back soon," he growled, "and soon it'll be raining beer and the chickens will be reading Latin." The first pressed his lips, the second stared into the puddle, the third muttered, "One can certainly hope." "Hope is like thin beer," said Robin. "After three pints, you think you're a king and wake up in your own vomit."

The fire was doing its best, but still looked like a dog ruining the day. Will leaned his boots against the wet wood. "I'm telling you: the king will come back. Then the sheriff will be hanging from the gate like a fucking onion." Marian pulled her hood down and snorted. "And then the sky will shit almonds. Will, you believe in fairy tales because they're louder than your reason." "You have no faith." "Yes, I do," said Robin. "I believe in things I can touch. Rain. Hunger. Bills. Kings? They're like air holes in bread: they look big, but they don't fill you up."

Rit sprinkled two more sparks into the evening. "Kings are sheriffs with better tailors and longer excuses." Jack strummed a sad third that sounded like a wet apron. "I can write a song about the king. Rhyme with 'comes': *'He's coming, he's coming—'* Marian: "—'and no one notices because they never do it.'" Jack sighed. "You beat my muse."

Back then – Robin was young, muscles fresh, brain still in training. The royal messenger: a smile made of beeswax, a coat of arms so clean you felt dirty next to him.

"In the name of the king: support in the war." "What do we get?" "The honor of serving him."

By evening, Robin's stomach growled, honor weighing on him like a cold stone. He learned: Honor is bread, which one may only look at.

"The Drunken Donkey" smelled of damp straw, beer, and stories just born for a tankard. "The king has won!" - "He's dead!" - "He's coming with a hundred ships!" - "He has the most beautiful wife from the end of the world!" - "He's traveling in a pilgrim's habit, unrecognized, like a saint!" Every statement got a beer, truth got a headache.

"When the king rides tomorrow, I'll be the Virgin Mary," Robin growled. Marian rested her elbows on the counter. "With your beard?" "Then the bearded Mary. I bless whoever pays the bill."

The innkeeper grinned crookedly. "At most, you're blessing my patience." "Then give me another beer. I need more holiness."

Three days' march, thirty curses away. A village thinner than its shadows. "We'll hold out until the king comes," said the eldest, hands like roots. "And if not?" asked Robin. "God's will." "God's will has no tabard," Robin snarled. "He wants you to eat and breathe. Everything else is the will of men farther away than an arrow flies."

They didn't hide their grain and paid dutifully. Three weeks later, two children and an old man were missing. Hope consumed them faster than hunger.

Market square. The sheriff gleamed like a freshly laundered fraud. "In the name of the king! Order! Security!" From the crowd: "Then work slower so the king lasts longer!" Laughter. Brief. The guards smothered him. Robin thought: *As long as the king is far away, any scoundrel can claim to speak for him. God, king—same company, different coat.*

"If the king comes this year," said Robin, "I'll drink the river dry." Will: "And if not?" Robin: "Then I'll drink just like that. At least the first time I'll have an excuse." Jack: "I'll rewrite it for you as Psalms."

A village on the edge of the forest, ready to try something other than praying. "Take out the wooden floor," said Robin. "Put in the wrong floor. Supplies downstairs. Upstairs, just brooms and a bad-tempered dog." The collectors marched in: "In the name of the king—" The eldest stepped forward. "In the name of my field. And he doesn't know your king." Pitchforks make honest arguments. The collectors ran. Children laughed. So did the dog.

In the evening, a velvet cloak with gold thread arrived, his voice like honey on mold. "The king is approaching. A little help..." Marian saw the ring. "False crest. And backwards." "Fashionable." Robin tore off his cloak. Underneath, rags pretending to be damask. "Fashionable," said Marian, and kicked the politeness out of his knees. He disappeared into the darkness, accompanied by boos from the trees.

A week later: A supposed envoy with two "knights" who looked like butchers' apprentices in aluminum. "The king wants to remain undercover," he trilled.

"Then put a hood on him," said Will. Marian smiled toothlessly. "Say the blessing." "Uh... The gentleman... and all." Rit: "He can't even say evening prayers. Get out." They sent her barefoot into the forest. The nettles sang a hallelujah.

Another village wanted to sell the last goat, "for the king, so he'll come faster." "The king won't come because you sell your goat," said Robin. "He'll come when he wants to—which is never. Keep the goat. Tomorrow you'll have two fewer problems: hunger and stupidity." Two months later: two kids. The eldest cried because he hadn't believed it himself. "Thank you, King Robin." "Say that again and I'll slaughter *you*," said Robin. Marian laughed so hard that the rain stopped listening for a moment.

A messenger trotting, tongue like wet string. "Message from the king!" Robin: Open the seal, look inside. Tax increase. *For stability*. "The only thing that's stable is my middle finger," he said, thus fueling the fire – first the letter, then the rest of his patience.

Later, a tavern. An old soldier with scars like bad maps. "The king isn't coming," he said. "He's busy." "With what?" "Hissself. Women, dice, wine. Wars that others lose." "Like us." "No. You drink." *with* the people. He drinks *from* them." Robin raised his cup. "Then cheers—to the one who doesn't come, so we know what to do."

Sunday. The sheriff next to the priest, two pillars of a church that only ever asks for the collection. "By order of the king—" "By order of the lord—" Two hands, one purse. Marian whispered to Robin, "If God came, he'd fire them both." "If the king came, he'd sew medals onto their greed," Robin growled.

By the fire, wet cards, dry anger. "We plan, *as if there were no king*—because that's how it is," said Marian. "Connect villages. Standardize signs. Three tones means: steering party. Four tones: false king. No sound: We're here and working." Rit nodded. "Chain of paths in the northern part. Two caches per mile. Supplies move in rings, not piles." Tom: "Double up tools. A hammer isn't a king—but it brings order." Will: "And what if the real crown does appear?" Robin: "Nod politely, carry on."

Tax transport "for royal reserves." Two wagons, double the guards, triple the stupidity. Rit blows out lanterns like birthday wishes no one should hear. Tom jams a wheel, which squeals like an offended pig. Will pulls the politeness out of the captain's jaw. Robin steps forward: "Tax audit. Section Sherwood Do you know us?" "In the name of the King—" "He's sick today. Standing in: me." Five

heartbeats, two curses, and a stolen blessing later, the crates are gone, the guards alive, and the lists in flames. "Receipts are the psalms of thieves," Marian says, and the smoke nods.

Nighttime rounds: bags under doors, over thresholds, in aprons. No coat of arms, no sermon, just weight. A widow finds five coins and almost collapses with relief. A farmer counts slowly, as if he can't trust his fingers. A child falls asleep crying, not knowing why it's warm. "Miracle?" asks Will. "A calculation error in the system," says Robin. "Corrected by us today."

The next day the city is full of notes: *"In the name of the king: bandits steal sacred property."*

Someone is hanging next to it: *"In the name of hunger: what feeds children is holy."*

The sheriff turns red as a boot in a fire. He vows tougher action, polishes even harder, and lies even more flatter.

"The king will bring justice!" "Then hurry up with sins," a woman calls. "Perhaps they'll arrive at the same time." Laughter. The priest is sweating. After the mass, instead of silver, he finds a note:

"Those who sell kings should learn first aid."

He sits down and practices breathing.

Two crooks are selling tickets "for the big homecoming celebration." The grand prize is an audience. Robin buys one. On the back it says: *"Stupid farmer."*

He holds out the tickets to them both. "Grand prize: Keep both hands.

Consolation prize: Wear shoes." They suddenly decide on barefoot, running faster than a thought. Marian: "You're getting pedagogical." Robin: "I'm allergic to kings in advertising."

Straw floor, wet shoulders, dry throats. "We don't need royal decrees," says Marian. "We need agreements. He who has grain doesn't keep it – he *hidden* it. Those who have guests remain silent. Those who cry, cry quietly. Those who laugh, laugh louder." A woman raises her hand. "And if they say they're acting on behalf of..." "Then ask why they don't know your names," says Robin. "Whoever speaks for you knows you."

On a quieter night, Robin really listens. Far in the distance – hoofbeats? Perhaps thunder. Perhaps a heart. He imagines someone coming, clean, just, like in the stories, dismounting, saying "Enough" – and the world obeys. He smiles briefly. Then he snorts. "My fairytale days are worn out," he murmurs, straightening his arrows again. Work: the antidote to legend.

"I want to believe," says Will the next day. "Something must be..." "Believe what makes you breathe," says Marian. "Not what makes you wait." "What do you believe?" "That knives get blunt if you use them wrong. And people too." Will nods. "That's a very unpoetic religion." "It keeps you warm."

He summons "public audience in the name of the king." Robin and Jack stand in the back, hoods down. A woman steps forward. "My husband is in the dungeon for collecting wood." "Illegal felling—" "He was collecting branches." "In the name—"

An arrow is stuck in the yard post, on the shaft: "IN WHOSE NAME? SIGN IT PROPERLY." The crowd laughs, the guards look up, Robin is already forest.

Late in Marian's back room. "To some, you're the king," she says. "I'm a lumberjack with a small orchestra." "And still, when you leave, their chairs shake." "I'm not leaving," he says. "I'm just not waiting." "Fine," she says. "I'm the queen of bars. You're the king of reasons." "Damned crown." "Put a cap on it."

List (not for quotes, only for actions): Widow L., Baker P. (customs ripped off), Blacksmith R. (son drafted). Nighttime tour. Three compresses, three breaths of relief. No thanks. No name. Just a bearing that feels like a screw finally engaging.

The sheriff wants to recruit men "for Homecoming Day." Robin stands at the fork in the road where the boys must cross. "He who is torn, will not be torn free," he says. "Go home. When the king comes, you will run faster than your fear." A few laugh, a few leave. Two stay out of spite – Marian finds them in the evening and explains to them so clearly the use of stubbornness that they are back with their mothers in the morning.

Notes appear in the city:

- **"THE KING COMES – WHEN HE FINDS HIS SHOES."**
- **"TODAY: BIG RECEPTION FOR NO ONE."**
- **"BRING BREAD. HE BRINGS HUNGER."**

The sheriff tears them down, sweating out order. Children restick them. Laughter sticks better than seals.

It's raining so softly that even the trees whisper. Robin sits, counting arrows, counting breaths. Somewhere, Jack is singing a melody that hurts, but really hurts. "Sometimes I wish he'd come," Robin says into the night. "Just so the

waiting dies." The forest answers as it always answers: It pushes a cloud forward, letting the embers rise higher. *Do it yourself*, says the fire. *As always*.

Dawn. A woman discovers a package in front of her door: flour, salt, two coins, a small wooden sign: "ENOUGH TODAY." No crown, no seal, no saint. Further out, at the edge of the woods, a band moves through wet bracken. No one waves. No one sings. Robin stops briefly, looks into the gray where other people want to see a king. "Some wait for the king," he says quietly, "I prefer to shoot myself." Marian knocks twice on the post of the world. "Go." They leave. The forest takes away their noise and returns silence, which lasts.

Chapter 17 - The Sheriff Strikes Back

Nottingham hung new teeth on its walls: parchments that bit. "BOUNTY DOUBLED." "DUSK CURFEW." "DOG PATROLS." And at the very bottom, the polite footnote: *In the name of the king*.

Robin tore one off, smelling ink that reeked of pure lies. "Well. Our fame has had children." "Yes," said Marian, "and the sheriff wants custody."

At the market, the man himself stood upright, crest like tartar, tongue freshly polished: "Security, order, peace!" "You get peace first," murmured Rit, "order afterward—if there's any left." "There's never any security," Will added. "Except for the fact that he hates us."

Northern route, wet morning, Fink in front as marshal. Car in a ravine, wheel apparently broken, two men waving helplessly like flags. "Smells like theater," said Rit. "Like theater," nodded Robin. "No audience, so it's for us."

The first step: Tom into the mud, checks the wheel. Hollow. Truly hollow. The second: Will releases the reins. Leather snaps—and bolts spit out of the box. "Cover!" Wood splinters, the air thins. Rit places two arrows: one takes away the argument from the left bolter, the second writes "No" on the sleeve of the right. Jack creates noise from the left, which falls into the right flank—it's his only magic, and it works.

A dark figure rises from the ferns, his bow like an opinion that won't negotiate. The man in black. His arrow grazes Marian's hood. "Later," he calls. "Today," Robin calls. They exchange two shots, which miss only for the sake of politeness. Then the stage is empty: we retreat, taking nothing, leaving no one—except a shadow that takes our measure.

"Everything okay?" asks Robin. Tom clenches his teeth. "My dignity is wet."
"That doesn't count," says Marian. "Go on."

The city reacts with chains: sermons against "robbers of the master," posters with Robin's face so badly drawn that even children laugh, and dogs that are supposed to smell like us. "The dogs only smell that he's sweating with fear," says Will. "And that we sleep in the woods," says Rit. "They like that."

In the evening, a dead chicken lies by the stream. Fink wants to grab it. Marian whistles him back. "No. Falsely dead." Rit stabs the skin with the arrowhead: black mucus, a chemical smell unknown in the forest. "Poison," she says. "The sheriff studied pharmacy," says Robin. "Very well. We'll learn antidotes. And shortcuts."

That same night, an arrow is stuck in the tavern post. A coiled piece of wood is attached to the shaft. Rit pulls it out with pointed fingers: "*Your forest has many paths. I can find them all.*"

"He didn't lose the capital letters," Will growls. Marian rubs the notch in the wood. "He means it personally." "Me too," says Robin, "but later. Today we're talking to the city."

At the gate to the upper town hangs a sign: "*Relief distribution from the royal hand — Marian's Tavern, Dusk.*"

"Oh, is that what we're called now?" asks Marian. "He's using your name so people will come," says Robin. "Then he'll take the people."

We go in—not as a gang, but as the sound of traffic. Marian opens the door as if she'd planned it. Inside: benches, empty barrels, a table with bread arranged too neatly. Two scribes sweating too neatly. And behind the stove: the hinge of the trap, which you only hear when it's too late.

"You're early," says Marian. "We're on time," says one. "And very glad of your cooperation, landlady." "I don't like to cooperate without a knife," she says, smiling. The door closes. The bolt falls. And in the courtyard, the world rises: guards, dogs, a square in the rain.

"All right," says Robin. "Plan B." "We had a Plan B?" asks Jack. "Starting now, yes."

We knew the bell times. We had counted the roofs. We knew which alley would go faster when it was wet. Rit took the windows, Jack the noisy corner—his lute sounded like a fall that didn't happen, but everyone went there. Will

dismantled the back door with a bolt he had saved for bad hosts. Tom propped up the passage, which collapsed. Sprat was through the pantry hatch before anyone could say "where to."

Outside: "In the name of the King—" "Never mind," says Marian, throwing the first jug into the face of an unexpectedly pious guard. Dogs jump. Rit has special arrows for dogs: short, heavy, mean. Not deadly, but instructive. The man in black stands on the wall, his arrow flying like a well-aimed wink. He wants to taste Marian. Robin takes the shot, directs, hits—just barely. The black man laughs. "Even later."

"Out, out," Marian calls, "before they find words!" We separate, become alley, become rain, become five different sounds. The city lets us go, but only because it's trying something new tomorrow.

By the fire, Ralf counts wounds. Will has a notch in his flesh as accurate as an accountant's. Tom has something worse: a tear below his rib cage, where breathing suddenly becomes a challenge. "No fever," says Marian, "not yet." Fink sits next to him, his hands open, as if waiting for someone to collect his trembling. "You're breathing," says Robin. "So you're learning. Listen: Today we lost and we lived. Those are two reasons to keep going."

"Who reported the trap?" asks Rit. Ralf raises his eyes. "A baker. He was probably honest. Until someone honestly scared his daughter." "Blackmail," says Marian. "The sheriff can do more than just shout now."

Two days later. The sheriff declares "amnesty" for a village that had laughed with us. "Come, and you will be forgiven." "If we go, he'll take heads," says Rit. "If we don't go, he'll take hearts," says Marian. Robin stands for a long time in the rain, as if he could read it. "We're not going," he finally says. "We'll get them out."

"How many?" "All who believe in evenings."

We divide the night: Will and Tom with carts and blankets to the north edge, Rit and Sprat along the hedges, Jack with the noise machine where the echo is created. Marian in the church, because she doesn't ask for it. Robin in the bell tower, where the view is painful.

"Now," he says, as the sheriff polishes his words. The bell rings twice—false alarm—the crowd staggers—Rit pulls three people into the ferns—Marian suddenly stands beside the priest, whispers a word only she knows, and he

shrinks. Will drives the cart forward, Tom lifts it, even though the interior light flickers in his belly, Fink pulls a child who clings to his neck and gives him a lesson in puffing. The sheriff notices. "Close!" he shouts. We're already in the woods.

Tom collapses where the path belongs to us. Marian presses, scratches, rinses. "Holds," she says. "If he doesn't laugh." "I rarely laugh," grumbles Tom. "Even less often now," she says.

"Why not go to him and take heads?" Will barks his words. "Because he wants us today," says Robin, "and tomorrow we need him tired. We won't get him in the hall, but in his sleep."

Later, Fink sits at the edge of the clearing, eyes as wide as wet pennies. "I'm scared," he says, as if it were a crime. "Good," says Marian. "Fear keeps you awake. Panic is something else. Panic is stupid. Don't be stupid." "How?" "Count," says Rit. "Breath, fingers, paths." "Don't shoot faster than your body thinks," says Robin. "Shoot sooner. Or not at all. You mustn't 'at all.'" Fink nods so vigorously that his hood protests.

There's another arrow stuck on the old bridge. No message. Just a feather we know. "He wants to be alone," says Rit. "He'll never get us alone," says Marian. "Yes," says Robin, "but not today. Today we are you."

He stands in the middle of the planks, draws, and places the arrow on the plank, as if putting a finger on the pulse of the city. "Come," he says into the fog. "Get it." No one comes. Only another sound: the scraping of chains on stone. The sheriff tightens the city.

We find two more fake chickens, a poisoned barrel, and a bitten apple next to the path. "Someone's trying to clear out our decorum shelf," says Jack. Marian is cooking something with bark, bitterness, and experience. "It doesn't cure anything," she says, "but it makes you drink until you do." "Great," says Will. "A medicine that tastes like life."

At night, Nottingham stinks of leather and opinion. Locks click, boots march, questions are asked in cellars. Names wander: Robin, Marian, *the young, the blacksmith, the landlady* "They'll come to you tomorrow," says a child in the tavern, pretending to be invisible. "I'm not here," says Marian. "But thank you, ghost."

In the morning, two cars are parked in front of their door. Inside, there's nothing but dust and the note: "LATE." "That's art," says Jack. "That's timing," says Marian.

The sheriff takes away a friend of a friend: Widow L., who once wrote "Enough" on the post. "Interrogation," they say. "Right," they say. We say nothing. We leave.

Rit gets us the canal climbing map—lines of dirt and smell. Ralf counts laps, bells, and travel times. Tom insists on coming along. "I'll hold," he says. "If necessary, my breath." "You stay here," says Marian. "If you fall in, we'll all fall after you." "I'll hold," he repeats. "Even if it's just the door."

We deal like cards:

- Marian, Sprat: Cellar and bars.
- Will, Jack: Yard Distraction (noise + poor choreography).
- Rit: roof edge and starry sky.
- Robin: Arrow and door where no one expects a door.

Smell of age, water, shit. The canal is a poem without rhyme. Sprat fits through a gap, saying "never." Marian follows "yet." Up above, someone shouts "in name," Jack shouts "without name," and it sounds remarkably similar. Will drops a ladder as if it were an argument. Rit cuts a silhouette from the roof that we don't like. The Man in Black appears as if he were a shadow who's grown bored. "Later," he calls. "Now," says Robin, and shoots. His arrow hits bowstring, which flicks, slashing his cheek. The black man doesn't flinch. That's his talent: not doing what the scene wants.

Marian finds the cell: bolt, key, prayer. "We'll save the last one." She springs into the lock, Marian into the guard's ear, which is now no longer listening. The door opens. Widow L. looks like someone who will never believe in doors again. "Come with me," says Marian. "Today is a holiday."

In the courtyard, worlds collide. Will throws buckets, Jack throws words, Rit throws stars, Robin throws the decision. The Man in Black raises his bow once more. Marian raises her gaze. "No," says Robin, stepping in, not heroically, just practically. Arrow strokes his skin as if signing without a tremor. "That's enough," says Marian, tugging at his collar, "for today."

We'll become an alley. We'll become smoke. We'll become laughter that doesn't fit. Tom stands at the exit, white lips, red bandage. "The door held," he

says. "Good," says Marian, supporting him and the word. Widow L. doesn't cry. "Thank you," she says. "I..." "Later," says Robin. "Breathe today."

In the forest we count again:

- Will: Lost skin instead of pride.
- Jack: Half of the voice is gone, the rest sings back.
- Rit: new scratch that looks old.
- Marian: Scratch that belongs to the arrow.
- Robin: Line on the neck that looks like handwriting.
- Tom: with us.
- Fink: pale, but there.

"He's learning," says Rit of the sheriff. "Good," says Marian. "Then he gets tired." "He gets angry first," says Will. "Anger is loud," says Robin. "We are quiet."

Ralf calculates: "Our supplies will last another three weeks if no one steals and everyone lies—the other way around." "No one's stealing today," says Sprat. "I've got it on my back." "And lying?" asks Jack. "Only outwardly," says Marian. "As always."

"We'll tire him out," Robin declares. "Not big. Small. One screw every night. A different one missing every morning."

- Extinguish lanterns, but only every second one.
- Bridge wedge, but only in such a way that the hoof stutters.
- Notes on doors: "YOU OWE EACH OTHER NOTHING."
- In church, a song that no one knows and everyone hums.
- "Forgot the lock for a moment" at the pawn shop.

"This isn't a war," says Will. "Yes, it is," says Marian. "The one we win."

Later, when the smoke only pretends to be warm, Robin sits with the arrow that marked his skin. "He'll be back," says Marian.

"Me too," he says. "Good plan." "No plan," he says. "Habit." Marian smiles, that short knife without blood. "Let's make our habit hell for him."

The forest nods its branches. Night closes its door. And Nottingham, which tried to eat us again today, lies awake counting arrows it hasn't heard yet.

Chapter 18 - A bargain with the devil in a silk coat

The messenger had hands like butter and a mouth that said "please" as if it were a command. In his arm was a box that didn't rattle—that's what makes the most dangerous boxes. "From Sir Galfrid de Lace," he breathed. "A friend of order. A benefactor." "A word for thieves with gloves," said Marian, taking the box from him as if stroking a frog's back. Inside: a silk ribbon, a letter, and underneath, a gold piece—so lonely it screamed.

Robin read. "Neutral ground. Ruined chapel, moonrise. Conversation without witnesses. Generosity versus reason." "Translate it," Will growled. "He buys us when it's cheap. He breaks us when it's expensive."

By the fire, they discussed things with their fists in their pockets. "That's bait," said Rit. "The kind that swallows you." "We're going," said Robin. "We're not going," said Marian. Silence like a knife. "We're going," repeated Robin, "but we'll be back. I want to hear the voice that repeats our sentences in the city." Marian nodded slowly. "Good. Then we'll go. Within our rules." She counted them off like bullets: "No name. No location. No paths. No bargains that cost children. And anyone who double-crosses us will be made odd."

The ruined chapel hung in the forest like a guilty conscience: roof full of holes, altar crooked, bell long since stolen.

Sir Galfrid de Lace was already standing there, wearing a silk cloak and wearing shoes that insulted the earth. His hands were soft, his eyes like polished debts. "You're on time," he smiled. "We're curious," said Robin. "I offer you peace." "That costs?" "Less than war costs you."

He placed a bundle on the altar: papers with seals, precise lies. "Amnesty. For you. For those you name." "And what do you want?" Marian smiled so politely that the stones wanted to blush. "Just... eyes and ears. Sometimes a hand. This city is complex. You're talented. I pay for talent." "Talent dies when it works for the wrong people," said Rit.

Galfrid raised an eyebrow. "The sheriff is a crude solution. I'm the fine one. With me, no one suffers needlessly." "Except everyone," Jack muttered.

A branch cracked. Not ours. High on the right of the wall, a shadow pushed a feather into the wind. "Arrows," said Rit. "Of course," smiled Galfrid. "I'd be irresponsible if I didn't... secure our conversation." "We would too," said Marian. The bell the chapel no longer had suddenly tolled in the distance. Jack on the ridge. Twice—now. Smoke rose, not from us, but from the old organ

hole: Sprat's work. The fog ate figures. "In the name—" someone shouted, and received smoke for his trouble. The man in black on the wall raised his bow. Robin shot first, not to hit, but to count. The black man just laughed with his teeth. Marian stepped past Galfrid, so close that his perfume offended the air. "Neutral ground means no one brings dogs." "I don't bring dogs," he crooned. "I bring contracts." "Then learn what no means."

We were out before the riflemen realized they'd been invited too late. Galfrid stayed behind in the chapel, smiling as if he'd just made a good deal. That was the danger: He enjoyed loss like others enjoy wine—as long as he kept the cellar.

The next morning, new notices plastered the city like rash: "Charity Ball for the Poor — Residence de Lace. Donations requested. Grace granted." "The poor should dance so the rich will donate?" Will spat. "I'd rather dance on his receipts." "We're going," said Marian. "As who?" "As who we must be."

Plan: Marian as a lady with blunt words and an even blunter knife; Jack as a musician with false notes and real eyes; Robin as a shadow that reads doors; Rit up on the roof where the air is honest.

The Residence de Lace was a house that had never said "please." Light everywhere, voices like silverware. Marian glided through the hall in a dress cut from a stolen curtain, but worn as if it were velvet. Galfrid mowed through the crowd, smiling in succession. "Woman...?" "No one," she said. "Or anyone who interests you?" "Everything interesting has a name." "And everything dangerous has none."

Jack played a tune that sounded drunk but hit home when sober. Meanwhile, Robin read Stairs, Joints, Shadows—and followed the scent of leather, ink, and guilt. He found a room that seemed more expensive than the others. Chest. Lock. Latch. A book so heavy it needed a table: the Ledger.

Rit was at the window, cold fingers, warm brain. Sprat gave her wires that looked like sins. "Three bars," murmured Rit. "And one who pretends to be the third." "I like it," said Sprat. "Arrogance. Always easy to crack." Click. The ledger smelled of tallow and fear. Names, totals, lines. Sheriff X – Affection Y. Priest Z – "Smoothing." Merchant A – Duty rebate for donation. Rit cleared her throat. "Did I say it? Arrogance." She flipped through the pages until she saw what she needed: a planned "forest peace." Condition: "Gang provides paths, two heads, and can be summoned in the future." "Let them summon themselves," murmured Robin. "Best in the water."

In the hall, Galfrid offered Marian an olive, so slowly, as if trying to bribe time. "I offer you peace," he said. "You offer me leash," she said, chewing, spitting the pit into his open hand. "And think I'll keep quiet." He looked at the pit like a small sun. "You don't like me? That doesn't bother me. People are lazy; they get used to me. You too." "I'd rather not breathe."

He leaned forward, his voice golden, his tone steely: "A sample. Take a certain document from the office tomorrow night—it's in my way. Prove that you're... relevant. After that, we lose the sheriff together. And you get slugs. Night after night." "You can't screw slugs," Marian said. "But we'll see if your writing can get some traction."

The Chancery Tower was a stomach of stone. The Writ rested in the third belly. Will and Tom made ladders out of things that never wanted to be ladders. Fink learned how to play "Get Lost" so the guard would win and search in the wrong place. Jack put noise in an alley and made it resonate somewhere else. Rit counted breaths between torch changes. "Six... five... now." Sprat crawled through a shaft no human would want. Robin hung between "yet" and "soon," his fingers on the window ledge, which wasn't built to be friends. "Your hands," Rit hissed, "are not prayers." "Not yet."

Inside: cupboard. Key. Folder. Wax. Words that said "right" and meant "property." Fink held his breath until his head whispered. "I'm alive." "Today, yes," said Robin, smiling so the boy knew: fear is a pet, not a wolf.

Out like rain. Down like laughter. A soldier shouted "Halt!" into the wrong yard. Rit left him a feather that said "Morning." He never understood it.

By the river, beneath the willow, Galfrid waited, his cloak dry even though the mist was wet. "Impressive," he smiled as Rit showed him—not gave—the Writ. "Corn," said Marian. "Corn, yes. And... one small addition. I need your storage locations. Just so... there are no misunderstandings." "Misunderstandings?" Robin laughed coldly. "You mean: executions." "Words, Mr. Hood, words are like coat fabric. You choose what fits."

Marian stepped closer. "Here's my word: no." "Then someone you like dies today," he said so kindly that the river quieted. "Wrong answer," said Robin. "Rit." Rit whistled. Two voices answered—far away, very high, very fast. Children. Runners. "If we fall," Robin explained, "three people will see your ledger tonight. Abbot, Guild, Thin-Skinned Lord. We copied it. Several times. Painstakingly. And pretty."

Galfrid's smile remained, but his eyes went blank, as if a window had been slammed shut. "You're... modern." "No," said Marian. "Just not stupid."

He emerged from the willow slope like an edge that had decided to be a knife blade. "Enough drama," said the man in black. "Give me the writ. And the boy." Fink froze on a word he wasn't thinking. "No," said Marian. "Later," said the man in black, meaning death. "Now," said Robin, meaning let go.

Galfrid raised his hands peacefully. "Gentlemen, my lady—civilization." "It's sitting in your cash register," said Marian. "And crying."

De Lace's barge lay dark against the piling, silk and wood and secret compartments. "He's moving," Jack remarked. "Coward celebrates moving with night." "So do we," said Robin.

Will cut the stern line, Tom lifted the hook, Rit threw a small blessing of oil and sparks. Nothing much—just embarrassing. Galfrid hissed like an offended velvet collar. "Barbarians." "Thank you," said Marian, climbing up. "Barbarians live longer."

Below deck: chest. Ledger copy. Box with seals. A small, hideous Madonna made of gold, shining with shame. "We need proof, not statues," said Rit, and let the Madonna stay on board so she could learn what water is.

Up on deck, the man in black held his bow as if he already had the answer. "Who first?" he asked. "Me," said Robin, "I have to go to bed first." They each shot past the other, each reading what the other was about to write. Proximity is an impertinence only arrows dare. "You're getting tired," said Robin. "You're getting soft," said the black man. "Not with her," said Robin, inclining his head toward Marian. The black man twisted his mouth. "Later." He leaped—not forward, not back, but into the night. Some men are trapdoors.

Galfrid watched as his barge lost a piece of its dignity—not burning, not sinking, just coughing. "You misunderstood me," he said mildly. "I wanted to save you." "We'll save ourselves," said Marian. "And perhaps you—if you drop the Sheriff." "I..." "Your Ledger will be singing Matins tomorrow in three choirs." He weighed what he didn't want to possess: risk. "You have your peace. For now." "We want your war," said Robin. "Against him. Quietly." "I'll send signals," murmured Galfrid. "Send bread," said Marian. "And leave the children alone."

Two nights later, sacks lay in front of doors we knew. No seals. Just weight. "Late insight," said Will. "Quick copy," said Rit, holding the second ledger sheet to the fire until the ink smelled more honest.

In Nottingham, order suddenly rumbled: rumors that the sheriff had "privately diverted the course." A councilor fell from his horse because his conscience had a stroke. "Galfrid sacrifices his fist," said Robin. "And keeps his fingers," said Marian. "That's why they wear silk: so blood doesn't spurt when they squeeze."

"Was that a deal with the devil?" Fink asked by the fire, his voice raspy from his breathing. "No," said Marian. "That was a dance on his carpet while we pulled his nails out of the floor." "When he comes back?" "He will," said Robin. "In a new coat, with the same old intention. Then we'll shoot again—or laugh, which is worse."

For three nights we heard nothing. On the fourth, an arrow was stuck in our post box. No note. Just a feather, red with paint or frustration. "He's working for free," said Rit. "Or for no one," said Marian. "That is, for the next price." "Then we'll offer him one he won't pay," said Robin. "Time."

Galfrid sent one last box: no coins, no threats. Just a single, very honest line: "We're useful to each other, as long as you don't become romantic." Marian laughed. "Romance is when you think silk is warmth." Robin put the line in the fire. "And devils wear horns."

Late. Mud, smoke, the usual orchestra. "We didn't sell anyone," said Marian. "And hired a devil," said Jack. "No," said Robin. "We lent him the carpet and slipped the bill under it. He trips if he runs too fast. And we never run fast—only early."

He put down the bow, not out of tiredness, but deliberately. The forest, which hears everything and betrays nothing, nodded in the wind. Dealing with devils is simple: You give them nothing, you take their time. And if they do get something, it's only what they pay back later—with interest, in peace, in the dark.

Chapter 19 - Burial without a Path

The morning smelled of cold ash and wet iron skin. Sherwood held his breath. Rit knelt first. "Sprat," she said, and the word came out as if it had splinters. He lay beneath a hazel tree, crooked, his eyes open, still surprised. No bloodbath. A clean, quiet cut, as accurate as an accountant who wants to call it a day.

"The black one," Robin murmured. Marian just nodded. Will clenched his fists as if he wanted to fold the world. Fink was standing too close, too straight, too young. "Back," said Marian, and he listened.

"No cross, no stones, no song on the path," said Robin. "We'll make it so no one finds him. Burial without a path." "Dogs?" asked Rit. "Blind," said Robin. "We'll get Merlin." "And for the soul?" Jack struggled for a tone that wasn't corny. Marian: "We'll get Tack. For what words can do when they don't lie."

The dive was called "The Impaled Eel." Brother Tack lay half in the barrel, half in prayer. He wore his habit as an excuse and smelled like a burst pantry. "Holy liquor," he muttered when he saw us. "And unholy faces." "We need words for one who no longer breathes," said Marian. "I have words, but not breath. Taste it." Robin placed the bottle on the counter. Tack raised it, blessed it with a cross that was more like arm circles, and drank as if he were finishing a mass. "Who?" "Sprat." Tack blinked as if he knew every poor man's name. "Child-stealing with a big heart. Good. I'll come."

On the way, he preached into the rain: "King Rich—what's his name—Lionheart? Lions drink far away. Dogs drink here. Amen." "Amen," no one said, and yet it stuck.

"The king is on a crusade," Tack slurred so clearly it hurt. "Hunting sin abroad while collecting sin tribute here. Good business. God is into lists. He loves order. Ask the sheriff."

"God has nothing to do with Nottingham," growled Will. "Maybe he lost his hat," said Tack. "Maybe he never had one. Maybe he's a petulant peacock who only sees kings. I don't care. Today we bury one I knew—and whom God will never know except through us."

The man children called "Merlin" lived in a rickety shack that looked like it had been built by a drunk with a set square. He wore bones on his belt—not out of superstition, but out of bookkeeping. He smelled of resin, fish, smoke, and arithmetic. "Dogs are noses on legs," he said before we asked. "Noses are

stupid with dignity. You have to rearrange the world for them." "We need blindness," said Rit. "Then we'll build it. Layer by layer."

Merlin led us to a depression that even the rain avoided. "Don't dig where water is cheerful." He apportioned it as if pouring: "First layer: loose earth—wrong. Second: lime, a small amount. Third: charcoal, for the dogs who think they're hunters. Fourth: earth again. And only then the body." "Tracking?" asked Robin. "Run backward, branch broom, Fink and Will go forward with wet leather, then back dry, Rit puts fish gall next to it, not on top. Dogs hate contradictions. Brains explode quietly."

The hole was first a scratch, then a decision. Sprat lay on a cloth that had once been a sack. Brother Tack placed the bottle next to his head like a candle. "I don't have any holy water, but I have a fire in my throat. This will have to do." He took a small, blunt knife from his habit and stuck it into the ground. "Cross enough. God, if you're listening—improbable—here lies one who shared more than he had and received less than he needed. If you're justice, take him. If you're statistics, at least take note." He crossed himself backward. Intentional. "Amen." "Amen," said Marian, and everyone else didn't say it—but pretended.

Jack told the story without rhyming: "He once stole a sack of flour—from us—and brought it back. Double. Once in bread. Once in time." Will nodded. "He was stupid in the right way. Courage is only that with bad timing." Fink stood silent until his lips made up their minds. "He taught me how to untie knots without seeing my hands." "Good lessons," murmured Rit.

They came like coughs, first distant, then too close. Three, four, six. Men behind, torches insulting the night. Merlin hissed. "Now the bile." Rit blew the edge, not the hole. The wind took the smell and placed it on the stream's chest. "Broom!" Marian and Robin swept the footprints backward into nothingness. Will laid out wet leather that smelled of everyone and no one. "Let them guess," Merlin whispered. "Guessing is tiring."

Dogs burst onto the stream bank—sniffing, sneezing, drooling their confusion into the ferns. A man cursed: "In the name—" "—of your mother," Will growled. They went on, too far. Sprat's Hole continued to breathe calmly. The forest acted as if none of it concerned it.

"We'll dig him up again," Will suddenly snarled. "We'll carry him to Nottingham and lay him at the king's feet." "The king has no feet in Nottingham," said Marian. "Only hands—ours." "Then we'll piss on the sheriff's door." "We'll piss

in his head, every day," said Robin. "Our way." Will was breathing too fast, too loudly. Tack handed him the bottle. "Drink. Not to forget—to postpone."

On the embankment stood a shadow, as patient as a grave. The bow rested, as if it were about to behave. "Later," called the man in black. "Today," Robin didn't call. He didn't raise the bow. "Not today," hissed Marian. "Not here." The black man understood. He disappeared, as if the darkness were a door that belonged to him.

After the last spade of earth, Tack stared into the nothingness that was now called "Sprat." "I'm a bad monk," he muttered. "I only pray when it's too late. I drink when I should hope, and I hope when I should drink." "You were here today," said Marian. "That's better than saints." "Saints don't stink," said Tack. "Yes, they do," she said. "Of incense."

He laughed, almost tearing his eyes apart. "I'll stay close. No absolution for copper. Just... glass for confession."

"There's one more thing," said Merlin. "Noise." "Noise?" "Odorous noise. Here." He scattered crushed shells, resin, soot, peppermint, fish scraps. "Dogs hear with their noses. We play music to them." "That's magic," said Fink. "That's work," said Merlin. "Magic is just the word people use when they're lazy."

He showed Fink how to walk backward until the boy stumbled, laughed, and learned. "That's how you disappear and still stay there." "I thought that's what you die for," whispered Fink. "Only if you think slowly."

Earth, lime, coal, earth, sprat, earth. Bark all over it, needles, wild herbs that pretended they'd been growing there since spring. No cross. No stone. "Done," said Rit. Fink laid his last arrow on the ground. No heroics. Just wood. "So you have something to throw when it gets boring down there." Tack mumbled a half-baked Lord's Prayer and a whole "Shit it." Both were fine.

Marian drew a line in the mud with her foot—not toward the grave, but away from it. "Rule: We don't take anyone to places dogs can read." Robin nodded. "And we learn to disappear faster than their rumors."

In the morning, a note hung on the city gate, wetter than courage:

"KING RICHARD FIGHTS FAR, WE DIE NEAR.

PAY LESS FOR HIS WARS AND MORE FOR YOUR DEAD."

Below, in smaller letters: "Sprat."

The sheriff had it torn down. Children glued a new one on. Merlin claimed he had nothing to do with it and smelled suspiciously of glue. Tack sat in his corner, holding the bottle like a prayer and whispering, "Rest in peace, you stupid hero. We're still messing things up here."

The forest laid its hand on our secret. No path led there—only we knew where the ground was quiet. And once, when the wind was just right, Robin really heard it: no arrow, no song—only the sound the earth makes when it retains something good.

Chapter 20 - The mask fits too well

Nottingham acted as if Carnival had been invented to disguise guilty consciences. Masks everywhere: harlequins, half-moons, dogs that looked better on human heads than real people. "Masked party for the poor," Will read from a notice. "Donations requested. Music, dancing, alms." "Alms," growled Marian. "Weird music and tight pockets." Robin saw a page with a bowl cut skip by, chin jutting out, hair pot over it. "Look, a Prince Ivanhoe clone. Poor fellow looks as if his mother put the saucepan on his head and said, 'Now you're noble.'" "Prince Ivanhoe", chuckled Jack, "hero with a waiter's bowl on his head. If that's chivalry, I'm a baker." "You're a minstrel," said Rit. "And Nottingham is a theatre where the scenery earns money and the extras go hungry."

Brother Tack came across the alley, his habit askew, his eyes alert. "There's a man with an iron on his face." "Romance or reality?" Robin asked. "Realistically romantic," Tack said. "No crown, just a clamp. They keep him down, show him off when it's worth it. 'That's how mask wearers end,' they say—and wear velvet masks on top." "Name?" "Severed. You see only the iron. And hear only the bare minimum. A muzzle, not a myth."

"We're going in," said Marian. "Ball, cellar, out. No heroic deaths. No hymn." "Roles?" "I'll play checkers," she said. "Jack makes noise with class. Robin makes shadows. Rit makes sky. Merlin makes scent and light." Merlin stepped out of the fern, smelling of resin and ideas. "Perfume for the poor," he said, "coal dust for the rich, and a whiff of fish bile to politely bid dogs farewell." "Sign?" asked Fink. "Two collars, one cough—goes," said Robin. "Three fingers on the edge: abort. And if it burns, it burns."

Merlin's crate groaned. He painted shadow bones on Marian's cheeks, which looked like good cheer; he spread charcoal on Robin's neck, which disappeared

in the candlelight; Jack developed dark circles under his eyes that smelled of talent; Fink learned that silence is not silence.

"A mask is only useful if you can still breathe under it," said Merlin. "Otherwise, you're an extra in your own face." "I'm only an extra in bed," Will muttered. "In battle, I play the main role." "No monologues, please," Rit begged.

Residence de Lace: Doors that were never allowed to creak; laughter that came with a wine price. Marian entered the hall like a debt that wanted to be paid. The silk mask marked her nothingness above what everyone should see. Jack raised his lute. He played first "Purse in C Major," then "Tax Collector's Waltz," both sickly beautiful. Robin glided along the edge. He saw them all: the priest with the mild eye mask that looked like an upside-down confessional; the merchant with the moon face that smelled of the tides; and three Ivanhoe hairstyles that looked like pots rehearsing rebellion. "If hair could talk," whispered Robin, "it would scream, 'Let me down from the bowl!'"

Sir Galfrid de Lace pushed smiles into the crowd like plates to hungry mouths. His was no mask—at most, a well-mannered expression. "Welcome, my lady," he crooned to Marian. "We dance for the poor today." "Dancing fills you," she smiled. "Sometimes," he said. "When the powerful look." "They never look where it hurts." "That's why they have us." "They have YOU," she said, handing him an olive pit, fresh from her mouth. He caught it like a blessing.

"King Richard is fighting far away," he said loudly to the group, as if it were the evening news. "We hold the homeland." "You hold the purses," Robin murmured from behind a pillar. "The rest keep quiet."

A side door, two steps, five breaths—and the music turned to stone. Rit was already downstairs, shadows in shadows. Torch glow, iron rust, water licking the walls. He sat on a bench, bound, iron straps across his face, eyes behind slits that looked like two forgotten letters. Fink stepped forward, too quickly. "Who are you?" "No one," came the voice through metal. "As long as this is on it."

"Why a mask?" asked Jack, whose words usually fell easily into place. "So I'm not an example," it scratched back. "They point to me when they need legends. 'So ends he who was nameless.'" "We are not their morals," said Marian, reaching for the strap plate. Lock. Screw. Conscience. "Stop," he breathed. "Outside, I know the gallows. At least inside, I have peace." "No peace in the cellar," said Robin. "Only holding patterns."

A pianissimo upstairs—then the clack of bolts, signifying "in a minute." "Guests into the courtyard," purred a voice wearing servant shoes. Galfrid's men no

longer wore masks. That's the last thing to go: politeness. On the stairs, the man in black appeared. No ball gown, no crest, just intent. "Later," he said to Robin. "Today is later," said Marian. "Today is today," said Robin. "And we're not finished yet."

A mirror fell from its frame because Rit had decided it should. Candlelight broke three times, smoke crept under tablecloths, and somewhere Jack opened a side door so gracefully that no one noticed he was stealing: air. Merlin had mixed the smoke with oil in such a way that dogs coughed and people thought they were in heaven. "Mask down," someone shouted. "Mask up," another answered. No one knew who was right. Perfect.

Down below, Marian loosened the last screw. The Iron Man didn't groan as the metal came off—pain that's lasted too long is surprised when it gets a short break. He had no royal face. No prince. Only wrinkles that said: I've said yes too often when no would have been better. "Name?" Fink asked quietly. "Don't write me down," said the man. "I don't want this back." "You'll get bread," said Jack. "I want air," he said. "And no one who will recognize me later."

Someone in the hall shouted: "Speak! Speak!" Galfrid was just raising his hands when Robin stepped up beside him—half visible, half sense.

"I have one," said Robin. "About chivalry and the pot's edge." Laughter.

"Ivanhoe", he began, pointing to a noble brat, "has the pot on his head. Others wear it in their hair. And all of you carry it in your hearts: a round, shiny, utterly useless idea of what is beautiful. Meanwhile, your alleys eat your children. Applause." A breath of silence. Then actual applause, impolitely quiet—the kind that happens in heads. Galfrid smiled thinly. "Charming." "Cheap," said Robin. "Like your masks."

"Time," Rit hissed from the balcony. Jack made the lute scream as if she had a toothache; Will tipped two barrels that looked like wine and smelled like walking. The man in black sent an arrow that passed exactly where Robin's neck had been a second ago. "You're slowing down," the black man shouted. "You're getting rude," Robin shouted back, cutting a rope that lowered the chandelier just a fraction—just enough to make Galfrid shift a step. Toward Marian's knife.

We became windows. We became gutters. We became the idea of escape. Rit hung from the edge of the roof, shouting "right," meaning "left." Fink jumped too early and landed right—beginner's luck, which later would be called humility. The Iron Man stumbled over his sudden freedom. Jack held him by

the collar as if he were a note not yet allowed to play. "Are you breathing?" asked Marian. "Yes," he gasped. "Good. Then live tomorrow."

The next day, the sheriff came up with a new idea: a mask tax. Anyone who wears a mask pays. Anyone who doesn't "must have something to hide" pays double. "He taxes breath," said Rit. "He taxes stories," said Robin. "Two extra sentences if they're true." "I'll pay in arrows," said Will. "You don't pay at all," said Marian. "You deliver."

Galfrid remained polite. That's his talent: smiling when others are rude. He sent us a card: "You've lost face: mine. Come and get it back." "He thinks we're vain," said Jack. "We're not," said Marian. "We're tired." "And up early," added Robin.

Late by the fire, Marian held the mask Robin had worn. A crescent of leather, the inside dark with sweat. "It fits too well," she said. "Which one?" "The leather one. And the other one, the one you always wear when people say 'Robin' and mean 'rescue.'" He was silent. The forest listened. "I'll take it off if I can," he murmured. "Take it off if you must," she said. "Or it'll eat you."

Brother Tack sat next to him, making the liquor more honest. "The Lionheart fights far, the Sheriff fights close, and we fight mirrors. Who wins?" "The one who's still breathing in the morning," said Robin. "And who laughs?" "The one who doesn't lie in the evening."

We took the man without a mask to a place even Merlin would have to search twice. "No name," he begged again. "No path," Marian promised. "No stories," he said. "Just bread," Jack said, laying it down. He didn't cry. He ate. That's sometimes better.

In the night: An arrow in the post. No threat. Two words, carved into the wood: "Not yet." "He's consistent," said Rit. "He's boring," said Will. "He's the knife that has patience," said Marian. "Then we'll break his patience grip," said Robin. "Not today. But early."

In the morning, Robin looked into the water of the puddle. A face that had two: the one you eat with; the one you die with. He washed himself. The water turned gray. The second face remained. "The mask fits too well," he thought. "Then at least don't let it lie for you," said Marian behind him, as if she had heard the thought. He nodded. The forest nodded along with him.

They left. Behind them remained a ballroom with torn cloths, a sheriff with a new tax, a silk man without a mirror—and ahead, the next morning awaited, which would once again force us to wear faces that barely fit in our hands. And we would take them off again in the evening. Until none of them fit us anymore.

Chapter 21 - Marian tells the truth

The forest sweated fog. The fire coughed. Marian stepped into the middle of the clearing, raising her hand like a judge's sentence: "Quiet! Today there's truth. He who giggles chews bark." Will fell silent. Jack put away the lute. Fink looked as if he had just adopted a sin. Robin remained in the shadows, his gaze like a drawn bow.

"You want to know? Good. Yes—Robin and I, we existed. No opera. No tickets. Two people who shared their breath so it would last. Details are garbage. We're not a wall theater for your heads. Now work."

A dull thud, far to the east. Rit smelled the air. "City. Printing works. They're starting something up." "Then we'll pull the plug on them," said Marian. "Let's go."

Nottingham had a new machine for lying. A hand press that belched words into the world from the Sheriff: FORNICATION IN THE WOODS – SHAME OF THE POOR. Merlin led us through the back door of the alley, the one you only find after making bad decisions. "Jack, Rit – window. Will – door. Robin – bow. Finch – with me, keep your mouth shut. Tack, you pray no one dies today." "I'll only pray if it's too late," Tack grumbled, "but fine, I'll start."

We jumped. Wood splintered. The printer squeaked. Two scribes gripped ink like weapons. "In the name—" one began. "—of your superfluous vocabulary," Marian snapped, knocking the sentence right out of his jaw. Will tipped the type cases, letters raining down on the floor like small black teeth. Robin shot a warning arrow into the doorframe; the frame reconsidered and chose to remain silent.

"Paper burns better than arguments," said Jack, pushing the first pile into the flames. "Not everything," Marian ordered. "Pick something up." "Souvenir?" "Proof."

Boots screeched outside. We were already out of the alley.

Back in Sherwood: "So," said Marian, "now for the gossip. One more note above my bed, and I'll nail it to the writer's forehead. Respect is a tool, not a poem. If you don't use it, you lose your hands—symbolically or... we'll see." Jack raised his fingers. "Art—" "—gets wood," she cut. "Carve something that will last."

"Patrol on the northern route," Rit reported, "two horsemen, three on foot, dogs." "Follow me," said Marian. "No heroics. Just work."

The ravine was as narrow as a lie. We lay down on the slope like bad news. Dogs first. Merlin's powder—coal, peppermint, fish bile—blew the dogs' minds out of their noses. "Up top, left," whispered Marian. A rifleman; we didn't see him, but his arrogance breathed louder than his chest. "I'll take him," said Robin. "I'll talk first," said Marian, taking half a step out and calling, "Do you have a receipt for your bravery?" The rifleman flinched. That's often enough. Robin put the arrow next to his ear. The world declared "No." The rest worked. We didn't.

In the afternoon, village number three, the cobblestones were full of ears. The priest was keeping morale high, so high that she couldn't see any details. Marian climbed onto the edge of the well. "You want to know who's with whom? Wrong question. The right question is: Who stands up when things get tough? Who takes less so others can eat? Who keeps quiet when hunger strikes? Yes – Robin and I. Yes – we look after each other. No – you won't get any bed-hopping. We owe you protection, not pornography." A woman laughed dryly. A man lowered his eyes. The priest acted as if a leaf had fallen down his throat.

Evening, bridge. An arrow in the post, carved into the shaft: NOW. Rit looked at Robin. "No," said Marian, placing herself between the forest and the word. "Today I command cowardice. For a change, we'll survive on time." "Listen to her," said Robin. "She's right—as always, when it's annoying."

Tack raised the bottle like a flag. "Congregation: Heaven doesn't keep bed books. Hell might, but it's overloaded. If two people find warmth for a moment while the stones freeze outside: cheers. If someone uses that to act big: shame. And now you're not singing, you're working."

"Amen," said Will. "Amen," no one said—but everyone nodded.

Galfrid de Lace had planned new flyers. Not with printing, with a needle: rumors in velvet. We slipped through Tailors' Alley, where the fabric was so expensive he wept receipts. "Riegel," said Rit. "Sprat taught us—" Jack began, then trailed off, looked briefly into the ground. "I'll do it," said Fink, pulling the old trick out of his pocket: thin wire, count your breath, don't swear when things get stuck. Click. Door opened. Inside: patterns, lists, invitations with names that hurt us. "Take the cargo, leave receipts," Marian ordered. "Means: we'll take their weapons, but not launder the ammunition."

One night. The wind was a knife with humor. Beneath the canvas: Robin, silent; Marian, more silent. No grandiloquent remarks. No villainous pathos. The door to the world closed. In the morning, bread, water, plans. That is the truth that endures.

The sheriff smelled of opportunity. Bait: granary open, guards stupid. "Too clean," said Marian. "Will, Tom – Wedge. Rit – lights out. Jack – noise later. Fink – with me, eyes open, muzzle shut." We went in, came out, then it started: bolts closed, torches lit, dogs in. "Smoke!" Merlin called from the corner he's never in when you need him, but always when it matters. His incense crept into the dogs' lungs. They briefly considered career changes. Will crushed a lock. Rit cut a rope bridge that didn't even exist. Jack screamed a tune that sounded like three men who were out of time. "Right," ordered Marian. We were on the left. And out.

A new board hung on the town gate: DEPRAVEMENT BY THE WOOD FOLKS. Below it: a poorly drawn Robin, an even worse drawn Marian. We painted over it: FEEDING BY THE WOOD FOLKS. Below it: bread. "Art," said Jack. "Better than your last song," said Will. "Hold the lyre," said Marian. "We still have a church to desecrate."

Sunday. The parish church was full of shadows. The priest raised his arms. "Fornication in the whale—" "Fornication is when you take the money of the poor and sell them morals," Marian called from behind. The priest swallowed a Kyrie. "And discipline is when we adhere to the rules that keep us alive: consent, respect, work. Anyone who preaches against this should sleep outside for a night. Amen." Brother Tack clapped. "Thus speaks the saint of the wet."

An arrow chirped in the churchyard. The man in black stood on the wall, face like stone, soul like an unwritten note. "Now," he said. "No," said Marian, stepping before Robin, not pathetically, just properly. The arrow ripped her sleeve, a red comma emerging from her skin. Robin shot—not at him, but at

the bell pole. Bong. The town listened. "Later," said Robin. The black man smiled toothlessly. "Later."

"Why didn't he aim at you?" Fink gasped. "Because he likes to write stories," Marian said. "And we're ruining the ending for him." Will growled. "Next time, I'll take the pen out of his hand." "Next time, you put the dogs on a leash," she ordered. "I need you alive, not heroic."

In the evening, at the old draw well, they set a loop for us that seemed to smell simple. Ropes, three men, a lantern. "Don't go in," said Marian. "All the way around. Always the outside." We tightened the circle until only their stupid plan remained standing in the middle, alone. "In the name of—" "—Quiet," said Robin, and tied the man up with his own claim.

Back at camp, Marian stood in front of the fire. "Listen, so I don't have to repeat myself: Yes – Robin and I. No obligation to tell. No – no object smearing in the gang. Those who joke about bodies clean latrines until they know the difference between humor and humiliation. No – the sheriff doesn't determine what's customary. Our custom is that everyone breathes. Yes – there's love here. Sometimes. Quietly. Between work and fear. That's enough. And now sleep, you unromantic heroes."

A card in the moonlight: "The court loves stories. Yours is rude. Meeting?" "No," said Marian, throwing the card into the fire. "Without poets, there are fewer poems," said Jack. "But more peace," said Rit.

Widow L. arrested again. Reason: "Depravity through silence." "We'll get her," said Marian. Canal. Boards. Clockworks. Will propped open a hatch that shouldn't have existed. Rit danced over roof tiles that wanted to curse. Jack sang weariness into a guard's bones. Marian opened the cell where someone prayed who had never believed in God. "Come with me," she said. "In here, truth dies first." Outside, the man in black waited on the porch. "Later—" "—latest," said Marian, yanking the curtain cord, letting him stumble, not fall. "He's still alive," murmured Robin. "Our decision," she said. "Not his."

Bread in the morning, thin. "We?" Robin asked quietly. "When the world is up," said Marian. "And if not?" "Then later. Above all: We're working." He nodded. The world took note.

In the evening, Marian stood in the middle again. The forest held its breath. "Final word: You want action? You've got it. You want dirt? It's everywhere. You want to know if we're heroes in bed? No. We're heroes when we put the

knives aside so someone can sleep. Whoever talks about other bodies tonight without permission will talk to me tomorrow. Long. Whoever wants to live tonight drinks with Tack, sharpens with Tom, studies with Rit, and keeps quiet with Robin. The truth is: We belong to no one. And if the city puts up a poster saying otherwise, we'll tear it down—or burn it down. Good night. And heaven forbid anyone snores louder than my knife."

The fire smoldered. The forest nodded. The wind wrote "Later" on the leaves—meaning everything except tomorrow's work.

Chapter 22 - The Bench Under the Trees

It was just a piece of oak plank, held by two roots like old fingers. We sat on it in the evenings, when the world no longer owed us anything. "From today on, this is a bench," said Marian. "For sitting, for calculating, for holding on." Will reached for the wood. "Too thin for my fortune." Ralf didn't even look. "You have debts in humor." "Then I'm rich," grinned Jack. "Shut up," growled Robin. "Listen."

Ralf shoved four bags onto the plank, each one sounding like disappointment. "Inventory: 43 silver, 29 copper, 2 gold—they look at me like lice in velvet. Grain: 8 bags, 2 get angry if we linger. Tools: 1 hammer that wants to cry; 2 saws that lie; 5 needles that work honestly." "Not enough," said Marian. "Never enough," said Rit. "That's why we have rules."

Marian raised two fingers: "First: sweat equity. Those who borrow pay back in hours – guard, wood, path, carrying. No interest on money. No usurious priests under trees. Second: No names in books. Only marks on logs – everyone has their own notch, only we understand. Third: Pledge is work. Those who can't pay, pay later – but pay. Those who lie inside work twice. Fourth: Disclosure without betrayal. Show numbers – protect people. Fifth: The bank is flexible. It sits and it runs." Tack raised the bottle. "Amen in liquor."

We moved into the north grove. There stood an oak stump, as old as greed, hollow inside as a promise. Rit knelt, scraping dirt, measuring with a string. "Entrance here, step there, wedge here. Anyone who stumbles will ring the tin and wake bees." "Which bees?" asked Fink. "Mine," said Grete, the beekeeper behind us, shoulders like wooden horses, veil around her head. "Two boxes. I'll put them in kindly. Kindly means: Keep your hands off."

Jory the Charcoal BurnerHe brought bagged goods: charcoal, pitch, and ash.

"Smell trap," he grumbled, "wild garlic in, pitch rim, coal dust. Dogs get headaches, people get doubts."

We laid steps made of mud bricks and tied a mirror plate into the shaft so that each lantern could see itself and no one would notice how large the space was. Will heaved boards, Tom set the bolt, which felt like a random act. "Try it," said Rit and pushed. The mechanism gave an honest cough—short, quiet, deadly to impatience.

"Coins remain in reserve," said Ralf. "For bribes and funerals. In circulation: leaf pennies (notched wood chips; no one counterfeits our forest) and fern notes (bark notes, valued in bread, not silver). Exchange only at our bank. Those who steal only hold wood—and we hold it." Will turned one of these chips between his fingers. "Feels poor." "Feels honest," said Marian.

Widow L. came with that look that hadn't been able to shake off the weight of fear for weeks. "Not for me," she said, "for the stove." "You're a stove," said Marian, laying down two fern bills. "Two loaves of bread, oil, a good night's rest. Repayment: two nights' watch at the North Furth, three buckets for the coughing people. Done."

Blacksmith R. got leaf pennies in exchange for clamps for traps and an appointment that smelled of honesty.

Baker P. sweated flour. "Ten loaves a week as a return?" "Twelve," said Robin. "Two go to those who can't ask." "Whose idea?" "We're all cold," said Marian. "Math is that simple."

Brother Tack raised the bottle: "I don't bless money. I bless hands that don't sell it for dirt. Whoever prays with silver should show God his receipt. Whoever prays with bread, eats. Amen, you unteachable saints."

A messenger with teeth like polished lies brought a box: IOUs with seals. "Creditworthy," he said, looking as if he'd already bought us. Marian smelled the wax, which reeked of polite blackmail. She wrote back: "Send bread without a name—or send nothing at all. We burn paper faster than you can lie." Robin scribbled underneath: "Say hello to your barber. Ivanhoe looks like a bowl on legs." Ralf grinned; that's already riot for him.

Night. Hooves like heart defects, torches like bad ideas, dogs like opinions. "Positions," said Marian. "Tom, Will: wedges in the path. Rit: lanterns out. Jack: echo from the left, but you stand on the right. Finch: with me—count, don't point. Grete?" "Peaceful bees," said Grete, lifting the lid of her box so

respectfully that even the night became polite.

Jory rubbed pitch into the path and blew coal dust – invisibly, but intentionally.

The dogs sniffed wild garlic, bad luck, doubt—and suddenly found homesickness more important than heroism. "There!" shouted a henchman, running into the edge of Rit's mirror. The mirror stayed, but his pride didn't. Will dropped the wooden wedge, exactly where a horse thought the world was flat. The horse discovered religion. "Back!" roared someone who wanted to be alive tomorrow. The bees buzzed a polite "Make way." We didn't laugh—we memorized where they jumped.

Later, he stood on the edge, the string loose like a loaded lie. "You buried your heart," he said. "We scattered it," Marian answered. "I want to hear if it's beating." "Then be quiet," said Robin. An arrow drew a thin line in the night, exactly between threat and compliment. No deaths. Just a note.

Two boys from the village rushed forward, sentences without periods: "At the market they say the bench is empty! Get it if you can!"

Marian stood up as if someone had underestimated her knees. "Who's 'she'?" "A guy with a bowl cut and teeth like deer—says the sheriff's cleaning up tomorrow." "Ivanhoe in cheap," Jack muttered. "Ralf. Hölzer."

Ralf placed notched sticks on the plank, neat as cuts in stone. "Grain: six sacks in the North Kettle, two in the South Bush, four distributed with receipts. Coins: two gold, twenty-one silver, eight copper. Leaf pennies in circulation: one hundred and twelve. Fern bills: forty-nine. Open returns: seventeen, of which five are in progress, three excused due to illness, nine with an appointment." Marian turned to the people: "The bank isn't here. We are the bank. No one takes because they're loud. Everyone gets what's needed today and returns what's possible tomorrow. Anyone who cheats works twice. Anyone who sets us on fire will meet Grete's bees. Questions? Good."

Panik hates math. She was ashamed and left.

"Starting today, the bench won't be sitting," said Robin. "It's moving. Monday, Spring. Wednesday, Hedge Lane. Friday, Old Bridge. Same rules, different place. And whoever carries rumors carries wood in the evening—punishment on the back." Jack sighed. "I carry songs." "Wood today," said Marian. "Art later."

Two notes hung next to each other on the gate: Galfrid's writing: "Liquidity shortage? De Lace helps." Marian's bark: "Bread today. Wood tomorrow. Rest

the day after tomorrow. Shortage? Yes: Patience. Security: Us."

Tack painted an Amen underneath with soot that looked like a fist.

At night, we slipped through Schneidergasse. No magicians, just Rit with feeler fingers, Fink with wire, Jory with pitch on the doorknobs (to make them squeak before they scream). Click. Door. Lists. Invitations. Bills of exchange from Galfrid's hand: beautifully printed air. Ralf spat on them, the ink running like lies in the rain. "Value: spit." We took copies, leaving traces that no one could read but us.

The next afternoon, two clever men tried to copy leaf pennies. Bad notch, wrong wood. Marian placed them in front of the bench. "First punishment: You say I, not one." "I... am hungry."

"Second: You're working double duty—water today, guard tomorrow. Third: You eat now. And listen carefully: We don't judge. We do the math. Next time without us, we'll do the math with your ass." He nodded. You learn quickly when your stomach listens.

The sheriff came again—more stubborn than Winter. This time the dogs had rags on their noses, and the riders had new boots. "They're learning," said Rit. "We're learning too," said Grete. She lowered the bees, giving them space that smelled of warning.

Jory opened his pitch bladder in the furrow. Rain made it slippery like lies. Will made wedges sing, Tom held doors, Jack made noise in the wrong direction, Fink did what heroes rarely do: He waited. A horse slipped, an officer prayed, the bees only made a sound, not a sting—politeness with an edge. "Enough," someone shouted. They departed, leaving nothing but the suspicion that we won't remain polite if they try again.

An arrow in the trunk. Carved on the shaft: "Not stupid." "He likes our bank account," said Jack. "He's looking for the heart," said Marian. "He only finds wood," said Robin. "And us, if we want it."

In the evening, half of Nottingham sat on our plank—with eyes that wanted bills instead of songs. Ralf showed the notches. Tack explained them like a priest without heaven: "Here, breaths, here, bread, here, return. That's the spot where someone was sick, and we decided he should live before paying. And here are the guards—unaffordable, yet paid nonetheless." An old man raised his hand. "Why are you showing us this?" Marian: "Because trust counts. And because I want you not to run tomorrow if someone shouts 'empty!'"

Galfrid whispered again: "Partnership?" Robin wrote on the gates: "Partnership means you bring bread, we bring peace, and no one tells fairy tales. Anything else: no." Rit hung a mirror next to it. Those who stood in front of it saw themselves as stingy. Some walked faster.

Widow L. brought two buckets of water and more dignity than before. Blacksmith R. delivered clamps that held properly. Baker P. brought thirteen loaves because he had "accidentally" baked one too many. Marian laughed, calculating incorrectly in her favor. "Interest in decency," she said. Tack made the cross backwards. Intentional. God needs to work sometimes, too.

Monday, spring: two bags out, three in, five leaf pennies on the way. Wednesday, hedge path: Fink falls, gets up, and only laughs later. Will carries wood, sweating like an honest thief. Friday, old bridge: Ralf counts without looking, because his fingers know better what's right. The bench is now a movement. You can't burn it. The most you can do is get tired.

Someone with a Ivanhoe hairstyle tried to sow panic on the hedge path. "I heard—" "Me too," said Marian, took his cap, and held a leaf penny in front of his face. "That's a leaf with a notch. More than you're contributing today. Back off. Or bring bread." He brought bread the next day. Probably out of shame. Enough.

Late. The rain has stopped the cursing. Ralf carved the final notch. "We're in the black," he murmured. "Measured by what?" Robin asked. "By breaths. More today than yesterday." Tack raised a toast to the darkness. "The only dividend that counts."

Grete checked the crates. "They're their forests now, too," she said, stroking the lid of a worker—very carefully. Jory washed his face—there was no noticeable difference. "If you need more smoke, say early. Late is for priests." "Early," Marian promised. "As always."

A new notice: "Surrender on exchange slip" – stupidity finally has a form. "He's taxing wood," growled Will. "He's taxing trust," said Robin. "Do we pay?" asked Fink. "Yes," said Marian. "In fatigue. Every night a screw. Every morning he's missing one." I felt sorry for the smile she wore. For Nottingham.

Another raid, half-hearted and too late. Rit took their light, Grete gave them humming in their ears, Jory gave them slippery ground, Will gave them lessons, Tom gave them direction, Fink tried hard not to show how young he was. "Enough," said Marian as the town retreated. "We're a bank, not a

slaughterhouse." Robin nodded. "Today we only calculate. Tomorrow we remember."

Disclosure, again. No names, clear notches. Two gold coins left – one of them earmarked as a bribe, for a door key that still creaks. "You see what we see," Marian said to the group. "If anyone thinks they're into it, they should say so. We're making room. For air. For tomorrow. For mistakes that can be endured."

An arrow in the post, again. "Yet" was written on it, this time just the one word. "He has patience," said Rit. "Then we'll bore him," said Marian. "With order."

The plank creaked, as if it had understood what we'd saddled it with. Marian sat down, resting her elbows on her knees. Robin sat next to her, saying nothing—his way of signing things. Grete pushed the beehive a little deeper into the shade. Jory blew the last of the coal dust into the wind. Ralf put the tally stick away as if it were a knife that didn't have to do anything anymore today. Tack raised the bottle. "To the bank," he said. "And to it not becoming a bank." We drank. The forest nodded. Somewhere in the city, the Silk Man stood before a mirror that was finally honest. And the mirror said: "They're sitting on wood—and you're standing on sand."

The bench under the trees remained where it was—and yet was everywhere: in rules, in hands, in the way we looked at each other when someone said "empty!" and we saw "enough" instead. That's how you make money that lasts: You count breaths. You distribute bread. You let the lie starve.

Chapter 23 - The Bait

The rain fell like liquid piss from the sky, as if some bored god had decided to flush Nottingham and just leave the shit in. Sherwood stank of wet fur and fear, the ground a greasy gut that commented on every step with a smacking "Tough luck!" Fresh notices, as big as slaps, were plastered to the city wall: **AMNESTY**—Whoever betrays Robin Hood gets "protection." Sure. Protection from thoughts, protection from bread, protection from dignity. The letters had as much morality as a robber baron on Sunday morning.

Will spat into the gray. "If that's peace, I'll eat pebbles." "Pebbles are more honest," said Marian. "At least they hurt without pretending they're good for you."

Tack staggered up from a side alley, his robe bent, his eyes alert. "South side. Granary open, guards pretend they have knees of flour. Inviting, like a strange

bed with clean sheets." "Too clean," murmured Robin. "Too slippery." Rit held his nose in the air as if the rain had a menu. "Smells of pitch. Dogs. And a scribe who wants to marry his ink." "Bait," said Marian. "Then we'll build one with teeth."

We crouched under the canvas, which smelled of mold and determination, and Marian sobered the air. "They lure hunger with bread. We lure greed with prey. Three layers of dirt and brains: First, we whisper three rumors—each different, each false, each so tasty that someone will bite into it. Second, we build a wagon that laughs when it's eaten. Third, we lay a path where dogs learn democracy—everyone takes a wrong turn, no one notices."

Ralf pulled three pieces of bark from his cloak and carved symbols into them as if they were small coffins. "A says: Traveling bench tonight at Heckenfurth. B says: Two gold via Bleicherweg. C says: Meeting with a 'patron' at the Ruinenkapelle." "To whom?" asked Robin. "A goes to the market woman who already knows what you're saying before you even open your mouth. B to the gate guard with the honest shoulders and the expensive debts. C to the traveling merchant who asks too many questions when he's selling little." "And if no one bites?" asked Will. "Then we eat the notes," said Ralf. "Better than the wax-eaten stuff from the silk man."

Tom and Will nailed as if the wagon had offended their mother: hollow space beneath the flour, bars that looked like furniture but were actually ribbons. Grete, the beekeeper, brought a small box that hummed as if it contained a poem that hated mosquitoes. "Ladies only bite when idiots scream," she said, pushing the box under the tarp and stroking it like a dog with a past. Jory, the charcoal burner, painted pitch on the frame, his hands like gloom and the smile of someone who had made coal talk. "When one falls, it falls long," he grumbled. "That's enough of a sermon."

Rit disappeared into the brambles, laying mirrors so flat and dirty they looked like puddles of good cheer. Later, when lanterns come, they'll look at themselves and clap. Jory sprinkled coal dust on the edges, wild garlic in the middle, so fine that dogs get homesick halfway through. Fink ran along, counting breaths, holding the wire like a prayer, and doing what the youngest children are worst at: He kept his mouth shut.

Towards evening, the sheriff had a market crier shout as if he were an angel with a horseshoe: "A prisoner will be released if Robin turns himself in!" "Name?" asked Marian. "Surely made up," said Tack. "That way you save money and still get applause from people who don't want to think." Robin

looked at the rain. "If it's real, we'll get it. But not today. The fake mouths are biting today."

The wagon creaked away like a bad joke. Will cursed the boards for manners, Tom pushed like an ox with a bookkeeping spree, Ralf walked stubbornly with bark in his fist. Fink wore his trembling like an oversized coat and learned to fold it until it fit. Marian walked in front, hand on the drawbar as if she'd taken the reins from the rain. Robin beside him, bow loose, gaze like a cold blade.

The ravine had the shape of a bad decision: narrow, slippery, quiet. "Good evening, taxpayer," crooned a voice in the back left, thinking it was being funny. Dogs snorted. Four men, one in half-tin, two with a crossbow, one with the grin of stolen bread. "Bank check," said the Tin Man, approaching us as if the path had promised him courtesy. "No problem," replied Marian, kicking her heel against the wagon frame. It mader**ratchet**, as if someone had finally made a decision, and the world unfurled ropes that hadn't even been there. The straps kissed arms and legs so nimbly that two men suddenly found themselves sitting without knowing where. Grete's box opened, a polite, nasty sound rang out in the air, and then order turned into an angry buzzing. No beast. Accounting. Each bee only one receipt, but it wrote beautifully. Jory's pitch burst on a boot. The man looked as if someone had poured liquid shame into his knee. "Back! To—" someone shouted, but the sentence was drowned in his helmet.

He stood at the top of the wet wall. The man in black. Not wet, not clean, just as if water were for humans. "Nice bait," he said, and his voice was a stone trying to be charming. "Better bite," said Robin, cutting the distance in two with an arrow. Two shots, two opinions that won't become friends. One gouged Robin's ear to a red comma, the other left the black man with a scar in his mind, not on his skin. "Later," he said. "You're a broken clock," Marian growled. "Always the same time, always wrong."

We left no dead bodies behind. Just bad luck, rope, bites, and two new sounds that dogs hate: bees and self-doubt. Then Marian whistled twice, briefly. Retreat like a clear calculation: not greedy, not cowardly. Grete gathered the ladies as if they were on duty. Jory wiped away traces with coal dust, who understood the meaning of discretion. Rit took the mirror from the bramble; no one saw her come, no one saw her go.

In the city, at the same hour, two riders were moving along Bleicherweg, right on time. At Heckenfurth, three busybodies patrolled a void we hadn't filled. In front of the ruined chapel stood a servant in velvet, thinking "left" and getting

"lost." Ralf saw the signs coming and posted the report: "B. Leck B. The gate guard. Not greedy. Indebted." "No cleaver," said Marian. "We'll make him a mirror. He'll show them what we paint on him. Bread for food, sentences for silence." Robin nodded. "Double-mouthed. Better than a blunt knife."

We met him in the hedge hole—a man with straight shoulders and the face of a man who knows his debts. He had the trembling of a father in his hands. "I—" he began. "You were talking because hunger was catching in your throat," said Marian. "From today on, you'll only talk about what we give you. Your family will have bread and a hole that doesn't draw drafts at night. If you go private, you'll eat pitch and learn the bees by heart. OK?"

He nodded, as if for the first time in his life he'd found a wall to hold him.

"Fine," said Robin. "Tomorrow you'll say: Nordfurth—after we've already left."

The sheriff didn't like bees. He liked dogs. He sent more. The new ones had rags over their muzzles—learning the village way. Rit took the light from their lanterns, not with magic, but with a stick that insulted the flame. Jory watered his gutter: oil at the bottom, rain at the top—the horses suddenly discovered God and decided against him. Will and Tom formed a wall that breathed. Fink knelt in the bracken, counted to four, held for two, looked to zero. That's how you don't die.

At the chapel, the velvet servant stepped forward, pretending it was a polite mistake. "Charity—" "—is drunk," Marian cut in, taking the air out of his sentence and giving him grace in return. "Tell your smiling boss: his lures smell of perfume. Ours of work and bites. Next time, he'll send bread, or he'll leave out the oven where he roasts himself." He stumbled backward into the wet, which didn't like him.

In the morning the city walls had a rash again:**Guardians of the common good warn against forest fraudsters.**Next to it we nailed bark:**Guardians of the common good wear bowl-cut hair and lend your future at interest. Our bank takes sweat, not souls.**Tack scribbled underneath with soot:**Bees are fairer than civil servants.**No one complained loudly; the smart people pretended they couldn't read, and the stupid people pretended they had invented it.

At noon, a traveling salesman stood before us, a guilty conscience dripping from his sleeves. "They showed me coins," he muttered. "I—" "From today on, you'll bring us everything they give," said Marian. "And only tell them what we write to you. Once in private, and you'll be eating bark until your mouth is full." He nodded, because hunger is the best secretary.

In the evening, Ralf laid the tally sticks on the bench, which was just a plank and already halfway through playing the game. "Loss: a rope, two pounds of bad luck, two handfuls of bee stings in Will, a scratch on Robin. Gain: seven breaths, because no one died. Grain stable. Coins equal. Leaf pennies circle like sparrows. Ferns breathe heavily, but breathe."

"Balance sheets are prayers without hypocrisy," said Tack, toasting the fire.

"Amen, you godless accounts."

The gate guard—our new mirror mouth—brought us his fear well packaged the next day. "They asked where you were taking the cash register," he whispered. "You said Nordfurth," Marian nodded. "Yes. But later." "Good. Later is the new never."

We tried Bleicherweg again, just in case. Too open. Too orderly. Too much of a theater for men who spend all day hiding something. "Outside," Marian commanded. "Always outside." Rit found the mirror. Jory found the gutter. Grete held the ladies in their sleep—the most dangerous skill. We didn't fall into the trap; the trap didn't come to us. This is the kind of victory no one sings, but everyone needs.

In the evenings, we sat on our bench, which never got warm and yet held up. The village we gave bread to last week stood by the well, waiting for heroes. Marian stepped on it as if she had stone heels. "You want a story? Here: The sheriff threw a bait. We bit it, spit it out, and put it in his face. Your job: If someone whispers 'empty!' tomorrow, you answer 'stupid!' Anyone who runs is just outrunning their feet." A woman raised her head. "And if they send dogs again?" Jory raised his pitch bladder. "Then the dogs will learn to slide. And pray. In that order."

An arrow later stuck in the post of our bench. Carved into the shaft like a small curse:**Almost.**

"Favorite word of cowards," said Marian. "And of the patient," said Robin.

"Then we'll bore him," said Rit. "A fast every day."

Night came as nights come when they've seen too much: quiet, but heavy. The rain took a break. We sat under the canvas, where better ideas had slumbered, and heard the wood cracking as if it were an old woman with a sense of humor.

"What if we're just bait?" Robin asked into the darkness that knew us. "Then we'll bite back," said Marian. "Again and again. Until they realize their fishing rod is in their own hand." He nodded. Sometimes that's enough.

In the morning, a new board hung on the gate, even more stupid than the weather:**Final deadline for amnesty.** Anyone who betrayed us received "protection." Fink read it and looked as if someone had insulted his food. "What do they protect you from?" he asked. "From thinking," said Rit. Marian tore off the board, broke it over his knee, and threw the splinters at the guard's feet. "Tell your boss: The bait stinks. We eat bread, not promises." The guard was our man. He nodded, barely visible. Hard work makes you thorough.

In the afternoon, they attacked again, as if they couldn't decide whether to be more stupid or more diligent. We responded with weariness that was stronger than courage: Rit took away their light, Grete gave them humming in their ears, Jory gave them ground that has opinions, Will gave them sayings, Tom gave them direction, Fink tried not to die too young. As they retreated, the air wasn't proud. It was just free.

At the end, Marian sat on the bench that never softened. Robin sat down, silence like a signature. Grete pushed the bees deeper into the shadows, Jory washed the pitch from his fingers, Ralf put down the tally stick as if it were a knife that had seen enough blood today without drawing any. Tack raised the bottle. "To the bait," he said. "And to the idiots who swallow it." "And to us who build it," Ralf added. "And to hunger," said Marian, "who thinks he's being clever—and is just being honest in the end."

The forest nodded, as it always does when people aren't quite so stupid for a day. In Nottingham, Galfrid de Lace stood before a mirror that, for the first time, wasn't lying, and the mirror showed him something red, round, and small on his cheek. A bee sting that looked like a yes no one wanted to hear.

We didn't drink to victory. We drank to tomorrow. The ravine smelled of a trap again, and the sky was collecting more piss. It was fine. We had ropes, pitch, bees, numbers—and enough anger to be friendly again.

Chapter 24 - The Feast of the Rich

The rain stopped, only to make way for perfume and pepper. Nottingham smelled that evening as if someone had set fire to roast pork in a church. The sky was a greasy lid over a pot of noise, gold, and complacency. Galfrid de Lace had invited guests "for the common good." A sign stood on the gate, as honest as an anointed robber:**Festival of Charity.** Below in small print, disguised as a

joke:**Donations requested.**Donations, phew. The world today was called "show what you've got," and what they had was more than bread, less than dignity.

The hall glowed like a well-oiled belly. Tapestries hung on the walls like lies that had made something of themselves. Silver plates sparkled as if they thought they were stars. Three suckling pigs spun around before the fire; a sugar swan sat enthroned atop a tower of fruit and insolence; wine flowed as if "thirst" were merely a rumor from poor neighborhoods.

We were already inside, in the middle of a land of milk and honey, surrounded by barbed wire. Marian wore a maid's dress, with an expression that immediately reminded any gentleman of his mother, who would pull his ear. Robin had strapped on a neutral apron and smelled of "I work here, don't ask." Rit hung somewhere above the beamed gallery, invisible like a guilty conscience. Will and Tom were dragging crates, as if everything were just weight and no plan. Ralf had hung onto the wine key, eyes like notches, heart like a book. Jack tinkles his way warmly—the smile of a man about to pull the rug out from under someone's vanity. Brother Tack was officially the one who tastes the wine, "so no one dies"—very generous service. Grete stood in the kitchen, the beekeeper as the supposed cake lady, the calm of a thunderstorm under her hood. Jory crouched by the coals, and the coals listened to him.

The sheriff arrived as the first fanfare: polished chest, polished lies. The priest in tow, a censer pretending that scent could wipe away sin. Galfrid floated, velvet and teeth, and behind him a row of bowl-cut hairstyles—Ivanhoe in series, noble potted plants with legs. You touch your head and touch only porcelain.

"In the name of the king and charity!" Galfrid shouted, and the pack cheered as if someone had handed out free lies. King Richard—the distant lion—was once again the excuse why no one here had to think. "We hold the homeland," Galfrid crooned, while the homeland outside counted its teeth in the fog.

In the kitchen, Marian was counting other things. "Baskets one through six at window three. Jory, get the damp bale of straw—the one who thinks slowly. Grete, is your sugar swan in a bad mood today?" Grete nodded curtly. "He's buzzing for sweets. I'll hold him until they start lying. They prefer lies to honey." "Good," said Marian. "Ralf, the wine key?" "Sticks to me. I stick to the truth." "Jack?" "My fingers are hot and rude." "Will, Tom—when things get tough, you're not brave. You're useful. Wedges, not heroes." Will grinned. "I can also wedge with charm." "Charm dies first," grumbled Tom, tightening his belt as if the evening had teeth.

Rit's whisper dripped from the planks. "Two crossbows on the gallery. One across the table, one by the tapestries. Haven't seen the Man in Black yet. Or too well." "He likes to see himself too much," murmured Robin. "Then you'll still see him." "If he's here," said Marian, "he'll smile later. Today we'll smile first."

The music began, a polite lie. Jack let it begin politely. Then he added another layer of sugar: meter like a knife, rhyme like mockery.

"The fork cries on a bare cloth, hunger outside remains in pairs. The god is far away, the king is far away – here only those who clothe lies eat."

A few laughs, thinking it was about someone else. A few tongues choked on the honesty.

Galfrid raised the blade of a glass. "To the people," he crooned. "Whom we love," breathed the priest. "Whom we protect," boomed the sheriff, spelling protection like a club. "Whom we feed today," said Marian very quietly—and gave the signal.

Jory pushed the damp bale of straw into the smoke pit. Not smoke like fire, but smoke like demons who only want to think. The chimney breathed lazily, then sent out a cloud that politely stayed at the edge. Eyes began to water, noses quarreled with perfume. No one ran. Not yet.

Grete lifted the cap from the sugar swan so gently that even the patroness of lies would have nodded. Beneath it hummed the small, angry truth. She liked the scent of applied sweetness. She liked gel and hair ointment. She liked velvet collars.

Ralf swapped the wine labels—no poison, just truth. One barrel was now called "Grace," another "Tax," and a third "Sweat." He filled the goblets accordingly. Tack tasted "Tax" and spat into the fire, very satisfied. "Tastes like an office. I'll stick with Grace."

Marian passed Galfrid, tray like a shield, gaze like a thunderstorm without thunder. "My Lord," she smiled. "For your teeth: something sweet." "Like you," he smiled back, more false than glass. "I'm tart," she said, letting the sugar swan glide into the center of the table. The bees beneath the sugar were still lingering, polite, busy. They were good guests: they waited until someone offended the truth.

The sheriff was faster. "Our people are willing to pay taxes. They love order." "Your people love bread," Marian murmured, just loud enough to make the priest lose his temper. "What was that?" he hissed. "Cheers," she said.

Jack changed the key. The lute now sounded as if it were pulling a knight's wig from his head. He sang:

"Prince Töpfschnitt rides without a helmet, the bowl brakes, the head is mischievous. Those who are poor pay for fine hair – so I carry my forehead forward and let the plates fly."

A murmur. A young lord reached for the pot holding his hair and found only a bowl. A few hands laughed, a few lips pretended to be numb. Galfrid smiled thinly, his jaw flat. "Funny," he said. That was his talent: never joining in the laughter, only surviving.

Rit hissed from above: "Man in Black. Gallery West. Keep your eyes on Marian. And the Sugar Swan." "He should learn something," said Robin. "Patience isn't just his game." "He's a broken clock," sighed Marian. "Always later."

The toast came. Galfrid raised his cup. "To charity!" "Now," said Marian.

Ralf tapped the ladle against the barrel of "sweat"—a sound like an honest yes. Jory drew the draft into the chimney, smoke creeping forward, like a question that can't be quenched. Grete threaded a thin pin under the sugar swan, twisted, loosened, lifted—like a midwife for trouble. The swan trembled. A buzzing, first polite, then correct. Two bees, three, then a small, nasty chorus. They liked Galfrid's hair gel. They loved the priest's collar. They idolized the councilor's wig, which smelled of sugar. The first stings weren't war—they were accounting. Each just one. But properly.

The sheriff jumped to his feet, panicking. "Quiet! In the name of—" "Keep your name," Will growled from behind him, discreetly pulling a wedge under the board. The sheriff stepped back, his boot slipping, his pride sinking.

Jack switched to marching music that sounded like laughter. Marian climbed onto the bench. Her voice was as hard as yesterday's bread, which you need today.

"You wanted a feast for the people? Congratulations. The people are at the door. They're hungry. Your pig is fat. Your words are fat. Your consciences are thin. So let's make it short: Out with the bread. Out with the wine. The rest remains – as a reminder of what shame smells like."

She grabbed the bread knives and ripped open the tablet, not graceful, not holy. Beneath the tablet was a belly full of lies: receipt books, lists, keys. Ralf was there before a guard could think "trade secret." He stuffed paper into his coat like it was cold potatoes. "Proof one, two, three," he muttered. "And this one is called the Church Tithe—oh, it's pretty."

The priest reached for a book as if it were God. Marian simply cut the cord. "You keep your robe. We'll take the contents with us."

Rit dropped the banner. A piece of linen, as big as a guilty conscience. On it, in thick charcoal: **"EAT TODAY WHO IS HUNGRY."** Next to it, smaller, readable for cowards: **"Sweat interest, not silver interest."**

Then came the best part. The windows opened. Will and Tom tipped baskets onto the sills. Bread fell like apologetic rain. Down in the courtyard stood people who weren't mentioned in the invitation. Hands up, mouths open. A child caught a loaf of bread like a miracle and laughed as if they had tricked the world. The laughter was the loudest sound of the evening.

Galfrid held his own until his teeth knew where they belonged again. "That's theft," he said quietly. "That's bookkeeping," Marian replied. "And you wrote the wrong numbers." His gaze slid to the gallery. The man in black slowly drew a line on the bowstring. Robin drew faster, not louder. Two arrows like two commas in a sentence that wanted to go differently. One cut through the candle flame, sparks on velvet. The other tore off a tapestry knight's proud nose. Art criticism in wood.

"Down!" hissed Rit as a crossbow fired. The bolt buzzed past Marian like a stupid thought. Tom was there, as big as a shed that had decided to be a wall. He caught the bolt with the board that had just been a table. Wood screamed. Tom growled back. "Not today."

Grete had the bees back. A snap of her fingers, a gesture that calmed the queen. "Enough," she murmured. "You've counted." The ladies understood. They sat back in the sugar setting as if they had done their duty and were now on their break. Better employees than all the servants in the hall combined.

"Hold them!" yelled the sheriff, climbing over his dignity and calling for dogs who had the day off. Slip. Bad luck. Jory was already standing at the side gate, pulling with one hand on the rope the world called "light." The door gave way. We were in the kitchen.

In the kitchen, the smoke sang deeper, darker. Jory's hands directed. "Not too much," he growled. "Panic eats legs." "Panic eats arms," Marian corrected. "We need legs. Three or four more baskets. Then out."

Ralf pushed a bundle toward Marian: lists, seals, a few dirty letters that reeked of "Secret." "That's enough for three weeks of haunting the gates," he said. "Or for one very ugly morning," Marian replied. "We'll decide later."

Jack stood in the doorway to the hall, singing quite differently now—a lullaby with teeth. The rich didn't listen; they sought their dignity beneath the table. The priest prayed that the bread would fly back up. It didn't do him the favor.

The Man in Black had disappeared. That made him more dangerous. "He's waiting for us outside," whispered Rit. "Let him," said Robin. "Outside, you can breathe. And die. And both are better than here."

We tipped the last basket, bread like the world's apology. Then we stepped on the gas. Kitchen, stairs smelling of old grease, wine cellar reeking of confession, backyard where the darkness already knew who would win. The wagon line was ready, as agreed. Two from the village in front, three in back – hands that didn't ask if they could.

"Up!" Marian shouted, and the first group of people poured out of the side gate: sacks, baskets, half a ham that looked as if it had done its duty. "Don't run, don't shout, don't smile. Work."

The sheriff appeared in the courtyard like a pimple on a wedding day. "In the name of—" "Your barber," Will snarled, dropping a wedge onto the edge of the stairs. The sheriff stepped—again, wrong. It was ridiculous. Even his armor sighed.

Galfrid appeared in the doorway, velvet unharmed, his gaze made of glass. "You think you've won," he said so gently that the rain started to come back. "We don't believe anything," Marian replied. "We're calculating." "You disturbed, not changed." "Says the man who bakes cakes with someone else's flour." His lips twitched. "The lion is coming back." "Then he should bring hunger," she said. "We like to cook for working guests."

He stepped aside, very politely. That was the worst thing about him: always making room so you could later say you didn't hold anyone up.

The man in black waited at the archway, half shadow, half dictation. "Later," he said. "Today," said Robin. "Not here," Marian cut, pushing Robin on as if he

were a good donkey being dragged from the precipice. "We won't die for their tablecloths." The black man nodded, a polite knife. "Later," he repeated, so quietly that only the stones went clammy.

Outside stood the city. Not the town hall, not the courtyard. The city with bones, with fever, with mouths. Hands reached for baskets, feet found what is called ground again. Jack was no longer playing. He was carrying. Tack blessed from the bottle, and for once the blessing smelled of something that didn't lie.

We made progress. Backyard, alley, the angle that only opens up once you've already disappeared. Ralf counted quietly, not coins, but steps without a pursuer. Rit heard the clean sound of order behind us, which had just fallen flat on its face, and grinned. Will and Tom were once again just weight and breath. Fink carried us, and the trembling no longer carried him.

We set off in the forest. Bread in the arms of those who would have had nothing else tomorrow but a reason to yell at the church. Receipts in their coats. Sweat on the neck. Pinching in the side. The small orchestra of survival.

Marian sat by the fire. No one clapped. Clapping was forbidden today because it was considered offensive to work. "Balance sheet," she said. Ralf threw wood onto the light. "Food out. Refills. Papers secured. No deaths. Will has stitches – from Grete's ladies. Tom has splinters and a bad temper. Robin has an ear with a comma. Rit stole two candles. Jack lost a song and didn't miss one. Tack is praying again. I... I have numbers that breathe." "Expenses?" asked Robin. "Smoke. Bad luck. Nerves. Pity – one quick, then straight back up." "Profit?" Ralf looked into the embers. "Children with bread in their mouths. Rich people with honey in their hair. That's what counts."

Grete came quietly. "The ladies are back in the box. They were good." "Better servants than the court," Marian nodded. "Thank you." Jory rubbed coal from his fingers. "The smoke has calmed down. Next time, more gutter, less coughing." "Next time," Will repeated, and it didn't sound like greed. It sounded like a calendar.

Tack raised the bottle. "That wasn't a celebration. That was a mass. The altar was up front, the hypocrites stood back there, and you, Marian, were the priest with the fake knife today. I hereby offer—er—the truth. Amen." "Amen, you old barrel spirit," she said, and clinked glasses.

Later, when the fire was only pretending to be awake, Robin said, "You smiled into his eyes and counted his teeth." "He thinks he's a scale," said Marian. "But

he's just a pretty plate. And we were the spoon today." Robin laughed wearily. "The Man in Black—" "—will come back," she chimed in. "Good. Then we'll get old. And he'll get boring."

Far back in town, Galfrid stood before a mirror, searching his face beneath a thin layer of honey. The bees hadn't taken his skin, just his dignity. That sticks longer. The sheriff stood beside him, looking like a suit of armor considering whether it was still needed. The priest didn't wash the sugar stains from his fingers; he called them "stigmata of charity." And somewhere in a closet, a pot-haired child pulled the bowl off his head and silently decided to ask the baker if there was any work tomorrow.

The forest nodded as we placed the receipts in the trunk. The bank beneath the trees had paid dividends today. No coins. Breath. Smiles without teeth. Hands without trembling. And a city that was allowed to know what rich fear smells like: of perfume, sugar, and a touch of smoke.

"One more sip," said Marian. "One more morning," said Robin.

We drank to both, and to the celebration we hadn't wanted to celebrate, yet had won, because it wasn't about the cheers, but about the silence afterward. In the silence, you could sometimes hear them—the bowl of hairdressing, secretly washing the troops' hair. And you could hear the man in black practicing "Later," and notice how the word became a little smaller each time.

Chapter 25 – Fire Signs

The wind came as dry as a bill. No rain, no mercy. Nottingham smelled of old grease and perfume that had already given up. The forest kept the air flat, as if it knew we were about to nail night to our cheeks.

"Today we talk with fire," said Marian. "Not shout. Speak." "I can shout," said Will. "I know," she said. "That's why I speak."/."

Ralf laid his tally stick on the bench, not like an accountant, but more like someone who knows that numbers eventually start to kill if you don't set limits for them. "Time frame: First ignition on the North Ridge, as soon as the moon hangs over the moor. Old Bridge two breaths later. Tannery after that. Monastery as an echo. Moor Hill, the end. Those who burn too early will extinguish it alone."

Grete checked the fire extinguishers, wet cloths like wet fists, just waiting. "I only extinguish when things get stupid." "Today we'll be smart," Marian promised. "Tomorrow things will get stupid on their own."

Jory sat on his pitch like a king on a bad throne. "Wind is fickle," he grumbled. "So am I," said Marian. "The two of us together are mathematics."

Fink held the fuses, thin as lies that work. "How long do you count?" "Four on, two off," said Robin. "And if it wants to go too soon, you don't want to go." Fink nodded so seriously that for a moment you felt sorry for the world.

Meanwhile, the city did what cities do when they're fed up: listened to themselves. The sheriff rehearsed orders in the mirror, the priest gave the evening a blessing that sounded like sticky honey, and Galfrid polished his smile until it reflected how little he felt.

We set off like children who know they're up to something and yet are right. Rit ran through spaces others call "roofs." Will and Tom pushed carts filled with barrels that looked like harmless soup, but inside were pitch, Jory's favorite poison. Grete hauled water that sometimes burned if it hit the wrong floor. Ralf bore the stigma like a knife—*my numbers, not yours*.

On the northern ridge, the sky stood open like an invitation. Rit placed the first torch in the basket of wet straw that Ralf had marked with two notches. White smoke rose, heavy, honest, stubborn. A finger to the sky: *Way clear*.

Marian raised her hand. "Bridge." At the old bridge, Will gave the straw a spark. White smoke. *Way clear* Two fingers. The path formed, not for us, but for those we wanted to fetch: the blacksmith with the child, the old tanner with the lungs, the widow who had been acting for weeks as if she were already earth.

"Tannery!" Black smoke rose, sluggish as guilt. *Block*. The path through the toll-gathering lane was blocked. Anyone who could read the signs didn't have to die today because some gentleman wanted a quick ambush.

The monastery waited like an old lie. Jory lit resin, which burned red without screaming. A red glow flickered against the stones: *Danger/no heroism* "Don't grow up," murmured Marian. "Today, only what breathes grows up."

The town only realized it when the sky no longer belonged to them. A drummer ran across the market square, sounding the alarm without understanding himself. The sheriff looked up, saw three languages he never wanted to learn, and bellowed at his dogs. Dogs don't look up. Good night, dogs.

Rit was already over there — the tannery roof. Two crossbows had landed there because *anyone* believed a roof was an end. Rit took the end from their hands, leaving only the beginning. Wood creaked, tendons snapped, a bolt whined as if it had seen how ridiculous it sounds when no one is afraid.

Will set the first wedge at the customs yard, pretending he was a cart wheel that wasn't moving today. Tom followed, a torso on purpose. They turned the world an inch, and suddenly no cart that wanted to hurt us could fit through. Small victories, big impact: the only math subject the poor are allowed to pass.

"Cart one!" Marian called. The widow stumbled out of the side gate, child under her coat, heart in her throat. Fink took the basket from her as if his life depended on it—and he did, only the other way around. "White smoke, follow white," he whispered, and she nodded with something that seemed like faith.

At the barracks gate stood a flag that no one respected. "No firing," they had written on it, as if it were a spell. We read: *Vulnerability* Jory rubbed pitch on the crossbars, just enough to make wood ring when metal touched it. Then he left it alone. Good traps are polite.

Meanwhile, Galfrid sent his servants running. "Put it out!" he whispered, saving his wine cup. Shabby genius: first set fire to the sky to celebrate alms—then be alarmed when it answers.

"Red glow on the monastery!" shouted a city guard. "Means: Leave the heroes at home," said Marian. "That's our shield. Not your excuse."

The priest stood in the pulpit and tried to explain to God why smoke wasn't necessarily evil. Then he started coughing himself. The truth scratches.

"Bridge clear!" Rit called from the crossbeam. "Bridge clear," Marian repeated. "Cart two." The tanner, grey on grey, came with a bundle that used to be *Wife* had called, now *Memory* Tom took the burden because he carries things that cannot be carried. His face remained blank. Some men save quietly because noise is too expensive.

The man in black appeared, as if shadows were learning a lesson. Not on a wall this time, not in the honey glow, but in the alley between the draper and the butcher, where the wind strays. Bow loose, eyes weary. "You play with fire," he said. "We speak with it," Robin countered. "Fire consumes idiots and heroes alike." "Today it only consumes your temper." He didn't shoot. He measured. An arrow in the bow is sometimes just ambition that can't find a set.

Black smoke at the tannery:*Block*, alley closed. A troop of dogs turned off, smelled pitch, smelled coal, smelled*Doubt*They barked at the sky, as if the sky could change direction just by barking. We didn't laugh. Laughter awakens those who are meant to be asleep.

On the moor hill the final chord rose: two short torches, one long —*Meet immediately*. That was the call for those who could, and the slap in the face for those who had forgotten. The forest nodded. It likes it when people finally talk to it.

Meanwhile, in the city, they were making their own noise. The guard ran to the wrong gate because Rit had hung a mirror in their lantern. Light reflects very politely—in the wrong direction. Two riders collided because Jory's chute had just decided to*now*to be.

"Tanner out. Widow out. Blacksmith out," Ralf counted like a butcher who's decided to become a vegetarian. "Next: Town Hall."

The town hall was called the town register. We didn't want to steal it; we wanted to know it by heart: who laughed at whom, when, and how, and in return received bread that had been taken from others. Ralf can read in a way that would have made God suspicious. He wrote in his tally stick as if it were the most tender murder.

Marian led us to the back door of the council archives. No heroics, just wood that gives way if you breathe the right breath. "In, clean, out," she said. Jack joked, "Like love." "Shut up," she said. "Love has more rules."

Inside lay paper like a sin, stacked so it wouldn't stand out. Ralf leafed through it, dug in, and occasionally grinned: "Church tithes—fictitious, twice a year. Exemption from customs duties for someone who never paid customs duties. The silk man's mortgage bond: a snare, word for word." "Enough," Marian decided. "We'll take copies—bark, soot—and leave the rest where it hurts: with them."

Things were starting to get stupid outside. The sheriff found his voice, and his voice found men. "Fire signals are riots!" "No," Marian shouted from the railing, "fire signals are reading lessons for people you don't educate." A bolt whistled and hit the post that belonged to all of us. Tom took the post personally. He kicked it, and the post voluntarily moved somewhere else.

Grete grumbled something about brains and water, then hurled a wet sack at a straw fire that was trying to play too fast. "Not in my forest," she said to the flames, as if they were naughty children. The flames were actually listening. There are voices that can do that.

Fink stood at the corner, fuse in hand, time on his mind. Before him was a load of bad luck for the alley *wenot* wanted to take. Behind him was Marian, who wasn't thinking because she had already decided. "Four in, two out," murmured Fink, "and if it's too early..." "...you don't want to," Marian finished. He let time run its course. The spark crept, the fuse hissed, the world waited briefly. As the dogs turned the corner, the pitch slid politely into the gutter. No one burned. Everyone slipped. One guard fell so cleanly that even the ground respected him. "Good," said Marian. "You're alive."

At the rectory, where God had left his signature, we burned a sign into the door, neither big nor small: an upside-down cross, which was actually only a *Nowas*. No mockery, just a receipt. Tack saw this and nodded, as if he'd given Heaven a piece of paper to sign. "I'm not demanding anything," he murmured. "I'm informing."

"Red glow on the moor!" cried Rit. That meant: *no heroic deeds* We remained the cowards who survived. A gang has to learn this: bravery is expensive, usefulness keeps you warm.

Galfrid finally stepped onto one of the balconies built only so rich men could own the wind. He raised his hand as if he could command smoke. "Citizens!" he cried, "do not be deceived! These are the signs of robbers who have destroyed your order—" A loaf of bread flew. Not from us. From the courtyard below. It didn't hit him—it hit the speech. The loaf fell as a sentence falls when it is no longer needed. The courtyard laughed, a short, cheeky, honest thing. Galfrid smiled back, that thin knife without blood. His genius: never losing control. His weakness: never owning it.

The man in black was now standing up at the edge of the gallery, his eyes on Marian, his bowstring lurking. Robin raised his bow, not high, just enough. Two men, two beaten dogs, refusing to let go of each other. "Later," said the black man. "If you don't forget how *to* *today* says," Robin replied. The arrow didn't shoot. The night had more important things to do.

We left when the first rooster, who had arrived too early, spoke his mind. No more torches. No more heroic sayings. Only footsteps that know how long a

lane is when panic dwells within. The forest took us back like a bad joke that suddenly becomes useful.

At the oak trunk, we laid down the margins, the numbers, the receipts, the sweatbands. Ralf glanced over the notch, drew a notch, the *today* Food out. Three families out. Two prisoners out. Book out—half a belly. No deaths. Two stab wounds, a burnt hem, one dignity less in Nottingham. Counts." "How much is *one* Would?" asked Jack. "Enough to continue tomorrow," said Marian.

Grete set down the beehives and stroked the wood as if they contained animals that knew more about work than half the city put together. "They were good," she said. "Gooder than we were," grinned Will, holding out his arm. "Two stings. A lesson learned." "You should thank me," said Grete. "The ladies have taste."

Jory shook pitch from his hands as if it were debts that wouldn't stick. "The wind was decent." "Me too," said Marian. "We two got along." He nodded. "Next time we'll use less straw on the bridge. One more spark and we'd have said too much."

Fink sat on the plank, looking at his fingers as if they were borrowed. "I've been waiting." "You're alive," said Robin. "That's how it all begins."

Tack raised the bottle, which still had half a sky left in it. "Congregation," he mumbled, "fire is honest. It warms you if you feed it, and it eats you if you think you are. Today it spoke, not shouted. Thank you for that. Amen, you blockheads."

In the morning, something new was hanging on the city wall: a fire ban— whoever lights one candle pays, whoever lights two is hanged. Next to it, written in charcoal, scrawled and dull, was: WE ARE AWAKE. Not by us. By people who had caught bread yesterday. That was the most expensive sentence of the night.

Galfrid sent flyers: "*Robbers set off seditious signs!*" The priest sighed piously. The sheriff dictated punishments that looked like old armor: too severe and too late. We didn't set fire to anything else—we just waited until the city itself asked heaven what it had said yesterday. *Hen*ever answers. We sometimes do.

The man in black left an arrow in the trunk. Branded on the shaft, not scratched: Soon. Marian took a glowing coal and burned just three letters next

to the word: Never. "Not true," said Robin, unsmiling. "Yes," she said. "For today."

As the sun pretended to rise, the forest smelled of cold ash, wet cloth, pitch, and a little bit of luck that was too old to be pretty anymore. We squatted, we counted, we were silent. The fire signals had spoken. Not everyone had understood. Enough. Understanding rarely comes overnight. Sometimes it takes three. Sometimes it burns in between. And sometimes only one sentence remains in the dawn: We are awake.

That's enough, world — for now.

Chapter 26 - Reckoning in the Chapel Courtyard

The morning was so cold that even the dirt shivered. Sherwood smelled of wet iron and a lie that wanted to wrap itself up warm. The chapel courtyard stood empty as an open mouth. The walls were gums, the altar a crooked back. No god, just weather. Good thing. Gods make poor witnesses.

Rit shoved a mirror into the crack in the north wall, so shallow even spiders would look twice. "If they come with lanterns, they'll see themselves. Maybe they'll scare them." "If it doesn't scare them," said Marian, "we'll scare them." Jory poured pitch from a bubble that looked as if it could think. "Only at the hem. If they dance, they learn to slide." Grete put the boxes in the side chapel. "The ladies are polite. They let anyone have a go—once." Will shoved wedges into the sunken lane like bad thoughts into a sermon. Tom set a crossbeam that pretended to be rotten but had muscle. Ralf put the bundle of ledger copies in the niche as if they were children who were supposed to be asleep. Fink ran the distance from the west arch to the priory door and back until his legs said "yes" and his head said "not now."

"Reminder," said Marian, rapping on the altar as if it were a table in a pub. "No shouting of names we don't need. No arrows we don't count. And if any of you think today is the day for great deeds—I'll cut the deed out of your flesh and hang it around your neck." "Amen," grumbled Tack. "Amen today means: shut up if it's not your sentence."

White smoke rose from the north wall. The way was clear. Then black smoke from the tannery. The sheriff was on the move. The sky changed language, and the city was once again dyslexic.

They came not as an army, but as a habit: four in front, dogs holding their noses like flags, the sheriff in polished fury, the priest with a face like vinegar, and behind them: Sir Galfrid de Lace with the polite smile of a knife that never gets dirty. On the wall, where moss and memory dwelled, stood the man in black. No salute, no pose. Just waiting with a bowstring.

"Neutral ground," Galfrid crooned before his teeth had even opened. "Neutral," said Marian, "today means: **no** lies without stinging." "I never lie," he smiled. "Then you're only reading fake books," she said. "Ralf."

Ralf stepped forward, his hands black with soot, yet cleaner than any seal. He held a page filled with numbers like mice. "Church tithes, accounted for twice, once for God, once for the priest. Council duty exemption for a merchant who never saw a toll. Allowance to the sheriff, noted as 'security expense'. And here: Forest Peace—price: two heads, three paths, and silence for bread." The priest cleared his throat. "In the name—" "—of your inventory," Marian cut in. "Keep your hand out of the sky. It's raining receipts today."

The peasants, who had huddled in the shadows, pretended they were stones. Stones hear well. A child with cheeks like winter stood next to his mother and, with his fingers in mute, counted how many times the word "bread" came out of the gentlemen's mouths. It never came. It only came from Marian's.

The sheriff jutted his chin. "Insurrection. Slander. You're—" "—in the red," said Ralf. "And I got the notches." Will grinned crookedly. "And I got the wedges."

Dogs barked at the edge of the mirror. The city guard's lanterns saw themselves and didn't find it funny. One shouted "Watch out!" and said, "I saw myself." The second ran into the pitch that had dragged Jory into the gutter like a bad mood. Slip. That sounded honest.

"Neutral ground means no blood," Galfrid said quietly, looking at Marian, smiling subtly.

"Neutral ground just means: If one falls, we say oops," she replied. "Ralf, pages two to four." "Tithe from Widow L., duplicate. Alms book: empty, but well bound. Salaries for three dogs that never existed—or all called 'Greed.'" The priest turned as pale as warm wax. "Where did you—" "From your chest," said Ralf. "Where you keep God."

The sheriff grabbed the handle as if he had the world by the throat. "You're under arrest." "Try it," said Marian. "Will, Tom." Wedges. Crossbeams. The ravine narrowed, like a mouth saying "no." Two guards stepped forward and

found no future. Dogs tucked their legs between their legs. Grete's bees buzzed politely once from the side chapel. The politest animals in the yard.

"You're playing war," hissed the sheriff. "I'm playing math," said Marian. "And you can't count to bread."

The man in black on the wall drew his bow slowly, as if testing whether time likes pain. Robin first raised his eyes, then his bow. It was the old, dumb, honest game: two men, two lines that don't meet. "Later," said the black man. "You sound like a lame clock," muttered Robin. "Break or tick."

Galfrid raised his never-working hands. "This is a misunderstanding. The books—" "—are yours," Marian said. "Or the priest's. Or the city's. I don't care whose filth it is, as long as everyone sees it. Ralf. Hold it up." Ralf held the page marked "Security Effort" high like a flag. The wind didn't blow, but the people gulped. Two men in the back, who wouldn't normally be with us, nodded without looking. Nodding means: I've known it for a long time.

The sheriff did what sheriffs do when they don't like the bill: He looked for a face to punch. He chose Will. Bad choice. Will took the fist with his forehead, grinned back the pain, and gave the sheriff his own hand back. "You haven't paid your taxes, friend." The armor squeaked in offense.

"You're crazy," the priest snarled. "We're tired," Marian said. "Crazy is expensive. Tiredness keeps you warm."

Jory tapped the pitch seam. "He's getting nervous." "Not the seam," said Tom, looking at the sheriff. "That one too," said Jory. "Listen." You could really hear it: the ringing of fear between the metal and the sweat.

"Listen," Marian said to Galfrid. "This reckoning has three ends. First: You throw the sheriff under your wagon today. Without negotiation, without mummers. Second: You go down with him. I have copies that run faster than your servants. Third: You give us bread, and we'll give you time to sort out your reflection. That doesn't mean peace. It means you'll still be breathing tomorrow. Make up your mind."

Galfrid smiled the way you smile when you step into a river and hope it plays. "I bear no guilt." "Correct," said Ralf. "You're spreading it around. That's worse."

The gate guard, our double-mouth, stood at the arch, sweating, breathing, and waiting for the word that turns men into people. Marian gave it to him quietly: "Time." He nodded. His nod contained an entire village.

The sheriff huffed, lifted, and kicked, as if physics could save him. Tom blocked, Will held, the dogs decided to become God for once and did nothing. Grete's bees buzzed again and stung the very person who said "Shut the—" After that, he had fewer words left.

Rit dropped the bell clapper we had made from an old wheel. No god, but a sound that runs through bones. The city heard it. The city **came** Not as a crowd, but as a possibility. Faces on the sidelines, hands that knew how to catch bread. Children who just watched. Mothers who just stood there. Men who had waited a long time for something they didn't know was a reckoning.

"Again," Marian said, more gently than usual. "Your choice, Galfrid." He looked at the sheriff. He saw the pages. He saw the winter-cheeked child. In his face twitched a calculating machine never meant for humans. "Sheriff," he said, "you have... compromised the town." The sheriff blinked. "What?" "You're fired." "By whom?" "By the one who paid you."

The sheriff's expression suddenly took on a very old look. He tossed his head once, as if his neck were a disobedient horse, and then found nothing but air.

"That's not enough," said Marian. "Accounting doesn't mean moving paper. Accounting means: **Calculate**." She stepped forward, lifting the page marked "Security Expenses." "Here's your beating, Sheriff. Here's your hunger, Priest. Here's your glove, Galfrid. Today I strike back. Not with a knife. With my voice."

She turned to the side. "Guys. Do you want to hear who your bread belonged to? Listen." Ralf read. He read as if reading were a hammer. No names, but sums, yes. Always "bread," "guard," "customs," "tithe." The terms sounded like stones in the mouths of the wrong men. At the third "tithe," someone started to giggle. At the fourth, no one was laughing anymore. At the fifth, two men stood up and spat in the direction of the priest. Not much. Just enough.

The sheriff charged. There are men who can only go straight. Will pushed the wedge a thumb further. Tom took a step to the side. The sheriff stepped into his office. Slip. Knee. Bang. A faint sound that sounded like "now." "Lift him," said Marian. "Too heavy," grumbled Will. "Then leave him there. A halo of mud suits him."

The man in black pulled the string. Robin pulled with him. Two lines of air stretched between "not today" and "maybe." "Later," he said again, but this time it sounded like he had a toothache in his soul. "Find new words," Robin murmured. "The old ones are tired."

"You've lost," Galfrid whispered to Marian. "The city forgets. Tomorrow it'll eat my hands again." "Tomorrow it'll eat our bread," said Marian. "And the day after tomorrow your shame. Calculate longer." "I'll calculate the longest," he said, letting his smile fall like a scale. "That's why I'm still here." "Because no one came for the bill," she said. "Today, I did."

Grete stepped forward, raising her hand as if she were the minister of usefulness. "Enough stings. Enough smoke. Stop posing. Work." It was as if she had finished a mass. Will and Tom pushed the sheriff to the side, not gently, not brutally. Rit retrieved the mirror from the wall. Jory laid sand on the pitch groove. Ralf bundled the pages that smelled of the future. Fink brought the widow a cup of water, as if he were suddenly five years older. Tack didn't say amen. He drank one.

"What do you want?" someone shouted from the sidelines, his voice rough as stale bread. "Fewer thieves in pulpits," said Marian. "More hands on the grain. And don't run tomorrow when someone shouts 'empty!' We've shown you numbers. Remember them." "And if they catch us?" "Then you'll learn to slide," growled Jory, and his smile was that of someone who knows bad luck as truth. A woman picked up the child who had been counting fingers in the air for an hour. "How much does justice cost?" "Two breaths and a no," said Ralf. "Daily."

Galfrid made a beautiful bow that smelled like poison. "I will let happen what I cannot stop." "And we will not let what you have planned happen," said Marian. "See? Partnership." He didn't bat an eyelid. That's why we hate him. He is the incarnation of a receipt without a sum.

"Let's go," said Robin, without letting go of the string. "Before the day gets too opinionated." "Not yet," said Marian. "One more."

She climbed onto the altar that no one needed, took a lump of soot and wrote on the chapel wall, large, dirty, and impossible to miss: **WE CALCULATE**. Below a small line: **Weld interest, not silver interest**.

The priest stared as if she had forged Heaven's signature. "Your God could write too," she said, "but he's got his hands full."

The man in black leaped from the wall without landing. His boots found shadow. "Later," he murmured at the gate, almost apologetically. "If you say it again," Will shouted, "I'll tie it around your neck as a name." No answer. Just a puff of air that looked as if he had hesitated briefly.

Grete snapped her fingers. The bees went back into their boxes as if nothing had happened. Jory mopped with sand and water until the bad luck was a rumor. Rit untied the last mirror. Fink tied the rope to the west arch. Tom and Will put the crossbeam in front of the sunken lane the other way around, so that **wewent** easier. Ralf tucked the copies into his coat. Tack poured the rest of the schnapps onto the altar. "For the gods," he mumbled. "If they ever want to learn taste."

The sheriff lay there, breathing, hating. Good. Hate keeps you awake. Perhaps he'll learn something. Galfrid walked, smiling at no one. The priest gathered his dignity into patches and found only threads.

We left as we had come: like people who had done their work. No more music, no more triumph, no more banners, just legs that knew where to go and hands that weren't yet empty. The Chapel Courtyard remained with a word to the wall and the sound of armor realizing it was too heavy.

We set the bundle down at the edge of the forest. Ralf counted his breaths. "Food today: enough. Anger tomorrow: predictable. Risk: alert." "Profit?" asked Robin. "A city that thinks twice before it prays," said Ralf. "Half the profit is better than none at all."

Marian sat down on the plank, the bench under the trees, which by now was more government than anything in Nottingham. "Accounting settled," she said. "For the time being," said Rit. "For the time being is a nice word," said Tack. "It sounds like hope with dirty boots."

The wind shifted and brought back the farmyard smell: bad luck, fear, shame, a hint of honey spread by Grete's ladies. The forest nodded. A small fox looked around, as if asking if it would rain bread again. Not today. Today, only silence rained.

"One more sip," said Marian. "One more morning," said Robin.

And somewhere in the city, Galfrid stood before a mirror that finally became honest. He tried a new smile and saw something behind it that he didn't like: **Bill outstanding** The sheriff allowed himself to be pulled out of the mud and noticed that his armor only shone when others were lying in the dirt. The priest smelled his fingers and tasted soot. Not incense. **Soot.**

The Chapel Courtyard bore the word on the wall as if it were a saint: **WE CALCULATE.** The city couldn't say they hadn't seen it. We couldn't say we hadn't

meant it. And the forest, which hears everything and reveals nothing, placed its hand over the courtyard and left it that way. Until the next bill comes. Until the next stupid god orders rain and we slam the numbers on his table again.

Chapter 27 - When Legends Lie

The night stank of beer, tin, and borrowed courage. A moon hung over Nottingham, pretending to be clean. In the "Blue Plum," the ground smelled of spilled promises. A bard kneaded his lute as if stroking a pig's ears and sang of "noble Robin," who kisses orphans at sunset and beats taxes with a smile. Feathered hat, feathered tongue, feathered brain.

"That's not me," said Robin, drinking as if he had to drown the melody. "That's not you either," said Marian. "The song's eating us. Not because it's wrong, but because it's pretty." Jack pricked up his ears, his eyes narrowed. "I'll cut his shoes off the beat." "No," said Marian. "You'll cut the sugar off his teeth."

She stepped forward, not loudly, just straight. "One more verse from your pure sky, and you'll be playing on my fingers today." The bard paused. His gaze sought the innkeeper, who was just realizing that courage rarely pays off. "People want it pretty," he murmured. "People want it warm," said Marian. "The pretty thing is freezing." She made way for Jack.

Jack tuned, but not the lute—the air. He slammed the first chord in my face like a door, then he let the words roll, barefoot over broken glass:

"The hero has dirt under his fingernails, no feathered hat, only a storm on his back. He doesn't steal gold, he steals your nights so you can breathe in the morning."

Laughter stifled, cups faltered, eyes learned to look. The song wasn't a knife. It was a mirror with scars.

"Go on," said Marian. Jack nodded and sang the second truth:

"The maid is not a virgin, she is a knife in the kitchen. She cooks bread out of fear and anger, and every bite is called: *You live.*"

The bard with the sugary mouth lowered his lute. He looked like someone drinking water for the first time. No one was crying in the corner. Crying is

expensive. But a hand placed a crust of bread for the child next to the fireplace. Without a verse. That was enough.

Outside, new notes were stuck to the wall: a woodcut of the Plumed Hat Savior, beneath which: "Give and it will be given to you" – Galfrid's signature, so fine it stank. Ralf tore one off, smelled the ink, and spat. "Tastes like office." "Then make us something that tastes like breath," said Marian.

In the printer's den, the air was heavy, like a threat. Lead in boxes, words lined up like men about to drown. The printer, a slender worm with oar arms, raised his hands. "I print what I'm paid." "Today we pay you with sleep," said Marian. "And you print what breathes."

Ralf laid out the picture calculation: a piece of wood into which he had carved the world with a nail. No Latin. Just pictures even a dog could understand: – a hand giving bread – another taking, with a ring – a dog chasing a man – a guard swallowing coins – a priest holding a tape measure around his heart – and in the middle: a pair of scales, one side of which holds sweat, the other interest. The sweat side is heavier. Always.

"Print it," said Marian. "Big. Bad. Open. Not pretty." The printer oozed sweat and labor into the press. Jory placed coal in the embers to keep the inks warm. Grete washed the rollers with water that smelled of patience. Fink turned, slowly, as if each print shifted the heart of the city a bit. Each impression became a plaster for an eye.

When the first sheets were hung, we saw it: The picture screams quietly. And quiet screams the longest.

That morning, the priest preached about "miraculous signs in the sky" that the Lord had sent to "dissuade the congregation from false stories." The man had a sense of humor: He meant our fire signs. So we built him a new miracle.

Rit stretched a canvas of linen across the rectory, looking like a shroud. Jory blew smoke onto the wall, gently, in circles. No fire. Just breath. Grete held the buckets in case a lie tried to burn. Jack stood in the back and played a sequence of notes that awakens shadows. And Ralf demonstrated our picture calculation on the canvas with a stick. Not a word. Just the shadow of the scale, which grew longer the more people arrived.

"Why is the left bowl heavier?" asked a girl with a knee injury. "Because there are lies on the right one," said Marian. "They weigh little. Until they press on

you." "And what do we do?" asked the boy next to her. "We keep breathing," said Robin. "And make the sweaty side so heavy that the other one falls off the table."

"Blasphemy!" hissed the priest from the window, shadow upon shadow. "Receipt," said Ralf, pointing to the woodcut where the priest wraps the measuring tape around his heart. "Doesn't fit well, does it?" Laughter rumbled, not malicious, just tired and righteous. A laugh that doesn't have to be loud to sting.

"Look," said Marian, waving to the children. "Funeral."

At the edge of the market, they had placed the plumed hat on a pole, so green, so clean, that it smelled of mockery. We took it down, not solemnly, not roughly. Marian held it up. "That thing lies," she said. "It tells you that heroes are clean. We are not clean. We are alive. That's enough." She threw the hat into the tub of dirty water. The green turned gray like the truth. Then she laid it flat on the plank, by our bench under the trees. "Here lies the lie. We let it grow cold." Tack drank to it. "Amen," he said. "Amen today is a curse that hits the right people."

But legends aren't just hats. They're tongues that get paid, and hands that clap when they're full. So that afternoon, a troupe arrived from the courtyard, wearing velvet, smiling, and with three newcomers who looked like they'd sing our song better because they had rounder faces.

The first snarled, "In the name of the king, we—" "—have no name today," said Marian. "Only prizes."

She held out the picture bill to him. "That's what you're costing us." He looked, pretending he couldn't see. "Lies made of wood." "Lies made of velvet," she said. "Whose are better?" He wanted to take the sheet. Ralf let him. Then he put the second woodcut in front of him: a pot-haired head with a crown made of IOUs. "Ivanhoe," murmured Jack. "You get a crown if you put a pot on the stove and claim it's a miracle long enough."

The velvet bubble didn't burst. It just crackled. "Arrest," crunched a tin one. Will and Tom stepped so that their boots happened to be standing on the shadows of the tin men. Shadows don't scream, but they retreat. "Legends lie," said Marian. "They don't pay."

In the evening, we returned to the "Blue Plum." The sugar singer sat silently at the edge of the table. He looked like a liar who had lost his voice and was finally

becoming human. "Play," said Marian. "But play what *you* see, not what the court wants to see." He nodded and began, quietly, without a plumed hat, without a hero. He sang of the smell of the tannery, of the rain of bread at the festival, of the buzzing in your teeth when bees remind you of justice. He sang of a child who counted how often a word was spoken, and of the post in the chapel courtyard that stepped out of the way when truth had to pass through. He sang off-key. It was perfect.

In an alley lay a new pamphlet: "Robin betrayed the widow L." – there was a seal that smelled of mockery. We found the widow and placed the leaf in her fire. "Did they ask you?" "No one ever asked me," she said. "Just counted." "From today on, you count," said Ralf, pressing three leaf pennies into her hand. "For guard duty. For water. For *No*." She looked at him as if he had given her back her legs.

The man in black stepped out of the shadows where shadows meet. No announcement. Just breath. "Your songs will kill you," he said. "Yours too," said Robin. "Mine are wordless." "Then they'll stop sooner." He looked toward the rectory, where the wall of shadow still glowed. "The farm will paint you a new face." "Let them," said Marian. "We'll wash it off in the morning."

"And if the children love the pretty face?" asked the black man. "Then we'll bake them bread," she said. "Pretty is filling until hunger comes. Bread is filling, even if it's ugly."

The black man smiled, a line that didn't last. "Later," he said. "You need other words," said Robin. "Your *Later* is tired." "Your *Today* too." "True," said Robin. "But mine works."

The next morning, our bill for the dead was hanging next to the gates. No one knew who had nailed it. Everyone knew it would stay there until the rain honestly ate it away. Next to it was a court pamphlet: "Benefit of the Council – Bread for the Poor." Someone—not us—had scribbled underneath: "With what money?" Legends start to sweat when questions arise.

"We need more than wood," said Marian. "We need eyes." Rit created eyes. He hung mirrors above the market street, not large, not beautiful. When someone took off their hat, they saw their face and the child behind them. Merchants put down coins and suddenly saw hands without rings. It slowed them down. Slowness is the beginning of thinking.

The priest wrote an open letter—his handwriting was like cold mucus: "The forest folk desecrate the good name of the saints." We wrote underneath: "The saints may help clean." Grete stuck a dead mosquito next to it. "It sucked too," she said. "No one is crying."

Will came back from the watering hole with news: "They say Robin was noble-born, raised by scholars, and his bow is made of a tree that kings made weep." "They say a lot," grumbled Tom. Robin looked at his hands. The lines in them were paths that were never on maps. "Noble-born I am when I stand up when others lie down," he said. "Learned I am when I keep my mouth shut when it's wiser. My bow is made of wood that doesn't like to talk." "Write that down," muttered Jack. "No," said Marian. "Run it."

We left. We left the feathery greenery on the bench until it smelled like the truth: wet, dirty, and toiled. We adjusted the picture calculations when someone had torn them down. We didn't take the sugar warbler's sounds away, we gave him themes. And we survived because we ate the pretty things before they ate us.

In the evening, children stood by the fire. Not the ones with injured knees, others: cleaner, quieter, more fearful. "Is it true," one asked, "that Robin carves arrows with his teeth?" "No," said Robin. "With time." "Is it true that Marian is a princess?" "Yes," said Marian. "The kind who washes knives." "Is it true that the sheriff saves people during the day?" Tack laughed dryly. "He saves his receipts. People are collateral damage if they fall into his purse." "Is it true that God hates you?" "God has taste," said Grete. "Today he loves bees. Tomorrow your hands."

The child nodded as if he had made a deal.

And yet the lie continued. Suddenly, at the city gate, a man stood who looked like Robin, only cleaner, and two boys sang behind him. "Look! The hero!" He wore a feathered hat that wept in the right light. "That's stealing," whispered Fink. "That's acting," said Marian. "We'll break his wardrobe."

We didn't go. We left him standing. We let him sing until his voice sounded hollow. We didn't shout, we didn't whistle. We plastered the alley next to him with our picture calculation. Whoever wanted to pass the false Robin had to pass the truth. Some did. Some stayed. Both saw, both heard. That's enough. You can never get them all.

Night. The "Blue Plum" slept, but the city did not. We hung the last mirror on the gate that was used the least: the small passage where maids bring bread and dogs dream. Those who worked in the morning saw themselves first. Those who stole in the evening saw themselves last. Two men handed over their knives. Not out of fear. Out of tiredness. Tiredness is sometimes more honest than a vow.

In the chapel courtyard, our word still stood: WE CALCULATE. Someone had scribbled underneath: "AND WE WATCH." Someone else: "AND WE HELP." The wall became a conversation. The priest had lime brought. He painted it. The rain washed away the lime. The wall won.

Galfrid de Lace stood before the mirror and practiced a new smile: that of the man who admits he knows that you know that he knows. It didn't suit him. He sent a messenger with velvet words. "Conversation?" Marian wrote back: "Work." He replied: "Bread?" She: "Yes. Without a seal." He: "Conditions." She: "One: No songs about you." He didn't laugh. His genius: He knows that songs are laws.

The man in black left an arrow in the trunk. On the shaft: "Tell them you are nothing." Marian read it aloud. Robin nodded. "I am nothing," he said at the bench, loud enough for the bench, quiet enough for the world. "I am the hole left when you've been too much of a hero and too little of a human. I am the chair you push up to the table so someone else can sit. I am the sentence that's never finished because you were already asleep. I am not the plumed hat. I am tired. I am here." The fire answered with a sound that sounded "good."

"Legends lie," said Marian. "But they can learn. Ours will learn: She has dirt on her shoes, she stumbles, she sits, she calculates, she doesn't kiss the moon or spit in the sun. She doesn't say *always*, she says *today*. And if one of you claims tomorrow that he saw us with shiny teeth, he'll be cleaning latrines until they shine." Will grinned. "I can already see myself shining."

The picture bill was still hanging when the first rain came and made the coal flow. The lines ran, but didn't run away; they sank deeper into the wood, as if trying to take root. Jory stroked it and nodded. "Some lies get destroyed in the rain," he said. "Some truths, too. But wood remains. And those who read, read in wood."

We stood under the canvas, listening to the rain baptizing the city without question. Tack held the bottle as if it were a psalm. "Look, congregation," he

mumbled, "the legend is dead. Long live the legend. But this time it's wearing shoes that can get dirty."

Robin looked over at Marian. "Enough of a funeral?" "For today," she said. "Tomorrow we'll practice resurrection again. No cloths, no angels. Just us."

The rain became finer, more honest. The "Blue Plum" washed its floor. A child wiped chalk from the wall and wrote: BREAD TODAY? Someone—perhaps the Sugar Singer—wrote underneath: YES. No name. Better that way.

And somewhere in Nottingham, a man with pot-hair stood in the attic, cutting off a strand of hair. Not much. Just enough to realize that hair grows back and lies don't. The man in black leaned in the archway and practiced a new word that was difficult for him: "Today." It sounded strange in his mouth. But it stuck.

Legends lie. We don't. Not because we're better. But because we're too tired to write poetry. And because tiredness is the only thing that lasts longer than velvet. We're not saints. We're bills. And bills don't sleep well.

"One more sip," said Tack. "One more morning," said Marian. "One more song," said Jack. "One more notch," said Ralf. "One more wedge," said Will. "One more rope," said Rit. "One more bucket," said Grete. "One more breath," said Robin.

The forest nodded and left the legend lying there like a wet hat. When it dries, maybe someone will wear it again. Let them. We now have heads that function without hats. And hands that live without applause. That's enough. For today.

Chapter 28 - The High Gallows and the Low Truth

In the morning, the city smelled of damp wood and packaged fear. The gallows stood in the market square like an expensive morale-boosting toothpick, freshly trimmed, beams gleaming, ropes twisted like good lies. Below, the stage: boards meant to signify death, in reality nothing but sweat, sawdust, and saliva. All around, the people: the gawking onlookers with their bright eyes, the thin-mouthed mothers, the children learning to count too early.

"Nice day for hypocrisy," growled Will, who was disguised as a squire's servant – leather apron, stare like nails.

"Today, boards are talking," said Tom, heaving the plank as if it were the cross of all. Rit was already crawling up the beam, a shadow climbing like a worry. He stroked the rope, tested it, whispered something to the fibers, as if hemp could be persuaded not to play along. A small sack of chalky white dust hung from the side of the crossbeam: a counterweight that acted as if it were decoration.

Marian stood downstairs, her coat cheap, her eyes expensive. "No one dies for a picture," she said quietly. "We make movies. And then we make a fuss." Ralf pulled the fluttering pages from his coat: copies of the Ledger, looking like laundry for a very dirty day. "If the wind helps, half of Nottingham will be reading today."

Grete came unnoticed along the cart path, a basket on her arm, as if she were only bringing honey cakes for the priest. A whim of God hummed in the crates, cheerful until someone tells a lie. Jory rolled a barrel that looked like nothing and smelled of pitch. Fink carried two fuses and wore an expression you only get when you've understood that waiting is living.

The sheriff appeared, polished to the point of dreams. He had a face like a freshly sharpened hook. Beside him was the priest, who looked as if he were about to milk the heavens. Galfrid de Lace followed, velvety, smooth, smiling as if the world were at his feet and he were afraid to get dirty. On the wall, where the crows were taking a vacation, stood—as always when things get ugly—the Man in Black. He was so calm that one could forget him, were it not for the air around him.

Two prisoners on the cart. In front was baker P., who had distributed bread as if it were contagious reason. Behind him was the gate guard, our double-barreled snitch, pale, but with eyes that could say "today." Hands behind their backs, ropes on their wrists, necks free—still. The square took in the breath. Children grew up.

"Citizens of Nottingham!" The Sheriff stepped onto the stage, and the plank joints squeaked an amen they didn't mean. "Today the city honors its order. Treason has a price—and we'll pay." "You always pay," murmured Marian. "Today we pay back."

Tack, clad in priest's rags, climbed the cart. His breath smelled of truth that had once passed through a barrel. "Last words?" he whispered in the baker's ear.

"Bread," said the baker.

"Good sermon," Tack nodded, placing his hand on his forehead as if blessing the yeast. In reality, he stroked the rope on his wrist, felt the knot, and gave

him a second, fake brother. "Good, little one. The spell will come soon: It's called a tong, and it will pull death from your day."

The gate guard looked up at Marian. He searched for a sentence, found only her nod. Yes. Today. If you're breathing, it was right.

Rit raised two fingers to the light above—the signal. Jory pushed his barrel next to the stairs and laid a narrow groove of pitch that looked like shadows. Grete opened the first crate a finger's width: humming like a guilty conscience with wings.

"In the name of the king and—" the sheriff began. "—your barber," Will growled, turning the screw on the stair stringer until it said "right away." "—the church," the priest filled it, and his incense acted as if it could perfume fear. "—the city," Galfrid crooned after him, "that loves justice." "Today it loves us," Marian whispered. "Ralf. Make it windy."

Ralf didn't jump. Ralf threw. Paper flew into the air like a dirty swarm, pages with numbers, with seals, with **Security effort and Tithe and Alms book: empty** The wind did what it rarely does: it took sides. It distributed receipts over heads, on helmets, on hats. People caught the pages like bread, looked, read, and slowed down. Slowness is the beginning of thinking.

"Blasphemy!" roared the priest. Grete opened the box a finger wider. A few ladies jumped up, found collars that reeked of sermons, and put little dots on their vanity. Shrill "Ouch!" amens made of expensive fabric. That was something.

"Execution!" commanded the sheriff, his voice steely, his mind straw. Rit made the knot on the crossbeam pretend to obey. The rope fell cleanly—but only as far as its fake little brother: a stopper that slows the neck end too early. The noose tightened, bit, and didn't do what it was designed for. The baker got a kiss from the hemp, but no death. He gasped, Tack supported his weight, Will shifted the board, the rope did half the work, and decided to be union-friendly today.

"More rope!" snapped the sheriff, giving the world too many orders. Ralf's papers were stuck to his armor. A sheet of paper with his signature hung around his neck like a bib. **Security expenditure – approved.** A child giggled, and the giggle was the most honest music of the day.

The gate guard stepped forward. The rope around his neck hung like a threat that thought it had already been delivered. "Last words?" asked Tack. He looked at the crowd. "I spoke. Wrong. Today I speak right:**No**." "Good," said Marian. "Wrong knot."

Rit pulled. The second rope blocked, the noose fell—and held on to the pin he had disguised as "humanity." The man fell five fingers, nothing more. Enough for drama, too little for death. The crowd held its breath so loudly that the crows choked.

"Fraud!" roared the priest, as if the mechanism belonged to God. "Fraud is your specialty," called Jack from the crowd and began a little song consisting of only one word: "**No**"—in time, dirty, disobedient. Twenty voices took it up. "**No—No—No**." The market square got a pulse.

The sheriff reached for the lever to "establish order." Jory discreetly kicked the pitch chute. The sheriff kicked—and discovered a change of guard. Ready-to-wear: his dignity was the first to slip. He slid down the banister on his butt, making a face like a man finding his career in the dirt. Laughter crackled, first from the back, then from the front. Nasty? Sure. Healthy? Also.

"Hold the gallows!" Galfrid snarled, his voice flat, his eyes calculating. "I hold the truth," Marian replied, stepping onto the lower step. "People! This is the high gallows. It stands on low ground. Here they hang stories for you so you don't see your coins disappear. Today we hang their receipts on it."

Ralf blew up the last stack. A sheet landed on Galfrid's shoulder:**Duty-free – de Lace – Friend of the Council**Someone read it aloud. Another translated: "He doesn't pay. We do." A woman spat on the floor, not much. Just enough.

The man in black raised the string, only as high as a promise no one wants. Robin raised his bow as if petting a dog about to bite. They looked at each other, both tired, both stubborn.

"Later," said the black man. "Today," said Robin. "If you want me to like you." "I want you to live," he said, and for the first time he sounded not like a clock, but like a man who knows that words carry weight. He released the string. "Later," again—but it was a request, not a judgment.

"Cut him loose," Marian hissed to Tack. "Both of them, but nicely." Tack pretended to bless the noose, but instead blessed the knots: pincers, cut, hand, grip. Will pulled, Tom lifted, Rit gave way at the top. The baker fell into Tack's

arms, the gate guard on Will's shoulder. Both hung briefly between the gallows and the ground, then they were...**below**. The truth lives below.

Grete looked at the priest, who was catching his breath again. "One more time," she murmured, and lifted the lid two fingers. Two bees placed a dot on each of his index fingers—the spot he most often threatens with. He squeaked. It was music.

"Arrest them!" shouted the sheriff, getting back to his feet like a cat with too much iron. "Try it," said Marian. "But be careful: the ground is honest." He charged. Will held out the plank, friendly as a door. Tom changed the angle of the world by a fraction of an inch. The sheriff bounced off the truth. Slip, slam, lesson. There are days when gravity is communist.

Galfrid smoothed out invisible wrinkles. "The people will suffer from your fuss. Tomorrow they will want food and peace. You have disturbed both." "We have distributed both," said Marian. "You have disturbed it for years. Today your name lies on the square. It looks beautiful." A leaf stuck to his shoe:**Alms – diverted**He didn't hand it over. That was the smartest mistake of his day.

Rit dropped a small banner above: linen, soot-black, as big as shame.**TODAY THE LIE HANGS**.Not a work of art. Just truth that claimed the right to be great. People read, and you saw how some people were just becoming human. It's not pretty when that happens. But it lasts.

"Clear the way!" Ralf shouted. Fink had his eye on the tanner's gate, fuse ready, but not greedily. Grete pushed through the crowd, crate closed, lady inside, good-natured. Tack supported the baker as if he were a baptismal font. Will carried the gate guard as if he'd always practiced it. Tom cleared paths with his shoulders, politely, firmly. Jory wiped away the trail of pitch with sand as if it had never been there—trails are a luxury we can't afford.

The priest jumped onto the step, which seemed taller than the sky. "This is riot!" "This is accounting," Jack cried. "And you're the footnote no one reads."

The sheriff finally found a dog who still believed in him. He pointed at us. The dog saw Grete, saw the box, smelled honey, smelled order, sat down, and decided to be the priest for the day.**Good dog**.The sheriff yelled at him. The dog yawned. It was the wisest yawn of the year.

"Walk," said Marian. No heroic tone, just a reckoning. We walked. Not running. Not posing.**Work**.Through the gate that smells like old leather and second-rate

confessions, into the ravine that everyone who has ever messed up here knows.

The man in black didn't follow. He watched us, counting arrows, counting steps, probably counting his missed opportunities. "Later," he was heard again, quieter than dust.

In the ravine, Jory had a second chute in case stupidity slipped in behind. It did. Two guards came in a hurry, walked with speed, and landed with humility. Will nodded to them. "Today the ground learns your names."

The wagon, our quiet friend, was waiting at Gerberfurth. The baker lay on sacks and laughed, a sound that was more like a snort. The gate guard held Fink's hand, briefly, awkwardly, well. "What do I owe?" "Two guards and a no," said Ralf. "And later you'll bring bread to those who can't pick it up." "Later," he said. "Today I'm breathing."

"Tally," Marian demanded, as soon as the trees smelled of us again. Ralf placed his tally stick on our plank under the trees, which by now was more state than half the city. "Two down, both alive. A sheriff wet. A priest scored. A Galfrid smiling—doesn't count, but annoying. Papers distributed. People watched. No deaths. Two stitches, three grazes, a new phrase: **The soil is honest.**" Tack raised the bottle. "Amen. To put it bluntly: The gallows is high, but it poops on the same ground as us. And today we're faster with the bucket." Grete fed her ladies sugar water. "Good," she said to them, and a little to us. Jory rubbed pitch from his fingers as if it were old sins: "Next time I'll put the gutter higher. It'll fall nicer." "Next time," Will repeated. "Sounds like a calendar."

Robin sat for a moment. He looked like a man who had just explained to an arrow why it had to wait. "The black one..." "...didn't shoot today," said Marian. "Maybe he saw the base truth. Maybe he's just having a whim." "Maybe he wants us to believe he has a soul." "Should we lend him one?" Robin grinned crookedly. "Too expensive."

The rain came late, as if apologizing for missing the show. It washed the square clean, but the words stuck. **TODAY THE LIE HANGS** grew darker, not fainter. The tall gallows still stood, but it looked smaller from a distance, as if someone had sanded down its impudence.

In Nottingham, the sheriff stood at the basin and scrubbed pitch from his coat, cursing dogs and gravity. The priest held two fingers in vinegar and called them

martyrs. Galfrid sat in front of his mirror and practiced neutrality. Neutrality is when the mouth says nothing and the eyes say the opposite.

We sat by the fire under the trees. The wood crackled not heroically, only gratefully. Fink held the remnant of the rope Tack had given him. "Remember how not to die." "Remember how to live," said Marian. "And how to laugh," added Jack, humming a song without a feathered hat.

"Another sip," grumbled Tack. "Another morning," said Robin. "Another**No**," said Marian.

The forest nodded, slowly, as if it had already known us as naughty children. In the city, someone nailed our paper pages to a barn, and someone else didn't tear them down. The high gallows scratched at the sky. The low truth spread in puddles. And somewhere between the two stood a child, counting how many times today**Bread**was said. More than yesterday. That's the only statistic that counts.

We lay down, as tired as truth and a little drunk as the sayings of the day. And as night finally withdrew its tongue from the city, we thought briefly of knots that hold, of boards that say "no," and of ropes that refuse to obey. Good ropes. Good night.

Chapter 29 - Escape is a form of war

The morning was a rough rag on the face. No rain, just cold, tangy air. Sherwood held his breath and acted as if he'd never been our ally. After the gallows circus, the city screamed, and screams have legs. We heard dogs in the distance, boots in time, a drummer who could count the fear.

"Pack it up," said Marian. "Not sentimental, not clean. Everything that breathes comes with you. Everything that merely shines stays here and learns humility."

The bench under the trees looked at us like an old animal that wants to do it again. Ralf knelt and grabbed the notched sticks. "We're splitting them," he murmured. "Three crates. North – East – Moor. Numbers on the backs that only we can read. Whoever loses, loses today." *not*the hand—just sleep." "I sleep badly anyway," grumbled Will, picking up the heaviest box as if it were a complaint against gravity.

Grete pulled the veil over her forehead. "The bees stay here. Two are coming with us. The rest will guard what we can't take—politely, but firmly." "Polite," repeated Jack. "Like a slap in the face with a glove."

Jory tipped a bowl of pitch into the forest floor, spread ash, rubbed wild garlic, and peed into it—an old recipe. "That's what we'll smell like tomorrow: of nobody," he explained. "That's what they smell like today: of stupid horses." "And of perfume," Rit added, tying a mirror to a branch so it looked like a random puddle. "Lanterns like to walk into their own light."

Fink stood there with two ropes and a face that didn't yet know what today demanded from yesterday. "When do we run?" "If I say 'now,'" Marian answered. "And if I say 'no,' you'll still run slower. Anyone who goes fast today will die stupid."

We extinguished the fire with cold determination. Tack added a sip, called it holy water, smelled like distillery. "Congregation," he mumbled, "Retreat is a psalm God never learned—because he was too proud. We sing it anyway. Quietly, but with a knife."

The first ravine was a scar that knew how to bleed. Rit crawled forward, eyes on the ground, ears in the bushes. "Two scouts. On the left, the one with the new boots, on the right, the one with the old hate." "Hate slips worse," said Jory, painting the gully with oil that didn't like light.

We ran—no, we moved. Running is for people with time. We were at war. War has rhythm, not pace. Will walked as only men walk who have never breathed in time and yet manage to carry the world. Tom was a shadow with shoulders, politely waving stones aside. Fink counted in his head: four in, two out, one standing, *life*.

Behind us, Ralf released the collection plates: three rabbits with little bells on their paws, dancing through the undergrowth as if they'd eaten the lute. "Chase the music, you rascals," Jack grinned. "We'll take the beat."

The dogs turned away. Dogs are suspicious of music. They'd rather run away from the noise than follow it. Good dogs. Bad masters.

At the moor, the truth emerged. A moor is mathematics for people who don't want to believe they have to do math. "Planks!" Marian commanded. Will and Tom built the jetty, which looked as if it had fallen into the world yesterday. Jory taut the sliding rope that keeps you from falling when you're in debt to

gravity. Grete took the first child and tied it to her back like a reminder. "Don't scream," she told him, "and if you do – be quiet."

The double-mouthed man, the gate guard, carried the second crate, his face like a withdrawal. "If they catch me—" "We'll get you back," Marian said. "Or we'll take what's left of you and make it a 'no.'" He nodded, as if this were the first contract he'd understood.

We walked across the moor like bad thoughts through a neural canal. Every step was a choice, every splash a receipt. Fink slid, found his footing in the sliding rope, and learned to distinguish between shock and death. "Good boy," Tom murmured, unsmiling. "You can unlearn shock."

The wind brought noise we hadn't ordered. Dogs, riders, boots in unison. "They love us again," said Jack. "The love of fools is loud," growled Rit. "Left." Left was a strip of deadwood that looked like a pile of "no." Marian nodded. "Ralf, sign." Ralf lifted a sooty rag: white stripe, black dot, crooked line. Our language. Will and Tom took the bait:*squeaking boards that give way at the right moment*Jory finished making the shadow. Grete placed the beehive in the peat, lid closed, heart open.

"Ready," said Marian and pulled us into the hollow, where for a moment the world pretended it owed us peace. The riders came and found the bridge *wefor them*had built: smooth, honest, right down to the middle – that's where the truth slipped into the movement. A horse briefly made the acquaintance of God and spontaneously changed its mind. The sheriff cursed half a rosary, the priest, who for some reason rode along, noted that incense reacts to shock like wine reacts to confession.

"Don't laugh," Marian breathed. "Laughter awakens the next mistake." We didn't laugh. We kept breathing.

Beneath the oak ledge, our lie waited in wooden form: an abandoned "camp," neatly draped—two blankets, a frying pan, a plumed hat with the smell of pancakes (thanks, Jack), a fake tally stick with two dozen heroic strokes. "They should think we're dumber than our songs," Marian said. "Maybe we'll get lucky, and they'll be dumber than their armor."

The dogs arrived first. They hadn't read what Jory had written in the ground: pitch, ash, piss. They sniffed the future and got the past: noses full of the smell of nobody. One sneezed so desperately that even the crows politely looked

away. The rest ran into the feathered hat, bit into cardboard, got powdered sugar and scorn. Good scene. No applause.

The man in black appeared in the clearing, and the light acted as if it were having an affair with him. "You're running," he said. "We're leading," Marian replied. "Running is when you decide which card counts." He looked at Robin. "Your arrow? Feel like working today?" Robin shuddered. "It only works when I run out of words." "You never run out of words." "Maybe today," Robin murmured.

"Later," said the black man. "Your favorite word is tired," Marian replied. "Come with us. We'll show you what 'now' smells like."

He didn't go with you. He walked alongside, like an idea you can't get rid of because it's too polite to be annoying.

At the stream we did what the city *never can: be quietly clever* We took off our boots, strapped them to our backs, and waddled through the cold knife like ducks without a career, and Ralf left boot prints behind us heading north—two pairs moving on, legless. Rit laughed so quietly that the stream felt flattered.

"How long?" asked Fink. "Until we're no longer asked," said Marian. "When is that?" "When you're tired enough not to want to know."

Will limped. "Scratch from the pitch board." Grete gave him a look that seemed like stitches. "Wound later. Now walk." "Yes, Mother." "If I were your mother, you'd be cleaning latrines right now." He nodded seriously. "Good point."

The path narrowed into a gullet that smacked of ambush. "Not in," hissed Marian, "from the top." Rit was already at the top. Mirror in the undergrowth. Two. Three. The pursuers' lanterns conspired with themselves: They saw each other, made love, almost burned. A man screamed because light frightened him. Good man. Wrong profession.

Jory dropped two small drops of pitch into the dust at the edge. "When a horse brakes, a rider learns to fly." "Flying is expensive," said Tom. "We'll just land."

We moved on, a procession of the improbable. The tanners coughed up the past, the children held their breath until the future became an idea. The gate guard sweated guilt and felt it leaking out. Ralf wore notches heavier than coins. Jack wore his tongue as if it were a torch to *benot* lit. Tack carried the bottle and had the patience not to empty it.

"Break," said Marian in a hollow that smelled of old things. "Two minutes. No more. Whoever needs to pee, pees in the plan: here and with ashes." We peed in the war. It smelled of shamelessness and hygiene. Jory nodded. "Good mix. Dogs hate prescriptions."

The wind shifted. That means some god wanted to play along. We rarely let gods play along. "Plan B," said Marian. "Ralf, whistle." Ralf didn't whistle prettily. He whistled truthfully. Three short ones, two long ones, one who misheard. The harebells answered us from a direction we'd never been. The city guard chased music. We chased morning.

At the old windthrow site, the world stood askew. A good spot. We built shame in wood: A cart that looked as if it had carried us stood sideways, its wheel off its axle, its canvas in the dirt—*theater*Next to it were three breadcrumbs and a trail that said: "We stupidly ran south." "Anyone who believes that will never catch us," said Marian. "Anyone who doesn't believe that will fall here."

The sheriff came. He believed the wrong thing and did the right thing: He roared. His men became nervous. Horses picked up pitch and slipped. A post that Tom had only pretended to be old became young and jumped into the path. It was beautiful. Not moral, but healthy.

"We're too good at it," Robin muttered, "sending idiots back to their gods." "Our job," Marian said. "Idiots need goals."

By midday, the world was an oven that wouldn't bake. The children clung to Grete, who sorted them like bees: "You breathe, you drink, you look. So, yes. Good swarm," she murmured. "She talks like that to everyone," Jack whispered to Fink. "To you too?" "Especially to me."

The double-jawed man almost fell, caught himself on the slide rope, and gasped. "I've never lived like this." "It's exhausting, isn't it?" said Tom. "Yes." "Get used to it."

Rit explored the old Roman road—stone upon stone, dead, yet faster than dirt. "Empty," came his signal. "Or too empty." "Means trap," said Marian, turning into the undergrowth. "We'll take the world that isn't pretty."

We rummaged through ferns and opinions. Will got stuck with the box, cursed, and tore out the ferns like offended hair. Tom helped with the patience of someone who'd once carried a forest through a door. Ralf whistled again – the

rabbits were singing their wedding song somewhere else. The dogs lost their marriages.

In the evening we reached the old sheep pasture, where for years only stalks had grown. "Here," Marian decided. "Short camp. No fire. Just breath. Jory, scentless smoke – two fingers, no more. Grete, crates in the shadows. Ralf, counting notches. Will, Tom – securing the edge. Rit, mirror away. Jack, *no* Song. Tack, you..." "...drink later," he sighed, sitting on his bottle like a pious hedgehog.

We ate bread that tasted as if it had seen the day. The baker P., who *today* *not* died, chewing slowly, as if he needed to convince himself that chewing creates the future. The gate guard looked at his hands as if they were new. "I'll pay you back," he said. "Guard. Water. No." "So you understand our custom," said Marian. "Good."

The man in black stood at the edge, pretending to be a tree that grows arrows. Robin looked at him like a mirror one doesn't like to see oneself in. "Why don't you run with us?" asked Robin. "I never run," he said. "I'll stay and see if you come back." "So? We do?" "Always have." "That's the lie of legends," said Marian. "Not today." "Later," he whispered. "Bring another word," she growled. "Otherwise, no one will believe you're real."

Ralf read the notches. "Two stab wounds, three grazes, zero deaths. Grain: minus one sack. Morale: no longer hanging from the gallows, but by a thin thread of hunger and wit." "Wit is a poor thread," said Jack. "Lasts longer than velvet," said Marian.

Night crept in like a cold dog. We didn't drink—for once—because drinking makes noise, and noise writes invitations. Nevertheless, Tack smelled of comfort. "Congregation," he whispered, "I'll deliver the sermon today in my heart, so the forest won't betray it." "Amen in silence," said Grete. "My favorite kind."

We didn't sleep. We learned to close our eyes without giving away trust. Fink lay next to the box and cried, not because masculinity is nonsense, but because he understood what *not* means dying. Robin stayed awake and didn't give the man in black a "today," only a "maybe." Marian sat with her back against the tree, her knife at her knee, her future clutched in her teeth.

Shortly before midmoon, the trackers arrived, wanting to be clever. Not loudly. Just wrong. Rit let them through the fake bridge into the real moor. A curse, a

splash, a gurgle, it sounded like politics. We didn't look. Decency is: give the enemy his due.

Before the morning forgot the sky, we pushed on. The forest suddenly gave way—rarely, but it knows when we're being honest. The stream pretended to know us. The birches whispered their paperwork. We became lighter because we carried heavy loads. Paradox? War is a collection of paradoxes that work.

At the Nordfurth, the "no" awaited in stone: an old border marker whose border no one knew anymore. "Ours," Marian decided. "From here on, our numbers apply again." Ralf scratched: two notches – arrived. A third – tomorrow. "So we don't forget," he explained. "Forgetting is a luxury," Tom murmured. "We haven't."

The sun slowly crept into the forest, as if it wanted to witness our impudence. We sat—briefly—at the plank we had sawn from a fallen tree trunk in one night. New bench, old will. "Balance sheet," said Marian. Ralf: "People: all of them. Bench: scattered, alive. Enemies: confused, wetter than yesterday. The Man in Black: has finished his 'later' and is practicing 'maybe'. The city: tired. We: more tired. But—" "But," repeated Jack. "The best word after 'no'." "—but we're breathing," Ralf finished, laying down the notched stick as if it were a weapon that could sleep.

Will almost fell backward from exhaustion. Grete caught him with a glance. "One more step and you'll be in the bee hotel." "I snore well," he murmured. "You never snore well," she said. "You snore like you're dictating to heaven." "Someone has to do it."

The gate guard squatted there, hands open, as if he'd just learned they weren't just for grasping. "I thought flight was shame." "Flight is war," said Marian. "Shame is standing still when the enemy sings your song. We'll write new beats."

Jory stretched his legs, smelled his fingers (pitch, ash, piss—the perfume of survival). "I'll make us a gully along the new path later. In case stupidity comes to visit." "Stupidity always comes to visit," said Rit. "We'll have tea ready."

Tack finally opened the bottle and passed a sip around, but no more. "To cowardice," he said solemnly. "To what?" asked Fink. "Cowardice is the art of being able to fight later," Tack explained. "And the courtesy of not dying today."

Robin looked at the new clearing, which promised nothing and yet held everything. "We'll be back," he said softly, as if speaking to the forest. "Where to?" Marian asked. "To Chapel Courtyard. To the gallows. To the bench under the trees. To every place the city tries to forget." "Later," she teased him with a smirk she rarely wore. He nodded. "Later."

The dogs barked far, very far away. The barking sounded smaller. We took the last sip. The morning smelled of birch and silence. And somewhere in Nottingham, the sheriff stumbled over his own trail, the priest counted stitches like joys, Galfrid smiled as he brushed mistakes from his waistcoat, and the man in black stood in an alley, said "Later," and realized the word no longer suited him.

Flight is a form of war. You lose battlefields to gain days. You let the enemy run into their own light. You carry children instead of banners, boxes instead of forehead rhymes, chutes instead of trumpets. You know the price: fatigue, hunger, ridicule. And you pay it, because tomorrow is a good debt.

"Another sip," said Tack. "Another morning," said Robin. "AnotherNo," said Marian.

The forest nodded. And we nodded back—not because we're polite, but because we're still here. That's all. That's enough. For today.

Chapter 30 - The Exchange

Morning came with a dry cough. No rain, only air that smelled of old salt and new anger. Nottingham tensed its shoulders, the river acted innocent, and the salt warehouse stood there like a pitted tooth: solid, ugly, ready to hurt.

"Everything is a trade," said Marian, pulling her coat tighter. "Today we trade hunger for numbers. Anyone who cheats us trades their teeth for my boots." "Good rate," grumbled Will. "Where do you sign?" "With breath," she said. "Not with ink."

Ralf was already sitting at the scale, which was as old as lies. He had a wooden bowl, a stone measuring stick, and that look that counts grains and doesn't forget people. "The sacks come mixed," he muttered. "Two with sand. One wet. One too full—to make it look nice." "We'll throw niceness at their feet," Tom grumbled. "It breaks faster than bones."

Rit climbed onto the roof like a rumor cat. He tied a white cloth to the ridge—a good sign, not yet hoisted. Next to it, he scratched a line on the south pillar with charcoal: a scar only we understood. Jory applied a thin seam of pitch under the ark, resembling a shadow. Grete placed a beehive against the wall, neat, unobtrusive, with a lid that commanded respect.

On the riverbank stood carts pretending to be empty—they weren't. Will and Tom had filled them so that they looked like nothing and could carry everything: boards, ropes, cloths, a short ladder, and one smile missing.

"Conditions," said Marian, pulling her gloves tight like teeth. "First humans, then grain, then copies. Anyone who changes the order learns to do arithmetic with their elbows."

"Amen," coughed Tack, who was holding the exchange rate fair today. His bottle smelled of humility. "The Lord bless whoever is counting, and damn whoever is lying."

They came with a show. Sheriff in front, armor like a shop window: lots of glitter, no merchandise. Priest beside him, expression "I am the truth dressed in moderation," voice "How much for your soul?" And Galfrid de Lace – silk, no luck, smile like a receipt without a sum. On the wall, the man in black, like a parenthesis in a sentence that never ends.

"Commoners," the priest began, "we have—" "—goods," Marian cut in. "Humans." Galfrid smiled thinly. "Let's not get rude." "I was already rude when you still had saliva on your chin," she said. "Humans. Up front. Now."

Two tanners, pale as tanned leather. A miller's boy who looked as if someone had stolen his night. Widow L's sister, smaller than her grief. An old night watchman, bones like nails. And the child we called "Poppy" because he was quiet and saw red when the world got too loud. They stood there, searching for the word **today** in the air.

"Surrender," said Marian. "No jokes." The sheriff twitched his chin. "Simultaneously. People versus grain." Ralf rubbed his thumb on the stone measure. "Simultaneously is a lie that likes to pretend it's mathematics. First those who breathe. Then those who feed. Then those who lie."

Galfrid slid forward two steps, hands visible, intent invisible. "Allow me a little pragmatism: The people are nervous. If we make things exciting, people will

die. So—we'll do it quietly." "Your word 'quiet' always means 'submission,'" Marian said. "Today it's '**Series**'. Go."

They did what you do when a woman talks without showing her hands: They obeyed a little. The miller's boy stumbled over to us first. Grete took him, smelled his forehead, called it a sermon, and gave him sugar water from a bottle that looked like a sin. "Good boy. Cry later."

"Corn," said Ralf. "Bag one."

They rolled a sack they thought looked pretty. Ralf cut the binding, stuck his hand inside, and ran the grain through fingers that knew the notches. "Too heavy," he muttered. "Two pounds of sand. Southeast pit." The sheriff snarled. "The nerve!" "Mathematics," said Ralf, throwing the handful of sand at the priest's shoe. "Your god doesn't like side dishes."

Marian raised her head to the roof. The white cloth remained below. The black soot scar stood like a gentle no. "Back the sack. Next. You love order, so learn it."

The second sack was honest. Ralf nodded. "Good." Grete lifted the child and handed it to Marian as if it were on loan to the future. The child clung to it as if it needed the earth itself. Marian held it as if she had room, even though she never has room. "Two," she said.

In the alley, the people trembled like a string. Some looked as if they wanted to kiss us, others as if they wanted to hang us—the city is always two people at a time. Jack stood in the back, playing with his eyes, not with his lute. Sometimes music is not playing.

"Next human," said Marian. The night watchman staggered. Tack supported him, sniffed him, called it sacrament. "You stink of duty," he murmured. "I like you."

"Bag three," said Ralf. He smelled, tasted, and weighed. "Moist. Counts an extra half hour of milling." Galfrid smiled. "Why?" "Because moisture lies," said Ralf. "It pretends to be weight." "That's philosophy," scoffed the priest. "That's bread," replied Ralf.

The man in black switched hands on the bow as if patience were a blade. Robin stood at the edge like a punctuation mark, not yet knowing whether to turn into a comma or a period. Their eyes met briefly, pushed away, met again, pretending nothing had happened.

"Copies?" Galfrid asked gently. **Later**," Marian said so coldly that even the river got goosebumps. "First your hands, then ours."

It was working—until the sheriff remembered himself. He waved his hand as if dogs were better than rules and brought four dockworkers who looked like they had more debt than lungs. "Search," he growled. "Who?" asked Marian. "You." "No," she said. "We'll search **your** Sacks. That's the exchange." He took a half step, Greed in his arm. Tom took a quarter step, shoulders in the way. **mathematics**.

"We're losing time," Galfrid crooned. "We're gaining the future," Marian said. "Next human."

The widow's sister stepped forward, holding a hand that weighed so little it almost disappeared. Grete took it as a secret. "Are you breathing?" - "Yes." - "That's all we need today."

"Bag four," Ralf said. "More chaff. You're not doing a good job of manuring. I'll convert it into shame." "How do you convert shame?" Jack asked dryly. "In looks," Ralf said. "And in missing loaves."

Rit gave a quick signal from the roof. Movement on the riverside: two guards who would like to be heroes, three dogs who would rather sleep, and behind them a cart acting as if it were random. "Late trap," Marian nodded, barely visible. "Jory?" Jory dragged the pitch lip with his boot as if blackening the edge. "In case they need illusions," he murmured.

"Now the copies," Galfrid urged, more politely than stealing. Marian patted Ralf on the shoulder. Ralf pulled a bundle from his coat that smelled of truth and yet was only **half** was: the **Copy of the copy**— enough to embarrass, too little to die. "One look," said Marian. "No keeping. No seal. No haha, now we have you. One look – like into a mirror, where you're ugly and have to stay kind."

The priest reached out as if he were God. Marian pulled back as if she were gravity. "One reads. With his mouth closed." Galfrid took it. He saw what you see when you don't consider numbers to be art: **Security effort** with his name next to it, **Tenth** double, **Duty-free** Clean, but dirty. His eyes remained calm. His genius: revealing nothing. His weakness: remembering everything.

"That's enough," he smiled neutrally. "Not you," said Marian. "Us."

"Next human," she commanded. The tanner came, brown with work, gray with fear. Tack placed an Amen in his hand and called it water. "Drink. Pray afterward, if you wish."

"Bag five," Ralf. Good. "Bag six," Ralf. Sand. He dug deep. **Black** on the south pillar – Rit drew the line a finger's breadth longer. Sign: **Fraud** "Sand again," said Ralf. "If I find sand in my bread again, I'll feed it to your priest." "The nerve!" The priest swelled. "He would bless it," said Jack. "He blesses everything that doesn't run away."

The air tightened. The crowd smelled strife. Dogs raised their heads. The sheriff reached for the grip his hand understood. Marian raised her open hand. "We don't trade blows. We trade breaths. Next human. Now."

Galfrid nodded—light, expensive. The last person arrived hesitantly: the old night watchman, who falls asleep as soon as truth sounds boring. "You're alive," Marian confirmed, as if it were a contract.

"Now the remaining bags," Ralf demanded. They rolled. Good, good, moist, mixed, honest, good. A finger lifted the white cloth. Not yet. Rit waited as if we had time. We never have time. We only pretend.

"And the three mill hours?" asked Grete, hard as bread. "The bell rings in two hours," said Galfrid. "Open the gates." **Today**," said Marian. "Today," he repeated. And I swear, the man in black on the wall listened as if he were learning a new word.

The sheriff had had enough. He thought he was the flip side of the bargain—the fist that comes when numbers become inconvenient. He gave a signal that was more vanity than command. The two guards on the river bank pulled their "random" cart. Beneath it: hooks, chains, a piece of theater we've seen three times before.

"Fink," Marian said very quietly. Fink did what he was born to do: He **waited** Half a second too long—and then pulled the wrong rope, the one that was right for her. The hook snagged into Jory's pitch lip, slipped, snapped empty, tore a cloth that looked like a mouth, and hung, offended, in her own cart. The guards stared at her intelligence lying on the ground.

"If you cheat, you pay for the cleanup," Marian explained to the sheriff like a stupid child. "Next sack."

The man in black made the bowstring sing—not as an arrow, but as a note. Robin sang back, silently, inaudibly. Two men negotiated about later, neither of them having a voice. It's been like this for weeks. It's driving me crazy.

"The last four," Ralf counted. "And then we disappear into the bills."

They rolled. Ralf weighed. Rit lifted the white cloth. **Real enough** "Exchange done," said Marian. "Now it's our turn." She pointed to the child. "We'll take it. You keep your faces. This is a special offer."

The priest trembled. "The copies?" "Have you seen them," she said. "That's all you have the right to do. Clear your mind and read it again."

Galfrid stepped forward, very calmly. "I want another exchange." "Speak." "My ten days of rest—for your ten days of silence in the songs." Jack snorted. "He wants me to tie my tongue." "I want the city to breathe without someone adding fuel to the fire." Marian thought about it for as long as it takes a knife to cut. "Five days of silence. After that, Jack sings twice as much. And your mill runs three hours longer today." **Today.** Galfrid inclined his head. "Agreed." The sheriff hissed, "Disagree!" Galfrid smiled toothlessly. "You're dismissed until I need you again." The sheriff looked as if someone had stolen his alphabet.

"Pull out," said Marian. "No drama." We pulled. No running. No waving. **Work** Will and Tom pushed carts. Grete held the child as if it were sugar water on legs. Ralf secured the sacks with a gesture that looked like a prayer to mathematics. Rit dropped the white cloth as if peace could be bought—for today. Jory stamped the pitch seam flat so that no one who didn't deserve it would break a leg. Tack made a cross in the air and called it residual alcohol.

The man in black jumped from the wall and came to a standstill next to Robin. "You got little." "We got today," said Robin. "Tomorrow we'll renegotiate." "You trade time for courage." "I trade time for life." "Later," said the man in black, but it sounded... small. "Today," said Marian, and left.

On the riverbank, gravity gently took hold. A slide rope. An embankment. A hazel hedge. A cart. The world acted as if escape wasn't art. It is art. And work. And cheeky humor.

"Balance sheet," Marian demanded from under the first canopy of the beech trees. Ralf laid down the tally stick. "People: six. Grain: nineteen and a half – the wet counts half. Mill: five hours today, maybe zero tomorrow, the day after tomorrow: we'll see. Lies: less brilliant. Town: looked. Priest: stung? No. Too

bad. Sheriff: de-shined. Galfrid: new currency – peace for silence." "Numbers?" asked Robin. "Enough," nodded Ralf. "For today."

Grete sat the child down. It ate. Again and again this miracle: chewing as revolution. Jack watched and sang.**not**He hummed. Humming is an exchange: noise for courage.

Will rubbed his shoulders. "I almost wanted to make a noise." Tom snorted. "Noise is expensive. This bill was cheap." "Cheap? I was sweating like an officer thinking about it." "Then it was worth it."

Tack lifted the bottle and found only faith in it, no liquor. "Holy shit," he muttered. "I'm getting old." "Not yet," said Marian. "We've bought five more days of silence. Use them to run, not to die."

The wind brought sounds from the city: a mill singing stubbornly, and something that might**Laugh**was. Not mocking. Relieved. Laughter after exchange is rare. Laughter after victory is cheap. Laughter after**today**is gold.

The man in black remained at the edge, half tree, half question. "What are you trading yourself for, Marian?" She pulled her hood down. "For**Time**. And for**People**I have no pen for legends. Only a knife for paper." "And Robin?" "He'll trade his peace for my yes. Don't ask any more questions."

We pushed the carts deeper into the forest, where smell feels at home. Will stacked the sacks on the bench under the trees, as if a hungry king were sitting there. Ralf cut notches for each tongue that would be fed today. Grete counted the stitches she had taken.**not**Jory counted the gullies he had**not**Rit counted mirrors that he**not**needed. And I swear, even the forest counted one more breath than yesterday.

"The trade was dirty," Jack observed. "Clean trades only exist in songs," said Marian. "Ours are honest—they stink."

Later, when the sun acted like it knew what it was good for, Marian placed a note on the bench. No poetry. Just rules in a nutshell:

TODAY: Bread for hours.

TOMORROW: Rest versus work.

ALWAYS: welding interest instead of silver interest.

Tack looked at it and nodded. "Amen, you bills. Amen, you dirty receipts with hearts."

In Nottingham, Galfrid sat in front of his mirror and practiced a new face: that of a man who **Time** bought it and knows the bill is still outstanding. The sheriff stared at his faded armor and wondered when metal would start to lie. The priest dipped his finger in ointment and called it martyrdom without an audience. The mill sang. That was the only sermon we wanted to hear.

"Another drink," said Tack, finding one and sharing it fairly: three drops for each broken one. "Another morning," said Robin. "Another trade," said Marian. "But next time they won't bring us bags of sand. Next time they'll bring us **awe**— or they bring bandages."

We laughed. Not nicely. Real laughs are never nice. The forest nodded, as if it knew that everything on this earth is change, even grace. And somewhere between the river and the salt deposits stood the man in black, trying the word **Today** in my mouth and noticed that it tasted like bread. Good currency. Stays.

Chapter 31 – Trade hated friend for beloved enemy

Morning came as if it had found the night in the ditch. Cold. Dry. Honest, like a slap in the face without warning. Sherwood smelled of metal and the future. At the edge of the bone meadow stood the ruined cross, which had once promised miracles and now only provided shade. We were there too early. Being early is a luxury. We paid for it with our nerves.

"Really," said Jack, staring at the traveling salesman tied between two trees like a bad thought. "I'm as sick of that guy as church Latin." The salesman blinked like someone hoping you'll forget he's breathing. "I—" "You spoke for both sides," Marian interrupted. "First for coins, then for fear. Today you're not talking at all. Today *go* You. Far. Without a tongue in the market, without an ear in the gate. The city won't get your lies anymore. We won't get your cowardice anymore. Deal?" He nodded vigorously. "Where?" "Away," she said. "North, until no one knows you anymore. And when you turn around, you'll meet my bees, and they don't like repetition."

Grete stood next to him with the box. The ladies hummed politely, so friendly it made you sick. "They're not angry," Grete explained, "they're professional." "We're the only ones here without training," Will murmured. "Speak only for yourself," Tom grumbled.

Rit climbed the wall stump and placed mirrors that looked like rain on stone. Jory rubbed pitch into the grassy verge, the fine groove that educates every hero at knee height. Ralf sat down on the old altar, drew the tally stick, and carved three new lines: Pact, Deduction, Reward. "Numbers breathe," he said quietly. "If they don't, they're lies."

Robin stood a step away from Marian, bow loose, eyes tired, the good tiredness—the one that counts and doesn't cry. "Are you sure?" "I'm never sure," she said. "I'm just awake." "He'll demand." "Me too."

The city rolled toward midday, pretending to be justified. At the far edge of the meadow, the man in black suddenly stood. No sound. No judgment. Just breath, which knew how to cool. His bow hung like a thought that could become a sentence at any moment.

"You wanted to trade," he said. "We still do," Marian replied. "You give us peace for the carts, we give you rules for war. You want rules, don't you, or are you just theater with a bowstring?" His mouth twitched almost imperceptibly. "I want villages not to burn." "Me too," Marian said. "Then: no torches in the forest. No dogs in the huts. No arrows in women's backs. You hunt us, we hunt you—" *and* "You don't hunt those who fetch bread." "And you? No traps for..." he pointed with his chin at his men in the mist of the trees, who acted as if they weren't there, "...mine." "Traps remain, but without death," said Marian. "Slips, stings, shame. We teach them to slide, you teach them to think. Deal?" "For how long?" "Until you stop, *Laterto* say."

Robin tilted his head slightly. "Three carts a week. Northfurth. No blockade. You keep the sheriff short when he wants to go on." "And in return?" Marian jerked his chin at the traveling merchant. "We'll stop our leak. For good. Your ears will hear from now on." *notus* – but silence. And we'll stifle the songs. Five nights. No song about us in the plum." "The people like songs." "The people like bread."

The man in black looked at the merchant, looked at Marian, looked at the trees, who acted as if they had better things to do. "I'll take the trade," he said. "With one condition: If Galfrid sends torches, you keep the farmers away from the wood." "If Galfrid sends torches," Marian replied, "we'll send him smoke back, in books. That's fine."

Ralf whistled twice briefly. The signal. "Pact is valid." "Then go," said Marian to the merchant. Grete untied the rope without seeming merciful. "Straight ahead, until even your past no longer believes you." The merchant set off like

someone who understands for the first time that direction is a gift. Fink walked along for a bit so that Weg wouldn't be alone. "If you turn around," said Fink kindly, "I can whistle." "He can whistle loudly," added Jack. "The bees love music."

The wind shifted. A faint clanking in the bushes: armor trying to be clever. Sheriff. I smelled him before I saw him: the scent of polished stupidity. He stepped into the edge of the meadow, flanked by two guards who looked as if they'd been carrying bread yesterday and were lying again today. The priest stuck to him like chewing gum under the pew.

"So here you are." The sheriff grinned like a knife without a blade. "Neutral ground, huh?" "Neutral ground, yes," said Marian. "Means we count, you keep quiet." "I'll talk when I—" "—get paid," Jack chimed in. "Do you need a receipt?"

Galfrid stepped out of the shadows, half behind the sheriff. He seemed bored, which for him meant he was calculating. "I hear there's a trade I didn't order." "Trade hated friend for beloved enemy," Marian said. "We give up the songs—five nights of silence—and embrace danger: rules for war. Your sheriff may continue to shine, but he slips if he missteps." "And what do I get?"/"? " he asked. "Five nights without riots in your taverns. A city that breathes because it knows the forest isn't an arsonist. You get respect from those who can count and ridicule from those who just clap. Ridicule is cheap. Respect keeps you warm."

"And you?" "We'll get passage," said Robin, "and an opponent who isn't dressed as a god." The man in black looked at him. For a heartbeat, the air was like a coin standing on edge in the sun. Then he nodded.

The sheriff snorted as if the world weren't right for him. "I forbid—" Rit let a bit of light bounce back into his own eye: mirror. The sheriff saw himself for a moment—and lost track. Jory nudged his boot against the edge of the pitch. The sheriff misstepped half an inch. Not a fall. Just a lesson. The meadow giggled.

"Good," said Galfrid, pretending he'd made it all up. "Five nights of silence. Three carts a week. No torches in the forest. I expect discipline on both sides." "You'll get discipline," said Marian. "Discipline is what got us here."

The priest raised his fingers, Grete's last stitches already healed, but his vanity, unfortunately, not. "And the songs? Without songs, hope dies." "Hope dies of

lies," said Marian. "We don't give up hope. We give up fame. The difference is: Fame eats you up. Hope lets you eat."

"Who's monitoring this?" asked Galfrid. "The tally stick," said Ralf, holding it up. "And your fear of the wall in the Chapel Courtyard." A small twitch in the corner of Galfrid's mouth. He hadn't forgotten the wall: WE'RE COUNTING.

The man in black twisted the bow and placed it against the stump, as if he were suddenly a human being. "I'll go one step further: If one of my men touches a civilian, I'll bring him to you. Alive. You do with it what you will." Marian studied him. "You're not the Church." "No," he said. "I'll pay in cash."

"Then enough talking," she said. "We'll show you what exchange looks like."

We brought the three carts up, as quiet as a rectory robbery. Will and Tom pushed as if they'd never practiced anything other than shifting the world. Ralf checked the canvas, the pitch, the knot. Grete kept the ladies in the shade, threatening them in a friendly manner. Jory smoothed the bank so no one would die halfway through with a full stomach. Tack raised his bottle—just in greeting, not to drink. For once.

"Five nights of silence," repeated Marian, "and not one of your lackeys in the plum sings a new fairy tale. If they do, Jack sings about his *Mistake* So loud that even your mirror turns red." Galfrid nodded. "Deal."

The sheriff bit the air like someone who'd been ripped from the bone. "I—" "—slip if you're stupid," Tom helped him. The sheriff did him the favor and slid half a step. It was a beautiful half-slide, almost poetic.

The man in black put two fingers to his lips. A whistle, clean, crisp. Five figures emerged from the shadows—his men. No dogs. No torches. Just faces that could work. He gave them a sign. "Three carts, Nordfurth. Anyone who touches them without paying will pay me." They nodded. Order without a Bible. I almost clapped, if clapping didn't belong on the wrong side.

"And the traveling salesman?" Galfrid asked hypocritically. "Away," said Marian. "To where your curses won't find him and our patience won't be ruined." "Too bad," he said. "He was useful." "He was useful to no one," she replied. "Only for lying."

"Then all that remains for me to do is wish you success," said Galfrid, smiling the way one smiles when sipping poison and remaining polite. "And to you," he

looked at the man in black, "success in educating your... colleagues." "I don't educate," said the black man. "I do the math. Today, like you."

They left. Not at the same time, not together—each in his own direction, like honest enemies after mass. The sheriff turned around three times, forgetting why each time, and stepped into the pitch chute for the last time. We said nothing. One shouldn't insult luck.

"So," said Marian, as the meadow became ours. "Now we come to the hard part: We're throttling fame." Jack pretended to pull a tooth. "Five nights without song is like five days without curses." "Try it," she said. "Your mouth will hate you. Your heart will love you." Tack snorted. "I can go five nights without a sermon. Maybe. I'll preach to the bottle. It listens."

"And the city?" asked Fink. "The city gets paid," said Ralf. "The mill sings. The tannery pays. Coal only burns in kilns."

That evening in the Blue Plum, the air hung lower than usual, as if someone had nailed it into the rafters for five nights. Jack sat down and *did not play*. He looked at his hands and smiled at them as if they were children keeping their mouths shut for the first time. "Do we laugh without a song?" he asked the group. "We laugh when bread comes," said Will. "We laugh when no one dies," said Tom. "We laugh when someone tries to break the rule," said Grete, and her ladies hummed approvingly from somewhere under the bar.

The innkeeper, a man with a face like soaked bread, cleared his throat. "No song?" "No song, no anger," said Marian. "Today we drink quietly. Tomorrow we work loudly."

The people murmured. Murmuring is the music of the poor, if they're clever. One of them wanted to start singing – Jack placed his hand on his cup. "Save your voice. We'll need it for swearing when the mill jams."

On the second day after the exchange, the mill actually sang longer. The river did its bickering, but the stones let it pass because someone *paid* had – not with coins, with rules. Women dragged sack after sack, men acted as if they had invented it. Children ran alongside, counting wheels, carts, batons, loaves of bread. Someone wrote on the wall with chalk: NO SONG TODAY. BREAD TODAY. Someone else wrote underneath: BETTER THIS WAY.

The priest stood at the sidelines and looked as if he had to pray to retain control. He didn't pray. He looked at us and said, "The people will forget you if

you take away their songs." "Let them," said Marian. "Forgetting is a pause. Fame is an intoxication. We want to fight soberly." "And if the enemies learn to love you?" "Then we're doing something wrong," she said. "Enemies should *berespect*, not love. Love is for those who have your back."

The man in black appeared briefly on the third evening, merely an outline in the gate. He said nothing. He saw the mill running. He saw that the plum remained silent. He nodded to us and disappeared, as if he were a comma in a sentence yet to come.

We had bought our beloved enemy: danger with rules. And we had sold our hated friend: convenience with applause. The price: five nights of silence. The reward: three carts through Nordfurth without fear of death.

Naturally, someone tried to cheat the course. A council servant stood on a barrel and started singing a new song: "O Robin, you plumed hat—" Jack stood beside him and did nothing. The servant continued singing until a bee pricked his upper lip and told him that rhythm isn't everything. Grete lifted the box and smiled. "Industrial accident." The servant whistled another song: *Ouch*. That was more appropriate for the time.

"Balance sheet," said Marian under the plank on the fifth morning. Ralf laid down the tally stick. "Wages paid: three days at two mills, plus two half-mills for wet weather. Bread distributed: enough to give four children new cheeks. Gossip: minus five nights. Trouble in taverns: minus seven lashes. Carts: three clear, zero robberies. The sheriff: regularly slips. Galfrid: does his calculations in the evenings, sleeps little. The man in black: keeps his word." "And us?" asked Robin. "We keep our mouths shut," said Jack, looking very proud.

On the sixth night, the promise was broken—not by us. A new guy, fresh and shining, came into the plum and roared about the "real Robin" kissing the moon. We stood up. Not angrily. Just consistently. Jack stepped onto the table and clapped once. "No song," he said. "Not today. Today we're swapping." "What then?" slurred the new guy. "Your voice for your exit." He laughed. He even laughed well. Then he stopped laughing. Will and Tom showed him how the door worked. He left. The house exhaled. The innkeeper filled mugs. That's what peace sounds like: like beer hitting wood.

At the edge of the night, where the fire smelled less like heroism and more like work, Marian sat, peeling rest like an onion. Robin sat down next to her. "Do you miss the song?" "Sometimes," she admitted. "Like I miss sleep. I can survive without it." "And the enemy?" "I love her," she said. "Danger keeps us

awake. It sharpens us. It's more honest than glory. We just have to be careful not to marry it. It's hard to sleep with blades in your bed." "We'll sleep hard either way." "Then at least we're honestly tired."

Tack came over, leaning on the bottle, which was truly empty this time. "Congregation," he murmured, "that was my best sermon: five days of drooling and silence. I'm healed. See you tomorrow." Grete pushed a cup of water toward him. "Water is also a trade: hangover for tomorrow." "Ugh," said Tack, and drank. "Tastes like God."

On the seventh day, the carts were running again, as if the world could actually be planned. The man in black stood on Furthweg and simply raised his hand. No drama. No "later." *Justtoday*. I swear I heard the word click in his throat like a tooth finally fitting.

"Well?" Marian asked quietly. "Today," he said. "Good."

The sheriff tried to sabotage the peace by shouting "Quiet." The town didn't listen.*worked* Galfrid wrote—certainly not to us—but to someone who would promise him that respect could once again be replaced by velvet. The priest preached about "moderation and balance," and for the first time in weeks, no one came out of the plum to laugh at him. No one had time. Mill. Bread. Life.

That evening, the child named Mohn stood at the bench. He held a piece of bread and looked at us as if he had understood that barter doesn't require a coin. "Is that over?" he asked. "Never," said Marian. "Barter is always. But sometimes we barter on our terms. That was the case today." "And tomorrow?" "Tomorrow we'll learn it all over again."

Robin placed the notched stick next to Mohn's bread. "Do you see that?" "Notches." "Each notch is a *Yes*. Sometimes she is a *No*. Both are important. Songs are beautiful. Notches remain." Mohn nodded and took a bite. Crumbs fell onto the numbers. I swear: I've never seen math more beautiful.

Late—the trees were already acting as if they were closing time again—the man in black stood at the edge of the clearing. He said nothing. Marian looked at him. "Are your people okay?" "Someone broke a law," he said. "I'll bring him to you tomorrow."

"Don't do that," she said after a brief silence. "Raise him. Tire him out. But bring him back to his mother. We don't need trophies. We need rules." He looked at her for a long time. Then he nodded. "Deal." "What do you want in

return?" "That you continue *today* say and not *always*. *Always* makes you stupid." "Deal," she said.

And so we traded: fame for rules, clapping for cart, hated friend for beloved enemy. The city grew up for a moment. We became lighter for a moment, even though we carried a heavy burden. And the forest, which notices everything and forgets nothing, jotted down somewhere in its bark: LEARNED TODAY: DANGER MAY STAY – FAME MAY GO. (The forest writes poorly, but it means well.)

"One more drink," said Tack. "Water," said Grete sternly. "All right. Water." "One more morning," said Robin. "One more trade," said Marian. "But never again our people for their lies. Only their lies for our bread."

We laughed, and it didn't sound pretty. Good thing. Pretty is suspicious. In Nottingham, Galfrid washed the day from his face and found no song underneath. The sheriff washed the pitch from his pride. The priest smelled his fingers and thought for a moment. And somewhere in the meadow of bones stood the ruined cross, which today was not praying, but *winked*. As if to say: *Finally, you're swapping properly*.

Chapter 32 – The devil made the liquor

The morning smelled of soot and regret, even though nothing had happened yet. A banner that wasn't one hung over Nottingham: **FESTIVAL OF GRACE – FREE LIQUOR FOR THE PEOPLE**. Galfrid's handwriting, as clean as a knife in church.

"Mercy tastes like a headache," said Marian. "No one will faint at our bench today. We're drinking work."

Tack held the bottle up to the light as if it were a schoolchild: "The devil made liquor to make honest people silent and stupid people loud. Amen, you barrels."

"One more word and you'll be preaching dryly," Grete growled. "We have a distillery to visit."

The distillery lay by the river like a cough in the body of the city. Copper kettles glowed in memory, hoses snaked like lies with style. A sign threatened: **ENTRY ONLY FOR ANOINTED** We looked at each other. We were anointed—with sweat, bad luck, and bad decisions.

Rit climbed first, cat's leg on damp brick. Will and Tom pushed two carts as casually as if they were just removal men for God's cellar. Jory sniffed the ground, found the pitch crack under the loading trestles, and smoothed it like a barber cutting straight. Ralf stood over the spirit level as if it were his favorite psalm.

"Barrels one through five are real," he murmured, knocking. "Six: sugared. Seven: flat as a noble title. Eight..." He sniffed. He laughed dryly. "Eight is for velvet faces. Peppery, sweet, only stinging in appearance." "Galfrid gets that," Marian decided. "But with an additive."

Grete lifted the box. "The ladies are not here to kill. Only to **Remember**." "Let's remind you gently," she said to the bees, and the buzzing sounded like "Yes, boss."

Will screwed on taps, Tom swapped heads. The barrels got new stomachs: water in those meant for the public; liquor for those who whisper "private"; and in **alarge barrel**, chalked in red "For the Council", Jory mixed a touch of soot honey: not poisonous, just **honest**—black tongue when lying, sticky lips when swearing. Rit hung a mirror in the barrel's mouth, so shallow that the person examining it could see his own greedy face when weighing "quality." Ralf threw two scraps of ledger into the councilman's barrel: **Security effort and Tenth – double** These notes float well. They wait for the right moment, like bad memories.

"And the private barrel?" asked Fink. "It'll sing," said Jack, who would later help us with silence. He held up a small whistle. "If I blow, it'll tip over." "Not tip over," corrected Marian. "Turn on the tap. We have to **see** how truth works."

The city stripped down for the afternoon. Loud, hungry, and humid. The stage in front of the distillery was a joke that thought it was serious. The sheriff was on top, armor as fresh as a lick. The priest beside him, his face like the confession of a barrel. Galfrid, velvet like thick dust.

"People!" cried the sheriff, and the wood beneath him sighed. "The council grants mercy! Today, those who usually only sniff will drink!"

"Today **eats**" "Who usually just prays," whispered Marian. "In position."

We stood the way you sit when someone's up to something foolish. Will and Tom were at the bars—"Ring up!" Tom shouted with the friendliest force. Jory lurked by the platform, where truth disguises itself. Grete held the box by her

arm as if it contained cakes that stabbed politely. Ralf was at the scales—yes, also with the schnapps—and by the water basin we'd made from a trough. Rit was on the roof, mirrors ready to throw lanterns at lanterns. Fink was counting breaths. Tack was rehearsing the sermon in his stomach.

"Cock one!" shouted a guard, and Will turned. **Water** shot into the crowd – clear, cool, cheeky. "That's not schnapps!" someone yelled. "That's **Water of Grace**," said Will. "Heals faster than moonshine. Try it, you'll get angry, but **bright**."

The first few cups went up and down like bad moods: disappointed, relieved, confused. A child laughed because they could see their reflection in the cup. A woman drank two handfuls and stopped shaking. Someone cursed because they had to stay sober. That was music.

"Tap two!" shouted the overseer at the second barrel. Tom turned. More water. "Sacrilege!" shrieked the priest. "Sacrilege is when you leave the liquor for the poor and hide the bread," said Marian loudly enough that the fools thought they had said it themselves.

The sheriff frowned. "Where's the booze?" "At the council," Galfrid smiled. "Private tasting. Order needs order." "Order needs slaps," Jack muttered, but today he wasn't singing. Five nights of silence; we were still in the thick of it.

Grete sat down next to the bar and took out a pot that smelled of peat, onions, and salvation. **Soup** "Bring it!" she called, and the people brought cups, bowls, and hands. For every sip of water, they received a spoon. The crowd quieted down, not obediently—**awake**.

Rit knocked a signal upstairs. Jack whistled – short, dry, **now**.

The courtyard changed color. The council servants fetched the red cask. Velvet and smiles. "For the gentlemen," the priest crooned. "So they can taste grace on their tongues." "So they can lose their tongues," Jory grumbled, quietly loosening the pitch seam beneath the platform. "Just a little slippage—enough for morale."

The tap on the councilman's barrel sprang as requested. **schnapps** flowed – thick, clean, evil. The first councilor raised his cup, drank, smiled – and received a **black tongue**. He didn't notice. He continued: "In the name of—" "—Soot," he coughed, and the people laughed, first gently, then cruelly.

The second time, his lips became sticky with honey. He swore, and the oath stuck to his mouth. He pulled, he tugged, and the words tore like wet laundry. This was more just than any edict.

"Blasphemy!" moaned the priest – Grete left the **box**~~not~~She just hummed in his direction. One learns. He took two steps back. A learning curve with a spike.

"Arrest... anyone!" snapped the sheriff. "The platform is wet," said Tom kindly. "Careful, your arrogance will get cold." Jory tapped the edge. The sheriff took a half-step, honest dance step. Audience – Applause**inside**. People drank water outside.

Galfrid remained calm. He tasted the velvet liquor, discreetly licked his lips – **sticky**He noticed, and his face briefly became human. Then he became conscious again. "Nice joke," he said quietly to Marian. "Nice truth," she said. "Your mercy has a price."

At the same time, Ralf threw the**Ledger scraps**into the bowl where the councilors' hands washed their cups. The notes came back up, stuck to armor, sleeves, and vanity.**Security effort.Tenth, double**. No wonder anymore. Only**Proof**.

"This is rebellion," snarled the priest. "This is accounting with a drink," retorted Tack, climbing onto a stool. His sermon smelled of grain and war. "Congregation! The devil made the liquor so the poor would forget who fills the barrels. Today we drink**Water**– God did that, or the rain, or the hand carrying the bucket. I don't care. The main thing is: it doesn't lie! Amen, you thirsty brats!" The people really said "Amen." Out of hunger, not out of piety.

The man in black stood at the archway like a spider monkey's conscience. He looked at Marian. "Today," he said crisply. No "later." Just today. She nodded. "Today."

A supervisor tried to incite the people against us: "The forest people are taking your liquor!" "We will give you**Dinner**!" Will shouted, pointing at the pot. "Quick! Whoever drinks water gets another spoonful. Whoever wants moonshine should ask the council why their mouth is black." Laughter that hurt—good laughter. Someone shouted: "Show me your tongue, you saint!" The councilman made the mistake. He pointed.**Black as regret**The sound that followed was not cheering. It was**knowledge**.

The sheriff roared his head off. "Out! Out, everyone! Robbers! Blasphemers!" "You're welcome to go," said Marian. "The rest are too busy with **not die**."

Fink stood at the riverbank, looking for smoke, found **none**— as agreed. No fire. No pretext. Just people who finally had something better to offer than promises.

Galfrid stepped closer, his mouth sticky but his gaze firm. "You won today, Marian. Tomorrow..." "...is **not Yours**," she said. "Tomorrow belongs to the one who carries water. And to the one who reads numbers. And to the child who holds a loaf of bread without hiding it."

"Then let's drink to tomorrow," he said. "You drink," she corrected. "We count."

He raised the cup, its black rim like shame. He drank **not**. Smart mistake. He put it down as if he'd never been thirsty.

The priest tried to bless the pot. Tack pushed his hand aside. "No incense over stew, friend. He has enough miracles: He turns water **People**."

Rit lowered a mirror from the roof, just so that the sun hit the courtyard: the light jumped into the face of a councilor, he saw **itself** with a black mouth and found the sky less convincing. Sometimes that's enough.

"Trigger," said Marian, when the pot was almost empty and the jugs full **shame** were. "Calm down. You don't have to thank us. Better payback: work tomorrow."

Will and Tom pushed carts as if peace were a difficult thing. Grete let the box close, stroked it as if the ladies had waited patiently (they had). Ralf took the scales as if they were a child. Jory wiped his pitch seam with sand—tracks are gifts to people you don't love. Fink carried the last bucket as if it contained people, not water. Tack stepped off the stool, put down the bottle, the hero of the day: **Water**.

The sheriff stared at the boards that made up his platform. "Arrest... someone," he said wearily. No one moved. A dog yawned. Good politics.

The man in black took half a step to the side, making room for us. **Today** The city saw it. There was no song; only the mill stream threw a melody against the walls, sounding like work without a whip. It rarely gets better.

We withdrew, not gloriously, only **full and sober** Behind the distillery, by the river, where the stones hold messages, we crouched for a moment. Ralf placed his tally stick on his knees. "Tally," said Marian.

Ralf: "Barrels rewritten. People: water; Council: soot. Bread distributed: eight baskets. Soup: empty pot. Injured: zero. Irritated officials: five – all with embarrassed mouths. Dogs: friendly. Noise: less than yesterday. **Teach:** The devil makes booze; we make rules." "Profit?" asked Robin. "Shame in office, laughter in the courtyard, no deaths. And..." Ralf tapped the tally stick. "...a new word from the Man in Black."

"Today," said the man who suddenly stood behind us, as if he had been born of the willow. "Today," confirmed Marian. "Are you keeping your men away from civilians—even drunken civilians?" "They're drinking today." **not,** he said. "Good," she said, and it sounded like a contract.

We pushed the carts deeper, to where the forest is our memory. The bench under the trees waited, hard as ever, honest as wet boots. Tack sat down, rubbing his forehead as if he'd lost a halo and gained a mind. "Congregation," he sighed, "today water has won. The world is mad." "The world is sober," said Grete. "Rare, but possible."

Jack sat down and **didn't sing** He just pushed his back against the plank and smiled crookedly. "Five days without a song were worse than I care to admit." "Tonight you can have a **Water Song** hum," Marian allowed. "Quietly. Without a hero." "I can do it without a hero," said Jack. "I can even do it without rhyme. I can do nothing—and I can do it well." "Then you're a poet," said Ralf dryly.

Will and Tom rubbed their hands, which were covered in sooty honey. "That stuff won't come off," grumbled Will. "Good dirt stays," said Jory. "It reminds you who you were when you were real."

Fink lay on the ground, arms outstretched as if measuring the forest. "I thought war was noise," he whispered. "Today it was... a quiet yes." "Whispers that don't lie," said Robin. "Harder than screaming."

Dusk came, blue as a cold confession. In the city, two councilors scrubbed their tongues with salt and stumbled over words. The priest preached about the danger of **Nights with water**, and the people yawned in his face – not mockery, just tiredness. The sheriff polished his armor and found **soot**, which wouldn't go away. Galfrid sat in front of a mirror that no longer liked him so much, practicing the new face: the one without sugar.

We drank. **Water**. One round. Then a sip of liquor—not from the devil, from the old barrel we know, thin, honest, not blessed, not lying. Tack raised his cup.

"To the devil," he said, "for showing us how stupid we are. And to the water, for keeping us awake. And to us, because today we didn't have to be the heroes they sing about, but the idiots they need." "Amen," murmured Grete. "Amen," said Ralf. "Amen," sighed the forest.

Marian placed her hand on the tally stick as if it were a head. "The devil made the liquor," she said quietly. "We make the rules. And that's the only intoxication I can endure anymore."

Robin nodded. "Another drink?" "Water," she said, and laughed—rough, dirty, free.

In Nottingham, a lantern flickered above the distillery. Someone wrote on the door with charcoal: **NO MERCY TODAY. ONLY BREAD TODAY**. Below, crooked, defiant, honest: **THANK YOU FOR WATER**—without names. These are the best signatures.

The devil made liquor. Maybe. We made **Today** And sometimes that's enough to pull a city out of the bottle. Tomorrow there will be more lies. Tomorrow there will be more calculations. Tomorrow there will be more love, hate, curse, and gorge. But today—today we drank without forgetting who we are. And that's the greatest thing for people like us.

"One more sip," said Tack. "One more morning," said Robin. "One more no," said Marian – and put the knife away. Just for one night. Just for today.

Chapter 33 - Sherwood falls silent

The morning wasn't golden. It was gray, like a scar that no longer hurts but has stories to tell. The forest smelled of wet wood and old jokes. Birds were silent, as if they'd talked too much yesterday. Sherwood was silent. Not dead. **Still**.

Rit climbed up the tannery ruins and brought down the last mirrors. "Get rid of the alarm," he said. "No one's looking the wrong way today." Jory scraped the pitch edge out of the gutter with a board and pushed sand over it, as if giving a cloak to a bad character. "The world can slip, but not on us." Grete raised the box to ear height. The ladies hummed softly, like a clear conscience. "You stay inside," she said. "No piercing today. At most, kissing today. And that's air."

Ralf sat on our bench under the trees, the tally stick on his knee. He scratched a straight, clean line: **Today** "I like numbers that don't bleed," he murmured. Will and Tom were unscrewing boards that had once been barricades. "This will be a table," said Will. "And the crossbeam?" asked Tom. "A bench for tired kings when they want to learn," said Will. "Or for children when they're screaming."

Tack looked at his flask like a naughty altar boy. "No preaching vodka today, congregation. Water today, so I'll be sane when I marry you off. If I match you up while you're drunk, you'll be with the sheriff."

"Not today," said Marian, grinning crookedly. She was in leather and hunger, not in velvet. The laughter stuck to her like a knife left in its sheath for once. Robin sat next to the bench, sharpening **not** He looked like someone who knows and trusts his hands. "The king is coming," he said, and it didn't sound like a trumpet, but more like a weather forecast.

An hour later, Fink came with the sign: two fingers to his throat, a low whistle. "Dust on the Roman road. Banner with a cat's face. Armor that knows it's going to get a backache." "King," said Ralf. "King," repeated Marian without fear and without fanfare. "We don't run. We don't pray. We talk."

Nottingham had dressed himself up like an altar boy with poor Latin. Wreaths that smelled of mold, ribbons that told lies. The sheriff stood freshly polished, as if his armor hadn't been lying in the dirt for the past few months. The priest polished his face as if it were a communion plate. Galfrid de Lace. Velvet. Mouth. Reckoning.

The king's procession was smaller than the songs promised. Fewer horns, more dust. Men who bore more scars than grudges. A banner that looked smaller in reality than it did in their heads. At the front rode a man with a face no song could bear: **Richard** Lionheart, if you need it. Straight back, but no drama in it. His eyes were tired in the right way. Not whiny. Tired of arithmetic.

"Citizens of Nottingham!" The Sheriff stepped forward as if the place belonged to his tongue. "Your king—" "—has ears," said Richard calmly. "And they prefer less polished sentences." The Sheriff choked on the remnants of his own fanfare.

Richard took the reins short, did not jump off, did not stay on top. He made the move that wiser men make: he **went down**. Ground. Dust. Same height as the rest. Good.

Galfrid stepped forward, velvet making his knees weak. "Your Majesty, Nottingham—" "—has been working," Richard interrupted, looking not at him but at the hands in the crowd. Calluses. Scrapes. Breadcrumbs on the sleeves. "That's what England smells like to me. Not of incense, not of perfume. Of work."

We weren't standing in front, we were standing on the sidelines. Silence isn't absence. Silence is power that doesn't need a stage. Marian just raised her hand. Rit saw it, Ralf saw it, the forest saw it. **Today** We speak when we're asked. As an exception.

The priest cleared his throat like an old horse. "Your Majesty, in your absence—" "God has not betrayed us," said Tack from the crowd, priest without a church, church without walls. "We saved ourselves. With bread, rules, and no. You're welcome to say amen, Your Majesty. It doesn't cost anything." A murmur that sounded like laughter without being rude.

Richard didn't smile. He let the corners of his mouth rest and did something rare: He **heard** His gaze wandered across the square, lingering on the wall in the chapel courtyard (yes, the words were still there, half smoothed by the rain, entirely held in defiance): **WE CALCULATE**. He nodded as if recognizing a whip that had hissed in the right direction.

"Where's your..." He searched for a word. "...argument?" "Paid off," said Marian, stepping forward after all, without a halo, with dirt on her boots. "Today is quiet. Tomorrow there'll be another row, but a smart one." "And the sheriff?" "Slips when he stands stupidly," said Tom. "And the council?" "He's got a sticky mouth right now," Jory interjected. "Go off, but slowly."

Richard looked at Galfrid's velvet. "I need silver," he said, as honest as an ugly bill. "I have fought wars that deserve no song. I have buried men. I must save England." **hold** "You could have cried. Not sentimental. Real. The man wasn't posturing, wasn't prophesying. He was simply laying the truth on the farmer's market.

"We have grain," said Ralf. "We have hands. We have rules. Silver... we have little. But you get numbers. And people who don't run away." "You?" asked the sheriff, offended. "Your Majesty," Ralf corrected without bending.

Marian raised the tally stick. "Look at this," she said to Richard. "This is England. Not the seal. Then **notches** Bread, guard, no. We kept it going without everything burning. We don't need a fairy tale. We need you not to work against us."

Richard took the wood in his hand as one greets a stranger. His thumb ran over the notches. "Who led it?" "Ralf." "And who made the decisions?" "We," Marian answered. "Mostly me. Often the forest. Sometimes fear."

Richard looked at Robin. "And you?" "I've noticed that arrows are bad at ruling," said Robin. "But they're good at remembering." A tiny chuckle. "I'll remember that."

Galfrid stepped forward again. "Your Majesty, if I may point out—" "You may," Richard said politely. "Later. Today I only hear those who sweat." A slight tremor ran through the velvet. I drank it in with my eyes.

The man in black stood in the shadow of an archway. He was there, that was enough. No gesture. No "later."**Today**we were all present.

"There's one more... matter," said Marian, looking not at the king, but at the group of us. "Before Nottingham warms up its songs again and the priests consecrate the water: We're getting married." "Who?" asked the Sheriff, stiff as a post, not understanding the joke. "We," said Robin, placing his hand on Marian's finger, not as possession, but as a promise. "Today. Without fanfare. And without you."

A murmur that had heart. Not a scream, not a market cry. A quiet**Yee**esthat smelled of bread.

Tack climbed onto the old stone, which had seen it all: rain, blood, booze, regret. "Congregation," he said, "I'm not a real priest. I'm a drunken brother with too many stories in my stomach. But I can hold a 'yes' without it tipping over. That's enough." "Enough," Marian confirmed.

We placed the table (formerly a barricade) across the bench. Will placed a cloth on it that had probably once been a shirt. Grete placed two small pots of honey – the ladies hummed in agreement, but stayed safely in the box. Ralf placed the notch stick in the middle. "If you say yes," he said, "it'll get its own notch. Not too shallow, not too deep. Otherwise, the future will be ruined."

Tack raised his hands. "Robin, will you work with this woman...? Don't dream:**work**– in the morning when everyone's stupid, in the evening when no one's listening, at night when you'd rather be doing something else? Robin didn't look at the crowd. He looked at Marian. "Yes." "Marian, will you go with this man...**calculate**? Don't lie:**calculate**– with his stupidity, with his

stubbornness, with his better days and his bad jokes?" Marian didn't look up at the sky. She looked at Robin. "Yes."

"Rings?" asked Tack. "No gold," said Marian. "That's lying too quickly. We'll take what's been holding us." Robin pulled a small **Bow fiber**, twisted, hardened, plain. He tied it around Marian's finger. "Holds," he murmured. Marian took one **thread** from the bee box—thin, tough, with a hint of honey—and tied it around Robin. "Sticks," she said. "So be it," grumbled Tack. "What the forest growls, no town clerk shall tell. Kiss her, but not so that the bees come out." They kissed. Not cleanly. Genuinely. Someone sighed. Someone laughed. Someone cried, without drama, just because the world was about to end. **worked**.

Richard stood a step closer, his face soft over hard. "You have more sense than many crowns," he said quietly. "I'm fitting to wish you luck. And I'll take you at your word: no fires. You'll get peace. I'll get grain and men who won't run away." "And women," said Grete. "Especially women," said Richard, his tone gracious but not forced. "The rest... we'll talk to Ralf."

The Sheriff cleared his pride. "Your Majesty, these robbers—" "—have silenced Nottingham today," said Richard. "And fed me. You'll get your chance, Sheriff. But you treat these people like **People**." "Yes, Your Majesty," he pressed, and his yes sounded like a poorly paid witness.

The man in black came to the edge of the circle. He nodded to Marian, nodded to Robin. "Today," he said, and the word suited him well. "I'm keeping my people out of the huts. Three carts a week, as discussed. No arrows in the back. But no bees in the eyes." Grete raised an eyebrow. "If they remain polite." "If **her** Remain polite," he replied. "Deal," said Marian. "Today is big enough for deals and little kisses."

Ralf put the notch in the wood: **M+R**— not kitschy, just functional. Including a small additional one: **2** "What's that for?" asked Jack. "Advance," said Ralf. "For what's to come." "Two...?" murmured Fink. "Children," said Ralf, as if speaking the weather forecaster. "One notch per head. So we don't forget how much more bread needs to be baked."

Later – and yes, we're fast-forwarding because the world doesn't wait for you to be lyrical – later screams **one** in the forest, small and angry, red face, hands like clamps. **Later another one screams**, thinner, but more resilient. Two children, two voices. One likes to fall asleep on Robin's chest, as if it had counted the arrows and said, "That's enough." The other grins at Marian as if it

knew that rules are the true love letters. But that won't happen for a few paragraphs. Now it's time for wedding soup.

Grete filled wooden bowls. "Food, you reluctant saints." Will held out the spoon to Jack. "Five nights without a song—today you may hum." Jack snorted, hummed **one** line that sounded like water. Not a heroic tone. A **Work song** without words.

Richard ate. No pose. He ate like a man who feeds the army by first making himself honest. "Good," he said simply. "Not the best stew of my life. But the most honest." "That's enough," said Jory. "Soup is like law. Honesty beats beauty."

Galfrid didn't come any closer. He stood in the shadows, calculating. His tongue was no longer black, but his mirror saw him as he was: a man who buys peace because war is more expensive. I don't judge him. I don't trust him. Either is fine.

The priest tried to draw a cross in the air. Tack lightly stepped on his foot. "No lying signs over honest food today," he whispered. "Pray later. Or not at all. God has the day off."

We sat. We ate. We drank **Water** Yes, and a little booze—very little. The devil mustn't think he's been kicked out, but he's sitting in the back. Silence fell over the clearing like a blanket. Not the quiet cemetery kind. The other kind, with a heartbeat.

And then—because the world has a sense of timing like an old dog—you heard it. Not a horn, not a drum. A baby. **A first scream**, sharp, offended, beautiful. Grete was as calm as a stone. "Come on, you little rebel." She lifted the bundle, which Marian held with a gaze that must have been made of steel and softness. "You're early," Marian murmured. "Good style," said Robin. "Punctuality is boring."

Tack swallowed audibly. "I have a wedding and a birth today in one voice. Who needs heaven?" "We do," said Grete. "But not today."

The king stood up. He suddenly had no crown on his face, only wrinkles that looked good. "I've seen battles where men sang songs and won nothing," he said. "Here you were silent and won much. I'm leaving without reciting a blessing. I'll only take one with me." "Take bread," said Marian. "Blessings don't satisfy."

He nodded, took half a loaf as one takes a flag: not to wave, but to carry. "I'll be back," he said. "Not as a judge. As a suppliant. England is big. And small. I need people like you, who aren't beautiful, but right." "We're rarely right," said Robin. "But we listen when we're not." "That's enough," said Richard, and climbed back up. **on**. No higher than before. He didn't ride away with fanfare. He simply rode. Dust. Silence.

The sheriff mumbled something that sounded like "ordinance." No one was listening. Galfrid nodded to us, as if arranging a new kind of truth later. The priest acted as if he had organized it. He did so much that he grew tired. Good punishment.

The man in black stayed until the baby stopped crying and started again. He tilted his head as if considering whether he could smile without dropping the bow. "Today," he said quietly to Robin. "Today," Robin replied. "Tomorrow too, if you don't go stupid." "I rarely go stupid." "That's enough."

In the evening, Sherwood lay down like an animal that has been caressed without being tamed. The fire was small—not cowardly, just sensible. Jack laid the lute on its back and set it free. "I'll play tomorrow. Today I'm listening to the child." "The**first**," Ralf corrected, carving the second, even more delicate notch. "Don't forget."

Later – weeks, months, a winter – the**second** Gentler. More stubborn. We're already more practiced at holding, worse at sleeping, better at scolding. Two children, two reasons to build the traps shallower. Grete feeds honey, Tack swears by water, Will and Tom build swings from old trestles, Rit no longer hangs a mirror that might accidentally blind a child. Jory buries the bad luck deeper. The forest learns children's noise. It smiles crookedly. I swear.

But on**this** Day—on this quiet, cheeky, drunkenly sober day—we do only one thing: We keep our mouths shut and keep quiet. Sherwood falls silent. The silent forest doesn't call us "hero." It calls us "people." There's no better label.

Ralf clears away the tally stick. "Balance sheet," says Marian, although no one asks. Ralf nods. "King: seen, not knelt. City: looked, not yelled. Wedding: yes. Child: one – later two. Traps: dismantled. Bread: all. Water: enough. Arrows: dry. Lies: wait. We: awake." "Winning?" asks Robin. "A quiet today," says Ralf, "that will stay."

Tack raises his cup. "To silence. May it always be louder than stupidity." "To work," says Grete. "To bread," says Will. "To 'no,'" says Tom. "To**Today**," says

the man in black, and really thinks it. "To the children," says Marian, and kisses one while still planning the other. "To you," says Robin, just for her.

The forest nods. The night nods along. In Nottingham, Galfrid takes a sip **Water** and doesn't find it ignoble. The sheriff practices commanding tones in front of his mirror and is always shocked by his own voice. The priest writes "miracle" in his book and erases it again because he doesn't trust the letters. Richard camps in a field and shares a loaf of bread with a man who would rather sleep. It's fitting.

Sherwood is quiet. Not because the world has become better. Because we're just smart enough not to make it any louder. Tomorrow there will be more grinding, banging, and growling. But **today** The knife rests. Today the tally stick counts **People**, not **Enemies** Today we don't need a song. We have two more breaths. And soon we'll have two children who will force us to say better sentences.

"Another sip," says Tack. "Water," growls Grete. "Water," smiles Marian. "Today," says Robin. And the forest answers, very quietly: "Good."

Chapter 34 - The Full Truth About Robin Hood

Morning came like a fist, without warning. No sun, just a gray streak that looked as if someone had diluted the night with cold water. Sherwood smelled of old smoke and fresh apologies. I sat on the tree trunk behind the old tannery, bottle in hand, back in the moss, future in the bucket.

"The whole truth, huh?" I said to the bark. "All right. Here she comes, naked and in a bad mood."

Marian did it. Not with a god, not with a grinning saint. With a guy who looked like a potter had given him his haircut with a soup ladle. Ivanhoe. Clean chin, polished manners, hands like receipts with no sums. A courtly engraving in human form.

No drama. No blood. No dagger in the night. Just one day too much rest, one request too few, one look too long. You don't hear it when trust breaks. It doesn't make a sound. It just gets up, puts on its coat, and goes for a walk, and by the time you notice, it's already behind the next bush, smoking the wrong cigarette.

I didn't scream. I counted. First steps, then bottles, then reasons, then bottles again. The children were asleep, and the world acted like it was grown up. I wasn't.

The city came with paper.**Alimony.**A beautiful word, sounds like an Italian dance and means chains of ink. The writer's handwriting smelled of perfume. "Numbers, Robin," he said. "In the name of order." "Order has no name," I said. "It has teeth."

Ralf laid before me the tally stick that had been our peace. "I've gone through the sums," he murmured. "Not pretty, but doable. If you breathe and don't buy heroics." "I breathe on credit," I said. "And heroes are sold out."

Will and Tom stood like two beams, knowing that houses are about to collapse. Grete held the ladies tight—the bees buzzed with that kind of pity that isn't soft, but awake. Tack smelled of water and regret. The man in black leaned in the shadows and pretended not to listen. That old trick.

"She did it," I said. "There's nothing more." "There's always more," said Marian. "You just don't want to hear it." "I want to drink it," I corrected. "I'd rather be able to."

She looked tired in the way that hurts when you know her. No drama. No excuses. Just eyes that had once cleaned up entire cities and were now standing in front of her own kitchen. "We were honest, Robin," she said quietly. "For a while. Then we were tired and thought tiredness was also a truth. It wasn't." "It was," I said. "Just a stupid one."

I picked up the bow. The wood felt like an old dog that doesn't judge you. I left. The forest made way. It does that for people who no longer fit themselves.

The full truth? Here:

I'm living like a robber again. Not out of romance. Out of mathematics. The court sends bills that smell of silk, and the city nods because nodding is less work than thinking. The children need bread. I need air. Marian needs—what do I know—a table that doesn't always wobble when the war leans against it. And Prince Bowlcut needs a story in which he doesn't get lost for once.

So: I'm running down ravines again, I'm setting wedges again, I'm stealing time again. I'm throwing lanterns at lanterns so they steal each other's light. I know the paths where the office gets stuck in the mud. I know the words that merchants hate:**Not today!** I know the faces of the men who used to cheer me

and now check whether my pockets are open because they want to put their hands in before the clerk arrives.

In the evenings, I sit with the old sinners. Will, who remains silent when talk becomes cheap. Tom, who laughs when bones talk. Jory, who has bad luck on his fingers and jokes up his sleeve. Grete, who parks thorns in her heart and pours honey into the world when no one deserves it. Tack, who preaches dryly and dreams wetly. Ralf, who calculates and keeps us alive by carving the truth out of wood for us. Rit, who buries mirrors so no one cuts their own face. Jack, who no longer sings, only hums, because humming doesn't lie.

We drink. Not much. Not a little. Enough not to hope or despair. Hope and despair have the same throat: they both quickly drink it all down.

"Are you sending them the money?" Ralf asked into the silence. "I'll send it to the baker," I said. "She knows how to make bread from noise. The kids will have it. Paper doesn't get any of the taste." "And Marian?" I drank. "She can't get my peace anymore. She's seen enough of what she looks like when she's broken."

On the third day after that, Ivanhoe was actually standing at the edge of the clearing. Not with an army. With two polite idiots in tin. He wore the kind of mouth one uses to make false confessions. "Robin," he began, "we're men—" "You're a hat with hair on it," I said. "Say what you will, or walk in circles until you think you're making progress."

He wanted to say "respect." He wanted to say "order." He wanted to say "for everyone involved." I wanted to tack the sentence to his forehead that had been hanging on mine for months: **Pay it yourself.**

"The children—" "The children aren't your text," I snapped. "If you bring them bread without a seal, put it down and show yourself thin. If you want to talk, go to church: someone's always clapping there."

He blinked as if the forest had thrown dust into his eyes. "I'm not your enemy." "You're the audience," I said. "And the audience likes to eat sugar. Today we're having onions."

He left. Smart mistake.

Marian stopped coming to the forest. Not to the bench. Not to the places where we had nailed the sky to the bark. She sent notes that smelled of soap and honesty. Short messages, no drama. **They're sleeping. They're eating.**

Don't walk on them.

I didn't answer. What should I say? **I breathe. I run. I don't fall over.**? Airmail to absence.

Once, the king stood at the edge of the tannery, without banner, without drum. Just Richard. Lionheart with less heart, more lion in his eyes. He looked at me like a man who knows his shadow. "I've seen your notches, Robin," he said. "The world will never be fair. But it can be straight sometimes." "Straight isn't enough," I said. "I need crooked, if crooked pays." He nodded. "Will you pay?" "I'll pay." "Then good," he said. "There's no more blessing than that."

The town got used to me no longer sitting at the table. People got used to everything here, even justice. A small commodity that fits in pockets if you can fold it. The priest wrote a sermon on "Discipline and Order," and no one listened because the mill sang louder. Galfrid kept his tongue in check and his fingers on the cash register. The sheriff slipped less often. One learns.

The children grew. That was the only progress I trusted. They could walk before they wanted to talk. I wondered who they got that from. When I saw them—twice, three times, rarely—it was in places that didn't like songs: backyards, market squares, watering holes. No hugs for the city to see. Only a look that said: **I'm here.** And one back, which was called: **I'll remember that.** That was enough on the good days. On the bad days, it wasn't. I took the bad ones and threw them into the river. The river was faster.

"Will you ever stop?" Jack asked after one cup too many and one lie too few. "With what?" "With living like a robber." "I don't live like," I said. "I live **as**. The difference is one grave further back."

That evening, when the forest decided not to let me down, the man in black came over, asked no questions, and sat down. He placed the bow next to him as if releasing a snake. "Today," he said. "Today," I replied. "Tomorrow?" I drank. "It's expensive." He nodded. "I'll pay with silence." "Good rate."

We were silent long enough for the trees to stand by us again. Then I said it after all, half to the moss, half to myself: "I might have messed up just as badly if I were in their place. I'm not a priest, I'm a habit. Habits eat love letters for breakfast." The man in black snorted. "Write new letters." "To whom?" "To the forest," he said. "It rarely answers, but it reads everything."

I began to build traps as flat as handshakes. No more spikes repeating old mistakes. Only edges that gently push stupidity. I stole grain from carts that

took themselves too seriously and deposited it where water lives at home. I took coins from pockets that are never empty and put them in boxes that are never full. No heroic numbers. Just a record of refusal.

The clerk came back, a different one. "Payment received," he said, as if reading the weather. "Stay tuned." "I'll stay," I said. "I only have two hands." "Enough," he said. "If you use them."

"The whole truth," I growled into the fire at some point. "Here it is: I still love her. And I still won't be good. I pay, I steal, I run, I keep quiet. I'm an honest thief: I steal time from the rich and give bread to the children. I hate fanfares. I love water. I can stand liquor. I trust downpours more than promises. And if anyone asks if I'll change, they'll get the kindest no in the world."

Marian wrote another note. **You're growing. Thank you.** No "Forgive me." No "Come back." No "We." I didn't burn it. I placed it in the trunk, where the rain softens the edges and the core remains hard. Like all of us.

The city remained a city. The forest remained a forest. The king remained on the move. The sheriff remained embarrassing. Galfrid remained dangerous. The priest remained loud. The children remained hungry and grew full. Jack began to sing again, but quietly, without heroes, with bread in the rhymes. Grete placed the box in the sun and told the ladies they had the day off. Ralf carved a new notch into the wood that looked like a door. He didn't say what it was for.

I'm going now. Not far. Only to where the world stops asking me questions. I'll take the bow, the bottle, the boots, the refusal. I'll pay again tomorrow, if the river doesn't run too high and the writer doesn't stumble. I'll run when men take themselves too seriously. I'll stay when children start counting. I rarely lie. I often remain silent. I don't like shooting, but I have a good aim.

And you want to know, at the very end, without flowers, without God?

I'm Robin. Not a lord, not a saint, not a prim hero with a plumed hat. I'm the guy who tips the cash register of stupidity into the stream and leaves the bread on the corner where no one claps. I'm the one who pays even though he curses, and curses even though he pays. I'm the one with a no in my mouth and a yes in my back when it comes to children. I'm the one the forest won't spit out because it knows: I'll bring the bottle back empty and fill it with water.

I live from now on as robbers. Not out of spite, but out of consistency. And that will never, ever, change.

Another sip.

Another morning.

Fuck the worries.

imprint

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