

ROBIN HOOD AND THE IMPOSSIBLE HEIST

Written by

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Using BeatBandit

EXT. GREAT NORTH ROAD - DAWN

Fog to the knees. A tax convoy stands dead on the road: four wagons, a dozen GUARDS kneeling on the verge, their swords piled out of reach like kindling.

One man works the strongboxes. ROBIN OF LOXLEY, mid-thirties, weathered, forearms corded from the bow, a deep hood over forgettable brown wool. He moves down the wagon line like a man laying a table for guests.

ROBIN

Step six. The strap, not the lock.
Locks are for admirers.

His knife parts the strap. Coin sacks slide into panniers on a grey mare, one at a time, each weighed in his hand before it drops.

A young CLERK stands by the lead wagon, trembling, charcoal moving on a scrap of paper anyway -- sketching the robber out of pure habit.

In the treeline: five armed men crouch in bracken. LITTLE JOHN, a wall with a beard, mouths: NOW? Beside him WILL SCARLET, ALAN-A-DALE, MUCH, FRIAR TUCK. Bows strung. Nothing to shoot.

Robin, without turning his head, lifts a flat palm toward the trees.

Wait.

John sinks back into the wet ferns. Tuck sneezes into his sleeve, twice. Nobody blesses him.

GUARD SERGEANT

(kneeling)

The escort is a mile back. You're one man.

ROBIN

One is the whole trick, sergeant. Two men can contradict each other.

He hefts the next sack, frowns at its weight, sets it in the pannier and tucks a loose coin back under the strap, the way you'd right a crooked picture on a wall.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

Step seven -- the mare comes with me.
She's wasted on the exchequer.

He unhitches the grey mare, murmurs something in her ear.
She follows him like he paid her.

GUARD SERGEANT

They'll hang you by Michaelmas.

ROBIN

A wager, then. Take me by Lauds
tomorrow and I'll tie the knot myself.
Lose, and every man kneeling here gets
a Sunday off at your expense.

The sergeant stares at him. The joke lies down and dies on
the wet road.

In the ferns, Will draws a thumb across his own throat --
OURS? -- and jerks his chin at the sergeant. Robin's palm
comes up again without a glance. Down.

Robin carries on, undiscouraged. Passing the clerk, he
plucks the sketch from his fingers. Studies it. Genuinely
wounded.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

The hood doesn't sit like that. It
breaks here -- off the brow.

He turns the scrap so the clerk can see, taps the line.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

You've made me a monk.

He corrects the drawing with the clerk's own charcoal, hands
it back, and steps off the road into the fog.

Gone.

The kneeling guards look at each other. Nobody wants to
stand first.

In the treeline, five armed men rise out of the bracken with
nothing to do. John looks at his staff, un-swung, then at
the empty road where the fog is already closing.

EXT. SHERWOOD CAMP - NIGHT

Firelight through old oaks. A WEDDING PARTY in patched wool
-- a BRIDE in a borrowed veil, her GROOM grinning around two
missing teeth -- eats venison off spits with both hands. The
crew serves them like lords.

WILL SCARLET kneels at the bride's hem, needle flashing, a
spool of crimson thread clamped in his teeth. He tilts a
shard of mirror from his pouch, checks the line of his own

collar in it first, then the hem.

WILL

My mother's thread. The stitching
outlives the marriage or your money
back.

The groom opens his mouth. Will raises the needle at him.
The groom closes it.

At the fire, LITTLE JOHN saws venison onto the bride's
trencher, a slab that would founder a horse.

JOHN

Next job. I keep saying it. The door.

He sets the knife down and holds two thick fingers a hand's
width apart.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Take the door off its hinges and a
castle is a big house.

TUCK

(mouth full)

A miracle. One weeping statue, two
witnesses, and a bishop with debts. I
know the bishop.

ALAN

(strumming)

And John proposed the door again, / and
lo, the door was... proposed again...

On a stump by the woodpile sits a palm-high trebuchet built
of twigs and twine. Nobody claims it. Everybody knows whose
it is.

ROBIN threads through all of it, rolled vellum under one arm
-- maps marked in a hand only he can read. He tops cups,
squeezes shoulders, leans to the bride's ear.

ROBIN

The Sheriff bought your wedding. He
doesn't know it yet.

She laughs. He's already moved on.

At the edge of the light, MUCH crouches over the camp's
hand-quern, fitting the runner stone back onto the bedstone.
Barley shifts in his cheek. He gives the handle a turn; it
catches on nothing and stops.

MUCH
 (to the quern, not to
 anyone)
 Stone can't grind alone. It takes the
 other stone.

ROBIN
 (passing, not stopping)
 Then get a better stone.

Laughter around the fire. Much shrugs and keeps fitting.

A BOY, twelve, runs into the firelight and hands Robin a
 folded scrap. Robin reads it once. Pockets it.

WILL
 Trouble?

ROBIN
 An invitation. Step one, I go to town
 in the morning. Step two -- there's no
 step two yet, but it will be
 magnificent.

He takes his food standing, back to a tree, last of anyone
 to eat from the pot. From the dark, the quern starts to turn
 -- two stones, grinding.

INT. THE BLUE BOAR ALEHOUSE - DAY

Rain flogs the shutters. The door bangs open: ROBIN, hood
 back, three steps in --

-- and stops. His eyes flick the room: shuttered window,
 cellar hatch, the packed hearth crowd. One way out.

MARIAN FITZWALTER sits at a table, dry, two cups already
 poured, her grey hood thrown back. She nudges the second cup
 an inch toward the empty bench.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
 Outside.

MARIAN
 It's raining.

ROBIN
 It's honest rain. Rarer than you'd
 think.

He's back through the door before she's set the cup down.

EXT. THE BLUE BOAR ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Rain comes off the thatch in ropes. Through the window behind them: hearth-glow, dry benches, her two abandoned cups.

Marian steps into the wet like it's a point she's conceding, not a courtesy. She pulls her hood up. He leaves his down; water runs off his jaw and he doesn't seem to feel it.

MARIAN

If a man wished to know why the Sheriff's foresters are buying songs by the verse, one would tell him they pay best for the long ones. The ones with landmarks in them.

ROBIN

Foresters can't read a wood. Most of them can't read at all.

MARIAN

These have a clerk who can read a ballad.

Robin's hand rises -- once -- to a cord at his throat. Old arrowheads under the collar. Down again before he speaks.

ROBIN

The silver sleeps where only I can wake it. It's safer than the king is.

Her eyes go to his collarbone. Then his face. She files something away and says nothing about it.

In the alehouse doorway, the LANDLORD sets a full tankard on an empty corner table -- a table with no chair pulled to it -- catches Robin's eye through the rain, and nods.

Robin does not nod back. He turns a quarter-step, so the window sits behind his shoulder.

MARIAN

You're bought ale you won't drink in a house you won't sit in.

ROBIN

And you rode an hour through weather to talk to me about music. That's a courier's errand wearing a conspirator's face.

He tips his head, appraising.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
It's a very good face.

MARIAN
If I had more than a warning, it would
cost more than a wet hem.

She pulls her hood tighter and walks into the rain. No
goodbye.

Robin stands under the eaves. One look at the amber window
-- the corner table, the tankard going flat, nobody sitting.
He goes the other way.

EXT. TRYSTING OAK - DAWN

A monster oak alone in a clearing, older than the shire.
FORESTERS ring it with spades. Their HEAD FORESTER squints
at a parchment: ballad verses copied in a clerk's hand,
words crossed and re-crossed.

HEAD FORESTER
'Where the lovers' oak drinks deeper
than the priest.' North side. Roots.

He toes the turf.

HEAD FORESTER (CONT'D)
That ground's been turned this year.

Apart from the diggers stands REYNARD DE VAUX -- fifties,
lean as a quill, dark robes cut plainer than his rank
allows. He smooths a wax tablet with a stylus; old sums
ghost up under the fresh wax. His right forefinger is inked
to the knuckle.

Spades bite. Bite again. A blade RINGS -- iron on iron. The
digging stops all at once.

The foresters kneel and haul. A chest comes up trailing
roots like a pulled tooth. A second behind it, heavier; two
men on the second.

REYNARD
One. Two.

HEAD FORESTER
My lord?

REYNARD
The ballad has four more verses. Dig.

More ringing under the spades. Reynard crosses to the first
chest and opens it himself, unhurried, the way another man

opens his own front door. Silver marks. Melted church plate, a chalice folded flat. A tray of wedding rings, still sorted by size.

He lifts a single coin to the grey light. Then drops it flat on the chest lid.

It RINGS -- high and true -- and hangs in the cold air until it doesn't.

Something in his face almost happens. He puts the coin back exactly where it lay, in the row he took it from.

A third chest breaks ground. A fourth.

HEAD FORESTER

Cart it in quiet, my lord? Back roads,
before the town's awake?

REYNARD

Through the town gate. Noon. Every
chest open to the sun.

He writes as he speaks, stylus steady.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

Eleven years of the Loxley debt, paid
in one morning. The shire will stand in
the street and watch it paid. It is so.

He has the find entered in his tablet before the men have the fifth chest out of the ground. Six, in the end, stand dripping in a row.

Behind him, a young forester pockets a clod of the oak's dirt, for luck, and nobody sees.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM MARKET SQUARE - NOON

Bells. Carts drawn up in a row, chests open, silver throwing the sun back into the crowd's eyes. Guards in ranks. The square is packed and makes almost no sound.

At its edge, a tanner's apprentice stacks lime pots two-high by the culvert mouth, sweating, ignored by everyone.

Deep in the press: ALAN-A-DALE, hood up, lute wrapped in sacking and slung like a swaddled child. He works toward the front a shoulder at a time, thinks better of it, and stays put.

REYNARD stands on the guildhall steps. He doesn't raise his voice. He doesn't need to; the square leans in to hear.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

Thirteen thousand marks, recovered to the crown. At Prime tomorrow this levy rides south -- the shire's gift to Prince John's coronation.

He leaves a chest lid standing open beside him.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

Tonight it rests behind three locks. My counting-house. Blackmere Keep. The mint at Kirklees. Honest men keeping one another honest.

A beat.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

For one night.

Two soldiers nail a fresh board to the gallows post: a TARIFF, ruled and priced in a fine exchequer hand. Offenses in the left column. Fingers in the right.

Those who can read it teach it, low-voiced, to those who can't. A woman near Alan counts on her own hand without meaning to, then stops.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

And since theft is never one man's labor --

Soldiers wade into the crowd. They pull out a MILLER'S WIDOW, still gripping a basket. A boy of fifteen. The LOXLEY REEVE, grey and straight-backed, who steps clear before they reach him. Seven in all, chained wrist to wrist.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

Seven accomplices of the Loxley debt, to hang at Prime beside whatever else my scaffold catches.

He looks the count over once, the way he looked over the chests.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

Seven. Thirteen thousand. One night. The arithmetic of this shire is finally kind.

The FORESTER chaining the reeve works with his tongue between his teeth -- humming. A jaunty little tune, note for note.

Alan goes white under his hood. His tune. The cache-ballad.

ALAN
 (under his breath)
 And Alan stood far from the front...
 having sung nothing... of any...
 weight...

The rhyme won't come. He swallows and stops trying.

The reeve stares at his own boots while they chain him --
 catching no neighbor's eye, pulling nobody down with him.

Alan slides along the wall, past the lime pots, down the
 culvert lane, gone.

EXT. SHERWOOD CLEARING - DUSK

Cook-smoke and last light. The crew stands at the sound of a
 horse.

MARIAN rides in astride, mud to the knee, a HAWK on her
 fist. She dismounts before anyone can offer help; nobody
 would have been fast enough anyway. She sets the hawk on a
 makeshift perch by the fire, unhurried, and it settles as
 though the camp were hers.

She lays a folded parchment on the flat stump where the crew
 eats. Keeps two fingers on it.

MARIAN
 If a woman had copied the split
 manifest before the wax cooled -- which
 portion sleeps behind which lock, the
 gate rotas, the convoy order signed for
 Prime -- she would be holding the only
 honest paper in Nottinghamshire.

The crew closes in around the stump. John reaches; her look
 stops his hand at arm's length. He puts it behind his back.

ROBIN
 Name your price and I'll double it in
 promises.

MARIAN
 Partnership. The whole of my plan for
 the whole of yours. Both ways. Nothing
 kept back, and nothing kept for later.

The fire pops. Tuck looks at Robin. So does the hawk.

Robin steps up, smiling -- and reaches for the manifest. Not
 for her offered hand.

Everyone sees it. Will winces like a man watching a stitch pulled crooked.

Marian looks at the reaching hand a moment. Then she lifts her two fingers off the parchment and lets him take it.

MARIAN (CONT'D)
Eyes open, then.

ROBIN
(already unfolding it)
Step one, we read the Sheriff's mind.
Step two --

His finger stops on a line.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
Blackmere's watch is timed to the Ave?
Whose Ave?

MARIAN
Sir Guy walks his inspection like a
paternoster. You could set a mill by
him.

MUCH
(counting on his fingers)
Three castles. Six of us. One night.
Nine ways that kills us. I've solved...
none yet.

Nobody answers him.

Marian pulls her riding glove back on. She crosses to the perch, runs a knuckle down the hawk's breast, and lifts its leg so the strap shows -- the jess, empty of any tie.

MARIAN
I go back inside tonight. If my hawk
comes home to you with an empty jess,
I'm taken -- and whatever you are
doing, do it faster.

JOHN
We'd come for --

MARIAN
You weren't asked.

She swings up into the saddle, turns the horse, and is gone into the dark between the trees.

Robin doesn't look up from the manifest. Firelight on the Sheriff's neat clerk-ruled columns.

ROBIN

Seven Loxley necks say we solve it by
Vespers tomorrow.

Nobody laughs. The hawk on its makeshift perch shakes rain off, watching him.

EXT. SHERWOOD COUNCIL FIRE - NIGHT

The split manifest lies open on the eating-stump, corners weighted with river stones. The whole crew ringed around it. Bowls of pottage go cold at their feet. Nobody is eating.

Robin stands a step back from the stump, a half-fledged arrow turning in his fingers, a warm knife in the other hand. He splits a goose-feather down its spine and does not look at the paper.

WILL

The wedding. We arrive as a bridal party -- grief and joy open gates that crowbars don't. Will Scarlet has walked into three castles on a good coat.

JOHN

The door. Blackmere's is oak. Four men. Three if I'm cross.

Much lifts his little twig-and-twine trebuchet off his knee and sets it on the manifest, hopeful.

TUCK

Saint Osbert teaches: a locked cellar is a challenge to Providence. I propose a miracle --

ROBIN

No.

He hasn't raised his voice. He fits the feather to the shaft and binds it, thumb rolling the thread flat. He lifts the trebuchet off the paper and hands it back to Much without a glance.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

Three castles. One night. Six of us. That's not a plan, that's a ballad about eleven corpses.

His hand goes to his throat, to the cord under his collar, before the sentence is finished.

The fire spits. Nobody asks about the number.

ALAN
 (quiet, tuning a string
 that doesn't need it)
 And the bold outlaw weighed the odds...
 and the odds... weighed... also...

MUCH
 Seven necks at Prime. That's not odds,
 that's a schedule.

ROBIN
 And I've beaten schedules. I've never
 beaten arithmetic dressed as an
 invitation.

He lays the finished arrow across the stump, over the
 Sheriff's neat clerk-ruled columns.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
 He wants us there. A man posts three
 locks the way you bait three hooks.

WILL
 Then we're the fish that takes all
 three.

ROBIN
 Fish don't get to be famous, Will. They
 get to be dinner.

A small laugh from Alan. It dies alone.

John stands. He doesn't argue. He tips his cold bowl into
 the ashes, takes up his staff, and shoulders his pack -- the
 pack was rolled and tied before the meeting ever started.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
 John.

JOHN
 Loxley folk hang at Prime. Coming?

He walks out of the firelight. Much scoops his trebuchet off
 the stump and goes after him. Tuck drains his cup and
 follows. Will, then Alan, the fire shrinking behind each of
 them.

Robin is left with the only honest paper in Nottinghamshire
 and an arrow nobody took.

He looks at the dark where his crew went. Then he rolls the
 manifest tight, tight, the way he winds a fletching.

ROBIN
 (to the fire)
 Step one.

He follows them.

EXT. CAMP EDGE - TWILIGHT

Gear laid out in rows on sacking: coiled rope, grapnels wrapped in wool so they won't clink, a sand-glass, Much's punt-poles. FRIAR TUCK moves down the line with a jug, flicking ale on each item with two fat fingers.

TUCK
 Rope -- Saint Osbert keep your knots.
 Poles -- Saint Fenella, the fen is
 Yours, I never doubted it.

The jug rests, between blessings, on a square of parchment gone soft with rings of old beer. A heavy wax seal in one corner. An excommunication writ, retired to beer-mat.

Robin crouches, gathers a coil of rope over his shoulder. Reads the writ upside down.

ROBIN
 She signed it herself?

TUCK
 The Prioress does her own
 correspondence. Beautiful hand. She
 spelled 'irredeemable' right on the
 first go, which is more than the bishop
 managed.

He thumbs at the cork, which has swollen and won't seat, and gives up on it.

ROBIN
 And you kept it.

TUCK
 It's the only letter I ever got.

He splashes ale on the wagon wheel, then looks up at the first stars, aggrieved.

TUCK (CONT'D)
 (to the sky)
 You saw the tariff board. The boy of
 fifteen. That one's Yours to answer
 for, not mine. I'm just carrying rope.

ROBIN

Does He answer?

TUCK

That's the wrong question from a man
who's never once asked Him anything.
You don't pray, Robin. You give God
instructions.

Robin grins, and has the counter ready before Tuck finishes.

ROBIN

Then He and I have an understanding. I
do the work, He takes the tithe.

TUCK

A prayer is a plan you hand to somebody
else. Try it some night when yours runs
out.

ROBIN

Mine don't.

Tuck corks the jug -- forces it this time -- and takes a
pull off it first, because waste is a sin.

TUCK

Where we're going I'm damned already.
So I'll walk in front.

He picks up the writ, wipes it on his sleeve, and works it
into an inner pocket with care. Robin watches him go, files
the sermon somewhere he won't look at it, and whistles low
for the wagon.

INT. NOTTINGHAM CASTLE - GREAT HALL - NIGHT

Two braziers, one long table, three chairs set far apart. A
CLERK inks three contracts, his forefinger black to the
knuckle. REYNARD stands. SIR GUY OF GISBORNE -- forties,
mail under a plain surcoat, a face that has never once
apologized -- reads his contract slowly, with a finger,
moving his lips over the numbers.

At the third chair, PRIORESS ERMENGARDE, seventy if a day,
wimple white as altar linen, warms her hands at nobody's
brazier.

REYNARD

Three portions. Three keepers. The
counting-house holds the first under my
own audit. Blackmere holds the second
behind Sir Guy. Kirklees holds the
third behind God.

PRIORESS

Behind Kirklees. God does not sign
sureties.

GISBORNE

(not looking up)

This says 'consideration to follow.'
No.

REYNARD

The crown's gratitude is a --

GISBORNE

Loxley manor. Written here, tonight, or
your silver sleeps outside my walls. I
hold Blackmere until Prime. Then I hold
a deed. That is the whole of it.

Reynard's glance goes to the Prioress, then to Gisborne's
boots, then back to the contract.

REYNARD

(a breath; to the clerk)

Write the manor in.

The clerk writes. Gisborne signs -- big, square letters, the
quill pressing through the parchment into the board beneath.

GISBORNE

(flat, to Reynard)

The other two locks. Who holds them.

REYNARD

The counting-house is mine. Kirklees is
hers.

GISBORNE

Then I hold the one worth robbing.

He does not look at the Prioress. She does not look at him.

Reynard slides a purse down the table to the Prioress.
Advance. She opens it without hurry, takes out one coin, and
bites it. Checks the tooth-mark against the brazier's light,
turns it, checks again.

PRIORESS

Kirklees has kept kings' treasure
before. It charges by the night, and it
blesses no locks it has not priced.

REYNARD

Eighty marks for one night's prayer.

PRIORESS

And the abbey will pray on the other
twenty.

Reynard's jaw sets. He does not answer at once. His eyes move -- the two braziers, the three chairs, the three contracts -- a man doing sums instead of shouting. Gisborne watches the Prioress's purse. The Prioress watches nothing at all. Then Reynard nods, once.

The Prioress rises, small and unhurried, and makes the sign of the cross at both men, a woman flicking water off her fingers.

PRIORESS (CONT'D)

May each of you be trusted exactly as
far as you deserve.

She goes. Gisborne rolls his contract, tucks the deed against his mail, and is gone without a bow.

Reynard looks at the two empty chairs, then at the clerk.

REYNARD

Note the hour. All three locks bought.
It is so.

INT. SHERIFF'S COUNTING-ROOM - NIGHT

One candle. Shelves of ledgers squared to the shelf-edge, not a spine proud of its neighbor. On the desk, a coin-tray of confiscated wedding rings sorted by size, each row labeled in a fine hand: LOXLEY. EDWINSTOWE. BLIDWORTH.

Reynard eats standing, bread held out over the desk, crumbs caught in a spread cloth. A GAOLER waits in the doorway with a rope-thin CARTER, wrists bound.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

The carter who talks in his cups.

GAOLER

Took him at the Trip gate, my lord.
He'd had a few --

REYNARD

He'd had four.

(to the Carter)

You heard my serjeants dispute the convoy order this afternoon. The muster at Prime, the Kirklees barrels loading last. You heard it twice, because they are careless men and said it twice.

CARTER

I -- my lord, I heard nothing, I swear
on --

REYNARD

You will swear on nothing. You were
arrested in error. The error is
corrected.

He nods. The gaoler saws through the cords. The carter
stands rubbing his wrists, waiting for the trick.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

The Trip's fires are lit until curfew.
Go and be seen drinking.

The carter bolts into the dark. The gaoler pulls the door to
and follows him down.

Alone, Reynard sets the bread aside and wipes his fingers on
the crumb-cloth. He takes up a used wax tablet, warms the
blade of his knife at the candle, and scrapes it smooth --
old sums ghosting up under the new surface like drowned
writing.

He draws. A triangle: three points, labeled in exchequer
shorthand. Roads between them. Hours along the roads --
Compline. Matins. Lauds.

At the counting-house point he writes a small, neat figure
and boxes it twice.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

(to the tablet)

You take the small portion first. You
will not batter my door -- battering is
for men without a better idea, and you
have never once been that man. You make
the paper carry it out for you, signed
and sealed, and you leave smiling.

He sets down the stylus, picks the smallest wedding ring
from the Loxley row, and holds it to the candle.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

You trust the paper, because paper has
never lied to you. Eleven years of the
Loxley debt.

He sets the ring on the Blackmere point of the triangle.
Considers it there, a bright bead on the wax.

Then he snuffs the candle between his inked finger and
thumb, and the room goes dark over the drawn night.

Somewhere out in the town, faint, a dog will not stop barking. He listens to it in the dark. It means nothing.

INT. RUINED CHAPEL - SHERWOOD - VESPER

No roof. Rooks quarreling in the broken tower. The VESPERS BELL rolls in faint from three parishes at once, none of them quite together.

The crew stands among fallen rafters, breath smoking. Robin has set the manifest on the altar stone -- and beside it, five things in a row: a wax seal, a sand-glass, a monk's rope-belt, a lute-string, a coil of rope.

ROBIN

The Threefold. Three castles, in descending order of paperwork. Step one: Nottingham by Compline -- we don't break the counting-house, we make its own procedure carry the silver out signed-for. Step two: Blackmere by Matins, across the fen, through the water-gate, out before the watch turns. Step three: Kirklees by Lauds -- and out at dawn inside the abbey's own tithe carts, waved through by the convoy itself.

Silence. It is, annoyingly, magnificent.

MUCH

The Blackmere crossing. Loads, times, how deep the causeway floods at --

ROBIN

You get the bells and the punt.

He puts the sand-glass in Much's hands. Turns to Will.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

Will, you're Master Joos of Bruges. Assayer. Expected before the night audit.

He holds out the seal. Will takes it, holds it to what light there is, and pockets it like a man who has decided it was always his.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

Tuck -- the ale, and the exit.

The rope-belt goes to Tuck.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

Alan, signals. And not one verse with a fact in it.

The lute-string. Alan winds it round two fingers and says nothing, which for Alan is the loud kind of nothing.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

John. Carrying.

He holds out the coil of rope. John looks at it. Takes it. Weighs it, once, on the flat of one palm.

JOHN

And the back half? Out of Nottingham -- then what road?

ROBIN

The road I'll show you when you're on it.

WILL

Will Scarlet performs better with a script.

ROBIN

You'll have your pages by the time you need them.

He steps in among them, off the altar, into the fallen timber.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

Nobody improvises tonight. Nobody's plan runs but mine -- not the door, not the wedding, not the miracle, not the machine, not the ballad. You each hold your piece. Only your piece.

John sets the coil of rope down on the altar stone, deliberate, and leaves his hand on it.

MUCH

That's not a plan, that's five blindfolds.

ROBIN

It's five alibis. What you don't know can't hang you.

WILL

And what you do know?

ROBIN
Stays where it's safe.

He taps his temple.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
The plan lives here. It's the one lock
in England he can't buy.

Five stony faces. The rooks scream at something none of them
can see.

Tuck picks up the rope-belt off the altar, kisses it, and
looks at Robin the way a man looks at weather he has to walk
through.

The last Vespers bell dies out over the forest.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
Nottingham by Compline. Step two will
be magnificent.

He's first out through the broken door, so he doesn't see
five men trade one long look before they follow him into the
dark.

INT. TITHE WAGON - MOVING - NIGHT

Dark. Six bodies packed between empty barrels that smell of
old ale and new pitch. The wagon rocks over ruts. Through a
gap in the boards, torchlight slides past -- the crossroads
gibbet, iron creaking, its tenant long past caring.

ALAN
(whisper)
Left at the hanged man. We're a mile
out.

Will has his mirror shard up, catching stray torchlight,
working river-clay through his beard to grey it. He becomes
older, richer, Flemish, in six strokes.

WILL
Master Joos of Bruges despises this
wagon. He travels ahead of it, in his
mind, in a coach.

Nobody answers. A barrel knocks against a knee. The wagon
rolls on.

LITTLE JOHN sits wedged in the corner, huge, still. In his
hands: a child's shoe, half re-stitched, an awl like a
toothpick in his fist. He works wax into the thread by feel,
in the dark, and never looks down at it.

Will's eye finds it in the shard's reflection.

WILL (CONT'D)

Whose is that?

John pulls a stitch through. Says nothing. Will looks away first, and fusses his stolen collar straight.

TUCK

(low, to the roof of the wagon)

You know where we're going. Come or don't. But no surprises.

MUCH

(counting the wagon's joints with a fingertip)

Compline in half a glass. If the gate day-book runs slow we lose the audit window. Nine ways this goes wrong before the wall. I've solved six.

ALAN

And the brave six rode in a barrel-cart, / their fortunes all to seek --

JOHN

Why not the door?

Beat. Then laughter -- real laughter, five men strangling it quiet in a wagon full of echoes. Even Alan loses his rhyme and has to start it over in his head.

John doesn't laugh. He bites the thread, knots it off, and puts the small shoe away inside his coat, against his chest.

ROBIN

(through the laughter, delighted, already somewhere ahead of all of them)

Because, John, tonight the door opens itself. Step one --

The wagon slows. Torchlight floods the board-gaps and lays bars of it across their faces. A GATE GUARD'S VOICE, bored, outside:

GATE GUARD (O.S.)

Nottingham! Declare your load!

Everyone stops breathing. Will palms his mirror shard, squares his stolen collar, and reaches for the canvas flap.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM TOWN GATE - NIGHT

Torches gutter in the river-wind. The canvas flap of the tithe wagon whips back and MASTER JOOS OF BRUGES descends -- Will Scarlet, grey-bearded with river clay, furred collar, the posture of a man owed money by everyone present. He does not step down so much as grant the ground his weight.

Robin, hooded, humble, hops down behind him hauling two strapped cases: the servant.

Behind them, Tuck on the wagon bench, all tonsure and tithe-paperwork, licking a thumb to count leaves he has no intention of reading.

WILL
(loud, Flemish vowels)
Master Joos of Bruges, assayer to the
wool staple, expected by your exchequer
before the audit. Announce me.

He does not wait to be announced. He walks.

INT. NOTTINGHAM GATEHOUSE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Small room, one candle, a seal-register chained to the desk. The GATE CLERK, young, careful, lays Will's letter of credence beside the register. Wets a finger. Turns pages. Stops.

A new leaf is pasted in. Fresh ink. This morning's date. The paste still tacky at the edge.

GATE CLERK
This seal's the old matrix. The staple
reissued this morning. Yours is --

WILL
Mine is CORRECT, which in this county
makes it a stranger.

He snatches his own letter back and holds it to the candle like a physician with a urine flask. Turns it. Lets the wax catch the light for the clerk to admire.

WILL (CONT'D)
Look at this wax. Look at the BITE of
this impression. Bruges wax, sir. What
you have in that register is tallow
with ambitions.

He leans over the chained book. Taps the tacky leaf, once, with a clean nail.

WILL (CONT'D)
 Who verified YOUR page? Whose hand
 pasted it? Were you present?

GATE CLERK
 I -- the register came down from the
 castle --

WILL
 'Came down.' A document that 'came
 down.'

He straightens. The furred collar rises with him.

WILL (CONT'D)
 Master Joos has hanged men in Flanders
 on evidence better dressed than that
 page, and it was still a scandal. Fetch
 your sergeant. Fetch him a candle. We
 will verify HIM.

The GATE SERGEANT fills the doorway, sucking a tooth. He
 weighs the fur collar, the cases, the hour, the audit
 upstairs waiting on this man. Behind him, out in the dark,
 Tuck's wagon-horse stales loudly against the gatepost;
 nobody dignifies it.

GATE SERGEANT
 Let him through. The exchequer's been
 squalling for its assayer since
 Vespers.

GATE CLERK
 The seal --

GATE SERGEANT
 Write it up, then. That's what the
 book's for.

The clerk stamps the pass, sullen, and pushes it across
 without looking up.

As Will sweeps out, cloak swinging, the sergeant pulls the
 day-book to himself and writes, slow, tongue between his
 teeth: tall, red mouth, laughs at wax.

Robin, passing with the cases, reads it upside down. Says
 nothing. Carries the evidence inside.

INT. NOTTINGHAM CASTLE - COUNTING-HOUSE - NIGHT

Candles doubled for the audit. Scales down the long table like little gallows. Clerks in a row, quills ready. The widow's-portion chests -- iron-strapped, chalked numbers -- squat by the wall.

Will sits enthroned in the best chair, a coin held to the flame, suffering.

WILL

No.

CHIEF CLERK

Master Joos, the sample was weighed at
--

WILL

This shilling has been CLIPPED, sir. By
someone with TEETH.

He sets it down as if it might infect the table, and slides it back with one finger, the whole length of the wood, to the clerk's edge.

Along the wall, Robin-the-servant lifts Will's cloak from a peg and brushes it once. Will's eyes flick to it. A cue.

WILL (CONT'D)

And if one coin in the sample offends,
the sample is dead. Dead, sir.

He stands. Sets both fists on the table, over the scales.

WILL (CONT'D)

I will have the CHESTS. All of them, at
my own bench, my own light, my own
weights -- Bruges weights, which have
the advantage of being weights.

CHIEF CLERK

The chests don't leave this room
uncounted. Procedure.

Will's mouth opens for the kill. By the door, Robin sets the two cases down. Stop.

Will breathes. Swallows the insult whole. Comes back magnanimous.

WILL

Procedure! At last, a word I love. Then
follow yours: independent verification,

(MORE)

WILL (CONT'D)

witnessed, signed. Or shall I write the staple that Nottingham's levy was sworn on tallow and a boy's arithmetic?

A junior clerk's quill stops mid-word. He looks to the chief and does not find help there.

WILL (CONT'D)

The gate bench. Your guards may watch me the whole way. I insist they watch. Bring the day-book, bring seals, bring God if He keeps your hours.

The Chief Clerk looks at the scales, the hour-candle burning toward the audit, the furred collar. He looks at the door, where the meek servant waits with the cases and will not meet his eye.

CHIEF CLERK

(to a junior)

Draw the release. Independent verification, four chests, returned by Matins under my seal.

Quills scratch. Parchment turns. The chief clerk signs. A junior signs. A guard leans in and signs an X, witnessed, wiping his palm on his thigh first.

The exchequer of Nottingham, in its own hand, in triplicate, orders the king's silver carried out its own door.

Will blots the release with his sleeve, regally, then holds it to the candle to dry as though checking that, too, for tallow.

Robin hoists the first chest, servant-meek, and his eyes over the iron strap are bright as a boy's.

INT. BELL LOFT - NOTTINGHAM CASTLE - NIGHT

Rafters, rope, one nervous APPRENTICE, 13, rich by tonight's standards: three pennies and a twig-and-twine model trebuchet sit on the sill beside him, guarded by his elbow.

MUCH crouches over a stolen sand-glass, lips moving, a barley-grain shifting side to side in his cheek. Below through the louvres: the yard, guards at their posts, the handcart with four chests waiting in shadow.

MUCH

Third watch rings at the glass's turn.
We ring it... now-ish. N-now.

APPRENTICE

Now-ish or now?

MUCH

Half the sand between -- the overlap
wants forty counts, watch relieves
watch, nobody owns the yard for forty
counts, it's -- just ring.

The apprentice sets both hands to the rope and hauls. Below, the SHIFT BELL's toll: guards stir early, grumbling. Fresh watch files out of the guardroom while the old watch still holds posts. Two sets of guards meet in the middle of the yard and salute each other, uncertain who relieves whom.

The handcart rolls quietly across the yard behind their backs, one wheel ticking.

Then -- a SERGEANT plants himself under the loft, cranes up, bellows:

SERGEANT (O.S.)

WHO RANG? Third watch is short a glass,
you want my boots up there?

Much stops. Whole-body stop. Mouth open, hands in the air over the sand-glass, a machine with its gears pulled. The barley falls out of his lip.

APPRENTICE

(whisper)

Sir? Sir.

Nothing. The sand runs. Below, the cart is halfway -- exposed -- in the open --

The apprentice grabs the rope himself and yanks. One bright off-schedule CLANG.

SERGEANT (O.S.) (CONT'D)

...Rats in the loft again. RE-RING IT
PROPER.

Much's hands come down out of the air and onto the bell-rope. Onto mechanism. And the stammer is gone.

MUCH

(steady, counting)

Eight. Nine. Ring the half-toll on
twelve, dampen on the swing, he hears a
proper watch-bell.

He guides the boy's pull, catches the rope on the backswing to kill the ring clean. They ring it proper. Below, the

sergeant listens, satisfied, and moves off. The cart slides into the arch shadow, safe.

Much sags against the rafter. The apprentice holds out a penny.

APPRENTICE

For ringing your ring.

MUCH

Keep it. You finished. That's the whole trade, finishing.

He closes the boy's fist around the penny, then packs the sand-glass with hands that won't quite stop shaking. The apprentice pockets the trebuchet model like contraband and is gone down the ladder.

Much stays one more breath in the loft, alone, looking down at the yard he just stole forty counts from. His lips move. Re-counting it. Making sure it really carried.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM CASTLE YARD - NIGHT

The handcart, dressed under sacking, waits by the inner gate. Robin, servant-stooped beside it, watches the last stretch: fifty feet to the arch, the passwall, the road. He counts it on his fingers against his thigh where no one can see.

A HORN. Not a shift bell. Doors bang. TORCHES multiply along the wall-walk.

A HERALD, breathless, strides to the yard at large:

HERALD

Night audit! By order of the High Sheriff -- gates sealed, every load counted, no cart passes till the exchequer's tally stands!

Guards fold across the arch like a portcullis made of men. Robin's exit dies in front of him.

Robin's face does not change. His knuckles on the cart handle do.

ROBIN

(under his breath)

Step eight. Step eight. There is a step eight --

WILL
 (sotto, through his
 beard)
 Is it magnificent?

Rumble. Groan of axles. Through the outer arch rolls A
 SECOND WAGON -- Tuck's, stacked with six barrels, Tuck
 standing upright on the bench like a prophet of abundance,
 arms wide.

TUCK
 (voice for three
 counties)
 MICHAELMAS ALE! Blessed at Kirklees for
 the garrison of Nottingham -- Saint
 Osbert's feast, boys, and the abbey
 pays the tally! Free, free, and FREE,
 in that order!

Stillness. The word 'free' crosses the yard like weather.

ROBIN
 (low, furious)
 No. No, that's not -- I forbade --

John steps on Robin's foot. Gently. The way you'd rest a
 millstone on a foot. He does not look down at Robin; he is
 watching the barrels.

The garrison arrives at the barrels the way water arrives at
 a hole. The first bung is out before any officer rules on
 it; an officer rules on it holding a cup. Someone produces a
 pipe. Two guards from the arch drift over, then four. A
 crossbowman leaves his span cocked on the cobbles to reach a
 jug. Within one bell's span the portcullis crew is singing
 about a girl from Retford.

Tuck works the tap two-handed, wetting a thumb to bless each
 cup, and catches Robin's eye across the yard. Raises the
 jug: a toast, or a sermon.

TUCK
 (mouthed)
 Yours to answer for.

The arch stands open and unmanned as a church door. Robin
 looks at it a long moment -- the gift he didn't plan, from
 the plan he forbade.

He lifts a corner of the sacking, thumbs a chalked
 chest-number by feel, and sets his shoulder to the cart.

ROBIN
 (to Will, dry as sand)
 Step eight. We're invited to the feast.

They roll the cart into the singing.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM TOWN GATE - NIGHT

The celebration has leaked from castle yard to town gate: torchlight, ale-froth, off-duty voices. The tithe wagon inches through the crush, barrels and chests indistinguishable under God's paperwork.

A hand takes the bridle. MARIAN, hood up, court-grey lost in the crowd's brown, walks the horse forward like she owns the road and is renting it to them.

MARIAN
 (to Robin,
 conversational, eyes
 ahead)
 If a man had promised a partner the
 whole of a plan, one would expect the
 partner to know there were two wagons.

ROBIN
 The second wagon was a surprise to its
 own driver. That's the beauty of --

MARIAN
 You gave me a fragment and a
 compliment. I invented that. I've done
 it to chancellors.

Robin, magnificent, adjusts. His free hand drifts to the cord of arrowheads at his throat and thumbs one.

ROBIN
 Then you know it's done with love --

MARIAN
 It's done with fear.

Not cold when she says it. Just true. Her eyes have gone to his hand at his throat and stayed there a beat. Robin has nothing on the shelf for it; his mouth stays open a half-beat too long. His hand comes down off the cord.

She slips a folded scrap into the chest-strap by his hand, quick, without looking at what it rides against.

MARIAN (CONT'D)

Blackmere's watch doubled an hour ago.
New rota. If a man meant to cross the
fen tonight regardless, one would want
him to have it.

ROBIN

And what does one want in return?

MARIAN

Asked and answered at the stump.

ROBIN

Marian.

She waits. He has her whole attention, which is more than he
bargained for. The crowd jostles the wagon; a drunk leans in
and blesses the barrels in passing, then forgets why.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

Blackmere's the middle act. If the
middle act goes wrong, the audience
should be somewhere else. Go back to
the castle and be visibly asleep.

MARIAN

If a man wanted me somewhere safe, he'd
have made me a partner where I could
hear the plan change.

She releases the bridle. The crowd takes her like water
takes a dropped ring.

In the wagon-bed behind Robin, Alan -- flushed with survival
-- is humming. Composing. His fingers find frets on a lute
still wrapped in sacking. Words arriving:

ALAN

(sotto, to himself)
...and the silver walked OUT, by the
clerk's own quill, / four chests by the
gate bench --

WILL

(through his teeth, beard
in Alan's ear)
Four. Chests. Rhyme us to the gallows,
why don't you. Give it a WRONG number
at least.

ALAN

(wounded)
Wrong numbers don't scan.

The wagon clears the gate into the dark. Behind them the town sings; before them, nothing but fen.

INT./EXT. NOTTINGHAM SQUARE - LATER THAT NIGHT

The tariff board's torches. Reynard reads the counting-house release -- unhurried, twice through -- while the CHIEF CLERK stands at attention beside the gate sergeant, both grey as porridge.

REYNARD

Four chests. Three signatures. One assayer, expected, admitted, remembered.

He does not look up yet. His eyes travel the square instead.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

Six torches on this board. Two braziers. One gallows, empty.

(now he looks up)

The paperwork is immaculate. You are both to be congratulated on being robbed in triplicate.

CHIEF CLERK

My lord, the seals, the procedure held, we --

REYNARD

One day-book.

He holds out a hand, palm up, the ink-stained forefinger steady. The sergeant surrenders the day-book. Reynard reads the entry -- tall, red mouth, laughs at wax -- and tears the leaf out with the care of a man taking a cutting from a rose. He folds it once. It goes into his sleeve.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

Your post is forfeit, sergeant. Collect your pay to the hour; the hour is struck. Go.

No shouting. That is somehow the worst available version. The sergeant opens his mouth, finds nothing in it, and goes -- in front of everyone, a man subtracted.

Reynard walks to the tariff board. Takes out his own ink-horn and brush. Doubles every figure himself, in a fine exchequer hand, the crowd of late drinkers watching him letter each numeral.

REYNARD (CONT'D)
(to the ADJUTANT, while
lettering)

Bar the gates. Curfew till further
order. Quarantine on rumor of fen-fever
-- nothing enters, nothing leaves, no
exception under my seal. Question every
alehouse; there is a new song tonight,
and I will have every man who can hum
it.

ADJUTANT
And the thieves, my lord? Riders?
Hounds?

Reynard finishes a numeral. Steps back. Checks the board's
alignment as if it were a ledger line, and touches a wet
figure to be sure it holds.

REYNARD
The night knows where they're going.

He blows the ink dry and pockets the brush, and there is
nothing on his face a witness could hang a word on.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM BACK STREETS - NIGHT

Curfew-empty lanes. Somewhere two streets over, a PATROL
hammers on shutters -- muffled questions, an alewife's
protest. The words 'song' and 'sing it, then' carry over the
roofs.

The crew moves at a burdened trot, chests slung on
staff-poles between them, hugging walls. John shoulders both
his poles so Alan can keep two hands on the wrapped lute.

EXT. TANNER'S YARD - CONTINUOUS

A reeking yard. Hides on racks like hanged men -- nobody
looks twice at them tonight. At the wall's base: the drain
mouth, iron-grated, and beside it the lime pots stacked
two-high, pale in the dark.

John sets down his end, spits on his palms, takes the grate
in both hands, and peels it out of the mortar like a scab.
He lays it aside without a sound.

MUCH
(passing chests down into
the dark)
The lime. Two pots. Three.

JOHN
(hefting one)
Heavy.

MUCH
Yes.

That is the whole debate. The pots go down the hole with the silver.

Torchlight swings into the lane. The crew flattens into the drain's shadow -- Alan last, half in the hole, lute hugged to his chest.

The PATROLMAN idles at the yard gate, working his torch-point along the rack-shadows. Bored. And -- softly, absently -- he's humming. Alan's tune. The new one, the triumphant one, three hours old and already loose in the streets.

He has it WRONG -- flat where it should lift, the second phrase folded into the first --

Alan's mouth opens. Every muscle of a lifetime rises to correct it. His hand comes half off the lute.

He bites his tongue. Hard. Eyes watering. The hum saunters past the lime pots, the pulled grate, the six held breaths, and away down the lane, still flat, still wrong, unbearable.

The torchlight goes with it. The crew pours down into the drain. John lowers himself last and draws the grate back into place over his own head, working it down into the mortar-dust.

INT. TANNER'S DRAIN - CONTINUOUS

Black. Stink. Chest-splash. The crew wades bent double toward a far grey circle of night, staff-poles knocking the walls.

WILL
(whisper)
You're bleeding, minstrel.

ALAN
(thick, tongue-bitten)
And not one note wath thpilled.

Up front, a grey smear of fen-light grows. Robin, first out, stops in the drain mouth with the marsh wind on his face -- and for one unguarded second he looks back down the black gullet at his crew: Will steadying Alan, John carrying double, Much hugging a lime pot like a child.

None of them see him look. He turns it into a wave-them-forward before it can become anything.

ROBIN

(whisper)

Step nine. The fen. Mind the pots.

They wade out toward open black water.

EXT. BLACK FEN - NIGHT

Water like poured tar, smelling of iron and rot. Much's punt-rig -- two hulls yoked with cart-timber, chests amidships, lime pots lashed at the bow -- slides through the reeds. Poles rise and dip without a drip. Nobody speaks.

They pass an eel-smoker's hut on stilts, dark, a heron asleep on the ridgepole. Tuck crosses himself at it, out of general policy.

A moth blunders into John's face. He lets it. Off in the black a fish takes something small; the rings spread and die, and no one turns to look.

Ahead, BLACKMERE KEEP squats on its island. And it is wrong: torches doubled along the wall, twice the count of any rota. On the causeway, lantern-dots move in pairs. A dog's bark carries flat across the water.

MUCH

(barely aloud, counting torches)

Twelve on the wall. Rota says six.
That's not a watch, that's a --

ROBIN

It's a promotion. Gisborne's showing off for his paymaster.

Far off, thin, the AVE BELL. On the wall, a tall figure begins to walk the battlement, lantern swinging with parade-ground rhythm.

MUCH

That's the Ave walk. It's EARLY.
Marian's rota, the leak, the --
everything says he walks at the half-bell. Robin, the paper's wrong. If the paper's wrong once --

ROBIN

Then he's eager. Eager men keep worse time, better for us.

WILL

Or the paper was never --

ROBIN

Step one.

That flat. The punt glides on. Robin looks at nothing for a moment -- rattled, and burying it fast. He dips his pole and finds the bottom sooner than the rota's soundings promised, and files that away with the rest.

JOHN

Torches are twelve. Dogs are four. Us, six.

ROBIN

Six is plenty. Six is lavish. I once did a bishop's strongbox with two, and one of those was the bishop.

Nobody laughs. The keep gets bigger. Alan turns a rhyme over under his breath and puts it back unfinished.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

We split. John, Much, with me to the water-gate. Will, Tuck, Alan -- reeds off the causeway side, hold the second punt, watch the dogs.

TUCK

And when you're inside? What do we listen for?

ROBIN

You'll know it when you hear it.

TUCK

That's not a signal, that's a prophecy.

ROBIN

It's both. Poles up.

Much draws the two long cart-timber pins. The yoke lifts clean, the rig separates into its hulls -- his quiet perfect work under a plan going quietly wrong. Robin's half slides toward the black bulk of the keep. His hand drifts up -- arrowheads -- and back down before anyone can see it.

Except Much sees it. And says nothing, and counts torches again in case the number improved.

It didn't.

EXT. BLACKMERE KEEP - BATTLEMENTS - NIGHT

SIR GUY OF GISBORNE walks the wall like a man laying brick: each stride the same length, the lantern held at the same height. At the northwest turret a brindled MASTIFF waits -- he feeds it from his own pouch before he checks the brazier. Dog first. Always.

His SERJEANT trails him, half a step back, out of a cold he can't share.

SERJEANT

Quiet as a purse, sir. The extra men
are settled in --

GISBORNE

Torch eleven is starved. Feed it.

The serjeant works a fresh faggot into the cresset. Sparks skid sideways on the wind and go out on the wet stone.

SERJEANT

Sir. The men were saying -- with the
silver in the vault it's like dancing
on a full purse up here, eh --

GISBORNE

It is not like dancing. It is standing
a wall in the cold. I have been to
dances.

The serjeant peels off. Gisborne stops in the turret's lee, sets down the lantern, and unfolds a parchment worn soft at the creases: a DEED-MAP. A manor, its mill, its vale, drawn in a clerk's hand. LOXLEY lettered across it.

His thumb moves once along the boundary line. That's all he permits.

Movement below: in the bailey, two men in the Sheriff's livery stand out of the torchlight. Not watching the fen. Not watching the causeway.

Watching him.

Gisborne looks at them for a long, level moment. They pretend to be a wall.

He folds the deed-map along its soft creases and puts it away, flat inside the surcoat.

GISBORNE (CONT'D)
 (to the serjeant,
 returning)
 Rounds are doubled. Mine as well. I
 walk again at the quarter.

SERJEANT
 Sir, the Sheriff's rota says --

GISBORNE
 You heard me.

He picks up the lantern and walks on, same stride, same height. The mastiff falls in at his heel, and the two liveried men in the bailey have to find something else to look at.

EXT. BLACKMERE KEEP - WATER-GATE - NIGHT

A stone arch at waterline, barred by a grate green with weed. The punt noses under the shadow of the wall. Above: boots, torch-flicker, the doubled watch.

John stands astride the punt's bow, takes the grate in both hands. Tests. The iron GROANS, a whale-sound --

Everyone stops. The boots above pause. Move on.

Across the water, on the causeway wind, the HOUNDS lift their heads. One bays. Another joins -- the handlers turning, lanterns swinging toward the reeds --

Much, hands steady the instant they have work, uncaps a lime pot. He and Robin sow handfuls of pale dust downwind, onto the mud-bank, into the water. It settles on the black surface like frost that forgot to melt.

The lead hound hits the lime-scent mid-stride -- recoils, sneezes, casts in a circle, baying at a world that has stopped making sense. The HANDLER hauls the line, cursing.

HANDLER (O.S.)
 (distant)
 Tanner's yard got in his nose again.
 Useless article.

The lanterns swing back to the causeway.

At the grate, John breathes out. Braces both feet. And BENDS the iron -- slow, continuous, silent except for his own joints -- a man arguing with the smith who made it, and winning by a finger's width at a time. A bar folds. Weed-slime greases his grip; he wipes the palm on his thigh, sets it flat, and pushes from the shoulder.

Above, a boot scrapes the wall-walk. A guard leans out over the water, close enough to hear a man breathe. John stops mid-bend, iron half-turned in his fists, and simply holds it there -- no groan, no give -- until the boot moves off. Then he finishes the pull. A second bar gives.

He holds the gap open with his shoulders while Robin, then Much, then the chest-poles slide through the black water beneath him. Then he folds himself after, impossibly, like a bear using a cat door.

INT. BLACKMERE KEEP - UNDERCROFT WATERWAY - CONTINUOUS

Dripping vaults. The three of them rise from the water, streaming. Above their heads, through the stone: garrison sounds, dice rattling on a drumhead, a man laughing at something that probably wasn't funny.

Much wrings his sleeve, pacing the vault heel-to-toe, lips moving.

MUCH

(whisper)

Eleven paces. The rota put the guardroom at nine. The drawing's off by a room.

Robin holds up a hand: doesn't matter. Points up and mouths: the strong-room. John lifts the pry-bar in answer, water sheeting off the iron.

Much looks back once at the bent grate -- their one door out -- measuring it against the width of trouble. Then he follows, counting stairs under his breath.

INT. BLACKMERE KEEP - STRONG-ROOM - NIGHT (MATINS)

A fat iron door -- already unlocked, which nobody remarks in the hurry. Inside: the chests, iron-strapped, chalked like their Nottingham brothers. Robin's crow-bar lifts the first lid.

Silver. Bars of it, stacked like bread.

ROBIN

Step five, we -- hello.

He stops. Wets a knuckle, runs it along a bar. Looks at his knuckle. Silver leaves you grey when you touch it; this left him nothing.

John picks up a bar one-handed and drops it flat on the flagstones.

It THUDS. Dead. Wooden. Wrong.

He picks up a second, raps it against the first. No ring in it -- the sound a broom-handle makes, not a fortune.

The three of them look at the sound lying there on the floor.

MUCH

Lead. That's -- pigs, painted. That's a fourteen-stone lie in a box.

(rapid, arithmetic taking over)

The weight's short too. Silver would sit lower on the strap-boards, the chalk-tally says four hundredweight, the boards say --

ROBIN

Open them all.

Lids bang. Lead. Lead. Lead. And in the last chest, on top of the pigs, squared to the corners like a laid table:

A WAX TABLET. Fine exchequer hand.

Robin lifts it into the lantern light. A triangle -- three points, roads between them, hours along the roads. Compline at the counting-house, ticked. Matins at Blackmere, boxed. Routes. The tanner's drain. The fen crossing. THIS ROOM, THIS HOUR. Under the fresh writing, old sums ghost up through the wax like drowned men.

Sitting on the tablet: one small wedding ring.

Robin turns the tablet a quarter, then another, reading the road-hours. His thumb finds the boxed word MATINS and presses it, as if it might smear.

MUCH

(reading over his arm;
the stammer comes back)

That's -- that's your night. That's t-tonight, written before --

ROBIN

(very quiet)

It's a playbill.

John takes the tablet from him. Turns it over once, like checking a plank for rot. Hands it back.

JOHN

Kirklees. Third point of his triangle.
He's written an hour by it.

MUCH

Lauds. He's given us until Lauds.
Given. It's a -- Robin, the timetable
was his the whole way, the carter, the
rota, Marian's --

ROBIN

Not hers. Hers was real. This--

(he stops himself; the
showman's voice won't
come)

This one's mine. Written for me.

He stands absolutely still one instant -- the cleverest man
in England reading his own mind in another man's hand. His
fingers close over the little ring without his eyes leaving
the wax.

MUCH

(quieter, doing a sum he
doesn't want the answer
to)

If he knew the fen, and the drain, and
this room -- then the door up there
wasn't left open. It was set.

Then a BELL erupts overhead -- not canonical, harsh,
garrison iron -- and boots hammer above, doors slamming in
sequence, orderly, rehearsed.

Robin palms the ring, snaps the tablet into his shirt.

ROBIN

Out. The water. NOW.

John is already ripping the door wide, a torch-glow washing
down the stair to meet them. Much snatches the lantern off
the chest-lid, then hesitates over the open chests -- a man
who cannot leave a job un-tidied.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

Leave it. It was never ours.

The lead stays where it lay, holding its breath of paint,
worth exactly what everyone paid for it.

INT./EXT. BLACKMERE KEEP - WATERWAY AND FEN - NIGHT

Down the stair three at a stride. Torchlight floods the undercroft behind them -- pikes, shouts, the garrison funneling down.

They hit the water. Through the bent grate -- Robin, then the empty chest-poles abandoned to the current, then Much, dragged under by his own soaked wool and clawing back up --

Outside, in the reeds: the second punt. Will, Tuck, Alan, poles ready. From the causeway, hounds and lanterns converging on the keep -- the whole night waking up at once.

Robin surfaces, slaps the water twice, flat-palmed. A signal.

Will hauls Robin aboard by the collar, both of them nearly going over the far side. John wades out, chest-deep, towing Much by a fistful of jerkin --

-- who stops. Waist-deep. Staring at the two rings of Robin's splash still spreading.

MUCH

Two. What's two? Nobody said what two
-- is two 'come' or two 'scatter'?
There's a difference, the difference is
everything --

WILL

Much. The boat. BOARD IT.

MUCH

(not moving, water to his
ribs, voice going
smaller)

If two means scatter then boarding
kills us all, I can't solve it, nobody
gave me the --

Above on the wall: ARCHERS. A first arrow drops hissing into the reeds a yard from John's ear.

John hauls on the jerkin. Much's feet stay planted in the mud, a mill-post grown into the fen.

Tuck sets down his pole, takes two steps into the water, and picks Much up bodily -- a sack of anxious arithmetic -- and THROWS him over the gunwale into the punt.

TUCK
 (climbing in after, water
 pouring off his habit)
 Saint Fenella forgives the wet. MOVE.

Poles bite. Will and Tuck lean into them together, the hull grinding off a mud-bank and then loose, and the reeds close over the stern. Arrows walk across the water behind them -- one THUNKS into the stern-board and stands there quivering, and Alan stares at it like it owes him a rhyme.

ALAN
 (white, automatic)
 And the bold crew fled the -- fled the
 -- fen --

(beat)
 Nothing rhymes with fen.

JOHN
 Wren.

ALAN
 NOT NOW.

The punt slides behind the reed-wall. Torches line the battlements behind them, useless, furious. The keep shrinks into the dark -- unrobbed, victorious, empty.

In the punt bottom, soaked, the crew counts itself. Six. No silver.

Much sits apart in the bow, dripping, arms around his knees, not looking at Tuck. Not looking at anyone. His lips move, soundless. He reaches once for the tool-roll at his belt, finds it, lets it go.

Will opens his mouth toward him -- and for once closes it without merchandise.

Robin bails with his hat, fast, mechanical, and doesn't offer anyone a step one. The wax tablet presses cold against his chest.

INT. BLACKMERE KEEP - STRONG-ROOM - LATER

Torches now. Order restored. The burst chests stand in a row with their lids up, lead pigs gleaming their lie under the light.

Gisborne stands alone in the middle of it. The mastiff sits in the doorway, forbidden further, and watches him with the patience of a fed animal.

He picks up one pig. Weighs it in one hand, the way a man weighs a hammer, or an argument. His thumbnail works at a corner of it -- small, deliberate strokes.

Paint flakes. Curls of silver skin. Grey lead underneath, dull as a Tuesday.

He looks at the grey for a long time. A man reading his own contract by better light.

He sets the pig on the strap-board and thumbs the chalk-tally beside it -- four hundredweight, a clerk's confident hand. He looks from the number to the flaked grey in his palm. Then he wipes the chalk figure off the board with the heel of his hand.

He takes out the deed-map. Unfolds it beside the flaked pig -- the manor in a clerk's hand, the lead in his own. Holds them, one in each hand, at the same height. The scales of Sir Guy of Gisborne.

He folds the map away.

The SERJEANT appears in the doorway, breathless, keeping clear of the dog.

SERJEANT

Sir -- the birds are away, punt's gone
in the reeds, dogs are blind with
something. Do we ride the causeway? And
-- the inventory, sir, for the
Sheriff's clerk. What did they take?

Gisborne sets the pig down. Then picks it up again and puts it inside his surcoat, against his chest, where the deed-map lives.

GISBORNE

Nothing of value.

SERJEANT

Sir. And what do I write for the
Sheriff?

GISBORNE

That. Word for word.

He takes his lantern off the hook and walks out past the mastiff, who falls in at his heel. The serjeant looks at the open chests full of painted lead, understands none of it, and starts counting pigs.

One short.

INT. EEL-SMOKER'S HUT - FEN - NIGHT

A hut on stilts, one smoky lamp, racks of eels overhead like punctuation. The crew steams around a driftwood fire -- wet wool, wet rope, wet men. Alan has his boots off and his feet to the coals, and nobody has thanked him for the smell.

Hoofbeats outside on the causeway-path. Hands go to knives. Then MARIAN ducks in under the lintel, hawk on fist, rain sliding off her shoulders in a sheet.

MARIAN

The town's ringing like a dropped tray.
Blackmere's signal fires are lit. If a
woman wanted to find six drowned fools,
she'd follow the smell of eels.

She sets the hawk on a roof-beam. It shakes itself, sprays them all, and glares.

Robin already has the wax tablet flat on the fish-bench, lamplit. The triangle. The hours. He weights one corner with a whetstone, the other with a mug, so it won't curl. The crew crowds it, shoulder to shoulder, dripping onto the wax.

ROBIN

His whole hand, face-up. The real
bulk's at Kirklees -- there's his
muster order, there's the hostages'
slot at Prime. So. Step one: we stop
stealing.

WILL

I beg your entire pardon.

ROBIN

We SWAP. Kirklees before Lauds, through
the flood culvert Tuck knows -- silver
out, ballast in, his own convoy carries
the lie south under his own seal. He
signs it himself.

He taps the muster line twice, then flattens his palm over the whole triangle, the way a man covers a bet.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

It's not a theft. It's a forgery the
size of a county.

It lands. Even John's beard moves -- almost a smile. Tuck blesses the plan with the ale-jug.

Much has the tablet tilted against the lamp now, one eye shut, nose an inch off the wax.

MUCH

(bent low, tilting it)

There's older writing under. Ghosting.
Sums -- these aren't levy sums. Levy's
thirteen thousand. These columns are
shorter, they re-add, they --
somebody's been keeping two counts of
one treasure.

His thumb hovers over the faint scratches without touching
them, the way he won't touch the brass fitting in front of
others.

ROBIN

(taking it back, not
slowing)

The Sheriff's arithmetic is his own sin
to carry. Keep the tablet dry.

Much opens his mouth. Closes it. Wraps the tablet in oiled
eel-skin and knots it twice, filing the itch away
unscratched.

MARIAN

The swap needs seals. His travel matrix
sits in the chancery drawer. If a woman
rode back within the hour, she'd have
it by --

ROBIN

Done.

Marian pauses. A beat too easy. She studies him across the
lamp.

MARIAN

No conditions? No wager?

ROBIN

You're the only one of us the gate will
pass. It's good sense.

It is good sense, and they both hear what it isn't. Tuck
looks between them and finds something fascinating in the
jug. Marian pulls her hood up, takes the hawk back onto her
fist.

MARIAN

(at the door)

Watch the sky for her.

She lifts the bird into the dark. Gone.

Robin bends back over the tablet, one runner at a time, all threads in one fist. Behind him John gathers rope without a word. For half a breath Robin looks up at the door she left through. Then back to the wax.

INT. SHERIFF'S COUNTING-ROOM - BEFORE DAWN

The candle again, burned to a stub, a second one waiting unlit beside it. Reynard writes, ink-stained finger steady down a column. The door BANGS.

GISBORNE crosses the room, fen-mud to the thigh, and sets the painted pig on the open ledger. Not a slam. Placed. Exactly, on the wet ink.

GISBORNE

Lead.

REYNARD

(not looking up)

You are off your post, Sir Guy.

GISBORNE

My post guarded paint. Twelve extra men. My name on the surety. Your men in my bailey, watching me watch nothing.

He does not raise his voice. He never does.

GISBORNE (CONT'D)

Say it plainly. I was the goat staked for the wolf.

REYNARD

You were an entry. The entry performed.

(now he looks up)

The wolf came, the wolf fled, the wolf believed. Your part is concluded and your fee stands. Loxley manor, at Prime, per contract.

GISBORNE

You let my men stand a wall for a lie. Men take arrows for what's in the vault.

REYNARD

Men take arrows for what they THINK is in the vault. It is cheaper. And it heals identically.

Gisborne holds where he is. On the desk between them: the coin-tray of confiscated wedding rings, sorted by size, rows labelled in the same fine hand. The candle. The pig,

sweating a grey smear into the parchment.

GISBORNE

I have never told a lie in my life. You
put one under my roof and had me feed
it torches.

Reynard sets down his pen. He looks at the pig, at the
smeared line. His finger touches the rim of the coin-tray.
One ring. Two.

REYNARD

Entries do not question the ledger, Sir
Guy.

(he stops counting)

The ledger balances at Prime. Bring your garrison to the
scaffold square by the half-bell; the debt hangs at dawn and
I will want honest steel around it.

He lifts the pig by its snout, weighs it, sets it down again
on Gisborne's side of the desk.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

You may keep the pig. Call it a
souvenir of your usefulness.

A long moment. Gisborne reads the manor's name in the
contract, upside down from where he stands, the big square
letters he made them write. He picks up the pig. Puts it
back inside his surcoat, next to the deed-map.

GISBORNE

My men will be there by the half-bell.
I heard you.

He goes. Reynard blots the pig-shaped smear from his ledger,
re-rules the line beneath it in a fresh stroke, and
continues the column where he left it.

EXT. EEL-SMOKER'S HUT - DOORWAY - NIGHT (RAIN)

Rain sheets off the thatch in a rope. Inside, lamplight, the
crew packing -- Will folding crimson, Alan winding a
lute-string round his wrist. Robin stands in the doorway
between the warm and the wet, finishing the plan to John.
Bright, fast, airtight.

ROBIN

-- culvert by the half-bell, Great
Silence covers the cloister, Tuck leads
to the undercroft, and from there --

JOHN

From there.

ROBIN

From there it's handled.

JOHN

Handled.

Robin waits for the rest of it. It doesn't come. John sets his staff against the jamb -- deliberately, the way another man would roll up his sleeves -- and steps out under the drip beside him.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Will's face is in a day-book because
Will had a fragment. Much stood in the
water because two splashes meant
nothing to him.

He lays them down flat, one weight after another. John doesn't gesture.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Marian's riding at a castle because
you'd rather risk her than share her.

ROBIN

That's -- no. Marian rides because
she's the best of us at exactly that,
and I'll wager you a --

JOHN

You don't have a crew, Robin. You have
an audience.

Rain. Behind them Alan's lute gives one wet note and stops.

Robin's grin arrives on schedule, a half-second before his eyes.

ROBIN

Then it's a very loyal audience,
because the seats are terrible and it
keeps --

(the grin stops working;
he pushes anyway)

It's care, John. Every man carries what he can drop without
it killing the rest. That's not a wall, that's -- ask Much
what a load-limit is. It's how you build a --

He stops. Because he can hear it. Out loud, in the rain, it
sounds exactly as thin as it is.

John watches him hear it. Ten years of covering for him -- a laugh in the right place, a subject changed -- and he doesn't cover it now. He waits, and the waiting is the whole sentence.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
 (quieter; a real offer,
 the only coin he has)
 At Kirklees. When we're through the
 wall, I'll -- we'll see. Catch me wrong
 tonight and I'll carry your staff a
 year.

JOHN
 Middling.

John picks up the staff, steps out past him into the full rain, and stands the watch -- ten feet off, back turned. Close enough to guard him. Too far to be with him.

Robin stays in the doorway, lit from behind, alone in front of his whole crew.

INT. NOTTINGHAM CASTLE - CHANCERY - NIGHT

Dark. Marian comes through the window like a rumor -- one boot, then the other, no sound -- and knows this room in the black, crosses to the seal-cabinet without a candle. Her hawk settles on the sill behind her, out of the wet, and folds.

The matrix drawer. She reaches. Stops. Two fingers, testing the pull.

It slides. Unlocked. Oiled. Silent.

Her hand stays on the drawer. In the dark her thumb finds her brother's ring and turns it once against the pad of her finger.

REYNARD (O.S.)
 (from the corner,
 unhurried)
 Wardship of the Fitzwalter estate:
 forty marks the year. The lady's
 marriage, at market: two hundred.

A shutter opens. Reynard, seated in the corner with the night behind him, an unlit taper in his hand. He lights it from the brazier coals, and the room grows a low orange.

REYNARD

Her uses these eleven years -- rota
copied, manifest copied, a gate changed
by Compline -- I price at a war.

In the new light: SOLDIERS in the doorway. Four of them.
Courteous. Waiting to be told.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

The drawer was oiled for you Tuesday.
You are punctual, which I have always
admired.

Marian does not look at the window. She looks at him, and
her voice comes out smoother than silk, the courtlier for
the danger.

MARIAN

If a clerk found a lady in the chancery
at night, he might wonder which of them
had lost his way. I would be happy to
escort you out, my lord.

REYNARD

Four soldiers. Two doors. One window.

(he rises, taper high)

The arithmetic declines your kindness, lady.

The soldiers step in. Marian doesn't bolt. She turns her
wrist once against the sill -- a small motion, a practiced
one -- and the jess slips free into her palm.

MARIAN

(to the hawk,
conversational)

Go on. Nothing for you here.

She tosses the bird up through the open window. It beats
away into the dark, jess trailing empty.

Reynard watches it go. For once, he counts nothing.

REYNARD

A message with no words. Whom do I
torture for its meaning?

MARIAN

(offering her wrists like
a woman offering her hand
at a dance)

It means feed her at dusk. She bites
otherwise.

(a beat)

So do I.

They shackle her -- gently, at his nod, which is somehow worse than rough. She does not flinch at the iron. Reynard crosses to the cabinet and, last of all, unhurried, pockets the seal matrix himself, a man collecting his winnings off the table.

EXT. FEN EDGE - NIGHT

The crew loads the punts by feel, no lamps -- chests, coils, the lashed lime pots. Overhead a shape drops out of the black. The HAWK lands hard on the gunwale, wet, furious, talons scoring the wood.

Jess empty.

Nobody says anything. The hawk mantles, glares around the ring of faces, cheated of dinner, proof of everything. Tuck reaches to soothe it and thinks better of his hand.

ROBIN

(flat)

Load faster.

ACROSS THE FEN -- lantern-chains crawl the causeways: mounted serjeants in pairs, HOUNDS keyed low over the mud, noses down.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM - SCAFFOLD SQUARE - SAME TIME

Torches ring the platform. The SEVEN HOSTAGES are marched up the scaffold steps and seated on the boards themselves, lit like a mystery play -- the reeve grey and straight-backed, the miller's widow, the boy of fifteen. Advertising. On the tariff board, fresh figures over the old, doubled again in a fine hand.

EXT. FEN EDGE - CONTINUOUS

At the foot of the eel-hut ladder, a skinny MAN in a good cloak stands with Tuck, holding a slate with faces chalked on it. Tuck's voice stays low and warm. His hands don't.

TUCK

Barnaby. Brother. The abbey's ale settles Michaelmas quarter-day, it always has --

BARNABY

Quarter-day was Tuesday, friar.

(he tips the slate to the
torch-glow)
Six descriptions. Fair likenesses. Every bailiff from here
to Lincoln pays by the face. Or your dice-marks clear by
dawn.

TUCK
Saint Osbert teaches that a debt paid
in haste is a debt paid twice --

BARNABY
Saint Osbert isn't holding your slate.

Behind them, at the punts, Alan is humming his triumphant
Nottingham ballad under his breath, packing to the tune,
happy as a man who has forgotten where he is.

WILL
(quiet, then not)
Stop it. STOP THAT SONG.

Steel. Will's knife is out and low. Alan's hand goes flat on
his lute like it's a child at his chest.

ALAN
(the words before the
sense)
And the tailor drew his little pin --

WILL
That song walked the foresters to the
Oak. Sing it once more and --

JOHN steps between them. Doesn't push. Just IS, a door
swinging shut. The two of them stand on either side of him
like coats on pegs. The knife goes away. The song stops.

And Much -- shouted over by three voices at once -- has gone
still over the punt-lashing, hands stopped mid-knot, chin
down, lips not moving.

The loading stalls. Out on the water, the lantern-chain is
closer than it was.

ROBIN
(low, to all of them, the
shine back over the top
of it)
Enough.

He moves through them, a hand on this shoulder, a word at
that ear, dealing them out like cards.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

Tuck -- promise him double from the
abbey's luck. He'll wait for greed
where he won't for God. Will, Alan --
opposite punts, now. Much.

(nothing)

Much. The knot.

Much's hands don't move. His eyes are on the chalk faces
across the mud.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

(gentler; the one gentle
thing left in him
tonight)

The knot, Much. Just the one in front
of you.

Much's hands start again. Slowly. Over. Under. The punts
push off into the reeds.

Far across the black water, KIRKLEES ABBEY begins to light
its windows. One. Then a whole row at once, like a thing
waking up and deciding not to hide it.

EXT. REED BANK - BEACHED PUNT - NIGHT

The punts pulled up in cover, reeds hissing. Upstream, the
abbey glow lies flat on the water. The crew rests in shifts;
from the second punt, snores. Tuck sits in the beached bow
with the ale-jug and his parchment beer-mat across his knee.

He holds the writ out to Robin. Actually hands it over.

TUCK

Read it once. Someone besides me
should.

Robin takes it, tilts it to the abbey light.

ROBIN

(reading)

'...irredeemable appetite... dice...
the sum of eighty marks unaccounted
from the poor-box --'

(looks up)

Eighty?

TUCK

Sixty. She improved me by twenty for
the record, God love her. I put it back

(MORE)

TUCK (CONT'D)

over four years, which the record does not say.

He drinks. Wipes the neck of the jug on his sleeve, courteous, and holds it out.

TUCK (CONT'D)

Barnaby's slate is the last of it come home. There. Now one man knows the whole weight of me, and the punt didn't sink.

Robin takes the jug and doesn't drink. The abbey light moves on the water between them. His free hand rises -- the arrowheads under his collar -- and this time Tuck watches him do it, and Robin watches Tuck watch.

His hand stops on the cord.

ROBIN

Tuck. What I carry --

(a breath; the showman's voice gone; the words very slow)

I've kept the whole shape of every night to myself since before you knew me. All of it, always, only here. And it's --

(he can't; his hand drops from the cord; the grin limps back)

-- it's a long story, and we're due at church.

Silence. Tuck takes the jug back. Doesn't push. Doesn't fill it.

TUCK

Saint Dismas -- the thief on the hill, the good one -- got absolution on scaffolding. Last possible hour. No story told at all.

(he flicks a few drops of ale at Robin's boots, a blessing)

There's precedent. That's all I'm saying.

He corks the jug. Upstream, the abbey burns brighter.

EXT. NOTTINGHAM - ROOFTOPS ABOVE SCAFFOLD SQUARE - NIGHT

Robin and John flat on wet slates, chins to the tiles, looking down into the torchlit square. They shouldn't be here. Robin insisted -- one look before Kirklees, and John came so he wouldn't come alone.

Below: the scaffold with its seated seven. The convoy forming up rank by rank, wagons, mounted men, the whole machine assembling in straight lines.

A BELL begins to toll. PRIME. Deep, wrong, half a night early. Down in the square even the soldiers look up, lips moving, counting the strokes against a sky still black.

On the platform Reynard steps forward, a tablet in hand, and the square hushes for him.

REYNARD

The hour of Prime is moved by order of the crown's business. What was promised at dawn occurs at the half-bell.

(a pause, priced exactly)

Exhibit the clerk.

Soldiers bring her up the steps: MARIAN, shackled, chin level, walking as if she'd chosen the stairs herself, dressed for her own arraignment.

REYNARD (CONT'D)

Marian Fitzwalter. The outlaw's clerk, taken in the chancery with the crown's seals about her. Entered accordingly.

He crosses to the gallows-board, takes up the chalk, and writes -- fine, unhurried exchequer letters, the near crowd reading each stroke as it forms -- her name. Eighth. Below the reeve. Above nobody.

Then, from his sleeve, small between two fingers: a signet ring. He holds it up to the torchlight -- HAL'S SIGNET, twin of the one reversed on Marian's thumb -- and lets it fall into the coin-tray on the clerk's table below the board. A tiny, exact CLICK. Sorted. By size. Into the Loxley row.

On the platform, Marian sits at the end of the hostage line, beside the boy of fifteen. She turns her head and says something to him -- small, practical, no comfort wasted in it. The boy stops shaking quite so hard.

On the rooftop, Robin does not move. Rain runs off his chin and ticks on the slate. His hand is not at his throat; it is flat on the tiles, white at the knuckles, pressing. John's

hand comes up near his shoulder -- hovers an inch off the wet wool, does not land.

ROBIN

(perfectly calm; the worst sound he's made all night)

Step one. You take the crew to the leper gate and make noise at the culvert like six men going in.

JOHN

Robin.

ROBIN

Step two, I go in. Alone travels faster.

JOHN

And the back half?

ROBIN

The back half is me.

He's already moving, down the roof-slope, hands and heels sure on the wet, precise as a clock's second hand. John stays a moment on the tiles, looking after him -- then down at the square, at the eighth name drying pale on the board.

JOHN

(to no one; he can't whisper, so it carries)

Middling.

He goes down the slope after him.

EXT. KIRKLEES ABBEY - LEPER GATE - NIGHT

Lit windows above; below them the outer precinct wall and its lowest, meanest gate.

A procession shuffles toward it out of the dark. Six figures in lazar-house shrouds, hoods drawn to the chin, wooden clappers knocking their slow, dreadful rhythm ahead of them. Clack. Clack.

The guards at the gate hear it before they see it. They back off the road by pure reflex, pikes half-lowered like men warding off weather.

At the wicket, an old NUN in a white wimple lays out alms loaves in a row, each thumbbed with the abbey's cross. Unhurried by the hour. She watches the road the way old women watch roads.

The lead shroud -- Tuck's bulk, unmistakable under any cloth -- raises a slow hand in blessing. Behind him the tallest shroud carries a covered creel against its chest. The thinnest of the six carries something lute-shaped, swaddled tight, held so it will not knock.

A SERJEANT steps out of the guardhouse shadow. Sheriff's livery, not the abbey's. He plants himself in the middle of the road.

SERJEANT
Precinct's closed. Crown business.

No one answers. The clappers knock. Clack. Clack.

SERJEANT (CONT'D)
(a step closer; not
afraid, only thorough)
Lazar-house pilgrims walk singing.
That's the custom, that's the license.
Sing the psalm and I'll wave you round.

Silence.

Under the shrouds, five people stop breathing.

Because six lepers must sing like six lepers -- and only one of them dares open his mouth.

Inside his hood, Alan lifts his head. His shoulders drop. And he begins.

A cracked bass first, low and rotten -- then, impossibly, a reedy tenor climbing over it to answer -- a wheezing drone laid under both -- a boy's split treble floating on top and falling off the note on purpose. Four ruined voices out of one throat, ragged, overlapping. The psalm of the unclean rises off the little procession and hangs in the cold like smoke.

The serjeant's face does what every living face does at that sound. He steps back off the road entirely, all the way to the wall.

SERJEANT (CONT'D)
(waving them past without
looking up)
Go on. Go. GO. Round by the ditch --
not past the guardhouse --

The procession shuffles through the gate, clappers knocking, in no hurry at all. As the tallest shroud draws level with the wicket, its free hand rises -- once -- to the throat, to something corded there under the cloth, and settles it.

The old nun's eyes follow the hand up. Then the man. Then the whole slow spine of him as he passes.

She turns back to her loaves and says nothing.

Inside the wall, swallowed in shadow, the singing stops dead. Alan sags against the cold stone, spent. Tuck catches him, grips his shoulder through the shroud, holds him up.

TUCK

(low)

Saint Cecilia bent four strings for you
tonight. She'll want the lute back
eventually.

ALAN

(hoarse, drained to
nothing, and even now)

And the choir of the damned
processed... rhyme-free... by special
request.

INT. FLOOD CULVERT - UNDER THE MINT - NIGHT

A stone gullet, waist-deep in black water, breathing cold up out of itself. The crew wades in single file, hands on the slimed walls. Tuck's lantern swings low and finds the far end.

BARS.

New iron, unruined, the mortar around the footings still pale -- set this season, and set to keep men out.

TUCK

(to the low ceiling,
wounded)

It was open in my day.

(he lifts the lantern to
the fresh iron)

You've grown suspicious in Your old age.

John wades to the front, hands his quarterstaff back over his shoulder without looking; Will takes it. He sets his boots wide on the flooded stone, wraps both hands around the two center bars, braces his back against the wall.

He bends.

The bar fights him. This is nothing like the water-gate's weeded lattice -- this is fresh forge-work, cold and mean. His shoulders load until the shroud strains across them. His boots grind, slip, find purchase. The iron gives -- a hand's

width -- another --

The wet bar SLIPS in his wet grip.

It springs back across both open palms and he takes the whole load raw, skin splitting on the burred edge where the file left it rough.

He does not make a sound.

He cannot whisper. So he bleeds -- face pressed to the cold iron, breath dragging through his nose, both hands closed on the sprung bar, holding it wide by main strength.

He tips his head: go.

The crew posts through the gap under his arms, one at a time. Tuck, sideways, grunting. Will, kit held high and dry over his head. Alan, still gray from the gate. Robin, ducking, a hand brushing John's shoulder as he goes.

Much comes last, pushing his tool-roll ahead of him on a scrap of floating board, guiding it like a laden pony over ice.

A surge of current shoulders through the culvert.

The board tips. The tool-roll -- awls, pegs, twine, the little carved models -- rolls off the edge and is gone, straight down into the black.

Much lunges after it.

John's knee comes up and blocks him. Gently. Like a gate swinging shut. There is no time and they both do the arithmetic in the same half-second: a diver in that water, and the whole night ends here.

Much stops. He stares at the black surface where his hands' entire language just drowned. His mouth works once. Nothing comes.

Then he ducks his head and goes through the gap.

John eases the sprung bar back toward true -- close enough -- and folds himself through last of all, leaving two dark prints on the wet iron.

Ahead: stone stairs climbing up out of the water toward a thin sliver of moonlight.

TUCK (CONT'D)
 (low, to the ceiling,
 binding John's ruined
 hands)

The hands were his. The iron was Yours.

(he knots the rag)
 We'll call it even.

EXT. KIRKLEES ABBEY - CLOISTER - NIGHT (THE GREAT SILENCE)

Moonlight lies flat on square-cut grass. Covered walks run all four sides of the garth. No wind moves. No sound at all -- not a cough, not a hinge -- the hour when the whole house is forbidden speech, and keeps it.

The crew comes up out of the undercroft stair and stops at the edge of the light. Dripping. Absurd. Six armed shadows in the holiest silence in the shire.

To reach the mint door they must cross the open garth. In full moonlight. There is no other way and no darker minute coming.

They go. Single file. Painfully slow.

And the SISTERS are awake.

A young nun stands at the mouth of the far walk, a taper cupped in one hand, halted mid-errand. She sees them. Six outlaws steaming faintly in the cold moon, water pooling off their hems onto the sacred grass. Her lips part --

-- and the Great Silence closes over the sound before it is born. She looks at them. They look back, frozen mid-stride. Law and curiosity balance on a knife's edge.

Then she turns her back. Not fleeing. Offering them the one mercy the hour permits: the courtesy of not existing.

And she is not alone. Along the walks, other shapes resolve out of the dark -- a sister at a lit window, drawing back; a second in a doorway, hands folded into her sleeves; a third at the corner, motionless as the stonework. The whole abbey, awake and watching six thieves cross its heart, and refusing, formally, to know a thing about it.

Halfway across, Will's boot comes down on the one gravel path laid through a whole lawn of grass.

The crunch is deafening.

Everyone stops. The moon does not care. A long, held nothing -- and then nothing keeps happening. They move again. Will

finishes the crossing up on his toes, arms out for balance, stepping like a heron in a duck pond, dignity intact by force of will alone.

Tuck comes last. And Tuck stops.

Through the open church door off the cloister: the ALTAR, candled, quiet. The very rail he was dragged from with a writ read out over his bowed head. His writ. Her hand on the wax.

He looks at it a long moment. The others reach the far walk without him.

Then he steps in through the door. Dips two fingers in the font. And blesses himself -- slowly, deliberately, forehead, breast, each shoulder -- a man quietly taking back a coat that always fit him.

He rejoins the line. Will, waiting at the mint door, arches one eyebrow: all square?

Tuck tips his head back toward the church in general.

TUCK (CONT'D)
(barely a breath)
Hers is the lock. It was never His.

They slip through the mint door one by one, out of the moon, and the garth is empty grass again.

INT. KIRKLEES MINT - UNDERCROFT JUNCTION - NIGHT

One lantern between six. A low vaulted junction where the passage forks: LEFT, toward the vault under the chapter house; RIGHT, toward the bakehouse court and its gate.

Robin gathers them in, and the lantern-light draws the circle small and close.

ROBIN

Right-hand passage. Bakehouse court. At the half-bell you make six men's worth of noise at that gate -- carts, iron, boots, a good argument about money -- and then you're over the ditch and gone before anyone thinks to count heads. That pulls the yard-watch off the chapter house while I'm in the vault and out of it. Step one through step four. And every step is LOUD.

MUCH

(the wax tablet in its
oiled eel-skin still
strapped flat to his
chest; quiet, past
pretending now)

And the vault side. Loads. Doors.
Counts. How many between you and it?

ROBIN

One door. One me. The arithmetic sings.

It isn't an answer, and all five of them hear that it isn't.
The lantern hisses. Somewhere overhead a roof-beam ticks as
it settles -- the whole sleeping building breathing on top
of them.

John looks at Robin. One beat. Two. Too long -- a door held
open, plainly, for the last time tonight.

Robin looks away first.

John shoulders the ram-bar, turns, and starts down the
right-hand fork.

WILL

(catching Robin's arm;
pressing something small
and hard into his palm)

Here. Bad luck to walk into the dark
with no way to see what's behind you.

Robin opens his hand. The MIRROR SHARD -- edge smoothed,
backed and bound in a strip of crimson-stitched cloth.

ROBIN

(turning it in the
lantern-light)

Will Scarlet. Parting with a mirror.

(pocketing it, over his
heart)

If I don't come back, tell them that before you tell them
anything else about me.

WILL

You'll bring it back.

(already turning away,
gruff)

It's my good one.

They file off right, one after another, swallowed into the
dark. Robin stands alone at the fork.

His hand rises to the cord at his throat, to the arrowheads under his collar -- once. Settles them.

Then he lifts the lantern, takes the left-hand passage, and walks down it easy and unhurried, chin up, like a man strolling out to the front of his own stage.

INT. KIRKLEES ABBEY - VAULT - NIGHT

A long undercroft room, and Robin's lantern gives it to him in pieces. Coin-dies wrapped in altar cloth. The trial-plate on its chain. And then, past them -- chests. Rows of them, iron-strapped, chalked, squatting in the dark like a congregation with its back turned.

He crosses to the nearest and kneels. Sets the lantern down. Presses his thumbs into the lid-seam --

A VOICE, from the black at the far end of the room. Unhurried. Old.

PRIORESS (O.S.)

The candles, child. You walked past four of them. Lit.

Robin goes still. Then he straightens, slow, and turns toward the dark.

At the far end, seated in a plain wooden chair among the chests like a woman at home receiving late callers: PRIORESS ERMENGARDE. The old nun from the leper gate. A cup of watered wine on the chest beside her elbow. She has been waiting here a long while, and it has not put her out in the least.

ROBIN

(the grin arriving a half-second ahead of the rest of him; step one)

Reverend Mother. I've come about the accounts. There's an error in your cellar the size of a king's ransom, and I'm the auditor heaven sent --

PRIORESS

You touched the arrowheads at my gate, boy.

The word boy lands wrong. Robin's grin holds. Everything behind it stops.

PRIORESS (CONT'D)

Fifth leper. A head too tall for the shroud, a stride too proud for a dying man, and that hand going up to that cord.

(she lifts the cup,
drinks)

You were nine the first time I watched it happen. The communion silver stuffed down your shirt, a lie already loading behind your teeth, and up went the hand -- just so.

(she sets the cup down)

You never wanted the silver, child. You wanted the congregation.

ROBIN

(recovering, pushing on;
the offer)

I want this silver. Name the abbey's price. I'm told it always has one --

PRIORESS

Kirklees has kept boys' secrets for forty years. It charges interest. Tonight yours came due. The Sheriff paid it in full.

Robin moves -- weight shifting toward the stair, the door, anything --

And the dark moves first.

From behind the chest-rows. From the foot of the stair. From the very door he strolled in through. MEN-AT-ARMS in Gisborne's colors rise up out of the black, crossbows already level, and the ring draws closed without the smallest hurry -- because hurry was never needed.

Robin's eyes go around the room, counting exits. The count comes back zero. His lantern-hand does not shake at all.

ROBIN

(to her; the last card,
laid down light)

A wager, then. Double or nothing. Best of three, you pick the game --

PRIORESS

The abbey will pray on it.

She sets down her cup. Rises. And makes the sign of the cross over him, slow and complete -- benediction and signed receipt in one unbroken motion.

PRIORESS (CONT'D)

Take him up. Mind the candles --
they're the abbey's.

(as the men close)

He is expected at Prime. And Kirklees keeps its deliveries whole.

Robin lowers his hands and opens them.

They take his knife. They take his lantern. And it is exactly, exactly that quiet.

INT. PRIORESS'S PARLOUR - KIRKLEES - BEFORE LAUDS

A small room, warm and ruthless. A ledger open on a lectern. A caged linnet asleep on its perch in the corner, head under its wing. Between them, spread on the table, the night's paperwork.

Reynard stands. Ermengarde sits. He would not sit in this room if she begged him, and she will not beg.

REYNARD

One outlaw. Delivered whole, as agreed.
One portion below, untouched. Two hours
to Prime.

(he lays a purse on the
table without weight or
ceremony)

The balance of the eighty. The account closes.

PRIORESS

The account of the taking closes.

(she does not look at the
purse)

The account of the using opens. You mean to stand him on a scaffold, before the whole shire, and have him unsay himself. A recantation is a sacrament turned inside out, Lord Sheriff. Kirklees does not lend sacraments.

(beat)

It leases them.

REYNARD

(quieter; the counting
starting)

One lectern. One ledger. One caged
bird. Forty years of one small abbey,
exempt from three kings' levies, no
crown auditor ever once through that
door --

PRIORESS

Sixty marks for the recantation. Spoken beneath the abbey's blessing, so the crowd standing there knows that heaven has co-signed it -- else it is only a beaten man mumbling, and beaten men are cheap.

(she folds her hands)

And the seven -- eight -- souls chalked on your board. The abbey will pray them down to exile. Prayer of that weight is another forty.

REYNARD

The eight are the exhibit. Exhibits hang. That is what an exhibit is for.

PRIORESS

Then the abbey prays on it.

(beat; she folds her hands)

A crowd that watches mercy come down believes the legend simply broke -- knelt, recanted, went out. A crowd that watches eight necks stretch believes it was murdered, and a murdered legend does not die. It recruits.

(quietly)

You are buying belief, my lord. Buy enough of it.

Reynard looks at her a long moment. The one ledger in the whole shire he cannot open, cannot audit, cannot make afraid.

REYNARD

The recantation at Prime. Under your blessing.

(a beat, conceding it)

Exile for the seven -- if he performs. If he balks on that scaffold, the deal is ash and the ropes come out. And the clerk stays mine.

(he sweeps his tablet up off the table)

It is so.

PRIORESS

Pax tecum.

He is already at the door.

PRIORESS (CONT'D)

Et cave a mendicis, my lord.

(as he pauses, hand on
the latch)

Beware of beggars. They are the one audience in the world
with nothing to lose by laughing.

Reynard stops -- just one instant -- turns the words over,
files them as an oddity, and goes out.

The latch clicks. The linnet wakes, shakes out its feathers,
and begins, off-key, to sing.

INT. KIRKLEES ABBEY - BELL-TOWER CELL - BEFORE LAUDS

A round room under the bells: one stool, one slit window,
ropes vanishing up into the dark. The Prioress sets a cup of
watered wine on the stool, square in its centre, where a man
will have to cross the room to reach it. Robin stands at the
wall, wrists free -- the cell is courteous; the tower is
sixty feet.

PRIORESS (CONT'D)

Recant at Prime, beneath the abbey's
blessing, and the abbey prays your
seven down to exile. Refuse, and they
precede you. The terms do not improve
with the hour.

(at the door, turning)

Kirklees leaves you the one thing the condemned always
mistake for mercy. Time.

The door closes. The key turns once, then a second smaller
turn -- a lock being made certain of. Very loud.

Robin goes to the slit window. Below: the broad market
square before the abbey gate, filling with torches. Workmen
bolt a SCAFFOLD together out of cart-beams; a mason chips a
level seat for the upright, spits on his palms, sets to
again. A wagon rolls in from the Nottingham road carrying
the gallows-board, the chalked names riding at an angle like
a psalm-board -- the Sheriff's theater, moved overnight to
the treasure it serves. The hostage cart behind it. A grey
braid between soldiers: Marian.

Somewhere down there a dog barks at the cartwheels and
nobody calls it off.

Robin looks a long time. Then he sits on the floor, back to
the stone.

His hands go to his collar and work the cord's knot --
stiff, years stiff -- until it gives.

He pours the arrowheads into his palm. Counts them, one by one, turning each with his thumb.

ROBIN

Wat. Osric the elder. Osric's boy. Tom
Fletcher...

(and last, held apart
from the others)

...Hal.

Eleven in his palm. He closes his hand.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

(to the empty cell, dry,
even)

There was no traitor.

He turns one arrowhead over with his thumb. The oldest one, the notched one.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

There was a boy in an alehouse who
wanted a girl to think he was clever.

Nothing answers. The bells above him hold their tongues. He sits with it -- the sentence out in the air after eleven years, and the cell no different, and himself still breathing.

He gets up, crosses to the stool, and drinks the watered wine, all of it, standing over it with his dead in his fist. It's thin and sour and he finishes it anyway, because she was right about the time and a man has to do something with it.

He sets the cup down upside down, the way a man does with an empty vessel he means to keep track of.

Then -- below, off-key, from the crowd: a TUNE. Familiar. Forbidden. Badly sung, on purpose.

Robin's head comes up.

INT. BELL-TOWER CELL - AT THE SLIT WINDOW - CONTINUOUS

Robin presses into the window slit, cheek to the cold stone, one eye working the torchlit crowd. Deep in the waking square a hooded busker saws at a lute: ALAN, singing the CACHE-BALLAD -- the song that dug up the Trysting Oak, the song the whole crew is forbidden on pain of Will.

Robin flinches -- the old wound song -- then stops.

The verses are wrong.

ALAN (V.O.)
 (drifting up, mangled,
 cheerful)
 ...and the DOOR walked up on its own
 two men, and knocked itself on the
 wall... / ...the bakehouse bride wed a
 scandalous man, with a GOOSE to carry
 her train...

Robin mouths it back at the glass. Door. John. Wedding --
 Will --

His thumbnail finds a seam in the mortar and picks at it
 while he listens, the way another man would count on his
 fingers.

ALAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 ...the friar he paid what the friar he
 owed, and the ale ran FREE at the
 gallows... / ...and the miller's boy
 weighed the mo-o-on, and found her a
 beam too light...

Beer. Tuck. Beam -- counterweight -- MUCH.

Down below, a pardoner is crying relics against the noise
 and selling none of them.

Robin stands at the slit, gripping stone, doing the one
 thing he does best: seeing a whole plan from fragments.
 Except it is not a plan. It is five plans, pitched in
 public, in code, to each other, under the Sheriff's counting
 eyes -- by a crew with no leader, no orders, and no
 intention whatsoever of going home.

They didn't scatter. They came back. With THEIRS.

Robin starts to laugh. Quietly at first -- a man trying to
 hold soup in a cracked bowl -- then helplessly, sliding down
 the wall, forehead to the cold stone, shoulders going, the
 arrowheads loose in his fist.

The first honest sound he's made all night.

Above him the great bells hang mute, waiting for Lauds.
 Below, Alan's ruined choir launches another verse about a
 goose, and half the drunks in earshot are starting to hum
 along without knowing they've been enlisted.

INT. BELL-TOWER CELLS - ADJOINING - NIGHT

Robin crosses to the shared wall, crouches, and lays his knuckles low against the floor-stone. He taps: three knocks, then two -- an old poacher's count. A pause. His palm flattens on the wall, waiting for it through his own skin.

Three knocks back. Then two. Then MARIAN'S VOICE, low through some flaw in the old stone, startlingly near:

MARIAN (O.S.)

If a man got a woman arrested for his cause, one would expect him to at least be in a better cell.

ROBIN

(almost a laugh; then,
flat and careful)

Marian. Before anything. There's a thing I should have said eleven years ago, and you'll want to be sitting.

MARIAN (O.S.)

I'm chained to a ring. Proceed.

Robin sets his back to the wall so his mouth is at the flaw, and closes his eyes.

ROBIN

The Loxley raid. The eleven. There was no informer in the crew.

(beat; his hand finds the
cord isn't at his throat
anymore; it's in his
fist)

It was me. The Blue Boar, the night before. I laid the whole of it out loud -- every step, every post -- to shine in front of a merchant's ward I'd met twice. A man by the hearth sold every word. They took the crew at dawn and I overslept in a hayloft.

(the hardest part,
plainly)

Hal was on the list because of my mouth. I let the shire hunt a traitor because a traitor was a better story than a boy showing off. That girl was you. You've known me eleven years, and that's the first whole thing I've ever handed anyone.

Stone silence. A long one. On the far side of it, the small dry scrape of a chain shifting, and nothing else.

When her voice comes back it is precise and cold and has not moved one inch toward him.

MARIAN (O.S.)

Eleven years of watching every man in that crew wondering which of them did it.

ROBIN

Yes.

MARIAN (O.S.)

Wat's widow still sets a place. You knew that. You ate at her table.

ROBIN

(barely)

Yes.

A breath through the stone. Then the temperature of her changes -- not warmer; usable.

MARIAN (O.S.)

We are not finished with this. But we are finished with it TONIGHT, because the bell is against us.

ROBIN

Then -- your plan. Tell me my part.

Through the wall, a breath. If a woman could be heard straightening --

MARIAN (O.S.)

Not steal. SWAP. Their manifests for mine, my seals on their loads. The convoy hauls Blackmere's lead south under the Sheriff's own signature, and the silver leaves this abbey dressed as alms.

(beat)

I'll need my brother back. The Sheriff keeps him in a coin-tray.

ROBIN

Step -- no. Say it your way. What do I do?

MARIAN (O.S.)

You? You do the one thing no one else in England can do for us.

(beat)

Hang.

Silence on Robin's side of the wall now. His thumb runs over the arrowheads once -- and stops, and doesn't finish the old motion.

ROBIN

...How long do I hold them?

MARIAN (O.S.)

Every eye, from the cart to the drop.
If the square looks anywhere but at
you, someone dies who shouldn't.

ROBIN

(leaning his head back
against the stone; a slow
grin arriving with
nothing sold in it)
Eleven years I've worked this shire,
and the first honest role anyone offers
me is the gallows.

MARIAN (O.S.)

Eat whatever they bring you. You're no
use to the plan dead before Prime.

He looks at the upturned cup by the stool. Says nothing about the wine already gone.

INT. BELL-TOWER CELL - GREY LIGHT

The door open. The Prioress in it, guards behind. Robin stands center-cell, easy, like a man keeping an appointment he made himself.

ROBIN

Tell the Lord Sheriff I accept. The
recantation, at Prime, under the
abbey's blessing, full voice. I'll want
a wash and my own face. If a legend's
to die it should die shaved.

The Prioress studies him. A long, slow beat. She comes one step into the cell, hands folded, and the folding is the whole of her posture.

PRIORESS

When you were nine you wept over the
communion silver only after you were
caught with it. You are not weeping
now.

ROBIN

I'm older. My timing's better.

She looks at the cord in his fist. At the bow-cased shape against the wall. At the man not touching either.

PRIORESS

(slower; the Latin
arriving like a raised
eyebrow)

Qui nimis libenter perdit, aliquid
emit. He who loses too gladly is buying
something.

ROBIN

Reverend Mother, I'm buying seven necks
and a woman's exile down to my own
hanging. Your abbey priced it; I'm only
paying the bill.

She looks at him -- true, and incomplete, and both of them
know which parts. A guard shifts on the stair, waiting on
her word to carry down. She lets the moment pass unspent.

Sold anyway. She raises two fingers and blesses him,
unhurried.

PRIORESS

May you be remembered exactly as you
deserve.

ROBIN

(a bow, showman-deep)
That's the most frightening thing
anyone's said to me all night.

She sweeps out. The door swings -- and in the last narrowing
gap, Robin crosses to the slit window and HUMS: eight notes,
the cache-ballad's tune turned upside down, a counter-melody
sliding down into the square.

Below, in the crowd-noise, Alan's lute stops mid-phrase.

Then it starts again -- faster, in a new key -- and the
hooded busker is suddenly moving through the crowd like a
man with errands.

The cell door bangs. The key turns. Robin stays at the
window, watching his crew's morning begin to boil.

EXT. KIRKLEES MARKET SQUARE - THE HALF-BELL BEFORE PRIME

The square filling for coronation-eve: convoy wagons in file by the abbey gate, clergy assembling, the scaffold getting its rope. A festival with a gallows in it. A crier reads the curfew notice to nobody; men step over the words.

Moving through it, five separate errands --

BY THE WELL: Tuck upends his purse on a barrel-head in front of BARNABY and a half-circle of creditors' men. Coin, rings, one gilt reliquary. Everything he owns rolls out and rings on the wood.

TUCK

Paid. Paid. And PAID -- Saint Matthew
the taxman witness it, in front of God
and three shires. And every man here
drinks the abbey's ale free while he
counts it.

Barnaby wets a thumb, counts a stack, counts it again, coin in fist. He does not leave. Nobody paid in full ever leaves. They stay to watch, which is the point: three shires' worth of hard men, planted like a hedge along the scaffold rail, sipping.

BY THE GATE: John backs a hay-cart against the wall, slides out its AXLE, and re-hafts a splintered ram-head onto it with wet rawhide, winding and biting off the ends -- a carter fixing a cart, in front of the men guarding the very wall it's aimed at. Finished, he stands it upright, thumbs the joint, and kisses it once, like a relic.

CENTER SQUARE: a bridal wagon, ribbons and scandal. WILL, magnificent in stolen velvet, hands down a terrified GOOSE-GIRL dressed as a duchess, her goose riding her train like a page and hating it. The crowd whoops. Serjeants drift toward the fun and away from their posts.

WILL

(to the goose-girl,
radiant, sotto)

Chin up. Eyes wet, smile ruined. Will
Scarlet has married above himself in
nine counties. Today you're the ninth.

And under the scaffold itself -- while his 'wedding party' brawls prettily around the platform and the hangman argues with a piper about fees -- Will sits half-hidden against the coiled HANGMAN'S ROPE, needle flashing. Crimson thread into hemp, stitch after tiny stitch, buried inside the coil where the loop will take a man's weight. The finest work of his life, sewn where no one will ever see it, by a man built

entirely of being seen. He bites the thread. His hands are shaking, and he keeps them moving so no one can tell.

AT THE SCAFFOLD'S BASE: Much paces the platform's spare beam heel-to-toe, lips moving, the eel-skin packet swinging at his neck. He sights up the gallows-arm, then down the beam, and does sums with his eyebrows because his tools are at the bottom of a flooded culvert.

MUCH

(to himself)

Forty over the arm... she'll hold. She shouldn't. She'll hold.

THROUGH IT ALL: Alan, teaching the creditor-hedge a drinking chorus, line by line, verse by verse, conducting with the lute-neck -- every verse a cue, and every drunk who learns it a man who will be looking the wrong way when it matters.

Nobody is in charge. It is working anyway.

INT. BELL-TOWER CELL - FIRST GREY

Keys on the stair below. Boots, unhurried, in no rush for a man who cannot go anywhere.

On the cell floor: a bundle the guards delivered at the door -- the Sheriff's stagecraft. Robin unrolls it: a green hood, new-dyed, theatrical, the wrong green entirely. And his own bow, taken at the vault, sent up so the legend can be marched out in costume.

Robin looks at both a moment.

Then he takes up the bow, braces it against his instep, and strings it -- one practiced motion, wood creaking under the horn nock -- draws it once to the ear on nothing, feels the old weight answer, and unstrings it just as smoothly, laying the slack cord along the stave. Retired. He sets it against the wall, upright, like a tool returned to its rack.

The hood he shakes out, holds up, folds once, twice, small, and leaves squared on the stool. Declined.

From his boot: Will's MIRROR SHARD in its crimson-stitched wrap. He props it in the window slit, splashes his face from the wine-cup dregs, and looks.

Grey light. Stubble. Lines. A man in browns, mid-thirties, tired. Nobody special looks back -- no grin deployed, nothing sold. He tries half a smile; puts it away; tries the face he'll wear on the cart, which is no face at all.

That one he keeps.

ROBIN

(to the shard, barely
voiced)

Step one. There is no step one.

He wraps the shard, pockets it against his chest. Last, the arrowhead cord: he doesn't put it back on. He winds it around his knuckles, once, twice, and closes his fist over all eleven.

The door opens. TWO GUARDS, pikes, and the morning behind them.

GUARD

It's time.

ROBIN

(stepping through ahead
of them, unhurried)

It is.

They form up around a man who could be anyone -- and take the stairs down toward the noise of the square.

EXT. KIRKLEES MARKET SQUARE - PRIME

Bells. The true Prime this time, all towers together. The square packed to the walls: convoy, clergy, gallows-cart, ten thousand eyes.

Robin comes down the abbey steps between pikes, bare-headed, unremarkable -- and the square CRANES to see him anyway. A boy is hauled up onto a father's shoulders. A pie-seller forgets to sell.

Then, from the outer gate: a CRACK like a felled oak. John's ram takes the gate off its hinges -- no plan behind it but the door itself -- and a hay-cart's worth of confusion pours through the gap. Guards peel toward it, shouting orders that cancel each other out.

By the well, Tuck's barrels stand three deep in garrison men already singing the wrong psalm, tankards up, none of them watching the wagons.

Center square, Will's wedding party has half the serjeants dancing and the other half wagering on the goose. A fiddle nobody asked for saws away.

Robin walks through all of it, watching plan after plan detonate -- none of them his, none of them permitted, every one of them WORKING. Something in his face keeps almost becoming the grin and arriving instead as something better.

At the gallows-cart a GUARD offers the folded green hood -- the costume, come down from the cell after all.

Robin takes it. Turns it once in his hands. Puts it on himself, squarely, a player dressing.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
(to the guard, nodding at
the cart)
Help me up.

The words come out easy. First time in his life. The guard, baffled, gives the condemned man a hand up onto the boards.

The cart rolls past the scaffold's base -- where Much crouches at the counterweight beam, triple-checking a lashing that cannot be checked again, lips moving over numbers only he can hear.

Robin leans down off the cart.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
Much. Will it hold?

MUCH
(not looking up)
It -- it shouldn't be done. The arm's
green, the load's guessed, I had no
tools, I had no time, it shouldn't --

ROBIN
Then do it.

Much looks up. Robin presses something into his flour-pale hand: the CORD OF ELEVEN ARROWHEADS, knotted closed.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
You were right. It takes the other
stone.

Much stares at the cord in his palm. Then, wordless, he digs in his pocket and holds up the BRASS MILL-FITTING -- offered back, the thing no one has ever been allowed to touch.

Robin closes Much's fingers over both, shakes the fist once, and rides on toward the rope.

EXT. THE SCAFFOLD - PRIME

Robin mounts the steps. On the platform: the eight in a row, roped at the wrists, Marian at the end, chin level. The HANGMAN with his coiled rope, thumbing the knot the way a man worries a bad tooth. And REYNARD, tablet in hand, immaculate.

The crowd-noise dies to a hiss. A cart-dog barks once, twice, and is hushed.

REYNARD
 (to the square; inventory
 as liturgy)
 Thirteen thousand marks, recovered
 twice. Three castles, held. One night,
 concluded. Eleven years of the Loxley
 debt --

He crosses to Robin. Takes the green hood in one inked hand.

REYNARD (CONT'D)
 -- and under the hood, all along:

He PULLS it off.

REYNARD (CONT'D)
 Behold. An ordinary man.

Silence. The crowd stares at a tired, stubbled, medium-sized man in brown. A pardoner near the front cranes for a better look at nothing in particular.

REYNARD (CONT'D)
 Say it.

Robin finds the far wall over their heads.

ROBIN
 (clear, flat, carrying to
 the walls)
 My name is Robin of Loxley. Yeoman's
 son. I stand here an ordinary man,
 caught like an ordinary thief.

(beat)
 The rest was a song. Songs don't hang.

Somewhere in the crowd a woman starts to weep. A man boos, is elbowed, boos again. The legend is dying in public, on schedule, and Reynard stands drinking the whole square of it -- eleven years of arithmetic arriving at its sum.

REYNARD
 (only to Robin; almost
 gentle)
 There. Was that so dear? A song has a
 last verse. Everything does.

Then -- at the breached gate: John's diversion has torn a lane clean through the guard line. Open ground, a waiting horse, fog beyond. A bolt-hole a blind man could read. John

stands in the gap, hands loose at his sides, looking up at the platform. He does not wave. He does not call. He only holds the space open, the way a man holds a door.

Not a rescue. An OFFER.

The hangman is mid-fumble with the rope. Reynard is mid-triumph, facing the crowd. Three steps and a jump and the legend lives. The horse tosses its head at the fog and waits too.

Robin looks at the gap. The whole old life stands open in it -- the woods, the running, the one man who ever knows the whole of a plan.

He steps BACK. Onto the trapdoor. Square on the planks. He shifts his weight until it settles, and nods to the hangman to get on with it.

Up the queue, Marian watches him do it. Her thumbnail finds Hal's absent ring and, finding nothing, goes still -- and her eyes stay on Robin as the rope settles on his shoulders like a stole.

EXT. THE SQUARE - CONTINUOUS - THE VORTEX

The clerk's table below the gallows-board: the coin-tray, rings sorted by size. Marian, shackled hands folded like a lady at prayer -- and a HAIRPIN already working in her fingers. One shackle stands open. Her hand walks the tray, lifts HAL'S SIGNET, and presses it into hot wax on a folded manifest: seal after seal, her brother stamping the Sheriff's undoing. She never once looks at the wax. She looks at the crowd, courteous, faintly bored.

By the wagon lane: alms-barrels marked with the abbey's cross roll onto tithe wagons -- heavy, RINGING faintly at each jolt -- while the convoy's iron-strapped chests sit sealed and dead-quiet, their fresh manifests co-signed and immaculate.

Then the cascade --

Tuck's creditor-crowd surges for the free ale ONE VERSE EARLY, a wall of thirsty men jamming the wagon lane, tankards over their heads --

WILL
(atop the bridal wagon;
battlefield-polished)
Now, my love. Faint LARGE.

The goose-duchess drops into the serjeants' line like a felled spire. Guards lunge to catch her; the goose achieves

escape velocity; the lane clears -- but the eddy shoves the crowd toward the scaffold --

Alan, up on the well-head, WHEELS the choir: new verse, new key, three hundred creditors' men pivoting like starlings, hauling the crowd's weight west --

-- and the surge slams the scaffold. The platform lurches under the eight. The hangman grabs the lever to steady himself --

MUCH

(at the counterweight; to
nobody; to everybody)

Early. It has to go EARLY --

He knocks the chock loose with the heel of his hand. The beam SWINGS. The gallows-arm shudders down its whole green length. The trap BANGS open on the wrong beat with ROBIN IN THE ROPE --

-- which parts. Exactly at the coil's heart, exactly where crimson stitches say, hemp blooming open like a cut flower --

Robin drops through the trap, through the scaffold's skirts, into a forest of legs -- and the crowd closes over him like water over a dropped ring.

GONE.

Under the platform, in the moving dark of bodies: hands find him -- strangers' hands, all of them sure, none of them his crew. A shroud goes over his shoulders. A leper's clapper is pressed into his fist and someone folds his fingers shut around it. A woman turns her back to make a wall. Somewhere very near, John's voice, which cannot whisper:

JOHN

Walk slow.

Half the square hears it. None of it knows what it heard.

On the platform, the hangman holds eleven inches of rope. In it, just visible, a thread of red. He turns it toward the light, turns it away again. He shows it to the nearest guard, helpless, like a man holding the wrong end of a miracle.

At the clerk's table, Marian rises with the seven -- her shackle closed again, decorative -- gathers her skirts, and looks courtly and stricken and precisely nowhere near the wagon lane, where the alms-barrels are rolling out under the abbey's cross, one wheel-jolt at a time, ringing.

Reynard turns from his triumph to a scaffold with no one in it. The empty rope sways. He watches it as though it has made an error in addition. He looks under the platform, at the crowd, at the tablet in his own hand, back at the rope.

REYNARD
(quietly; beginning to
count)
One rope. One trap. One --

He stops counting. The arithmetic has left him.

EXT. CONVOY MUSTER - ABBEY GATE - MOMENTS LATER

PRINCE JOHN'S STEWARD, all velvet and impatience, before the lead wagon. Courtiers. Banners going limp in the fog. Reynard arrives at a fast walk, composure reassembled, soldiers dragging the noise of the square along behind him.

STEWARD
His Grace departs. The gift will be
seen NOW. Open one.

REYNARD
The manifests are sealed and co-signed
--

STEWARD
Open one.

A soldier sets a bar to a chest and heaves. The lid gives. The steward lifts one bright coin, weighs it in his palm, drops it on the wagon boards for the ring --

THUD. Dead. Wooden.

The whole muster hears it. Somewhere a horse shifts its feet. A courtier's smile stops halfway to his neighbor. The coin lies there on the boards where it fell, and no one picks it up. Nobody breathes.

REYNARD
(stepping forward, tablet
already out; the voice of
perfect reason)
That is -- an irregularity of the
casting. The Blackmere consignment was
assayed under my seal at --

GISBORNE
(from his post; flat,
carrying)
No. It was not.

He crosses the muster, mailed, deliberate, in no hurry at all. From his surcoat he takes the PAINTED PIG, thumbnail-scarred. He sets it on the wagon boards beside the dead coin, the two of them side by side.

GISBORNE (CONT'D)

You paid me in lead.

And then the second thing -- pressed into his hand in the crowd's crush by a man who should have run past him and didn't: the EEL-SKIN PACKET. He unwraps it, unhurried. The wax tablet. He hands it up to the steward.

GISBORNE (CONT'D)

His night's plan, in his own hand. Tilt it to the light. Under the fresh wax, the old sums. Two counts of one treasure. Sworn to on my honor, which is all I own. He priced it in lead.

The steward tilts the tablet. The ghost-columns swim up under the wax. His face closes like a ledger.

STEWARD

Take the Sheriff south. His Grace will want the arithmetic explained.

REYNARD

(as soldiers take his arms; genuinely bewildered, correcting them)

The sums are RIGHT. Look at them. Every entry balances -- the error is not in the LEDGER --

They walk him past the scaffold, past the tariff board in his own fine hand, still explaining to men who have stopped listening. On the platform the SEVEN HOSTAGES stand unchained one by one under the Prioress's raised palm, her blessing pitched precisely loud enough to be witnessed.

Gisborne watches the wagons of lead roll south with the royal party. Then he looks at the LOXLEY DEED-MAP in his hand, folds it along its old creases, and puts it away. He mounts, and rides the other way. Unbought.

EXT. LOXLEY VILLAGE - MARKET DAY - A FORTNIGHT LATER

A mended stall. A TINKER pays a WIDOW for eggs -- and the coin, dropped in her palm-worn scale-dish, RINGS. High and true. She looks at it a moment longer than the price warrants. Bites it. Soft. Real. She tucks it into her apron and hands him back a farthing and one extra egg for luck.

Around the market: small silver everywhere, in mended aprons and hat-bands and children's fists -- ten thousand pockets deep and no vault anywhere. A man counts coppers into a butcher's hand without once looking over his shoulder for who might be counting him.

The tinker moves on to the next stall, sniffing at a cold he has had all week. On the notice post behind him, an old proclamation about a Loxley debt hangs rain-pulped and unread, and a girl has chalked a hopscotch grid across the foot of it.

EXT. SHERWOOD CAMP - EVENING

The council fire -- but changed. A plank board leans against the oak, chalked with a plan: roads, a bridge, arrows. EVERYONE can read it. Robin stands beside it, mid-pitch, wearing no hood. Sherwood behind him is lit with other people's fires -- three camps' worth, voices, a dog that will not settle -- and he stands in the middle of it like a man who likes the noise.

ROBIN

-- step four, the bridge toll rolls
home before the escort's even saddled
--

JOHN

Middling.

ROBIN

It is NOT middling, it's --

(catching himself; to the
fire)

Show of hands.

Hands. Will, Alan, Tuck, Much -- down. John -- down. Marian, seated with the hawk and the whole of the map in her lap, doesn't vote. She waits.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

(a beat; then, laughing,
actually laughing)

Outvoted at my own fire.

He sits. Takes the pot's last ladle -- last, still, some things hold -- and gestures at Marian with the spoon.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

Your counter. Go on. Ruin it properly.

MARIAN

If a crew wanted the toll AND the
escort's horses, one would let the
bridge fall first.

A beat. Much is already chalking loads on the board's
corner. Tuck is already blessing the idea on spec.

ROBIN

...That's better than mine.

JOHN

Yes.

Will is already selling it bigger than it is. Alan finds a
rhyme for "bridge" and is told to stop. The crew leans in
around the board. Robin listens -- one voice among six,
arguing happily in the firelight, and losing, and staying.

EXT. GALLOWS-OAK CROSSROADS - MORNING - FOG

The fog again. But the gibbet-oak wears a MAYPOLE's ribbons
now, and market stalls crowd the crossroads where the iron
used to creak. Geese, apples, noise. A boy sells nothing
very fast.

On the notice post, fresh-nailed, a proclamation:

WANTED -- THE MERRY MEN. NUMBERS UNKNOWN. FACES UNKNOWN.

Below the letters: six woodcut blobs. One is possibly a
goose. No name priced above another. The hood is drawn on
the wrong figure, at the wrong angle, badly.

Robin stops in front of it, market basket on his arm, a
cabbage and a loaf in it. The crew drifts on ahead through
the stalls -- John's head above the crowd, a snatch of
Alan's tune, Will's laugh.

Robin studies the poster. The man who once corrected his own
wanted sketch at knifepoint. His head tilts at the botched
hood, at the goose that might be a man, at the price left
blank under every one of them.

He takes out a charcoal stub.

WILL (O.S.)

(from the stalls, without
looking back)

Don't.

Robin draws -- one more blob. A SEVENTH, down in the corner,
no better than the rest, its little hood on crooked to
match. Now the count is wrong too.

He steps back to look at it, the way a man checks a sum. He pockets the charcoal. Fixes nothing. Signs nothing.

And walks into the market crowd -- past a fishwife, between two farmers arguing about a pig, around a child chasing the escaped goose -- and by the fourth step there is no one to point at. Just people, laughing at something, in the fog the morning is already burning off.