

Short Stories

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Acknowledgments

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Herne24 The Saracen's Daughter

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Chapter 1

The Saracen's Daughter

Robin of Sherwood short story

Part 1

“Go back!”

“I’m on an errand for your father.”

“I know what your errand is and I’m telling you to go back!”

“I obey only your father.”

“Very well, but I will not let you pass.”

The boy looked down at the cloaked figure standing on the road before him. He had a determined expression on his face, as you would expect from a young man, eager to do right but untried and untested by peril. He did not know what the cloak concealed. The creature took care never to show itself. It moved swiftly and silently about his father’s castle, shrouded in shadow. It hid in corners and would appear out of dark alcoves when people least expected it. It was his father’s creature and all, save his father, feared it.

“I must go this way. I have not the time to go round. Get out of my way, boy!” it said. Its voice was low and quiet but the anger in it was clear, nonetheless.

The boy remained where he was. “If you harm me, my father will be angry.”

“Your father? What is he to me? He lost control of me and has now paid. You think I liked being his spy and servant?”

The boy turned white. “You’ve killed him!”

“Froze him where he sat and now I must get your girl and *you* are blocking my way.”

The boy hesitated while his mount fidgeted beneath him. "I don't believe you." The creature extended an arm and muttered a word. The boy dropped from the horse.

The creature bent over him and was satisfied. In its judgement the boy was still alive and might yet be useful. It heaved the body across the horse, although the animal shied from its touch. Then, catching the bridle, it led the unwilling beast along the path. The creature sensed its prey was well away by now. Never mind, it thought, it would have plenty of time to catch her.

In Sherwood it was a fine July. The sun had shone unabated for days and the outlaws lounged about and soaked it up. Nasir sat in the shade of a tall oak and watched Will and Much, who were half-heartedly arguing about something; Tuck lay fast asleep; and Marion was making herself a garland of wild flowers. The sunlight filtered through the forest, bathing her in cool green light, the odd ray slipping in between the leaves, making her red hair flame gold. She had been their queen of the May that year. She had been their queen of the May every year and had stood laughing gaily in the cool English sunlight. In Palestine, there had been no queens of the May. The sun had been too fiercely hot and uncompromising and the girls had been dark with deep brown eyes and long full raven hair. She had still laughed in the sunlight as she went about, sparks flashing from her dark eyes and darker hair. He shied away from the thought. He had chosen to belong in England with its dappled sunlight and its fair women, who had pale eyes and hair that was red in its depths but blonde where the sun had caught it. He could have gone back but he had stayed.

Marion caught Nasir watching her with his strange, intent gaze. A gaze that seemed to see right through things. She wondered if he was thinking of deep blue skies and warm dust-laden winds. Her father had described an alien landscape to her in that bleak, cold year they'd spent together after the death of the first Hooded Man. She smiled at Nasir across the glade because it was warm and the sun shone and she wished him to share her sense of happiness and well-being. He smiled briefly and bent his head once more over the sword he had been sharpening.

"Riders!" came the sound of John's voice. He and Robin had been watching the road.

Silently, the outlaws gathered up their weapons and slipped into position. It looked unpromising, however. There was nothing but a lone rider, albeit one

on a fine horse. A tall slender girl wearing a light cloak that hid her features. Nevertheless, it was a fine cloak. On Robin's signal, the outlaws broke cover to surround the horse. Tuck caught the bridle and held it still.

"Well, well, what have we here?" murmured Will quietly.

"Who are you?" asked the girl apprehensively, "What do you want?"

"I'm known as Robin Hood. We're outlaws. Who are you?"

"My name is Joanna. I am the ward of Sir Hugh Morely of Dalston. I carry nothing that can be of value to you. I know about you. You won't hinder me."

The name "Sir Hugh Morely" meant little to the outlaws, save Nasir, who watched the girl darkly, for Sir Hugh had never been to Nottingham. Little John frowned, however, at a dim memory.

"I've heard that name before, somewhere," said John, shaking his head as if to clear it of a fog.

"Sir Hugh Morely," said Nasir, not without venom, "was a close ally of the Baron de Belleme."

"Belleme lives near here?" said the girl, eagerness in her voice.

"What's it to you if he does?" said Scarlet angrily. "Friend of his too, are you?" he asked and he reached up and tugged viciously at the cloak. The clasp that held it was torn out and it fell away. The outlaws stared in astonishment at the girl revealed. Her skin was olive-coloured and she had the dark hair and eyes of Nasir's people. A broad pronounced forehead and a sharpish chin were framed by her hair which hung loose upon her shoulders.

"You're no Norman!" said Robin.

"No, I'm a Saracen," she said bitterly. "Go on. Say it. I'm an infidel and ought to be burned!"

"We've nothing against you because you're a Saracen," said Marion gently. "Nasir's a Saracen."

The girl appeared to notice Nasir for the first time and her eyes widened slightly in surprise at the stocky dark man standing by her ankle.

"What are you doing here?" asked Robin.

"Belleme gave Sir Hugh a magic creature to take care of his wants, but he *wants* to use it to stop Harry and me getting married. So I'm going to destroy it."

"How?"

"I don't know, but I will, somehow, with this." She hauled a heavy ornate gold cross out of a saddle-bag and handed it down to him. Scarlet whistled quietly through his teeth.

"This is very valuable," pointed out Robin.

"But you won't take it," she said confidently.

“No,” he said, handing it back to her, “but you had better come with us. The Baron’s not a good man to cross. You’re going to need some help.”

She regarded them thoughtfully for a moment and chewed at her bottom lip. Then she slipped gracefully off her horse and went with them into the forest.

From a short way off, the creature watched her go and pondered what to do. It did not know the outlaws but it did not like the feel of them. It would have to move carefully.

Robin examined the cross in the evening twilight. His brow furrowed in thought as he turned the heavy object over in his hands. “You’ve tried destroying it?”

Joanna sat opposite, leaning forward with interest. “Can’t be done. So I came here to see if there was any clue to what it was or where it came from.”

“We’ll start looking tomorrow.” He handed her back the cross.

Scarlet sniffed before speaking. “So how does a Saracen come to be the ward of a Norman knight?”

“Sir Hugh took me from my home when I was five years old. He and Belleme raided a farm and captured me. Sir Hugh would probably have killed me but Belleme said, ”Leave her. She’ll be the saviour of your family.“ And, of course, when the Baron says something like that, it’s as well to take notice. So I was brought up with Sir Hugh’s son, Harry.”

Anyone watching closely at that point would have noticed the expression intensify in Nasir’s thoughtful eyes. But no one was watching and the look went unobserved.

“And you fell in love?” asked Marion, smiling.

“Yes. Only Sir Hugh said it was one thing fostering a Saracen brat but quite another to have her as a daughter-in-law. Then Isabella, that’s my nurse, overheard him give the creature orders to get rid of me, Baron or no Baron.”

“So you took the cross and escaped.”

“Yes.”

Suddenly, Will got up swiftly, drawing his sword. The other outlaws followed his gaze to the tree line and a movement deep within it.

Out of the bushes stalked a skeleton carrying a long glowing sword. Little John, who was nearest, threw himself upon it, only to fly back across the glade and crash into a tree. Much grabbed a quarterstaff and swung it at the creature. The sword came down to block the blow. Much yelped with pain and the staff shattered into fragments. The skeleton stalked on determinedly towards Joanna, who clutched the cross and screamed, backing away. Will rushed at the creature, only to find his weapon disintegrating in his hands as the quarterstaff had done.

“Kill it, please!” gasped Joanna.

Nasir, standing beside her, said, “We can’t.”

Part Two

Nasir placed his hands firmly on Joanna’s shoulders and pushed her behind him. The skeleton continued towards them.

Marion had picked up a sword and was advancing upon the skeleton, but Robin held up his hand. “Let’s see what Albion can do,” he said, and drew his own sword.

He stepped forward and swung it at the apparition, under its guard and straight through its body. The skeleton stopped, split in half and collapsed into a pile of bones, which, in turn, disintegrated into dust.

“Was that the creature?” asked Will, marching towards Joanna.

“No, I don’t think it was,” said Joanna. “The creature always wears a black cloak. Sir Hugh says it’s made of smoke.”

“Well, it certainly vanished into thin air,” said Tuck.

Joanna shook her head doubtfully. “I’m fairly certain it wasn’t the creature.”

Night drew on and the forest lay shrouded in darkness. In the village of Baldon, the villagers hid in their huts and prayed for the demon to leave. In the central barn, watched darkly by Harry Morely, the creature was working up another illusion, aided by a lock of Harry’s blonde hair. One of the barn stalls had been converted into a makeshift cage. It was only wood, but still strong enough to keep Harry in. He banged at the bars in frustration.

In the hollow where they'd made their camp, the outlaws slept. Much, on watch, sat before the fire, peering into the gloom, trying to make out if any of the shadows cast by the flames concealed a smoke creature wearing a dark cloak.

Nasir was also awake and gazing at the sky with unseeing eyes. In his mind, he heard the sounds of horses moving among the orange trees and he saw smoke rising up from the orchards. A dim memory came to him from the time when he had been the Baron de Belleme's slave. He got up and began to strap on his swords.

"What are you doing?" asked Much from where he sat.

"I'll be back."

"You oughtn't go out alone. Anything might happen!"

Nasir looked at the boy. "I go alone."

Apparently recognising the finality of that statement, Much gave up. "But I don't like it," Nasir heard him mutter under his breath.

Robin had a dream. He dreamed of a stone altar with the mark of a cross hewn into it, a wind that blew autumn leaves across the stone flags, and a voice, half-recognised, saying, "A double-edged weapon - I'll give it to Sir Hugh and he will destroy himself!" Then he saw a man of forty or so years sitting upright in an ornate wooden chair, staring with dead eyes, as if at some unimaginable horror.

Herne came to him and before Herne stood a young man in a scarlet cape with bright golden hair. The man's features swam and reformed into a skull. Robin knew it was a warning. Lastly, he saw a village: a few huts, a barn and a forge with a large broad-shouldered smith. The smith's hair was red and a scar ran down one cheek.

Towards dawn, Joanna awoke to see a movement and a flash of scarlet between the trees.

“Harry?” she called quietly.

He appeared then, some distance away, and beckoned her over. She began to pick her way towards him.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” said a voice behind her. Looking back, she saw Will Scarlet leaning against a tree, watching her.

“Wouldn’t what?”

Will nodded towards Harry. “I’ve been on watch the past couple of hours and he’s been flitting around for some time. I reckon he’s up to no good.”

“That’s Harry.”

“So what if it is?”

Joanna pulled herself up to her full height and looked down upon the wolf-head. Then, turning, she headed on towards the figure in the scarlet cape. Suddenly Will was beside her, holding on to her arm. “I said don’t.”

“Get your hands off me!” she said imperiously.

He didn’t move but turned his head and called, “Robin!”

She watched the Hooded Man start awake, shaking his head as if to clear the dreams. He got up and crossed over to them, blonde hair blowing in the wind.

“It’s Harry,” said Joanna. “He wants us to follow him.” And indeed, the figure lifted its arm and seemed to beckon them urgently to come on.

“It’s not Harry,” Robin said bluntly. He picked up a bow and quiver.

“But...” began Joanna.

“Watch,” he said and, fitting an arrow to the bow, he loosed it at the figure.

Joanna screamed and fought against Scarlet, who held her fast. The arrow sped towards Harry and then hit some invisible wall inches in front him. The arrow shattered into fragments, but the apparition remained where it was, beckoning them on.

“It’s an illusion.”

Joanna felt weak and leaned against Scarlet for support. “But what about Harry?”

“I don’t know.”

“How did you know that wasn’t Harry?”

“I had a dream.”

She stared at Robin, perplexed. “What else did you dream?”

"Of the church where the cross came from, a dead lord, and a village with a red-haired blacksmith."

She followed him across the glade as he walked back to the rest of the band. "The church must be near the village!"

"Possibly."

"There are lots of red-haired blacksmiths," said Little John suddenly, rising up on his elbows and blinking in the half-light.

"This one had a scar down one cheek."

"Alfred at Baldon has a scar," said Much.

"Then we must go to Baldon," said Joanna.

Robin worried that, in his mind, he hadn't connected the church and the village of his dream. To him, they still didn't seem to be related. He could tell that, in all likelihood, unless he came up with something different, Joanna would go to Baldon, alone if need be. But he had a vague foreboding about the scheme.

He was even more when he discovered that Nasir had disappeared.

"There wasn't anything I could do about it," said Much anxiously.

"No."

"Naz can look after himself," said Will reassuringly.

"One of us should stay to tell him where we've gone, though," said Marion.

Robin nodded. He moved to the edge of the trees, in the direction Nasir had departed. "He hasn't tried to cover his trail," he said. "Someone could follow him."

"I'll go!" volunteered Tuck.

"Very well. Take care of yourself."

Tuck nodded and slipped into the trees. The others picked up their gear and set off in the opposite direction, towards Baldon.

The village, when they reached it, was strangely quiet. No one came out to greet them.

They walked into the centre of a group of huts, where a stoney-faced wall of people, brandishing clubs and staves, rose up around them, cutting off their

escape.

“Giles?” questioned Robin, singling out the head man.

“I’m sorry, Robin, but we ain’t got no choice.”

“Well, we have,” murmured Scarlet, drawing his sword.

Robin held out a hand. “No, Will, not the villagers!”

“We can’t just let ourselves be taken!”

The villagers hung back, nervous, aware that the outlaws would be a match for them.

“No, Will, Robin’s right,” said John, resigned. He knocked aside Will’s sword with his staff and then threw the thick piece of wood to the ground. One by one, the outlaws laid down their weapons. Last of all, Robin placed Albion on the top of the small pile. Then the creature appeared, the villagers parting to let it through. Cautiously, it bent down and picked up Wayland’s sword to examine it. It shook its head over the writing on the blade but, nevertheless, made a pleased low hissing pleased and hugged the weapon to its chest.

“When you avoided my trap,” it said in an icy voice, turning towards Robin, “I hardly thought you’d come of your own accord and walk straight into my arms.” It laughed out loud then, wildly and harshly. “Take them away and put them with the boy!”

As they were marched past, the creature grabbed Joanna’s bag from her hand and laughed even louder.

Part Three

In a wooded valley, nestling at the foot of a crag, Nasir found a tiny ruined church. Only half was still standing. The altar was open to the elements, rising out of the moss that had invaded the chancel over the tumbled ruins. Ivy hung down the remaining walls. Last autumn’s dead leaves littered the floor. A narrow window in one wall let in a beam of light, which fell across a deep shape of the cross shape hewn into the altar beneath a rough Latin inscription: *Gratia Dei Bellua Superata Est*. Nasir brushed his fingers over the words, but could not make them out. He was sure the answer was here somewhere, but he didn’t know what it was.

He searched the place and was arrested by carvings, visible through a broken flag on the floor. Carefully, he began to prize up the heavy lumps of stone.

“Harry, thank God you’re safe!”

“Joanna! What are you doing here?”

“The creature caught us.”

“Us?” The boy looked beyond her to the outlaws.

“This is Robin Hood and his men.”

“Robin Hood? The outlaw?” Righteous Norman indignation bristled from every noble inch of him.

“Robin Hood, the outlaw,” she confirmed.

He scowled at the outlaws angrily. “Where’s the cross?” he demanded.

“The creature took it.”

“And they let it?”

“We couldn’t harm the villagers.” Robin said, speaking up for the first time.

“The villagers!” Harry was aghast. His face flushed red a moment and then he shut his mouth. He was clearly resolved not to comment further.

“Bright lad,” murmured Scarlet, almost inaudibly.

“So this is the church the cross came from. Why did you come here alone?” asked Tuck.

“I was not certain it was the place,” answered Nasir.

“It is that, all right,” said Tuck thoughtfully, surveying the desolation.

“The answer’s here.”

“Aye, but where?” Tuck bent to examine the words on the altar. “By the grace of God, the demon is overcome. Not a typical inscription for an altar. Not very helpful either.”

“Here!” Nasir gestured to the elaborate carvings he had uncovered beneath the stone flags of the floor.

“I can’t remember much about Palestine,” said Joanna. “I can remember trees, an orchard of them, I think, and being carried on someone’s shoulders down a dusty path. I remember the night I was taken as well because my mother came to me

and she had a knife. Someone grabbed her. I think she attacked them. Then there was a lot of blood and the knife was in her heart.”

“You remember all that?” Harry asked.

“As though it happened yesterday. It’s not the sort of thing that’s easy to forget.”

Harry took her and held her. “You’ve never said anything about it before.”

“Meeting another Saracen has set me thinking.”

Harry held her tight.

“Robin!” Little John called quietly.

“What?”

“The ground here is soft enough to dig.”

As casually as possible, Robin moved across to John. The stall had been solidly built against the back wall of the barn and converted to a cage by raising the walls with hastily constructed wooden bars with a makeshift roof across the top. But, at the back of the stall, the ground sloped away and was soft and crumbly at the surface.

“If we dug here,” said John, “we could make a small gap, big enough for someone slim to get through to find Nasir and Tuck.”

“Like me?” asked Joanna eagerly.

“Aye, or Marion.”

Joanna’s chin jutted out stubbornly. “I’m smaller than Marion is, and it would be safer with two of us!”

Robin and John exchanged glances. Robin shrugged. It would take a long time to argue her out of it. Time he doubted they had. Besides, she would be safer out of the way. He nodded.

“John, you dig. The rest of us must try to cover up what he’s doing. Keep to the front of the cage and watch out for the creature.”

“So that’s why Albion destroyed it!”

“Yes.”

“Any weapon made by Wayland can overcome it?”

Nasir shrugged. The carvings were open to interpretation "There are no other weapons left," he said.

"We don't know that. Wayland was the only person strong enough to defeat it and he trapped it in the cross and then imprisoned it in the altar."

"Yes."

"And presumably the Baron de Belleme found out about it and released it."

"Not from the cross."

Tuck nodded, thinking of the heavy ornate cross that Joanna carried. "Whoever has the cross can control it, if they know how," he guessed.

Nasir looked up. "Can it break free from the cross?"

Tuck glanced around him, thinking hard. The story was stirring up vague memories of something he had read.

"What is the name of this church?"

Nasir shook his head. He didn't know. Tuck picked his way down the aisle across the lumps of fallen masonry and the traces of the encroaching forest until he came to the wooden porch. Across the top, carved into a heavy oaken beam, were the words THE * CHURCH * OF * ST * BRENDAN * THE * NAVIGATOR. He thanked God for the diligence of his old monastery in its constant secluded copying and re-copying of manuscripts. Nasir had followed him and stood leaning in the doorway, eyeing him curiously.

"When I was at the monastery," Tuck said, "I copied out the story of this church, only it was a Christian bishop, not Wayland the Smith, who imprisoned the demon in the altar. The only way the demon could free himself from the cross, assuming he had already escaped the altar, was to kill an innocent before the altar when the cross was in place. I remember thinking at the time it wasn't a very Christian way to go about things, but Wayland might well have done that."

"An innocent?"

"A child or a maid."

"We must get back."

Tuck was suddenly reminded why he had come. "But," he said, puzzling, "the church is here, so what is at Baldon?" He caught his breath. "The demon! It will get the cross!"

In the same instant Nasir was upright, his whole body alert and tense.

"What is it?" asked Tuck.

"Joanna!"

Joanna stared defiantly at the Creature. “What are you going to do with us?”

The villagers had come and nervously removed her from the cage. She was sat on a horse, her hands tied to the saddle. She glared down at the creature.

“Well?”

She resisted the temptation to look back towards the hut where the outlaws were still digging.

“The others I will deal with later. Shortly, when my scouts get back, you and I are going to make a small journey to a church.”

Part Four

In the cage, the hole was now large enough for Marion to squeeze through.

“I don’t like to think of you going on your own,” said Robin.

“I’ll be all right. Don’t worry.”

Marion slipped cautiously out of the hut, which was at the edge of the village, and into the shelter of the forest.

Tuck and Nasir were just leaving the camp when Marion got back. Tuck sat calmly on a rock as Marion related the events at Baldon. Nasir paced up and down with a kind of intense bottled energy.

“Joanna is safe?” he asked.

“The creature had taken her outside and tied her to a horse, but she seemed to be all right,” said Marion.

Nasir and Tuck exchanged glances.

“I was right,” said Nasir.

“What about?” asked Marion.

“Nasir thinks the demon will use Joanna as a sacrifice. In fact, in my opinion, he’s more worried about her than the rest of them put together.”

Marion looked at Nasir curiously. It was unusual for Nasir to express any emotion, least of all worry.

“Are you?” she asked.

Nasir turned and moved towards the edge of the hollow. For one panicked moment, she thought he was just going to walk away and leave them, but then he sat down and remained still, staring at the ground. Eventually, he looked up.

“Once,” he said, “before I became the Baron’s slave, I had a farm in the hills between Jaffa and Jerusalem. It was an old farm with small white buildings and

orange groves. I grew up there. It belonged to my family.”

“And you loved it very much,” said Marion, hearing the longing in his voice. He glanced her way but made no sign of agreement.

“One night the Baron and Sir Hugh made a raid on it. It was very sudden. We had no warning and they burned the orange trees and killed all the people.”

“Except you.”

“I... was taken alive, to become the Baron’s slave. I also had a wife...” His voice choked and cut out. He took a deep breath, then continued. “I never knew what happened to her.” He paused, looking at them thoughtfully. “I also had a baby daughter. She would be about seventeen now.”

“Joanna?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Marion wondered at what she had heard: the burden and the dishonour of being taken alive, the lost wife and child who had not been protected. Never once had Nasir given any indication of his past. It was his failure and his grief, none of theirs. She wished she could say something to console him but words evaded her.

Nasir got up. “It was a long time ago.”

“And we must worry about the present problem,” said Tuck, also getting up, “which is how are we going to rescue Robin and the others?”

It was then Herne came to them. They felt rather than heard him come and, when they turned to look, he stood, some way from them, stock still, and his very stillness implied urgency. He wanted them to follow.

“You two go,” said Tuck. “I’ll stay here. He is on the other side, as it were!”

As Marion and Nasir started towards him, the large cloaked figure turned and moved into the forest. He led them on until they reached a small stream running in a rocky gorge it had cut for itself. They reached a ledge overhanging the brook, caught one more glimpse of the stag’s antlers among the trees, and then he was gone.

Marion who, all the way, had been a step ahead of Nasir, stopped, puzzled, and looked around her. Nasir stopped beside her then pointed. A narrow path led alongside the brook, just below them. Cautiously, Marion clambered down, over the mossy stone, until she stood on the small pathway. But which way should they go? Up or down stream. Suddenly there was the clatter of loose stones. Nasir, climbing down behind Marion, had dislodged a seemingly well-embedded rock, revealing a small hollow in the bank. Curious, Nasir peered into the hole. Then he put his hand in and brought out a decaying leather bundle. Carefully, he unfolded the cloth to reveal a small dagger, shining brightly silver, with an inscription along the blade.

“What does it say?” Marion asked.

Nasir grinned, something he rarely did. “Wayland made me.”

In Baldon, time was running out. The creature had produced a virtual army of followers from somewhere and they were hanging around on horseback, clearly impatient, waiting. Joanna sat among them, rigidly upright, head erect, but spoiling the effect by thoughtfully gnawing at her lip while watching the group with doubtful brown eyes.

Nasir, watching her, felt her fear. He weighed the dagger absently in his hand. It was a beautiful weapon, perfectly balanced so it would slice through the air. He was waiting for the creature, hidden behind some sacks where he could see everything clearly. He watched Tuck and Marion slip out of the forest and enter the hut unnoticed. There was no guard. The demon was arrogant.

Inside the hut, Tuck and Marion were greeted with relief. Little John took the axe Marion had brought and, with a few swift, skilled strokes, he cut through the makeshift wooden bars attached to the upper half of the front of the stall and clambered out.

He picked up his quarterstaff from where it had been placed at the side of the hut, followed closely by Robin. The demon had taken Albion, but Marion had brought another sword. Robin took it from her and paused, looking out of the doorway.

Tuck began to explain about the church, but Robin held up a hand to silence him. He scanned the men outside. “I’ve got to get Albion back,” he muttered and slipped out.

“But that sword will be... no use,” Tuck trailed off. Robin was out of earshot already, darting from cover to cover.

“Why not?” hissed Scarlet behind him.

“Only weapons forged by Wayland can harm it.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, isn’t it?” said Scarlet. “He’s gone out there with a weapon that’s absolutely useless! He’ll be hacked into little pieces.”

“Nasir’s out there,” said Marion, but she had gone pale.

“Yes, well...” Will calmed down slightly. He had to admit that Nasir balanced the odds slightly. He wouldn't let Robin get hacked to pieces easily. “I'll try to warn him,” Will said, peering out the door. He thought he could see a wisp of fair hair near some barrels up ahead. Considerably faster, and less cautiously than Robin had moved, Will followed. However, as he ran, one of the rough men waiting by Joanna saw the flicker of movement and called out an alarm. Within seconds, a large number of men, eager at the thought of action, had turned their horses and were heading towards him

The rest of the outlaws issued out from the hut. They were badly outnumbered and on foot, while their enemies were mounted. The leading horseman yelled out a prolonged battle cry.

The sound brought the demon out of a hut, followed by a tall ash-blond man with the carriage of a nobleman. Seeing his chance, Nasir raised the dagger, took careful aim and sent it spinning through the air. But, at that moment, Robin stepped out of hiding, brandishing his sword. The creature turned sharply to face him, and the dagger skimmed past to embed itself in the wall of the hut. Robin scarcely seemed to notice. He raised his sword and attacked. The creature didn't move. The sword came swinging down and shattered to pieces within inches of the creature's neck.

The creature allowed itself a small chuckle and swung Albion. Robin jumped out of the way. The demon took a step forward, trying to back Robin into a corner, and lunged again. The hut wall was at Robin's back. Nasir raced across the space towards him, but he had covered barely half the distance. The creature raised his sword to make the final stroke and moved in for the kill.

Part Five

Robin smiled. He stood tall and calm, a look of challenge in his eyes. The demon tried to bring the sword down and found its arm wouldn't move. Then, in its hand, Albion grew warm, gradually becoming hotter and hotter until it was impossible to hold. With a wailing scream it dropped the sword. It turned and ran across the ground to a waiting horse.

The blond knight tried to follow, but was stopped by Nasir, sword in hand. Robin picked up Albion and ran his fingers over the inscription “Herne's son is my master. I can not slay him.” This was the second time it had saved his life.

The other outlaws and Harry Morely were hard pressed. None of them, as yet, had been seriously wounded but they were slowly being forced into the centre of a ring of their mounted attackers. Suddenly, one of the men dropped from his saddle. From the melee, it was possible to see Robin and Nasir standing shoulder-to-shoulder, firing arrows. A second attacker fell. Then a third went down.

“Leave them!” cried the demon, “follow me!” It looked round for Joanna but she had taken the first opportunity to urge her horse into the forest and was nowhere to be seen. The demon swung its horse and led the troops at a gallop out of the village. As it was passing the last few huts, it grabbed hold of a village girl, who had been foolishly watching events. Screaming, she was hauled across the front of the creature’s saddle. Then the cavalcade disappeared into the depths of the forest amidst a thunder of hoofbeats.

A sudden stillness descended on the village. Robin and Nasir walked towards the others, bringing the knight with them. Nasir paused on the way to retrieve Wayland’s dagger.

“Who’s this?” Will was asking as Nasir approached. He was clearly prepared to object, whoever it was.

“I am Sir Mark of Steventon,” said the knight.

“And what are you doing here, Sir Mark?” asked Robin.

“I wouldn’t be here if I had the choice.”

“Yes, but why *are* you here?”

“That... creature has taken over my manor. It came last night, killed two or three guards and made it fairly clear that the rest of us could expect the same if we didn’t do what it wanted.”

“What did it want?”

“I don’t know. That was what I was doing here: trying to find out. It’s taken most of my armed men, but it won’t let on what it wants them for. I think, though, that it means to attack Nottingham.”

“Nottingham!”

“Well, it’s only a thought.” Sir Mark regarded them suspiciously. “Who are you?”

“Outlaws.”

The knight scowled. "I thought so."

Nasir saw Joanna emerge from the forest, hands still tied to the high pommel of the horse's saddle. He went over, leaving Tuck to relate their discoveries to the others. He released Joanna and lifted her down. Her wrists were grazed where the rope had been, but they would mend, he thought, examining them.

Robin was peering in the direction the demon had gone. "He'll be aiming for the church."

"Are you all right?" Harry had come up behind Joanna and Nasir. There was a note of challenge in his voice.

"Yes," Joanna said quietly.

"Good!" He took her from Nasir to lead her back to the others. Nasir heard a chuckle behind him and turned to see Tuck.

"You've got him well and truly jealous," Tuck said, apparently amused.

Nasir just smiled.

"Tuck! Nasir!" Robin called to them. "How far is it to the church?"

Tuck's brow furrowed in concentration. "About twice the distance back to the camp."

"Less than an hour's ride," estimated Robin.

"Can you be sure the demon's heading for the church?"

"It took the miller's daughter, Judith. I should think that it intends for her to take Joanna's place."

"What will you do?" asked Sir Mark.

"We need horses or we'll never catch it in time!" Robin fumed. "Where can we get horses?"

"The demon brought all the horses from my castle it could get," said Sir Mark. "You'll find them in that hut over there."

Not much later, ten riders departed from the village, Nasir and Tuck in the front, leading the way. They had lost precious time at the village and, privately, each doubted they would get there on time. Their only hope was that the demon would stage some sort of ceremony, allowing them time in which to catch it up.

They were not far from the church, and a vague throbbing chant hung on the air, when a woman stumbled out of the trees. At first sight, she looked like a dark crow, swathed in flapping black cloth, but when she looked up at them she suddenly appeared to be a young girl. She stood tall and the hood of her cloak fell

back. A round face, with a strong jaw, stared at them, scared but undaunted. Her hair was jet black and hung, glossy and thick, on her shoulders. Her eyes were deepest dark brown. Nasir drew in his breath sharply.

“Aleya!” The word, no more than a whisper, rang out like a bell over the sudden quiet that had fallen on the outlaws.

Almost before the echoes were taken by the wind, Nasir was dismounting.

“No! She’s dead!” It was Joanna.

“Dead?” Nasir glared at her.

“Yes. She’s my mother. I saw it happen.”

He turned to the woman. “Dead,” he said bitterly.

Slowly, he took Wayland’s dagger from its sheath. He walked purposefully towards the waiting figure. He paused just short of her and tilted his head, as if studying her. Then the watchers saw Nasir reach out and grip the girl’s shoulder. At his touch, the girl underwent a sudden transformation. She bared her teeth and her arms reached out from under the cloak, long and grasping. They reached for Nasir’s throat. Somehow, Nasir avoided the deadly embrace and moved in still closer. Everyone saw Nasir’s arm move and the hands stopped grasping and began to flail. The girl seemed to wither, and grow old before them, and then crumbled away into dust. Nasir was left holding empty air. For a moment, stillness hung on them, only the dull throbbing chant echoing in the air. Joanna moved forward on her horse to where Nasir still stood, stock still. Then a piercing shriek broke in upon the stillness, breaking away into a sobbing moan and falling back into silence. Robin’s head went up like a hound that had caught the scent.

“Judith!” he said and spurred towards the sound.

The others did likewise, Nasir running back and swinging himself up into the saddle, barely glancing at Joanna, who was the one person remaining still, remaining where she had been when the scream came, chewing her lip, a sure sign of doubtful thought. Harry paused, looking at her.

“Are you all right?” Harry asked.

Joanna nodded and flashed him a brief smile.

“Curious?” he asked.

“Yes, how did he know her?”

Harry shrugged. “You’ll have to ask him later. If you ever get the chance,” he added grimly.

The outlaws had reached the church. The chanting, much louder now, seemed to set the whole place vibrating. It wasn't a tuneful chant, more a low monotonous throb. Entering the church, they were greeted with the sight of the once empty silence filled with the assorted ranks of Sir Mark's guard, standing at the front, in the collapsed part of the building where the long vanished pews had stood. A clear aisle led the eye to where the demon stood behind the altar, the cross in its place before it. Bound and gagged, the girl, Judith, was held securely at one side, her eyes wide with terror. Calmly, in time to the chant, the demon was sharpening its knife. It turned to stare down the church at them as they stood amid the standing pillars, beneath the roof, such as it was.

The demon raised the knife high in the air. The chanting changed pitch and became a single long drawn out ringing note. It tore through the church, seeming to shake the very foundations. The vibration in the walls became almost visible, and the outlaws could feel the floor tremble at their feet. As they hesitated, terrified, dust, and then chips of stone, began to fall around them. One pillar, already weakened by time, collapsed, and more dust came down, followed by beams from what was left of the roof.

"Stop it!" Sir Mark shouted above the note. He moved forward into the body of the church. More rubble began to fall. The rest of the outlaws retreated towards the porch as another pillar gave way. More beams fell, followed by large blocks of masonry. Around them, the very walls of the church collapsed.

Part Six

From some distance away, Harry and Joanna witnessed the demolition of the church. Without a word, they hastened their horses towards it. The mound of fallen masonry obscured the demon and his followers from view, but the chanting had returned, and the low throb hung on the air like a portent of doom. There was no sign of the outlaws. Dust gradually settled on a motionless mound of rubble. They dismounted.

"Robin! Marion!" called Harry anxiously.

"Nasir!" added Joanna.

They picked their way over the first boulders into what had once been the body of the church. Looking about him, Harry pessimistically, but not unjustifiably, surmised that the outlaws were under the main body of the rubble. He spotted a

scrap of scarlet among the wreckage. Moving over, he saw it was a scrap of cloth. He cleared away the smaller rocks and uncovered the man's face. Joanna came over.

"What is it?"

"Sir Mark, dead. The others must be buried under the heaviest part."

"What are we going to do?" Joanna's eyes, brimming with tears, were wide and luminous.

"We'd better get away from here!"

"What about the demon?"

"We can't do anything about the demon. We haven't got any weapons that can harm it."

She bit her lip. "We can't just leave it to do whatever it wants!"

"We have no option."

He had taken hold of her hand and was leading her back to the horses, when they both distinctly heard the sound of loose stones falling. Looking back, they saw one of the boulders that had fallen across the porch move slightly. As they watched, it was slowly rolled away and Little John climbed out.

"You're alive!" cried Joanna, running towards him

"Aye, lass, we all are - took shelter in the porch."

The porch had remained intact. It was made of smaller stone formed into an arch. When they discussed it later, the outlaws were unsure whether it was the material or the shape that had kept it standing, but it had survived. One by one they emerged. Scarlet was limping slightly and Marion's forehead was badly cut, but they were otherwise unscathed.

"That was quite an effect!" mused Tuck, surveying the wreckage.

"How was it done?" asked Robin.

"I don't know but a couple more displays of power like that and people will be falling over themselves to obey the creature's every whim."

Robin hefted Albion. "We've got to stop it," he said. "We can skirt round the edge of the ruin and come up behind it."

"We haven't got a chance against that lot!" objected Scarlet.

"You got any better ideas?"

Will glowered, but said nothing.

"Come on then."

The outlaws began to edge around the rubble, Joanna and Harry in tow. The open part of the church came into view. Judith was already dead. The altar had fallen. The demon stood in its place, arms raised to the sky. Screened by the

undergrowth, the group watched the demon make a swift cutting gesture with one hand and the chanting stopped, leaving a deathly silence.

"I'm free!" cried the creature, "free!"

The wind snatched his voice and the cry seemed to float among the trees and hang about the crags.

"Free!"

Robin signalled to the others to follow him and broke cover, running directly to the demon. One of Sir Mark's men stepped into his path, drawing a sword. Robin barely paused. Giving the man no time to use the weapon, Robin slashed up and across, freeing Albion with a jerk, and ran on. The demon drew a sword and the two of them faced each other across the remains of the altar.

Around them the fight grew. Although outnumbered, the outlaws were skilled fighters, while several of the demon's followers were untrained servants or villagers. All were badly shaken by the demon's display of power. A few turned and fled, but most were held by fear of the demon. Among them were trained warriors and men-at-arms who rallied quickly and fought with grim determination.

Joanna, watching from the trees, surmised thus much. She had stayed behind, having no training with a sword, aware she would be more of a hindrance than a help in the fight to come. She singled out her friends one by one.

Will Scarlet, fighting with fierce energy, swiftly cut down a number of the untrained before coming face to face with a small dark man, whose looks betrayed his Celtic origin and who proved a skilled and deadly opponent. They circled, attacked and parried, evenly matched.

Much had paused on the edge of the melée to let off a couple of slingshots before grabbing up his quarterstaff and laying about him with a skill that belied his innocent looks.

Little John, with more strength, and no less skill, left a trail of broken heads in his wake.

Tuck and Marion, using swords, were soon engaged in a series of small private fights and Nasir, with two swords, fought with the cool deliberation of the professional killer: precise, efficient and deadly.

Harry was fighting a heavy-boned Saxon with skill, but without the desperate energy the others put into it. He had never fought a man before who seriously meant to kill him nor had he, himself, ever killed a man. Joanna watched anxiously, aware that for all his training this put Harry at a disadvantage.

In the centre, undisturbed by the fighting going on around them, Robin and the demon circled cautiously like cats, wary and unsure. The demon attacked. Robin parried. They parted and continued to circle. Robin attacked. The demon stepped

back and slipped on a loose stone. It rolled swiftly to one side as Robin's sword came down, inches away, on the stone flags, and then the demon was up again. The gladiators continued to circle.

Suddenly Joanna's attention was diverted back to Harry. The saxon, changing tactics, had brought his sword down low and cut across Harry's ankle. Harry collapsed to his knees groaning. With a cry, Joanna broke cover and ran towards him.

The cry rung clear across the *melée* and caused Robin to look up briefly and pause, fatally. The demon sword came down, connected with his and, with a small twist, Albion went flying across the ground. Once again, Robin stood at its mercy, weaponless. It was then that Nasir broke through the wall of followers and, with single-minded determination, grabbed hold of the demon from behind, one short dark arm encircling its throat while the other reached for Wayland's dagger. Nasir plunged the dagger through the cloak, at the base of the demon's spine, then ripped savagely upwards. The demon writhed, heaved and then sagged heavily against him. Nasir let go and the demon collapsed in a small crumpled heap on the ground. Nasir's arm and dagger, and most of his front, were smeared with the demon's blood. Slowly, the fighting stuttered to a halt as, one after another, the demon's reluctant followers dropped their swords.

"It's dead," Joanna said, walking forward, trying to take in the enormity of it. Harry got up and limped towards her. He put his arm round her shoulders.

"Yes, it's dead," Harry said with a sigh.

Suddenly, like a taut string snapping, everyone started grinning and talking. In the midst of it all, Joanna sought out Nasir.

"How did you know my mother's name?" she asked. "Back there in the forest. How did you recognise her?"

He looked at her. "She was... my wife," he said slowly.

Joanna took this in. It did not come as a surprise: a thought, half-formed, had already suggested as much.

"Then you are my father."

"So it would seem."

Nasir's face was impassive. Joanna didn't know what he thought, whether he wanted a daughter or not. She knew nothing of him. She bit her lip and gazed at him. Then, suddenly and impulsively, she did the thing that came most naturally to her and, flinging her arms around Nasir's neck, hugged him. Nasir stood motionless for a second under her embrace and, then, with a strange sound that might have been one brief convulsive sob, he slipped his arms around her waist and, dropping his head to the same level as hers, held her tight as if he

would never let her go.

Chapter 2

Robin of Sherwood Drabbles

2.1 Winter in Sherwood (Challenge “from a character’s viewpoint”)

Winter gripped Sherwood. Frost stood out on the bare branches of the trees, a mocking memory of beauty. Moving beyond the fire at the cave mouth was an agony of biting wind and a penetrating damp that cut to your heart.

Scarlet was leaving anyway.

“Don’t go,” John had said. His voice carried echos of summer warmth, long chilled by bickering and argument.

Much watched, still and silent, frozen solid by the bitter ice wind.

Tuck tended to the fire.

It had been winter in Scarlet’s heart since Elena died.

The summer in Sherwood had only ever been an illusion.

2.2 Do not got Gentle into that Dark Night (Challenge “Sherrif’s POV”)

The Sheriff died in his bed.

Some would have called it peaceful.

The forest was long clear of outlaws.

Gisburne was dead; lost to war and rebellion. His successor also believed in force as the option of both first and last resort.

Hugo continued to amass wealth and remained smugly content with his lot. Robert, enmeshed in ties of blood, achieved little with his aid.

Once Robert de Rainault had had plans. None had been achieved and he knew how he would be remembered.

Surrounded by incompetence, venality and thugs, he raged impotently in death as he had in life.