

1. The Old Road

Jon Camber shivered and wrapped his cloak more tightly around himself. The action was not prompted entirely by the fact that there was a distinctly wintry chill in the air, although that in itself was troubling. Autumn was upon them, true, but in this part of the world the season was usually far milder. Even so, the real reason for his discomfort lay in their location. They were passing Wychwood.

“Alright lad?” said Daffyd, sitting next to him at the front of the wagon.

Jon nodded by way of answer, not wanting to talk unless it was absolutely necessary. It was already growing dark, although it was still a good few hours before decent folk would think of having supper, and it was now eerily quiet, a near silence that seemed almost to have a shape and substance of its own. He had the feeling that if he spoke, or made any wrong noise, he would bring unwanted and unnatural attention to himself. The only other sounds were the creaking of the wagon and the clip-clop of the carthorse, Old Toby, as his hooves hit the ground. Jon had the sudden, irrational wish that Daffyd would make Toby go faster.

The Old Road was well named. It had been laid by the very first settlers who had come eastwards across the mountains almost two thousand years ago. A kingdom had existed here in past times and the road had provided a means of passing easily between this realm and the richer lands near the coast. Even after the fall of the old kingdom and through the many wars which had scarred the lands thereafter the Old Road had endured, though the myriad holes, pits and ruts along it testified to its great age and the centuries of ill-use.

Through all this time Wychwood had stood alongside the road, but it had never been an easy neighbour. Throughout the life of the Old Road the forest had provided obstacles for those who journeyed along it. Trees and bushes grew at the road’s edges, twigs snapping at the faces of unwary travellers and whole branches falling, fractionally missing the heads of those passing below. Occasionally a rotten tree would keel over and stop all traffic from moving past it. It was as if, angry at being forever sundered by the laying of the road, the wood had made up its mind to wage a perpetual war on its man-made neighbour.

For the wood was ancient, and had cause to be bitter towards men and all their constructions. Once, the forest had covered all the lands between the mountains and the sea, suffocating everything within its boundaries like some covetous giant spider. It had been here before men had ever walked this country, and long before there had been an Old Road. All that remained now was a resentful shadow of the forest’s former magnificence. Wychwood was a remnant of that primeval tract of woodland and it hated men and their settlements, which had ended its dominion over these lands.

It was the trees that unsettled Jon most of all. They rose up on either side of the road like ancient statues, their branches arms that reached far above him, seeming to grasp at the sky vengefully. They seemed to be in a constant state of motion, leaves rustling and twigs snapping in the cold evening wind. There was little enough light as it was, for they were far from any villages, but the tall shapes of the trees seemed determined to make it difficult for the moon to show itself through their branches. Their silhouettes were cast on the road in front of them in terrifying, twisted shapes, which seemed to contort on the ground of their own accord. Noises were everywhere now and Jon’s frightened, overactive imagination turned them into more sinister sounds – the cry of a hunting owl became a woman’s scream, and the sound a fox

made as it rustled through the undergrowth was magnified until it seemed that a great hungry bear was crashing through the trees towards them.

“How much further is it to Walker’s Edge?” Jon decided against silence and found the sound of his voice to be comforting amid the constant, ominous noises emanating from within the forest.

“Not far now lad,” Daffyd pointed ahead, “We just have to follow the road around that stand of trees over there. Then we reach the bridge. Over that and it’s a straight ride on to the village.”

He reached over and ruffled Jon’s hair, a black colour that people in his home village of Three Willows told him did not match his eyes, which were grey like mountain mist. Three Willows was in The Free Hems, a backwater district of the Westlands whose people were mostly farmers, shepherds and woodsmen. Daffyd also came from the same village and was a farmer like Jon’s father, although he was a good few years older than Owen Camber. His face was covered in wrinkles, especially around his eyes, and when he smiled, as he was often wont to do, he looked like a prune. This was a harsh observation however, for Daffyd Crell was a warm-hearted man, well liked in the village for his generosity. When Jon’s parents had been unable to spare time away from the farm this year for the annual visit to their relatives in Walker’s Edge, Daffyd had kindly offered to drop him off there for them. Jon had been grateful for the lift, for he had not been looking forward to going there on his own.

It was rare enough for anyone from Three Willows to travel out that far. One reason was simply because Three Willows’ folk were renowned for being very insular; some might even call them xenophobic. Jon knew that there was more than a grain of truth in such observations, since many people in the village were distrustful of anyone who lived on the other side of the Jade River and travelled only rarely on the Old Road. But beyond this it was rare for anyone from the Free Hems to go to Walker’s Edge and this had as much to do with the place’s reputation as with its location.

Of course, its proximity to Wychwood would make Walker’s Edge an unfavourable destination for any traveller. Besides this, it was also the most isolated and least populated of all the villages in the Free Hems and its inhabitants led a hard life. Whilst the unpleasant growth of the forest rose up on the western side of the village, in the east arose the far greater and more menacing shadow of the Dragon Spine Mountains, which were regarded by many as marking the boundary of the civilized world. The mountains were like a vast natural picket fence, and they dwarfed all that stood around them, including the Free Hems. Some of the bravest folk ventured into Wychwood when they had to, but even the gravest need never induced anyone to go up into the mountains. For they were an ill-omened place, the haunt, it was said, of blood-hungry ghouls, wights and other creatures of legend. Of course, much of what was said about the Dragon’s Spine were tales told by farmwives to frighten wayward children. But it remained the case that now and again, perhaps as rarely as every ten or fifteen years, travellers forced to take the little-used High Road because of blockages on the other roads went missing and were never heard of again. For all these reasons the punishment for the very worst crimes committed in the Free Hems was banishment into the mountains, and it was reckoned to be a harsh penalty.

Jon put a hand to his brow and strained his eyes, searching for a sign of the Dragon’s Spine beyond the outline of the trees. It was no longer possible to see them. Even though full dark had not yet settled in, visibility was much reduced around them. In itself this was not unusual, for they were at a high altitude in these parts and low

lying mists lay at the base of the mountains much of the time. But the air seemed particularly thick tonight and there was a cold that seemed to cut straight through to his skin, no matter how tightly he pulled his travelling cloak.

“Did you hear that lad?” Daffyd looked up suddenly, reining Old Toby to a halt. Jon, already on edge, looked around fearfully, expecting at any moment to be attacked by something coming out of the shadows. When he saw nothing he relaxed a bit, feeling ashamed that he was acting like such a coward. Yet when he turned to Daffyd he saw that his fears were mirrored in the older man’s expression.

“I don’t see anything.” Jon informed him.

“I never said there was anything to be *seen*, boy. Keep your ears pricked.” The old farmer made a gesture for silence and they both waited.

This time both of them heard it. From behind them there came a sound, quiet at first but seeming to get louder all the time. It was an animal’s sound, no question, but as to what manner of creature made the noise Jon could hazard no guess. A cross between the howling of a wolf and the wailing of a madwoman was the closest he could come to a description of it. But unlike either of these, this noise had an unsettling, almost supernatural quality, which set the hair on his neck standing on end.

“What in the Westlands is making that sound?” Jon asked.

“The Mother knows.” answered Daffyd, looking as shaken as Jon had ever seen him. “I certainly don’t.”

Quickly Daffyd turned his head so that his eyes were on the road ahead and with a crack of the reins he got Toby moving again. It was not lost on Jon that though they were not yet hurrying, the horse was being made to go at a much faster pace.

“We get some wildcats in these woods in the summer, when it warms up enough for them to come down from their dens up in the mountains.”

“It’s autumn.” Jon was unconvinced by the old farmer’s attempts to explain away the hideous howling. “And that was no cat.”

“What else could it have been? We don’t have direwolves in the Free Hems.” Daffyd was clearly unsettled and his horse seemed to be picking up on the humans’ discomfiture. Unbidden, Old Toby broke into a canter.

“Perhaps it was a Wulfen.” Jon suggested.

Daffyd made the sign against evil. “Don’t be daft. There’s no such thing.”

“Nan says there are.”

“Your Nan should know better than to go around filling young folks’ heads with that kind of nonsense.” Daffyd scoffed.

Jon went silent. His grandmother had been a much-respected figure in Three Willows when she had been the village’s Apothecary. It had been her job to cure those who came to her suffering from injuries and illnesses, of the mind as well as the body. In those days she had been valued as much for her no-nonsense bedside manner and sensible advice as for the herbs and potions that it was her duty to administer. In her later years, however, Nan had been struck down by a wasting disease and, rather than risk giving out faulty treatment in her reduced state of mind, she had retired her position. It was a sad decline; a once proud woman who had successfully battled the ailments of others had been powerless to do anything to help herself. She had been taken in to be cared for by her son’s family, and Jon, a lonely only child, had appreciated the company she provided. He had sat at her feet countless times; listening to all the stories she had heard in her long life with the fascination of a child. There had been tales of Wulfen and wights, ogres and banshees; of good King Bran and the wicked sorcerer Morkar; and his favourite, the legend of Thrull the Swordsman. In those days Nan’s stories, and the fabulous, terrifying creatures that

inhabited them had seemed wondrous, fuel for an imaginative boy's mind to burn. But here, in the darkness of a fog-filled night, Jon found that he did not relish the prospect of coming face-to-face with a fairytale. He did not feel like Thrull the Swordsman at the moment, more like Culloch the Craven.

Jon was dragged from his thoughts as the wagon lurched. One of the wheels had hit a rut in the road. For a few precarious moments he was forced to concentrate on just trying to keep from being thrown from his seat. Reaching out his hand he caught hold of the wagon's guardrail. As they rolled to one side again Jon's knuckles went tight with the effort of maintaining his grip there.

"Hold tight lad, this is a tricky part of the road."

Jon hardly heard Daffyd. The wind was whistling in his ears as Old Toby went faster and faster, now breaking into a gallop. He could no longer hear howling but he strained to hear another noise, in the distance at present but seeming to come closer. It was the sound of something moving on the road behind them, but it did not resemble the noise that a horse or a man might make. Jon could not tell what it was.

Their journey, progressing until so recently at a gentle pace, became a headlong flight through the darkness. Trees went past in a blur, their branches whipping out to strike at them. The wagon bucked perilously this way and that as it hit grooves, furrows and other imperfections in the road. Jon's teeth were chattering, although he himself did not know whether this was from cold or fear. He tightened his jaws and kept his eyes on the road ahead, not daring to look back.

Minutes passed as Daffyd drove them further up the Old Road. Looking around, Jon noticed that the trees on either side of the track seemed to be thinning out. They were leaving Wychwood behind.

Daffyd snapped the reins and the horses slowed to a trot.

"Why are we stopping?" Jon asked, trying to keep the edge of panic out of his voice.

"Old Toby's a carthorse, son, he wasn't bred for steeple-chasing." The old farmer brought the wagon steadily to a halt. "Besides, whatever was in those trees won't be troubling us now that we're out of Wychwood – even if it was a Wulfen." Daffyd attempted a smile, showing his crooked teeth.

Jon did not return the smile. He knew the old farmer was only trying to reassure him, but he still felt a deep sense of unease. The danger, whatever it was, was not yet behind them.

Daffyd heaved himself to the ground. He went round to the back of the wagon, where he bent over to examine the wheel. He clucked his tongue loudly at what he saw. Jon dropped down and joined him. One look at the large wooden wheel, or rather what was left of it, told him what had dismayed Daffyd.

"That'll need to be changed".

"I'll give you a hand." Jon was anxious for them to be on their way as soon as possible.

Luckily, Daffyd had packed a spare wheel before they had left Three Willows, anticipating just such an emergency. The road to Walker's Edge was always treacherous at this time of year, with marks left by the autumnal rains and the wear and tear of the summer, when carts bearing trade goods passed back and forth on the Old Road between all the villages in the Free Hems.

Jon held the new wheel as Daffyd knelt to remove the broken one. He found himself looking back up the road, not really knowing what it was that he expected to see. To tell the truth he could not really see much of anything. There was still a fog in the air, and it was now much darker. In the distance he could make out some vague

shapes; tall and dark they were, and indistinct through the fog. He took them for the trees that marked the edge of Wychwood. Suddenly he squinted hard. One of the trees appeared to be coming towards them.

A large dark shape was moving in the fog. As it grew nearer Jon saw that it was actually much smaller than one of the trees from which it seemed to have detached itself, and besides that it had limbs, not branches. It was still huge, however, maybe eight or ten feet tall; too big to be a man and much bulkier besides. For a moment Jon thought it could be a bear, but it walked far too comfortably on two feet to be an animal.

He stood transfixed in terror as the creature came closer and its hitherto vague outline became more discernible. The light from the moon above gave a terrible clarity to its features at last. It was no man indeed, but equally it was not like any beast he had ever seen before.

Now that he could see it clearly, its size was even more impressive. It was bigger than any bear he had ever heard of; longer-legged, more powerfully muscled and broader of chest. Its face was nightmarish. Huge jaws opened, revealing long, cruel-looking fangs, above which a pair of red eyes gleamed with unmistakable malice. It was those eyes which had him pinned now and his gaze was held as the beast settled on its hairy haunches and squatted on the road ahead of him, seemingly satisfied not to come any closer at present.

“What are you doing lad?”

Daffyd’s gruff voice broke him out of the trance that the creature’s eyes had put him in. Looking down, Jon realized that he had dropped the wheel he had been holding for him. Unable to speak for the moment, Jon raised his hand and pointed down the road.

The old farmer got up from where he was working on the broken wheel to stand beside him. He stared in the direction Jon was pointing and squinted. Frowning, he walked forward a few paces.

“What are you pointing at son, I don’t see anything.”

Jon did not move at first, but eventually he summoned up the courage to move to Daffyd’s side. He put his hand to his brow and strained his eyes. A sense of relief started to flood him when he saw nothing. However, this did not last for long. In the fog ahead a huge tree-like shape was once again on the move.

He turned to Daffyd. This time the old farmer had seen the movement as well. The worry etched in his features was testament to that.

“By the Mother.” was all Daffyd said before he went to the back of the wagon. Throwing back the tarpaulin that protected his goods from wind and rain, he rummaged around for a few moments before drawing out an oaken longbow and a quiver bristling with arrows. The men of the Free Hens rarely carried swords with them, as the roads in the region were as safe as they were anywhere in the Westlands. This did not mean that they travelled unprotected however, as no Hens-bred man worth his salt ever went abroad without a bow. This was usually enough to deal with any dangers they had to confront, which were more likely to be wild animals than bandits. Daffyd was one of the finest shots in Three Willows as well, despite his age, but even so, Jon felt that they were woefully under-equipped to deal with what they now faced.

For a while they simply stood there, side by side, waiting. Jon was unarmed but Daffyd was ready with his bow, one hand pointing it at the trees, the other poised at his left shoulder where his quiver hung, prepared to pull and draw an arrow at the first sign of danger. The old farmer stood utterly still, only the twitching of his jaw

giving any indication of his nerves. Jon wished he could hide his fear as well. Unbidden, his teeth started chattering again.

Daffyd spun around suddenly, now pointing his bow in the opposite direction down the road in front of them.

“What is it?” Jon whispered.

Daffyd did not answer, his attention riveted on the fog ahead, where, even as Jon watched, two new large shapes were coming towards them. *Mother help us*, he thought, *we’re surrounded*. By his side Daffyd reached for an arrow.

They waited with bated breath until they could more clearly make out what was approaching them. Then Daffyd gave out a relieved sigh and returned the arrow that he had just drawn to its quiver. The two figures standing in front of them in the moonlight were odd-looking, but at least they were men.

They were both on horseback, which accounted for why they had seemed so huge and unnatural-looking before. One of them kicked his mount forward. He was the older of the two, a man with traces of white in his grey beard, who looked strong and sprightly even though he seemed to be of an age with Daffyd. His eyes were clear and blue, and certainly did not look dulled by age. He wore a travelling cloak, mud-stained and frayed at the edges as if from long use. The greybeard’s companion was younger, about the age of Jon’s father, or his Uncle Kennet. His reddish hair was long and tied back from his face by a bandana, revealing swarthy, weather beaten features and a pair of bright green eyes which regarded both of them with a casual weighing look. He too was bearded, although his beard was much shorter than the older man’s and bore no touch of grey. His clothes looked equally well worn, and Jon noted with interest that a longsword hung at his belt. The pommel looked worn by use. Wherever they both hailed from, it was clearly a long way from the Free Hens. He looked back at the old man, who was now addressing Daffyd.

“A good evening to you good master, and to your son.” he said, inclining his head to both of them.

“A good evening to you, sir,” the farmer replied, “I am Daffyd Crell, and this is Jon Camber. He is no son of mine by blood, though I have often thought of him as my own kin.”

“My apologies,” The old man was fair-spoken and though he had traces of an eastern accent Jon had no trouble understanding him, “Let me introduce myself. I am Golan and this is...”

“Roshin Hawkeye,” his companion broke in, “At your command.” He gave them a crooked smile.

Daffyd doffed his hat to both of them, although he did not return Roshin’s smile. Jon did not blame him; it was a wolfish grin, and had little of humour in it.

Golan gave the other man a cold look, clearly not pleased at being interrupted, then turned back to address Daffyd.

“We have come from a place far from here and have been travelling on these roads for some time. I would be grateful if you could tell me if we have at last reached the Free Hens.”

“You’re in the Free Hens, but only just.” Daffyd lowered his bow and pointed with his other hand. “Over yonder is Walker’s Edge, the last village before the Eastern Marches, and the border of the civilized world.”

A smile flickered across Golan’s face when Daffyd said ‘civilized world’, clearly understanding what his opinion was of those lands outside the Free Hens.

“Thank you Master Crell. If I could trouble you with just one more question though – how far is it to Bearn’s Crossing?”

Bearn's Crossing was the largest village in the Free Hems, and was almost the size of a Westland town. Jon had never been there, for it lay far from Three Willows, a couple of days' travel on the South Road.

"You're a long way from there, friend. You'd have to travel on this road for half a day to get to the next village and from there it's a further two days before you'll arrive at the mouth of the Emerald River and Bearn's Crossing."

Golan blew through his nose at that, clearly vexed. He gave Roshin a dark look, in response to which his companion merely shrugged, still smiling. Jon wondered what their relationship to each other was.

"It appears that I've been given faulty directions. But there's no help for that I suppose. At least it will give us more time to enjoy the scenery in this fair land of yours. My thanks to you."

Once more Golan inclined his head and, pausing to give his companion a nod, it seemed that he would be on his way. Then Jon found himself piping up.

"Please Master Golan, it's not safe to travel the roads at this time of night. We're on our way to Walker's Edge, where you can be sure of a kind welcome at the Weeping Willow Lady Inn. Come with us now and you can be on your way come the morning after a good night's rest."

Golan turned to Jon, fixing him to the spot with his clear blue eyes.

"Jon Camber, isn't it? Tell me why the roads aren't safe."

Looking at Daffyd, who nodded, Jon told Golan about the howling they had heard and the shapes in the fog. He neglected to mention the creature he had seen sitting on its haunches watching them before. Even thinking of it made his blood run cold.

Golan looked worried enough by the rest though. Even Roshin had stopped smiling. At a signal from his master, for Jon was now sure that he was in some way in the older man's service, Roshin led his horse up the road. He went past the wagon and off into the gloom. Soon he had disappeared, swallowed up by the fog and the night. Golan turned back to Jon.

"Think carefully boy, did you see anything more, anything at all?"

Jon shook his head, not trusting himself to speak lest he make them all laugh by telling them about the hideous creature he had seen. *At least I think I saw it*, he now thought.

He was saved from having to answer when they all heard a cry from the direction in which Roshin had gone. Daffyd picked up his bow again, while Jon held his breath and then slowly released it. That had not been a man's cry. Turning to look at Golan he saw that the old man did not seem the least bit perturbed.

And he needn't have been either. A moment later Roshin appeared again, his crooked smile firmly back in place. Daffyd set his bow aside in obvious relief.

"It was nothing, just a wolf straying down from the mountains. I sent it back on its way." He addressed Golan mainly and Jon had the feeling that he emphasized the word 'wolf' when he did. "I didn't even have to draw my sword."

At that point Jon looked at Roshin's right arm, his sword arm. For a brief instant he thought he saw blood there, before Hawkeye hurriedly drew his cloak over himself. He looked at the others to see if they had noticed this as well but Golan had already turned his horse and Daffyd, looking much relieved, had retaken his place at the front of the wagon. He was in the process of calming down Old Toby, who was still whickering nervously.

Jon took one last look down the road and clambered up beside him. Roshin steered his horse up alongside them, still grinning good-naturedly.

“Well it looks to me like we’ll be travelling companions for a while farmboy.”

Jon merely nodded and watched as the man who called himself Hawkeye kicked his horse and moved to join Golan, who was already several paces ahead of them on the road to Walker’s Edge. Daffyd snapped the reins and they were finally on the move again, leaving the fog, and the shadows, and Wychwood behind them.