

Chapter 5

The Raven in the road

That day's travel passed swiftly, and the night was so still Alan felt for sure he could hear the snapping of a twig a hundred yards off. The morning dawned cool and pleasant, and after a short breakfast they were back on the trail.

They traveled swiftly as there were no obstacles and the road was well-maintained. The only remark Jerome would make was that it was the main road to Hells Gate and the human world. Hundreds of caravans traveled this way each year, and the Pa'grund made sure the road was maintained. That was why he was surprised to see bandits the other night. The Pa'grund were not gentle with thieves or bandits, as they injured trade and ruined prospects.

Alan was mystified at how they could keep the road so flat. Though he could see no cobbles, it appeared as if the dirt itself had been scraped smooth as a board, and packed as hard as stone. Surely this was the work of some great beast that he had never heard of, or some fiendish device. Whichever was the case, Alan tried not to dwell on it. He was just happy at the speed they were making.

"We should make Hells Gate by midmorning the day after tomorrow at this rate." He said at one point.

"I doubt it." Jerome snorted. He gestured ahead. "You can't see it through these trees, but the road quickly grows steep as it passes up the mountainside. Even if we were to abandon the wagon, the climb would still slow us to a crawl. I understand your impatience, but there is little we can do about it. We are but mortal men you know."

Alan took a moment to digest what he had heard. The news did not comfort him, and he began to wonder if it would not be prudent to leave the wagon behind now. He did not think it Jerome would part from it, and they needed him once they got to Hells Gate. Fume as he would, there was nothing he could do. They would have to get to the top together, or risk spending the lost time trying to find a way to set up a meeting.

With nothing better to do, Alan could but sit and wait. He could not even pretend he was riding; Stormy needed no help, she was surefooted and strong. With nothing left to him, his thoughts turn inward and he wondered what was happening back at home. Was Mary recovering? Was she getting worse? Or had she already died, and this whole affair was for nothing? He banished the thought. Mary, he knew, would be all right. He would get help for her, and by Winterfest they would all be together again. He swore it.

The road started to climb the next day, but they were still in thick forest and the road curved around small hills and skirted narrow valleys, or dove straight into them and up the other side. By midmorning, Alan was sick of the trail.

"There's dust behind us." Tobias announced unexpectedly. Startled, Alan turned to look and saw the thin plume further back catching up to their own.

"One rider, maybe?" he offered.

"Possibly. But just in case, one of us needs to take a look."

"Okay, let me slide off Stormy and..."

"I'll do it. There's a curve just ahead, where it goes around that hill. I'll hop off Red there, and hide. I'll get count of the riders and see if everything is safe. I'll give a whistle if it is or a swamp cat roar if it isn't."

"Are you sure?" Alan wanted to make sure. He saw Tobias's teeth flash white.

"Of course. Just be ready." He remarked cheerfully as he tossed Jerome his reins and jumped off Red into the brush. He ducked behind a fern and was quite lost to view as they continued on, not slowing.

"Be careful." Alan called quietly.

"Don't worry lad, I'm sure he'll be fine." Jerome said comfortingly. "He'll give us the signal and we'll come runnin' you'll see. We're going slow enough that we won't make it far past that next bend up the road before it happens."

"I hope so."

"We'll be ready." Stormy promised, sliding her spear out of its holder and gripping it as she walked. Alan readied his and checked the sword he had grabbed. On the wagon, he saw Jerome twitching slightly, like a man with itching powder down his back, and realized he was checking the

placement of his knives. He wondered how many were hidden, but after a full five minutes of Jerome's twitching, decided he really didn't want to know.

Tobias waited under his fern, arrow knocked and ready to fly in case there was more than one. Sweat dripped off his brow and soaked his shirt from his tension, and he resisted the urge to wipe it away. *Can't make a movement that could be detected, just in case.*

To take his mind off the torture, he slithered a little further up so he could make out the road better. The problem was that he could see only a short distance around the bend, so the owner of the dust cloud would be nearly upon him before he saw them. Once he revealed himself, whether with whistle or roar, there would be no retreat. He would have to stand...or fight.

He heard the clink of hooves striking rocks in rapid succession, and realized the rider was hurrying along. Probably trying to catch up, but not wanting to run. That did not bode well, Tobias thought. He checked his hunting knife and readied himself.

The rider came around the corner, cloaked with the hood pulled low for the shade. The horse was a big black stallion, easily as large as a draft, but with the lines for speed. Tobias had heard tell of the breeds used for warhorses, but had never seen one until now. However, there was no mistaking that was what he was seeing now. An observation confirmed when he noticed the hilt of a sword poking up on the other side of the horse from him.

Taken together, he was sure this was not some friendly traveler. It could be another assassin, and Tobias thought briefly of simply sending a shaft through him, but hesitated. What if he was wrong? Perhaps he could subdue him and find out?

It was a good plan, he thought. At the very least, they could tie him up and leave him behind if he proved to be one.

The figure was nearly in front of him. Tobias readied himself to...spring!

Throwing himself forward like a runner from the line, he gave the biggest roar he could, hoping Alan hear it and come running back. The figure jerked and turned towards him, clearly surprised as Tobias leapt from the hill and hit the figure square on.

They tumbled from the back of the horse, which whinnied and jumped. Tobias felt the wind whoosh out of the figure as they hit the road, but it didn't stop him from throwing a punch at his stomach. Tobias caught that arm and forced it down, reaching for the other one, but the figure was hammering blows on his ribs and chest. Tobias yelped, those punches *hurt*! Whoever it was, they were no lightweight!

Tobias hit them in the stomach and managed to land a blow on the flailing arm. That locked it up long enough for him to sap the figure on the side of the head. He went limp just as Alan and Stormy raced around the bend, spears held like lances. They came to a stop, spraying Tobias with rocks and dirt.

"Hey!" he shielded his face, annoyed.

"Sorry." Stormy said sheepishly.

"Are you all right?" Alan asked.

"Fine, fine. But this guy is quite the fighter! I thought he'd get me for a minute or two there, until I was able to land a blow on his head."

"Well, let's get a look at him then."

Tobias whipped off the hood and stared in shock. So did Alan and Stormy. Tobias's thoughts raced as he stared at the long raven hair and porcelain face of the girl that lay beneath him. *I hit a girl. I jumped her and punched her in the face*, Tobias thought numbly. He felt horrified.

He felt her stir and was awash with relief. He patted her cheek almost shyly. Her lashes fluttered before opening to reveal deep green eyes that captivated him. She looked around for a disoriented moment before locking gazes with him.

"Get off of me!" she snapped with the authority of royalty. "Do you know who I am?!"

"No." Alan said harshly. "And that's the problem. Are you an assassin sent to kill us?"

She turned her head to look at him. "Kill you?" she scoffed. "As if a couple of farmboys like you would ever warrant such attention! Besides, I'm the daughter of a noble house, not some mere assassin!"

She shoved Tobias, who was unprepared for her strength. He went rolling and got to his feet as Jerome pulled his wagon up.

"Who is...Why Lady Sa'reen!" He was surprised.

"You know her?" Alan asked as they looked at him.

"By reputation and description only. She's the daughter of a minor noble house that has...fallen on hard times."

"Who are you, and how do you know so much of my family?" The girl demanded. She drew herself up to her full diminutive height while trying to bore into Jerome with her gaze.

"Allow me to introduce myself, milady. I am Jerome the Trader." He bowed from his seat on the wagon.

"And your...companions?" she sniffed.

"Alan, Tobias and Storm Walker of Boggington." He gestured to them one at a time. They murmured their greetings, but she ignored Alan and Stormy to focus on him.

"Why did you leap on top of me like some randy Morseville farmboy?" she spat the question with enough venom to kill a dozen wild boars.

Tobias felt his head snap back, and the first stirrings of anger. "We told you." His voice came out in a growl. "We've been set upon by bandits and assassins on this road, more than twice now. We assumed you were such."

"Bandits!" she mocked. "No bandit would be foolish enough to attack on a Pa'grund maintained road. Not if they wanted the mercy of a quick death at least. Besides, I haven't seen any sign of bandits, except you!"

Tobias resisted the urge to reach over and smack sense into that empty head. *And what is so hard to believe about bandits on the main road? Surely there are some, not even the Pa'grund are powerful enough to stop bandits entirely!* He said as much.

Both Jerome and Raven laughed. Tobias felt anger bubbling towards the surface, though he strove to maintain a calm exterior.

"The first punishment a Pa'grund doles out to an unfortunate bandit stupid enough to be caught by it, is to be dismembered alive. There are no second chances." Jerome smiled, amused by the sickly green cast of Alan's skin. "Of course, they only patrol the main road. Any other route is, of course, infested with bandits."

"Then why were we set upon twice by bandits and assassins?" Tobias growled.

"I guess greed overcame common sense." Jerome said thoughtfully. "Never mind you boys alone, but the chance to get back at me must have made Jones freer with his money than normal. If he's increased his offer for you, then we must be very, very careful when we make it to Hell's Gate."

Alan groaned, prompting everyone to look at him. He ran his fingers through his hair, turning red. "I...uh...may have mentioned what the jewels were for." He muttered.

Tobias exhaled slowly as the enormity of what Alan said came to him. The value of the gems in Alan's pocket were more than enough to set every thief and bandit in the country looking for them, and though Hell's Gate wasn't technically part of the country, it would be an open field to them if the bandits would care to try their luck there. Already his mind pondered angles and possibilities. They could try disguises, change their names, but that would mean losing Stormy, and Alan would never agree to that. For that matter, neither would Tobias. Unless...

The thought hit him hard and he felt like three kinds of fool. They could disguise her! It wouldn't be easy, but dying her coat a different color...maybe finding a wig or something to cover her hair. It could work, he thought. It had to work. He gave a quite chuckle as he pictured Storm with white and red patches on her body, a red-streaked tail, and a red wig on her head.

"What are you talking about?" Raven's voice brought him to the present, and he realized he didn't dare say a word just yet. No need to let her warn every bloody bandit in the country about their marvelous disguises! Especially since he had no idea how he was going to pull it off.

"Nothing that need concern you." Tobias said forcefully, glancing around at the others to remind them that she was a stranger.

Alan, fortunately, seemed to take the hint, though plainly he did not like it one bit. He muttered about speaking out of turn and it wasn't important. Stormy gave a sickly grin and turned away, pretending to look down the trail for any more signs of pursuit. Jerome just shook his head, and smiled innocently, and Raven...

Raven glared around her as if she truly was the princess of fable. Her eyes finally settled on him and tried to bore a hole through him. Tobias felt a cocky grin come up and he leaned casually against the side of the road as he stared down at her. He would be a goat-herding fool if he fell for her intimidation.

As quick as a striped-back tigerfish striking a wounded bass, her expression went from angry to haughty. She arched a brow and spoke demandingly. "Are you the leader of this party then?"

Tobias chuckled and drawled, "'Fraid not, milady. That would be Alan here." He nodded towards his friend.

"Strange." She commented. "It seems to be you as the one giving the orders around here."

Tobias found that notion utterly ridiculous, and he laughed so hard he felt as if his ribs would crack! That anyone in their right mind would consider him a leader! Even Alan joined in on that one and both of them were grinning like fools at her as she turned her head from one to the other slowly.

"What's so funny?"

"Your suggestion that I could be a leader," Tobias grinned. "It's funny."

"Why?"

"Because, I'm not." Tobias laughed. Him? A leader? Ridiculous. "I'm the son of a simple farmer in the Great Swamp. Nothing more."

Raven grunted sourly, giving him a close look. He realized she must have been disappointed not to have correctly judged him, and he felt absurdly pleased at the thought.

Feeling almost happy for the first time in an age, he climbed onto Red's back, feeling the horse shift under him slightly as he swung over the saddle. The others were getting ready to leave as well; Alan already on Stormy's back while Jerome got comfortable on his driver's bench.

Raven just stood for a moment, watching them go and looking completely uncertain of herself before quickly nodding as if coming to a decision. Running to her warhorse, she leapt onto the saddle so lithely that Tobias stared. Clucking him to a trot, she hurried to catch up with them.

"What are you doing?" Tobias asked in surprise as she came abreast of him. The massive stallion nipped at Red who laid his ears flat against his skull and snapped at the other horse. Tobias had his hands full for a moment keeping his horse under control. When they got their horses to settle, Raven spoke.

"What does it look like, *farmboy*." She had a tongue like a rasp when she wanted to, and the look of disdain she shot him wasn't pleasant either. Tobias suppressed the urge to strangle this infuriating woman. All he did was ask a civil question and she made it sound like he had cursed her family!

"I don't remember inviting you along." Alan rumbled mildly from ahead, twisting around on Stormy's back so he could ride backwards and

watch them. Tobias admired the control his friend had, and his absolute trust in Stormy. Raven just stared in surprise.

"Look." She spoke reasonably after giving herself a slight shake. "Assuming I believe your tale for a minute, that means there are probably armed men behind us that won't be keen on meeting anyone else on this road that may identify them later. It would be safer for all of us to be in a large group then going our separate ways right now." She paused a moment before adding, "I'm also a skilled fighter. I can be another sword guarding your back in a fight."

"I've seen how well you've fought." Tobias remarked dryly, seeing an opportunity to get his own back. He was rewarded with a look that should have roasted him alive in the saddle.

As abruptly as it had appeared, the look was gone and replaced by wide, innocent eyes and a wide smile. "Then I guess I will prove to you how good I am when we stop for the evening."

Tobias tried to control the sudden unease her confident voice evoked in him, even as he felt his own slip slightly. *What have I gotten myself into this time?* He had an uncomfortable notion that he was going to find out as he agreed to her challenge.

They set up that night near the edge of a small clearing, not far from the road. Raven had bustled around camp with the rest of them, collecting firewood and getting the fire started. While she worked, Tobias admired the curves of the girl as she bent over the bundle of sticks she was trying to ignite into fire without much success. A glare from Alan made him sigh and walk over.

"You aren't going to light the fire like that." He put as tactfully as he could.

"Oh, and I suppose you happen to have a flint on you?" her snide comment took him aback.

"What made you set off without one?" he asked in surprise.

"I had one." She muttered in frustration. "At my last camp I lost it in some bushes, and I wasn't able to find it before I set off."

"Ah." Tobias nodded. Privately, he wondered what this girl was going to do if she ever got into *real* trouble.

"Well, you don't really need to use flint to make a fire, if it comes down to it, although it is much more useful. Here, let me show you how to use a bow and staff." He hunted for a few minutes before he found a perfect stick, slightly curved and mostly smooth and placed it on top of the driest log he could find. Setting small grass and tiny twigs at the base, he twirled it as fast as he could, the wood blurring in his hands. In just a few minutes he had a tiny flame catching on the twigs, which he soon breathed into a small flame.

"How did you do that?" Raven asked curiously, easing a little closer.

"Rubbing the stick rapidly builds smoke and heat, causing the tinder to catch fire." Tobias explained.

"Ah." Raven nodded. Suddenly she grinned, which made Tobias's stomach plummet rapidly. "Which reminds me," the Cheshire cat grin was in full force now. "We still have a battle to settle."

"Ah, yes we do." Tobias said tonelessly. This wasn't going to go well, he just knew it.

"Well, then let's begin." She looked at Alan. "Let's start with you shall we? I'd like to save Tobias here for the last."

"Great." Tobias groaned. Why couldn't he get lucky just once with women?

Alan shrugged, stepping out into the forest. He returned a minute later with a long branch nearly as tall as him. Whittling the branches off, he started to make a staff when one fell across his lap. Looking up, they saw Jerome standing there with three of them. Dropping the other two near the fire, he sat on a log near his wagon to watch the show.

With a sigh, Alan reached down and picked up his staff, walking to one side of the firelight to wait. Tobias watched keenly, interested in seeing the outcome of this match. Raven faced him on her side, staff twirling more like a sword than a spear.

Alan faced her across the fire, his form towering over hers. She eyed him warily as he idly swung his staff in a circle. Without warning she charged forward. Surprised, he barely got the staff up to block as she swung her staff as if it was a sword. Wood smacked wood with a resounding clack that echoed throughout the clearing. He easily pushed her off and launched into an attack of his own. Using the stick as a spear, he jabbed at

her midsection quickly, but carefully so that he didn't hurt her. She easily dodged the blow. She spun in a form that he didn't recognize, and he had to leap back to avoid getting hit by the staff. He growled and jabbed again, trying to hit her, but she danced away. Blocking several moves, he was slowly pushed back across the clearing. The stick blurred in her hands as she pressed her advantage. His staff was suddenly knocked out of his hand and he froze as the staff flicked up at his throat.

Tobias felt his throat grow tender from his cheering. He hadn't expected his friend to put up such a fight, but then he had been the champion in quarterstaff competitions last year.

"You fight well." Raven nodded to him. "You just need to watch that tendency of yours to overcompensate on your right side. You're wielding a staff, not a sword and shield." She continued for a few minutes, giving him some tips, before turning to him.

"Ready?" The grin was back in full force. Tobias matched it.

"Of course I am." He announced boldly as he grabbed his staff and strode forward. Taking his position, he waited for Alan to sit back down before making his move.

Tobias didn't wait for her to rush him, he stepped of the moment she indicated she was ready. They met with a clack of wood on wood as she met his attack with one of her own, and for a minute all was a blur as they struck and counter-struck at one another. Tobias felt fresh astonishment as Raven easily dodged one of his blows and lightly rapped his arm. She was better than anyone he had ever seen! This wasn't going to be a contest, he realized. It was going to be a slaughter, with his name on it!

Recklessly, he combined and alternated every form he knew, inventing some on the spot, trying to get around the web she wove around herself. Apparently tiring of the game, she attacked in earnest, and Tobias found himself on the defensive, trying to push Raven away. It proved for naught however, and he froze, feeling her staff hovering about his Adam's apple. He dropped his staff in defeat.

"Very nice." Raven huffed slightly as she stepped back from him. "You fought extremely well, and came up with some moves I haven't seen before. Still, your forms were a bit slow and you could use some polish on them." She lectured.

With a dejected growl, he stalked off to the log to nurse his wounds and get a bite to eat from the biscuits Jerome handed him. He realized the night wasn't over yet however.

He looked up from his biscuit as Stormy passed him, holding the last staff in the guard position. "Stormy, what are you doing?" Alan asked.

"It's been many years since I've learned. I would like to see what I remember." She said. She looked at Raven, "Unless you're too tired?" Raven shrugged. "I didn't think slaves were allowed to learn how to fight."

A flash of anger crossed Alan's face and Tobias felt the first stirrings of his own. No one considered Stormy a slave, but as part of the Eagleheart family.

"Stormy is her own person. If she wants to learn how to fight, she can." He said coldly. Raven raised an eyebrow at his tone, but shrugged again before setting herself against the centaur.

Stormy didn't give her a chance to rethink her decision. She gave a powerful shout and lunged forward. A ton of centaur-flesh was bearing down on Raven who seemed rooted to the spot as she came on. Tobias felt himself moving forward to Raven.

What is Stormy thinking?! Tobias thought frantically as he gripped the biscuit in his hand to hide his anxiety. Little brown crumbs fell from his fist and fell onto the floor. If Raven doesn't move away in time, she could be crushed, and she won't be able to stop!

He fell limp in relief as Raven simply stepped out of the path and swung the staff towards Stormy. It was met with the sound of wood as Stormy's staff met hers. The two women battled, Stormy meeting every attack of Raven with one of her own. Raven scowled in concentration, sweat gleaming in the firelight on her brow. It sprayed out from her with every whirling motion as she struggled to find an opening to exploit. Stormy continued to advance forward while Alan and Tobias looked on in amazement. "

Alan, did you know she could do that?" Tobias whispered. Alan shook his head, unable to tear his eyes away from the spectacle. The two women came apart for a minute, Raven breathing heavily and looking for an opening. Stormy planted as firmly as an oak, staff on the guard position. Raven launched an attack of her own, swinging hers above her head for a devastating blow, leaving her forward body open to attack. She changed positions midway, swinging the staff down and inwards in a circle, trying

to get under Stormy's guard. Stormy blocked it and sallied a strike. She clipped Raven's shoulder, causing her to hiss slightly. Stormy stepped back and was rewarded with a sharp rap in her side. Raven had stepped with her and gotten under the guard.

"Enough." She panted. "Stormy, I take back what I said. You are a hell of a warrior. Where did you learn all that?"

"From my mother before I was kidnapped." She replied sadly. "I was badly surprised and very young when I was captured. I forgot all I had learned until I was at the Eaglehearts. I remembered what Mother had taught me, and I practiced every night when I was small, just as I practiced human tongue."

Alan stepped forward to comfort Stormy. She gave him a wan smile as he stepped beside her heaving flank. "I've found a good family here." She said softly. She then turned towards Raven. "Thank you for the sparring session. I've never had a sparring partner. I was always too afraid to ask." "Stormy!" Alan said, clearly shocked. "I've never given you a reason to be afraid. You could have told us!" "I know, but Wild Weed warned me against showing you when I asked her. I never forgot. I'm sorry." "It's all right. I'm just glad you know what you're doing!" Alan chuckled. He looked at her proudly.

Tobias shook his head, this night had been full of surprises, but now he really wanted to sleep. With a yawn, he spoke up.

"Well, this has been great fun, but I think we should turn in, especially if we want to continue with our early start business. I'll take third watch, if you don't mind."

"I'll take the first." Stormy volunteered. She smiled at Alan. "I'm not very tired right now anyway."

"All right." Alan nodded. "I'll take second and Raven can have the last watch."

"Very well." Raven nodded. "If I am to get up that early, I'm going to turn in then also. Good night."

Tobias went to his saddle to fetch his bedroll. Unrolling it next to the fire, he set the blanket down, curled up under it and shut his eyes. In minutes, he felt the comforting blackness of sleep swallow him.

