Onefoot, Awaiting a Wizard

The young Crow had become somewhat impatient by now, awaiting the Wizard slowly working his way across the low mountain’s misty heights.

Men seemed to have not yet mastered the art of walking about in nature at all, as far as she could tell. They were excellent at getting lost though, and practiced it often. It was both frustrating and fascinating to her, watching them for hours as they moved in harried squiggles, there-and-back-again loops, and gentle, accidentally arcing paths, through tangled wildlands clearly designed to suggest they go elsewhere. She often surprised herself by her own curious concern for men, whenever she caught sight of one far afield from his dwelling. She considered people primarily an indoor species.

Most creatures just got well out of the way when the familiar, furtive rustle and crunch of boots on the earth announced, in spite of the traveller’s self-conscious care taken to conceal his passage through the neighbourhood, the presence of a Man on a Wilderness Trek.

Other, less skittish creatures were naturally drawn closer to investigate the sound of civilized folk caught out of their element. These were the creatures the young crow kept her left eye on, whenever men came trampling about. Her right eye, as always, was busily gazing into spaces neither mortal nor woodland creature could see.

The Crow was called Onefoot Down by the others, due to her habit of standing on one leg when she had a concern (she was on her left one, at the moment).

In the Crow world, Onefoot was a Seer. Strictly speaking, the title crows use among themselves is tricky to precisely translate, to the tongues of men. In the language these accounts have been written in, the most fitting word is more likely to be “Imaginer”, but when dealing with those not of Crowkind, they are simply Seers, to avoid creating unwanted confusion.

Seers are not so uncommon among crows, but uncommon enough to warrant identifying at an early age, so that the necessary precautions can be taken. It is the job of the extended crow family to prepare their gifted young for the perplexing visions that will vie for their attention throughout life, up until the eve of their mortal death. For Onefoot, that final day was nowhere close at hand, and so she had a lot left to See, and also Imagine.

It was common knowledge among the crows in the area that the gift had been visited upon Onefoot at an unusually early age. She was, as far as she knew, the earliest-identified Seer that any crow she had ever met had ever recalled meeting, or hearing about.

Her elder sister, Moremice Thankyoumuch, greatly enjoyed re-telling the story of how the freshly-hatched Onefoot (not yet named so, of course), at the moment both her eyes thought to open in unison, became instantly so overtaken with vivid, overlapping visions of close-at-hand worlds (both real and imagined), that she popped right away from her nest, tiny wings flapping in an excited panic, and flew straight down into a large, soft mound of colourful leaves, twigs, and coyote scat, waiting for her below. There, at the foot of Old Moss Grey Spirit, their family’s ancestral birthing tree, Onefoot was left to thrash about in a terrific tizzy for many long hours, all among the branches, poop, and fire-hued leaves, until she tired herself out completely, and fell into a long and fitful sleep.

It had been late October when she had taken the Big Hop (as Moremice called it). As was the custom when it came to welcoming a young Seer into the world, no crow was permitted to come near her during this period of her first revelations in the leaf pile. She needed to learn for herself how to direct her sight back toward the mortal realm, and so begin the life-long journey of mastering the ancient crow art of seeing from each eye independently.

To other animal kind, this tradition of early non-intervention seemed at times unnecessarily harsh, but crows know all too well that a Seer who cannot control her own visions – even at such a tender age – will grow to be a great danger to others over time. Thankfully, the hatchling soon managed to attune her sight, and on the second morning since falling from the nest, wiggled her way from the warm sanctuary of the leaf mound to find herself covered in filth, and surrounded by family. They had prepared a feast of crickets and berries for the occasion. It was a happy day for all.

That was late October, nearly two years ago now. Onefoot had become quite proficient at navigating her visions in that time. The lookout tree she was perched atop of now was her favourite of the lookout trees she frequented, because things rarely came down from this side of the mountain, and so she was left mostly alone with her own thoughts, of which she had many.

Onefoot angled her head upward again toward the rounded crest, peering through the dense fog to where the Wizard had come to a swaying standstill.

His approach across the hilltop had taken most of that morning, and the crow was beginning to wonder if he had been out drinking late the previous night – or was perhaps suffering from some other illness of the mind that often plagues women and men – as his path up it had been alarmingly erratic. He had also spent a considerable amount of time standing near the summit itself, muttering nonsensically to an invisible companion named Will.

Onefoot could not see Will anywhere. Given she could see more things than most, this concerned her enough that she had to switch feet several more times.

The laws forbade any crow from contacting wayward travellers near the mountain, so the crow had simply waited, growing increasingly worried for the man’s safety, and for the circumstances that had brought him there in the first place.

Witches, incidentally, had never had any issues traversing the squat summit, as far as she was aware. Then again, they rarely felt the desire or need to do so. They were too busy teaching their young, and preserving their lore, both of which were precious and vulnerable. This was a full-time job. Wandering around for the sake of getting lost – or in far worse trouble – was not really their thing.

Was the Wizard on a survey? Did he plan to build a road over *this* hill? He seemed smarter than that. The man was on some kind of mission – that seemed certain enough – but he was now clearly caught once again in the most dangerous glamour of the Hedge Wilds, and seemed to have forgotten his purpose there entirely.

A trio of field mice peered up at Onefoot from the base of a nearby tree stump. *They are from the North side of the mountain*, she thought. She recognized them, but did not recall their names. They had become annoyingly accustomed to feeling unthreatened by her. She was exceptionally keen when it came to sensing nearby danger of any kind, so the mice in these parts often hung around her when they felt like kicking back and taking it easy for a while. It ruffled the crow’s feathers a little that they didn’t think to at least act nervous in her presence. It would have been the polite thing to do.

Perhaps men’s need to periodically tempt disaster out in the natural world was nothing more than an evolutionary strategy to keep their population under control. Onefoot found it puzzling in any case. They certainly spent a good deal of time and energy going back and forth from one place to another, for reasons they often couldn’t or wouldn’t articulate, until they’d reached wherever it was they had been going, or had otherwise ended up arriving at.

According to crow Lore, the civilization of women and men could - more or less - be explained like so:

Men had a compulsive desire to wander (it was not the Lore’s place to explain why this was), which would drive them into the Hedge Wilds, in search of other places, perhaps better suited to soothe their wandering spirits. They learned to build roads over time to facilitate this activity, and structures made of wood, stone, and brick at the crossings of these roads. In these places, they could properly trade supplies and travelling advice with other men on journeys to or from places both new and old to them.

Around these structures, they planted delicious crops, built low barriers around those to ward off hungry woodland creatures displaced by all the construction, and then raised other creatures to be poor at climbing and jumping, so they could easily be kept inside the same barriers, to be eaten later.

The men would employ one another to guard and maintain all of these things, because some of them, being less inclined to the hard toil of it all, were more likely to simply take things from each other when nobody was looking. This mistrust in their own nature drove some of humanity’s greatest technological achievements, which was of dubious value to anybody, in the end.

At some point, if everyone had managed to settle into a somewhat safe routine despite all of it, several them would soon grow impatient, and head back into the Wilds to build new roads to other, perhaps better, places. The women kept things from falling apart logistically during all this moving around, and taught their children how to grow up without permanent roots.

People otherwise conducted many more obscure and mysterious activities related to the planning, building, maintenance, and protection of these elaborate travel and food-storage networks, and when the roads from one tribe of wandering people began to intermingle with the roads from another, pretty much anything could happen. It wasn’t always good. Not at all.

All of it fascinated Onefoot greatly, for reasons she couldn’t at all explain. Most crows simply thought of people as something to be avoided, or perhaps observed from a safe distance with mild, morbid curiosity, like a slowly spreading grassfire after a lightning storm.

This fellow in any event was expected by others of his kind, for reasons no doubt important to all concerned. Humans had by far the largest footprint of any creature she knew, relative to the actual size of their physical feet. When one of them chose to crest this particular hill, it was a significant portent of new possibilities, and for a Seer, that was something which could not be ignored.

The man had been standing still for approximately forty slow breaths now, swaying almost imperceptibly to the low frequency pulse of the hill’s heart. He seemed to her distressingly unaware of the danger that lay close by, at the hill’s rounded summit – the deep and dark pit the Deerkind in those parts called *Never-ever-approach-this-hole*. It was an open maw from which the hill’s breath could be felt most fully, and the Wizards who occasionally journeyed there could not see or think properly in that place, and so had never been able to study its true nature, or the implications of following the hill’s low, throbbing dirge to its real origin.

This man had come closer to the entrance than any of his kind had for years, just this very moment. Nothing good would come of him lingering there, she was sure of that. Twenty or thirty long strides forward and somewhat to his right, and he would never likely return, in fact. He hadn’t brought enough rope. Or weapons. He hadn’t brought any of either, in fact.

She was back on her right foot now.

Crows are often making decisions. They don’t particularly enjoy making decisions on behalf of others, especially for those not of their kind. *Especially* especially on behalf of wandering men, who generally cause a lot of unnecessary decision-making wherever they go. Many crows simply dismiss this extra mental work as the cost of having a nearby supply of garbage to rummage through, when food gets scarce. Just as many others are quick to point out the rather obvious irony in that, and once you get a bunch of crows arguing the subject of irony, you’re in for a long, loud discussion.

Onefoot, more than most, found decision-making particularly stressful. *Hoppingly stressful*, is what Moremice called it, whenever she meant to tease Onefoot, which was mostly all the time. That Onefoot found decisions stressful was not all so surprising really, considering how many more factors she had to allow for when making them. Moremice could not of course be expected to understand that, and so did not really try to. She had enough to worry about anyway.

This discomfort with decision-making was the main reason the young Seer spent most of her free time out here, lingering at the quiet Northern periphery of her family’s territory. Decisions she made while patrolling the borderlands mostly involved if and when to announce the comings and goings of creatures (there was a well-established protocol for this, and so it required little thought), and on occasion, whether to harass an intruder, which was always a judgment call based on what she could see of their immediate intentions, as well as other things.

Now and then, she might accidentally happen upon some carrion, and would then feel obligated to bring it back to the family. Not her favourite task, but she understood its importance. She would not kill anything that had a heart. Her rule. The others, recognizing that each crow is on their own unique journey, naturally never begrudged Onefoot this personal principle. Moremice made up for her sister’s lack of hunting in any event, and was quite happy to do so.

The man coughed thoughtfully, possibly considering his next course of action. He looked as though he was about to sit down, to continue thinking.

*The Wizard is in great peril*, thought Onefoot. Something had pulsed along the root system nearest to the top. The mountain had awoken, and was paying far too much attention to the intruder now.

At a certain point, an absence of action is, for all intents and purposes, no different than action. Some decisions are simply intended for a crow to make, or to not make. Onefoot scanned her surroundings worriedly, but of course saw no-one else present or willing to make it, or not make it, for her.