The Engineer, Tempting a Murder

It took a rather long time, by his own standards, for Oakely to grasp what was happening to the sky. He had just begun to drift off into an anxious sleep at the bottom of the wooden boat, swaddled in his now-too-large clothing, when the sunlight began to dim, and the air took on a seething black quality all at once.

At the aft of the boat, the stoked motor belched ash and steam as it chugged the craft in the general direction of across-the-lake, and away from the hill and its unknown perils. At the fore of the boat, his new crow companion had settled into clinging firmly to the side for the journey (it was obviously able to use both legs just fine), and seemed content to let him nod off, or not. It was as though where they were headed, and whether Oakely was in control of that (or even wanted to be) were both equally acceptable, or unacceptable, as far as the crow was concerned. That it was staying with him simply meant it had some personal interest in seeing the trip to its next development.

All the noise and vibration from the engine had begun to lull him into feeling that none of that at the moment should concern him either. He needed to sleep, so his head could clear. He needed a clear head so that he could think straight, and make proper decisions.

However, the sky as seen through his half-closed eyelids was now a fluttering darkness, and he wondered at once whether he had begun to dream already, or whether the sinister mountain had opened and sent forth a whirlwind of dark magic to enfold and take him back to it, or to some other place.

His crow pilot – who was a *she*, he now surmised, chastising himself for making hasty presumptions – watched it all calmly unfold around them, his plight perhaps not something that involved her, but only something she was only there to observe.

Oakely rolled out of his vest-blanket, and, hiking up his now absurdly large trousers, reached back to flip the engine’s toggle to smother the flame in its belly. The boat briefly shuddered as its momentum drove it to bend port-side. The sound of thousands of black feathers had filled the air around him, and he was buffeted slightly backward and to his knee by the air, as a thick murder of crows descended onto the gunnels of the boat, like a single creature, with many more still filling the sky overhead; a dome of birds. The boat swirled into a gentle spin, as the weight of those coming to roost on the craft caused it to bob and shift haphazardly.

And then at once, the engineer stood, somewhat shaky and small, in the midst of an impromptu conclave of a hundred crows or more, as though gathered there to consider his origin, implication, and fate.

The discussion was loud, and began immediately. Those who had come to alight on the port side launched in with a great, enthusiastic cacophony of noise and beating wings, while those lining the starboard gunnels calmly waited a half-moment before forming a sharp and loud response in loose unison, back at their counterparts across the floor of the vessel. Those who had not found a seat circled above, vulture-like, a living ceiling to the cage in which the man now found himself.

The exchange was intense, seemingly involved each member of the conclave voicing their own opinion for or against each of the others, at a volume just loud enough to not require the point to be repeated, and was over in a few short moments.

Several of the port-side members seemed to regard him with harsh suspicion, while those to the starboard turned their general attention to the crow at the front of the boat, his new companion-guide. She had not spoken during this initial exchange, but instead seemed intent on hearing everything that was being said. She had regarded several of the members as they spoke in turn, rapidly, and glanced a time or two at the sky, perhaps to gauge the mood of those circling above, who would caw an occasional thought.

A crow near the front port side, perched near the female, addressed the assembly, its shining dark beak clacking and clattering rapidly – and, imagined the engineer, somewhat urgently – occasionally ruffling its feathers for dramatic effect. Another from across the floor interjected, and half a dozen more from both sides quickly began cawing for or against either or both points that had just been made. Two crows had hopped from the gunnels and into the boat, pointing themselves cautiously but threateningly at the Engineer.

He did not feel things were going particularly well for his case. He was not sure if he *had* a case, to be certain, or who was representing him in defense.

A heavier, older crow with a curious grey feather on its left wing emerged from the crowd on the starboard side and pushed its way past its smaller neighbors, clattering loudly at the assembly, and causing the general hubbub to subside somewhat. It addressed the crows who had hopped on to the floor in front of him, and they cocked their heads to hear what it had to say, taking a tentative step backward, away from the engineer. The elder began to express itself at length.

What the elder had to say, Oakely could only guess at. He had only met one other person who had ever claimed to be able to understand Crow. She had once attempted to explain its structure to Oakely, but the explanation had done nothing to help him break the code, though he had spent some significant time trying to. It was a complex language, laced with social context and mysticism. Parsing the meaning of Crowspeak required (apparently) an intimate understanding of the speaker’s social dynamics, familial relationships, personal history, and individual convictions. Oakely knew how to speak four languages well, and two or three more well enough to muddle by, but despite this, had come to expect words to mean just what they meant. Language to him worked best when the ways available to interpret what was being uttered aloud were very limited. This was the efficient way to communicate, in his view.

Crows did not apparently share this point of view, much at all.

The speaking crow seemed to have some authority – that much was evident. The initial belligerent exchanges across the floor had ceased, and now only select members from both sides seemed to briefly interject with their own beak-chatter. Those who remained witness but did not speak – he estimated that was a full 3/4ths of them – seemed to divide their attention equally between the discussion at hand, the female crow at the boat’s fore (now back on one leg, he noticed), and the engineer himself.

Oakely tried as best he could to shape a robe / cloak out of his former shirt during the exchange. If he was to be the subject of a high noon tribunal on the water, he would at least face his jurors with some dignity. He would probably need to fashion suspenders out of his belt, once he got out of this. If he got out of this.

The elder speaking bird concluded whatever it had to say, and there was a general murmur and agitated low croaking from the port side of the floor. One member from each side then launched itself into the air without delay, and both were immediately gone, disappeared through the cloak of young crows overhead.

A rustle shot swiftly through the assembly, and their collective attention seemed to shift all at once to the crow at the fore of the boat again, who was now regarding him in an unsettling fashion with the side of its head, its eye, impossibly dark and penetrating. Black holes take information in, but rarely give any back.

Then, in his mind, Oakely heard, *why did you come here?*

The engineer waited a half-breath, glancing about at the assembly, but if any had heard the question asked, they did not reveal it. They seemed now to be waiting for something from the female. The two crows who had jumped onto the boat’s floor were also to be waiting, poised at the edge of some decision.

“My name is Oakely. I’m looking for the Engineers Guild in this place”.

The answer didn’t seem to impress the crow, as she waited for him to supply more of it.

“I’m here to fix a problem. I came from over the hill – it was a hard trip”. Perhaps appealing to their charitable natures might work. Did they have charitable natures? He could not recall, or imagine.

The female crow shifted to its other leg, but said – or thought toward him – nothing more.

The engine now had sputtered out, choked of air. He felt they must be near or past the center of the lake, and perhaps drifting, but he could not tell in what direction. It occurred to him then that he had a strong desire to not drift back in the direction of the hill. If he found his way through this present circumstance, Oakely imagined he might have to stay here for a while, regardless of what size he had ended up for coming to this place the way he had.

He felt he was at this point approximately no more than two and a half feet tall. Larger than any crow for certain, but he knew well what a group of them were truly capable of, and how quickly their decision-making often went. There would be no getting overboard and into the water if they did not want him to do so. The too-large-for-him boat had come to feel like a steep-sided cauldron, and there were far too many cooks here for his comfort.

“I don’t know what the problem is yet”, he carefully continued, “That’s the nature of my work. It’s important”, though he wondered as he said that, if it really was important, to crows. “I need – I would like to connect with my peers here, to consult with them”. He looked at the crow’s orb eye, which was still gazing back, searching for the right answer to its unspoken question. “Do you know where I can find them?”

A moment passed, the female’s feathers ruffled gently in a slight gust travelling across the lake surface.

*Yes.*

“Will you take me to them?”

A pause. *No*.

The two regarded one another for another pair of breaths, the surrounding black wall of crow patiently hunched along the gunnels of the drifting vessel. High above, the remaining onlookers were circling ever higher, and gradually dispersing into the horizons.

“What will happen to me?”, Oakely kept his tone neutral.

*Nobody can know that for certain.*

The engineer nodded, in grudging acknowledgement of the observation.

“What are you planning to do with me, then?” He had adopted a slightly wide-legged stance for balance now, and it was giving him a small shred of extra confidence to keep up this line of questioning, as though he had some leverage in the whole situation. Improvisation was a skill he had always tried to practice for these sorts of social circumstances (well, he had not ever pictured this circumstance specifically, to be sure), and he slightly regretted now not taking the practice somewhat more seriously.

The crow placed its high leg back on the boat, tentatively.

*The Witches are to be informed. The nearby Human village is theirs.*

Oakely had a unique and confusing moment where the relief of knowing he was not going to tempt a crow murder that day mixed with the realization that he had evidently arrived near a community under the purview of witches. The moment was his instinctual attempt to calculate in which direction his fortunes had suddenly gone, and the results were frankly ambiguous. The crow seemed to be observing his moment as well.

“My history with witches…” He trailed off. The crow just blinked at this. “It’s complicated”, is all Oakely could think to say, by way of explanation, since he could not really know what the crow might already know. The rest of the group had become still and silent.

The young female blinked thrice more, and twitched its head slightly. In a brief flurry, the entire conclave dispersed almost at once, sending the boat rocking wildly about, as it released the dark flock upward and outward.

When Oakely regained his balance, the female had gone as well, mixed in somewhere among the birds flying in all directions toward the shoreline – except, he noted, in the direction of the hill, which by now was no surprise to him. The simple fact that most animals chose never to approach those places was something many engineers conveniently chose to ignore, but he was not in the habit of forgetting encountered patterns in the natural world, when they were considerate enough to present themselves clearly.

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Moremice had made some excellent points during the assemblage, when Onefoot thought about it. Her elder sister had wanted to drown the man, because what did any of them know about him anyway? Mortals who wandered into the Hedge Wilds were either dangerously stupid, or actively trying to find trouble – that was the common consensus. This man had admitted to coming there in search of his kind, because of important Human reasons. He had crossed the hill on purpose, in other words, and acted as though he had done so before, as well.

Whether a man intentionally surveys some ground in order to cover it with artificial material, or simply stamps it down through repeated use, roads are almost always the result, and roads always invite more travelers. Their hill had not seen a visitor in some time, and for all the different creatures living in the region, this was quite alright.

Moremice was not a cruel bird, but she was pragmatic to a fault. It had not gone unnoticed by the conclave that Onefoot had just ignored long-standing rules about helping mortals traverse the hill. The assemblage had been as much about her actions as it had been about the appearance of the stranger.

Moremice would not have her young sister be the subject of any tribunal, if she had anything to do with it. The man’s life was, as far as she was concerned, forfeit the moment he chose to journey where he should not have.

Onefoot, of course, was not blessed with the luxury of so easily dismissing any kind of life as being without value. She could not. It was not her way. She understood more than most the give-and-take of making decisions about important things. That proper endeavor was not simple, and never resembled either black or white, in the manner men often chose to see things. Onefoot had no seniority in the crow community, but she was one of its only two living seers, and was the one present for the finding of the wizard. This gave her more authority in this matter than she had wanted to have. She would have been happier circling the boat with the other youth, putting on a display of strength and certainty from high above, but beyond the responsibility of having to do something dire, and at close range.

In the end, the protocols the crows in the region were bound to observe had spared her the hard decision anyway, because in truth there was no argument in favor of letting the man live. He was a danger, for the simple reason that he set out to arrive there, and had succeeded. More or less. However, he was in witch country know, and when it came to the fates of men, the problem here was to be borne by |Witchkind, and not crows.

Onefoot knew all about this. Her father’s side of the family did not much like it, but understood the law well enough. Her mother’s side of the family had long ago determined to be done with the attempted murder of men. It was a misdirection of energy, as they saw it, and could never end well.

So the conclave had dispersed, returning to their haunts, routines, and their trading of rumours, alerts, and opinions. Onefoot had chosen to perch atop a tree along the shore, from which an old truck tire hung by a rope, where she could watch the wizard make his way toward land, without influencing the path he took to get there. This would be a thing to pass some time, and would give her insight into what insight, if any, the man might himself possess. He seemed a truthful sort, and well-traveled enough to be unalarmed by Mindspeak. She did not feel that he had a great potential to do harm – at least, not purposefully – but these things could always change quite quickly, and so the only recourse that seemed left to her was to continue observing the fellow until she could better discern by what means he came to choose his own behaviors.

The old tire, as always, swayed somewhat under the power of whatever breeze was available to it, and under a power seemingly its own when no breeze blew. The creaking from its thick, weathered rope like a slow pendulum, tuned to a timescale all its own.

The man, had started the motor up again – its churning hiccup echoing across the water, providing a counter tempo of its own. As the two sounds began to blend and synchronize, the man, head and neck just visible over the boat’s walls, took hold of the manual tiller with both hands, and with obviously considerable effort, swung the thing about, zig-zagged for a few moments, and then eventually wheeled toward the shore where the young crow Seer watched from the tire-swing tree.

Onefoot could already make out, in the far distance, the throaty rattle of an old minivan, no doubt stuffed to the brim with witches, lumber, and groceries, making its hasty way down the dirt road leading in a most winding manner toward the still-tranquil lake.