

Under Wandering Stars

“Well,” Tisharelle said in a small, sad voice, “that’s the last of them.” She stared at the spot where the distant figures of the rest of the Jade Pact had finally moved out of sight. It had taken the last caravan hours to move out of sight from their vantage point, and she’d insisted on watching until they’d all left. Vorenath, sitting on the rocks near her, didn’t glance over at either her, or the disappeared Elves, instead tracking the movement of a hawk in the sky. “That’s our signal to move on as well.” He made no move to leave, however, seemingly aware of her reluctance to go.

“It’s quieter without them here,” she said, looking around. Evergrove was one of the largest Jade Pact encampments, a forest sanctuary built into the deep forest. It had been home to several dozen permanent residents, and had a welcoming waystation for countless more as they moved through the woods. Now, it was empty save for those two, and the quiet buzz of the settlement’s existence had faded away. Even the animals in the area seemed to be subdued, aware of the import of the day, even if they didn’t understand why.

Evergrove had been hurriedly stripped clean of most of the essentials. Some things, by necessity, needed to stay; things too heavy or bulky to move quickly during an evacuation, or things that wouldn’t be needed on the journey to the Cairn, or in the long years thereafter. Tisharelle, Vorenath, and the others who had stayed behind would find a use for those things. Their last orders had been to stay, and even though everything had changed since then, they intended to hold true. The hawk moved out of sight, heading to hunt somewhere else, and Vorenath finally looked over at Tisharelle. For some reason he couldn’t quite put a finger on, she tested his commitment to Yzien’s teachings about not having expectations. In many ways, she was - or, at least, seemed - still very much Tisharelle of Thaleron. She had been part of the Mouse’s Tribe for many years before she was marked by Yzien, and those habits were deeply ingrained. Everything about her just... screamed ‘unassuming’, quiet, disinclined to rock the boat....

Many had expected her, the last chosen for the Crow Tribe, to leave with the others, and Vorenath wouldn’t have blamed her for it; survival was one of Thaleron’s core teachings, and a good one at that. But Yzien themselves had picked her, marking her to share the destiny of the Crows: to wander amongst the other tribes, disrupting the status quo for the better, gathering useful tidbits and helping bring change the same way the autumn wind tore dead leaves from the trees to make way for the eventual growth of spring. As both forces of nature and collectors of ‘shiny things’, those of Yzien - too few and too scattered to truly be an independent Tribe the way the others did - were effectively tasked with errantry within the Jade Pact, taking up lost causes and other odd tasks.

Now that Yzien had fallen fighting the Vreech - Vorenath felt the loss stab him in the chest - those of the Crow’s calling clung to Yzien’s last command: no matter what the outcome of their last, brilliant attempt, they were to stay and uphold the Jade Pact. The original Pact, not the one renegotiated after Yzien’s death, the Pact that carried the other Tribes away in the evacuation.

And so, the Crow Tribe was staying. And, despite the expectations of others, Tisharelle had stayed, with zero hesitation. In the years to come, Yzien's final decisions - both in choosing Tisharelle and in that desperate fight against the Vreech - would be put to the test. Somehow, though, Vorenath suspected that both would be proven to have been the correct choices, despite Yzien's death. The fallen Primal had been far too clever, in Vorenath's experience, for anything they did to be as straightforward as it seemed on the surface. So, despite how Tisharelle might seem, he would listen to the teachings, put aside his expectations, and view things as they truly were.

Vorenath rose, and offered her a hand up. "Let's get as much out of the infirmary as possible. If the Vreech catch scent of it, they're going to tear the whole place apart trying to eat that circle. No reason to let them spoil the more mundane supplies." She accepted his hand, and in a half-hour, they were on their way out of Evergrove, carrying heavy packs to cache elsewhere.

* * * * *

"Well," Tisharelle said in a small, sad voice, "that's the last of them." She knelt by Vorenath's body as the last of their attackers drew their final, gasping breaths. He was beyond the reach of her meager healing; she had never been able to bring the stronger Earth magics to bear, and there had been too many attackers to get to him faster. Soon, he would join the restless dead - his body dissipating, his spirit congregating near the remains of the long-lost Earth circle. She'd been able to feel those remnants if she got too deep into the ruins, their energies swirling like eddies in a slow stream, brushing against her skin like wind-strewn cobwebs. They were drawn by the echo of resurrection magic, but the ability to bring them back had been lost since the Vreech had devoured circles all across the Protectorate, including that of the Evergrove. Lost to all except their attackers, it seemed.

Something about these yellow-skinned things was...off. They were drawn to death in a way nothing else was, moving in and out of it as fluid as a frog moving in and out of water. Perhaps that was why they'd taken over the ruins of Evergrove, seemingly reveling in the whispers of the dead that always made her skin crawl. She had no idea where they had come from, but they had been getting more and more numerous over the years, until conflict with them was seemingly inevitable. Still...there was precious little time to waste speculating about these death-obsessed creatures and what they wanted. She has a rite to perform. Not on them, of course - the one time she'd tried, years ago, the migraine had knocked her senseless for days. But, Vorenath... what he held was still needed.

She cleaned off her knife, trying not to feel the squeamishness that plagued her every time she did this, even all these years later. A little voice in her head reminded her to focus - Thaleron's second teaching - and she did, centering in her mind Yzien's third teaching: accept what's offered. She'd never get used to this...but she was one of the few who'd been able to master it, and the necessity outweighed the cost by far. 'Don't think, just do it'.

She took a deep breath to steel herself, trying not to think about what she was about to do, then moved.. Knife point dropping, then rising. Get the eyes free.... slice the optic nerves.... 'bite, don't chew!' A white film covered her eyes as the rite seized her. The shadows of the past rose up around her, filling her vision with countless scenes of Vorenath's life. She tumbled among them, lost for a moment, until she was surrounded by them, spinning off in all directions. She brushed several aside, searching.

This was ancient magic, Fae magic, a remnant of the gifts Yzien had given their Tribe... but its power had limits. She quickly moved past the last few decades together, years of him as mentor and lover and parent.... side-stepped lessons he learned as young Vorenath of Ederna.... She dove deeper, past the great and trivial things he'd experienced to find what she'd needed, a secret buried as deep as his bones. The bitter, saline taste of aqueous humor flooded her mouth, overwhelmed the rest of her senses, and Tisharelle of Yzien knew. With this - with this, the Crow Tribe would survive. Clever, clever Yzien....