

The Black-Feathered Monk

Chapter 10

By Draconicon

Escorted by the owls of the Temple of the Eye, Satres and Silra were taken over the walls in bundled baskets. The owls flew over them, holding their bows trained on the pair at all times. The songbird demon shook her head, crossing her arms as she looked him in the eye.

“Are they always like this?” she asked.

“I haven’t been to another temple before.”

“Wonderful.”

To the top of the walls, over, and down to the other side they went. The gardens within the walls of the temple were kept as a mix of knee-height hedges and a small, cultivated forest of trees. Despite the sloped land around them, the temple rested on a plateau, allowing the trees to grow evenly, and their green boughs spread a soft shade upon the gravel between the hedges.

“How do you keep anyone from sneaking in?” Satres asked.

“We are followers of the Order of the Eye. There is nothing that can sneak past us,” one of the owls said.

The raven looked up at the great temple before them. With a narrow top and bottom, it reached towards the sky like a slitted eyeball. No matter where one stood, it appeared to be looking at them, and he felt as if he was being observed the closer that he came. He bowed his head, lowering his beak over his hands to any unseen watchers.

Despite his statement that Silra was bound by the techniques of the Quill, the owls continued to watch her with suspicion. He could see the way that they kept looking at her from the corner of their eyes, always concerned, always poised to strike her down at the slightest aggressive gesture. More than ever, he felt thankful that he had fed her before they had come within sight of the temple.

As they walked through the spiraling gravel paths in the forest, he was aware of other eyes on them. Though he never quite caught them, he was sure that there were other monks in

the trees, other warriors keeping an eye on the intruders. And why not, he supposed? He claimed to be of a fallen monastery, and surely they must have had at least one witness to the destruction report to them by now.

Eventually, they left the forest and gravel paths behind, coming to the center of the grounds. The temple seemed even taller when close up, and he leaned his head back, staring up the shadowy-gray walls of the temple to the bulging center. Were there holes for others to see through, or was it just an illusion, he wondered? Either way, it was a magnificent place to live.

The base had four different entrances facing the four compass points. They were led to the one facing north, towards the slope of the mountain, and it was there that Satres and Silra were separated.

Glowing talon-fingers crossed at the door, blocking the demon from stepping inside. Satres spun on his heel, feeling his bones protest from head to toe at the sudden movement.

“What is this? She’s controlled!” he protested.

“And she is allowed into the grounds. The only place within the temple she will set foot is the dungeon.”

“Then take us both there, then.”

The owls slowly turned their attention to him. The raven stood his ground, folding his arms slowly.

“You offered her entry under supervision. I ask that you fulfill that offering.”

“She is a demon,” the owl that had led them through the grounds said, speaking from over his shoulder. He did not speak with rancor, but merely as one stating a fact. “She is a danger, regardless of the control upon her. It would be safer to leave her here.”

“She was a witness as much as I, and the reason that I am still alive.”

“...Foolishness. No demon would save a mortal.”

“This one has.”

“Not entirely willingly,” Silra admitted. “But I have.”

Satres turned, looking away from the white-robed owls at the door to the one in white and green standing behind him. The horned owl had his head cocked ever so slightly to the side, looking past him to the demon, and then glancing at him once more.

“She saved your life, you claim?”

“She did.”

“How?”

“The bindings of the Quill are extensive and as flexible as the one that writes them. I ordered her to do no harm, and she could not stand by to allow me to be harmed.”

Of course, within that was the loophole that she had placed on herself. To do no harm did not mean to give help. However, her sense of responsibility was such that she could not help herself. She had to help if she saw that he was in danger. It was something that had left him sympathetic to her, because that had never been what he meant to do to her.

The owl shook his head, clicking his beak softly. Finally, he sighed.

“Master Akong will decide. Wait here.”

Satres did as he was told, standing with his arms at his side with as much of a relaxed pose as he could muster. The feeling of his own bodyweight on his wracked legs, the residual effects of the pain that Silra had summoned with her song, all made that difficult. He could feel the blood pulsing through him, passing spiked points of pain, and then pushing on. Everything burned, and he wished for little more than the chance to rest.

So long as Silra stood outside the temple, however, he dared not. They were already suspicious of her, already willing to believe the worst. If they were allowed to keep her alone, he did not know if he would return to find her alive or not. The owls were already on edge for unknown reasons, and he didn't want to risk her life.

They waited for nearly an hour, long enough for him to wonder if they were waiting deliberately to see if he would change his mind, before the soft click, click, click of talons on stone caught his ears. Talons and metal, he realized, as the clicking grew louder.

He turned his head to the source, seeing shadows coming around the corner from the far side of the rounded room. Satres slowly pressed his hands together respectfully, bracing himself to bow as the owls stepped around the corner.

The horned owl walked beside a snowy owl, one whose white feathers were immaculately pulled back and preened. They formed a shape similar to a veil running down the back of the bird's head, one that remained pressed flat despite the slight surprise evident on the master's small-beaked face. The owl paused halfway across the room, a robe of green with a white eye on the chest hiding any other reactions.

“You are the visitor, then?” Master Akong asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“And she is...the demon.”

“She is, indeed.”

“I see little reason as to why I was called, Tau,” the white-feathered owl said, shaking his head slowly. “Our rules are binding. No demon will step foot in the Temple of the Eye.”

“...Are you so inflexible?” Satres asked.

“The rules were made for our protection, and for the protection of our people. I have little doubt that one such as you would break the rules and reap the painful results, but we will not.”

“I see.”

“She will remain outside.”

“Then so will I, and so will any that will speak to me.”

As determined as he was, this did not bode well for his hopes of gathering other monks to bring back to the Temple of Talon and Quill. He needed those that were willing to put it back together, and to see to it that the demons would not damage the lands further, that was true enough. However, with the discovery of the dungeon beneath the temple, knowing what was being done to make them better, he could not ignore the potential. Anyone that came to his temple had to have it in them to deal with demons, not merely destroy them.

It obviously didn't sit well with the owls, either. Master Akong shook his head.

“Do you believe that you can set the rules as a guest, young man?”

“I believe that I am educated in proper manners, Master. It is not my place to judge those of others, present or otherwise.”

“You speak glibly for one that wishes aid.”

“Speaking plainly, Master, you do not know what I wish. I have yet to speak.”

“You come from a ruined land, raven. And you bring a demon in your wake. You should consider yourself lucky that you were not run off our lands the moment we saw your approach.”

“Yet, I was not.”

“...”

“I wish to speak with the Masters of the Order of the Eye. I ask in accordance with the binding agreements between the temples of the mountain. I must be allowed to speak.”

“But you are not allowed to demand that the Masters speak with a demon.”

“She will not speak, unless at your invitation,” Satres said. “But she will be there. I will not see a demon with hope of redemption destroyed because of your anger.”

“We are better than that. We do not harm our captives.”

“Do we not?”

The white-feathered owl narrowed his eyes, the golden color almost disappearing in the sea of fluff around it. Eventually, he snapped his fingers.

“Tau.”

“Yes, Master?”

“See the pair of them to the dungeons. They will be kept there until the Masters deign to see them.”

It was not the outcome that Satres had hoped for, but it was one that he was willing to live with. He shook his head, only to hiss in absolute agony as one of the owls gripped him by the arm. The monks stopped, turning to stare at him more.

“...Open his robe,” Master Akong whispered.

Satres’s robes were ripped open, exposing him from the waist up. Formerly glossy-black feathers had been stained dead and gray, and in places had completely fallen out. In the gaps between his feathers, his flesh was marked and pitted, gouged and torn from both his journeys beneath the temple and Silra’s song. The owls stared, and those not holding him by the arms stepped back.

“...How are you standing?” Master Akong asked.

“Will, Master Akong. I will stand, and I will be heard.”

“...Take them away.”

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The prison cell was not much larger than a monk’s living quarters back at his own temple, though it was granted a different appearance. Rather than the square cells of his home temple, Satres found himself in an oval, one that stretched from where the door opened into it to a narrow point on the far side. All surfaces were made of the same gray stone, empty and endless, and there was nothing for furniture.

“You will wait here until the Masters make their decision,” Tau said. “And do not try anything.”

“I would try nothing but to be heard.”

The door, made of the same stone as the walls, shut behind them, leaving them in a chamber almost perfectly smooth. Even the edges where the floor met the wall and the wall met the ceiling curved to meet one another, almost impossible to imagine being built this way. He imagined that someone, once upon a time, had carved the shapes out of the rock on their own. Perhaps it was a member of an ancient order, some grand thing that had disappeared over the years.

Regardless, he sat down against the wall, pulling his robe closed again. Silra shook her head, the demon songbird crossing her arms under her breasts.

“Did you have to do that?”

“Do what?”

“This,” she asked, gesturing around them. “This doesn’t help your cause in the slightest.”

“Does it matter, if I’m doing the right thing?”

“Since when does standing up for a demon count as the right thing?”

“Since the demon in question didn’t kill me when she had the chance.”

“...That was for food. And self-preservation.”

He chuckled, shaking his head before lowering his beak to his chest. He was tired, more tired than he had thought. The pain had been sucked away to some extent by Silra’s feeding, but the cause of it, the singing and the travel, still plagued him. Ever since his trip to the dungeons beneath the temple, he had been assaulted by one thing after another. The dungeon itself, the demon among those that had come for help, the trip and the singing, and...

It was more than the average monk could handle. The raven needed sleep, but not before he had the chance to speak to the Masters of the Order of the Eye. He was terrified that they would take the loophole of having seen him while he was asleep and then boot him from the temple, leaving him unable to try again.

No, he had to stay awake. Just for a little longer, surely.

“Do you think you’re going to find anything here?” she asked.

“I hope so.”

“Yeah? What do you think you’ll get?”

“Understanding. A few monks that will help rebuild and restore the temple. Maybe someone that will understand what I’m trying to do.”

“And what are you trying to do?” she asked, stroking her fingers along the door. “It’s not like you’re going to stand any better chance than the other monks did once the Demon Kings find out that there’s no master waiting to stop them.”

“Perhaps Chiang-Shol had the right idea.”

She was halfway towards slapping him before she stopped herself. He wasn’t entirely surprised, though he still flinched ever so slightly when her hand froze a few inches from his cheek. Was it the binding that stopped her, or her own choice? Either way, he shook his head, looking down at the floor.

“Demons *can* learn control. There were many demons in his dungeons that had put their dangerous ways behind them. I saw it, spoke to them. They knew the difference between a need and a mere urge, and they could restrain themselves.”

“Impossible. They’re not demons if they can —”

“They were still demons. Ogres, serpents, spiders; they all had the same feel that you do, of demon power and *chi*. They were imprisoned to learn control, and some *were* learning. None had yet, but they were learning.

“Chiang-Shol was right that they could. If they can...why not others? We have made deals with creatures, with spirits, with monsters. Why not with demons, if they can learn to control themselves?”

Satres could hardly believe that he was saying something of such heresy. Any of the temples would have cast him out if they heard him say something so against their teachings, but everything he saw told him that this was possible, and not just possible, but *right*. They condemned demons to death on sight, merely on the idea that they were demons and could never be better than that.

But what if they could be?

It was clear that Silra didn’t believe him. Her face was twisted, her beak clicking irritably and her eyes anywhere but on him. For that matter, he knew that she didn’t believe that she had become better around him. She didn’t believe that she was controlling herself around him. Instead, she believed that she was just as much herself as before, just controlled by the words that he had inflicted on her with his *chi*. There was nothing in her that could believe that she could be better.

It was a pity. She already was, and she didn’t know it.

Sighing, he pulled one leg up to his chest, letting the other stretch. It wasn't much better, but it was something.

"Could you tell me more about him?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Chiang-Shol. You mentioned a little before, but I would like to know more."

"Hmmp. Why?" Silra asked, glancing at the exit again. "Not like it matters here."

"He was a demon that decided that things could be different. Why would I not want to know about that?"

"He was insane."

"Just for his ideas?"

"No, actually insane," she said, squatting down by the door, her tail-feathers fanned for a moment in a way that showed off her hips before they came down again. "It wasn't just that he decided against being a Demon King. He didn't act like a demon. He was always setting down one rule after another, almost like he was setting up his own kingdom. A kingdom of one, I guess, with him being king and subject at the same time."

"...I never thought of that. With how all of you follow your urges —"

"No Demon King sets down more than a handful of rules, or they'd have an outright rebellion on their hands," she said, nodding. "They might say that they get the first right to feeding, or they'll establish tribute from their subject demons, but that's as far as most of them can go aside from commanding where the demons go. Chiang-Shol was the heir to one of the Demon Kings, and he started putting down rules. Rule after rule after rule. And he changed. It was...frightening.

"Eventually, it got to the point where nobody trusted him enough to stay around, and he disappeared. Until we found the door, I assumed he was dead."

"To be fair, he might be; that door was ancient."

"So are most demons."

Satres nodded, looking back to the ground. So, there was a demon prince out there that was under many, many rules, each one probably more binding than the last, trying to keep himself under control. But what had made him want the rules in the first place? Most people would find too many rules stifling, but from the sound of the story, Chiang-Shol had gone out of his way to find more of them, to bind himself in chains of rules to cover himself and keep him from doing things that he found wrong.

What would a demon consider so wrong that they would do something like this?

That was the question, and he had no answer. However, it fascinated him, and he closed his eyes to think on it.

“There’s someone outside.”

“Hmm?” he asked, opening one eye again.

“Someone’s outside, and listening.”

“Can you feel them, then?”

“Of course. Can’t you?”

“...No. I can sense demons with ease, but other people, no.”

“Hmmp.”

Satres groaned as he dragged himself back to his feet, trying to ignore the discomfort blooming in his lower legs again. He walked to the door, tapping it, and realized that there had been a background whisper that had just faded, disappearing as he tapped the door.

“Well then...” He leaned against the stone. “If you are curious, you are welcome. We are not dangerous.”

“Speak for yourself,” Silra muttered.

He would have said something, but the door was already opening. It slid to the side, clicking up before sliding out. Three owls in pure white robes looked up at them. Novices, he realized, inexperienced and not knowing all that much. They looked at him, then at Silra, and one of them stuttered a question.

“A-are you a...a demon?” the barn owl asked.

“I am,” Silra said.

“Does that mean you eat sex?”

“What?! I do not! Who – shut up, you!”

The raven had broken down in giggles the minute Silra exploded on the novices, leaning back against the wall as he tried to get control of himself again. It didn’t work. Everything that he tried only made it worse, leaving him laughing harder, and he soon gave up, falling down the

wall and sitting there with his beak pressed tightly together as he laughed. The novices looked incredibly confused, which only made it funnier.

“But...but the Masters said...” the barn owl said. “They said that demons tempt others to _”

“Your ‘Masters’ are wrong. We do *not* do that, or at least, MY kind of demons don’t. Some of us might, but I do not.”

“Heh, so much for you getting lucky,” one of the owls muttered, nudging the barn owl from behind.

“Shut up.”

Silra looked like she was about to explode from indignation, and Satres could do nothing to help her. The whole thing was so absurd that he could hardly contain himself.

“You...brats...” The songbird drew herself up, slowly breathing in deeper and deeper, only to point to the door. “Out.”

“But we wanted to know –”

“Out!”

They ran as they were commanded, and as soon as the door shut, Silra started singing again. The song was not of broken flesh and bone, nor of blood and stained earth, but rather of a different pain. He heard the cruel laughter in her voice, in the chirping song that came from her lips. Sharp and quick it was, singing to the depths of the soul, to the hidden corners of darkness where one thought that things were hidden.

Even though the song was not directed at him, he felt hints of its effects. He clenched his beak tightly, feeling the humiliation rising, the pain of embarrassment rather than the pain of mutilation filling him. It was a short flood, something that barely rose to a fraction of what she had done to him on the mountain, but it was still there. His cheeks burned and he struggled to look at the songbird when she was done.

As she sat down, folding her arms under her breasts, he shook his head.

“That was...different,” he said.

“Hmmp. I could have left them writhing in agony. They’re lucky I chose otherwise.”

“Yes. Lucky.”

Lucky that she had learned something, even if it was merely pragmatism rather than control. The song had echoed through the room, struck him rather than them, and even then it

was something that he could take. Yet, at the same time, it was a power that he did not entirely understand.

As she preened at her feathers along her torso, he watched with his head still cocked slightly to the side. She ignored it for a time, but eventually, she fixed him with another stare.

“What?”

“Can you sing any sort of pain?”

“What sort of question is that?”

“It was your name.”

“Yes. Was.”

“...Did something happen?”

Silra shook her head, looking away from him. That was probably a yes, though just what that might have been, he couldn't guess. Too many possibilities there, when one got right down to it.

He sighed.

“I'm sorry if I'm digging too deeply,” he said. “I just want to understand.”

“Why? So you can tame me?”

“No.”

“You tamed the spider. You want to tame other demons. What makes me different?”

“I'm not taming them. Or you.” He sighed. “There's a difference to teaching you self-control and –”

“Control. Control, control, control. Why do you have to control so much?”

He opened his beak to answer, but before he could, there was a knock at the door. He and Silra turned as Tau opened the cell, looking in at them.

“The Masters will see you.”

“Both of us?” Satres asked.

“...Yes.”

“...Then let’s not keep them waiting.”

The End