

The Black-Feathered Monk

Chapter 7

By Draconicon

It was common to need sleep after expending a great deal of *chi*, and Satres had used most of what he had in his body, and had even started borrowing some that he shouldn't have touched in the first place. As a result, when he finally woke up, it wasn't so much a question of whether he had slept through the night as whether he had slept through more than one.

The raven sat up from his bedroll, looking at the walls around him. He had obviously been pulled out of the underground, but it took him a moment to realize that he was in one of the upper rooms of the basement. He reached into his robe, feeling around.

The scroll...

As his fingers closed around it, he sighed in relief, the fear of having lost it in the underground fading away. However, before he pulled his hand free, his fingers bumped into something else. Something small, and smooth. The raven paused, slowly feeling it, trying to get a better understanding of what it was.

Finally, after feeling a near-perfect circle, he remembered. The spiders, and their egg. They had asked him to bring it with him, and it had been able to pass through the barrier.

Now I have to be responsible for this, too...

It was a hard thing to imagine, taking care of a demonic spider, but he supposed that it had proven that it deserved to be in the upper world. If it could pass through the doorway, then it meant that it was not officially a demon anymore; it had learned some understanding of control, and it could be allowed to try and live a decent life.

The question was, would it be able to maintain that control when it was no longer forced to?

It hasn't hatched; that is something.

Satres shook his head, withdrawing the egg from his robe and putting it down by the side of his bed. He looked at the little thing, tracing the elegant egg-webbing around the shell itself for a second or two before getting to his feet.

No sooner had he gotten his talons under him than Silra poked her head in, coming up the stairs from one of the lower levels.

“Finally,” she muttered. “I was starting to think that you’d sleep another day.”

“How many days has it been?”

“Two full ones, and you’re about halfway through the third.”

“Well...”

The raven had expected something of that degree, though to hear it was another thing. Three days, almost. That meant that he had been even closer to dying than he’d thought, and if he hadn’t been flung upwards by the demon in the ladder shaft...

He shook his head, feeling the hunger that had been sleeping with him wake up, as well. Resisting the urge to grab his belly and complain, he forced himself to step forward, walking around the demonic songbird and down the stairs.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“The kitchen. I believe it is time for me to break my fast.”

“Hold it.”

The instinct to throw her off as she grabbed his shoulder was strong, but he was able to resist it. Instead, he froze, waiting for her to move around him. She glared at him, her eyes narrowed.

“You haven’t fed me since we arrived.”

“You fed on the door.”

“Yes, and I did that again while you were unconscious. That’s not the point. I *need* food.”

“Then we will go up the mountain after I have had a chance to study.”

“...I...” She shook her head, her feathers fanning and then falling again. “I didn’t think you’d say that.”

“I made an agreement. Now, I must feed myself, if you don’t want me to faint and fall down the stairs. I’m sure that would be plenty of pain for you.”

“Not now that you’ve said it. You know, you could do a woman a favor and not warn her when you’re going to come to harm.”

“You’d be able to let me be hurt, then?”

“Well, I wouldn’t know what I’d need to do to fix it, would I?”

He shrugged as she leaned to the side, stepping under her outstretched arm. The way that she nattered and nagged like that would have been annoying if he didn’t still carry a little guilt for what he had done to her in the first place. The alternative would have been death until they discovered the door, admittedly, but with what he had turned her into, was that really that much worse? Yes, she still lived, but being bound to someone that she obviously hated, someone that she would have killed to be away from, forced to obey and keep him from coming to harm: was that living?

It was a question that he would have to answer, eventually, but not yet. Not now.

Down the stairs he went, until he reached the bottom floor. Outside of the hall where everyone congregated for their meditations, there were several open rooms, one of which was used as the kitchen. Normally, there would have been a fire burning there for most of the day, but without anyone to feed it, it had long since gone out.

Satres checked the cupboards, going through every container that they had. There were a few loaves of bread left, hardened and stale, but barely edible. He pulled them free, then looked for what else they had.

Not much. The majority of the containers were still sealed from the sacrificial technique that his master had used, and those that weren’t had been broken in other ways. Most of the food was rotten, left out and half-destroyed. Only what was left in the underground was probably still good.

Shaking his head, he broke one of the loaves in half, offering the other half to Silra. The songbird looked at him for a moment, eye-feathers raised, and he withdrew the offer.

“I forgot. I apologize.”

“Hmmp.”

“If I might ask, however.”

He sat down, and gestured for her to join him. After a moment or two, she did, pulling on a non-existent skirt as if out of habit. Considering that she had been living here alone with him for nearly a week now, he would not have been surprised if she had not worn actual clothes for that whole time. Her power as a demon seemed to include the art of illusion, which would have allowed her to wear nothing and lessen the load on her back.

Certainly, she didn't seem to need to wear anything. Her plumage was sufficient to hide her breasts, and he had yet to actually peer downwards. She was as natural as a two-legged bird might be, and she had certainly not taken the effort to hide the red demon glow from her feathers.

Silra cocked her head to the side, waiting for his question.

"Yes. I guessed that this body..." the raven gestured at her. "Was not yours. Is that correct?"

"...It was."

"Then whose was it?"

"Someone that died."

"Naturally?"

"Enough."

Satres shook his head. He hadn't expected her to be as cagey as she was about her answers, and he didn't want to invoke another command on her. Obedience was one thing, but forced obedience was another. The raven sighed, tearing a portion of the bread loose, soaking it in a bit of water before swallowing it.

"Does your body not need sustenance?"

"Its...urges...have long since faded. I am only concerned with mine."

"So it will not starve? It doesn't have any..."

"Whatever a living person is required to do through...biology...I'm not. That's all you need to know."

"How long does it take to rot?"

She shrugged, and he sighed. No sooner had the sound left his mouth, however, than she slammed her fists on the raised table between them.

"What? You think that you deserve to leash my next body, too?"

"No." *Not deserve to, no.* "I wasn't trying to imply anything of the sort. I merely wanted to know how it worked, so I could help you as much as possible."

"...Why?"

He arched an eyebrow, and Silra groaned, rubbing her forehead.

“Why are you like this? Huh? Why are you like this?”

“Like what?”

“Like...this? Like you want to give me a chance instead of killing me. You know I’d kill you in a heartbeat if I had the freedom to do it. You know I have reason.”

“You might,” Satres agreed with a nod. “But that isn’t why I want to keep you leashed, or alive.”

“Then why?”

“Because you’ve already given me reason to believe that demons can learn to control themselves, that they can accept responsibility for something.”

“Ha! Responsibility? Do you think we don’t know what that is?”

The raven arched an eyebrow as the songbird got to her talons, lifting one leg and standing with her claws embedded in the table. She stretched forward, her eyes going slightly wild as she looked down at him. The way she stood, he could almost make out something between her legs, but the black and red feathers kept it from showing in any great detail.

“Do you really think that demons know nothing of responsibility?”

“Isn’t that the definition of a demon? To have no control? To shrug off any responsibility because they can’t control themselves?” Satres asked, and there was more of an edge to his voice than he expected.

Silra laughed, though, and that, perhaps more than anything else, was enough to shake him from his slightly high horse. She grabbed him, tilting his head back, and the only reason that he didn’t fight back was because he knew that she could not harm him. Her commands forced her to keep from doing that, so if she could touch him, then it wasn’t a touch meant to harm.

“That’s where you’re wrong...”

She leaned in, dragging herself onto the table, holding him by the sides of his head, forcing him to look her in the eye. The madness in her eyes softened, and she tilted her head to the side, almost cooing.

“We’re predators, Satres...all of my kind are...demons hunt, and fight, and consume...” Somehow, her tone of voice managed to make her words seductive rather than horrifying, or angry, or anything horrifying. She nudged his beak with hers. “We crave those that will fall to use...and we brag about what we do every chance we get. We need others to see us as powerful...as legends...”

“We are powerful creatures...and we are vain...vain, for how much we need this...for how much we need others to see us...worship us...fear us...”

There was something about her that was sending a shiver down his spine, something that was at once chilling and enticing. He leaned back slightly, but she merely followed him down, and he felt a strange fear as she pressed herself against him. She smiled.

“Are *you* afraid of me, Satres?”

“I wasn’t...”

“But now you are?”

“...In a way. I’m not sure what I am.”

“Ha...”

She chuckled, sliding back, crossing her arms under her breasts as she smiled down at him. There was a difference to her now, no longer angry, no longer seductive, but more...satisfied.

“And that is why we understand responsibility.”

“...I don’t understand.”

“You can’t brag about something, or claim a kill, or anything like that, if you don’t know whether you’re responsible for it. If someone else can argue whether you did something or not, then there’s no point in bragging about it. If you can’t be responsible for your own victories, then how can you make everyone else understand how strong, how powerful you are?”

She shrugged, sliding back into her chair, and he couldn’t help but stare at her. Every single time that they talked, he swore that he learned something about demons that nobody else would ever have been able to teach him.

It was a completely different way of looking at responsibility, he supposed, but at the same time, it was akin to the arguments against fate. Those that believed in fate were quick to say that any failure was merely fated to happen, but they were far less likely to believe that they were merely fated to win. Pain was easy to dismiss, but glory was quick to be claimed.

It was a strange argument, and one that he had not believed demons would have used. Then again...

The differentiation...were demons the ones that described that, or mortals?

That was a question that he had never considered. All that he knew of demons he had learned from the folklore of the people outside the temple and from the masters within. It had painted the demons as monsters, and certainly, they were. There was little else that one could call such creatures that came down the mountain with such malevolent intent, hunting and killing and causing pain merely for the sake of their own pleasure. One did not feel guilty for eliminating a scourge animal; one could not feel guilty for fighting back against those that would maim or kill one without reason.

Yet...if they were able to understand how to be responsible for their victories, then they had to understand that their base urges were not acceptable, either. He cocked his head to the side as he looked at the songbird again, slowly shaking his head.

“You must delight in giving me puzzles.”

“I will admit, I do,” she said with a smile.

“And why is that?”

“It is little more than a snack, but the headaches they give you are *truly* delicious.”

He rolled his eyes, but he didn't say anything in response. It seemed that Silra was still determined to cause him problems.

As he finished the chunk of bread, the raven pushed back from the table. He was in the process of getting to his feet when he heard the sounds of voices outside, shouting, calling for him. The raven cocked his head to the side, glancing at Silra. She shook her head; they weren't demons.

Then...what...

Gesturing for her to wait there, he left the kitchen, walking through the hall of meditation to the fallen doors to the garden. He had almost reached them when one of the speakers poked their head through and smiled.

It was one of the farmers from that night, a crow. He bowed his head, letting out a groan of relief.

“Oh, you're alive. We all worried. Everyone, he's alive!”

The farmer waved, likely at others that were in the garden, and then turned to face the raven again. The crow walked in, looking around, but his smile slowly faded as he didn't see what he expected.

“Where...where's everyone else?”

“...They're gone.”

“Gone?”

“They were...overwhelmed. I was the only survivor,” Satres said, shaking his head.

The crow stopped dead in his tracks, his beak working soundlessly as he obviously tried to rationalize what he had just heard. His beak clicked against itself, words trying to come and then failing.

Satres sighed. He had hoped that the news had spread down the mountain, at least. If it had spread up, following the demons back into the hell beneath the mountain, then it would have been devastating; if it had spread down the slopes, then there would have been possibilities of bringing more converts to the temple, people that would be willing to learn the techniques of the orders again. But to know that nobody had heard...

“The masters died in the fight...and Master Kazir sacrificed himself for the good of everyone. He managed to slay the Demon King, and he died in the act.”

“Kazir...gone...”

“I’m sorry.”

“What about our farms? What about...what about everything up here? Who’s going to protect us?”

“Protect? What happened?” a pigeon asked as the other farmers started arriving.

Satres shook his head, knowing where this would go. The farmers had always relied on the temple and the protectors that lived within it. Without the monks, without the masters, the slopes of the mountain were too dangerous for the farmers to settle on. The fertile lands would be overrun, their family holdings destroyed without someone to keep the demons on the high slopes, well away from them.

And that was what he had to do. Otherwise, there was no point to him being in the temple at all.

“I will see to it that you are protected,” the raven said, bowing his head.

“You? But...you weren’t even part of an order.”

“They sent you with us, though...”

“Yeah, but that’s because he wasn’t good enough to fight, wasn’t it?”

“He did save us, but...yeah, he could have been at the temple...”

“He never even picked an order...”

“No way he can protect us from all that. He barely won against one demon...”

Satres’s shoulders hunched slightly beneath his robe, and the painful comments did nothing to help push them back down. Instead, he took a deep breath, let it out, and faced the arguing farmers directly.

“I am all that you have. If you can bring yourself to trust me, go back to your homes and settle there. I will do everything I can to make sure that you’re safe.”

“And if you can’t?” one of them asked.

“Then I will send warning the day that I believe I am no longer enough. And you can join those that can’t believe me today in the lower villages.”

“But...but our farms...”

“We can’t just...”

“You have to do something!”

“What about everything that we leave behind?”

“What about all the crops we’ve grown?”

“You owe us!”

“Owe you?!”

Satres’s shout echoed through the room, and he took a step forward before he could stop himself. It was enough to make every single one of the farmers take a step back, their eyes wide as he glared at them. The words poured from his mouth before he could stop them, unrestrained, unleashed.

“Owe you?! Nobody in this temple owed you a *thing!*”

“But the food -”

“Could never have been grown without the monks putting their lives on the line every single day. You could not have settled here without their protection, *every single day*. You could not have made a family if it wasn’t for their protection, their medicine, their support, *every, single, DAY!*”

“This temple was here before you came. This temple stood while you ran, giving you the time to make it to safety. The monks, the masters, my *family*, they all died so that you could run away, so that you could live. And you think I *owe* you something?”

They didn't answer him. He wasn't sure that they could. Not one master of the temple, not even the greatest fighters in the Order of the Talon, had ever lost their temper the way that he had just done. But then, he imagined that no member of the temple had ever been offended like that, either.

It was not good, but it was understandable.

The seething rage that the heartless comment had provoked had been leashed, however, and he was slowly getting it under control again. He brought his arms to his sides, releasing the *chi* that he'd barely realized that he was holding. It was enough to bring some of the pain of the world back to him, the aches and discomfort that he had been ignoring ever since he had gotten out of bed.

That, in turn, made it a bit easier for him to be less angry. He was too tired to be angry, too tired to rage. Sighing, he shook his head.

“I will continue to do my best. I will guard the grounds, and the pass, as best as I can. That is all I can offer you. If that isn't enough to make you feel safe in your farms, then I suggest that you move down the mountains. I cannot give you any more than I already have. Unless you wish to learn how to be a monk yourself, I cannot give you any other tools.”

He had hoped to see at least one man raise his hand, or offer his wing, or nod his head, but the fear of the demons was too strong. Not one of them were willing to learn, and most were not even willing to put their faith in him. One by one, the farmers left, not one of them offering so much as a word of condolences, or thanks, or a wish of luck. All they had were words of discontent, the lot of them muttering about how this wasn't fair, or wasn't right.

It took more than the raven wanted to admit to keep his fury from rising again. Now that it had been awakened, it wanted nothing more than to be used, and the usual training mantras were not enough to silence it.

Owe them...owe them...They would all be dead if it wasn't for...and they think...

His thoughts ran at a mile a second, and he could not stop them. Satres stood there like a statue, watching as they left, but only so that he didn't make a further fool of himself. He crossed his arms over his chest, his fingers clenching into the upper parts of the limbs as he held himself back from lashing out any further.

Soon, they had departed. They did not pause in the garden, they did not stop at the grave. They merely walked right out through the hole in the wall, leaving him alone once more. The raven could hardly believe it, and his hands shook when he slowly unfolded his arms, and there were scratches along his upper arms.

We protected them...for this?

He knew that there were selfish people out there. He knew that there were those that took things for granted. But he had expected so much more from families that he had known for over a decade, from people that had been visitors and regular partners with the temple for longer than he had been alive. They were people, for crying out loud, not -

Satres sat down, crossing his legs and resting his hands on his knees. He tried to summon up a more meditative frame of mind, something to calm himself down, but it was too late. He'd already crossed a line.

They're people, not demons...but at least the demons were fair...

It was an unworthy thought, and he knew it. The farmers were afraid, and they had every right to be. They'd seen the horde that had come down the mountain, the great evil that had assailed the temple. Of everyone on the mountainside, they knew what they faced if the temple ever fell for good. They had every reason to want reassurance, and they had every reason to be terrified and confused when he couldn't give it to them.

Yet, the anger still burned. It wasn't fair that they had to lose their homes? It wasn't fair that he had to take on all the responsibilities of a temple full of monks, or that he had to offer protection to those that wanted more. It wasn't fair that he had to be warden to a demon himself. It wasn't fair...

It wasn't fair...

It.

Wasn't.

Fair.

And that was something that he could fix.

Satres let the anger drift off from him, taking a breath in, then letting it out. It was part of the grief, he realized, another piece of it that he had yet to let himself feel. He'd been busy hurting, letting go of the pain, but he hadn't let himself be angry at what had happened. He'd been so busy just trying to hold himself together that the anger had gotten buried, and now, he had to deal with it.

Anger needs a place to go...

And considering that he needed to feed Silra, anyway, it might as well go into the minor demons further up the slope. He took a deep breath again, let it out, and got back to his feet. It

wasn't perfect, but he felt better than he did, and no longer quite so enraged at the farmers as he had been.

Before he could call for her, however, there was a gentle rap at the entryway. The raven turned, cocking his head to the side at the hawk waiting. He stood slightly taller than the raven did, his arms turning from feathers to scales at the elbow, but both ends of his limbs were muscular and thick. He wore the linens of a farmer, but he didn't have the dirt of one on his body.

"Who are you?" Satres asked. "I don't believe I know you."

"You don't. But I know you. Satres. The lone survivor. The last monk of the temple. And the protector of more than he knows what to do with."

"..." The raven slowly turned to face the hawk full-on, shaking his head. "You speak more truth than you know."

"Then allow me to say something that you need to hear." The hawk took a step through the door, bowing his head. "Thank you."

"...For what?"

"For what you're doing, and everything that you've done."

A simple thanks should not have meant as much as that did, but it still made him sigh, covering his eyes for a moment. Just...acknowledgement. It meant more than he thought, and it sent a shiver through him that nearly took him to his knees. He could not speak for a moment or two, and when he did, his voice shook.

"You're...You're welcome," he managed to say. "I will continue to...do everything I can."

"I know. But until then...my thanks are more than words..."

Pulling his hand down, Satres blinked as the hawk started to pull his shirt off, gradually dragging it over his head to reveal a hardened chest, barely cushioned by the brown and white feathers over it.

"I don't know if you monks are allowed to take this kind of 'thanks,' but...I would like to offer you something..."

...Oh, my...

The End