

# **The Black-Feathered Monk**

## **Chapter 11**

### **By Draconicon**

Satres and Silra were led from the narrow bottom of the temple to its peak. The passage could have been made by air, but they distrusted the demon to have freedom, and Satres could not fly. Lacking the wings that the other birds relied on, they were forced to take the stairs that wound through the center of the tower.

They followed Tau, the horned owl, all the way to the upper chamber. There, the horned owl stood to the side, holding the door open for them.

“You may enter...”

He did not sound pleased, but Satres didn't expect him to. They were not welcome guests, not here, and particularly not Silra. It was a miracle that he hadn't been labeled a demon sympathizer, he supposed, considering that he had both come from a destroyed temple and in the company of a demon. It was more of a miracle that the masters of the Order of the Eye were willing to speak with him at all, even with the treaty that was in place between the different temples.

Nodding his thanks, he stepped forward. The dimness of the winding staircase faded into the brilliant orange of the setting sun, spilling through the glass-domed chamber and giving the entire room the feeling of firelight glimmering off glass surfaces.

As a matter of fact, the room was made entirely of glass, ranging from an opaque style that was shaped into thick chairs to transparent pieces that rose in twisted, slender stems from the floor to the ceiling. The entire room gave the feeling of transparency and fragility, forcing him to walk carefully forward. Every stride made him all too aware of the cool, slippery floor beneath his talons, and how easily one could break a single panel with a step that was too firm or too harsh.

As he stepped to the middle of the room, he realized that there were more masters to this temple than there had been at his. Even at the Temple of Talon and Quill, there had been only three masters, one per order and one to oversee the temple itself. Here, there were five. Akong, the snowy owl that had greeted them and sent them to the dungeons at the start, sat on the far

left. The other owls he didn't know, but they ranged through various different species, with an elder horned owl sitting in the center.

Satres bowed his head to the masters, his hands at his sides in respect. Silra did not bow nor make any other gesture, but the stillness would suffice, he hoped.

"Rise, raven," the horned owl said, voice firm despite the gray, drooping feathers. "You come to use with secretive motivations, I am told."

"I did not wish to speak until we were in private, and with those of authority."

"Then speak now, for you will receive no greater greeting than what you have before you."

"Nor would you deserve it if you were offered it," Akong muttered. "One so marked should not still be living."

"Yes, we will attend to that in time, Master Akong," the head of the council said. "Raven. Your name?"

"I am Satres, a novice of the Temple of Talon and Quill, Master...?"

"You may call me Yun."

"Master Yun." He bowed his head. "I am the survivor of the attack."

"The sole survivor, as far as we have been able to see. But there was much that happened that night."

"...Yes."

"You were at the edge of the fight. I was not watching you, so I did not see how you managed to survive the demons that were at the outskirts of the battle. Your master, Kazir. He fought against the Demon King."

"As well as Masters Sarin and Wulin."

"They were seen, as well. Many of your fellow students were watched; we have long had good relations with your temple, and knew them well. Their deaths pained those that watched."

"This is all obvious," Silra said. "What is the point of going over the past like this?"

"To see what is truth, and what might have been demonic trickery," Master Yun said. "It is unlikely for a novice to have survived alone. What allowed such an accomplishment?"

Ah, so that was why they were present like this. At least some of the council, perhaps Akong, perhaps more, believed that he was either taken by the demons, or lying to them. They believed it so strongly that it had cast doubt on their techniques, perhaps, for all that they had said that they had seen the fight happen.

Satres lowered his head, but before he could respond, Silra interrupted.

“You think that one of us would want him? Don’t make me laugh.”

“Demon. You have not been addressed. Hold your tongue.”

“Oh, trust me, I am. If I wasn’t, you would *all* be screaming for me right now,” the songbird said, sweeping her eyes across the room. “Congratulations. You’ve made me care a little bit about this topic.”

“Silra.” Satres shook his head, gently pushing down on her shoulder. “Control.”

“...I hate that word. I *hate* it.”

Nevertheless, she backed down, taking several deep breaths. Despite the outburst, her reaction to his ‘request’ shocked the room, and more than half the masters went wide-eyed. Akong, certainly, did so. Master Yun cocked his head to the side.

“I have been informed of some of the situation. Satres, if you will tell us your story?”

“In brief, masters. I was tasked with seeing to the safety of those that sheltered at the temple. I guided them away, only for Silra to reveal herself as a demon looking to feed on those that were fleeing. We fought, and I spared her life.”

“A mistake,” Akong muttered.

“A blessing. Utilizing the techniques taught by Master Wulin, I bound her with the tools of the Quill. And as she stood there with me, I watched the battle unfold before me. I watched as my teachers died. I watched as my master sacrificed himself to slay the Demon King that had come to take the temple. And when I would have died, she dragged me away from the temple to our ally, the Toad of the White Rock. I woke there, and returned after to see what had become of the temple.”

“What we saw was true, then. It is no more?”

“I am the sole survivor, master. I wish to rebuild, but I cannot do it alone.”

“So you have come for help, to poach on our numbers to rebuild your own,” Akong said, the snow owl shaking his head. “We cannot spare such a force.”

“I don’t wish for your aid. But I do ask for your information.”

In truth, he had wished for their numbers, but the more that he saw, the more that he realized that they were going to be reluctant to give that to someone like him. He was too far gone in their eyes, and the temple too total a loss. He imagined that their plans would be to slowly build up something further down the slope, to shore up the defenses further from the peak, where the demons could take longer to reach it.

If that was the case, then they would sacrifice multiple villages in the process. He did not hold warm feelings to those that lived there, not after their anger when they came to beg for protection that he 'owed' them, but he did not believe they deserved that, either.

"Then what do you wish, young one?" Master Yun asked.

"Information."

He gestured towards the windows that looked over the slopes of the mountain, that oversaw the grounds for miles around. Even he, without his *chi*, could see that the temple offered a vantage point matched by few others. It allowed one without power to see far enough that anyone approaching could be seen hours away. With the powers of the Temple of the Eye, that range increased dramatically, and so did the details.

"You will have seen much from here. I will seek my aid elsewhere."

"There are none that will uproot themselves for your cause, Satres," Master Yun said, shaking his head slowly. "You will find nothing of aid in that."

"I do not seek other monks, or villagers, Master Yun. I seek demons."

The feeling in the room changed instantly. Gone was the curiosity and mild suspicion of Master Akong, replaced with a heated glare and a sudden dread. Even Master Yun looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

Satres shook his head, slowly undoing his robe. The masters watched as he stripped himself to his waist, showing the scars, the acid marks, the various damages that he had taken in his time since the battle. He wobbled as the aches, pains, and exhaustion came home to him once more, leaving him hissing through his beak.

"What is this, young one?" Master Yung whispered.

"This is proof of what I believe. There are demons that can, and have, learned control. I seek to bring that same technique to others."

"They can't be controlled!" Master Akong shouted, rising to his feet. "This is madness. You would pollute your temple further by *inviting* demons to trod upon its ashes?"

“I would bring the demons to it to rebuild. I would bring them there to turn them from demons to something else,” he said.

“Impossible. They may only be controlled for a short time, by the power of Quill or other *chi* techniques. If they cannot control themselves, then there is no way for you to use them.”

“They may control themselves.” He gestured at the scars across his chest and arms. “Every wound upon my body came from a demon. Every single one could have killed me. But they did not. Not Silra. Not the spiders. Not the ogre or the other demons I have found. They can be taught rules...and those that are taught remember them.

“Believe me or not, it doesn’t matter. What matters is whether you will tell me where to find them. Tell me where the demons are nesting upon the mountain, and I will leave you be. You will never see me again. Just tell me where to find them.”

“Why? So you may join them?” Akong snorted, clicking his beak as he turned away. “You will die or become one of them, raven. You throw away all that remains of your teachers and their teachings.”

“I believe that I will preserve them.”

“Believe? I imagine that the fools believed that they would live through the onslaught. Your master was always overconfident, always –”

“Master Akong.”

Satres was grateful to the interruption from the horned owl master, for he wasn’t sure if he would have been able to restrain himself for much longer. An insult to himself, he could bear. An insult to the master that had given him so much, he could not. This time, it was Silra that touched him, pulling him back as Master Yun turned to him.

“This information. What will you do with it?”

“I will take what I have learned of demons, and I will teach them. I will put them to work rebuilding the temple.”

“And then? When their purpose is done, what then, Satres?” Master Yun asked. “I cannot, in good conscience, give you that information without knowing what you plan to do, or that you at least have a plan.”

“I do, Master Yun.”

“Then tell me.”

“...I plan to make allies of demons,” he said. “Our deals that we have made with monsters and spirits, I plan to make with them. I plan to give them a chance, as I have given Silra. Should it succeed...our war may finally be over.”

It was a long shot, but the more that he had thought about what had happened in the underground beneath the temple, the more that he realized that it was possible. The demons were too strong for them to ever eradicate the enemy, and no defensive war could last forever. When their attackers were all but immortal, when they were never able to be pushed back completely, when the monks could only hold out and hold the line for as long as possible, it was inevitable that they would eventually be overwhelmed.

The only way that they could change the course of the war was by turning the enemy against itself. If they could do that, if they could stop the constant attacks, then there was a way for them to survive. There was a way to win.

“That is my plan,” he said. “And it may be insane...but I believe it can work.”

“You will receive no aid from me,” Akong said. “Nor from the students of this temple.”

“Master Yun?” Satres asked. “I ask only for information. Will you grant me that, at least?”

The horned owl looked between the other masters, glancing from one to another. The aged members of the Order said nothing, merely glanced back. He did not know what passed between them, but eventually, Master Yun sighed.

“We will give you what you seek. There is a small camp of demons, ranging from meager imps to a commanding eagle, not that far from here. If you wish to try your luck, you may. A map will be provided.”

“Thank you, Master Yun.”

“Do not thank me, Satres. I do not believe this will work. Moreover, I believe that I am sending you to your death. But the treaty binds me, and you ask for aid that is possible for us to give. I feel, sadly, that I am compelled to go through with this.”

“It will work.”

“So you say, young man. I hope that I do not come upon your bones one day soon.”

#

They were pushed to leave as soon as possible, after that. Satres and Silra made their way from the temple to the grounds outside, and from there to the slope on the far side. A river ran down the mountain from the high slopes, but it was blackened, marked with the corruption of

demons that had taken root on the upper heights. He shook his head, sitting by it to rest. Silra stood behind him, shaking her head.

“The old one was right about one thing. You’re going to get yourself killed at this rate.”

“Possibly.”

“You’re taking a day to rest.”

“And what would a day of rest do?”

“It will clear your head, at least. And you won’t be killing yourself to stay awake.”

“...This is true.”

“And it will at least ease some of the pain left over from my song.”

He nodded, slowly pulling his legs into a meditative lotus, only for Silra to kick them apart again. He groaned from the impact, looking back.

“And your reason for that?”

“You’re tired. You are going to actually sleep, not just meditate.”

“And is this preservation of your food-source, again?”

Silra snorted, shaking her head. Without a word, she started making her way further up-slope. Satres shook his head, but took his cue to lie down, getting more comfortable for the night that was fast approaching.

Being out in the open was dangerous for those that were tired or weak. In his current state, he almost qualified as both, and he definitely was the former. He could not fight at his fullest. But it was better to be away from those that distrusted them, and closer to their target. In the morning, after a night of rest, he would move to the camp further up.

*I wonder if Silra will be alright with this, he thought, looking up at the darkening sky. Will she accept her own people being brought down like this? Or...will she start seeing what I see?*

He didn’t know, but he knew one thing for sure. They could not rely on the treaties for much any longer. They needed whatever help they could get, and if that meant trying to turn demons, then he would try it. It was all that he had.

The raven slowly closed his eyes. He could feel Silra moving about, passing through underbrush. She was tracking something. A rabbit, perhaps, or small game, from the feel of it. She was hunting for something for him.

*She cares, on some level, he told himself. He just hoped that he wasn't lying to himself. Sleep. She's right; you need it.*

And so the raven rolled onto his side, his back to the blackened river, and he slowly drifted down to the place where sleep welcomed those that needed it. Darkness and dream claimed him, and for a time, he was back in a place where he had been happy, before life had turned upside down.

**The End**