

The Black-Feathered Monk

Chapter 9

By Draconicon

The spider demon had no name, it seemed, and it persisted in calling him ‘Father’ no matter how much the raven insisted that they had no relation. In the end, he allowed it if only to give himself a sense of peace. If it wished to see him as a relative, then perhaps it would have an easier time listening to him than if not.

As he cut Silra from the webs using his talons and *chi*, the spider remained at his side. Its eyes glittered every time it blinked, and while it could not cock its head to the side the way that he or Silra might have, it gave the impression by closing several of its eyes, allowing the others to look like they were slanted.

“This one is not to be eaten, Father?” it asked.

“No. She is not food.”

“I apologize, Father.” The spider walked across the web, hanging down a few inches from the songbird demon’s face. “My apologies. I was not aware of the rules of my new home. How may I make amends?”

It was surprising to hear a demon talking about apologizing, let alone making amends for something. Satres shook his head, hanging from the edge of the rooftop and flexing his legs. He brought one talon up to the long ropes of web that hung down, his toe-claws glowing as he channeled his *chi* into them. A snip here, a cut there, and the holdings started weakening. A few more would free her from the trap.

Silra didn’t say anything to the spider demon’s offer, looking away. Satres shook his head.

“I believe that it is sincere,” he said.

“It probably is. I don’t want amends.”

“You’re not smashing it, either.”

“That wasn’t the plan.”

“Or stabbing it. Or dismembering it. Or otherwise causing it harm up to the point of or exceeding death,” he said.

“...Do you plan to leave me any loopholes for feeding?”

“Not without supervision.”

The sheer mundanity of having a deadly demon under his control was almost as shocking as the fact that his life had become something so surreal at the same time. The spider demon looked back at him, and he shrugged. It retracted the silks that allowed it to dangle, moving along the rooftop before lowering itself down at his side once more.

“Are there other rules that I should be aware of, Father?”

“Probably. Let me think of how to phrase them.”

“I will be patient. Please, allow me to earn my place in my new home.”

It took him a moment to realize why it felt so strange to hear a demon talking like that. It would have been odd if the spider was eager, or even sounded it. That would have made some sense and would have been familiar. There were plenty of little urchins that had begged in the same way as they snuck up from the villages further down the mountain, wanting to see the fantastic things that were on the high slopes. They all had that same sort of eagerness in their words and voices.

The spider demon, on the other hand, sounded almost dead as it asked for what terms and amends it could make for things. There was a strain under that monotone, almost like it was bracing itself for what must be paid, for something that had to be done rather than something that it wanted to do.

Hmmm. It has control, but it is not comfortable being under control. Worth knowing.

With one last kick-cut, Satres severed the last of the web. Silra fell, twisting and cutting through the bonds that held her arms at her sides, and managed to land on her feet. He followed her down, and the spider followed him.

As the songbird shivered, the spider bobbed at the end of its string. It was quite the large arachnid, the main body slightly larger than his own head and with legs that were almost as long as his forearm. They clicked more than was seemly for a natural animal, and he could make out both the little mouth-limbs and the fangs behind them. The spider demon looked at him again, and he knew that it was impatient for rules.

“Rule one. You may not harm a mortal that does not try to harm you first. However, you may restrain them in a way that does not give harm in the long term. What does your poison do?”

“A small dose will paralyze. A heavy dose will stop the heart with fatigue.”

“Fatigue? Not poison?”

“My poison is that of lethargy and sloth,” the spider said. “When I bite, I remind them of every long day, every dull hour, every moment that drained their energy. With every jolt of my venom, those memories grow stronger, and become reality. In short order, a man may fall asleep and die of pure exhaustion that he may not have earned that day.”

It was a stark reminder that he was dealing with a demon rather than a regular spider, and the raven nodded.

“You are not allowed to use a killing dose of that unless you are under direct attack, and only if you did not start it.”

“I accept the rule.”

“What do you eat?”

“I feed on dreams, both those of the night and of the day.”

“...Oh.”

“Yes.”

Satres reevaluated his thoughts. The spider demon had the power to be a truly dangerous creature, he realized. One that could devour the dreams of another was not merely a creature that took the memories of the night away, but a creature that took away ambitions, as well. He wondered if the deadly dose of this demon’s venom was not a real death, but rather a coma from which the victim would never wake. It would fit with what the spider fed on, and how it needed to survive.

He would have to make sure that there were a great many rules set down on that if it was to stay at the temple.

“Satres.”

The sudden interruption pulled him out of his own thoughts, and he turned to the songbird. She nodded towards the interior of the temple again and made her way around, going to the front door. He paused, looking up at the spider demon.

“We will continue this list when we have more time.”

“I understand, Father.”

“In the meantime, are you well-fed?”

“I am fed enough to survive the week.”

“Then find a place to curl up and rest, and I’ll set the rules for you later.”

The spider retracted itself to the rooftops. Once it was out of sight, he followed the other demon into the main part of the temple.

Silra stood in the precise center of the great hall, her arms wrapped around her middle. She didn’t react when he entered, nor did she turn as he approached. In fact, she didn’t move at all until he stood right behind her.

“Is this how we are going to live, Satres?”

“What do you mean?”

“In a ruined temple, with nothing but your books and your scrolls? With nobody but that spider?”

“...I was planning a journey before long.”

“I’m coming with you.”

The raven narrowed his eyes. The songbird turned, shaking her head as she saw his expression.

“I can’t stay here. Not with that...thing...”

“Why not?”

“The way it talks. I don’t like it.”

“Because it has control and you don’t?”

“...That may or may not be the reason. Regardless, I will be coming with you. I can’t stay here. There is nothing for me to feed on. Nothing.”

“This wouldn’t be a hunting trip.”

“Wherever you go, there will be pain. And if there is pain, I can feed on it. You don’t understand, Satres; I *need* this.”

He opened his mouth to argue, then stopped, taking a second look at the demoness. Her wing-arms were limp, and she was showing signs of strain along her face and every exposed part of her body. Considering that she hadn’t bothered to dress since she had revealed her demonic

self, that was everything, though her feathers protected most of her modesty. She was thin, and not merely slender, but thin, drawn tight along her own body.

She was starving, he realized, and the pain that she had ‘eaten’ from him earlier in the day had done little to nothing to satiate her. No wonder she had sounded positively starving when she had been eating it. She actually was.

“...You may come,” he said.

“Good.”

“But you will still be under my commands. I don’t want you to be caught and killed, just because of what you are.”

“Hmmp...”

Yet, despite her dismissal, there was something there. Not something happy, but something that was closer to curious. She looked at him like he was a puzzle, and he wondered what it was that she thought about when she looked at him like that.

He could have known. He could have ordered her to tell him, as a matter of fact, but that was something that he didn’t want to do. There were too many lines to be crossed with the power that he held over her, and he didn’t want to make it worse than it already was. She had reason enough to hate him.

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The day passed mostly in the discussion and setting down of rules with the spider demon. It declined to name itself, still, though that was out of a lack of understanding itself enough to know what to call itself rather than a desire to hide something. He allowed that, focusing instead on what they needed to do to make sure that anyone that visited the temple in their absence was handled properly.

The rules were simple enough, though they were layered one over another so that there was always a continuity, always a link from one requirement to another to enable a better understanding. Whenever one rule was invoked, two more were tugged on to create a full, organic decision rather than merely holding to the letter of the law. The spider demon was not always happy with this, but it was willing, and that was enough.

Simplified down, Satres ordered that the spider demon keep itself busy as a defense of the temple while they were gone. The webs were allowed anywhere along the walls and the exterior, but the interior passages were off-limits to the webbing. Anyone coming in had the right to address the spider, but none had the right to slaughter it or hurt it. The spider was forbidden from preemptive assault, and was only allowed to step in if someone appeared to be doing damage to the outside of the monastery, to the grounds, or to the temple itself.

It seemed good enough when combined with the first rule regarding whether the spider could feed on or bite someone. Satres hoped that it would be enough.

The next morning, it was clear that the spider demon had been hard at work through the night. Several holes in the wall had been closed by webs where the individual strands were thicker than his thumb, and several prey had already been caught. Wandering bats in the night, cats that had been away from farmhouses, and more were there, all paralyzed and all sleeping as the spider demon crawled above them. The demon bit at things that Satres could not see, but it seemed to satiate the creature.

Silra waited for him outside the walls, obviously eager to get away. She had dressed herself in a wrap of blue cloth that was several shades darker than her own blue feathers. Her talons tapped against the earth in impatience as he approached, and she shook her head as he looked back at the temple.

“It will be there when we return,” she muttered.

“I know. But I still worry.”

“The only thing that you need to worry about is a general of Hell, or something of his rank. The spider will be...sufficient.”

“...” Satres slowly turned, looking at her. “You know their sort?”

“I know what they can become.”

“Then -”

“Don’t make me talk about this right now. We should go.” She looked around. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“To the Temple of the Eye. I believe that they might be able to tell me better where to find some of the ancient techniques that the other scrolls referenced. And perhaps they might lend me a few monks of their order to hold the temple.”

“Hmmp. Unlikely.”

“Quite. But it is worth trying. One man cannot hold that forever.”

“No...no, one couldn’t.”

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They took the trail up the slope for nearly a half mile before turning to make their way around the sides. The steep ground frequently necessitated Silra to take to the air, and Satres was forced to follow with a leaping imitation of flight. His *chi* allowed him to soar higher than the

average man, but he always had to come down again. The joy of the wind in his feathers was always short-lived.

More than once, Silra looked back at him as they traveled, but not once did she say anything. There were times when he almost thought she might. After all, her mouth was open, and she looked curious enough to say something, but the moment always passed in silence.

Satres focused more on how he needed to land, and how far he could jump with each successive launching into the air. Even strengthened with *chi*, his legs were not strong enough to keep this up forever, and the fall always came with a burst of pressure and discomfort. The bones of a bird were not well-suited for repeated impacts.

They had traversed nearly a quarter of the mountain's circumference at that height when Silra began her descent. With the monastery still a mile or more off, it was too soon. Satres slowed himself on his next impact, waiting for her to touch ground.

The songbird demon stumbled as she landed, almost falling to her knees, and only avoided it by willpower and pride, from what he could tell. He waited for her to catch her balance, then approached.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m...weak,” she admitted.

“How bad?”

“Bad enough that you look tasty at this point.”

In other words, the starvation was taking over at that point. The raven looked back the way they’d come, and then up and down the slopes. There was little to be seen in the way of plant life on the heights, and less to be seen of those that would feed on it, and nothing to be seen of those that would feed on them. When they reached the Temple of the Eye, he doubted that there would be much in the way of pain for her to consume, either, particularly without catching the attention of the monks there even further.

There was little choice in the matter.

“When you feed on pain, do you leave the injury behind?” he asked.

“A portion of it. I feed on the agony behind the injury, not on the injury itself.”

“But you take some of it?”

“The stress that the pain causes you, yes. It is an illusion of ease, however, and one that will still need time for recovery.”

It wasn't ideal, but there was a solution. He looked down at the marks that he'd left on her, the golden lines of *chi* glowing through her feathers. Silra looked where he did, then back at him.

"What?"

"...I am going to regret this."

"What? What are you doing?"

"Sit down."

"What are you doing, first?"

"I'm going to loosen your restrictions."

Her eyes went wide, and justifiably. He doubted that she had ever expected him to say those words, and quite honestly, he had never thought that he'd say them, either. As she sat down on the rocky slopes, he did the same, pulling one of his grayed feathers from his side and channeling new *chi* through it.

"Don't move," he muttered.

"Is that a command, then?"

"It will be, if you do."

"...You're actually serious. You're going to do this."

"You need to feed, and this prevents it. I'm not getting rid of it, but I am loosening it a bit further."

A swipe of the feather pulled away the marks that he had left behind before, drawing the *chi* that had enforced the command into the feather that he held. Silra gasped, almost like something that had been choking her had been suddenly removed, but before she could draw away, he was writing again. The end of the feather darted along her midsection, drawing little symbols among her feathers as he moved the wrap out of the way.

It was a simple shift. She could give harm, provided he ordered her to do it. Otherwise, she was forbidden from harming him or other mortals, still. It wasn't the same, but it was better than nothing.

When he dropped the feather, he realized that she'd been bracing herself. As the glow faded from the gray feather, she took a breath, then seemed almost startled at how easy it was. She shook her head in disbelief.

“Is it that different?” he asked.

“More than you know.”

“Is it better?”

“Oh, yesssssss...”

“Then. Singer of Pain.”

Tensing at the name, she turned back to him. Her eyes widened as he braced himself for what he was about to say. He couldn't believe that he was doing this, but he knew that it was necessary. He just hoped that his understanding of how her powers and her feeding worked was correct.

“Sing your supper.”

There was a moment of shock, followed by a moment of relief. He had hoped to see something that showed grief, but Satres should have known that was too much. There was too much hate built up there, and too much hunger.

As she opened her beak, a song left her mouth. It filled the air around him, and as it warbled, he felt the notes collapsing around him. It was like the sound itself became pressure, hard and painful against him. It condensed around his bones through his skin, making it feel as though every single bone in his body was starting to collapse, going right to the point of breaking. He could feel bones that he hadn't even known existed before going through the same feeling, and he clenched his beak tightly.

That was a mistake. The pain spread to his beak afterward, and it felt as if it was on the verge of shattering, as if a hundred, a thousand little cracks had formed in the hard, sharp halves of it, and if he put any pressure on it at all, it was break into uncounted pieces. He gasped, and that too fed him pain, as if his lungs were on fire, as if his throat were ablaze.

Silra continued to sing, and the pain got worse, descending into agony. His feathers felt as if they caught the sun and carried its fire under his skin, like the worst burn of his life magnified and spread throughout his body. The old injury in his leg, where he'd broken a bone and fainted from the pain as a young hatchling, came back with a vengeance, that moment of shattering, splitting pain repeating itself again and again in micro-explosions through his limbs, spreading throughout his entire body again.

The song had only lasted for ten seconds, and he felt like he was going to be crippled for life. He held out, holding on to the scream that wanted to come flying from his throat, hoping it would end soon.

The pains and agonies continued to rain down on him. The feeling of a rib snapping, stabbing through his lung and stealing his air. The sensation of his beak breaking, the pieces

jammed into his head. The jarring, horrible feeling of his talons being cracked off one by one, the claws stabbed into the bleeding wounds.

Eventually, he could no longer hold out. With a scream, he fell onto his back, and the scream did not stop.

The song, however, did.

Silra was above him, her breath hot against his neck and beak as she dragged her tongue against his body. Where she touched, the pain died as she ate it, consuming the rending agony that had been blasted through him.

“So much...a feast...”

Satres barely heard her words, too lost to the raw horrors that wracked his body. He almost drowned in it, only saved by the slow departure of it as she kept eating it from his body. She pulled at his robes, dragging her tongue against the feathers of his chest, then further down. It would have been erotic, if he wasn't in a Hell of the mind.

Bit by bit, her feeding drew him out of that horror, and he was able to stop screaming. Instead, he cried, the tears slowly running down the sides of his beak before he could stop them. They refused to stop, even as Silra pulled his robes back together, having finished feasting on what she had caused down there and further down his thighs.

“I must be losing my touch. Couldn't you hear the pain?” she asked.

“I -” He hiccuped, forcing it down. “I felt it.”

“Well, you must not have felt much.”

“I wanted to scream ten seconds in.”

“...Why didn't you?” she asked.

“You were...starving,” he said, the last of the tears fading, replaced with panting in exhaustion. “I thought...the more I felt...the better.”

The songbird stared at him like he had said something in a foreign language, then slowly shook her head. He could not move, no matter how he tried, and he ended up needing her to lift him to his feet. He had to lean on her for a change, and she helped carry him around the side of the mountain. There was a massive difference to how she walked now, and it was clear that her 'meal' had done her no end of good.

They were in sight of the Temple of the Eye a few minutes later. Rather than the walled garden that had served as the majority of the Temple of Talon and Quill, the Temple of the Eye was a great spire that loomed over the land surrounding it. Unlike many, it widened towards the

middle and narrowed at the tips and base, becoming almost like an eye tilted on its side that looked over the world around it. Its defenses were smaller than the ones at his home, with shorter walls and nothing in the way of gates.

However, their defenses laid not in their buildings, but in their preparations. Satres looked up to see owls coming down the slopes, two armed with bows, and one without any apparent weapon. It landed before him, while the other two continued to flap their wings, their weapons held in their talons.

“What brings a demon and a monk to the Temple of the Eye?” the owl asked, adjusting his white and green robe.

“Death. Death and destruction, and the hope of recovery,” Satres said.

“We have seen the former. We cannot promise much for the latter.”

“I don’t ask much. May we enter?”

“You may. She -”

“She is marked. Contained.”

“By the power of the Quill?”

Satres nodded, and the owl nodded back.

“Then she may enter, but under supervision. Come.”

The owls in the air took flight, as did the one that had spoken to them. Satres watched them rise, shaking his head, and leaned on Silra again to aid his steps. The songbird shook her head, muttering ‘idiot’ under her breath, but she continued to guide him along.

They had made it. Now, it was time to see if they would be willing to help.

The End