

The Black-Feathered Monk

Chapter 5

By Draconicon

A full day passed as Silra and Satres worked to strengthen the walls of the temple again. They did not have the skills to fill in the holes, so they took what material was loose enough to work with and dragged it back to the main tower of the temple. There, they assembled the stone and tiles into rough walls, barriers that were scarcely chest-high, but would at least slow down anything that came for them. The defensive spirits that had been bound to the tiles had long since departed, so it would not be as effective, but it was better than nothing.

That night, before going to sleep, Satres climbed the central tower of the old temple. He stood outside the steel bars that had once guarded the fire that burned and lit up the sides of the mountain at all hours of the day, and he shook his head at the ash that rested there instead.

One by one, he laid out wooden logs, splitting those that were too big and building up a small temple in miniature. A square of wood that grew by the piece, it soon developed into a cube of wood that was big enough to have served as a small, one-room cottage. And on that, he laid the fuel of the dead plants, leaves and more that were suitable for tinder.

Kneeling at the edge of the metal bars, he took stone and flint, and he lit the dead fuel. It burned slowly, then a bit more swiftly, until the wood began to crackle and darken. The flames of life and light began to spread, and soon, it was once more ablaze.

Satres knelt before the fire, staring at it as the night around him began to lose its chill. The darkness was pushed back.

Kneeling before the flames, he rested his hands on his thighs, breathing slowly, evenly. He could almost feel the ghosts of his old masters kneeling with him, their hands on his shoulders, and he suppressed the shudder that wanted to go down his spine at that thought. They were gone, and there was no bringing them back, no matter how well he did with bringing the temple back to life.

But that did not mean that he would dishonor their names.

He lowered his head, bringing his hands together, one solidly in a fist, and the other cupping it gently. He bobbed his head down, tapping his beak against his fingers, then tilted it back to look at the starry sky.

“The Temple of Talon and Quill still stands.”

It was a challenge, however quiet, to the demons, he knew. For all that they would know that the Demon King that came down the mountain had been slain, they would expect that the mortals would eventually flee, that the heart of the temple had been snuffed out in return. Let them know that it was not the case. Let them hear that there was still one more that drew breath within the walls.

The raven pressed his hands together all the tighter, looking at the burn scars along his arms, the markings along his feathers. The gray marks would fade in his next molt, but for now, he looked as if he were a ghost walking the land. A spirit, perhaps.

A spirit of vengeance, however, he would not be. He had his rules, and he would keep to them.

Once more, he brought his eyes to the fire, and he let the blaze hold him, consume him.

#

Morning came, and with it came pressure from Silra. The songbird was not happy with him, and her demon urges were stronger than usual as she pestered him as soon as he entered the grounds.

“I need to feed.”

“I assumed you would.”

“You – what are you planning?”

The raven arched an eyebrow, pulling his yellow robe tight around his chest. As he finished dressing himself, the songbird sighed, reaching over her shoulder to continue preening her feathers.

The longer that Silra remained at his side, the more he wondered what he would do with her. She flitted between being a busybody to being a helpful assistant, and then reminded him again that she was a demon, barely in control of any of her urges at the best of times. The only thing keeping her from challenging him and trying to fly away was the control that he had over her, the *chi* markings on her sides and stomach that bound her to see that no harm came to him...or other mortals, for that matter.

It was dangerous to think of her as tamed, but he refused to think of her as an enemy. For all that she was bound not to hurt another, she had taken that rule and applied it to negligence, as

well; she believed that if she didn't help someone, if she just allowed them to be harmed, that it still violated the rules. That meant that she felt that she had responsibility for what she chose not to do as well as what she chose to do.

That was a step forward. That was something that could be encouraged.

When he felt properly dressed, and she was properly preened, he ended the silence.

“There are scrolls of the Talon buried beneath the temple. We are going to dig them up.”

“I am not made for digging.”

“Then you can keep an eye out while I do it.”

“How do you know there's anything down there, anyway?”

“The scroll that the masters entrusted to me. There is a code in the writing, one that tells where to find the other scrolls and ancient teachings.”

“And you think it's still in the same place as when the scroll was written?”

“It's a place to start.”

She shook her head, disapproving, but what else was new? Satres didn't let it get to him, and merely turned his attention to the side of the main temple building.

It had been constructed as much as a watchtower as it had a gathering place, and it showed in how it had been built into so many levels. All members of the temple had been taught of the history of the great structure, and more than that, of all the different hiding places that could be found within it. Novices were always taught that it was better for them to hide than it was for them to fight, save for at the last resort.

They rounded the sprawling base of the tower, the terraced roof shading them against the morning sun as he ran his fingers through the dead grasses. It had been a while since he had been sent into the underground of the temple, but he remembered what to look for. A collection of simple twine that –

There. He collected the twine in hand and pulled. The grasses had provided most of the cover for the trapdoor in the past, so there was nothing for the purifying flames to melt together. He pulled the chunk of earth and dead flora free, revealing a stone door that rested against the edge of a stone square in the ground.

Silra looked at him, then at the stone, then at him.

“Why would you do something like this?”

“Hmm?”

“Why put the basement entrance outside the tower? What if someone decided to tunnel in and then break into the temple from underneath?”

Satres arched an eyebrow. As he pulled the stone door upwards, he gestured at the deep hole that was revealed. It dropped down so far that there was no way to see the bottom, even in the morning light.

“I would like to see a demon that could make its way up from the depths before someone in the temple heard it. And besides, this way, it allows one to keep their stores safe.”

“...I'll give you that. So – damn it. I have to go first, don't I?”

“I was not going to say that.”

“No, but the rules...Ugh. Fine.”

She shook her head, adjusting the clothes she wore seemingly with nothing more than a thought. Her dress of blue and white silks faded, becoming a more practical top that wrapped around her chest and bound what little she had in the way of curves flat. It was like layers of silk wrapped about her, still, but in a binding fashion rather than flowing. As for her legs, they were mostly uncovered, leaving only a hint of silk to protect her modesty.

Satres turned his eyes skywards as she approached, holding the door open. It was not precisely immodest for a bird to show that much leg, of course, as they were quite useful for fighting. However, it was still a marked shift.

The demonic songbird began the slow descent down the ladder, and when she was at least a few rungs in, he followed. The stone door closed overhead, plunging them into darkness.

“There is a light at the bottom, right?” Silra asked.

“There should be.”

“Should be. That doesn't bode well.”

“It *has* been some time.”

“You couldn't have brought one?”

“Tell me where I might have found one, hmm?”

“...”

“Indeed. Now, keep moving.”

It took them a total of two minutes to reach the bottom of the ladder. Satres shook his head, reaching into himself for his *chi*. As he pulled at it, pooling it in his palm, his fingers began to glow with a golden light. It wasn't much, but it was enough to find a torch that had fallen to the ground – probably from the thundering footsteps of the army – and he handed it to the songbird. She held it while he scratched flint and steel together, and soon, they had a bit of firelight, brighter, and illuminating more of the underground chamber.

It was smaller than he remembered, Satres realized. Perhaps that was time passing, or perhaps he really was much younger the last time that he had been here. Either way, it felt cramped and low, with the ceiling mere inches away from pressing down on his head. The cramped quarters stretched out towards the edge of the torch's light and beyond, but along the walls danced shadows that the barrels and crates cast along the walls.

He carried the torch with him, giving the stores a cursory examination. They were still full, and he could feel potatoes and other roots well-packed inside. They wouldn't starve, at the very least.

But that wasn't what they were here for.

Satres thought back to the images that he had seen in the Scroll of the Order of the Talon. The scroll's map had referenced the basement of the tower, but more than that, it had indicated that there was a level below this one, somewhere deep, deep underground. He'd never seen it before, but if he had read the map right, then there was another trapdoor in this chamber.

“What am I looking for?” Silra asked.

“Another trapdoor.”

“You're joking.”

“I wish I was.”

“...How deep does this place go?”

“We'll find out. Keep looking.”

Satres doubted that the hole in the floor would be out in the open, but as moving the various crates and barrels would take all day, he started with the more open areas. He shuffled his talons along, feeling for any cracks in the floor as he walked, and he swept the torch side to side, seeing if the shadows would change, indicating subtle variations in the floor levels.

The further into the chamber they went, the more scattered the food storage became. The walls were emptier, more bare, and the room itself seemed to narrow, almost like it was becoming more of a triangle than a rectangle.

Worst of all, the torch smoke was filling the room to a horrible level, making it difficult to breathe and harder to keep focused. He was blinking his eyes regularly to get rid of the tears that it drew from him, and he coughed more and more often.

Just when he was about to give up and put out the torch, the far wall was illuminated, and Satres saw something that he'd never been allowed to see before.

It was a tapestry, rich and lush and well-preserved in the deep underground. The golden threads through it shimmered next to the dyed emerald and deep blues that formed forests and lakes, mountains and clouds. In the center of the tapestry was a temple, a beautiful one. An exact replica of the one above, back when it was in its prime, before it had the walls that it had now.

However, rather than focusing on the upper levels, this one mapped out the entire thing, going down to the storage basement that they were in, and then further, a great drop more than twice the distance down from the surface than they already were, leading into a long-buried chamber that he had never heard of.

But it would fit with the map...

He glanced at Silra, and she glanced back, saying nothing. He shrugged, gesturing for them to move a bit closer.

The tapestry was soft to the touch, as if it had been made only yesterday, but as he turned it to look at the back, it was clear that it had been enhanced by the power of *chi*, the marks only now fading. It must have been something that the Masters of Quill and Talon had worked together to preserve for it to last that long.

Shaking his head, he tilted it to the side, wondering if it would be as easy as –

It was. There was a locked door just behind the tapestry. Handing the torch to Silra, he took hold of the sides of the tapestry and gently lowered it to the ground, spinning it into a rolled-up state in the process. As he set it to the side, he gestured her forward, and the torch lit up the door.

It was a piece of beaten metal, red as rust and sanded smooth. On its surface were the faces of a hundred demons, their mouths wide open as if in the middle of screaming. Silra gasped.

“I never knew...”

“What?” Satres asked, turning to her. “You know what this is?”

“Yes. It’s a prison.”

“What? That’s impossible.”

“No, it’s very possible...I just didn’t know the temples could make them...”

The songbird hovered her fingers over the surface of the door, tracing faces bestial and regal alike. She shook her head, her beak hanging open in awe. Satres was silent, allowing her time to process this.

He had never heard of a demon prison, but he supposed that they were theoretically possible to make. The Order of the Quill, after all, did have the capability to bind a demon, and they were able to put binding commands on spirits within things, as well. It would make sense that they could craft a prison.

The why, however, escaped him. Until Silra, all demons had been creatures to vanquish from the earth. The idea that any would be kept alive would have been anathema to the ideals of the monks that he had spoken to. They were intent on seeing those that could not control themselves, that threatened the world with their urges, meet their end.

So, why would there be a prison beneath the temple that was capable of holding them?

Silra shook her head as she dragged her fingers towards the edge of the door, her fingers turning to feathers as she flicked them along the red surface. Dust flew into the air, and letters were revealed. Satres shook his head.

“I can’t read this. Can you?”

“It is the demon language...”

“What does it say?”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she traced her fingers over the letters, her beak moving soundlessly. He watched her, staring as her eyes glittered more and more angrily the more she read. Her fury rose with each passing moment, and Satres waited for the inevitable explosion.

It came when she finished tracing the doorway, and she flung the torch at the metal. It bounced off with a resounding clang, the demonic songbird turning her feathers to fingers again as she slammed her fist on the door.

“Bastard!”

Bang. Bang. Bang. She kept slamming her fist down on it until she seemed to lose the will to keep beating it down. As she slumped forward, Satres caught her, turning her slightly so that she leaned against the stone wall rather than the metal door. He calmly reached down for the torch, put it out, and turned to his *chi* for light, instead.

However, as it spread along his arm, lighting up the room around them, the door turned from red to something different, almost gold in turn. The faces on the door were uplifted, turning

from suffering expressions, angry expressions, to something more worshipful. He paused, the raven shaking his head, and even Silra broke out of her slump for a moment.

“What – are you doing something?” she asked.

“Other than holding my *chi*, no.”

“But that’s not supposed to...”

“If I might, I would appreciate some enlightenment, Silra.”

The songbird shook her head, holding her hand in front of the *chi* light. As soon as she did, the red returned, and so did the expressions of suffering. She shook her head, tapping her chin.

“This isn’t...normal.”

“Silra, answers, perchance?”

“...Do I have to?”

“If it is pertinent to mutual survival from going through this door? Yes.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that...”

Shaking her head, the songbird pointed to the letters around the door, dragging her finger from the base of one side up along the side, over the arch, and then down the other. She took her time, and she spoke slowly, softly.

“I speak, and you will obey. Be ye bound beneath this door of blood, sealed by suffering, locked by guilt, secured by pain. Cross not the threshold to the world above, on promise of extinction, save those that learn...” She paused, taking a breath. **“Save those that learn control. So speak I, Prince Chiang-Shol.”**

“That...is not the threat of a normal demon,” Satres muttered.

“No. And I know the name.”

“Prince Chiang-Shol? Who is he?”

“Once, he would have been a Demon King. But...” She shook her head. “I heard the rumors, but I never expected them to be true. It was said that he refused to excuse himself by his urges, and he left the mountain, turning his back on demon royalty to pursue his own goals.”

A Demon King...that turned his back on being a Demon King. That shouldn’t have been possible from all that he knew of demons, but then, he had never heard of this prison before,

either...and from the way that Silra was acting, it was not done in the way that it was supposed to be.

She leaned against the door more than ever, her mouth hanging open, her breath coming in ragged bursts as she pressed against it. He realized that there was a red tint coming off of the door, something that she was sucking down.

“What are you doing?”

“Feeding.”

“You – on them?”

“Yesssss.”

Her eyes rolled back as if she was in ecstasy, her head lolling on her shoulders as she seemed to breathe in the pain from the door. It was both disturbing and oddly beautiful at the same time, as if she was being brought to the edge of some great pleasure.

The raven turned his head, giving her the privacy to feed. After so long, he imagined that it was rather important that she get some sort of sustenance. She had been starving herself due to being around him all the time, after all.

Yet, for all that he tried to ignore what she was doing, it was impossible to get that out of his head. She was *eating* the pain of another, the suffering of someone else, and the more she consumed, the more hedonistic she sounded. He could not close his ears, but he wished he could as she moaned, groaned, and even hissed through her beak as someone in the throes of ecstasy.

It was one more reminder that she was a demon, not a person, and it was harder for him to accept that this time.

He wasn't sure how long she fed, but eventually, the disturbing sounds stopped. He waited for a half-minute or so, then turned to look over his shoulder. Silra had collected herself, finally, and she huffed softly as she stepped away from the door.

“That's better...that's much better.”

“Will you be able to feed on that?”

“Oh, yes...there's so much suffering down there...so much pain...”

“And the fact that it comes from other demons means nothing to you?”

“Heh. Why should it? They were caught.”

“So were you.”

She whipped her head around, her glare burning brighter than before. Regardless, he stood his ground until she looked away, muttering under her breath about mortals 'not understanding.' He ignored that, stepping up to the door once more, and he touched it himself.

This time, the door shook.

They both took a step back from it, Silra's eyes going wide. Satres looked down at his hand, half-fearing that his *chi* had been corrupted from touching a door that had been set down by a powerful demon, but no. It still glowed the same golden color as before, and there was nothing different about it.

The door, however, had opened. Just a crack, no more, but enough for him to see the flickering red and black dancing along the walls, to hear the shrieks and screams of the deep underground. The sounds of imps, of ogres, and more filled his ears, and he realized that it truly was a prison, and an occupied one, as well.

"Close it," Silra whispered.

"..."

"Close it, before they –"

"They're still bound."

"I – yes, but –"

"And I still need to go down there."

"I? What happened to 'we'?"

"You can't control yourself, remember? You're controlled, but you do not have control. You don't even understand it. You'd be trapped down there."

And until he understood what a demon prison actually was, he wasn't going to put someone else in there. It could be a fate far worse than her current one, after all, and with the other inmates down there...well, who knew where she'd stand in the hierarchy?

He took a step towards the door, resting his hand on the red metal, only for Silra to grab him again.

"If you go down there, what's to guarantee that you're going to come back?"

"Nothing."

"You damn fool."

“We aren’t exactly in an ideal situation, and I need the techniques that the Talon had. If they’re down there...”

“...”

“I have to get it.”

“Fine.”

“If the marks wear off, then you’ll know the worst has happened.”

“That doesn’t help.”

“It wasn’t meant to.”

Satres pushed the door, and it opened in response to his *chi*. As he expected, the doorway itself burned with a glowing red, filtered through with more golden lights. Not his *chi*, or his master’s, but much older, more ancient energy. It had been stored, somehow, and now, it was serving as a barrier against those that would try to escape.

Leaning through it, he felt the energy of Hell and old life rain over him, but not stop him. He was not one bound by the writing on the doorway, and so he could go back and forth between the two sides of the barrier. The demons could not.

There was a ladder, faintly visible, but no more. He shook his head, passing through and gripping the sides of the metal poles. Taking a deep breath, he loosened his grip, and he fell.

Despite slowing himself every so often, Satres expected to reach the base of the ladder in little more than a minute. A minute passed, and then another, and another. It was not until the fifth minute had slid by that he realized that he had stumbled into a demon already, a demon that was greater than some mere imp or ogre.

He paused, holding onto the ladder with both hands. He stretched out one leg, only to feel it touching his hand a moment later, as if he had circled it back around to stand on top of the segment of ladder he was already on. Reaching upwards found himself grabbing his ankle. He could not escape by going up, or going down, and the chute was too narrow for him to lash out and tunnel through.

So, he had little to do but hang there. He turned, resting his body weight on one arm and one leg, and looked at the wall in front of him.

“I don’t suppose you have ears to hear?” he asked, genuinely curious.

“*I hear, and I speak.*”

The voice was high and keening, the sort that cut at the ear sharper than winter winds to hear. There was no face from which it might come, but rather a presence all around him, like the little blades of snow in the air during the winter. Satres did not move, but he felt the world shift with him, almost as if he was no longer in the chute at all.

“To whom do I speak?”

“No-one that you would know. My name has fallen from the earth, and from the mountain.”

“Then what do you wish to be known as?”

“A wish? Are you a spirit, then, to grant wishes to others?”

“No. Merely one that seeks a treasure hidden below.”

“You will find no treasure here, but only agony and death.”

“It is not a treasure of gold or gems, but one of knowledge, protected from those that would abuse it.”

“Who are you?”

“I am a monk of the Temple of Talon and Quill.”

“I do not know this name.”

Satres shook his head. He doubted that he would get anywhere quickly with trying to persuade this creature with words, so he did the next best thing. He reached out, and allowed his *chi* to shine.

As it glowed along the walls, he felt the tightness in the air pull tighter still, pressing in on him from all sides. His robe felt as if it was filled with nettles, stinging at his flesh, and his beak clamped shut, refusing to open. A pressure filled his nostrils and his ears, and his eyes felt as if there were hands pressing over them, rubbing them, feeling them like some groping blind beggar.

He endured it, feeling the pressure focusing down towards his hand, and then surrounding the golden light. The pressure squeezed it, testing it, but it held true. The pressure withdrew from him and his *chi*, and Satres leaned on the ladder again.

“You carry pain, mortal.”

“...Yes.”

“A toll of pain to pass.”

“How much do you need?”

“A *third*.”

“So little?”

“I am learning. I have ascended half the shaft; I will not chance myself with greed, now, with a loss of control.”

It did not seem to be a bad offer, all things considered. He had grieved, already, and while the pain remained, it did little good save to remind him of what he no longer had. To give it up would be better, in the long term. And considering where he was going, the scent of pain might attract demons from further than he'd like.

He nodded.

“It is agreed.”

“Then hold, little monk.”

The pressure returned, and this time, the nettles turned to needles, and they dug *deep*.

#

Satres reached the bottom of the ladder shortly after that, passing through the zone of control of the demon that had claimed the chute. He doubted that it would be any easier ascending when he found the scroll, but he knew better than to plan that out now. He didn't know anything of this underground place, and it would be foolish to make his exit strategy without knowing more.

Despite that, he felt lighter, lighter than he had since the night of the attack. The weight of pain was no longer so strong as it had been, no longer so all-consuming as it was. He could think without imagining his masters looming in the background, without feeling as much like a failure.

It was still there, and he doubted that there was a demon that could take it from him, but it was more manageable now.

Without light, he could only see in hints of black and red, in silhouettes from the light that danced across the walls before him. His eyes flicked from place to place, taking in the cracks in the walls and the skittering things in the distance, where it sounded like greater creatures than mere imps called these caverns home.

The raven took a deep breath, and stepped forward.

The rock was uneven underfoot, his talons slipping here and there, and an application of *chi* was required to give him the grip to keep moving forward. The resulting light was enough to allow him to see the floor ahead, to avoid the holes in it that seemed to drop into infinity, but little more than that.

As a result, it was hardly a surprise when he almost stumbled upon another demon.

The beast looked up as he approached, and Satres looked into the eyes of an ogre. It was a great beast, almost one and a half times his height while sitting, with gray skin and a multitude of eyes. It looked down at him with a slow huff of breath, rolling a chunk of what looked like meat in its hand. Uncooked...bloody meat...which was probably best not to guess where it came from.

The raven ignored it, looking the ogre in the eyes, before slowly bowing at the waist.

“I apologize for barging into your space,” he said.

“Huh. You talk fancy.”

“I speak as I have been taught.”

“Teacher funny, then.”

The ogre looked at the squelching, nasty bit of ‘meat’ in its hand, and then threw it off into the darkness. It leaned forward, eyes glittering in a way that he was rapidly becoming familiar with. The hunger of demons seemed to be a constant thing, ever-present, ever-consuming.

“What you want?”

“I’m looking for something. Something hidden.”

“No good. Dark hides everything.”

“Yes, but I imagine there are those that hoard. Those that seek and find and hide.”

“Heh. Yes. Little crawlies. Always annoying. And – SKITTERING!”

The ogre brought its fist down, slamming into the stone and breaking something much smaller into little more than ripped flesh and pasty meat. The blood splattered about, some landing on the stone before the raven’s talons, other bits rising higher and almost hitting him in the face.

As the ogre brought its hand up again, the remnants of the latest kill were revealed. There were recognizable bones and organs left, as well as an eye that rolled over slowly to peer at the

darkened ceiling. Satres swallowed as his stomach tried to exit through his throat, and he turned to the ogre once more.

“They are a pest, then.”

“Pest? Yes! Big pest!”

“Do you know where they are?”

“Big nest of skitter-skitters, somewhere,” the ogre said, gesturing with one hand. “You want know, you give something.”

“Pain?”

“Heh, pain good. Or guilt.”

“...”

“You want know, you give.”

“If you want it, why aren’t you just taking it?”

“Cause...bad.”

“...Can you explain?”

“No got words,” the ogre said, shrugging. “Just bad.”

Satres shook his head, glancing around him in the darkness. He imagined that there were quite a few more demons around, little ones that were waiting for him to be away from the ogre so that they could strike. This underground chasm felt as if it was crawling with them, and that was the terrifying thing. It felt like they were everywhere, like they could be anywhere, and anything.

The only thing protecting him was an ogre that might be willing to make a deal. Information for pain...if he could decipher what the big demon said. And if he didn’t ask for too much.

“I am going to take a walk...perhaps, if I can’t find it myself, I might return?”

“Will be here.”

“Thank you.”

“Heh...funny man...”

The raven put the ogre behind him, allowing the light from his *chi* to illuminate the corridor. It was uneven stone just like everything else so far, but it was straight and narrow, perhaps no wider than two people could walk abreast. His footsteps echoed back at him, and in the distance, the skitter-skitter continued.

The further he walked, the more attention he paid to the tracks that he left in the stone. The *chi* faded slowly from the rock, but he made sure to push out a bit more, just to keep it glowing for a bit longer. It would be his only method of finding his way back out, and he couldn't afford to get lost down here. He had already found one demon that was completely intangible. There were probably more.

And so, into the darkness he went, searching for one of the hoarders. If anyone would know where the scroll was, they would.

The End