

Ebon Feathers

The promises made seemed so long ago, and the strange encounter in the darkness of the woods almost felt like a whimsical dream. The shadows had been too dark, the forest too comforting, and the eyes... the eyes... so many amethyst eyes...

Hemedes awoke to the cackling laughter of crows. Black feathers danced before his wide eyes, and the flapping of wings filled the room.

He attempted to sit up, but his body would not cooperate. As he flailed his arms, he noticed that long, black feathers caught the flickering candlelight instead of hands and fingers. Panic swelled as he struggled to rise, his dark feet with sharp talons tangled in the bedding.

“Oh, look,” a gravely voice cackled overhead. “The featherless has awoken!”

Raucous laughter filled the room.

What is going on?!

Hemedes lunged upward, wings — yes, they were most definitely wings — flapping, scattering dark feathers. He kicked his slender legs, trying to flip over onto his belly. When did his room become so tall?

“Stop flopping about like a fish, featherless,” the voice said, a dark shape fluttering into view before an enormous black raven appeared over Hemedes. It cocked its head, one purple eye glinting as it peered down at him.

Hemedes almost screamed, but shock strangled his voice.

“Get your feet under you, featherless,” the crow said. “You have always had two legs. Have you forgotten how to use them?”

More laughter echoed from the rafters of the small room. Tiny amethyst eyes winked down at him, spectators in the dark.

Hemedes’ chest ached with each breath he took. His heart was too loud in his ears.

How was he supposed to stand up? These feet weren’t his feet!

The crow sighed down at him, and it sounded agitated.

“Roll over, featherless,” he complained. “And then stand up.”

“My feet are caught!” Hemedes protested.

The crow sighed again, hopping over to snatch at the blanket with his slender beak. He grunted something under his breath as he pulled it off of the poor Imperial’s legs, freeing them.

Hemedes kicked his feet and flapped his wings before flipping onto his belly. He lay there for a moment, catching his breath and trying to still his racing mind.

“You won’t do any good laying down on the job,” the crow told him as he hopped back into view.

“Job?” Hemedes whispered, lifting his head to look up at the crow. He noticed the bird had a small, purple sash around his shoulders, fastened with an amethyst button.

He had seen that button before!

The fey-like man in the woods...

“Nocturnal demands Her trinkets, featherless,” the crow huffed. “You must get up. Up!”

It hadn’t been a dream. None of it had been a dream. It had all been *real*. The deal, the man, the crows... Nocturnal.

Hemedes’ breath stilled in his chest as realization washed over him like a splash of cold water.

“Trinket,” Hemedes whispered, looking up at the crow. “Sir Trinket.”

“Yes, featherless,” the crow scoffed. “That is my name.”

“My name is Hemedes,” Hemedes retorted. “Not ‘featherless.’ Especially not now. I’m a crow! How — why? Why am I a crow?!”

“A gift,” Trinket quipped. “Why must you ask stupid questions? There is too much to do! You must fly. Fly! The Mistress demands Her shiny!”

“Fly?” Hemedes mumbled, finally getting his feet underneath him. “I can’t fly.”

“You can. You’re a crow.”

“Well, yes, I see that I’m a crow. But I can’t fly. I don’t know how.”

“With your wings.”

Hemedes blinked at the crow, his beak half-open. This had to be the strangest conversation he had ever experienced.

“Trinket—”

“Sir Trinket!” the crow snapped.

“Sir Trinket,” Hemedes amended. “I have never flown before. I wasn’t born a crow. I don’t know how to fly with these wings. I can flap them, but that doesn’t mean I’ll actually be able to get off the ground! Or my bed.”

“You must try,” Trinket told him. “The night is young, but there is much to do.”

“Didn’t that man... The Oathhand? Didn’t he tell you that you were supposed to help me?” Hemedes asked.

“I am helping you,” Trinket drawled. “And my advice is for you to fly!”

Hemedes stared at the bird, and then, as if to prove his point, started flapping his wings and hopped off the bed. To his surprise, he didn’t plummet to the ground as he expected, gliding to land on his small dinner table instead.

“You did not actually think your gift would be given in halves, did you?” Trinket cackled, flying over to land next to Hemedes on the table.

“That was — that was incredible!” Hemedes gasped, flapping his wings again, but not hopping off into the air, just in case.

“You have instincts you must learn to hone,” Trinket said, spreading his wings. “But you still have a mortal, featherless brain. No one can teach you how to be a crow. You must learn on your own. The only way is to fly. Fly! Yes, fly!”

Hemedes tried to smirk, but, alas, he had a beak instead of human lips.

“What does Nocturnal want me to steal for Her?” he asked, testing his wings again with a good flap that carried him back to his bed to stand before Trinket.

“Come, I will show you,” Trinket said, hopping off the bed and onto the floor.

“How?” Hem sighed, following the larger crow down. “I don’t have windows in this room.” He blinked and tilted his head at Trinket. “How did you even get in here?”

Trinket cackled and lifted off the ground with a fierce flap of his dark wings. “Silly featherless! Use your little brain!”

Hemedes felt his chest feathers ruffle in agitation at Trinket's condescending nature, but words failed him as he watched the crow dive into a shadow in one of the room's four corners, vanishing from sight.

"How in the...?" Hemedes carefully stepped toward the shadow Trinket disappeared into, tilting his head here and there to get a good look at it.

As he neared the darkness, he realized it looked nothing at all like a shadow should. It had depth, a hollowness. A cool, loamy wind teased the feathers on his face.

"It's a doorway," Hemedes whispered, stunned. "Shadows are doorways."

"Now he sees," Trinket's voice laughed from all around him. "Come, featherless, come inside! Away, away!"

Hemedes hopped forward, excitement tingling along his spine. His tail feathers splayed out behind him as he ducked low to look at the shadow one more time before leaping in.

His cell of a bedroom faded away as darkness enveloped the small, once-Imperial crow. He hung suspended in a dark sky and a sea of silver stars, an aurora of violets and blues weaving tendrils of light across the horizon. Dark forms moved in the sky, wings, feathers, more crows and ravens.

"This way, featherless," Trinket's voice said, and Hemedes finally spotted him a short distance ahead. "You must learn to use the shadows to travel. Remember your ring?"

Hemedes blinked at his right wing, where his ring would have normally resided on his third finger. It was gone, of course. There are no fingers to hold rings in this form.

"Where is it?" Hemedes asked Trinket, disheartened at the perceived loss of such a valuable artifact and gift from his new, dark Lady.

“You wear it,” Trinket said, swooping close and snagging something around Hemedes’ neck.

Hem gasped as the raven’s claws tugged at a black band hanging like a necklace over his chest.

“Oh, I see,” he giggled. “How clever.”

“The darkness is your ally. With your ring, you may pass between shadows at will, both as a naked-skinned mortal, and a glorious, improved crow.”

Hemedes rolled his eyes.

“But be cautious,” Trinket said. “The shadows will devour you if you stay too long and stray too far from the ebon paths. Remember what Lord Oathhand said about it.”

“For all their protection, they will take if you let them. Don’t let them,” Hemedes said, quoting the dark man from the woods, then he looked at Trinket. “Who is he? Lord Oathhand?”

“What a silly question,” Trinket cackled. “Ask another.”

Hemedes sighed. “I was being serious. He said we would probably meet again. Do you think so?”

“Perhaps,” Trinket said, swooping close to snag Hem’s ring necklace and drag him along. “But there is work to do. Work, work!”

Hem choked a little as he was pulled after the crow.

“I’m coming!” he called out.

“Your prize is close to home,” Trinket informed him, leading Hem toward a light in the distance. “Our Lady wishes for you to steal something from your jailor, to prove your loyalty to Her.”

Hem’s heart froze, and he stalled with a fierce flap of his wings.

“What? Steal from Ventros? I — I can’t!”

“You must,” Trinket scoffed. “The Lady demands it. She has given you gifts. You must repay Her and prove your worthiness to be counted among her mortal shinies.”

Hem couldn’t breathe. His muscles began seizing, his mind swimming. He didn’t want to go anywhere *near* his husband. He didn’t think he could.

“No,” Hemedes said, shaking his head as he backpedaled. “No, Sir Trinket, I can’t do that. I can’t. He’ll — he’s a monster.”

Trinket actually seemed to inspect him for a moment, not immediately quipping out some smart-ass remark in response to Hem’s panic.

“Do you think our Lady chooses weak mortals to serve Her?” he asked.

Hem’s breath caught at the question.

“What?”

“You are pathetic and featherless, but you are strong enough that She had Lord Oathhand answer your prayer. You were promised protection. Do you doubt?”

“You doubt me,” Hemedes murmured. “Why should I not doubt myself when everyone else around me does?”

“Because you are weak when you doubt.”

“But you still doubt me.”

“Because you doubt yourself.”

Hemedes pulled his legs and feet closer to his body, as though he could shrink in on himself.

Trinket was right. It hurt. He didn’t feel like he could amount to anything, even with all these gifts. Had Ventros truly broken him down to nothing?

“You need to learn how to be a crow,” Trinket said, drawing him out of his dark, sad thoughts. “You are more than the sniveling featherless from the grove. You are strong. Maybe clever, but it’s too early to judge.”

“I have to be clever if She chose me to be Her Thief,” Hemedes said with a small, inward smile.

Trinket howled with laughter.

“Yes. Yes! Say those things. Maybe they will become true.”

Hemedes tilted his head at Trinket. “Did you doubt yourself when you were still a Squire?”

Trinket didn’t immediately answer. He finally huffed.

“Yes, but that was then. This is now.”

“So, you understand, then. That’s why the Oathhand assigned you to me.”

“Perhaps.”

“Did the other crows treat you... you know? Poorly?”

“I was a squire.”

“So... yes?”

“I no longer like your funny questions. They are not amusing anymore.”

Hemedes smiled in his head again. It was all making sense now. Of all the crows to help and understand him, it was *Trinket*. They were somewhat alike — as alike as a daedric crow and a mortal could be.

“When did you stop doubting yourself?” he dared to ask.

“When I realized it made me weak. As I told you, it is making *you* weak.”

“I’m still afraid of him, Trinket.”

“This will help you. It will be your secret! You will have power. You will have one of his shinies for your own! What fun, what revenge!”

Hemedes finally giggled. “You know, I think you’re right. What does She want me to steal from Ventros?”

“His wedding ring,” Trinket laughed. “You will steal it. Yes. Yes, you will!”

How fitting. It seemed Nocturnal knew exactly how to get Hemedes to steal for Her this first time. He needed the motivation, and now he had it.

Revenge.

He could take back the symbol of his chains, the physical embodiment of his enslavement to his wretched husband.

Wretch. Ventros was the wretch.

“Ventros,” he whispered as the realization seeded within him. “He’s the wretched one. Not me. He hurts me, he abuses me, he doesn’t love me. I… have done nothing wrong.”

“He uses you,” Trinket agreed. “He thinks he has power over you. It’s time to prove him wrong, yes? Prove that you are strong. Prove he is a worm in your talons. Claw his eyes out! Eat his liver!”

Hemedes laughed and shook his head. “I love the sentiment, Trinket, but I don’t know that I could do those things, even if I do hate him. He has a hold of my magic, which means that if he feels pain, so do I. I don’t like pain. The Oathhand was right about that.”

“So you will steal from him,” Trinket chortled. “Secrets are power! Imagine what secrets you can learn if you are close to him, spying from the shadows? And then you can drive him mad! Stealing things from him, important things. You can make him suffer.”

“It sounds cruel,” Hemedes snorted. “But I’m not all that sad about it. All right, Trinket. Let’s go steal that damned wedding ring.”

Hemedes hopped out of the shadows into Ventros’ room, surprised that he and Trinket had come out just above his husband’s bed. What didn’t surprise him was the fact there was a young stableboy sprawled out over the sheets, completely nude and in Ventros’ arms. Hem’s feathers ruffled, and he growled low in his throat as he hunkered down to move around the wooden canopy overhanging the bed to see who it was.

Ventros lay on his back, one arm under his head, his knee bent, shamelessly displaying all of himself. His other arm was around the blonde stableboy, who Hem recognized now as Artan.

“My lord, you were magnificent,” Artan said, snuggling against Ventros’ side. “I don’t know why Hemedes would have rather lived in the servant’s quarters than lie with you every night. He has no taste.”

Hemedes sucked in a sharp breath, his blood boiling and feathers stiffening. No taste? No taste?! He didn’t leave Ventros because he wanted to; he did it because he had no choice! He was banished down there! What’s more, he suffered abuses at the man’s brutal hands! This idiot boy was a fly in a web. He was flirting with fire. Real fire. Fire that burned.

“He doesn’t even try,” Ventros said, his fingers lightly tracing Artan’s shoulder and chasing one of his curls toward his throat. “It’s pathetic, really. He lies there and takes it.”

The most horrible feeling bubbled in Hemedes’ chest at those words. It filled him with an angry heat, his magic coiling within him like a viper. It wanted to lash out, but couldn’t. It would never bite the mage that held it prisoner.

Trinket stepped close to him and leaned over to get a good look at the scene below. He cocked his head to and fro, observing.

Hem's claws dug into the wood, but he wanted to scratch at something else.

"After how he treated you, I don't know why you don't just return him to his brother and let them live with the shame," Artan scoffed, walking his fingers up Ventros' broad chest. "I would make a better husband for you than him. I'm stronger. More flexible. More... *experienced* in the bed chamber."

Hemedes growled again and almost leapt off the canopy, but Trinket put out a wing to stop him.

"Let me go," he hissed at the crow.

Trinket shook his head.

"Trinket if you — "

"Look," Trinket whispered. "Look, there." He pointed with his feathers to the end table.

Hemedes' gaze followed the gesture, and his eyes fell upon the golden wedding band that should have been on Ventros' finger. It lay discarded, like trash.

"What say you, my lord?" Artan chuckled. "Would a ring suit my finger?"

Ventros smirked and reached over to pluck the ring from the end table. He then moved to take Artan's hand.

"I cannot return him," he said. "But I can always marry another. One more agreeable, hmm?"

Artan grinned at him as Ventros started to slip the ring onto his finger.

That was *it*.

Hemedes dove off the canopy, releasing the most infuriated scream he's ever given. It tore out of his throat, making it burn. The burn felt good. What felt better was seeing the surprised looks on Artan and Ventros' faces, and hearing their panicked screams. Hem grabbed the ring, snatching it out of Ventros' hand, and let it slip around his delicate talons like a bracelet.

"Oh, gods, kill it!" Artan wailed, flailing as Hem swooped too close.

Ventros tore out of bed, flinging sheets and bedding. He picked up a vase near the windowsill and threw it, missing Hemedes by mere inches. It shattered against the stone wall, water spilling onto the floor and scattering flower petals around the room.

It made Hemedes laugh. Oh, yes. What fun this was!

"How did it even get in here?!" Artan cried, then screamed again as Trinket swooped down from above, cawing out his laughter. "Gods, there are *two of them!*"

Hemedes cackled with glee as he and Trinket circled the room. He dove toward the shadows, fully intending to vanish with Trinket and their prize, but his companion cried out as something crashed behind them. Hemedes glanced over his shoulder and gasped when he saw Trinket pinned to the floor by a stool.

Trinket screeched and flailed, trying to free himself, but the stool was far too heavy, and Ventros was moving fast.

Hemedes let out a cry as he rushed to protect Trinket, his body a dark mass of feathers and fury. How *dare* that monster treat him like garbage? How *dare* he threaten Trinket? How *dare!*

Hemedes reached out with his talons, scratching at Ventros' face like a wild, unbridled creature. His claws tore into flesh, drawing blood and screams from his husband. He dodged his husband's grabbing hands, his flying fists. He swooped away, then came back again, biting,

clawing, screaming. He hated this man. He hated him and everything he had ever done to him. He was so focused on getting his kicks in that neglected to realize he wasn't feeling any of the pain he thought he should have felt.

I won't let you hurt one more fucking soul, you bastard!

Ventros stumbled back, pitching his arms into the air in one last bid to get Hemedes away from him. His leg caught on the stool and he cried out as he crashed onto the floor.

Trinket staggered to his feet, then lifted his left one off the ground with a hiss of pain.

Hemedes tucked his wings to dive down to Trinket, but a pillow flew toward him from the bed, striking him to the floor. He gasped, winded and stunned, then tried to find his footing. Where was Ventros? Where was Trinket?

A blanket fell over him, and then he was tumbling around in the bedding as it hoisted into the air.

“I caught one!” Artan announced, and the blanket swung.

“Good,” Ventros growled before the blanket parted and his hand reached in to grab Hemedes.

Hem squawked and kicked his feet, tried to flap his wings, tried to bite and peck. He wheezed as Ventros’ grip tightened around his body.

“I’ll wring your fucking neck,” Ventros rumbled down at him. “And then I’ll roast you for supper.”

Hem squirmed, but he couldn’t get loose. He couldn’t see Trinket. Was he going to die like this, without having proven his worth to Nocturnal? What would happen to his soul then? Would She even want it?

A horrible cry filled the room and Trinket came into view, wings bashing and beating as he clawed and pecked at Ventros' face.

Hemedes fell as his husband dropped him. He tumbled across the floor, fighting to get back onto his feet. He heard movement on the bed and knew Artan was coming for him. They had to get out of here.

Air ruffled his feathers as he took to the wing, grabbing fingers narrowly missing his tail.

Trinket cried out at him, and Hem watched the crow fly toward a dark shadow under the bed.

Hemedes drew in his wings and dropped after him, feeling more hands brush at his feathers as they missed him. The screams and chaos fell away as Hem fell into darkness.

He gasped as his wings beat the air, desperate to stay aloft.

“Trinket!” he cried, not immediately seeing the other crow. “Trinket! Sir Trinket!”

“Here, featherless!” Trinket cawed, swooping into view. “This way, come, come!”

Hemedes rushed after him, his body nearly spent. His claws felt crusty with blood, and his bones ached. He looked down and saw the pilfered ring still neatly wrapped around his foot. He nearly laughed, but he was too tired, and he hardly had any breath left in him to do so.

Trinket exited the darkness through another patch of light, and Hem followed. They came out in Hemedes' room, tumbling onto his bed. Hem collapsed, panting and trembling. The adrenaline had started wearing off and he was definitely feeling the bruising under his feathers. He would pay for the chance at ripping open Ventros' smug face.

Worth it.

Hem looked up to see Trinket hobbling his way, lifting his foot high in the air.

“Trinket,” Hem gasped. “You’re hurt!”

“A wound that is swoon-worthy when retold to the courtly ladies,” Trinket boasted. “Yes, tales of our battle will be immortalized in song and verse! Sung and recited in every dark hall!”

Hemedes chuckled softly and forced himself to his feet. “Is it broken? Your foot?”

Trinket brought his foot up to inspect it, wiggling his toes. He winced and settled on the blanket.

“That’s a yes,” Hem sighed, kicking the ring off his own foot. “Let me help you.”

“Yes, it is a squire’s duty to see to his knight,” Trinket said, likely swallowing pride with expectation instead.

Hem rolled his eyes and hopped away, finding something he could bind Trinket’s foot with. He tore a few strips off his old rag of a blanket and returned to bind Trinket’s leg. It was harder in this form that he anticipated. He didn’t have hands to work with, and he wasn’t used to working with feet.

Trinket squawked at him as he fumbled with the makeshift bandage and pulled his foot too hard.

“Sorry!” Hem yelped. “All right, I just need practice!”

Eventually, Trinket’s leg was properly bandaged and the pair of them sat on the blanket in a long, heavy silence.

The night’s events had seared themselves into Hem’s memory. What he saw, what he heard, sparked a new kindle of rage in him. Ventros had taken someone else to bed, and not just anyone, but a servant! That ungrateful, greasy snake was grooming another boy into his sheets. He didn’t know what made him more ill, his husband’s antics, or Artan’s willingness. As he lay there, fighting waves of nausea at imagining the pair of them in bed together, another thought crossed his mind.

He hadn't felt pain while attacking Ventros. He should have felt it all, but he hadn't.

He squinted at the bed.

How was that even possible? It made him think back to other times pain should have been shared. Like when Ventros was beating on him, or raping him in their marriage bed. Had Ventros learned to turn the Bond off, or make it one-way? And if so, how had Hem not felt any of the pain he inflicted on his husband that night? Was it the blessing of Nocturnal? The ring around his neck? Was being a crow disrupting it all somehow? He had so many unanswered questions.

Hem closed his eyes and then opened them to peer at Trinket. He needed a distraction.

"You called me your squire," he said quietly.

Trinket fluffed his feathers. "That is what you are."

Hem couldn't outwardly smile, but he certainly did inside.

"Even though I'm a featherless?"

"You were strong and brave," Trinket said. "You helped me escape the monster. You are worthy of being my squire."

Hemedes felt a strange sense of pride he hadn't expected at those words. A squire, huh? To a crow? What would that be like?

"But you will change back at dawn," Trinket informed him as he slowly stood. "You have completed your task, and our Lady will be most pleased. You have done well. I must roost, but I will return."

"When?" Hem asked.

"Soon. You are a squire now! I will bring you my shinies to clean!"

Hemedes laughed as Trinket took to the air and vanished into the pits of a dark shadow.

He shook his head and looked at the gold ring winking in the light of his lone bedside candle.

While made of precious metal, it might as well have been worthless. The ring wasn't a symbol of love, it was a symbol of oppression. Abuse. Hate.

Hem flexed his toes and looked down at the blood on them.

He growled low.

He had made Ventros bleed. Had made him afraid.

Good.

It wouldn't be the last time, if he could help it. The Oathhand and Trinket were right. He wasn't weak. Doubt made him weak. He wouldn't doubt again.

He would make Ventros fear him, even if his husband didn't know it was him doing it.

As he settled down to sleep, he gave a determined sigh.

He had worth, and he'd fight to prove it.