

**July, 6031 A.S.**

“When I see that Whisperling Master I’m going to wring her skinny little neck like the chicken she is.” Quin flicked his tail back and forth as he made his way up the stairs that connected the tower to the rest of the far-too-opulent Alliance headquarters. “She can’t even send official messages without being as vague as possible? Do all Whisperlings have to be insufferable, or is that just the trait of every Whisperling I happen to meet?”

“Quin.” Lightsteeler’s walk turned into a semi-jog as Quin picked up his pace, her annoyance plain. “You might want to shut up.”

“Why? Look, is it too much to ask for a letter that says the time, date, and reason for summoning, rather than-” He held up a paper in his talon, a small line of fanciful scrawl dancing on its edge with a taped leaf just below the dried ink. “‘Come to the Whisperling tower tomorrow ;)’ - with a random leaf haphazardly attached by some little kid that just discovered the craft supply closet? I couldn’t tell if this was a letter from a lover that got the wrong room address or some sort of strange attempt to lure me into the Whisperling tower where I’m sure I’d be beaten up by backstabbing emo criminal-”

“Quin.” Lightsteeler’s patience was beginning to run thin. “Look at the leaf. See anything *interesting* about it?”

Quin looked down and then back up with a tight-lipped blank-faced stare. “It’s a leaf.”

“Yes. What else.”

“It’s green.” Quin peeled off the tape and flicked the leaf in Lightsteeler’s direction - to which the leaf made it halfway and then floated pitifully downwards. “What else do you want me to say exactly? That this letter was clearly crafted by a two-year-old?”

“Alas, my artistic talents end where my scales do.” Cypress was standing at the top of the stairs as the trainee and mentor pair rounded the corner, her grey and white scales swirling in time with the rays of light that bounced to-and-fro outside the spire’s window. “Why don’t you two come in? You’re a little late, but I’m sure it’s definitely not because you couldn’t identify a cypress leaf, right Harlequin?”

Quin stood still for only a moment, surprise quickly morphing into an unapologetic frown. “I stand by what I said.”

“I’m sure you do.” Cypress grinned one of those stupid types of grins that said a person knew more than they were letting on - just the sort of thing that put Quin on edge. “Feel free to enter. And Lightsteeler? Nice work.”

As Cypress passed through the doors to her study, Quin glanced at his apprentice, rolling his eyes at just how much the dragon was beaming from ear-to-ear. Lightsteeler noticed his little movement and couldn't help but flick her tongue out at him - Quin was a very direct mentor, rarely administering compliments, but here she was, receiving them from an Alliance Master of all things.

Lightsteeler walked into the study, Quin following just behind. The first thing he noticed was the excessive amount of plants lining the room. They were on reasonable places, like the corner of her desk, windowsills, and various ledges around. But they were also very *unreasonable* places, like the ground. Covering it. Covering the ground to the point where there was only a small path between leaves. There were vines on entire walls, there were trees poking out of open-air windows, there were plants inching to claim a space at the singularly open table among the mess of green. And while there were other things about - like beautiful pieces of stained glass, an entire wardrobe of various clothing accessories, and a whole-ass group of dragons sitting at previously mentioned table, Quin was focusing in on the most obvious note.

"So is this like, an obsession? Do you need an intervention or something?"

"Quin!" Lightsteeler hissed between her teeth, nudging him in the side, to which Quin only gave her an incredulous look in return. Was he wrong? No - he thought to himself - he was completely fucking right. This was on the level of insanity, just as he would expect from the Whisperling Master herself.

"You know, a few people have tried, but it never really got anywhere." Cypress led them through the maze, stopping at the head of the long and nearly-overtaken table in the center of the room.

"I can see that," Quin mumbled, his other thoughts fading away as he took in the other dragons waiting patiently in the room.

*Fuck his entire fucking life.*

Swagger, the tiny little asshole staring at him with those beady little eyes. Although Quin registered that there were others - a very gold looking Hivewing-hybrid, an older looking Mudwing (Aluma, he thought he remembered her name being, a fellow Shieldite), and a much-older looking Mudwing-hybrid (The librarian, right? Her name was something... chicken related) - he was staring at the one he actually knew, the one he rather preferred *not* knowing.

"Make yourself comfortable," Cypress said, motioning to the single open seat, Lightsteeler having already found a spot. Quin, shaking himself out of his aggravation, sat on one of the open pillows beside the wooden table, nodding his head to the rest of the group, but not bothering to make any introductions. If they didn't already know about him - then they didn't matter, that was that.

Besides, he assumed Miss Whisperling herself would likely lead the whole introduction routine. Because that's the sort of thing the Masters did - as annoying as it was.

“Alright everyone, as you were each told in your summonings, we’ve finally gathered enough information about the-”

“What’s with the grandma?” Swagger interrupted, his eyes trained on the chicken dragon.

“-Clearsight Cult... Swagger, do I need to have you removed from the table?”

“No.” Swagger looked back down at his talons. Clearly bored.

“What the fuck do you mean ‘as you were each told in your summonings?’” Quin mimicked the higher pitch in her voice, overdoing the Master’s accent as best he could. “You gave me a *leaf*.”

“Can we please get back to the topic? I’m just- I’m a little confused, and I’d like to figure out what we’re supposed to do next.” The older but not-so-old Mudwing spoke up - Aluma, Quin reminded himself - and Quin shot her a small glare in return. He wanted answers from the stupid Master, but it seemed all he was getting was- There! Cypress just fucking winked at him. *Winked*.

“So is it gonna be a babysitting sort of thing, but we’re in a senior home, and instead of little babies it’s old ladies?” Swagger spoke up again, flicking his tongue out as he looked at the two dragons of Mudwing descent.

“Be polite,” Cypress said, speaking as though she were disciplining a child. She then turned to look at the rest of the group, sending an apologetic glance toward Aluma and Chicken; although Chicken seemed to be completely content, smiling in a grossly-endearing manner toward her very own bully.

“Our primary objective is to take out the leaders of the Cult, and thanks to Sovereign here-” Cypress gestured to the overly-gold dragon who gave a small nod and wave, “We now know who they are. We also know where their hideout is, and *you*-” She gestured at the gathered dragons. “Are going to meet up with the first group in the Scorpion Den. There’s a small, but very frequented tarven just a mile south of their hideout. Once you get into contact, formulate a plan from there. You can go as small teams or work together as a group - it’s not my decision - but see to it that the mission is successful. And *do not* kill *anyone* besides the cult leaders. Not the cultists, not any potential bystanders, nobody besides the cult leaders. Is that clear?” Cypress looked toward Swagger first, then Quin - knowing both might go against her wishes for very different reasons.

“Not really,” Quin said, frowning. “It’s a cult. It’s not like the cultists aren’t taking part in the crime too. Are we just blaming it all on the leaders and letting the rest of the criminals get off scot-free?”

“Some of them are likely to be brainwashed, darling; that’s not really their fault, is it?” Chicken finally spoke up, and it was a whole lot of nothing.

“Yes it is?” Quin raised an eyebrow. “Weak-willed is all I’m hearing. And that’s their own damn fault. Besides, brainwashing or not - it doesn’t excuse their actions. They’re letting all this shit happen.”

Cypress sighed, interrupting the exchange. "Look. This is what's been voted on by the *entire* Alliance, regardless of your individual opinions on the matter."

"Bull-fucking-shit," Quin murmured underneath his breath, wishing to Clearlight herself that he could be back in his position as a general right about now - he'd be able to do whatever he wanted with those damn cultists.

"Is there anything we should be worried about as we make our way into the lair?" Lightsteeler spoke up, her voice rather soft. Quin looked over at her, his apprentice appearing to shrink into herself as everyone's attention shifted over to her.

He knew what this was - this behavior of hers - and although he didn't really understand it, he spoke up to bring everyone's eyes back towards him. "There's gotta be a few traps, right?"

"There are," Sovereign said, reaching out a talon as Cypress handed him a large piece of rolled up parchment. He unrolled it and proceeded to point out a few locations on the map, describing the various booby-traps that were set up. "Those are all that I remember, and they may have added more since I left, so stay aware as you make your way through the lair."

"Can we leave now?" Swagger looked over to Cypress as he leaned back, acting as though this was some sort of painful timeout in a whole list of annoyances forced on him by the Alliance.

Cypress pinched the bridge of her nose. "Not quite. You'll be traveling there in groups of three so as to not draw attention to yourselves. Hen-" Ah, that was Chicken's name "-Aluma, and Sovereign, you're to make your way to the tavern together."

"No WAY you're making me go with that asshole-"

"You've got to be kidding-"

Swagger and Harlequin began speaking in conjunction with one another - the individual words lost, but their shared meaning all too clear.

"As you surmised - yes. Lightsteeler, Harlequin, Swagger, you'll be the other group." Cypress dipped her head to the much better behaved group of three. "You're dismissed. Prepare what you need and make your way to the Sand Kingdom." She turned back to the grumbling young adults with a glint in her eyes. "A little reminder? Behave yourselves. Should I hear anything about the murder of cultists beside the leaders-"

"Wait, let me guess." Quin held his talon up sarcastically. "You'll blunt my claws for a little while?" He shifted. "Ooo, maybe I'll go on a short little probation in a tower before being freed to go frolic wherever I so choose." He dropped his lilting tone and frowned. "The Alliance is notoriously bad when it comes to punishments, I don't think I'd mind getting a slap on the wrist if I get to do the *right* thing, which is taking out more cultists than you people want."

"I'm sure we could come up with something you'd hate, Quin." Where Cypress had been light with all previous interactions, the twist in her expression and the darkness of her tone suggested she was *serious*.

"Sorry about my mentor, Master Cypress," Lightsteeler spoke up, her mouth twitching upwards in a sheepish - and mildly embarrassed - smile. "I'll keep a watch on him."

'*Traitor*,' Quin mouthed, but shut up.

"Now that we're all squared away, you three are dismissed. Be sure to say your goodbyes - there's still a lot of uncertainty about what's in the lair, and it is, without a doubt, a dangerous mission. So Quin?" The hybrid looked back over his shoulder as he made his way out of the plant-infested room. "Make sure your apprentice is your highest priority."

Cypress - no doubt - had some sort of file on him. He knew the Masters knew more about him than he'd like to admit, but to have his personality scrawled down like that? Even those negative traits he... well, it wasn't like he kept them a secret, so he supposed it made sense that Cypress knew he was all about self-preservation. Still, she likely didn't know that Lightsteeler had grown on him, a lot. Even though he was hard on her - through training or otherwise - he counted her among the few he wanted to protect and care for. He'd make absolutely sure she wouldn't be harmed during the mission - Hell, Moonwave would kill him if anything happened anyway.

"Toodaloo!" Quin heard Cypress say as she shut the door behind the three leaving dragons - likely going back to tending her plants or some shit.

"So-"

"Shut up," Swagger interrupted Lightsteeler as soon as she opened her mouth, his creepy little eyes staring up at Harlequin. "Neither of us wants to deal with the mission together, so as soon as we leave Mezzo, we split up. Got it?"

"As delightful as that would be," Quin began, "We've got our mission directives, and I know you don't want to go and piss off Master Cypress, right?" He said the last word with pointed venom, having noticed the way Swagger was moving when Cypress mentioned punishment for doing the "wrong" thing. "Besides, once we get to the tavern, it'll be a free-for-all. I'm sure we can say 'bye-bye' without issue."

"Fine," Swagger spat, turning tail and heading down the stairs of the Whisperling tower. "We'll meet at the docks in two hours."

Quin didn't bother to reply, looking back over to Lightsteeler who was gritting her teeth. "I think I know what you mean. About Swagger."

"Right?" Quin snorted. "Insufferable! Just like the rest of the Whisperlings I meet."

“You’re not much better, Quin,” Lightsteeler joked with a laugh and an elbow to her mentor’s side, to which he grumbled and pushed her away with his talon.

“Get going, brat.” He watched as she descended the stairs. “And remember to bring lots of water! The Sand Kingdom is hot as fuck.”

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“It’s so hot,” Lightsteeler drawled, her stature becoming smaller by the second. She looked like she was melting - literally - sweat droplets rolling off of her in a waterfall of salt. They were about a mile out from the Scorpion Den, and the Sea-hybrid was enjoying exactly 0% of it.

Swagger, while doing marginally better, didn’t seem particularly pleased about their current situation. He looked like he regarded the entire desert as a speck of dust beneath his far superior rainforest-born talon. And the sand - if looks could kill, all of that sand would’ve shriveled up and dissipated a long time ago.

Quin, on the other hand, was enjoying exactly 99% of it. The 1% being the huffy little criminal that was journeying with their group.

He loved the heat, and despite Phaedra promptly dismantling everything he had worked towards, he loved the Sand Kingdom too. It was his home, and that would never change. He was also rather peppy about finally getting to take part in action again. He had packed what he needed; his sword. He had also grabbed a canteen of water - not for himself, but rather for Lightsteeler if she happened to run out. Which- He looked over at his apprentice who was currently chugging her own bottle - yeah, bringing extra had been a good idea.

As he left, he had popped by Solstice's room and waved goodbye. Where she had initially been an acquaintance thanks to their shared friend (or, lover in Quin’s case), Solstice was becoming more of a friend as each day passed. She had wished him luck while calling him a loser at the same time - he supposed that meant good things in Solstice-ese. He had also made his way to Moonwave’s room - now more of their own shared space - and left her a small note when he saw she wasn’t there. He wished he had gotten to actually say goodbye, given her a kiss or-

“Can you shut your stupid lovesick thoughts up?” Swagger groaned, shaking his head as though he were knocking all of the words out of his brain. “You’re so unbearably loud when you think.”

“Aw. Jealous?” Quin shot back before nodding just ahead of them. “We’re almost to the entrance. Get ready to follow my lead.”

“Your lead?” Swagger said incredulously. “Sure, I’d be happy to rest the success of the mission entirely on the dragon that can’t tell leaf from leaf.”

“Oh buzz off.” Quin was absolutely certain that Swagger was keeping note of everything he was thinking. The little bastard, for all of his irritability and unassuming looks, was quite the skilled criminal. Clever and silver-tongued, very good when it came to matters of information-gathering - it all culminated into Swagger being a tiny-statured sonofabitch. “How big is your mental file on me now?”

“Oh, huge. I’ve got a whole page that’s titled ‘Menial Mistakes Made Before Masters.’ With a bit of alliteration to make it interesting.”

“Fascinating,” Quin said, not fascinated at all. “We’ll take a vote, then. Whoever wants Harlequin to be the leader, raise your talon.”

He and Lightsteeler raised their talons.

“With a vote of two to one, Harlequin wins,” Quin said, shooting Swagger a shit-eating grin and trotting forward, spotting the entrance just ahead.

There were two strangely familiar thugs blocking off the path, one holding an outrageously large meat-cleaver, the other brandishing his tail like it was some sort of weapon - and, well, with the stinger it kinda was.

“Oh no-” Swagger began as soon as he spotted the thugs.

“Oh yes-” Quin replied with an even wider grin. “Alright, Light, this is your first test. Get ready to play along.”

“Hey there y’all!” Quin waved one of his right wings as the trio approached. “You remember me?”

One thug looked over at his partner, the two squinting for a moment, before the one with the cleaver nodded, pointing. “Oh right! The family man! We thought it was a bit strange for you to bring your youngins into the city but- Oh would you look at that.” The thug leaned down, staring at Swagger and Light. “Guess you didn’t learn much, bringin’ kids through here again.”

“Oh, the visit wasn’t so bad last time.” Quin waved the comment away.

“Well it’s kinda funny ‘cause,” One thug began, the other one finishing the rest of his partner’s thought, “Oh yeah- we actually saw your wife pass through here a bit ago - she had another woman on her arm...” The meat-cleaver dragon trailed off. “Oh... marriage problems?”

*Oh this is perfect.* Quin nodded his head with a sad smile. “Unfortunately, yes. She’s been having a number of-” he leaned forward and whispered to the guards with a softer tone “-*affairs* behind my back. Toadspit here,” he said in a louder tone, reaching out his talon to lightly touch Swagger’s face, “misses his mother quite a bit, so I’ve come to find her.”

“Ohhh, don’t you worry kid, I’m sure she’d doin’ just fine-” The tail-brandisher looked up and over at Lightsteeler. “This one doesn’t really look much like you though.”

“I’m, uh,” Lightsteeler hesitated, her voice catching for only a moment before she pushed onwards. “I’m his step-daughter actually.”

“From one of her mother’s previous relationships,” Quin said, shaking his head sadly before motioning his two ‘children’ forward. “I should’ve known better,” he whispered to mear-cleaver before handing over the silver toll to tail-brandisher. “That should settle it.”

“Right-o. Head on through,” Meat-cleaver said, lightly patting “Toadspit’s” head as he passed by. “Don’t worry kid, your pa’s got it handled.”

“Mhm,” Swagger replied with a strained smile, flicking his tail back and forth as they entered the Scorpion Den. As soon as they were out of earshot, Swagger reached up - Quin would definitely say he had to get on his tippy-toes - to latch onto Quin’s ear and pull him down with a snarl. “If you call me Toadspit one more time-”

“Should I tell Moonwave you’ve found another lover or what?” Lightsteeler said impatiently, nodding her head in the direction of the meet-up tavern. “Come on, we need to meet up with the rest of the group.”

“She really takes after you, huh?” Swagger grumbled, setting back onto the sand. “What have you been training her in, exactly? Sarcasm?”

“Ab-so-lute-ly not,” Quin chuckled, following after his apprentice with a smile.

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The tavern was bustling - strange, for this time of day. And what was even stranger was the amount of Alliance dragons squeezed into the building. Had anyone - *anyone* - thought that maybe, just maybe, the mission should be done with a few fewer dragons - those of a more advanced sort? He swore he could see trainees in the mix - and while Lightsteeler could certainly hold her own (she was *his* apprentice after all), he wasn’t sure about the rest.

“See you never,” Swagger hissed, flicking out his tongue, before disappearing into the throng of bodies.

Quin didn’t bother replying, instead nudging Lightsteeler towards the bar. Quin was the observant type, and with that detail-oriented scope of the tavern, he immediately spotted just who he needed to speak to - not that it was particularly hard given the very noticeable gold. “Sovereign!” Quin waved with a grin. “I brought my sister-in-law along so you could finally meet her.” Quin pulled out a seat for Lightsteeler and he took a spot beside her. “Now what was that about party plans? How do we want to do this so that it stays a ‘surprise?’”



“Well,” Sovereign began, leaning forward. “While our birthday boy probably has some idea that something’s about to happen soon, he’s still right where we want him.” The hybrid looked up and gave a polite smile to the bartender who got Quin’s order before continuing. “So far we’ve got groups going there one at a time so that they don’t draw any attention to themselves. We want it to be a surprise party after all.” He paused as Quin took a drink of his beer. “Some people are already in his house, setting up. You should be free to help out within the hour.”

“Wonderful!” Quin said, leaning back to look at the rest of the tavern attendees. “Well I better talk to our fellow conspirators, aye?” He grabbed his beer and made his way to a seat at an open table that contained not just one, not just two, not even three, but *four* fellow Uno players. There was another dragon there too, but based on the way he was sitting close to Spire, he assumed it had to be the Icewing’s apprentice.

“Would you look at that,” Quin said as he slid into the open spot, “All of us here, gathered to celebrate our very good friend. What a joyous occasion!” He grinned. “I feel like this calls for a game of Uno, right?”

“Harlequin,” Spire spoke up, inclining his head. Everest made a rumbling sort of noise, Auriga smiled cheerfully, and Dingo seemed a bit awkward as she shifted about. There was also the pale trainee who glanced up and then down. He seemed off - nervous but not in the sense that he was meeting more dragons. No, there was some sort of *fear* hidden in his mannerisms. A curiosity, but Quin didn’t bother asking about it.

“While I’d love to take you up on that offer, I’m afraid it’s about time for me to buy the cake,” Auriga said in a lilting tone as she moved away from the table. “A few of us are solo-attendants after all. I think your small friend from earlier is probably choosing the same path as me.”

“Probably,” Quin snorted before turning back to the rest of the group. “Who wants to be dealt in?”

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The mansion was just ahead, its golden sandstone sides gleaming in the glow of afternoon light. Quin was slightly hunkered down, as best he could be, not that he really enjoyed the thought of having to slink around like a rat. He knew this mission wasn’t built for the likes of him. Not this first part at least - the second part, sure. He could slice and dice just about anyone up - but the slinking and slunking? Nah.

He felt somewhat guilty as he looked over at Lightsteeler. He was her mentor, and a mentor was supposed to help create well-rounded members of the Alliance. Yet, here he was, leading her down the exact same path as himself; he hadn’t given her any help when it came to stealth. In fact, he’d done the opposite - encouraging head-on fighting whenever possible. That was good most of the time, and it was definitely a superior method to the Whisperling way, but still...

He wished he could waltz right in and fight his way through, but if there was something he had besides his strength, it was his observational skills and knowledge about battle tactics. Quin knew It would be stupid to have every alliance member charge through the lair if the goal was only to kill the leaders.

“Are you ready?” Quin asked, nudging Lightsteeler with his two left wings. “How do you want to do this?”

“You’re asking me?” Light replied, flicking her ears upwards in surprise. “Aren’t you like, good at planning these sorts of things? Why have me do it?”

“Practice,” Quin replied. “Look, if anything happens, I can take over. No worries. But field work is extremely different from notes and books and charts and maps. The experience you get here will be invaluable.”

Lightsteeler hummed a moment before nodding. “Okay. Alright. Give me a minute then.”

Quin nodded and leaned against one of the nearby buildings, interrupting Light’s concentration for only a moment when he passed her his canteen of water. “Don’t let the heat get your brain all muddled either.”

“I gooottt it,” Lightsteeler replied, exasperated, but thankful as she took the canteen, drank some of the water, and poured the rest of it on her face. “You see the entrances on the western side?” Quin peered over to where she was pointing. “Since it’s backed up against the wall of the Scorpion Den, there aren’t any guards. I assume they figure that they’ll be able to spot anyone heading to the back entrance from the southern, eastern, and northern doors.”

“Right. And they aren’t wrong about that.”

“No,” Lightsteeler said, affirming his words, “But, they have a routine. I’ve been counting the minutes and...” She paused as a deceptively normal-looking dragon turned to head inside the southern door. “Look! Now.”

The dragon was still beside the entrance, but their back was turned toward Lightsteeler and Quin who were hidden in the shadow of a neighboring building. Their head was dipped low - praying, perhaps?

“It seems to happen every-”

“Go then!” Quin pushed Lightsteeler forward with his talon - his shove a little more forceful than it needed to be. She let out a small peep before quickly scuttling toward the mansion, dipping into shadows cast by nearby buildings. Quin followed closely, and in the span of thirty stressful seconds, they passed between the western doors.

As soon as they established that nobody was around, Lightsteeler shot him a pointed glare. "What was *that*?"

"Remember what I said about field work? You don't have time to ponder every option. Sometimes you only have a split second to make a decision and go with it. Experience," Quin tapped the side of his head, "Now come on - let's find a passage to the lair."

That wasn't particularly hard. There were plenty of secret entrances about. Quin let Lightsteeler call out the majority, and for those she missed, he'd point them out to her. And as all of them were so immediately noticeable, it was only a matter of which one they chose; In the end, that came down to which choice would be the most entertaining.

Quin pointed to the suspiciously clean fireplace, Lightsteeler motioned to the large tapestry of Clearlight, and the two of them had a brief rock-paper-scissors bout to see who'd get the final choice. Light won, and the two pushed past the very-poor quality fabric only to end up in a rather dim and dreary hallway.

It was all black marble - cold, unfeeling - and as there was only the occasional torch to light the way, Quin could see why all the cult leaders turned out to be crazy bastards. Who could live like this? Locked away in the darkness every day?

He looked to his side, his apprentice strangely quiet as they made their way forward, both crouching as they did so. He had known the hybrid long enough to realize that she had... problems when it came to dark places. But it was even more clear in the lair. She was tense, jumpy even. "Light."

She whipped her head around, staring at him with wide eyes.

"It's gonna be just fine. And if you happen to mess up, don't worry about it - I'll just beat your ass up during training as recompense, yeah?"

Light snorted, a few of her muscles relaxing. "I'm sure you will, Quin."

The two quieted down after that, making their way into the main room before having to quickly duck behind two bookshelves as a pair of cultists passed by - discussing... something something Clearlight something something. Quin didn't really give a fuck, instead he rather wished he could kill them too - his talons itching to dig into their scales and-

"Quin, your emotions... can you tamp them down a little?" Lightsteeler whispered as the two cultists rounded the bend.

Quin sighed and nodded, quelling them as best he could. "Sorry," he murmured, "Now, which path do you want to take next? Do you remember the map?"

“Not really, but I don’t think it matters too much. They all head the same direction. It’s just a matter of which one will be easier, and which one happens to have our target.” She squinted. “I feel like it was the center one that had the most direct path, but that also means we’ll likely run into more of the ‘innocent’ cultist types. So it’s probably best to choose something else.”

Quin nodded. “Lead the way.”

Lightsteeler chose the path just to the right of the center hallway. And, at first, everything seemed just fine. There weren’t any traps, not yet, and there weren’t any signs of any cultists about- Quin knew that wouldn’t last though, so he kept his eyes trained, noticing just a minute after that there was... some sort of vent system in the high ceiling. “Hey Light-” He cut himself off. Of course she wouldn’t want to go into that dark cramped space alone. No. He wasn’t going to even mention it. But then, something else, just ahead. “Wait! Wait-” He held out a talon, pausing just before a series of patterned tiles. “Let’s maybe not get impaled by darts, why don’t we?”

Lightsteeler nearly screeched to a stop, hesitating just at the edge.

“Let me take the lead on this one, okay?”

His apprentice nodded, watching as he leaned down and looked at the tiles with the most scratch-marks from dragon talons. That one there... he stepped. Nothing happened. And then it had to be that one over on that side. He took another step. And once again he wasn’t impaled by darts. It was a slow pace, but he made it to the other side, turning to watch as Light followed in his footsteps. She made it to his side, a little more slowly since she had to check with him again to make sure certain tiles were safe, but without any little darts piercing her scales.

“Alright, good, and now we-”

“Who are you?” A voice that was most definitely not Harlequin’s or Lightsteeler’s spoke up from a shadowy corner in the distance.

*Fuckity fuck.*

Quin turned, slowly, facing the dark Nightwing with a glare.

Well, he was noticed, and that meant he had a very very easy excuse to do some murder in the name of justice, but Lightsteeler was there and-

Oh, *right*. There was another way.

“How *dare* you,” Quin flicked his tongue out, stepping forward with a few firm click-clacks of his talons on the marble floor. “I should complain to the head about this, but seeing as you’re just a whimpering little underling that knows nothing- Ah,” Quin waved his talon in dismissal, “Perhaps this will remind you that there are other reasons dragons come down here - not everyone seeks to lead

menial little lives like you.” He reached down to his side and pulled out a purse full of coins - *his own fucking coins* - and shook it.

The Nightwing shifted, flinching back slightly as Quin advanced on them. But they still seemed firm in their desire to know exactly *who*-

“Syndicate,” Quin hissed, heat building up in his throat (he couldn’t actually breath a flame worth shit, but the teardrop-less Nightwing didn’t need to know that) as he leaned forward, right next to the cultist’s left ear. “You should know that, at the very least.”

The Nightwing’s eyes widened and they quickly dipped their head. “Oh! Oh, Clearsight curse me where I stand! I’m deeply ashamed, I hadn’t realized-”

“If this is the quality of dragons your *organization* fosters,” he spat the word, “then perhaps the Seven Sands should look elsewhere.”

“Oh no sir! Would you like me to lead you to our great leader? I’m sure he’ll prove to you just how worthy we are of your patronage.”

“No,” Quin sneered, looking down at the nightwing in distaste. “Myself and my assistant will take it from here - we’ve seen quite enough of you.”

The Nightwing swallowed nervously and dipped their head, moving past the two and into the pitch-black hallway the pair had just come from. Once their footsteps faded - a few irregular paces due to the booby-trapped tiles - Lightsteeler rushed to Quin’s side with a multitude of questions in her eyes.

“The Seven Sands Syndicate, it’s a gang of rich pompous-” Quin waved the thought away, ‘Look, it doesn’t really matter, I just came up with a reasonable guess on who the cult might be interacting with and I’m damn lucky it worked out. Let’s keep going. Haven’t seen that Notongue asshole yet”

The two continued past a few traps here and there, Lightsteeler pausing beside one of the doors in response to one of her empathetic Nightwing pulls. It sent a shot of anxiety through Lightsteeler herself; after that, Quin was quick to keep them moving. No more holdups, no more enemy encounters if he could help it, he was definitely *not* going to lead them down the path that had screams echoing throughout its length.

...Unless that’s where Notongue was - and that meant he was rather obligated to check it out.

“Shiiiiittt,” Quin hissed under his breath and then motioned Lightsteeler to follow behind him, down, down, down the hallway. And there, standing just before the cell-

Well, that wasn’t his initial target, but plans change, and he was about fucking ready to sink his teeth into one of the cult leaders. *Any* of the cult leaders.

And there was *the* cult leader. Back turned. Just enough for Quin to... “You stay here. Back me up only - *and I mean only* - if I need it. You think it’s too dangerous? Get the fuck out.” He whispered to Lightsteeler and then grabbed the hilt of his sword, preparing to move forward to attack Blackfang himself.

**The Clearsight Sisters’ Legacy: Part One | End**