It was late at night. The kind of time when there weren't too many people around. Excursions such as this worked best when there were no disruptions. No witnesses. That was what Esamo said, anyway, and it really didn't help that he said it with a slight menace in his voice, his eyes glinting in the darkness as his fingers trailed over the hilt of his dagger.

Aniss wanted to believe his friend would never actually *do* anything to a witness, because… well, escalating things just made it worse. Still, not getting caught was better. Sneaking onto the sands at night, so they could get a closer look at the eggs, was what diplomatic incidents were made of. Very important people, Aniss' Lord Holder father among them, would be utterly scandalised.

"Are you sure this is such a good idea?" Thiathery asked, following some distance behind Aniss and Esamo with his shoulders hunched and curly hair somehow seeming to vibrate in response to his anxiety. A fat green firelizard was draped across his neck, her eyes half-closed. "Won't the… the clutch mothers be angry?"

"They'll be asleep," Esamo replied, looking back over his shoulder. "And we'll only be a couple of minutes. They won't even know we were there."

"I don't know…" Thiathery said.

Aniss paused in his steps, then backtracked to go to Thiathery. He put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "It'll be alright, Thery. And I promise it'll be worth it."

Thiathery gave a huge sigh, and then puffed his chest out. "Alright…" He took several deep breaths. "I can do this."

"Yes, you can," Aniss said. "Come on."

It had been like this all their lives. Aniss, the Lord Holder's son, was always the one to offer reassurance or compromise, bridging the gap between Thiathery and Esamo. They'd been friends since early childhood, the three of them. Thiathery's father was one of Aniss' father's closest friends. And Esamo… well, Aniss' father had never really approved of that particular friendship. No one even knew who Esamo's father was, and these days, Esamo offered a different story every time someone asked. Last week he'd said, "My father was a giant firelizard from space."

"Isn't that just a dragon?" Thiathery had asked. The debate about whether a dragon was just a giant firelizard had gone on for hours.

And that was the problem. Thiathery *liked* Aniss. Although Aniss wasn't a Harper, he was well-educated and could hold a good conversation about all kinds of subjects. Thiathery enjoyed that. What he didn't enjoy so much was Esamo arguing about things he didn't understand, or dragging all three of them into ridiculous, impulsive adventures. Like this. Sneaking onto Ryslen's hatching sands in the middle of the night to look at the eggs. The very same eggs they'd be watching hatch within the next few days. There just wasn't any need to take a risk like this. It was enough of an honour to have been invited – or more accurately, to be Aniss' guest, after Lord Nissran had been invited.

Thiathery followed Esamo onto the sands because Aniss asked him to.

But Esamo, as always, was the first one to step foot on Ryslen's sands. And why shouldn't he be? Why shouldn't he take this risk? When else was he going to get a chance to look at dragon eggs this close? Aniss could watch a hatching whenever his father was invited to one. As a Harper, Thiathery would get to see plenty too, more likely than not. But Esamo wouldn't get this chance again.

Ryslen's sands were reddish in colour. Somehow, Esamo had been expecting them to be gold. They shifted slightly beneath his feet, and he slowed his pace, checking that his footsteps made no sound. He looked over at the mothers of the three clutches as well, just to make sure they were asleep.

There was the bright white form of Sinaeath, the Light Court. Over there, pale pink and blood red, the Blood Court Eilonwyth. And that meant on that side should be—

Esamo stopped so suddenly that Thiathery bumped into his back.

"Why'd you stop?" Thiathery asked.

"Because I can't see where the other one is."

"The other one?" Aniss asked.

"Yeah—" Esamo began.

The darkest of the shadows in the sands actually moved, approaching the three young men like the night itself. *That would be me*, Dark Court Agstan said, separating herself from the shadows that had cloaked her presence. *What are you three doing here?*

"We were just—" Esamo said.

I know exactly what you were doing. Do you think you're the first ones to sneak onto these sands to look at a dragon's eggs? Did you think you were being original?

"I don't see anyone else here," Esamo said.

Thiathery slapped him on the shoulder. "Stop antagonising her! Why do you always do this?"

Aniss took a short, sharp breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. "This… really isn't the best time. Look… uh… Agstan, is it? We're really very sorry. It won't happen again, I promise. Esamo, come on." There was no need to convince Thiathery to leave.

*Oh, this definitely won't happen again. If you really want to be here so much, you should **really** be here. Ryslen does need more novos for these eggs, and I think it would be a perfect lesson in responsibility for you three.*

"Uh… um… thank you, Miss Agstan, but… I already have a firelizard, and I'm quite… quite scared of heights…" Thiathery mumbled, so quietly that it was a miracle Agstan even heard him.

"Never mind that. My father's going to *kill* me," Aniss said.

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Aniss - https://nexus.ktrenal.com/aniss.html
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Esamo - https://nexus.ktrenal.com/esamo.html

Thiathery - https://nexus.ktrenal.com/thiathery.html