

Quin and the Snake Den

Quin dismounted her white horse at the edge of the forest. The way ahead was too thick for a horse, so she would have to continue on foot. She brushed a gloved hand along the horse's nose telling him to remain here. Stepping into the forest, she closed her eyes as she felt her magic grow with the thick foliage around her. Her feathered cloak blew in the soft breeze that wafted between the trees. Humans told stories of how this forest was full of dangerous creatures. They were scared of the unknown magics that lived within. Quin knew what lay in the depths of the forest, and she was unafraid. She was more powerful than any of the creatures that resided here. Using her ornate cane, tipped with a silver raven's head, she pushed aside some hanging vines and proceeded ahead.

Large tree roots protruded from the ground, holding up broken sections of stone walls from human-made buildings that had long since been abandoned. Vines and moss hung from the branches and the remains of the buildings. This human city had once stretched far but, when the war against magic started, the humans had withdrawn towards their capital and abandoned the outer villages. They had retreated like an injured animal licking its wounds.

Quin listened to the birds chirping in the high branches of the ancient trees. She occasionally saw the flashes of colorful feathers between the dark green leaves. Though the forest was beautiful during the day, Quin preferred the forest mostly at night when colorful bioluminescence from the creatures and plants lit up the forest. The chirping birds would be replaced with chirping frogs and insects.

But Quin wasn't here for a pleasant walk, she was here to perform her job. She reached up with a gloved hand to her neck, and pulled off the pendent she had attached to a ring on her collar.

The pendant was of a beaked mask. As she held it, it grew in her hand till the mask was big enough to place over her face. She took a deep breath as she pulled the straps over her short brown hair and tightened them. She hated how the mask cut her off from the world. But it was for the safety of others that she remained covered. Once the mask was secure, she continued deeper into the forest.

She walked along the ground for a while, slightly bowing under branches that crisscrossed overhead. Using one of the large branches as a ramp, she walked towards a village suspended in the trees. Many different sized tree houses were scattered around the branches on small platforms. Wooden-planked paths connected the housing platforms. The walls of the huts were made with smooth dark stained wood. The rounded roofs were woven from leaves and grass, all tied together with thick vines. At night, glowing plants would light up the village, allowing one to see in the dark. The use of fire was usually too great a risk in a forest this large.

Along the paths connecting the huts slithered snake-like creatures about the size of a human. Their lower bodies were made up of a long powerful snake tail, their upper bodies were scaled human-like torsos with arms, tipped with clawed fingers. Their upper chests were covered with colorful hand-dyed cloth and jewelry. Some wore iron chest plates and were equipped with long spears. Their snake heads were attached to short necks. The males had scaled hoods that connected from their necks to their shoulders, the females did not. They were all different colors of browns, greens, blacks, yellows, reds, and some blues.

Some of the armored ones glanced at Quin, their forked tongues twitching in the air. Quin stopped as one of the males approached her. He wore an ornate feathered headpiece that enhanced the size of his neck hood. His arms and tail were covered with gold bands. One male

and one female dressed in armor stopped behind him and stood at attention, their spears held vertically next to them.

“Greetings Master Healer,” said the ornately dressed snake with a bow. Quin returned the gesture with a bow of her own. Quin had met Saova before. He had been the leader of this tribe for many years. He was a wise leader who was respected greatly by his people. The last time Quin had been here, she had blessed Saova’s first son’s birth. “Please sit, have a drink with me old friend,” he continued, starting to head to one of the larger structures. Quin followed him into the hut, the two guards remaining outside.

The two entered a sitting room with a few low-standing chairs around a table. Saova coiled up onto one of the low cushioned chairs. The chairs were a bit too low for someone with two legs to sit normally so Quin had to sit crossed-legged, pushing her cloak and long coat out from under her as she sat.

Saova’s wife came in carrying a tray with two cups carved from polished wood. Small designs that depicted the history of the village were hand carved into the wood. Saova took one of the cups, and took a sip of the hot liquid.

“Delicious as always dear,” he said, showing his fangs as he smiled at his wife. She bowed at the compliment and returned to the other room, leaving the tray on the table.

“Saova, I’ve seen you as a trusted ally and friend for many years now. I was there when your first born hatched.” Quin paused a moment. “So I warn you that my visit today is not a pleasant one.”

Saova lowered his cup to the table. His pleasant expression turned to concern. Remaining quiet, he waited for Quin to continue.

“It’s your daughter,” Quin said sadly.

“No,” said Saova, shaking his head. “Not her. She’s less than two years old. She’s too young, she won’t survive.”

“I’m sorry,” said Quin, almost whispering through her mask.

“We are friends,” he said, giving a pitiful laugh. “Can’t you do something about this?”

“You know my hands are tied in these matters. I have a job to perform, and it’s not guaranteed that she won’t pull through.”

He straightened up, uncoiling to his full height.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you hurt her. She has brought me, brought this village so much joy.” His raised voice caught the attention of the guards outside who now had entered the room, their poisoned tipped spears held ready.

“Saova please don’t do this,” Quin begged.

“Escort my guest to the edge of the village,” he ordered his guards. The guards slithered closer as Quin lowered her head. The grip on her cane tightened as she reached up removing her mask. Her once human face now started to turn a sickly yellow. The skin had started to sink inwards around her eyes and lower cheeks. Rotted away sections of her lower cheeks and lips now showed fanged teeth underneath. The whites of her eyes turned black, the pupils glowed a neon green. Her feathered cloak had split in two, morphing into wings. The black cane she held flowed with green lightning. She clipped the mask back to the ring on her neck and turned to the guards.

The guards were startled at her new appearance. When they had regained their thoughts they slithered forward, spears raised for a fight. One guard lunged forward with his spear. Quin stepped aside, dodging the spear as it moved beside her. Dropping her cane to the ground she grabbed the wooden spear just below the point with both hands and tugged on it. With her

increased strength she was able to rip it from the guards hands. She snapped the spear over her knee, tossing the two broken pieces aside.

She stepped forward, flaring her wings to their full size. The guard she had disarmed slithered back in fear. The second guard charged forward, this time his spear cut into Quin's shoulder as she moved aside too slowly to dodge it. Quin growled as blood started to drip from the cut. She could feel the paralyzing poison starting to go through her blood stream. Holding one hand over the cut Quin raised her free hand and whispered an incantation. Green mist swirled around her gloved hand and shot towards the two guards. The mist wrapped around their wrists, neck, and waist, pinning them to the nearby wall. They hissed, bearing their fangs, as they tried to free themselves but to no avail.

Having dealt with the guards, Quin turned to Saova who was frozen in place, in awe of Quin's powers. As Quin took a step towards him, he flinched back. Saova's wife came in hearing the commotion. She looked at Saova, then at the guards still pinned to the wall, then back at Saova with a concerned expression. She reached a hand forward as if to offer help.

"It's alright honey. Go visit your friends, Quin and I have some business to finish." She hesitated but left the house slithering past the still immobilized guards. As she left, Quin sank a little as the paralyzing poison was starting to take effect. She reached up to her cut shoulder, and hovering her hand over it she muttered another incantation. The clear poison flowed out of the wound to form a small floating ball. When Quin broke her concentration, the little ball splattered to the floor.

Saova's once tall form had sunk in defeat. He didn't seem to want to put up any more of a fight.

"Please," he whispered, his voice desperate. "Please don't hurt my little girl." Tears had started to form in his eyes. Quin, still angered at being attacked and not fully in control of her

actions, reached forward grabbing Saova by the neck. Her rotting face held close to his. Saova made no attempt to fight back or struggle. “Take me instead, spare her,” he begged.

“That’s not how this works,” said Quin, her voice distorted in her angered form. “You don’t have to watch, but I am not leaving until I perform my job.”

“No, I won’t leave her alone when she needs me. I was a fool to try and stop you. Only a fool tries to stop the circle of life. There is no magic in the world that can do that.”

Quin removed her hand from his neck and the two relaxed a little. Quin still in her demonic form turned and headed to one of the other rooms. As Saova followed behind, the two entered a nursery room. Curled up in a makeshift nest was Saova’s daughter. She was smaller than a snake her age should have been. Her scales that should have been dark muted colors like her parents were instead a pearly white.

Quin pulled off her long sleeve gloves, revealing hands tipped in claws. Saova slithered next to Quin so that he could see his daughter in the nest. Quin’s body twitched unnaturally as greenish gray mist seeped from her rotting mouth and hands. The mist moved like a heavy fog as it fell into the nest and swirled around the child's body. The child’s sleep was interrupted by a rough cough. Her cheeks turning red as clear mucus started to drip from her nose.

When Quin was done her rotting face returned to normal. The claws on her hands retracted back to normal fingernails as she put her gloves back on. Her wings retracted and morphed back into her cloak. Her shoulders slumped in exhaustion as she placed the mask back on her face.

The young snake stirred in her nest. Her father slithered closer, taking her into his arms. She let out another deep cough.

“Dad, I feel so hot,” she whispered, still somewhat asleep.

“I know,” Saova said. “You’re going to be ok. You’re just a little sick, but I’m going to help you get better.” He placed her back down into the nest. “Just try and sleep a little longer. I’ll get a healer to make you some medicine that should help break your fever.” With another cough, the snakeling curled back up to sleep.

Quin took one last remorseful glance at the child and left the room. She had made it back to the sitting room and released the magic that was still holding the guards against the wall. When Saova entered he motioned to the guards to stand down. The guards were still noticeably tense and gave one last glance at Quin before leaving the house. Quin picked up her cane and turned to Saova.

“I... I truly am sorry. I wish your daughter luck, and I understand if you want to end our friendship.”

“You were just doing the job that was forced upon your shoulders. I forgive you for this. I understand that the balance must be kept.” He paused a moment, his expression dropping. “Even the chief can’t choose who lives and dies...I accept that I might lose my daughter. It is I who should be apologizing to you for trying to stop you and causing you to become injured. I hope you can accept my apology.”

“Of course,” Quin responded bowing. She left the village, now eager to return home. As she saw her house come into view she took off her mask. It shrunk and was once again placed back on the ring at her neck. She walked her horse to the stables where her three sisters' horses were also kept, one red, one black, and one pale.

As she entered the house, she paced past her sisters, ignoring their concerned looks. She climbed the stairs to her room, locking the door behind her. Quin stepped up to her desk, which sat next to her bed. She winced as she moved her shoulder to remove her feathered cloak. She

draped the cloak over her chair, and looked at the cut on her shoulder. Quin reached up to heal it but hesitated. She lowered her hand, wishing to leave the cut there as a form of punishment to herself. She sat down at her desk, resting her arms on the surface. It wasn't long till she felt a warm stream flow from her eyes as she buried her head in her hands.



Saova 
and daughter

