

Dimension Master

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The tunnels to the dungeons were long and dark. The soft flicker in recesses in the walls casts dark shadows in the already dark tunnels. Drake, letting his green eyes glow softly, watched the gargoyles and humans inside the throne room.

"We need a plan," he whispered. "My gut says, we can't kill the residents, even though they betrayed us. I would just leave, but we can't. My system gave us a quest to defeat the gargoyles. So far, we took out ten of two hundred and sixty-seven. The quest is preventing us from walking away from this."

"Damit," Mike cursed under his breath. "I would have said for us to just leave and finish our quest."

Chad only nodded in agreement as he attempted to see through the dark. Renn still walked behind them as if watching for ambushes from the back.

"Walking into the throne room where everyone is would be a bad idea," Drake continued. His voice was so low that his friends could barely hear. "I think that's what they want us to do. I think this is like some sort of mouse trap...only for us. I think the throne room is the cage at the end of the trap."

Mike growled low to himself in frustration. "We have a lot of gargoyles to defeat. How are we going to do it with just the three of us...four of us?" Mike asked, looking at Renn, who was the fourth member of their cohort.

Chad smiled weakly. "Didn't you say...slow and steady?" he asked. "Maybe we need to just wait for them to exit the throne room and take them out as they exit. Then again, it would still be easy to use the citizens against us, knowing our duty. We should lock up all exits of the castle except the front door and wait for them to leave."

"That is a stellar idea." Drake praised. An excited grin crossed his face. "Let's work on barring their exits. I'll keep watch for any leaving the throne room. We also have to remember that those assholes can fly."

"So they received a quest preventing them from leaving," Drake's father pondered as the three men watched the boys on the screen secure all the exits of the castle. "That means the dimension has an agenda."

The blond archer stoked his bow. Like his son, he carried it like a security blanket. He stared at the screen for a moment before speaking. "What kind of agenda? If the dimension wants the boys to finish the quest, wouldn't it be better if they left, now that they know it's a trap?"

"I don't know what kind of agenda. I agree, you would think that they should leave, but since they received a quest to defeat them, there has to be a reason. I just don't know what it could be," Drake's father stated out loud. His eyes did not waver from the screen.

Mike's father leaned back in his chair, pulling on her long brown hair. He was in deep thought as he stared at the boys. They were moving around the castle, locking everything they could find that led to a room with a window. With efficiency, they methodically traveled through the castle, locking one door at a time. Drake used his own power to melt the locks, preventing them from being picked.

As the boys exited the castle, done with the inside, they started on the exits. The Renn was used to pull heavy boulders and large items to help block the doors. Those that could be locked, Drake melted, making it impossible to unlock. When they were done, there was only one exit: The front doors of the castle. This would funnel them out of one opening.

Mike's father suddenly leaned over, his eyes still on the screen as he spoke. "What if it's the only opportunity to alleviate a threat that would otherwise prevent the boys from completing the quest? What if..." he added. "If they leave, and that is what causes the quest from not being completed."

Drake and his cohort stayed hidden in a spot with a perfect view of the castle's front door. Drake, using his magic vision, his eyes glowed softly as he watched the castle, periodically looking around the area for movement. There was none.

He looked up at the sky and closed his eyes. His pale face was serene before he opened his eyes and smiled, then continued watching the castle.

Mike and Chad looked at each other, wondering why Drake kept doing that. He had been doing it periodically throughout the night.

"Four are coming," Drake observed aloud. "Slow and steady," he said, raising his bow. "I'll take the two at the right, you take the left. If we miss, our goal is to prevent them from alerting the others."

They all nodded and focused on the door, waiting for the four gargoyles to exit the castle. Renn growled softly in anticipation.

They watched as the doors opened and the four gargoyles stepped out, first looking around them, then heading toward the wall.

The gargoyles hadn't even discovered that their people were locked inside. They hadn't tried any doors, only the one that allowed them to exit the throne room and the front castle door.

Once the winged monsters were far enough away, Mike held his hand up, counting down. As soon as the countdown ended, Drake and Chad shot arrow after arrow in a rapid succession. Drake missed one of his, but his arrows were fast enough to hit on his second attempt before the gargoyles even noticed they had been attacked.

The four turned to light particles, vanishing out of existence.

{Gargoyles defeated 14/267}

The system was only giving a countdown. There had been no rewards, no indication of the cohort getting stronger, no notifications of mana or any other attribute. Drake hoped that meant that whatever the reward was, it was something that was insanely powerful.

Mike stared at the area where the gargoyles had vanished. "Why do you guys get all the fun?" he frowned.

Drake chuckled softly, trying not to be heard. Every sound seemed to bounce off the shadows and darkness. "You'll get your chance. We only killed fourteen. There was a total of two hundred and sixty-seven. That leaves us with two hundred and fifty-three left. That's plenty to share."

Mike nodded in satisfaction. "Good, because this is my town. I've been thinking about it. There has to be a reason the citizens agreed to help them. I bet they weren't given a choice. Maybe some sort of blackmail. Whatever they have here anyway. I'm not giving up on them until I know for sure."

Chad nodded silently, still watching the door.

Drake smiled, nodding in agreement. "We've already learned that in this dimension, things are not always what they seem." His eyes glowed softly as he kept watch on the gargoyles inside.

Chad tightened his grip on his bow. "This is the calm before the storm, isn't it?" he asked. "The battle is going to be brutal. I can feel it."

Drake nodded. "We can only pick them off one at a time until they realize something is wrong. Once they figure it out, we're pretty well screwed. I have a trump card, though."

The sky suddenly darkened, making Drake smile. "Now the battle can begin at any time. We still can't go inside. I know the throne room is a trap. We need to bring the battle outside."

Drake closed his eyes once more; his face pointed toward the sky. Serenity washed over his features for several moments before he focused again on the castle's front door. He smirked as he watched.

"Are more gargoyles coming?" Mike asked. He and Chad exchanged a glance. Drake was acting strange.

"Not yet." That was all he said. The small smirk never left his lips.

After several moments, Drake sucked in a breath. His eyes shifted from the door to the sky, then back to the door. "We have incoming, there are ten. Remember, they can't be allowed to alert the others. Renn, go with Mike to the shadow of the castle, closest to the wall. Take out those we can't."

Renn led Mike toward their hiding spot, anticipation washing through them, their adrenaline peaking. This was a larger battle; they would need all of them. Just as they disappeared into the shadows, the door to the castle opened, and ten gargoyles exited. They held their weapons, ready to fight. Clearly, they knew something was going on.

The gargoyles scanned the arrow, their red eyes shining as they peered into the darkness, then began walking toward the wall.

The sky darkened further, making Drake's smile widen. It was going to be a long night. "But not too long," Drake whispered, smiling wider.

Drake smiled, counting down. His voice was barely a whisper that only Chad could hear. As the countdown ended, their arrows flew.

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Drake and Chad's arrows went flying, slamming into the gargoyles, not giving them time to react. They pulled their bows, releasing arrow after arrow as quickly as they could. Bursts of light particles followed as they continued to fire their arrows one after the other. All of Chad's hits were with perfect precision, while Drake missed several. He was still learning after all, but getting better by the day.

Three of the gargoyles tried to run around the other side of the castle, away from the glowing arrows, but were stopped by Renn and Mike. Mike let his sword glow, lighting dancing up the blade, crackling menacingly. He grinned at the gargoyles in front of him.

Renn growled menacingly in warning. Her glowing green eyes were blazing as her saliva dripped from her long fangs. She appeared to be grinning in hunger at the three gargoyles in front of them.

Seeing the beast in front of them, the gargoyles' red eyes widened; first in fear, then, realizing what was happening, their fear turned to confusion, as they understood that the beast was helping the heirs.

Mike, not looking away from the three gargoyles, spoke softly to Renn. "Are you hungry, girl?" He asked, grinning widely as he spoke. After hearing what Mike had said, the gargoyles flinched.

As if the question was an invitation, Renn leaped up, her sharp jaws opening wide and clamping down on one of the gargoyles. The gargoyle tried to scream but was cut short by Renn's sharp jaws as she tore into the gargoyle's throat. The wet sound of chewing followed.

Mike drove his sword through another of their heads, causing it to burst into light particles. The gargoyle had been caught by surprise, shocked by the scene in front of him. Mike swung his blade at the third and final gargoyle that was standing in front of him.

The gargoyle defended himself, countering the blade. The two swords produced sparks of light as they clashed, metal against metal. In the corner of his eyes, Mike noticed that Renn had completely devoured the gargoyle. Chunks of its flesh still hanging out of her glowing green mouth. Like a cat, she licked her large taloned claws in satisfaction, causing Mike to chuckle.

His own fight, however, continued. With one hand, he swung the blade of his glowing sword; with the other hand, he slammed his spiked fist into the gargoyle's head. He was wearing his spiked gauntlets. To his surprise, the curved spikes lengthened, going into the gargoyle's face. When he pulled back his fist, a large chunk of the gargoyle's face went with it, falling off the razor-sharp tips as they shortened to their original length. "Cool," he laughed. He hadn't known they could do that. It was a pleasant surprise.

The gargoyle was still alive, blood dripping from its ugly face. Muscles and flesh hung from tattered layers of skin. Its red eyes narrowed in anger, turning glassy from the pain. Its pointed teeth gritted angrily as it let out a growl.

Mike swung his sword, the white glow a millisecond from the blade, causing two strikes at once. As soon as the metallic sword connected, sparks flying as their two blades met, metal against metal, he slammed his fist again, aiming for the same spot on the gargoyle's damaged face. When the curved spikes connected with the monster's face, the spikes lengthened again, this time even longer, reaching the depths of the monster's skull and piercing all the way through to the other side.

Mike pulled back his fist, brain matter and skull fragments coming out with it. The gargoyle burst into particles of light, vanishing out of sight.

Mike looked around for more, but the battle had already ended. He looked down and stroked the top of Renn's large head, smiling. "Good Girl," he told her. "We make a good team."

Renn made a soft bark-howl sound, satisfied by Mike's words. He only chuckled as they headed toward the others.

They walked out to see how Drake and Chad had fared.

{Gargoyles defeated 24/267, 243 remaining}

Drake was watching the castle again, watching for more gargoyles to exit. The number on his quest message was going down, but not enough. There were still two hundred and forty-three left. He needed more to exit, dwindling their numbers even further. The less they had to fight during the final battle, the better.

He knew that after the last group of ten didn't return, the gargoyle king would know that his men were being taken out one by one. As soon as he realized it, the battle would truly start. It didn't stop Drake from wishing that the gargoyle king would continue to send smaller groups. He feared what the actual battle would be like. Last time they battled at Draco Town, Chad nearly died.

Thinking of this, Drake looked up once again at the ever-darkening sky. His face pointed up as he closed his eyes, looking serene before he returned his focus to the door only moments later.

Mike noticed Drake's behavior, his eyes going to Chad. It was clear Chad had noticed Drake's behavior, too. Chad shrugged, not knowing what Drake was up to.

Renn and Mike finally returned to where Chad and Drake were concealed from the view of those in the castle, then hid with them.

Mike stared at Drake for a second, then decided to ask. "What's with the sky?" he asked. "You keep looking at it strangely."

Drake smirked, still looking at the castle door. "My trump card."

Mike and Chad both looked up into the sky, trying to see what Drake was talking about. They couldn't see anything because it was too dark. It was almost as if the clouds themselves wanted to help them.

"Can you control the storms now?" Mike probed, trying to figure out what was going on.

Drake shook his head. "Not that I know of. Perhaps it's something to test on a day I'm not about to fight for my life."

There was silence as they watched the castle door. Drake's eyes glowed softly as he looked at the light forms inside the castle. For him, they were white and grey. The white were the humans, who were clustered in the center of the throne room, with the grey surrounding them. The grey were the gargoyles.

Drake suddenly spoke. "There's movement. I think the king knows his people are being attacked when they exit the castle. I think the battle is about to start."

Inside the throne room, Drake could see that the humans remained clumped in the middle with the gargoyles surrounding them. The gargoyles moved quickly, leaving the humans where they were as they filed out of the throne room. Only a dozen stayed behind. They spread out evenly as the others left. However, there was one that stood apart from the others. Drake guessed that the solitary gargoyle was the gargoyle king.

"They're pretty much all coming out. There are a dozen still in the throne room. I bet the king is one of them." Drake stated aloud. He kept his voice low.

"What's the plan?" Mike asked. His eyes were going toward the castle's front door. He was worried about having to fight so many at once. From what Drake had told them, he knew that it was way over a hundred gargoyles.

"We've caused a bottleneck for them as they come out of the castle, so we need to shoot them as they come out. This is going to be a long battle, so try not to deplete your energy. Remember, we still have one token left that Chad is the only one who can activate. I used mine on you," he said, pointing to Chad, "and you used yours on me," he pointed to Mike. "Chad, you can use yours, I think, even on yourself. Don't use it unless you have no other choice. Remember that your sword can heal, and we still have a long way to go before we finish this damn quest."

The dimension master and his two friends watched in apprehension at the screen in Drake's bedroom.

They were able to see the battle Mike had fought alongside the beast with glowing green eyes. He had won fairly easily. That was a good sign...at least it was until Drake spoke.

The three men's faces paled as they had all heard what Drake had told the other two boys. All but a dozen were exiting the throne room and coming outside. That was over a hundred gargoyles against three teens who had been in the dimension for nearly a week. That was not long enough for the boys to hone their fighting skills, nor was it long

enough to figure out and utilize the powers that they had already received. They would receive the rest when the ascension quest was complete.

The three fathers feared that there wasn't enough experience among the three youths to defeat so many gargoyles at one time.

"What about Drake's trump card?" Chad's father asked. "What do you think it could be. He can't possibly control storms yet." He was baffled, not sure if whatever this so-called trump card was, if it would be enough to keep the boys alive.

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Drake looked up at the sky briefly before raising his bow. "Don't get killed. They're here."

Just as Drake finished his sentence, the doors of the castle burst open; the large wooden doors splintered as they slammed against the side of the stone castle. One fell limply to the side, still attached, but only by the torn hinge, trying desperately to hold its weight.

Out of the open doors, gargoyles poured out like water, their weapons in their hands, ready to fight. Their eyes gleamed with a murderous red light.

Immediately, Drake and Chad began to fire their bows. One after the other, the arrows hit, filling the area with light particles. They kept firing. With each arrow that found its mark, a burst of light particles formed in its place. Fire...fire...fire.... The arrows flew.

The gargoyles that made it past the flurry of arrows, Mike and Renn dealt with. They were an efficient pair. Mike's sword glowed brightly, lightning traveling along the blade, crackling its electrical blue light. As he swung his sword, clouds of light particles floated around him. More were created with each swing of his glowing, electrical blade. The lightning pulsed, eager to consume its prey.

Renn's eyes gleamed as she dove into the mix, tearing the gargoyles apart one piece at a time, eating some as she went, to regain her energy as she tore through their bodies. There were no light particles when she killed them. She was a beast of the dimension after all. Her claws dug into flesh like paper, tearing through flesh and bone. Her fangs gleamed as he consumed her prey.

It felt like a never-ending flood. Wave after wave of enemies. They were having trouble keeping up with the gargoyles exiting the castle. As more and more made it past them, Drake put his bow away, uncoiling his whip. After filling it with soft green energy, he calmly stepped out of the shadows, lashing his whip as he did: A steady swing, taking the enemy's lives with each swing of his whip.

His eyes were steady as he scanned the horde of gargoyles. His movements were calm as if there were nothing wrong. His eyes glowed brightly in the night.

The long ethereal whip struck first, slicing into several at once; A cloud of particles of light formed in its place. The metallic whip followed, slicing more bodies in half, causing the cloud of light particles to grow thicker.

Drake was far better with his whip than his bow. It was his preferred weapon.

Chad kept firing his arrows, not yet ready to enter into the fray. His eyes focused, his bow steady as he fired arrows into the horde. It didn't matter; he was like a machine gun, shooting rapidly, taking the gargoyles out one by one. Bursts of light particles, like fireworks, surrounded the area where his arrows hit their targets.

More and more gargoyles flooded out of the castle. Drake and his cohort were barely hanging on. Drake wondered why none of them flew. They all had wings after all. Even the three from the group of ten that tried to escape didn't try to fly away.

With methodical grace, Drake lashed, slicing one after the other, but they kept coming out; a nonstop flood of monsters, swinging their massive swords.

Mike swung with practiced efficiency. He had learned quickly, fighting in the battle at Draco Town; He had learned quickly, fighting the beasts, bandits, and ambushes on the road. His sword was a part of him now, an extension of his own hand. The glowing blade shot lightning up and down the blade, crackling as it traveled. With each swing of his storm sword, gargoyles fell, and light particles burst. His own eyes began to glow with a bright electric blue light. His vision started to change, sharpening with each strike of his sword. He could feel himself getting stronger. He grinned, slicing another head from its shoulder.

Renn leaped with a deadly, enchanting grace; her eyes were blazing with an emerald green shine into the coming flood. Her teeth were gnashing, claws extended as she tore through anything that got close enough to her to reach. As she ripped limbs, clawing heads, blood flowed like water, but the gargoyles kept coming. Bursts of energy rippled through her fur, the green patches briefly changing to orange, then back to green. Her claws grew; her fangs lengthened. The saliva dripped, causing smoke to rise where it dropped.

{Your familiar has evolved: Renn is now level 2}

Drake heard the soft voice floating through his mind, a smile on his lips as he gracefully swung his whip. His beast had evolved. With each swing, the ethereal whip slashed first, followed by its metallic counterpart, taking out layers of gargoyles with each strike.

Chad was still in the shadows, pulling his bow. The ethereal arrows flew elegantly through the air. Each slamming into its prey. Bursts of light particles lit the way, lighting up the entire area with constant bursts of light.

The doors of the castle helped, bottlenecking the gargoyles in. The opening was still too wide, making it easy for them to exit. At least it was the only exit the cohort had to worry about.

Drake scanned the castle with his glowing green eyes, briefly; the dozen inside remained. They weren't moving, not wanting to abandon their trap. There was more to come, Drake could feel it. Giving only a second, he wondered what else was planned. 'Fly damn it, fly,' he thought to himself. He needed the bastards to fly.

The sky above darkened, descending on the scene below. Even the sky couldn't be seen. The shadows of the night sky were closing in, creating a dome around the city.

They kept fighting.

Chad's eyes focused on the horde, his arrows hitting their targets with perfection. He smiled, he felt stronger, his eyes sharper, and each detail, each movement was easily seen. His eyes began to glow with a soft white light. His energy filled with each kill he made. He smiled softly. Understanding swept through his mind. They were getting stronger. They were all getting stronger.

At the computer monitor, back at home, the dimension master and his friends watched the three boys' battle. The boys fought with elegant grace, their targets vanishing as if they never existed. When Mike's eyes began to glow, his father gasped in shock.

Then Chad's eyes followed.

"Their eyes are glowing. You see that, right?" The blond archer exclaimed in shock, standing up and pointing at the screen. "Even ours don't glow. What's going on?"

Drake's father remained silent, watching the fight. He was taking in each detail. He noticed the area around them darkening. The only light was in front of the castle where the boys fought. It was the light particles from the gargoyles' deaths that lit the area. Without them, the only sight that would be seen would be the glowing eyes of the boys and the beast.

He noticed the beast evolve. It was subtle. The green of its fur, its eyes, and even its saliva flashed orange before returning to green. As the beast fought, he noticed the change. Her fangs lengthening, her claws sharpening. Even the drip of saliva that sizzled on the ground below. The proud look on the beast's face as she realized she had just evolved. She threw herself into the horde with a renewed vigor.

The brown-haired man stared at the screen, watching the fight. "I don't understand... What's happening to them?" he asked, his tone low, nearly in a whisper. The question was more to himself than anyone else in the room.

Drake's father remained silent, still staring at the scene in front of him. It was as if he didn't even hear his friends' worry.

The boys were having difficulty fighting so many, but they all remained calm and focused as if they did this every day. Even the beast was calmly focused, as she was tearing through flesh and bone in a gruesome dance.

The dimension master stared, wondering what was happening. He didn't voice it, though. His two friends watched as their sons transformed, their eyes glowing brightly as they calmly fought the horde of gargoyles. This was the first time the eyes of the cohort of the dimension master glowed brightly. Something was different about this group. It was no wonder that there were so many trying to stop them from completing the quest.

"I don't understand," Mike's father said slowly. He was in disbelief. This had never happened to anyone in his bloodline.

The blond shook his head. "I don't either." He was in equal disbelief. His bloodline had never experienced it either.

After several moments, the dimension master stood up, glancing briefly at each of his friends before looking back at the screen on Drake's desk. "I don't know...I don't know...I don't know what's going on." Confusion laced each word as they flowed from his mouth. "I don't know what's going on."

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In front of the tattered doors of the castle, clouds of light particles floated around the area, creating a shining fog-like appearance.

The gargoyles fought with their swords, sweeping violently back and forth. It wasn't enough, not nearly enough. The young heirs and their beast fought with ease. The longer they fought, the more powerful their strikes became.

Their numbers were dwindling; over half of them were already gone. There was nothing they could do but fight.

The leader of the soldiers, brought with the gargoyle king, stood staring at the battle before him. With every second, more of his men vanished in clouds of light particles. On the ground, piles of flesh and bone lay strewn around the courtyard, killed by their beast.

As he scanned the battle, his eyes locked with the young heir, his green eyes glowing brightly. The boy smiled as he slashed his whip, taking out six at one time. 'The damn whip and its double strikes. How can the boy be so strong so soon? He hasn't even completed the quest to gain his power!' he seethed.

Scanning further, he found the swordsman, his glowing sword crackled with lightning that shot up and down the blade. His strikes struck true. His powerful blows were severing his men in half with one strike. The boy's eyes shone brightly with an electric blue light, exactly as the lightning, crackling up and down his blade. It was something that had never been seen before. Only the dimension master had glowing eyes.

Looking toward the archer, his arrows struck true, glowing softly as they glided smoothly through the air. One after the other, they flew, hitting targets with flawless aim. The boy's eyes gleamed with a soft white light.

The beast was leaping through his men, its brightly glowing eyes shining with an emerald light. It belonged to the young dimension master heir. It was the only explanation. Beasts are not green. There are only five levels, and none of them are green.

The fog-like cloud of light particles thickened, as silence fell. Not a sound could be heard. Only the heavy breathing of his men. Those who had survived so far.

Slowly, the cloud dispersed, clearing their view, but only a little. Just enough to see a bit through the cloud.

A long, thin green line was heading toward him. It was too fast to avoid. He tried to block it with his sword, but it sliced right through, slamming into his chest with two consecutive strikes, and everything went dark.

Drake watched the leader of the horde turn into light particles, then continued taking out the rest. Mike was with him, swinging his crackling sword. Chad's glowing arrows flew smoothly, hitting their targets, glowing brighter than ever. Each shot finding its mark with ease, a flawless strike.

Renn was busy, eating her last target, energy pulsing through her fur. It flickered red before going back to green. Her form grew, her claws lengthened. Her long fangs grew serrated, gleaming with the blood of her enemies. She had leveled up again.

{Your familiar has evolved: Renn is now level 3}

Drake smiled at the notification. Renn was growing powerful, just like he and his friends. There was a slight pause in the battle, as the gargoyles noticed the change in the beast.

Their eyes widened in fear. The boys looked on, their eyes shining brightly, confidence radiating. Only ten gargoyles remained.

Chad shot arrow after arrow, taking half of them seemingly in one go, while Drake's whip slashed, taking out the rest. Mike stood back, taking a breath, patting Renn. He had seen her evolution, too.

It took only moments to finish the task. The remaining ten gargoyles, gone in clouds of particles of light.

{Gargoyles defeated 255/267, 12 remain}

"There's only twelve left," Drake informed. "They're all in the throne room. I believe the king is with them."

Mike smiled widely. "I know...I can see them too."

Chad nodded. "Me too. I can see them. The humans are clumped in the middle, surrounded by eleven gargoyles. There is one more that is standing back away from them."

Drake looked up at the sky and closed his eyes. The serene look to his features returned as Chad and Mike watched. They exchanged a look before moving their attention back to Drake. Drake stayed that way for a few minutes before opening his eyes and looking at them.

"We can't enter the throne room. I think there might be some sort of enchantment on it to prevent us from leaving once we step inside. We have no choice but to wait for them to come out," Drake told his friends. "We can rest a bit while we wait."

Back in Drake's room, the dimension master and his friends watched as their sons battled with the gargoyles. The longer they fought, the easier it seemed to be for them. They grew stronger with each kill.

Their eyes glowed brighter the longer they fought. There was nothing but a calm confidence as they battled the gargoyles. It was like they fought like this every day. They made it look easy.

Then the beast evolved again, her colors flickering from green to red and back to green. She was now a level three beast. The shock of it paused the battle.

The dimension master counted only ten gargoyles left. Before he could point that out, Chad shot his bow and Drake his whip. Seconds later, there were none left.

"They did it...They really did it!" Mike's father said in disbelief. Pride swelled.

Drake and Chad's fathers remained silent. They wanted to hear the conversation. They watched as Drake looked up at the sky with an angelic, serene expression. Moments later, he looked at his friends.

They listened. There were only twelve remaining, and one of them was the king.

"Do you think they're right? Do you think the throne room is enchanted?" Chad's father asked the dimension master.

Drake's father thought about it for a moment as he watched the three boys and their beast rest. They were keeping an eye on those in the throne room, yet also on their surroundings. There were hidden tunnels and entrances in Storm Town. The men who brought them in had only shown them one of them. "Yes, I believe they are correct. It doesn't make sense any other way."

"Do you think they're strong enough to take on the gargoyle king or any shaman that might be in the throne room?" Mike's father asked, pushing his brown hair back. His eyes kept moving to the screen.

Chad's father sat back in his chair. "I wonder what Drake's trump card is that he mentioned. I also want to know why he keeps looking up at the sky like that. Can he control the weather now?"

"I don't think he can control the weather. I know his emotions can change the weather, but control it intentionally; I can't see that happening. As for his trump card, I haven't a clue. I want to know that too. We've been watching, and I haven't seen anything that could point to what that is. As for the gargoyle king or shamans in the throne room. All I can say is that I hope they are strong enough," the dimension master answered.

In the throne room, the lone gargoyle paced on the dais, waiting for his men to bring the bodies of the heirs. Each time he sent someone out, they didn't return.

He had decided to send the rest, except the crucial amount needed for keeping the humans in their place. They needed to stay where they were.

He pointed to one of his remaining men.

"Go see what's going on. Don't leave the castle. See what you can find out and come back to report." The lone gargoyle ordered.

The gargoyle rushed out to see what was going on. After a long time, the one on the dais realized he wasn't coming back.

Drake watched the castle, seeing one gargoyle heading out of the throne room.

He grinned. "I get this one."

The boys chuckled as they watched Drake enter the castle, who immediately hid in the shadows. He blended perfectly, unseen by the passing gargoyle. With the monster's back turned, Drake stepped out of the shadow he was hiding in and slashed his whip. He didn't even fill it with energy. He didn't need to, not against only one.

The whip sliced through the gargoyle's neck, its head falling toward the ground. It turned into light particles before it even touched the ground.

{Gargoyles defeated 256/267, 11 remain}

Drake smiled, then calmly walked back to his friends. "Only eleven more," he informed, still smiling.

He turned and assessed the throne room. Ten gargoyles were surrounding the humans, while the last one was standing further back. The one separated from the others was pacing frantically. That one knew that he failed. This made Drake's smile widen.

"I think they're going to wait us out. Something tells me that guy isn't going to send any more of his men out. Is there a plan to speed this along so we can get back to what we need to do?" Chad asked.

Chapter 55: 55: Dealing with a Trap pt 7

"I think they're going to wait us out." Chad stated, watching the castle, "Something tells me the gargoyle king isn't going to send any more of his men out. Is there a plan to speed this along so we can get back to what we need to do?" Chad asked. They had been fighting all night. They needed to figure out how to end this entire fight without being caught in the gargoyle's Trap.

Drake had an idea, but he wasn't sure if it was going to work. He looked up at the sky and closed his eyes. The familiar, serene expression appeared on his face before opening his eyes and lowering his gaze to his friend.

His friends exchanged a look. They both knew he was doing something. It was becoming more and more obvious. They just didn't know what it was.

"Stay here, I'm going inside the castle. Keep an eye on my energy signature. Whatever happens, whatever you do, don't go into the throne room. I know you'll know if I need help," Drake stated before heading to the castle, then entering the broken, open doors.

Drake spoke to his system. "System, analyze for enchantments, traps, power sources, or magic. Notify me when one is found and explain what is found." He ordered his system. He didn't speak out loud. It was all in his mind so that no one else could hear him.

Drake slowly walked through the halls, scanning his surroundings. He wanted to make sure that his system could find whatever trap was laid for them.

His system remained silent as he walked hall after hall, making his way to the throne room.

When he finally reached it, the system spoke.

{Power source has been identified. Power source analyzed. Castle's throne room has a one-way barrier that only specific bloodlines are unable to exit.}

{Power source location identified. Power source located within the center of the throne room.}

"How can the power source be destroyed?" Drake asked the system.

{To destroy the power source, the anchor must be destroyed}

"What is the anchor?"

{The anchor is the humans inside the center of the throne room.}

Drake gritted his teeth. Their duty was to protect the people of the dimension, not kill them. "How can the enchantment be destroyed without harming the humans?" he asked the system.

{All gargoyles in the throne room must be destroyed. 11 total.}

"Will my energy arrows or ethereal whip pass the barrier?"

{All dimension master power is neutralized within the throne room.}

"Are my cohort's or familiar's powers neutralized in the throne room?"

{Yes, all powers associated with the dimension master are neutralized in the throne room.}

Drake growled to himself. "Fuck!"

Drake quickly went back to his friends. He was frustrated. They couldn't go into the throne room to kill the gargoyles left inside. If they did, not only would they be trapped, but they would be defenseless.

As he stepped out of the castle, Mike studied him for a while. "What's wrong?" he asked, seeing his friend's demeanor. Something was wrong, and whatever it was...it was bad.

Drake paced several times before speaking. "We have a problem. First, the anchor of the power source of the enchantment is the group of humans in the center of the throne room. According to the system, they have to die to destroy the power source. Second, the only way to avoid killing them is to kill the gargoyles inside, who won't be leaving the throne room. Third, the enchantment on the throne room is a one-way barrier that traps our bloodline inside. Not only that, it renders us defenseless. The enchantment neutralizes our powers. We can't kill the humans to get to the gargoyles. That would be wrong. We're supposed to be protecting them, not killing them."

They sat in the dark thinking of a solution. Chad suddenly smiled. "We don't need our powers to kill the gargoyles," he said, pulling out his bow and quiver from his dimensional storage ring. "I brought my bow. I just have to make sure I don't miss. I don't have many arrows left."

"What about an armory. We can get more there...right?" Mike asked.

Drake looked over at Chad, "How many arrows do you have left?"

Chad counted. "I have nine arrows."

They sat in silence for a while, keeping an eye on the throne room. If one of the gargoyles left, they needed to take advantage of it.

Drake suddenly smiled. "What if our first target is the king?" he turned to Chad. "If you can take out the king, I can do the rest. I have an idea," he said, smiling. "Take out the one who has separated himself from the others...he's the key."

"What if my regular arrows are ineffective?" Chad asked. "Without the added stats, what if they don't penetrate their skin enough to kill them?"

"We won't know until we try. If they aren't, it will prompt at least some of them to leave the throne room. We can take care of them then. Just don't enter the throne room, no matter what."

"We have to if they start killing the humans," Mike said somberly.

"Then prepare to fight with everything you have. Inside the throne room, there won't be extra stats or powers. Just us, stripped of any power we received from being in this

dimension. It will literally be life or death." Drake warned. "Our priority is the one separated from the others. Once he's out, take out the rest."

Drake looked up at the sky, one last time. After closing his eyes, a serene expression crossed his features. This time, it was much longer. A soft smile crossed his lips after nearly five minutes, making him look like an angel. He opened his eyes and then turned to his friends. "Let's go."

Chad has his magic bow on his back. All three had their swords either out, gripped tightly in their hand, or at their side with the straps open, making it easy to pull them from their sheaths.

Drake had his whip uncoiled, hanging loosely over his shoulder. It was his first choice in weapons. Keeping it resting over his shoulder prevented it from dragging on the stone floor and making a sound, which in turn would alert those inside the throne room to their arrival.

Back in Drake's room, the dimension master and his cohort watched the screen. They knew that what the boys were planning would be difficult. They also knew that they had very little choice.

The three men watched their sons with anticipation, fear, and worry all wrapped into one. This would be the boys' last stand. They would either succeed and live or fail and die. There was no other choice.

They watched the screen in silence.

The blond archer broke that silence by asking a question. "At the end, Drake faced the sky again. What do you suppose that was about? He's been doing that periodically all night long. I can't even guess what he's doing."

Drake's father shrugged, his eyes not wavering from the three young heirs. "I would like to know that myself. It's not something I would do. It's almost as if he is communicating with the dimension itself."

"Do you think he might be communicating with the dimension?" Mike's father asked, still looking at the boys as they headed toward the castle's mangled front doors.

Drake's father shrugged again. "I don't think so. The dimension communicates with the dimension master through the system. For instance, if I'm needed somewhere, I would be given a quest. If I need something that can't be found easily, the dimension will give that item after a beast kill. What I see right now is that the dimension has already given the boys their weapons. They even have the map. I didn't get mine until we were in the middle of the third ascension quest. As the dimension master, I can give some items,

but not many. That's why I was able to give the life tokens..." the dimension master paused. "What I really want to know is where that ring came from. I don't think that even my father can interfere with the quest."

There was silence for a while as they watched boys make their way through the halls of the castle.

Chad's father broke the silence once more. "Do you think that if they fail and the power source is activated, the humans in the throne room will die?" he asked. "If the dimension gave them a quest, not allowing them to leave, wouldn't that mean that they are needed here. The humans' lives who are held in the throne room could be why. I think the quest is really to save them. In order to do that, they have to kill all the gargoyles so the power source can't activate."

Mike's father shrugged. "Makes sense."

Drake's father continued staring at the screen. "If that's the case...If they have to enter the throne room, then the humans of Storm Town are already dead."

"So basically you're saying that no matter what, if there is even one gargoyle left, if they enter the throne room, those humans will die?" Chad's father asked for confirmation.

The dimension master's eyes flashed with an emerald green light as his eyes narrowed at the screen. "Yes."

It was the only confirmation that was needed.

Chapter 56: 56: Dealing with a Trap pt 8

Drake led the way through the halls of the large castle, weaving through one corridor after another. They were staying as quiet as they could, not wanting to be heard.

He had the handle of his whip grasped tightly as he scanned the area. The length was draped loosely over his shoulder, so it wouldn't drag on the stone floor and alert those inside the throne room.

Chad was next. He had his magic bow on his back and his healing sword on his side with its strap open, allowing it to be released from its sheath if he needed to. The bow he had brought with him from the ordinary world was in his hand with one arrow noticed, and several more were grasped in his hand to access them quickly. The remaining arrows rested in his quiver that hung on his belt. He knew he couldn't miss. He had only nine arrows, and eleven gargoyles were remaining. He didn't have enough to take them all out, so he had to make them count.

Best-case scenario, some of the gargoyles inside would exit the throne room once the one that was separated from the group was taken care of.

Mike was in the rear with Renn beside him. His sword was grasped tightly as he scanned the halls. Those in the throne room were staying in place; The one who was separated from the rest paced in agitation. Mike was ready to fight; they just had to leave the throne room so that he could.

Drake, who was in the lead, tensed. His face was white, drained of all color. "I just thought of something. Don't go into the throne room, no matter what. If I'm right, the humans inside will die if we do."

"What do you mean?" Mike whispered.

"If the humans are the power source and it doesn't activate unless we enter, then when it does, it will use the human's life energy to activate the barrier once inside. It would kill them. The only way to prevent that is not to enter...Even if the gargoyles start to kill them.

Chad nodded slowly. "On our way, look for more arrows. I need at least one for each gargoyle. More, if possible, in case I miss."

As they made their way to the throne room, they found no arrows left with the armor, lined up in the halls. There were only swords and spears. Mike started pulling spears from the armor. In doing so, he found several daggers hidden near the back, hanging on the armor's wide belts. He figured he could throw them, eliminating at least a couple of the gargoyles before Chad ran out of arrows. Technically, he only needed two, since there were eleven gargoyles and Chad had nine arrows, but he didn't want to take chances.

When they reached the large arch of the throne room, he mentally told Renn past the arch so that if they ran out in that direction, Renn could take care of them. Drake and Mike would stand on the closed side of the arch, preventing them from exiting. Drake knew it didn't really matter if they did, but he didn't want to activate his trump card if he didn't have to.

Chad stood with his back to the wall, taking in several breaths. He was preparing to rapid-fire his arrows. He had to be quick. It would be slower than his magic bow. He didn't have to take the time to take arrows out of his quiver, notch, aim, and fire with his magic bow. With his regular one, he did, which would slow him down.

When he pulled the string taut, the squeak of the tension echoed. He quickly swung his body around the wall to face the entrance of the throne room, letting the arrow fly as he did, then, as fast as he could, he notched a second.

The first arrow slammed into the gargoyle's head, who paced on the dais, his back turned, not even seeing his death coming. Quickly after, he burst into light particles, vanishing out of existence.

{Gargoyles defeated 257/267, 10 remain}

The next slammed into another that was keeping the humans in the center; A cloud of light particles formed in his place.

{Gargoyles defeated 258/267, 9 remain}

As Chad fired more arrows, Mike pulled the daggers he had collected. He rapid-fired two of them. Each one hit their mark with precision, killing them on the spot. The cloud of light particles grew thicker.

{Gargoyles defeated 262/267, 5 remain}

Between the two of them, they had taken out a total of four more gargoyles. Chad had five arrows left. Convenient since there are five gargoyles left as well.

The remaining five rushed the entrance arch, with their swords swinging with a powerful force. Drake and his cohort each took one while the last gargoyle rushed toward the entrance of the castle, trying to get free to notify his master that the plan had failed.

{Gargoyles defeated 266/267, 1 remain}

All for was taken out quickly. Drake ignored the escaping gargoyle and looked inside the throne room. "The three that were sent to trap us are in the dungeon," he notified them, before calmly following the gargoyle's trail. He had a slight smirk on his lips.

Back in Drake's room, their father watched in silent awe at how quickly and easily the gargoyles were taken out.

Drake's father was impressed by the way Drake had figured out the issue with entering the throne room. It would have been a disaster if they had chosen to enter it.

"That wasn't the king on the dais," Chad's father noted. "That was a shaman. That means the king is still out there, able to cause trouble while they finish their quest."

Mike's father frowned. "Why aren't they going after the last one. If he gets away..."

The last gargoyle in the room ran toward the castle's open door, only stopping briefly to note the mangled wood and iron. He gasped in shock at the sight.

Behind him, he could hear the soft footsteps of the young heirs. The king's plan had failed. They had lost a lot of men that day. Too many. Their army was diminishing fast. He needed to warn the king. He had to get away.

He knew that all exits were blocked except for one. It was the one the men were supposed to use to allow the heirs to enter the city, seemingly undetected, if they found out there was a trap in place for them.

He rushed down the wide steps and looked behind him. The heirs were still coming. Their pace was steady, not even rushed. They didn't seem to be worried about him escaping. The king told him not to fly, the archer couldn't miss, and the dimension master heir can see through the darkness. He felt like he had no choice.

Before he could leap to the sky, the young heirs exited the castle. A massive beast with glowing green eyes followed. A soft growl could be heard as the sound vibrated through the courtyard.

The dimension master's heir was in the lead; his glowing eyes gleamed as he smiled down at him. "You can't get away." The young man stated, his smile not leaving his face. He watched as the young man looked up into the dark sky, a serene expression on his delicate face. His eyes were closed, only briefly. His smile grew, turning wicked. He lowered his gaze and then stared directly at him. "So what do you want to do? Find an exit? Fly away? It doesn't matter what you do. There is no escape."

Back in Drake's room, the three men watched the monitor. The gargoyle stood in the courtyard, panic in his eyes. He looked toward the exit, then at the sky.

Drake and his cohort, including the beast, remained on the castle's wide steps.

"Either way, the gargoyle is screwed. He isn't fast enough to outrun arrows or Drake's glowing ethereal whip," Mike's father laughed. "Or, Mike's electric pulse. What do you think gargoyle is going to choose?"

Drake's father shrugged. "He did that thing again. It's almost like he's communicating with the sky. It's strange. The gargoyle might have a trick up his sleeve; you never know. In his position, I would probably fly." Then he thought about it. "No, I would run toward the exit. Something about Drake's behavior tells me that something about the sky is his trump card."

The three men watched as the gargoyle made his choice. He extended his leathery wings and flew up into the darkness. Moments later, blood rained from the sky.

Drake smiled as the gargoyle chose to fly. He looked up and watched, not even trying to stop him. When blood started raining down into the courtyard, Drake's smile widened. He quickly gazed up at the sky, his serene expression appearing. His smile grew. The sky suddenly cleared, revealing the stars.

The soft voice floated through his mind.

{Gargoyles defeated 267/267, 0 remain}

{Quest: Defeat the gargoyles has been completed}

{Instant Quest teleportation token has been received.}

{pre-set location: At the crossroads}

{Use teleportation token now?}

{ Yes: No}

Chapter 57: 57: Crossroads

{Use teleportation token now?}

{ Yes: No}

"Will it take me and my entire cohort?" Drake asked the system.

{The quest teleportation token will transport all members of the cohort who are within six feet of the dimension master heir.}

Drake smiled, then turned to his friends. "We just received something equivalent to a cheat code. I want to use it now, before anything else happens, to try to stop our quest. Come as close to me as you can. Keep your weapons ready, just in case."

Chad and Mike looked at Drake questioningly. But received no answer to their silent question.

Renn was the first one to come to Drake, trusting her master fully. She didn't need to know why; she just knew he wouldn't harm her. She sat beside him, her emerald green eyes gleaming in the darkness.

Chad and Mike followed Renn's lead, standing next to Drake. "Now what?" Mike asked. He wasn't sure what else he needed to do. Mike and Chad exchanged a glance before turning their attention back to Drake. They were still wondering what was going on.

"Use teleportation token," Drake told the system the moment all his friends, including Renn, were in position. His friends were still looking at him, waiting for him to tell them what to do next.

{You have chosen to use item: teleportation token}

Drake still didn't answer his friends as he stood with them, waiting for the token to take effect. A green light flashed brightly, surrounding Drake and his cohort, bathing them in a soft green glow. They all flinched, not expecting the bright green light. When the flash subsided, they were no longer standing in the courtyard of the castle in Storm Town. They found themselves, instead, standing at the crossroads at the base of Dragon Head Mountain. The teleportation token had sent them a considerable distance, far ahead of schedule.

Using their newly found magical vision, with their eyes glowing brightly, they observed their surroundings, trying to figure out where they were. They found they were standing in a large clearing, with the packed dirt road clearly visible. It was a massive clearing with no trees hiding the road. It wasn't a four-way crossroad; it was only three. The three roads led off in different directions, with equal distance between them. In front of them was the mountain they had been trying to get to. Now they were there staring up at its massive cliffs. It did indeed look like the head of a dragon.

Mike grinned widely, "Talk about an awesome cheat. This cut a day or more out of our journey." He said excitedly. "Maybe we're about finished, and we can get back home."

Drake just nodded, then quickly placed the cabin. He was exhausted and knew the others were too. "We have been fighting all night; we need to rest. We can start up the mountain first thing in the morning." Then he looked over at Renn, who had doubled in size from her evolutions. "I don't think you can fit through the door anymore."

Renn, acting like there was no problem whatsoever, walked up to the porch, then found a large open space, lay down, and closed her eyes.

Drake walked past her and went inside. Having an idea, he closed the door before his two friends could enter. "Try to open the door," he called out to his friends. "Your eyes glow, so I want to see if you can enter the cabin without me now."

Moments later, the door opened and Chad stepped in. There was a large smile on his handsome face. "I can open it now," he declared, then closed the door for Mike to try.

Once the door was closed, Mike opened it again and stepped inside the cabin. "I can open it too. This will make things a lot easier."

Nearly thirty minutes later, Drake and his friends sat around the table, eating a hearty stew. They hadn't had a chance to eat all day, making them extremely hungry. Renn wasn't; she had taken bites out of her kills during their battle.

Drake had the map open and spread across the table. "We're here," he pointed at the crossroads. "It's going to take about an hour to get to the mountain trail. Mayor Ivan said that the trail only goes a few feet up and there isn't any further trail. That means we have to go hiking up the mountain."

Mike and Chad groaned in unison before Mike spoke. "So, we have to wander around the mountain, trying to find a cave," Mike groaned. His words were sarcastic. "Great...just lovely."

Drake sighed, then pointed to a small symbol on that map. "That's a cave entrance...." He pointed to another. "This is also a cave entrance. There are only three entrances on the map. All we need to do is find which one has the cave of valor inside it and go there."

"So how do we do that?" Mike grumbled. "I feel like we're so close, yet so far."

Chad sat back in his seat. There was a wide grin on his face. "I think I know how we're going to find it."

Drake smirked. "I already figured it out."

Mike raised one brow, folding his arms across his chest, eyeing his two friends, who remained silent. "Well?" he asked, exasperated, wanting them to tell him.

"The staff should have some kind of energy signature. If I've learned anything since we've been here, it should be green. All we have to do is look for that, then head in that direction," Drake stated.

Chad nodded; it was what he had come up with as well.

"I hate to burst your guys' bubbles, what if all the caves are connected and it just looks like it's in one of those caves, but there's a wall separating one cave from another," Mike stated, looking at his friends smugly. "And...what if we can't see through the mountain with our magical vision. I keep trying to see energy signatures inside the mountain, but it's completely dark."

Drake and Chad sighed, their smug smiles falling, then turned into a frown. "Damit," Drake cursed under his breath. "I guess we just search each of them, one by one, until we find it, then.... unless either of you has a better idea?" he asked, looking between his friends.

Chad shrugged. "Maybe we can see it when we get on the mountain. We may be at its base, but it's going to take an hour or so just to get to the trail. Maybe once we're there, we can see more," Chad offered.

Back in Drake's room in the ordinary world, the dimension master and his friends, Mike's and Chad's fathers, watched the computer screen. All three men were in awe that Mike and Chad could now use the magical vision like Drake could. It was something that had never happened before.

They listened to how the boys discussed the caves and how they would attempt to find the Master Staff.

"You have to admit that the boys are doing rather well, considering everything that has been standing in their way. We took months just to figure out the enchanted clearings. Even the bridge took us weeks to figure out how to cross it." Chad's father pointed out.

"They didn't really figure out the bridge. They crossed it differently," Mike added. "They are completing the quest unconventionally."

Drake's father stared at the screen. His expression was calm, yet worry shone in his emerald green eyes. "I think we have several problems. This is just a theory, but I think that someone is trying to either stop them, kill them, or use them as bait to get to us. My first thought is that it's the gargoyle king, but I don't know. There is also someone helping them. There has to be. I know there is a way to hack into the system. The Dimension wouldn't send them forward like that. I don't know who or what, but there is no way the dimension is the one that sent them to the crossroads."

Mike's father paused in thought and looked at his friend. "What do you mean? But helping them is against the rules. Couldn't that force them to fail the quest because of outside involvement?"

"Yes, it is. The question is, who is, and why are they doing it? Are they trying to disqualify them by giving them outside help, or are they getting the boys to where they need to be so whoever it is can swoop in and steal the staff from them?" the dimension master pondered aloud.

"I thought the quest was given to them by the dimension...didn't we discuss it, and that's what we figured?" Chad's father asked.

The dimension master sighed heavily. "That was my first thought, but after they were transported so far ahead in their journey, I'm not so sure. There has to be something that we're missing...something crucial."

Chapter 58: 58: Trek to the Mountain Pt 1

The massive mountain shaped like a dragon's head loomed over the large clearing, casting a shadow that stretched over the vast majority of the clearing.

Drake, Chad, and Mike stood within its shadow, looking up at the massive dragon head. They were trying to determine what direction to head. The trail going up the mountain

was not shown on the map. They had to find the trail themselves at the base of the mountain; they just didn't know which way to try first.

Drake pulled out the map, studying the roads leading to the mountain. One of them led to the mountain's left, the other, the right. It encircled the entire mountain. It didn't really matter which way they went; they would eventually find what they were looking for, but they wanted to find the trail as soon as possible.

Noticing a small marking on the map, Drake hoped it was the beginning of the trail. In the end, he chose to walk straight between the two roads toward the mountain, bypassing both of them. He was heading to the exact center between the two roads, aiming for the small mark on the map.

Walking forward, he replaced the map in his cuff. He didn't want it to get damaged if they were forced to fight.

Renn walked closely behind them, scanning the area for dangers. All three boys had their eyes glowing softly as they watched for beasts, bandits, and other dangers. They looked for clues to where the staff might be inside the mountain as they traveled. It remained dark; they could see nothing within the mountain and its caves.

"Why are we going this way?" It was Chad. He looked between the roads, wondering why they were not traveling on either of them. His long blond hair blew in the wind as he spoke, forcing him to push it out of his face.

The wind whistled through the clearing, causing the long grass and bushes to sway violently as gusts swept through the area.

Drake, still walking, pointed in front of him. "There was a mark on the map that I wanted to check out. It might be the trail we're looking for." The wind didn't bother him; he had swept his own long hair back into a man bun. He didn't want his vision obstructed if they had to fight something or someone on the way there. Mike didn't have that issue; he kept his cut short.

"What if it's a waste of time and turns out to be a rock or something?" Mike asked. There was a bit of humor in his tone. It would be their luck to get all the way there to find that the marking on the map was just a decoration.

Drake chuckled. "Does it matter? We have to get to the mountain regardless of which road we use. Then you have to think...what if the trail is kind of hidden? Most would follow the road, not finding the trail. Why would someone not use the road unless they had a specific reason? We're on a quest...the chances of that little mark on the map being what we're looking for are pretty high. It's not guaranteed, but the chances are still high."

"Yet, Mayor Ivan knew of the trail," Mike cut it. It was one of the things that Ivan had told them. He even said that it only went a couple of feet up the mountain and then stopped completely. "It has to be off one of the roads."

"I don't care," Drake shrugged. "I still want to check it out. Besides, it's the shortest path to the mountain."

Chad was scanning the area, seeing a level five beast heading their way. "Hey, umm... Drake? There's a level 5 beast heading our way. Do you want to try to add it to your collection or kill it?"

Drake turned to Chad, seeing where he was looking. He grinned widely. "Let's play it by ear. If the beast attacks, we kill it. If not, we see if we can add it to our cohort."

Renn turned toward the direction of the incoming beast. Her head was held low. A soft growl came from deep in her throat. It looked like the beast's fate had already been decided.

Chad removed the strap on his sword and raised his bow.

Mike already had his sword glowing brightly, tightly gripped in his gauntlet-covered hands.

Drake removed the strap on his sword, uncoiled his whip, and started to form a spell in his free palm. He didn't want to take chances with a level five beast. "Don't die," he told his cohort.

Drake and his friends had their eyes glowing brightly as they watched the beast charge toward them. It was clearly a level five beast. Its glowing purple eyes shone like bright orbs as the beast came closer.

Glowing violet saliva dripped from its massive fangs. It was a wolf beast, just like all the others. Drake wondered if that was the only kind of beast in the dimension.

Purple streaks of fur glowed through its pitch-black fur. Long, taloned claws tore through the ground as it ran toward them. Even from the distance they were in, they could see glowing purple veins pulsing brightly running through its long claws.

The beast leaped in the air, its sharp jaws wide open, ready to bite down on its first victim. Drake shot an explosive whirlwind towards the beast's chest as it leaped. It exploded on contact, tearing a hole through its thick hide.

The beast roared in pain. Its glowing eye flashed as it landed on the ground, then quickly turned to face its foes.

Drake slashed his whip, two slashed, one ethereal, the other metallic, at the angry beast. It slashed through its hide easily. Cutting through flesh. It only made the beast angrier.

Chad shot an arrow, aiming for the eye; It was a weak spot. If it could go far enough in, it would shoot through its brain. The arrow hit; it was a flawless aim. The beast roared as the energy arrow dissipated. It turned to face Chad, who notched a second arrow, shooting it swiftly.

The beast charged. Mike jumped in the way, slashing with his sword. The purple pulsing through its fur crackled as lightning pulsed through the beast. The beast growled as it fought through the pain of the electrical current.

While it was distracted, Mike slashed his glowing sword, cutting through the soft flesh of the beast's neck. It didn't go very far; the thick muscles tensed, stopping the blade. Mike yanked out his sword and stabbed. The beast twisted, swinging its massive rat tail, throwing Mike several feet back, blood pouring out of his mouth.

"Heal Mike," Drake ordered Chad, as he swung his glowing whip at the beast. At the same time, Renn leaped in, tearing the rat-like tail and detaching it from its owner; The sound of ripping echoed through the clearing. Renn, keeping her prize, chomped down on it as if it were a snack.

Drake's whip double-slashed, hitting the beast's giant head twice, causing blood to pour down its face. Before the second slash had hit, he had already shot an energy beam, while he filled his whip with energy again.

The beast was relentless.

Renn, finished with her snack, leaped on the beast, holding on with her sharp claws. Her sharp, fanged teeth sank into the beast's back, making it howl. With the beast distracted as it was trying to force Renn off its back, Drake ran forward, pulling his sword, and stabbed right through the heart. The beast exploded into a cloud of light particles, causing Renn to fall to the ground.

{You have slain a level 5 beast}

{You have received level 5 beast armor}

Drake put his sword back in his sheath and walked toward the armor. Immediately, he could tell that it was for his familiar. It was a massive set of chainmail and black armor, with green runes, carved in beautiful patterns in the elegant metal. "Come, Renn," he told her. "I have something for you."

Renn walked up to her master, sitting proudly. She had helped Drake kill the powerful beast. Drake draped the glossy chainmail over her head, sliding it into place, then

added the runed, elegant black armor. As soon as the pieces were all in place, the runes glowed green, as if overjoyed by being used by a new master. The runes faded, barely glowing.

Chad was still hunched over, next to Mike, with the healing sword glowing brightly. When he was satisfied, he replaced his sword and helped Mike stand.

Renn walked up to Mike and nuzzled his side with her massive head. He nearly fell over. Chad had to grasp him tightly, preventing him from falling. She didn't like that he had been injured in the fight.

"Renn received armor, showing she can be a bit more protected," Drake said, smiling as he walked toward Mike. He studied his friend, scanning for injuries. He wanted to make sure that he was alright. He was glad that at least one of them had a healing ability.

Chapter 59: 59: Trek to the Mountain Pt 2

When Drake approached Mike with relief on his face, he quickly grasped Mike's hand and pulled him forward into a hug. "I'm glad you're okay. I saw the blood and was afraid you were hurt too badly." He pulled away, then looked over at Chad. "I'm really...glad you have that healing sword." Drake choked out.

Chad nodded; he was glad, too. His face was pale, worried that he couldn't save Mike. "Let's get going before anything else happens," Chad stated. Drake wasn't the only one relieved that Mike could be healed by it.

With one last scan of the clearing, Drake and his friends turned and headed toward the mountain. Renn followed close behind, preening with her new armor. Her green eyes glowed brightly as she scanned the clearing, as well as the forest around it, for dangers.

The wind blew, whipping Chad's hair as they walked. Sudden bursts of wind gusts whistled past as they walked forward.

"This is the first time the wind has been this bad since we've been in this dimension. Not counting those strange storms, though," Mike observed. It was true. There had been a light breeze, but nothing more. The storms were different because they weren't natural.

"I was wondering that too. I think we need to be aware that something might be going on, and we haven't seen it yet. It seems like every time there is something strange with the weather, bad things happen," Drake advised, still walking toward Dragon Head Mountain.

Wind whipped around them, blasting dust and leaves around their feet, creating whirlwinds of debris. It was getting worse... Much worse. The sky suddenly darkened, black clouds moving in, hiding the twin suns one at a time.

A menacing darkness consumed the clearing.

Drake called back to his friends, "Keep your eyes peeled. Someone or something is trying to prevent us from getting to the mountain. The closer we get, the worse the weather is."

The trio pulled out their weapons and continued walking. Their eyes glowed brightly in the darkening clearing, but as they scanned the area around them, they couldn't see anything that would be considered a danger. Drake looked up at the clouds, but all he could see was clouds, nothing more.

His gut told him that this was not a natural storm. He pressed forward, trying to get to the mountain's base.

"What if we just run there?" Mike asked. "It's not really that far away."

As if answering Mike's question, the thunder rolled across the sky. Lightning flashed, striking in front of them.

Drake looked at his friends as he continued walking. He nodded. Then sprinted forward. The others followed, running as quickly as they could, yet still scanning for dangers. Their weapons were tightly gripped in their hands as they ran, refusing to put them away. If something emerged from the storm to attack them, they wanted to be able to defend themselves.

The closer they got to the base of the mountain, the harder it rained. Thunder crashed, vibrating the ground. It was so loud, it was like an earthquake. Rain poured in thick ropes, no longer droplets. The clearing was beginning to be covered with water.

Drake activated his lantern of truth, which helped to light the way. It was barely seen through the downpour. As the thunder rolled across the sky, the ground shifted. Drake's eyes widened as he saw glowing purple lights under the packed dirt. "RUN!!" he yelled. "RUN FASTER! Level 5 Beasts...Lots of them!" Drake was in a panic. He wasn't sure if they could take on that many beasts. There were dozens of them.

The boys picked up their pace, their own eyes glowing, as they looked down at the ground beneath their feet.

They saw the glowing level five beasts, too. These were not wolf beasts but something that tunneled through the ground like worms. All they could do was run, trying to get away from them.

"System, if you can tell us how to get out of this mess, I would like you to tell me!" Drake groaned to the system as he continued to run.

{Horned worms are attracted to movement}

{Recommendation. Stop}

Drake halted immediately in his tracks, freezing in place. Mike and Chad nearly crashed into him. Renn stopped, then stood by her master.

"Freeze," Drake hissed. "They're called horned worms, and they are attracted to movement."

The boys froze. Even Renn complied, understanding the danger. Drake and his friends looked down at where the beasts could be seen. Their eyes glowed as they observed the bright purple energy clusters beneath their feet. After nearly twenty minutes, the beasts began to disperse.

The storm around them raged on, relentlessly pelting them with thick rain. The clouds shifted in the sky, crashing loudly, vibrating the ground. It didn't seem to affect the worms. The vibrations were too widespread. It was their footsteps that caused the horned worms to pinpoint their location.

"So, we wait it out?" Mike asked.

Drake nodded. When we don't see any of them anymore, then we start again. Try to walk as softly as possible. There isn't much distance left. There's only about twelve feet.

Back in Drake's room in the regular world, Drake's father sat in front of the computer screen and watched the boys as they ran toward the mountain. A massive storm assailed them as they ran.

His green eyes flashed with worry. If they had taken one of the roads that surrounded the mountain, they wouldn't have had issues with the worms. Even through the computer screen, he could see the massive clusters of horned worms attracted by their pounding feet on the packed ground.

The roads around the mountain were built using magic. The enchantment was specifically designed for the worms that lived in the clearing closest to the mountain. Since the worms were attracted to movement, the enchantment on the road prevented them from feeling the movement of those traveling on it. It was a way to travel around the clearing and stay safe as they traveled to the towns on the other side of the mountain.

Since the boys bypassed the roads and headed straight to the mountain, they were facing a horde of horned worms. All of which were level five beasts.

The boys suddenly stopped. Drake's father leaned in, listening to what he was saying. He had told them to freeze. The system must have told him what they were. Either that,

or he was trying to see if it would get them to leave them. It was a good call if it were the latter.

Mike's and Chad's fathers entered the room, seeing Drake's father staring intently at the computer screen on the desk.

When they looked at the screen themselves, they both gasped. "Why did they cut through? The horned worms will never let them get to the base of the mountain. They're stuck!" Mike's father complained.

Drake pulled out his map of the dimension and stared at the area where the boys were frozen in place, watching the ground at their feet. He had been looking at where they were aiming, seeing the mark on the map. He frowned, pointing at the map. "That's why."

The dimension map was unique. It changed on its own. The mark in question was not there before. It was something new.

"What is that?" Chad's father asked, staring at the spot in question.

"I'm not sure." Drake's father stated, staring at the mark. "I hope it's not a trap of some kind. They have dealt with enough already. Far more than we ever did."

Mike's father stepped back and leaned against the wall. "Does the cave of valor move locations?"

"I don't know. Perhaps, perhaps not. I don't really know," he said honestly.

Back at the clearing. Drake stood frozen, staring at the retreating horned worms. As if on instinct, he pressed his palm on the ground and closed his eyes. His features were serene as he stood unmoving, with his palm pressed on the dirt.

Mike and Chad glanced at each other before looking at Drake and what he was doing. Neither of the boys could figure out what he was doing. First toward the sky, now toward the ground, yet he appeared to be doing the same thing. They wanted to ask, but didn't want to interrupt him.

They looked down at the ground. The worms had not yet moved. Suddenly, both boys froze. "What...What...what's happening?" Mike asked in disbelief.

Chad swallowed hard, staring at the ground. He couldn't understand what was happening. He had no words. None...none at all.

Drake suddenly stood up. The serene appearance left his features; a wide grin spread across his face as he calmly walked the remaining few feet to the spot that was marked on the map. Renn followed calmly, no longer caring that there were level 5 beasts at their feet.

With one last glance at each other, Mike and Chad followed their friend, utter disbelief on their face.

When they reached the base of the mountain marked on the map, the storm ceased, and the clouds quickly vanished, like a fast-forward button being pressed on a movie. In moments, the sky cleared and the wind settled.

Mike looked at Drake, his eyes wide. "What the hell did you do!"

Chapter 60: 60: The Mark on the Map

Mike looked at Drake, his eyes wide. "What the hell did you do!"

They had just arrived at the mountain's base. The storm had stopped abruptly, the sky clearing, the wind had stopped, all in seconds after they had arrived. Drake had done his weird...whatever he was doing. He did it at Storm town, only facing toward the sky. Here it was toward the ground. They had no idea of what their friend was doing.

Minutes after he had started doing whatever he had done, the worms had turned from bright purple energy to green. The horned worms had paused for a while before disappearing deeper within the ground and out of sight of their magical vision.

Drake shrugged at his friends as if it were no big deal. "We gained more allies."

"What! How did you make the worms allies? I saw it. They went from purple to green when you were doing that weird thing with the palm of your hand on the ground...then you just stood like nothing had happened and walked toward the mountain. So...what the hell did you do?" Mike was baffled and couldn't contain himself. He blurted the words loudly, as if demanding an explanation.

Chad stood to the side watching with interest. He wanted to know, too, but Mike was already asking the questions that he wanted to ask.

Drake shrugged again as he studied the map, unbothered by Mike's outburst, looking for the exact area of the mark. He had looked around the area but didn't see whatever the mark was on the map, so he was studying the map once again to try to figure out what he was supposed to find. He didn't know what the mark represented. It was something he was trying to figure out.

Chad finally cut it. "I want to know too. You did the same thing in Storm Town. You did it again in the clearing. Here...It was only on the ground instead of the sky. So, what did you do?"

Drake sighed. "In Storm Town, I was communicating with 'Protector.' He was the one who was darkening the sky, creating a dome around the city so that if the gargoyles tried to escape, they couldn't. It worked out just fine. Here, I was talking to the horde of horned worms. They became allies and let us pass through the clearing unharmed. By the way, as our allies, we benefit from their kills. You should be thanking me," he said, smiling widely. "Now, let's find whatever that mark on the map is supposed to be so we can complete our quest."

Back in Drake's room in the ordinary world. Drake's father stared at the screen in awe. His two friends stood behind him, unable to speak. "He turned the worms into allies? Like he did with the Broken Bridge's protector? You heard that, right?" Drake's father asked his friends in disbelief. As a dimension master, he had seen a lot, but he had never seen anything like what Drake was doing.

Mike's father nodded. "I heard that...How can he do that?" He was baffled by what Drake was capable of. It was their bloodlines for centuries that protected the dimension. The dimension master and his cohort positions were hereditary; they were passed down from generation to generation. None has ever accomplished anything like that. Not even close.

"But how many horned worms were there? There had to have been hundreds...right? That's a lot of allies!" Chad's father added. The entire situation was... legendary.

"Even the prophecy states that the last dimension master will control a legion of beasts. You have to remember, though. He will either destroy or save the dimension. From what I'm seeing, he will save it. I pray that he saves it. I don't know what to do if he turns against the dimension and destroys it." The dimension master said solemnly. "Too much is happening to him. He may decide to hate it so much that he decides to destroy it. We can't let that happen."

Mike's father swallowed hard. "You're talking about what happened during that other storm: The one where he said that we would go in and kill the three of them. I think if and when they complete the quest, they aren't going to trust us. We need to prepare for that. We need to show them support and make sure they don't have any reason to believe that we would turn against them. That alone could make them want to destroy the dimension. I think our support will help prevent it."

Chad's father nodded in agreement, but didn't say anything. He kept his eyes on the boys as they searched for the mark the map was indicating.

At the base of the mountain, Drake studied the map while Renn roamed the base in search of whatever the mark on the map was identifying. She sniffed the air, then traveled along the ground as she tried to find what they were looking for.

A low bark-howl left deep in her throat before she looked up at her master, indicating that she had found something.

Drake slowly walked toward her, looking near where she was indicating. There was a rock edged with runes, the same ones as on his robes and armor. The runes were placed in a unique pattern as if they had written a message of some kind on the rock. It reminded him of a road sign; somehow, he knew it wasn't one.

"Good girl, Renn! You found what we've been looking for," he praised. Renn had found what he had been looking for, and by the look of what it was, he knew they were supposed to see it.

Chad and Mike came up behind Drake, their eyes glowing brightly: one white, the other blue. They looked down at the runed rock. "I don't see anything; just a runed rock," Mike shrugged. He was studying it with his magical vision. All he saw was a rock with runes carved inside. The runes weren't even glowing. It was just a rock.

Chad remained silent, staring at the rock intently. After several minutes, he shrugged. "I don't get it. It's just a rock." He was seeing the same thing Mike was. To them, it was an ordinary rock with runes carved into its smooth surface.

Drake pressed his hand on the rock to see if it did anything, but nothing happened. He let his eyes glow brightly as he conversed with the system.

"System, analyze and notify the purpose of this item," he ordered the system. There was silence for several minutes before Drake lifted his hand and stared at the rock. He had figured that the system wasn't going to answer.

Behind him, Mike had started laughing, "It's just a rock! I told you it would turn out to be a decoration!" he laughed so hard that he had to hold his stomach as he hunched over in laughter. "It's just a stupid rock!"

Drake ignored him because seconds after he took his hand from the rock, the system began its work.

{Analyzed Marker, A Marker is a stone left with a message or item inside that can be absorbed by the system.}

{Would you like to absorb the Marker?}

{Yes or No}

Drake smiled. "Yes," he answered the system. He wasn't even thinking that it might be harmful to him. He felt that it was something good because the runes on the rock matched his robes and armor.

The 'Marker' rock began to glow with a faint green glow, then burst into green light particles that entered his body. Drake fell to his knees in pain as the light particles swirled through his skin and into his very soul. His eyes dimmed as it completed its absorption process, then the system's soft voice spoke.

{Marker has been absorbed}

{Ascension Quest map has been absorbed.}

{1 of 7 quests has been unlocked. You can now use the first quest map.}

Drake smiled widely as he picked himself off the ground. He didn't even realize that his cohort surrounded him. There was worry and fear in their eyes. He hadn't realized that he had been screaming in pain for nearly fifteen minutes. He was consumed by agony, making him lose all sense of time.

Chad had his sword out. He had been trying to stop the pain, but nothing was happening.

Mike was on his knees, staring at Drake in horror, not knowing what he could do.

As soon as Drake turned to look at them, relief washed through their features like water. He was fine; there wasn't anything wrong with him anymore. He would be fine.

With his jaw clenched tightly, Mike looked at Drake. "What happened...why were you in pain?" His voice was shaky; it was fear from the thought of losing his friend.

Looking between his friends, he pointed at the place where the rock once was. It was gone, absorbed into the system. "Sorry for scaring you, but it was painful. I absorbed the rock."