

Dimension Master

#Chapter 61: Quest Map - Read Dimension Master

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"Sorry for scaring you, but it was painful. I absorbed the rock." Drake informed them. He felt bad that his friends worried about him. He couldn't control what was happening once it started. It had felt like hot knives were going through his veins as he absorbed the ruined rock. He didn't even know that he had been screaming in agony for a long time. Fifteen minutes was a really long time to lose track of.

Mike studies his friend for a moment, "You're okay, though, right?" Drake's face was still pale, looking somewhat strained. He wasn't convinced that his friend was doing okay. He may be acting fine, but he didn't look like he was doing okay. Chad had used the sword on him, but it didn't do anything. It was as if Drake's body had ignored the healing power or rejected it. It didn't make sense.

Chad stood beside them quietly, just watching. He didn't know what to say. Besides, Mike was already asking everything that he wanted to know. For now, anyway. He didn't believe Drake's protests that he was fine either. After watching him roll on the ground screaming for the last fifteen minutes, there was no way in hell that he was fine.

"I'm okay. I'm just a little sore, that's all. I'll be completely back to normal in a bit. I just need to recover." Drake looked between his friends. "I'm okay, really...Don't worry about me, I'm fine." He tried to convince them that he was fine, but it didn't seem to be working. He was fine; he was just exhausted from absorbing the rock. It seemed to have taken a lot out of him.

Mike sighed, not knowing what else to do. He could tell there was something different about Drake. He couldn't place what it was. His gut told him that Drake was different. Whatever it was, it worried him. He only had two friends, and both of them were standing next to him. The thought made him look at Renn... 'okay...three friends.'

Seeing that Mike wasn't going to ask, Chad had his arms folded and stared at Drake. His gaze pierced him like daggers. He was two seconds away from tapping his foot on the ground like a child out of impatience. "What did the rock do or do to you, after you absorbed it?" he asked. "You don't look fine, and you seem to be intentionally keeping whatever it did a secret. So...what did it do?"

Drake sighed, knowing that his friends weren't going to let the subject go until they knew what had happened. "I'll tell you when I try it out and see if it works. I want to recover a bit before we head up the mountain. I'm hoping it will do what I think it will, but I want to

be sure. As soon as I know the details...I'll let you know. I don't want to get your hopes up for it to be something entirely different than what I thought it was." Drake explained.

He didn't want to tell his friends and cohort what he had received. He didn't understand if it told him what the quests were, where to find them, or if it led them to the spot at the end of the quest where he would find whatever artifact was waiting for him.

In the current quest, it was the Master Staff. The other quests were locked, so he had no idea what they were. The map could also show where the hidden quests began and in what order to follow them. In reality, he hoped that it would guide him to the end of the quest so he could find the Master Staff and take his friend's home.

"Then let's rest, and when you're done recovering, you can try it out...whatever it is," Mike grumbled, annoyed at his friend. His friend normally didn't keep secrets; this was the first time he could ever think of him hiding something. Normally, he was an open book and told them pretty much everything. He wanted to know, and if he was told what it was, they could try to figure it out together.

Drake sat on the grass and pulled out the map, and studied it. The first thing he noticed was that the mark showing the rock was no longer present. "This map seems to be enchanted," Drake observed aloud. "More than what we already know about it. I know it shows us where the beasts are located and what level they are, but this is different." Drake wondered what else the map did that they hadn't discovered before. Drake wondered if the map changed the landscape as the dimension changed.

"What do you mean?" Mike asked, leaning over to see what Drake was looking at. He didn't really see a difference from the last time they looked at it. As he scanned the map, he saw nothing different from before.

"The mark showing where the rock was located is gone. The map erased it after I absorbed the rock," Drake explained, still looking at the map. Shaking his head, he handed Mike the map. He couldn't wait to recover fully; he wanted to know what the ascension quest map did.

He didn't even have to ask the question. The moment he thought about looking at his current quest, a green thread appeared for him to follow. He could easily follow the thread, but he wanted to see the whole map.

The moment he thought about it, a map appeared in his mind. The green thread remained, not fading. He could see both the map and the thread that led him toward the side of the mountain that he needed to go. He smiled as he studied the map.

The Map showed a green line weaving through the mountain and entering a cave. He didn't see inside the cave...figuring the map would change and show the rest of where they needed to go once they entered it.

Mentally closing it, he kept the thread active. "Ok, I know what it does. Are you ready to go? I know how to get to the Master Staff," he told them, grinning widely. "Second, do either of you see a green thread leading toward the mountain?" Drake wanted to test whether his friends could see it, too. He hoped that they could. It might make things easier.

Both boys allowed their eyes to glow brightly, one white, one electric blue, as they scanned the area.

"There," Chad pointed. "We go that way. It looks like a green thread, and it's leading us that way."

Mike nodded. "That's what that is? It leads us to the quest's artifact?" He stood there, looking at the glowing green thread in disbelief, unsure what else to say.

Drake started following the thread with Renn close behind. Mike and Chad had no choice but to follow them, or they would be left behind.

The thread they were following led to the right side of the mountain, all the way to the road.

"So, is that all it does?" Mike asked; he wanted to know more about the green thread.

"No, I can bring up a map to see the entire path to the Master Staff. So far, I can tell I can either follow the thread or follow the map, which shows a lot more than what we can see in front of us. I don't know if it will do anything else yet. When I first got it, the system told me that one of seven has been unlocked. That means we have a total of seven ascension quests. I don't know yet if we can go home in between or not. I guess we'll find out when we get to the Master Staff and retrieve it."

"We have seven ascension quests?" Mike asked. "What happens if we don't complete them?" He was worried that they would have to return the dimension or not let them return home until all seven were completed. Either option sucked. Then he looked at Renn. "I wonder if we can take Renn with us back home."

"We won't know what we can do until we finish this first quest. My gut tells me that either way, we need to complete all seven quests, regardless of whether we go home in between or not. Either way, I will complete the quests. I feel like we have to...that bad things will happen if we don't," Drake explained.

Chad looked between his two friends. "I hope we can go home in between. We can prepare for the next one instead of going in blind like we did with this one. Besides, I'm not convinced that what you found out during that big storm isn't true. What if our dads decide to kill us?" He had been pondering it the entire time. At first, he didn't believe it, but the more he learned in the dimension, the more he wondered if what happened at the clearing during the storm was a warning.

Chapter 62: 62: Guard at the Trail

Drake followed the glowing green thread. It led them all the way to the road located on the right side of the dragon-shaped mountain. It was the side that they would have taken if he had not gone in between the two roads and cut through the clearing that headed toward the runed rock. He was glad he chose the path he took. It gave them a boon. One that would help them complete their quests far quicker than without it.

"Well, we're back on the road," Mike observed. His glowing, electric blue eyes followed the green thread. "Weren't we going to go this way anyway?" he asked.

Chad just nodded, keeping an eye on Drake. Something was different, but he didn't know what it was.

"I guess we just follow the thread and see where it takes us. I'm pretty sure we need to find the trail that Mayor Ivan was talking about," Drake said, as he scanned the area for beasts. The only ones he could see were the horned worms in the clearing. Their colors were once purple, now bright emerald green. They were now allies and would come to him if he called them, just like Protector would.

He couldn't see anything on the mountain. It seemed like the mountain was shielding the beasts. There should be beasts up there somewhere. Back in the ordinary world, there were always beasts there, no matter where you went.

Mike and Chad walked down the road, following Drake. They were following the thread, which followed the road as far as they could see. They didn't know when they would need to start up the mountain. They couldn't see the map that Drake could when he summoned it. All they could see was the thread.

"When do we start up the mountain?" Chad asked, still following the green thread. He was thankful that he could at least see the thread. He wished he could see the map, too, so that he could analyze it.

Drake barely looked back and shrugged. "It's pretty far. It's near the back of the mountain. We have a long way to go."

Mike and Chad looked up at the mountain's face. They scanned the long cliffs and the areas with clusters of trees, grass, and rocks. They saw how far it was to the back of the dragon-shaped mountain, realizing how far it was. "Yeah, we have a long way to go," Mike grumbled.

After hours of walking, they finally reached the trail that led up the mountain. It weaved around rocks and trees only a couple of feet from the road. Slowly, they followed the trail. The glowing green thread was overlaid on it as well.

They were so exhausted from walking that they hadn't noticed that a large beast was guarding the trail.

A menacing growl echoed through the trees, which caused the boys to look up from the glowing green thread they were following. They were met with a pair of brightly glowing purple eyes. It was a level 5 beast. It looked like a bear, but its fangs were long, nearly touching the ground. The fur was camouflaged, blending in with the trees. Its claws resembled the bark of the trees on the mountain.

If the beast had its eyes closed, it would have been hard to see. What scared Drake the most was that when it closed its eyes, he couldn't see it at all...not even with his magical vision.

Renn lowered her head, growling menacingly, moving her large body in front of Drake to protect him.

Drake immediately uncoiled his whip and filled it with green energy. With his free hand, he filled it with an explosive whirlwind. Without stopping to think, he threw it toward the bear-type beast. It smashed into its face, exploding on impact.

The beast roared; it echoed through the trees and vibrated through the mountain. Rocks slide down the side, crashing into trees and boulders that stay firm, refusing to move out of their place.

Drake knew this was going to be a tough fight. He worried that the beast's roar woke others. He didn't want to have to try to fight more than one.

Chad had pulled out his bow and was firing nonstop, hitting the beast. The strap on his sword was undone, just in case he needed it.

Mike was filling his sword with power, and an electrical current passed up and down the blade, crackling as it moved. He shot a lightning bolt at the beast, hitting it in the same spot Drake's explosive whirlwind had exploded.

The beast was unharmed. It was pissed.

Drake slashed his charged whip. The whip slashed and dual-sliced at the beast, causing it to step back. It was unharmed. It didn't even scratch it. "Shit! Nothing's working!" Drake hissed.

He tried his whip again, with the same results. He quickly coiled it around his wrist and pulled out his sword. Filling it with energy, the runes lining the elegant blade glowed a bright green. Slashing at the beast, the energy exploded toward the beast.

It slashed its large claws at the attack, flinging Drake against a tree. His vision blurred, but he refused to pass out. Shaking his head to clear it, he stood up and headed toward

the beast. Putting his sword away, he started shooting spells one after the other. He began with wind blades, making them as sharp as he could, then switched to fire blades, not giving the beast time to react. As he did, Chad continued to slash his own sword, trying to wound it, but it did nothing.

Mike kept shooting lightning bolts and energy blades, doing what he could to kill the beast. It seemed like his attacks were only an annoyance. This beast was strong. They had no idea what to do to even scratch it.

The beast roared in anger, the sound echoing through the trees. Drake flinched with the sound. Rocks rolled down the mountain from the vibration of the sound. He quickly scanned the mountain for more beasts, attracted by the sound. He saw none.

With a relentless barrage of spells, Drake shot his wind and fire spells. Remembering he had energy beams as well, he shot one, still aiming in the same spot. The beam smashed into the beast. This time, it howled in pain.

"Damn it, where is its weak spot!" Drake yelled in anger as his friends continued to attack it. Renn was keeping back; their attacks were in the way, preventing her from attacking it herself.

The soft voice of the system answered his plea.

{The weak spot of the level 5 beast is in its abdominal area.}

"Go for the abdomen, it's the beast's weak spot!" Drake yelled to his friends as he still shot spells.

"How the hell do we get there? It's on all fours; we can't even see it!" Mike yelled in frustration. Nothing seemed to be harming the beast.

Chad continued to swing his sword. There was nothing they could do until they could find a way to get the beast to show them its stomach. "We took down over two hundred gargoyles, how can we not even scratch this beast?" Chad breathed out. His voice shook with frustration; everything he tried failed.

"We just need to get it to show its abdomen!" Mike yelled. He swung his sword, using as much power as he could, trying to do something, anything to the beast. Nothing was working.

Frustrated, Drake uncoiled his whip, this time filling it with the same power as his energy beam. It seemed to give the beast pain at least. He sprinted toward a large boulder that was right next to the beast and leaped, slashing his whip out at an angle as he did.

The whip coiled around its large neck as Drake's feet landed on the boulder, then he leaped again onto the beast's back. He pulled the whip as hard as he could, causing the whip to tighten. The beast flung backward, trying to throw him off, but he held firm.

As he flung back, its abdomen was revealed. Renn took advantage and dove forward, opening her large jaws, biting down on the beast's abdomen, and ripping out a chunk of flesh. The beast tried to howl in pain, but the tight whip around its neck prevented any sound.

Renn continued her assault, eating the beast alive.

Drake, with one hand keeping the whip tight, yanked his sword out and stabbed it directly in the beast's eyes, slamming it as hard as he could, making it go all the way through to its brain.

The beast burst into light particles, causing Drake to fall to the ground, breathing heavily.

{You have slain a Level 5 Beast}

{You have received Emerald Key}

Drake hunched over, breathing heavily. Chad and Mike were doing the same.

Slowly, Drake crawled over to his reward, picking it up and staring at it, wondering what it did. He knew it was a key, but didn't know what it opened. It looked like an old-fashioned skeleton key, but was made out of solid emerald. Delicate runes decorated its surface. It was beautiful.

Chapter 63: 63: Mountain

Drake stored the key in his storage book and leaned against the boulder, trying to slow his breathing. He was exhausted from walking; now, after the fight with the powerful beast, he wanted to pass out and sleep. Looking around at his friends, he could tell that they wanted to do the same.

"We can either continue or we can go to the clearing and rest," Drake stated, leaning his head against the rock. "There is enough room at the other side of the road to set the cabin. We can sleep and continue in the morning if you want. I don't know about you, but I don't have the energy to fight another Level 5 beast."

Both boys nodded in agreement and slowly stood.

Drake forced himself to stand, wincing as he did. Slamming into the tree hurt. He was beginning to feel it.

The three boys, with Renn following, walked down the few feet to the road and crossed it to the clearing. It was as if the mountain was placed inside the clearing.

Drake pulled out his book, found the page where their cabin was, and quickly placed it in the clearing. "Let's get something to eat and get some rest." He looked down at Renn. "After we complete this quest and we get home, I'm going to see about making a door big enough for you to come in, too. I feel bad you have to stay outside." He frowned, then opened the door, stepping inside.

Renn lay down on the porch, watching their surroundings. She appeared unbothered by not being able to enter the cabin.

It was morning again, and they had already eaten and stored the cabin in the storage book. They stood in front of the trail and prepared themselves to face more bear beasts. Drake was staring at the ascension guest map, wishing that the others could see it too. He found that the cave entrance wasn't too far past the trail.

The short trail was only three feet long before it ended completely. It served, in Drake's opinion, to be a marker to start up the mountain to find the cave that held their prize. Past the short trail was a cave entrance. According to the map, it wasn't the cave they needed. They had to keep going.

They followed the glowing green thread. Coming off the short trail and past the first cave entrance, through the trees, and around small ravines. There were no other beasts, at least none that they could see.

It was hard to tell, since the bear beasts were virtually invisible if their eyes were closed. Even their magical vision couldn't see them.

A gentle breeze whistled through the trees as they made their way up the mountain, closer to the cave entrance. They were nearly at the entrance they needed when sounds around them quieted. There was total silence. Even the sound of bugs couldn't be heard.

Renn lowered her head, her eyes glowing brightly as she surveyed the area. There was nothing to see.

Chad removed his bow from his back and prepared to pull the luminous string that would create one of his energy arrows.

Mike had his gauntlets on and his sword held up in a firm grip, as he scanned the area around them.

Drake uncoiled his whip, letting it fall silently to the ground, and filling it with soft green energy. He knew something was out there; he just didn't know what it was. It had to be something powerful. Only something that could silence the mountain had to be very powerful. "Keep walking," Drake ordered, just keep going, and be prepared for an ambush. I think something or someone powerful is following us."

As they walked through the silent forest, they hadn't seen anything. There were no beasts, no bandits, no assassins, nothing. The forest remained silent, a haunted mountain of trees, giving an eerie pressure to the atmosphere around them. Drake felt like he was in a horror novel, where even the trees came out to attack.

In the distance, he could see the cave entrance that they needed. He hoped that whatever was out there wasn't in the cave. The beasts in the area were supposed to be level 5-ranked beasts. They had barely survived the last one. He wanted the quest to be over with, but things kept getting in the way. It felt like everyone, including the dimension itself, wanted them to fail. 'I refuse to fail,' Drake thought as he contemplated the situation and everything that had happened to them so far.

As they stepped through the trees, following the green thread, the pressure heightened, pressing against their very beings. Whatever was out there was incredibly powerful. Drake knew by the pressure he was feeling that he would not be able to win in a fight with whoever or whatever was out there.

A sudden darkness covered the trees like a blanket, causing Drake to pull out the lantern of truth. It was a tiny lantern, but it illuminated the area around them, enough for them to see in the distance, even the entrance to the cave they were heading for.

"I think we need to hurry," Drake whispered, not wanting whoever or whatever was out there to hear him. "We need to get to the entrance...stay close, and be ready to fight."

Chad and Mike stepped closer to Drake, while Renn took the lead, sniffing the air around them, trying to find what was after them. She didn't see anything.

Back in Drake's room in the ordinary world, the dimension master and his two friends, Mike's and Chad's fathers, watched the boys on the screen as they made their way toward the cave.

Even from the screen, they could feel the pressure as the forest around the boys quieted down. The entire mountain went silent, as if afraid to make a noise.

"It's like the entire mountain is holding its breath," Chad's father observed. "Something powerful is pursuing them. It's the only explanation."

Drake's father continued to stare at the computer screen. "I don't see anything. Do either of you?" he asked, hoping they could figure out what was going on. He didn't like what he was feeling.

Mike's father bent closer to the screen, scanning every inch of what the monitor was revealing. "I don't see anything either. They're a few feet from the cave entrance, maybe whatever is out there is inside the cave?" he offered. He spoke the words in a question.

"Maybe...but, if whatever is out there is in the cave, that doesn't give them much room to fight. Being attacked in a small space can get them all killed," Drake's father said evenly. His green eyes shone brightly with fear for the boys' safety and anger that they were most likely about to be ambushed.

The three men watched as the boys continued their journey. As they walked, the path suddenly darkened, causing Drake to pull out the little lantern to light their way. The forest couldn't even be seen through the thick darkness. The sky above was only pitch black.

"Could whatever or whoever is out there be making sure we don't see what the boys are about to face?" Chad's father asked. "I feel like that darkness is for us, and not the boys."

Drake's father clenched his jaw, thinking of the only three individuals living in the dimension who could do that; none of them good. "If it's who I think it is, I'm going to kill them when the boys are done with their quest. I may not be able to right now, but as soon as they obtain the master staff, I can pulverize whoever is out there, no matter who or what it is...family or not."

Mike looked at his friend. "It can't be...he wouldn't do that," he said in disbelief.

Drake's father, his eyes not wavering from the screen, spoke with clenched teeth. "I don't know, he is only one of the possibilities. If it's him, I will never forgive him. He will die for trying to harm my son."

The boys walked through the darkness toward the entrance of the cave they needed. The small lantern shone its soft white light, revealing the area around them. The mountain was silent as they continued slowly toward the cave entrance.

Renn growled low, but continued moving, not stopping, even to sniff the air. She was focused on something, but Drake couldn't tell what it was.

Only a few steps left, and they would be in front of the entrance. The green line leading them was heading inside, but could not be seen through the thick black mist inside the cave entrance.

"Shit, I can't see anything. Even the lantern can't penetrate the mist," Drake complained in a whisper. His words, although quiet, echoed through the darkness as if the mist were solid.

Drake turned to his friends. "I don't like this, but we have no choice. Our quest leads us inside that cave. Be ready to protect yourselves at any moment. That black mist looks... unnatural."

The boys nodded in agreement as they all stepped into the entrance of the cave.

Chapter 64: 64: Cave entrance

As the boys stepped into the cave's dark entrance, the black mist pressed against their bodies. The freezing, black mist blanketed their skin, tingling through them as if tiny worms were crawling on their skin's surface.

"I don't like this," Mike complained, rubbing his arm.

"Agreed," Chad whispered back. His whisper bounced off the mist in a slightly louder echo. 'Weird,' he thought.

Renn slowly walked, her eyes glowing brightly, as her magical sight attempted to penetrate the dark mist to see what was beyond it. She still couldn't see anything.

Drake followed his familiar as she moved slowly forward, forcing his way through the thick mist. It had a pressure all its own. It felt alive...wrong.

With one hand, Drake formed a firewall, throwing it forward through the freezing, dark mist. The mist sucked it in, then a sizzling sound was heard. The fire didn't part the black mist; it was sucked through it.

Forming an energy beam, he shot it forward, the mist sucking the glowing green energy into its depths, but the black mist didn't part. Drake was trying to see what was in front of him, but nothing seemed to work.

Next, Drake tried his whirlwind, the air moving at high speed. The boys' hair blew in its powerful wind, but the mist stayed, unmoving. "I'm running out of ideas," Drake complained. "Open to suggestions..."

Neither of his friends had any idea how to penetrate the mist. The little lantern seemed to work, but it didn't spread its light far enough. They could only see each other as long as they stayed close to Drake. They could only see several inches of the green thread that they were following.

Sounds echoed through the cave, bouncing off the cold black mist. It was difficult to tell where the sound was coming from. It was in front of them, yet all around them at the same time. It was the sound of footsteps, hitting the wet rock of the cave.

"There is someone in here with us," Drake whispered, yet the black mist amplified his words through the cave. "We need to keep going," he told them quietly. "Follow the thread, it's our lifeline."

With Renn in the lead, they made their way through the long tunnel entrance. The sound of feet echoed as they inched their way forward. The sound was not coming from their own feet. Someone or something was pursuing them. They didn't know if their pursuer was behind them or in front of them. Because of the echo of the caves and the dark mist, it was impossible to tell which direction their pursuer was coming from.

With their weapons held ready, they continued following the bright green thread. It was slow going due to visibility, but they had to keep moving. The closer to their destination, the better.

"What about the map? It will tell us at least if the person after us is human," Mike said quietly. He wasn't sure if looking at the map would show anything. It was just a suggestion.

"It's too dark to read the dimension map; we can barely see each other, much less the map. I don't think my ascension quest map shows that either. It seems to show us where to go, but that's it."

After taking several more steps, a shape flew toward them. Renn jumped up and caught it in her mouth. It was a strange-looking bat. Due to Renn's speed, they were unable to see what level the beast was. His system, however, was.

{A member of your cohort has slain a Level 1 beast, Cave bat}

{Your cohort grows stronger}

{Mana +1}

Drake smiled. Each time one of them killed something, their entire group grew stronger.

He felt it was strange that it was only a level 1 beast, considering the area they were in was supposed to be level 5. He was grateful that it was only a level 1 beast. He wasn't sure if fighting something stronger was a good idea in the caves where the strange black mist was located. It would be a hard battle, not being able to see their opponent or each other. They could accidentally harm one of their allies instead of their foe.

They took several more steps. The sound of flapping wings amplified as a horde of bats headed their way.

"Don't lose track of the direction we're supposed to be heading," Drake hissed. "We have to take care of some bats."

Chad cut in, preparing his sword. He couldn't fire his bow, not being able to see his target. "Keep Renn in front of us; that way, we know what direction to head. She is leading, so keep her that way."

It was a good suggestion, one that would keep them going toward their goal and not back outside the cave. They needed to finish their quest as soon as possible.

Stepping back away from Renn, they readied their weapons and waited for the barrage of flying beasts. Drake hoped they were all the level 1 cave bats, nothing harder to kill. It was bad enough that they couldn't see where they were going. They would be fighting blind, while trying to maintain their position so they didn't get turned around during the fight.

Breaking through the dark mist, bats flew at them, and a high-pitched squeak echoed through the tunnel as they flew toward them. Renn jumped up, grabbing one out of the air, nearly swallowing it whole as Drake, Mike, and Chad swung their swords, slashing at the bats as they came into range.

Many of the cave bats flew past them, ignoring Drake and his cohort, but others attempted to attack. Renn was munching on them like they were her favorite snack while Drake and his friends swung at them using their glowing swords.

Mike's electrical currents flashed up and down along the blade, causing the bats to electrify. If one touches another of its horde, the electricity would spread to them, causing electricity to spread above them like wildfire, taking down multiple bats at once.

Chad swung his sword, letting the white power it contained consume the blade. The bats shied away from the bright light of the sword's power. It was too bright for their eyes; they were too used to the darkness of the cave. The bright light rendered them completely blind.

It was an endless storm of leathery wings and high-pitched shrieks that echoed through the long tunnel. Drake, Mike, and Chad continued to swing their swords like mad, trying to keep the swarm of bats from attacking them all at once.

After nearly fifteen minutes of fighting, the bats flew past them toward the way that had come, disappearing out of sight. The sound of their leathery wings and high-pitched shrieks was disappearing into the dark.

Drake looked around, relieved that they had maintained their position. All they had to do was head in the direction where Renn was. She was the lead, and by some miracle, she had stayed that way.

"Let's go," Drake stated, rubbing a long gash on his arm. The bat's sharp claws were shot, and he couldn't stay completely away from him. He wasn't the only one injured; so were Mike and Chad. Chad quickly used his sword, healing them before they began to follow the bright green thread again. The cold black mist was still present, but they were finally moving forward again.

As they slowly walked forward, they listened for the footsteps that they had heard earlier. The dark tunnel was silent; all they could hear was their own footsteps as they continued toward their destination.

Silence once again surrounded them. The freezing dark mist began to fade, but only a little at a time. The cold, dark mist was thinning, allowing them to see more of the glowing green thread the farther along they got inside the cave.

After some time, the gold dark mist finally faded, leaving them inside a large chamber. There were cave entrances in several areas. The green thread was heading to the one directly on their right. Drake made note of the direction; he wanted to make sure they didn't get lost on their way out. He doubted that the green thread would still be present after they completed the quest.

Suddenly, Renn lowered her large head. A menacing growl escaped her throat as she faced the tunnel directly in front of them.

Drake studied the large opening that appeared to lead into another chamber in the cave system, but didn't see anything. He trusted his familiar. She knew when there was danger. Right now, it was clear that she was sensing danger.

Drake quickly uncoiled his whip, leaving the strap on his sword unhooked, ready for him to pull it from its sheath if it was needed. Due to the small space, Chad held his sword; A glowing white power illuminated the blade. Mike held his own sword tightly in his gauntleted hand, lightning pulsing up and down the elegant blade. The boys were ready for battle.

Renn continued to growl.

From the darkness of the chamber, a figure stood out and grinned menacingly.

Chapter 65: 65: Death

When the figure stepped out of the darkness, Drake stared at the intruder, his eyes glowed brightly as they narrowed in anger. He knew exactly who this man was, even though he had never seen him. He had only heard about him. Slashing out with his whip, the thin metal flew in a graceful arc and slashed toward the gargoyle king, who stood with his sword pointed directly at him, ignoring his three companions. It was clear he was after him, not Chad or Mike. To him, Renn was just a beast and didn't count. Drake himself was the gargoyle king's target.

Bloodlust poured from the gargoyle king's pores as he stared at Drake with a menacing grin. His fangs gleamed in the green light of Drake's energy whip as it glided toward him.

The ethereal whip hit first, then the thin metallic whip next; a double slash that the king blocked easily. Drake knew he wasn't strong enough to defeat the gargoyle king. He may have been able to hold his own with his army, but the figure in front of him was a hundred times stronger than all those he sent to trap him.

The king swung out his sword, but Drake stopped it. Swinging his whip, the thin metal wrapped around the blade. When he yanked, the blade nearly came flying out of the gargoyle king's hand. Nearly, but not quite. The gargoyle king was too strong; he stopped it before it could leave his clawed fingers.

"Damn it..." Drake muttered. He knew he had to survive, but could see no way to make that happen, not with the gargoyle king's strength and skill. This creature was skilled and incredibly powerful. Even the mountain had fallen silent when in his presence.

Mike shot an electrical blade at the gargoyle king. He flinched when it hit, but was completely unharmed.

Chad put his sword back in his sheath and pulled out the enchanted bow, pulling the luminous string. An arrow formed, and he shot it toward the gargoyle king. He hoped that it would do more than Mike's lightning blade.

The arrow hit its mark, but did no damage. It faded into nothing at contact, unable to pierce the gargoyle king's thick skin.

With one hand, Drake formed an explosive whirlwind and threw it out. The spell hit the gargoyle king in the chest. It exploded on contact, causing the gargoyle king to be thrown back by only a couple of feet. There was a scorch mark on his chest, but nothing else. Trying again, Drake shot an energy beam; the blast hit the gargoyle in the face. Still, there was no effect. Drake realized that none of his attacks would ever be strong enough to defeat the gargoyle king. His energy beam was only level one; the wind and fire attributes were level 2. He needed something far more powerful to do any damage to the creature in front of him.

All three boys attacked at once, each using their strongest attack. Renn jumped in, taking advantage of the sudden attack from all sides, and tore at the gargoyle's wings, one of them tearing completely away from the gargoyle's body, and falling to the floor of the cave.

The gargoyle king flung his fist out, hitting Renn. Her body went flying against the wall of the chamber, landing in a crumpled heap on the cold rock floor. Her eyes were closed, and she was barely breathing. She had been knocked out completely unconscious, taking her out of the fight.

Chad wanted to go and try to heal her, but he couldn't leave Mike and Drake. Their opponent was far too strong, even with all of them fighting him at once.

Drake shot spell after spell as quickly as he could, trying not to allow the gargoyle king to attack. It wasn't working. The gargoyle king's blade swung with unyielding force, slashing at the three boys. The blade struck Mike, flinging him toward Renn, who was still lying crumpled and broken.

Mike hit the wall, falling still. He was out of the fight as well.

There were only Chad and Drake left, both fighting frantically, trying to survive. The gargoyle king kicked Chad in the gut, causing him to hit a wall. With only that one kick, he was knocked out as well.

It was now just Drake and the King. The gargoyle king laughed gleefully, eyeing Drake with joyful malice. "There's no one else to help you. I will end you and your cursed bloodline," he laughed.

Drake knew right away that the gargoyle king intended to kill him. He would probably leave Chad and Mike alone once he skewered him with his sword. With everything he had, Drake hoped that after he was gone, the gargoyle king would leave his friends in peace. He had to stall it.

Back in the ordinary world, the three fathers watched as their sons fought desperately with everything they had against the gargoyle king, trying to survive. They weren't strong enough to fight him yet. They needed at least the staff. The staff would make the three of them more powerful. They would need it to win.

They watched the screen intently.

The first one down was the beast. At least she took one of his wings. He wouldn't be able to fly home; he would have to walk. Drake's father doubted that the bridge guardian would allow the king passage. At least he hoped the bridge guardian wouldn't allow the king passage.

Next was Mike. He was thrown against a wall, falling unconscious. Chad was last. He was kicked across the large chamber; he was also unconscious. It was only Drake now, and his spells and weapons didn't seem to be doing anything to the gargoyle king, who swatted them away like flies.

The gargoyle king yelled that he was going to get rid of the bloodline. Taking Drake out it would work. There were no other heirs to take his place. A new bloodline would be chosen.

Drake threw spell after spell, trying to leave no time for the gargoyle king to attack. It was working, but not entirely. The king swept his sword, slashing Drake across the shoulder, and a large cut opened, and blood seeped.

Finally, the king spoke the only words that would justify the dimension master and his cohort to get involved. Yet, it was already too late.

Back at the large cavern, Drake kept firing spell after spell, his shoulder seeped blood from the long gash from the gargoyle king's sword. The whip didn't seem to do anything, regardless of whether it was filled with energy or not. It couldn't even cut through his thick skin.

The gargoyle king laughed in glee, continuing to taunt Drake that he was ending his bloodline. Drake barely heard; his ears were ringing from the loss of blood. His energy reserves were depleting fast, and he could hardly see as he tried to stay conscious.

He continued to swing his whip with one hand and send spells with the other. The gargoyle king was barraged, but it didn't do enough to stop him.

With Drake weakened, the gargoyle king slammed him against a wall. With his face inches away from the weakened Drake, he held the tip of the sword to his gut. "You will never complete your quest; it's over. I stopped you!"

He then slammed his sword into Drake's gut all the way through, until the tip of the blade hit the wall behind him. The king yanked it out, letting Drake's body fall to the floor, crumpled and limp. A line of blood smearing the wall behind him as it fell. The gargoyle king laughed, then exited the tunnel, leaving the bodies where they lay.

The dimension master stared at the screen in shock, his son impaled by the gargoyle king. His friends and beast lay unmoving at the back of the cave's large chamber, unconscious and broken. As he and his cohort watched, the computer screen flickered and then turned dark. Showing the death of the heir. "I will kill him!" the dimension master hissed, clenching his fists, as he and his cohort left immediately for the dimension to end the gargoyle king. They had very little time. They had to do it before the dimension took their positions from them to give them to a new set of bloodlines.

They didn't even care that they could be stuck in the dimension forever, not being able to leave. If the positions were taken from them while inside the dimension, they would be stuck. If they completed their task and returned to the ordinary world, they would never be able to enter the dimension again.

As the dimension master's staff slammed onto the ground, the portal opened, and the three men stepped through. Their eyes were wet with tears, their sons were broken and injured in the cave. With the dimension master dead, the cohort would follow. It was the law. They couldn't even try to save their own sons because the dimension wouldn't allow it. The three of them were bound. Anytime the dimension master died, the cohort would also, regardless of how healthy they were. The fathers were just happy that their sons were all unconscious and would never realize that the dimension took their lives because Drake had died.

Chapter 66: 66: Aftermath

Back in the large cavern where the boys lay broken and wounded by the gargoyle king's attacks, Chad woke up in just enough time to watch the gargoyle king leave the cavern. He stayed still, not wanting to get the monster's attention.

Once the gargoyle disappeared down the corridor, Chad quickly got up, taking his healing sword with him, and stumbled to Drake. He himself was barely conscious; he hadn't yet regained all of his senses from being knocked unconscious. It was just enough to realize that Drake needed him and the healing power of his sword. He could feel his own life slipping as Drake's slipped away.

Because of what was happening to him, he had realized that their lives were bound. If Drake died, the others would as well. He could feel it. He knew the moment he felt his life slipping.

After stumbling to his friend, he kneeled to assess the damage, his face turning paper white as he gazed at the hole in Drake's stomach that went clear through to the wall behind him. Drake's crumpled body lay in a swiftly growing pool of blood. Chad knew he had to try to heal him. If he didn't, one of his best friends would die.

Of course, he and Mike would follow, but he didn't want to see his friend die; he wanted him to live. He wanted to save him, and not just to save himself and Mike; it was because, out of his friends, Drake was the one he was closest to, and he didn't want him to die.

Chad pressed the blade's flat surface onto Drake's wound, the blade glowing a bright white as Chad willed it to heal his friend. He could see that Drake was still breathing, but just barely. "Come on...come on...heal!!!" Chad hissed, trying to get his sword to heal Drake faster. It wasn't working. The thought of the token flashed through his mind, forcing him to remember it. "Use the damn token...Damit!" he hissed, wishing he knew how to activate it. He wanted the life token to take effect. It could save Drake's life if he could get it to work. He wasn't sure if he could. He didn't actually know how it worked or how to activate it.

Drake had used his token on him, and Mike had used his on Drake; that left the one Chad could activate. Since he was the only one able to activate the life token, it worked,

to Chad's surprise. All he did was wish that it would save Drake. The wounds began to close, and energy burst from Drake's body. A soft green glow encased him as he healed.

It took only a few minutes once the token had been activated. Drake slowly sat up, his hand going to his abdomen as he looked up at his friend. "You... you healed me," he whispered, having difficulty speaking the words. He was close to death when the token had taken effect. Any longer, and it wouldn't have been able to do anything for him. He was still weak from blood loss, and his gut was in pain. It was fading, but not as fast as he would have liked.

Drake's gaze went to Renn and Mike. "Please heal them," he choked out, pointing awkwardly to where they still lay, unconscious. He still had no strength; he had lost too much blood. He could barely lift his arm to point.

Chad stumbled to the others, still shaky from his own injury, and the shock of what happened to Drake. Drake had sustained a terrible wound. One that would have taken his life.

He bent down, pressing the flat of his healing sword to Mike first. When he became conscious, he went to Renn. When they were both healed, he sat down, resting his head against the wall.

"Try to heal yourself," Drake said quietly, still unable to raise his voice above a whisper. He wasn't sure if it would work, but he wanted him to be healed as well. It wasn't fair that everyone else was healed, but left him, the one who healed everyone, in pain.

Chad did the same for himself. With a pleasant surprise, he found he was able to heal not only others but himself as well. When he was done, he sighed in relief, as the pain he was feeling vanished.

Renn whined as she padded over to Drake, nuzzling him, glad that he was no longer close to death. As his familiar, she could feel when he was mortally wounded.

Needing to rest, the boys sat against the cave wall, trying to get their energy back. The battle had taken a lot out of them. They were not strong enough to fight an opponent as strong as the gargoyle king. Drake knew the moment he saw who had been pursuing them that there was no way for them to win. It felt like they were defeated in mere seconds.

"I hate this..." Drake said quietly. "I hate this dimension."

Drake's words made Renn whine louder, not liking the conversation. Drake bent to the side, hugging his massive familiar. "I know, girl. I'm not leaving...I'm just tired of us nearly dying. Every step we take is us, getting attacked or nearly killed. I'm not leaving

you, girl. I'm just tired of dealing with all this other stuff." He lay his head on her neck, trying to comfort her.

Mike watched Drake with his familiar. He could tell the beast loved her master. He smiled. He loved his friends, familiar too. They made a good team. "Think of it this way, Drake. We're at the cave where the staff is hidden. If we get the staff, the quest is complete. I'm going to take a wild guess and say that I'm pretty sure when you get it, we all get stronger. When we're strong enough, we can kill that bastard for what he did to us. The best part of it all is that the gargoyle king thinks you're dead. We can get him by surprise."

Drake nodded, his jaw clenched as he pressed his palm where the hole from the king's sword had been. "In my book, he's already dead. We just need to get strong enough to take him on...Right now, he's way too strong."

"Yeah, and our dads have some serious shit to explain to us because they should have warned us or at least trained us so we could get through this stupid quest without dying at every turn," Chad added.

"Seven...there are seven stupid quests... This is just the first one," Drake mumbled.

A loud whine came from Renn while the other two boys groaned.

"We have to do this shit six more times?" Mike asked. "Six more times of this messed-up life-threatening danger around every corner, barely surviving, attacked at any moment, danger?" Mike asked, his head hung, not looking forward to seeing his friends nearly die again.

"So it would seem. We can look forward to getting strong enough to kill that bastard gargoyle king, though. I'm looking forward to that," Drake stated, gazing between his friends. "As soon as you guys are ready, we can go get that damn staff and get the hell out of here."

There were agreements all around, while they rested in the large cavern.

Nearly an hour later, Drake stood up and activated his ascension quest map so they could follow the green thread. He looked over at the large wing that the gargoyle king had left behind after Renn had torn it from his back. It was crumpled near one of the cave's many caverns. As he studied it, it suddenly burst into light particles, vanishing out of existence.

"Good riddance," Drake mumbled, looking at the spot the wing had been. Mike and Chad stood, stretching as they looked down at the green thread that led to the master staff. Their magical sight could still see it.

"Any chance you remember which one is the entrance cave and which one is the one we need?" Mike asked.

Drake smiled. "The thread is directly to the right of the cave we need to enter to find the staff. I took note of it when we entered after I saw how many openings this area has." He looked again at where the gargoyle king's wing once lay. "I wonder why it disappeared?"

Mike shrugged. "Beats me. I'm glad it did... unless of course, it went back to that bastard. Shit, the more I think about it, the more I think he got his wing back. Dammit, we can't seem to get a break."

Chad smiled and shook his head. "I don't think that's it. This dimension seems to work on the same principles as the ordinary world. I'm betting something happened to the gargoyle king, and it vanished with the rest of him."

"How about a bet?" Drake offered. "I think Chad's right. If he is, you owe him a favor. If you're right, he owes you one. If neither is right... Well, we'll call it even, and no one owes anything."

Mike grinned widely. "You're on!"

Chuckling, Drake headed toward the cave where the green thread led. He wanted to find the staff and get home. There was a lot of explaining to do.

Behind him, Mike, Chad, and Renn followed.

Chapter 67: 67: Cave of Valor

Drake and his cohort entered the entrance that the glowing green thread led them to. It turned out to be a large cavern with smooth walls. Stalagmites and stalactites formed beautiful patterns in the large cave. There was a large platform in the center, carved flat to create a smooth surface that wasn't very large. In the center, there was a hole as if something should have been placed inside it.

There were no other cave entrances, just the one they had entered from. The bright green thread ended in that room, but did not give any other clues as to where inside the cavern the staff would be. Drake didn't care. Without it, they would still be searching cave systems to find the cave they needed.

"I guess this is the 'Cave of Valor,'" Drake guessed aloud. "But I don't see the staff. I think we have to figure out how to access it before it presents itself to us. I can see that it's supposed to come from the center platform, but it's not there. I don't think anyone but the dimension master heir can access it, so we just have to figure out how to do that."

"Didn't you receive a key?" Chad asked, remembering the emerald key he had seen Drake store away inside his storage book.

"Yeah, I did...look for a keyhole hidden somewhere," Drake stated as he began looking through the cave for a hidden keyhole.

Renn sniffed around the cavern, looking for clues. She appeared to understand exactly what her master was looking for and had gone to search for it.

Mike, with his eyes glowing an electric blue, scanned the walls, ceiling, and floor.

Chad did the same, his eyes glowing with a pure white light, but paid close attention to the protrusions coming from the floor. There was nothing that suggested a hidden keyhole. All the surfaces were completely smooth, with no indentations indicating a keyhole.

Drake walked around the cavern trying to find a hint of what he needed to find. His gut told him he didn't need the key...not yet anyway. He wasn't even sure if the key was for the quest. It felt like it was for something important, but not for a quest. He would have to figure that out later.

He started to pace, thinking of what to do as his cohort searched.

'This quest...it's not just for me, it's for my cohort as well,' he thought, then looked over at Renn. 'I think it's only for the human portion of my cohort.... What do I do?' Drake continued to pace, wondering what he was missing. He had to figure it out, or they would never receive the Master Staff.

As he paced, Drake's eyes lingered on the platform. It was small, but large enough for him and his friends to stand on it. 'I wonder...?' he thought before walking up to the platform and bending low, trying to see where it attached to the floor of the cavern.

When he studied the base of the platform, running his elegant fingers down the crease where the floor began and the platform ended. In doing so, he found that the platform was not part of the floor at all, but went inside the floor as if it were a long cylinder dropped into a hole of the same diameter. Drake stepped onto the platform and looked inside the hole in the center. He could see the top of an emerald crystal that was nearly two feet below the surface of the platform. He could see nothing below the top of the crystal...it was too dark.

"I found the staff," Drake called to his friends. He still spoke in a normal tone, not wanting to have to fight any of the cave bats or anything else that might be hiding in the cave.

Hearing Drake's words, Mike, Chad, and Renn walked toward him and looked down at the hole in the platform where Drake was pointing. "It's the top of the staff," Drake explained. "We just need to figure out how to get it to come up out of there."

Drake was standing on the platform when he spoke. Mike, Drake, and Renn stepped on the platform to look inside the hole Drake was pointing at. With Renn stepping on the platform, the four of them barely fit.

One by one, they each peered down into the hole at the top of the crystal. As they did, the platform trembled, then began to lower.

"Don't move...I think we all needed to stand on the platform to get the staff to rise," Drake said, excited that the staff was finally near their grasp. He was wondering how to get it to surface, but couldn't figure it out. At least not until his entire cohort stood on the platform. "Don't get off the platform until I tell you," Drake added. He didn't want to take the chance that the staff would return to the depths of the narrow hole in the platform.

The cohort stood still, allowing the staff to rise. When it finally did, the staff stood proudly, with the emerald crystal at the top. Intricate designs ran through the polished wood down the length of the staff. Runes mixed in with the elegant designs, that glowed faintly with a beautiful, soft green light.

Drake and his cohort stared at the staff for a few seconds when, suddenly, the Emerald crystal glowed brightly. A pulse of green energy shot out, consuming the cohort, including Renn, before it faded.

Drake reached out and grasped the staff. It pulled freely without resistance. Energy flowed from the staff into him, boosting every aspect of his powers. The soft voice of the system seemed never to stop listing rewards. It listed rewards, naming everyone who bound themselves to him. Everyone...even the beasts he had become allies with.

{Quest Complete: Find the Cave of Valor/Obtain the Master staff}

{You have received 'Master Staff'}

{All power attributes have leveled up by 1 level}

{Fire Skills are now level 3}

{Wind Skills are now Level 3}

{Plasma skills are now Level 2}

{Emerald Energy is now Level 2}

{Your cohort has grown stronger}

{Your familiar has grown stronger}

{All allies have grown stronger}

The Master staff flashed brightly, shooting a bright light around them, lighting the entire cavern. When they looked at the walls, there were glowing green runes that twinkled like stars. The runes shimmered, then moved around the walls, forming into a new position. The system was silent as the runes moved around the cavern. When it had stopped, the runes faded, becoming invisible once more. The soft voice of their system spoke once more.

{Quest 1 of 7 Complete}

{You may now return to Draco Town, to return to Earth}

The system remained quiet after that. Drake stepped off the platform, his friends following. He turned to his friends. "Do you want to know about all the rewards?" There was a grin on Drake's face as he looked at his friends. His eyes glowed a faint green, and his hand grasped the beautiful staff.

Mike and Chad nodded. Renn just sat there, watching Drake intently. She appeared to want to hear too.

Drake's grin grew. "We completed one of seven quests. I have the staff..." he said, holding up the staff. My fire and wind skills leveled up to level 3. My plasma and emerald energy is now level 2, and you guys, including Renn and even the beasts I formed allies with, all got stronger. You should already feel the power rising.

"I can feel it," Mike smiled. "I'm a lot stronger than before. My energy is fully restored, but I have even more energy." He squeezed his gauntleted hand. "I'm a lot stronger, too. I bet I can run faster if I try out my speed." He looked around the cavern. "Not in here, though."

Chad nodded. "I can feel it too. It's as if everything I can do has doubled. My strength, energy, magical powers, stamina...everything."

"Even Renn should be feeling all that you're feeling, you guys," Drake said, smiling widely. They had completed their quest and were now ready to return home. Their fathers had a lot of explaining to do. Drake knew they needed to go back to Draco town first, but he didn't care. He wanted to see Nelly again. He had grown attached to the child when he had to go to the gargoyle's treehouse lair to save her.

Drake watched his friends as they experimented with their new powers. He gave them nearly ten minutes before he headed toward the entrance of the cave. He stopped at the exit and turned to his friends. "Let's go. We have a long way to go to get back to Draco Town."

With Drake still grinning, his friends followed. Renn moved her massive body to the front with Drake as they headed out of the cave and towards Draco Town.

Chapter 68: 68: Trek Back

As Drake and his cohort exited the cave, they made their way off the mountain. None of the beasts attacked. Drake didn't know if there even were any. The bear beasts on the massive Dragon Head Mountain were invisible to his magical sight as long as their eyes were closed.

He could hear birds and insects in the trees as they headed back down toward the road that would lead them to Draco Town. Nothing came out, though.

In another part of the dimension, Drake's father, along with his own cohort of Mike's and Chad's fathers, stood looking at the body of the Gargoyle king. His crumpled body lay unmoving in the dirt. He hadn't crossed the massive ravine. He couldn't; he only had one wing.

The mortally wounded gargoyle was still breathing, but just barely. When his gaze met that of the dimension master, he laughed. "You fool... It's over," the king gloated. "I killed your heir; there will be a new bloodline. I prevented him from completing the quest...it's over. The others will die soon, and this dimension will be free of any of your entire bloodlines..." the gargoyle laughed, coughing up blood. It sprayed around him, leaving droplets on his face. He didn't care, though. He had done what he wanted to do. His entire goal was to prevent the heir from completing the quest and to destroy the current bloodlines. It was revenge against the dimension master for going into his lair and killing their most powerful gargoyles. His people were virtually stripped of all power. He had only one shaman left, who had died in the trap set in Storm Town along with a large amount of his army.

The three boys and their beast had slain all of them. His people were diminishing, and it was the dimension master's fault.

It was clear to the dimension master and his cohort that someone else had gotten the gargoyle king before they could. They didn't know who, but they were glad they left him for them to deal with. "At least whoever nearly killed you left you for us..." Drake's father sneered as he slammed his blade into the gargoyle's gut, then twisted. It was the same place the gargoyle king had struck to kill his son. He pulled his sword out of the gargoyle's gut and then slammed it into its face, killing the monster instantly.

The massive gargoyle exploded into light particles, vanishing from existence. The three men watched the cloud of light particles float in the air before disappearing. Their faces were pale, eyes wet from tears. They had lost their sons because of the gargoyle king; now he was finally dead.

"Well, what is there for us to do but go to Draco Town to wait for our powers to vanish. We have enough power to get back. Nothing has changed yet. We can either stay here or go home. This will be the last time we see this place and the people here.

"I want to go to Draco Town and say our goodbyes. We do have friends there." Chad's father stated. Incidentally, all three men had the same names as their sons. It was designed that way.

Mike's father, also named Mike, nodded. "Yeah, let's stay as long as we can. If you feel the power fading, we can go back then, before it's gone. I don't want to be stuck here. Not after what happened to our boys."

Drake's father, also named Drake, nodded. "Then let's go."

The three men turned and headed toward Draco Town to wait for their powers to disappear. They knew they were stuck there if their powers were taken from them before they returned home. If they didn't leave in time, they would be unable to get back to Earth. Knowing this, they had to keep an eye on the power that they still had.

As they began to walk, they felt some of it fading. It was only a small amount, but not all of it; it was barely noticeable. Drake frowned. It was only a matter of time.

If the boys had survived, they would have maintained most of their powers, draining only as they completed their quests, but not completely.

With a quick slam of his staff, the three ended up on the other side of the ravine. They had decided to walk the remainder of the way there. They needed time to come to terms with what had happened.

Drake and his cohort finally made it to the road. As they walked past the clearing where the horned worms lived, Drake lowered his head and closed his eyes. His features turned serene as he spoke to the horned worms.

In doing so, he found they had grown much stronger as well. He smiled as he opened his eyes and looked at his friends. "The horned worms are even stronger. I think they would have leveled up if beasts could become level 6. They're happy about the added strength."

"I bet Protector is stronger too," Mike stated. "I bet he did level up."

Drake nodded. "I hope so...He deserves it. He even left the bridge to help with that trap in Storm Town."

With a sudden thought, Drake slammed the staff into the ground, his thoughts on getting to the other side of the ravine. When the bottom hit the packed dirt, a bright flash of emerald green light consumed them. When the light faded, they found themselves at the ravine, in the same spot that Drake had envisioned. He smiled. "That works."

Drake closed his eyes again, his features turning serene. This time, he was communicating with the bridge guardian, Protector. To everyone's surprise, the sound of wings echoed through the ravine, and Protector emerged through the massive crack.

He landed in front of Drake, giving him a low bow. Drake smiled. "I see you evolved; you're now level 4. I'm glad. Thank you for helping us in Storm Town," Drake told the beast in front of him, before bowing himself. It was his turn to thank his beast ally.

Protector bowed again, then dove back into the ravine. Drake turned to his friends. "He's thankful for the power boost. He has been trying to evolve for a while. Now he has, and he's happy for it."

That made Mike and Chad grin. Renn whined, causing Drake to stroke her neck. "Don't worry, girl, you'll evolve. You need a bit more time." Drake told her gently, then turned to his friends. "We can either cheat and use the staff or walk the rest of the way," he offered.

Mike and Chad thought about it. "Let's walk a little," Mike spoke first. "Not all the way, but for a few hours at most."

After several hours, Drake's father stopped. "I haven't felt any of my power leave," he pondered aloud. "I felt a little bit of it leave at the ravine, nothing since then. Have you?"

Chad's father shook his head. "No, I haven't. Maybe it's waiting for a new bloodline to go through the quest?" he offered in question.

Sighing, Drake's father thrust the staff into the ground, bringing them to the Draco Town's welcome sign, where they would wait out their depleting power. If the new bloodline appeared, they would leave.

As they entered the town, Drake's father spoke. "Let's not tell them what happened. Not yet anyway."

His cohort agreed as they slowly entered Draco Town.

After several hours of walking, Drake and his cohort stopped in the middle of the road. "Can we use the staff now. I'm tired of walking," Mike complained.

Chad looked at Mike before Drake could say anything. "It was your idea to walk," he reminded him sarcastically. Chad wasn't normally sarcastic, but the situation called for it.

Renn made a funny growl-howl, making her sound like she was laughing, which caused Drake to laugh out loud. He was holding his sore gut and bending over in laughter. Drake didn't know why it was so hilarious that Renn even found the situation funny. Mike had wanted to walk, but now he was complaining that they were. Chad pointed it out, using Mike's usual sarcastic tone. It was somehow funny as hell. He couldn't even fathom why it was, but he kept laughing anyway. "Fine, let's head to Draco Town and say our goodbyes, and get home to our dads. They have a lot of explaining to do."

Drake, still holding in his laughter, slammed the staff into the ground and brought them to the Draco Town's welcome sign. They walked through the street heading directly for the tavern where they expected Mayor Ivan to be.

The streets seemed to be empty with no one in sight as they made their way to the tavern. They didn't think much of it as they walked up the town's dirt-packed main street with Renn in tow.

When they arrived at the tavern, Drake took the lead and opened the double door, allowing Renn to walk through.

All eyes turned to them. As Renn and the three boys stepped into the tavern, the double doors closed behind them.

Drake's gaze went directly to the large table where their fathers were sitting next to Mayor Ivan.

"Dad!" All three boys said at once.

Chapter 69: 69: Draco Town

"Dad!" All three boys burst out at once. Shock radiated from all three of them. They weren't expecting to see their fathers until they arrived back on Earth. They knew from what Drake had told them about their own fathers going to kill them. It was also when they learned that all three of them were heirs to the current dimension master and his cohort and that they were to take over for... said fathers.

Renn looked around the tavern, moving closer to Drake, not trusting those around her. She wasn't used to being around a town full of people. She hadn't noticed the three from her vision yet. She didn't understand that the vision might have been false.

Drake's father stood up, his eyes wide in shock. His own cohort stood up, with the same expression. They thought their boys were dead. They weren't, though; they were

standing in front of them. Drake had the Master staff in his hand. They were alive and well. All three boys stood staring at their fathers in disbelief and shock.

None of the fathers spoke as they moved toward their respective sons and hugged them tightly. Renn, not sensing any threat, allowed Drake's father to hug him, carefully watching them during the exchange. She had remembered her vision. She had remembered that it was the man with her master who slaughtered all three of the boys she was bound with.

Gavin was at the counter, drinking from his stein, watching the exchange between fathers and sons. His eyes stopped on the beast beside Drake, his eyes going wide. It was unmistakable who the beast belonged to. It was that the beast's eyes glowed with a brilliant, emerald green light, just like Drake's.

Drake's father released his son, stepping back. His face was pale, his eyes red from thinking his son was dead. "How...how did you survive?" he asked. "We saw it. You died."

This statement caught the attention of the rest of those in the tavern. All eyes turned to the three fathers and their heirs; Two of them with the unmistakable staff of the dimension master.

"I wasn't dead, and Chad used his healing powers on me. We completed the quest, made a couple of stops, then came here." Drake explained. He was looking at his father with distrust. He remembered the vision that Renn showed him. Even though he didn't believe that it was real, it still affected him. He couldn't help it.

"Couple of stops?" It was Chad's father who spoke, not seeing the tension that was suddenly pulsing from the three boys.

Drake forced a smile. "Yeah, I seemed to have acquired a horde of level 5 horned worms that grew much stronger after we completed the quest. They wanted to thank us for making them stronger. After that, we had to speak with Protector, the Broken Bridge guardian. He grew stronger, too. He even raised an entire level. He's level 4 now. He wanted to thank us and show his respect." Drake explained proudly. With each word he spoke, his own tension faded.

"You...you have beasts?" Mayor Ivan stuttered out, then noticed Renn. "Besides that, one?" he asked, pointing to Renn, who was still standing protectively next to Drake, eyeing his father with suspicion.

Drake looked over at Ivan. "This," he said proudly, his softness to his voice showing how much he loved the beast, "is my familiar, Renn, and she is part of my cohort. Yes, I have lots of beasts, but they are allies, not familiars. I have the entire horde of horned worms that live at the clearing where Dragon Head Mountain is, and I have Protector, who is now titled Broken Bridge Guardian. I intend to gain more.... It's safer that way,"

his eyes subconsciously turning to his father before he went back to Ivan. "I would rather gain allies than kill them," he finished, shrugging.

Mike looked around the tavern. His gaze stopped at Ivan. "Is there any chance we can get something to eat? We haven't eaten all day."

Mayor Ivan nodded enthusiastically, "We can go to the inn for food." He looked down at Renn. "I don't know if your familiar can get through her door, though."

Drake cut in, "We can eat at the picnic table in the inn's backyard. I like to keep her close." His gaze turned to Gavin at the counter before he headed toward him. When he reached the man, he took several seconds studying him. "Something about you is off. Do you want to tell me what it is?"

Gavin frowned. "Off?"

He didn't appear to know what Drake was talking about. His features remained the same, yet there was a glint deep in his eyes that revealed that Drake was not imagining things. There was something off; he just couldn't tell what it was. Drake shrugged. "I'm not sure," he answered calmly, not revealing what he could see. Shrugging once more, Drake turned and headed out of the Tavern with Renn in tow.

Through the reflection of the glass in the door, Drake could see Gavin's face pale slightly before quickly composing himself as he watched them leave the tavern. 'I'll find out what you're hiding, Gavin. Soon... I will find out,' Drake thought to himself.

Mayor Ivan led the three young heirs and their fathers toward the inn. Renn stayed next to Drake, eyeing Drake's father, not trusting that he wouldn't do anything. Drake rested his hand on the massive beast's neck, assuring her that he was fine. Her gaze didn't waver.

When they got to the end, Mary rushed out and hugged the boys. She stopped for a second, seeing the large beast beside Drake, but appeared unfazed by Renn's appearance. Mary had watched them approach. Drake had seen her looking through the window, only exiting when they had reached a few feet from the inn.

"It's so good to see you!" Mary burst out as she hugged the three boys. Drake, Mike, and Chad all hugged her back, not knowing what else to do. They didn't want to be rude.

Ivan ordered a meal for them all and told her that they would be eating in the backyard and why. She didn't seem to mind. She just smiled and headed back inside to prepare their food.

Drake and his friends took the lead and headed to the large picnic table in the backyard and sat. Drake sat on one of the ends so that Renn could lie beside him, next to his

seat. Mike and Chad sat on the same side of the table as Drake. Their father sat across from them with Mayor Ivan at the head of the table.

As they sat in awkward silence, a group headed toward the inn, with blankets and baskets in their hands. Ivan smiled widely as they approached. "They're almost here!" he beamed. I decided to have a celebration of your return and that your quest has been completed!"

Drake looked at the incoming crowd and frowned. 'So much for heading home,' he thought. He kept a hand resting on his familiar as he watched the crowd approach.

"A celebration is an excellent idea!" Drake's father stated. "The boys have been through far more than they should have. They deserve it!"

Chad and Mike looked at him strangely, while Drake gave his father a hard stare. "How would you know what went through?" he shot out, unable to help it. "You weren't there."

Drake's father's face turned a little red, while the other two fathers lowered a bit in their seats. "We've been watching you. Some rules prevent us from getting involved or helping you to complete the quest. Everything that happened, we were forbidden to aid you. We tried, but we were refused. None of the situations you were in spoke the words that would allow us. Not until after the gargoyle king used his sword on you." He couldn't come right out and say it. He couldn't. His own voice would shake from the memory of what he had witnessed.

"Are you the one who killed the gargoyle king?" Drake asked, genuinely interested. His tension released, but only a little.

Drake's father sighed. "I may have made the final blow, but someone else left him for dead. I don't know who, but it wasn't me."

This got Ivan's attention. "The gargoyle king?"

Drake's father sighed. "The monsters that plague the night are called gargoyles," he explained. Then he turned to Drake, briefly scanning the other two boys and Renn. "The way you dealt with the trap at Storm Town was truly amazing. When we found out it was a trap, we tried to come and help you, but we were denied... forbidden from getting involved. The goal of the quest is for you to get stronger in a semi-controlled environment. That's not what happened, though. There were too many others trying to stop you. We only knew the gargoyle king was, but there are others. We haven't figured out who else is involved or who else might be after you."

Loud laughing and talking were heard, stopping the conversation. Apparently, the celebration was about to begin. The incoming crowd had finally arrived.

Chapter 70: 70: Celebration

"You're back!" A high-pitched voice pierced through the crowd.

Drake looked over to see Nelly running toward him. She had her raggedy doll hanging limply as she rushed toward him. She had left Nana and Tod behind to run toward him. She had a wide grin on her face as she ran. He stroked Renn's fur, mentally telling her to be nice to Nelly; she was important to him. Renn made a soft, growl-howl, showing her understanding.

When she reached Drake, she flew into his arms, nearly knocking him over as he landed on his firm chest, ignoring the large beast beside him, and hugged him tightly as she giggled. Mike and Chad, as well as all three fathers, watched with interest. They had never seen Drake show affection to this degree. He was hugging the little girl back and whispering so they couldn't hear what he was saying.

"Hi, Nelly," he said softly. "Do you want to meet, Renn? She's nice?" he asked her. He wanted to introduce her to his beast familiar. Nelly frowned, not knowing who Renn was. There was a hint of jealousy in her eyes. Seeing this, Drake chuckled softly and pointed to the massive beast beside him with glowing green eyes. "Nelly, this is Renn. Do you want to ride on her back?" he offered. He knew when he was little, he liked to go horseback riding. He thought she might like to do the same.

Nelly peered around Drake's shoulder and saw the large beast. Her eyes widened as she looked at the large creature. Renn lowered her head, trying to look smaller. Even she knew that she looked fearsome.

Deciding to preverbally rip the band-aid off, Drake, without giving Nelly a choice, picked her up and set her gently on Renn's back and held her so she wouldn't slip off. Renn slowly stood, trying to be careful not to throw the little girl off, and started walking slowly around the yard. Nelly had grasped onto Renn's thick fur, trying to stay mounted on the massive beast.

Nelly couldn't help it; she burst out laughing so loudly that she caused others who were setting up for the celebration to turn and look at what the commotion was about. To their surprise, Nelly was riding on the back of a level 3 beast, one with brightly glowing emerald green eyes.

Tod was standing next to Nana, watching his little cousin with envy. Nana watched with fear that Nelly would fall off the beast.

As Renn walked around the yard with the little girl, Nelly laughed and giggled, holding on to Renn's fur tightly.

Drake walked over to Tod, still keeping an eye on Nelly. When he reached the boy, he looked down at him and smiled. "Do you want to ride Renn, too?" he asked.

Tod beamed with sudden excitement and nodded his head vigorously. "Yes! Yes! I want to ride her too!" he shouted, jumping up and down, unable to contain himself.

Drake mentally told Renn to come to him. She did immediately, still being mindful of the child on her back. When she reached Drake, he quickly lifted Tod and set him behind his little cousin. Renn walked around the yard, being careful, yet keeping an eye on her master. She didn't trust the man who smelled like him. She remembered the vision she had shared with her master. This was the one that slaughtered them all.

Drake watched Renn with the children, smiling as the children laughed. He went back to his seat at the table, then turned briefly to his father, then back to the children playing with his familiar.

"What happens next?" he asked. Then he paused for a moment before continuing. "Renn had a vision... I'm sure if you were watching, you already know the content. Is it true?"

The three fathers looked at each other before Drake's father answered. "No, it's not true. The gargoyle king can put visions in beasts' minds. Well, he was able to...since he's dead. We believe he was the one responsible. There are others in this dimension that can do the same thing. You have six more quests. They may try to do the same thing or something similar. Use your lantern. It can help you to see the truth. That ring you have. It didn't come from us. It does, however, block mind attacks, so continue to use it. The only thing we gave you through the quests was the three life tokens, nothing else. We also won't be able to give you any more of them, so be careful when you complete your quests," Drake's father explained.

Drake relaxed a bit. As he watched the kids playing on Renn, he asked another question. "What can I do about Renn. She can't come to Earth. She has to stay here. I can't stay here...I still have school. What can I do?"

The three men exchanged glances again. Drake's father sighed. "The time runs differently here. When you return home, you will find you were only gone for one school day...the day you came and the weekend. If we go back home after the celebration, you can go to school tomorrow. Renn can come with you. As you're familiar, she can change to accommodate worlds that are not her own. When you come back to this dimension, she will revert to what she is supposed to be."

"When do we have to return here?" Chad asked, quietly. He didn't want to return at all, but knew they had no choice.

It was his own father who answered. "You will return after school on Friday. There are only a few weeks left of school, so most of your quests can be done during summer vacation."

"Some of them have time limits... we're not allowed to tell you which ones. You find that out during your quest." Mike's father added.

Music suddenly blasted through the backyard, causing Drake and his friends to look around them. The people had finished setting up, and the celebration was about to officially begin.

They had set up a small stage for dancing. A long table was filled with food that the townspeople had brought. Mary had filled the tables with all sorts of goodies, adding to the already abundant food.

Drake noticed that Gavin was watching Renn carry the two children before looking over at Drake and holding his stein up in salute. He didn't like the look in the other man's eyes. It wasn't obvious; it was subtle. So subtle that he thought that it could be nothing, and he was overreacting. He knew better. His instincts were good... much better than they were when they had first arrived.

For the rest of the afternoon, they ate, drank, and had a good time. None of the boys danced along with the other townspeople. Nor did their fathers. They all sat watching the festivities and eating.

There was very little conversation between them. Drake kept an eye on Renn, who was now lying next to where he was seated, again eyeing their fathers suspiciously. Drake knew why because he was having trouble trusting them, too, after the vision she had shown him during their quest.

Looking toward his two friends, they were distant from their fathers as well. It was clear they were worried about it, even if it was only subconsciously. Drake didn't know, and he wasn't going to ask them, with their fathers sitting across from them.

His eyes went to Gavin, who was looking their way, before turning to look toward Nelly and Tod to watch them instead. The two cousins were back with a relieved Nana as they played on the ground with little wooden blocks, stacking them to make castles.

Drake didn't trust Gavin, and he was leery about their fathers. He couldn't help it. Renn's vision damaged him to the point where he couldn't trust that they would come for them, completely out of the blue, to destroy them all.

He shivered unconsciously when thinking about it.

"Are you alright?" Drake's father asked, worried. It was clear that something was bothering him.

Drake turned to his father. "I'm fine. I just want to get home. I want to prepare to come back for the second quest. I want to get it over with."

His father raised a brow. "That may be true, but that isn't what's wrong. I can tell that something is bothering you."

Mike and Chad turned to Drake, realizing he was having the same trouble they were. Mike spoke, not giving Drake a chance to respond to his father.

"It's not something we can discuss here. I think I can speak for all of us. We need to talk, and it can't be here in this dimension. When we get back, we have lots to talk about."

Drake nodded to his friend. "Thank you, that was my thought exactly," then he turned to his father, glancing between the other two men. "Besides, Renn doesn't trust you."