

Dimension Master

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Chapter 71: 71: Seed of Doubt

"Besides, Renn doesn't trust you," Drake informed his father and glanced at the two men sitting beside him as if waiting for a reaction. They received none. Drake's father only sighed.

Regardless of whether the vision was true or false, it had planted a seed of doubt that took root so deeply that Drake was having trouble trusting their fathers.

In the background, the music still played, but none of those at the table could comprehend it. They were too focused on their own conversation. A conversation that had stopped abruptly as soon as Drake had told them that Renn didn't trust them.

Mayor Ivan had long ago left to dance with Mary, who blushed as they danced.

It was nearly night when the music had finally stopped, and Drake and his friends, along with their fathers, could go home.

Drake had gotten up, with Renn by his side, and walked over to the two children. He bent down to Nelly and Tod, who were still sitting on the ground playing with their blocks. "I have to leave. I'll come back as soon as I can for my next quest." Drake told them.

Nelly stood up and hugged him. Drake returned the gesture, rubbing her back while he did. As he released her, Renn nuzzled her gently, nearly knocking the small child to the ground.

He quickly hugged Tod before getting up and heading over to Mary and Mayor Ivan, who were talking quietly near the side of the building.

Drake cleared his throat before he moved forward toward the two. "We're leaving. I wanted to thank you for all your help... I didn't want to leave before saying goodbye, either," he told them. "We'll be back as soon as we're able. We want to get the next quest started, but we still have things to do back in our own world."

Mayor Ivan smiled. "Then we'll see you soon." He hugged Drake before he could step away. He allowed it, not wanting to be rude.

Mary was next. 'We'll see you soon," she beamed. "I'll have rooms ready and waiting for you."

"Thank you, Mary. We appreciate everything you do for us," Drake confessed, before hugging her too.

After he said his goodbyes, he and Renn returned to their fathers, who were waiting in a small cluster. Mike and Chad had made the rounds as well.

Drake's father scanned the boys and his own cohort. "Are we ready?" he asked.

"Yes," Drake said flatly, as he grasped Renn's fur, afraid that she would be left behind.

Just before His father's staff was slammed on the ground, Drake's gaze lifted toward Gavin, who was looking at him. There was something in Gavin's eyes that made Drake flinch. Before he could, the bright flash of green light consumed them. When it faded, they were in the large living room of his home.

He looked at Renn, who still looked like herself, but only for a few seconds. A soft glow surrounded her, and she turned into a rat with pitch black fur. The only green on her was her bright green eyes. "Good girl," Drake praised. 'You're small enough to hide so I can take you to school."

Mike grinned. "I expected her to turn into a dog. It makes sense, though, with her rat tail and all. Maybe she could choose either form if she wanted to...a rat's good though. It would be hard to hide her green eyes if she were a dog."

Chad stayed silent as he watched Renn and Drake. He turned to his father. "I'm staying wherever Drake and Renn are staying."

Mike nodded. "Yeah, me too."

It was clear to their fathers that the boys no longer trusted them. They didn't see the vision, but knew it had to be bad if they were acting this protective.

"I want to know how to change the cabin so Renn can fit inside it. She shouldn't have to sleep on the porch," Drake added.

"When you get back, she should be able to change to whatever form she has chosen for this world. All she has to do is change form and stay in it until she leaves the cabin." Drake's father informed him. "She couldn't do it then, because she hadn't left the dimension yet."

Drake nodded in understanding. "If we have school tomorrow, I want to get some sleep. Mike and Chad can stay with me in my room. I don't want to separate from them either."

We need to restock the cabin and get other things we need in case it takes too long to complete the next quest."

"Don't you think we should have our talk first?" It was Drake's father who spoke. The other two men stayed quiet.

Renn jumped onto Drake's shoulder and stared at the dimension master. A small rat hiss came from her mouth.

"I think we need to shower and get some rest. We can talk when we do all that." Drake turned to Mike and Chad. "Do what you need to do. I'll be in my room. I want a real shower before I do anything right now."

Mike and Chad nodded, following their fathers out of Drake's house, leaving Drake and Renn alone with his father.

As soon as the front door closed, Drake's father spoke. There was pleading in his voice. "Whatever vision your beast had was a lie. We would never do anything like that to you. We would never harm you. Our only goal is to protect you and do what we can to get you through the quests. Nothing that happened during your quest was supposed to happen. It shouldn't have been like that."

"I can't help it. That vision was terrible. You slaughtered all my beasts. You killed my friends, then me. All I saw was hate. There was no other emotion... except there was also bloodlust. It washed over me like a tidal wave. I could barely stand there was so much of it. You wouldn't even tell me why you killed them. You just killed me without saying anything."

His father lowered his head. He knew the vision was bad. He didn't know how he could make his son believe him. The vision was false... it had to be. "I don't know what else to say to you," his father pleaded. "I don't know how to prove to you that it wasn't real."

Drake didn't say anything. He didn't know if it was fake or not. There was that seed of doubt that bloomed in his gut. Until Renn believed the vision was false, he would maintain his distance. He turned and left his father standing in the middle of the room.

Just as he stepped onto the first step, he turned to his father. "When Renn trusts you, I will trust you," he said before continuing up the steps toward his room.

After taking a shower and cleaning up his armor and washing his clothing from his quest, he waited in silence on his bed for his two best friends to arrive.

After waiting for nearly an hour, his friends showed up. They had sleeping bags with them, which they spread out onto the floor. They had their backpacks with them, so they could take them to school.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I think I would like to get school over with. We still have one year to go, but I'm not sure we need it if we can live in the dimension. I was wondering if we should just move to Draco Town and finish our quests. Besides, my father said that if you die, we die with you. It's automatic," Mike stated, a glum tone to his voice.

Chad nodded. "I don't think we need school either. I think if we go back, we should just stay there."

Drake looked between his two friends. Renn was sleeping comfortably on Drake's lap. "I think we need to make sure we know how to get fresh water, food..." he looked at Chad. "Coffee. If we don't return, we won't be able to obtain anything like that."

Chad shrugged. "Dad said they have a similar drink, but it's not as good. I think we should stop at the big box store and get several pallets of it. That way, we don't run out. Each time we return, we should get more. I'm not talking cases...I'm talking complete pallets filled with cases of them," he said, grinning widely.

"Or we can just figure out how to live off the resources in the dimension," Drake stated calmly. "Your obsession with coffee seems to be the only real reason to return here."

Mike slipped into his sleeping bag. "I think we should restock the cabin, get as much water as we can. Evern get more water holding tanks.... Chad's coffee.... And figure out what we need so that we don't have to return. That way, we can just get our quests over with. If we fail... we're all dead anyway. If we don't, then we can live there, preferably peacefully."

Chad slipped into his own. "Agreed," he said, yawning loudly.

Drake flipped his light switch off, then carefully slid into his own bed, moving Renn to one of his pillows. "We'll talk more about it in the morning."

Chapter 72: 72: First Day of School

Drake's car pulled out of the driveway with his friends inside. Renn stayed nestled on his shoulder. To Drake's surprise, she could dim her eyes so much that there was no glow whatsoever inside them. That would help to hide her from the prying eyes of other students and teachers.

"So, the plan is to get through the day... right?" Mike asked. "When we get home, we need to figure out what we need to buy. If we plan on staying in the dimension indefinitely, we need to have everything we need. I don't want to have to come back for supplies."

Drake glanced at his friends before going back to the road. He was driving, so he had to pay attention to where he was going. Not that it helped the last time they tried to go to

school. "I don't think we can return here for supplies if we have an open quest," he said calmly. "Once we return, it signifies we are there to do the next quest, so we can't leave until the quest is complete. From what I can tell, we can leave at the end of each quest, then return for the next one."

"Still, if we plan on trying to stay and complete them, I want to get as much stuff as we can," Chad added. He didn't want to run out of coffee. It was the only thing he was worried about. Coffee was his only addiction. It was more like an obsession.

"I want to get Nelly a new doll. One that is similar to what she has. I noticed it was getting pretty nasty and the seams were disintegrating," Drake told them, his eyes still on the road. "I got attached to her when we saved her. She's been through a lot. I want to get her something nice that I know she will like."

Chad and Mike briefly glanced at each other before looking back at Drake. "Isn't she a little too young for you?"

Drake rolled his eyes. "Why do you assume it's like that? I'm not like that. Geeze." Drake sighed. "She's like a little sister that I never had."

Both of his friends shrugged, each thinking about the time difference between the ordinary world and the dimension that would catch her age up to Drake's naturally, until he decided to stay there.

For the rest of the ride to school, they remained silent, preparing themselves for the ordinary task of attending school. Chad pondered dropping the archery team, while Mike was thinking of leaving the football team. Drake wasn't involved with any of the school's clubs or teams, so there was nothing for him to drop out of.

The boys wanted to save the extra time for preparing for their quests, which would keep them in the dimension for extended periods. Staying in the dimension would make them unreliable to their respective teams. They didn't want that. It would make them look bad. Each had games or competitions that were held on weekends. Since they would be busy completing quests, they couldn't involve themselves in their teams.

As they pulled into the school's parking structure, they signed simultaneously, none wanting to attend. They all felt it was pointless.

With a calm resolve, they exited the car, grabbed their backpacks, and headed toward their homeroom classroom; each going in a different direction. They didn't share the same homeroom.

Drake slowly walked, subconsciously stalling for time. He normally loved school, not like his friends. They only showed up and got good grades to stay on their respective teams. They hated the academic part of school.

He stepped into his homeroom and took his seat. The teacher ignored him, as usual. In homeroom, they only took attendance and listened to announcements. The teacher only cared when he called out a name and there was no answer, signifying that the student was absent.

Renn nuzzled his neck, hiding behind his long hair, trying not to be seen. She could feel Drake's discomfort, so she was trying to comfort him by nuzzling his neck.

The bell for the first period rang, and he went to his first real class, taking his seat. He didn't share this class with either of his friends either.

As his teacher droned on, he didn't even pay attention. His thoughts were on the dimension and what he needed to do to prepare to return to it. He wanted to leave school and return there so he could finish quests and get it over with. They had six more to go, and he wasn't looking forward to it. The sooner they finished, the better, so they no longer had to worry about it. He had to wait for his friends. He had driven them to school that day.

The bell rang again, bringing an end to the first period. He had been thinking the entire time, and hadn't even realized time was flying by. He stood up, not even bothering to write down the assignment written on the board, and walked out of the classroom.

To his surprise, Mike and Chad were standing outside his classroom door waiting for him. They still had five classes to attend, and neither of them shared any of the classes that he had before lunch.

"We left our teams; we want to head back home and prepare so we can leave sooner. There is no point in us staying in school if we'll be someplace else," Mike stated sarcastically. "Literally, there is no point in staying. If you can find a point, I'm all ears."

Drake smiled, relieved that they felt the same way he did. It was something he was thinking about during his class. He wasn't looking forward to sitting through his other subjects, waiting for his friends to finish their own.

As one, they turned around and headed back toward his car. "If we can finish preparing today, I want to leave in the morning," Drake stated with a smile.

"Are we going to tell our dads?" Chad asked. He hadn't thought of what to do about that. On one hand, he felt like they needed to know. In the other, he didn't fully trust them due to Renn's vision. He believed that it was a false vision, but somehow, he felt... 'what if it wasn't?'

When they returned to Drake's house, they quickly assessed what they needed for their return to the dimension, then wrote out a list so they could purchase everything they needed. Drake had added a doll for Nelly and something he could find that would blend

into the dimension for Tod. He didn't want her cousin to feel bad for not receiving anything. He was trying to be fair, not wanting to hurt Tod's feelings.

As they grabbed the list and money to pay for what they needed, Drake grabbed his keys, and they headed outside to get into the car. As soon as they closed the front door of Drake's house, an annoyed voice came from behind them.

"What are you doing at home? You should be in school!" It was Drake's father.

Drake folded his arms, staring at his father. "We are preparing to head back to the dimension. We need to purchase supplies so we don't run out. We have all decided, finding no evidence to think differently, that there is no point in finishing school if we're going to spend all our time in the dimension."

"You do your quests in the dimension; you can live in the ordinary world," his father countered.

"Yet when we finish the quests, we felt like we could do more good living there," Drake shot back. "Besides, there are so many trying to kill us, we probably won't even survive the quest. Either way, we don't need to finish school."

Mike and Chad stayed quiet, while Renn stayed tucked in Drake's hair as they all listened to the argument between father and son. None of them wanted to get involved.

Drake's father stayed quiet for a long time before he spoke. "Let me see the list," he demanded.

Drake stepped forward, keeping his distance, and handed over the list of what they needed. His father took it and scanned the list. "I can have most of this delivered by this afternoon. For the toys, you can go shopping. You can fill the water tanks when the new ones get here. I'll get a few more things that you might need."

Chad gasped. "You're helping us?" He was surprised that Drake's father would help them... or any of their fathers would help them.

Drake's father nodded. "Go find your toys, I'll get the rest. I see you want multiple pallets of some items. Is there a reason you want so much?"

Drake folded his arms, with a small smirk on his lips. "We don't want to run out if we have to stay a while."

Drake's father looked up from the list. The silent 'read between the lines' comment was not lost on him. "Fine, I'll get what I can," he said, turning toward his car. The three boys watched as he got in his car and drove down the street, disappearing out of view.

"At least we don't have to get any of it ourselves. Let's get Nelly and Tod their toys," Mike said, walking up to Drake's passenger seat and getting in.

With only a short pause, Drake and Chad followed.

Chapter 73: 73: Shopping

Drake pulled into the parking lot of the local toy store. He wanted to find something for the cousins that they would like, but also something that would blend in with the dimension they lived in.

After getting out of the car, Drake pressed the key fob and locked the car door before heading to the door of the toy store.

Chad pulled it open, letting it close when his two friends entered.

"So, what are we looking for?" Mike asked. "I know we need to find a rag doll or something like that for Nelly. We can't get a regular doll. It wouldn't blend in with the dimension. What about for Tod?"

Drake shrugged. "Maybe some form of wooden toy. Those can be found there in the dimension. We can't get anything like a toy car, but something he would like. We have to be careful that it blends in with where they live."

Drake walked to the doll aisle first, looking for a rag doll that wasn't too big, but not too small either. There wasn't much of a selection.

One of the workers approached them. "May I help you?" she asked.

Drake turned to her and smiled. "Yeah, actually, you can. We need a rag-type doll and a wooden toy for a boy. Do you have any?" he asked. Drake wasn't sure how to explain what he wanted.

"You're looking for old-fashioned style toys?" the girl asked.

Drake nodded. "Yes, that's a good description. A rag doll for a girl and a wooden toy for a boy. The boy's toy can't be anything like a car or other modern-looking items."

"Oh... are you doing a project in drama class? A western, maybe?" she asked, smiling widely.

Drake shrugged, "Something like that." He didn't want to lie, yet he couldn't tell the truth either.

The girl thought about it for a second, then looked down the hall on either side, seeing if she could see her boss. There was no one there, so she bent forward and whispered.

"There's a shop on the other side of town that has handmade toys. They're exactly what you're looking for...I know it is." She said, smiling.

After getting the directions and the name of the shop, Drake and his friends left the toy store in search of the shop that sold handmade toys. When they found it, they went inside and were taken aback by what they saw. Everything was handmade. There were rows and rows of wooden toys, cloth dolls, puzzles, doll furniture, and more. It was packed to the brim with toys that threatened to explode out of the store.

"Doll first," Drake stated, heading to the dolls. His eyes went straight to one doll in particular that looked like Nelly. The doll had auburn hair with hazel eyes expertly embroidered to look almost real. He picked it up, knowing he had found exactly what he wanted for her. "Tod's is next," he told his friends.

Mike and Chad exchanged a look, seeing what Drake had chosen. Both boys smiled inwardly.

As they walked through the toy aisle, they couldn't really find anything that stood out to them. There were many cars, trucks, trains, and other modern-type toys. None of them seemed to belong where they would be taken.

An elderly man approached them as they scanned the rows of wooden toys. He seemed pleased that three teenagers were interested in his merchandise. "Can I help you boys with something?" he asked.

Drake smiled. "I want to purchase this doll, but I also need something for a boy around the age of ten," he told the man. "There are limitations for what it can be. It can't resemble anything modern, like planes, trains, cars, or anything like that," he tried to explain. It was hard explaining because he couldn't come right out and say that it's going to a dimension with zero modern technology.

The man smiled, nodding in understanding. "I see, come with me."

Drake and his friends followed the man near the back of the store. There were all sorts of items that looked as if they came out of the Old West. One in particular was a carriage pulled by a horse. Drake smiled. "Any chance you have a large wolf that can replace the horse?"

The man's eyes widened, then suddenly smiled. "I see... You want something appropriate for the dimension."

All three boys froze.

The man chuckled. "Just because I don't live there doesn't mean I don't know about it." He looked over at Drake, then at Mike and Chad. "That makes sense. All three of you are the heirs, aren't you?" he asked.

Drake sighed. "Yes, and the toys are for two children in one of the towns."

"Draco Town?" the old man asked with a chuckle. He was only saying the name to solidify that he knew about the dimension. "I grew up there. I wanted to leave and see what this world had to offer. With luck, the dimension master allowed it. I believe that was your grandfather, not your father, by the look of you," he told Drake. "You're too young to be his heir."

"Yes, it is for two children in Draco Town. I need to purchase something appropriate for a ten-year-old boy from Draco Town," Drake told him.

"And you want a wolf-beast to pull the carriage?" he asked.

Drake nodded. "He likes to ride my familiar, Renn, like a horse. So it should look like her."

The man paused. "You have a familiar? A beast familiar?" disbelief washed through his features like water.

"In this world, she's a rat," Drake chuckled.

The man leaned forward. "Did you know there's a prophecy that the last dimension master will control beasts and that he will either destroy the dimension or save it?" he probed.

"No, I didn't know that. However, if that's the case, and I am the last dimension master the prophecy tells about, I plan to save it. There are too many people in that dimension that I care about to destroy it."

The old man visibly sighed in relief, then nodded. "Then I will not worry so much." He paused for a moment before introducing himself. "My name is Bren. You may know my little sister Nana. If you do, please tell her that Bre says hello."

Drake's smile widened. "She cares for two children, Nelly and Tod. Those are the two the toys are for."

"What is the level of your beast familiar?" the man asked. "I would like to make sure it's the correct one."

"Renn is currently level three, but she is evolving pretty quickly," Drake said proudly.

The man, Bren, nodded. "I have that," he said, walking to a cabinet and opening it up. A row of items resembling those in the dimension had been locked up. He pulled out one that looked like Renn. "This is the level 3 wolf-beast. I think this will be perfect."

Drake looked at it. It was exactly what he was looking for. "Thank you," Drake told him. "I would like to purchase it along with the doll."

The man nodded, then headed to the front. After Drake paid for the items, they left. The man smiled as he watched them leave his shop. He didn't particularly like their grandfather, but the young boys were pleasant, nothing like their predecessor. He hoped that they could clean up the mess their grandfather had made.

Drake and his friends got back in the car with their toys and headed back home. There wasn't anything else they needed to do since his father was apparently getting everything else. They would leave in the morning if they could get everything ready.

Pulling into the driveway, there was a large truck parked in front of Drake's house. A man was unloading everything and putting it inside the garage. There were five pallets of coffee, which made Chad grin, several more water tanks, along with pallets of other items that he could not see what they were because of how they were packed. He noticed that seeds had been added to the pallet: different squash, root vegetables, salad greens, and many other types of fruits and vegetables.

They watched as the rest of the pallets were unloaded, and the driver left.

Drake walked into the garage with his friends following closely behind him. Their fathers were in the garage, looking at the pallets. "Did you find what you were looking for?" Drake's father asked.

Drake nodded, not saying anything because he was too busy looking at all the pallets. Scanning the containers and boxes, he realized that his father had added everything they needed if they decided to live in the dimension permanently.

"How do we get armor and clothing if we need to replace ours?" Drake asked.

"Chadwick Town has someone who makes armor and clothing for us. I can provide you with all the information you need to get anything from him. Some things come as rewards for fighting bandits or beasts, but if you can't get what you need from fighting, go to Chadwick and buy it from them. You can get coins from fighting opponents to pay for it," his father answered.

Chapter 74: 74: A Bad Feeling

Drake stored everything from the garage that his father had obtained for them, except for the water tanks, which they quickly filled with water one by one, then placed all of them inside the book as well. When they were finished with everything they needed to prepare, they went inside the house for lunch.

Upon entering the house, they sat around the table as Chad's father prepared sandwiches for them.

There was subtle tension in the air as silence permeated the room. The only thing that could be heard was the chopping of lettuce and tomato as Chad's father worked in the kitchen making them sandwiches for lunch. It wasn't until the plate of sandwiches was placed on the table that the deafening silence was broken.

"Are you sure you want to leave in the morning. We still think you should finish out the school year," Drake's father told them as he looked between each of the boys. He knew that when the quests were done, they could live their life on Earth and only intervene with dimension business when it was necessary. "If you finished out the week, then do your quest, you could be back for the weekend to return for next week. You shouldn't miss school. We think it's best if you finish. If you miss this week, it will be difficult to finish out the school year."

No one spoke for a long time, not wanting to be the first to break the silence. They didn't like the conversation. Ever since the night in the clearing when Renn had her vision, they had been having trouble trusting their fathers. In their hearts, they felt that the vision was false, that it was a trick sent to them to hinder their quest, but they couldn't help but mistrust their fathers as a result of it. What they had been through was too devastating. Drake and Renn had seen the worst of it. They had witnessed the vision for themselves. Mike and Chad only heard about it. It was enough to make them all uneasy.

Choosing to skip school and get the quests done was a sore subject. All three of their fathers thought they should wait until the weekend to go back to the dimension, while Drake and his friends felt there was no point in school anymore... at all.

Tired of the silence, Mike was the first to answer Drake's father's question. His tone was sarcastic. "Why bother? Either we finish the quests or we die trying. There are no other options for any of us."

Chad nodded in agreement. "I agree. Why spend valuable time going to school when it does nothing for us when we go to the dimension? It's a waste of our time at this point. After the last one, it's doubtful that we'll even survive the next one."

Drake stayed silent, not wanting to speak. His thoughts swirled around their family and how he and his friends had been thrown into the dimension. Most importantly, he thought about how it all began; Drake wished it had never started. He and his friends were caught in a cycle that would never end until their bloodlines disappeared.

Drake lost in his thoughts, barely heard his friends speak, picking up the conversation only when Chad had mentioned the dimension. He looked up at his friends... "Sorry, I wasn't listening. What did you say?"

Mike rolled his eyes, but said nothing.

Chad shrugged. "I was agreeing with Mike that school is pointless. He said that our only options are to finish the quests or die trying. I agree. We don't even have any more life tokens. The fact that we had to use all three of the ones we had means we are most likely going to die trying to get our quests finished."

Drake nodded, showing he agreed. He was thinking about what to say to respond to Chad's words, but a sudden knot formed in his stomach as if warning him that something was wrong. His face paled. He grabbed his stomach as if he were holding it in place. A soft groan left his lips, unable to stop it.

Renn jumped off his shoulder onto the table and looked up at him. Her green eyes were shining with concern. Her rat tail curled around her, staring at her master intently. Even Renn could tell something was wrong.

The conversation stopped immediately, as everyone at the table noticed Drake and Renn's demeanor. There was complete silence as they all kept their attention on Drake and what was happening to him.

Drake swallowed, taking in what he was feeling, trying to rationalize it. His instincts told him that something was wrong in the dimension. He didn't know how he knew or what was wrong. He just knew that there was something terribly wrong happening there. Fear washed through him as faces of those he had become attached to floated through his mind: Nelly, Tod, Nana, Mary, and even Mayor Ivan.

His body began to tremble in fear. Sweat beaded his brow, and he swallowed, his unease rising.

"Something's wrong," Drake stated evenly, wiping the sweat off his forehead, then looked up at his father. "How do we know what's going on in the dimension?" he asked, his voice shaking. "There's something wrong. I can feel it. Something terrible is happening."

Drake's father frowned; he hadn't felt anything. If there was a problem, he should be able to feel it too. He felt nothing. Drake's father immediately got up, pulling a sphere off the shelf. It was something he kept near him. If he left the house, he took it with him. He looked inside the sphere. It began to glow a soft red as he peered inside it, yet it wouldn't reveal anything. There was only the soft red glow.

The sphere was unique. It was an ordinary crystal ball if anyone else tried to use it. Well... anyone except the dimension master. For him, it would glow red, then show a scene of what was happening. If there were nothing he needed to deal with that was happening, it would glow a soft green instead, showing him anything he wanted to look at. He would only have to think of a place in the dimension, and it would reveal it to him.

"Something is wrong, but I can't see what it is," the dimension master stated. "When it glows red, that means there's trouble, but it normally shows us what the trouble is so we can go into the dimension and fix it."

Drake stood up unsteadily and looked inside the sphere himself. He couldn't see anything either. The small globe glowed a soft red. It pulsed softly when Drake touched it. When his father did, the glow remained steady. It was something that his father had never seen the sphere do before.

"It won't show you anything. You haven't finished your quests. It will only show the current dimension master what's wrong, but for some reason, it's not showing anything to me either," Drake's father complained. "Normally, it shouldn't glow for you at all. It still glowed red when you touched it. That's not normal; neither is it pulsing like that."

Drake stiffly moved away from the table. He felt like he urgently needed to return to the dimension. It was like a compulsion; a desperate need. "I'm going to go change. I know for a fact that there is something wrong. I'm going as soon as I'm ready. I can feel it. I need to see what it is. Whatever it is, it's urgent."

Mike and Chad stood, following Drake's lead, leaving the house to get dressed in their own armor and clothes. They needed to prepare to go back to the dimension. Both boys hurried, not wanting to keep Drake waiting. They could tell that whatever was happening, they couldn't wait.

Moments after Drake came out of his room, changed, and was ready to go back to the dimension, his friends returned, ready as well.

As they prepared to leave, Drake's father spoke. "If you go now, you will have no choice but to start your quest. Whatever is wrong could hinder your quest. Remember that many of the quests have a time limit. You may not have time to take care of whatever is wrong and complete your quest at the same time. If you fail to complete a timed quest, it's all over...for all three of you," he warned. "You can return to school. We," he said, pointing to himself and the other two men, "can go and deal with whatever is wrong."

Drake looked between his friends, ignoring his father's words. "You know the risks. I'm the one who felt it. My father didn't. I'm the one who has to go. I can either go myself, or you can come with me. I won't force you to risk your life over my feeling that something is wrong."

His friends both nodded, understanding what was at risk. They stepped closer, showing their solidarity. Drake, without hesitation, slammed the staff into the ground. There was a flash of bright, emerald green light. When it disappeared, they found themselves at the welcome sign, welcoming them to Draco Town.

Chapter 75: 75: Draco Town

Drake led his friends to the tavern at the far end of the main street to search out Mayor Ivan. He was the best choice to talk to first. If anyone knew anything, it would be him. He seemed to know everything that was going on in the small town.

As the boys walked through the streets, they were empty of townsfolk, and all the shops in the town were closed. There was silence everywhere. They couldn't hear even a whisper from anyone living in the small town. It was eerily quiet.

For the small town, it was in the afternoon, just after lunch. Like most days in the dimension, the weather was calm with fluffy clouds slowly floating across the sky. The twin suns bathed the dimension with a warm light. The soft breeze could barely be felt. It would be an ideal day if it weren't so creepy with no one around.

As Drake and his friends scanned the streets of the small town, they looked for any signs of life. The town should have been filled with citizens going about their business, rushing up and down the streets. They weren't, though; everything was empty. It felt like a ghost town; something out of a horror movie.

"I wonder where everyone is at?" Mike murmured. He was looking around at the empty streets and closed buildings. It was giving him a creepy feeling. There was a subtle tension in the air that they couldn't place.

Chad nodded in agreement. He shivered, a cold sweat moving down his spine, getting the creeps as well.

"We're going to check the tavern first. It seems to be the hub of the town. If they need to gather everyone, I'm pretty sure that's where they would gather," Drake stated. His face was pale. He was still having that urgent feeling. He knew whatever was happening needed to be dealt with quickly. It was as if someone's life was in danger. The strong feeling in his gut never lifted. He was on the verge of vomiting. Every second, he held back a groan from the discomfort. It was a dull pain that bordered on sharp.

When they reached the large building, Drake rushed up the tavern steps and pulled the door open. His friends and cohort followed close behind him. What he saw made him pause, his friends nearly crashing into him as he stopped abruptly. All the townsfolk were huddled around in small groups all around the tavern, worry on their faces. Many of them were crying.

Gavin was in his usual spot, drinking from his stein unbothered. From what he could tell, he was the only one who did not seem to be worried or upset. It appeared to be Gavin's baseline, though. Regardless of the situation, he always appeared that way. There was never any change.

At the long table in the back of the tavern, Mayor Ivan had a map spread out, a doll sitting near it. His higher-ranking soldiers were scanning the map intently as they quietly discussed something that Drake couldn't hear; they were whispering. Ivan looked up,

seeing the boys as the double doors closed behind them. Relief washed over Ivan's face as he rushed up to him; his eyes were red. He had been upset... really upset.

Before Ivan made it to him, Drake put his hand up, stopping him in his tracks. "What's wrong? What's happening?" he demanded. His body was tense, his eyes briefly scanning the room, not stopping on anyone in particular.

Ivan had only stopped for a brief moment before he kept going, stopping only a foot away from Drake and his friends. "It's Nelly, she's gone. Someone took her," he choked out. His voice was ragged as he spoke. There was desperation and worry in his features.

Drake gave Renn a silent command. She jumped off his shoulder, transforming into her real form, and went to the doll on the table and sniffed it. There was a splash of blood on it. She took in the scent of Nelly's blood, letting Drake know through their mind link that it was indeed hers, before she began sniffing everyone in the room.

Many of the people clumped in groups in the tavern backed away, afraid of the beast, even though they had seen her before at the celebration. She sniffed each person, one at a time, making her way through the tavern.

Each person acted differently. Some even attempted to back away, trying to hide their scent. Drake took note of each and every one of them who did that, cataloging them in his system so he could do something about them later if he needed to. It didn't matter that they backed away because Renn could sniff them out regardless of whether they backed away or not. She was a wolf after all and had a good sense of smell. If they had Nelly's blood on them, or even her scent, she would know it. There was no way for them to hide it. All those who had Nelly's scent on them flashed through Drake's mind. Only one had her blood.

Renn's instructions were to find a link with the blood on the doll to someone in the room. He also wanted to know each person who had come into contact with Nelly. Renn wasn't to reveal to anyone in the room who she had discovered who was linked, but to mind link the vision of who she had found to him. Drake had a suspicion of who it was; by the behavior of those in the room, he just needed Renn to confirm it.

Everyone with her scent was revealed to him. When a picture of the one who was involved, the one with her blood on them, appeared in his mind, he flinched. It was exactly who he thought it was.

Something told him that he couldn't express this yet, or Nelly would be in further danger.

"Tell me everything that happened?" Drake ordered. "Tell me everything you know so far."

Mayor Ivan ushered Drake and his friends to the map. "She's been missing for nearly an hour," Ivan started. "Nana went to her room and found her doll on the floor. It had blood on it. There was a splash of blood around it. It was fresh blood, so she was taken just before Nana found the doll. We think it's Nelly's blood."

Drake nodded, looking briefly at Renn, who made a low growl-how, confirming it. "It is." He scanned the room, intentionally passing over the one in question as if that person wasn't a suspect. "Anything else?"

Mayor Ivan nodded, his eyes watering with recognition. "One of her shoes was found near the road. It had blood on it. We believe it is hers, too."

"Where is the shoe?" Drake asked, scanning the room again. He needed to find out if the suspect had an accomplice. So far, there had been no indication of it.

Ivan pointed to a basket on the table that Drake hadn't noticed before. Renn walked over and sniffed the shoe, then mentally confirmed that the blood belonged to Nelly.

"It is. It is Nelly's blood." Drake confirmed, making Ivan's face pale further. There were several gasps in the tavern. "Is anyone else missing? Any more of the children?"

Ivan shook his head. "After Nelly was taken, we took a census of everyone in town. We checked it against the town's roster and found that everyone else was accounted for. Now, we check the town roster every half hour. No one else is missing."

"Is there anything else that you can tell us that might help us locate her?" Drake continued. He knew he needed to find her fast. He could feel it.

"We believe they took her to the gargoyle's lair, but we don't know. Her shoe was in the center of the road heading toward their lair, which is why we suspect that."

"Any suspects on who might have taken her and why?" Drake probed, still trying to get as much information as he could. He also subtly watched if anyone in particular leaned in to listen, or if their features indicated relief with whatever the answer was.

Mayor Ivan shook his head. "The only clue we have is the shoe in the road toward the monster's lair," he choked out. "We have nothing else to go by... nothing."

No one showed him anything. No one leaned to listen, no change in features, nothing to indicate their involvement. Not even any of those that Renn had indicated who had Nelly's scent on them, nor the one with her blood on them.

Drake stayed quiet for a while. He knew he needed to do something about the situation quickly, but he just didn't know what to do. He was at a loss. With no other options, he decided to see if his system could help.

"System, can you link me to Nelly?" he asked the system mentally.

{Quest received: Save Nelly}

Chapter 76: 76: Conflicting Quests

As soon as the system offered a quest to save Nelly, a red line appeared, leading out of the tavern. Drake knew right away that it was linked to wherever Nelly had been taken.

"We're going to see if we can find any evidence of where she might have been taken," Drake told Mayor Ivan. "If we don't come back, we're following a lead. I promise we will find her or die trying." He then scanned the room one last time before heading out and following the link to Nelly.

He took only a few steps toward the door to take them out of the tavern when he received another system message.

{Hidden Quest Received: Find the chamber of knowledge/obtain the Master Spell book}

{Timed Quest: 5:00:00:00 remaining}

Drake watched the counter already beginning to count down. "Shit!" he hissed. "5 days, that's not enough," he whispered more to himself.

The only ones who heard it were his cohort. He was happy about that. He pulled the door open, letting his friends pass him before stepping out himself.

As they followed the red line that led to Nelly, Drake pulled up the quest map, then the green quest thread. He sighed in relief; they were going in the same direction... for now, at least. He also noticed that the lines were heading in the opposite direction from the gargoyle's lair, where Mayor Ivan had suspected her to be taken.

"Five days for what?" Mike asked, his tone uneasy. He looked at Drake, worried for the answer.

"We have two quests that we need to finish before the time runs out. First, we need to save Nelly. There is no time limit; only... her life is at stake. We received our hidden quest, which has a timer that's already counting down. It's giving us five days to find the chamber of knowledge and obtain a master spell book. Dad's right, saving Nelly can hinder us from finishing the quest." Drake looked between his friends. "We need to choose which quest to do." There was a long pause before he continued. "We either save Nelly's life and die, or finish our ascension quest and live, letting Nelly die. I personally want to save Nelly. In my opinion, that's what we should do, regardless of the consequences. What do you want to do? Majority rules."

Chad and Mike exchanged a look. Their expression was resigned. "We are with you, brother. We can't knowingly let an innocent child die to save our own skins," Chad said somberly. "We save Nelly, and if we have time, we try to finish the quest. That's the best thing we can do."

Mike nodded. "Agreed."

Drake nodded. "Then we follow the red thread," Drake said, then rushed down the road, following the red line. He was relieved that his friends agreed with him. He didn't want to let Nelly die. It didn't matter what the consequences were as long as she was saved. Mike and Chad followed with their eyes glowing, allowing them to see the two glowing threads, one red and one green.

"I find it strange that her shoe was found going the other way. Do you think someone is trying to stop us from completing the quest again?" Mike asked. Then he added, "It seems to be working. If we had gone the other direction, there would have been no way to do both quests. At least now we have a chance. Both lines are going in the same direction."

"We still need to hurry. I have a gut feeling that if we don't, she'll be dead when we find her," Drake advised. His gut was still aching. There was also that overwhelming urgency. He knew they had to find her as quickly as they could.

As they rushed down the road, following the red thread linked to Nelly, Drake brought up the quest map. He could see where the green thread was leading. It was leading to a large clearing surrounded by dense trees. They hadn't gone in that direction before, so they weren't sure what was there. Drake used his quest map to see where the road led. He knew he couldn't continue following the green thread until he found and saved Nelly. He hoped with everything he had that no one would attack them, knowing how urgent it was to catch up to where Nelly was taken. They were over an hour behind her.

"Maybe we should pack a car or something like that if we happen to survive this quest," Mike mumbled. "We could easily catch up to her if we had one right now."

"Yeah, well... we don't have one, and we need to hurry," Drake complained. "If we were close to the mountain, I would get the horned worms to help find her. I can't do that, though. Protector is at the bridge; he's too far away from us. He can't help either. We're on our own."

A loud laugh sounded, before three men stepped out of the trees. Dirt coated their skin, their clothes torn. They stood in the road, blocking their way, not moving. Drake could tell that they weren't there to attack. They were there to prevent them from going further.

Drake gave Renn a silent command, needing her to determine if she could smell Nelly on the men. She needed to find out as soon as she could or during their fight... if they had one.

Drake's eyes narrowed at the three men in front of him. "I don't have time for this," he snapped. Throwing out his hand, he sent an explosive fireball toward the one in the middle. It wasn't a strong one. It was just enough to stun him. The man dodged, laughing manically.

Renn leaped up, knocking the man down, and quickly bit through his throat, yet didn't kill him; she only incapacitated him. He lay on the packed dirt road, bleeding. Mike shot a lightning bolt out of his sword, shocking him as he lay. The power of the electrical current knocked him out. That was one down; there were two to go.

The other two men froze, unsure what to do. They knew that as long as they didn't attack, the heirs couldn't kill them.

"Why are you blocking our way?" Mike sneered.

The men didn't answer; they just gave a smug smile.

Renn stalked around the remaining, sniffing. She growled menacingly at one of them. It told Drake that they were part of Nelly's kidnapping.

The men backed away from Renn, yet they kept their smug smiles.

"They're trying to stall us," Drake shot back. Then gave Renn another silent order.

She immediately leaped, tackling the second man, while Mike shot his lightning out of his sword. It wasn't to kill. They knew they couldn't. They had to incapacitate them instead. The men weren't bandits. They never attacked, only blocked their way. Their instincts told them that it would be bad for them if they killed them.

The lightning attack stunned the man long enough for Mike to punch him with his gauntlet. It knocked the man out completely. It was a powerful blow.

Mike turned to the last man. Chad just watched. He wasn't needed for the fight. He just kept an eye on the men's vitals, just in case they went too far and had to heal them. So far, it was just enough.

With two of the men out of the fight, Drake turned to the third. He grinned wickedly. "Your turn."

The man looked at his friends before running into the trees and disappearing out of sight. Renn leaped after him. Moments later, she was dragged by the leg back to his friends. Once there, she moved her large jaws to his neck, making him freeze.

Mike shot another lightning bolt, hitting the man. It was powerful, but it didn't knock him out. Mike sighed, then punched him in the head, knocking him unconscious.

Drake turned to his friends. "Let's go. Those guys stalled us enough. We need to get there faster. I think they're trying to get her to the ocean. We need to make it there before they do."

Mike growled in anger. "If they make it to the ocean, there is no way we can get to her," he complained.

Drake looked down at Renn, speaking to her through their mind link. He wanted to know if she could see the red thread. A vision of the red thread flashed through Drake's mind. He nodded, then gave Renn a silent command to try to stall whoever had her. He begged her to be careful. He didn't want to lose his familiar either. She nuzzled him briefly before dashing off ahead of them, following the thread leading to Nelly.

Drake and his friends began to run, following the red thread. As they ran, the trees became denser. When they approached the thickening trees, the green and red threads split in different directions. Sighing at the green thread, they continued to follow the red one that led to Nelly, leaving their ascension quest behind.

Chapter 77: 77: Silent Escape

Drake felt like they had been running for hours. He looked at his friends, who were breathing heavily. They had been running nonstop, trying to catch up to the ones who took Nelly before they were able to get her on a boat. Renn was long gone, out of sight. She was far quicker than they were. She remained uninjured, boosted by the familiar bond.

Throughout their journey, images flashed through his mind, telling him that Renn was fine. She was still following the red thread. She even fought a few beasts on her way, but was doing well.

Drake and his friends ran for as long as they could before they had no choice but to stop and rest. They knew they couldn't stop completely. They had to keep moving. They continued to walk forward instead as Chad pulled food out of his storage ring. They ate while they walked. He had stocked his ring with food and bottles of water.

As they walked, another image flashed through Drake's mind. Renn had found Nelly. From what he could tell, they weren't that far from them. "We need to keep running. Renn caught up to them," Drake informed his friends.

Nodding, they began running again. Drake gave Renn a silent message. If those who had Nelly made it to the beach, she had to do everything she could to keep them from putting Nelly on a boat.

Nearly twenty minutes later, Renn flashed an image of the men hiding in some trees, taking a break. In the distance, the beach could be seen. She was close already. "Shit!" Looking at the image carefully, he realized that there was no boat anywhere near the

beach. There were no boats at all in the water that he could see. "There's no boat. They must have stopped to wait for it to arrive," Drake stated as they continued.

"What is it?" Chad asked, concerned.

"They're not far from the beach. Right now, they're taking a break. I think they're waiting for their ride to get there. We need to get to Nelly before they can reach the beach and get on a boat when it arrives. If they make it, it's all over. I don't know how we can get her once they put her on a boat."

Drake kept running. His chest was tight with panic. He worried they wouldn't get to her in time. The dull pain in his gut remained. So did the sense of urgency. He knew he had to get there. There was worry that he wouldn't get to her in time to save her.

As they ran, they heard a high-pitched sound. Something was coming after them. When they looked, it was a beast. It was a very large one. Its eyes glowed orange, telling them it was a level 2 beast. It dove at them, teeth bared. It looked like a large scorpion. It flashed its tail, pounding it toward them, trying to impale them.

"Can't you tame this thing so it can give us a ride?" Chad complained as he blocked and moved in zigzags, trying to stay out of range of its large, bladed tail.

"I don't know. Let me see what I can do. If we can, it's large enough to fit all three of us on its back," Drake panted. He was out of breath from running. He let his eyes glow a bright green and tried to link with its mind, trying to make it an ally. It wasn't working. The beast was in a frenzy, trying to kill them and not paying attention to the thoughts that were being transmitted into its mind.

Drake let his eyes glow brighter as he pulled his staff out of his storage. He had stored it in his cuff, not even in the book. He wanted to be able to pull the staff out quickly if he needed it in an emergency. With the intention of taming the beast, he let the large emerald on top of it glow brightly, as he attempted again to link their minds.

He blocked each strike the scorpion made, but tried not to hurt the scorpion beast as he tried to link minds with it. After several excruciating minutes, finally, the beast halted, backing away slightly. He had done it; their minds had linked. It had realized that Drake wasn't trying to hurt it.

Drake stood still, his eyes glowing brightly, looking toward the beast. The normal, serene expression crossed his features as he stared at the beast. It took several minutes before the beast's eyes began to glow a bright green, and it lowered its head. Drake stepped forward, pressing his hand to the beast's head. He stayed that way for a while before he lifted his hand and backed away.

The beast turned to its side, lowering its body. Drake mounted its back, ushering Mike and Chad to follow. They did it quickly and carefully. Both boys were amazed at what Drake had done.

"Is it a he or a she?" Mike asked, banting between breaths. He was wondering what it was. Renn was a girl, Protector a boy... he wanted to know what the scorpion was.

Drake smiled. "She... and her name is Ruby. She is also a familiar," he said, smiling, then gave her a silent command on where to head. Ruby dashed down the road, taking only minutes to get where they needed to go. She was incredibly fast.

In the distance, they could see Renn, inching closer to Nelly, who was locked in a cage that hung on a tree.

Drake silently conversed with Renn, who immediately looked toward her master. The men were taking a break to eat dinner. Nelly was in a ball, hugging her knees with her thumb in her mouth. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She barely fit in the cage.

Drake had the scorpion hide, so that the men wouldn't see her. Then quickly dismounted and inched their way to Renn. The scorpion watched from her hiding place.

When they reached the cage, Drake carefully lowered the cage from the tree. He couldn't unlock it; he didn't have a key. He would have to break it when he got her out of there.

Nelly opened her eyes, seeing Drake. He immediately pressed his lips with his finger, telling her to stay quiet. Renn inched up, took the top of the cage in her mouth, and backed away from the camp.

Drake gave Renn a silent command, telling her to take the cage to the scorpion, Ruby. The feeling in his gut was still there, letting him know that they weren't out of hot water yet. He needed to get her out of the cage and home, or at least safe.

It was already starting to get dark. The men were sitting around a fire, ignoring Nelly and her cage. It made it easier to get her away from their camp.

When Renn reached Ruby, Drake had her place the cage on Ruby's back. She did so quickly. The men still hadn't noticed.

Drake and his friends mounted the scorpion while carefully holding the cage. "I'll get you out of that cage as soon as I can, Nelly," Drake whispered. "We have to get away first."

The little girl nodded. Her thumb was still in her mouth as her tears fell. She looked relieved but still scared. He understood. Drake told Renn to follow as he had Ruby rush off. They went all the way to where the green line was for the quest. Turning toward it, they followed it until they got to the clearing where it had stopped.

Quickly pulling out the cabin, he opened the door and had Renn carry the cage to the door. She did as she was instructed. She then changed into her rat form and entered the cabin, letting Drake, Mike, and Chad carry the cage inside.

Drake spoke again to the scorpion, who bowed, rubbing its massive head on his shoulder, and then turned, disappearing into the trees.

After closing the door and locking it, Drake closed and locked all the shutters, hung all the bells, and then worked on opening the cage. In the end, Mike had slammed his sword into the lock, breaking it to pieces.

Drake carefully opened the door and pulled Nelly out of the cage and pulled her into his lap. "Chad, can you give her something to eat. I don't want to cook anything. The smell might attract them here."

Chad pulled a bag of sandwiches out of his ring, handing each of them one while taking one himself. "I made a bunch, just in case," he stated, shrugging. "I found out that as long as they stay in the ring. They never go bad."

"I'm glad you did," Drake nodded. "That was good thinking."

They ate quietly, keeping the lights out, fearful of attracting the kidnapper's attention. Nelly stayed close to Drake, refusing to leave his lap. This was the second time he came to save her.

Chapter 78: 78: Cabin

It was dark in the cabin, while Drake, Chad, Mike, and Nelly were huddled in the bedroom. Renn was prowling around in her rat form, keeping a careful watch. She was doing her duty to protect her cohort and the child they were protecting. They hadn't lit any lamps or candles, not wanting to alert anyone that they were there.

In the forest, Ruby stayed hidden deep within the trees, focused on the clearing and the cabin near the tree line. She watched the cabin and the surrounding area for dangers, wanting to protect her master.

For all of them, all was quiet; not a sound was heard. Even the beasts were keeping their distance.

Inside the cabin, Drake sat on his bed, with his back to the wall. Nelly was asleep on his lap with her thumb in her mouth. He gently stroked her hair, trying to make her feel better. She seemed to be a constant target for attacks. First, the gargoyles had kidnapped her; now this. He feared that this time, she was being used against him and his cohort. He felt responsible, like her kidnapping was his fault. Someone must have noticed there was some kind of bond between them. There was. Nelly had grown

attached to him ever since he had arrived at the gargoyle's lair to save her, then carried her all the way back to Draco Town on his back so she didn't have to walk.

As soon as they placed the cabin and went inside, they had secured it, leaving all lights off. Nelly had been given a bath and something clean to wear while her own clothes dried. Mike had washed her clothes for her while Chad and Drake bathed her. Chad used his sword to heal the gash on her arm where they had cut her. Dried blood caked around the wound. They needed to clean her up; they couldn't wait; they were afraid that the wound would get infected. It had been left unattended for too long already.

Rather than cleaning only her arm, they chose to bathe her so that they could inspect her for more injuries. All she had were bruises on her arms and back. The long gash on her arm was the only one that cut through the skin. Drake was relieved when he discovered that she had no other injuries.

After Nelly was cleaned of dirt and blood, Chad healed her with his sword, and they put her in a clean shirt that reached the floor when she stood. It was one of Drake's that he had packed, just in case he needed it. He was glad he had it with him. They couldn't do anything about undergarments. They had nothing to put on her. It didn't really matter since the shirt was so long for her.

Drake had taken out the doll he had purchased for her, so she had a toy to play with or hold. He knew she liked to keep her doll with her, but her old one had been left behind on purpose, by her kidnappers, to send a message that she had been taken. Drake believed that the gash was to spill blood, to show she was injured. It was also done intentionally. He believed that it was part of the message they were trying to send.

Nelly was now asleep on Drake's lap while he and his friends sat on their beds, awake, worried that her kidnappers would catch up to them. They were all too exhausted from running to catch up to her kidnappers. It felt like they needed time to take a breath. It didn't help that they were on the clock. Once that continuously counted down. They were quickly running out of time. It would be a tough fight if they were made to fight in the state they were all in.

Drake let his eyes glow so he could see the threads, to see where they were heading. Making sure nothing had changed. The green one was heading deeper into the clearing, while the red one had vanished. He had Nelly with him, so it had disappeared. He had never received a message stating that he had completed the quest, so he figured that he needed to take her all the way home for it to be complete.

The pain in his gut remained, telling him there was still danger, yet his instincts told him that if he did take her back to Draco Town, they would only kidnap her again. "I think we need to keep Nelly with us while we complete the quest. My gut tells me that if we take her back now, they will only take her away again."

Chad nodded. He had been thinking of that too. "I was thinking that too. We're in the clearing where the quest is anyway. We have two beast familiars that can help protect her, and on top of that, the time is running out. I know we have time to take her back, but I agree with you. They'll take her... again."

Mike nodded in agreement. "Yeah, let's finish the quest and take Nelly back when we finish it. We're already here anyway."

At that moment, an image flashed through Drake's mind. It was from Ruby. A group of men entered the clearing and headed toward the cabin. Each man had an old-fashioned torch, the fire flickering and reflecting off the trees as they made their way into the clearing. "Shit!" Drake hissed. "I sure hope this cabin is fireproof."

With a silent command for Ruby to protect herself, if she chose to get involved, he carefully stood from the bed, still holding Nelly. Carefully, he placed her on the bed, covering her with a thick blanket before they left the bedroom. They had a large group of men that they might have to deal with. They didn't know for sure yet.

"If they set the cabin on fire, can we kill them? Wouldn't that be considered an attack?" Mike whispered, trying not to be heard by the men outside. He knew that they couldn't kill the residents of the dimension unless they were attacked first. They could do nothing until the men acted against them.

Chad had another thought. "What if they surround us, trying to prevent us from finishing the quest?" he asked. "If we die because we failed to complete it in time, Nelly is stuck here by herself."

Drake sent a mental message, trying to discover how many men were surrounding them. They need to know how many they were dealing with. Regardless of how many were coming, they needed to come up with a plan. Something that would help them get Nelly to safety and complete the quest.

Drake looked down at Renn, who remained in her rat form. It would be easy for her to take them all out. All she had to do was leave the cabin, sneak up on each man, one at a time. When she was close, she could transform into her real form, take them out, and change back, making it hard for them to see her. Rinse and repeat... until all the men had been dealt with. Of course, killing them wasn't an option; she had to render them unconscious so they could all get away.

They could only do something to kill them if the men chose to attack them or attempt to set the cabin on fire. They had no choice but to wait and see what the men would do before they came up with a plan.

The other option would be to render them unconscious, regardless, and immediately continue following the thread before any of them woke up, obtain the master spell book, and use the staff to return to Draco Town. Drake knew it sounded easier than it was.

They would continue to follow them, trying to take Nelly from them and to stop them from finishing their ascension quest.

Using his mind link with Ruby, he kept an eye on the men who were coming closer to the cabin. Drake lit a lamp, knowing they knew the cabin was there, so it didn't matter. "How much food do you have prepared in that ring of yours?" Drake asked Chad.

"A lot, why?" Chad asked, not sure why it mattered. After the way they were thrown into the dimension the first time, the first thing he did was fill his ring with as much food as he could, along with other things he thought they might need. He wanted to be prepared in case they were thrown in again without notice or warning.

"Enough to last us five days?" Drake asked, then continued. "I believe we are about to be under siege. We won't be able to leave the cabin unless we deal with these guys without killing them. If they are only blocking us and not attacking, preventing us from finishing our quest, we can do nothing but incapacitate them. We may be stuck here for a while."

As Drake watched through Ruby's eyes, the men arrived at the cabin and began setting up their camp, surrounding the cabin. Thirty men were blocking their way to escape the clearing. It was clear, they weren't being attacked but stalled... besieged.

Chapter 79: 79: Making Plans

Watching the men through Ruby's eyes, Drake studied them carefully. "I wonder if they're going to have someone keep watch?" he whispered to his friends. He needed to know what the men were planning to do so he could come up with a plan of his own.

"Why?" Mike asked, then continued. "Do you want to deal with those on watch and leave while the others are sleeping?" Mike asked, unsure if that's what Drake was planning. It didn't matter what Drake planned; he would go along with whatever it was. He trusted his friend's instincts.

"Yes. I was thinking about doing that. If they sleep and leave only a few on watch, we can easily incapacitate them and leave before the rest wake up," Drake explained. He was thinking about doing exactly what Mike was saying. If they could incapacitate the guards and leave before they realized it, they would be able to finish their quest, send Nelly home, deal with her kidnappers, and get back to the ordinary world to replenish supplies so they could start on the next quest.

Chad shook his head. Creases lined his brow as he thought about the plan. "That wouldn't work. If there are guards on watch, they would be watching toward the door of the cabin and the windows on every side. They would see us exit. Second, if we attempt to take one of them down, the others would hear the fight we have, regardless of how short it is. If we get Renn or Ruby involved, I don't doubt that the guards would scream when they saw them, alerting the rest of the men that there's a beast. We need to think

things through a bit better until we figure out a plan that has definite results. There are too many loopholes in your current plan."

Drake sighed, knowing Chad was right. Too much could go wrong with his plan. They couldn't even come up with one until they knew what the men surrounding the cabin were going to do.

Mike sat down next to Chad on the small sofa and looked between his friends. "What if we leave the cabin here and sneak out? They will be focused on the cabin while we are finishing our quest." It was the only thing Mike could think of to do.

"How are we going to sneak out with them watching the front door?" Chad asked, thinking his idea wouldn't work either.

"Drake can use his staff to teleport us outside the clearing, where the green glow it produces wouldn't be seen. Then we can follow the thread again, but under the cover of night. They will be so focused on the cabin that they won't see us passing them, heading toward wherever the green thread is leading us," Mike explained.

Drake thought for a moment, then shook his head, his green eyes flashing. "I don't think that will work. They would see the flash through the cracks in the cabin when we leave. They will also see the flash wherever we end up, even from a distance. It's too bright to hide. It's too dark, and the flash will be a beacon of where we are," Drake explained.

The boys sat silently, trying to come up with a viable plan. They thought about it for several long moments. They knew Drake was right. Chad smiled. "I think I know what to do. It may work, but it may not; it wouldn't hurt to try it." He looked over at Drake. "If you teleport to the road and draw them there, you can teleport back immediately, so they don't know it was done twice. As soon as they head toward the flash, we can get out of here."

Analyzing what Chad had suggested, Drake nodded slowly, but was still unsure if it would work. "It might work, but just in case, I want to try it later. Nelly's clothes need to be dry, and she needs a good night's rest. Disturbing her now would only make her scared. We can come up with alternative plans while we're waiting for her clothes to dry and for her to wake up," Drake told his friends.

Mike had another idea, but didn't want to say until he knew how Drake's teleportation worked. "How does your teleportation work. Can it only go to places that you've been? Can you teleport anywhere as long as you know where you're going? How does it work?"

Drake thought for a moment. "I can go anywhere as long as I've been there before. It doesn't matter that I know where a place is. I can't take us there unless we've been there."

"What about Ruby? Can she be taken to places she's never been?" It was Chad who spoke. He wanted to know if all parties involved had to have been at their destination before or just the one teleporting them.

"Yes, it only matters where I've been," Drake confirmed. "I can take anyone with me, regardless of whether they've been to the destination before or not."

Mike smiled. What he needed to know was confirmed, and he knew that his plan would work. "Then I have an idea, but I'm not sure you're going to like it. I think we should teleport Nelly back to Draco Town, deal with whoever had her kidnapped, and teleport back to the clearing and try to finish the quest before we die." Mike explained. "We can leave Ruby here to keep watch of the men. You have a mental connection to her, so it would make it easy. We can even leave the cabin here, block all the cracks so they can't see a flash. There are no windows in the bathroom, so it would be an ideal spot to leave from. They will be focused on the cabin while we're in Draco Town, dealing with Nelly's kidnapper. They might never even realize that we left."

After thinking about it for a long time, Drake communicated with Ruby, explaining the plan to her. She agreed quickly. She didn't like being left behind, but understood that they would return. After his communication with Ruby, Drake turned to Mike and Chad. "We leave in the morning. Nelly's clothes will be Dry, and she will have gotten enough rest. It will also be harder to see a flash when we teleport back because it will be light outside. We all need rest anyway."

Drake, Chad, and Mike lay down on their beds, trying to get some rest, while Renn kept watch. She had good senses, so she would easily hear them, even if she went to sleep herself.

Ruby had enlisted more of her kind to help keep watch. Drake didn't know it, but her species was connected. It was similar to a hive mind. They had surrounded the clearing, out of sight from the men surrounding the cabin, keeping watch, letting Ruby get a little rest herself.

Unbeknownst to Drake, Ruby had made her entire species allies; At least the ones from their current area of the dimension. It was the hive mind connection. It had been automatic when she became a familiar. It was something that the beast chose.

Renn had done the same, choosing to be a familiar. Her species weren't hive-minded, so the rest didn't become allies. Unlike Ruby, who had attacked them on the road, Renn followed him, and his cohort had tried to save him. She knew they were a good cohort. She could feel the light power that radiated around them, devoid of corruption of any kind. She wanted to be by their side because of it.

Regardless of their beast level, Ruby's entire horde had become allies, resulting in all of their eyes now glowing green. She had communicated what was going on to the horde

and made sure they all knew who her master was, as well as his cohort and the child he was protecting. She didn't want any of them attacking her master or his allies.

While Drake and his friends slept, the clearing was protected by hundreds of allied beasts he didn't even know he had.

It was a peaceful night. Drake and his cohort, along with Renn and Nelly, slept well. Outside the cabin, the men sat around small firepits. Men surrounded the cabin, as well as the camp, each with their own watch for something different.

Those around the cabin were watching the door and windows, trying to keep those who were inside from leaving the cabin. Although the goal was to keep them inside, they still held their weapons, ready to defend themselves in case their camp was attacked.

The men around the camp were watching for beasts and other threats in the clearing that might be stalking them. They walked the perimeter with their weapons ready to defend themselves. It was dark out, and they didn't like being out in the open where the beasts could easily find and attack them.

After a while, shifts changed, and most of the men went to sleep, with watch changes every three hours. None of them knew that hundreds of pairs of glowing green eyes were watching them from the dense trees.

Chapter 80: 80: Escape

It was morning. The sky was blue, with fluffy clouds floating across its vast expanse. The twin suns shone brightly, warming the clearing with a soft, warm light.

Drake had woken up first, which woke Nelly at the same time. He yawned, then stretched as he carefully got out of bed, pulling the awake Nelly with him. He allowed her to bathe herself while he prepared something for her to eat. When she was clean, he dressed her in her now dry, clean clothes and gently carried her to the table.

Her new doll was clutched tightly in her hand as she sucked her thumb. The fear in her eyes had left them, with only a spark of unease. She wasn't home safe and sound. Not yet anyway. She trusted Drake, connected by the bond they formed when he had first rescued her. With him showing up again, that bond strengthened. Her young mind already knew he would come to save her if she was in trouble.

Drake and Nelly waited in silence, eating their breakfast as they waited for Chad and Mike to wake up so they could head back to Draco Town. It was already light outside, and they had a lot of work to do to make sure that Nelly would be safe at home. Dealing with her kidnappers was one of those ways. Drake had been thinking about ways to do that. To make sure she was safe when they left her there, they had to remove all the dangers that seemed to hover around her.

He had a plan, and he knew it would work, but it would take a lot of time. It was time they didn't really have.

He and his cohort had chosen to save Nelly instead of doing their timed quest. They knew what the consequences were going to be if they couldn't do both. They were ready for it. Making sure Nelly was safe in Draco Town took priority.

If they took her with them on the quest and she died because they themselves died from not finishing the quest in time, it would be bad. Drake didn't want that for her. He wanted to make sure that no matter what happened to them, she would be safe. It is what they all chose.

That didn't mean that they wouldn't try to complete the quest once she was safe in Draco Town. They would use every second they had trying to complete it so they could survive. Regardless of what they chose, they still didn't want to die.

As they ate quietly, Drake checked in with Ruby. She had rested all night, having the rest of her horde keep watch of the thirty-man camp. Ruby had reported that there were five men on watch, surrounding all sides of the cabin, worried that they could leave through one of the windows. She also let them know that men were surrounding the camp, watching for danger as well.

Currently, all the windows are shuttered and locked. Bells hung from the locks to alert them if someone attempted to get in. The men's watchful gaze was useless.

Even those inside couldn't get through the windows without moving the bells, which would alert the men watching outside. Even the act of unlocking and removing the shutters would give the men watching time to prevent anyone inside the cabin from escaping.

Drake thanked his new familiar for making sure they were safe while they slept. He was still unaware of the horde that was with her. He had no idea that by making Ruby his familiar, he gained hundreds of new allies along with her.

Just then, Chad and Mike stumbled out of the bedroom, yawning dramatically. Seeing the food already spread out on the table woke them completely. They were teenage boys after all, and had what some would describe as a bottomless pit for a stomach.

Mike ruffled Nelly's hair before he sat down and began eating the food that Drake had left for him.

Chad kissed the top of her head, then sat down to eat his own.

They ate quickly, knowing they had to be as quick as possible. They had a lot to do before trying to start their quest again. Try... was a relative term. They kept trying, yet obstacles kept getting in the way. That was the problem with the first quest. Now it was

happening with this one. The problem with this one was that there wasn't enough time to deal with things getting in the way of it.

It was fortunate that they were able to follow the green quest thread along with Nelly's red one. They had to return to Draco Town, deal with the kidnapper or kidnappers, and then get back to the clearing to finish their quest. They had very little time to do it.

"What's the time on the quest counter?" Chad asked in a whisper, shoving some eggs in his mouth. They were whispering, not wanting to be heard by those outside.

Drake looked at the system.

{3:22:34:12 Time remaining}

Drake read off the numbers quietly. "We have 4 days, 22 hours, 34 minutes, and 12 seconds and counting."

"Yeah, we need to hurry," Chad grumbled, nearly to himself.

Drake conversed again with Ruby, letting her know they would be leaving any minute and that he would contact her periodically to ask for information about what the men were doing surrounding his cabin. She had agreed. She showed him what was happening with the men at that moment, but as she was showing him, her gaze had swept past others like her; all their eyes were glowing brightly in a soft green hue.

In disbelief, Drake asked her about it. She had informed him that she and the others were a hive, all connected through a mind link. They thought as one in most cases, but could think for themselves as well. Drake smiled widely, catching the attention of Chad and Mike.

"What's going on? Why are you smiling like that?" Mike asked in a whisper, suspicious. "It's kind of creepy."

Drake ignored Mike's jab. "It's Ruby. Her beast is from a hive. In making her my familiar, the entire hive is an ally. She has hundreds of beasts surrounding the clearing, so those men can't get away." Drake beamed with pride. Unknowingly, he had obtained hundreds of scorpion allies.

"What are the men doing?" Chad asked. He was eating the last of his meal.

"They're eating breakfast, just like us. Men are watching all sides of the cabin, and they seem to be taking turns, not wanting us to leave." Drake chuckled. He knew that pretty soon, they would be watching an empty cabin.

Drake then looked over at Nelly, altering his tone to be as gentle as possible. "Do you know who took you?" he asked quietly, not wanting anyone outside to hear.

Nelly shook her head. Sudden tears flowed down her face. She didn't want to talk about it.

Drake knew that he had to get to the bottom of it or it would happen again. "If you see him, can you point him out to me?" He asked gently.

Nelly appeared to think about it for a while before nodding slowly.

"We're going back to Draco Town. We're taking you home, but I need you to point out who took you, okay?" Drake continued. "I don't want them to get to you again."

Nelly nodded again, not saying anything.

Chad bent down, looking Nelly in her eyes. He had a gentleness about him that calmed her down. It wasn't from the dimension; it was something that he naturally had. "Was there more than one?"

Nelly nodded. She sucked on her thumb faster, upset about the line of questioning.

"Then we need to know all of them so they can't get you again... okay, sweetie?" Chad told her quietly.

Nelly nodded again. She still didn't speak. Chad kissed the top of her head before going to the bedroom to dress for their journey. Drake was the only one already dressed.

When they finished eating breakfast, Drake cleaned up the breakfast dishes, then went to the bedroom. He needed to make all the beds and make sure that everything was tidy. He even cleaned the bathroom, so they didn't have to do it when they got back. When everything was cleaned up and ready, Drake picked Nelly up as Chad, and Mike filled the cracks, hiding the green flash from the master staff.

Nelly held her new doll tightly, her small arms wrapped around Drake's neck. Tears still flowed down her cheeks. It was clear she was afraid to return. Renn was on the same shoulder as Nelly, trying to snuggle with her to comfort her, to make her feel better.

Drake quickly told the system to keep the lie detection active. He wanted to interrogate everyone. He only needed to ask a couple of questions, and the system would do the rest.

Drake held Nelly tightly, then looked around at his friends. "Ready?"

They all nodded before Drake slammed the staff onto the floor. The bright green flash consumed them, then faded. They were now standing at the sign, welcoming them to Draco Town.

Before entering, Drake checked in with Ruby. He wanted to know if any of the men had noticed that they had left. What she had informed him of made him smile. They had no idea there was no one in the cabin anymore.