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Chapter 259

**Calliphone** leapt over the final stair and onto the mirror-smooth landing, and was immediately faced with a crossroads. All three paths were identical, from the woven-metal banners fluttering in a nonexistent wind beside the enormous windows, all the way down to the faint patterns in the polished slabs of Blackstone that served as the floor. Even her second-sight couldn't find any detail that wasn't shared by all three hallways.

Cal's teeth ground together, before she relaxed. The floor was trembling slightly; there were guards approaching from all three paths. With the winged dragonman's importance to the city's cult, it would likely be guarded by the largest concentration of manpower; she could simply go down the corridor that the largest group came down.

So, she waited, as the floor trembled from the tread of what had to be at least five dozen dragonmen rapidly approaching in a lockstep trot. Evidence of either better training, or superior inborn knowledge when compared to the soldiers, the dragon-knights, and even the palace guards below.

Not a good sign, she thought, despite her blood boiling in anticipation. A second swordspear joined the one she'd been holding, and the adventuress carefully slowed her breathing in an attempt to settle her nerves. Overeagerness wouldn't do her any good here, she knew, despite the near-overpowering urge to charge right down the corridor which trembled the most.

It must have only taken a few seconds for the first squad of dragonmen to come into sight, all jogging down the right-side corridor with an identical stride, but they were the longest ones of her life. They were taller than the palace guards below by at least two yards or so, Cal idly noted.

The odd part was that, when they came to a halt, barely thirty feet away from her, they did not brandish their weapons in her direction. Instead, one of the identically-armored stepped out of the three-wide ranks, and spoke that same gibberish as every dragonman who'd spoken to her before.

Unlike them, however, it did not seem to expect a response, nor did her lack of one cause it to draw the forward-curved blade at its hip. It simply gestured for her to follow it, barked out an order that made her bones vibrate, and promptly about-faced, and the unit of dragonmen guards began jogging back to where they came.

Cal was left so utterly baffled that she simply stood there for a long moment, before racing after her supposed guides. Her mind did much the same, as she tried to parse what had just

happened. In the end, she couldn't come to a conclusion, other than this being an elaborate trap.

One that she was running into of her own volition.

Freya was going to kill her.

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This may have been the most polite ambush that she'd even come across, Cal thought, stepping through a doorway larger than Orario's gate.

The chamber within was composed of two levels; the entrance, then a staircase with steps half again her height, then the second level, which was at least thirty feet above the lower. All of it was ornate, almost absurdly so, with an atau-edged carpet running down the center of the room, most of it covered in patterns and clawmark writings, while tapestries of winged and armored dragonmen covered the walls, hanging from the walls above, just below the open ceiling.

A voice spoke, its rumbling tone striking Cal like a hammerblow to the gut. Still, the words were incomprehensible. The royal guard, as she'd begun thinking of them, gestured for her to go up the steps, and the ranks barring her way parted, as if they were simple wheat-stalks being nudged aside.

A small hop brought her from the lower level, up to the topmost step, and allowed her to see, for the first time, the winged dragonman, which was slouched atop its building-sized throne like a lion.

No, Cal corrected herself. The Dragonking. The air around it was regal, to say the least, and its bearing no less so, like a weight that settled on her shoulders and which attempted to bring her to her knees.

It failed, of course. The weight of Freya's undivided attention was a far heavier thing to bear. In comparison, this much was next to nothing.

Still, the Dragonking was a sight to behold. It towered over the royal guards by just as much as they towered over the dragon-knights, and was clad in bulky crimson armor, which bore extreme amounts of decoration. Filigrees, etchings, engravings, encrusted jewels and more were clear to see all over the voluminous plating, and the monster itself was no plainer for it.

Its crown of horns was impeccably polished, more than twice the size of the next largest example present, with rune-engraved bands of atau and ifer affixed onto them. Its ink-black hide was immaculate, and bore clawmark runes much like the priests and magi of the ziggurat, but where theirs had glowed like dull embers, and brightened to, at most, the luminosity of a

campfire, the Dragonking's runes burned like viridian lightning, practically searing the sight into Cal's memory.

Its eyes were much the same, glowing like green suns set into a black void, while its wings, of which there were two pairs, were flared wide, showing off the tough hide of its patagium, as well as its thick, sturdy wingbones, the clawed ends of which bore bands similar to those on its horns.

Its tail, which was at least twice as long as any other present, shifted languidly, allowing Cal a glimpse of its bladed end, which was so keenly sharpened that it was painful to gaze upon. Still, before she had to avert her eyes, the adventurer noted that it also bore runic carvings, though they had been filled in with golden atau.

Its arms, which numbered four, were arranged peculiarly. Two of them were as the ones of all other dragonmen; attached to its shoulders, and otherwise quite similar to those of any mortal, if far larger and ending in four clawed fingers, including a thumb.

The other pair, however, was far more unusual. It was mounted between the Dragonking's two pairs of wings, and was far larger than the pair attached to its shoulders. The limbs were also far larger, and consisted of at least three sections excluding its clawed hands, with two elbows. To accommodate its additional limbs, the armor it wore sported a second set of arm-holes, and its additional elbows were protected by something that resembled a couter.

Its two smaller upper-arms held nothing, though a claw-headed scepter and a long-hilted blade rested against its throne. Its larger, extra-jointed arms, however, each held a poleaxe. Their hafts were made from twisted crimson metal, as were their heads. They were brutish, inelegant weapons, and contrasted heavily with everything else about the Dragonking's appearance.

Then, it spoke, and every syllable from its maw shook the air like a thunderclap from an inch away.

**DESTROYER.**

**THE MOTHER-STONE WARNED ME OF YOUR KIND**

**RAVAGERS, BEARING ABOMINABLE ICHOR-BRANDS UPON YOUR SOULS**

**MY FOOLISH HOPE THAT IT SPOKE IN ERROR HAS COST MY KIN DEARLY**

**YOUR SKY-REALM OF DEFILERS, I REPAY IN KIND**

The deafening soundquakes didn't register in her mind for a long moment. Once she found the wherewithal to comprehend the Dragonking's words, she saw that it was gone, and the air was howling. Then, she heard the wingbeats, each of which was akin to a monsoon's blinding gusts.

Cal didn't even sense the first blow coming; She only noticed it when the twenty-foot blade cut through her armor, hacked through her flesh, and cracked against her ribs. Her swordspears had fallen from her hands.

The second blow didn't even touch her. Instead, her clawed hands caught the axe's drakolite edge, and, without even any conscious decision, charged it full of unstable energy.

Its detonation was what spurred her out of her daze. Her wound healed in a moment, as the axe-head's explosion turned the two nearest royal guards into mulch, soaking her in their lifeblood. Then, the world turned to red. A bank of crimson storm clouds filled the room, and the floor shattered, as Cal leapt with all of her might, rocketing into the hollow and leaving behind her a quickly-fading streak of crackling red.

As she reached the apex of her leap, the unnatural darkness that had plagued her in the earlier sections of the hollow returned, precluding her from spotting the fleeing Dragonking in the gloom. Fortunately, the limits on her line of sight didn't extend to her other senses; the monster rex's thunderous wingbeats were readily audible, and, while less than ideal and far from perfectly reliable, considering the speed with which it was moving, it was better than nothing.

Cal reoriented herself, and kicked off the air once more, hurling herself blindly through what felt like an empty void. A few small packs of flying monsters, which must have nested and had spawning-walls in the top of the cavern, far above the dragonman city, attempted to bar her path, but were torn apart by energized lashes from her chain, their relatively slight forms not possessing the natural defenses and magical resistance necessary to force her to waste more time dealing with them.

A small portion of the gore scattered by their exploding corpses reached her, and was consumed by her warskin, easing the ringing in her ears and the slight headache that been building from the combination of severe magical effort, the terrible racket produced by the Dragonking's wings, and the mental strain of operating with full focus for longer than she cared to remember.

Another skystep brought her flight back to top speed, and the trellis-tower of the piled-up urban maze came into sight, far below her, vanishing into the gloom almost as quickly as she spotted it.

A faint hint of motion in the murk drew her eye. A platform, which looked as if it was the size of a playing card from her height, was quickly rising, laden with silver-armored figures.

The elevator connecting the forge and the city, Cal realized. It was being used to transport dragonmen upwards, to join the Dragonking. They were planning a full-on dungeon break!

Quickly, she hooked her chain onto one of her swordspears, and allowed herself to lose altitude, until she became certain that her chain would extend far enough.

The polearm became infused with tremendous energy, until it came to resemble a bolt of crimson-and-orange lightning, and the bronze-armored adventuress hurled it towards the elevator with all of her incredible might, the throw's follow-through causing her to spin mid-air for a moment, before another skystep stabilized her trajectory.

It impacted the Blackstone platform with incredible force and violence, shattering it into countless shards, each of which then detonated, shredding through most of the contingent that had been aboard, and sending those that hadn't been torn apart into the abyss below.

Cal couldn't quite make out if the rails upon which the platform had been mounted had been destroyed, but it didn't especially matter. This was the dungeon, after all; all of it would doubtless be repaired by the next time she delved this deep. Still, that would hopefully limit the number of dragonmen capable of following their rex, and she hadn't lost much time by taking care of them.

The Dragonking's wing beats were still readily audible, and easily tracked, Cal thought, skywalking her way back up to roughly her previous altitude, only to allow herself to drop like a rock as the ledge leading into the forge and the Black Dam came into sight, and the thunderous beat that accompanied every flap or her quarry's four wings stopped assaulting her eardrums, replaced by the sound of rumbling earth and stone as its armored feet slammed into the floor.

Of course, she couldn't see it. Even when she landed with earth-shaking force, and looked right into the tunnel, there wasn't a thing in sight except for darkness, though she could hear the pounding of its clawed feet against the stone-tile floor.

Cal didn't waste a moment in rushing in after the Dragonking, her armored boots fading into her warskin and exposing her clawed toes, which allowed her to put on just a little bit of additional speed.

When she exited the tunnel, and entered into the titanic smithy, she caught a glimpse of a gold-runed tail-blade as it slipped into a tunnel with a far, far larger opening than she remembered. Then, as she raced forward, the Blackstone frame around the tunnel's mouth seemed to ripple and shift, before shrinking back down to the size she remembered.

Ah.

She remembered, now.

The dungeon hated her. It hated all mortals, and reviled deities even more. It weighted the scales against anyone who entered its depths in a truly outrageous manner.

Cal had simply forgotten, used as she was to being an unwelcome guest within the Pit.

It took seeing how the dungeon's spawn was blatantly favored by it to remind her; the dungeon was not a place. It was a *thing*, it was alive, and it despised her.

It made its hellish tunnels, halls and chambers as impossible to traverse as it could without making them physically impassable, and, if anyone other than its precious spawn dared to not play along with the sadistic environment, then it would shit out juggernauts onto their heads until they fled or died.

The seething rage in her heart wasn't something that Cal was familiar with. It burned its way through her veins like a living fire, but somehow she didn't hate it.

The environment around her simply changed, as she darted across the forge, and up the tunnels, which deformed as if made from wet clay, shaped by the dungeon's malevolent guiding hand.

Before she knew it, she was chasing the Dragonking's tail up into the barrowpath, where its bullheaded charge simply passed through suddenly-expanded halls, chambers and tunnels that would've barely fit her, tripping every trigger for every trap that she knew was present, only for them to simply sit there, inactive, until she came into range.

Cal no longer cared. Wrapped in a shroud of destructive energy, she sprinted right through every obstacle in her way, ignoring the devastation she was wreaking on the dungeon, as well as the limp-wristed attempts at reprisal it hurled at her.

A juggernaut's claws tore through her visor. Hers ripped its skull in half.

A twenty-strong squadron of shieldmaiden-golems attempted to physically bar her way, shields raised and blades poised to cut her flesh. Her swordspear bisected them all with a single swing.

The Wildwood came to life, treants, bramblehounds, roottigers, thornbears and thicketmen attempting to crush her with brute power, while moth-winged faeries spread poison. She burned through all of them.

Her mirror image, face hidden by a wooden mask, attempted to waylay her while the Dragonking escaped down a should-have-been-undersized tunnel. She tore its throat out with her claws while her other hand crushed its heart.

Then, the chase reached the Petrifying Hollows.