

CHAPTER 67 – ONE MORE ROOM

It took Alfair several hours to drag Yindferl away from the patch of shadow Luke's body left behind.

The shadow drake sulked the whole way. He couldn't blame her, but at the same time he wondered if she would mourn Alfair's death half as much as a man she only just met.

She had been his spectral familiar for over 2 years now, and he still sometimes wondered whether she acknowledged him as her master.

It was obvious after the first few days that she saw Luke as a person to follow. Unfortunately, his brashness had finally caught up with him.

Alfair was eternally grateful. His life had been saved thanks to Luke's sacrifice, but he was deeply concerned if Yindferl would ever get over the loss.

It had taken months for her to do more than sulk around the dorms and libraries of Sorcerri after his master's death. Granted, he felt the same at the time, so their moods matched one another's.

Alfair mourned Luke, but human lives already seemed so fleeting and fragile to an elf's view of the world that he did not feel his friend's loss as keenly as he knew he would in the coming days.

He wished he could have spared Yindferl this new pain of loss. She had already lost so much.

When they arrived back at the library, Alfair was wondering just what he was going to do. Without Luke, the odds of repairing the First Layer were vanishingly small.

Perhaps he would be trapped here for many years more. This was no place for Yindferl to be stuck in.

He was so busy thinking of what to do that he didn't notice the way Yindferl's curled ears perked up. It wasn't until she was bounding across the room in a flat-out sprint that Alfair looked up from his brooding.

The vision in black before him was startling. "Luke?!"

Before he took two steps Alfair summoned a revealing spell, intent on unmasking this interloper and was hit with another surprise when the sparkling wave washed over Luke without changing a thing.

With a squeaky roar of joy, Yindferl crashed into Luke, sending him sliding across the ground.

His spectral familiar, however, clearly knew he was the real deal before Alfair did. The elf watched them good-naturedly rolling around and knocking over tables, papers, chairs, and books.

She has never been so happy to see anybody, Alfair thought.

With a pang of loss, he realized what he would have to do. It was inevitable, just like the multiverse sweeping up lesser universes in its wake.

Forcing a smile onto his face, he spread his arms wide and welcomed Luke back, who had just managed to get to his feet. He embraced the man in a hug, surprised when Luke reciprocated so quickly.

"I am sorry to say that I doubted your survival," Alfair told him. "But Yindferl is not the only one who is ecstatic about your return. You must tell me what happened!"

Luke recounted his tale in full, leading to a new revelation that Alfair had always suspected but was unsure of since, unlike Luke, he was trapped here.

“Then you are functionally immortal here,” Alfair told him. “You may die, but you will only be ejected by the Gordian because you entered via the proper channels while I... did not.”

“Then it’s a good thing I stopped that laser beam from killing you,” Luke said with a chuckle, rubbing his chest where it had punched a hole through him.

Alfair noticed that his armor was in perfect repair. Luke was coming along swiftly with his rune-graving. Then the word Luke used registered. The elf tilted his head inquisitively.

“A laser?” he asked.

Luke mumbled to himself for a moment, then shook his head. “I guess it doesn’t fully translate.”

Yindferl put her massive paws on Luke’s shoulders and licked the side of Luke’s face, plastering his dark hair up at an odd angle.

He wrapped his arms around her and patted her flank affectionately. “I’m glad to see you too, girl. I’m sorry to have left you.”

“I am sorry about your weapons,” Alfair told him. “However, many types of equipment were dropped by the beastmen. Perhaps you would like to look through them? I took the liberty of bringing any intact pieces back.”

“Yes, I’d very much like to,” Luke said, his eyes brightening with excitement.

Alfair noticed that Luke palmed a slim silver cylinder into his pocket as the elf showed him to the pile of martial implements.

Luke spent the next half hour combing through the loot for an upgrade, or at least something appropriate. Unfortunately, the beastmen were not keen on light weaponry. They almost all used heavy items, with a sole exception. A well-maintained falchion.

Item: [Wolven Falchion (Unusual)]

(Weapon)

A double edged curved blade of bone, forged from a dire wolf's great fang. Infused with lightning mana from a dire wolf's preternatural affinity, this weapon inflicts both physical and lightning magical damage.

Enchantments: Increases attack speed wielding this weapon. Deals additional lightning magic damage.

Luke grinned to himself as he studied the slightly curved blade. Its arc was not as great as a scimitar, which was his preference, but falchions were a little easier to poke and prod with. A tactic that Luke found very useful for riling up the more powerful enemies he encountered.

The wounds did little actual damage, but they hurt and could poke through several layers of light armor with ease. Even heavy armor was a simple affair to slip between two plates or joints with his high Dexterity and Perception working in concert.

“I have never seen a curved sword with two edges,” Alfair said. “I must confess, I do not see the utility.”

Luke ran a thumb slowly across the second inner edge, careful not to cut himself. “I could think of a few uses. It means I can't brace my hand against the back of the blade, but as I'm always using two weapons anyway, that's not something I do.”

Yindferl butted her head against his thigh affectionately and made a rumbling noise in the back of her throat.

“I think she's keen to go back out,” Alfair said. “By my estimation, she still has an hour or more.”

Luke turned, eyes alight with the fires of human ambition that Alfair so envied in the shorter-lived race. “Do you already know where we should be going?”

The elf nodded. “To the best of my understanding, we have been slowly homing in on the central core of the First Layer. The density

of monsters suggests that our last foray was incredibly close. I suggest we start looking near the last room. Yindferl and I backtracked to this room in order to regroup after we thought you were lost. But if you're feeling up to it..."

Luke nodded enthusiastically. The Gordian, while difficult and fraught with danger, was a veritable gold mine of experience. It was really too bad he couldn't gain LP here. He would be swimming in the stuff by now. But his astronomical rise to power could be solely attributed to surviving the Gordian.

Once released, he could rake in colossal amounts of LP, pulling ahead of the competition and buying whatever he wanted from the Company Shop.

Assuming, of course, that his earlier assumption of LP per level band was true. Alfair didn't know how the Company did things, but the System used points as currency. They followed a different pattern of increasing quantity than what the Company used so he wasn't able to corroborate Luke's prediction.

If he was right, however, that would mean the level 35 and 40-plus bands of monsters he was killing should net him 256LP and 512LP, respectively.

Luke could gain all the LP he had acquired up until this point in just a few battles.

He really hoped the Company Shop would get restocked at some point.

"You have less than a tenday on your assessment now, yes?" Alfair asked him as they headed out into the twisting tunnels and odd out-of-place rooms that were pulled from all sorts of realities.

There were rooms that were filled with gaseous balloons that they had to leap across, with clouds all around them. Others were so dark that even Luke's shadow vision didn't seem to work right.

Thankfully, those were the more difficult rooms in the First Layer that they had to navigate.

As they entered a room filled with colored clouds and bright pale stone, Luke turned to Alfair. "A what?"

The elf looked a little taken aback, but then understanding dawned on him. "Your timekeeping must be odd. The System uses tendays as its day-grouping. I have heard you say the word 'week' is that your version?"

"A week is 7 days," Luke told him. "I'm guessing that a tenday is 10? It is in the name."

"Right you are. Each month is made up of 3 tendays, and each year is made up of 12 months."

"Better than the 365-and-change days my people had on Earth," Luke told him as he edged out onto the narrow stone bridge. The monsters usually didn't come out until they were halfway through the room.

The room was so brightly lit by the glowing colorful clouds that Luke was having trouble finding a shadow to sense.

"That is... an odd number. You use 7 days a week? How many weeks are in a month?"

Sliding out onto the bridge, Luke kept the [Wolven Falchion] in his hand ready for an attack, but kept his other free in case he needed to grab onto the bridge. "Usually 4, sometimes 3-and-change."

The elf crumpled his perfect brow in consternation. "Then I suppose the counting system of the System might take some adjustment, but it will make things a lot easier going forward, I think. We have days, tendays, and then months. Four seasons a year for most worlds that have them, each season 3 months or 12 tendays long."

"You've mentioned other worlds before," Luke said, spotting a flutter of dark wings out beyond a pillar of pale stone over the clouded expanse of color. "Are all worlds the same? I mean, from what I know of other planets in my universe, they all have different

gravities, rates of spin, etc. so that they're very unlike one another. One year on Earth is drastically different from a year on Jupiter, for example."

"Mostly," Alfair said. "The System does a lot of work to make a baseline, but with so many universes all crammed together, you can imagine that there are quite a few outliers that don't conform. Either by willful intention or a quirk in the System's parameters. Gravity is definitely a fluctuation that differs based on worlds, but most civilizations like to stay around 1G, which is what you are experiencing now."

"So basically, what I'm used to," Luke said, reversing his grip on the falchion as he forced his gaze away from the moving dark shape in the clouds.

He didn't want to spook it.

"Though, the outer worlds operate somewhat differently—" Alfair began to say.

A blur of black, leathery wings and scintillating scales was all Luke saw before he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He spun around in place with the falchion tucked tight against his body.

He felt a tug as the blade bit into something, then a sizzling jolt of electricity as the creature—some sort of bat—was blasted apart and fell into the clouds below. Luke reached out to try to loot it, but it was already gone.

You have defeated [Crystalline Bat - Level 39]. Extra experience gained for slaying an enemy above your level.

As if that was a rallying call, the room was suddenly filled with the fluttering sounds of leathery black wings and shimmering jewel-studded bodies. Bedazzled bats swept out from every cloud, storming the group on the bridge.

Luke dropped a hand to his knife belt, his free hand moving in a blur as one black knife after the other leapt into the air. Each blade aimed at a different bat.

Alfair summoned gale force winds to blow away the cloud cover and to force the bats off course while the shadow drake pranced on her hind paws, trying to swat at passing bats without losing her grip on the narrow bridge.

With Alfair and Luke carefully aiming at different groups, they sent the swarm of shining bats into disarray and quickly crossed before the creatures thought of returning.