

CHAPTER 65 – DEATH IS NOT THE END

“Nearly done!” Alfair called out, hunched over the burbling contraption full of colorful fluids in glass-fronted steel-cased pipes.

“We can’t hold them forever, Alfair!” Luke called, darting to intercept a lion-maned creature that stood at least 8-feet tall and wielded a pair of sickles in his muscled furry arms.

Dodging aside at the last moment, Luke triggered [Perfect Dodge]. The boost to his speed allowed him to perform a quick two-prong attack on the leonid’s middle, then spin around him and hamstring the bipedal monster.

With a roar, the creature went down hard and Luke ended it with a scissoring motion of his two blades.

Nearby, Yindferl pounced on a similar beastman. This one with the snout of a wolf and body of a bodybuilder wielding a greatsword that could have easily doubled as a surfboard.

The last week had been a particularly brutal and frantic series of delves into the Gordian. Luke was fast running out of nodes, but they were making great strides toward finishing the repairs on the First Layer.

Alfair eventually had to come out with them. The monsters were too much, even for Luke’s new skills to deal with. He couldn’t fix a node and fight off the monsters at the same time.

As talented and accomplished as Alfair was, the elf was Luke’s opposite in many ways. His power resided in his Alchemy profession, not so much a battle class. As a result, he wasn’t much

of a fighter. Instead, he was more a mage that relied on potions, elixirs, and poisons rather than magic spells.

The elf looked up as he finished the last admixture, sending it along the pipe. The room, covered in glass pipes jacketed in various materials, began to come alive with sound and motion.

Each node room had a different trial. A different problem that needed to be solved before the monsters would stop flooding in.

The first few that Luke and Yindferl encountered were the simple kind. Defeat a guardian monster of some sort and the room went still enough to fix the issue.

The later rooms were a constant battle of attrition that would have been almost impossible without Alfair. However, the inverse was also true: Alfair would not have been able to do any of this on his own. Even with Yindferl protecting him.

Alfair felt an unfamiliar stab of envy at how well Luke and Yindferl worked together. He had seen them working firsthand as if they had always been together.

They moved as one, the night-black drake and the dark-clad Thief always managed to be where the other needed without ever communicating.

Alfair had trouble getting Yindferl to guard him unless his life was in danger and here was this human, a fresh F-Grade, that could communicate with his spectral guardian as if they were telepathically linked.

It was like seeing Yindferl with his late master once again. Master Frenlebren had always been more of an adventurer than an artisan at heart. The man was possessed by wanderlust, and the mystical creature Yindferl was similarly stricken.

You've always known you weren't using Yindferl to the fullest extent of her abilities, Master Frenlebren should have given her to somebody else.

Then Alfair's thoughts jumped to the painful, undeniable truth. *Like Luke. If we both had been Master Frendlebren's students back then, Yindferl would have been bestowed upon Luke. Not me. Never me.*

Distracted, Alfair watched as Luke used his [High Larceny] skill on a passing leonid. Its aura of power vanished and transferred to Luke, granting him faster speed and greater power at a costly mana drain.

When Luke told him about the skill selections upon hitting level 30 Thief, Alfair had strongly suggested he select [High Larceny] instead of the newer skills.

Luke was still relatively low level, but Alfair knew that almost all higher level creatures—including people—used magic to boost themselves.

Dunamis was considered magic, after all.

He was glad to see that his friend took his advice to heart. Alfair had heard that humans were rash and prone to making grave errors, but Luke was as thoughtful as an elf. Unfortunately, he was also as stubborn as a dwarf, like his late master.

Alfair saw the flash in the distance too late to react in time. He realized he had made an error with his calculations.

Distracted by thoughts of inadequacy, he had forgotten to factor for the admixture's goetian levels.

Alfair raised a hand to form a warding barrier against the lance of white-hot heat. He knew that it would obliterate him well before he finished casting.

Luke was there in an instant, moving like smoke on the water. He raised his blades in a cross and took the beam of superheated mana on them as well or better than Alfair could have with his barrier.

If he had time to finish it.

A rune flashed and shattered into a thousand glowing motes in front of Luke.

Though reduced, the defensive attack of the Gordian was not to be denied. It speared straight through Luke's chest and out the other side, where it was diminished to the point of evaporating before it reached Alfair.

Luke fell before Alfair's stunned eyes. "Luke!"

Yindferl snarled and ripped out the throat of the beastman she was attacking, immediately leaping to Luke's defense. She straddled his supine form, snarling and roaring with defiance at any of the gathering beastmen who dared move close to the still form.

"Finish it," Luke said through gritted teeth. Alfair had no idea how he was still alive, let alone talking. He could *see* the hole in his chest.

Bending back to his task, Alfair corrected his mistake, poured the contents of the mixture into the right tube, and sealed it again. The pipes gurgled and bubbled as he uncorked a health potion and scrambled over to Luke's body.

He was too late.

The man was still, with a waxen expression of... curiosity? Alfair had seen plenty of people die in his long life, but none who bore the expression Luke had at that moment. As if he had seen something interesting and amusing all at once.

Yindferl raised her head and keened, a long, drawn-out song of lament and sorrow that joined the chorus of noise issuing from the pipes that banged and clanked.

One by one, the beastmen vanished in gouts of colored smoke, leaving behind weapons and armaments. Luke was always looking for new weapons, using his Runegraver ability to break them down into flux so he could power his growing supply of runes.

Alfair knelt by the cooling body of his friend. “He gave his life to save mine,” Alfair muttered. “A life so much shorter than mine... and yet he didn’t hesitate.” Alfair was surprised to find his eyes stinging with tears for this man who had quickly become a close friend.

In Luke, he saw much of his master. Brash and reckless, but reserved and thoughtful. At total odds with himself and yet never seeming contradictory.

Touching Luke’s forehead, Alfair muttered an elvish prayer for the dead. His swords were destroyed, their shattered remnants littered the ground around his body.

Yindferl, keening her lament, refused to move aside. She would not let Alfair move her or Luke’s body. So he sat there, hugging his knees to his chest, wondering what he was going to do now.

Luke gasped with pain and sudden awareness as he flew through the air and collapsed in a rolling heap out into the hall of his refuge.

He had moved without thinking, trying to cover his friend. He had been so sure the new rune Alfair discovered from one of his master’s old books would work. It was a defensive rune that Luke had instilled with Dunamis. It *should* have been enough.

The attack was simply too strong. All the monsters the Gordian had been unleashing were quickly trending towards higher and higher leaps of power.

Now Luke’s only weapons were his throwing knives and the [Rat King’s Ire].

Item: [Ratking’s Ire (Uncommon)]

(Weapon)

A serrated blade made from an unknown white alloyed metal. Balanced perfectly, this blade is small enough to throw but

serviceable as a main weapon in a pinch. Lost in the sewers of Mitrasal by its original owner, it has taken on some of the properties from the fabled Ralking of Mitrasal.

Enchantment: Applies a stacking [Poison] affliction when the blade is exposed to a creature's blood.

Enchantment: Automatically returns to the hand of its wielder after an allotment of time.

His [Cipher Sword] was too dangerous to use in battle except as a last resort. Luke had tried it out once all of his vital resources were over a thousand. His hopes were that the drain was a static value that he could out-level.

Instead, the drain matched his new resources, gulping down HP, MP, and SP by the hundreds each second.

Luke had long-since [Razed] the common-rarity dagger he received long ago from that first Rogue who tried to kill Ed.

The last realization he had within the Gordian was that he wasn't going to die. Instead, the Gordian cast him out. Perhaps he should have taken the earlier hints that his HP wasn't reflecting the wounds he received on the inside.

"I really could have used that knowledge earlier," Luke thought, rubbing the blossoming bruise on his chest.

He was at 10% HP. His whole body hurt like hell, but he was *alive*, and that was all that mattered. Luke did his normal post-Gordian ritual of cleaning up and getting food while he used [Trance] to quicken his recovery.

It was going to take longer than usual.

He had never experienced such a close brush with death before. He hoped Alfair and Yind were all right. He wanted to let them know he was okay, but there was no way he would be able to get back to the Gordian today.

And without his swords, he was at an even greater disadvantage.

He liked the ratking dagger, but it was short-range only unless he wanted to wait around for it to return to his hand. He preferred dual wielding his swords, but that was also out of the question.

Even if he still had his swords, he would have preferred to have weapons that were at least on par with his [Mossy Boots] and thurskite set.

Luke took stock of his situation.

There were less than 10 days left in the assessment, and the expanding spiral of death was fast approaching a critical point. There were only 8 nodes left that he could use, 7 if he counted the one he would need tomorrow.

He was burning them at an alarming rate. Each node he used was a node that could not be used as containment for the deadly energy leaking from the Gordian.

If he hadn't been working with Alfair the last week, he would already be dead. The Gordian was mostly repaired. The last few damaged nodes were proving to be nearly impossible.

Though Alfair was stronger than Luke, he wasn't as used to combat as Luke was. His magic was potent, but it was costly, and his skills lied primarily with Alchemy.

When it came to potions and poisons, he was without equal, as far as Luke was concerned. All of his potions were incredibly potent, even though he had long since been forced to scavenge for materials. It was the elf's main reason for grumbling.

Luke would have liked to see Alfair in a proper lab. He had spoken at length of Sorcerri and all its wonders. As Luke and the elf worked together, Alfair's initial proposal of sponsorship turned into something quite a bit more.

He was now determined to get Luke into Sorcerri if it was the last thing he did. Luke guessed that saving his life numerous times had a positive effect on Alfair's impression of him.

Though he would sorely miss Yind when the Gordian was finally finished, Luke was happy to know that Alfair cared for her deeply. Even if he couldn't give her what she needed, it was better than a cruel master that mistreated her.

Oftentimes Luke would go out in search of the next node just as an excuse to spend some quality time with the shadow drake. Her power was synchronized with the person who summoned her, meaning she never siphoned off experience or leveled up herself in any way that Alfair or Luke understood.

But she was capable of growth all the same. Every level Luke put behind him saw more capabilities and greater strength from Yind. *And these levels should bring out even more in her*, Luke thought to himself as he turned to his latest notifications.