

## CHAPTER 61 – COMPANIONSHIP

“I could get used to this!” Luke said, watching Yindferl leap from the shadow of a tentacled horror and sink her teeth into its rubbery hide. It let loose a shrill scream, flailed around, and then fell to the ground where it was easily dispatched by Luke’s twin swords and Yindferl’s razor-sharp claws.

The twisting halls right outside the library were teeming with all sorts of monsters. Thankfully, none of them were quite as high level as the thurskite.

Luke could have handled them on his own, but with Yindferl alongside him, they were almost trivial battles that netted staggering amounts of experience.

However, the pair’s first outing had been rocky to start with.

Luke was given Yindferl’s figurine, an onyx-black statuette that resembled a cunningly carved tabletop RPG piece, but she was a proud animal that did not suffer being commanded easily.

Luckily, Alfair had what Luke could only think of as “dragon treats” which were cubed dried hunks of meat that smelled delicious. Like freshly roasted and perfectly charred steak.

Yindferl watched him warily, as if she could sense his hunger for them. Luke had the keen understanding that if he dared to eat *her* treat, she would never forgive him.

And so, despite the temptation of actually good food for once, Luke managed to get close enough to the drake that she could eat out of his flattened palm.

Luke had seen that on some animal show. He wasn’t keen on getting his fingers nibbled off by the razor fangs in the drake’s mouth.

Yindferl was surprisingly gentle. She licked the residue off his hand, and Luke started at the raspiness of her tongue. *It's just like a cat's!* Granted, it was like a cat the size of a small horse, but it felt the same.

After that, it was a little easier to get Yindferl to come to him when he called her. With each treat he gave her, she warmed up to him by degrees. Eventually, when he called her name, she bounded toward him full of excitement. She clearly expected another treat.

Which Luke gave her without hesitation.

Next came the summoning and dismissal commands. These were bound to her in a way that made Luke feel a little uncomfortable. Yindferl was a sentient creature, very likely sapient, and it felt odd to issue her commands.

There were some things about magic he didn't quite grasp, but Yindferl didn't seem harmed by the words. She simply had to obey them like any trained animal might.

"Release, Yindferl!" Luke intoned in the High Tongue. The drake looked at him with a disgruntled stare, paced in a slow circle and shrank down into her onyx-black statuette. It was rendered in such loving detail that you could see every scale.

Luke picked up the statuette, surprised by its heft. Some time ago, he wouldn't have been able to even lift it.

"Good," Alfair told him. "You're a natural. She always resists me. Go on and release her."

Luke spoke the command to summon her, but as he did Alfair blurted out, "Set it down!"

As the last word was out of his mouth, Luke crouched and set the figurine down. And not a moment too soon.

Purple smoke rolled out from the statuette, obscuring it. Luke had the sensation of movement from within the smoke, and a moment

or two later a dark scaled head poked through the smoke looking for treats.

Luke handed her a double-helping, praising her and daring to pet her scaly head. Rather than the glassy texture he expected, her head was remarkably smooth and silky, not at all like the clingy glass he expected.

And so, with a store of treats, Yindferl's command words, and her statuette, Luke headed out into the Gordian following the vague directions Alfair gave him.

The Gordian was unplottable. It resisted attempts to understand or map it out. Map too much out and it deployed countermeasures to reconfigure itself.

However, there were set pieces that it used. Tiles, in other words. Tiles that possessed a finite number of arrangements. Alfair, who was intimately familiar with his master, understood enough to give Luke a rough guideline to follow.

“Look for the cross-section where red and green tiles meet,” Luke muttered as he opened a door and found himself in the bowels of a cavern system.

Luke had never seen such a jarring transition before. Up until this point, everything looked manmade.

Just to be sure, he poked his head back into the hallway where Yindferl was still eating the tentacled monster that had given Luke his 24th Thief level.

Whistling to his partner-in-crime, Yindferl's head poked up and then immediately went back to eating. Alfair had told him that she was a voracious eater and would happily consume any monsters she came across if he let her.

Luke could see how much she enjoyed it and didn't feel it was right to deprive her. Alfair also suggested that if she was getting unruly,

he could dismiss her back to the pocket dimension she called home, calling her back when he needed her.

Luke didn't see any reason to right then. The cat-like dragon had been cooped up long enough. He figured she should be able to enjoy herself.

He was on a time limit, but it wasn't down to the seconds. He enjoyed his time with Yindferl. She seemed bored with Alfair, and Luke understood loneliness better than most.

Yindferl didn't talk, so his introverted social battery didn't need to be recharged from spending time with her like it would with people.

The only downside to keeping her out all the time was that it wore down her duration. Yindferl was not a creature of this world—at least, not anymore—and she couldn't sustain herself indefinitely while in the “Prime Plain” as Alfair had called it.

Eventually, she would need to return to her home to rest, making her unable to be summoned for several hours at a time. The longer she was out, the longer she needed to rest.

Alfair told him it was roughly 4 hours a day she could be out. For every hour she was out, she would need more rest. Sending her back periodically would mean she was always ready to come to Luke's aid.

Despite knowing this, Luke didn't have the heart to send her back. She looked so alive, so unlike how she was in the library. 4 hours a day seemed far too short.

“You want me to kill all the monsters by myself?” Luke called to her jokingly.

That got through to the drake.

She perked up and loped down the hall after him at an impressive clip. Large and cat-like, she moved with surprising grace for a creature so heavy and thickly muscled.

Stepping into the cavern space beyond, Luke was impressed by how much it felt as if he was truly underground. The oppressive darkness crushed in on all sides. Stalactites hung from the ceiling in large rows, and down below, iridescent pools of water glimmered in his shadow senses.

“You can see the shadows too, can’t you?” Luke asked, crouching down on the edge of the stone precipice that overlooked the sprawling cave.

The drake made a noncommittal noise in the back of her throat that Luke took for affirmation.

There was a rope bridge across the gulf, but Luke didn’t like the look of it. Besides, he could feel monsters prowling around down there. One of the main benefits of the Gordian was that it was stuffed full of monsters. Most of them shouldn’t have been here, but the more monsters he saw, the closer he was to a spatial tear.

It was quite the beneficial coincidence. That meant more experience for Luke while also progressing his goal of fixing the Gordian.

As Alfair explained it, the spatial tears were the cause of the Gordian’s malfunctioning.

Luke stepped foot onto the bridge and immediately could feel that the boards might hold his weight but would never bear Yindferl’s.

He turned to her and crouched to get on eye-level with the drake. She watched him curiously with those unblinking golden eyes that reminded him so much of the Discordant Dragon. “You want to go hunting?”

She tilted her head to the side. Luke took this to mean she was curious and wanted him to explain.

He gestured behind him. “The bridge there is too old to carry your weight, but if you go below and draw out the monsters, I could use my throwing knives to take them out.”

As soon as he said it, he realized the way it looked. He was effectively telling the creature before him to risk its life so he didn't have to.

"You know what," Luke said suddenly, "never mind. I'm coming with you."

The drake looked at him, then at the bridge. Proud and arrogant, she waltzed right onto the rotted boards held together by fraying ropes.

"Your funeral," Luke told her as he picked his way down the steep incline. It was better than joining Yindferl on the bridge and falling. He might not break anything but any attempt at surprise would be lost.

He had it on good faith that Yindferl could not die, not truly. She could be banished, but that wasn't the same. Even if she was badly wounded, she would return whole and hale once she had rested enough.

The more wounds she sustained, the more time she needed to recuperate, but she was functionally immortal. That made her a great forward scout. Any damage done to her was temporary, but that still didn't sit right with Luke.

She was a living, thinking being. Subjecting her to pain just to save himself didn't feel right. Luke kept her out rather than forcing her back into her pocket dimension, even though he was sure she would hurt herself when the bridge eventually snapped under her bulk.

The drake was free to make her own decisions.

He couldn't shake the feeling that she was so excited to be out for a lengthy stretch of time. It would be cruel to stop her from experiencing this world just because he was mildly inconvenienced.

As Luke was slipping from shadow to shadow, stalking a beaked creature that stood nearly 8-feet-tall and looked like a hideous

cross between a vulture and a turtle, he heard the first of the fraying ropes snap high above.

There was a sucking silence, and then the next rope snapped, followed by a high keening cry of alarm that Luke realized belatedly was Yindferl.

She crashed right onto the horned horror as it turned its turkey neck up to inspect the sound.

It crumpled to the ground with Yindferl digging her claws into it, purely by instinct.

**You have defeated [Horned Horror - Level 30]. Extra experience gained for slaying an enemy above your level.**

**Level Up! Your [Thief] Class has reached Level 25.**

**Stat points earned: +4 Strength, +6 Dexterity, +2 Perception, +2 Vitality, +2 Free Points.**

**You have [Thief] skills to select.**

That was one of the biggest benefits to Yindferl.

She didn't count as an extra party member. Luke's bonuses to soloing were fully in effect despite her joining him. If anything, the System considered her an extension of Luke, granting him the experience of her kills even if he didn't do anything.

Dazed, Yindferl shook her head, then took a sniff at the horned horror's body.

Her lips curled back in disgust and she batted the large body away into a pool of glowing acid before Luke realized what she was doing. He stared after it as the body dissolved.

"I could have looted that," he told her.

Sitting on her haunches, Yindferl looked imperiously at him and groomed one massive paw with her raspy pink tongue as if to say, "Yes, and?"

Shaking his head, Luke gave her an affectionate pat on the side and continued picking his way through the cavern floor.