

CHAPTER 50 – FLUX UP

Luke found some solace in the fact that his crafting attempt had at least been successful.

He had something to show for his effort, even if he had nearly failed and wasted an excessive amount of flux and mana. More importantly, he had gained experience. Not enough for another level in Apprentice Runegraver, but it brought him closer all the same.

Having rested long enough to recover his MP to nearly full, he wandered back into the storage room, inspecting the barrels for more junk to break down with [Raze].

He needed the contents to generate crafting flux. He was beginning to have some doubts that there would be enough here for his crafting purposes despite the large room full of junk. Eventually, he would run out, unless he figured out some other kind of trick.

With a spike of alarm, Luke worried that perhaps working with limited resources was part of the challenge of solving the Gordian's impending explosion.

Grimacing, he resolved to be more careful. If it was absolutely necessary, he'd break down his cloak and ratking dagger to survive.

They wouldn't be much use to him if he was dead after all.

I feel like I've had that thought a little too much lately.

It was fortunate that he hadn't been wearing his cloak at the time he Ascended and gained extremely basic access to whatever Dunamis was. He worried it would've melted into that pile with the rest of the linens.

As it was, he had access to very little armor. He mostly just had weapons. And while he could use some of what was in the barrels, it would be temporary at best.

He didn't see a need for it at the moment. So far, the Gordian just seemed to be a time-based crafting challenge, with no monsters involved. If he took too long, then it'd just end up killing him in that slow motion explosion. It didn't really need monsters to do the job for it.

Luke didn't intend on letting that happen.

Luke divided his time between [Razing] materials to generate flux, and using that flux to create and learn new runes and their properties.

While he didn't immediately have to put his life on the line to gain levels for his profession, the level ups were growing increasingly harder and harder to come by. While a single mistake wouldn't cost him his life like it would against a murderer or a monster, runegraving was incredibly difficult.

Luke hoped it would result in incredibly useful creations compared to other professions, but he hardly knew what else there was out there. Maybe the standard stuff, like smithing and carpentry. Both of which were far less interesting to Luke than his Runegraver profession.

Though the existence of potions suggested alchemy was a thing as well.

Using [Raze] gave a small amount of experience, it turned out, because the second day of gathering more flux granted him his coveted 5th Apprentice Runegraver level.

Level Up! Your [Apprentice Runegraver] Profession has reached Level 5.

Stat points earned: +6 Arcane, +6 Wisdom, +2 Dexterity, +2 Perception, +2 Free Points.

Level Up! Your [Human (F-Grade)] Race has reached Level 12.

Stat points earned: +3 All Stats, +1 Fate, +2 Free Points.

You have [Apprentice Runegraver] skills to select.

After putting the free points into Wisdom, Luke now had an equivalent amount of MP and HP, both at 830. The added mana would help him continue working with fewer reading breaks. He hadn't bothered to use [Trance] yet because, quite honestly, he wasn't sure he understood *how*.

Luke tried it once or twice half-heartedly and found out that it wasn't quite as simple as he had been led to believe.

It was like trying to meditate, but he wasn't good at that either. Relaxing and clearing his mind was all but impossible. It was like trying not to think of a pink elephant. Suddenly, that's all he could think about.

And so [Trance] became a cycle of futility as he tried to relax. He found his mind wandering back to the runes he was learning, or the strange way every single book he read touched on Dunamis as a fundamental thing every child knows but never *said what it was*.

At first, he wanted to scream in frustration. Then he did, since there wasn't anyone around to be bothered.

Considering he had learned [Trance] after moving up into F-Grade, he figured that the skill had to do with the enigmatic Dunamis. It felt like he lacked something fundamental to be able to use the skill.

Which meant that Luke spent most of his downtime reading. He read books on rune-graving while he ate, while he rested, and he read to lull himself to sleep every single day.

It felt like an age since he last spoke to anybody. Luke enjoyed his alone time, but this was beginning to border on solitary

confinement. He had things to do, so it wasn't quite the same, but the loneliness crept in all the same. Bit by bit. Day by day.

Luke looked over his new Runegraver skills. He wasn't quite at the point of reading out loud and speaking to himself, but he was worried that the day was fast approaching when he would.

[Flux Sense (Uncommon)]

(Apprentice Runegraver Profession Class Skill)

Flux comes from all things, not just equipment. It is in the grass beneath your feet, the rocks in the hills, and the water that flows through the valley, but breaking down common items for fractions of flux would be a colossal waste of time. Flux Sense grants you the insight to feel the concentration of flux in any given item. Adds a minor bonus to the influence of Arcane, Willpower, and Perception when using this skill.

Luke perked up as he read the description. [Flux Sense] seemed like an incredible perk and it would handily allow him to focus on the highest yielding items in the storeroom, drastically cutting down on the time it took him to gather flux.

It would prevent him from having to pick up everything he came across and using [Raze] on it just to be able to store the material.

While his cloak had sealed pockets, they weren't limitless. They were just slightly advanced pockets with the ability to seal items inside, keeping their contents preserved.

Time was an invaluable commodity that he possessed precious little of. Especially during this challenge quest, where every hour brought destruction closer to him. And yet, he was keenly aware of how long it took him to gather up a proper amount of flux from the storeroom.

Some items gave a pinch of flux, others gave handfuls, but he saw no rhyme or reason to it. Gilded gauntlets that looked like they once belonged to a king would give a paltry amount of flux—usually just a

single element at that—while innocuous items would provide double-fists of the stuff.

As soon as he started going for the rusted and disused items, he found that only a few gave a large amount of flux.

Marking [Flux Sense] as a clear early winner, Luke scoured the next skill.

[Augmentation (Unusual)]

(Apprentice Runegraver Profession Skill)

Levels and skills are often considered the cornerstones of advancement, but all too often, equipment is forgotten about. Tossed aside when it is no longer useful or a better piece comes along. There are numerous ways to empower equipment, but Augmentation provides a universal avenue to increasing the power of equipment by utilizing Dunamis, flux, and specialty augmenting materials. Grants the ability to sense augmenting materials. Adds a moderate bonus to the influence of Dexterity, Perception, Willpower, and Arcane when using this skill.

With a groan, Luke put his face in his hands. Two skills he absolutely wanted, and he could only pick one. This was beginning to become a running theme. [Augmentation] was unusual-rarity too, so it was even stronger than [Flux Sense].

He felt torn between two worlds. He needed [Flux Sense] to gather a greater amount of materials to create more runes, but [Augmentation] would allow him to empower equipment.

Without it, he might come across augmenting materials and not even know it.

He didn't know what they were. A simple pebble could count as one, but with that skill, he'd gain the knowledge and ability to sense them.

He might be able to get by without [Flux Sense], except it'd be a gamble. [Augmentation] would directly increase his power through equipment.

But that would require him to come across the augmenting materials, which didn't seem very likely considering he was stuck here.

Perhaps the storeroom had them? It wasn't as if he would know.

Unable to make a decision, Luke's eyes traced the fiery words of the final skill.

[Runic Ease (Common)]

(Apprentice Runegraver Profession Skill)

Many Apprentice Runegravers find it cumbersome and difficult to create runes. Runic Ease simplifies the drawing process, allowing the rune to aid in its own formation for faster and more accurate results. Adds a small bonus to the influence of Dexterity, and Perception when using this skill.

With his high Dexterity and [Ambidextrous] trait, Luke didn't need [Runic Ease] to accurately draw runes. He had already practiced that enough to get it down.

At least the third skill was a dud. He was fine with drawing runes and while making him even faster seemed like a good thing, it would only be something he would dare pick up if he had nothing better to choose from.

For now, he had *two* excellent skills to pick from. If he wasn't in the challenge quest and time was not of the essence, he would pick [Augmentation] without question.

It provided an avenue for gaining power that Luke hadn't thought about before. If he could sense these augmenting materials, then use them to enhance his equipment, how much stronger could he make himself?

Equipment possessed varieties of enchantments naturally, and sometimes even increased stats. If he could affect any of those through [Augmentation], it would be a major improvement to his capabilities.

He might even be able to sell his creations if he ever survived the assessment.

Luke already had loot-based skills from Thief, and his Fate twisted rewards in Luke's favor. By now, that was obvious from the skills he received. [Runic Ease] was a boring common-rarity skill, but it was just 1 of 3. The other 2 were phenomenal and painfully useful.

Both would dramatically increase his utility as an Apprentice Runegraver, but only one would make it easier for him to craft runes and cut down on time spent hunting for flux.

The storeroom was full of so much junk that he could only walk a few feet into the room before he was stopped by the piles of dross.

Getting flux faster would speed up his crafting process significantly, which meant gaining experience even faster. He was unlikely to find a dungeon *within* a dungeon, so the odds of finding any valuable loot—such as augmenting materials—seemed remote.

Though he was satisfied with his decision, Luke still felt a small pang of loss. [Augmentation] was next up on his list for level 10. It was simply too good to pass up.

Skill gained: [Flux Sense (Uncommon)]

Braced for the headache inducing flood of information, Luke slumped into his chair and barely managed to avoid sliding bonelessly to the floor.

“That was worse than normal,” he said thickly, blinking and struggling with enervated limbs to sit up properly.

With information still trickling into his mind, Luke was keenly aware of another sense blossoming into full awareness. It joined

with his extrasensory shadow bloodline, giving him an illuminating understanding of the flux capacity of each item in his current room.

At first it was a faint sense, but as the information settled in to stay, Luke could sense auras of color rolling over the high-flux targets. Unsurprisingly, most of the materials he worked with would net high amounts of flux.

The [Stele] that he used to create runes was shrouded in a golden nimbus that he took to mean it would give a very large quantity of flux, while the chair he sat on gave off a pale crimson aura that signified a moderate amount.

His weapons, cloak and [Climbing Gloves] paled in comparison to that [Stele]. Still, they offered more than the typical amount. Once again, he would only [Raze] those as an absolute last resort.

Breaking down the [Stele] wouldn't be particularly useful unless he found another crafting tool. While he didn't *need* the [Stele] to grave runes, it made the process significantly easier and faster.

Once he steadied himself, Luke headed down the hall into the storeroom. Before he ever got to the door, his mingled senses of shadows and flux exploded in his mind's eye and provided a treasure map of high-yield flux for the taking.

Standing amid the trash and debris, Luke grinned to himself. "Happy birthday to me."