

CHAPTER 62 – SKILLS WITHIN

Luke quickly found another horned horror and hunkered down behind a stalagmite the size of a Buick.

Yindferl sidled up alongside him, as silent as a shadow. Her every motion made Luke feel like a clumsy toddler, even though Dexterity was his highest stat.

“Watch this,” he whispered, summoning an Echo out of the pitch of shadow at his feet.

Yindferl looked at it rising out of the ground, then put a massive shovel-sized paw on its head and forced it back into the shadow from whence it came. It had just enough time to realize what was happening and salute before its head vanished into the ground.

Never breaking eye contact with Luke, she lifted her other paw. An Echo of Yindferl appeared beside her, looking imperious and haughty as any monarch.

Luke absolutely wanted to know how she did that. Yindferl definitely had control over shadow mana. The question was, did she already possess that ability or did the drake use his own Echo to create one of her own?

They loped off together, splitting up and moving in a typical pincer pattern. Luke drew a few throwing knives, empowered them with the bleed effect of [Lacerate], and tossed them in quick succession. Using [Barrage] on the last [Lacerate] enhanced knife more than doubled the bleeding affliction's effect.

The horned horror hissed and cried out in its garbled voice. Blood poured from its wounds, distracting it so completely that it didn't even notice the twinned drakes approaching until it was already too late.

You have defeated [Horned Horror - Level 29]. Extra experience gained for slaying an enemy above your level.

The rest of the horned horrors were taken out with similar ease. Luke distracted them while the true ambush predator took them out. They worked surprisingly well together.

The utter lack of friendly fire was another benefit to fighting with Yindferl. He was accurate and quick enough to strike the enemy with his throwing daggers rather than risk a glancing blow on the drake, and she was similarly swift and agile. If not even more so.

From there, it only took a little practice to work together efficiently.

The more they fought together, the better they became at reading each other's cues and signals. Luke came up with a simple system of hand gestures that Yindferl took to with surprising speed.

Together they cleared out the cavern, slaughtering the horned horrors and hop mites that were normally skilled ambush predators of their own.

It wasn't strictly necessary, but once the room was cleared, Luke climbed up along the other side and sat with his legs dangling over the edge. He was tired, but he had a few potions courtesy of Alfair to restore his vital resources should he need them.

For now, all he needed was to pick his new skills and spend his free points from the levels he received since he didn't have time while clearing out the cavern.

Yindferl climbed effortlessly up the sheer cliff and sat beside him, nudging him aside slightly with her hefty bulk. Warmth radiated off her dark scales, banishing the frigid chill of the cavern.

Luke fell into a [Trance] while he went over his abilities, trusting that they had cleared the cavern. Should any creature happen upon them, Luke had faith that Yindferl would alert him to any danger. If she didn't outrightly kill the threat herself.

[Sneak Attack (Uncommon)]

(Thief Class Skill)

A staple of any Thief's kit, Sneak Attack allows a Thief to deal high damage to a target while their opponent is yet unaware of their position. You have proven that you don't need Stealth in order to pass undetected, and so you have been granted access to a skill that is usually part and parcel of the Stealth line. So long as you are undetected, utilizing Sneak Attack will drastically amplify any attack's damage. Adds a minor bonus to the influence of Dexterity and Strength when using this skill.

"Now that's more like it," Luke said, immediately enticed by the Sneak Attack skill. "Maybe I won't need to pick the Stealth skill up after all."

While it was only uncommon-rarity, that still wasn't too bad. It would improve his initial burst damage when engaging a foe in battle, but it wouldn't do much for a protracted battle.

Thinking, Luke rubbed his chin. He was long past stubble now and growing the beginnings of a beard. "If I could hide again, I might be able to weave that in the middle of battle."

Yindferl looked over at him.

"Especially with your help," Luke added, giving the drake a gentle pat.

[Mug (Uncommon)]

(Thief Class Skill)

While not the most elegant of abilities in a Thief's kit, Mug is useful all the same. By combining a light-attack to disorient while you simultaneously steal from your opponent, you are able to mix damage and profit into one ability. Not all targets are capable of being Mugged. Adds a minor bonus to the influence of Dexterity, Strength, and Perception when using this skill.

[Mug] seemed useful, but the note that not all targets could be mugged deflated his enthusiasm.

Luke was capable of holding his own against more powerful foes. In fact, with his [Soloer, Second-Class] title, he was pretty sure he was *more effective* fighting stronger enemies than those of the same level.

That meant he needed more tools for punching through an enemy's defense. And while [Sneak Attack] might be a one-use skill, it would be a powerful opening salvo.

Meanwhile, [Mug] would line his pockets and deal damage, but it didn't call to him the way [Sneak Attack] did.

Not to mention it seemed like a core identity skill for Thieves that he lost out on simply because he didn't pick up [Stealth] earlier as a Rogue.

Luke happily selected [Sneak Attack], feeling the knowledge of its use fill his mind. He could see how he should have moved differently when attacking the horned horrors, where he should have aimed to deal the most damage.

Still recovering while in a [Trance], Luke set his remaining free points. He recently put some into Endurance to lift his stamina out of the dumps. Seeing as nearly every Thief skill used stamina instead of mana, Luke saw the writing on the wall for what it was.

He wished his class had more magic oriented skills, but that was all he had to work with. At least, for now. He didn't know what kind of evolutions would be offered to him down the line.

Luke's first class evolution had been at level 10. He was now level 27, though *technically*, he was only level 17 Thief. The former 10 levels came from Rogue.

That meant that evolutions weren't every 10 levels. With his high Fate, Luke assumed he would be getting the soonest evolutions possible. Everything he read suggested that beyond the first evolution for classes at level 10, the following evolutions were sporadic.

I suppose that'd be too much to ask, Luke thought to himself. The last class evolution gave me a host of new skills and significantly more stats per level. Getting that every 10 levels would be insane, even if they were normally hard to come by.

Luke looked over at the drake beside him. “Do you know when classes evolve for the second time?” He figured there was no harm in asking.

Yindferl looked at him, stretched her neck out slightly, then dropped her large head into his lap and began to snore or perhaps to purr. It was hard to tell.

“Guess not,” Luke said with a chortle. He rubbed the side of her neck and the tiny, curled ears she had on the sides of her head that reminded him of the American curl breed of cat.

Putting the free points into his stats, Luke felt the warm glow of Endurance expanding, making it just slightly easier to breathe in this chilly cave.

Status

Name: Luke Solus

Race: Human (F-Grade - Level 18)

Dunamis Rank: Mundane (1)

Class: Thief (Level 27)

Profession: Shadetouched Runegraver (Level 10)

Vital Resources

Health Points (HP): 1,288/1,490

Mana Points (MP): 1,300/1,440

Stamina Points (SP): 255/750

Stats

Strength: 149 (+8)

Dexterity: 246 (+8)

Endurance: 75

Fortitude: 58 (+6)

Vitality: 149

Perception: 124 (+2)

Willpower: 81 (+14)

Wisdom: 144

Arcane: 123

Fate: 96

Free Points: 0

“My profession is really falling behind,” Luke said. He glanced at the drake. Did she have one too?

He had a hard time imagining her crafting potions with those shovel-sized paws.

Though cutting up the ingredients would be as simple as a single swipe of those dagger-like claws.

Luke stayed there in a [Trance] for a few more minutes to recover as much as he could, then got up and immediately felt like the world was twisting and spinning around him.

Staggering to the side, Luke struggled to keep his feet beneath him. Yindferl, surprised and concerned, circled around him protectively. Luke bumped into her flank and then staggered forward into her.

She kept moving to be where he needed her, keeping him on his feet. Luke could hardly see her. The edges of his vision were getting grainy and gray as if he was seeing through a heavy wash of static.

“What the hell is going on?” he mumbled, trying to lift his arms to brace himself against the side of Yindferl. His limbs were too heavy and slow. He felt like he was trying to move in a dream.

Luke felt a *snap* between his shoulder blades as if somebody popped his back. Darkness rushed in all around him, and Luke felt himself traveling at a tremendous speed.

The next thing he knew, he was flying through the air. His Dexterity had improved so much that he was able to twist and reorient himself mid-air to prevent cracking his head against the far wall.

Landing lightly on his feet, Luke looked around the now-unfamiliar Gordian room.

How long had it been since he was back here? At least a day or two, by his reckoning. He had spent a great deal of time with Alfair and then more with Yindferl.

“Yindferl!” Luke patted his cloak and his pockets, looking for the figurine but could not find it.

Did Alfair do something to send him back?

Luke hated to doubt the elf, but he had learned the bitter lesson early that nobody else could be trusted in the assessment so far. Why would the elf be any different?

Because of Yindferl, he thought. She wouldn't suffer to be with him if he was like that... right?

Luke didn't know.

The only thing he was certain of was that he had to get back to the Gordian.

But just like last time he was ejected, his MP and SP were utterly drained.

His HP, already fairly high to begin with, was almost as good as new. Being in there too long must put some kind of strain on his body, or it was a quirk of the Gordian's faulty state.

The Gordian's spiral of death had expanded in his absence since he hadn't been able to repair another node within.

Luke tried to remember the path he and Yindferl took. He knew how to get to Alfair and the library. After that, it grew a little hazy.

What if Yindferl was looking for him right now, unable to find him? If she was hurt, she would be sent back to her home plane... but what of the statuette? It would be there for anybody or anything to pick up.

He could have inadvertently caused her figurine to be lost forever.

Checking his pockets again, Luke found the potions that Alfair had stocked him with. At least he wasn't without recourse.

He knew items could be taken out of the Gordian, but there appeared to be some kind of limitation with Yindferl's statuette.

Perhaps because it was truly Alfair's? He suddenly felt hollow and empty.

Luke hoped it was returned to Alfair as he chugged a [Mana Potion]. It tasted like blue raspberry candy. The green potion that restored his stamina tasted like sour apple.

For the first time since arriving in the assessment, Luke noticed two little symbols beside the 3 vital resource bars. One next to his MP and the other next to his SP. There was a crossed out potion icon with a tiny clock symbol in the upper right corner. Slowly, Luke watched as a sliver of the icon dimmed.

"A cooldown?" Luke wondered aloud, a second mana potion in his hand, ready to drink.

Luke corked it and settled it back into his cloak's pocket. He had enough to make another conduit rune already. He didn't want to waste the precious few potions Alfair made him.

The elf had impressed upon him how rare the ingredients were within the Gordian. Unless they got lucky, there wouldn't be any more potions.