

# CHAPTER 46 – RUNEGRAVING: THE GOOD PARTS

Luke retreated quickly to the safety of the hallway, runes dancing in his head as he tried to figure out what it was he needed to do.

“Containment,” he muttered, wiping the filthy sweat from his brow. “The containment is already set up, but it’s incomplete.”

The first thing you do with any new coding language—after poking around for fun—is RTFM or at least whatever ages old documentation an overworked intern managed to whip together.

A quick second check on the Gordian room, as Luke was calling it, confirmed that the progress of the Gordian’s meltdown was slow. At its current pace, it would take weeks to reach the hallway.

He had plenty of time to shower, eat, and rest up, so all his mental faculties would be primed for the mother of all cram sessions.

Luke returned to the bathroom, peeled off the sole remnant of his Earthly clothes, and stepped into the shower. He planned on taking a nice hot bath later to relax. For now, it was scrub town: population Luke.

There were benefits to stats that he hadn’t had time to contemplate, much less see in action. Showering? Infinitely easier to do with high Dexterity.

Slipping was a thing of the past, and Luke could bend and twist to wash his back in a way that would have had Cirque du Soleil hammering on his door.

Luke scrubbed raw, then scrubbed again, courtesy of the loofahs and bars of pleasant-smelling soap provided by the previous occupant.

Luke emerged from the bathroom feeling like a new man.

With a towel wrapped around his waist just in case anybody decided to poke their head in, Luke went hunting in the bedroom for clothes.

He expected to find something that he might have to tolerate, but he never would have expected to find his exact size.

The clothes were nothing special. They didn't even have item tags to examine. Simple spun linen shirts, slacks, and the sort of billowy boxers that his grandfather probably wore.

Aside from the airiness of his clothes, Luke was surprised at how comfortable they felt. He expected something coarse and rough. These were like high-end products you'd find any "beach bum" with a 7-figure net worth wearing with flip-flops down at the pier.

Cleaned and clothed, Luke set his sights on the kitchen for something to eat. He already knew the water was potable. The lack of resistance notifications told him there wasn't anything untoward about the water supply.

The cupboards were stocked with cans of food. Even if he hadn't found the can opener, he would have been able to use his bare hands since at that point he had a whopping 86 Strength.

There was no microwave, but there were a few pots and pans and a simple wood stove that he could cook on. There was a magical equivalent of a refrigerator, judging by the shining runes in the back of the polished wooden box.

Even though Luke was still new to runes, he could tell that they altered the temperature inside the box, much like a heat pump for a fridge would in a modern Earth appliance.

Luke felt around the outside of the box, his curiosity getting the better of him. When he discovered the warm currents of air, he felt something close to relief.

There was no violation of thermodynamics here, at least not that Luke could see.

Shuttling heat from one place to another was the basis for most of the modern creature comforts of Luke's age. He was glad to see that he could very likely recreate a lot of the simpler gadgets he grew up with and relied upon.

A fridge was pretty easy, especially if he didn't need to mess around with phase-change materials or a complex piping system that needed a compressor and all manner of machinery to make it work.

He frowned, looking from the icebox to the stove, deep in thought. If it was as simple as using a set of runes to transfer heat from one place to the other, couldn't he create a more sophisticated burner that drew out heat from one location and concentrated it at another?

That'd probably require a separate ice box, one that would drop to below freezing temperatures to handle the load.

Luke grabbed some hanging sausages from the pantry, a block of cheese, and some crackers from the cupboard. He left the idea to fester in the back of his mind.

If he tried it now, he was more liable to blow up his only source of sustenance than cobble together something useful, let alone an actual improvement over the preexisting appliances.

He didn't even know what runes to use, nor if what he thought was even possible.

*Baby steps*, he reminded himself.

Loaded plate in hand, Luke wandered toward the secondary study, the one with the strange tables and peculiar magnifying glasses.

With the Runegraver profession rattling around in his head, he knew they played a role in the graving process.

Unlike the first study, where he had originally appeared, the books here seemed to be mostly records of attempts to do something so mind-bogglingly complex that it looked like an alien language to Luke.

“Maybe later,” he said around a mouthful of food. It felt *so good* to eat something that didn’t taste like he was licking the underside of a rusty dumpster.

He shivered in revulsion at the memory of eating that raw monster meat. He wanted to vow right then and there to never do it again, but even Luke knew better than that.

Sometimes things got desperate, and just because he was temporarily comfortable now, didn’t mean those times wouldn’t return.

Spoiled meat might help him recover faster, but it wreaked havoc on his morale. His appetite had been nonexistent until now, and no wonder.

Venturing into the initial study with its comfortable seating and study tables, Luke picked a book up at random and plopped himself down for some light reading to aid in his digestion.

*“The memorization of runes is often the first step on any Runegraver’s journey, and also the most fruitless of endeavors,”* the book explained. *“Runes are tools meant to serve the Runegraver, a tool in the belt, useful to know, but with so many permutations it would be folly to spend the initial years of a youthful apprentice’s time studying runes by rote instead of learning to master and utilize Dunamis.”*

Luke frowned at that last word. “What the hell is Dunamis?”

Clearly, the author of the book didn't think anybody needed a primer on this "Dunamis" and continued to extol the virtues of problem-solving and creativity versus rote copy.

Luke remembered seeing Dunamis mentioned before, but it hadn't been elaborated then either. It was too bad he couldn't just go and ask the Discordant Dragon for answers. At least he wasn't about to get accidentally obliterated by a god for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Luke had always been gifted with the ability to focus so hard that he often forgot to eat, drink, go to the bathroom, or generally take care of himself as any adult should.

Normally, this demolished his social life, but it also let him get a 4.2 GPA when he stopped trying to manage it. When the chips were down, Luke could turn off the outside world and focus on what was right in front of him, as if it was the only thing that existed.

For Luke, it was.

What started as one book turned into two, then three, and quickly four. With some good food, Luke's appetite returned in force. He made a quick trip back to the kitchen, heaped his plate full of some kind of apple-like fruit and rich orange cheese, then grabbed an entire jug of water.

Arms laden, he hurried back to the study, eyes bright with an eagerness to learn.

Learning about Runegraving was not enough for the System to net him any experience. Though Luke chewed through the thick leather-bound tomes, there was no handy progress bar or notification to let him know that he was on the right track.

For the first time in his new life, he felt like this was the most comfortable and familiar thing in existence. Although he had to admit that he was a little bummed out about the lack of a reading skill.

On the other hand, whether it was his stats or something else, he was able to read at least twice as fast as he could back when he was in college.

That was fine by him. Learning about Rune-graving was the first step to being able to successfully craft, and potentially without wasting limited precious materials.

Luke would rather spend some time studying and then crafting a set of three runes, instead of attempting to craft twenty runes and blowing up almost every single one until the last.

There wasn't a way out of here, not without completing his quest. Everything he did mattered. A mistake early on could cost him heavily later.

For the first time since arriving in the assessment, Luke was able to finally focus and work his unique magic.

Preparation was key to any good product, whether that was magic or bespoke accountancy and record keeping programs.

It was little wonder that Luke spent his first night there in the worn out but surprisingly comfortable leather armchair. Two books were wedged into the cushions on either side of him, with another opened and pressed against his chest in a loving embrace.

Head tilted back, Luke snored contentedly for the first time in over a year. Even his apartment back home, he lacked the deep sleep he was getting. After everything that happened, he usually needed two or three different sleep aids to help him off to dreamland.

With the books nesting on and around him, Luke woke up with a start. For a moment, Luke panicked at where he was until his brain rebooted.

His fight-or-flight response tapered off before he could topple the many stacks of books he thought might be illuminating, but he still had to bend down and rearrange things.

Resolving to get to sleep in a proper bed next time, Luke got up and stretched. He luxuriated in having yet another hot shower, used the bathroom gleefully instead of just squatting somewhere, and generally took full advantage of the creature comforts afforded to him.

If the System thought it was balanced to provide him with a safe haven and so much comfort that he could focus wholly on the Gordian problem, then he knew it was going to be incredibly hard to accomplish.

After getting ready for his first day of crafting, Luke headed into what he was beginning to call the workshop. The study had more books, not to mention places to read and study them.

The workshop, meanwhile, was more surfaces and tools with books that served as record keeping accounts.

The smallest of the four tables in the room was already set with graving tools, a bag of silvery powder spilling onto the tabletop, and several pinned sheets of paper depicting three runes.

Each of the runes was drawn with incredible precision. Tiny measurements were taken in the margins, with notations about how far one crook of the rune should be from the other.

Luke sat down. He took one of the sheets of thick linen paper stacked on the far corner of the desk and a sharpened pencil from a cup at the other edge, then went to work.

The books he read had a dozen different solutions for what an apprentice should tackle first and foremost, but Luke had other ideas.

If Runegraving was all about incredible precision—something having high Dexterity helped with—then what he needed to do was practice drawing the runes without any magical aid. Only until he could draw them in his sleep at any scale would he consider moving on to something more.

*With the fundamentals down, I'll be able to move forward at speed with a solid foundation beneath me.*

The world faded away as Luke worked with pencil and paper, drawing and erasing and drawing again, over and over.