

CHAPTER 45 – LOST PROFESSION

Luke lowered the dagger and stared in awe at the tableau before him.

It took him some time to understand what he was looking at. Even then, he wasn't entirely sure his eyes were capable of perceiving all the angles that existed.

Like many of the other rooms of significance associated with the Discordant Dragon, this room was circular. It had a domed roof that towered overhead and made anything within the large room feel unaccountably small and insignificant.

Which was a true feat because the room was filled with esoteric clockwork machines floating above points of polished, curving metal. A large tesseract-like object floated upon the central dais.

Unlike a normal tesseract, this was in the shape of a sphere that continually shifted and moved. Some parts seemed to be flowing outside from *inside* itself, which he shouldn't have been able to see but nevertheless could.

Several orbs, pyramids, and other stranger non-Euclidean shapes floated above the spikes of polished colored metal arrayed on the floor.

Luke wasn't a mathematician, though getting a CS degree did put him in somewhat close proximity. Kind of like the flavors in La Croix, familiar but only in passing.

He couldn't help but think that the design, when viewed from the top of the dome, would look like a Fibonacci spiral. With the spikes and their strange non-standard geometric shapes above acting like points of delineation.

Before Luke could lose himself too much in the theory of what this was, his eyes were drawn back to the strange sphere at the center of the room. It seemed to be powering up, a gathering rush of light leaked out of its many folds and moving seams.

Luke eased his footing forward, slowly sliding into the room. Though he was overcome by curiosity, he stayed on guard. Ever since the assessment test began, he had never encountered a truly safe area. Not once.

It didn't seem likely that was about to change.

A part of him knew that he badly needed true rest, one where he wasn't ambushed in the middle of the night or constantly on watch for monsters. He put it off all the same by forcing back the yawning fatigue through sheer force of will.

Microsleep could only get you so far.

Luke searched the room for traps and monsters while keeping a reasonable distance away from the sphere, all the while promising himself that he'd sleep once he assessed that things were reasonably safe.

As he watched, the sphere's many-changing topography altered and peeled back to reveal an infinite cosmos and then an item he had last given back to the Discordant Dragon. The tiny obelisk was clearly on display at its heart, beckoning Luke to grab it.

He made it within the first few spirals before a notification stopped him in his tracks, hand reaching out for the obelisk and the power it promised.

Challenge Quest: Containment Breach

The Gordian before you is badly damaged and, if not tended to properly, will destroy this place of rest and respite, as well as the hidden treasures it holds. Within its First Fold is a Precursor relic, granting access to the lost Runegraver Profession. The artifact is all that is holding the Gordian in check. Once removed, this location

will be locked down. The only way to leave will be to repair the Gordian.

This is an optional Quest. Should you decline, you will be free to leave the Dungeon. However, if you accept, you will be confined to the Dungeon until such time as you repair the Gordian or the resulting meltdown destroys you and the Dungeon.

Do you accept?

Y/N

“Is that the threat, then?” Luke asked aloud, expecting no answer. “The next thing I face off against?”

He had a strong feeling that if he reached in and took the obelisk, that would also constitute an acceptance of the quest.

Despite himself, he began to let down his guard. The System named this place as one of rest and respite. And considering he found no other monsters, perhaps it really was.

That meant that the task of repairing the Gordian would be impossibly difficult if he needed his full mental faculties to manage it.

And then his exhausted brain caught up to the information presented to him.

This quest was offering a *profession* to him. And a lost one at that. Runegraving *did* sound sufficiently esoteric.

A profession could easily be an incredible, life-changing source of progression.

That alone would have been worth venturing into this dungeon and fighting the auditor. A profession would be immensely valuable to attain.

If he understood the System correctly, this Runegraver profession would offer another source of levels, much like having two classes instead of merely one.

The initial levels were easy to get as well. That meant he could likely power up his race levels quickly if he had access to a profession. But was that what he wanted to be?

Runegraving does sound pretty interesting, but it's just a name. What's it do?

Unsurprisingly, there was no answer.

This could catapult me forward in power, Luke thought, marveling at the opportunity before him. One where he didn't have to worry about getting hunted by Marcy, or deal with a never-ending slew of monsters out in what was effectively the overworld.

If he wound up disliking Runegraver, he might be able to evolve it into a different kind of profession, much like the Marksman class that had been offered as an evolution for his beginner Rogue class.

Of course, that was assuming professions functioned similarly to classes, and he performed the necessary actions to be presented with said forked evolution.

With infinite care, Luke reached out and pressed his fingertips to the obelisk.

Nothing happened.

He frowned and inched closer until he was at eye level with the thing. Somebody had carved a small hole into the face of the obelisk, which led to a glowing gold dragon scale the size of Luke's thumbnail.

Steadying his hand to prevent it from accidentally dislodging the obelisk, he touched the rough glowing scale at the heart of the obelisk.

He was about to give up, it had been a long shot anyway, when the notification flashed across his vision. First as a series of incomprehensible runes, and then finally as words.

[Apprentice Runegraver]

Runes are the source of countless power across the multiverse. A Runegraver is one that learns these esoteric and often ancient sigils, binding them with flux, instilling them with mana, and graving them upon their chosen vessel. At their heart, Runegravers are enchanters of the highest order, their teachings incomprehensible to all but the most learned scholars, making this a difficult profession for most to excel at.

Unlike other professions that only require a set of tools and the appropriate work, Runegravers require significantly more involvement. Runes must be found, memorized, and adapted. Flux must be obtained and properly apportioned per rune, and only then do the graving tools and mana come into play. Profession stats awarded per level: +6 Arcane, +6 Wisdom, +2 Dexterity, +2 Perception, +2 Free Points.

Bind this Soulstone?

Y/N

Luke's eyes widened at what Apprentice Runegraver had to offer. He grew increasingly excited about the profession, intrigued by the possibilities it presented. He almost felt like a kid again, unwrapping a new toy during the holidays.

The stats awarded per Apprentice Runegraver level complemented his needs extremely well, and further built up two of his heavily used stats, Dexterity and Perception.

Obviously, if given the choice, he might have traded Perception for either Strength or Vitality, but that would only serve his battle capabilities. Runegraver clearly needed Perception instead.

What was more, this level 0 profession offered more stats than his evolved Thief class did. Thief gave him a total of 16 stats per level while Apprentice Runegraver would offer 18.

Luke had to clamp down on the urge to accept it out of hand and therefore accepting the quest that would lock him in here.

But was that really so bad?

The odds of him finding another place of rest were vanishingly small. Furthermore, it was offering him a *profession*. He would have another chore to deal with if he accepted, but it would be a welcome change from the end of the world survival that he had been experiencing so far.

Hot and cold running water, a *bed*, food, and presumably reading materials related to his craft.

All for him if he chose to put his life on the line and take the only thing holding this Gordian thing in check.

Luke didn't like to rush into things, but the thought he couldn't get out of his head was, *if not me, then it'll be somebody else. Somebody who either will succeed and gain the power I could have had, or they'll fail, and this place will forever be erased.*

Not to mention, the profession sounded exactly like the sort of thing he would like. Infinitely complex and challenging—a lot like coding—but whose main expression was one of creativity. You used coding to *solve problems*, and it sounded like runes were similar in scope.

What those sorts of problems were, Luke couldn't tell without getting his hands on the System's equivalent of documentation.

He couldn't quell the fluttering excitement that welled up from his middle. Not only was this a chance to prove himself equal to the task before him, but it was one where he would gain an untold amount of power. If professions held true like classes, then in 10 levels he might be able to evolve it into something even stronger.

And that meant by the end of those 10 levels, he'd have another 180 stats spread out to the ones he needed most to support his *bloodline*.

Luke wasn't one to turn away from a once in a lifetime opportunity. While he might not be able to gain LP while undertaking this quest,

the resulting power he could gain would allow him to rake in incredible amounts of LP once he got out. The stronger the monsters got, the greater and greater amounts of LP they awarded per kill.

Provided he succeeded, of course.

“I accept,” he said aloud, meaning for it to include both the quest and the profession’s soulstone acquisition.

If Luke had been less exhausted, he might have more readily contemplated waiting to accept the quest. However, the result would have been the same. Besides, there was a small chance that by walking away, the System would consider that as a refusal and would immediately boot him out of this area.

There was a brittle *snap* as the soulstone, the tiny fragment of power visible through the bore in the obelisk, broke free and lurched out into Luke’s outstretched hand.

The pain was immediate and intense, causing him to drop his dagger and fall to his knees, clutching his wrist.

As the fiery heat in his hand traveled up his arm and over his shoulder, the pain lessened and the heat began to spread throughout his body.

Everything hurt. Sweat poured out of him. He hallucinated, seized, writhed, and then stilled.

It was all over in a matter of seconds, but it had felt as if Luke crammed the full experience of the flu into those scant few seconds.

When it was over, Luke got to his feet shakily and looked at the world with new eyes. The runes that were glowing around the room now made a semblance of sense.

This wasn’t the full understanding, but a new coder’s comprehension of the basic syntax of any new language. Syntax that rearranged in his mind as he looked at the runes and felt the

great working that some ancient Runegraver must have performed here.

Turning a slow circuit, Luke realized that the entire space was designed for a singular purpose. To keep the Gordian inert and its immense power drained away so it could never activate.

And Luke had just undone that.

His gaze snapped back to the Gordian as it lifted a few inches off its plinth and began to glow an ominous red.