

CHAPTER 71 – PREPARATION

Looking around at all the books and scrolls, Luke realized that the Gordian was now in his possession. He didn't need to pilfer every book from this room, though he did take a few of the runic books that had been particularly helpful in solving the latest puzzle.

The Gordian had plenty of those, and doubtless he would discover many more before long. He wanted to be ready.

Luke took a deep breath and stepped through the gateway. As much as he wished it would whisk him off to Sorcerii, he knew it wouldn't.

He appeared in the ruined Gordian room. Behind him, the Gordian clanked and fell to the plinth. Luke picked it up and as he did so, the Gordian shrank down to the size of a golf ball of infinite golden complexity.

[Gordian (Unique)]

(Relic)

The culmination of Master Runegraver, Augustus Frenlebren's life's work. This unknown contraption contains multiple Layers. Though damaged by an unknown source, by repairing sections you will gain access to new Layers and the resources hidden within.

A swirling vortex of darkness appeared where the Gordian had once been. Luke could feel a connection to his bloodline and to the Discordant Dragon through that gateway. If he stepped through, he would be done with the refuge, likely never able to return.

He still had time.

There was no rush to meet the Dragon. Least of all, because it would mean giving up this slice of peace in a turbulent time of death and

barbarism. Luke realized with detached amusement that he had been infinitely lucky to escape the horrors outside.

He wasn't very good at checking the quest or leaderboard except to use the timer as a means of measuring when the Gordian was going to boot him out.

Luke pulled up the quest again to see what categories he might qualify for. He knew there was no way he would be in the top 10 for LP, but the quest did mention there would be rewards for other categories.

[Assessment Test]

Time Remaining: 3 days, 1h:9m:2s

Assessment Type: Survival

Your standing within the Company and subsequent debt forgiveness is wholly dependent upon the ranking you achieve by the end of the assessment period. Loyalty Points (LP) are earned by killing creatures or other interns, the amount split between eligible combatants. A portion of an intern's currently held LP, based on remaining interns, is awarded to their killer.

LP can be used in the Company Shop to purchase a wide assortment of goods, but be warned that doing so might cause your ranking to shift as points are lost and gained across the assessment field.

Rank is based on the number of remaining interns, Loyalty Points, and level at the end of the assessment. Additional rewards will be given to the top 10 in each of the following categories: Most Loyalty Points, Highest Level, Most Kills, Most Loot Pilfered, and Last Survivor.

Now that he saw the other categories, he might make it to the top 10 in the highest level or most kills. Two of which seemed to go hand in hand.

While Luke had been fortunate with his loot pilfering, he didn't think it would be enough to warrant anything special. Not unless the storeroom and the dross within counted as loot he pilfered.

He doubted it.

Trying to investigate any of those categories was frustratingly fruitless. He had hoped for another ranking notification to show up, but there was nothing.

Might as well check my ranking for points then, Luke thought. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that he would be rock bottom.

It came as a sobering shock that he had jumped up a few thousand places.

[Assessment Rankings]

Time Remaining: 3 days, 1h:9m:0s

[Current Points: 144]

982. Marva Weeks

983. Christina Sharp

984. Bryon Salas

985. Jewell Wu

986. *Luke Solus*

987. Latasha Waller

989. Loretta Moss

990. George Foster

991. Marcia Spears

Considering he had neither spent nor gained LP since arriving in the refuge weeks ago, there was only one sobering explanation.

People were dying en masse outside.

Since Luke had last checked, hundreds or thousands of people's lives had been snuffed out, causing his position on the list to jump up.

Whatever was going on, he was well out of it. The conflict outside had nothing to do with him. He had been living the crafter hermit lifestyle.

For once, Luke felt he could walk out and feel disconnected from the events surrounding the assessment. It would be nice to be an outside observer for once.

Ever since the assessment had started, it was one bad streak of luck after the next.

People he once trusted and respected turned on him, looked at him as if he was some sort of monster. A worrying number of people he didn't know had tried to murder him, and he had taken a surfing lesson in the sewers.

All incredibly low points, and all somehow connected to him.

Unfortunately, there were only a handful of days left, 3 to be precise. That gave him 3 days to kill as many things as possible. With people dying left, right, and center, perhaps he did have a chance to hit the top 10 in LP.

Perhaps he was being a tad morose, and *maybe* it wasn't an apocalyptic hellscape outside.

It was just as likely that as the competition heated up toward the final stretch, there were people buying things from the shop in order to get that last boost.

Not that there was anything worthwhile Luke could buy in the shop with 144LP.

Fat chance. That's about as likely as Marcy sincerely apologizing to me.

Luke returned to the comfort of his after-Gordian ritual. Bath, food, sleep. He didn't bother with [Trance] this time.

His body had been telling him for a long time that it needed true sleep for once, and if he didn't acquiesce to its demands, it would not be pretty.

Seeing as he had nearly a day left with the refuge, Luke didn't see any reason not to indulge a little. Besides, he had some crafting to do before he met the Dragon.

Once he was well rested, and took another snack of meat and cheese, Luke headed over to the workshop. He was eager to see the [Obele Stele] in action. It felt cold and heavy in his hand, far heavier than something so small had any right to be.

If he had more time, he would have loved to tinker with the potion bottles that Alfair gifted him. He was sure he could modify them, perhaps enhance the speed at which they gathered ambient mana.

That was the whole point of runegraving after all.

Instead, Luke turned to his latest runegraving skill, the one he hadn't been able to use yet: [Augmentation].

[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 of equipment 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.

Luke went around the refuge, taking out bags of flux, and neatly arranging them by type. When he had gathered everything, he dropped each into the bottomless [Runic Box].

“That’s handy,” he muttered to himself. It sure as hell beat stuffing things into his cloak. And it made tidying up easy.

Luke had access to Dunamis, flux, and now he had augmenting materials courtesy of the Gordian.

Luke pulled out 2 [Spirit Plates] and glanced at their description.

[Spirit Plate (Uncommon)]

(Crafting Material)

A metallic plate of spirit so densely concentrated it has taken on physical form. Used for augmenting equipment, weapons and accessories. Typically found in dungeons, or from high difficulty monsters.

Then he set aside the [Heavy Spirit Plate Pouch]. It clinked like a bag full of coins, and true to its name, it was quite heavy.

Then again, the [Spirit Plates] were surprisingly heavy even for his high Strength.

[Spirit Plates] were green glassy things about the size of his palm. They were ever-so-slightly convex, with odd rounded corners.

If he held one up to his eye, he could *almost* see through it, but not entirely. No matter how much light shone through the material, he never was able to see through it.

“The uncommon ones first,” Luke said aloud. If he screwed those up, then he’d still have the higher unusual-rarity ones from the pouch.

He took off his trusty cloak, which was like an old friend at this point. It had been burned, cut, stabbed, speared, dunked in acid, frozen, nearly drowned, and so much more together that it felt like a piece of his soul.

Placing the first plate atop it, his obsidian stele poised with a bag of [Threefold Flux] ready, Luke set to work.

It was odd exploring what you already knew, but didn't exactly *know* you knew it. It was like remembering a dream. Luke worked slowly, etching the first rune with infinite care.

As he did, his understanding unfolded like a blossoming flower.

The cloak's rarity mattered greatly. It was the main limiting factor when augmenting. He estimated that he could squeeze 8 plates into the uncommon-rarity item.

Plates, the only augmenting item he had, were defensive in nature. That made some level of logic to Luke, considering what the items were based on.

While it seemed odd to infuse plates into leather, the plates would disperse into the material, becoming one with it. With an altered rune, he could augment specific defensive capabilities of the cloak.

If he wanted to be resistant to physical damage, he could weave that in. It was a simple rune. The [Threefold Flux] wouldn't even be needed.

More water resistance? Easy.

What about magical damage resistance? Also easy. Just about any sort of defensive augmentation was up for grabs. All it took was a slight alteration to the rune used to bind the [Spirit Plate] and an appropriate element—or elements—of flux.

Considering this was almost all defensive, he would need mostly [Flux (Earth)], but a few of the elemental variations would need their elemental counterpart.

If he wanted to have higher water resistance, for example, he would need [Flux (Lightning)]. Suggesting rather heavily that there was a system at play for strengths and defenses based on elements, though Luke wasn't a mage and had no idea if his guess was right.

As he explored the possibilities, Luke came upon a use for [Threefold Flux]. If he used multiple plates in sequence, binding them with the appropriate runes, he could create a new defensive enchantment.

It was semi-randomized. Semi only because it was restricted to defensive enchantments.

If he had other augmenting materials, he could influence it to have different enchantments, even ones that bridged the gulf between support, defense, offense, and the like.

While Luke didn't know what other augmenting materials there were, he was keen to find more. This felt like the tip of the iceberg and a core function of runegraving that he hadn't been exposed to yet.

"It's like Schrodinger's Plate," Luke said as he emptied out the bag of plates.

He had the strangest sensation that as he did so, the System decided how many plates were in the bag. Until he looked inside, it remained uncertain. Maybe it would be 10, maybe 3. Every time he tried to jingle the bag, it sounded like there were a different number of plates.

Luke looked at the table and nodded to himself. 6 unusual rarity plates didn't seem so bad. That gave him a total of 8 plates, 2 uncommon and 6 unusual.

As he stacked the plates, he could feel the potential strength of the enchantment increasing with each new plate he added.

"There's a way to influence the strength," Luke murmured to himself, wishing he could take out Yind for the company. He didn't want the first thing they did together on their own to be so alike to Alfair's studying.

He knew how easily she got bored.

Besides, the longer he let her recover, the longer she would be able to stay out. If things were really as bad as he feared out there, then he would need Yind more than ever.

Outside, unlike in the Gordian, Luke's death would be final.

Luke decided to give the cloak a general defensive augment with the 2 uncommon plates. He watched with great interest as the rune etched with the [Obele Stele] shimmered brightly, like somebody had managed to create LEDs the size of glitter.

He had only recently been able to make common-rarity runes, so it was a pleasant surprise to see the uncommon-rarity rune as well as the augment of the [Spirit Plates].

If he had opted for a more refined version of defense, he could have improved it more, but as it was, he was happy with the result. Luke's eyes widened in surprise at the notification that rolled in.

**You have successfully augmented [Scout Cloak (Uncommon)].
Extra experience gained for crafting a recipe above your level.
Bonus experience gained for first time crafting completion. 64 LP
gained.**

[Spirit Plate (1/8): -2% Damage taken].

**You have successfully augmented [Scout Cloak (Uncommon)].
Extra experience gained for crafting a recipe above your level. 64 LP
gained.**

[Spirit Plate (2/8): -4% Damage taken].

Luke stared at the LP gained, then he realized why he had gotten it.

The quest was over. He technically wasn't in a dungeon anymore, as there was no objective to complete. The dungeon had turned into a normal place, allowing him to gain LP again.

His initial intention was just to do a little augmenting, but now that he could gain LP...

This changes everything.

“If I could stack that augment together across multiple items, I could vastly improve my damage mitigation,” Luke said to himself in complete awe.

Those plates were just uncommon-rarity as well. He wondered how much his unusual plates would give, then thought better of it. Luke had other plans for them.

With each uncommon-rarity [Spirit Plate] giving him 2% mitigation, he would cap out at 16% on his cloak. There was an easy way to test his theory, too.

Since he could gain LP now, and each augment gave him a solid 64LP, he could get enough LP for an [Item Upgrade Ticket], enhance the cloak to unusual, then check again.

Luke had 144LP going into this crafting session. By some strange divine providence, the 128LP from the 2 augments brought him to 272. Literally 128LP more and he could buy the 400LP ticket.

More than ever, Luke saw the Runegraver profession’s bottomless potential. A potential he had barely scratched the surface of. With enough rare materials and time spent crafting, augmenting imparted incredible powers to equipment that could dramatically change the course of every battle.

And it was all for him.

No pesky guild or settlement to oversee and equip. Just Luke.