

CHAPTER 52 – BREAKTHROUGH

Luke carefully looked over the choices for his profession's class evolution, paying particular attention to the number of stats awarded per level. That would be one of the most important factors for him.

Every book he read told him that the quantity of stats was a telltale sign of both rarity and strength.

He had been fortunate to gain a profession evolution so swiftly. No doubt owing to his unusually high Fate stat. If not for defeating that auditor so many times, he wouldn't have nearly so much.

The same could be said about defending himself against a bunch of murderers hellbent on his destruction. If he had been left alone, he would have been like every other human recently uplifted into the System.

A quick glance at his status told him he'd have 14 Fate instead of the whopping 92 he currently had.

[Adept Runegraver]

Your dedication to your craft has not gone unnoticed. Adept Runegravers are capable of infusing their runes with more Dunamis and creating more complex runes as a result. Recursive runes become possible with the aid of Dunamis-entangled mana. Continue your progress and you will take another step along the path to a Master Runegraver. Profession stats awarded per level: +8 Arcane, +8 Wisdom, +3 Dexterity, +3 Perception, +3 Free Points.

This variant appeared to be a straightforward, standard evolution from Apprentice Runegraver. That at least meant Luke was growing notably proficient at his craft, rather than stagnating.

He could see himself continuously moving forward, never straying from the tried-and-true path the other Rune-gravers undertook.

But Adept Rune-graver was not Luke's only choice for a profession evolution.

[Shadetouched Rune-graver]

All Marks tell a story, but yours tell of a man steeped in shadow and thriving in darkness. Few can stand the long, lonely hours it takes to perfect a single rune, much less to apply it properly. While others are happy to toil away toward an inevitable goal, you seek a different path. One for which your Marks have made you exceptionally suited to. Shadetouched Rune-gravers are able to weld shadows into their runes, creating new variations otherwise impossible. Not all who wander from the path are lost. Continue forging your own path through the dark. Profession stats awarded per level: +9 Arcane, +9 Wisdom, +3 Dexterity, +3 Perception, +3 Vitality, +3 Free Points.

Now that sounds more my style, Luke thought with surprise.

The stats per level were significantly better than Adept Rune-graver's.

Stats were one of the central paths to power, but skills and evolutions factored in as well. He was already fairly shadow and darkness aligned. Selecting Shadetouched Rune-graver would take him deeper down that road.

Which isn't necessarily a bad thing, Luke thought. *Specializing in something is a good thing. That was one of the reasons why I didn't pick the starter class Warrior after all.*

His bloodline was one of his greatest strengths. It was unique and rare, so most enemies wouldn't be prepared to fight against his powers and magic.

Shadetouched Runegraver definitely reflected that. However, it would come at the cost of being unable to explore other kinds of powers. What they would be, Luke didn't know.

He was only theorizing. And while he had picked up a fair amount from all the books in the study, his knowledge was still lacking about the multiverse.

It was possible that picking up Shadetouched Runegraver wouldn't prevent him from branching out into more powers down the line.

However, it was equally possible that by picking Adept Runegraver instead, he would forever close the door on Shadetouched Runegraver because the choice could only be presented to him once.

He hadn't yet been able to evolve Thief into a higher class, so he didn't know if the previous options were able to be presented to him again. Skills worked like that, but he had a nagging feeling that classes and professions didn't.

However, the upsides of Shadetouched Runegraver were just too many to deny.

Feeling sure of his decision, Luke chose Shadetouched Runegraver as his profession's evolution.

A heady mixture of knowledge and power struck him all at once, overwhelming his senses. Shadows erupted from his skin, darkening the hall with twisting shapes that were reminiscent of his silhouette.

Just as quickly, they receded back into his body, leaving him wondering if the whole thing had been a hallucination from overwork and not enough actual sleep.

He rubbed his bleary eyes.

Even if [Trance] allowed him to keep studying while resting, it didn't feel like proper sleep. He missed being able to shut his eyes and turn off the world for a time.

There was something deeply restful about being dead to the world for a night instead of constantly burning the candle at both ends.

But if he succumbed to such base desires, he wouldn't survive the challenge quest before him.

Shadetouched Runegraver wasn't done with him yet. System prompts rolled in, pulling Luke's thoughts away from the challenge quest and instead to the powerful skills being unlocked within him.

Skill gained:

[Create Shadow Rune (Uncommon)]

(Shadetouched Runegraver Profession Skill)

The shadows are yours to control. They are everywhere and nowhere at once. There before light arrives and lingering long after light has fled, shadows are all around you. By utilizing your unique connection to shadows, you can create a Shadow Rune, utilizing shadowstuff instead of physical mediums (frames) for any given rune. Shadow Runes are strongly influenced by your Bloodline. Adds a minor bonus to the influence of Perception and Dexterity stats when using this skill.

Skill gained:

[Instill Shadow (Uncommon)]

(Shadetouched Runegraver Profession Skill)

Instilling runes is the process of activating their effects, allowing the power within to come to the fore. Instilling your unique shadow powers into a rune grants you the ability to augment runes one step further or to subvert the need for mana. Instill Shadow is strongly influenced by your Bloodline. Adds a minor bonus to the influence of Arcane, Willpower, and Wisdom stats when using this skill.

Skill gained:

[Bind Shadow (Uncommon)]

(Shadetouched Runegraver Profession Skill)

The capacity to use shadows to enhance your runes is the calling card of Shadetouched Runegraver. Bereft of shadows, a Shadetouched Runegraver is little different from an Adept Runegraver. By Binding Shadows, you pin a shadow in place and grant it resistance to light sources, providing you with a stable supply of shadow no matter the environment. Bind Shadow is strongly influenced by your Bloodline. Adds a minor bonus to the influence of Willpower and Arcane when using this skill.

Luke felt his skin tighten all over his body as the new skills settled in and made themselves at home. His mind spun with the new possibilities these Shadetouched Runegraver skills granted.

He immediately tried out [Bind Shadow], then took a lantern off a hook inside the storeroom and held it right up to the pitch darkness.

Though the shadow lightened ever-so-slightly, it resisted the light as if something was standing in the lantern's way. It was an impressive feat, and infinitely more useful because he could use his ring to create a shadow, then bind it in place wherever he needed.

The skill wasn't even mana-intensive, though that could have been because of his meteoric rise in max MP.

Using the [Umbral Ring] and the [Bind Shadow] skill together, Luke could make shadows wherever he wanted. Grinning, he could easily see himself being even more formidable and tricky to fight in battle with this pairing alone.

He released the shadow and created one with his ring, noticing the difference between a real shadow and a created one.

"So manufactured shadows are less resistant and costlier," Luke mused, glancing between his ring and the lantern.

That meant clinging to shadows would still be the preferred way to move, and binding existing shadows was superior in every way to using those he created.

It gave him options though, and that was the important part. Because eventually somebody was going to notice his shadow powers and try to devise a strategy to deal with them, and by extension, Luke.

He wanted to be ready for that day with an ace up his sleeve.

While Luke was itching to try out his other new Shadetouched Runegraver skills, he had the Gordian to manage with his recently created [Conduit Rune].

Steeling himself for what was to come, he stepped into the Gordian's room. The explosion, frozen part way across the chamber, served as an ominous reminder for what was to come if he failed.

Even with his Perception, he could barely notice its glacial crawl forward. It was practically locked in time. If it wasn't potentially going to kill him, it would have been fascinating to look at.

Luke had read all he could about the Gordian, but there was precious little about it in either the study or the workshop. Whoever had made it left enough notes that Luke understood what he was supposed to do.

There were countless references to a "temporally locked, self-forming, null-dungeon" within the Gordian. After piecing together several notes in the margins of other books on spatial anomalies and the like, Luke had come to the conclusion that the Gordian housed a dungeon of utterly unique properties.

What exactly that entailed, he didn't know. The concept was already strange enough. A dungeon within a dungeon. He was already in a F-Grade dungeon, so did that mean whatever was within the Gordian was of greater strength?

Unless the Gordian was somehow the source of this dungeon, that didn't seem likely. Though neither did the Company uplifting him into the multiverse.

The Gordian floated on the plinth at the center of the room, slowly turning in place.

If Luke dared to walk into that slowly expanding sphere of death, he would be killed. He wished the creator of the Gordian could have left some more notes in his study, but it was clear from his notes that he was paranoid about somebody stealing his precious invention.

All the man's notes were encrypted. An encryption that took Luke all of half a day to crack. Cipher puzzles had always been a hobby of his. The author's cipher was challenging, but not impossible to break.

There were several references to a hidden workshop and an expansive library *within* the Gordian. The various spikes—pylons as the creator called them—with their odd geometric shapes on top of them, served a dual purpose.

When the expanding sphere of death touched one, they acted like a containment field and slowed down the expansion, shifting it to make it take on the trademark pattern of a Fibonacci spiral.

Four sections were already consumed by the field of the Gordian. Luke had taken too long, been too caught up in his own perfectionism of getting every rune just right in order to prevent the consumption of the early containment nodes.

The primary purpose of the nodes was not to contain the Gordian, but to allow passage *into* the Gordian.

The conduit rune he created would allow him to create a link between himself, the node, and the Gordian, giving him the ability to enter it and repair it from within.

All the documentation was very clear that the Gordian's exterior was something called a meta-projection. It looked like an infinitely

complex sphere of shifting panels and protrusions, kind of like the world's worst puzzle ball.

With the rune in his possession, Luke picked up the nearest node to the expanding spiral of death. It would mean that it wouldn't slow the expansion further, but it also gave Luke another chance to go inside and fix whatever was wrong.

The sections, Luke now understood, correlated to a Fibonacci number. Each section contained the same number of nodes as you would expect to find in the sequence.

Luke had already counted how many sections there were. They were denoted by the different geometric shapes on each pylon. As the room spiraled out toward the edges, the containment nodes grew thicker and thicker.

If he played it safe, he would take from the nodes closest to his temporary home. That way the spiral of death would be slowed continually, but then he'd have fewer chances to go inside.

Because just holding one of the nodes told him it was sacrificial. The thing was not designed to hold up indefinitely. He might be able to squeeze two trips into the Gordian from a single node, but he wasn't counting on it.

With the first 4 sections already consumed, that left the latter 4. Thankfully, due to the way the density of nodes increased logarithmically, Luke had a large supply of nodes to work with.

Hefting the strange helical node in his hand, Luke went to work binding the rune to the node. Even with 29 nodes to work with, he wasn't sure about his chances. The plethora of opportunities did not bode well.

The System was not known for being generous.