

CHAPTER 56 – VORTEX SPOILS

Though it felt like he was crawling over shards of broken glass that were *inside him*, Luke made it to the vortex just as the pool began to froth and churn once more.

Reaching up with a shadow-darkened dagger, Luke severed the tether once again. Despite his weakness, it was significantly easier. Either because of his jump in levels, or the shrinking vortex of corruption just above him.

As the tether fell like a line of heavy smoke, the waters stilled.

Luke reached a hand up into the vortex. There was something there, just barely visible. His hand burned with infinite coldness, but he was so far beyond caring that it hardly made him flinch.

He pulled back the diamond-like gem and brought it down onto the platform with all the force he could muster.

It might have looked like a diamond, but it shattered like glass.

One look at the runes on the platform told Luke what he needed to do. The next few minutes were among the most agonizing of his life as he took out his [Stele] and used own blood to fill in the etched runes.

Flux might have been the preferred method, but blood—another mana-rich substance—was also acceptable in a pinch. In Luke's current state, it was also more plentiful and readily available.

With a flash of ruddy light, the platform's runes connected in one long chain. The two cold braziers lit up with blue-purple fire and Luke felt something grab at his body and *pull* it through the floor.

Darkness collapsed around him, and Luke only realized his mistake when he was hurtling out of the Gordian's doorway back at his refuge.

He braced for the agony of hitting the ground, but found that his body was just heavily bruised and more than capable of recovering from the stumble on its own.

Surprised to find himself on his feet again, Luke patted himself, looking for any of his more serious injuries. His HP had taken a hit, but by his reckoning, it reported less than half of the damage he should have taken.

His SP and MP, however, were drained. Not just a little, but *entirely* wiped out.

Dragging himself back to the Gordian's room, Luke was surprised to find that the spiral of death had shrunk slightly, revealing a burned-out node that had slowed it down previously.

"So that's how it works," Luke mused, rubbing his sternum. He could still feel the shattered bones, but he knew that his ribs were whole once more. It made him wonder what would happen if he died within the Gordian.

And then he remembered the pile of loot.

Cursing himself, he looked for the node he used last and saw it crumpled on the floor. "Guess that means I have 28 more chances to get this thing fixed," Luke said to himself.

He turned away from the room. Despite his urgent desire to return, he had neither the SP nor MP to facilitate it.

Focusing instead of his own needs, Luke cleaned up, ate, and read for a few hours while [Trance] did the heavy lifting. When he was feeling clearheaded enough, he opened up his notifications and assigned his free points, dumping them wholesale into Willpower.

Status

Name: Luke Solus

Race: Human (F-Grade - Level 16)

Dunamis Rank: Mundane (1)

Class: Thief (Level 22)

Profession: Apprentice Runegraver (Level 10)

Vital Resources

Health Points (HP): 972/1,190

Mana Points (MP): 740/1,370

Stamina Points (SP): 380/530

Stats

Strength: 121

Dexterity: 202 (+2)

Endurance: 53

Fortitude: 51 (+6)

Vitality: 119

Perception: 109

Willpower: 74

Wisdom: 137

Arcane: 116

Fate: 94

Free Points: 0

Satisfied with the additions, Luke turned to his Thief skills.

Like every time before, all the old skills were still there: [Novice Stealth (Common)], [Lockpick (Common)], [Puncture (Common)], from Rogue, as well as [High Larceny (Uncommon)] and [Uncanny Footing (Unusual)] from Thief.

Two more skills graced this list, clearly influenced by his latest escapades. Unfortunately, they were both uncommon-rarity.

I'm beginning to rely on my Fate working too much for me, Luke thought. He would have been ecstatic to consistently be getting uncommon-rarity skills before he began to see them all the time.

[Perfect Dodge (Uncommon)]

(Thief Class Skill)

To a Thief, timing is everything. Only those that live by dancing on the razor's edge ever truly prosper. Whenever you narrowly avoid being hit by an enemy you can see, your movement speed temporarily increases. Adds a minor bonus to the influence of Dexterity, Willpower, and Perception when using this skill.

[Brazen Defiance (Uncommon)]

(Thief Class Skill)

Thieves are known as masters of disguise, subterfuge, and trickery. But there is one more type of Thief that is lesser known, if only because their lifespan tends to be measured in minutes instead of years. The brazen Thief stands tall in the face of their opponents, openly taunting them. By attacking an opponent solo and openly, you dramatically increase the quantity and quality of their loot. Adds a minor bonus to the influence of Willpower when using this skill.

More loot would always be welcome, but staying alive was even more useful. However, Luke wasn't sure how [Perfect Dodge] matched up against [Uncanny Footing]. They operated similarly, though they had entirely different outcomes.

[Uncanny Footing] increased reflex and reaction times when he could see an enemy that was attacking him. [Perfect Dodge], meanwhile, worked from the other end.

If he was attacked and managed to dodge it, he received a speed boost. It seemed like a perfect ability for launching a counterattack. His opponent wouldn't expect him to suddenly pour on the speed, and if he was attacked by multiple people, it would give him a much needed edge.

One allowed him to stay out of danger, but did nothing else, and the other didn't help him avoid getting hurt but allowed him to turn the tables on his attacker.

The choice seemed obvious to Luke, who was intent on creating a fighting style that wasn't just hit-and-run tactics. If he was going to have any hope of achieving that goal, he needed skills that supported his capacity to take the fight to his opponent instead of playing defensively the entire time.

As much as he still was interested in [High Larceny], he had yet to see anything that suggested the monsters he was currently facing had anything to steal. Perhaps he could have stolen the vortex's buff placed upon the thurskite. That would have been interesting.

It required his enemies to have a buff to steal, and he couldn't count on that. Besides, [High Larceny] would still be there next time.

Considering the meteoric rise in levels he gained from a single enemy inside the Gordian, Luke was confident he would see another skill selection before too long.

Luke turned his attentions to resting and reading more about runegraving and the System in general—though the latter was remarkably sparse—while he rested up.

Skill gained: [Perfect Dodge (Uncommon)]

Significantly healed, and with over half of his MP and SP at his disposal once more, Luke returned to the Gordian.

He appeared in the starting hallway again. He knew his way around by now and made quick work of the two trapped hallways that led into the thurskite's room.

The pile of loot was still there, and Luke found himself giving silent praise to whatever god was listening.

After a careful assessment, he found no further threats and made a beeline toward the pile of glorious, glorious loot.

He picked up the first thing that drew his attention. Two plates of metal that were surprisingly heavy for their small size. They immediately struck him as important for runegraving.

(2) [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.

I can use these in augmenting equipment, Luke thought, immediately wondering what to experiment with first. He put the two plates into a pocket on the inside of his cloak before moving onto the other loot.

He picked up a pair of trousers, surprised to find something to wear off a monster, of all things.

[Thurskite Trousers (Unusual)]

(Armor)

Glossy, sleek blue-black trousers that faintly shimmer like crushed obsidian under light. A mixture of the thurskite monster and the Gordian's power has infused these pants with a high affinity for water.

Enchantments: Reduces magical damage from Gordian monsters. Dramatically increases swimming speed. +4 Strength, +2 Perception.

At unusual rarity, they would give him a great amount of defense. He had learned while studying that even without enchantments, all equipment imparted effects empowered by their rarity tier.

Armor increased defenses, and weapons dealt damage. This was fairly obvious to Luke, but it was nice to have some extra

confirmation that even items without enchantments were still incredibly useful.

Luke wasted no time in putting the trousers on. They conformed to his body with uncanny perfection, as if they were made personally for him.

He looked down and was a little relieved at what he saw. Which was the lack of any intimately revealing details. He coughed, just in case. *At least the trousers aren't skintight.*

He breathed a sigh of relief. It was nice to finally be wearing some armor. The simple linen clothes he found in the armoire were better than being naked, but only just. As he had painfully discovered against the Thurskite, they provided zero protection.

Luke knelt, inspecting the next piece of loot. “Wow, this is good. My first real piece of armor.”

[Thurskite Scalemail (Unusual)]

(Armor)

Glossy, sleek blue-black scales that faintly shimmer like crushed obsidian adorn this lightweight chest piece. The essence of the Thurskite's powers resides within the central black jewel on the armor's sternum, moving water aside without any effort from the wearer.

Enchantments: Reduces water-based damage. Dramatically increases swimming speed. +4 Strength, +4 Willpower.

Thurskite Set Enchantment (2/2): Grants [Wave Disperse]. +6 Dexterity, +6 Willpower

Skill Gained: [Wave Disperse (Uncommon)]

(Equipment Skill)

The power of the thurskite is rooted in its powerful water alignment. By attuning yourself to the thurskite's power, you can tap into a portion of its affinity. Whenever you are damaged and you are in contact with water, you can disperse a portion of the damage into the surrounding water. Adds a minor bonus to the influence of Vitality, Willpower, and Fortitude when using this skill.

Luke inspected the equipment skill closely. He didn't know items could combine into set enchantments and grant equipment skills. It was likely that if he removed one of the pieces, he would lose access to the skill.

He wasn't curious enough at the moment to try it out. He was tired and exhausted. Yet he was glad he had come in so soon. There was no telling if the loot would have been there if he had delayed any further.

His new pieces of gear were considerably stronger than his favored cloak. He would have to figure out a way to improve its rarity. If he needed to buy another ticket from the shop once he could finally get more LP, he would.

He had hoped that by finding a dungeon *within* a dungeon, he might be able to gain LP. But it seemed it operated on a nesting order of limitations. Anything the higher order dungeon imposed seemed to go for the nested one as well.

So much for finding a loophole.

Luke looked over the rest of the glorious pile of loot. There was a kite shield, a sick-looking bow with a string of magical water instead of sinew, and a heavy pair of metal boots. None of which he wanted to use.

Most would yield high quantities of flux. Having picked what he wanted to personally use out of the loot, Luke used [Raze] to break the rest down into flux.

From there, he collected the flux into his various satchels. He had more than enough space for it all.

Satisfied with his new finds, Luke found a place to sit and complete his rest, binding the equipment to himself in the process.

The injuries he sustained were nothing that his natural HP, SP, and MP regeneration couldn't recuperate from. Adding in [Trance] made his recovery a breeze.

Luke was eager to explore another section of the Gordian. Maybe one of the paths he hadn't gone down. Hopefully not all of them ended with a super high leveled monster that could crush him to powder if he made one wrong move.

He did want to try out augmenting but figured it would be a better idea to wait until his Shadetouched Runegraver was a higher level before tackling that. He only had two [Spirit Plates]. It stood to reason that if he was more experienced, he might make a superior creation.

Luke divided his recovery time by using [Trance] and breaking down anything else of value to his [Flux Sense], converting them into multiple types of flux. There wasn't much. The thurskite had destroyed almost everything in the room, but there were still a few items he could [Raze].