

Runesmith 239

Chapter 239: Deadline.

“Please follow me, Mr. Wayland.”

Roland nodded while going through the gate of the mansion where the city lord was living. The first thing that he noticed is that the number of soldiers had increased. They were wearing the usual armor and weapons that would probably not be all that great against anything than other humans.

Most of them were holding spears with a couple also having a side blade strapped to the side. From what he could tell, Arthur was starting to expand his personal forces. The men looked to be young and their levels weren't all that high. There weren't that many people over a hundred in levels and quite a few haven't reached their first tier 2 class.

‘I guess he doesn't have the money to gather a proper battalion but this is a start...’

There was no tier 3 class holder here, without one working under a noble, they would not be taken seriously by the other aristocrats. The guards here could produce an artificial crowd to make the lord look better in the eyes of the commoners, but only with enough high-level retainers could they be called proper nobles.

This could be attained in a couple of ways, the most common one was, of course, wealth. Powerful adventurers would swarm to become proper knights as a retirement plan. In certain aspects, it was safer to become a soldier of a noble than to battle swarms of monsters.

The second one was prestige and influence, under a powerful house the soldiers and retainers would have various perks. Sometimes the potential for growth would also be enough, but Arthur Valerian lacked all of these in the eyes of the masses. Probably only with money could he sway anyone's mind.

‘I might be the highest level ‘lackey’ that he has but not like I'm loyal to him, it's only a matter of convenience for now.’

Roland wasn't sure what to do with the Arthur situation. Even though he was a hidden noble that didn't mean that he couldn't be a retainer of another one. He could easily become a knight as a son of a baron and due to having a commoner mother, this would be as far as he could go.

There was another way, if Arthur actually became a Duke or a higher status noble. Roland could be given land and a title of his own, just like his father did before him. This was the case with his father, after attaining many accolades in battle, the aristocrat that he was subservient to had given him a title as a reward.

He was somewhat convinced that if he asked Arthur, he would be glad to take him on as a proper retainer. Yet he did not want to get locked down by another person, his life as a craftsman just gave him all the freedom he wanted. Even though the work was hard, he was still working towards his own dream and not someone else's as he used to.

“I see that you have already noticed, Mr. Wayland.”

“Yes, the improvements are hard to miss, are you renovating?”

While walking towards the entrance of the mansion, Mary the silent walking maid called out to him. Besides the increase of the soldiers, he also spotted a surplus of builders. The walls were being expanded and he could even see a few watchtowers springing up here and there. This place used to be the house of the city Mayor so it did lack some defensive features that a noble would use. Assassination attempts between opposing aristocrats were quite common, so this wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

"The world is a scary place Mr. Wayland, now even more than ever with that cult on the loose, but you probably know more about that than me."

He just nodded at the statement as he wasn't quite sure about how much of the information he should disclose. If anyone found out that he had a skill to counter the cult relic, he would probably be a dead man. After seeing the lengths the cult was willing to go through in Reeka, he knew that they would quickly swarm this city to either kill him or get to the bottom of his skill. Becoming a lab rat for a strange cult wasn't something that he was willing to take. Luckily he could just shift all the responsibility to the church that was also here. Loreena was the perfect scapegoat.

"Yes, there is an important fact that the Lord needs to know."

"Then let us not delay!"

Mary clapped her hands together while smiling before increasing her pace. Roland was then guided through the busy Mansion that was going through some improvements. He could even see new side houses being set up behind the main one, perhaps with more money, Arthur could even add a separate wing to the main mansion. The big question was if he had enough funds and if he did, then where was he getting them from.

'Did he take a few bribes from the merchants or did he perhaps increase the taxes?'

There weren't that many ways of earning money in this city besides the obvious ones. The most lucrative ones were probably related to adventurers and the resources in the dungeon. Arthur would probably make a lot of money if Roland ever decided to disclose the secret mining location.

'On the other hand, he could have finally taxed those dwarven mines in the dungeon...'

Before Arthur appeared in the city, the dwarves along with the merchants were monopolizing the mines. They could easily fake the numbers without proper supervision or by bribing the officials. Roland was sure that Arthur would probably go through a purge of those officials, perhaps during his time spent in Reeka this had already taken place.

Without anyone faking the numbers more money would flow into the pocket of the governing noble. This didn't mean that he couldn't work a deal out with the dwarves that would be more lucrative for the both of them. With official records out there, he would need to send a large chunk of those earnings back to the main house. Instead, he could pocket all of the bribes for himself while still giving the other side a better deal than if they did everything by the book.

'That would explain why he got so much cash to spend and why he hadn't been that active...'

Roland knew that Arthur had locked himself in the mansion. Rumors had spread at that time, everyone thought that the bastard son of the duke was just scared to manage his territory. Yet instead he was going through all the records and probably sent a large portion of the city officials to prison.

This also put him in danger, he was withholding information about the secret mine spot. Even though he was not a city official or a proper retainer, this wouldn't matter. Everything that was in these lands belonged to the nobles. It was similar to hunting without a permit in forests belonging to aristocrats, it was something that could be punishable by death.

Roland was still willing to risk it, it was the fastest way of reaching tier 3. If the need arose to gain more money it was still possible to unload the rare ores on the black market without being discovered. Luckily in this kind of world, it was not that hard to commit tax evasion. There was no paper trails leading to his home and the thieves' guilds would take care of the selling.

"Please wait a moment."

Finally, they had arrived at Arthur's main office, this was the first time for him here and the usual two sentry knights were guarding it. Previously he only came across the city lord at the auction house but these two always followed after him. Their levels weren't all that high compared to him but if the Lord actually needed protection he did not know. Like most nobles in high places, he wore an artifact that jumbled up his identification skill.

"Come in, the Lord is expecting you."

"Excuse me then."

After entering through the door he was greeted by a large desk that resembled the one at the adventurers guild. The person sitting behind it was a lot smaller though, his aura of nobility was clearly shining through. Bookshelves with thick books and documents were everywhere, he could even see some of them stacked on top of chairs. The man was clearly working hard and still going through the records.

"Mr. Wayland, please take a seat, I'm sure you know why I requested your presence today."

"It's about Reeka, isn't it?"

"I'm glad that we are on the same page, would you be so kind to describe the events that transpired in that city, please don't leave any details out!"

Arthur was not beating around the bush, the work seemed to only be piling on so he needed Roland to quickly give him a recount of what had happened. Normally such information could actually be sold for some coin but he also needed to show some respect to his new landlord. There was no reason to push his buttons just to gain a few gold coins that he could earn by inscribing a few runes in five minutes.

"Very well, but this could take a while to explain... and also..."

"Mr. Wayland?"

"Sorry my lord, you must understand that this information concerns the Abyssal Cult and one of their most well-guarded secrets... are you aware of the consequences of this information ever leaking?"

In all honesty, Roland was worried about giving away the secret. Luckily the rumors spread by everyone would cloak the people with the true scoop. Yet if the Abyssal Cult pinpointed a rumor about their secret relic being spread from this city, it would put a bullseye on everyone.

“Hm, now you really got me interested in this Mr. Wayland but worry not, whatever is said here will not leave this room, you have my word for it.”

“Very well then, but this could take a while.”

“Mary, prepare some tea and some snacks!”

“As you wish my Lord.”

Roland sat himself down before the lord while the maid started preparing the tea. There was a cart with everything required for tea brewing on the side. The kettle could be activated by mana to boil the tea by a simple heating rune. Thus while his beverage was being made he began to tell his story while also keeping some facts of it to himself.

“I see that you already knew that I had gone on a guild mission towards Reeka. Besides a few bandits and monsters on the way, it was mostly uneventful, that is until we reached a strange village...”

He continued to tell his story while twisting some facts. Instead of presenting himself as the hero of the hour, he shifted the glory onto the golden order member that helped them defeat the abomination that was created from the cultist's suicide. Roland focused more on the brain parasites and how the city had been infected instead of how he managed to survive, at the end Arthur was left speechless and with quite a frown.

“A magical artifact that puts people under an illusion and monster possession...”

“My Lord...”

Arthur mumbled to himself while Mary was visibly shaken. He didn't blame the two, they were just informed that anyone in this city could be infected and turned into a strange tentacle monster.

“I'm fine Mary, I just didn't think it was this dire of a situation, can these... Abyssal Larvae, only be removed by Solarian church clerics?”

“The creature has an adverse reaction to divine spells, I think priests from other non-evil gods should be fine too but there might be another method...”

“This method is?”

“Do you perhaps know what an empyrean crystal is?”

“The ones produced by the priests?”

“The same.”

It didn't take Arthur long to realize what Roland was proposing.

“Yes, those crystals are used to create divine magical weapons. But Mr. Wayland, would creating such a weapon do us any good? The cost themselves would be quite fierce...”

“I do not intend to make anything as grand as a weapon, I was thinking of something more compact, this devices purpose would not be to remove the creatures, it's enough if we leave that to the clerics.”

“Then what would it be good for?”

“It would help us to detect the creatures, I have observed a change in the host of these parasites. If they are exposed to even light divine mana they will be affected by noticeable symptoms. My proposition is simple, we place this device at several checkpoints in the city and have the citizens be exposed to this mana, the ones that show signs of corruption will then be taken to the church for proper treatment.”

“Hm, that could work...”

This was Roland’s sales pitch for the crisis at hand. If he gained access to some empyrean crystals along with some divine runes, then it would be possible to design a magical apparatus of this kind. This would also aid him in developing proper divine runes and perhaps allow him to somehow emulate this different source of energy.

“How long do you need Mr. Wayland?”

“I’m not sure, first I need to get the correct materials then I will need to make a schematic, I also require some divine weapon or armor piece for examination...”

“Could you make it within a week if you had them?”

“A week might be a little...”

Before Roland could continue Arthur raised his hand to stop him. The noble was clearly listening to all of it and quickly turned to Mary.

“Mary, take Mr. Wayland to our storage, I think we should have a few of those empyrean crystals lying around, you also required something with a divine rune? There should be a few of those in our auction house as well, isn’t that right Mary?”

“You are correct, my Lord. I will be sure to give Mr. Wayland everything that he needs.”

“Great, I will be expecting good news from you Mr. Wayland. If you require aid from the Church for your research, please contact Mary, she will help organize things.”

“I, uh... My Lord? I’m not sure that I can make it in a we...”

“Time is of the essence Mr. Wayland. I will do my part and prepare these checkpoints and also contact the local Church. I’m sure rumors of these creatures will be spreading soon and we must preserve the piece. Now then, we all have a lot of work to do!”

It was of utmost importance to not paint a grim picture to the public, at least not yet. If they had a solution for the problem before people started asking questions, then they would have one less battle to fight. If the city became chaotic it would affect all of its bottom lines. People that were backed into a corner didn’t make the most logical decisions and that was something Arthur clearly wanted to avoid.

‘This bastard...’

Roland was forced to go outside and tag behind Mary that was rushing him back to the auction house. While it was his idea to create the divine energy devices he didn’t expect the lord to have all of the materials ready. He had planned to create it within a month while also doing research on Kassia’s healing arts.

While he wanted to help the people from the city out, his plan was driven by his own home that he wanted to outfit with the divine energy devices. They would probably protect him from any afflicted and perhaps even work against proper members of the cult.

“Here we are Mr. Wayland, please pick out the items that you need!”

Soon they found themselves in a storage facility under the auction house. There he saw various objects that had not yet been auctioned off.

‘I won’t be sleeping much for this entire week, will I?’

He wanted to curse but in reality, the situation required his expertise. The world around him was becoming a lot more dangerous and the sooner he built the countermeasures, the faster he would be able to relax.

Chapter 240: Time to get to work.

‘Should I take more?’

“Are you finished Mr. Wayland?”

“Ah, give me a minute...”

Roland had been going around the auction house storage facility. It reminded him of the last tier 2 class change quest that he had been through not so long ago. There was a lot of useless clutter but some of the items would hasten his research.

At this very moment, he was looking at a simple orb that looked like a giant pearl. When injecting it with his mana the orb started giving out a radiant glow. For the uneducated eye, this item would look like a low-quality magical lamp but he could recognize what it truly was.

‘An empyrean crystal must be inside of this thing, this isn’t just a yellow light, the mana pattern is similar to a healing spell.’

There was a certain warmth to this spell that was different from a regular heating spell. It was a phenomenon that was difficult to discern but thanks to his various mana-sensing skills, Roland was able to see through it.

Orb of mending light

Lesser Mending Rune, Lesser Light Rune.

‘So it had two different runes on in, the craftsmanship isn’t too great... the Runesmith was unable to combine both of the structures into one to lower the mana expenditure. These people really like to stick to their old schematics...’

On multiple occasions, he had seen magical items be inscribed in this way. He was always reminded of how most magical craftsmen stuck to the old trusted methods. It was quite rare to see something unique being made. The usual reason was either fear of failure or the astronomical costs of doing proper research to improve on an older design.

Then there was also the problem of limited mana reserves. Most craftsmen still had to make a living by creating various artifacts. After a full day of work, it was normal for them to be tired. Thus if they reached a point where they could sustain their lifestyle they would choose to take it easy.

At least that was Roland's point of view, there also existed idiots like him that would risk their health just to make a tiny improvement on an existing rune. Even in this case, if a person combined the two runes into a Lesser Mending Light Rune, the improvement would be more than five percent. In the case of a tiny rune like this, the mana expenditure wouldn't matter that much. Only when the runes became grander and grander, did that five percent become a serious advantage and a worthwhile endeavor.

"I'll be taking this one if that's alright with you?"

"I'll note it down in the book Mr. Wayland."

Mary nodded while writing something into the large ledger that was on the side. Everything that he took out of here would be written down, if he would be later charged for the items if they were destroyed he wasn't sure.

'The mending spell is the lowest healing spell that even a tier 1 cleric can perform, will this be enough to cause an adverse reaction from a parasite? It's best if I get more runic variants for research...'

There wasn't really much to work with here, they were still in a developing town. After going through the whole place he ended up with two other items besides the mending orb. This together with some separate empyrean crystals would have to be enough to create his new contraption.

'There really aren't that many divine artifacts with actual runes, most of them are just regular enchantments...'

Talisman of Faith

Shield of Faith Enchantment

Mace of Lesser Smite

Lesser Smite Evil Rune

Luckily he had a skill that could see through other spell languages. With it, he would be able to get the runic versions out of enchanted weapons. Yet considering that it had a massive drawback, he still decided to go with the few runic variants that were here.

'I should get home and test these out...'

"This will be enough."

"Are you sure Mr. Wayland? If you require anything else, please look for me at the mansion and I will gladly grant you access to the storage facility."

Mary just smiled at him while continuing to note down the items that he took. Roland still wasn't sure what he thought about this woman. Each time that he turned his back to her, it was as if something bad could happen. She gave him the vibe of some thieves guild members that he bumped into at the black market.

'She is being awfully nice but that might be just an act...'

It was clear that the woman was dangerous and not to be underestimated. He felt that he would have a better chance of taking out the two armored knights that protected Arthur than this one maid. There were rumors of butlers and maids being trained fighters or retired adventurers. They acted as both servants and bodyguards for nobles, sometimes sticking with them from a young age.

"Sorry for making you wait, let's go back..."

"..."

On the outside, he encountered a rather floppy ruby wolf. Agni was forced to remain chained to a post like a dog waiting for its owner at a supermarket. He was visibly unamused for being forced to remain in one spot for this long.

"I'll see you in a week then Mr. Wayland, please contact me through the usual means if any problems arise."

Mary covered her mouth while looking at the large tamed monster being overdramatic. Luckily for Roland, the moment he took the doggy leash into his hands Agni was more than willing to move from the spot he was previously in.

"Stop acting like a little kid Agni, after we'll out of the city I'll remove that muzzle."

"Awoo!"

After he mentioned the device that was making his muzzle itch being removed, Agni started pulling him towards the exit. Night had already fallen on the city and some guards started patrolling. Armand, Lobelia, and Elodia were both safe from the cult influence and spent the night at the orphanage. Yet, one person from the city had already been infected. Being that it had happened to a person from the thieves guild, it could have happened anywhere.

'Is this a coincidence or part of their protocol?'

Jasper was part of the guild and this made him think of the one in Reeka. There he witnessed a secret passage that probably went to the cult's secret lair. There was a chance that the same thing was happening here, the cult might already be here. If the cult possessed a strategy of creating underground lairs, infecting thieves that created a foothold in developing cities would be part of the course.

Albrook's dungeon could have been enough reason to invest in the takeover. Many adventurers wandered through this place and would be perfect hosts for their monsters. Roland was unsure what the cult's true purpose was or what was the deciding feature of the city they took over.

There was a possibility that they started out whenever a promising area appeared. Albrook's structure was still growing, nothing was set in stone. It would be much easier to grasp a foothold during this time of development than five years after everything was formed.

'The underground tunnels and the thieves guild are a good smoke screen for the cult, it wouldn't be a problem to falsify an identity there and build more tunnels...'

The guild of thieves would defend their assets. They would bribe the officials or use assassination to protect the underground black market. This would allow any cultists to have a safe haven without the need to spend any resources. Even without a mind-affecting relic, they could probably infect people through more conventional means. 'Even if that's true and they are here, they will probably hide in the shadows for a while. They might even retreat to areas that are dominated by them to conserve their forces.'

With the high concentration of paladins in the area it would be unwise for the cultists to continue with their usual antics. Everyone had become aware of them, this also included the thieves guild that a member was confirmed to be afflicted by an abyssal larvae. He wouldn't be surprised if the guild master turned the tunnels upside down to search for a potential culprit.

"Woof!"

His contemplations were interrupted by a maddened Agni. Both of them were now outside of the city gates but the ruby wolf was still muzzled. Roland just gave out a sigh while smiling weakly afterward. Soon Agni was freed of the dreaded contraption that was placed on his snout. This was all signaled by a large sneeze he performed when it came down.

"Hey, stop running around, I'm not going to put it on you again."

Agni bolted away as if he had spent years in wolf prison. From a distance, he glared at the metal muzzle that was being held in Roland's hand. It was quickly placed in a spatial bag so that Agni could calm down, only after it was gone did he slowly trot back to his master's side.

"See it's gone."

"Awroof!"

After smelling the air for a moment Agni was back to his old self. His tail started swinging around as the two finally headed back to the workshop. Thanks to this distraction Roland's mind went back to the problem at hand, he needed to create a device that would bathe a small area in divine energy. He had been at the church before and could somewhat ascertain the amount of this divine mana that was floating there.

"It feels like I've been gone for months..."

Not even a full month had passed since he had left Albrook. He wanted to do nothing more than to go to sleep for at least a week but thanks to the cult and the city lord, it was impossible. The nap that he took on the ship and at the port town would need to be enough.

"She's been keeping the place clean."

A smile appeared on his usually grumpy-looking face. The whole house was spotless, not a speck of dust could be seen and there was even food inside his runic refrigerator. After going through mostly dried meat it didn't take him long to grab some leftover stew. Thanks to the runic stove it wasn't hard to warm it up and then feast on it.

It only took him a few minutes to devour a massive amount of food. Regretfully even if he wanted to toss himself into the bathtub and then sleep everything off, there was more work to be done. After finishing the quick meal and leaving Agni to run rampant in the backyard he descended to his workshop.

“Everything seems to be in order.”

The large metal door slid open after he was identified. On the inside, he was greeted by the sound of mechanical movement. It was one of his spider golems that was hanging from the ceiling and prepared to blast anyone that was not allowed to get into his workshop.

“That reminds me...”

When looking at the golem he started getting mad. He had lost two of such units during the village battle and was only left with scrap metal. This mission was part of his rank-up test so he received no rewards to cover his losses. It was an all-around net loss and most of the money he took along for the trip was now gone. If he wasn't withholding information about the dungeon mine he would have probably filed a complaint.

Soon he was going around the place to check if Bernir didn't cause any unwanted explosions. All of his smithing hammers and runic tools were there, nothing eventful seemed to have happened. Everything was in good condition and he could start working whenever he decided to.

“First I need to draw up the schematics of these runes.”

Before starting his work Roland was sure to give his enhanced radar system a look. A whole kilometer around his house could be mapped thanks to him burying signal extending equipment. All humans, monsters, and magical beings would be detected by this system without him needing to use his own mana.

If an unannounced guest showed up he would be informed by an alarm. With how the underground workshop was soundproof anyone outside would not be aware of their position being discovered. There were several ways this system could detect any intruders and it included movement.

Quickly his hand started moving the pen around the large piece of parchment. Within a couple of minutes, he had the improved version of the mending rune up on the board. Next to it, he placed the more complex smite rune that would probably be quite effective against evil chaotic beings like the ones the cultists used.

“This Talisman of Faith can wait for later...”

He didn't want to risk getting a headache right the moment he started his work. For the time being, he focused on the mace and the orb. Both of these items were in possession of divine runes but both worked differently. When he activated the orb it started to give up a warm glow that was able to slowly mend small wounds like shallow cuts.

There didn't seem to be a limit to how much healing this item could output. If it was given mana it just activated and the secondary power source that was on the inside took care of the second part of the equation. Only with the help of the empyrean crystal that was on the inside could this artifact function.

Then there was the larger mace that was made of a deep steel alloy. It wasn't anything special and it was also able to activate the spell effect when he injected his mana into it. There was one big difference though, there was no empyrean crystal or any other outer source of divine energy. This weapon had a limited amount of charges that would quickly get drained the more he used it.

"It has only twenty charges and I already used up one..."

This was an ingenious way of retaining clients. The person getting this weapon would be forced to visit the church to supply more charges. It was a constant stream of revenue that would never dry up until the weapon broke down for other reasons.

'Perhaps I should make a deal with the Sister... would she be fine with a seventy-thirty split?'

While thinking about a brand new way of earning money he placed the mace to the side. This rune that was meant for smiting evil creatures was a bit more complex than the mending rune. Now with both of the schematics on his board, he could start analyzing them in more detail.

Without needing much time he could already spot a lot of similarities to other runes. The spell effect on the mace just surrounded it by a radiant glow of divine energy. After striking something this energy would be dispersed to the surroundings, similar to a small explosion from an explosion rune.

'The only problematic part is this holy energy that must be directly injected into the runic structure from another source, either a charge or a more direct way.'

Even without performing a test, Roland was convinced that he could create a working rune like this. This could only be achieved by substituting the divine energy with regular mana, the effect would probably be a similar small explosion of blue mana instead of the radiant divine one that this mace was filled with.

'Is there a way to emulate this type of energy and forgo the empyrean crystals altogether?'

This was his true purpose for decrypting these runes but he was not that versed in the types of mana or spiritual energies that floated around this world. Thus for the time being he decided to put this thought on hold. There was no time to waste here, the empyrean crystals were provided for him so he could ignore his lack of understanding in that part of the project.

sigh

"I guess I should make this before we get overrun by tentacle monsters..."

The difficult part of this project was not actually combining the runes to form a proper spell. It was to refine it enough to only use up the faintest of divine energy. Even though the crystals could be provided by the church, it was a finite resource. Tweaking the area of effect spell to be enough to have the infected exhibit clear symptoms would be the hard part.