

Runesmith 276

Chapter 276: Time to spill the beans?

"Halt! Identify yourself."

"It's me, Wayland."

"The Runesmith? What are you doing outside of the wall, didn't you hear the city bell?"

"I was a bit busy... can you open the gate? The city Lord wants to speak with me."

Roland had arrived at Albrook, the usual road that was filled with merchants and adventurers was emptied out and the large gates were closed. The first thing he noticed when getting closer was the piles of white bones everywhere. There were no soldiers patrolling outside which could have been due to his direct message to Arthur about the existence of tier 3 monsters outside.

It looked like some people had been working on these bones as they were getting piled up in several locations. The monster materials could still be used so it was understandable to take this in to pay for the damages that the city sustained. The walls and the main gate were riddled with claw marks from the sharp skeletal fingers. They had clearly tried to scale the walls but had been unsuccessful.

'The turrets need a bit of servicing.'

These defensive structures that fired off concentrated mana bolts had an expiration date. They were enough to contend with a few hours of continued assault but if it started taking days or weeks they would become too damaged to function. This could of course be alleviated by building them with better materials or having a runesmith nearby to repair the damaged runic traces. This would probably fall to him but before he began this job he needed to visit the Lord.

"Open the gate!"

The guard went away for a moment to ask for permission and another one shouted to grant him passage. The gate here consisted of two slabs of metal that resembled a door. When opening he could hear the massive construction creaking which probably meant that the hinges needed some more grease.

They left him enough room to slip through it before shutting them instantly. Everyone was clearly on high alert and when he was on the inside all eyes were on him. Above him there were actual soldiers prepared to dump magical bombs onto his head. In his world, they used hot oil or something similar. In a world filled with magical traps, they could just throw down some magical scrolls instead.

'They turned on the divine scanner.'

When walking through he felt the flow of divine mana in this place. He was the one that made these items but even though they gave off holy energies they would not be concentrated enough to kill a tier 2 skeleton. These were only enough to affect tiny creatures like the abyssal worms but for more powerful undead some more juice would be needed.

At the end of the road, there was a massive iron gate that needed to be hoisted up. The sharp bolts it was made of dug into the earth and would be the last part of the defense. The spaces between this gate

were great for poking spears through but this approach would be less effective against skeletal monsters. Instead, it would be more worthwhile to have a priest cast some kind of spell to take care of them, perhaps dumping copious amounts of holy water on them could also do the trick.

“Wayland, the Lord will see you now.”

When on the other side he was greeted by one of the knights that the city lord arrived with. Normally they came together but this time around only Sir Gareth greeted him. The other one could have been either at Arthur’s side or perhaps he was giving orders to the soldiers. This city was a bit understaffed and this man had probably gone through the knight academy just like his brother did. He must have been part of some lesser family if he was delegated to the 5th son with no actual power.

He noticed quickly that they weren’t going to the mansion but toward the main guard tower. This one was situated on the other end of the city in the southwest corner. The construction of this one had been finished first while the three others that made up the four corners of Albrook haven’t quite been done.

The northern gate was the one that he usually went through and the one that he arrived through today. On the sides were two large towers and the walls stretched out to them and towards the south. Albrook didn’t have any natural defenses like large mountains or large bodies of water. It had to be sealed up from all sides by large walls and guard towers.

These weren’t just meant as lookouts, there was enough space in them for some of the guards to live in and one of them was a designated prison for some special prisoners. Then another one had a whole armory that had not yet been assembled. This was the southeastern one where he also visited to deliver some of his goods. Probably if he didn’t have his own workshop then this would be his place of employment after signing up with Arthur Valerian.

Further south past the gate was Arthurs's mansion which was in the process of being walled up from all sides. In the future, it would be turned into a proper castle or perhaps a full-fledged fortress where the lord could reside. For the time being it was actually better for him to seek shelter in the guard tower that had better defenses.

‘They really did clean out the place, the roads are all empty.’

While going through the streets he could see people peeking out from their windows to look at what was happening. Most of the people there were either city guards or adventurers. The former were probably forcefully conscripted by the noble. Closing down the city like this wouldn’t allow them to just leave. While they wouldn’t be directly forced to defend the citizens they could be given demerits by the guild if they were of silver rank and up.

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Though normally giving a hefty reward was enough to interest the adventurers in the city defense. They were all going against monsters and not an enemy kingdom, This was what the guild was made for and it would look bad on them if their guild members just fled at a point like this.

‘I bet they are forming parties to take back the dungeon but first, they’ll wait for the backup to arrive from the main city. The big question here is, how long will that take?’

What they didn't know was what the Lich was up to. The dungeon break had happened but it went against the old records. What usually happened was a burst of monsters with no end to them. The monsters spread out in all directions and attacked everything they saw, they didn't just send a forward force and then go back to their dungeon.

This was indeed a unique occurrence that needed more looking into and he kind of knew why this actually happened. On the surface, it looked like a dungeon break but it wasn't one. Instead, one monster had become sentient and was quickly building up an army. The sooner they descended into the dungeon the better. The more they waited the more skeletal monsters would be created.

'But if that Lich stays in the dungeon then it's better to wait for the platinum ranks instead, as long as the city can defend itself it will be better to wait it out.'

He was not sure what to do, there were a few ways of taking care of this situation but they would need a large force and the help of the guild master to lead them. Roland would probably need to join the early combatants as his magical canon and array of spells were capable of killing the tier 3 monsters. But only with a component frontline fighter would he have enough time for his spells to charge up.

"Please follow me."

After nodding he finally arrived at the guard tower. He had never been to this place that had been built from scratch. It was a bit over thirty meters tall and had winding stairs that led to the guard captain's quarters. From the outside, a person could see tinted windows on the top floor and that area was where he was going.

During his walk, he also arrived at the middle floor which connected with a large wall. Each other tower could be traveled on foot when following the walls and had an iron gate that could be lowered to block the path as well. When he arrived on the top floor there was a small ladder that led to a lookout spot and another closed door that had Arthur's other knight guarding it.

'I guess this is it...'

The buildup of butterflies in his stomach was starting to bother him but with the help of his stress resistance skill, it was manageable. The man that could decide his life was there, perhaps coming clean about the Lich wasn't the best idea. It was likely that everyone would point their fingers at him even if it was a random chance that the Lich was able to get over to the other dungeon. He was partially responsible for the whole debacle, if the reigning city lord decided that all the responsibility lay on his shoulders, then getting thrown in prison or to the gallows would be his fate.

"Excuse me."

"Welcome Mr. Wayland, please take a seat."

The knight that was standing at the door opened it for him and on the inside, he saw the usual Maid and noble combo. Just as usual the two guard knights retreated to the outside while he was left alone with the city lord. From his point of view, this was somewhat of a risky maneuver. Roland was wearing his side armor with magical runic capabilities. He had left his weapons outside but a fast runic spell could incinerate the entire room quite fast.

It was clear that they would not try to capture him considering that there wasn't enough manpower available. That was the case or either the guild master was waiting somewhere to jump him but it didn't seem so. The windows on the sides were potential escape routes as he did have some spells that could cushion him from a thirty-meter fall.

After getting his escape route in a place he decided to take a seat in front of the city lord. There didn't seem to be any traps or anti-magic devices that could hinder him in any way. Arthur was probably incapable of procuring such a pricey treasure but perhaps he was overthinking things.

"Troubling times we live in, don't you think so as well, Mr. Wayland?"

"I guess?"

"Who could have expected a Lich to suddenly appear in the dungeon and cause a dungeon break."

The moment he sat down Arthur asked him a question that he answered. It was indeed quite the peculiar mess, even though he was the one that unearthed the other dungeon that the Lich escaped was not something that should have happened. Even now he was unable to comprehend how this had happened, it didn't make sense after seeing it or the other tier 3 monsters not being able to get to his side of the dungeon.

Then after months of grinding it finally happened without any gradual buildup at all. If he had at least seen or noticed some clues that the monster could potentially get out, he would have stopped himself from using that spot for leveling up. After working for twenty hours a day he kind of put himself in a trance. Getting his tier 3 class and enough money to support his workshop was the only thing that he thought and perhaps the reason that all of this happened.

"I..."

Roland wanted to speak about what had truly happened but he stopped himself from speaking. At first, he wanted to lie or at least deflect the allegations but perhaps there was another way. Arthur as of this day had been very helpful to his cause. The problem with the union was cleared up by him, and so was the drama with the orphanage. He had been given more by this noble than by others and he didn't want to be ungrateful.

"Mary, could you bring Mr. Wayland some tea, think he seems to be a bit parched."

"Of course, Lord Arthur."

"I mean, the special tea..."

Mary went over to the neatly placed cart with refreshments that was here for some reason but was told to fetch something else by Arthur. The woman's gaze met with the lord's and it seemed that he was trying to get a point across. Soon she just nodded and made her way out of the office.

'She never left me alone with him before, what are they up to?'

This was a strange turn of events. He had known almost from day one that Mary was some kind of trained bodyguard. There was no one incident where she didn't keep an eye out for him. Then if she was missing he would see the two guards there instead. There was not an occasion where he was left alone

with the young man before, Arthur was up to something. Was he trying to keep something from the maid while speaking to him? But why.

“Wayland, that’s an interesting name but it isn’t your real name, now is it?”

“What do you mean, my Lord...”

His heart skipped a beat as after Mary removed herself Arthur dropped a bomb on him. Was he aware of his true name and that he was part of the Arden household? In the world of nobles, the two wouldn’t be that far apart but Roland would be below on the social ladder. He still came from a Baron house while the other was from a Duke one.

“You don’t need to call me that, or perhaps you do if you came from a lesser knight house? Perhaps a fallen aristocrat that lost their war of succession?”

“I don’t really know what you are trying to imply here...”

“Please, we both know that you are not a commoner, the way you conduct yourself isn’t very common.”

Arthur smiled at the little pun that he made while Roland continued to just get more nervous. What was this person trying to do, did he know about his father, or was this about something else? Even if he knew everything, what was the point of all this? It wasn’t as if a noble couldn’t moonlight as a Runesmith.

“Wayland if that is your name, I think you might be misunderstanding my intentions, I do not wish to corner you with anything or delve into your let’s say... unique circumstances. The mine that you withheld information about isn’t a problem nor are the secret tunnels but if you want me to protect you, then you have to tell me the truth.”

It seemed that word about the secret mine had reached Arthur’s ears just as Roland expected. The information he received was probably through the dwarven union to which Wedamir ratted him out. Perhaps it was before he managed to save them from the Lich but it didn’t really matter. If he held his mouth shut then perhaps he could sweep it under the rug just as he intended.

“... you and I aren’t that different, I understand why you might be doing this...”

‘What is this guy talking about...’

The conversation started moving in a strange direction. It was as if Arthur wanted to become buddies with him and bond over being fallen nobles or bastards. Perhaps he misunderstood his entire situation as Roland didn’t really see himself as an aristocrat and actually didn’t want to have anything to do with them. His mannerisms were somewhat ingrained into him by the body he occupied and another five years of looking at proper nobles.

“Okay... please stop... and you can tell that maid that I know that she is behind that window...”

“Uh...”

Roland had enough of this, the whole conversation was unexpected and Arthur had gotten the wrong idea about him. Then there was Mary that after going out had probably used the ladder outside to sneak over to one of the tinted windows. There she waited probably to burst in if her lord needed help.

“Haha...Mary... I told you that it wouldn't work, just come in.”

Arthur called out while weakly laughing like a kid that was caught doing a prank. The maid managed to open the window rather quickly and contorted her body in an interesting way to get in.

Though this charade played out, Roland didn't really feel angry. If he was against any normal noble then he would have probably been carried off into a prison cell for questioning. This was actually more what he had expected but there was no shouting, only a bad attempt of convincing him to talk.

“My Lord.”

Mary bowed before Arthur as an apology. For some reason, Roland believed that this might have been the Maid's idea and that Arthur actually wanted to have a more heartfelt conversation. Roland's true age was almost double Arthur's, perhaps the young man was actually trying to find a kindred spirit but he couldn't dismiss the reverse. However, if he was planning to throw them into prison then perhaps meeting at the prison tower would have been a better idea.

Now he had to choose, what should he say? Arthur already knew about the mine which he expected. Should he stick to the premade script and deny most of his involvement or was there another option waiting for him? Could telling more of the truth to this young man be a better choice? If he was truly looking for proper allies then he could become one where keeping secrets wouldn't be needed...

Chapter 277: New Contract.

The room was silent, and all eyes were on the man sitting in front of a desk. Arthur Valerian and his maid Mary were looking with a lot of interest towards Roland. He on the other hand wasn't sure how much truth he should disclose. The miners already revealed parts of the fact. While he didn't see them interacting with Arthur there was enough time for both parties to speak with each other.

‘They probably had a meeting with him after returning to the city. Wouldn't be strange if that Wedamir character talked about everything...’

Wedamir, the dwarf he saved from dying, had seen both his mine and the secret tunnel leading to the upper levels. Then there was of course Jasmine the archer lady that was with that party. She didn't see the other tunnel but had been in the one leading out of the mine. If he tried to deny the part about the mines and secret passageways Arthur would obviously know that it was a lie.

‘There isn't really a reason to catch me in a lie though, they should have already had all the information they need. I don't think they even suspect any foul play here, they must think the Lich was just some kind of random spawn or perhaps a triggered trap...’

Roland didn't believe that anyone actually knew about the existence of the other dungeon. It was already rare enough for two dungeons to connect with each other. That a monster made it out of it was not something that had been ever documented. At least not in the literature that he had gone through, perhaps some findings were kept away from the lesser nobles like his house and the public. This was not likely as it would endanger adventurers which the guild would probably not allow.

‘But what is his end game here, he is either being very naive or desperate...’

Arthur was being friendly for no reason and this was bothering him. Normally he should have been surrounded by ten guards with spears pointing at his throat. The city lord was putting himself in potential danger by allowing Roland in this room. Even if Mary was watching him from outside it wouldn't take much to set off a spell to explode this entire room. They had to know what he was capable of by now, which made this scene strange.

'Does he really need me to trust him this much?'

A desperate noble that was trying to find allies is how Arthur seemed to him. Could this little noble here be that desperate to need a sketchy runesmith with a shaky background? Could he instead just be too friendly for his own good and seeking to befriend someone that could come from a similar background?

'The first option is more likely, the question is... what will he do after achieving his goal?'

This was the big question, if Roland fully joined Arthur's camp then he would inexplicably be putting himself in line of danger. The Valerian household, just like many other noble houses, took the war for succession very seriously. If he truly affiliated himself with Arthur then perhaps down the line he would need to confront his elder brothers and their retainers.

'Think my dear father would lay an egg if he found out that I became a retainer of the opposite noble faction.'

Wentworth Arden was a diehard fanboy of the royal family. While that faction was strong it wasn't the only one around, many powerful old aristocrats formed a separate side to balance things out. They had their place, they needed to watch for an incompetent king and remove them to safeguard the kingdom's safety. Both sides kept themselves on their toes which contributed to strengthening the entire kingdom. This however didn't mean that each side didn't want to rule without any limit.

'I guess some of the truth will come out eventually if the dwarves start mining, sooner or later they will discover the entrance to the other dungeon...'

Roland knew this already, even if he withheld information now and denied everything it would eventually come to bite him. This wouldn't be a problem if he decided to ditch just like he did before. Perhaps he could visit one of the neighboring countries to seek shelter there. For someone that was on the cusp of breaking into tier 3 it would be that hard.

There was a small problem however, the roots that he cultivated in this city were already deep. He did not really want to restart everything from scratch each time a problem arose. Perhaps in the past there was no other option but now it was different. His level and knowledge had grown enough to rise to this occasion. Even when going against the cultists he was not powerless anymore. There was now a chance for him to stem the tide and get through this without losing much in exchange.

"Do you have some paper or parchment that can be infused with mana?"

"I'm not sure but that can be arranged? Do you mean to make a..."

Finally, Roland spoke up after remaining silent for several seconds. While he wanted to believe in Arthur and his gang he needed some reassurance. If things went badly there needed to be something that he could get him on. To test the young noble's sincerity or desperation he needed a binding contract.

“Yes, a magical contract, if we come to an agreement I don’t mind telling you everything.”

“I see... Runesmiths do have the skills for that...”

It was well known that runesmith classes had to take the mana scribe class to progress. This made things a lot easier as no other person besides who was in this room would need to know about what was in the contract. Two identical copies just needed to be made and given to each side.

Roland wasn’t sure how these contracts actually worked but they bound people on some kind of higher level. If someone tried getting around the contract in underhanded ways it would trigger the curse effect. Even if the paper it was written down was destroyed the contract would persist. The consensus was that the contracts were overseen by a divine being of some sort. Thus the only way of going around them was through divine intervention which wasn’t that easy to come by.

“Yes, that won’t be a problem but do you wish to go through with it, even when the punishment will be severe?”

“Severe? What do you wish to put us under if we break the agreement?”

All contracts came equipped with some kind of magical deterrent which people either referred to as curses or debuffs. This status could be something mild as a tiny drop in stats or something severe like persisting blindness. While Roland didn’t want to go too extreme he needed to test Arthur’s sincerity. If he agreed to a curse effect that prevented him from rising above his brothers, then he could probably be trusted.

“There is one that I can do at my current level...”

“Deterioration of mind and flesh.”

“My Lord, you must not agree to this sort of contract, how could you even propose something like this?”

“Calm down Mary, give me some time to think.”

The detrimental effect that he was proposing was a proper high-level curse. Normally it could be only used by dark magicians or people like the abyssal cultists. For some reason, a lot of prerequisites could be ignored by signing a contract. It was like a loophole that was made to help people take these contracts seriously.

Just like the name implied, the deterioration of mind and flesh did as it was described. It would turn a person into something that looked more like a ghoul than human. Their hair would fall out and their body would be given a pungent smell. This wasn’t all, with time the person would suffer a massive drop in intelligence and willpower.

To someone like Arthur that needed his wits and charms to get further in his life, it would be a disaster. He would no longer be able to go to any noble parties or talk to influential merchants. His charisma would drop below ten and no one would be able to stand his presence. For someone that needed to conserve their public image, it would truly be terrible.

“That’s quite the dastardly contract curse you thought up Wayland... but doesn’t that particular one have tremendous requirements to scribe down and you are saying that you are capable of producing such a contract?”

Arthur seemed rather intrigued than angered by the proposal while Mary was giving him the death glare. Deterioration of mind and flesh put a strain on the scribe creating a contract that could only be alleviated by pure stats. It was clear that whoever was able to put a powerful hex like that onto paper had to have superior numbers on their side. It was almost a confession of him pronouncing that he had been hiding his true level from the start.

“Yes, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

He replied with confidence as if he was some kind of hidden expert that was hiding out in the open. In actuality he wasn’t sure if the other party would go through it, the curse was also meant to frighten Arthur to back off. This would give him an excuse to not come forward with the truth or at least withhold some things.

‘He’ll probably not take the deal, I’ll have to think about a way to explain how that Lich appeared. Maybe telling them that I sprung some kind of trap when I found the entrance to that other dungeon will be enough? It’s probably more believable than telling them that it just somehow walked out of it when I wasn’t looking.’

“Fine, I’ll take you up on the offer but don’t think that you’ll come out in one piece either, Mary bring over the magical parchment and bring me my pen, I’ll need to go through a few drafts with Mr. Wayland before we decide on the contract.”

“My Lord, are you sure you want to do this? Please think this over, what if...”

“I have been thinking things over for years, now is not the time for that, we must act before this city gets overrun. Don’t worry, I don’t intend to sign a one-sided contract either.”

Arthur had some kind of glint in his eye that reminded him of his old boss from Edalguard. This man had probably studied a lot in the island capitol before coming here while Roland had more of an unorthodox upbringing. If the contract was actually going to be written down then he would need to read it many times over to not get swindled.

“You don’t seem to trust me, Mr. Wayland, we will do it your way.”

“Are you sure? After you sign it, there is no turning back.”

Roland wasn’t sure why the noble was smiling after being told to sign a somewhat unfavorable contract. First of all, he wanted Arthur to promise to not leak any personal information relating to him. He also wanted to be exempt from any jail time if that was possible. It didn’t seem that it would be that much of a problem as Arthurs’s aim was gaining his trust. There was of course a limit to what he could put in there but his new friend here seemed like he wanted to pour his heart out.

“I am but are you? It does seem like you don’t really want to part with the truth even if I sign your contract.”

This was not wrong, Roland didn’t really want to delve into his past and unearth any buried skeletons. If he wasn’t invested in the city as much as he was now, he would have probably been gone after exiting the dungeon. Gaining a new identity in a world like this wasn’t that hard, he had done it before and would be able to do it again.

“Let’s say that trusting people doesn’t come easily for me.”

“I hope I can remedy that characteristic after we of course come to an agreement.”“Mmm.”

Roland nodded his head as in actuality he would rather be around people that he could trust. This lord on the other hand was a mixed bag. On one side he seemed desperate for his approval but on the other side, he could see getting used by him as a stepping stone the moment a problem arose.

For that reason, he would need to think of a way to discount future betrayal or at least minimize it. The curse wasn’t omnipotent though, there were costly remedies that could alleviate the state of decay and it would not last forever. He didn’t want his paranoia to get the better of him but he still needed to be cautious.

He needed to see this not as a pact of friendship but as any other business contract. Arthur wanted his support and perhaps he would be asked to perform other tasks in the future. Perhaps this could develop into a proper relationship involving camaraderie. This of course depended on what Arthur would do after he was able to achieve his goal. However, if he was just replaced by someone else and given leave it would be fine and it would be something that he wished to include in the contract.

“Here My lord, these are the best magical parchments that we possess.”

“Great, well then, let us discuss the contract before we prepare it. I’m sure you’d like me to withhold the information that you disclose to me Mr. Wayland but I won’t just let you walk all over me.”

Arthur started grinning while he pulled out a well-used quill. It looked like it had gone through a lot of paperwork but was still holding together. The quill being used didn’t matter as much as the magical ink that needed to be infused with mana on the paper.

“I don’t intend to write an unfavorable contract, only when both parties are satisfied will it be a proper deal...”

Both of the men looked at each other with a glint in their eyes. Mary that was standing on the side wasn’t sure how to feel about it as the two started putting down words to paper. It seemed like both were versed in bureaucracy and knew all the little pitfalls a contract could potentially bring.

“Do you think I was born yesterday Mr. Wayland, if you want to put that clause in there then you’ll have to agree to this small addition ...”

“I might have underestimated you Lord Arthur but don’t think this is over yet...”

“... I’ll bring over some more tea and food...”

Soon Mary walked out of the room to go fetch some food. It was clear that this write-up would take quite a bit. For the time being she needed to monitor the room and also what was happening outside. If for some reason the skeletal monsters attacked then Arthur needed to be woken up from the trance of paperwork.

Ever since getting to this city he had been going through this type of process so she was convinced that his opponent wouldn’t be able to get one over him. The contract might have contained a troublesome curse but if the paper was worded correctly there would be a slim chance of her master actually getting it.

Though his opponent Wayland could not be underestimated. Supposedly he was also a noble and probably had a scholarly upbringing if he could keep up with Arthur. The exchange of paragraphs, sections, subsections, and conditions was making Mary's brain let out steam. She had almost no idea what the two were talking about. Her job description was an assassin and bodyguard, complicated paperwork just produced migraines.

"That took a bit, but I think we have it, don't you agree?"

"Yes, that should do it."

Roland nodded while looking at both papers before them. The contract wasn't the longest but a magical scribe could fit a lot more words onto a piece of paper thanks to compressed characters. It was also one of the tricks of the trade, if the fine print was too small to read then the other party could be easily duped. This trick was seen quickly through by Arthur who had some magical glasses to read through the tiny text.

In the end, he received a rock-solid agreement between the two parties. He could now safely disclose the information concerning the whole mine area and also the secret dungeon without needing to worry of going to jail. In actuality he expected Arthur to be delighted at the information that he would be given.

First of all, while the dwarves had an agreement with the Valerian household it didn't mean that Arthur actually needed to give them the mine. Instead, he could make an agreement with the adventurer guild or even send his own people there. With the discovery of the tier 3 dungeon, it would be a space that needed to belong to him.

"Very well then, Mr. Wayland, how about you tell me what really happened in the dungeon."

"Okay, this might take a while but this is what took place..."

While they spent multiple hours on the contract this wasn't over. It was time to spill the beans about some of his secrets but some of them didn't need to be voiced as he wasn't quite contractually obligated to disclose everything yet. Perhaps if the trust with his new partner in crime grew then his true identity could be revealed.