

## 227: Risk

Tristin drummed his fingers on the back of his elbow, feeling the conspicuous absence of his sword's weight on his hip. The line was moving slowly, leaving him ample time to scan for threats he wouldn't be able to do anything about. He'd worked himself to exhaustion, day in and day out, earning the distinction of the top-ranked unawakened in Samson's class. Here, finally, was a place where he could put that work to use. A place where he could excel. And he'd been hobbled at the starting line.

Swords were banned in Se.

More generally, weapons were banned, including knives, axes, spears, staves, clubs, bows, and a hefty list of things that blurred the line between tool and implement of death. Carrying anything like that through the streets would see you stopped and questioned, at the very least. As foreigners, they'd be watched twice as closely. If the guard presence inside the city proper was anything like it was at the docks, he'd hesitate to pick his teeth with a splinter.

"You're doing it again," said a voice behind him, and Tristin sighed, uncrossing his arms and trying to relax. He glanced over his shoulder at Shet, then clicked his tongue and looked forward again.

*Of course, HE doesn't care.*

Shet was one of the few people he couldn't reliably beat in unarmed combat—discounting the awakened, though he could beat some of those too. Only in a duel, though. In a fight where there were rules.

Duels were a good money maker. People tended to bet against him, no matter how often he won, but dueling prowess wasn't something to rely on when lives were on the line. The Strength accolade he had bound at the moment, though it remained locked in the ship's armory, was only a small comfort.

*I should ask Ameliah to show me Bear Kata again. Maybe if I'd known what I was doing, Thrast wouldn't have been able to break my arm like that. I could have slipped out of it or something. Probably not, but maybe.*

*Damn it. I need a blue.*

"Next," called a bored woman's voice from ahead.

Tristin stepped forward, now at the head of the line. He watched with interest as the man who'd been in front of him walked forward, then placed his hand on the statue guarded by a pair of heavily armed and armored soldiers. Absolutely nothing happened in response, and the man moved forward again, stopping to speak to the official seated at the desk just beside the gate.

Tristin looked back at the statue, the thrill of the unknown running through him. It was of a pair of marble hands rising from a stone pillar to hold a jet-black orb, as if offering it to the sun. The base was granite, massive and immovable, ornately carved with what was either runework or decoration. Given the statue's function, much more likely the former.

"Next," called the bored official.

With a brief glance over his shoulder at his companions, Tristin left the line, walking the last few meters to the checkpoint. Imitating those he'd watched, he placed his hand on the orb without prompting or giving himself time to second guess. Immediately, there was a small static shock, and he pulled back, seeing the tiniest flicker of color swirling below the surface.

*Shit. Am I sunk already?*

"Maintain contact for five seconds, please," the woman said.

*Maybe not yet.*

He placed his hand on the orb again, feeling the shock which grew to a tingling running through his entire body. The orb, however, did not glow. No alarms went off. Against all logic, he felt himself relax. This was his element.

"That will do. Come here, please."

Tristin took his hand away, seeing the swirls of color again, but only below where his palm had made contact. He blinked, and they were gone. He risked a glance up at the guards, their expressions unreadable behind their scarves. The official, too, wore a scarf, as did every single Novian he'd seen. He couldn't say for sure, but he didn't think they'd noticed the colors.

*Maybe it's normal?*

"Today, if you please," said the official.

He stepped forward.

"Thank you," she said, though her tone said she was less than thankful. "Do you have any weapons?"

"No."

"Magical equipment perverting El's order?"

"No," he said coolly. *Technically.*

They'd followed the letter of the law, bringing no enchanted items that were offensive, dangerous, or that would enhance their stats beyond that of an unawakened. The accolades weren't items, and the aura anchors tucked in his Tel pouch weren't equipment. He'd gone first specifically because he was carrying a full set of Rain's Wards, plus Detection and Purify. The unknown magic was sure to be a sticking point if they were questioned on it, but Rain had refused to let them go in undefended. He'd said he'd prefer they be turned away if it came to it.

The woman gave him a look.

Tristin grinned. "Well, I've got a Message scroll, but that's allowed, right? Also a couple potions. Health and Stamina."

The official made a noise of disgust, looking away. "Cease your barbarian lewdness. Showing me your teeth like that in public. Honestly."

"Sorry," Tristin said, closing his mouth but maintaining his smile. *These people are weirdos.*  
*Wait, is this where Myth and Reason are from?*

The woman sighed. "Those items are indeed allowed, if unusual. Do you have anything expressly prohibited? Do I need to read you the list? No accommodation is made for ignorance."

"I read the list, yes, and I don't have anything on it."

It would have been hard not to read the list, with it painted in enormous letters on a sign beside the excruciatingly slow-moving line.

The official glanced significantly at Mlem's journey cart, which was waiting with a line of others as yet more soldiers walked along inspecting them. "Your purpose in the city?"

"That cart, in fact," Tristin replied. "It's damaged. We're trying to find someone to look at it. We'll also do some shopping while we're here. How much shopping depends on whether we can get it fixed. It tends to freeze up if you put too much—"

"Duration of stay?" interrupted the official.

"A few hours. Maybe half a day."

"Very well," she said, reaching into a drawer and pulling out a small wooden token, which she placed on the table with a click and slid across to him. "Your one-day token. Do not lose it, trade it, or give it away. Always have it ready to present when requested and upon departure. If you are discovered with a weapon, it will be confiscated. If you were seen wielding said

weapon, it will be used to remove the hand that wielded it. Any other crimes will be punished according to the King's law as if you were one of his subjects. You may stand in the waiting area there until your cart has been searched. That will be twenty copper for entry, or two Tel if you prefer."

*They're not going to search us, just the cart?* Tristin's eyebrows rose, but he didn't question it, paying and taking the wooden token before walking under the eye of the soldiers to the designated area.

*Maybe they didn't tell this lady we're with Ascension, or maybe they're turning a blind eye. If they know we came in with Ameliah, they probably think she'll make a stink if they hassle us. On the other hand, if they don't give us trouble, we won't give them trouble, and everyone's happy. They probably don't expect four unawakened to be able to do much damage, regardless. No matter what we're carrying. Idiots. What if one of these anchors were Immolate?*

Reminding himself that they weren't through quite yet, he waited patiently as first Shet, then Faas passed the checkpoint, joining him in silence. Silence was the rule of the day. Divination couldn't be ruled out, even with Arcane Ward active.

Atyl came through last, long after the search of their cart had concluded. "Finally," he said, striding toward it and beckoning to them. He tapped the activation rune on the side, then clicked his tongue and punched it instead. It took two more solid hits before the cart quivered, pivoting on its wheels to face him. Their story wasn't just a cover story to get in contact with a core crafter; the arcane contraption really *was* acting up.

Under the supervision of the guards, they passed through the open gate into the city proper. Atyl had apparently had better luck charming the official and had gotten basic directions from her, so he led them westward along a wide thoroughfare.

Se was...different. The streets were immaculate, paved with smooth bricks of gray stone that looked like they'd been laid yesterday. The buildings were largely wood, but all were in perfect repair, though they lacked a certain vibrancy, almost as if their owners were afraid to stand out. The people, too, had a sameness to them beyond that of the black scarves they all wore. Hair color, build, height, the shape of their eyebrows, the way they all seemed to be on edge...

The gender ratio was off, too. There were too many women, except for the guards, who were all men. And there were no children anywhere.

*Weirdos.*

"Anyone else feeling like a pig in a henhouse?" Faas asked.

"Painted blue," Tristin replied, looking down at his shirt. It wasn't even that good of a shirt, and yet, he seemed to be catching every eye. The expressions, though, looked almost offended.

"Does anyone know if blue means something to these folks?"

"It is the color of nobility," Atyl replied. "If you see a blue scarf, that's a Royal, though that doesn't necessarily mean they're awakened. Or important. Cousins. Nephews. Great-great-grand-somethings. If we ran into the Prince, we'd know.

"Ah," Tristin said. "If someone had told me that, I'd have picked green."

As they wound their way deeper into the city, the stares began lingering longer, both from the common folk and from the soldiers that patrolled every street corner. People seemed less used to seeing foreigners further from the gate. Indeed, they were stopped more and more frequently, asked to display their tokens. Soon, shops and businesses became homes and small parks, and from one street to the next, the omnipresent guards seemed to vanish all at once. Like they'd crossed some invisible line, the bricks became dirty, and the homes rundown.

"Are you sure this is the way?" Shet asked.

"Reasonably sure," Atyl replied. "There we go. That's the building with the red shutters." He pointed, and Tristin blinked to see the splash of faded color, exceptional only thanks to its dreary surroundings. "Nearly there now."

"Some kind of inn?" Faas asked. "A drinking house?"

"No idea," Atyl said. "Come on. I don't like the looks we're getting." He remained silent for a long moment. "It occurs to me now that the directions I was given might not have been the directions I asked for. This could be a trap."

Tristin frowned, eying a shifty group of men watching them from an alley. "You don't say."

Atyl clicked his tongue. "She said there were a few different core crafters we could try, but only one who'd be willing to speak to a foreigner. The rest just sell their workings indirectly. It'd be a lot more work to get an audience with one of those."



"Audience?" Faas asked, then snapped his fingers. "Ah, right. They'd be awakened, so that'd make them Royal. Not used to that."

"Should we turn back?" Shet asked.

"I...don't know," Atyl said, slowing.

"Let's go a little further," Tristin said, glancing over his shoulder. The group from the alley was out of sight now. They'd just looked like downtrodden working folk, suspicious of the outsiders, not criminals or muggers or anything. Even if they had been, they weren't a threat, not with Force Ward going. The real threat would be what Rain would do to them if they got themselves into a pointless fistfight. He had no interest in joining Mig and Del on the shit list. Rumor was, they actually had to.

"There," Atyl said, pointing with relief.

"Bluewash Fine Artifacts, Corework, and Curios," Tristin read, peering at the faded sign. It hung over the double doors of a small shop front, exceptional for having glass windows, though they were so crusted with dirt that it was difficult to make out the tumbled wares on display.

"Do we knock, or...? Faas asked.

Tristin shrugged, then stepped forward. It was a shop, after all, so he simply turned the knob on the right-hand door and pushed. It swung open smoothly, though he didn't step through, instead taking a moment to look around, then up. The shop was crammed

with...junk...essentially. There was a small arm mounted above the door where a bell may once have hung, though there was nothing there now save dust.

"I'm open!" called a female voice from inside in a rush. "Just a moment! Come in, come in, what can I—"

The voice faltered as Tristin stepped through. "Foreigners?" asked the shopkeeper, frozen in mid-rush to greet them, having just emerged from behind a pile of dusty chairs.

She was surprisingly young—twenty or thirty, perhaps, though it was hard to tell with the blue scarf she'd just finished winding over her mouth. With all the ancient garbage piled here and there, he'd been expecting the core crafter to be a shriveled-up old man with a face like a raisin. Instead, he found his attention stuck on wavy blond curls falling over perfectly shaped ears and a pair of blue eyes he felt he could drown in.

*Wow.*

"Hello," Atyl said, stepping around Tristin. "We are looking for a lord or lady Bluewash. Would that be you?"

"It would, but a 'lady', I'm not," she said. "We don't use that title in Nov, and even if we did, I wouldn't really have the right to use it anymore, so..." She trailed off, her voice having become cautious as she looked past them. Tristin glanced over his shoulder, seeing that Faas and Shet had entered to stand behind him, the three of them towering over Atyl like hired thugs. It was easy to see how someone could get the wrong impression.

"What do—um..." Bluewash paused. "What do you want? Petar didn't send you, did he?"

"I have no idea who that is," Atyl said, clearly deciding to ignore her unease as he bowed. "My name is Atyl Wagarardrogrum, of Ascension. We were told this was the place to come to get our journey cart repaired. It's just out in the street, there,"—he turned—"if you three could stop *looming*."

"Sorry," Tristin said, stepping out of the way.

"Oh," Bluewash said, taking a breath, then exhaling and pressing a hand to her chest. Quickly, she took hold of herself. "Sorry. Never mind. I thought—" Stopping with a wince, she muttered something to herself about scaring away the customers, then looked up, her eyes and tone cheery once more. "I think I can help you with that! What maker?"

"Hold on a minute," Faas said, glancing at Atyl, then back to the woman. "Are you really a core crafter?"

"I—yes?" Bluewash said, tilting her head. "*Coresmith*, actually. Best in the city."

Faas harumphed. "Somehow, I doubt that. Why is your shop in such a shady part of town? Why is it full of junk? And why are you afraid of us, a bunch of unawakened? Aren't we the ones who're supposed to be afraid of you?"

"Junk?" she gasped, indignant.

"Faas," Atyl hissed.

Faas whispered back. "Sorry, boss, but something's not adding up."

"That's no reason to insult the woman," Shet muttered.

"Okay, maybe some of this is junk," Bluewash admitted suddenly, having been looking around and seemingly ignoring their whispered conversation. "Most of it, even. I've been meaning to clean it all out, really, I have, but it's hard to let go, you know?"

Tristin rubbed his chin. "Who's Petar?" he finally asked.

"That's not our business," Atyl interrupted. "Don't be a Guilder."

"Petar is my cousin, and he got me this shop after the old one, uh...exploded." Bluewash waved her hands rapidly, craning her neck to look past them. "Forget I said that! I'm good with cores, I swear!" She pointed past them. "That's a Lightcore model, isn't it? I can tell from here. No wonder it needs seeing to!" She spun, headed back the way she'd come. "Let me get my tools! Bring it in, bring it in! Just park it in the middle there!"

"In the middle where?" Shet asked, but she was already gone.

"Can we go back to the part where her last shop exploded?" Faas asked.

"She's the best kind of person we could hope for," Atyl said in a hush, touching Faas's elbow and giving him a pointed look. "Let me do the talking, all of you." He took his hand away, then spoke in a more normal tone. "I'll get the cart. Someone move those mannequins."

"Be careful with those!" came a voice from behind the pile of chairs. "They're antiques!"

With a shrug, Tristin moved to help Shet. Force Ward would protect them in case of an explosion, and Atyl was right. If the woman was as desperate as she seemed, she'd be much more likely to answer questions than someone who didn't need to worry about keeping her customers happy. And if she was a fraud, well, the worst they'd lose would be some time and a cart that barely worked to begin with.

By the time the woman returned, Atyl had negotiated the cart through the double doors. It didn't seem to want to follow him inside, going as far as to lock up its wheels completely, so the four of them had to drag it the rest of the way, leaving tracks in the dust.

"Let's see here," Bluewash said, unconcerned for any damage that might have just been done to her floor as she knelt to access the cart's core compartment. She'd donned a leather apron covered with pockets and loops holding various delicate-looking tools. One of them was glowing.

Silently, Tristin elbowed Faas, then gestured to the tool and signed in hand code, "See? Glow equals power. She's the real deal."

"If you say so," Faas signed back.

"Ah, gods, those lazy—" Bluewash said, already shoulder-deep inside the cart's guts. "They didn't even *try* to make it match. Let me just—" She grunted. Then there was a sharp snap, and the rune on the front of the cart flared before flickering and going out. "Oops."

"Oops?" Atyl asked.

"What?" Bluewash said, pausing as she reached for the glowing tool. "Oh, don't worry. I meant to do that."

"Sure you did," Faas said.

"Quiet," Atyl said. "What do you mean they didn't try to make it match?"

"The core," Bluewash said, replacing the panel, then lying down on her back and pushing herself completely underneath the cart. There was a clatter as she tossed aside a different panel, then she levered herself back to sitting, worming her whole torso up into the cart's innards. Her voice echoed as she continued over the scratching sound of the tool as she carved into something. "Every core is different, even two cores from the same lair. Subcores, sorry. This is obviously a subcore. Almost nobody works with full cores, so Coresmiths tend to shorten it when we're talking to each other. Where was I? Oh, right, you asked me a question. You need to match the runes on the cradle to the nature of the core, or the friction will cause damage. Once it gets bad enough, it'll stop working, which is exactly what—" She grunted again, and there was a sudden blast of wind that sent dust flying and toppled over something highly breakable, from the sound of shattering pottery.

"What was that?" she said with a gasp, struggling to free herself.

"That's our line," Shet said, watching as Bluewash wormed her way out from under the cart, then rushed to the shattered object, which seemed to have been a small vase.

"Oh no!" she moaned, clutching the pieces. "That was an original! From before the division!"

"What was that pulse?" Atyl asked, clearing his throat loudly. "You broke it, didn't you?"

"Yes, I broke it, I—" Bluewash stopped, looking up from the shards, then over at the cart. "Oh, the cart." She dropped them with a sigh. "No, that's fine. That was just the residual charge dissipating when I bypassed the...never mind. You wouldn't understand. Anyway, you'll have to charge it up again, or, well, I guess I'll have to charge it for you since you're not..." She smacked herself on the forehead with a palm. "I forgot to even ask if you could pay! Why am I so bad at this?"

Tristin's mouth twitched. *She reminds me of the captain. She must have a lot of Clarity.*

"Will this do?" Atyl asked, reaching into a breast pocket of his coat and removing a sphere of Bank silver.

Bluewash's eyes went wide. "Um...two spheres?"

Atyl smiled. "You really are bad at this."

"I know," Bluewash said with a defeated sigh. "Fine. One sphere."

"How long will it take you to finish the repair?" Atyl asked. "And would you mind explaining what you're doing while you work?"

"Huh?" Bluewash asked with a blink. "Oh, it's already done."

Atyl raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Really," Bluewash said, moving to hover her hand over the activation rune, but then she stopped. "Another sphere to charge it?"

"One sphere, only, for the repair and the charge," Atyl said, bemused, then tossed her the spherical coin. Bluewash yelped, almost fumbling the catch before she trapped it against her hip.

"Why they made them round, I'll never..." she said, lifting the troublesome bit of currency to her eyes. "Fine, then." Tucking the sphere into a pocket, she touched the activation rune and furrowed her brow. The rune lit up, then the wheels unlocked as the cart swiveled to face her, running over the discarded access panel in the process.

"You see?" she declared proudly, not taking her hand away, the charging presumably still in process. "I didn't have to do that much, really. Lightcore's work isn't *bad*. Just lazy. Though if you ask me, they want them to fail. That way, you have to keep paying them whenever something breaks." She hesitated. "I should probably tell you that they won't honor your repair discount if you take this back to them now." She removed her hand, and the light went out as she knelt to replace the access panel. "I kinda sorta *maybe* voided your warranty. Oh, and don't tell them I told you anything about their design. That would just get them mad at you. And at me. I don't want any trouble." Finished, she rose, then dusted her hands. "Actually, I'm not really supposed to talk about this stuff outside the Academy. They like to listen sometimes, and I might have already said too much. I'll..uh...stop talking now."

Tristin had tensed at the mention of Divination, as had the others. Before the woman noticed their reaction, Atyl reached into a pocket, removing another sphere. "What if I paid you to say more?"



Bluewash's eyes narrowed, and she tore them from where they'd seemed magnetically drawn to the sphere to meet Atyl's gaze instead. "Oh, I see what this is. This is a test. This was all a test, wasn't it? You're trying to buy my designs. I should have known you weren't merchants. Who do you work for? Is it Upton? Maybe Jennermar? No, he wouldn't bother. Hmm. Wait, maybe *you're* from the Academy. I haven't said anything anyone couldn't have figured out for themselves if they took one look at the runes."

Atyl removed another sphere, adding it to the first. "Again, I have no idea who those people are or what this 'Academy' you're referring to is. We're just naturally curious people."

"*Ascension...*" she said out of nowhere, as if tasting the word.

Tristin started, taking a moment to remember that Atyl had said it back when he'd introduced himself.

"Who are you four, really?" Bluewash asked, seemingly no longer interested in the money glittering on Atyl's palm. "You're not Guilders. If you were, I'd have to report you for walking around without your plates. Not that you could have even made it into the city, um..."

"We're not Guilders," Tristin said, earning himself a look from Atyl, though he didn't care. His instincts told him there was an opportunity here, though it depended very much on what the woman decided to do. On how much risk she was willing to tolerate. On whether he'd judged her situation correctly. Maybe Atyl could get her to talk if he kept pulling out spheres, and maybe she was about to report them, but if he was right...

Stepping forward, he cleared his throat. "Some of our members are Guilders, but not us, specifically. We've got crafters, too." He pulled out his day pass. "We're just here to get our

cart fixed and for some shopping. Ascension is leaving as soon as we get back to our ship." He very deliberately didn't stress the final word, but the stage play he enacted with his eyebrows should have made it abundantly clear what he was trying to say.

*You can come with us.*

"Let me see that," Bluewash said, taking the token and giving it a long look. When she looked up at him, it was almost as if he could see the gears turning in her mind. She passed the token back, then tapped a finger against her ear.

Tristin nodded, then smiled. *She gets it.*

"Seems real," Bluewash said, the barest quaver in her voice. She hesitated for a moment, looking around the shop before seemingly coming to a snap decision. "Let's say I believe you, then." Silently and with the first awakened-level strength she'd shown, she grasped the side of the cart, lifting her entire body into the air. "You still smell like trouble," she continued as she just as smoothly maneuvered herself over the side. "I think I want you out of my shop now that our business is over." Settling within the empty cart bed, she scrunched herself down, her head disappearing below its walls. "Demons and friends of demons are nothing but trouble. I see now that that's what you are."

"Are we really doing this?" Faas signed, clear disbelief written all over his face.

"Apparently, we are," Atyl signed back.

"Should we cover her with a blanket or something?" Smet asked in hand code as well. "What if they search the cart again on the way out?"

"Why would they?" Tristin signed, grinning. *Now THIS is a proper risk.*

"Well?" Demanded Bluewash from within the cart. "Get out, already! Shoo!"