

Adventures of the Hand 1.1

Little

After waiting in a small copse of woods near the Birthing Grounds for *six hours*, I'd started getting frustrated with the group I was planning on infiltrating. For Alouin's sake, dawn had been two hours ago! How long did it take to break camp and march the half-mile to this position?

I'd been tracking a group of Conscripted for the last day or so, following them after they'd finished cleaning up after the Harvest of a small village. What I'd seen there had been sticking in my brain since then, and while I couldn't blame these Conscripted for what they'd done—they'd been putting horrendously injured people out of their misery—I wasn't looking forward to what I might find at the end of the group's return trip.

It was only another reason that I wanted them to *show up*. Better to reach their destination and scout the area as soon as possible. Only then could I return to somewhere full of *sane* people, even if they also weren't exactly... safe.

Soon enough, I saw the Conscripted group on the horizon—*finally*—and once they'd reached my position, I slipped into the column toward the end, watching the others to see if anyone had noticed my addition. Fortunately, no one made a commotion, which was good. Given where we were headed, I very much wanted to enter the place with my weapons on me, rather than as one of the prisoners I'd occasionally seen being dragged by.

And on thinking about that, I almost stopped short. Here I was, once more doing something I'd sworn I'd never try again. I hadn't been beholden to anyone since the Southern Kingdoms...

Well. Swearing my loyalty to Raimie would be worth it if it meant I got to work for a primeancer. Stories of those legendary magic users had kept me afloat when I was a kid. Before sleep could soothe me at night, I'd pretend that Ele primeancers were coming to my rescue or that I'd somehow attracted a Daevetch splinter. Imagining what I'd do to former clients if I had Daevetch at my command still kept me calm on nights when nightmares woke me up in a cold sweat.

That wasn't a good subject to think about right now, though.

Now that I was here, I wasn't sure what act I'd need to play for the brief time I was with these people. That could become especially problematic if they noticed my presence before we arrived.

Not that I was especially worried about that. For the most part, the Conscripted soldiers looked tired and tensed all to hell, a bearing I was well acquainted with.

That made sense, though. From what I understood, the Birthing Grounds, which Middle had assigned me to infiltrate, was one of the most horrific places in this kingdom.

When Middle had outlined the missions that the Hand would soon have to complete last week, I'd jumped on this one, precisely because of the place's nature. While the other spies could certainly handle horror, I was the best fit for situations like this. Pointer, Thumb, and Ring might deal with their own ghosts from the past, sure. Still, they didn't *understand* certain things about life. Not like I did.

So, here I was, about to walk into another of the worst places in the world, and while it might scare the shit out of me, I was also prepared to do it.

Hopefully.

As the group around me slowed down, I spied the edge of a gaping pit ahead, a sheer drop-off with no way into it. I'd been scouting around it for long enough to know that this was true.

Meaning, yes. I had *no clue* how this group of Conscripted planned on reaching the pit's floor. The Conscripted weren't Kiraak, those unnerving monsters who could fall from a height like this and somehow keep walking.

But that had been the point of infiltrating this group. This way, maybe I could figure out a means of entering the Birthing Grounds. That was what *King Raimie*—

I made a face at that thought. Kings and Little Lords and all other men of power could get annihilated in the void, so far as I was concerned.

—would need if he decided to attack this place.

When we reached the cliff's edge, a rumble shook the ground, and as it gradually fell quiet, a man with black eyes hopped over the edge. While some of the Conscripted began filing into the space he'd left behind, he and the first of these soldiers stepped aside to talk.

But then, I reached the edge and had to stop short. The awful and awe-inspiring sights in front of me would allow nothing less.

Below my feet, a stone staircase led to the pit's floor. Holes beneath each of this staircase's steps showed where the material required for it had come from, and as if to further defy rational explanation, no mechanism joined each of them to the cliff, not any that were visible at least.

At the staircase's base, the Birthing Grounds spread for a solid mile. Round and smooth, it looked like an ancient god had scooped a bowl from the earth, there to store water for its pet humans.

If water had ever filled this pit, it had long since drained away, leaving behind the perfect setting for a city dedicated to the transformation of decent and ordinary people into Kiraak. Squat buildings, made of stone and wood, were scattered across the pit's floor, barracks for the Kiraak and Conscripted stationed here. Armored people strolled between these buildings, and even from

up here, I recognized the black vines crawling under the skin of those who sauntered below my feet.

Shuddering, I choked down the summoned image of one such man loping toward me, even after his belly had been ripped open. The beach battle from months ago had most assuredly impressed the Kiraak's unnatural abilities into my mind. Was I ready to walk into a den of such monsters, considering how difficult they were to kill?

Although... I supposed that my wants and desires about this didn't matter anymore, did they? I'd have to go in there regardless.

At the center of the Birthing Grounds, a tall fence surrounded a crowd of people. From this far away, I couldn't tell if they were Conscripted, prisoners, or Kiraak, but I could definitely see how much they'd shied away from the building inside that fence. The small, two-story home wouldn't have looked out of place in Daira or any other human settlement, but here, among barracks and a shuffling Kiraak horde, the pleasant homestead screamed *wrong*.

I must not be the only one who felt that way. As I watched the scene, a pair of figures emerged from the house, seizing someone huddled by the fence, before dragging them inside. That helpless person's screams reached me clear as a bell, even from as far away as I was .

I'd seen similar sights while scouting, of course. Even still, they had yet to stop freezing my heart over every time they happened.

Beside me, someone cleared their throat before saying.

"How long do you plan on wasting my time, boy?"

And as if in concert with that, another voice *RUMBLED* in my head.

You survived your first night. Good. We'll see how you do the next time I visit.

It took everything I had to face the owner of that present-day voice. The lack of emotion in it yanked my stomach into a pinprick in my abdomen while squeezing my throat closed, and the man who'd spoken must see this. As he smirked, a shine passed through his black eyes.

"Forgive him, my better," another person said. "He's a new recruit. Hasn't seen the Birthing Grounds' glory before."

Oh... shit. That was right. I was supposed to be *infiltrating* this place, not standing frozen like a little kid before a predator.

"He's right," I said. "Please, forgive me."

And I bowed low, but as I did, I also directed a knowing smile at the black-eyed man. I knew what the hungry look that had flashed through his eyes meant, and I *refused* to let it cow me. Not anymore.

Fortunately, the black-eyed man seemed amused by my display. Huffing, he waved a hand.

“Well, now you’ve seen it. So, join your comrades below,” he said before pausing to half-smile at me, “and hope that I don’t drop you both while you descend.”

...Drop us?

At my side, the Conscripted who’d rescued me said, “Your threat will make us swift, my better.”

And it did. I raced the other man to the pit’s floor, sure with every step that stone would somehow give way beneath me. I wasn’t sure how these stairs were under the black-eyed man’s control, so as soon as my feet were planted on solid ground, I spun to watch that man make his descent.

After leaving each step behind, he waved a hand, and a stream of jet-black gloom eagerly rushed to it. With it seemingly the energy that had held the stairs aloft, each step flopped to the wall in its absence. Once he’d bounced onto the pit’s floor, the black-eyed man strode past me and my rescuer, not once looking at us.

Swallowing hard at the sight of that magical display, I said, “Thanks. Seems I owe you.”

With a half-smile, the Conscripted who’d rescued me scanned me from top to bottom.

“Yeah, you most certainly do,” he said. “You’ve got to be new here. Everyone knows they should avoid Enforcer Adrinusk’s notice, when possible.”

An Enforcer?

“Shit,” I said under my breath. “Seems I owe you more than I thought.”

It also seemed that with this, I might have unintentionally fallen into the role I’d play while in this enemy camp. Normally, a new recruit wasn’t the best one to play because most of the time, no one wanted to take an inexperienced fighter under their wing, but since I’d already found a ‘mentor’, I’d play the role to the best of my ability. Or until the situation required me to become something else, of course.

“So, when did you join up?” the Conscripted asked. “I don’t remember recruiting you before the Lindow Harvest. In fact, I don’t remember recruiting you at all.”

Of course he didn’t. Why would he, given what I’d done not a quarter mark before?

After glancing around for eavesdroppers, I leaned toward the other man.

“That’s because I joined on the road,” I whispered. “Figured I’d have a higher chance of conscription if I showed enough initiative to reach the Birthing Grounds without notice.”

This made the other man bark a laugh.

“Oh, I like you!” he said. “I hope our Captain doesn’t kill you. If he doesn’t, watching you bumble about should be entertaining.”

Huffing, I crossed my arms.

“I don’t plan on dying,” I said. “That’s why I’m here, yeah? Because becoming a Conscripted in our Dark Lord’s army has the highest survival rate in Auden.”

“True.”

As if to join me, the Conscripted soldier leaned forward as well, lifting a hand to his mouth.

“Unless you can find a rebels’ haven, that is,” he whispered behind it.

I jerked back, fighting to keep my face neutral, but this just made the soldier laugh.

“I’m joking, kid!” he said. “Come on, now. The others are probably checking in with our Overseer by now. We don’t want to be late for that meeting. Trust me.”

When he took off, I trotted behind him, soaking in the sights like a wide-eyed kid, or at least, that was how I hoped it would appear. In actuality, I was scanning every bit of this place, looking for tactical advantages.

So far, attacking the Birthing Grounds seemed like a bad idea, no matter how tempting cutting off Doldimar’s supply of Kiraak might be. Sure, Raimie and his soldiers would have the high ground here, but in this singular case, that advantage wouldn’t help much. If Raimie wanted to use the Birthing Grounds for his own purposes, his army couldn’t heavily damage the camp, and without a way to descend the cliffs, a battle for it would quickly turn into a siege. Other arms of Doldimar’s military would come to crush Raimie’s army long before they could starve out the Birthing Grounds’ defenders. Of course, Raimie *might* want to bombard this place into oblivion, but that didn’t seem like his style.

Unfortunately, I didn’t see a way to attack this place directly, but honestly? It wasn’t my job to come up with battle plans. I’d leave that task to people who were better at it, namely Raimie. Instead, I’d stick to my areas of expertise: observing and playing roles.

To align with that, I soon asked my guide, “Where are we going?”

“Raelinov’s quarters. He stays with the other Overseers here,” the Conscripted soldier said. “Though hopefully, he’ll receive another assignment soon. I can’t stand this place.”

Cocking my head, I said, “Why?”

Spinning to face me, the Conscripted soldier frowned.

“Because being here is a constant reminder of what will happen to us if we fail,” he said.

At that, I must have shown an appropriate amount of distress because the other man crookedly smiled.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You’ve accidentally joined one of the best Conscripted squads in the Dark Lord’s army. We rarely fail our missions.”

“Good to know,” I said.

So, along with every other problem he’d find here, Raimie might encounter substantial resistance in the fight for this place as well.

“Oh! Is there anywhere I’m not allowed to go while we’re back at base?” I said, as if the thought had just occurred to me.

Shrugging, the Conscripted soldier said, “The whole of the Birthing Grounds is open to everyone, but... well. If I were you, I’d stay away from that house at the center.”

That had seemed obvious... but still, I asked.

“Why?”

Shuddering, the Conscripted soldier said, “Just take my advice and stay away from it.”

He faced forward, cutting off further questions, but for the moment, I didn’t have any more. As soon as I could get away, my next destination would be the fence-enclosed house that I’d seen before. It seemed likely that I might find secrets there, given how much a soldier stationed here had advised against visiting it.

Leaving squat barracks behind, the soldier and I advanced on a bunch of black specks, dotting the pits walls. These quickly revealed themselves as cave entrances, and on realizing that, I suppressed a disappointed sigh.

I’d hoped that maybe with catapults, trebuchets, and a laughable amount of time, Raimie’s people could bombard the Birthing Grounds into submissions—given their leader’s approval, of course—but if the enemy also had caves to escape into, that idea was worthless. Considering that, Raimie would be left with the option of a siege, which... well. I’d already gone through why that would be a bad idea.

Ahead of us, the group of Conscripted that I’d joined was waiting, and one soldier stepped out from among them.

“You’re late, Lieutenant,” he barked. “How did you fall so far behind?”

Trotting to a stop, my ‘mentor’ said, “Unfortunately, our newest recruit caught Adrinusk’s eye, Captain. I decided to help him out, so now, he owes me a favor. A big one.”

Oh... so, he was this squad’s lieutenant? That could be useful.

Scrunching his face up, the captain said, "I don't remember recruiting anyone recently, and I *certainly* don't remember doing that for someone so scrawny."

Stopping in front of him, I ducked into a short bow.

"You picked me up in Lindow, sir," I said, "and I'm not surprised you don't remember me. I believe you said something about 'usefully expendable' when we met."

The captain stared at me for so long that the moment painfully stretched, but I did nothing to provoke a response. I wasn't worried about what he'd say. Even if he called me out on my lie, I'd have no trouble with getting around the handful of soldiers standing between me and open air, and once I was outside, getting lost in the crowd should be simple enough. So, I wasn't in any danger yet.

"Perhaps you're right," the captain begrudgingly said. "We can discuss it later. For now, our Overseer's waiting for us. Stay in the back, recruit, and don't say *anything*."

"Yes, sir!"

As I loosely saluted, the captain rolled his eyes, pushing through the rest of the squad to open a set of doors.

"You are *so* lucky," the lieutenant said under his breath. "I thought for sure he'd strike you down. Captain must be in a good mood. He doesn't like lying very much, even ones as fantastic as yours."

Good to know.

Still, I shrugged. In the previous, I'd only said what had had the highest probability of success. A long, *long* time ago, I'd learned how to read people, so putting that skill to use here had been simple.

Following their captain, the twenty or so people in this squad filed into a large room. While no furniture occupied it, maps painted the walls. Pins were poked through their parchment, marking towns and other clusters of humanity. Two green ones were jabbed through villages on the map's edges while a smattering of blues and yellows decorated the middle. A big, red pin conspicuously marked the recently Harvested town of Lindow.

Overseer Raelinov was studying one of those maps, refusing to move even after the doors had slammed shut. While my squad waited upon his pleasure, I shoved my way into the center of their cluster, blatantly disobeying orders. If I'd stayed in the back, I wouldn't have had a decent view of this meeting's proceedings, and I'd need that.

I hoped I could get something useful out of it.

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