

Adventures of the Hand 1.2

Little

Soon enough, the Overseer faced the Conscripted squad, which made me gulp. The man's skin was barely visible over the sheet of Corruption bulging beneath it.

"Report," he said.

The squad's captain took a step forward, crossing his arms behind his back.

"Per your orders, we've been tracking a group of rebels for the last few weeks, and as you suspected, they led us to several pockets of resistance," he said. "We wiped out any of them who were foolish enough to remain in place after their visitors departed. A small number of them fled before we could join with the Kiraak to attack, but besides those minor exceptions, the rebels were slaughtered to a man."

"This is good news," Raelinov said with a grim smile. "And what of those you followed? Did you eliminate them as well?"

As the captain stiffened, an uneasy air fell over the room, which confused me. This squad had done as they'd been ordered, so they should be fine. Right?

Unless this was one of those situations where the person in power expected more from his subordinates than mere competence, which if it was...

Well. This squad's captain might be fucked. I hadn't had to deal with circumstances like that in a while, and I wasn't looking forward to the possibility of facing them again now.

Stiffly, the captain said, "No, my better. That group managed to elude us."

"I see."

But then, the Overseer sighed, waving as if to shoo away an annoying bug, and some among the squad relaxed.

"Oh well," he said. "I'd hoped for... but no. Such a task would have been impossible for a squad of your capabilities, and if I'd added Kiraak to your ranks, those people would have smelled them from a while away."

Still, the captain remained a statue, even as the Overseer returned to studying his maps. Maybe this would turn out ok...?

“Is there anything else you wish to add?” Raelinov asked.

Cautiously, the captain said, “No, my better. May we-?”

“Are you sure?” the Overseer interrupted.

“I-!”

Slumping, the captain rubbed his face before turning to the squad. He met his lieutenant’s eyes, giving a nod that the other man returned, but then, he faced forward once more with a straight back.

“No, my better,” he said.

“Hmm.”

Oh, shit. The tone in the Overseer’s voice...

Spinning in place, that intimidating man strode forward until he was nose-to-nose with the captain.

“I see you have a new addition to your squad,” he said.

With a deep sigh, the captain closed his eyes.

“Yes, my better,” he said. “He’s apparently from Lindow.”

“I see,” Overseer Raelinov said. “That’s good. It means your presence won’t be missed.”

Snatching the captain by the throat, Raelinov squeezed his hold. Corruption-free fingers clawed at that black-vined stranglehold while the captain struggled to unsheathe his sword, but twisting the weapon away from him, Raelinov claimed it as his own before shoving it through the captain’s body. Its bloody tip was thrust from between his shoulder blades, and as a strangled gurgle came from the man, I- I-

The dagger’s point plunges into the child’s chest, and as instructed, I continue laying on her hips, holding her down as she breathes her last and blood trickles from the stone slab to the drains on the floor.

And all I can think is: it wasn’t me this time. I didn’t get picked. Not me. Not cowardly, stupid, undeservedly lucky me.

FUCK that memory, straight to the void!

Fiercely biting my lip, I struggled to swallow the noise my body wanted to make. Even if I’d never expected to find something like it *here*, I was well aware of how disastrous any noise would be in

this situation, and the Conscripted around me seemed to know this as well. They kept their eyes fixed forward as their captain's limbs stopped twitching and Raelinov tossed the body to the side.

"Which one of you is this man's lieutenant?" he snapped.

Without expression, my 'mentor' stepped forward, and the Overseer nodded.

"Were you aware that the man who would call himself king, Kylorian, was leading the group that you were tracking?" he asked.

With a tight jaw, the lieutenant said, "We learned of it after he and his people escaped us, my better."

"Good. You see?"

Raelinov patted the lieutenant's shoulder.

"Telling the truth isn't so hard, now. Is it?" he asked.

"Not when it's in service to the Dark Lord," the lieutenant said through gritted teeth.

"Too true," Raelinov said with a giggle. "And so, it appears you've earned a promotion, Captain. Enjoy your new post. You and your squad have no further assignments for the foreseeable future, so go forth and enjoy the Birthing Grounds' comforts, such as they are."

"Thank you, my better," the lieutenant said.

As one, the Conscripted around me bowed low while I followed their lead, and once finished, their new captain led us into open air. Silently, they headed for a nearby barrack, and while I followed them, I wasn't sure if I should keep doing that.

What had happened back there... I might be used to violence like that—I had to be, considering my job—but it had been so *unexpected*, coming out of the blue, and that... that...

It reminded me of life in the Southern Kingdoms. *Hell*, I needed to get out of here. I couldn't be in a place like that again, no way in...

But wait. I wasn't trapped in this place like I had been back then. I was here to help free this land, giving its people the chance that I'd been given so long ago.

So, for a while, I kept following the squad, even if now would be a great time to investigate that fenced-in home. These soldiers were distracted enough that they might not notice me missing.

If anyone did notice that, though, it would probably cause a stir. No matter that Raelinov had probably meant to kill that captain even if he and his squad had done everything perfectly, my presence in that room had been the excuse the Overseer had used to murder that poor man. Who knew how his squad felt about me now?

Soon enough, we reached their barrack, and after its door had swung shut with me on the other side, I waited to see if anything would happen, but when a few minutes had crawled by without interruption, I tentatively decided that these people must not care about me, which came as a relief. Dealing with twenty vengeful soldiers wasn't something I ever wanted to do.

Right when I'd been about to depart, though, the door opened, and the new captain poked his head outside.

"You," he said, pointing at me. "Inside. Now."

Shit.

A single, open room made up the barrack's interior, and supplies were lined along its walls. The squad was circled around the center of the room, and when I strode inside, the beefiest of them leaned against the door with his arms crossed.

Just like that, I'd been surrounded, not that I'd have preferred my other options right now. Leading this new captain on a chase through the Kiraak-infested Birthing Grounds would have been conspicuous, and I couldn't have lost the man as quickly as I would have with the head start I'd had in the caves.

So, I nervously cleared my throat.

"I'm sorry about your captain," I said. "I didn't mean--"

"We don't blame you for Ibelfer's death," the new captain interrupted. "Trust me. That was merely our bastard Overseer asserting his dominance, yet *again*. No, we're here to decide if we're going to keep you or not."

Well, that was a relief. Still, I had to make a good impression on this squad.

So, I said, "I see. Well, my name is--"

Shaking her head, a woman said, "No names. If we keep you, you'll be Private and nothing more. Names have power, after all."

Sucking in a breath, I froze on hearing the repetition of *that phrase* before shaking myself.

"Yes," I quietly said. "Yes, they do."

But then, I frowned.

"But didn't you just call your captain by name?"

Shifting in place, the burly man by the door said, "He did. Captain, can we please get this over with? We're not planning on keeping him, right? His ignorance is *irritating*."

“You were just as annoying when you were a private, Corporal,” the new captain said. “Or have you forgotten?”

While the corporal mumbled under his breath, his captain turned to me.

“If you stay with us, kid, and you survive long enough to see a new recruit conscripted, you’ll tell that soldier your name,” he said, “and when you die, we’ll learn your name from them. It’s easier that way. No personal attachments.”

I slowly nodded, surprised by the practicality of this tradition. Sure, joining a Conscripted squad might have a higher survival rate in this kingdom, but it was still Auden, a land where living to one’s third decade was considered lucky.

It might also be why none of these people seemed as shaken as they should be about their captain’s death. They certainly didn’t look *happy*, mind you! Just not... in shock.

Shaking my head, I asked, “So, how do I prove myself to you?”

At that, most of the squad cocked their heads or narrowed their eyes, which only made me sigh.

“What?” I said. “You said that you haven’t decided if I’m worthy enough to be in your squad. So, how do I prove my worth? Do I need to smuggle weapons into enemy territory?”

In an eyeblink, a full-length dagger and three throwing knives were in my hands.

“Or should I prove that I know how to use them?”

I flung a knife at the corporal. As he ducked away from the door, that burly man drew his sword, lumbering toward me, and I tossed my remaining knives at him, one at a time. The corporal blocked the first, but to do so, he moved his arm into the second’s path. Its pommel smacked into the inside of his elbow, and hissing, he dropped his sword.

Smirking, I said, “Or should I show you how to take advantage of your environment?”

Leaping for the fallen weapon, I kicked dirt into the corporal’s eyes. While he retreated, rubbing his eyes, I retrieved his unclaimed sword, which had the other members of this squad going for their blades.

“Or should I give you an example of the best time to leave?”

Slamming through the cleared doorway, I spun to close it, jimmying my dagger into the wood to keep it shut, and when it shuddered against my body, I grinned.

“Or should I show you how to successfully retreat?” I shouted.

The pounding on the door’s wood increased in ferocity until the captain’s voice rose in a roar above it, and in the blissful quiet that fell, I waited.

“Private, I’m only going to ask you this once,” the captain called. “Open this damn door.”

“Does that mean I pass?” I asked, smirking to myself.

“Yes!” the captain shouted. “Now, let us out.”

Stepping back, I warily yanked my dagger out of the door’s jam, holding my borrowed sword at the ready, but when the door opened, only cheering assaulted me.

Still rubbing grit out of his eyes, the corporal moved toward me with a smile.

“Good show!” he said. “I wasn’t expecting you to fight dirty. You’ve got good instincts, Private.”

He patted my shoulder before extending a hand.

“I’d like my sword back, if you don’t mind.”

Reluctantly, I handed the weapon over, still watching the corporal for signs of an imminent attack, but he merely sheathed the sword before ruffling my hair.

“You’ve taken my spot, Private. Thank you,” he said before bowing. “I’m Montagor.”

He’d whispered the name as if it were sacred, which sent a flutter of unease through my guts.

Shifting in place, I said, “It’s... a good name.”

Grinning, the corporal waved off the compliment.

“Come inside,” he said. “We’ll send someone for ale, and while we wait, you can tell us how you learned to fight like that.”

Great. Seemed I’d charmed this group of soldiers. That could be useful... or it could be a waste of time. I wasn’t sure yet.

But I still had a role to play, so with a laugh, I joined the squad inside their barrack.

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