

Adventures of the Hand 1.3

Little

Later, I eased the barrack door shut behind me, backing away from it. Picking my way through snoring, drink-addled Conscripted soldiers without waking them up had been a tad difficult for me, considering sneaking and nimble feet had never been my specialty. Those tasks were more suited for Ring or Pointer, but somehow, I'd managed it tonight.

Besides that annoyance, my skill set had almost fortuitously matched up with this infiltration's challenges. Reading a room or a client and becoming the person needed in the moment were skills that I'd mastered long ago, and those had helped with my chosen task.

One of the reasons I'd picked the Birthing Grounds to infiltrate was because it had been the most difficult of the options laid before the Hand. I'd thought the challenge of it would be a welcome change from the boredom of sailing and the monotony of fighting. I wasn't a soldier, damnit! I was a spy.

So, when the choices presented to me had been investigating Doldimar's workshop of Kiraak or an extensive list of trading towns, I'd jumped on the one interesting task on the list. I hadn't thought about what might happen if I successfully infiltrated the place.

For one thing, I'd realized that the soldiers that I'd killed during the battle two months ago might have been like the people in the squad I'd left behind, and that made my stomach hurt. Middle and Pointer would laugh at my naivety, but they'd fought in battles before, many of them. I'd joined the Hand in a time of peace, a time when little killing had been required of me. If I was called to fight once more, could I bury the knowledge that each enemy soldier I would face had a life outside of the battlefield, especially given my reaction to the beach battle now?

Softly laughing, I shook my head, not sure why I was worrying about that. I doubted it would be a problem, considering how many other things I'd had to mentally shove to the side in the past.

When I eventually reached the house at the center of the Birthing Grounds, the gate for the fence around it was locked, something that shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. The captain of the squad I'd joined had claimed that the Birthing Grounds was open to all, so I'd assumed that would mean no locks. Apparently, I'd been wrong.

On testing how much space I could coax from in between the gate and its fence, I made a face. The fit would be tight, but I'd rather thread through this opening than climb over the fence or pick its lock. Again, that was a specialty for another member of the Hand, Thumb in this case, and if I

hadn't gained any weight in the last month...

I squeezed through the gap by the barest of margins, ripping my tunic on the way. Sucking on a finger, I ran my eyes over the yard around the house, unsurprised by how little I could see in the dim light.

Even still, when clothing rustled somewhere nearby, I skipped away from the noise.

From out of the shadows, a woman asked, "Are you... you're not one of Doldimar's, are you? Can you help me?"

"Please, help me!" I cry at the woman who's come to retrieve her husband.

Snarling, she kicks at me, calling me...

"...a bad boy! How dare you! How dare-!"

"I'm sorry," I sharply said. "I can't help. Not now. I've got a job to do."

Wincing, I turned away from the woman, and as I raced across the grass, her sobs chased me. I reminded myself that I'd spoken the truth, stopping the shudder that wanted to race across my skin. I couldn't help her, but maybe Raimie could. The sooner I finished with scouting this place, the sooner I could report to the king, and the sooner the army could free this place... if the king chose to take it.

That reasoning did nothing to banish a deep well of guilt inside.

While skirting the house, I looked for points of ingress. If I wanted to keep my presence here undetected, I couldn't waltz through the front door as if I belonged. Fortunately, this house had been poorly constructed. Given enough pressure, its daub walls crumbled beneath my fingers, and after making my way to a second-story window, I slipped inside.

The smell hit me first. The stink of sweat and fear were so familiar that they brought tears to my eyes, setting my stomach roiling. A metallic scent of spilled blood delicately intertwined with the other two, and on noting it, I gagged, fighting against a long-buried memory...

My first client of the day leaves, and I let myself relax. So far, I'm not too badly hurt. I can keep going, maybe earn enough coin for two meals today instead of one. Please, let it be so.

When my next client knocks, it pulls me out of bed with silent complaints, but still, I get up. Unfortunately, when I open the door, I know I've gotten unlucky. The big man on the other side is one of my regulars—

"...survived your first night."

—so I know EXACTLY what to expect.

No, no, no, *no*, *NO!* I... wasn't there anymore. I wasn't...

With difficulty, I pushed that *Alouin damned* memory away before it could get to the worst parts. Spitting the remnants of vomit out of my mouth, I winced at the pile of it at my feet, wiping my fingers on my tunic. So much for staying undetected.

It was fine, though. I could... do this. I could.

So.

With my eyes having adjusted to the dark, I scanned my surroundings. I was in a child's room, complete with a toy wooden sword and rocking horse, and this peaceful setting created a strange sense of disconnect with the memory that a smell had just provoked.

Retreating into the hall, I searched the top floor on shaky legs, growing steadily more confused as I did. So far, this house seemed like just that: a home. From the way the captain had reacted to it, I'd expected something more than this.

When I reached the foyer downstairs, its normal state—populated with traditional decorations and furniture—finished my climb back into a fully rational state. Two doors flanked the staircase in the center of this room. Perhaps what had everyone in the Birthing Ground so afraid lay behind them.

When I slipped through one of the doors, what sense of normalcy the rest of the house had exuded was shattered on the other side, nearly ruining my own regained rationality. Here, the first floor had been hollowed out to make room for lines of people, hanging from the ceiling by their wrists. Blood was pooling beneath their feet, dripping from the lacerations that coated their bodies, and so much of it puddled beneath them that it had stained the floor red.

On the far side of the room, a man was standing in front of a prisoner, humming. The blue tinge in his blonde hair glistened in the firelight while black armor tightly encased his body, and while I watched, checking whether he'd noticed me, shadows gathered around his burn-scarred hand. He needed those shadows into a cut on the prisoner's stomach, and she moaned, weakly struggling against her chains.

Holding my breath, I reached for the latch behind me. This room and the scene I'd found in it? I needed to escape from it *now*, before the other man saw me, but before I could get out, the same shadows from earlier darted for my face. I dove to the side, barely dodging that bolt, and when I sprang back to my feet, the other man was standing nearby with his gray eyes narrowed.

Shit. I was so fucked.

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