

Adventures of the Hand 1.4

Little

The hostile Eselan was *much* too close, so I stumbled backward until a wall halted my retreat. *Hell*. How was I getting out of this ?

“What are *you*?” the Eselan asked. “Not a Kiraak. I don’t sense Corruption in you. I suppose you could be sworn to me, but that’s unlikely. You’re not cowering enough to be one of those weaklings.”

With his head cocked, he paused, as if listening to someone.

“Corruption says you have Ele’s stench on you, but you’re obviously not a primeancer,” he eventually continued. “What *are* you?”

He stepped toe-to-toe with me, leaving me plastered against the wall, and as a hungry look overtook the Eselan, I forcibly stopped a scream from emerging, leaving it unsung against the block in my throat.

“Are you from *him*?” the Eselan asked. “Are you a gift of entertainment?”

He narrowed his gray eyes again.

“Your name,” he demanded.

And coughing, I was helpless to say anything but, “Lornilen.”

Deep in the past, a witch of a woman snaps at me.

“Names hold power, young wretch!”

As the voice faded, I snapped my eyes wide with a gasp. I hadn’t used that name since Middle had recruited me, so many years ago. It carried too much... history. Why the *hell* would I speak it now? Sure, this Eselan might remind me of clients from long ago, but that shouldn’t be enough to drag such a reluctant truth from me.

Frowning, the Eselan retreated half a step, running his eyes over me.

“Hmm,” he said. “You’ve experienced devastation of the soul, haven’t you?”

But he hadn't asked it like a true question. Still, I couldn't let *him* be the one to speak my own damn story, so I gritted my teeth and forced myself to admit a most unwelcome truth.

"I have a pretty face. It hasn't helped me over the years."

Something shifted behind the Eselan's eyes while he distractedly nodded.

"I understand. More than you can know," he said.

But then, he stepped back into my personal space with his head cocked.

"Do you know an Ele primeancer, Lornilen?" he asked. "He'd try to fade into the background, only revealing his power as a last resort."

Oh, thank Alouin. I had an answer for this question. Something about our interaction was screaming mortal danger to me, something more than the bodies hanging nearby or the way this man was looking at me, and I wasn't keen on finding out what that meant.

"There was an Eselan, Rhylix, who matched your description," I said, "but I'm sorry to say that he's dead. Several people attacked him last week. He succumbed to his injuries shortly after that."

The Eselan mouthed the name 'Rhylix', but then, he shook his head.

"He's not dead, can't be," he said. "No, he'll be the newest person attached to your leader, whoever that happens to be."

Strangely, I believed this claim. In the short time I'd known the man, Rhylix had pulled off many unbelievable feats. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that he'd somehow faked his death.

As if to draw my attention back to my peril, the Eselan flinched before turning aside.

"I don't *want* to kill him yet," he growled. "I'm *trying* to... hell, I hate you."

Shit. How would I escape from this catastrophe?

No. That was the wrong question, always had been. The right one was: who did I need to become so that this crazy Eselan let me live?

Best to start with the most commonly desired 'victim demeanor'.

With my lip trembling, I hesitantly said, "Please, sir. I- I'll do anything you..."

Trailing off, I frowned. Given the way the Eselan was now looking at me, that role didn't seem right.

"You'll never get me to talk, though!" I said, trying again.

And... no. That wasn't right either.

Peeling myself off of the wall, I forcibly brushed past the Eselan, striding to where I could poke at a hanging prisoner. That hapless man swung back and forth with each pass blocking my view of the Eselan, thank Alouin.

“Hell if I know how you want me to act,” I said. “You’re impossible to read.”

Which was disconcerting. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d failed with this simplest of tasks.

When the Eselan burst into laughter, slapping at his knee, I tensed, watching him as I distractedly swung the prisoner once more. Eventually, the Eselan calmed down.

Wiping his eyes, he said, “You know what? I’ll make you a deal. I’m going to ruin your pretty face—”

A knife materialized in the Eselan’s hand.

“—and if you can keep from flinching while I do that, then *maybe*, I’ll let you go. If not, I’ll kill you.”

Oh, Alouin. No. *Please*, no. Fuck, fuck, fuck-!

STOP IT!

Slowly, I forced myself to take a steadying breath. Right now, I couldn’t be emotional. I must look at this situation as if it were a transaction, as so much of my life had been. If I did that, then there was only one way to answer this unhinged man.

“Honestly, you’d be doing me a favor.”

Shrugging, I waved at the ground.

“Can I at least sit while you’re working, though? A man can only take so much pain before his legs give out.”

Fleeing or fighting hadn’t even crossed my mind. If that earlier display of shadows was any indication, then this Eselan was a Daevetch primeancer. I wouldn’t make it to the door before a bolt of that energy tore a hole through me, and I *knew* from past experience that I could handle any pain that this man might choose to inflict. So, which would I rather keep? My looks or my life?

As said, it was a relatively simple transaction.

Grinning, the Eselan gestured to a spot in front of him.

“Please, sit.”

I did as I was told, shifting on the floor until I was comfortable. Once I’d gotten settled, the Eselan joined me so that our knees were touching. Perched so close together, we might have looked like children playing a game, if not for our ages and the knife between us.

That brightly flashing knife.

Clasping my hands in my lap, I said, "Whenever you're ready."

So, the Eselan lifted the thin blade, resting it on my skin. He hummed a strange tune as he cut and mangled my flesh.

For my part, I sat motionless. Sure, there was pain here, but pain was a friend. It was a reminder that I was alive. That I hadn't wasted away in my former home.

Still, while the mind might be strong, the body was weak, and I had to clench my hands to keep them from shaking.

After what seemed like an eternity, the Eselan finished with one side of my face, and while he worked on the other, I retreated to the one happy place in my mind.

My final client of the day is due at any moment, and I'm scrambling to get this room straightened up. Before I'm finished, a knock comes, and I answer it, as I must. The man behind the door doesn't look like the type to visit a place like this, but I learned long ago how deceiving appearances can be.

Stepping to the side, I wave him inside.

"Please, come in."

Reluctantly crossing the threshold, the man stops short on fully seeing the room. Squeezing around my client, I lie on the bed with my arms behind my head. This man seems uncomfortable, shifting in place, and I internally groan. I prefer it when the client knows what they want because then, I don't have to think. I only need to react, letting me send my mind elsewhere.

"What's your name?" I ask, innocently blinking.

The wide-eyed routine usually works well with these types.

"Oswin," my client says.

Ah. If he decided to go with a name like that, maybe the man does know what he wants. He isn't Eselan, if his features are anything to go by. Therefore, choosing a name that's typical for the world's second race must have been deliberate. I can work with this.

Sitting up, I fold my hands into my lap.

"Forgive me, sir. My magic is quite rusty."

Glancing down, I force a blush into my cheeks.

"I can't make it any bigger than it already-"

“No!”

Shooting his hand up, the client clutches at his forehead, wincing.

“It’s not like that,” he says. “Oswin’s really my name, a cruel joke on my parent’s part.”

Now I’m thoroughly confused. Relaxing my pose, I sprawl across the bed, looking my client up and down.

“Why are you here, then?” I ask. “You’re obviously not interested in my body, and I don’t own anything else of value.”

Oswin makes a funny noise in the back of his throat, squeezing his eyes closed.

“I’m here because of your parents,” he chokes out. “We were well acquainted before they moved to the Southern Kingdoms. Grew up together in Daira’s Audish slums, in fact. Even after they moved, we wrote to one another. They always joked about how I’d be their kid’s godparent, if they had one. When I learned they’d passed, I used up my resources looking for you. Finding you took longer than I’d have liked, and I’m sorry for that.”

I’ve decided this client is speaking gibberish or... something. That or this is an incredibly elaborate fantasy on his part.

“I may have a job for you,” Oswin continues. “I’ve heard you’re quite good at reading your... client’s moods. It’s probably why you’ve lasted this long without gaining a disfigurement. The Queen of Ada’ir could use someone like you in her Hand.”

Oh... I get it now. This is a scenario I’m familiar with.

Rising from the bed, I say, “Well, master spy, I’m not terribly exceptional at blending into a crowd or finding things, but I’m sure I can manage tonight.”

I reach for the man, but he snatches my hands before I can get anywhere close to my goal.

“Lornilen, I’m serious!” he shouts.

For a moment, time stops for me, leaving the room spinning, and I drop onto the bed. Heavily.

Clients aren’t supposed to know my name—

“NAMES HAVE POWER!”

—and the house madam had always been diligent when it comes to withholding them. A client learning my true name can impinge upon my safety, and I make the house too much money for its owners to take the risk.

“You’re... telling the truth?” I hesitantly ask.

"I am. I knew your parents, and I can give you a job. A much more wholesome one," Oswin says. "I can take you away from this place. Is that what you want?"

Is that what I want? What sort of question is-?

My body's shaking. Why is it shaking? What's going-?

Bursting into tears, I wail my answer into this hell-like room.

"YES!"

The knife was pulled away from my face for a final time, and reluctantly, I returned to the present. In front of me, the Eselan grunted with his brow furrowed.

"No flinching," he said.

Why had he sounded so surprised?

"Does that mean I can go?" I asked.

Hell, that had hurt. With each word, fire had lanced through my open wounds, cracking them ever wider, and I fought to keep from swiping at the blood seeping over my mouth and chin.

Turning to the side, the Eselan grimaced.

"No! That was impressive," he hissed. "I'm not killing him! So, shut up, pest."

Odd that he was still speaking with something that wasn't there. Then again... maybe it was best not to focus on that. Maybe it was best to listen to the helpful part.

The Eselan meant to let me go.

"I'll leave you with your playthings, then," I said with difficulty.

Rapidly blinking, the Eselan fixed his eyes on me before roughly jerking away.

"What-?!"

I held still, praying no further horror was coming, while the Eselan's face morphed from confusion to something... unexpected.

"*Fuck*," he breathed out. "What did I...?"

Falling forward, he collapsed on himself, hiding his face in his hands.

"You should get out. Now," he said. "I don't know when Corruption's coming back. I don't know if I can... Just get out. Please."

I didn't know what to make of this, but then again, I didn't care about understanding right now. Instead, I focused on leaving the room.

Getting to my feet took almost all of the energy I had, making me trudge if I wanted to move. I'd almost made it to the door before the Eselan's voice stopped me short.

"I know it's a lot to ask," he said through his hands, "but if you see that Rhylix person again, could you give him a message? Tell him Arivor received his letter and says hello."

It took me a moment to process what the Eselan had said. That man had ruined my face, and now, he was asking for something else? *What the hell?*

But... on the other hand, his request was relatively simple. Given that it involved Raimie's friend, maybe it could help the king in some way, and that *was* the primary purpose of a spy from a Hand.

So, I tiredly nodded before leaving through the front door. I shuffled through the yard, and when I reached the gate, the woman from before burst into laughter.

"I see you completed your work with regaling success," she sarcastically said.

Actually, yes, I had, and in more ways than that woman could know. I knew where the Kiraak were made in the Birthing Grounds, a location of prime importance in my king's revolt. When we eventually took this place, Raimie would be able to more quickly finish his work here if he knew *exactly* which building to target first. If my looks had been the price needed for that knowledge, so be it.

Given that, it was relatively easy to ignore the woman's cackling as I left the house with its fence behind.

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