

Adventures of the Hand 1.5

Little

Fortunately for me, the Birthing Grounds seemed to follow a day-night cycle. As I dazedly wandered between barracks, weaving all the while, no one was outside to mock my stumble or notice my wounds. I was grateful for the silence all around me, a respite I needed if I was going to box up my pain yet again.

“Private! Where do you think you’re going?”

Or maybe that pain had been distracting me. How had I not noticed the only person outside right now? As I stopped short, trying to figure out where the voice had come from, the captain from the Conscripted squad I’d ‘joined’ glided in front of me, sucking in a breath when he saw my face.

Digging through his pockets, he said, “I told you to stay away from the center of the Birthing Grounds! Hell. Seems you’ve met our Dark Lord, huh?”

Despite how much it hurt, I squeaked, “*That* was Doldimar? He’s insane!”

Which only made the captain quirk an eyebrow.

“Why does that surprise you?” he said before handing me a capped jar and several clean strips of cloth. “That’s a salve and some bandaging for when the bleeding stops. Always good to keep those on hand when you’re Conscripted. Anyway, they should keep infection from setting in while you travel. I’d tell you to see a healer before you go anywhere, but I’d guess from your hurried pace that you need to reach Tiro as soon as possible.”

“Thanks,” I numbly said. “I’m sure I’ll-”

But then, what he’d said sank in, and I took a step back.

“Tiro?!”

“Sure,” the captain said with a grin. “You work for Ky, right?”

Oh, I couldn’t handle this right now, not with everything else on my plate. I needed... I needed to *leave*, damnit.

So, I snapped, “Who the *hell* is Ky?”

I'd never heard that name before, but given how often it had come up today, perhaps I should learn who it belonged to.

"Oh, cut the bull, Private. I knew you were a spy from the moment you slunk into our column," the captain said. "Thought it was strange that you didn't reach out when I gave you an opening earlier, so I wasn't sure who your master was until I saw your face. Only those of us who work for Kylorian are crazy enough to endure something like that."

As he waved at my face, I fought to keep it still instead of grimacing as I might like. This was not good.

"I don't work for a 'Kylorian'," I said. "You've mistaken me."

Gingerly, I tried to step around the captain, but a hand on my shoulder kept me from striding away.

"Then, who do you serve?" the captain said. "You *are* a spy, right?"

Shit. Shit, shit, shit! *Discovery was not an option!*

...Or was that the early days of my training creeping up on me again? I... I was having a hard time with focusing right now.

"Let me leave without a fuss, Captain, and maybe I won't report you to Enforcer Adrinosc," I said, keeping my voice as cold as possible.

Please, for Alouin's sake, say the captain would be scared off by my threat.

Unfortunately, it seemed to have only made the captain chuckle.

"You *are!*" he once again insisted. "If you were Doldimar's creature, you'd have run for the nearest Overseer long before now."

Ho.ly. hell. Why was this man so persistent?

"Maybe I'm just returning the favor you paid me," I hissed.

But the captain shook his head.

"Even someone as new as you has had loyalty driven in deep," he said. "Fear of him would have had you reporting my behavior as soon as possible, regardless of the favor you owe or any danger I might present."

I could say nothing more. I'd run out of protests, but I also couldn't agree with the captain, could I? What if this was a trap? What if this was...?

Hell, I was getting dizzy.

Sighing, the captain shook his head, staring at the ground.

“Look,” he said. “I may have found myself leading one of Doldimar’s best Conscripted squads, but I didn’t start here. I come from Tiro. Kylorian, Tanwadur’s eldest son, recruited me for his resistance soon after my hometown’s Harvest drove me to their refuge. He sent me and my partner, Ibilfer, to this place so we could serve as an early warning system for other towns’ Harvests.”

Crossing my arms, I pursed my lips, which I immediately regretted. Damn these cuts.

This man hadn’t given me enough proof of his association with Tiro. The enemy could have gleaned the information he’d shared through intelligence work. Even Overseer Raelinov had known Kylorian’s name. So, why should I trust this man?

“For Alouin’s sake!” the captain said. “Ibilfer and I sent the warning to Ren about Lindow’s Harvest. I know it got to her late, but we did the best we could!”

Now, Ren’s forewarned information on Lindow was something the enemy probably didn’t know about, not with how little time had passed between then and now, but I couldn’t be sure about that. The captain seemed genuine, but my confrontation with Doldimar had left me shaken.

That Eselan had read as dangerous and bloodthirsty in one moment and confused and compassionate in the next. It had been the first time I couldn’t read someone in *a while*, and the temporary loss of my greatest ability had made me antsy. So, could I trust the captain?

I’d have to take a chance with it. If I didn’t get past this man sometime in the next few minutes, I might end up collapsing on him instead.

“Yes, I’ve come from Tiro as well, but I don’t serve your master,” I said. “I’ve never met a Kylorian, but me and mine only recently reached Auden. I might have missed him in the chaos of our arrival.”

“Does that mean you’re from the Matvai Homeland?” the captain asked. “Why would the clans suddenly join the resistance? That would be... surprising.”

Matvai... Homeland? Alouin, there was so much my people don’t know about this place.

“No, we’re not part of any clan,” I said. “We’re from Ada’ir.”

That just made the captain look confused.

“It’s a kingdom across the sea?” I made myself continue.

“Across the sea...” the captain said before trailing off.

It took him a moment to process that, and as he did, I wondered if I could leave now. I needed to rest. Soon.

“But... we haven’t heard from those kingdoms in years,” the captain eventually continued. “They have no stake in our fight, not since Doldimar closed the border to trade. Unless-”

Disquiet captured his face, and I clicked my tongue.

“Look, I have to go. *Now*,” I said. “I need to get some rest somewhere safe, and then, I should return to my king as soon as possible. This salve might help with keeping these cuts from festering, but I can't get them sutured until after I've delivered my report.”

The captain, however, seemed to be too caught up in realization to listen.

“You said king,” he said. “Could it be true? Will those ridiculous, old foretellings actually be fulfilled?”

And finally, I'd had enough.

“Captain!” I loudly hissed. “I need to leave the Birthing Grounds! *Now*.”

“Alouin, I...”

With a hand in his hair, the captain roughly shook his head before turning aside.

“My people and I have a secret escape route here,” he said. “I'll take you to it.”

When he strode off in a daze, I reluctantly followed. Tempting as an easy escape was, I wasn't sure if I should follow this man. If he'd figured out that his foretold king had returned, he might become hostile. Over the last few months, it had happened enough in Tiro to make me cautious.

As if attuned to my suspicions, the captain said, “So, the Audish royal family has returned. What's the heir like? Is he a monster like everyone thought he'd be?”

Snorting, I said, “Hardly.”

It was difficult to contain the chuckle that wanted to emerge, but if talking was agony for me, how would laughter feel?

When I could continue, I said, “Raimie's everything the commoners would want from their king. He's smart, honorable, and fair. Sure, he has flaws as well, but unlike most people, he's aware of them. He's a bit too modest for me, perhaps a bit too self-deprecating for the average person, but those are my only complaints about him.”

While waiting for the captain's response, I cautiously explored my wounds. Blood was congealed into thick lines around each cut while a thin veneer coated everything else. They'd be ready for my gifted salve as soon as I'd escaped from this place.

As he led me into a cave, the captain said, “The foretelling insists that your king is destined to overthrow Doldimar, and while seer magic may have its strengths, it's notoriously fickle at times too. It would reassure me to know if this Raimie has some semblance of a plan.”

Much as it hurt, I had to laugh at that.

“Well, a few months ago, his army destroyed Teron’s Kiraak, and he recently captured Da’kul as well,” I said. “I’m not sure what the next phase of the plan is, but my compatriots and I have been dispatched to observe and evaluate several high-value targets. I gather that Raimie will make his decision about where to attack next based on our reports.”

“I’d wondered if the rumors about the loss of so many Conscripted squads were true,” the captain said. “How strong is his army if he’s already made such progress?”

I was hesitant to answer this question, but in the end, what harm was there in sharing?

Wincing, I sourly said, “Middle’s better at the numbers, and there hasn’t been a head count since the battle at the beach. If I were to guess, though, I’d say we stand at about thirty-five hundred, not counting any soldiers that Tiro might lend us.”

Stopping short, the captain stared at me.

“Alouin above, that’s-”

“More people than your resistance has ever had?” I guessed.

The captain nodded with a funny look taking hold of his face. This soon changed to resolve.

“Tell your king that he should attack the Birthing Grounds next,” he said. “Doldimar’s leaving for the capital in the next few days. A better time for an assault won’t come again soon.”

“Ok...” I said. “I can see how seizing this place could be helpful. But how are we supposed to counter that cliff face? Getting into this pit to secure it would be a logistical nightmare!”

Maybe someone who’d been living here would have an answer to that question.

Grim-faced, the captain said, “Taking the Birthing Grounds might be a long and costly slog, but your losses would be worth it. Cut off Doldimar’s supply of Kiraak, and you’ll break his army.”

I could follow that logic but...

“How would that break the army?” I asked. “I thought Doldimar *made* the Kiraak. How would losing this place stop him from changing humans into monsters?”

At that, the captain laughed, long and loud.

“Really?” he gasped when he could. “You think people volunteer for that change? Ha!”

While he broke into another laughing fit, I forced myself not to roll my eyes, beyond grateful when the captain got around to explaining himself.

“Doldimar needs infrastructure to keep his Harvested populace contained until he’s finished with processing them. If destroyed or captured, he’d need time to rebuild that infrastructure.”

Oh.

“And by then, Raimie may have taken the throne,” I whispered.

“Indeed,” the captain said with a grin.

He stopped beside a narrow crevasse with a ladder leading to the cave’s ceiling, far above.

“Your way out,” the captain said with a wave. “There’s a hatch that’ll let you out at the top, don’t worry.”

Much as I was grateful to *finally* be here and done with this conversation, I still took the time to clasp the captain’s shoulder before he could leave. If I had to lean a little heavily on him, the man was gracious enough not to mention it.

“Thank you for everything,” I said. “I’ll pass your suggestion along to Raimie. Let him know he has a friendly face here-”

“Don’t!”

With his shout ringing in the cave, the captain backed away from me with his hands raised.

“I’ve done *terrible* things for the Dark Lord while maintaining my cover here. At this point, I’m not sure who I’ve served better: the bastard who oppresses Auden or the people trying to overthrow him. I don’t deserve to go home. So... so, when your king’s army comes, I won’t fight. I’ll stay with my squad in the barracks, but if someone attacks us, we’ll defend ourselves, to the last if need be. And if we’re left alone, I’ll turn myself over to your king for his justice, although if he’s as fair as you say, he won’t let us live.”

That was... harsh.

“He’s also not one to waste resources...”

But I trailed off at the captain’s stern stare.

Sighing, I said, “I’ll do as you’ve asked.”

I grabbed one of the ladder’s rungs, wondering if I could handle a long climb to the surface, but before I could get started, the captain spoke up once more.

“Can you...?”

When he fell silent, I glared over my shoulder until the captain finished his thought.

“Tell Ky that I said I’m sorry. I couldn’t keep Ibilfer safe.”

That was a task I could happily accept.

“Will do, Captain,” I say. “Stay safe now.”

Chuckling, the other man said, “Safe travels, Private.”

Hopefully, that was what I’d get.

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