

Adventures of the Hand 2.1

Thumb

This line was advancing at a ridiculously slow pace, one that was clearly wearing on the nerves of the people around me, and when a fight broke out several places ahead, I smiled. Human nature was so wonderfully predictable at times.

For a moment, I considered breaking up the fight, but doing that might attract the Conscripted's attention, which wouldn't be smart right now. Because of this, I was planning to ignore the arguing men, blocking out their noise with the most avid of attention, but when one of them reached for a dagger in his belt, I found myself between them, twisting the assailant's wrist while resting a hand on my sword's hilt. This single point of contact with another person was small enough that I could maintain it without my skin crawling, but still, I'd be grateful when I could get rid of it.

"That's rather rude, don't you think?" I said in a slow, relaxed tone.

The assailant merely hissed in pain.

"Now, what seems to be the problem here?" I asked.

The intended victim shakily pointed at his assailant.

"He said I tried to cut in line, but I did no such thing," the man said. "I only wanted to see how many people were in front of me!"

With a rolling laugh, I said, "Is that all? That's no reason to draw a weapon, mister. You should apologize for your behavior."

Grimacing, the assailant shook his head, and this only made me twist my hold on him harder.

"Apologize," I repeated with a smile.

Gasping, the assailant said, "My apologies."

And satisfied, I dropped my grip.

"That's what I thought," I said. "Now please, try to remain calm. Remember where you are and who's watching."

Crumpling on themselves, the two men shuffled back into line, making not another peep more, and with the threat handled, the Conscripted soldiers who'd been quietly watching the altercation resumed their tasks.

I could characterize my visit to the port of Nephiron with predictable behavior like this. On arriving, I'd left most of my gear outside the city's gates, abandoning my armor in favor of street clothing while relegating myself to only one sword. No one had protested that single weapon in the other ramshackle towns I'd visited, so I'd figured the same would hold true here.

I found it interesting that remaining armed seemed to be actively encouraged in Auden. The strong were the ones who survived in this kingdom, which was slightly unsettling.

This port city, Nephiron, could be a copy of Sev, the famous city-state across the sea, if the poverty found in that distant place had been subtracted from the equation. People crowded the streets here, going about their business in a furtive manner.

I'd never seen a more frightened people, whether in this place or in the other villages I'd visited, but even still, trade insisted on continuing. Outside, I'd find markets occupying street corners and criers on the fringe, promising the best tackle for one's horse or the finest of steel to be found in one shop or another.

All a standard pattern for a larger city. It was almost sad that Doldimar, feared Dark Lord plagued with insanity, could run a city better than his counterparts across the sea, although perhaps I should attribute this prosperity to the region's Enforcer instead.

While on my way to town hall, the only oddity I'd noted had been when a loud bell had rung, filling the air with its peals. At the noise, people on the streets had scattered, and within moments, Nephiron had become like a ghost town. Following the pattern, I'd faded into an alley, determined not to stand out, and I'd reached it just in time too.

Howling Conscripted soldiers had chased a group of terrified people in front of them, herding those poor people toward a depression I'd seen on my way into the city. When the last of the enemy soldiers had disappeared, Nephiron had woken up with its citizens trickling onto the street again, and even as I'd wondered what that commotion had been about, I'd continued on.

Now, I was getting close to the front of the line I'd joined about a quarter mark ago. So far, the annoyance of my wait had been mitigated by my fascination with the mosaic on the receiving chamber's wall, a good replacement for watching the jittery bustle of the people around me.

In this place, those who wished to make deals with Doldimar's army came before his servants to argue their case. Here, I'd determine if Nephiron was a city worth taking. Until then, I'd try to understand the pattern of broken tiles on the wall.

Soon enough, a cleared throat pulled me out of my inspection, and blinking, I found myself at the front of the line. Ah. Must have once again lost some time while I'd been so focused.

This line culminated in a table, piled high with parchment on either side, behind which sat one of those strange people in black that I'd only seen in Auden. At some point in the past, the king and Spymaster Middle had touched on these 'Kiraak', mentioning that the only way to kill them was to cut off their head, but this was the first opportunity I'd had to see one up close. If the situation suddenly turned bad, would I have time to behead this woman, and if so, what would be the best way to do it?

"Name," she said on my approach.

"Marcuset," was what I answered with.

It would be interesting to see the commander's reaction on learning that his name had been added to the enemy's records.

"What's your business?" the woman asked, short and sweet for once.

"I have grain for the army's use," I said. "If you see fit to compensate me, I'd be forever grateful."

Nodding, the woman said, "Grain's currently going for fourteen gold chits a cart. Bring yours to the stable outside of town hall, and you'll get your money."

"Thank you, mistress."

Bowing, I turned on my heel. While speaking with the woman, I'd only gotten a fleeting glance at the contents of the parchment scattered on that table, but if the information on those pages was any indication of the truth, Nephiron accumulated and stored much of Auden's resources for Doldimar's army. With the city's capture, the Conscripted would quickly go hungry, and without the weapons gathered here, the Dark Lord's soldiers wouldn't have much luck with defending against a properly armed force.

It had taken three such waits in lines of equivalent length throughout this half of the kingdom, but I'd found what I'd been looking for, which meant I could go home. Maybe 'Sin would be back too, and the two of us could spend a quiet night together. That happened so rarely nowadays.

As I strode through the receiving hall's doors, intent on reaching my left-behind belongings and *getting out of here*, a handful of Conscripted soldiers flanked me. Oh, goodie.

Never ceasing in my stride, I asked, "Can I help you?"

As expected, none of them replied, but they subtly guided me away from prying eyes and into a small room. Great... this was just *great*.

Here, they gave me privacy, although a pair of them stood guard outside. For a breath, I considered incapacitating those scrawny men before leaving, but I didn't think violence was required yet. I hadn't noticed a pattern that would indicate the Conscripted soldiers meant to hurt me, and until that became the case, I'd wait to see how this situation played out.

Eventually, the woman who'd given me the price of grain entered the small room, giving me a single look before glancing over her shoulder.

"This is the one," she called.

A vine-covered man joined her, patting her on the back once he saw me.

"Nicely done, my dear," he said.

Beaming, the woman left as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, this new Kiraak approached me until he was a pace away, never wavering in his perusal of my body.

"Can I help *you*?" I asked.

I couldn't help the annoyance sparking through me. These people weren't following the typical pattern of social niceties, which was... irritating. I'd never known how to react in situations where people deviated from the patterns I'd painstakingly picked out over the years.

"Tell me, Master Marcuset, have you seen much combat?" the Kiraak asked.

As he'd spoken, he'd circled me, looking me up and down.

Shifting in place, I said, "Nothing serious."

The king and his soldiers might have fought a sizeable force of Conscripted and Kiraak after landing on Auden's shores, but by the time that battle had begun, Spymaster Middle had dispatched me further afield for reconnaissance. I'd missed the bloodbath, fortunately, and before coming to Auden, no large-scale fights had ever pulled me into their deadly embrace.

"Hmm," the Kiraak said. "Have you ever been in a fist fight, then?"

Wincing, I said, "More than I'd care to admit."

What an understatement. I firmly did *not* think of many a wonderful evening left behind in Daira.

"Fascinating," the Kiraak said. "You'll do quite nicely."

"Quite nicely for what, sir?" I blankly asked.

In situations without a pattern, it was best to only display deference and civility, even if this other man had done nothing but unnerve me since first entering the room.

Stepping back with his arms spread wide, the Kiraak said, "For the pits, of course!"

The pits? I'd heard about these, but I couldn't remember the context I'd heard it in. Maybe it had been in an overheard conversation or a report I'd scanned?

“Even more fascinating,” the Kiraak said, rubbing his chin. “Most candidates break and plead for their lives by now.”

That was... interesting.

“Why would I do that?” I asked. “You have no intention of outright killing me. This current pattern of behavior doesn’t call for it, and if that changes, I’m confident in my ability to defeat you.”

At that, the Kiraak burst out laughing.

“A good candidate indeed,” he said.

On the tail end of the man’s glee, a Conscripted soldier stopped in the room’s threshold, and on receiving the Kiraak’s nod, he stepped closer to give that man his news, which made the Kiraak stiffen.

“Of all the things to happen!” he snapped before glancing at me and subsequently making a face. “Take this one to the pits *now*. No need for the usual routine.”

Spinning on his heels, the Kiraak left at a run. The soldier and I simply stared at one another for a moment.

“You going to make this hard for me?” he soon asked.

“For now? No,” I said.

Why would I do that?

With a faint smile, the Conscripted soldier said, “Then, I’ll let you keep your weapons, although how much good they’ll do you remains to be seen.”

At that, I shrugged, and without another word, the Conscripted soldier led me out of the room.

When we emerged onto Nephiron’s streets, I understood why the Kiraak who’d been eyeing me like a piece of meat had been called away. As with most cities on the coast, Nephiron climbed from out of the ocean and onto higher ground with its town hall resting on the summit, and from atop it, one had an unobstructed view of the sea. Contrary to what I’d seen when first venturing inside the building, a new line of specs marred the join between sky and sea now.

“Are those...?” I breathed.

“Ships, yes,” the Conscripted soldier said. “I haven’t seen such a thing in years.”

“Where did they come from?” I asked, more to myself than for an answer.

Shaking his head, presumably at my wonder, the Conscripted soldier resumed our paused journey, and I followed, thrown by this break in the pattern.

Most people in the west nursed an unholy terror of Auden. No one would have braved a journey to this cursed land except...

No. No, it wasn't possible. No matter that it fit the pattern, I wouldn't accept it.

Up ahead, the Conscripted soldier eyed me with his hand on his sword's hilt.

"You going to make me drag you the rest of the way?" he drawled.

With a headache forming behind them, I rubbed my temples. Why had I stopped like that? I couldn't indulge in any distractions right now, not when I still wasn't clear about what was going on. I must focus on the here and now, not what might soon be coming.

With that in mind, I said, "I'll follow willingly."

And with a raised eyebrow, the Conscripted soldier continued leading the way.

Despite Nephiron's regularly spaced streets and intersections, I soon lost a precise sense of my location, if not my way, until my surroundings started getting familiar again. I'd walked down this road when entering Nephiron earlier today. Given that it was near the city's edge, I wondered if the Conscripted soldier was planning to let me go.

When we took a left instead of continuing forward, however, that theory crumbled to dust. No, this way led to...

The two of us stopped at the edge of a depression in the earth, and finally, the pattern clarified. Tall, curved blocks carved a stepped incline into this depression's walls, all leading into a perfectly level floor in its sunken center.

"An arena," I said.

Seeing this, I remembered when I'd heard of the pits. I'd scanned a briefing before agreeing to this mission, and references to these 'pits' had been buried within its contents. Apparently, Doldimar found it highly amusing to have his subjects fight each other until exhaustion saw the participants killed or otherwise maimed.

"I see why most candidates beg and plead before their march here," I said.

Chuckling, the Conscripted soldier trotted down the steps, disappearing into the gaping hole in the pit's far wall. Did he think I'd follow him? Sure, I'd been compliant to this point, but who walked into a situation like this?

Someone who felt an old, familiar itch crawling under his skin, that was who.

I patted at my tunic, breathing out a sigh of relief when glass brushed against my skin. If that was still there, I could indulge in my old habit. It had been such a long time...

In the dark beyond the pit's hole, cells lined a hall. People had filled them to capacity with some blankly staring while others gibbered nonsense to an unseen companion. One crazed woman slammed her body against her cage's bars when I walked by, reaching through them to swipe at my tunic.

Those howls faded the deeper into the earth that I plunged, soon replaced with silence and the occasional sob. When the soldier and I reached it, I recognized the people in the last occupied cell. They were the ones who'd been fleeing from soldiers earlier this morning, and on seeing them, I stopped short.

"There's a child in there," I said, pointing at a boy huddled in the corner.

After returning to look, the Conscripted soldier dismissively waved a hand.

"Old enough to fight," he said.

"Really."

Without my permission, my fingers twitched, and I did my best to still them.

"How old are you, kid?" I called into the cell.

The boy's eyes darted between me and the Conscripted soldier, but soon enough, he answered.

"Eleven."

Turning on my guide, I said, "That's old enough to fight?"

I found this idea... odd. Most societies followed a pattern that protected children from violence, and while that protection's length of time varied from culture to culture, most of them would have an eleven-year-old falling within it. I required clarification before I could continue.

Shrugging, the Conscripted soldier said, "You'd be surprised what they can do with such tiny hands and bodies."

He paused for a moment, looking me up and down.

"Are you thinking about running now?" he asked. "Because I can guarantee that you won't make it far. It's almost time for the fights, so the Kiraak will be coming to the pit any minute now. If you don't do as you're told, they'll tear you to pieces."

That... was an intimidating thought.

Raising my hands, I said, "You'll have no trouble from me. I was just surprised. The kid doesn't fit the pattern."

"Whatever you say, big guy," the Conscripted soldier said with an eyeroll.

Without another word, he tromped down the hallway with me reluctantly following, but soon, the Conscripted soldier stopped beside an empty cell. When he gestured toward it, I stepped inside.

"I won't lock the door," he said. "You've been more than cooperative, and if you do decide to run, you'd deserve the fate you'd get."

That was nice of him.

"Much appreciated," I said with a nod. "Any idea of when I'll be fighting?"

"Not sure, but I'd guess you'll go last this evening," the Conscripted soldier said. "You've got too much potential for it to be otherwise. So, you have some time to prepare and pray to whatever gods you believe in."

Bowing, I said, "Thank you."

For a moment, laughter won out over the sobs and screams found below the earth here.

"First time someone's thanked me for bringing them here," the Conscripted soldier said to himself as he left.

Once I was alone, I retrieved a bottle, hidden in a pocket sewn into my tunic's sleeve seam. I grabbed the charcoal and parchment found within its glass, careful not to break it, and sprawling on the ground, I smoothed down my writing surface while considering how to phrase my message.

Every missive from a Hand member went straight to our spymaster. Middle then decoded it before bringing it to the king, and I knew precisely which code would most frustrate my superior. Using it, I described my experience in Nephiron as well as my assessment of the city, ending the letter with an explanation of my decision to investigate the pits. Almost as an afterthought, I included the oddity of those ships that I'd seen on the horizon.

As I folded this paper back into the bottle, I smirked. I wished I could see Middle's face while he translated what his Thumb had written. Frustrating him like that had always been a pleasure.

After tucking the bottle into its hiding spot, I dismissed it from my thoughts. Sometime in the next few hours, that hidden pocket would flatten after a Zrelnach in Tiro had summoned the bottle.

Those Esela had been a fortunate find, speeding up the process of relaying reports to an extreme. I didn't miss the days of dead drops, and I could only imagine that Middle liked getting reports from his subordinates on a daily basis instead of sporadically.

Unfortunately, the spymaster would have to live without my daily updates until I was finished with this place. I'd hidden my remaining bottles outside of the city with the rest of my gear. Without them, I had no reliable way of getting a message out of enemy territory. Hopefully, nothing calamitous would occur before I could retrieve my things.

With my tasks as a member of the Hand completed, I settled in to prepare for the fights.

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