

Adventures of the Hand 3.1

Pointer

Nudging his companion, the plate-mail clad Kiraak ahead of me jerked his chin in my direction.

“Look. Another crazy one incoming,” he said. “Shall I dispatch him, or should I give you the honor?”

The monster had probably meant for that comment to stay between him and his companion, but I had perfect hearing. Save for one notable exception, I had perfect everything. It was one of the reasons that I was the best at what I did.

I couldn't blame these Kiraak for finding me crazy. Not many people voluntarily approached the pits, and of those who did, the big and burly, crazy, or immensely stupid made up the vast majority of them. They were the ones Doldimar wanted to watch in the fights.

I, on the other hand, didn't look imposing at all. I was slender and fragile with a constantly distant look in my eyes. How many times had I been told that I must be a scholar or otherwise learned man? No one saw me coming until my knife ended their life.

“Hello, good sirs,” I said as pleasantly as my ruined voice would allow. “I've been told that this is where one goes when one wants to participate in the fights. Have I come to the right place?”

My words might have painfully scraped against my throat on their way out of my mouth, but proper decorum required that I give these quasi-men at least the minimum degree of respect. They turned around and spat that respect in my face.

“Are you stupid?” one of them gasped around his laughter. “Someone like you doesn't volunteer for the pits, not here in Elisk or in any other city.”

I would hate to waste more words right now, but the Kiraak's assertion called for a response.

“Nevertheless, that is what I intend,” I rasped.

This set the two into a bout of seemingly uncontrollable laughter, but eventually, it began to fall still. When one of them got ahold of himself, he gestured to the hatch behind him.

“We won't stop you from committing suicide, worm. Your death should be mildly entertaining at least,” he said. “Enjoy your last hours of life.”

When that man lifted the hatch for me, I ignored his words, jumping into the holding pens instead. I was curious about what I'd find here. In the week I'd stayed in Auden's capital city, this was one of the few places I'd been unable to infiltrate.

A week in the seat of Doldimar's power. That time had been enlightening.

It seemed contradictory that Elisk, the center point of a Dark Lord's reign of chaos and terror, should be one of the most orderly cities that I'd ever visited, but such was the case. Its citizens lived anything but long, ordinary lives, yes, but even here, rules existed to shepherd people into safety. Auden was a civilization, and despite Doldimar's insistence otherwise, every society had rules.

Rule One: Avoid Kiraak whenever possible.

At first, the reasoning behind this rule seemed simple enough. The Kiraak made up the majority of Doldimar's army. Who wouldn't avoid representatives of a powerful, oppressive force? On closer inspection, however, the rule's true meaning became abundantly clear.

Kiraak were chaotically brutal. They took almost climactic pleasure from inflicting and observing suffering in anyone who wasn't them.

The ones with rampant vines crawling under their skin were the most powerful of their number, and over the years, they'd learned exactly what types of torture best fit their fancy, but the Kiraak to truly fear were the newly born, the ones who could almost pass for human.

These Kiraak hadn't yet learned how to control their new, alien wants and desires, and so, they were more easily pushed into wanton slaughter, followed by wailing and other forms of self-loathing. Their morality lived alongside Corruption, and the resulting conflict led these people into doing horrible things.

This was what befell every Kiraak: Corruption's gradual smothering of their seed of conscience—what the philosophers called 'humanity'—until only a husk remained. Until this was done, one should do everything possible to keep away from them.

Sometimes, an exceptionally strong Kiraak would retain shards of their conscience throughout their growth in power. Doldimar awarded these Kiraak, the Overseers, with day-to-day governance of his subjects, everything that his Enforcers refused to manage. They received these posts because the Dark Lord only trusted people he controlled with such powerful positions, but if weak Kiraak were allowed to oversee the average citizenry, they'd have massacred Auden's human population ages ago. It was best to leave governing to those who were both infected with his Vice and able to manage their coerced brutality.

Which raised the second rule.

Rule Two: Obey your Overseer in all things.

Because the alternative was always worse than whatever inane horrid task they might command. It was much better to drag bodies out of the pits than to be thrown into one instead.

But of all the unspoken rules that reigned over Elisk, one superseded all, to be followed in even the direst of circumstances.

Rule Three: Never, ever help your fellow humans when their time came.

Everyone who lived in the capital eventually attracted someone's lethal attention, be that a newly-born Kiraak or the Dark Lord himself, and when that happened, Alouin help you because your fellow citizens wouldn't. To try helping someone in such circumstances was to bring a death sentence upon oneself as well.

So, when a bordering district was relegated to Harvest, its neighbors purposefully ignored the sounds of combat. They became deaf to mothers screaming for their children, never recognizing the high-pitched cry that quickly cut off as the signal for a young one's death.

Although these rules seemed harsh, they granted Elisk's residents with a modicum of safety, more so than the rest of the realm. They also provided a precarious peace, lurking behind the haphazard destruction and disorder that the Kiraak doled out.

I'd been busy during my week in this strange city with its strange rules. During that time, I'd walked among its people with my unassuming face working its usual magic, prying the city's secrets from honest Eliskians. I'd also observed troop movement and assessed the city's defenses while several prominent officials had ended up dead.

In other words, I'd finished with my duty to my king and spymaster. Now, it was time for a personal task, one started by an intercepted message between Thumb and the Hand's spymaster. One that said spymaster had warned me against doing anything about.

Middle should have made that warning an order, not that such an arbitrary thing would have stopped me. Then again, the spymaster had probably known exactly what I'd try when I'd read the news that Thumb had gotten himself captured, the idiot.

For unlike the Eliskians, I had only one rule to follow. One overriding stricture that carried through the assassinations of both the guilty and the innocent, never mind any other atrocities I'd committed over my many, many years in service to my king.

I never endangered my loved ones or abandoned them to their death.

I occupy my time on the carriage ride home with the most recent letter I've received from Count Erinburgh. That man's incessant pleas for me to join his coup against the crown are starting to grate on my nerves, but decorum demands that I at least open and read the silly thing.

As I suspected, this letter is another appeal to my pathos, a long regaling of the infractions that the king has committed against the nobility, starting with his marriage to a foreigner. I understand why the count has been so heavily lobbying for my support. As the head of Ada'ir's most powerful

family—after the royals, of course—if I backed this rebellion, it would sway the uneasy balance between the rebels and loyalists. If the king lost my loyalty, it might spell the end of Ada'ir's ruling family.

Fortunately for the king, I have no intention of abandoning said loyalty.

I found the weeks spent coming to this decision agonizing, for Count Erinburgh has raised many valid complaints. Several of the king's newest policies could soon beggar the nobility, and I don't appreciate the threat that such a prospect places on my family.

In the end, however, I know that these new laws will see Ada'ir to greater heights of wealth and power. I also can't see the danger in letting the commoners stand on equal footing with the nobility, another of the count's grievances.

While considering the letter's contents, I've shredded it, and holding my hand out the window, I let the wind tug its scraps out of my grasp. As the last bit of paper catches in the breeze, the carriage pulls to a stop, and I close my eyes. Time to don the mask again.

I pay the driver well for his silence, not that I'm under any illusion about the status of my 'secret'. I have the money to indulge in the pretense that it's solely mine, though, so why shouldn't I?

On stepping inside the house, I call, "I'm home!"

Removing my coat, I store it in a closet myself—the servants were dismissed hours ago—but when no one answers my greeting, a frown pulls at my mouth.

"Madelaine?" I call. "Are you awake, my dear?"

When only silence greets me, I sigh. Yes, my predilections haven't led to the life that my wife desired on marrying me, but she's known about them for a long time now. I thought she'd learned to accept them, and besides that, I've already provided her with the one thing that she's demanded from me: a child. I think it only proper that Madeleine have the manners to stay up until I come home or at the least, leave a message for me, as is custom. At such a late hour, I'd expect our daughter to be asleep but my wife...

I take the stairs two at a time, fully intending to make as much noise as possible while getting ready for bed. Yes, that might be selfish of me, especially given what I so recently left behind, but in this, I couldn't help myself. Years of animosity between me and my wife have led me to this moment.

The glow of firelight from the parlor at the top of the stairs, however, has me pausing. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Madeleine fell asleep while waiting for me rather than going to bed by herself. Is it possible that she's finally learning to love me for who I am?

"Maddy?" I whisper.

As I round the corner into the parlor, an invisible wall stops my progress inside. With my fingers twitching, I numbly stare at an image that will be forever etched into my mind.

Madeleine and Lulani, our baby girl, are lying on the floor near the fireplace, curled around one another as if asleep, but that peaceful scene is contrasted by their skin's bleached state, the rope burns around their ankles, and the jagged wounds along their necks.

Splashed across a recent family portrait, a message in coagulated blood blazes much brighter than the flames beneath while Maddy and Luli's happy faces mockingly gaze through it.

'The king's eyes are upon you.'

One time. I'd broken the rule once, and look what had happened. I'd never do it again.

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