

Adventures of the Hand 4.1

Middle

Even though it was only halfway through the morning, I was drained, and there was still a long day ahead. Of course, I was always tired, had been since Aramar had dumped his spymaster responsibilities on me thirteen years ago, but this was a bone-deep weariness, riding me like an equestrian in the saddle. I'd stacked my obligations too high, assumed too many burdens, and it was beginning to show.

Recently, I'd started using a flesh-toned powder to conceal the purple semi-circles under my eyes, and only yesterday, I'd found my first gray hair. I was just now nearing the end of my second decade! Worry about hair color wasn't supposed to come for at least five more years.

At the moment, I was plodding through a thick stack of paperwork. Empty bottles, summoned earlier to Elisk, surrounded my chair, and considering how often I'd been pacing the room today, it was a wonder that I hadn't broken any yet.

For the fourth time, I tried to read Little's most recent report while continuing to tread a furrow in the floor behind my desk. Moving like this kept me awake and alert, but it did nothing to help with keeping my mind on my reading material. Without something compelling to anchor me—which Little's report most certainly wasn't—my thoughts turned to my family.

To Thumb and Pointer, my brothers. They thought I didn't know about their relationship, which was adorable, but I didn't plan on changing that assumption. Those two were professionals. They'd never let their romantic entanglement interfere with their duties, and it had been too long since either of them had been happy. I wished them countless days of bliss.

To Little, my adopted son. Many were the days where I both blessed and cursed Lornilen's parents for dropping their kid in my lap. With his easy understanding of people's intention and wishes, Little could be a boon. Many spies would envy his gifts. He was also the only member of this family who had the capacity for genuine empathy, identifying with other people so strongly that he could assume their identities, if need be, but at times, Little could be a burden.

The young spy refused to take his responsibilities seriously. I was always hesitant to assign him to the king's protection because not only did Raimie tend to dodge his bodyguards when he felt the need but Little's lackadaisical attitude encouraged that behavior. Someday, his flippancy would get him into tremendous trouble, and I knew that when that day came, I'd wonder if I could have done anything to prevent my son's misfortune.

And to Ring. Of all the members of the Hand, she was the hardest to classify. When thinking of her, how did I instinctually identify her role? Was she the mother of this family? My sister? My beloved?

I kept that last possible categorization secret, tightly locked in my heart's depths. Ring could never know how much I cared for her, else she flee from the King's Hand. In her lifetime, too many amorous men had caused Ring trouble to consider adding another to the list. I wouldn't do the same, no matter how much I might want to share my feelings.

Pausing in my pacing, I shook my head, trying to clear it. Distracting thoughts like those had gotten obnoxious today.

I discarded Little's report, hoping that if I read something else, I'd find my focus. Maybe then, I could return to that messy jumble of words with the attention needed to understand it.

The report I picked up next was from Pointer. As usual, the assassin had found no sign of Doldimar in his journey, not even a whisper of a rumor.

I would never understand why Raimie insisted on searching for the Dark Lord. He was right that Doldimar was lurking somewhere, watching for the perfect moment to strike these innocent people down, but to think the Hand could find him was folly. An incredibly powerful, Daevetch primeancer who'd lived for at least two centuries had undoubtedly mastered the art of concealment, but despite my objections, I followed my orders. My unthinking obedience was one of the qualities that made me such a good spymaster.

It was how I'd originally fallen into the role.

"Have you finished yet, Oswin?" Master Saryntor asks. "At some point, I'd like to go home and see my wife."

"Yes, master," I says. "Give me five more minutes, and I'll know how to replicate it."

Saryntor grumbles his doubts, but he leaves me alone.

I didn't lie to the blacksmith. I'm so close to understanding this weapons' inner workings that I can taste it.

The pieces of the object we've named 'pistol' are spread across the table in front of me. I've disassembled and reassembled it so many times now that I could do it in my sleep, and with so many repetitions, the broad strokes of the pistol's workings seem clear, to me at least. The details are what elude me.

How does the pin at the barrel's end trigger the miniature explosion that makes the pistol fire?

The idea of an explosion isn't new to me. References to dynamite litter obscure history books, ones that predate the last primeancer calamity. Supposedly, those bundles caused explosions that were devastating enough to destroy chunks of mountains, but they required an unknown ignition source to blow. What's the trigger for the far smaller explosion that takes place inside this pistol?

I lift our last intact projectile for a closer inspection, flipping it over and over.

“Oswin, it’s been a half hour,” Master Saryntor says behind me.

“Goodness! I apologize, master. Time-”

“Got away from you, I know,” Saryntor says with a sigh. “Clean up and go home, kid. Lock up when you leave, and that had better be soon. So help me, if I find you here in the same clothes tomorrow morning...”

“Yes, master.”

Saryntor stomps out the door, and alone once more, I quickly reassemble the pistol but hesitate before replacing the projectile into our storage bin. Perhaps inspiration will strike if I look at this piece of the weapon in a different setting. Pocketing that metal chunk along with several other supplies, I leave the workshop, locking the door behind me.

With my mind too preoccupied by my current puzzle, I don’t register the transition from the noble’s district around the queen’s workshop to the sordid quarter where I keep an apartment. The calls of scantily clad ladies and gentlemen of the night go unheard, and belted drunken ditties go unnoticed. The only oddity that catches my attention is a spark, coming from the hands of a rough man. He’s leaning on a tavern’s doorframe with his friends around him.

“What was THAT?” I ask, eagerly approaching. “Can you do it again?”

Puffing on a pipe, the man eyes me.

“You’ve never seen a flint and steel striker?”

He lifts his metal-wrapped knuckles and a gray stone into view, knocking them against each other to create a brief flash of fire.

“Fairly common ‘round these parts, boy. Where’ve you come from?”

“I work near the palace,” I distractedly say. “How does it work? Does it need to be flint and steel to create such a reliable spark?”

Snorting, the man says, “What are you, a pyro?”

He shakes his head.

“In any case, you should know that we have a system down here, boy. Information is bought and sold, not freely given, and you have yet to pay me for the answer to your first question.”

Suddenly, I feel very foolish. I didn’t consider that these less fortunate men might try something like extortion with me. While I live in the Audish slums, like my parents before me, I certainly don’t mingle with its residents.

"I'm sorry. I... I don't have any money on me," I say, flushing.

At that revelation, the man's entourage perks up, and two of them circle behind me.

"I see," the rough man says, puffing on his pipe. "Are you sure? Nobles always carry a stash of spare chits on them like the coin's nothing."

They think I'm a...?

"I'm not a noble," I say, barely containing a laugh.

The men at my back release that hilarity for me while their leader knocks his pipe against the wall.

"Then, I suppose we'll have to take our payment out on your hide," he says. "You know... I've never had a mugging victim come to me before."

Oh, hell. How do I keep finding myself in situations like this? One day, my curiosity will be the death of me.

Before these miscreants can attack, I flick my switchblade into my waiting palm, raising it into view, but my warding posture only makes them chuckle.

"Do you know how to use that, boy?" asks their leader.

"I do, although I really don't want to," I say. "Master Saryntor will give me a tongue lashing if he learns that I used such a crude weapon because I forgot my sword in the workshop."

Where my posture did nothing, my confidence makes the rough man's peons falter.

"Oh, come on!" that man huffs. "He's a kid with a single blade. We've got the backing of the guild if we need it."

Malicious smiles spread from one face to another, and I decide that waiting for their first strike would be a bad idea. Before he has a chance to defend himself, I dive for the ringleader, thrusting in two, neat arcs at his face. As I dart away, my opponent howls, clawing at the leaking holes where his eyes once were.

I probably should have attacked the men behind him then, fleeing at the first opening, but I couldn't leave that flint and steel striker behind. It could help with my current project, and so, I have to have it. I don't even consider that I could probably find another one of these somewhere else until the rest of the men have surrounded me.

As I spin toward them, I vainly hope that my work on their leader will make them stupid or at least nervous enough to give me an advantage, but luck doesn't favor me tonight. They rush me together, and I manage a glancing slice along one of their ribs before they pin me to the wall, smashing my wrist into stone until I drop the switchblade.

“Got him, boss,” one of the men calls, panting. “What now?”

“Kill him, you idiots,” the blinded man hisses, “but take his eyes first! And make it hurt.”

As a knifepoint hovers in the center of my vision, I squirm, yelling at the top of my lungs. Maybe somebody will decide to take mercy on me, although that doesn't seem likely. Muggings like this are fairly common in the Audish slums.

“Hold still, brat!”

My breath wooshes out of me as one of the brutes buries his fist in my stomach, but even through hazing thoughts, I know that's enough. It's time to break the rules, time to return to every trick my long-spurned heritage has taught me.

I shoot my knee forward, crunching it in between the legs of the man in front of me. While the two holding me are distracted by their companion's pained grunt, I yank against the hands pinning me in place. I only break one arm free, but even that small freedom is enough to give one of my captors a black eye.

The miscreants who were waiting in the wings recover from their shock, slamming me into the wall again, and I hiss and spit, struggling to escape their hold.

“Boss, I don't think he's a noble,” one of the men says. “He fights dirty. Might make a good recruit.”

A RECRUIT? For what? A thieves guild? No, thank you.

“As if I'd ever work for the likes of you,” I wheeze.

Shuffling forward, the ringleader shoves some of his men aside.

“He BLINDED me, morons,” he bellows with liquid weeping from the pits of his eyes. “That insult must be met with strength.”

The man drives a knife at me. Thank Alouin for his lack of vision because the blade buries to the hilt in my shoulder rather than my face, but my body doesn't join my mind in celebrating the near miss. At the sharp flare of its protest, I scream, getting louder as my tormentor withdraws the blade nice and slow.

Alouin, I'm going to die, murdered by a ruffian. This can't be happening.

“Sorry, but I cannot let this continue.”

That unknown voice drifted from overhead, and the gathered criminals lift their faces toward the interruption in time for a shape to land on their ringleader. Two thunks sound on either side of me, leaving my arms freed as my captors limply drop.

Only a second has passed, and three of the men are down with the other four only now reaching for paltry weapons. I grin. Maybe tonight isn't my day to die.

Then, my rescuer rises from his crouch with the moonlight revealing him to be a child, no older than six.

Sent reeling by my erratic changes of luck, I barely notice as a whistle pierces the night air. It quickly cuts off, which confuses me until the other five men clutch at the holes that have appeared like magic through their chests.

"A moment too slow. That is not good," the child says, grimacing. "How quickly can you run? With the summons that tall one unleashed, their gang will be here shortly."

What in the-? Why is this KID speaking like an adult? And how did such a small person kill seven street thugs so efficiently?

Of more interest: have I found my next puzzle?

These questions aren't important right now. I've angered one of Daira's street gangs, and their backup is sure to be coming.

Crouching beside an eyeless corpse, I rifle through its pockets while sliding a broad steel ring off of its knuckles.

"Now is not the time for looting," the child says while checking the shadowed recesses around us.

Ignoring that comment, I stride toward an alley, one that a pack of riled-up gang members will most likely use to reach us soon, if they come at all. The square that houses most of the gangs' hideouts lies close to the end of it.

Withdrawing a container that I borrowed from the workshop, I pour its enclosed black powder into a pile in the center of the alley.

"What are you doing?" the child hisses behind me. "We need to run. Now."

"If you're scared, you don't have to stay," I say, "but I need to run an experi- start a distraction before fleeing."

The child looks at me like I'm crazy.

"What sort of distraction can powder cause?"

"Possibly none at all, but if I'm right, a big, bright, deafening one," I say, flashing my teeth at the kid. "From what I saw, you can propel solid matter at high speeds. Is that correct?"

Flinching, the child mumbles, "Maybe."

"If I place this," I say, lifting the striker into view, "next to that powder, can you hit it from the end of the alley, hard enough to cause a spark?"

"I do not know," the child says with a shrug. "Possibly?"

"Oh, good," I breathe. "I didn't like my chances of lighting it without help."

Setting the striker down, I move to the alley's end, where we can use the buildings as cover. As we wait, I clutch the projectile in my pocket in a tight fist.

Soon enough, howling voices float down the alley, and at least twelve people round the corner.

"When do I-?" the child asks.

"Wait."

When the screaming gang members are almost on the pile, I nod.

"Now!"

The child gestures, a spark flies, and an ear-shattering boom splits the night. The force of the explosion knocks us on our back, and I squint through teared-up eyes at a glorious gout of flames. Quickly regaining my feet, I help the child up.

"Now, we run," I say.

When we eventually stop outside the queen's workshop, winded and sore, we catch one another's eyes, and uproarious laughter spills from us, despite our labored breathing.

"What did... you do?" the child asks.

"Took powder from... disassembled projectiles and..." I wheeze. "Wait. I can't... tell you this. State secrets."

That only doubles the child's laughter.

"Don't think you... need to worry about-"

"RAIMIE!"

A short distance from us, a man in military dress is standing with his fists clenched at his sides. On seeing him, the child flinches, but he conspiratorially winks at me before trotting to the stranger.

"I'm sorry, father," he says. "I know the job was to observe-"

The stranger grabs Raimie's shoulders hard enough that he flinches, and as if in response, a glow settles over the child. Before I can determine if I'm hallucinating that strange phenomenon, the stranger pulls Raimie into a hug, tightly squeezing. This also happens to obscure the glow, if it was

even real.

"Don't EVER make me worry like that again," the stranger growls.

Raimie pushes against the man's chest, and at his insistence, the stranger releases him.

"You didn't need to worry," Raimie says. "Oswin had the situation well in hand. Didn't you, Oswin?"

Oh. They're speaking to me now. I thought I'd been forgotten. Possibly.

And they know my name. How?

"I did what was necessary for the cleanest escape possible," I say.

"So?" Raimie asks, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Does he pass?"

"We'll see."

As the stranger advances on me, I stand up straighter.

"My name is Aramar," the stranger says. "Do you know who I am?"

I narrow my eyes. From the way he phrased it, that question must require more than the answer that anyone in Daira might give, but I have no clue what secrets the famous persona of Aramar might be hiding.

That such secrets exist doesn't surprise me. I always thought the puzzle that is Aramar was missing pieces, but my duties in the queen's workshop have sheltered me, for the most part, from court politics. I haven't been exposed to the man that often.

If I have nothing to presently offer him, though, I might as well start with what I know and extrapolate from there. That strategy has never failed to serve me in the past.

"You're the queen's confidant," I say. "Supposedly, you're of the exiled Audish royal line too."

Silently, Aramar waits, giving me nothing.

Nothing except for the way he's holding himself, as if a threat could appear at any moment. The near silent approach, where I was oblivious to his presence until he called for his son. And that child's capabilities! Dropping into a seven-on-one fight without a thought. Not the slightest flinch when a dozen enemies were charging him. Who does that?

When realization hits, I want to take a step back, but I hold my ground as I answer.

"You're part of the Hand."

"Excellent, Oswin," Aramar says with a nod of approval. "Much faster than the other candidates."

He glances at Raimie, who's still bouncing with excitement.

"And my son likes you," he says, as if to himself, "which is impressive in its own right."

A weighty gaze falls on me, considering, and I stand stock-still, meeting Aramar's eyes with a confidence I don't feel.

"I don't see the harm. We'll give you a try," he says. "How would you like to join the queen's Hand?"

I palmed a bullet, the projectile from nearly two decades ago, and slowly rolled it from one side of my hand to the other. It had become my good luck charm, a memento of the night I'd met Raimie, the child who'd become my best friend despite the seven-year gap between us. Who after a nine-year separation, hadn't recognized me when we'd met on a boat in Daira's harbor, no matter that it had seemed like he might have for a moment.

Nine years surely explained Raimie's change in demeanor. When he'd first returned from his convalescence, a strange sense of innocence had smothered every trace of the friend I'd sacrificed everything for, but over the last two years, that had faded. Raimie had once more become the confident, brash boy that I'd been inseparable from in Daira.

The one I'd enjoyed testing my skills against during sparring contests. Who'd loved, during Hand training, to race over the rooftops with me. Who'd confessed his darkest secrets during a week when Aramar had been away and his home had been less than welcoming. Nine years and the injuries that he'd sustained in the accident surely accounted for Raimie's loss of memory. Surely.

Damnit, I couldn't keep dwelling on the past like this.

Once more, I snatched Little's report off of my desk, determined to finish it this time. In it, the youngest member of the Hand spent a great deal of time describing the journey to Qena as well as the village itself, at least at first. I recognized the delaying tactic, even in its written form, but I still took my time while reading this part.

A village of scientists and engineers? What a beautiful concept! Maybe I could visit them when I had spare time. I could show them my bullet and the original pistol from years before, the one I'd stashed away from prying hands and minds. Together, the scientists and I could unravel the mechanisms that made the gun from Daira's tear so reliable and accurate, and once that puzzle was solved, we could tweak the crude replica that I'd devised years ago, further improving upon it. It would be a glorious trip, assuming I could ever find the free time needed to make it.

Little eventually meandered away from his lengthy description, and when I read about the group's time in the village itself, I groaned.

Of course Rhylix had shown up in the same town. That Eselan always appeared at the most convenient or, depending on one's point of view, inconvenient of times.

I was well aware that my dislike of Rhylix was irrational. Four years ago, when Marcuset and I had received a coded message from Eledis, calling for us to ready the troops, I'd been overjoyed, eager to prepare everything for the Audish royal family's return. Marcuset had warned me that Raimie might not be the same, but I hadn't listened to him. My childhood friend was coming home!

Then, Raimie had arrived, and very little recognition had passed between us. Instead, my friend had insisted on adding to the danger to his soldiers, all to retrieve his new friend. Rhylix.

Ever since then, I hadn't been able to shake my dislike of the man, despite everything Rhylix had done for Raimie and his people.

The Eselan's addition to Raimie's group in Qena wasn't what had triggered my dismay, though. Once again, my friend had come up with a ridiculous plan, and once again, I was expected to help with it, not that I ever truly minded doing that. Helping Raimie with the reckless and daring was one of my favorite pastimes, but unfortunately, it usually came with additional work.

Was this what my life would become? Work piled on work until I was so overwhelmed with it that it killed me?

No. I couldn't think like that.

Tucking the half-read report in a breast pocket, I left my office. It was time to speak with a man I despised.

Revision #1

Created 9 November 2024 23:43:37 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:45 by FatalisticFable