

# Adventures of the Hand 4.2

## Middle

I found Eledis on the other side of the palace, but the old man wasn't alone. Gistrick and Marcuset were in the study with him. I could hear the three of them shouting from the end of the hall, but when I slipped into the room, the argument, whatever it had been about, cut off.

I smiled at their shocked expressions. Using my status as spymaster to intrude on sensitive moments like this was always a pleasure, even if I sorely missed my previous anonymity as a simple ship's captain.

"What are you three up to?" I asked.

Even with it lingering more on Marcuset than on the others, these three men's sense of guilt was almost imperceptible, but I caught on to it regardless. Reading people's faces was a skill that Aramar had extensively trained me in.

One of the men gave an excuse of logistics for the investiture to explain their argument, but now that my interest had been piqued, I was only half-listening to it. What had they really been discussing before I'd interrupted?

Usually, I would discount what I'd seen here, attributing it to the planning of a surprise or something equally as harmless. For a time, I'd increase the number of people watching these three, but that would be the extent of my precautions.

These were not normal times. A new king was about to be crowned, or whatever they called the process in this strange land. The period from now until the end of Raimie's first year on the throne would be exceptionally perilous for him. Add to that my suspicions that we had a traitor in our midst, and one got a jumpy spymaster.

When Ring had first brought the possibility of treachery to my attention, I hadn't taken it seriously. As good as Ring was at her job, she also had an unhealthy fear of betrayal, one that sometimes manifested as paranoia. She constantly saw plots against those she loved, even from the most harmless of people.

When she'd brought me evidence of her theory, however, I'd paid attention to her claims.

One of her contacts had discovered a suspicious flask during the one-year anniversary of Auden's liberation. People, both notable and insignificant, had packed the capital for the festivals and

feasts.

That day, I'd been in a good mood, mostly because Raimie hadn't once tried to escape from my watch. Playing the role of bodyguard was always more fun if one's charge actually cooperated with you. Because of that, my only challenge at the time had been keeping my friend away from Ren.

She'd attended the anniversary ball with Kylorian, and subtly guiding Raimie out of her path had taken every trick I knew. At the time, a meeting between the two of them would have been disastrous, given how much of a mess my friend had still been from how she'd left him, and that day, Raimie had been so very content. I hadn't wanted the evening ruined for him, not with a reminder of what he'd lost at least.

Later that night, after most revelers had gone home to sleep off their drunken stupor, Ring had come along and ruined *my* good mood. She'd given me the flask, flushed with what she'd viewed as victory, and I'd had enough time to carefully glance over the folded message inside before the flask and its contents had disappeared.

What I'd gathered from that note had been enough to convince me that Ring was right. A malicious plot against Raimie was afoot, and our unknown enemy was using Esela to gather their reports, a tactic stolen straight from the Hand.

Even now, so many months later, our only clue about the traitor was the Eselan nature of that note's recipient. Nothing further had surfaced, much to my chagrin. Raimie's Hand and its various subordinates were supposed to be the pinnacle of spy networks in this world, and someone else was besting us.

Some nights, the lack of results drove me up a wall. I might excel at solving puzzles, but I needed more than one, single piece to do that well. I wasn't like Thumb, who could look at whatever slight evidence had been gathered and extrapolate a 'pattern' from it, if the subject matter matched his obsessions. I needed more data to move forward.

The only assumption I felt certain of was that Doldimar was involved in this plot. As I'd told Raimie weeks ago, no other nation would want to take advantage of Auden's weakened state, not when the kingdom had made an ally of Ada'ir.

The Southern Kingdoms might try to take control through economic means, but with Ada'ir providing necessary and reasonable trade agreements, such a ploy from those infighting nations would decisively fail.

Soon after Doldimar had disappeared, Ratchav had looked like they might, for the first time in decades, try to expand their borders, even if said expansion happened to be across the sea, but with Ada'ir's army between the two nations, that plan had quickly flopped as well.

For a time, I'd toyed with the idea that the Matvai were involved in this plot, but the mountain clans had always been aggressively isolationist, more so than Ratchav, and that stance hadn't changed, even with Raimie's current round of negotiations.

In the known world, no other nation could contest Auden's sovereignty. The ruins to the north suggested that, at some point, a realm might have existed beyond the mountains, but it had long since vanished from the face of the earth. Auden's former neighbor, Lyzencroft, had also gone the way of that supposed ancient civilization, nothing but dead cities and wild forests. The small corner of the continent where the Esela had once carved out a haven for themselves was full of nothing but desolation as well. That left only one significant player on the board: Doldimar.

With the Dark Lord gone and no way to track him, however, I was at a loss as to how I could proceed with this investigation. On the night in question, one of Ring's contacts had found our only clue, the flask, in the gardens, which had been both unmonitored and crowded during the ball. Trying to learn who'd dropped the flask out of everyone who'd visited the gardens that evening had been a nightmare, one that had surfaced nothing.

Given that, I'd been forced to lay low and watch for suspicious activity. Activity such as what Eledis, Gistrick, and Marcuset were currently displaying.

"Can we help you, spymaster?" Eledis asked.

I must have been staring at them for too long. Tiredly blinking, I resisted the urge to rub my eyes while scrambling to remember why I'd come here in the first place.

"Do you have any plans for the palace's spires, Eledis?" I asked.

"None currently. So far as I know, no one would want to climb all those stairs on a daily basis," Eledis said. "Why?"

"I need them for the king's latest pet project. I wanted to ensure they'll be vacant when our guests arrive," I said. "If I require anything else from you, I'll let you know."

Turning, I started for the door.

"Guests?" Eledis asked behind me. "What guests?"

Fixing him with a stern stare, I said, "It's not my place to say."

It really wasn't. I carried out the king's will in whatever way he decided to use me, serving as an extension of my friend if you will, and because of that, I didn't need to explain my actions to anyone who chose to question them. Let Raimie tell those three magic-phobic men about how he planned to gather, house, and train who knew how many primeancers in the palace.

With an unpleasant task completed, I proceeded to a much more anticipated chore. When I reached Ring's room in the maid's quarters, I knocked on the door and stepped back, prepared to wait, but it opened much more quickly than I'd expected.

After hurrying outside, an unknown man scurried away from Ring's room, only briefly pausing at the sight of me glaring at him. Ring soon followed with her hair disheveled and face paints slightly smeared. Seeing this, my guts twisted into a knot, and I folded my arms behind my back to hide

my fists.

“Learn anything useful?” I lightly asked.

“Not in the slightest,” Ring said with a yawn. “He was boring in bed too. What a waste of time.”

I said nothing in return, afraid of what might come out if I opened my mouth, and looking me over, Ring grinned, leaning forward so that her robe gaped open.

“Would you like to come in?” she asked.

“No. Thank you,” I said, firmly fixing my eyes above her head. “I have a new assignment for you.”

Straightening, Ring crossed her arms.

“But I was so enjoying tracking our spy,” she said with a pout.

“Ring...” I sighed.

Rolling her eyes, she snapped, “Fine. What’s the new assignment, then?”

Alouin, I *hated* it when she was upset with me, but... I wasn’t exactly happy right now either.

“You’re aware of the list that Thumb and Pointer have written for us while on their search?” I asked.

“You mean the hunt for the Dark Lord we’ll never find? Yeah, I know all about that silly quest and their extra duties,” Ring said. “At least they’re keeping track of potential threats, like primeancers while, on their tryst.”

I’d never like hearing that tone directed at anyone I loved, least of all when it came from a member of the Hand.

Frowning, I said, “Ring, those are your-”

“-family, I know,” she said with a grimace. “I’m just jealous, Oswin.”

At my name on her lips, my heart fluttered, but I forced my frown to deepen instead of listening to what that pathetic organ wanted to do.

“Middle,” Ring corrected with an eyeroll. “So, the list?”

“I want you to go to the potential primeancers on it and invite them to the palace,” I said.

With her eyes lighting up, Ring clasped her hands in front of her face.

“Oo...” she breathed. “What does the king want with them?”

“Not your concern,” I said. “You have your orders. Sweet talk the people on that list into coming here. It should be an interesting challenge for you. They won’t want to come, and you can’t force them to if they say no.”

She beamed with the last of her early morning hostility vanishing.

“I look forward to it.”

If that was true, why didn’t she seem like she did? Why was she looking at me with a slight pinch to her eyes?

“Good,” I said. “If you need any additional details for your mission, I’ll be in my office-”

“Middle?” Ring interrupted. “When was the last time you slept?”

Oh. That explained why she looked so concerned. Had my fatigue gotten bad enough that others could see it?

“What do you mean?” I asked with a fake smile.

When Ring stepped closer, it sent my heart leaping like a rabbit in my chest, only increasing in speed when she wiped her thumbs under my eyes. On inspecting their pads, she lost all expression, examining the powder found there.

“As I thought,” she said. “Come on.”

Snatching my wrist, Ring dragged me into her room.

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