

# Adventures of the Hand 4.3

## Middle

“Ring!” I hissed.

I glanced back as the door to her bedroom thumped closed behind us.

“What are you doing?” I continued. “We can’t-”

Shoving me onto her mussed bed, Ring sternly pointed a finger at me.

“Stay.”

With that, Ring fled behind the screen that halved her room, and I considered bolting rather than following directions. Why were we in *here* right now? Much as Ring had offered for me to follow her through that closed door earlier, I knew how much she hadn't actually wanted it. She'd once told me how much she valued her privacy from the other members of the Hand, after all.

Before I could decide whether I was fleeing or not, Ring returned with a small bottle in hand.

“This will work much better than that shitty powder you’re currently using,” she said, placing the bottle on the bed’s edge. “Now, take off your jacket and lie, belly-first, on the bed.”

Wait, *what?* This wasn’t- I didn’t... Well, I *did*, but I’d wanted it to be more-

Making an exasperated noise, Ring straddled my lap, reaching for the top button of my jacket, and my thoughts stalled for a moment, resuming with difficulty.

Alouin, she was close. Hell, I badly wanted to throw my arms around her waist and pull her on top of me, but I shouldn’t encourage... whatever this was.

I really, really shouldn’t.

“Arms up,” Ring said.

When I followed those instructions, my shirt came off, making my heart both seize and jump in my chest, but by the time it was over my head, Ring had climbed out of my lap.

“Face down,” she demanded, pointing at her pillows. “Now, Middle.”

Oh. *Oh!* A massage, one of those things Ring specialized in. That made *so much more sense* than anything else I'd been thinking. Damnit, why had my thoughts automatically gone *there*? I should know better than that.

Fortunately, a pillow in my face was there to mask my chagrin, and as I fought it down internally, Ring climbed to sit on the small of my back.

"So many tensed muscles, Middle. That's bad for your health," she said. "Try to relax."

And wasn't that going to be a struggle, what with *her* pinning me to her bed? Still, I did my best. I focused on her fingers and the heels of her palms, on where she placed them and how she moved them to release strain from my body. Soon enough, I started drifting off without meaning to: not quite asleep and not quite awake.

Moving to rest on my thighs, Ring began her work on my lower back, and I made an utterly embarrassing noise, thankfully muffled by the pillow.

"Ha! Figures," Ring said with a laugh. "You *would* carry your tension here."

Alouin, what she was doing was pure magic. I hadn't even known how tense I was until she'd gotten started with this, and *hell*, I didn't want her to stop...

That might be a problem, but right now, I couldn't bring myself to care.

"Why do you refuse to call me by name, Oswin?" Ring asked. "You did when we first met but ever since then..."

Well did I remember the moment she was talking about. Even beleaguered as she'd been at the time, I'd beheld Ring as the essence of beauty. The way she'd faced down the men who'd wanted to murder her, the defiant tilt of her chin, the glint in her hazel eyes: a memory that clearly blazed in my mind. I'd often wondered if I'd fallen for her then or if it had been in the subsequent years, spent working together.

"Did you know that you were my first mission as a member of the Hand?" I asked with sheets muffling my voice.

"I always thought it might be so," Ring said. "You were quite inexperienced at the time."

She laughed, and I wished I could listen to her delight forever.

"I should never have tried to fight so many of those guards at once," I said, groaning at the recollection, "but you were desperate, and I couldn't let them kill you. Speaking your name as I did was a mistake. Even if we know each other's names, the members of a Hand are never to use them. We can't have a strong attachment to anyone."

Silently, Ring released her pressure on my legs, and I thought she might be done, which was more disappointing than I might like, but then she removed my boots. While she started working her

magic on my feet, I propped myself up on my elbows before retrieving Little's report. I should finish it while I was 'stuck' here.

"Do you ever stop working?" Ring asked with a strained laugh.

"No," I distractedly said. "Maybe I'll get a break when I'm dead."

The fingers on the balls of my feet paused for several heartbeats before resuming, and unwilling to question that pause, I started the report from the beginning again.

"You know Raimie will never remember you, right?" Ring said "Marcuset told us that the accident did something to his head."

"I've accepted that fact," I said, "but he's Raimie. I know you two didn't spend much time together before he left Daira, but he was my best friend, all parts of him. In my entire life, pretending we were strangers when he returned was the most difficult deception I've ever-"

"You don't have to explain yourself to me," Ring said. "I had two reasons for joining this crazy quest to Auden. One was for Raimie, and the other was-"

As I ran my eyes over a line in Little's report again, my body stiffened, undoing all of Ring's hard work in an instant.

"What is it?" she asked, as if from a far distant place.

I checked the report's date. Alouin above, it had arrived two weeks ago. How had I slipped up so badly that I'd missed this until *now*?

Scrambling out of bed, I hastily grabbed my shirt, tossing it on. Ring joined me on her feet, snapping her fingers to get my attention.

"Middle! What is it?" she snapped.

"Read it for yourself," I growled, shoving the report into her chest. "Then, start your assignment."

Hell, that had been harsh. Before I left, I stumbled to a halt, clinging to the doorframe.

"And thank you," I said with an awkward smile. "Truly."

Shaking her head, Ring tossed the bottle that I'd forgotten at me, and as I took off into a run, I stashed it. Don't ask me why I was moving with such haste. What was I going to do? Sprint toward Qena and hope to encounter Raimie and his soldiers on the way?

At that thought, I laughed, startling a maid. Sure, I probably couldn't help my friend now, but I *could* prepare the palace for when he arrived. My first task would be finding a room that could work as a better resting place than a bedroll, perched on glass above a chasm.

I should visit Raimie's study to retrieve said bedroll so my friend would have something familiar in his new room, and the fastest route there was via a shortcut through the service passages, one of which was quickly approaching.

As I spun onto it, something hard and fleshy stopped me short. I went down in a tumble of limbs, landing on whatever had caused this embarrassing fall, but even with the breath knocked out of my lungs, long-drilled instincts took over.

I rolled to my feet with a knife in my hand before clutching my aching chest. Seemingly in response, a pained wheeze came from the ground, and while searching the hallway for threats, I noted this sound had come from Little, sprawled at my feet. Taking a shuddering breath, the youngest member of the Hand followed my example, scrambling to his feet.

But if Little was back...

Weak laughter drifted from further down the hall.

"Gods, that hurts," Raimie groaned. "I'm sorry about laughing. Two members of the Hand collapsing so spectacularly was too much for me to resist, though. Did you two hurt anything?"

Alouin, how could *he* ask that?

A crutch was keeping Raimie upright with its support unmistakably necessary, considering how heavily he was leaning on it. He'd tried to undermine the severity of what was wrong with him, walking on his own and pleasantly smiling, but the act wouldn't fool... *anyone*, actually.

Ele's light was thickly clinging to him, like a halo engulfing his body, and Raimie *never* used his powers so blatantly. He wasn't afraid to display his primacy, but the fact that he was relying on it simply to stand told me how unwell he truly was.

Taking this in, I tried to breathe or move, but alarm had locked my body in a vice. I hadn't seen Raimie court death so closely since the accident that had robbed me of my friend.

*The boat pulls into the dock, and while the sailors weigh anchor and lower the gangplank, I rapidly shift from foot to foot. Once I have a path to it, I can't say how I stay where I am instead of sprinting onto the ship's deck.*

*Marcuset debarks first with his head hanging low. Even with that, I somehow catch the commander's eye. Maybe my wiggling is what prompts him to come over.*

*"Did you find him?" I ask.*

*The ocean is vast, so big that I can't wrap my head around it. Finding one boy, floating on its endless surface, is incomprehensible.*

*I ran for help as soon as Raimie fell into the water this afternoon, but Aramar didn't finish organizing a search and rescue party until what felt like hours later. In cases where the sea has*

*dragged someone into its embrace, rescue depends entirely on how quickly the hunt for its victims begins. So, did this one start early enough or not?*

*"We found him," Marcuset tiredly says.*

*"That's great news!"*

*Clapping my hands together, I cock my head.*

*"Why do you look so unhappy, then?"*

*"I'll explain," Aramar says from behind me.*

*I don't jump, which is a testament to my years of training, but still, that man's approach went undetected AGAIN. Spymaster Aramar's lack of presence is enviable.*

*"Spymaster!" I say, stiffly saluting.*

*"No need for formality this evening, Middle," Aramar says with no inflection in his voice. "You've saved my family's lives, after all."*

*He still has his eyes fixed on the gangplank, which quickly draws my attention as well. Soon enough, two pairs of stretcher bearers descend from the ship, making my stomach drop, and when they set foot on the dock, I leap forward. Aramar shouts something behind me, but I ignore him, intent on those stretchers.*

*The first of them holds Samantha, Raimie's mother. She's sleeping peacefully, wrapped in blankets, and I quickly abandon my inspection of her. I couldn't care less what's happened to that woman.*

*Raimie is in the second. The kid has been tied to the stretcher, but when my friend flails against those bonds, I understand why they've taken precautions like that. His arm is purple and swollen from the wrist to the elbow, badly broken, and he's staring at nothing, frantically shifting his eyes back and forth while he incoherently mumbles. That ramble is only broken by the occasional, wet cough. Despite the fact that someone seems to have changed his clothes since his tumble into the sea, drying him off as well, moisture is still clinging to his new outfit, and goosebumps are spread across his skin.*

*If those issues weren't bad enough, Ele and Daevetch are fighting for control of Raimie's body. Black tendrils slap at white vines, and the occasional bloom of light drives its adversary away. Raimie's face alternates between an angry, bared grin and serene stillness with those changes happening so swiftly that disquiet rises in me.*

*At the edge of my awareness, I note Aramar gently tugging on me, so I step back, letting the stretcher bearers continue toward the carriages at the end of the dock.*

*"You did well, Middle," he says, patting my shoulder.*

*"I could have been faster," I whisper. "Maybe if I had, Raimie wouldn't be-"*

*I stop short, refusing to say another word.*

*"My son isn't dying. He's stronger than you think," Aramar says. "Even if he was leaving us, though, it wouldn't matter. I'm taking both of them to Allanovian, where they'll get treatment."*

*"The Eselan city?" I say. "They'll turn you away! No humans are allowed there."*

*"My family is," Aramar says.*

*He grins, the first real emotion he's shown since his return.*

*"Where do you think Raimie learned that fighting style you're so envious of?"*

*I was certainly jealous of it BEFORE I replicated the style on my own, in secret.*

*But that's not the point right now.*

*"I have friends there," Aramar says, crinkling his brow. "They'll have to see us."*

*Despite the clear evidence of his disquiet, I decide to believe his assertion, and that relieves me more than I care to admit.*

*"Allanovian has the best healers in Ada'ir. If you're going there, I'm sure Raimie will be fine," I say.*

*But then, I stiffen again. Aramar may have told me to abandon formality, but I need to know what he expects from me for the next few weeks.*

*"Do you have any assignments for me while you're gone, spymaster?"*

*With a sad smile, Aramar reaches over his head for the delicate chain around his neck, taking it off.*

*"I certainly do," he says.*

*He hands me a key, dangling from the end of the chain.*

*"This will give you access to our records."*

*Reaching into a pocket, Aramar gives me a pin, smelted into the shape of a hand.*

*"And this will get you in to see the queen, night or day. Marcuset will explain the rest. Good luck, Oswin."*

*When Aramar offers me his hand, I shake it, despite my growing trepidation. Then, Raimie's father trots to catch up with his wife and son, and while I inspect his gifts with a frown, Marcuset sidles up next to me.*

*“Congratulations,” he says.*

*“For what?” I say, pocketing the pin to further inspect the key.*

*What does it unlock? Records? Records for what?*

*“On your rise to the rank of spymaster, of course,” Marcuset says.*

*The rank of... Wait.*

*“WHAT?”*

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