

Adventures of the Hand 4.4

Middle

Taking fistfuls of Little's jacket, I pulled him uncomfortably close to me.

"You were supposed to keep him safe!" I growled.

My adopted son wouldn't lift his gaze from the floor, and at his miserable expression, I almost stopped scolding him. I almost released him and told him that we'd fix this, but this was exactly what I'd been afraid of, a mistake that could have irreparable consequences.

Pushing forward was for Little's own good as a spy.

"What did you do? Let him go off on his own again?" I snapped. "I should remove you from the Hand, making you revisit your training. How do a few months of processing paperwork sound?"

Little's face blanched, but he remained resolutely stoic.

"Nothing to say for yourself, huh?" I said, shaking him.

At the tail end of that, white light zapped between us, and stumbling back, I spun on Raimie—the obvious source of that light—intending to tear into him for leaving Little behind. That reproach died on my tongue before I could speak it.

Raimie was gasping, supported by Rhylix. His crutch was on the ground, most likely abandoned when he'd thrown Ele between me and Little, and when I noted Rhylix glaring at me, I, in turn, swallowed guilt.

"This injury wasn't Little's fault," Raimie said once he'd recovered.

He retrieved his crutch with Rhylix's help.

"A storm snuck up on us while I was fixing Qena's tear. A pebble and especially fierce wind did this to me."

I narrowed my eyes, wondering whether to believe this tall tale. If Raimie ever lied, it was in service to the people he cared about, but even in circumstances like those, his deceptions were easy to spot, which I'd always found ironic, given what he'd once been. Right now, I couldn't detect falsehood in this story.

“You and I need to have a very long chat,” I told Little, “but it can wait. Get out of here.”

Nodding, Little slunk away, and I fought to keep from rubbing my face.

“And you!” I snapped instead. “Why do you make life so difficult for me? Sir.”

Alouin, I *had* to remember to add that sign of respect. When I was emotionally compromised, as I was now, such signs of formality were quickly forgotten. I ended up slipping into the jargon and beat of conversation that Raimie and I had used as kids.

“I promise, that’s not my aim,” Raimie said with a smirk.

Of course it wasn’t. It never was, and yet, that was what always happened.

“At least tell me that you’ll rest until the investiture,” I said. “In a *proper* bed, sir.”

“That was the plan, but then, I remembered that I don’t know which wing holds the bedrooms,” Raimie said, grimacing. “Would you mind showing me?”

“Not at all, sir,” I said.

Finally, my charge was showing some sense.

As I led Raimie and Rhylix through the palace, I could feel the Eselan’s stare drilling into my back. That man was probably upset about the commotion I’d caused, and for once, I thought his prickly temper might be warranted. I should have waited to discipline Little until Raimie wasn’t in sight, but I’d just been so *angry* to see my childhood friend’s body broken again that I hadn’t thought about what I was doing.

This was why a member of a royal Hand couldn’t make personal attachments. Once that happened, a spy made mistakes much more often, and Raimie couldn’t afford a spymaster who was worn out and emotionally entangled, not when danger was courting him with every breath.

I should step down. It was a prospect I’d been toying with for the last year, but the timing had never been right, not that four days before Raimie’s investiture would be good timing either. Dealing with a host of new responsibilities *and* handling an inexperienced spymaster would be difficult for Raimie, but it might be for the best.

It was only a matter of time before my exhaustion caused more than simple mistakes, like what had happened today. Soon enough, I’d fail to assign one of the Hand to bodyguard rotation or something equally as terrible. Before disaster struck, someone else should take up the reins, and Pointer, the one I’d been preparing to take my position for years, was ready for the job, even if he didn’t know it yet. Yes, Raimie would be safe with the other spy in my current role.

“Here we are,” I said, gesturing toward a closed door. “It should be to your liking, sir. The occasional diplomat’s guard sleeps here, and I’ll be next door, if you require anything.”

“Sounds perfect,” Raimie said.

Shuffling into the small room, he got into bed with Rhylix’s help.

“Thank you, Rhy,” he said. “Get some rest before starting up with the school, ok? You and Oswin will need to work out plenty of logistics before we’re set up.”

And wouldn’t that be *fun*?

“Are you sure you’ll be fine by yourself?” Rhylix asked.

“More than sure. I’m not entirely helpless,” Raimie said. “I can hobble far enough to get help, if needed.”

He grinned, which did *not* help with arguing his case. It pulled his chalky skin tight over his cheekbones, emphasizing how sickly he looked at the moment.

“If you say so,” Rhylix said. “I’ll come by later this evening to check on you. Stay in bed until I return.”

With a chuckle, Raimie said, “Yes, healer! I’ll see you then.”

When the Eselan left, I made to follow, but Raimie called me back.

“We need to talk.”

So. Maybe Raimie had reached the same conclusion as me. That hurt more than I’d expected.

Closing the door behind me, I absently pulled my lucky bullet from its resting place in my pocket, tumbling it through my fingers. Settling against a wall, I waited for the berating that was sure to come.

“Did you ever figure out how that thing works?” Raimie tiredly asked.

Surprised, I almost dropped the bullet.

“...This?” I asked.

Why would Raimie want to know about it?

“No. Its trigger continues to elude me.”

“That’s a shame. I know how much the difference between that pistol from the tear and the flintlock you created bothered you,” Raimie said. “If it helps, I always thought your design was brilliant. Transmuting the huge explosion that massacred a Daira gang to the tiny one our guns can handle was pure genius. Made me a tad jealous, if I’m being honest.”

“Yes, well. At times, your mastery of anything written makes me want to tear my hair...”

Rapidly blinking, I fell still. Had I heard that right? An explosion that had destroyed a gang in Daira. That had happened before Raimie had left the capital. Before he'd left my life.

No. No, on top of everything else, my hearing must be going too. Marcuset had insisted this would never happen.

So, why were my eyes burning while a single sentence tripped over itself in my mind?

"Sir, I don't mean to pry," I said, "but are you trying to tell me something? And if you are, could you please clarify what you meant?"

Raimie looked away with his throat working several times before he could speak again.

"I remember, Oswin. I'm sorry it took so long."

With the burn in them almost overwhelming me, I squeezed my eyes closed while something flattened my throat. No matter how hard I concentrated on it, my breathing continued to hiccup and stretch, uneven all around, and I didn't know how to stop it.

"When did this happen?" I faintly asked.

In painful jabs, I recalled recent moments when Raimie had sped in the opposite direction from me or times when my friend would go strangely silent, usually after he'd brought up events that had occurred during the first nine years of his life.

Raimie scratched something while considering how to respond before sighing.

"The block on my memories broke a little over two years ago, but they didn't fully assimilate until the last anniversary celebration," he said. "I may be ridiculously quick to recall anything written, but apparently, that speed suffers when it comes to my own damn memories."

"It's been that long?" I hissed through gritted teeth.

Cracking my eyes open, I found my friend, but as had become the norm in the last year, Raimie wouldn't meet my gaze, focusing on his twiddling thumbs.

"I didn't know how to broach the subject, so I avoided you," he said. "Then, I almost died. I realized how easy it would be for me to fade from the world without you knowing that I remembered our friendship from long ago. So, I'm sorry for running away from the subject. I'm sorry for taking so long to tell you. Mostly, I'm just godsdamn sorry."

Was there a pre-written response for this sort of confession? Because if there was, I didn't know it. *Damn*, I wanted to punch Raimie for not coming to me earlier, but at the same time, something absolutely exuberant was crackling across every inch of my skin. My friend was back!

"You're back," I repeated.

For some reason, saying that out loud broke the pressure that had been building in me: the burn in my eyes and the fist in my throat. Sliding down the wall, I drew my knees up, hugging them, and *cried*. I didn't know what was causing this breakdown. Fatigue? Anger? Relief? Ridiculous happiness? I genuinely *didn't know*. All I could do was sit on the floor, weeping into my knees, and try with everything I had to stop it.

Vaguely, I heard something crash to the floor, but I didn't realize what had happened until Raimie lightly brushed his fingers along my arm.

Jerking my head up, I said, "What are you doing out of bed? You're supposed to be resting and... hell, Rhylix is going to kill me. You- you *idiot*."

Searching me, Raimie bit his lips before getting to his knees in agonizingly slow increments. I wanted to stop him, to *get him in bed*—hell, Raimie was being the most Alouin damned difficult charge, even now—but I couldn't move. Raimie wrapped his arms around me, giving me the most instinctual of human comforts, but it only made tears stream from my eyes even faster than before.

Nine years, I'd been wiped out of my best friend's mind, three of which had been spent in his presence, and yes! Some of that time he'd claimed me as a friend, but it hadn't... hadn't been the same. Now that it was over, I could finally admit how much it had all *hurt*, how betrayed I'd felt, how ecstatic I was that my desperate hopes had come true.

I wasn't sure how long we stayed like that, but eventually, we ended up sprawled on the ground beside one another, propped up by a wall.

"Where does this leave us?" I asked. "I could act as your bodyguard when you didn't remember me, but if we're friend, truly friends like we once were, perhaps someone else should take my assigned slots."

Raimie jerked around to face me with his mouth gaping.

"We're friends?" he asked in a rush. "Even now?"

Huh?

"Why wouldn't we be?" I asked.

"I-"

Sinking back to the floor, Raimie distractedly ran his fingers through his hair.

"I don't know," he said. "I suppose... I thought you might hate me for how long it took me to approach you."

"I'm certainly not *happy* about it," I said, "but since when has such a lapse come between us?"

Slumping, Raimie said, “Oh, thank Alouin. All those months I spent running away from you, I was terrified about whether you hated me for forgetting you. I didn't care about losing the presence of another ally watching my back. I was afraid that I'd lose *you*.”

“Does that mean you want me to stay on as your bodyguard?” I asked.

There was a long silence, and when I looked over at Raimie, I smirked. The kid—and I couldn't help but think of him as a kid right now—had fallen asleep, but I couldn't blame him for that. He'd just finished a trip that had spanned hundreds of miles after taking a life-threatening injury. Of course he'd fallen asleep.

With difficulty, I got Raimie back into bed, somehow not waking him up despite the many jostles and bumps made during the trip, and when I slipped outside, it was with a decidedly jauntier step. My workload hadn't decreased in the slightest, but Raimie had remembered our friendship, and because of that, perhaps... perhaps Nylion had too.

For some reason, that simple fact made the burden lighter.

Revision #1

Created 10 November 2024 01:43:34 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:45 by FatalisticFable