

Adventures of the Hand 5.1

Ring

To enter the ballroom was to step into a different time and a beautifully exotic place. The palace staff had outdone themselves with the decorations this year. One need only compare their efforts to the foreigners' contribution to see the care and attention that had been imbued into the task.

Let it not be said, however, that Auden's allies had come bearing less than their best gifts.

The Matvai had made a significant appearance this evening, wrapped in their furs and charm-entwined hairstyles. As a sign of continued goodwill between their peoples, the northerners had gifted the Audish with intricately carved ice sculptures that dominated each serving table as well as a small ice palace to ensconce the room's musicians.

Ada'ir's representatives had brought beautifully embroidered tablecloths and tapestries to liven the ballroom's otherwise stark state. The drape of colorful silk and muslin softened the room's hard lines, providing guests with a sense of hominess.

The food, along with its presentation, was proudly Audish work. This fall, the realm had celebrated its first bountiful harvest, and evidence of their plenty was artfully piled on top of cloth-draped tables, towering so high that the tables threatened to groan.

Floral arrangements, artificially frosted over, joined Ada'ir's tapestries in hiding the frescoes that the king had off-handedly called garish several months ago. Raimie might not have meant what he'd said or intended what had happened afterward, but his staff was attentive to his every need, including the aesthetic. When his attention had been diverted elsewhere, they'd been slowly replacing the frescoes, hiding their work with disguises when circumstances had called for it. Today, flowers masked their reconstructive efforts.

Doors opening onto the gardens had been flung wide in preparation for the Qenan display later this evening. Scientists from the quaint town could be found in every corner, bragging to anyone who would listen about their discovery: their 'fireworks'.

Above everyone's heads hung the king's contribution. For those firmly planted on the ground, those little lights seemed to airily float by themselves, but of course, that was an illusion, an impossibility. Each glowing source was a small candle, surrounded by a globe of scavenged paper, with that thin barrier effectively diffusing the light. Lines of sturdy wire had been strung through those globes at uneven intervals and inclines from wall to wall.

Raimie had spent hours making impressive acrobatic leaps and disappearing acts to properly rig them, but their effect made his work seem worthwhile. The lights stole the gazes of guests when they first entered the hall, and many exclaimed about how the stars had descended to float among them. A handful had even grown faint at this idea.

And the people! Even after four years of unimpeded recovery, the average Audish citizen couldn't claim much in the way of wealth, but on this most special of occasions, when the king and queen had invited anyone and everyone into their home, they came dressed in their best.

Deciphering which people belonged to which faction was a rather simple undertaking.

The Matvai with their loud Vasnavai wore their fur-lined caps and knee-length tunics, wrapped with colorful sashes at their waists, and their traditional weapon of choice—the ax—hung between their shoulder blades. They crowded around tables that had been carefully laden with hundreds of glasses, each filled with the vodka that they so thoroughly enjoyed. Drunken singing and shouts were already bursting from them, even at this early hour.

The visitors from Ada'ir wore their elaborately stuffy gowns and suits. Their small number stayed on the fringes, isolating themselves with their air of superiority.

The average Audish citizens, gathered from Elisk to the border, sported a similar dress to their cousins from Ada'ir, but theirs was noticeably faded and threadbare in comparison. It also reflected the style of their beloved king. More militaristic when compared to the embroidered and bejeweled gowns of the guests from Ada'ir, their clothing claimed only natural colors. For the most part, the Audish stuck to the black and navy-blue palette that Raimie favored.

A few primeancer students had gathered the courage to descend from their spires and join the fun. Their uniforms stuck out from the rest of the crowd like a sore thumb, following the same lines as the Audish military uniform: the same trousers but in a more pliable material, the same silky undershirt but without a jacket to conceal it. Instead, a circular pin stabbed the undershirt's fabric where the jacket's lapel would rest. The pin's color—white or black—declared the wearer's primeancy affiliation.

Since this was a formal occasion, many of the students had borrowed jackets that just happened to hide their pins. Even with their pitiful attempt to blend in, people gave the primeancers a wide berth, a fact that surprisingly, they had yet to notice. Students from both sides of the primeancy line giggled and happily screeched with one another. Some of the small ones were openly using Ele or Daevetch as they chased one another through the crowd, and guests scrambled to clear a path for these frolicking children.

If the norms uneasily avoided the primeancers, they hostilely ostracized the Esela, but those implacable people didn't seem to mind. Over the years, they'd come to expect behavior like this. It didn't matter that the same antipathy they'd experienced in other realms was also exhibited here. What *did* matter was that the royal family had invited them to such an important, human celebration in the first place.

Along with the rest, they wore their finest garments, but of all the factions gathered here tonight, their attire was the most eclectic. A handful of Audish military uniforms represented the Zrelnach, and Ada'ir's finery was sprinkled among the strangeness that the rest were clad in.

Big, poufy pants and bare chests; white robes that fell to the tile; floor-length, silk kimonos, embroidered with scenes of pure fantasy; skimpy cloth strips that covered the bare minimum, all poorly hidden by an airy gauze...

When I stepped into the ballroom for an initial threat assessment, a dancer in gossamer finery was what caught my eye, and on seeing that outfit, my stomach lurched. Hurrying back around the corner, I dry heaved into a fist.

"Is there a problem?" Raimie asked before Ren shushed him.

Her skirt's rustling fabric was my only indication that the queen had come near.

Gently rubbing my back, Ren asked, "What's the matter?"

"Visions of a past I thought long forgotten," I said, wiping my mouth. "I'll be fine, and you two are safe to enter. No signs of hostile intent."

Ren hesitated, resting her hands on the bump that her gown was purposefully hiding, and internally, I sang with gratitude for how much my friend cared.

"Go, go!"

I shooed them away with a wave.

"I'll be right behind you."

After another concerned pout from Ren, the couple strode into the ballroom. Raimie grabbed his wife's hand as they turned the corner, and taking a deep breath, I followed them, slinking to the room's fringes.

I found it funny how quickly the room fell silent when Raimie entered it, remembering a time when his childlike lisp had gone unnoticed in a crowd, and now, his presence elicited an intense response from everyone caught in it. To be fair, Raimie had matured since his Hand training in Daira. At some point, he'd finally, *finally* reacquired the confident air that he'd lost alongside his mother in his long-past accident, and when he smiled, he oozed charm. He placed a hand on Silverblade's hilt—not Shadowsteal, always so careful not to touch that sword—and everyone around him *knew* that they'd found the safest place on earth to be.

The best part? This charm, confidence, sense of safety? All of this was unintentional. This was Raimie, king of Auden, in his natural state.

So, when he led his queen forward to stand in front of the crowd and tugged on his sleeve, no one else saw a nervous habit. They saw a man perfecting his image, a man comfortable enough to

smooth clothing that was bothering him, an altogether forgettable action. When he clasped his hands behind his back, they didn't know that Raimie was clenching them to stop them from trembling. They only knew that their king wanted to address them. Even the raucously drunk Matvai drifted closer so they could listen to his speech.

"This ball celebrates many things, chief among them freedom from a tyranny that lasted centuries," Raimie said, "but with that celebration, we must also include the tenacity of the Audish people, a spirit that never gave up, even in the darkest of times."

He paused for a moment, assuming a faraway look that meant he'd changed his mind and would execute his new plan whether it was a good idea or not. It was a look that the Hand had grown to dread over the years, and so, I casually brushed my fingers over my weapons, scanning the crowd in preparation for what might come.

Relaxing, Raimie dropped his clenched hands to his sides.

"I assume most of you know I'm not from here. Sure, descended from Audish citizens, their king even! But not from here," he said. "When I unearthed Shadowsteal in Ada'ir and reluctantly commenced my journey, I honestly didn't know what to expect from this place. Because of a years-long embargo between our kingdoms, Auden had become a land of fables and myth in my homeland. So, when Rhy and I were stranded on Auden's shore, away from our group and with no clue where we were, I greeted this great realm with hesitation. Do you know how it responded?"

He stopped, as if expecting a response, but no one dared raise their voice. When it became apparent that none would respond, Raimie answered his own question.

"It attacked me. With *throwing knives*."

The crowd laughed. To the foreigners, the presented image was a funny oddity of this strange land, but to the Audish, it painted a perfect representation of their much-loved home.

After a moment, Raimie raised a hand to call for quiet.

"When I fell asleep that night, tired and afraid, I *hated* Auden. I thought that I'd sailed to a land that didn't deserve saving, but over time—"

Facing Ren, Raimie took her hands.

"—I learned that maybe Auden wasn't as horrible as I'd thought. Maybe I'd found something in this beautiful kingdom worth fighting for. Over time, I grew to love Auden more than any other realm."

Ren teared up, but with Raimie clasping her hands, she couldn't wipe her eyes. A single drop spilled over, running down her cheek, before Raimie caught it and swiped it away.

He turned to the crowd.

“For anyone who missed the metaphor, Ren’s the one who attacked her brother and me on our first day in Auden. She shouldn’t, however, be blamed for her hasty actions. When I look back on it, I can say with certainty that we were acting extraordinary Kiraak-like that day, skulking about the shore as we were.”

“I’m sharing this story because I want you to understand why I chose her to be my wife. I’ve heard nasty rumors of ‘Esela witchcraft’ floating about court, rumors that frankly, aren’t true. Ren has never used magic on me, a fact that can be verified by the many people who’ve stood beside us since our first meeting. Our growing love wasn’t some instantaneous trick, some entrancing spell. The romance between us was one of years, much the same as what lies between Auden and me.”

The crowd had gone tense, and feeling that atmosphere coming to the point of boiling over, I carefully watched a pair of red-faced Matvai warriors near the front, drawing my pistol to loosely hold it.

“Doldimar—”

A flinch rippled through the crowd at the sound of that horrible name.

“—destroyed Auden,” Raimie continued. “This realm may have the same name, but it is not the same kingdom as the one of old. Every day, I build our new Auden from its ashes, and this realm *will* be one of tolerance. You don’t have to like the Esela to live next to them, but you do have to LEAVE THEM ALONE and give them their peace. The law states that in Auden, Esela and humans are equal. If you don’t like this rule, move somewhere else.”

Raimie swept his glare across everyone gathered, fixing it on the two fidgeting Matvai, and they quailed before it, taking a step back. As quickly as it had been wiped off of Raimie’s face, a delighted grin bloomed on it once more, and the crowd relaxed.

“I’m sure you’re eager to hear the announcement that I promised, so enough with the reprimand and on to the good news.”

Wrapping an arm around Ren’s waist, Raimie pulled her close

“Go on,” he said. “Tell them.”

Nervously, Ren cleared her throat.

“King Raimie and I are expecting our first child and-”

Cheers drowned out the rest of her announcement. As people rushed forward to congratulate them, the Hand, including me, worked to keep the crowd’s push down to an acceptable trickle. Soon enough, other diversions distracted the couple’s guests, and the three Hand members who were unencumbered by bodyguard rotations were freed to participate in the ball’s activities.