

# Adventures of the Hand 5.2

## Ring

With the royals' announcement over, the musicians in their corner resumed the piece that they'd set aside for the king's speech, and people drifted onto the dance floor. I perched on a table beside an ice sculpture, happy to pick at a nearby roast while I watched.

"You know you want to join them," Oswi- Middle said as he stepped up beside me.

I jumped, having failed to detect his approach. Having him unexpectedly in my vicinity made my insides go warm, which made me need an excuse for my sudden blush.

"Right," I said. "Like anyone would want to dance with this."

I gestured at my crisp uniform, my face sans powder and pastes, and my hair, pulled into a tight bun, but after following my gesture down my body, Middle merely offers me his hand.

I let him pull me into a whirling throng of people. This dance didn't fit the style that I'd trained for as a child, but I knew its steps. I began its first clap and twirl combination, realizing the Middle had been right.

When was the last time I'd danced? When was the last time I'd *let* myself dance? Why had I forbidden it from myself in the first place?

On this floor, I was the master. Let the world see my beauty, my skill, my excellence.

The dance called for me to temporarily join with Middle, and I complied, even if I kept a defiant smirk affixed to my lips. Let this man have the illusion of leading me. I determined where we'd go next.

"Can't show off too much, Ring," Middle said with a laugh. "Raimie has a surprise performance planned."

Which meant I couldn't upstage whichever dancer he'd planned to take the stage.

Of course he did.

Reluctantly, I relinquished control, letting my partner lead me through the remainder of the song. He twirled me more than I'd like, but Middle was a good dancer, despite that small failing.

After a few stanzas, I surrendered, but it wasn't to music this time. With him holding me tight, my blood sang while lightning zipped over my skin, and so much joy bubbled from the place where happiness was born that I wanted to cry from it. By the time the song faded, my face felt like it might split from my beaming grin.

I wanted to do another, but Middle persuaded me to leave the dance floor.

"Raimie will start the performance soon," he said. "Let's stand with him."

"Will there be danger?" Ring asked.

Giving me a funny look, Middle said, "No! I just thought you'd like to be near him and Ren."

And I smiled at the reminder that I didn't belong solely to the Hand.

As Middle and I approached them, the Vasnavai had hold of Raimie's hands, refusing to let them go.

"-must give him a drop of vodka every day, or he won't grow strong," she was saying. "And if you ever need someone to watch him, I would love to do it."

"I'll keep that in mind," Raimie said.

Giving his hands a firm shake, the Vasnavai released them, joining her drunken companions beside the vodka tables.

Eyeing an already half-empty supply of glasses, Raimie said, "I don't know if we've provided enough for them."

"Drop of vodka a day! Really. It's no wonder their people have trouble with the simplest of academics," I huffed. "Please, tell me you won't be taking her advice, sir."

"Ren would kill me if I tried," Raimie said. "Since when have you cared about academics, Ring? You were always more focused on combat training when we were kids."

I glared at him. When Oswi- Middle had told me that Raimie had recovered his memories, I hadn't realized how much of an annoyance it could be. Still, I was glad he remembered our times together, back in Ada'ir.

"Where is Ren, by the way?" I asked.

"She went to bed," Raimie said. "Something, something, baby's making her throat burn."

"Nasty," Middle said, wrinkling his nose.

Lightly punching him, I hissed, "Don't let your dislike of children ruin the king's time of happiness!"

Raimie's lips twitched.

"It *is* a bit gross," he said.

At my disgusted glower, they both dissolved into snickers, and I rolled my eyes, waiting for them to stop laughing. Until it was out of their systems, I wouldn't get a sensible word from either of them.

When the music faded again, Raimie perked up with his laughter abruptly dying.

"That's my cue," he said. "Oswin's told me that you're from the Southern Kingdoms, Ring, something you failed to mention in the past."

He mock-glared at me, which I only shook my head at.

"You should especially enjoy this."

Taking a few steps forward, he raised his arms.

"If I can have everyone's attention, please," Raimie called, waiting for the noise to die down. "We'll now begin the night's festivities with a performance from one of our newest citizens. Hailing from Hanif in the Southern Kingdoms, she's come to show us northerners how to really dance."

While indulgent chuckles rolled over me, I tensed. The woman I'd seen before, in sheers and jangling bracelets, stepped onto the dance floor, and seeing her, I felt my hand drift toward my pistol through a haze. After a tensely excited beat of quiet, a wild, fast-paced melody burst from the musicians' corner, and the dancer moved, and my pistol was out, and I was pointing it at the back of Raimie's head, and its hammer was fully cocked, and a hand was on my forearm, and a mouth pressed against my ear.

"Remember—"

*"—your family," Nasifin says. "If you don't perform as expected, I'll ensure that they die in debtor's prison."*

*He flings me forward with my ankle shackles already removed, and I manage to gracefully come to a stop in front of the Little Lord's throne. Trapped in his gaze, I sprawl across the floor with my forehead to the tile and my arms stretched overhead.*

*"At least this one's pretty, Nasifin," the Little Lord says. "Let's see how well she dances."*

*A double snap precedes the mournful tone that signals the beginning of the dancer's art. I slowly sit up, reaching for the ceiling, and bend back until my skull touches my heels. Then, I swing my body in a sweeping circle.*

*'Make sure you accent your hips, butterfly,' Papi says with his voice echoing in my head.*

*I corkscrew up with my hips as my center point, arching my back on the final circle. The tone from before cuts off, and I set the beat, clapping my hands overhead so that my steel and chain bracelets jingle. Now that the pace is set, the song begins in earnest, but I rise to my feet slowly,*

*sensually, defying the beat. I meet the Little Lord's eyes.*

*'This is the most important part, butterfly,' Papi whispers. 'Make them see what they want to see.'*

*As the Little Lord hungrily watches me, I toss him a knowing smile before beginning my dance. I make it my best, undulating and whirling and rolling in ever more eye-pleasing movements. Desperation nips at my heels, but I kick it away. No time to indulge it.*

*For I am the essence of a dancer. I live and breathe for the dance, and this is to be my last.*

*I'm not sure how long it lasts. Time loses meaning when I plunge into the rhythm's flow.*

*'Don't get too immersed, butterfly. It's bad for your health.'*

*I kick Papi away too. His advice is well and good when applause and accolades come next but what will follow this...*

*I dance. My feet stick to the floor, but I adjust to account for it. The music stops, so I compose more in my head.*

*"Beautiful, talented, and determined," the Little Lord says. "I'll take her, Nasifin. Someone see him paid, and stop her. I want her in my bedchamber this instant."*

*My stomach drops. Despite knowing my skill, I hoped that my dance wouldn't impress the Little Lord. He's the Little Lord, after all. What wonders must he see every day? I hoped... but hope is dead.*

*Reluctantly, I murder the musicians in my mind, and my body stops. I turn myself off.*

*Despite how hard I try to avoid them, small things sneak into my hiding place. Sounds. Scents. A bit of touch.*

*"She's gone doll, poor thing," someone says.*

*"Don't worry. He won't care."*

*Cool silk under my back. The sound of ripping organza and satin. Grunts and tugging and nothing for a very long time. Finally, a snore.*

*I sit up, gazing dead-eyed at my surroundings. A room so lavish that it makes me sick. A bed with a man lying beside me.*

*I try to stand up, to drift away, but wince upon applying pressure to my feet. Lifting them, I nod with satisfaction to see their soles mangled and torn. Reaching for what remains of my clothes, I wrap satin around my feet.*

*Standing, I start hobbling away when liquid trickles down my leg. Curious, I follow its trail to its origin point, and my hand comes away bloody. With my stomach heaving, I fling my clean hand over my mouth to keep the nastiness inside, but it beats down my defenses, and I can't hold it back. I can't...*

*When the fit concludes, I register with dull surprise that I didn't wake the Little Lord and subsequently, am relieved because that would have ruined the plan.*

*Forcing myself to sit beside him, I reach for the pin that's binding my hair in place. It emerges from my curls sharp, shiny, and deadly. At this point, I'm supposed to be a good, little slave. I'm supposed to plunge this dagger into my heart and fall so that in the morning, the Little Lord is caught in bed with a prostitute's corpse. All part of the day-to-day politics of what the northerners call the 'Southern Kingdoms'.*

*I hover the dagger's point over my heart. I must do this. My family needs me to do this, or they'll be sentenced to debtor's prison. Mami, Papi, Mosfaika, Rinata, even little Levi starving in that dark hole...*

*Fuck them. I've suffered enough. Stretching over the sleeping body of the bastard who raped me, I slit his throat. While he gurgles his death cries, I drag the sheet out from under him. How on earth am I supposed to escape from this place?*

*Circling the room, I stop beneath one of the decorative grates that those of noble birth use to bring fresh air into their homes. It's so high up. Can I...? Yes.*

*If I drag that heavy desk into place, I can reach it, and yes, I might break my fingernails while prying the grate off. Yes, I might have to dislocate a shoulder to fit through it, but on the other side lies freedom.*

*I can do it. And once I've wrestled my freedom to the ground and claimed it, I'll never let it go.*

*"—it's in the past, Ring," Middle whispered in my ear. "You're pointing a pistol at your little Raimie. Will you shoot the only boy who could make you laugh when we were kids?"*

I blinked, returning to the present moment, and the pistol slipped out of my grip. Fortunately, Middle caught it before it could hit the ground, returning its hammer to a half-cocked position. When he offered it to me, I hesitantly accepted it.

I furtively scanned the room, relieved to see that the exchange had gone unnoticed. My legs gave out, but once again, Middle was there to catch me. After helping me to a chair, he lowered me into it, and I propped my elbows on my thighs, hiding my face in my hands.

"It was the Little Lord, wasn't it?" Middle asked.

When I nodded, he said not a word, merely placing a hand on my shoulder: a single point of warmth to keep me firmly grounded in the now.

When once loved music culminated in a final crescendo and polite applause rewarded the dancer's efforts, I relaxed. I should be able to stay in control now.

"What was that?! If it had been anyone other than Ring, you'd be reaming her for her dereliction of duty. I bet you don't even plan to reprimand her for it."

Peeking through my fingers at Little, I cringed. What had I been thinking? At least three other people had witnessed what I'd done.

I found Pointer standing near Raimie, and he stared at me with no condemnation. Instead, disappointment lit his eyes. Every member of the King's Hand was damaged in one way or another, except perhaps for their leader. We were supposed to be resilient enough to keep those wounds from impairing our abilities as spies, and I had failed in that regard.

"What she's experiencing now is more than enough punishment," Middle said.

"I let Raimie investigate a tear by himself *at his insistence*, and you've made me do the Hand's paperwork ever since," Little snapped. "She points a *gun* at the *king*, and her consequence is to sit there, feeling sorry for herself?"

"With your lapse, Raimie almost died," Middle said. "With hers, no one was hurt, and no one saw it."

Alouin bless him for coming to my defense, both when I desperately needed it and when I truly didn't. With his hand still on my shoulder, I followed the line of his arm to his face. He answered his adoptive son so calmly, but I saw the wrinkles of worry and anger creasing the corners of his eyes.

They met mine, and as usual, I was swept up in a wave of uncontrollable—

*—hunger. My body is an unwieldy sack of brittle bones and paper-thin skin. The cost of dragging that sack to my corner has finally out-weighed the gains that I've wrought from begging there. Something needs to change.*

*I have no marketable skills besides dancing, and using that talent isn't an option. I'll never dance again, not like that, even if it means I'll starve.*

*If I get desperate enough, I could rent my body out to sex-starved men, for them to use however they wish. I think I could stomach that indignity, used goods that I am, but first, I'll try a slightly riskier plan.*

*For the last few months, I've been begging in an out-of-the-way city sector, changing my spot every day. With the hunt for the Little Lord's assassin cooling down, however, I'll try a spot closer to the alcazar, somewhere passersby are more likely to part with their chits.*

*Settling in the grand structure's shadow, I pull my bowl into my lap and wait. I can't cry out or draw attention to myself like the other beggars. What would happen if I attracted a guard or an alcazar staff member?*

*With my pretty face and gaunt figure, chits soon clink into my bowl without any supplication on my part. Faster than I thought possible, its shallow depths fill, and I get ready to return to the rag pile that I've begun to call home.*

*As I draw my shawl over my head, a pair of silver chits drop into my bowl, and I lift my face to cheerily thank the generous donors, but on seeing them, fear freezes me solid. The guards have almost turned away to resume their patrol, but one pauses when he catches sight of my face.*

*"Say, Rafichi, isn't that-?"*

*I don't wait for them to confirm their suspicions. Flinging the bowl at them, I'm up and running before it and my precious chits have hit the ground. Shouts of surprise rise behind me, and as I round onto the closest cross-street, a bell peals the alarm to every guard in the vicinity.*

*I can't stop, can't blend into the crowd. Slapping feet are following too closely behind me. I try everything I can to lose them: diving through merchant stalls, knocking obstacles into their path, nimbly vaulting over short fences. Nothing helps. In fact, the noise of pursuit increases in volume with every second of the chase.*

*They catch me in a dead-end alley, one that I thought would lead into a busy market on the other side. With my back plastered against a wall, I take panicked breaths as they draw closer with leery smiles.*

*"They say she lulled the Little Lord into sleep with the power of her sex," one whispers.*

*"Do you think they'll mind if we use her before bringing the body back?" another asks.*

*The voice of terror wordlessly screeches in my head. I've been so careful, always watching for guard patrols, but my hunger was all-conquering...*

*That hunger will get me attacked again before they murder me.*

*A loud bang splits through the alley's tense air, and a guard falls to the side, clutching at his knee with a howl. The others stare at the hole that his hand covers, where his shin and foot are dangling by strings of muscle and skin from his thigh.*

*While they're distracted, I dart past them toward the boy who's pointing a smoking, metal tube their way. He extends his free hand.*

*"Follow me, Silivren!"*

*There's no hesitation, no worry of a trap or danger. I take the stranger's hand and run.*

*What rode me now wasn't true hunger like that time, long ago, when we'd been lost teenagers. It was more desire or incredible need.*

I'd unreservedly followed Middle on the day that he'd rescued me and on every subsequent day until I'd come to understand why I was sometimes a nervous wreck around him. After that realization, I'd considered running from him, even though I'd become the Ring for the Hand that he led. At the time, I'd thought it likely that I could avoid the search that would surely accompany my dereliction of duty. Fear for my life hadn't been what had kept me from fleeing.

The reason I'd stayed had tightened my step every closer to his heel. I'd been the first to agree with his crazy plan of forming a Hand for a boy destined to be king, the most eager to hop on a boat that would transport the lot of us to Auden. I'd accepted every assignment, completed every favor. All in the hopes that he'd notice me.

Our tale, if it was to be told, needed to be perfect, a gloriously fitting reward for my suffering, but the timing had never been quite right. Always, some new danger, some urgently required project, some new fear had interfered with us.

As I sat, listening to Middle- Oswin once again come to my defense, I realized that the timing would never be right. As the Middle and Ring of Raimie's Hand, danger and fear would always tail us. If I wanted a story of Oswin and Silivren, I needed to carve it out for myself.

I was sure that Oswin would wonder why it had taken me so long to come to this conclusion for years to come.

"Little's right," I said, interrupting the petty argument between the other two spies. "You favor me too much. My actions this evening have been inexcusable. Come. Let's discuss what my punishment should be."

Rising, I floated toward the ballroom's exit.

Was I doing this? Really?

Yes. Shut up, doubt.

Was he following?

Don't turn around to check, stupid.

The party and its noise fell behind me, and I smiled on hearing Oswin hurrying to catch up.

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