

Adventures of the Hand 5.3

Ring

On drawing even with me, Oswin asked, "You don't really think you need a sanction, do you?"

"No, but I couldn't come up with a better way to separate you from Little. You two would have argued all night if I hadn't intervened," I said. "Plus, the kid's right, Oswin. You do favor me. Why?"

"Ring... it's Middle between the members of the Hand," Oswin said. "You know that."

I shoved him sideways, pinning him to the wall, and at the end of the hall, a pair of guests gasped before skittering away.

"Oswin," I said with my body demanding answers. "Why?"

He stiffened into rock beneath my immobilizing arms.

"You know why," he hissed through his teeth.

I did? Thinking back, I carefully analyzed our interactions' typical rhythm.

Oswin was so formal with me. He tiptoed around me, as if afraid of breaking me, but no. He knew I wasn't so easily hurt. If he wasn't concerned about hurting *me*, who else could he fear for? Our exchanges only include the two of us. Was he afraid for himself?

Shock turned me into glass. His insistence on fixing his eyes on my face when I'd tried to tempt him in the past. The shoulders that had drifted to his ears when he'd learned that I'd used my body to successfully complete a mission. His eyes burning into mine now...

How had I been so stupid?

In a daze, I reached for the latch beside Oswin, pulling him with me into the room behind it. Inside, we found a storage closet filled with brooms, mops, buckets, an assortment of folded tablecloths, and an extensive number of other items that the palace staff might need to keep this building maintained. Claiming a mop, I threaded it through the door's handle, angling it so that it blocked the door.

"What are you doing, Ring?" Oswin asked with genuine confusion, poor dear. "I know we're technically free of our responsibilities for tonight but--"

Resting a finger on his lips to silence his protest, I took a shuddering breath.

"I need you to say it," I whispered.

"Say what?" he asked. "I don't-"

I pressed my finger harder against his lips.

"Don't play ignorant with me," I said with a wan smile. "We've known each other far too long for that to work."

When I lifted my finger, he uncertainly eyed me.

"You first," he said.

I couldn't say the words before he did, couldn't bear the pressure, but I had other ways to convey what I meant. Lifting trembling hands, I traced them over his face, over every longed-after speck of it, before rising to my toes and kissing him.

This wasn't the hungry, passionate kiss that I gave away, like cheap sweets, to every man that my job had required me to seduce. It was gentle. Slow. But firm enough that he'd know exactly what I was saying with it.

When I pulled away, I examined his slackened features, searching for... something.

"Now, you," I said.

Oswin cleared his throat.

"How long-? How blind have I-?" he stuttered. "What about the other... men?"

"They meant nothing. Nothing, Oswin. You should know after fifteen years as a spymaster that sex is merely another tool in a spy's hands," I said, shaking my head at his hesitation. "Now, you."

"A-are you sure? I'm not the easiest person to deal with once you get to know me," Oswin said, flicking his gaze around the supply closet. "And look at this place, Ring! It's not exactly romantic."

My spirit shrank. Maybe I'd been wrong, only reading what I'd wanted to from him.

"A spy's life is short, especially one who's in a Hand. It's a wonder that no one in this Hand have died yet. Every other kingdom's Ring is replaced within a five-year period, and yet, I've served for thirteen," I said. "Such a length of time is unprecedented, but we shouldn't let our luck make us cocky, Oswin. Our lives are spent in service to a primeancer king. Death could come for you five-person family at any moment."

Oswin swallowed, gritting his teeth at the hard truths that I'd spoken.

“So, I’ll give you one more opportunity because while we can, we spies should have every chance to live our lives to the fullest,” I said. “Tell me what I want to hear now, or I’m returning to the ball, and we’ll never speak of this again.”

Still, he hesitated. I shook my head, more at my presumption than anything else, and turned to find the closest source of alcohol. I didn’t enjoy getting drunk, but tonight, I could make an exception to my usual sobriety rule.

“I love you, Silivren! Please, don’t go!”

Stopping short, I smirked. Took him long enough.

I flung myself at him, tugging, pulling, caressing every part, and he joined me with a gasp. The momentary shrieking alarm that always accompanied a man’s passion-fueled embrace never came with him because this time was different. This time it was *him*, the man I’d grown up with, trained with, laughed with, fought beside. He’d saved my life when I’d been a panic-driven thirteen-year-old girl, and I’d saved his many times over in repayment.

He *knew* me, and that understanding showed. He was gentle when I needed it, rough when I wanted it. After years where sex had been completely focused on my partner, now I was the only one who mattered, and it brought tears to my eyes. He wiped them away, disgruntled, before kissing me.

“Don’t think about the past. You’re here. With me.”

My giggling fit didn’t start until we were cuddling later.

“What is it?” Oswin asked, running fingers through my hair.

“I’ve wanted this for years, spent so many hours imagining how it would be,” I said, “and we end up here. In a *broom closet*.”

I let my laughter loudly peal, unable to stop it. Something about the situation just tickled my fancy.

“You’re the one who said we couldn’t wait,” Oswin said, pouting.

“Oh, don’t get your feelings hurt,” I said, rolling to lay on top of him. “The setting may be funny, but the sex... Alouin, I didn’t expect anything like that from you.”

“So... it was good?” Oswin asked.

Men and their insecurities.

“Oswin. No one’s ever done what you did to me,” I said.

He beamed, I nestled into his chest, and the door rattled, making us both stiffen.

“Is someone hurt in there?” Kylorian bellowed, banging on wood. “Do I need to call for help?”

And hearing that voice, I breathed, “Do you mind?”

Oswin would know what I meant. I was nursing a pet project, the same as every other Hand member. Mine just happened to coincide with work. I *would* find the traitor plotting against my king, my little Raimie, even if it killed me.

Smiling, Oswin drew me in for one more kiss.

“Be careful, Ring,” he whispered.

‘Thank you,’ I mouthed.

On my feet, I quickly pulled my hair into a bun and straightened my clothes. As a last touch, I pinched my lower eyelids to redden them.

“Don’t get help, Minister!” I called, pulling the broom free of the door’s handle. “I’m coming out.”

After checking that Middle was safely hidden behind an equipment rack, I pulled the door open and recoiled from the intense smell of alcohol that met me. Kylorian wobbled as he peered at me.

“Have we met?” he asked.

“I’m Ring,” I said. “I escorted your sister to meet you the other day. The tavern, remember?”

Kylorian’s face brightened.

“Oh, yes. I remember now. You’ve very... funny,” he said, hiccupping. “Why do you-? Have you been crying?”

“I’m from the Southern Kingdoms, although my parents traced their ancestry back to Auden,” I said. “The dancer at the start of the festivities made me homesick, is all. I found a private corner where I could cry.”

Kylorian seemed like the type who’d prefer a damsel in distress. After years of practice, I could usually pigeonhole a man’s penchants after only a few minutes together, and I’d spent plenty of time with this one.

Speaking of the festivities, a thunderous boom shook the palace, and I crouched with my hand on my sword. So much for the damsel in distress angle.

“What was that?” I snapped.

“The Qenans’ ‘fireworks’, I’d guess,” Kylorian said with a shrug. “I heard something about them starting with that when I left.”

For a moment, he swayed in place, looking so lost that I almost reached out and comforted him, but he soon shook free of whatever had been bothering him, meeting my eyes.

“Can you help me to my room?” he asked. “The world’s spinning like a top right now.”

All of the Ministers had a set of quarters here, somewhere they could sleep if meetings between them took too long.

“Had one too many?” I asked.

“You could say that,” Kylorian said, suppressing a belch.

Ugh.

“It’s happened to the best of us,” I said. “Which way are we headed?”

“This way. I think.”

Kylorian unsteadily tottered away, and winking at Middle, I blew him a kiss before letting the door fall closed.

I hurried to catch up with the poor Minister, who was weaving from one side of the hall to the other. Once I’d drawn even with him, I tossed his arm over my shoulders, bearing the slight pressure that he placed on me without complaint.

Here was a prime example of why Kylorian was so low on my suspect list for the traitor. The man was in his cups too often to make an effective spy. Besides that, Kylorian was truly a sweet man, going out of his way to help those in need. Several of Elisk’s orphanages and charities had been established by Ren’s older brother, and he nightly joined his officers in patrolling the city’s streets. I suspected that Kylorian took solace in brandy as often as he did because he’d despaired of solving the heightening conflict between the Esela and humans in the capital.

If that weren’t enough, he and Raimie seemed to be good friends, often catching an initial drink together when policy meetings had run long.

With a better suspect already in hand, I’d almost tossed Kylorian out of the suspect pool before tonight, but if I could cross him off of my list for sure, I could focus on my prime suspect, Gistrick, with a clean conscience.

The Zrelnach commander maintained his posting at Da’kul even this many years after Auden’s conquest, a posting that I knew he despised. On the rare occasion that they crossed Middle’s desk, Gistrick’s reports to the king contained nothing but complaints of boredom, but it was widely known that he makes lengthy, unsanctioned trips away from Da’kul. Add to that the bad blood between him and the king and the rapidly narrowing suspect pool, and Gistrick had quickly topped the list of my contenders.

Soon enough, I dragged Kylorian to a stop.

"Aren't these your rooms?" I asked.

"Oh, look! We're here," the Minister said, slurring his words.

Withdrawing his arm from me, he banged the door open, but the 'firework' bang that accompanied it was louder. Kylorian hesitated before leaving me in the cold.

"Would you stay with me tonight? Not like that," he rushed to clarify at the look on my face. "I- I can't sleep most nights, and tonight was... harder than I expected it to be. I thought having someone in the room might help."

"I'll do you one better."

Smirking, I breezed past him.

So, here was a Minister's room. It was rather plain, all told. A fireplace, a simple bed, and a rickety table with a crate beside it were all that occupy the space. I'd expected... more. Nothing here could expose the Minister as a spy.

"I'm an excellent masseuse," I said. "If you can't get to sleep after I'm done with you, I promise that I'll stay overnight."

Maybe I should botch the massage. Watching over the Minister would give me plenty of time to snoop around this room a little more.

"What would I need to-?" Kylorian asked.

"Take your tunic off, and lay face-down on the bed," I absently said.

"I don't- I don't know," Kylorian said.

He rested a hand at the back of his neck, and irritably blowing a lock of hair out of my face, I circled behind him.

"I won't judge your body, Ky," I said, gently pulling his hand away. "I've seen many ugly scars in my..."

I trailed off. I wasn't often wrong when making assumptions, but when I was, the error always caught me by surprise. This one shocked me to a standstill.

Hidden beneath Kylorian's long hair and high collar, a snarl of Corruption pulsed beneath his skin.

"You saw it, didn't you?" he tonelessly asked. "I haven't thought about it in *years* but..."

"I've certainly never seen a scar like that before," I said, nervously laughing. "Not one so small at least. How have you kept it in check?"

Kylorian rounded on me with his jaw set, even as his hands tremble. His body language spoke indecision to a woman long-trained in reading others. I could handle hesitancy, even in an especially drunk person. Talking people down was my specialty.

“Let me get Raimie.”

Don't mention a possible source of jealousy, and if one must, minimize the source to a simple name. Avoid titles at all costs.

“He can draw that evil crap out of you.”

Offer a viable solution to the problem.

“Ren's often told me about how excited she is for her baby to meet Uncle Ky. That meeting will never take place if Kiraak Kylorian gives Auden to Doldimar.”

Mention loved ones and the consequences to them if the subject continued along his current course.

“Why did she have to be carrying a child *now*?” Kylorian breathed.

Now for the dangerous part. I took a deep breath, loudly speaking so that my voice carried over cracks and bangs. The fireworks display must be coming to an end.

“I'm leaving now, but I'll return with help soon,” I said. “You stay here until I get back.”

I turned on my heel as the pops petered out. A final, deafening bang finished the display, and I got another two steps before dropping to my knees. Reluctantly, I looked down, staring with fascination at the gaping hole in my shoulder and chest.

Kylorian came into view, sobbing.

“Sorry. I'm so sorry.”

I couldn't be bothered to listen. Prodding at the charred skin around the hole, I tried to laugh—murdered by Oswin's creation—but I couldn't find the air. Confused, I tried to—

—take a breath. My rescuer is moving too quickly, and the barely healed soles of my feet are shedding their newly grown skin.

The sounds of pursuit faded long ago, and as if prompted by this development, the boy ducks into the alcove of a nondescript home's front door. He raps once, pauses, three times, pauses, and twice. After a moment, the latch slides back, and the door opens.

We tumble into such luxury that it makes me cringe, taking my hand out of the boy's to hug myself. Resolutely turning my back on silks and sheers, I come face-to-face with an unknown man, and shivers race along my spine, freezing me in place.

"Are the alarms in the city your fault?" he asks, eyeing me.

I can't answer his question. He's too close. If I move, even to open my mouth, I'll turn into a wailing pile of flesh.

"Partially," the boy says, out of view. "I had to shoot one of them."

The stranger's eyes aren't on me anymore, and that gives me the strength to retreat to a safe distance, all while the man reprimands the boy.

"You USED it?" he says. "Great! This was supposed to be a quiet infiltration, a possible recruitment mission. With your slipup, the Southern Kingdoms will know someone's gotten their hands on new weaponry."

Southern Kingdoms? These two must be northerners. Why are they so far from home? Why did the boy help me?

What should I do? The man scares me. I can't stand to be in his presence for much longer. Can I slip away while they're arguing?

"I'm sorry, spymaster," the boy says, scuffing his foot along the floor.

Spymaster? Really? Unprompted, a snort flies out of my nose, drawing their attention. So much for slipping away.

"What about her?" the supposed spymaster asks. "How did she do?"

The boy uncomfortably shifts, obviously torn.

"She tried a new tactic today. Good instincts. She wouldn't have lasted much longer where she was," he says. "Got caught while trying to leave. That caused the alarm."

"So, she started this mess?" the spymaster says, shaking his head. "She'll never make it in the Hand. Get her some food and coin, Oswin. We need to return home. Kaedesa will soon start wondering where we've gone."

"But Aramar!" the boy whines.

The man's casual dismissal of me riles me so badly that I momentarily forget my fear of him.

"Excuse me. I don't know who you are or why you've been watching me, but it's a little offensive that you'd reject me from your Hand, whatever that is, because of a small mistake," I snap. "Am I not allowed to speak in my defense?"

The spymaster, Aramar, bemusedly eyes me.

"You may speak," he says.

Anger's quickly draining from me, so I launch into my explanation as quickly as I can.

"I seduced the Little Lord, and after he was finished with me, I slit his throat. While his body lay cooling, I escaped through a grate, dislocating my shoulder to fit through it," I say. "I've survived for THREE MONTHS while the Little Lord's guards were looking for me. The only reason they caught me today was because of bad luck."

I almost squeak on the last word, but defiantly, I stare the spymaster down, even if I can't move. His face goes through a variety of expressions, most of which I don't understand, and not knowing what he's thinking has me sipping little gasps of air.

"How old are you, child?" he eventually asks.

I only realize his muscles are straining against his skin when I hear the absolute monotone of his question.

"Thirteen," I whisper.

Swallowing hard, I dart my gaze to the floor, and fatigue hits me like a surprise visit from boisterous cousins after an especially long dance practice. Swaying, I wince at the spikes of pain coming from my feet.

"Oswin," the spymaster says.

In an instant, the boy is at my side, lifting me into his arms, and once that's done, he sucks in a sharp breath.

"Aramar, her feet!" he says, horrified.

"It seems that I have business to attend to in the city," Aramar hisses. "Try to save her feet as best you can, Oswin. She'll need them if she's going to be a member of the Hand. I'm going out. I trust you can make the pitch?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I won't be more than a couple of hours."

The door slams, and for a moment, blissful silence occupies me as I huddle against the boy's chest. The room moves around me, and I flinch at the sight of sheers floating past.

"I'm going to set you down, Silivren, but before I do, I want you to know that I won't hurt you," the boy says. "No one will ever hurt you again."

I'm lying on a bed with silks meeting my back, and I want to scream and cry. For some inexplicable reason, though, I also trust this boy. I hold perfectly still while he washes my feet, dabs cloth in a salve, and wraps it in circles around my wounds.

"You're Oswin?" I say. "That's a strange name."

"I had strange parents," Oswin says with a shrug. "And you're Silivren. Does that mean your parents are normal?"

"My parents, if they live, thought it was better to sell their daughter to a slaver than to find another way to pay off their debts," I say, biting back a sob.

Oswin nods, as if knowing that I needed no response.

"Would you like to leave this city?" he asks. "You could train to become a stronger person, someone who can defend herself—"

"Does it mean I get to stay with you?" I ask.

Oswin nods again.

"Then, yes."

—took a deep breath, but my lungs weren't working properly.

It was all right. Oswin was here, standing over me, and he'd always take care of me. As long as I was near him, everything would turn out shiny.

I'd meant to tell him something before I'd left. It had been of supreme importance, central to who I was. He was so close now, holding something bright and glistening in front of my eyes, and I fought to remember what it was, but my thoughts wouldn't stop swirling.

"Did you know I've always loved you, Oswin?" I gasped. "From the beginning, I've only ever loved you."

I had more that I wanted to share, plans for our future, places that we should visit together, but my lungs had run out of air. That was fine. Oswin would know. He always knew.

A sob broke through my circling thoughts, the bright gleam moved forward, and a *thunk* filled my mind. Then, nothing.

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