

# Chapter 6: The King's Hand

## Raimie

At Oswin's prompting, four people joined us at the tower's top, and Oswin was right. I did know them, if only nominally.

As they entered, each of them quickly scanned the room, but while the woman and the... small man or perhaps teenager squealed on seeing the bed, running to jump on it, the tallest of them stalked to a window, looking out of it. The burly one headed for the desk.

While he started rifling through the pages on it, I did my best not to gawk.

Clearing my throat, I said, "So, you're finally getting around to introducing your friends?"

Because the last time I'd seen these people, I'd never learned their names, preoccupied as I'd been at the time. I'd been worried about how they'd react to the revelation of my primeancy.

"Oh, give him a break, most kingly one," said the small man on the bed. "We've been busy setting up your spy network since then."

Bristling, Oswin said, "Little! Mind yourself. No matter how much you like to forget it, respect is part of your job."

While the small man made a face, mouthing silent words behind Oswin's back, the older man turned to me.

"And yes. Introductions are in order," he said. "The mouthy brat goes by Little, as you may have noticed. He's our expert in infiltration, wriggling into any and all sorts of problem areas that we might encounter."

Smirking, Little tossed his hand in a wave, and at that, I fought to keep my lips flat. I liked him already.

"Beside him is Ring," Oswin continued. "She excels at persuasion, dropping the right words into the right ears at the right time."

The pretty red-head at Little's side flowed off of the bed, flourishing a bow once she was on her feet.

“A pleasure to meet you formally, sir,” she said.

When she sprang upright to hop on the bed, I snorted to suppress a laugh. I knew this woman could have oozed desire at me if she’d wanted to. It was found in her bearing and confidence, and I was so grateful that she hadn’t. I wasn’t sure how she’d known the best way to act around me, but that didn’t matter. With a single greeting, she’d made interacting with her ten times easier.

“Likewise,” I said.

Turning to the other two men, Oswin gestured at the burly one.

“That’s Thumb,” he said. “He’s our brawler and code breaker. Pretty decent with picking locks too.”

Never looking away from what he was reading, Thumb mumbled something unintelligible, which was... interesting.

“Seems intense,” I said.

“Mm,” Oswin helpfully replied. “In the corner, we have Pointer. He specializes in the less savory parts of our work, but that’s all I can share for now. Out of all of us, he’s the most private.”

Still at the window, Pointer absently said, “I heard that.”

His voice made me shiver. I wasn’t sure what was wrong with it, but it had sounded ruined, in a way. When Oswin merely laughed at what he’d said, however, I was forced to join him.

“And last but not least is me,” he said with a deep bow. “I fill the position of spymaster and Middle, which is the only name you should have known me by. Unfortunately, our circumstances didn’t allow me to maintain my anonymity.”

While he straightened, I cocked my head.

“Middle...” I said. “I know that you were once the Middle of Queen Kaedesa’s Hand, which means you were perfectly capable of maintaining your anonymity, if it’s what you really wanted.”

Behind Oswin, Pointer snorted, curling on himself.

“He’s got you there,” he rasped.

Oswin merely rolled his eyes, so I continued.

“But what are you the Middle of now? Unless...”

Glancing over the five strangers around me, I frowned.

“Unless these people are supposed to be a Hand?” I said. “That would make sense, what with the names.”

With a tongue click, Oswin shook his head, lifting his eyes to the sky.

“Yes, sir. We’re a Hand,” he said. “Yours, in fact.”

“But... why would I need a Hand?”

The words were out of my mouth before I could consider them, and on hearing them, I winced.

“Please, don’t say a word. I know how silly that question was,” I said.

“Well. I’m glad someone pointed that out,” Little said.

From beside him, Ring sat up so she could smack him upside the head.

“*Respect*, Little,” she hissed.

Chuckling, I said, “I don’t mind. It was a silly question.”

If an understandable one as well. I’d only accepted this new position a few months ago, and transitioning one’s viewpoint from that of a peasant to a leader of men would take anyone a while.

“So... what exactly does a Hand do?” I asked. “I know you’re spies and usually the cream of the crop at that, but what does spying usually involve?”

With a giggle, Ring bounced to the bed’s edge.

“Lots of things!” she said. “For now, we’ll probably scout for you, supporting the greater spy network that we’ve established, but when we served Queen Kaedesa, we kept tabs on Ada’ir’s criminal element, eliminated subversives before they could become dangerous, and occasionally, countered members of other kingdoms’ Hands, among other things. For the most part, though, you won’t have to think about the dark matters we handle. That’s not the king’s job.”

She’d given me a lot of useful information. Unfortunately, I couldn’t fully process it as I was stuck on one particular portion.

“Served Queen Kaedesa?” I repeated with a raised eyebrow.

Had anyone else heard panic in my voice there? Gods, please say they hadn’t.

Nodding, Oswin said, “Certainly. Before leaving Ada’ir, the five of us were Queen Kaedesa’s Hand. Now, we’re yours.”

For a moment, all I could do was blink at him and the others, and when I found my voice, I had to take a moment to clear it.

“Sorry. I’m sorry,” I said, “but... just... *what?* That’s... oh, hell.”

Clutching my head, I sank into a chair.

“So, you’re telling me that not only have I stolen a large part of a neighboring kingdom’s army, along with its commander, but also its queen’s *Hand*?” I said. “*How?* And Alouin above... she’s going to kill me. For an insult like this, that utterly terrifying woman would definitely cross the Narrow Sea, just to murder my ass.”

...Which would absolutely help with this ridiculous quest of freeing Auden.

*Please, heart of my heart. Do not panic,* Nylion said. *From what I have seen of her-*

“Yeah... no. Kaedesa won’t do that,” Little drawled.

Groaning, he propped himself up on his elbows.

“She’s far too paranoid and prepared for the loss of something like her *Hand* to affect her. In fact, I’d be shocked if she hasn’t already replaced us,” he said. “Plus, she likes you, for some incomprehensible reason. You amuse her, which... lucky you. You’ll have to mess up in a direct and personal manner to get on her bad side.”

“Accurate,” Pointer said by the window.

The other three grunted or nodded their agreement, which made me relax, if only slightly. If anyone could know Queen Kaedesa’s mind, it would be people who’d served as her top spies.

That still left me with a question, though.

“All right, then. Say you’re right. Why should I trust you?” I said. “You’ve already switched your loyalty once. Who says you wouldn’t do it again?”

Stiffening, Oswin said, “I told you, sir. I’ve only ever been loyal to you, not Ada’ir’s queen. In my youth, I found myself in a position that might be beneficial to you, so as the spymaster of Kaedesa’s *Hand*, I began recruiting for you, replacing its old members with people loyal to you. Technically, no one here has betrayed a former employer because we’ve only ever been yours.”

...But why had they, particularly Oswin, been loyal to me? Until recently, I’d lived a quiet life, never making waves.

So, had Oswin simply been loyal to the idea of Auden’s royal family, not me specifically? If he was a descendant of an Audish refugee, that would make sense.

And he’d given me no reason to suspect him of treachery. If anything, he’d been a huge help, and besides that, I liked the man, which was rare for me. I could trust him.

Right?

“I can accept that,” I said, “and I’m glad to have met all of you in a full capacity. Truly.”

With a warm smile, Ring said, “We’re glad for you to know us, sir.”

“Maybe some of us are,” Little said, rolling his eyes. “Can we get back to work now, Middle? Dragging that Overseer to the tower was enough of a delay, so sure, he may have had time to meet us, but I didn’t.”

Squeezing his eyes closed, Oswin sighed.

“Yes, Little. You may return to work,” he said.

“Awesome.”

With a grin, Little bounced off of the bed, and the other three were quick to follow, although unlike their youngest member, they offered some form of respect before doing so. Only once Oswin and I were alone again did I fully slump into my chair, exhausted beyond measure.

“Well. They’re interesting,” I said to no one.

“I’m glad they’ve pleased you,” Oswin said, “and I’ll ensure they swear their loyalty to you soon, much as you might hate that. In the meantime, can I help you in any way, sir? You seem a bit... overwhelmed.”

Gods, he’d hit the nail on the head with that observation, so much so that I had to look away.

Rapidly blinking, I said, “I’m fine. Just struggling with what to do next.”

Because there was so much to do, and I was so very new to this leading a resistance thing. Sure, we’d taken another base of operations and a defensible one at that, but what should I do with it? I’d been hoping to use the intelligence found here to plan our next steps, but considering how heavily encoded everything seemed to be, that hope had been unfulfilled.

Even still, having a backup base would be nice. Who knew if or when my people’s current refuge, Tiro, might become hostile to us once more? For the last two months, Tanwadur had daily threatened to throw us out of his city, and I wasn’t sure when that threat might become a reality.

So, it was good that we had a potential new home. From here, we could begin our true work. We could slowly free Auden’s many cities, defending them once they were ours, until such time as we could contest the capital.

But where to start? Over the winter, that had been the major question for me, and while I had a spy network, it was new and fragile enough that reports had been slow in the making.

Perhaps the Hand could pick up the slack while the rest of the network was getting more established. With their experience, it shouldn’t take them as long to get into the swing of things, compared to a slew of new spies at least.

*And hopefully, Rhylix will soon bring us the information he has coerced from Nessaira,* Nylion said.

Right. How had I forgotten about that?

I should check in with him before some new task came along to distract me.

Blinking, I refocused on my surroundings and smiled on seeing Oswin, patiently waiting.

“Let’s see how Rhy’s interrogation is going, shall we?” I said.

Turning toward the stairs, I almost missed Oswin’s subtle grimace, but it had been there in time for me to see it.

I wasn’t sure why the spy didn’t like my friend, although it couldn’t be because Rhylix was Eselan or a primeancer. Oswin had already established that he wasn’t constrained by society’s typical hatred of primeancers, and when around the Zrelnach, he was nothing but polite and respectful. Given that, it seemed safe to say that he didn’t hold some strange prejudice against Rhylix.

But something about my friend still rankled him. That much was clear, and it bothered me that I didn’t know why that was.

I spent most of the walk down the tower considering this question, halfway tempted to just ask the spy. In the end, though, doing that didn’t seem wise. I needed to stay on Oswin’s good side, and while I doubted mentioning this issue would cause a problem between us, I’d rather avoid difficult conversations with him, at least until his side of this resistance was more stable.

So, we descended into the lower floors of the tower in silence.

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