

Adventures of the Hand 2.2

Thumb

No matter how hard I tried, my mind wouldn't go empty, as I'd like. My thoughts kept returning to the last time I'd indulged in this habit.

My opponent—an unimpressive little man—enters the ring, but just because he seems so unintimidating doesn't mean this fight will be boring. Rolling my shoulders, I stretch, hungrily watching as my opponent strips off his clothing until only skin remains above the waistline. Then, this evening's referee steps between us.

"I expect a clean match!" he shouts. "No funny business. We go until one of you yields, is incapacitated, or the round's timer expires. Understand?"

Once he receives his acknowledgments, the referee chops a hand between us combatants.

"Begin!"

My opponent starts with several jabs at my face, each of which I easily block, but I make no move to counter them. The man's pattern of attack isn't clear yet, and if I want to understand it, I need more data. Fortunately, the other man is more than willing to oblige. His already ruddy face turns uglier with each of his failed attempts to land a blow, but I don't pay that much mind because soon enough, I know his pattern.

Lunging around the man's now predictable right hook, I land a solid uppercut on his jaw. Blood gushes from my opponent's mouth as his teeth cut into his tongue, and the man topples backward.

"End round!" the referee shouts.

Unsteadily sitting up, my opponent spits blood into the dirt. He shoots metaphorical daggers at me, but I ignore them. Now that my opponent's pattern is known, this fight has become tedious. I want to finish it.

"Marsuvius!" someone calls from the edge of the ring.

Reluctantly tearing my focus away from analyzing the fight in my head, I plod to the woman asking for me, frowning at her. I don't know why this woman has continually insisted on acting as my promoter, both before, during, and after fights, but it annoys me how much she interferes in the one area of life where I can relax.

When I've reached her, the woman says, "You need to take your punches and bow out in the next round, big guy."

Which only confuses me.

"Why would I do that?" I say. "That man's pattern is predictable to an extreme. Now that I know it, I can't lose."

With her face going bright red, the woman hisses, "Fuck your pattern! Your opponent is a noble! If you humiliate him, he'll make your life hell."

If anything, my opponent's social status makes me more inclined to ignore the woman's suggestion. The nobility conform to a pattern of oppression that I, as an Audish slum brat, have always found baffling.

"If the two of you don't mind..." the referee drawls from his corner, apparently eager to get round two underway.

Before I can leave, the woman grabs my wrist.

"Promise me you'll take a fall," she says.

Tugging my hand free, I turn my back on her without a word.

"Marsuvius!" she shouts behind me.

But it's too late for anything more.

Chopping his hand through the air again, the referee says, "Begin!"

This round, my opponent's pattern goes somewhat erratic, but that doesn't happen to a large degree. I let the fight continue for a minute, hoping against hope that I've mistaken the other man's predictability for something more interesting, but when my opponent again goes for a right hook following a feint, I abandon that wish. My surprise is colossal, then, when he slashes cold steel across my blocking arm, sending blood droplets pattering into the dirt.

As the alleged noble brandishes a knife, the crowd cheers, and I look to the referee to call foul and stop this fight. That supposedly impartial man, however, says not a word.

My opponent attacks again, and this time, blood follows each of those blocked thrusts. The noble wickedly smiles, which tells me that if I don't end this fight soon, I'll become another corpse in a pauper's grave.

I won't let that happen.

Here comes that feint and hook combo again, but this time, instead of blocking the right hook, I catch my opponent's unarmed hand and squeeze. Bones unnaturally bend beneath my fingers,

making the noble howl.

Confident that this injury will incapacitate him, thus ending the fight, I retreat, but my opponent follows me, jabbing at my chest with the knife. Again, this isn't what I expected, and it makes me slow. I shift my body enough that the blade fails to reach my heart, but it embeds, hilt-deep, into the meat of my arm with its tip painfully bouncing off of bone.

While holding the noble off, I can't rip my eyes off of that knife's hilt. This isn't right. The rules say that weapons aren't allowed in these fights. They say a match is over when someone is severely wounded. They say that the referee will enforce those rules.

Rules are the pinnacle of human patterns, and patterns are the essence of life. They must not be broken, otherwise, chaos takes over and society collapses. THIS ISN'T RIGHT.

But wait. If... if the noble can break the pattern, does that mean I can too?

When I swing at him this time, my fist meets my opponent's nose with a crunch, and roaring, I drop to my knees atop the fallen man's chest. Plucking the knife out of my arm, I slam it into the noble's face over and over and over and...

I took a shuddering breath. Those memories were of another man, one who'd lived a separate life from me. They had no relevance in the present.

Still, my thoughts refused to slow down, and when a Conscripted soldier came to escort me into the pit, my mind wouldn't stop spinning. As I stepped outside, the setting sun blinded me with only silence in the air, and when my eyesight cleared, my confidence in my ability to escape this place wavered.

People with black vines squirming under their skin had lined the steps, filling this pit to the brim, with hundreds of eyes piercing me.

And not a single word was spoken. Only the occasional breeze broke an absolute silence.

So, when sniffing came from behind me, I faced the noise's source with trepidation. A familiar, eleven-year-old boy was hugging his chest near the hole beneath the earth, shuffling in the sand.

"He's going to be my opponent?" I said. "I thought the Kiraak liked a spectacle. A child won't be much of a challenge for me."

Still, a voice called, "You will fight."

Shivering at the emptiness in that voice, I raised my hand in surrender.

"Whatever you say," I shouted.

I didn't like the idea of fighting someone who was unavoidably weaker than me. It wasn't fun when I had an unearned advantage over my opponent, but when my options were to fight or to brave

these violent people's displeasure, I knew what my choice would be.

Besides, maybe I could use the fight to help the boy out. Unfortunately, when I lifted my fists to try that plan, the boy refused to move from his huddle.

"Come on, kid," I whispered to him. "Don't make me hurt you before you've had a chance to hit me."

Sniffing back tears, the kid uncertainly matched my stance.

"Good," I said with an encouraging nod. "Now, attack me."

Again, the boy followed my instructions, swinging at me, and I let the blow land, along with several subsequent punches and kicks. From everything I understood about the Kiraak, they'd want to see a display of violence and would kill anyone who didn't conform to this desire. So, I'd let the kid have a chance to prove he could be entertaining, given time, before decisively finishing this fight.

When that time eventually came, I avoided the kid's overly ambitious strike, spinning around him. After dislocating the boy's shoulder, I stepped back. Sure, the pain caused from this injury would be bad, but the boy would be able to recover, quickly returning to health and heartiness.

I faced the audience.

"Good enough?" I shouted over the kid's screaming.

To my surprise, something landed on my back, and tiny fingernails were raked across my cheeks and neck, engaging long-held instincts. Dropping to the ground, I rolled backward, crushing and subsequently shedding a recently added weight. Once I was back on my feet, I warily watched the kid, flattened into the sand, but that boy didn't move with only hiccupping sobs to shake his frame.

I didn't understand. According to accepted decorum, the injury I'd imparted should have ended this fight. I'd proven I was the better brawler, and wasn't demonstrating superiority the point of contests like this? I should be facing my next opponent, not warily circling the one I'd already bested.

"Why haven't you sent out my next challenger?" I asked. "Yes, this kid did well, but he's no match for me."

This had a rustle breaking the audience's stillness.

"Where did you find this one, Overseer?" an overly amused voice growled.

A crunch and choking cough followed this question, briefly restoring a deep silence.

"The fight is to the death, Master Marcuset," a decidedly more imperious voice eventually called. "Do you not understand how the pits work? You'll stay locked in mortal combat with a string of opponents until you die or satisfy our need for entertainment."

Snorting, I poorly tried to contain my laughter. That claim couldn't be right. Sure, I'd only skimmed the briefing that had touched on the pits, but the words 'mortal combat' or 'to the death' would certainly have leapt off of the page at me.

Besides that, Doldimar had been in power for nigh on three centuries now. With the rate of his Harvests alone, that Dark Lord should be close to a complete cull of the Audish population, but if deaths from the pits were thrown into the mix as well, the kingdom's citizenry would surely have passed from existence years ago.

Unless Auden was much larger than my fellow Hand members and I had suspected.

The voracious gazes fixed on me revealed how serious these Kiraak were about their demand, though. They sincerely wanted to watch a highly skilled brawler fight a child to the death. What the *hell* was wrong with them?

"We do as you ask, or what?" I shouted.

Following their command would test me in a way nothing ever had before. Forget the silly emotional rationale that was *supposed* to affect me at the prospect. Children were the future of humankind. To kill one was to end the possibility of future genius.

"You fight, or we kill you both," someone from the crowd said.

Oh, how one amused statement changed things. Suddenly, my expected fistfight was no longer about providing entertainment but a visceral struggle for survival. Whose existence would continue at the end of this: the older, stronger man or the underdeveloped kid?

I stood over my opponent, and terrified eyes met mine.

"At least I can make it quick," I said.

Without thinking about it, I snapped the kid's neck, and the pit erupted into cheers while a Conscripted soldier dragged the body away. So quick. One child's potential gone from the world, and already, the next challenger was stalking toward me from across the sand.

As he came, I idly remembered something about how pit fighters eventually lost their minds here, which made perfect sense now. Most couldn't long withstand the emotional pressure that came with ending a life before something snapped in their head.

As for me, I felt nothing but disgust for the travesty that the Kiraak had forced upon me, and I quickly shook that off in order to face the next threat to my survival.

I had to.

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