

Adventures of the Hand 2.3

Thumb

My next opponent—a stout man, madly smiling—stopped opposite me, and on inspecting him, I quickly discounted any challenge that he might bring. I could easily counter his pattern.

Soon, the cheering around us died, and I waited for the command to begin.

Instead of receiving it, I had to clap my hands to my ears as multiple bells across Nephiron started clanging, a clamorous tumult of ringing chimes—so much *noise*—and after a beat of stunned silence, the pit dissolved into movement. Howling, the Kiraak sprinted out of the pit, and Conscripted soldiers came forward to herd me and the other combatant away.

When we reached them, the holding cells were in the process of being emptied, and Conscripted soldiers were driving this crowd in the direction opposite the pit. I endured their shoving and screaming, holding back the panic threatening to claw up my throat.

Too many people in one place! I couldn't read their patterns, and with chaos looming, my vision narrowed to pinpoints with black stalking along its edges.

When we broke into open air once more, creating space, I nearly collapsed with relief, but my torment wasn't yet at an end. The Conscripted corralled me into a cart filled with prisoners, several of whom tried to bite and scratch at me. The cart bed was crammed with flesh, forcing every inch of my skin into proximity with someone else's.

I could only stand one person's touch for more than a few seconds, and that man wasn't here. How long was I supposed to endure this?

As a final, bawling woman joined the group, a Conscripted soldier slammed the cart's hatch closed.

"Get your cargo to Elisk as quickly as possible," she called to the cart driver. "We can't afford to lose the Dark Lord's entertainment."

After an acknowledgment, the cart jerked forward, slamming a mass of bodies into me. I was quite aware that I was hyperventilating, but until I could get away from the chaos of so many interwoven patterns, I'd never get control of my brain or lungs back.

At least black wasn't threatening to drag me under, like it had been earlier.

The last woman loaded had been left hanging over the back hatch. As we departed Nephiron, her eyes landed on me, and if possible, her sobs became even more violent.

"My son?" she asked.

What was she-?

Oh, Alouin. The kid. She was asking about the kid.

Slowly, I shook my head, and the woman let loose a single shriek. For a moment, her body went limp. Then, she jerked herself over the hatch, tumbling to the earth, and the cart behind us rattled over that debris a breath later.

Seeing this, my panic subsided, replaced with something... other. I'd only experienced this sensation once before, but it shouldn't be showing its face now. It didn't belong to me but the man I'd once been.

The jingle of a key ring approaches my cell, which doesn't match the pattern of the guards' established patrol. Another three-quarter mark should have passed before the next one.

So, I unlace my fingers from behind my head, quickly sitting up. Shortly afterward, the third-shift guard swings open my cell's door, and a stranger saunters inside with the guard quickly departing.

I stay perfectly still. With no indication of what pattern the other man holds to, I'm not sure how to act or what to say. The cell's quiet must have become uncomfortable because the stranger soon shifts in place.

"I hear you're good with codes," he says.

And I shrug. I've unraveled patterns for Daira's thieves guilds on occasion, whenever I've needed extra coin, but I wouldn't call my work 'good'.

"You've gotten yourself into quite the pickle, Master Marsuvius. Killing an ambassador from the Southern Kingdoms, even if the man provoked it, is never wise," the stranger says, clicking his tongue with disapproval. "Kaedesa was furious about that until I told her about your unique skills."

He ceases his flow of words as if expecting a response, but I have nothing to say. When they pulled me off the nobleman I attacked, they said I was incoherent with rage. That I attacked several other patrons. That restraining me took four other brawlers' strength. I remember none of it, just my opponent breaking society's pattern and something subsequently breaking in me.

"Have they told you what's happening come morning?" the stranger asks.

"Execution," I reply.

It's a fitting punishment. I doled out death on the man who broke the pattern and as a result, broke one of society's most sacred rules. I deserve what's coming.

“How would you like a grant of reprieve instead?” the stranger asks.

Cocking my head, I consider his proposal. Continued existence is, of course, preferable to death, but this offer confuses me.

“Wouldn’t that break your laws?” I ask.

“The queen makes the laws, and she’s the one offering,” the stranger counters.

An acceptable line of reasoning. Which leaves...

“Why would she offer such a thing?” I ask.

“She has need of your abilities, although I suppose I should test them before we go any further,” the stranger says while retrieving a document from a breast pocket. “We found this among the belongings of the ambassador you killed.”

Accepting the sheet of parchment, I scan it. At first glance, it seems like a love letter to a mistress in Daira, but on closer inspection, I notice a familiar, coded pattern in its otherwise confusing words and...

“The ambassador planned to use his protected status to get close to the queen so he could kill her,” I say while handing the document back.

“Exactly as we surmised,” the stranger says with a half-smile. “So, would you like a stay of execution?”

I hesitate but eventually nod.

“Excellent! Welcome to the Queen’s Hand,” the stranger says, offering me a hand.

Reluctantly shaking it, I suppress a shudder at our point of contact.

“My name’s Oswin,” the stranger says. “I’m your spymaster, and together, we’ll create a little chaos.”

At that idea, I promptly throw up.

That same reaction was threatening to overwhelm me now. Only the angry glares of the people around me were keeping my stomach contained.

What did other people call this sensation? Self-disgust? Regret? Somewhere in between? Whatever it was, I couldn’t shake it. That kid’s eyes were burning into me, even now.

I could produce a slew of logical reasons for what I’d done in the pit. My king needed me. If I’d let the kid kill me, the boy would have died at the hands of his next opponent, and that death wouldn’t have been nearly as painless.

None of these rationalizations, however, had been floating through my mind when I'd snapped the kid's spine. All I'd known was his life versus my own, and I'd chosen myself. It was a perfectly rational choice, one I'd made countless times in the past, but this one already haunted me, which was *frustrating*.

In a struggle to survive, nothing but strength should matter. Not gender, not genius, not age...

I buried my face in my hands, rubbing at my gritty eyes. What was I doing? Feelings like this shouldn't distract me from my job. I was the Thumb of Raimie's Hand. My sole purpose was to serve the king.

So, I carefully pulled my message in a bottle from its hidden pocket. This was the last report I'd be able to send for a while. Best to make it thorough.

Ignoring the curious glances directed my way, I added the information about the commotion in the pit and my current transport to Elisk at the end of my report.

So many Kiraak scrambling away from a favored form of entertainment and the appearance of ships on the horizon could only mean one thing. Someone else had invaded Auden, and they'd been lucky enough to make their landing at Nephiron instead of on an abandoned beach.

As I returned the parchment to its bottle, it disappeared, right as I replaced the stopper. This display of magic stirred something from the dejected people around me, but their reactions didn't last long. They soon returned to listless staring.

As for me, panic took over once more. The creak of the cart's wheels barely covered the noise of my ragged gasping.

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