

# Adventures of the Hand 3.2

## Pointer

The pit's holding pens were filthier than I'd imagined, and the smell was horrendous, a mixture of unwashed bodies, excrement, and urine left to fester for years.

The people weren't much better, clumping into three groups.

First came those who'd broken. They wandered around the pen with broad grins: barking, screeching, staring, and otherwise doing what they could to frighten those caged with them. One approached me, gnashing her teeth, and I coldly glared at her until she scampered away, whimpering.

Then came the living corpses. These unfortunate souls had given up on life. They stood or sat where they'd last been placed and gazed at nothing, at the void that had eaten them whole. No spark of what had once made them unique now lived in their eyes.

Lastly came those who were new to the pits. Almost average looking, these people stayed close to one another, whispering. Despair haunted their faces, and occasionally, one would break away from the pack in a fit of uncontrolled sobbing.

Scanning this crowd, I didn't find who I was looking for among them, which was unsurprising. Thumb had always insisted on a merry chase.

If he wasn't here, though, it was time to see if I could break into the next holding pen.

Before I could try, the pen's mood shifted, and I noticed the black-eyed men striding among the crowd. He inspected the caged humans, searching for something, but he clearly wasn't finding it.

As soon as I saw him, I pulled away to the edge of the room, but for once, my unassuming bearing didn't provide its usual protection. Perhaps it was the weapons hanging from me or the fact that I wasn't covered in filth, like the others, that drew the Enforcer my way, but whatever his reason for it, the man pointed straight at me.

"You."

Turning on his heels, the Enforcer stomped away, and I followed after a short delay. I hadn't particularly *wanted* to participate in this shit but fine. If they wanted to back me into a fight, then that was what I'd do.

I loosened my sword in its sheath, unbuckled the clasps that were holding my knives in place, and popped the tops on several poison flasks, hanging from my belt.

Beware whoever was soon to come. Your end draws near.

*Easing the window to the queen's chambers open, I cling to my precarious perch. A prolonged set of years has passed since my family was murdered, all to send a message. Something broke in me that day, and since then, I've killed so many people.*

*The rebellion against the king no longer exists. I teased out and snared each of their members until none remained. After removing what had initially caused Madeleine and Lulani's losses, I moved on to higher value targets. Targets like King Belqarim.*

*For an instant, the corpse faces of every person who died by my hand float like ghosts in the glass of the window in front of me, and I flinch, nearly losing my grip on its sill. Silently, I replay the chant of my reasoning for their deaths.*

*I didn't kill those people for revenge or out of some twisted need to appease madness. I did it because my victims' continued existence threatened the well-being of Ada'ir's people. A rebellion would have been long and bloody for all involved, and by ordering the deaths of my family, King Belqarim further incited the uprising that my girls' murders were supposed to deflect. If I hadn't eliminated the crown's enemies, rumors of why my family died would have eventually led to fighting in Daira's streets.*

*One final target remains before I can call the kingdom of Ada'ir free of internal threats.*

*When a king dies, the standard line of succession is for the oldest child to take the throne, but times are anything but normal right now. Belqarim's queen has failed to produce an heir for him, and in such circumstances, the question of next in line becomes a bit murkier.*

*Right now, the most likely candidate for the position is Belqarim's cousin, Duke Wylumin, but that irresponsible man is currently exploring the frozen wastelands to the north. No one had heard from the duke in months. Add to that the complication that not all of the royal family has perished in recent weeks, and one can see why Ada'ir's court has been in turmoil since the king's passing.*

*The problem with Belqarim's wife, Kaedesa, as monarch is that no one can say for sure where she came from. By the time she arrived on the scene, Ada'ir's court was desperate for Belqarim to show interest in any woman. The only reason the nobility allowed such a controversial marriage was because they were uncertain if Belqarim would ever favor another person as a marriage candidate, and the realm required an heir to the throne.*

*Kaedesa gained little popularity with the court when her influence over the king led to the passage of several laws meant to elevate the commoners, laws that were at the heart of the recently ruined rebellion. Her failure to produce the heir that the nobles desired has further deepened the resentment leveled against her.*

*Considering her lack of popularity, Kaedesa should have returned to the place of her mysterious origins after Belqarim's death, if only to maintain the realm's stability. Instead, she's continued to carry out a monarch's duties, as if the question of succession has already been answered.*

*This is why I'm hanging outside of her window this evening. Kaedesa can't garner enough support to keep the crown, and when she eventually loses it, blood and death will inevitably follow.*

*So, I ignore the dead faces I see in the window, slipping into the queen's chambers. My knife clears its sheath without a sound as I approach the four-poster bed that's dominating the room.*

*"So, you're the one who assassinated the king," someone says from a dark corner. "We knew it was a noble but Duke Lysinthir? That's unexpected."*

*When someone clicks their tongue, I twist toward the sound, brandishing my knife.*

*"Who are you that you must hide in the shadows?" I ask.*

*"Oh! Apologies. I didn't mean to make you nervous."*

*The voice's owner steps into the moonlight, and at the sight of him, I can't help but display my surprise. Finally, I've found someone who's homelier than me.*

*"My name is Aramar, my lord duke," the man says with a bow, "and I am the spymaster of Ada'ir's Hand."*

*At that, I snort, partially from surprise—a member of the Hand would look nothing like THIS—but mostly with contempt.*

*"I hate to inform you of this, but your work to date has been less than admirable," I say.*

*Rubbing his neck, Aramar says, "You're assuming that anything you've done over the last few years has been objectionable. Oh! Thank you for assassinating Belqarim, by the way. With how senile the old man was getting, we were worried about what might happen to this kingdom."*

*Those words grant me more comfort than I'm willing to allow. Further justifications for the king's murder might help soothe my conscience, but they're coming from someone I might soon have to kill.*

*Besides that, this man, supposedly the spymaster of Ada'ir's Hand, has just admitted to wanting his king dead. That seems a bit... unusual to me. I require further clarification.*

*"What do you want?" I ask. "Your intention obviously isn't to stop me from my purpose, or you'd have killed me before making yourself known."*

*"We'll get to that," Aramar says. "First, may I ask why you want to assassinate the queen?"*

*Clasping his hands behind his back, he cocks his head.*

*"We were certain that you'd committed your killing spree for the realm's protection and that alone."*

*Killing spree? How much does this spymaster know? I've been meticulous with my kills, completing them so that whoever would investigate them would chalk them up to accidents or natural causes. Did I make a mistake?*

*And how did this Aramar parse my purpose? If they knew about my kills, most would assume that they were random.*

*"That's right," I cautiously say. "As for the queen, my reason is the same. She doesn't have the influence needed to stay in power, and without that, she's a threat to the realm."*

*"In that, you're wrong," Aramar says with a chuckle. "She already controls Ada'ir's army. Who do you think convinced the king to appoint Marcuset as its commander years ago, rather than the other, seemingly more competent candidates?"*

*I didn't know that Kaedesa holds the army's support, but that backing will only get her so far. What will she do when the nobles stop paying the taxes that fund her soldiers' salaries?*

*But why am I taking the time to talk to this man? Every minute I delay is another that a palace guard might notice the lock that I broke to get in here.*

*Perhaps this spymaster is intentionally delaying me. Perhaps a retinue of guards is even now approaching the queen's chambers to take me into custody.*

*"Don't-!" Aramar shouts.*

*But I've already lunged. Before I can get too far, a hand snakes around my neck, forcing a clear mask over my nose and mouth, and this hold is quickly followed by the sound of a suppressed hiss. When did someone get behind-?*

*The hiss must have indicated something's release into this mask because my throat starts protesting the foreign substance now flowing down it, and I cough and cough and cough and-*

*Warm droplets splash against the mask's interior, and it falls off of my face in time for me to drop to the ground. I claw at my neck while my overworked lungs continue expelling filth from my body, and with clean air exacerbating the fire sweeping down my airway, blood splatters across the floor with each jerking exhalation.*

*When the fit stops, I lie still with only the occasional twitch moving me, too stunned to do more.*

*"How should we restrain him?" a new voice asks. "I didn't bring rope with me."*

*"Drapes, Oswin."*

*Next comes the sound of ripping fabric as well as the feel of hands dragging me upright and silky cloth binding me to wood.*

*“Apologies, Duke Lysinthir, but I did try to warn you.”*

*Aramar sounded almost sorrowful with that, and groggily, I stir in my seat.*

*“What-?” I say.*

*But it wasn't my voice that emerged. It belongs to a stranger. Before I can marvel at this change, a shorter coughing bout wracks my frame once more.*

*“Might not want to use that for a while,” says the unidentified man.*

*“This is Middle,” Aramar says, gesturing to the stranger. “I'm sorry for not introducing him sooner, but I wasn't sure how cooperative you'd be with us. It appears that my caution was warranted.”*

*Indeed. This spymaster took me by surprise with his subordinate but once I'm free...*

*Flexing against my bonds, I grunt.*

*“Yes, I'm afraid you're stuck here for a time. In the meantime, perhaps you'll listen to me,” Aramar says. “If you'd waited a moment longer, I planned to explain how Kaedesa intends to corral the nobility under her thumb. Fortunately for you, you're essential for that task.”*

*I snort, belatedly grateful that the noise didn't trigger another fit.*

*“You'd make a worthy addition to her growing Hand,” Aramar continues. “You have a unique position: an assassin with a conscience who holds high standing among the nobility, and Kaedesa has an army, one that's keeping the Southern Kingdoms' hordes from invading. Their patrols also allow trade to freely flow. By combining our resources, Kaedesa hopes to convince your peers that she can lead this kingdom to greatness. But a large part of her plan relies on you.”*

*The spymaster falls silent, giving me time to think. Could this foreign queen do the impossible? With one conversation alone—even if it was held by proxy—she's already proven herself resourceful, logical, and far-sighted, all excellent qualities in a monarch.*

*Meanwhile, what do I know about Wylumin, the next in line? The king's cousin has run off to explore the ruins of a dead civilization, neglecting his role in the one that produced him. That's not even considering all the negative qualities I observed in him over the years of our youth.*

*Which of these two would give Ada'ir the safety her citizens deserve?*

*Forget the harm that these two men have caused me. They were only responding to the threat I unwittingly became, a threat to Ada'ir. I need to fix my failure to protect her.*

*Meeting Aramar's eyes, I nod in acceptance of his unspoken proposition. Better the woman I have experience with than the man I know all too well.*

*"Excellent," Aramar says, clapping his hands together. "Middle, release our new Pointer."*

*While his subordinate follows his orders, Aramar crouches in front of me.*

*"I should tell you. Your goal aligns with Kaedesa's almost exactly," he says. "She too wants to provide safety for her people, but she envisions a far greater blanket of protection than one found in Ada'ir alone. She desires security for the entire world."*

*Pausing, Aramar narrows his eyes.*

*"Tell me. What do you know about Auden?"*

As the portcullis rumbled open, I prepared my mind for the coming struggles, but before I could get anywhere with that, a bolt of gloom tore past me, passing in such close proximity that it ripped my sleeve. Glaring at the Enforcer who'd thrown it, I stepped into the arena.

Having so many people's eyes locked onto me was a strange sensation. For years, I'd worked in the shadows, more so the further I'd transitioned from a prominent duke of Ada'ir to the Pointer of Raimie's Hand. An assassin wasn't much good to the one they served if people took note of them while they were completing a job. Now, *thousands* of people were watching me, some with glee and some with newly piqued interest.

One quarter of the arena erupted into a confusing mixture of boos and cheers, emanating from the humans who'd come to watch the evening's entertainment. This city, of all those large enough to host the fights, actively encouraged its citizens to participate in the spectacle. Doldimar thrived on chaos and corruption. If the humans who toiled under his reign wanted to add to it with their betting pools and blood lust, he wouldn't deny them.

In another quarter of the arena, unnaturally blackened and roped skin surrounded a host of glittering eyes. The Kiraak's appearance exacerbated their absolute silence and stillness. The view was unnerving, even to me, so I turned my back on them, facing the drop-off on the other side of the arena. I'd force my opponent into facing that unsettling sight, taking every advantage I could get.

Speaking of opponents, my first one came loping over the sand to join me on center stage. They'd sent me a slaverling, gibbering husk of a man, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe this fight would give me enough time to twist the valve of my conscience closed.

Someone barked, "Begin!"

On receiving that command, I didn't bother with fighting my opponent. Instead, a throwing knife was soon protruding from the man's eye, all before he'd had time to move.

There was a surprised pause, but then, a Conscripted soldier moved forward to drag the body toward the drop-off to toss it over, all while the crowd loudly booed.

What had they expected from me? For those forced to participate in these fights, the point of the pits was to survive for as long as possible. I wasn't about to waste effort on a fight that I could end before it began.

My next opponent was a teenager, and this 'battle' proved somewhat more challenging for me. While I killed the kid, my conscience strained against the barrier containing it, but somehow, I held it in check. I could self-flagellate later. At this point, guilt would only get me killed, and I couldn't help Thumb if I was dead.

Next came a grim-faced woman, a man who screamed and begged, and another woman who'd lost the battle for her sanity. They began to blur together, each a repetition of a previous adversary.

At some point, the crowd, restless with boredom, shifted with a wave of unease spreading through them like a plague. While I waited for my next opponent, I searched for the source of this change and landed on a slim, handsome Eselan, settling into a seat near the front.

An Eselan in Auden? I'd thought that race had been wiped out here, a target of the Dark Lord and his armies.

If that peculiarity weren't enough, the Kiraak around him were acting strangely. They visibly recoiled from the man, scrunching as far from him as possible, all while darting wanting glances his way. They'd given him plenty of room, enough for two, which was a marvel in this crowded arena, and if I squinted hard enough, I could almost see someone—*no, something other*—sitting beside the Eselan.

Before I could ponder this oddity to the extent I desired, the next fight began, and I was too caught up in killing my victims as quickly and painlessly as possible to return to the question of the Eselan in the crowd.

Right when I'd begun to think I'd never encounter a challenge, they pitted me against a woman who looked as if she might have been a soldier in the past. She successfully made two exchanges with me before the third killed her, and the crowd roared when her body hit the ground. After that, the enemies forced upon me ramped up in difficulty.

The night was growing late, and I was out of breath when the surprise came. The portcullis once more rolled up, the next poor sucker sauntered in, and my heart stopped.

*What have they DONE to you, my love?*

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