

Adventures of the Hand 3.3

Pointer

A big man stopped opposite me, exactly as every other opponent had, and when he met my fervent gaze, recognition failed to flicker in his eyes.

“Thumb?” I said, pitching my ruined voice to carry over the crowd’s cheering.

Alouin, Thumb must have gained a lot of popularity in the days... weeks...

How long had he been here?

“Begin,” a voice called.

Thumb sprang into action, and caught off guard, I scrambled backward. I was used to the other man letting his opponents have the first few blows, all in order to assess their ‘pattern’ of attack. Thumb and his obsessions.

“Thumb!” I said again.

For the first time this day, I drew my sword to keep Thumb’s answer from splitting my skull in half. After that, I was too busy avoiding blows to say anything else.

I switched up my method of attack and defense as much as I could. Thumb excelled at detecting an opponent’s weaknesses, and in the past, that ability had gotten my ass handed to me on multiple occasions. I flowed through the standard soldier’s thrust and block, the bobbing weave of the Southern Kingdoms, and the whirlwind of motion favored by the Zrelnach.

It wasn’t enough. Smashing through my defenses, Thumb kicked me across the arena. Where the other man’s foot had impacted, something cracked in my chest, and I rolled several times before I could scramble to my feet again.

Thumb advanced on me and...

Damnit! If things continued like this, I’d be forced to fight seriously, and a loved one would die. Again.

Not again!

“Marsuvius!” I yelled. “Come on! Remember me. Please!”

Nothing from Thumb. Shit.

“Suvi!” I screamed as loudly as I could.

Hearing that moniker, Thumb stumbled to a halt with something fluttering across his face, but I was much too obsessed with my long-ruined vocal cords to notice it in full. Falling to my knees, I raked at my neck while flecks of blood flew to cover the distance between me and the other spy.

When I collapsed to my side, I knew this fit would be bad. Each cough was coming in such close proximity to the next that they’d stopped the flow of my breathing. My lungs screamed for air, and I was vaguely aware of fleshy bits joining the blood that was escaping from me.

Would this be it? The one that killed me?

No. The fit eventually calmed down, and I was left shuddering in the sand. The arena had gone quiet with nothing to fill the air besides the occasional scrape of skin against stone.

In my moment of helplessness, Thumb could have easily ended our fight. Why hadn’t he? Was he-?

Familiar hands hauled me upright. Their grip on my shoulders was all that kept me from tumbling to the ground for the second that it took for my legs to start working again.

“Sin?” Thumb asked with muddled worry brimming in his eyes.

Relief saturated me from head to toe, and grabbing Thumb’s face, I dragged it to me. I tasted blood and the salt of sweat on the other man, but interwoven with those was a taste that was distinctly ‘Suvi, ‘Suvi, ‘Suvi!

Lowering one hand, I fiddled with the weapons hanging on my belt, but when Thumb started twitching beneath my other hand, I released his face, pulling away even if I stayed firmly within his embrace. Thumb placed a single finger on my cheek with one eye spasming, and I knew how much that skin-to-skin contact was costing him.

“Why are you crying, Sin?” Thumb asked.

With a crooked smile as my only answer, I shoved my poisoned knife into Thumb’s back, and the big man’s eyes went wide. He backed away, reaching for the foreign object in him, and flowing behind him, I tripped him onto his stomach—*I couldn’t watch ‘Suvi’s face for what would come next*—and bent to yank the knife out of Thumb’s back. The other man’s body spasmed, all while a trickle of blood spilled from the wound.

When Thumb fell still, the usual Conscripted soldiers came forward to collect the body, but I faced them with my sword drawn and one foot on either side of Thumb.

“This one’s mine!” I snapped with a cough. “You can’t take him.”

Exchanging a dubious glance, the Conscripted soldiers reached for their weapons, ready to force the issue, but before they could take another step, a voice from the crowd filled the air.

“He can keep it.”

With every word spoken, that voice had oscillated between high and low pitches, and hearing it, I slowly looked up at the sole Eselan in the crowd.

With a manic grin, that man said, “I’m interested to see what he does with the body once decay takes hold of it, and while he’s enormously entertaining, I’ve had enough of him this evening. He’s too... efficient. I want carnage, not clean kills.”

Having received their orders, the soldiers bowed low, almost scraping the ground, and facing the Eselan, I inclined my head toward him, all while chaffing at how long this process was taking.

“Your generosity is appreciated, lord.”

Hell, how it had hurt to say something even that quietly.

Cocking his head, the Eselan... or possibly Doldimar said, “Such a rash of people showing fearlessness around me lately! I wonder, are you-?”

When he narrowed his eyes at me, a shiver rumbled over my body before I could stop it.

“No. Nobody’s stupid enough to infiltrate Elisk’s pits.”

Taking his eyes off of me, the Eselan snapped his fingers at the Conscripted soldiers.

“Get him and his new baggage out of my sight.”

Oh, thank Alouin.

As I shouldered Thumb’s body and followed the Conscripted soldiers out of the arena, the crowd didn’t dare make a peep, and once we’d passed into the holding pens, I winced. Damn but Thumb was heavy. All those muscles made for a heavy burden, but fortunately, the walk back didn’t take long.

Once they’d locked their captives inside one of the holding pens, the Conscripted soldiers left, and I dropped Thumb onto his back. The open gash in him would have to come later. I had to counteract the poison I’d given him first.

Clearing Thumb’s mouth with one hand, I withdrew a flask from my belt with the other. I poured its contents into the cleared passage, holding Thumb’s jaw closed while stroking his neck until its paralyzed muscles moved. Then, I rolled him onto his stomach, dipped a knife into the tiny meniscus left in the flask, and gently grazed the open wound’s edges with it. One more roll and I settled in to wait.

The seconds dragged by, and soon enough, I started fidgeting. Maybe it was because a loved one was lying here rather than a target who needed to vanish sans a messy murder, but while waiting, I had to swallow bile, occasionally flinging nervous energy off of my fingers. Alouin, what if I'd actually killed Thumb?

"Come on, 'Suvi!" I rasped.

Another handful of seconds passed, and I couldn't take it anymore. The poison's reagent must not have worked. The hell was I supposed to do now? I killed people, not the opposite!

I'd have to try the only other option at my disposal, and if that didn't work, I'd find a quiet corner to taste the contents of the flasks strapped to my belt.

"Don't you dare leave me now," I growled.

Straddling Thumb's body, I prepared to bear down on his chest, but before I could, the other man gasped, coughing up a storm. I scrambled off of him in time to avoid the vomit that came out of his mouth, awkwardly rubbing Thumb's back above his wound. Doing my best to provide comfort, I handed over my water flask, and for a solid minute, Thumb chugged at it until it was nearly empty.

"Ugh," he grunted once he was finished.

Silence fell. It was *so* heavy, and I *needed* to fill it.

"I'm sorry," I said in a small, detached voice. "It was the only way to get us out of the arena alive."

Thumb merely stared off into space.

"If it helps, I fashioned an escape route for us to use once I'd found you," I said. "We might even risk saving these people if you think we can get away with it. If you don't want me near you once we're free and clear, I'll--"

Twisting around, Thumb pinned me into the dirt, roughly smothering my remorse with warm lips. I could still faintly taste vomit in 'Suvi's mouth, but honestly, I didn't care. Wrapping an arm around his neck and another in his hair, I melted into him. After a moment, he broke contact, leaving me gasping.

"You're not angry?" I asked.

"You found me," Thumb said. "Why would I be mad?"

Leaning down, he nipped the spot on my neck that always sent shivers up my spine.

"'Suvi!" I said with a restrained smile.

I shoved against the heavy body holding me down.

“We need to get out of here. Now.”

Sighing, Thumb sat back up.

“All right,” he said. “But once we’re out of here, we’ve got to find somewhere private, ‘Sin.”

Smirking, I said, “That we most certainly do.”

Getting to my feet, I extended a hand to Thumb.

“But for now, let’s focus on staying alive. As usual.”

Grimacing, Thumb took the offered hand, but of course he did. He knew how much I needed that form of contact right now.

“Time to get out of here,” I said.

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