



The Hand

By Gary Devereaux

Smoke hung lazily in the room, occasionally drifting from one side of the room to the other, as if playing its own mock game of tennis as the two rotating fans silently conducted an unending rally between themselves. Hannibal's gaze panned across the individuals gathered around the table, barely pausing, as he gauged each of them in turn. He sighed heavily, releasing breath he'd been holding unintentionally, uncertain times lay ahead.

One of the those sat around that table looked up at this, a rictus grin forming at the edge of his mouth to join a new found sparkle in his eyes. Leaning back, as if confidence itself had ran up and kicked him up the arse, he lifted his chin towards Hannibal and drawled *"What's the matter, no Gifts from the Gods today then, luck ran out has it?"* This was followed up with an unhealthy amalgamation of what was intended to be a giggle, but ended up being a hacking cough.

The rest of the table chuckled and smirked, enjoying the banter being directed across the table. *"You reckon you'll be the one do you? The one to finally do over the legend that is Hannibal?"* scoffed another as he intently studied the contents of his hand.

"Yeah, why not?" replied the first man, puffing his chest out. The second man feigned fear, leaning back, gripping the back of the chair in mock surprise. *"Hold up, what, you actually think you'll be the one do you? Don't make me laugh... you hearing this you lot? What a prat."* The rest of the table had laughed at this, with more colourful names thrown at the pair of them. The first man leaned forward again, feigning concentration but suitably chastened by the others. *"You'll see"* he murmured, returning his gaze to the man in front of him.

Hannibal took this all in without comment, instead he watched the development of the group with mute irritation. How in Purgatory had he ended up across the table from this lot was lost on him, but the world was a fucked up sack of stunning disappointment right now and he was clearly surrounded by the dregs. He knew all of them, or at least of them anyway. Some he knew better than others, either by an ill-deserved reputation or through the utter misfortune of being in the same place as them at one time or another. The spectacular irony that these, these..... village idiots were the heirs of his sacrifice, the so called next generation of mankind wasn't lost on him, not even the slightest bit. How these plebs weren't drowned at birth was an utter mystery to him still to this day. Worse still, he had to endure the close proximity of their never-ending drivel.

Hannibal used their distraction to observe. He picked out details on each of the characters around the table. The girl to his right was stunning, wearing a long red dress with a plunging V that almost kissed her belly button it went that far, though she was stacked out enough to carry it off that much had to be said. This one had a bit about her but not much and typically she relied on her sexuality and assets to get what she wanted. Anyone worth their salt would see past this in a heartbeat and slash her throat without pause and be done with it. Whilst she was sensible enough to flirt at the edges of the of discussion, if you could call it that, she wasn't sharp enough to be mindful of her surroundings, allowing Hannibal to catch a glimpse of what she was holding in her left hand. He filed the image away in his mind.

Next to her was the first man, who by now was no longer smirking. This one he knew well, well, enough to know that he was called Todd and what he was genuinely capable of. He was lean, with quite an angular face and whilst he dressed like a fool and had the hair to boot, he was certainly no idiot, though he was fool enough and young enough, to have allowed himself to be drawn into the situation. Hannibal knew that biggest threat to him in this moment sat with this Todd character and to his frustration he had the common sense to conceal what might become Hannibal's demise.

In between Todd and the other main protagonist sat another woman, well in truth she was still a girl and by Hannibal's reckoning she was easily the youngest in the room. He wasn't concerned with this one, he'd seen exactly what she'd got and he wasn't worried one bit by it. He frowned when he realised she was watching him through squinting eyes whilst twisting chewing gum around her index finger, slouching to one side. Shuddering at a stray thought, he moved on to the final person in at the table, who happened to be directly to his left.

Hannibal called this one Rent. He didn't know him, in fact he'd never even heard of him before two weeks ago but the way he was bragging, he would have you think he was the best thing since the Roman's introduced the road. He recalled in that moment that Jack had asked him why he called him 'Rent', even going as far as to ask if it were as a result of a particular activity. Hannibal hadn't understood at first but after a few seconds it dawned on him what Jack was implying, though Jack soon stopped smirking after Hannibal had given him a

decent job to his scrawny little ribs. No, Rent was derived from Rent-a-crowd, because this guy was utterly incapable of remaining quiet or still for more than half a second and the noise he was capable of making quite literally defied belief.

Some said it was the quiet ones you had to watch out for and to some extent that was right, but the loud ones were twice as deadly in the wrong situation. His brother, Hasdrubal was loud, a fact that had contributed entirely to his most recent death, and led to Hannibal being here, at this table, with these people as a result. In this moment however, Rent's gob was buying him the time he needed to assess the situation fully.

As the bickering dissipated into murmurs, Todd cut through the last of it as he leaned forward on the table, his eyes wide with intent. Hannibal knew in that moment that his time was up, the crows were circling, his hand had been dealt, the time for action was now. The decision he made in these next few moments would determine how he might walk away from this escalating situation.

"So then, General..." Todd scoffed, emphasising the honorific, *"as I was saying, before I was rudely interrupted by my fellows here, your times up methinks. It's been a long time coming but I've been waiting, waiting for a day, just like this one, where people would learn to respect me, as they do you..."* He paused, looking around, ignoring the collective sighs and groans from the room. *"Some might..."* Hannibal abruptly cut him off. *"Shut up and get on with it will you, for a man that wants to end my legacy you don't half take your time"* He placed his hands on the table, left hand first, with his right resting gently on top. He was relaxed, composed and it radiated. In that moment, he saw the faintest hint of doubt creep into Todd. It was time to end this.

Todd recovered his mettle and the gamesmanship return. *"Now, now, let's not forget our manners shall we... It is ladies first, after all."* Turning to Jess before he had the chance to speak, she cut him off. *"Oh do shut up..."* she said, laying her hands on the table. *"Nothing to see here, so it won't be by my hand, Mr Hannibal, sir."* She got up and immediately walked to the back of the room where she pushed an older man out of the way, taking his seat in the process.

The charade would carry on. The young girl was next up, she looked across the table, winked at Hannibal and without a word left the table. As she walked behind him, Rent reached over and grabbed her wrist. *"What, you just gonna walk away, without saying nuffin? You can't just do that, there's rules you know, etiquette..."* The youth snatched her arm away and stepped back. *"Eat shit"* was all she said as she swaggered over the bar. Rent turned back to the table, as Todd made his play.

There was a sharp intake of breath, a few cheers and a chorus of whistles. Rent let out a laugh, then said: *"Oh damn boy, I didn't know you were serious! Shit, you about done for now Gen-ner-rallie... it's over.... It's over for you... you can't walk away from this, not now..."* Todd smiled, lapping it up. He looked over to Todd and inclined his chin questioningly. *"Nah, it's all yours, it's all yours..."* was all Rent said.

The room erupted in a chorus of scraping chairs as everyone scrambled to stand by the table, most of them behind Todd. Jess, pushed her way to the front and, pulling Todd's chair out, she positioned herself provocatively on his lap, her eyes gazing across the table, along with the entire content of the room as they all settled on Hannibal one by one.

Hannibal took it all in. Arrayed before him were a collection of thugs, mercenaries and murderers. Without exception, every single one of them was intent on this course of action. They were baying for it, like a starving pack of wolves at a fresh kill. Lifting his hands, he placed them on the edge of the table. Slowly, he pushed his chair back, which oddly didn't make even the slightest sound, giving himself a fraction of room. He reached into his jacket pocket and took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. He made to speak but once again Todd interrupted. *"These are your last words, so make them a prayer..."* The crowd were loving it, Todd had been elevated higher than he had ever been and it was just where Hannibal wanted him. He started to clap.

"You know, when I sat here tonight, I didn't think for one minute, that you, of all these people would be sat here in front of me, at the death. You know, maybe I underestimated you" Hannibal continued. *"I mean, wow, that's nice, like, real nice."* He looked around at the crowd for some support and unsurprisingly found none. It was time for the hammer blow.

"But you know, as nice as that is.... This ten, his mate Jack, his first love the Queen and her new fancy man the King, look.... well they look real ACE from where I'm sitting... don't you agree?" as Hannibal laid his final card on the table, the Ace of Hearts.

In that moment. Two things happened. First of all, Todd's jaw almost fell through the floor into the room below. Secondly the room erupted into a cacophony of noise as people mercilessly destroyed Todd in an explosion of ridicule. Not seconds later, Jess had punched Todd full in the mouth, knocking him and his chair back with enough force to tip them both over, before pushing her way through the crowd in anger and disappointment.

The crowd parted and people went back to other activities, stripping weapons down, reading maps and chatting amongst themselves about the game of Poker that has just finished. Jack wandered over and crouched beside Todd. He didn't say anything but just winked and grinned like a loon. He offered Todd his hand and pulled him upright, sarcastically brushing dust off his back, a little too firm for Todd's liking.

"How?" It took Todd maybe a minute, minute and a half to finally ask the question.

"In truth lad, there was a point, just before you lot starting bickering, that I thought you might have the same as me." Hannibal began. *"I mean there is arrogance and, well, arrogance which made me think twice. Couple that with the fact that yours was the only hand that I didn't see at some point during your banter and bullshit gave me the impression that you obviously had something worth guarding."* He reached for the cards around the table and started to straighten them up to form a deck. He continued: *"You see, when you pay enough attention and actually stop to think about things once in a while. You get to notice things that others might miss. It could be anything, from a nervous tick, a worrisome glance, a stray reveal of a card hand or even that Tracii over there has five of my cards tucked into the back of her pants...."* He trailed off, returning his gaze to Todd. *"Which is why you won't be leading group four tonight."*

Todd made to protest, but Jack's hand was suddenly held firmly on his shoulder.

Lowering his voice, Hannibal went on. *"I don't care if you've heard it before, once, twice, one hundred, four thousand times. I got across the alps, with elephants no less, because I saw something that everyone else missed. I didn't do that by showboating, boasting or proving a point. I did it quietly and with a crap load of prep. Making me the singular person in control of everything in those first important moments. That Todd, is the difference between winning and losing and today, we cannot lose."*

Todd waited a moment, shirting his gaze from Hannibal to Jack, before eventually standing. *"Good game boss."* was all he said before he left the table. Hannibal sighed.

"You won't always be around. You've died before, you'll die again. You know this." Jack purred as he poured a measure into Hannibal's empty glass. *"Have I ever offered to lend you that book I found on motivational speeches Jack?"* Asked Hannibal as he pushed the glass of brown liquor away gently. Jack shrugged.

"He's not ready. He has the ability, no doubting it but he's like my brothers... and where are they? Dead, again. How many times is that now, ten, twenty, twenty-five? No matter their brilliance... and they do have it, they are no use to me if they aren't around to be useful and he's no different." Before he could continue, a burst of alarm shrilled through the room. Hannibal stood up.

He pointed at Tracii. *"You give me my bloody cards back! The rest of you buckle up, its go time."* He felt the slightest change in temperature as cold air kissed the back of his neck, instinctively knowing that Jack had made his exit he stomped forward clapping loudly to urge the last few dregs out of the safe-house.