

The Wrestler

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Well known to mill-ions who could cite no o-ther ath-letes' names,



He was the cham - pion wrest - ler at the games.



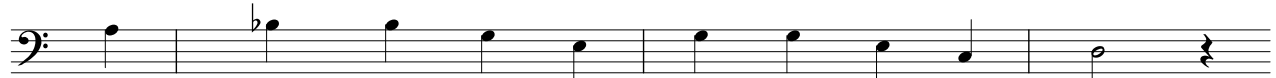
His moves were quick, his mus-cles thick, his skin a gol-den tan:



His coun - try's fi - nest spe - ci - men of man.



A pod - cast host with half an hour to fill



Once asked him for the se - cret of his skill,



And few a-mong the liste-ners guessed that there was a-ny truth



Be - hind the quip, "I had to fight a gi - ant in my youth."

Complete lyrics begin on the next page

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The Wrestler

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Well-known to millions who could cite no other athletes' names,
He was the champion wrestler at the games.
His moves were quick, his muscles thick, his skin a golden tan:
His country's finest specimen of man.
A podcast host with half an hour to fill
Once asked him for the secret of his skill,
And few among the listeners guessed that there was any truth
Behind the quip, "I had to fight a giant in my youth."

He'd broken up a vicious beating in his sixteenth year,
In wild lands not far from the frontier.
A giant briefly paused from raining down his kicks and blows,
To watch, observing if his victim rose.
Although his coach had warned him it's not wise
To try to fight with one three times his size,
The youth attacked the giant with a fierceness so intense
The giant had to flee, his size an impotent defence.

With water and support, both from the youth, against an oak
The black-robed victim sat, revived, and spoke.
He told the youth, "You've saved the world from horrors past compare,
That no one could imagine, nor could bear.
For I am Death, the reaper of men's souls,
Indifferent if their fates be harps or coals.
If Death could not come to each man, his final curtain call,
Then Earth could not provide the space or sustenance for all.

Although you were my rescuer, so I may do my task,
I cannot grant you what I know you'd ask.
I cannot free you from your fate, to die some future day,
To let your bones return to dust and clay,
But I can grant you this, if you are wise:
When next we meet, it should be no surprise.
I'll send you special messengers, one year before the date,
So you may prepare properly to meet what's all men's fate.

I can but dimly see the future, yet I can assure
You that the training which you must endure –
The pain, the work – is worth the cost, for one day, in your prime,
You'll be the greatest wrestler of your time.
You can achieve this goal. It may be hard,
But from such work you'll reap a great reward.
Become your country's hero!" With those words, Death took his leave.
What words of warning and advice for someone to receive!

And so, at the Olympics, it was just as Death foretold:
Triumphantly, he took the prize of gold.
He led his team mates with the flag upon the final day,
As nations passed in colourful array.
To cope with fame, he had not made good plans.
He found he had ten thousand Facebook fans.
The tabloids claimed to view his indiscretions with dismay,
And paparazzi followed him to every small café.

He tried to lead a double life, continuing to train,
To enter in the tournaments again,
While money from endorsements let him buy two fancy cars
And drugs sold in the parking lots of bars.
Admirers of both sexes filled his bed
And gladly followed where his fancies led.
He had no Leporello to compile and sort the list
But used an app for noting who'd been bedded, who'd been missed.

Two weeks before a tournament the press thought he would win,
His appetite diminished. He grew thin.
He visited a clinic to learn what the cause might be.
The doctors said, "It isn't HIV.
In fact, it isn't anything we know.
We ran a range of tests. No cultures grow,
And no immunoassays bind. Your white cell count is high.
It must be an infection." He was sure he would not die.

And soon, the taste, the smell, the sight of food he could not bear.
The doctors said he'd need supportive care,
Admitting him to hospital. They did not know its source
But watched as the infection ran its course.
Both night and day he feverishly tossed,
And then both strength and consciousness were lost.
He lived on IV drips two weeks. At last his fever broke;
His breathing became regular; he finally awoke.

Although he missed the tournament, his will to fight remained.
He rested six more weeks, and then he trained,
Did exercises, lifted weights, rebuilt his muscle mass,
And had to let three entry deadlines pass.
He narrowly lost practice bouts at first
But persevered. His diligence reversed
His months of inactivity. No longer did he lose,
And rumours of his imminent return were in the news.

Again, his inbox filled with offers: lovers old and new.
An upgrade to the app maintained the queue.
Some brought illicit substances, consumed by both, so said
His private tweets about their nights in bed.
In public, he was rather more discrete,
More business-like, announcing in a tweet
His name had just been entered in a tournament again.
The bookies rated his opponents' chances one in ten.

He left home for the tournament, but storms delayed his flight.
He reached his destination late at night.
He learned from the dispatcher he would need to share a ride,
As there'd been too few limousines supplied.
He slid across the three seats in the back
And waited briefly. Someone dressed in black
Sat down and buckled in while the dispatcher closed the door,
Then turned and said, "Some years ago, I met you once before."

The limo sped along the highway in the diamond lane.
The wrestler looked upon a face again
He'd hoped that he would not be re-encountering so soon,
So pallid in the light cast by the moon.
He finally spoke. "You've come yourself, I see.
I thought you'd send your messengers to me.
So, does the clock begin tonight, to mark my final year?"
And Death replied, "No, it does not. Your final day is here."

The wrestler grew angry, crying "Now? This evening? Dead?
When first we met, that was not what you said.
Where were the warning messengers you promised you would send,
To say I had one year before my end?
There's no one yet to guarantee my fame,
To ghost-write something that will bear my name,
An e-book where my fans can read my story. You agreed
To give me proper notice. It's but one year that I need."

Well-practiced in responding to that fear-filled cry "Not yet!"
Death said, "All the conditions have been met.
I sent you many messengers. Did not you first grow thin,
As all your muscles withered from within?
Were not you racked with fever, short of breath?
Was not your loss of consciousness like death?"
He nodded "yes" in silence, and the passenger in black
Picked up the other's cellphone to report his heart attack.

This is an adaptation of "The Messengers of Death", a tale from the Grimm Brothers' collection (KHM 177). I read it in translation in Ralph Mannheim's book "Grimms' Tales for Young and Old: The Complete Stories", Anchor, 1983.