

Arena

I adjust my shin guards, straighten my legs and bend my legs and adjust my shin guards again. My shin guards must be tight but not so tight they slow my blood circulating through my legs or inhibit my movement.

More armor is a privilege of affluence, but an error in using advantages can be fatal. I will have no time to adjust armor in battle. Poor win some victories because of careless affluents misuse of armor. That helps keep do-gooders from objecting too loudly to affluents small advantages.

Before I check the cutting edges of my sword and my knife, I know they are sharp. Attention to detail is essential. Over-attention speaks of dangerous nervousness.

Roger prepares for his battle across the locker room from me. As if hearing my thoughts, he stops his preparation, turns and looks at me, then walks rapidly across the locker room and stops close in front of me. He hasn't finished armoring himself. He carries his shield askew, unmindful of its function, careless of damage he might bring to it by forgetting he carries it. He sweats in agony of nervousness. He says, "Jake, this is insane. I shouldn't have let them talk me into this. There are plenty who want to do this. Why do they pick me when I don't want to do it? I hate it."

"They pick you, Roger, because you hate it, because you speak about how you hate it. You fancy yourself a champion of the poor. Make your choice. Join us wholeheartedly and survive, or continue walking with one foot in each world and be unable to save your own life."

"I haven't been a champion of the poor, Jake. Several times, I said, 'They are still human. They are human.' That's all I said."

"You wear your bleeding heart for all to see, Roger. You're visible pain and sympathy. You're offensive when you condemn the affluent, though you are one of us by your earnings and by your possessions, if not by commitment."

"I don't condemn Arena, Jake. I question the sanity, the sagacity of Arena. I don't know if we've developed the way we could develop. I don't know if we've attained high social evolution. I wonder about it, that's all. Is it wrong to ask a question, to hope humankind attains its highest possible

development?”

I had been focused on my shield, testing the fastenings of the hand grip. I turned and stepped close and spoke into Roger's face, “This is not a time to talk about it. I am preparing. So should you.”

“I know, but...”

“If you continue to talk, make sure the cameras are on, because we will fight. Spontaneous inter-affluent fights are rare. Camera crews sometimes miss the generation of combat. They would love to record a battle from the beginning. Shut up and prepare, or you won't live to see the arena. I'll make the decision for you, and your agony will be done.”

He turned and walked stiffly back to his side of the dressing room, laid out his equipment, and dressed for combat. From across the room, I saw him shaking. He spoke to himself in anger and agony.

Roger was a long way from ready for battle. A poor man would soon wipe Roger from the world, bettering the world. The poor man would take up his new name, “Roger Killer,” and battle again. He would reign as a hero for the poor, one who killed an affluent and lived to fight again. If he could win twice, that might lift him to affluent. Television producers would pay for interviews. Any degree of celebrity rewards the carrier with earnings. He could sign products. He could choose among many ways to earn money.

When a poor climbs to fame, ratings climb to the sky. Everyone tunes in, poor and affluent alike. Advertising climbs to peaks. Important stars interview the poor man. Pundits speculate, morning shows and evening shows, about the next battle, about the poor man's increased possibility for survival from the further training he inevitably finds after his first victory.

Television personalities interview the affluent who is next in line to fight the poor man. They walk deeply into his biography and his physical and psychological make up. World wide, abjectly poor who are giving up in despair to the inevitability of the arena, find encouragement in the developing story to try harder, to win a battle, to get a leg up before it is too late, to find a better job, more education. Some make the grade in time and achieve a fifty-thousand credit income and the right to survive as part of the economic system.

The system works. How can we give credence to Roger's suggestion that Arena is an uncivilized practice, preventing evolution toward a higher species than we are now? The system

works. Roger was not born to affluence but qualified when he grew up. Most who improve their situation can give up their past, but some remember too much. Perhaps inability to separate from his past is what causes Roger's questions, his fear.

Camera crews record the rest of Roger's preparation, and mine. They hope to record a locker room battle between affluents. But it is over. Roger and I won't fight each other.

Cameras record Roger preparing. When he is killed, the preparation will assume more weight, and it will be shown again and again, for the poor, that they can learn what gives them hope, for the affluent, that they can better focus their energy for victory. Cameras record my preparation. Other cameras in another room record the preparations of the poor man Roger will fight and the man I will fight. Anything that moves a particular battle above the ordinary daily round of conflict and death is carefully recorded.

We walk the long tunnel to the arena. Our armor jingles and clacks. Our feet slap, slap, thud, thud against stone. Leather creaks with our motion. Stone walls echo the sounds we make as we walk. In the cool stone tunnel, Roger sweats. I smell his fear.

He wants to speak, to ask my advice, to tell me more about what he believes, but he holds his tongue. Two join us, armored but with the open areas of vulnerability defined by Arena rules.

I am furious that this coward interrupted my careful preparation, demanded I focus my attention on him when I would devote everything to readiness. I am furious that I allow myself to be furious, that I allow myself to experience any emotion that could reduce my focus on the battle I walk toward. I calm myself. I breathe deeply and consciously. I bring my emotions and my thoughts under control.

My victory is assured. There is usually some small handicapping of the poor gladiator, subtle, secret, often not apparent even to those who know that secrets and invisible actions and intrigues tie Arena together in ways that please those in power, whose identities remain obscure to those who only view, whose identities remain obscure even to many who are involved in keeping Arena functioning smoothly.

Often enough to discourage carelessness, a poor gladiator overcomes handicapping and kills an affluent gladiator. When they are pitted against marginal affluent, or politically difficult affluent, the poor are usually not handicapped. I know this from living within the functioning of Arena and on the sand that

absorbs blood when I kill. All of Arena, including keeping the complex process of Worldwide Arena in operating balance, is part of the process of selection of those fit to survive and carry mankind into our future.

I am well trained and in good condition. I will win because I am ready for battle.

We walk toward the arena.

I have killed eight men for the camera. Each time, killing a man, watching his life's blood soak into Arena sand infuses my life with gratitude, with new appreciation of everything around me, with new appreciation of the preciousness of my own life. Each time, I walk back into the everyday world of work, back into the details of living with sharpened senses and heightened awareness of the preciousness of Arena, of humankind's chosen way to live and to assure progression toward eternity, to assure the orderly smoothing of all rough spots in our existence.

The foundation of Arena is battles between affluent and poor, that make political decisions, that provide entertainment, solve conflict, give poor a way up in the culture. There are battles between affluents, to settle political differences, financial questions, romantic disputes, social questions. Arena of the affluents is shot through and overlain with invisible lines of power among men, with intrigues, with concealed plans for power and wealth. Often enough to keep viewers interested in trying to see and understand contests for power brought into Arena, a plot to escalate into war between factions or a plan to use unsanctioned murder to short circuit the blind justice that walks into Arena is exposed, publicized, and stopped.

The orderly process of individual battling individual inexorably winnows those who would war or murder and adds to the allure of Arena. The stands are always filled, and millions watch on television, every minute they can take from earning a living, from sleeping.

We walked from the stone tunnel into the circles of arena, all enclosed by rock walls, with bleachers along the edges, built from stone.

Arena. Bright sunlight dazzled my eyes. My eyes adjusted. Wild colors and motion clarified into understandable vision. I smelled arena dust, blood, offal, fluids released at death, in soft afternoon breezes.

The powerful young man picked to fight Roger walked quickly and smoothly toward Roger. As quickly as my eyes adjusted to brilliant sunlight, I saw he had not been drugged, injured, or starved. He was ready for battle. His strength and

determination resonated across the arena to a vast, waiting audience, into hungry cameras. He swung his sword to free his muscles. He walked rapidly across hot Arena sand toward Roger.

The heavily-armored referee motored quickly into position and stopped the man. Good that the young man was eager for battle, but essential to follow every step of protocol. One of the first and most visible steps of protocol is that combatants meet in the center of the arena and consent to battle. Viewers had seen that the poor man was confident, aggressive, in excellent condition, and so eager to attack that the referee had to maneuver energetically to stop him and remind him.

The poor man retreated to the center of the arena and waited. He rested the point of his sword on the small metal and leather sword shield strapped across his instep. The polished blade reflected hot, bright sunlight toward us.

Alert advertisers had time to select this battle, rate it blue, and time to drive advertising to the sky.

Roger walked toward the center of the arena. I saw only his back, but perceptions deeper than my conscious thought told me something had changed. Had Roger's fear evaporated? I had time, a few of Roger's strides, to understand strength and discipline flowed through him toward the waiting poor, who raised his sword in sunlight, ready for Roger.

Roger swung his sword savagely above stained arena sand, and the poor man stepped back, swung, and thrust. Steel blades rang together. The poor man understood battle and moved well. He swung, thrust, chopped. He thrust toward Roger. He slammed Roger's efforts aside and cut, chopped, stabbed into clear air of the arena as Roger turned the poor man's efforts from him.

I felt a sense of leisure, as if, in the center of the arena, we left behind concerns about living or dying and entered into ancient, ritual dance. We entered into the celebration of trained, calculated motions laden with ritual strength and numinous meaning of battle to death, a dance from antiquity toward humankind's perfected future.

Metal rang against metal. Metal vibrated and thrust metal aside into air. Sword cut against shield, against sword. The poor man swung hard and low and sliced blood and flesh across Roger's left thigh. Roger's blood shone in sunlight. Roger stepped forward, into the swing of the poor man's sword, and chopped downward. He cut the man's right shoulder, exposed at the end of his swinging blow, deep enough to slow the man.

Roger stepped forward again, into the man's hesitation, and swung for the poor man's head. The man ducked, but Roger's sharp sword's edge glanced from his skull and sent part of his scalp and splashes of blood flying to arena sand.

The poor man turned, slashed, cut, and thrust, opened blood and flesh across Roger's abdomen, but not deep enough to stop him. Roger's blow to his head had slowed him. The poor man stepped forward and slashed but cut only arena air, swung too far and didn't recover quickly enough to guard himself. Roger swung down on his exposed neck and severed his head, thud into sand. Blood splashed Roger, splashed sand, and stank in hot sunlight. Poor man's body fell flat.

Roger stood, point of his bloody sword resting in arena sand, breathed golden sunshine and hot air, gathered his senses. He did not offer clenched hands above his head to the four cameras as protocol requires. He would probably be forgiven that breach because he fought well and because this was his first time, though I thought his breach intentional. He sheathed his sword, drew his knife, turned the poor man's body front up, slit his clothing, slit straight up his abdomen and chest, and exposed entrails.

Two Harvesters dressed in white and gold uniforms ran across the arena, carried the ubiquitous blue and white cool keeper between them. Roger stepped aside and let the harvesters and cameras close in. This poor man had been brave and powerful. His organs would be highly valued.

The harvesters sorted among entrails, took the poor man's heart, kidneys, liver, and his eyes. They cut bone and harvested his inner ears. They placed everything in the cool chest, closed it and lifted it. They exited slowly, lofted the blue and white container, one on each end, again and again as they circled the arena, that the viewing crowd might see and add weight of approval to this step toward immortality. Human voices raised in celebration overpowered hot sunlight in the arena.

Roger knelt and flayed. Now he was careful about the correct order of ritual. When he had peeled away chest skin and freed all the skin from the left arm, he had satisfied ritual. He stepped back and motioned professional butchers to move in. Two ran from opposite sides of the arena in their flashing red and blue uniforms, met at the carcass, and continued skinning. Bursts of red light and blue light radiated from them out into the arena. They cleaned out the poor man's visceral cavity. They began to cut meat. Two cameras moved closer. The cameras showed the man and the woman preparing the carcass and clearly defined

quality.

This film, starting with the action and analysis in the locker room, will become a classic. Bidding for meat, skin, and bones will set record highs for the week, maybe the month. Viewers love a strong story backing a battle, and we have an ideal story. Roger, uncertain of his ability and strength, uncertain if the system itself qualifies as good and strong, converts in the arena, in battle, to sure and strong, confident of humankind's progressive future. The story will show well, with little editing. The battle displayed well-matched skills and a hard-to-predict outcome.

Interviewers arrive quickly, run and rerun the film and talk to the survivor, the winner, to other participants, direct and indirect. Analyze and predict. When Roger goes into battle again, audience is assured.

My own battle seems almost secondary when I tell of that day, but my battle wasn't secondary, in my preparation for it, during the battle, nor afterward as the changes that began that day unfolded to my understanding, unfolded in my life, unfolded in Arena itself.

If a viewer of that day's history goes by what is most readily available to the searcher, Arena began and ended that day with Roger's battle, with reviewing the battle and parts of the battle, with analysis of the battle and what it meant in the history of Arena, but my battle rose toward its beginning as workers prepared the arena, as we walked toward each other over the clean, newly-smoothed sand.

Roger removed his armor, tended to his wounds, showered, and dressed again in his daily clothes. He was quiet, pale, and deep in his own thoughts, surrounded by people asking him hundreds of questions, surrounded by cameras.

I know that because I watched the videos from that day. I couldn't read him from the videos. The people who surrounded him as the videos were recorded couldn't read him either. That blankness in him, that immunity to being read and understood led to even more questions, none of which he answered.

He appeared to not even see the people around him, though they pressed close to him and joined in the rising sound of many voices competing with each other, competing with Roger's silence. When he walked forward to leave, people gave way, shrank back from him. Roger had become an unknown, deadly force. No one was presumptuous enough to touch the personification of that force or willing to be touched by that force.

I walked toward my adversary. He walked toward me in brilliant sunshine, over hot, white sand. Our swords and armor reflected hot sunshine. Watching people, crowded together into the stadium seats, awakened to the possibility that something new and even more dramatic than Arena normally was could happen, roared in joyful anticipation, in blood-lust.

Something happened in me that had never happened before, that I didn't foresee, that I didn't understand at first, didn't even know that it grew in me, that brought me much thought in the days, week, and months following that battle, that brought me closer to defeat and death than I had ever come.

I saw the man walking toward me in detail more minute than I had ever seen before, though only afterward, when I had time to think about what had happened, time to try to define what it was that was so different about that battle from any battle I had ever been in, did I begin to understand that the detail I saw was the beginning of what was different.

Before, I had always seen the form of my adversary. I saw the muscles that moved his weapons, the fingers that held his weapons. I saw his expressions that might forecast his movements, might forecast his plans, I saw his reactions to me.

They were all the same, the men who battled me, something to dispose of, something to win over and kill, then walk away from.

This day, I saw him, brown eyes watching me, from dark brown face etched by living. I thought of his origin, probably India. A man sweat in sunshine. A man moved in front of me, his black hair cut back sharply to leave his vision clear. I saw him and his life, the life he had lived, the life in him.

I realized later, when I had time to think about what had happened that I felt the touch of sympathy for him, the touch of empathy with him, identified with him, though I would not have chosen that sympathy, that empathy. It almost cost my life, because it stayed the sweep of my sword for a small part of a second, long enough for him to slash up to my face with his sword before all my training, my desire to live, took over, and I slammed his sword to the side and drove my sword through him.

He died on the hot sand. I bled from my face where his sword had entered my mouth and then cut through my gum, my jawbone, through my cheek when I knocked it aside. Survivor's helpers ran across the arena to me and stopped the bleeding, repaired the wound temporarily so I could prepare for surgery.

I wanted to talk to Roger that day, after the battles. Even

before I saw the videos, I knew large change had come to him. I wanted to know what part our interaction in the locker room before the battles played in that change. I didn't understand fully yet why, but it was important to me to see him up close and to understand what he thought about our interaction, about what part that interaction played in the change he had gone through, was going through.

I don't know if he stayed to watch my battle. I kept my attention focused on my opponent and saw nothing of the arena around me, of the audience watching us. He probably did stay. I couldn't imagine that he didn't, that he wouldn't want to know immediately what happened to me.

By the time medical people had fixed my face and cancelled pain-killing medication so my thinking was normal, Roger had tended his wounds, dressed in his daily clothing, and left the Arena.

We worked in the same offices. There would be time to observe him, to talk with him. I walked away from Arena and out into the day.

Chapter 2

But when we had time, back at work, in the daily flow of earning and living and keeping Arena working smoothly, I still couldn't read Roger.

Sun shone in the windows where we worked in offices or in large common rooms, at desks and work tables, with computers, in assembly stations for electronic gear, in editing stations, in control and direction areas

Above the skylights in the roof of the top floor, dark clouds blew across the sky. The city spread out grey and black beneath the windows of our tall building. Mountains used to rise beyond the city, I have read, but long ago, machines worked them flat in search for valuable minerals, then to level roughnesses, then to even landscaping for buildings, roads, and parking areas.

Chapter 3

Arnold's secretary said Arnold wanted to see me. Heavy with muscle beginning to slacken with age, Arnold sat at his desk and watched me walk into his office and toward him across the large, softly-carpeted room. He didn't stand but motioned for me to sit in a chair across his desk from him. He drummed the fingers of his right hand on his desk. I covered my irritation at

the distracting noise and waited for him to speak.

He said, "I want to know more about Roger. What he thinks, what he does, what he sees in his future."

I thought of saying, "Then talk with him. Observe him." but I've learned not to make suggestions to Arnold. He bristles at attempted interference with his plans and ideas, and he doesn't forgive off-handed jests.

Arnold said, "I want you to talk with him and observe him. When you know anything significant about what he's doing and what he's thinking, come in and talk to me again."

He took a file from his desk drawer and pushed it across his desk to me. "Here's his personnel folder, to give you something to start with. It's scant."

Arnold turned to paperwork at hand. I assumed our business was finished, and I left his office.

Arnold was promoted to a position of power ahead of more capable people. He uses his power for the aggrandizement of his ego, the aggrandizement of his fortune. He will trip up. No one is without vulnerability.

I learn Arnold's vulnerabilities. I cast about amongst those who work around us to understand better how Arnold works, to know if others itch under his heavy yoke. I learn which people around him might turn their contributions to his power in other directions. Investigation, learning is a slow and careful process, much more delicate than Arena sand underfoot, but eventually as deadly.

Kathleen looks up at me from her work station when I walk out of Arnold's office, then gathers papers in front of her and goes back to work. She'll want to know what he called me in for, what we talked about. Before lunch, I take paperwork to the copy and printing station and pass the table where Kathleen works. I stop on my way, and she looks up at me. I ask her. "Do you have anything planned for lunch?"

"I haven't decided what I'm doing, yet. I might call for something, just eat here."

"Want to walk down to Rosario's with me?"

"Sure. It's raining. I brought an umbrella. It's almost big enough for both of us."

"Maybe we could each get one shoulder and arm wet. It'll take me about fifteen minutes to wrap up what I'm doing."

"That's about right for me to come to a good stopping point, too."

I've talked often to Kathleen. I've touched her, lightly, quickly, and then drawn back. She might be receptive to further

touching. I've thought about asking her to go somewhere with me after work or on a weekend, maybe a concert, perhaps a training session together, but I haven't moved that far, yet. We've had lunch together several times. I like her. When we work together, we do well at it.

Weeks have passed. I've moved slowly toward knowing her better. I'm conservative about getting involved with anyone from Arena, particularly with someone who is midpoint in her battle cycles, as Kathleen is. She has killed six times in Arena and will probably fight at least six more battles unless she is killed in battle before she completes her cycle.

My battle cycle is still open. I could walk away from it soon or go on with it for some time. If we do well in battle, we are encouraged, monetarily and morally, to go on with battle in Arena. Promotions and increased income in the organizational part of Arena are usually linked with success and artful presentation in battle. Many find personal fulfillment in battling in Arena and go on with battles for quite some time before they begin to slow and so retire, are forced by the schedulers of Arena to retire or are killed.

Rain drums on Kathleen's umbrella and on the concrete around us. I'm glad for the rain. We're less likely to be eavesdropped upon if there is sound, like the thunder of falling rain, to cover our conversation, though I'm not totally sure of Kathleen. She could have a microphone concealed in her umbrella. Someone else could have concealed a microphone in her umbrella, without her knowledge.

She asks me, "Did anything significant come up when you talked with Arnold?"

"He wanted to know what I know about Roger. He wants me to find out all I can about him."

The management of Arena is shot through with intrigue, but I think neither of us knows all the details of intrigue, who aligns where, how closely we are watched and listened to, how much our actions, beliefs, and thoughts contribute to our positions, even what our positions are. Neither of us trusts the other fully not to betray a worker who wanders from accepted patterns of behavior and thinking. Neither of us is yet fully aware of how far we will wander from acceptable patterns of thought, of behavior.

Neither of us fully understands fully what are accepted patterns of behavior, of thought.

We do well in Arena. We do well at work. How far can we go in wondering, in asking questions?

Roger is a pattern to observe. He has wandered widely from accepted patterns of behavior, accepted patterns of things we ask questions about. What happens to Roger, what he is allowed to do, and what measures are taken to hold him in will teach us much.

Kathleen bridles under Arnold's abrupt direction and wonders if we're headed in a true direction. She guards what she says, but she wields power by her knowledge about those in power.

We reach out and touch each other, but we are too cautious to go further. We eat lunch slowly, liking each other's company, but still very cautious, stopped by the arena we are part of, stopped by our lives, by the knowledge that next week's battles could be the end of one of us or of both of us, slowed by uncertainty about how much we control our own lives.

Kathleen says, "Maybe after next week,..." She leaves it in the air between us and bites into her burrito. I say "Yes." I touch her arm, then pick up food from my plate. Rain increases against windows looking out to the main street.

I have been intimate with a woman who was killed in battle.

It was not easy. I had slowly grown to love her, to need her in my life, and then she was gone. I became more deeply aware of the temporariness, the undependability of everything around us.

I am very hesitant to get more deeply involved with anyone again.

I touched Kathleen softly again, then walked away from her into more rain.

Back at my desk, I read everything in Roger's folder. It is scant. We know Roger came from a poor and obscure family. Roger grew up interested in everything around him. He found ways to get something from Universal Education, tested high, and earned the opportunity for Advanced Education. After he finished Formal Education, he came almost directly to us, without much experience between.

I search on his name and identification number. He wrote for his college newspaper. I call up issue after issue of the newspaper and find a young man with a dream for a better world. That's okay. Even good.

Usually though, the shiniest, gleaming corners of idealism get rubbed off by experience before workers come to Arena, but usually workers come to us after they've had much more work experience than Roger has had.

When I finish reading everything in his folder, I know Roger

shouldn't have gone into Arena, yet. I lean my chair back and stare through the skylight. Dark clouds still cover the sky. They aim heavy rain at the city below them. Water washes across the skylight above me.

I search Roger's activities. Swordsmanship classes three times a week. Martial arts. Dance. Two classes, two different places.

Dance is unusual, but it is better than stopping at a bar on the way home and soaking up a couple of hours of alcohol. As far as I can tell, Roger doesn't drink. He could go to a bar, pay cash and leave no trail of records, but the rest of Roger's existence doesn't line up for that.

Someone slipped on monitoring Roger to make sure he was ready for Arena, but it wasn't me. Monitoring employees isn't my work. I send Arnold a note about the lack of testing and training before Roger's debut into Arena to make sure I'm covered. Who knows where this will go?

Roger works as well as ever. He communicates well whatever is necessary to work, but he avoids other conversation.

I might be a better observer if there weren't conflict between us.

I watch for opportunities to help him without seeming obsequious, to work with him or closer to him, but my efforts don't change his polite distance. I think of apologizing for my reaction to him in the locker room, but that attempt could become dangerous. I have no idea how he thinks of our encounter the day he killed the poor man. Did he take umbrage at what I said, or did he think my reaction bucked him up when he had lost all courage?

I don't know Roger well enough to answer that question nor to discern the answer in his demeanor. He speaks to no one about what happened before he walked into Arena and killed his first man. He seems calm and transparent, but I really don't know him. Nor do I entirely understand what I am looking for by watching him. Why did Arnold tell me to watch Roger? What did he expect Roger to do? Run amok? Bring Arena into the work place? Were Arnold's security measures unable to prevent that? Why did Arnold assign me this role? This can go nowhere good for me or for the corporation.

Arena rotated across Europe and Asia and then returned to us, the end of September. Crews had loaded blood and gore-soaked sand and hauled it to nearby farms. Farmers tilled the waste into their fields. Clean sand glistened in our arena in sunlight slanting down autumn. Crews painted bright colors and

renewed hangings and flags.

I walked into our building from rain beginning in autumn wind. The new roster hung on the bulletin board. I walked over to sign up.

Roger's signature was near the top of the page of volunteers to fight for affluence. That startled me. Roger had been pressured into his first fight in the arena, but signing up is voluntary. I would never have predicted that he would seek a second battle. I stopped him when he walked by.

"Roger, I see you've signed up for Arena."

"Yes, Jake, I have." I sense unease from him, perhaps some animosity, a brief reaction and then gone or covered up. If his reaction is personal, because I threatened him in the locker room before his first kill, it is understandable and acceptable. No one has to like every coworker, but resentment based on political disagreements bears study.

Roger is not stupid. He knows I seek to understand what change he's experienced that allows him to volunteer for combat. He looks into my eyes. He is not afraid of me nor of my position. He nods, then turns and walks away from me.

Again, in the arena, a referee maneuvered and stopped the poor man until Roger walked to the center of the arena. The poor see the films. They understand the history of combatants. They watch the process of the draw. This was not a battle between an almost anonymous affluent and a random poor. This poor man had prayed for the draw to match him with Roger, defector from defender of the poor to poor-man killer. The poor man was eager for battle, blessed with powers beyond himself by achieving this position he had prayed for. God was on his side. Everyone could see it in the way he carried himself and handled his weapons.

The poor man, taller than Roger by half a head, attacked, thrust, swung, then leaped forward and smashed into Roger, his full weight behind his shield. Roger turned the poor man's sword aside, and again, then carried the poor man's attacking weight, turned, thrust him in the direction his attack carried him, swung down his sword, but the poor man turned, crouched, caught Roger's blow on his blade, thrust it aside and stabbed under Roger's sword's arc, sword point reaching hungrily for Roger's hips but not reaching far enough.

Roger battled defensively, turned blows, stepped back, guarded himself, turned the poor man's thrusting sword aside. Roger took the measure of the man and saved his own life. Two men danced across the arena and paused when steel rang

against steel. Blood splashed on hot sand, bright red in hot sunshine, evidence of the passion of this dance.

Roger stood his ground and brought the poor man to a stop. Roger attacked, methodical, graceful, as if to rhythmic music that no one else heard. He delivered blow after blow. The poor man retreated, slow step at a time, clear to the west wall, trying again and again to rally time and space for attack but totally defensive.

Roger drove the poor man's sword point into the ground, cut off his right hand, stepped back and raised his sword, stepped forward and swung his sharp sword through the man's neck. The man's head fell to arena sand.

The sound of its impact carried clearly. Blood splashed. The tall man's headless body continued a step forward, as if he might continue to fight, twisted, stepped its left foot forward, then fell full length in Arena sand.

Roger dropped his sword point into sand and raised his left fist to the roaring crowd, once north, once east, once south, then west. Cameras stayed close. Roger opened and partially skinned the carcass and then stepped back. Harvesters ran across arena sand and crouched over the body to harvest organs.

Butchers rendered the carcass into components. There is a glut of organs right now, more hearts, livers, kidneys, eye parts, ear parts than there is demand, and most potential transplant organs go for meat, but we maintain the details of the ritual.

Four of us meet in Arnold's office soon after Roger's third battle, again a decapitation.

Arnold speaks to Roger, "Some call you 'The dancer.' You have become known for your grace of movement, as if you have formed your own rituals of battle, rooted in movement, in some music that you hear in your head as you fight."

Roger looked into Arnold's eyes and asked, "If that is true, do you object to that?"

"It's not a problem. You draw an audience. Your advertising ratings are in the top rank. But I wonder if everything will suddenly turn upside down. I would rather not be completely surprised."

"You want to understand my political and religious ideas so you can predict aberrations before they become dangerous."

"Yes."

"Three times begins to form a pattern, or three times could be luck. I don't know if I drew three opponents who were ideal for me or if I have a talent for fighting and winning, or if some power seized me and guided me through battle or if that power

will be with me when I fight again. The fourth time might tell us more and give us more to discuss. Or I might be killed, and there will be no need for discussion.”

Arnold said, “Your opponents have been without handicap. If you lasted this long, we planned to escalate into more highly trained opponents.”

That suddenly and blatantly, Arnold says what I had suspected, that Roger has been targeted from his first battle to die in the arena. I have no attachment to Roger, but I don’t understand his selection as a target. I have little idea who might be complicit with Arnold in Roger’s selection. Lines of power are mostly held in secret.

Arnold said, “Not long ago, you appeared to be a zealot holding forth for the poor. You’ve changed. I don’t think anyone questions our need to understand this change.”

Roger looked at each of us. He stood up and paced behind the chairs, burning energy. His face showed little but calm. He knew where he was. Even in his pacing, his energy was purposefully directed, strong and calm. He said, “All my life, I’ve been told the arena is what brought about the end of war, because it satisfies mankind’s need for battle, for killing. It satisfies mankind’s need for a shared ritual of deep numinous weight, worldwide, among all cultures. That ritual helps us achieve balanced existence.

“When I was a child, I believed that, because it was part of the body of knowledge given to me by adults, and I accepted everything I was given. Belief in Arena is the foundation of our social structure. It is our religion, our social system, and our economic system. It appears to work.”

Roger walked to the window and looked down on the city below us, square and composed of squares, and beyond, to the green and brown shapelessness of farmland and open lands beyond the city. White clouds raced each other across the sky above us.

“I grew to the age of individual contemplation. I questioned everything. I questioned belief in Arena as good for mankind’s future. I began to think Arena was an effective way to keep the poor in check, to help control the earth’s population, to control minds. The idea that legal, planned, exploited, broadcast violence fulfilled a moral goal and kept man tilted toward affluence and away from war and selected among us for positive evolution seemed to me effectively developed and disseminated propaganda, containing some basic truths, but standing some basic values on their heads, respect for life, and

compassion among humans, primarily. I wondered if Arena was a positive direction for mankind.

“Then I killed a man in arena. That changed everything, deeper than thought, in my emotions and instincts. I didn’t know I would kill a man and volunteer to battle and kill another man and another. I would not have predicted that in my wildest imagining. It’s taking me a while to sort it out. I don’t think working it out inside my head in words will assure that I have correctly worked it out, because what I am predates rational, conscious thought. What I do is not always the same as what I say or even what I think. I live in more than my conscious, rational mind. It has to be enough for you that I’ve volunteered for my fourth battle, and I seek answers to questions I ask, for my own use.

“I will fight who you choose. You want answers, what is going on in me, to assuage fear of unknown directions felt by men in power. I want answers to understand what humans are, so I can understand what I am, certainly not what I thought.”

He turned and left the room. Silence for a moment, and then I spoke, “We could put a highly-trained fighter against him now.” I was unaware until the words were in the air between us what I was going to say. But I did say it. I said, “An aberration developing in Arena makes me nervous. We have no idea where it will go.”

For the first time, I thought I understood Arnold’s approach. If it is different, destroy it. Change is dangerous.

Arnold tapped his fingers on the expensive wooden top of his desk.

Roger decapitated poor man number four in a battle beautiful to watch, two men dancing a long dance in hot sunshine toward consensual death for one of them.

Roger’s advertising ratings before his fifth battle raised him to E-5. An E-5 becomes a free agent and can change employment without Central Approval. What caught us by surprise was that Roger didn’t seek another, better-paying organization. He opened a battle training center for the poor.

No affluent had ever trained poor for battle in his own, personally-owned business.

Once again, Arnold tapped his fingers on his desk. Warren spoke, “We might have foreseen and prevented this, had we been alert and kept better track of what Roger said and did.”

Arnold said, “There never has been a need to prevent what is happening. There still isn’t a need to prevent it. We need change to prevent stagnation. It’s unprecedented, but he isn’t starting a

revolution. He'll bring some change and create more honesty when we say poor have a good chance in the arena and a good chance to achieve 50,000. We'll add truth to the statement that Arena brings evolution toward good by trimming the affluent for survival of the fittest. We talk about evolution, but how can there be evolution without change, without winnowing the affluent? After every battle, we are fatter and safer."

He stilled his hands. He let them lie quiet on his desk as he looked at us and spoke. "Study the history of Arena. Don't harvest the generalizations that serve for historic background, the finished product from the media. Find out about actual events, some of which seemed to be massive, threatening aberrations when they appeared. They kept interest alive.

"No matter what we give the audience, they like it. It's better than thinking. It's better than being alone with each other. The audience buys what we advertise.

"Before we had specific ammunition, three times, in wild west shoot-outs, revolutionary fighters killed part of the audience. That added to the thrill of Arena. Action, death, victory, and glory spilled from the arena into the audience and put the masses into the arena with the reality of danger and death. Whatever seats emptied because of fear, we filled again when those who had become bored realized Arena is not separate from life and daily existence but dominates humankind's existence."

I asked, "How does he pay for it? How does he earn a living? Poor can't pay enough to support his training center and him."

"He found sponsors among old men who have fought their battles and won't return to the arena. Or they found him. They are bored. Roger became effective advertising for change, for evolution, for more excitement in Arena."

I said, "This could become dangerous. If the poor begin to see they have power, it could lead to chaos in a world that has been operating smoothly for two hundred years."

Arnold said, "Have you been afraid each time you went into battle?"

"No. Fear can cripple a warrior. Whatever happens in Arena is what will happen. I learned that well when I was young. Fear nothing. Train for battle."

"Good. Apply what you learned when you were young to this situation. It still applies. Arena is inevitable, whatever direction it takes. What has started will develop in the fullness of Arena. If change begins, that change will work itself out in Arena. Fear of it will dilute your power. Train well for battle."

I left the meeting knowing Arnold is more radical than I ever suspected. He is changeable, undependable in his beliefs and actions. Something happened that caused him to veer in his course, and he's not telling anyone what caused the change or where he hopes it will lead us.

Change in Arena could lead deeper than he can imagine. This change Roger brings sets a precedent. It makes a suggestion that will stir the minds of many, world wide. It changes perceptions about human values, about Arena. Arnold is finished with battle, old enough that he is safe to be reckless with our future.

Arnold has too much power. His power within the organization is greater than mine, thus far. I will change that. I list his vulnerabilities in many conversations.

I stir among lines of power throughout Arena. My efforts become less secretive as days and weeks pass. Time flees from me. I gather allies. Together, we reduce Arnold's power. We begin to change the flow of power in and around Arena. We will preserve Arena from destruction. We will preserve ourselves from destruction. We gain more power.

Arnold becomes more isolated. More among those who work with the mechanisms of Arena turn away from him, subvert his normal orders for work to be done, circumvent his position of power.

Some among my coworkers turn away from me. More turn toward me. More add their force to mine. I become more aggressive in my attempt to rally my coworkers to me. There is no longer time for subtlety. There must be a shift in power to prevent the chaos that has already started. First, I will openly prove Arnold's vulnerability. I will remove his power.

I take a moment between work projects and enjoy sun shining on my desk through the skylight in the high ceiling above me. Then the door to the work area opens, and Roger walks in, accompanied by two dressed like he is.

It is the way they are dressed that brings their purpose to my mind, though I have a moment's hesitation, almost a stutter in perception, as if I have forgotten that Roger no longer works here and does not belong here.

They are unarmed, as law requires, but their clothes are intentionally reminiscent of Arena, close-fitting leather, with metal shields sewn on at every joint.

They walk quickly across the clean, open floor to my desk, and Roger hands me a cream-colored envelope. I have a long moment of nearly breathless speculation as I hold the envelope

in sunshine, then slit it, withdraw the invitation, and read it.

I am not the only one who thinks there is no longer time for subtlety. The cream-colored note invites me to battle Roger on the fourth of September, our last day before Arena rotates from us into South America.

My heart beats hard in my chest. It takes me a moment to compose myself. Given the nature of that moment, there will be cameras on me, but there is nothing I can do about that.

What I feel might not be as obvious to an observer as it is to me. Observer, observed, reactions to an invitation, none of that matters. Now I understand more fully what Arnold had in mind when he spoke of the inevitability of Arena, when he said everything would work its way into human history only through Arena. Everything will be worked out in Arena.

Arnold toyed with me. He began an elaborate statement whose details I did not realize until now.

I am trained. I have killed ten men in battle, and some of them were not handicapped. I have been so involved in intrigue, I haven't been training enough.

One never loses the skills of battle.

Yes, and a slight difference in conditioning can mean the difference between living and spilling life's blood to Arena sand.

There is no retreat. If challenger and challenged are within two ranks of each other, there is no appeal to a direct challenge. If both are qualified for full battle in Arena, once the challenge is issued, they will fight to the death in Arena.

I have twenty-eight days.

I could prove that Arnold pursued the aggrandizement of his ego and his fortune when he manipulated Roger to challenge me.

Sunshine creeps across my desk, over the edge, onto the floor, builds a slowly moving golden rectangle on the white floor.

Shut off the damn cameras, I need to think, and I really don't have much time.

It doesn't matter.

Run the cameras.

Run the clock.

I can't prove anything, and to whom would I prove? Who tells Arnold, "This would be a good thing to do, and that would be a good thing to do, so please do these things for me?" There are the obvious, formally structured lines of power, but they are not what drive this developing event.

I could talk to Roger, “You’re giving Arnold untold strength by challenging me. You’re furthering their cause in opposition to your cause.

“All causes, by the creation of new purposes to Arena, now fracture into chaos.”

In images running through my mind, Roger responds to what I say by listening to me, but he doesn’t say anything, because I have no idea what he would say.

He might say, “Arnold has nothing to do with it. I challenge you because of what happened in the locker room, when I asked you for support, and you threatened to kill me.” That will be the way the cameras run it, our confrontation in the locker room months ago, and then our battle as the culmination of that confrontation.

Roger could say, “I tried peaceful ways, and they didn’t work. Now let there be war between poor and affluent, but let’s empower the poor by training them and by giving them knowledge of the depth and meaning of this war. Let us, through battle, begin to wrest power from you.”

The less chance he is given to say anything, the better it will be.

They don’t sell the meat and organs of the affluents but burn their bodies.

It isn’t death that frightens me. It is the idea that Arena has started to go in unpredictable directions under Arnold’s hand. I am concerned more for the future of humankind than I am for my own future.

These are words and mean nothing.

I look up from the invitation into Roger’s eyes and tell him, “It will give me great pleasure to meet you in Arena.”

I put the invitation down on my desk and sign on the line provided, put the invitation back in its envelope, and hand it back to him. He bows and turns toward the door, walks away with his two attendants flanking him until the narrowness of the doorway forces them to drop behind him as they exit.

Parts of the next four days, I follow Arnold’s suggestion and research the history of Arena.

Research reinforces my knowledge that Arena has always been like this. Personal power, intrigue, deep secrets of power and influence, understood by few, have been part of Arena from the beginning, because they’ve been part of humankind from the beginning. When Cain killed Abel, that’s when it began.

I train every day, nearly to exhaustion.

At a workshop, we watch films of Roger’s battles, talk about

what we see, and act out what we learn from watching, from talking, from working together.

Other watchers integrate their new knowledge of Roger and his battle techniques into their futures stretching into indefinite time. I have little time to integrate this knowledge and use it well if my future would stretch out before me at all. Some say he does nothing new, only coordinates effective movement and rhythm from different disciplines of movement.

I can choose, train all possible or continue to invest much of my time in trying to change the lines of power in Arena. The work I have done will go forward in the hands of others until I have this battle behind me and can return my attention to working in the lines of power.

I thought I understood Arnold's intentions, the limits of his power, but now I know I understand little. When this battle is finished, I will have time to try to understand deeper lines of power and influence than I have seen before.

I am strong and in good condition. I have killed ten men in battle. I dance and twirl and dance.

My master of battle arts delights in my newfound motivation. "I haven't seen enough of you, these past few months. I think I will see much of you now."

I spin and come up hard under his arm. He laughs and thrusts me away. We turn to each other and bow and dance and thrust and speak of coordinating dance into martial arts and swordsmanship.

"It is a dance," he says and thrusts his naked blade, seeking flesh, "Like this," he pants out as he dances and thrusts and dances, "and like this, and like this, and you are dead at my feet in Arena sand in an instant if you open your movement low like that. Come high and shielded, like this or sideways, like this."

What happened before a challenge means nothing, except as background that shows the progression toward battle, toward the inexorable process of Arena, settling all questions, all disagreements, all challenges, keeping humankind in balance. I am well trained and in excellent condition. I fight for my life and for balance, to preserve Arena itself. Roger aims his force toward chaos. He is wrong. I will stop him. I will kill him.

The day of our battle is upon us.

I should have drawn and killed him the day this began, in the locker room. I remember that day as vividly as television, as movies. Roger paced across the room toward me, nervous and sweating.

I turn and look in the mirror. I sweat. I look like Roger

looked that day. I am nervous. I turn away from the mirror. I fasten my shin guards, stand, test and adjust them. I test the edge of my sword and my knife. They are very sharp. I bring calm into my deepest self. There is glory, a sense of history in our battle, that transcends individual values fought for in a challenge, that reaches back in time to the beginning of humankind's habitation on this earth, away from us into eternity of the unknowable future.

I walk the long tunnel toward the arena. My armor jingles and clacks. My feet slap, slap, thud, thud against stone. Leather in my garments creaks with my motions. Stone walls echo my sounds around me. I smell my own sweat. Two join me, armored but with the open areas of vulnerability defined by Arena rules. We walk out into sunshine in the arena. Roger walks out of the tunnel on the opposite side of the arena. Two attendants follow him closely.

Sunlight flashes from Roger's shield. A bright shaft of sun dazzles from his polished blade into the blue summer sky. We walk across hot arena sand toward each other through bright sunshine, our swords in our hands and ready. Breezes stir through the arena. The crowd that fills the stands is quiet, waiting. The referee moves to position, brings us together, gives the sign to start fighting, then backs away from us.

I turn, stand, and strike. Roger stops my blow with his sword. Metal rings against metal and echoes from far walls of the arena. We dance on hot sand of the arena for positions of power. Our sharp swords cast brilliant shafts of sunlight and ring musical tones of metal against metal as we leave our footprints in sand and fight toward first blood, toward injury, toward death for Roger or for me, toward the future of humankind.