

The Arena (Placeholder Title Only)

by Charles McLean Redding

“When night falls we light our sparks,
To guard against a cold and dangerous land.
For we are small against the terrors of the world.

When shadows rise we take up bows and spears.
We dip them in poisons and wield them deftly.
For we are courageous against the terrors of the world.

When thunder rolls we set our traps.
We lay them in the path of the giants, and the dragons.
For we are hunted by the terrors of the world.

When death comes among us we grieve together.
We remember, and make vows for the lost.
For we are slayers of the terrors of the world.”

Jera inhaled the sharp tang of giants' blood in the air. He dusted his hands and picked up his spear from the ground beside him, gripping it loosely. The sand danced upon the ground at the rumble of thousands of massive stomping feet. The noise was deafening as the titans squalled their delight. Screams, impacts, clangs of metal on metal, then a splash. Then they roared again. The giants were always eager to see blood spilled. Even that of their own. In a few moments, it would be Jera's turn. He breathed deeply, and calmed his racing heart.

The voice of one cut over the others. The master of this place. Jera didn't understand much of the giants' crude brutal language, but the context was clear enough. The fight was over. The next fight was about to begin.

Jera licked his lips. They tasted of the sour sweet gnar blood that still stained his body and coated his spear as a dried crust. He wished it were a poison. A gnar he could slay, though it was three or four times his size. Against a giant... poison for his spear would have been useful. As the massive metal gate creaked open, harsh glaring sunlight blasted upon Jera's face. He was prepared, his eyes still closed, lightly, giving them a chance to acclimate without leaving him blinded. Finally he opened his eyes and stepped out into the arena. It was easily a hundred times the size of the village he was born in... the village he had trained in, and learned from, and had vowed to protect. The village he would fight, and die, or kill for, in the next few moments.

His hand tensed, snapping the spear to ready. The giants roared with vicious laughter at his emergence. The main event was always a more fair fight, with closer-to-even odds and a less predictable outcome. But these creatures did love to preface such a battle with deeply one-sided engagements. Unfortunately, Jera had no way of knowing whether he was the main course or the appetizer, and if the latter, whether he was the executioner or the stooge. Whatever came through that gate, he was prepared to surprise them all.

The gate creaked open, unleashing a veritable wall of noise and light. Aldr came out blinking in the overwhelming brightness, blinded by the glare. The crowd had laughed a bit before his gate opened, but he wasn't sure what that meant. His too-big armor slipped off his shoulder as he stepped out, and in pulling it up he almost dropped the heavy shield, and did drop the blade. They laughed again, even more uproariously than they had before.

Suddenly panicking, Aldr tried to lift his shield against the sun so he could see, but it was still too heavy. His arm was starting to tingle and grow numb.

He could make out that the other side's gate was open, but he couldn't see his opponent. Where were they? Sovereign Gods above... His heart was pounding. This shield was going to get him killed. He throw it out, in a random direction, hoping Pama was on his side, and fell to his knees in the sand, grabbing for the handle of the sword.

His fingers closed around something soft and squishy in the sand. He threw it away before he could see too much and gag over it. His sister's voice in the back of his mind, always there for a witty commentary, said, "Better hope you die before you have to find out whoever that used to be."

Finally, he grasped the sword, and lifted it before him. No deathblow had yet fallen, or screams of a crazed attacker sounded. He got to his feet and held the sword up as his eyes finally adjusted. He might have a chance after all.

That's when he saw it. Too small to make out any expression, and it stood just a few feet before the opposite gate. Not bigger than a rabbit. Aldr's blood froze. It was a Niskie.

So much for having a chance.

Jera had thought for a moment, that up against an armored giant, this would be his end. But then he saw it's clumsiness. It's size, while massive, was half that of other giants, or less. He could see it squinting in the light, blinking the sand from its eyes and sweating...or were those tears?

Dear Mama... they wanted him to murder a child.

Having discarded the impossibly heavy shield, it now held out a heavy blade with two shaking hands. The moment it finally set eyes upon him, Jera was prepared for anything; a desperate charge, perhaps even for it to throw the massive slab of steel at him... but the beast crumbled. It dropped the sword to its side, then into the sand. The giant was terrified into complete surrender by the mere sight of him.

Jera's throat clenched up, his heart beginning to pound, blood drumming his ears, overpowering even the disapproving hiss of the vile audience as they responded to the child's pathetic surrender. For ten days, Jera had been here. For ten days he had been made to fight, and to kill; and kill he had. Yet even when they thought to challenge him, he was a calculating killer. A true warrior. Calmness is the sharpest spear, as Pao Mama had taught.

Yet in this moment, he found himself blind with rage. Filled with yearning for blood and death; to see the lights drain out of giants' eyes, and the blood from their sallow skins. For this moment he forgot his village, his vow, and the threat against them, and he wanted nothing so dearly as to personally see to the violent death of every giant here. All but one.

Calmness overtook him once more. Such a moment, Mama had taught the warriors, is a vision of the future. Not the future that happens to you; the future you make happen.

Aldr heard slamming metal as the handler, the big brute who had escorted him from his chamber, came, swearing into the arena behind him. Kicking sand as he came. Aldr flinched.

"Come on then, Runt! Pick'em up! You want the show to be good if you know what's good for your—!"

The crowd, and the brute, fell suddenly silent. Aldr felt something warm trickling down his back and opened his eyes to see blood pooling around him.

He thought: 'I'm dead. I'm dead and I didn't even feel it. That's a blessing I suppose.' But the sand never rose up to meet him. And the sound came back as a mad cascade of screams... some of laughter, some of outrage. It was chaos. Something heavy fell on Aldr, pressing him to the ground. He thought it was the brute... it smelled like him, but it wasn't grabbing, or striking. Aldr finally started to look up and around, confusion overtaking the certainty of his demise.

Aldr yelped as he struggled to heft the weight of the brute's lifeless body off of himself and scrambled backwards. There was blood everywhere. Aldr was covered in it. Suddenly, the blood-drenched niskie leapt from behind the brute's carcass and landed on Aldr's stomach. Aldr screamed outright as it scrambled up to his chest, moving with the blinding speed and reflexes the little fiends were known for. Aldr closed his eyes and pressed down into the blood-mudded sand, hoping it would swallow him down.

From his perch on the supine giant's ill-fitting cuirasse, Jera turned slowly and looked up-and-out at the crowd. The child's chest heaved beneath him, but it didn't dare move, and Jera's footing was stable. Jera pointed his spear out at the crowd, making eye contact with every one that he could, and addressing his weapon to each in turn who met his gaze. Silence fell at this act of brazen defiance.

"Any who touch this child will drown in their own blood." He spoke, knowing they wouldn't comprehend his speech.

But he figured the context would be clear enough.

Nearby...

The wretched prisoner cried and pulled back further into the cell in response to Haskirra's attempt at a friendly smile.

"Reza's Tail." She swore, dropping it for a scowl. "Just get out here, human. This is a rescue." She spoke carefully in his own language. "Everyone goes. Unless you want to stay?" She backed out and made what she hoped was a universal gesture with her claws, to politely get out of the gods damned cell. He looked at her reptilian features, then at the open door, her claws, back at her, and then out at the other prisoners leaving. She could practically see his eyes light on Justane, who, by most accounts, was of a fairly heroic cut for a human.

The prisoner cried out and lunged for the door, squawking like an animal as he passed her like he didn't think he'd make it. She rolled her eyes at him as he ran for Justane. A human gesture she hoped conveyed her annoyance properly to the gods.

"It's okay there, Friend!" Justane smiled with his ugly flat face and weird flat teeth, and the wretched human grovelled and wept, thanking him for the rescue and clutching at his gleaming armor. Justane disentangled himself and shooed him along after the other prisoners, where the other human, Bury, would be waiting.

Haskirra knew there had to be something stronger than an eye-roll. It was bad enough there'd been so few guards to fight, and she couldn't even get a proper thank you?

Justane instantly dropped his comforting smile for the sake of their more serious matter at hand as he approached. He knew how to be friendly when called for, but he also knew business. That was the only reason Haskirra tolerated that stupid face.

"That can't be all of them." He said.

"Is all the ones here?"

"Maybe we missed a hallway? Wasn't there one on the other side of the armory? The boy has to be here somewhere!"

"That was just a charnel. Could smell it. Better hope he's not in there." She cocked her head at the rising volume of the crowd in the stands above. "One place still to look."

He looked up in momentary confusion, and then his eyes widened when he caught her meaning. He turned and bolted for the arena, drawing his sword.

Haskirra sighed. "Thinks slow. But at least he *runs* fast."

"I was wrong." Haskirra said breathlessly, and in her own tongue, as she reached the arena floor. "*This* is the charnel."

She had seen true battlefields with less viscera and gore. Justane clashed with the two slaver guards left standing. The boy was huddled, bare-backed in a heap in the center of a ring of bodies, stacked two or three high in places. Maybe as many as twenty in all. He was several inches deep in a gathering pool of blood. She could see him breathing, but with so much about, it was hard to tell by sight or scent if any of the blood was his.

Haskirra drew her knives and ran cross the flank of the two men, slashing their calves even as Justane put his sword through the gut of one. The last one screamed as he fell, but was quickly relieved of his throat by Haskirra's other knife.

"You didn't do all this in the thirty seconds you were up here before me."

"No. It must... it could only have been the boy." Haskirra hissed her doubt at this suggestion. "Kuakham was telling these ones to finish him when I got here. He fled through the stands right after.

"It will be an interesting story to hear, if the boy's mind is intact."

"Sovereign Gods, Kira, at least pretend to..."

"I'll have compassion later. Now, I'll have Kuakham. You can see to the boy?"

"Just help me with him. Kuakham won't get far. Please."

Grumbling, she sheathed her knives and made her way over to the child, wincing as she stepped over the bodies onto something sharp jutting from the sand. Justane was leaning over him with a hand on the child's back.

"Aldr? My name is Justane. This is Kirra. We're here for you. To bring you back to your family. Can you hear me?" His voice was gentle in a way that made Haskirra's scales itch. Human tenderness always felt to her like a trap waiting to be sprung. Still, she tried.

"Bad men are gone. You're safe now." She said. Justane gave her a funny glance, and she glared back a silent, "*What? Didn't I do it right?*"

"Can you hear me? Are you awake?" After a moment, the boy tensed and seemed to nod his head. "It's all right." he went on, "We should go. We want to be far away from this place. And get you cleaned up."

The boy started to shift now, holding his arms close to his body like he was hurt. No... Haskirra tilted her head to see... he was holding something. A blood-drenched moppet of some kind.

"Best leave that behind..." She said, concealing her disgust, pretty well, she thought. The boy reacted almost violently, pulling away and hiding his toy from her sight.

"It's fine. You can hold onto it." Justane said. Haskirra gave her— what, third? Fourth? —totally inadequate eye-roll of the last hour. Humans and their *things*.

The boy seemed to breathe more easily as they reached the outer gate of the arena compound. Buryn had armed a few of the escaped gladiators, in case any guards had emerged to recapture their slaves. None had, coincidentally. The rest of the survivors were loaded into the large cage wagon.

Buryn had broken the barred door off the hinges and ripped out most of the chains. So, while it wasn't secure, the former prisoners seemed mostly content to ride within. Though a few had opted to climb up and sit on top, like the primates they were.

Haskirra studied their charge when he wasn't looking back at her. He did seem alert enough now. His mind seemed to have survived the ordeal after all. He was suspicious of them, untrusting, suggesting he was also fairly intelligent for a human child. He let Buryn lift him up to the wagon seat. That was fine. Haskirra was content to ride in the cabin and not make the jumpy prisoners even more

nervous.

“*Reza's bloody dewclaws!*” she swore at the barb still stuck in her foot as it twinged, finally leaning against the wagon to fish it out of her tender pads. It was long and sharp, and barbed, to boot. Some kind of quill? She got it loose and gave it a close look. Once it was a quill, but it had been sharpened beyond sharp, and hafted on a tiny rod that had been snapped short.

Her breath caught. A close call, for sure! If this had been poisoned, she'd already be long dead. But a niskie spear was an odd thing to find in the arena. She certainly hadn't seen a niskie among the dead! Then again, if she had, she probably would have mistaken it for a...

“*JUSTANE. GET. DOWN HERE. RIGHT NOW.*”