

JOSEPH DELANEY



# ARENA

## 13

SOME WHO ENTER LOSE THEIR LIVES, OTHERS LOSE THEIR SOULS.

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Leif has one ambition: to become the best fighter in the notorious Arena 13.*

Here, punters place wagers on which fighter will draw first blood. And in grudge matches, they bet on which fighter is to die.

But the country is terrorized by the creature Hob, an evil being who delights in torturing its people, displaying his devastating power by challenging an Arena 13 combatant in a fight to the death whenever he chooses.

And this is exactly what Leif wants . . .

For he knows well Hob's crimes. And at the heart of his ambition burns the desire for vengeance. Leif is going to take on the monster who destroyed his family.

Even if it kills him.

# RULES OF COMBAT

## PRIMARY RULES

1. The objective of Arena 13 combat is to cut flesh and spill blood. Human combatants are the targets.
2. No human combatant may wear armour or protective clothing of any kind. Leather jerkins and shorts are mandatory; flesh must be open to a blade.
3. An Arena 13 contest is won and concluded when a cut is made to one's opponent and blood is spilled. This can occur during combat or may be a ritual cut made after a fight is concluded. If it occurs during combat, hostilities must cease immediately to prevent death or serious maiming.
4. If death should occur, no guilt or blame may be attached to the victor. There shall be no redress in law. Any attempt to punish or hurt the victorious combatant outside the arena is punishable by death.
5. The right to make a ritual cut is earned by disabling one's opponent's *lac* or *lacs*.
6. The defeated combatant must accept this ritual cut to the upper arm. The substance *kransin* is used to intensify the pain of that cut.
7. An unseemly cowardly reaction to the ritual cut after combat is punishable by a three-month ban from the arena. Bravery is mandatory.
8. Simulacra, commonly known as lacs, are used in both attack and defence of the human combatants.
9. The min combatant fights behind one lac; the mag combatant fights behind three lacs.

10. For the first five minutes combatants must fight behind their lacs. Then the warning gong sounds and they must change position and fight in front of them, where they are more vulnerable to the blades of their opponent.
11. A lac is disabled when a blade is inserted in its throat-socket. This calls the wurde *endoff*; the lac collapses and becomes inert.
13. Arena 13 combatants may also fight under **Special Rules**.

## **SPECIAL RULES**

### **1. Grudge match rules**

The objective of a grudge match is to kill one's opponent. All **Primary Rules** apply, but for the following changes:

- If blood is spilled during combat, hostilities need not cease; the fight continues.
- After an opponent's lac or lacs have been disabled, the opponent is slain. The throat may be slit, or the head severed from the neck – the decision belongs to the victor. The death blow is carried out by either the victorious human combatant or his lac.
- Alternatively the victor may grant clemency in return for an apology or an agreed financial penalty.

### **2. Trainee Tournament rules**

The objective of this tournament is to advance the training of first-year trainees by pitting them against their peers in Arena 13. For the protection of the trainees and to mitigate the full rigour of Arena 13 contests, there are two changes to the **Primary Rules**:

- The whole contest must be fought behind the lacs.
- Kransin is not used on blades for the ritual cut.

### **3. A challenge from Hob**

- When Hob visits Arena 13 to make a challenge, a min combatant must fight him on behalf of the Wheel.
- All min combatants must assemble in the green room, where that combatant will be chosen by lottery.
- Grudge match rules apply, but for one: there is no clemency.
- The fight is to the death. If the human combatant is beaten then, alive or dead, he may be taken away by Hob. Combatants, spectators and officials must not interfere.

## **SECONDARY RULES**

1. Blades must not be carried into the green room or the changing room.
2. No Arena 13 combatant may fight with blades outside the arena. An oath must be taken at registration to abide by that rule. Any infringement shall result in a lifetime ban from Arena 13 combat.
3. Spitting in the arena is forbidden.
4. Cursing and swearing in the arena is forbidden.
5. Abuse of one's opponent during combat is forbidden.
6. In the case of any dispute, the Chief Marshal's decision is absolute. There can be no appeal.



**JOSEPH DELANEY**

**RHCP DIGITAL**

*For Marie*

*The dead do dream.*

*They dream of the world of Nym and twist hopelessly  
within its dark labyrinths,  
seeking that which they can never reach.  
But for a few, a very few, a wurde is called.  
It is a wurde that summons them again to life.*

*Cursed are the twice-born.*

# PROLOGUE

Within that thirteen-spired citadel dwells Hob. He is thirsty for blood.  
We will give him blood until he drowns.

*Amabramdata: the Genthai Book of Prophecy*

Hob is waiting for the woman in the darkness; waiting just beyond the river, under the trees where the pale light of the moon cannot reach him. He sniffs the air twice, exploring it tentatively until the sharp scent of her blood is carried towards him on the breeze. Now he can taste her on the back of his tongue.

Shola is alone. Her husband and child are left behind in the farmhouse at the top of the hill. Her son is sleeping; the husband, Lasar, can do nothing to help her now.

The summons is strong; more powerful than ever. Shola must answer Hob's call. Her will deserts her, and she runs down the slope until she reaches the river. She knows exactly where to go. She kicks off her shoes, lifts her dress to her knees and begins to wade through the shallow water towards the waiting darkness of the trees. At one point she almost loses her balance on the slippery stones. The water is cool and caresses her feet like the touch of a silk scarf, but her brow is hot and fevered and her mouth is dry.

The woman is at war with herself. One part of her wishes she could remain behind with her family, but she quickly dismisses the thought. If she does not go when summoned, then Hob will climb the slope to the farmhouse and kill her son.

Hob has threatened this.

Her husband would be unable to defend their son.

Better to suffer the will of Hob.

Tonight, as the sun went down, Lasar carried the battered leather case down from the attic, limped across the flags and placed it on the kitchen table. He drew from it two blades with ornate handles, each crafted in the shape of a wolf's head.

These were the Trigladius blades; the blades he'd once wielded in Arena 13 in the city of Gindeen, a lifetime ago.

'Don't go to him!' His voice was filled with anger. 'I will go in your place. Tonight I will cut the creature into pieces!'

'No!' Shola protested. 'Think of our son. If I don't go, Hob will kill him. He's warned me of that many times. You know that even if you were able to kill him this night, another would replace him tomorrow. You can't fight them all. You above all must know this! Please! Please! Let *me* go to him.'

At last, to Shola's relief, Lasar relented and replaced the blades in the leather case. He wept as he did so.

Now, as she steps out of the moonlight, she sees the outline of Hob's body against the sky. His eyes glitter in the darkness, brighter than the stars. He is huge; larger than she has ever seen him before.

She stands before him, trembling; her heart is pounding and the breath flutters in her throat like a soul ready for flight. She sways but does not fall. Hob has moved closer now and has gripped her hard by the shoulders.

He will just take a little of her blood, she tells herself; her heart will labour for a while and her legs will tremble. There will be some pain, but she will be able to endure it. It will be just like the other times, soon over, and then she will be free to return to her family.

But this is different. This is the time she has always feared - the last time he will ever summon her. She has heard the tales; she knew that it would come to an end eventually . . . One night Hob would not allow her to return.

His teeth pierce her throat very deeply – too deeply. The pain is worse than ever before. He is drinking her blood in great greedy gulps.

This is the beginning of her death.

As her vision darkens, memories of her husband and child flicker into her mind and she is submerged by a wave of sadness and longing. She struggles to block them out. Memories bring only pain.

And as she falls into darkness, she experiences something even more terrible. It is as if a hand is reaching deep within her to snatch and twist and loosen; reaching beyond her heart, beyond her flesh, to draw her essence forth like a tooth.

It is as if something is sucking forth her very soul.

Some call him Old Hob. Others whisper Pouke to frighten children. Some name him Gob or Gobble. Women call him Fang.

By any name he is an abomination.

A creature such as this deserves to be cut into pieces and scattered to the winds.

But men are weak and afraid, and here Hob rules.

For this is Midgard, the land of a defeated and fallen people.

This is the Place Where Men Dwell.

# 1

## Stick-Fighting

Sticks and stones may break my bones,  
But wurdres are far more deadly.

*The Compendium of Ancient Tales and Ballads*

I watched the two stick-fighters circling each other warily. The boy with the blond hair was tall and fast, a local champion who was taking on all comers. I'd already watched him beat four opponents with ease, but this fifth one was giving him a harder time. He was squat and muscular but had surprisingly rapid reactions.

These fighters were a couple of years older - maybe seventeen or eighteen - and much bigger than me. Could I beat the champion? Was I good enough? I wondered.

Blows had already been exchanged, but none had struck home where it counted; a blow to the face or head would result in immediate victory.

They were fighting on waste ground at the outskirts of the city, within an excited circle of spectators who were punching the air and shouting, clutching betting tickets they'd bought from the tout who was watching the contest from a distance. Mostly the crowd was young - teenagers like myself - but there were middle-aged people there too; they displayed the same degree of enthusiasm, waving and shouting encouragement to the fighter they supported.

Betting against the champion was risky: you were likely to lose your money. Though if by chance you won, you received four times your stake. I wouldn't have risked a bet

against this champion. Despite the skill of his adversary, he looked certain to triumph.

Even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't bet because I had no money. I'd been walking for almost two weeks and had only just arrived in the city of Gindeen. I'd eaten nothing for over a day and desperately needed food. That's why I'd come to watch the stick-fighting. I hoped to take part. The tout arranged the bouts so that he could make money from the betting, but only paid the winning fighter.

Suddenly the short, muscular boy threw caution to the wind and attacked wildly, driving his opponent backwards. For a few seconds it looked as if his aggression and speed would prevail. But the tall blond boy stepped forward and smashed his stick hard into his opponent's mouth.

As the polished wood made contact with flesh and teeth, there was a hard *thwack* followed by a soft squelching sound.

The loser staggered backward, spitting out fragments of tooth as blood poured from his mouth to drench the front of his shirt.

That was it: over. Now it was my time - or at least, I hoped it was.

I joined the back of the small queue of spectators who were waiting to collect their winnings. At last I reached the front and stared up at the tout. He was wearing a blue sash diagonally across his body; the mark of his trade - a gambling agent. His strong jaw and close-set eyes made him look tough; moreover, his nose had been badly broken and squashed back against his face.

'Where's your betting ticket?' he demanded. 'Hurry up. I haven't got all day!'

As he spoke, I saw the missing and broken teeth. I guessed that he'd once been a stick-fighter himself.

'I'm not here to bet,' I told him. 'I want to fight.'

'From down south, are you?' he sneered.

I nodded.

‘New to Gindeen?’

I nodded again.

‘Done much stick-fighting before?’

‘A lot.’ I stared up into his eyes, trying not to blink. ‘I usually win.’

‘Do you now?’ He laughed. ‘What do they call you, lad?’

‘My name’s Leif.’

‘Well, you’ve got spirit, Leif, I’ll give you that. So I’ll let you have a chance. You can fight next. The crowd like to see a bit of new blood!’

I’d got my opportunity more easily than I’d anticipated.

He led me to the centre of the patch of muddy grass and put his big beefy left hand on the top of my head. Then he pointed to the tall blond boy, whose previous opponent was no longer to be seen, and beckoned him forward to stand on his right-hand side.

‘Rob won again!’ he cried. ‘Will this lad ever be beaten? Well, maybe his time has finally come . . . This is Leif, who’s new to the city. He’s fought before, down south. He’s fought and he’s won. Perhaps a provincial boy can show you city lads a thing or two. So come and place your bets!’

A moment or two passed before anybody reacted. Over two hundred pairs of eyes were judging me. Some of the spectators were grinning; others were staring at me with open contempt.

Meanwhile I sized up my opponent. His white shirt gleamed in the late-afternoon sunlight and his dark trousers and leather boots were of good quality. In contrast my green checked shirt was smeared with dirt from the journey and my left trouser knee had a hole in it. People were now staring down at my shoes, the soles flapping free of the toes. My skin was also darker than that of anyone else present. Some spectators simply shook their heads and walked away.

If nobody wanted to bet, I wouldn’t get to fight. I needed to fight and I needed to win.

However, to my relief, a small queue soon formed in front of us and bets were placed.

Once that was over I faced my next problem.

'I haven't got a stick to fight with. I don't suppose somebody would lend me one . . .' I asked the tout, pitching my voice so that the crowd could hear as well.

I'd left my fighting sticks back home with my friend Peter. I hadn't travelled to Gindeen to become a stick-fighter. I'd thought those days were behind me.

The tout rolled his eyes and cursed under his breath, and some of the queue fell away, suddenly uninterested. But then someone placed a stick in my right hand, and moments later I faced the champion while the crowd formed a circle around us. Immediately I saw that I faced yet another dilemma. It was late afternoon and the sun was quite low in the sky. I was looking directly into it.

My opponent moved towards me in a crouch, a dark silhouette against the sun. I squinted at him, waiting for his attack, and he lunged forward. He was fast and I barely avoided the blow. I twisted left and began to circle while he tracked me with his eyes.

The crowd began to chant his name: 'Rob! Rob! Rob!'

They wanted him to win. I was an outsider.

I continued to circle until I was no longer blinded by the sun and stared back into the blue of his eyes. He wasn't crouching any more, and I noted again just how tall he was. His reach would be far greater than mine. I needed to make him over-commit and then get in close.

He attacked again, and I ducked away as his stick flashed over my right shoulder. He'd almost caught me that time. My shoes weren't helping. With each step I took, the loose soles slapped down on the damp, slippery grass.

*Concentrate, Leif, concentrate,* I told myself.

The next time he attacked I wasn't quick enough. He dealt me a painful blow on my right arm and I dropped the stick.

Immediately the crowd gave a great cheer of glee.

One rule of stick-fighting is that, whatever happens, you must not drop your weapon. Do that and it's as good as over – your opponent can move in close and strike you without fear of counterattack. The blow had struck a nerve and numbed my right arm, which now hung uselessly at my side.

I'd begun with a degree of confidence – I remembered all my victories back home – but maybe I'd misjudged the situation. After all, the city was far more populous than the rural area I came from. It stood to reason that, with more stick-fighters, the standards would be higher.

Rob was smiling, his stick raised as he approached. I wondered if he would go for my mouth – if so, I'd probably lose my teeth.

The crowd began to chant again, louder and louder: 'Run, rabbit, run! Run, rabbit, run! Run! Run! Run!'

They were laughing as they chanted. They wanted me to give up and run away.

Running would have been the sensible thing to do. Why wait here to have my teeth smashed in?

I never found out whether Rob was aiming for my forehead or my mouth. I dived in under the blow and rolled close to his boots, snatching up my stick with my left hand. I was already on my feet before he'd turned to face me.

Then I kicked off my useless shoes – first the right one and then the left. Time seemed to slow, and I heard each one slap down onto the grass. I spread my toes and gripped the grassy surface. That felt better. Next I took a firm grip on the stick. My right arm was still numb, but that didn't matter. I favour my right hand but I'm almost as good with my left. I can fight with either.

I attacked.

Rob was fast, but I am fast too – very fast. Maybe I wasn't as quick in my bare feet as I'd have been wearing a good pair of boots, but I was quick enough. I caught him on the

right wrist, then high on his left shoulder – not hard enough to numb his arm and make him drop his stick, but I succeeded in enraging him, and that was exactly what I'd wanted.

I had good reason to be angry myself. I'd been hurt, and there were very few people watching who wanted me to win. Only about four people had bet on me. But a stick-fighter whose vision clouds with anger has taken a big step towards defeat. When I fought, I always tried to keep calm, but I could see that my opponent was furious. No doubt he was rarely hit. Maybe he felt shamed in front of his supporters and wanted revenge. Whatever the reason, now I'd got under his skin and he became reckless. He came at me, swinging his stick as if he wanted to strike my head from my shoulders.

He missed three times because I was dancing away, retreating across the grass. But after his third attempt I suddenly stepped inside his guard.

For a second he was wide open – so I took my chance.

I could have struck him in the mouth – repeating what he'd done to the previous combatant. Some fighters were brutal and liked to inflict the maximum damage on their opponent. But I really liked stick-fighting, preferring to exercise the skill and speed that led to victory rather than deal the blow that ended the bout.

So I hit Rob with minimum force; just a quick strike to the forehead which didn't even draw blood.

It was enough.

Rob looked stunned. The crowd fell silent.

I'd won. That was all that mattered.

The tout was smiling when he paid me out. 'You are good. Very fast!' he said. 'Come back tomorrow at the same time and I'll find you someone even better to fight.'

'Maybe,' I said with a smile, just to be polite. I'd no intention of doing so. Stick-fighting didn't figure in my plans.

I was now able to buy food and had a little money left over - enough to get my shoes stitched back together.

That night I slept in a barn on the edge of the city. I was up at dawn and washed at a street pump, trying to make myself as presentable as possible for the meeting I had in mind - with Tyron, one of the most important men in the city of Gindeen.

I had a winning blue ticket. It gave me the right to be trained by the best - and that was Tyron.

I wanted him to train me to fight in Arena 13.

## Tyron the Artificer

Whom the gods wish to destroy they curse with madness.  
Whom the gods wish to flourish they bless with luck.

*Amabramsum: the Genthai Book of Wisdom*

‘Sit down, sit down!’ commanded Tyron, nodding impatiently towards the chair opposite his desk.

No sooner had I done so than he shook his head fiercely and pointed back at the open door behind me. ‘We don’t want everybody knowing our business, boy.’

He had a point. This was a public building, the Wheel’s administration offices, and the corridor outside was busy.

Having closed the door and sat down once more, I waited for Tyron to speak. I was doing my very best to be patient. I’d given him my blue ticket early in the morning, explaining what I wanted. Now it was less than half an hour before sunset; he’d had plenty of time to make up his mind.

What would he decide to do? Why had it taken him so long?

The room had no windows: suspended from the ceiling was a three-branched wooden candelabrum, the stubby yellow candles burning steadily in the still air. There was an odour of tallow and sweat.

Tyron shuffled papers about as he searched his large leather-topped desk. My chair was much lower than his so that, even if I’d been as tall as him, he’d still have been able to look down at me. I felt sure this wasn’t an accident.

I could have taken my winning ticket to any of the trainers in Gindeen, but I’d chosen to present it to Tyron.

Everybody in the whole country seemed to think he was the best. Even back home people knew his name. He looked different to the man I'd imagined: he was thick-set, with a ruddy complexion, and greying hair cut very short to disguise the fact that it was thinning at the front. Character was etched into his face: here was someone who had lived a lot and knew things.

'Look, you've won the right, boy,' he said now, holding my ticket aloft. 'I can't take that away from you. But how much is it worth?'

I didn't know what he meant. You couldn't sell a winning ticket. It couldn't be exchanged for money. And it was only valid once it had been checked and signed by the overseer of the gambling houses. I'd seen to that, so now it could only be used by me.

'Supposing I find you a trade apprenticeship instead?' he suggested, and my heart sank. 'Something nice and steady. The city's becoming more prosperous. You could be a builder or a joiner. When you come out of your time five years from now, you could earn a good living. Be set up for life. All you have to do is put this ticket back in your pocket and forget all about it. I'll even pay for your apprenticeship, your accommodation and food - and you won't owe me a penny.'

Why would he do that? I wondered. Why did he want to get rid of me so badly that he would pay my keep elsewhere? After all, giving me what I wanted wouldn't cost him anything. The gambling houses supported five trainees each season. This was partly funded by the thousands of tickets sold to young hopefuls. Or, more usually, to fathers who bought them on their behalf. Blue tickets were expensive.

Arena 13 in Gindeen attracted those who sought excitement and a chance of fame; the opportunity to earn real money, rather than being bound to some trade or, even worse, stuck in the drudgery of unskilled labouring. This

was why I wanted to fight there too – though I had another, more personal reason that I wasn't prepared to divulge to anyone yet – not even Tyron.

'Well, what do you say?' he asked. 'What trade would you like to follow?'

'I want to work for you, sir,' I repeated. 'I want to learn how to fight in the arena.'

'What's your name again?' Tyron demanded.

I took a deep breath and gave him the information for the third time. 'My name is Leif,' I reminded him.

He got to his feet. 'Look, I don't want you, Leif.' His voice was louder now, and edged with real anger. 'Why should I give you a place when I've dozens with proven ability already clamouring at my door? The system says that your winning ticket gives you the right to be trained, but that doesn't necessarily mean trained by *me*. You're just trying to live out a dream like lots of other young lads from the provinces. The reality of this life is not what you've been led to believe. None of it is. I bet you've never even been inside the Wheel or seen any of the arenas.'

I bowed my head. He was right. This was my first visit to Gindeen.

'I only arrived yesterday. I haven't had a chance to see anything yet.'

'Who brought you here?' Tyron demanded. 'Whose wagon was it?'

'Nobody brought me.'

'Nobody? You'll be telling me next that you walked!'

'Yes, I did. I walked.'

'What! All the way from Mypocine?'

I nodded.

Tyron raised his eyebrows in astonishment. I thought he was going to make some comment, but instead he asked, 'Tell me about that ticket, boy! Who paid for it – your father?'

'My father's dead and so is my mother.'

‘Well, I’m sorry to hear that. But I asked you a question. When I ask a question, I expect to be answered.’

‘Two weeks ago a merchant came to Mypocine,’ I explained. ‘He had a big convoy of five wagons, and everyone came for miles around to barter or buy. Late in the afternoon the men started drinking and he joined them. After a while he suggested that the local lads should put on a bit of a show for him and he’d give a prize to the winner. So we started stick-fighting, three against one.’

‘As usual, I won, but I was really disappointed when my prize was only a blue lottery ticket—’

‘Hold it there a minute,’ Tyron interrupted. ‘What did you say?’

I thought I’d spoken clearly but I repeated, ‘I said I was disappointed because I’d only won a blue—’

‘No, not that – it was your first two words that caught my attention. You said you’d won *as usual*. Did I hear you right?’

I nodded. I wasn’t showing off; just telling the truth. ‘I was the best stick-fighter in Mypocine – the champion. Since turning fourteen I’ve only ever lost once. That was because it was wet and I slipped in the mud – though that’s no excuse. If you want to win, you don’t slip.’

‘And how old are you now?’

‘I was fifteen last week.’

‘So you usually fought alone against a team of three boys?’

I nodded. ‘Yes, mostly it was one against three, just like the lacs in Arena 13. But occasionally it was one against one.’

‘Go on with your tale. You said you were disappointed with your prize. Why would that be?’

‘Because I’m just not lucky,’ I told him. ‘I never have been. Only five of all those thousands bought each year are winning tickets. But the Chief Marshal pulled mine from a lottery orb. I’d won! So I set off for the city straight away.’

As I told you, I walked all the way and it's taken me since then to get here.'

'This merchant - describe him!' commanded Tyron.

'He was a big man, probably about your age. He had red hair and a red beard.'

Tyron sighed long and deeply, and the expression on his face made me think that he knew the man I'd described.

There was an uncomfortable silence and I ended it, talking fast.

'I've walked all the way from Mypocine. Doesn't that show how much I want to be here and fight in the arena? I want to be trained by the best - that's why I chose you! I want to be one of the greatest and most successful combatants ever. That's been my dream since I was a child. Please give me a chance. I'll work as your servant without pay until you see what I can do.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Until you see me fight.'

'You can't fight until you've been trained, and I've already told you that I'm not prepared to train you. So I'm not going to waste any more of my breath. Now, off you go, boy! Go and bother somebody else!' Tyron snapped, pointing at the door.

I got to my feet and pushed back my chair to leave, filled with a mixture of emotions. I stared at him for a moment before turning and heading for the door.

'Here!' Tyron shouted. 'Catch!'

As I turned back towards him, he snatched something from his leather belt and hurled it at me.

It was a dagger.

It spun towards me, its blade gleaming in the candlelight. End over end it came. Concentrating, I noted that it was aimed a full hand-span to the right of my head. Tyron didn't want to hurt me; just to shock me. This was a test.

I reached up and plucked the dagger out of the air, walked back to the desk and set it down on the black

leather, the hilt towards him. Then, slowly and quite deliberately, I bowed.

When I lifted my head again, Tyron was staring straight into my eyes; it was a long time before he spoke.

‘Well, Leif, that earns you a visit to the Wheel,’ he said at last. ‘But that’s all. I’ve a two-year-old grandson who can catch as well as that!’