

*Shadow Fray*

By Bradley Lloyd

Chapter 1

First Fray. Arena: Mutual Conglomerate Building.

The contestant peered at the faded “4” over the rusty door. He pulled out the small slip of paper from his leather armguard and read it again. *Mutual Conglomerate Building. Entrance 4. Visiting Team. 11:48 p.m. 9/08.* Justin hoped it was 11:46. He’d rehearsed the route, but if he was nervous and off by a minute or two, he could be penalized. He hadn’t brought a watch or a phone. That had been his handler’s job, and his handler was dead.

But he wouldn’t think about that. Instead, Justin turned the paper over and read the note he’d copied there. They were his kid brother’s words, and Justin mouthed them softly, like a mantra. *Justin does his best even when it’s hard, even when he’s tired and maybe hurting a little bit. He always shows courage. That’s why he’s the person I look up to the most.*

Tonight was for Charlie. Charlie was his reason to fight—his reason to win.

Justin tore up the note. The lake breeze slipped past him, carrying the bits of paper away—a prayer on the wind. It was cold for September. A thin layer of petroleum jelly covered his face, but his bare skin prickled along his arms. He turned to glance over his shoulder. Darkness and fog. He listened. Out over Lake Michigan, a distant foghorn sounded. Then silence. No drones buzzing, and no one was around.

He grabbed the leather mask he had hidden beneath his T-shirt and quickly tied it over his eyes, tightening the lacing. He removed the shirt and cast it to the side of the doorway, glancing one more time at the dim 4 overhead. He stepped forward, giving the metal door a shove inward.

It opened. He shouldn’t be surprised. This was a Shadow Fray, and the doors to a Shadow Arena always opened, right on time. Justin stepped inside. No—not Justin. Someone anonymous. Someone who would win tonight. Someone who would finally earn a name.

The concrete corridor he entered was massive, supporting more than thirty floors and a cell phone tower. His mother once told him the building held the world record for the largest consecutive concrete pour. Cement trucks lined the streets for two days, stretching blocks back to

their home. She hadn't been alive to see it; in fact, it was before the Thinning. How had she described the scene from the distant past so vividly? If it was even true.

No matter. She was gone, and he was here for his sister and brother. *My brother does his best even when it's hard, even when he's tired and maybe hurting a little bit. He always shows courage.* Justin took a step toward the one florescent lightbulb illuminating the long hall. Then another. Then another.

Boarded and reinforced doors lined the corridor, a few with the metal framing from years ago when they used to hold glass. It was clear this basement area hadn't been used in ages, yet he passed down the hall half expecting some random person to step out of a doorway.

His heart was pounding. Just nerves. He paused, bounced in place, and shook his arms out. He breathed deeply, slowly, and scanned above the doors, down the length of the hall, not spotting what he was looking for.

He walked to the first junction where the hall split left and right, then paused. To the left, three doors down, he saw it, almost in total darkness—the small green light above the doorway that signaled the show was on. He approached, saluting the camera.

Beneath the door, a dim sliver of light indicated the room ahead would at least be illuminated. He pushed the door open and stepped forward, already beginning to raise his arms.

“Hands above your head,” said a voice to his right inside the door. He was shoved forward by a palm between his shoulder blades and assumed this was his opponent's handler.

Justin ignored the contact. In his periphery he saw his opponent, but his main focus was on the Arena itself, looking for any advantages. The walls around him were bare—just cement. The room was not overly large. The walls would be an issue, especially with someone stronger who could shove him around. Justin wouldn't hold up well if he was being driven into the concrete.

Not much to this Arena, so he shifted his focus to his opponent. The guy was bare-chested except for the leather harness crossing his upper body in an X. He was big—big arms, big chest. He had skinnier legs—those would be a weak point. The center of his harness contained one pointed metal stud. Decorative, but also potentially very painful. Justin grit his teeth. It would have been Joe's job as handler to prohibit the stud. Justin would just have to avoid it.

Time to compare. Strategize. His opponent was several inches over six feet, a hair taller than Justin. Reach seemed about the same though. Justin would be the fitter Brawler overall, but the other man looked to have more upper body strength. The plan would be to stay low, in the center, and go for the legs. He had to work at wearing the guy down—though in this small space that might be difficult.

Lastly he examined his opponent's face. The mask didn't hide the ugly. Eyes lidded with extra fat. Crooked front tooth protruding. Looked like a troll. He seemed familiar, but Justin didn't remember his name. Not memorable was good. For now Troll would do.

"Where's your handler?" said the voice behind him. The man's hands wandered down Justin's body, patting him down.

"I'm in the market for a new one."

"Fuck you!" Troll's words echoed on the cement walls. Since Justin was trying to steal Troll's handler, he understood the sentiment.

"What's your name?" said the man, stepping out from the shadows.

Justin hadn't earned a name—yet. "Whatever you want it to be."

"Tonight your name better be..." The raspy voice paused, and Justin turned to look at the handler. "Ruthless."

The man's bulging eyes peered at Justin from the holes in a sackcloth mask straight out of a *Batman* movie. Shit. Scarecrow. Justin's meager hopes sank, a weight in the pit of his stomach.

Any handler who wore that kind of mask to every Fray wanted a share of the spotlight. This fit with what Justin knew of the handler—he had more than one Brawler, but Justin couldn't name any of them. Scarecrow's image and reputation were as important as winning and money—and certainly more valuable than any Brawler he had.

Scarecrow didn't check Justin's armguards. That was on purpose, Justin was sure. Justin could be hiding a blade or something less conspicuous like powder, sand—anything to give him an advantage, but he wasn't. That Scarecrow didn't check indicated he liked to play dirty, and he wasn't attached to his current Brawler. A blessing and a curse. If Troll was expendable, then Justin

would be too, someday. Scarecrow wanted this fight to be brutal. So after tonight he was likely only taking on one of them.

With that the man stepped back through the doorway into the dimness of the hall. Troll looked like he was about to explode with fury. Justin had only seconds more to evaluate.

“Do you forfeit your right to inspection?” Scarecrow asked from behind him, loudly so the mics would pick it up.

“Yes,” Justin shouted, glancing around the room at the small green lights indicating the cameras. He tried to put some bass and confidence into his voice. More confidence than he—

“Ghaaa!” Troll bellowed and charged, looking like a barbarian from an old movie. Damn. No dancing around. Justin fainted right and dodged left to get out of his way. He could use another second, dammit.

He pivoted around, trying to stay low and keep his feet squarely under him while spotting Troll.

He never saw it coming. He only saw black and felt a fist like a brick on the left side of his face. Not a square hit, but not glancing either. The leather mask absorbed some, and he was low enough that Troll’s height took off a little more. Troll had anticipated the move, and that meant he wasn’t dumb.

Justin dipped his right arm back in the direction his head was going from the punch, using the momentum to dig low. He drove his right fist up into Troll’s gut, aiming below the leather harness. Two of his knuckles hitched on Troll’s bottom rib, and Justin screamed through with the uppercut as hard as he could. His knuckles slipped past the bone and into the softer tissue beneath Troll’s ribcage. Cracked, he hoped.

He backed off. The move gave him at least a few seconds while Troll caught his breath. This was happening too fast, and with Troll’s size, Justin needed speed to be his advantage. He needed to control the tempo.

And then he heard it—the blood dropping onto the cement floor with a thick splat, followed by another. He touched his face. Blood flowed freely down his chin from a gouge on his jaw beneath his mask line. He looked at Troll’s knuckles, taped up like any Brawler. But no—Justin

saw a fleshy smear on the tape, and beneath it a texture to the tape that shouldn't be there. Fucking sandpaper.

Troll had marked his face.

Troll let out a wheezing laugh as he stood, looking at his right fist. He brought his knuckles close, studying them. No way—

Troll grabbed a white spider web of Justin's discarded skin in his teeth and chewed it. "Tastes good."

Disgusting intimidation tactic. Justin couldn't let it deter him, so he compartmentalized, putting it away in a tiny box in the back of his mind to deal with later. Much later.

Behind Troll in the doorway, Scarecrow gave a laugh and clapped.

Screw that. Justin plowed forward with a yell, tossing his head before jabbing with his right and following with his left. Not full strength, not yet. He needed to see what damage he might have caused and get a taste for his opponent. Troll looked surprised, throwing up his arms to block, stepping backward once, twice, three times. This time Justin leaned into it, seizing on his advantage, driving his left fist forward straight toward Troll's face in a full-force power shot.

But Troll anticipated the strike. His fist glanced past Troll's ear, Justin's position now too far forward and open. Meanwhile, Troll countered with a right hook, direct and fast, like a turbine into Justin's chest. Justin swore his heart skipped a beat as white sparks flashed at the edges of his vision. He lost his breath, unable to inhale.

*Stay calm. Power through. The breath always comes back.* In the meantime he simply had to behave like oxygen didn't matter.

Troll lunged forward again with a right jab toward Justin's face, but Justin brought up both arms to block. Protecting his face from those sandpapered fists needed to be his priority.

With no choice but to try to create some space, he took a step back as Troll came through with another right, which Justin intercepted with his armguards. Another step back, and now Troll was battering forward with his fists, breathing out with each punch, increasing in momentum and power like a steam locomotive approaching full throttle. Scrambling backward, Justin could no longer keep on his feet. He was going down.

*Don't fight it. Don't freak out.* He used momentum and gravity, dropping backward onto his butt. This stopped him almost immediately. He used his abs to keep his body from continuing backward and kicked out fiercely with his left foot, driving it into Troll's shin. At the same time, he hooked his right foot behind Troll's opposite leg, pulling it forward. His abs clenched painfully with the strain of keeping himself centered.

With one foot forward and one foot back, Troll stumbled in place, dropping awkwardly to a crouch with an agonized cry. Justin quickly hopped back up on his feet, raised his hands high, and drove both of them down toward Troll's bowed head. He connected below the man's skull, feeling the push back of vertebrae like stones set into sponge. Troll's head snapped downward, bouncing off his knee. One more time, Justin hammer-fisted into the same spot, laying Troll flat on the cement. Now he had the advantage, and he leapt back, getting ready for the next move.

He took a second to breathe, happy to fill his lungs. The sensation of breathing and the effect of the oxygen was a heady kind of ecstasy. He easily could have lost this fight.

"What are you waiting for, Ruthless?" asked Scarecrow from the shadows behind him.

"Just takin' a minute to smile for the cameras." And he did, glancing around the room, making sure to look at each green flashing light in his field of vision. If this fight finished too quickly, Scarecrow would never pick him up. He needed Scarecrow to take him, even though the prospect of a handler like Scarecrow was far less than ideal. He was being tested. This had to be a good fight. It had to look good.

Troll was starting to rise as Justin rushed forward, grabbed him, and slammed his knee into Troll's face. It had to hurt, but at the same time, it had the effect of lifting Troll back to a standing position. Troll staggered backward, blood pouring out of his nose and over his mask. Justin ran his hand over his own face, collecting the blood from his chin and flinging it onto the cement. It would look good on camera, but he couldn't afford any more marks to his face. He was screwed with just the one.

"I'm gonna fuckin' kill you," Troll yelled, flecks of blood spraying out with the words.

Justin was never much of a talker, and he had no comeback. He kept his mouth shut. He looked Troll in the eyes as if to say, "Your turn."

He kept his arms high and purposefully left himself less guarded down below, where he could better afford to take some hits. He started circling, keeping himself ready. Troll took a few tentative swipes, and Justin let him graze his chest without taking any damage.

Justin spotted opportunity and entered a rhythm. Troll was slowing down, and Justin turned from attacks just enough to never take a hit head-on—but it threw Troll off-balance, repeatedly. The guy was sloppy. Justin jabbed and hooked to Troll's head every time the man stumbled, which actually had the effect of keeping Troll on his feet. It was obvious Troll was hurting, and Justin was playing, practically teasing, but to put on a good show he had to make the Fray last a little longer.

He had to change it up though. To risk such an obvious pattern was boring and amateurish. When Troll stumbled again, he punched to knock Troll down and at the same time kicked Troll's feet out from under him, bringing him to the ground. Justin danced backward, not quite ready to end it.

Troll got into a low crouch, half kneeling and appearing as though it might be difficult for him to stand up fully. He looked at Justin. Too bad for Troll, his mean look was stronger than his punch. Troll took in a long, struggling breath while slowly rising to his feet once more.

Time to end this. Justin closed the distance to attack. He was expecting the last-ditch yell that came from Troll, the bestial cry of the nearly defeated. He was not expecting the mass of blood and phlegm that hit him square in the eyes. Blinded but already committed, he tried to follow through with his punch but only grazed Troll. He expected a follow-up punch and tried to guard his face, but suddenly Troll's hands were on his chest. Troll yelled again, picking Justin up and driving him back into the wall.

Justin's head slammed into the cement, the impact so hard his ears popped.

Troll landed punch after punch along Justin's rib cage while Justin flailed, his hands high. He felt the skin tearing off his sides as if he were going through a cheese grater. Unable to see clearly, he punched back, hitting Troll on the sides of his head, but not from the best angle. He kicked out, aiming for Troll's groin, but barely made impact.

Fortunately it was enough. Already weak and unsteady, Troll lost his footing and dipped forward. His vision clearing, Justin advanced off the wall. Striving for balance, he put his right

arm around Troll, driving forward with his more dominant left, striking again and again into Troll's chest while in the clinch. Troll tried to back away, at the same time punching at Justin with his right. The burning scrape along his chin let Justin know he had lost more skin. He tucked his chin and kept pounding into Troll. They had each other in a strange embrace, both trying to gain leverage, both landing one-handed blows.

Gradually, Troll took the advantage, pushing Justin back against the wall yet again. With his hands up to block, Justin was taking a beating on his ribs. He had to stay away from the damned walls.

He let gravity work, dropping down below the next punch. He threw his arms around Troll's waist, using the wall to push off with his feet and drive Troll backward. It wasn't easy, and something pulled in his calf as he pushed what felt like three hundred pounds of dead weight. Good thing his opponent had weak legs.

Troll flopped backward, knocking his head against the cement, and Justin fell on top of him. Quickly he climbed up Troll's prone body, staying low. Left, right, left, he drove his fists into Troll's jaw, Troll's head ricocheting off the pavement each time. This was the ground and pound. Justin felt Troll go limp but punched three more times before he stopped.

Stilling his clenched fists, he heard himself yelling—the bestial cry of the desperate turning into a howl of victory.

He stumbled backward. He had lost himself. He closed his eyes as his echoing scream died in the cement box.

Had he killed Troll? He saw his downed opponent move slightly on the ground, a few droplets of blood spraying into the air—a sputtering breath. Thank God.

Justin sank to his knees, landing too hard on the pavement. He was suddenly chilled, the gray stone leaching all the heat from his body.

From the doorway to his left, Justin heard a gradual clap. Scarecrow's steps on the pavement sounded slow and deliberate as he walked out of the hall's shadows and into the room.

“Impressive.”

“Thanks.” Justin still hadn't taken his eyes off the barely moving Troll. “Who is he?”



“Doesn’t matter. You’ll do from now on.”

Justin finally looked at Scarecrow. From the gleam in the man’s eye, Justin could see the grin hidden beneath the mask. His blood ran cold. Troll moaned, giving Justin the excuse he needed to turn away.

Attempting deep breaths, Justin stifled a wince. Breathing hurt. His ribs were throbbing, but he wasn’t going to touch them to see if anything was broken. He couldn’t show Scarecrow any weakness, not to mention the cameras, which were required to stay on until the victor left the Arena.

Glancing up, Justin saw Scarecrow was still looking at him. How much time had passed? Two minutes? Five? Shit, he was out of it. He noticed again the blood landing on the cement. It had dripped all the way down his body, off his thighs, and onto the floor.

Troll groaned again, a sound like he was trying to wake himself up from a dream but couldn’t. Handlers didn’t usually leave their Brawlers on the floor. Although Troll didn’t have a handler any more, did he?

Still acting on instinct, Justin got slowly to his feet and walked over to him. “Hey,” he said, tapping him on the cheek. Weakly, Troll lifted an arm. Justin grabbed it, trying to pull him up.

“Let me help you with that.” Scarecrow walked behind Troll, getting on his knees and lifting Troll from behind into a sitting position. Troll’s body was as loose as a pile of rags. He had no muscle coordination, no way to sit up on his own yet.

“You all right?” Justin asked. What a stupid question. Troll was definitely not all right.

Scarecrow reached for something at his back. Suddenly this whole situation struck him as not right. He heard the blade snap out before he saw it in the light. He held his breath.

“Steady now,” Scarecrow said, the words directed to Justin. Scarecrow held his gaze, the gleam in his eye matching the gleam on the blade. This was another test. Justin couldn’t show weakness, but was Scarecrow really going to—

“I’d say you’ve earned this,” Scarecrow said. He drove the blade in below Troll’s ear and thrust it across his throat. In slow, jerking motions, the blade finally severed the windpipe with a

crunch and a snap, blood spraying out with a choking sound. The sound only lasted seconds, but the blood kept spurting, each small gush one more beat of Troll's dying heart.

Scarecrow stood, letting Troll drop to the floor. Troll was no longer moving, not making any sounds. His half-lidded eyes were unseeing, while a pool of blood extended from his ruined neck. He never knew what happened. He hadn't been conscious. Probably. But it hadn't been quick.

"Get up. Let's go." Scarecrow's voice was level and calm. Justin wanted to move his legs, but he was kneeling on the floor. He felt unclean, as though he were a captive worshipper at an unholy altar of human sacrifice, bound by chains to that very spot.

*C'mon. Move.*

He felt detached. He was getting up but couldn't feel his legs. Was he going into shock? Unaware of any pain, he followed Scarecrow out into the hall.

Once out of sight of the last camera, Justin stopped. It was like he was no longer in control of his own body. Scarecrow paused after a few steps and turned around. "Leave the cameras," he said. "It's not worth it if we get stopped somewhere. Come on."

He forced his feet to move. What was wrong with him? He needed to pretend he was still fighting. He needed some drive to get through this.

He thought of his family—his twin sister, Ginny, and their little brother, Charlie. Charlie, who had written that note. Justin grit his teeth. He had to play this game. He had to fight.

Scarecrow stopped in front of the exit. He turned to Justin, pulling off the sackcloth mask. He was old. He had salt-and-pepper hair, thin wisps sticking up around his head like smoke. He was sharp in the face, with skin hanging off pointed bones. "Take off your mask," he said. "Let me see you."

It was easy to obey. It didn't require thought. Justin reached behind and loosened the lace, pulling his mask off.

"Look at me." Scarecrow put his hand under Justin's chin. The man must be tall—and not gentle, though he kept his hand clear of any wounds. He surveyed Justin's face with a faint smile. "Yeah, not bad. How old are you?"

“Twenty-three.”

“You’re a good-lookin’ kid. A lot better looking than that guy on the floor back there.”

Justin didn’t respond. “Here,” said Scarecrow, reaching behind and pulling a brown bandana out of his back pocket. “You’re still bleeding.”

“Thanks.” Justin took it and held it to the gouge in his jaw.

“Your DNA clean?”

“Of course.”

“Good. What’s your exit plan?”

“I don’t live far from here. I walked.” And then Justin winced. Shit. He passed it off as pain, but it was his stupid mental error. He’d just given away too much information. He couldn’t have another Joe situation. This handler was dangerous enough. Not safe. Not for Gin. Not for Charlie. Fucking think.

“You able to get home?”

“Of course,” Justin said emphatically. No way was this guy coming anywhere near his home. “I have a plan. I’m careful.”

“You better be. I got my own plan, kid. I’ll meet you in a couple days. I’m not local, so location will be the train station in Racine, early morning, 7:00 a.m. That’ll be Tuesday. No—better make it Wednesday. Safer with that face. Best lay low, let it heal some, considering we just committed murder an’ all, right?” Scarecrow smiled.

Justin had no words, wouldn’t even nod. Scarecrow didn’t look pleased, his smile fading. “C’mon, speak. Let me hear you say it, so I know you got it. This is your one chance. I ain’t trying to find you.”

“Wednesday morning, 7:00 a.m. Racine.”

Scarecrow patted Justin’s cheek. “Good boy.” Justin wanted to recoil but stood his ground. Finally, Scarecrow turned and pushed through the exit. “Take care of that face now,” Justin heard faintly.

The metal door slammed shut.