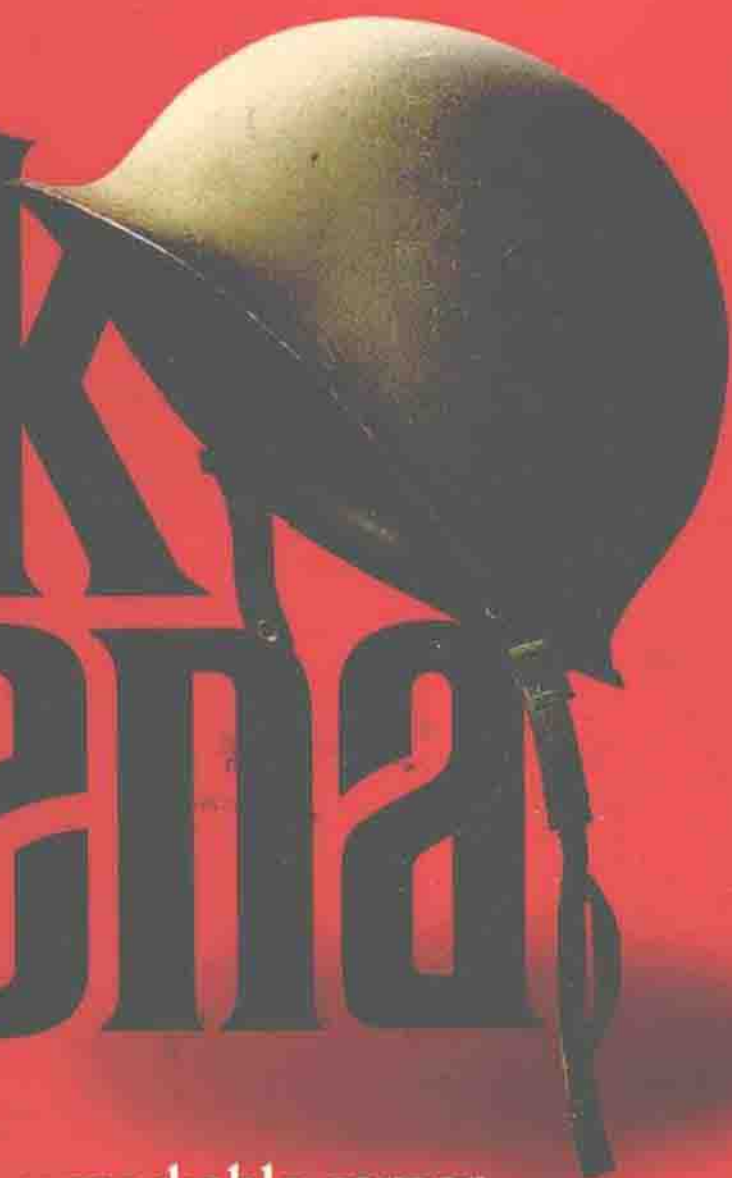


New York Times bestselling author of *The Godfather*

Mario Puzo

THE Dark Arena



First novel of Puzo's remarkable career

THE DARK ARENA

A Novel

Mario Puzo

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for erika

"Fathers and teachers, I ponder 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love."

"Oh, there are some who remain proud and fierce even in hell, in spite of their certain knowledge and contemplation of the absolute truth; there are some fearful ones who have given themselves over to Satan and his proud spirit entirely. For such, hell is voluntary and ever consuming; they are tortured by their own choice. For they have cursed themselves, cursing God and life. They live upon their vindictive pride like a starving man in the desert sucking blood out of his own body. But they are never satisfied, and they refuse forgiveness, they curse God Who calls them. They cannot behold the living God without hatred, and they cry out that the God of life should be annihilated, that God should destroy Himself and His own creation. And they will burn in the fire of their own wrath forever and yearn for death and annihilation. But they will not attain to death . . ."

—*The Brothers Karamazov*,
FYODOR DOSTOEVSKI

one

Walter Mosca felt a sense of excitement and the last overwhelming loneliness before a home-coming. The few ruins outside of Paris were remembered and familiar landmarks, and now on the last leg of his journey he could hardly wait to come to his final destination, the heart of the ruined continent, the destroyed city that he had never thought he would see again. The landmarks leading into Germany were more familiar to him than the approaches to his own land, his own city.

The train rocked with speed. It was a troop train with replacements for the Frankfort garrison, but half the car was taken by civilian employees recruited from the States. Mosca touched his silk tie and smiled. It felt strange to him. He would feel more at home with the GIs at the other end, and, he thought, so would most of the twenty or so civilians with him.

There were two dim lights, one at each end of the car. The windows were boarded up, as if the car had been built so that its occupants would not be able to see the vast ruins through which they would travel. The seats were

long wooden benches, leaving only one very narrow aisle along one side.

Mosca stretched out on his bench and put the blue gym bag under his head for a pillow. In the bad light he could hardly recognize the other civilians.

They had all traveled on the same Army ship together, and like himself, they all seemed excited and eager to reach Frankfort. They talked loudly to be heard over the roar of the train, and Mosca could hear Mr. Gerald's voice dominating the rest. Mr. Gerald was the highest ranking civilian in the shipment. He had with him a set of golf clubs, and on board the ship had let everyone know that his civilian grade was equal to the rank of colonel. Mr. Gerald was happy and cheerful, and Mosca had a vision of him playing golf over the ruins of a city, the long drive above flattened and level streets, the approach to a rounded heap of rubble, and putting carefully into the top of a decaying skull.

The speed of the train slackened as it moved into a small deserted station. Outside it was night, and in the blind railroad car it was very dark. Mosca dozed, hearing only vaguely the voices of the others. But as the train picked up speed leaving the station it shook him fully awake.

The civilians were talking more quietly now, and Mosca sat up to watch the soldiers at the other end of the car. Some were sleeping on the long benches, but there were three circles of light surrounding three card games, giving their end of the car a friendly glow. He felt a faint nostalgia for the life he had led so long and left just a few months ago. By the light of their candles he could see them drinking from their canteens, not water he felt sure, and breaking out K rations to munch chocolate bars. A GI was always prepared, Mosca thought with a grin. Blankets on his back, candles in his pack, water or something better in his canteen, and a rubber in his wallet at all times. Ready for good luck or bad.

Mosca stretched out again on the bench and tried to sleep. But his body was as stiff and unyielding as the hard wood beneath it. The train had picked up speed and was going very fast now. He looked at his watch. It was nearly

midnight, and it was still a good eight hours to Frankfort. He sat up, took a bottle from the small, blue gym bag and, resting his head against the boarded window, kept drinking until his body relaxed. He must have fallen asleep, for when he looked down again to the soldiers' end of the car, there was only one circle of candlelight; but in the darkness behind him he could still hear the voices of Mr. Gerald and a few other civilians. They must have been drinking, for Mr. Gerald's voice was patronizing, condescending, and he was boasting of his coming power, how he would put his paper empire on an efficient basis.

Two candles detached themselves from the circle at the other end of the car, their flares wavering unevenly down the aisle. As they passed him, Mosca was startled out of his drowsiness. The GI carrying the candles had on his face a look of malevolent and stupid hatred. The bright yellow glow of the candles dyed the already drink-flushed face a dark red and gave the sullen eyes a dangerous, senseless look.

"Hey, soldier," the voice of Mr. Gerald called out, "how about leaving us a light?"

The candle obediently came to rest near Mr. Gerald and his group of civilians and the sound of their voices rose, as if they had taken courage from the flickering light. They tried to include the GI in their conversation, but he, his candles resting on the bench, his own face in darkness, refused to answer. They forgot about the soldier and spoke of other things; only once Mr. Gerald, leaning into the candlelight as if to show himself with absolute trust, said condescendingly but with real kindness to the GI, "We were all of us in the Army, too, you know." And then with a laugh to the others, "Thank God that's over."

One of the other civilians said, "Don't be too sure, we still have the Russians."

They forgot about the GI again until suddenly over and above their voices, above the noise of the train running so blindly across the continent, the silent GI shouted loudly and in drunken arrogance, yet as if in some panic, "Shut up, shut up, don't talk so much, shut your goddamn mouths."

There was a moment of surprised, embarrassed silence, and then Mr. Gerald leaned his head into the candlelight again and said to the GI quietly, "You had better get to your end of the car, son." There was no answer from the GI, and Mr. Gerald continued to speak, picking up where he had been interrupted.

Suddenly he was standing up, fully lit by the flaring candles, his voice cut off. And then he said quietly, without alarm but with almost terrified disbelief, "My God, I've been hurt. That soldier did something to me."

Mosca sat up straight and other dark figures rose from the benches, one of them knocked out a candlelight as he brushed it to the floor. Mr. Gerald, still standing but not so brightly lit, said in a quiet horrified voice, "That soldier stabbed me," and fell out of the light into the darkness of his bench.

Two men from the GI end of the car hurried down the aisle. By the light of the candles they carried, Mosca could see the glint of officer bars.

Mr. Gerald was saying over and over again, "I've been stabbed, that soldier stabbed me." In his voice the terror was gone, it was surprised, incredulous. Mosca could see him sitting upright on the bench and then, lit up by the full power of the three candles, could see the rent in the trouser leg, high up on the thigh, the dark stain flowing over and around it. The lieutenant bent over, holding his candle close and gave an order to the soldier with him. The soldier ran down to the other end of the car and returned with blankets and a first-aid kit. They spread the blankets on the floor and made Mr. Gerald lie down. The soldier started to cut off the trouser leg, but Mr. Gerald said, "No, roll it up; I can get it mended." The lieutenant looked at the wound.

"It's nothing much," the lieutenant said. "Wrap him in a blanket." There was no sympathy in his young, blank face or in his voice, only an impersonal kindness. "We'll have an ambulance waiting in Frankfort, just in case. I'll wire at the next stop." Then he turned to the others and asked, "Where is he?"

The drunken GI had disappeared; Mosca, peering into

the darkness, saw a form huddled in the corner of the bench before him. He said nothing.

The lieutenant went to his end of the car and returned wearing his pistol belt. He threw the beam of his flashlight around the car until he saw the huddled form. He prodded it with his flashlight, at the same time drawing his pistol and hiding it behind him. The GI didn't move.

The lieutenant poked him roughly. "Get up, Mulrooney." The GI opened his eyes, and when Mosca saw the dumb, sullen animal glare, he felt a sudden pity.

The lieutenant kept the beam of his flashlight in the soldier's eyes, blinding him. He made Mulrooney stand up. When he saw that his hands were empty, he slipped his pistol back into its holster. Then he turned the GI around with a rough shove and searched him. He didn't find anything, so he threw the light of his flash on the bench. Mosca saw the bloodstained knife. The lieutenant picked it up and pushed the GI ahead of him to the other end of the car.

The train began to slow down and gradually came to a halt. Mosca walked to the end of the car, opened the door, and looked out. He saw the lieutenant going to the station to wire ahead for the ambulance; otherwise there was no one. The French town behind the station was dark and still.

Mosca went back to his bench. Mr. Gerald's friends were bending over him, reassuring him, and Mr. Gerald was saying impatiently, "I know it's a scratch, but why did he do it, why did he do such a crazy thing?" And when the lieutenant came back into the car and told them the ambulance would be waiting at Frankfort, Mr. Gerald said to him, "Believe me, Lieutenant, I did nothing to provoke him. Ask any of my friends. I did nothing, nothing, to make him do such a thing."

"He's just crazy, that's all," the lieutenant said. And then added, "You're lucky, sir; if I know Mulrooney he was aiming at your balls."

For some reason this seemed to cheer them up, as if the seriousness of intent made the event more interesting, made the scratch on Mr. Gerald's thigh important. The

lieutenant brought his bedroll back and fixed Mr. Gerald on it. "In a way you did me a favor. I've been trying to get rid of Mulrooney since the first day he came into the platoon. He'll be safe for a couple of years now."

Mosca couldn't sleep. The train had begun to move, and he walked down to the door again, rested against it, and looked at the black, shadowy countryside pass by. He remembered the same, nearly the same, land going by so slowly, from the back of trucks, tanks, on foot, crawling on the ground. He had believed he would never see this country again, and he wondered now why everything had turned out so badly. He had dreamed for so long about going home, and now he had left again. In the darkened train, he remembered his first night at home.

The large square sticker on the door had read *Welcome Home, Walter*, and Mosca noticed that similar stickers with different names were pasted on two of the other apartment doors. The first thing he saw when he entered the apartment was the picture of himself taken just before he went overseas. Then his mother and Gloria swarmed over him, and Alf was shaking his hand.

They all stood away from each other, and there was just one moment of awkward silence.

"You've gotten older," his mother said, and they all laughed. "No, I mean more than three years older."

"He hasn't changed," Gloria said. "He hasn't changed a bit."

"The conquering hero returns," Alf said. "Look at all those ribbons. Did you do something brave, Walter?"

"Standard," Mosca said; "most of the WACs got the same set." He pulled off his combat jacket and his mother took it from him. Alf went into the kitchen and came out with a tray of drinks.

"Christ," Mosca said, startled, "I thought you lost a leg." He had completely forgotten his mother writing about Alf. But his brother had obviously been waiting for this moment. He drew up his trouser leg.

"Very pretty," Mosca said. "Tough luck, Alf."