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This document is a collection of selected writing samples showing a variety in style, genre, and format. In certain cases, to preserve confidentiality, I have altered the text. Relevant clients have granted me permission to use this material, in its current form, as a writing sample. However, please do not share this material outside the hiring team as some of the content is still considered highly sensitive.

Samples include:

Cinematic Dialogue Scene - Deck Nine Games, 2023

In a grounded sci-fi future, space exploration affects the daily lives of everyone in the galaxy. Our characters, Parker and Trask, have crewed a salvage ship together for years, but a lucrative new opportunity threatens to test their relationship.

Interactive Series Pitch and Logline - King, 2020

A dark, tale of crime, faith, and family ties, Nostalgiaville was envisioned as a multi-season interactive series meant to appeal to readers who enjoy a good thriller with taut action and interesting, morally gray characters.

Character Spec and VO Sides - THQ Nordic, 2019

Story expansion *Fatesworn* built on the existing lore of open-world RPG *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* to create a new adventure with memorable characters—old and new—and quests that brought the series to a satisfying close.

Novel Chapter - Penguin/Random House, 2021-2023

"One lonely seventh grader gets way more than he bargained for when he is swept into the fantasy quest of his gaming dreams in this magical illustrated series full of laughs, adventure, and twists." (From the publisher.)

Additional writing samples are available upon request. Thank you.

Andrew

EXT. ARGONAUT

The Argonaut speeds through space with the moon of Io in the background.

Titles over the shot:
The Argonaut
Freight Vessel
Io

Beat.

Title:
Eight Hours Earlier

INT. CAPTAIN'S QUARTERS

CLOSE ON two empty glass tumblers. Fine crystal, worth a fortune.

TRASK (O.S.)
Let's celebrate.

Pull out to Parker seated across the desk from Trask, who has his back to her. Medals and memorabilia, anchored down for gravity, line the desk.

Trask turns and presents a scotch bottle, giving it a little shake of enticement, then pours it into the glasses out of frame.

PARKER
(cautiously)
What are we celebrating?

TRASK
Our last mission.

PARKER
I've heard that before.

He raises his hands, gesturing for her to wait and hear him out. His hand terminal sits on his desk. He flicks his hand over it, emitting a projection into the air, where it floats above their table alluringly.

TRASK
(pleased)
This is the one. By the end of the day, all of us are going to be fucking rich. But mostly you and me.

We see how what's left of the R.N.C. Humboldt: a fleet support ship that's been blown to bits, hanging dead in space.

With a downward flick, Parker collapses the projection into her terminal.

PARKER
(unimpressed)
It's another wreck.

TRASK
It's not just any wreck. The RNC Humboldt. Dropped off the map less than a week ago, no distress call.

TRASK
Those RNC pricks never come out this far unless they're carrying something special.

PARKER
(cheeky)
Aren't you one of those RNC pricks?

TRASK
Easy. If I'm still one of those RNC pricks, then you're still a terrorist traitor with Orson Keel's bounty on your head. But, the past is the past.

PARKER
The past is the past.

Parker considers her scotch for a beat.

PARKER
Why didn't you take it? The bounty?

TRASK
I knew you were worth more. Anybody who could piss off someone that dangerous must be pretty fucking valuable.

PARKER
*Anyone could piss off Keel.
~Orson Keel is a gangster and a killer. It's not hard to piss off a man like that.

TRASK
Well, his loss is my gain.
*You don't own me.
~Don't make the same mistake he did. I work for you, but you don't own me.

Trask smirks knowingly.

TRASK
Believe me, I'm well aware.

PARKER
Just want to make sure you're not having second thoughts about our deal.

TRASK
No, come on. We're equal partners. We pay the crew, the costs, and the overhead. The rest is fifty fifty, you and me.

Leaning over the table heavily, Trask sighs wearily and raises his Scotch.

TRASK
We've got a good thing going here. Nobody fucks with you, which means nobody fucks with me.

An introspective beat.

TRASK
And hell, if this score is what I think it could be, you've got the deal of the century.

Parker nods her approval. Trask gestures to the Scotch.

TRASK
Now drink.

PARKER
*Drink the scotch.

Parker raises the glass.

TRASK
(butchering the phrase)
Guta sey... or whatever the fuck you people say.

PARKER
Close enough.

They down their drinks.
*I'll celebrate later.
~I'll toast you when I've got my fortune.

She pushes the drink toward him. Trask shrugs.

TRASK
Suit yourself. I'll keep it waiting for when you return.

Parker stands and leaves.

NOSTALGIAVILLE

Written by Andrew Auseon

LOGLINE

In this ten-chapter mystery, you play as TOM HOLLIDAY, an FBI special agent returning to his small Iowa hometown to bury his hotheaded father and reckon with the past. However, the visit isn't all personal—his dad, Eldon, was a longtime lawman and Sheriff of Polk County. It's been 20 years since Tom left town, fleeing a long list of drug charges and a reputation as the worst juvenile offender in Polk County history. But growing up changes people. So does time. Over the last 15 years, Tom has worked some of the FBI's trickiest undercover cases, bringing down criminal organizations from Baton Rouge to Providence, all in an effort to make amends for his past. Now, as the lead investigator in the murder of Sheriff Holliday, he must infiltrate the Heartland Mob, a local crime ring with strong ties to drug running, human trafficking, and murder-for-hire. Will Tom be able to gain the trust of his old friends and family members and find the killer, or will he slip back into bad habits and lose everything?

Nostalgiaville combines the small-town dynamics of *Justified*, the small-town organized crime of *Fargo*, and the season-long mystery of *True Detective*.

CHARACTERS

Tom Holliday (Player Character, Special Agent, Late 30s)

An FBI secret agent with a decade of high-stakes undercover work behind him, Tom Holliday is a man with a lot to atone for. After a reckless youth in rural Iowa, he ran away to the big city—Des Moines—and worked for several local street gangs before ending up in Fort Des Moines Correctional on a two-year sentence for second degree robbery. While incarcerated, Tom met a social worker who would visit him and other inmates, and the two became friends. Inspired to turn his life around, Tom earned a degree in criminology and was released early on good behavior; but he couldn't go home again, not with the mess he left behind. Tom and his father had an extremely contentious relationship, even before his mother died, and he needed a fresh start. With the help of new, well-connected friends, he applied to the FBI and spent several years as an analyst before undergoing law enforcement training to join the Criminal Investigations Division. He penetrated a handful of high-profile organizations that were a threat to national security, before he took some time off in an attempt to save his ailing marriage. Quick-thinking and pragmatic, Tom is known for skirting the line when investigating his targets, but his instincts have proven reliable in the field, and he is well regarded in the organization.

Who will YOUR Agent Holliday be? Condescending or empathetic to the locals? Rough or compassionate? When difficult situations arise, does she confront them head on or play things tactically, always searching for a smarter solution?

Dawn McBride (F, Police Captain, Late 30s)
The best thing that ever happened to Dawn McBride was when Tom Holliday left town. Like so many young people growing up in the economic and cultural wasteland of Cullen, she yearned for freedom, for control. Drugs. Crime. Sex. These provided her best chances of escape, and she had no better partner-in-crime than Tom Holliday, the police chief's rebellious son. But when Tom fled, Dawn found herself facing an uncertain future. The oldest of seven kids, Dawn had always played mother to her younger siblings; her own mother was a meth addict and a frequent resident of the Polk County Jail. When local law enforcement held a recruitment drive, Dawn applied as a joke, and because she needed money to support her brothers and sisters, but she soon discovered that she was a surprisingly good cop. She was vigilant, responsible, and tenacious, and she had a gift for hunting down trouble. She even found an unexpected mentor in Sheriff Holliday, who treated her with a glowing paternal pride. Now, ten years into her career and a captain in the Cullen Police Department, Dawn's survived some of the town's hardest times and come out stronger for it.

Will you try to convince Dawn that you've changed, or will you avoid letting romance cloud your judgment? Should Dawn be brought in on the investigation, or will it cloud your judgment and endanger the mission?

Carter King (M, Crime Boss, 40)
Probably the smartest person in all of Polk County, Carter King is a man with a foot in two worlds. A highly educated army veteran, he received his doctorate in philosophy from Rutgers and spent several summers interning for senators on Capitol Hill, before a two-year tour in Iraq; but he's also a small-town boy from Hanlon, Iowa, with a vast family, much of which is deeply rooted in local politics, finance, and religion. He's the prodigal son-come-home. Much to everyone's surprise, Carter returned to Cullen in the early 2000s and set up shop as the business manager for a real estate firm that he used as a front for drug production and protection scams. Eventually, he sought to expand his power in the region by partnering with the growing Heartland Mob based out of Indianapolis. He established an Iowa affiliate under the shell company of the Foundation Lutheran Church, a mega-church in Polk County. Despite his worldliness and penchant for cruelty, Carter believes himself to be a devout Christian and takes his faith seriously, allowing it to inform his warped moral code. In the last few years, he's warred with Sheriff Holliday, who sought to curtail the Heartland Mob's expansion.

Will you establish a rivalry with Carter, or will you respect his authority? Do you go after Carter directly, or do you try to turn his own people against him? Will you appeal to Carter's strict sense of Christian judgment and try to change him, or will you use his faith as a weakness?

Ricky B (M, Kid Brother, 27)

Ricky B is a fuck-up. Everybody knows it, except Ricky B. In his own mind, he's the next big Midwest gangster, a boy with big dreams in a country where big dreams come true—if you sell enough drugs, make enough money, and scare the right people. He was only ten when Tom skipped town, and he carried his brother's torch for years, even when the rest of Cullen came down on Tom as the scapegoat for all their troubles. It wasn't a shock to anyone when Ricky B, inspired by his brother's outsized reputation, joined Blackbird, the dangerous street gang that had been making inroads into rural Iowa in attempts to recruit disillusioned teenagers; after dropping out of school, he went to work full time as an enforcer for the Heartland Mob. It was the beginning of a long, and most unimpressive career as a low-level lackey. Ricky B wants nothing more than to win Carter King's respect and earn a seat at the leadership table, something that anyone who's met him knows will never happen. With Tom's return, Ricky B is suddenly faced with a confusing decision: does he continue to pine for Carter's approval, or does he return to idolizing his brother, whose plans and motives remain unclear?

Will you try to steer Ricky B away from the gangs and the mob, or will you use him for his close ties to the inner circle? Will you make up for being a terrible role model, or will you play the part to keep Ricky B from suspecting anything?

Lynette (F, Diner Manager, late 20s)

Lynette's one of the good ones. Or so everybody tells her. Ever since she was a kid, Lynette's been the town's unofficial baby sister, and later, as an adult, she became its sweet girl next door, the one you could rely on to volunteer at church or bring a pie to the fire station bake sale. Sweet, pretty, and much cleverer than she gets credit for, Lynette dabbled in a wild youth but found it too exhausting. She dated Ricky B Holliday for a few years but quickly realized that his ambitions didn't amount to much beyond selling pot to high schoolers. She graduated high school and took a job as a waitress at the local 24-hour family restaurant Hotdish, where she's now the owner and manager. But times have been hard for everyone, even Lynette, and she hasn't been immune from the corruption and temptation. Her squeaky clean image and sweet demeanor hide a darker side that yearns to reveal itself.

Will you succumb to Lynette's good-natured reckless allure and become her lover, or will you resist, not wanting to endanger her? Will you support her in her own dangerous bid for revenge against Carter? Will you use Lynette and Ricky B against each other?

Mama Jury (Kennel Owner, 60s)

For decades, the only reliable source of information and wisdom in Cullen was Mama Jury, the affable, but mercurial, local dog breeder. Mama owns and operates CountryTails Kennels, a small business that appeals to the handful of "new rich" McMansion dwellers scattered across Polk County. Despite her pleasant demeanor, folks know not to cross Mama. She's fostered a lucrative marijuana concern since the 1980s, and she employs a small group of thugs who, while not as sophisticated as the Heartland's crew, are adept at shattering the occasional

kneecap or windshield. In the past few years, Mama has seen her network dwindle at the hands of the Heartland's expansion

Will you befriend Mama and use her as a source of information, or will you steer clear, knowing that she's as likely to betray you as to help you? Will you ally with Mama against Carter, or will you use Mana as a pawn to gain Carter's trust.

The Rev (M, Pastor, mid 70s)
A classic fire-and-brimstone preacher who spent decades shepherding a small, defunct parish in Crocker, Iowa, the Rev is having a moment, due in part to the recent surge in evangelical fervor that's sweeping the Midwest. However, the real reason the Rev's become so popular, articulate, and savvy is Carter King, the man God sent to renew his purpose. Carter needed a clerical collar behind which to build his operation, and the Rev was a willing puppet. The past year has seen the church's membership and notoriety explode as a result of the Rev's hugely popular podcast, "Eyes on the Skies," which burst into the mainstream when it was referenced in a speech by the President. The Rev is taking it all in stride. He sees the success as a heavenly reward for all of his earthly suffering, payday for 50 years of shit.

Will you be able to manipulate the Rev as well as Carter, to convince him that you're not a threat? Will you appeal to his ego, or exploit his guilt? Will you out the Rev for what he is, or risk dashing the faiths of thousands who look to him for spiritual guidance?

Agent Flores (F, Special Agent, mid 40s)
Tom's boss, Cecilia Flores is the lead agent in the Southern District field office in Des Moines, the closest FBI location to Cullen. Confident and supportive, Flores sees a bright future for Tom, so long as he doesn't screw it up. She knows that assigning him to his father's murder is a gamble, especially in a town as unpredictable and dangerous as Cullen.

Will you tell Flores everything, or hide certain details if it means furthering the investigation? What if you commit a crime while undercover?

Delbert (M, Heavy, Late 30s)
Slow with a remark but quick on the trigger, "Del" is Carter King's primary bodyguard. A former high school football star and college dropout, Del looms at an imposing 6'5", 300 pounds, and he's been known to beat a man to death with a cinder block. He and Tom were pretty tight back in high school, and he's secretly pleased to see his old friend again, even if it means that he might have to kill him.

How can you win Delbert's trust away from Carter? Do you try to rebuild a bridge with someone so dangerous? Can you help Del escape the mob?

Eldon Holliday, *Deceased* (M, Sheriff, Late 60s)

No one denies that Eldon Holliday was a hard man—to know, to love, to live with—but it was his stubborn, rigid adherence to rules and norms that made him a great cop… and a lousy parent. A boomer clinging to the distant homogeneity and prosperity of the 1950s, he didn't tolerate laziness, lip, or disrespect, and he believed that the American dream (at least how he envisioned it) was achievable to anyone willing to work hard and pay their dues. Of course, Eldon's plans for an ordered and ideal life came crashing down when his wife was killed in a drunk driving accident, leaving him to raise two energetic boys just starting to reveal their wild streaks. He didn't tolerate it.

SETTING

Cullen (Iowa, USA)

Incorporated in 1880, the small town of Cullen has experienced a roller coaster of booms and busts in its 125 years. Most notably was a turbulent period during American prohibition, when Cullen competed with the city of Davenport as the primary source of illegal liquor production in Iowa. Also, the late 1920s saw an exponential increase in the production of farming and harvesting equipment, as agriculture in the Midwest and Great Plains exploded prior to the droughts of the Dust Bowl era; and by 1928, Cullen was home to two separate equipment manufacturers, American Share and Monax. After the collapse of agriculture in the Heartland during the 1930s, Cullen struggled to regain its footing during the latter half of the 20th century.

With a current population of 3,551, Cullen hopes to stay relevant in a rapidly changing economic and social landscape. Recently, the town, along with several other Polk County communities, has become the recipient of federal grants to assist in diversifying local economies including a broadband connectivity initiative. Unfortunately, few of the locals believe this government money will make a difference, having experienced the disappointing bust of a similar renewable resources program in the 2010s, which devastated the fragile economy. Hindering any development in the area has been the steady increase of organized crime radiating out from Des Moines to the north. This uptick in violence and criminal activity has created an atmosphere of fear in the surrounding towns, causing state and local law enforcement to begin a comprehensive crackdown.

Key Locations

Hotdish

The Cullen location of the popular family restaurant chain. A favorite of truckers and families passing through to somewhere else, Hotdish is managed (and often waitressed) by Lynette, one of Tom's acquaintances. He becomes a regular and often hangs out at the counter. Lynette is hoping to expand the restaurant and possibly add another location.

Rock Island (Station)

An old Rock Island Railroad station ran through Cullen until the line's waning days in the late 1970s. This section of the train ran through what's known as "the red line" because of the violence outside nearby Cullen during prohibition. Now a ruin, this condemned building is a known hangout of gang members and drug addicts.

The Dozer Yard

A graveyard for abandoned construction vehicles, where local companies kept their surplus, unpurchased machines when the market dropped. Since then, the lot has become a body drop for the Heartland Mob and others.

Foundation (FLC)

The fastest growing evangelical church in Iowa, Foundation Lutheran Church has shown unprecedented influence in the region surrounding Polk, Boone, and Jasper Counties including the capital city of Des Moines. The main chapel building, built in 2014, perches on the rim of the famous Cloud Crater, one of three ancient meteorite craters in Iowa; and as a result, the campus attracts tourists from around the world. The church's pastor hosts a weekly podcast, "Eyes on the Skies," that reaches an estimated 8 million listeners.

CountryTails Kennels

Mama Jury's successful family business of pet care, grooming, and boarding; her clientele is made up of mostly wealthy county families with pampered dogs. The kennels are also the known headquarters of the Jury Gang, a mid-level criminal operation that focuses its efforts in Poly County. Mama follows the family tradition of using their trained dogs for relaying messages and moving drugs and other illegal items.

THE MURDER OF SHERIFF HOLLIDAY

In a friendly town, Eldon Holliday had a lot of enemies, which is now a long list of suspects...

The **Heartland Mob** targeted him for his constant, and expanding investigations into their activities, which was beginning to inspire federal interest (evident in Tom's assignment to his father's murder case). Like Tom, **Ricky B** had a pretty sharp axe to grind when it came to his old man. Family life has never been easy in a town where the father was a harsh, disciplinary lawman and his two sons were notorious criminals; and according to the stories around town, the tension between Ricky B and the Sheriff may have finally come to a breaking point. Of course, **Mama Jury** also sits pretty high on the list of suspects, what with her years of activity in the local drugs, fencing, numbers, and fraud rackets. The Sheriff's successful attempts to increase law enforcement in the county couldn't have been good for business. The street gang

Blackbird, a local, adolescent evolution of some of the regional white nationalist groups, has also been known to butt heads with the Sheriff as they've grown in numbers and audacity.

In reality, Sheriff Holliday's murder came at the hands of Lynette, with whom he was having a romantic relationship. Lynette targeted the Sheriff when he began his campaign to crack down on organized crime in Polk County, seducing him and then using him for information and influence. When he discovered the truth about Lynette and their relationship, the Sheriff went to the FLC church to confront Carter, believing she was being coerced. Later, he found Lynette at Hotdish, where he became frustrated and violent. She killed him, and the Heartland Mob helped to move the body to the dozer yard, where it was found by authorities.

THE TWIST

Lynette, the "girl next door" and confidante to the player, is actually deeply involved in the crimes taking place in Cullen. As Carter King's silent partner, she's helping the mob to expand its reach and influence. However, when the Sheriff finds out and tries to convince her to change her ways, she kills him.

CHOICE TYPES

Dialogue
Lines spoken by the player character. Use quotations. CHOICE: "You're a good friend."

Intention
Expressing the intention of the choice. Plain text. CHOICE: Be Courageous.

Action
Physical actions taken by the player. Italics. CHOICE: *Punch him!*

CHOICE MECHANICS

Time
Limited time for the player to input a choice. A meter will visually show how long you have left, along with haptic pulses that increase in tempo. Additionally, timed choices can also be gated in that they are not active until X minutes go by. You can either make the other choice, pay to finish the timer, or wait.

Fate
Risky, chance-based choices that do not always succeed. However, if the result is negative, you can pay to secure a positive result.

Lock

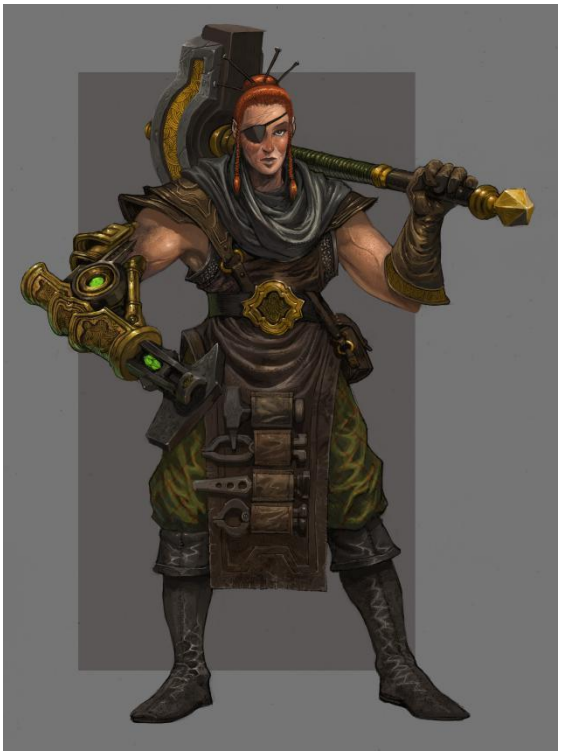
Certain choices will be locked based on previous choices/branches. The player can pay to unlock them.

Skald Atlas [skɔld ˈætləs]

Bio

Skald's life has been spent in a grand quest to learn all she can about the art of the forge, attempting to become the greatest weaponsmith that Amalur has ever seen. After a youth of servitude and forced labor, she wanted to become so uniquely skilled that no man or woman alive could claim to be her master. she was singular, and therefore powerful. she traveled from one end of Amalur to the other in a quest to forge the world's greatest weapon, apprenticing under the masters of every culture to hone her skills and further her study.

In recent months, Skald has holed up in the mountains, building a new forge and carving out a series of tunnels for the growing resistance. She uses her extensive knowledge of ancient magic to conceal and protect this new headquarters, hiding it from the eyes of her ever-watchful enemies. She's gathered a small group of fighters in preparation for an eventual assault on the occupied city. Always a rebel, Skald will lead the people in their fight to win back their homeland.



- **Race: Human (Varani)**
- **Accent: English**
- **Age: 50**
- **Traits: Wise, Cynical, Confident**

- She's been around a long time and experienced much, so **very little impresses or surprises her**.
- She **isn't afraid** to speak truth to power, and while she knows that the player is a godlike figure she isn't intimiated.
- She knows of a tragic fate awaiting the player, but she doesn't comment on it.
- She has a **gruff exterior but she is quite sensitive and kind** beneath the surface.

Samples

- "We go back, he and I. The Old wars. Another life. He could show you some scars."
- "You may be Fateless, but you still have much to learn."
- "Tragically, that's all you are. All you were ever meant to be. An avatar for those who are far more powerful."

Dungeon of the Ogre Lord, Day 27

Slurp. Slurp. Slurp. Slime grubs. They oozed across the walls. Ben stepped carefully, avoiding the skeletons, trying not to snap a rib cage or crush a skull. His Volcano Sword, which he called "Old Tootsie," hummed in his hands, giving off a comforting fresh-from-the-oven warmth. He needed it down here: twelve dungeons deep, sixteen tombs into the Dungeon of the Ogre Lord; this was where life grew coldest. Where fear wrapped you in its icy frozen burrito.

"Why have you come?" growled a voice. Ben listened hard, searching for the source.

"I can't let you escape," Ben said. "Not after what you did to me."

"I do what I please," the voice said. "No one dares defy me."

"But I had a life!" Ben shouted. "A cottage with a trophy room and everything. All the best armor. A promotional sword from that yogurt commercial. The whole town looked up to me."

"Ha! They were fools." The creature's cackle shredded the stillness of the throne room. "You offered them nothing but pain and heartbreak."

"I had great parties. We had freestyle rap contests."

"They thought your freestyle rapping sucked."

Ben shut his eyes and forced the fires of

rage into his belly. "You monster," he whispered to himself, remembering his sweet rhymes. He had pledged to spin only the sickest beats . . . and he had failed.

"You took everything from me!"

A chuckle. "And what will you do about it?"

Ben gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on his sword. This was the time to prove himself. So Sir Ben the Friendly, High Champion of Torr, Lord Warden of the Shallow Dumps, and Friend to the Orphans of Pez, stepped into the torchlight.

Ben and the Ogre Lord stood at opposite ends of the long throne room, a forest of sharp gray stalactites jutting down at them like a mouthful of crooked teeth. Jewels of every color and radiance littered the floor. Along with them, the bodies of the Ogre Lord's enemies, most of them wounded in the great campaign to breach the monster's lair. They included some of Ben's closest friends: Dorkus the Stumbling, Esmeralda, and the Wild Slicer. Now only two warriors remained. . . .

The corpse of Ben's beloved guide and squire, Turpentine, lay among the remains. The elf's beautiful little face stared up into the darkness. Perfect tiny ears. Those amazing cheekbones. Silently, Ben said a prayer to the Elvin gods on behalf of his adorable—and very dead—companion.

The Ogre Lord sneered. "I did not want to

hurt your friends, but you should have left them behind." Her lumpy orange head looked like a jack-o'-lantern several weeks after Halloween. "The elf in particular was quite handsome."

"That's one thing we can agree on," said Ben, raising his weapon. "And he wasn't *quite* handsome. He was *super* handsome."

With a low grumble, the Ogre Lord stepped down from the throne. Her muscles bulged. Her armor shone with blood and rust. "I do not wish to fight you," she said as she bared her fangs. "Not every struggle must end this way."

Ben took a mighty breath. "You're wrong," he said, staring down the end of his blade. "The battle must go on."

Defiantly, he pulled his +5 Cloak of Ferrets around him, and he felt a surge of power that can only come from doing the right thing. Or in this case from a cloak fashioned from the tails of a thousand cursed ferrets.

"For Turpentine!"

And he charged, a breeze blowing past him as he dashed across the tomb, sword raised in both hands. It was the stale funk of dungeon, the warm stink of victory.

Life with Biscuit

"Did you just call me an Ogre Lord?"

"Huh?"

A chair squeaked. "Ben? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

Outside in the nearest tree, a small bird chirped joyously, and somewhere far away on the recess field, a kickball *boinged*. Shouts and clapping. A potted plant on the principal's sunny windowsill died of thirst, inches from a full pitcher of water.

There was no Ogre Lord. This was not a dungeon throne room.

Across from Ben sat Mr. Sandusky, the principal of Sweet Air Middle School, and a man with far too many photos of his dog on his desk. It was like a shrine to a potbellied, bug-eyed pug named Biscuit—a name that Ben knew because Biscuit was usually photographed wearing expensive sweaters with his name on them.

"You looked far away," Mr. Sandusky said with a smile.

Ben blinked, taking in his surroundings. Real life, in all its boring sameness. Room B12, the principal's office. It was 3:15 p.m. on another Friday. "Yeah, sorry," he said, feeling a rush of color in his cheeks.

The kids outside shouted and laughed, and he'd never felt more alone.

"Tell me, Ben," said Mr. Sandusky, leaning forward with his elbows on the edge of his desk. "How are you doing?" A single strand of hair crossed from one side of his pale bald head to the other, like a crack in an eggshell. On one of his bookshelves sat a framed photo of Biscuit in a stroller. The principal seemed like a nice guy, but it was sometimes tough to take him seriously.

Ben would have preferred the Ogre Lord.

"It's been six months since you came to us," Mr. Sandusky said, "and I'd like to think you're settling in." His fake smile turned upside down. "But I've talked to your teachers, Ben, and they're worried about you. They say you don't pay any attention in class and don't talk to any of the other students in the halls. They say that you spend all your time doodling in your little notebooks."

Ben tried to explain. "When I get ideas, I have to write them down."

"What about making friends? How is that going?"

"I've already got friends," Ben said. "But they're back home. I'm sort of the leader, the one who keeps the group together. Well, I *was,* until we moved."

"Who's the leader now?" Mr. Sandusky asked.

"It's called a Quest Master," Ben said, "and the new Quest Master is my friend Big Barry."

"Why is he called that?"

"Because he's bigger than Regular Barry."

"I see."

Ben sighed. "I don't really need to make new friends here because we're not going to stay in Sweet Air."

Mr. Sandusky's eyebrows jumped. "Oh, you're not staying?"

"I have a feeling this whole move won't last very long," Ben said with a shake of his head. If he said it enough times, he might actually start to believe it.

"Well . . . ," Mr. Sandusky began, rubbing his hands together. "Six months is a long time."

"Maybe. But why make new friends when I've got a great group back home?"

"Okay. That's fair. Do you still see them a lot?"

Glancing away, Ben felt his face flush. "Not a lot. Not right now. I mean, it's been a while since we've had a chance to hang out, but I'm seeing them tonight, actually. They promised."

"Tell me," Mr. Sandusky said. "When you and your friends get together, what do you do for fun?"

"Games, role-playing games, mostly."

"A role-playing game. Is that like playing pretend? Like, with imaginary friends?"

Ben grumbled. "No. I'm talking about *Kingdoms of Forever,* the fantasy game. It was created a long time ago, like, in the nineteen-somethings. It's pretty famous. You play with a group of friends. Um, *not* imaginary ones. The real kind."

"And you play *Kingdoms of Forever* with them?"

"I used to, back home," Ben said, flinching at the words *back home,* which he found himself saying much too often.

"We played every week. They were my party. That's what they call the group you adventure with—a party."

"Neato. Parties are fun."

"Once, my friend Wanda's character got turned into seaweed."

"Exciting!" Mr. Sandusky said, but in that voice adults use when they're making you feel good about something they think is a waste of time. "Maybe you could meet some kids here who play? Start a new game group?"

Ben shook his head. "I've already got a party. We call ourselves the Five of Legend." Leaning over, he unzipped his backpack and dug inside. "But until I go back home, I've been working on making my own game, as practice."

"You're *making* a game?" Mr. Sandusky asked, brightening. "Wow. That's so cool. Does it have a name?"

"Not yet." Ben pulled a large notebook out of his backpack and set it on his lap, trying to keep it balanced, as stray scraps of paper fluttered to the office floor. A shooting star was branded into the fake-leather cover.

Mr. Sandusky's eyes widened. "Wow. What's all that?"

Ben grinned. The notebook had been a gift from his dad, and he carried it with him everywhere. Last time he'd checked, he'd filled 541 of its 600 pages. Inside, he kept scattered notes on his new fantasy game, all the ideas he'd been recording since last summer: maps; monster descriptions; long, cool character backstories; complex family trees; and, most important, all the rules of how to play. It was more than a story, it was a whole world, and it was the only place where he felt in control.

"I can see that you're passionate about this," Mr. Sandusky

said, scrunching up his face so that he bore a remarkable resemblance to Biscuit. "But you can't work on your game in class, and you can't ignore your teachers. You won't make any friends if you avoid the other students."

"I'm not avoiding—"

Smiling, Mr. Sandusky leaned over his desk. "Listen. I know you're new here, and I know we don't know each other that well. But I can see that you're a smart kid. *Very* smart. You've got so much potential. How can we help you learn if you're always distracted, always somewhere else in your head? You can't succeed in life if you don't take it seriously sometimes, if you don't set goals for yourself."

Ben had been in enough of these meetings to know what to expect. Especially when the principal, teacher, or guidance counselor started pulling out words like *potential* and *goals.* He was twelve. His goals should be playing laser tag with Wanda and Dee Dee, or brainstorming the best way to melt an Ice Dwarf, or scavenging for turkeys online with strangers in *Smash Royale.* He should enjoy life, like Biscuit in his little stroller.

"Can I go home now?" he asked. "It's Friday."

"Got some big Friday plans?" Mr. Sandusky asked.

"I'm going to the Fantasy Fandom Convention downtown. My friends are supposed to meet me. We do it every year." He didn't mention that Wanda, Dee Dee, Big Barry, and the Pooch hadn't been returning his texts, or if they had, the responses always seemed to be one-word bursts, like "sweet," "vibe," or "chill," and nothing important.

Although his recent text messages had gone unanswered, Ben wasn't worried. He and his friends had attended every annual Fan Fan Con since their first trip back in fourth grade,

for Wanda's birthday, when the movie series Toxic Freaks had turned the entire convention floor into a working sewer system. The convention started as Ben's idea, something special he and his father had done together every spring since he was a little kid, back when they'd been a family.

Fan Fan Con was the Midwest's largest gathering of fantasy fiction and gaming enthusiasts, founded in 1982, where the keynote speakers were William Dalton and J. S. Profit, the creators of legendary role-playing game *Kingdoms of Forever*. Ben would have given anything to attend that first convention, but it was held thirty years before he was even born, so unless somebody invented a time machine, he'd have to settle for the current version, which was still his favorite day of the year.

Mr. Sandusky stood up. "Good for you, Ben. I hope it's fun. But do me a favor and try not to be back here again next week. All right?"

"I'll try," Ben said.

They shook hands for some reason, like they'd been having a business lunch. The principal's hand felt like a chicken thigh from the grocery store—soft and cold, pressed tight against the plastic package.

Outside, Ben took a deep breath, relieved to have once again survived a duel with the principal of Sweet Air Middle School. A few seconds later, the final bell rang and doors flew open, spilling rowdy students into the empty hallway. Ben made straight for the exit, brain starting to rev up again, bursting with ideas for his notebook: spells (Fog of the Mind-Bender, Dark Malarkey), monsters (Knot of Tentacles), and

magical items (Hover Pants), all of them inspired by his daydreaming.

He caught the bus at the corner by the cell phone store, taking the F40, which started in the outer suburbs and ended in the center of downtown. After his parents' divorce, Ben and his mom had moved to Sweet Air, a small town twenty miles outside the city. Sweet Air's claim to fame was Gas Monster™, a popular medicine that helped with stomachaches . . . and turned your poop white.

The bus was mostly empty. An old lady with a goldfish in a clear plastic bag sat near the front, across from a pair of guys outfitted in green cloaks and pointy ears, headed to Fan Fan Con. Far back in the last row of the bus lounged a teenage girl with purple hair that fell in waves and curls down her back, another fangirl on her way to the convention. Nobody paid Ben any attention at all.

He checked his phone: 3:48. Plenty of time. His last text still glowed in the ongoing chat between him, DD, WANDA, BBARRY, and DE POOCH.

C YA AT THE SPOT. FANFANCON!
DON B LATE.

Opening his notebook, Ben settled down in his seat and began to draw the first thing that came to mind, and, as always, the rest of the world seemed to melt away.