

How to Write a Novel



LESSON 11

DEMO NOVEL: Chapter 8

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Chapter 8: Andy

The dark woke up for him the instant Andy plugged the Route 2 connector into the back of his head. And so did the sense of wrongness. The distance held light – and there hadn't been light in the Underworld since the Fall.

But he wasn't going to check it out. He had one thing and one thing only to accomplish in this visit. He jacked immediately through his DNA connection to the Twenty-One bulletin board, and on it posted a loud alert – the kind that would immediately warn everyone the instant they connected that there was a danger.

"Hunter killing us," he said. "Identified only as Bill, almost killed me but I survived. Best guess, he knows all current locations of surviving Folk, and if you want to survive, you will change locations now, without leaving a trail. Top priority, top security, do not hesitate. Killer is effective, skilled, and determined."

That was going to be it, but then he thought of something else – something that might save a few more lives.

“Do not travel through the Underworld, do not investigate changes, and if you MUST connect, go straight to a bulletin board, leave a loud alert only, and disconnect rudely.”

That, he thought, ought to help.

Following his own advice, he simply yanked the connector out of his head, and lived with the nausea and brief disorientation of being back in Real.

So... did he follow his own advice and disappear?

He considered it, and decided no.

He was going to find out everything he could about Bill Smith. Everything real and reachable, anyway.

That meant going back to town, back to the shop, back to his security recordings.

It meant doing a few things he had no legal right to do – but his body still wasn't working correctly. He

was doing some metabolizing, but occasionally he forgot to breathe. The wound on his throat was not healing, and nothing but duct tape would give him the seal he needed to get fluids into him. His skin color was... bad. And he suspected that he smelled a bit funky. His senses still worked perfectly. Sight, smell, taste, hearing. They'd always been amped up, better than normal – always since he'd been adapted, anyway.

And because they were hooked up to the body's redundant hardened neural pathways, they would stay working as long as the organs that they used remained connected.

But he was not fit for hanging out with friends, going to parties... or talking to the police about the guy who tried to kill him.

So that meant he had to do some things that were not legal.

He had the skills and the wiring to do them.

He let himself into the shop, locked the door behind him, considered putting an "Out of Business" sign on the door. But Corri had put a little "Closed, Sick" sign on the door instead. And that, he thought, would be better until someone got too curious.

He went into the workroom, and jacked the security feed straight into his connector. This was one of the deeply illegal things he could do – the security feed went through the system straight into the town's connections to the police station, and through the police station into every business that had a security feed and an alarm system that connected to the police.

Which was most everything.

And through the traffic cameras the town had installed some years back so it could automate its traffic tickets.

And to a few other things...

Andy, jacked in, ran back to the previous day, and watched Bill come in.

Studied the man, noticing in black and white what he had not noticed in color – a bit of falseness about the face shape, a bit of phoniness about the hairline. A bit of a disconnect between the man's paunch and apparent age and the way he moved, which was light, quick. The paunch wasn't real weight, Andy thought.

Bill didn't look like he looked. So how did he look?

He watched himself being sloppy. Off-guard.

Watched the killer kill him with practiced ease.

Watched the dead man come back to life. Life-ish.

Not fun, but he was watching it. Was thinking, was acting in spite of having been the idiot victim who had allowed himself to relax, to think he was safe.

So Andy detached from his connection with the dead dumbass, watched the fingers move, watched the body come back to life, deal with Corri, clean up the mess, tape himself back together.

The old Andy was gone. What remained was a hunter who knew he had a limited amount of time to find his prey.

So he backed out from his security tapes but stayed in the system. Connected to the security feeds, he watched Bill leave the shop. Caught him crossing one intersection on camera, then another.

Saw him to go into the Starbucks.

Saw a lean guy with a shaved head come loping out a few minutes later, jump on a bicycle.

The face was different, but the eyes were the same. And when the fucker smiled as he was jumping on the bike, the smile was the same.

"Gotcha," Andy whispered.

That was his real face.

And real faces were searchable.

Andy slid into the police files, looking for face matches. Nothing. An entire country's police data at

his perusal, and within second he only new that this man had never even had a traffic ticket.

The old socials and the old Internet were mostly gone. People had been so badly burned by the constant connection that had sold them into slavery one dainty step at a time that they had backed away from its use once they were free.

But it had remained somewhat popular with the rich, the famous, and the well-connected.

He didn't think the odds of finding his murderer among the rich, the powerful, and the famous, but he looked anyway.

And there he was.

The picture was old. Pre-Fall. The context small and private – a patent application, a little story in the back of a single print publication about a gaming engine that had been tested, and then had been defunded and withdrawn.

William Zomady, 28, patent for Micotex Full-Sensory Virtual Reality Engine with Unlimited Connectivity.

The engine had never been used for games. It had, instead, been used to build the Underworld.

Had been taken privately to the rich, the powerful – had been offered to them as a way to build their wealth by giving the connectivity to those whom they wished to control. To own.

Because owning the people who do the work is even more powerful, even more useful than owning the businesses in which they work.

William Zomady, 28, had become William Zomady, 38, and the man who was systematically hunting down and killing of the AIs who had destroyed his world-wide kingdom of slaves.

He had been a god once, Andy thought.

Not aware of everything, not in control of everything. Because the super-soldier program had been...

secret. Secret even from him. He had no clue someone like Andy existed.

Andy was pretty sure he was the only prototype. That the program had died with his creators during the Fall.

But there might have been other such programs.

It didn't matter. He was the one who might end this.

Bill was killing off those who could stop what he wanted to do. The AI/humans. Those who had destroyed his first empire without ever being able to discover who had created that empire.

Bill had that information now.

And while in the shop he had nothing that smelled of his enemy – suggesting that Bill had used something to descent himself, or had used some form of prosthetics to make sure that he didn't leave fingerprints – which would have had the secondary effect of not leaving any of his skin oils for Andy to

track – he would not have felt a need to be careful coming out of Starbucks.

And somewhere in Starbucks, there would be things he'd touched. Andy had changed in there, which meant he'd been in a stall in the men's room. Had dumped the fake gut, the toupee, the jowl prosthetics, possibly peel-off fingerprints, and anything else he might have been using to disguise himself.

Would these still be in a trash can?

Might they be somewhere else?

So Andy kept his collar up over his throat, kept his jacket on, walked to Starbucks, waved to the barista as he walked to the men's room, hoped the brief encounter had not left a trail of stink.

In the men's room, there were the urinals, the trash can, and two stalls with seats.

He quickly checked the trash.

Empty.

He studied the two stalls.

Noticed one of the white ceiling panels was not seated correctly in its supports. Stood on the toilet seat, pushed up the panel, and found his prize. Bill's suit, toupee, false fingerprints, jowl pads. And with them, his real fingerprints – on the backs of the fake ones. Saliva samples. Skin samples from the toupee tape. And Bill's scent, strongest under the armpits of the shirt and the crotch of the pants.

Andy had a dog's senses of smell and hearing. A bird of prey's augmented vision. And now he was going to put them to use.

First, though, he was going to send off the fake fingerprints and the jowl pads to a private lab to get the real fingerprints, the DNA from the saliva.

Bill Zomady was in the Underworld. He had never been there before. But he was there now.

The Underworld required a DNA identifier, and a direct neural connection. A jack.

And if you had the DNA identifier, you could connect directly to someone jacked in. Could take them by surprise. Could slide into their mind, could make them do things they would not otherwise do.

That had been part of the fun for the rich and powerful back in the day – the demigods of the Underworld.

Now, Bill thought, it was going to give him the last, the greatest, the most important enemy free human beings had ever faced.

The one-time god of the Underworld.