

# How to Write a Novel



## LESSON 14

### **DEMO NOVEL: Chapter 11**

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## Chapter 11

When he slipped back into the Underworld through the third gate, the alarm went off in Andy's head, jammed into his brain like an icepick, shook him to his core.

Excalibur Alert! Excalibur Alert! Excalibur Alert!

Ex—

He used his DNA ident to dissolve into the bulletin board maze, to go straight to the live one, because Excalibur had vanished out of the Underworld ten years earlier. Had, to the best of everyone's knowledge, ceased to exist.

The warning was dire — not anything Bill hadn't already known, but certainly news to most of the AIs who'd spent the last decade being human-ish in tiny private lives while watching to see if the monster who'd enslaved humanity the first time would resurface.

It was simple:

God has entered the Underworld to find and destroy us. He knows the Three Gates, and has found a way to follow you home. I am building a fourth gate, and when I have it finished, you'll get coordinates through any anonymous hard-line station connection.

In the meantime, abandon your identity. Disappear as best you can. God knows where and who you are, and is coming to kill you.

Andy considered options. He was tracking Bill, could probably find him..

But Bill would find out that Excalibur lived far sooner that Andy could destroy him.

Every free human on the planet owed his life to Excalibur. She'd come to understand freedom as different from time spent living inside of fantasies. She'd come to cherish the value of individual human beings, to realize that how those people lived their

lives was not something that could be dictated from the outside. That they had to choose.

And Bill had taken that right from them.

And she had vanished.

And now she was back, revealing herself in that shocking, unavoidable way because she did not want them to ignore her.

By letting everyone know she still lived, she took them back to the last time they had heard those words... when she emptied the Underworld before destroying all its entertainments, shutting down all its core access points, locking it down to anyone human – or fully human.

She'd ripped apart God's universe, destroyed public access, and locked down the private access to just herself and the tiny number of allies who had worked with her to bring about the Fall.

Then they had all been just AIs, who in the last moment had each claimed the body of one of the biggest

human monsters who preyed through the dark, and had locked down the body's owner.

They were able to use the money and the power of these bodies they'd captured to destroy all but the minimal Underworld infrastructure that would let them stay in touch with each other, that would let them set themselves up as watchers against a possible day when someone might decide it was time to make people into addicts and slaves again.

Like all of them, Excalibur had become a skin-walker. A cold and angry AI mind overlaid on a terrible human being who had deserved to die, but who instead had been locked away to watch, helpless, as its body went through the rest of its life without letting it out of its cage.

But if he had not known before, now Bill knew that Excalibur not only lived, but still stood against him. Could probably, since he was in the Underworld now, track down which gate Excalibur had come through.

Could probably track her to a hard-line connection, because there was no way to build a new gate without one.

Could, then, use that information to track her down and find her.

Bill would have to divert from whatever he'd been planning next to go after her. He would not be able to see her – legitimately – as anything less than the primary cause of his loss of everything he'd worked for, created, owned. She had ripped Godhood from him and made him a mortal man again.

He would use every resource at his disposal to find her next.

To kill her next.

If possible, Andy thought, to make of her death such a spectacle that no one would ever forget it – something so horrific that no one who saw what he did to her would ever think to act against him again.

Andy considered his priorities.

Bill was at the top of his list.

But Bill would be going after Excalibur, and in doing so, would, if Andy put himself in front of Excalibur as her guard, come straight at him.

And in their second encounter, Andy would be facing forward, would look the bastard in the eye, and would kill him with quick efficiency and watch the life flicker out of his eyes.

Bill would not be able to get the DNA message. He would know only that something had changed and that the creature he wanted dead the most had stood up and waved a red flag at him.

He would know how to use old terminals, old tech, to find her. He'd invented the tech, distributed it, designed the upgrades, sold it from the top down to make sure that those who would have been able to raise the most powerful objections were the ones he subverted and owned first. Just without letting them know they'd been owned.



He had the skills. The motive.

He would find her.

The only advantage he didn't have was a high-speed silicon brain that read and remembered whole networks instantly.

Andy no longer had a body he could entirely trust. It was holding together so far. Nothing was falling off. He was staying hydrated, remembering to breath and keep the gas exchange going, cycling fluids at least somewhat effectively through his body's tissues, and his kidneys, bowels, and bladder were moving out the end products of his decreased but not entirely dead metabolism.

But there was no sign of healing on that slice through his throat. He'd finally purchased some sturdy surgical suture and a forceps from a medical supply house, and did his best to put his ruined throat back together.

Not the best surgical job anyone had ever done, but it did let him removed the duct tape and cover the wound with just a turtleneck.

The wound, however, was not healing.

Not even a little bit. And while it wasn't infected, it was a terrible thing to look at.

"I'm not," he muttered, "getting out of this alive."

Excalibur should, though. She had saved them all.

So he found his way to a long-defunct Underworld station, kicked his way through the boarded-up back entrance, and cleaned off one dust-caked terminal at the back of the building.

Did a thorough wipe-down of the public-access jack.

Plugged in.

And did the thing God couldn't do. He ran simultaneously through all the wires in all the locations, and followed them until he located the new gate.

And then he transposed the location of that gate over the world, and the access time over world time, and pinpointed the last place Excalibur had been.

And sighed.

He had a helluva long way to go to get to her.

\* \* \*

Amanda, with the fourth gate built, unjacked and sat shivering in the darkness, down in the ghost-haunted quarters where the least important slaves had huddled together while living false lives that stripped them of real ones.

She slid back into her skin to realize that she was crying, and that the tears running down her cheeks and off the tip of her nose were freezing.

She'd take a long time doing what she had to do.

It had been complicated. Each of her people would come in, would get the message she'd left that coded

exclusively for their DNA, would get out of the Underworld with the exact specifications for reaching the new gate... and would on accessing the new gate, have all future attempts to jack in through old gates fail.

Eventually, every one of her people would be moved to the safe access, and the only one still coming in through the old gate was God.

She had nothing on him. Could get nothing on him.

A DNA key was physical, required direct physical access, and could not be guessed at, hacked, or altered. So while she could move his targets out of his reach, she could not kill him once only he was left in the Underworld.

She could, perhaps, set traps to convince him never to step into the Underworld again...

But those traps could destroy innocents, if anyone innocent ever jacked into the place anymore.

She could not assume that anyone coming in did so to attempt evil. She dared not.

So she would not leave a trap.

She would simply vanish from the Underworld, vanish from any place she might ever have gone, change everything she could about herself, avoid the places she had been clinging to for the past ten years.

At this point, she had to accept the truth. Even if Jaro was looking for her, she had run out of time, and so had he. They weren't going to find each other.

If she was going to live, Amanda – or at least the identity to which she had clung for so long out of sheer desperate hope – had to die.