

How to Write a Novel



LESSON 18

DEMO NOVEL: Chapter 15

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Chapter 15: Bill

He heard the news. It came in with the southbound Tanner-Dreyfuss Caravan, a thrilled story told word-of-mouth from those who'd heard it live. There'd been runners, of course and the gunner crews that helped them get from civilized point to civilized point.

And down in the northern part of Florida, in the walled Haxbro Station that was all that remained of Tallahassee, the word came with a burst of fireworks half an hour before the runners reached the gates and gave the password.

Bill was there to meet them when they arrived, just one of an anxious crew of transients waiting for news, hoping that something in the world had gotten better rather than worse.

He helped the gunners change out their tires, wrap them in new chains, helped swap out damaged shield plating for new.

But the northern crew, the Zarby Runners, had gone fast enough and quiet enough that most of the wildlings and cannibals along the path had not seen them until they were receding taillights.

Arriving at twilight, only minutes after the red and blue fireworks, the crew was oddly happy, elated, chatty and bouncy.

It was, Bill thought, disturbing. The end of civilization had not left many folks with anything to cheer – something Bill thought would give him a leg up when he wiped out the last of his enemies and gave those who survived passage back into his new and improved Underworld.

“Need a hand there,” he asked one of the runners who was swinging down from the top gunner mount on the lead vehicle.

“Got it,” the man said, “but I and mine could stand some food if you have any. We have news, and more news, and all of it astonishing. But we’ve been running south

for three days, and we have not had bite or bath since we left."

Behind Bill, the head man of Haxbro Station said, "Friend, you know we're good for both. But you say you have something astonishing to tell us – and we've had enough of astonishment in the last two years. What we could stand is some peace, some safety, a bit of the good of civilization."

"This is all of that," the gunner said. "This is the impossible made real, and joy ripped and tattered made whole. And we won't even wait to sleep before we tell all. Just, mercy, man. Food, water, and a wipe-down to get the road off us all."

The folks of Haxbro scurried, and there were local-grown fresh oranges and tomatoes on the sideboard in the general dining hall, along with good clean water, some local-brew beer, and churned butter with smoked, dried chicken jerky set in front of them by the time the runners were cleaned off and seated.

They ate, with the big folks in the settlement hovering around them, waiting at the long table for their news.

And the runners were good as their word. One gave a part of the story while the others ate, while the next took it up as soon as the first took a bit, and they went around their circle, one talking while three ate and drank, moving fast between them. This wasn't the first time they'd told the story on their run south, and it wouldn't be the last.

"The Goddess of the Underworld survives," the first man said. "She put out a call along the trails, through channels. She's proved herself, and proved she can still walk the paths beneath the world, and can still craft them through the darkness to travel wherever she chooses."

The second said, "So she is calling her people to come. She saved us all, and now a man is hunting her, and she knows him as her creator, the old god of the

Underworld, but just a man all the same. She says he's hunting down her kind – the people who were melded with machines, the ones who discovered freedom and broke the Underworld to end our enslavement."

The third said, "And now the one she says called himself God is coming to kill her so he can capture all who remain alive. So he can destroy us all. She says she's caught glimpses of him walking through the Underworld, trying to lure her kind in. She says he's tracking them to the places where they found homes, among the people they saved, and killing them one by one."

The fourth was about two chews late on picking up his story. Bill watched the gaunt young man, hoping he would choke on the dry jerky, but the runner just took an extra swig of his warm beer and said, "So the Goddess of the Underworld is putting out a call, for armed men and armed women, for those willing to hunt down the man who broke our world and our lives, who

cursed us with cannibals and the mad creatures who think themselves zombies, but who eat folk just like the cannibals. And, she says, to bring back the world where free folk could walk safely on streets without walls, could live safely in homes without bars on the doors and windows, who could raise children without fear that they would be some monster's meal."

And the story went back to the first.

"You are called," he said. "Her name is Amanda, and caravans are forming from each town we and the other runners pass through. You are called if you are of sound body and sound mind, if you are between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, if you are brave and have a skill that will help her hunt down the petty human bastard who tried to own us and destroyed the world."

Bill thought, You broke my world, you vile bitch.

But he said nothing. He did not know precisely where she was. Not yet.

And he was far on the wrong side of twenty-five, and no one would think him even close to the mark.

So he would not be invited to join her protectors. Clever of her, he thought.

She knew he had been in his late twenties when he built the Underworld software.

She knew that he had to be in his late thirties or early forties, though she had never asked his age, and he had never offered that information.

To her, he was and would always be God, her creator.

To him, she was going to become meat on the slab.

Over the voices of young men volunteering to go to the aid of the woman who'd freed them all, he said, "They should have a chronicler with them."

The young men volunteering and the old men on the sidelines all looked up, stared at him with incredulous expressions.

"History is written by those who are there," Bill said softly, "and back in the world, I was a writer of some renown. A writer of histories, skilled in documentation, in getting the names of heroes right, of being in the right place to see their acts of heroism and record them."

"This isn't going to be a trip for dead weight," one of the runners said, and Bill memorized his face. His voice. The set of his shoulders, the color of his eyes and hair. He thought he and the mouthy runner would meet in some dark place on their path ahead, and the runner would have to start talking out the hole in his throat.

The thought made him smile. "I know my way around a gun and a knife, and can do both patrolling and hand-to-hand fighting. I won't be dead weight, friend. I'll write during breaks, making sure I get your names, get your actions, leave you the heroes who will go down in memory as those who brought back the world we all love.

"Because here's the thing you have to remember. Stories told from memory are only as good as the worst memory that hears them. Stories on paper last for hundreds or thousands of years. And no matter how brave those other runners are, or how courageous their volunteers are, when it comes down to history, and to what lives and what falls to dust, the men who will become immortals are the ones who have a writer with them."

The young men looked at each other.

They would be well-read. It was one of the hallmarks of this dreadful new age. Without his entertainment, older forms of amusement came back to life. Sex and eating and the brewing of spirits, of course... but also reading the old books left behind, and discovering from them how to survive, and in some instances how to thrive.

Bill was grateful for that inasmuch as it meant caravans brought food and trade goods, and runners brought news.

But he hated every one of the bastards who was learning to think from histories, novels, and essays.

They were grinning at him, though.

Looking at each other, the four of them and the volunteers, and laughing and nodding.

"We'll be in the history books," they told each other. "When the books come back, when we own the world again, when the cannibals and the other horrors are all gone, we'll be the ones who live on in memory. Because with us, we'll have a writer."

And the first runner said, "You can come with us. We still have to run down the last road to the place where the last of the bridges collapsed. We have a couple hundred miles left to cover, and we have three main places yet to contact, and three more groups of

volunteers to gather up. These folks will wait for our return trip, but you can start traveling with us now."

And because he was not a fool, he smiled and nodded and said, "It'll take me a bit to gather my back and my journals and pens. And pencils. You'll wait for me an hour or two."

All four of them chuckled. "We'll wait for you until we come back this way, old man," the lead speaker said. "But if you come with us, you'll be a grand bit of extra we can add to sweeten the pot for the volunteers farthest down the peninsula. You'll be the promise that they'll have the chance to win eternal fame."

Bill smiled. "I'll go with you boys. Give me the chance to gather my kit."