

How to Write a Novel



LESSON 19

DEMO NOVEL: Interstitial Chapter

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Chapter 14 Interstitial: Jaro

"Cannibals," Jaro said thoughtfully.

"K45 specifically said they had news that the caravan they'd been anticipating. That they'd funded the caravan to run north for supplies, that those supplies were coming in, but that the Caravan was hit by cannibals. She specified cannibals.

"Anyone go up that far north before?"

"Not from North Carolinas. But they were hoping that Ohio had some areas that were safe – a lot of the state was open countryside. They thought maybe they could expand their trade route."

Jaro looked at the ground. The Binkley Caravan's trucks were parked in a double circle, the caravaners were in the middle, and the night-shift gunners were in their emplacements on the tops of the trucks. They were running dark at the moment, but they had a few spotlights that they could light up if the gunners heard anything wrong.

"They'd heard from them all safe in [TC- town north of Marietta], and had news they would be in [TC- town south of the Marietta Williamstown bridge] and when they didn't show up, [TC- town#2] send out search parties.

"And found what was left of the caravaners on the south side of the Williamstown bridge."

"What was left?" Jaro asked.

"Neat stacks of bones, cooking pits where the caravaners had been roasted, and a giant spoon and a giant fork stuck into the ground next to the lead truck."

One of the women sitting around the camp fire said, "Giant spoon and fork?"

"Five feet tall," Toby said.

She made a little face. "Did the searchers say what they were made of?"

Toby shrugged. "They said wood, carved with creepy semi-human figures on them... but what does that matter?"

She said, "I got a set of those as a wedding present," she said. "Back in the day, you know? Had them hanging on the wall of my kitchen."

Several of the other women around the circle nodded.

The men gave each other looks, and Jaro asked, "Why?"

She said, "For good luck. That's — it was a standard wedding present. A fork and spoon hanging on the wall in the kitchen meant good eating."

Jaro said, "Apparently it still does." And shuddered.

Binkley sat staring into the flames of the little cookfire. "Cannibals. With giant wooden eating utensils. You don't supposed they actually.. used them?"

But Jaro was shaking his head. "This reeks to me of group marking, or of claiming a trophy. Or... There's something very strange about the sign of the spoon and

fork. If we can survive the crossing, we need to find out what's going on."

"I think I remember something about spoons and forks. Giant kitchen utensils. Something that folks in the Underworld were doing...?"

The caravaners taking their meal break all leaned in. And the elder Binkley said, "There were a lot of new things starting up in the Underworld right before the fall. Most of them didn't interest me at all, because I was only there because it was mandatory to spend one night a week socializing."

Most of the others nodded. They already knew they'd been the oddballs of the Underworld. Discovering each other as they traveled out of California, they'd all come to realized they had common histories.

But what they had in common meant none of them were experts on what had been in the Underworld when it came crashing down.

"We have to capture one or more of the cannibals alive," Jaro said. "We have to question him, find out why they're eating people."

"We have to survive," Binkley said, "and do it while not getting eaten. I have never had a desire to see the inside of someone else's stomach as a visitor passing through. And I think that needs to be our focus."

"Survival, first," Jaro nodded. "But if we don't know why they've gone cannibal, we don't know if there's something we can do to fix that, or stop it. Because... really? Where does cooking and eating your next door neighbor become something that looks like fun."

There were dry chuckles all around the circle, and one of the women said, "If I could have gotten away with it, I would have been tempted. My upstairs neighbors boomed their stereo at all hours of the night so loud it shook our ceiling, and the police wouldn't

come into the neighborhood. Things had gotten awful at that point. Law enforcement was being targeted by the neighborhood gangs, and a little cannibalism to put the fear of God into the hoodlum neighbors would have been wonderful."

There were a few appreciative laughs, but some folks had to sleep and others had to take watch, and yet others had to cook the food for the next shift. So they ate in silence after that.

But Jaro, Binkley the Elder, and some of the gunners spent the next hour planning out their bridge-crossing strategy, and how they would gather up anything from the previous caravan that might still be on the trucks.

* * *

When Jaro woke, it was just before dawn, and he felt good until he remembered what was coming.

He heading out into crisp air, to thick, tall grass thick with dew and the pleasant smell of a late-summer

dawn that was different than anything he'd known in California. Different plants, different animals making different sounds.

The houses that fronted the road and those built on the bluff overlooking the river were all abandoned. Aside from broken windows and kicked-open doors, they still looked like they might be habitable with a bit of fixing up.

But the people who'd lived in them, like most of the people in bigger cities and towns everywhere, were gone.

All the way across the north, they'd found that towns under populations of 3000 people had mostly survived, had mostly built their walls and set up their sentries and brought out their guns and defended their people.

Places with signs that noted they populations of about ten thousand or under were hit or miss. Some had gotten their walls built, their sentries set up. Some

had been decent enough places, trying to hang on to civilization.

Some had become slave camps where the few who'd managed to claw their way to the top had set themselves up as petty kings. Thug governments were always nightmares, but the Caravan soon learned how to avoid those places.

The demand for a tithe of what they were carrying was always a tip-off.

Some of those bigger places had fallen prey to looting, pillage, slaughter... and the survivors had taken to looting such travelers as dared the roads.

The Binkley Caravan had learned to find a round around those places, too, rather than to try to travel through or to negotiate with small, dangerous tyrants.

Small cities were almost always nightmares, but they were the places that still had working bridges.

Big cities...

The Binkley Caravan had planned its entire route to avoid those.

Not everyone who'd lived in them was dead... but those who had survived and who dared to travel within the streets of their domain were deadly.

After a quick run through their battle plan, the Binkley Caravan's gunners, ground fighters, and spotters all deployed. The Caravan was going to attempt to run at top speed through the point where the cannibals had been reported, but spotters were going to be watching for traps, and if everyone had to stop, vehicles would circle up, armed mothers and their small children would stay in the center, while gunners atop the trucks and ground fighters outside the doubled circle took the fight to the enemy.

They rode in near silence. No chatter between the trucks, all radios open, gunners and spotters atop the vehicles reporting front and back position all-clears.

The ran fast – but then they got the call they'd dreaded.

“Road out, roadblock ahead, dug ditch, big earth pile behind it. Movement spotted east and west of the road. First targets acquired. Do we fire?”

“Hold fire,” Binkley said. “They might be innocent – folks trying to keep out trouble, and not knowing if we're trouble. Give them the benefit of the doubt until we see what they do.”

They ran another minute, and then the rear spotter said, “Movement behind us, got about twenty men with knives and spears, and a woman carrying a giant knife and fork.”

“Shoot the ones with weapons,” Binkley said. “We'll try to capture the woman alive.”

And all hell broke out.

The cannibals swarmed – they were all wearing body paint with images drawn on their chests that looked

vaguely familiar to Jaro. A giant pink bunny with enormous fangs.

He'd seen that somewhere.

Had seen a giant pink fanged bunny carrying a spear charging a... a... a one-armed walking corpse with half his skin off, who was wielding his other arm – with giant axe-head attached, as his weapon.

He could pull back, could see the image on a billboard, with "NEW! Underworld brings you..." written on the sign.

And what. He couldn't remember what the Underworld was advertising right before things all went down in flames and horror.

But – Pinked Fanged Bunny. Walking Corpse.

This was part of that. And it was still alive, when he and everyone else had been sure the Underworld was shut down, locked down, except for Amanda and the few like her who'd kicked out full humans and only used it themselves to stay in touch, to try to rescue humanity,

to try to bring back the world where people could live
like people

Over his head, gunfire.

Around him, screaming.

The bunny-chested men fell.

The woman with her giant spoon and fork waved them
over her head, screaming something bizarre, still
running forward.

"Bunnies rule, Zombies drool, we're going to take
you to school!"