

# **DANGEROUS GAMES:**



**HOW  
TO CHEAT**

**MATT  
FORBECK**

***DANGEROUS GAMES:  
HOW TO CHEAT***

***[BOOK #2]***

***BY MATT FORBECK***

# **ALSO BY MATT FORBECK**

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*Hard Times in Dragon City (Shotguns & Sorcery #1)*

*Bad Times in Dragon City (Shotguns & Sorcery #2)*

*End Times in Dragon City (Shotguns & Sorcery #3)*

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Dedicated to my wife Ann and our kids Marty, Pat, Nick, Ken, and Helen.  
They're always my favorite players.

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Finally, a huge thanks to all the readers who backed this book and the rest  
of the trilogy on Kickstarter. See the end of the book for a full list of their  
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this book justifies the faith they showed in me.

# **12 FOR '12**

This is the standard edition of a book first released as a reward for the backers of my third Kickstarter drive for [my 12 for '12 project](#), my mad plan to write a novel a month for the entirety of 2012. Together, 389 people chipped in just over \$18,000 to successfully fund an entire trilogy of *Dangerous Games* novels.

Thanks to each and every one of you for daring me to take on this incredible challenge — and for coming along with me on the wild ride it's been. And thank you to all my readers, whether you're backers or not. Stories have no homes without heads to house them.





## **CHAPTER ONE**

“Welcome back to Gen Con!” Matt Forbeck said into the microphone as he stood on the small stage in the bar in which he was hosting the Diana Jones Award event. Dressed in a black polo and tan cargo shorts, he looked like he’d already been enjoying a few of the roll of drink tickets he’d been handing out to everyone as they came into the party. His eyes glinted with a glowing sense of fun, and he wore a wide smile that reminded me why he’d told me earlier in the evening that this was his favorite time of the year.

“It even beats Christmas?” I’d stopped to chat with him at the table in the front of the restaurant between him greeting the people coming into the party in a steady set of waves.

“Damn right!” He laughed. “I get to bring the wife and kids here, so I have my family around, just like on the holidays, but I also get to see so many old friends again — and make all sorts of new ones. And we get to play games, buy games, and talk about games for the whole four days.”

“Plus tonight,” I said.

“Well, ‘the Best Four Days in Gaming,’ as it’s called, doesn’t officially start until tomorrow morning.” He gazed around to take in the people already stuffed into the bar’s main area, sitting at tables and standing at the bar, chatting in small groups. Many of them had spent the day setting up temporary booths inside Gen Con’s exhibit hall in preparation for the crowds of gamers who would be let into the Indianapolis Convention Center the next day. They were tired



from all the exertion already, but the excitement for the weekend shone like the sun in every set of eyes.

“So this is more like Gen Con Eve?”

“Sure,” he said. “Although it’s less like Christmas Eve and more like the night before Thanksgiving. That’s when everyone gets into town and heads to their favorite bar to catch up with their friends before they meet with their families and gorge themselves the next day.”

“Well, it’s good to be back and be an old friend this year rather than a new one.” This was only my second Gen Con — Matt had been to over thirty, starting when he was just a kid with crystalline dice sparkling in his eyes — but it already felt like home. I’d spent a good chunk of my year trying to figure out how to join the gaming industry full-time, and he’d helped mentor me along, showing me the ropes of freelancing and answering the barrage of questions I had from time to time.

“Here’s to many more,” Matt said, raising his glass of Guinness. I brought my own beer up to clink rims with him.

“Sláinte.”

He’d had to greet some other people then, and I’d wandered back into the main room, looking for friendly faces. I didn’t get far before Ken Hite waved me over.

“Liam!” he said with an easy smile. “Join us!”

I wound my way through the crowd, nodding at a few people I recognized and shaking hands with a few others. It really did feel like home in a way that few other places had in my life. I found myself standing in front of an open stool at Ken’s table, and he waved me into it as he shook my hand.

“Liam Parker,” he said. “Do you know Greg Stolze and Paul Czege and Jen Page?”

“Not personally,” I said as I sat, “but I know the names.” I pointed at Greg: “*Unknown Armies*, right?”

A lanky man with glasses and shaved-short hair, he spread his arms wide, palms up, and gave me a pleased smile. “Guilty as charged.”

I moved on to Paul. “*My Life with Master*. I loved that game. It was my introduction to modern story roleplaying games when I was a kid.”

Shorter than Greg, Paul gave a more modest nod of approval from behind his mustache and goatee. “You have excellent taste.”

“Although you’re killing us all with this ‘when I was a kid’ stuff,” Ken said.

“Oh, you’re not that much older than me,” I said.

“Yes, we are, although you’re way too kind to grind that into our faces any further, I’m sure,” said Ken. “Especially when you’re in the presence of a lady so lovely as our Jen here.”

Jen gave me a wide smile. She had long, blonde hair, flawless skin, and bright blue eyes, all of colors pale enough to make her seem like an otherworldly elven maid who just happened to be visiting us for a while.

“Of course,” I said as I turned to Jen. “I loved you in *The Gamers: Dorkness Rising*. And you’re in that new *Geek Seekers* web show with Monte Cook too, right?”

“She sure is,” a man with curly red hair and rectangular glasses said as he stepped up behind her with a pair of drinks in his hand. He set down one in front of her with a devilish grin. “And she gets all the good lines.”

I have to admit, I recognized Monte right away, and I froze up. He must have noticed me gaping at him because he extended a gracious hand across the table to me. “I’m Monte.”

“I know,” I said. “I grew up playing *Dungeons & Dragons Third Edition*. It was my first RPG. My pals and I played all the way though *Ptolus* too. And I cannot wait to play your new *Numenera* game.”

“Ah,” he said. “Did you back it on Kickstarter?”

“Of course!”

“Then you have my undying thanks.”

“I couldn’t believe how well that did for you,” said Ken. “I mean, hundreds of thousands of dollars to start up a new RPG. I know game companies that would kill for that kind of up-front

investment.”

Monte gave a modest shrug. “Because of all the stretch goals, I have to produce a lot of projects for all those dollars. I think the fans are going to get their money’s worth out of it.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I said. “Did you see the number of books they get for that money?”

“Still,” Monte said, “I’m grateful so many people saw the worth in it. I literally couldn’t have asked for anything more. But I hear you’ve done pretty well on Kickstarter yourself.”

I had to grin. “Sure. The *Mojo Poker* Kickstarter did better than we expected, although it didn’t pull in anything like what *Numenera* did. And I had a lot of help.”

“Well, you’re working with Matt, right?” said Monte. “I understand he has more than a little experience with Kickstarter himself.”

“Too true,” I said. “That crazy 12 for ’12 plan of his. I can’t imagine writing a dozen novels in a year.”

“No one else can either,” Greg said. “That’s the point.”

“Maybe taking down International Entertainments last summer didn’t hurt you either,” said Jen.

I think I blushed a bit then, just surprised that she had any idea about who I might be. “Well, I wouldn’t say I took them down,” I said.

“You helped expose Jewel Yin as a murderer,” Ken said. “I think that qualifies.”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t help but think about the two men who’d died before that: Allen Varney and Stephen Blair. “But the company’s still standing.”

“That Tollak Spielmacher’s one slippery son of a bitch,” said Ken. “That wasn’t the first time he’s slipped in shit and landed in roses.”

I shrugged. “You’d think that getting caught with a game with a kilo of heroin hidden inside it might knocked him clear of any flowerbeds.”

“Well, he never did have possession of it, as I understand it,” said Paul. “That makes it a lot harder to pin it on him.”

"True, but the fact that the game was put on the short list for the Diana Jones Award this year only makes it sting that much more."

"Well," Jen said. "*Kaijuggeddon* is a fantastic game."

"The fact that Allen Varney was finally identified as the designer had, I think, more than a little to do with its star rising so fast," said Ken. "Nothing sells better than a bit of real-life drama."

I nodded. "I understand all that, but the idea of Tollak standing up there on the stage while Matt hands him the traveling trophy galls me."

"Well, here's hoping that doesn't happen," Ken said, raising his glass. "Here's to anyone but *Kaijuggeddon* winning this year."

"You don't have any inside knowledge on that?" said Greg, arching an eyebrow at Ken's toast.

Ken snorted. "Well, if I was a member of the illustrious yet secret cabal in charge of the Diana Jones Award — and let me reiterate that there's no substantial proof of that — the secret masters in charge of the cabal might not see fit to let me know who the winner might be. As far as I know, the only person in the room who knows who the winner is might be Matt Forbeck."

"Really?" I said. "You think he just chooses the winner himself?"

Ken shook his head. "Seeing as how it was James Wallis who founded the award and who still runs it, I think that's patently untrue. Also, I could have been lying the entire time. I do make things up for a living, after all."

"The start of the award is all way before my time," I said.

"Fair enough," Ken said, "but I was there at the first event. Matt turned thirty-three years old at his twentieth Gen Con in a row, on that Saturday, and his intelligent and beautiful wife Ann decided to hold a party for him that night. James asked if he could present the first award then, and Matt agreed. We inducted Tracy Hickman into the Origins Hall of Fame that night too, mostly because he couldn't be bothered to show up at Origins that year, for whatever excellent reason I'm sure he might have had."

"Sounds like an amazing evening," I said.

Ken gestured at the entire bar. "It inspired all this," he said. "Now

the event's been going on so long that it's hard to imagine a Gen Con that didn't kick off with a DJA party, but it wasn't always this way."

"Of course, we used to be in Milwaukee too," Monte said. "And UW-Parkside before that, and Lake Geneva before that. Things do change."

"And there's all the people who used to show up here who rarely do now," Ken said. "John Kovalic, Aaron Rosenberg, Bob Watts, Ryan Miller, and so on. At least Christian Moore still shows up on the weekends, even if only as a civilian."

"Well here's to the good things staying the same then," Jen said, raising her glass. "At least when it comes to Gen Con."

I'd already seen a lot of toasts that night. I joined in but only sipped at my drink. After the kind of convention I'd had last year, I was a little too aware of the need to stay sharp, even when I was supposed to be celebrating.

The conversation rolled on to other topics, and I met more people than I could possibly list. I knew from my experience last year that the number of cool people I'd talk with, whose work I'd enjoyed, would soon move from an overwhelming experience to a blur, and I resolved to pay attention and memorize every moment as best I could.

Then Matt got onto the stage to announce the winner, right around 10 o'clock. I'd only been there an hour at that point, but my head was already swimming with how amazing the show had been so far. As we all quieted down to discover the winner, I told myself I wouldn't mind who won, even if it happened to be Tollak Spielmacher.

Even then I knew it was a lie.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

“Allow me to interrupt your drinking for a few minutes while I take care of the reason we’re all ostensibly here for tonight,” Matt said with a warm grin. “Despite what you might think, it’s not the free drinks. We’re here to announce the winner of this year’s Diana Jones Award!”

The crowd gave a hearty cheer at that. I didn’t know if any of them really cared about the award, but it had always meant something to me. Some might have referred to it as the results of the lunatic consensual ravings of a secret cabal of industry insiders, but I didn’t mind that at all. As far as I was concerned, that secret cabal knew their stuff and had proved it year in and out.

After a bit of a preamble in which he described each entry on the shortlist and thanked each and every one of the sponsors who’d all chipped in to purchase the drink tickets for the rest of us, Matt readied himself to announce the results. “And now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for!”

The crowd went wild, if only because they knew it meant that they’d be able to get back to their conversations soon afterward. I found myself sitting on the edge of my seat. It was all I could do to keep from repeating under my breath, “Not *Kaijugeddon*. Not *Kaijugeddon*. Not *Kaijugeddon*. Not *Kaijugeddon*.”

Ken turned to me and clapped me on the shoulder. “It’s all right, Liam. You’ll live either way.”

I knew he was right. It was just an award. It meant nothing in the

grand scheme of things, right?

“The winner of this year’s Diana Jones Award for Excellence in Gaming is —” Matt stopped for a dramatic pause and smiled at the ensuing silence. “*Kaijugeddon!*”

I felt my heart crumple up into a ball and look for a trash can in which it could throw itself away. I’d not cared much for International Entertainments and Tollak Spielmacher by the end of Gen Con last year, but those hard feelings had only grown stronger over the year as I’d watched Tollak’s attorneys help him weasel his way out from under the charges he’d had filed against him. He should have been in jail — or at least awaiting trial — on charges ranging from drug trafficking to accessory to murder.

Instead, he stood up from the back corner of a booth in which he’d been hiding the entire night and strode toward the stage to accept the award. He’d been surrounded by other people who’d packed him into that booth, which I knew had been by his design. If I’d seen him there, I don’t know if I’d have been able to stop myself from confronting him. Watching him walk up to accept that award on behalf of the man he’d had murdered in a twisted attempt to protect his company tore the guts right out of me.

I got halfway out of my chair before Ken put a hand on my arm. “Don’t,” he said. “This isn’t the time or the place.”

I didn’t take my eyes off Tollak. “No better time than the present.”

“Wait,” Greg said. “Just think, he might say something entirely stupid, and if you stop him, we’d all miss that.”

That resonated with me, at least enough that I was willing to sit back down, just as the tepid applause in the room died. Matt handed Tollak the Plexiglas pyramid on a wooden base — complete with the burnt remnants of a copy of the *Indiana Jones Roleplaying Game* encased in it — that served as the Diana Jones Award’s traveling trophy. Tollak accepted it with a handshake and a wide smile, baring all of his perfect teeth.

“Thank you,” Tollak said, taking the microphone from Matt. “After the year we’ve had at International Entertainments, you have no idea how much an award like this means to us.

“First, of course, we have to thank Allen Varney, the man who created *Kaijuggeddon*. Without his work — dare I say, his genius — this game would have remained little more than an idea that I promised myself I’d get around to working on one day.”

“I like that,” Ken said in a low voice that carried no farther than our table. “Taking credit for a dead man’s work, even as he pretends to praise him.”

“I’d also like to thank all of my staff at International Entertainments. As you know, we had a bit of a scandal last year, much of which can be put down to people I’d rather not name at the moment.”

“He’s supposed to be referring to Jewel Yin, right?” said Paul. “In reality, he’s taking the Fifth so as not to incriminate himself.”

“Despite that, we had a number of people step forward to offer us a hand.”

“People who were desperate enough for jobs that they were willing to ignore all the warning bells that went off in their heads as they spoke with him,” said Jen.

“Stand up, guys!” Tollak gestured toward the booth from which he’d come, and three men in glasses spilled out of it. One was tall and large and wore a kilt, a long ponytail, and a bushy Van Dyke. The next was another large man in a bright Hawaiian shirt, a wide, brown fedora, and a salt-and-pepper Van Dyke. The last was short and trim and wore a stylish suit and tie. His Van Dyke was just as sharp as the rest of him.

“I wonder what happened to the good-universe versions of them,” said Monte.

The rest of us stared at him in surprise.

“What?” he said with a sheepish shrug. “I’m not as naturally good at this snarky stuff as the rest of you.”

“Phil Lacefield Jr., my director of sales.” The man in the kilt stepped forward.

“Sean Patrick Fannon, my director of community relations.” The man in the hat snapped off a lazy salute.

“Anthony Gallela, my director of marketing.” The man in the suit



gave us all a gracious nod.

Tollak continued as the applause for his team died away. It had been warmer for them than for him, but it faded away as he spoke. "Without them and all their ceaseless labors and hard work, *Kaijuggeddon* would not have achieved half the success it's had today."

"Which means he wouldn't have been able to get anyone to buy the game if he hadn't been willing to ride on those guys' good names," Matt said. I'd been so focused on Tollak, I hadn't seen him meander over to us after handing off the trophy.

He patted the table in front of me. "You all right?"

I knew what he meant. "I promise not to throw myself or anyone else or anything else at him. During the party."

He gave me a wry smile before he returned to the stage. "I wouldn't blame you if you did, but you attack him here, and you'll wind up in jail with hundreds of witnesses to the fact you hit him out of the blue. You're smarter than that, right?"

I sighed. "Right."

Matt got back to the stage in time to take the microphone back from Tollak. "Thank you," he said. "And congratulations once again." He turned back to the crowd and said, "We now return you to your regularly scheduled carousing. Have a great night, and a great Gen Con too!"

Tollak stood around and basked in the trophy's reflected glow for a moment. A small number of people shook hands with him to congratulate him on his honor, but they were remarkable for how few they were. The winner the year before had been mobbed. I suspected that Tollak would be buying his own drinks tonight.

That made me smile. As I was grinning at the man, he turned toward me, and my bared teeth must have caught his eye. He gave me the kind of glare you'd give the man who'd killed your mother, then turned away before I could reply in kind.

"I see you're making all kinds of friends in the industry," Greg said.

"There are some people with whom it is perfectly fine to not be

friends,” Ken said. “Or friendly even. Tollak stands at the top of that list.”

“Thanks,” I said. “That means a lot.”

“Don’t take it personally,” said Ken. “The man’s left a trail of failed companies and broken dreams in his wake. I’ve had a number of friends who worked with or for him at various places over the years. For some it was so bad they vowed to never come back to work in the industry again.”

“You can see some of those guys around the con still though,” said Monte. “They usually just show up as civilians these days, though, like me. I’m just here to play.”

“You don’t miss being in the business at all?” I said. He’d once been at the top of the field and still was in many players’ estimation. To hear that he was just at Gen Con to only play games surprised me.

“I think the fact he ran a Kickstarter to launch a new game line ought to give you a hint,” said Jen. “I wouldn’t be surprised to see a booth from Monte Cook Games in the exhibit hall next year.”

Monte shrugged and favored us with a mysterious smile. “We’ll see.”

“Don’t look now,” said Ken, “but your favorite person in the world is heading this way.”

I had no idea who he might mean. I had a lot of idols running around here at Gen Con, and it could have been any one of them. I had no clue as to who I might even be rooting to see. Steve Jackson? Richard Garfield? Greg Stafford? Sandy Petersen? Reiner Knizia?

I craned my head around to see who Ken meant, and I spotted Tollak heading straight for me, making a beeline through the crowd. For a moment, I tried to look past him to see if I could spot the real hero coming toward me, but I soon realized Ken had been speaking sarcastically.

I scowled at the man as he approached, but he kept coming.

“Come on now,” Ken said. “You can’t blame me for this. I did tell you not to look.”

## **CHAPTER THREE**

Tollak sauntered straight up to our table, the Diana Jones Award trophy tucked under one arm. "Hello," he said to the table. "It's good to see you all once again."

He sounded friendly, but as far as I could tell he always sounded that way. I imagined he'd butter you up with a smile as he slipped a knife between your ribs. Still, I had nothing to say to him — well, nothing I didn't think I'd regret saying out loud.

The rest of the people at the table offered Tollak half-hearted congratulations at *Kaijugeddon's* win. I just paid a bit more attention to my beer.

"I have to admit, I had my money on another game," Ken said.

"Really?" said Tollak. He covered his mouth to cough. Up this close, he didn't look all that healthy, which I had to admit I took some enjoyment from. "Which one?" he said once he could continue.

"All of them," Ken said with a smile. "Or any of them. Take your pick."

Tollak stroked his chin. "I take it you don't think that my little game there deserved it."

"Well, sure it did," said Ken. "Other than the fact that the game is neither little nor, in anything other than the ink on the contract Allen signed, yours. Personally I consider the game's win a vote of sympathy for Allen having had to put up with you for so much of his woefully shortened life."

That got me to laugh. I nearly spit my beer out through my nose.

Ken gave me a gentle nudge in the ribs. "How am I doing so far?"

"Perfect," I said, clearing my throat. "Don't let me interrupt."

"Oh, don't worry about it," he said. "I probably deserve a break. I could be at this all night."

"There's no need to be vicious about it," Tollak said.

"You call that vicious?" I said. "It's a lot kinder than a box cutter across the throat, don't you think? Compared to being left in an alley to die, I'd say he's being downright generous."

"A pleasure to see you again too, Liam," Tollak said.

"That's Mr. Wants-To-See-You-In-Jail to you, asshole. Cut the bullshit. Wander out of here with that plastic pyramid of yours — I'm sorry, the trophy that you stole along with Allen Varney's life. Go on, before you somehow trip and land with that shoved up your ass."

He gaped at me for a moment. No one else said a word.

I couldn't take the tension anymore. "Purely by accident, I'm sure."

He snorted, which turned into a cough again. "I get that you don't like me, Liam. I even understand why you think you have a good reason to feel the way you."

"How fucking generous of you," Ken said before I could beat him to it.

"But it's a small industry," Tollak said, ignoring Ken. "We're going to wind up at a lot of events together. The least I think we can do is try to bury the hatchet."

"I'm afraid you'd try to put it in someone's skull," I said.

"Look," he said, trying again. "This year hasn't been kind to me. You can hear it in my voice, I think, the toll all this stress has taken on me. I've started to lose my hair, for God's sake."

"I hear getting old's a bitch," I said. "Too bad Allen Varney and Stephen Blair will never be able to find out."

He gave a deep, wet sigh and put the trophy down on the table before him. It seemed like it had grown too heavy for him to bear. "I'd like to have the chance to put this all behind us, to start fresh

with a clean slate. Is that really all too much to ask?"

I grunted. "I don't think bloodstains come out as easy as that, and you have a lot of them on your hands."

"Fair enough," Tollak said. "Like I said, I understand how you feel. Imagine how I felt when I'd learned that Jewel had betrayed my trust so badly. Did you know she'd been embezzling from the company as well? If it hadn't been for *Kaijugeddon* being such a smashing success, the company would have gone under for sure. I owe Allen far more than I could ever repay."

"You got that right." I took a long pull from my beer, right up until I emptied the glass.

"Hey," Tollak said, going for a gentle kind of indignant hurt. "I was just as much a victim here as anybody."

"Tell that to the dead."

"Hey," Greg said to Tollak. "I've heard rumors that International Entertainments is considering opening up a novels division. Tell me, is there any truth to that?"

Tollak shrugged, taken a bit aback by the style of the interruption. "Not that I know of, and since I'm the company president, I would hope someone would come to me with that news before it went ahead. Why?"

"Well," Greg said with a broad smile. "It's just that you're so good at telling such elaborate fictions that I figured you might want to find a way to turn a profit on that for your company. You know, other than keeping your sorry ass out of jail, which maybe did more harm to the company than good. In the long run."

For an instant, I thought maybe Tollak's head would explode. I hoped that he might finally crack and start bashing people in the face with his newly won trophy. That would be the kind of act that could get him thrown in jail for a good long while. Or at least until his high-priced attorneys bailed him out.

The moment passed, though, and the fury faded from his face, leaving him wan and pale. "I think I've had just about enough of this kind of company for the day."

"I guess we're on the same page then," I said. "Go find someone

who's willing to ignore the fact that you're a totally amoral douche. Please."

He spun on his heel and left, but it wasn't long until his trio of new hires came over to chat with us.

"Hi, Liam," the sharper man said. "I'm Anthony, and this is Phil and Sean. From what I hear, I'm afraid that we may have already gotten off on the wrong foot."

"You do realize who you're working for and what he's done?" I said. "I have nothing against you guys. Nothing but pity in fact. Just remember that his last CFO wound up going on a killing spree and was run down in the street in front of the convention center."

Anthony put up his hands. "All well and duly noted. None of us condone any of that kind of behavior, of course. We just saw a magnificent opportunity to do well by Allen's ultimate game, and we decided honoring his legacy that way was far more important than punishing Tollak for his heinous errors."

"You're smooth," Ken said. "How many times have you practiced that?"

Anthony smirked. "I can't tell you how many people I've had to have that exact same conversation with over the past eleven months. It's kind of tiresome and hard to remember sometimes, which is why I rely on it being entirely true. Otherwise, it would be far too complicated a lie to keep track of."

"I suppose it's easy to call something the truth when you don't know what it really is," I said.

"Hey," said Phil, "this isn't the best thing for anyone, right? But what should we have done? Let the game die? Have you actually played it?"

I shook my head, but he continued on before I could open my mouth.

"You really need to. It's fantastic. It's the first game to take the deck-building elements of *Dominion* and weld them to the pre-painted miniatures model pioneered by WizKids and forge them into an excellent game."

"There's a reason it won the Diana Jones Award just now," said

Sean. He leaned forward and put his hands on the table. "It's a much better game than anything up against it."

"Come on by the booth," Anthony said. "I'll give you a free copy."

I shook my head. "I don't want a damn thing from Tollak."

Anthony smiled. "It'll be a gift directly from me. The three of us do the best we can to keep Tollak out of the business as much as possible these days. It's a system that works well for everyone involved."

I could feel my resolve weakening. I knew then what these three men had succumbed to. As a gamer, it was hard to turn down a chance to play what many people had told me over and over again was an excellent game. As professionals in the industry, it must have been too tempting for them to have the chance to oversee the game and its development and to bring it to a world filled with eager and enthusiastic gamers.

"Thanks for the offer," I said. "I just don't know if I could ever bring myself to take you up on it."

"I totally understand that," said Anthony. "You two have a horrible history with each other."

"The three of us came on after that," Phil said, stepping back. "We had nothing to do with any of it."

"It's true," said Sean. "Our first order of business was going through the books and ruthlessly weeding out anything that even had a whiff of rotteness about it. We didn't stop scrubbing until the entire business was clean."

"I suppose Tollak thinks he got his money worth out of you," I said.

"We'd like to think so," Anthony said.

"Why not?" said Ken. "I mean, he had a filthy, nasty company when he hired you on, and now it's squeaky clean. You realize you sold him your reputations to help make that happen, right?"

The three men gave Ken a nervous laugh.

Monte shrugged at them. "Well, you're all consenting adults, I suppose."

"Of course, there's always a danger with that kind of thing," I

said. "Sometimes when good people try to clean a place up, they just get themselves dirty instead."

Anthony wagged a finger at me and smiled. "I can see why you fit in so well with this outspoken crew. This is just the kind of attitude we've encountered at every turn over the course of the last year."

"And how's that going for you?" I asked.

Anthony reached down and picked up the Diana Jones Award trophy that Tollak had left behind on the table. "So far," he said, "pretty well."



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

Phil Lacefield Jr. had worked for a lot of different gaming companies over the years. They always seemed like they were run on shoe-sole budgets, barely able to roll from one paycheck to the next. He'd gotten to the point at which he was able to recognize the signs as soon as the company began to nosedive straight into the dirt.

He'd already gotten a number of those bad vibes from International Entertainments. Truth be told, he'd gotten them before he'd even hired on with the company — before the murders at last year's Gen Con too. IE had never seemed like it would be long for this world.

Still, Phil had needed the work, and with a new wife and an even newer baby to feed, he'd taken the job despite his misgivings about it. Calye had been so happy about it that she'd set out to make herself a new chainmail bikini for the show. She'd been coming to Gen Con in such outfits for years, so much so that everyone knew her as the Chainmail Girl. Rick Loomis over at Flying Buffalo had even made a *Lost Worlds* gaming book that featured her.

Gen Con had become such a big part of Phil and Calye's lives that they'd gotten married at the show a couple years back. He had a hard time imagining a life wholly outside of the gaming industry. He'd been forced to take financial sabbaticals from it from time to time, but he always found a way back in as soon as he could

IE had been his latest on-ramp back onto the highway, and while he'd had some trepidation about it, he'd jumped at the offer as soon

as it had come his way. There was little he wanted more than to be the director of sales at a major gaming company again, one that already had a fully international operation, and so he'd shoved those little fears aside and taken the plunge once more.

So far, it had been a decent experience. Tollak had been under a lot of pressure, but he'd been up front with both Phil and the other new hires about the company's troubles. After the damage last year's scandal had done, though, it seemed like there was nowhere to go but up. The fact that the initial supply of *Kaijuggeddon* had already arrived in the company's warehouse meant that Phil at least had a potentially hot product to sell, so he'd dug in and given it his best shot.

Winning the Diana Jones Award tonight had been the icing on an already substantial cake. The sales of the game had been phenomenal, and it had gained huge critical acclaim too. Everyone seemed to love it.

Of course, success came with its own problems. They were now having troubles getting the next run of the game in their hands, and Phil had been dealing with irate retailers and distributors for the past few months, assuring them that they'd get their games as soon as he had them in hand. No one wanted to miss out on the critical holiday season, which they'd shoot past if they didn't have the games in stores by the end of October, which was rushing toward them like a runaway train.

Anthony had been agitating for a series of expansions for the game, a way to tap their large and currently loyal player base for more cash, which he hoped would help the company's sagging bottom line. Sean had taken it on himself to start designing the things, which were supposedly almost done. Phil would believe that, though, when the new bits got beyond playtesting and he had the prototypes in hand.

The best part about the job, though, was that Tollak had been desperate enough to find good people that he'd not only offered Phil a decent salary but also allowed him to telecommute. Working remotely meant that he could set his own hours, which meant a lot

when it came to helping take care of the kid. It also meant he didn't get any benefits, but he probably wouldn't have gotten them if he'd been working in an office with Tollak either.

The bonus part to all that, which Phil hadn't realized last year when he'd cut his deal, was that he didn't have to be in an office with Tollak. It wasn't that he couldn't stand the man, but he'd heard enough of the rumors swirling around the company that he found them hard to ignore. Since he rarely if ever had to talk to Tollak on the phone much less sit across a table from the man, Phil found it a lot easier to ignore the details about who he was working with. Otherwise, he wasn't sure he could have done it.

Like most people in the gaming industry, Phil had an active imagination. Here at Gen Con, or any of the other conventions at which he had to work with the other folks in the company in person, it didn't take much for him to picture Tollak as some kind of desperate game publisher turned drug lord, and the fact that he didn't have to deal with that every day made it a lot easier to work with the man.

Last month at Origins, which was held in Columbus, Ohio, every year, Phil had struck upon the strategy of leaving the booth whenever he could during the day, and he'd explained to Tollak that he needed to be out wining and dining clients in the evenings, all weekend long. He'd been grateful Tollak had realized — on his own, without any prompting from Phil — that having an accused criminal along for those might derail the business conversations he needed to have. When Tollak had excused himself from those meetings, Phil had breathed a long sigh of relief.

That was the main reason that Phil had decided to wander back to the hotel from the Diana Jones Award party on his own. He'd claimed that he needed to get back to Calye and their baby son, Chance, which was true, but Tollak had asked him and the others to join him for celebratory drinks after the party. Calye would have understood, Phil knew, but he just couldn't bring himself to join in the fun, especially not after he'd seen the ferocious look that Liam Walker had given Tollak when he'd come over to chat with him.

That glare had encapsulated everything bad that Phil felt about Tollak. He didn't know Liam at all, and he'd made a point of steering clear of him whenever possible. He just didn't need such vibrant reminders that the man he was working for was scum.

Phil was so deep in thought that he didn't pay much attention to his surroundings. Tollak had put the company up in the Marriott this year, right across the street from the north side of the convention center. It wasn't that far of a walk from the Diana Jones Award party, and the streets were filled with gamers, so Phil felt at ease. He almost walked straight past the hotel before he realized it.

He corrected course and strode up the bricked driveway to the front doors, trying to stifle a yawn as he went. He spotted Shane and Michelle Hensley chatting in the hotel bar and considered going over to say hi to them, but he knew he'd see them later during the show. It was only Wednesday night after all. They had a whole four days ahead of them, and Phil suspected he'd need a good night's sleep to be ready for it.

Phil took the elevator up to his floor and had to stop for a moment as he got off to remember which way he had to turn. It wasn't until he stumbled near the little room with the ice machine that he spotted the man standing between him and his room.

He was a tall man, broad shouldered, with Asian features. He wore a yellow decontamination suit, the kind of thing that Walt and Jesse dressed in when cooking meth on *Breaking Bad*. He had the hood pulled back though, leaving his face exposed.

As Phil came toward him, the man peeled himself off the wall he'd been leaning on and started walking his way. Phil wasn't sure he could trust his balance at this point, so he hugged his right-hand wall and gave the costumed man a friendly nod. He wondered if the guy was part of some kind of cosplay game set up for the show or if he had just come to Gen Con for the costume contest. It wasn't much of a winning effort, Phil thought, but lots of people seemed to overestimate their chances just like that every year anyhow.

The man grabbed Phil by the elbow as he got closer and yanked him toward the ice maker's room. At first, Phil didn't understand

what was going on. He thought that the guy had just bumped into him by accident. Phil was a big guy, after all, and the hall wasn't that wide.

"Excuse me," Phil said, but the man didn't let go. Instead, he hauled him hard into the ice maker's room, pulling with all his might.

When Phil was halfway through the door, alarm bells went off in his head. "Hey," he said. "Hey!"

That was when the second man — also Asian and also dressed in a decontamination suit, but shorter and heavier — stepped up behind Phil and jammed a pistol with a silencer attached into the back of Phil's skull.

"Move forward," the second man said in flawless but clipped English. "Do not resist."

Phil froze, unsure of what to do. His instincts told him to smash the gunman in the face with his elbow and run, but he'd had enough drinks that night that he didn't trust himself any longer. He took some comfort in the fact he didn't just comply straight off with the man's demands, but that proved to be short lived.

The first man fished a silenced pistol out from under his decontamination suit too. It was then Phil knew he had to run.

As he turned, the second man smashed him in the face with the butt of his pistol. Phil reached out and punched the little bastard in the nose. He reeled back into the hallway, and Phil saw the path to his freedom open wide before him.

The man behind Phil responded by shooting him in the leg before he made it to the door. He screamed out in pain as the limb gave underneath him, and he clutched at the wound as he spun toward the floor.

The shorter man came back at him then, stepping into the room. Instead of attacking Phil, though, he slammed the door shut behind him, cutting off the only way out of the room.

Phil spotted words on the back of the man's decontamination suit. They read "Deadman Removal Service."

That would have set him laughing, if not for the horrible pain in

his leg. Instead, he howled in agony again.

The thin man kicked him in the jaw to shut him up. It only made Phil bellow louder.

“You can’t do it like that,” the shorter man said as he leveled his weapon at Phil. “You have to shoot them in the head. It’s the only way.”

“No,” Phil said, putting up a desperate hand. He was ready to beg for his life, to promise anything, to do anything for another few moments with Calye and Chance. All he needed to do was make these two guys in their awful costumes listen. “Wait!”

The smaller man’s gun barked a muffled shot. In the tiny room, it would have been enough to set Phil’s ears ringing, but with the bulk of his brains spattered across the man and the wall behind him, he didn’t have to worry about such things anymore.