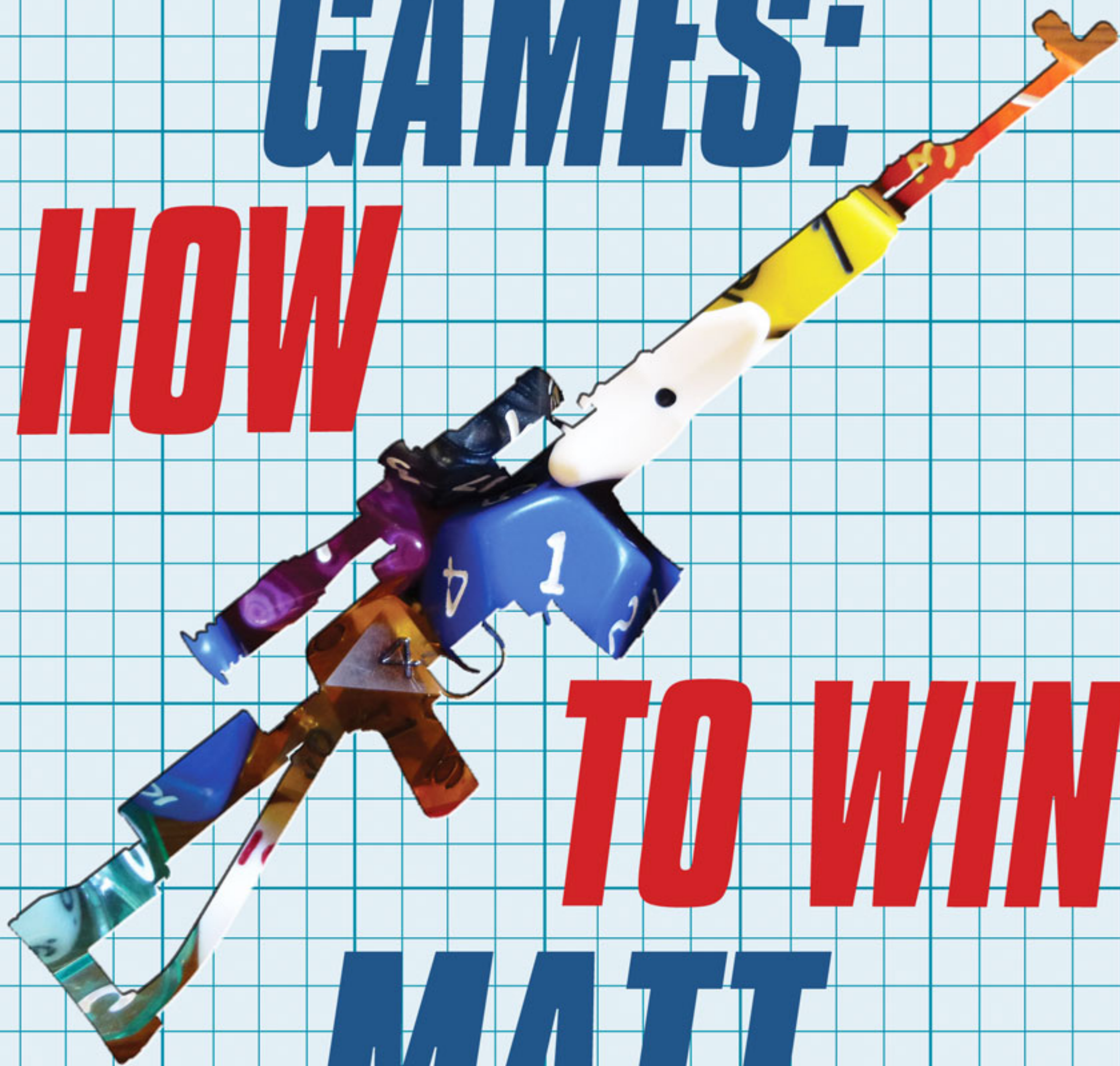


# **DANGEROUS GAMES:**

**HOW**



**TO WIN**

**MATT  
FORBECK**



***DANGEROUS GAMES:  
HOW TO WIN***

***[BOOK #3]***

***BY MATT FORBECK***

# **ALSO BY MATT FORBECK**

*Dangerous Games #1: How to Play*  
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Dedicated to my wife Ann and our kids Marty, Pat, Nick, Ken, and Helen.  
They're always my favorite players.

Thanks to Peter Adkison, Adrian Swartout, Owen Seyler, and the rest of  
the Gen Con staff for being such great sports and even better friends.

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Special thanks to my friends who appeared in this book. They are all  
fantastic people, especially considering how many liberties I took with  
their lives, their careers, and even their personalities. Do not hold them  
responsible for any of the horrible things that happen herein. That's all my  
fault. The good things, though, believe those double.

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  
names. Each and every one of them is fantastic, and I can only hope that  
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**

“Are you ready for this?” Nikki said as she straightened my collar.

I drew in a deep breath and blew it out. I wiped the sweat from my brow and tried to tell myself it was all due to the humid Indianapolis dead-of-August heat. I nodded at her.

“Sure,” I said. “I think so.”

“Liam Parker.” She gave me a devilish smile. “I don’t think you were this nervous at our wedding.”

I let out a brittle laugh. “I was pretty sure I knew how that was going to turn out.”

“Even with the ceremony nearly getting rained out?”

I put an arm around her waist and pulled her close for a kiss. “With us being married. That worked out just right.”

“So it did. But now you’re standing outside of the Diana Jones Award party like a schoolboy about to enter his first dance. Are you sure you’ve done this before?”

I looked up at the door to the downtown bar where the party was being held. “My third time attending, but my first with a game on the award’s shortlist.”

She took me by the arm and guided me toward the door. “I’m sure it’s not any different. You just wind up with a bit more attention, right?”

“And an insane case of nerves.”

“The head of Gen Con security gets nervous? How do you manage at the show?”

“That’s different. That’s work.” I nodded at the door. “This is a dream.”

She smiled. “Then try not to wake up.”

I walked into the place with my new bride. The inside of the bar was darker and cooler and jammed full of tabletop gaming industry professionals chatting with each other over drinks the party’s sponsors had bought them. Most of them were dressed down in T-shirts and shorts, fresh — if that’s the right word — from setting up their display booths in the still-steamy Indiana Convention Center. To save money, the convention center’s management wouldn’t turn on the air conditioning in the exhibit hall until tonight, so lots of the people here had been sweating and swearing in the stifling heat for hours as they prepared for the show’s opening day tomorrow.

When I’d first come to this party two years ago, I hadn’t known a soul in the room. After the events of the past two shows — at which I’d stopped a serial killer and then a pair of assassins — I’d become famous among this crowd. People waved at me as I walked down the street and sometimes even asked me for autographs. Most of the time, they wanted my signature on my first game — *Mojo Poker* — which had debuted at last year’s show. Sometimes, they’d just have me sign whatever was handy instead: a program, a badge, exposed skin.

More to the point, my actions over the past couple conventions had earned me my job as Gen Con’s director of security, something that had swallowed a good chunk of my life over the past year. The demands of the job had gotten crazier as the show approached, and at the moment it was threatening to devour me whole. Still, I’d managed to steal away to the awards party for a couple hours at least.

“Liam!”

Matt Forbeck stepped up to greet me with a smile and a backslapping hug. I’d known Matt as long as I’d known anyone in the industry. My *Mojo Poker* game was, in fact, based upon his *Vegas Knights* novel, which featured stage magicians in Las Vegas who played Poker against each other, using their skills with real magic to

alter the cards on the table, both in their opponents' hands and their own.

He turned and greeted Nikki as well. "Congratulations to you both, you newlyweds!" he said. "I wish I could have made it to the wedding."

"You would have had a ball," said Nikki. "But don't worry. We talked with Darren Orange over at Reactor 88 Studios, and we've joined with their Friday night afterparty to host a wedding reception at it."

Matt grinned. "How very cool." He tapped me on the chest. "Tell me you're taking her on a proper honeymoon after this though. I mean, I love Gen Con as much as anyone, but this probably isn't her dream vacation."

"We got that all worked out," I said. "We wanted to have the wedding in the beginning of August for our families' sakes, but I couldn't get away from my job until the convention was over. After that, we're taking two weeks up at a cabin in the Upper Peninsula, alone."

"That's beautiful territory," Matt said. "My wife Ann's from up there. Be sure to grab some pasties for dinner one night, and say 'Yah to da UP, eh?'"

"Will do," Nikki said with a smile. I knew she couldn't wait to get up there, but we had a convention to get through first.

"Are you nervous?" Matt said to me. He must have seen it on my face.

"Should I be?"

Matt might have been the only person in the room who knew who the winner of this year's Diana Jones Award would be. He was going to announce it within the hour, and I'd be a wreck until then, I was sure. He could have told me right then what was going to happen, but that would have spoiled the fun.

Matt gave me a savage grin. "Just repeat after me," he said. "'It's an honor just to be nominated.'"

Nikki punched him in the shoulder for me. "What are you trying to say?"

“Nothing!” He rubbed his shoulder, laughing. “It’s true isn’t it? And by the end of the night, it’ll still be true either way!”

“Here’s hoping I still feel that way then,” I said.

“Have a drink ticket,” he said, handing us each a little red stub of paper we could trade in at the bar. “Hell, have a few.” He stuffed more into our hands.

“Are we going to need them for celebrating or for drowning our sorrows?” asked Nikki.

“Either way!” he said with a mischievous shrug.

We moved past Matt and into the bar’s main room to make way for the people lining up behind us to get into the party. “I hate playing Poker with him,” I said. “Even *Mojo Poker*. He’s impossible to read.”

“You’re a winner in my book, no matter what happens,” said Nikki.

I put my arm around her as we bellied up to the bar. “Win or lose,” I said, “let’s celebrate that.”

Drinks in hand, we wandered deeper in the bar, where Ken Hite, Robin Laws, and Jeff Tidball hauled Nikki and me into a conversation about the relative merits of Chicago, Toronto, and Kansas City. Ken gave the most deadpan yet passionate advocacy for Chicago.

“People keep trying to hire me in different parts of the country,” he said. “They say they’ll pay relocation costs and everything. I tell them, ‘Do you know what it would cost to move the Hancock Tower alone?’ That always seems to shut them up.”

“I like Kansas City,” Jeff said. “It’s a great place to raise kids.”

“So’s Candyland,” said Ken, “but you don’t see me aching to relocate there. My teeth and my Adonis-like physique would never forgive me for it.”

“I hear you can get around all that with lap-band surgery and a set of dentures,” Robin said.

“Still not worth it.”

I left Nikki to sit with that crew, knowing they’d keep her entertained, and I wandered about a bit. The bar was already half

full, and we still had another half hour until the award would be given out. I saw so many people there that I knew, and I shook lots of hands, wishing that I could spend more time with every one of them.

We had a whole weekend ahead of us, I knew, but I'd be hard at work for a lot of that. I promised myself that I'd spend most of my time out of the office and patrolling the convention center. With luck, that would give me plenty of moments to catch up with people over the next few days.

Mark Kaufman and Eric Hautemont of Days of Wonder — publishers of great board games like *Ticket to Ride* and *Small World* — waved me down, and I joined them at their table. They introduced me to the other guys sitting with them. "This is Martin Stever, who used to be the director of marketing for WizKids, among many other things," Mark said, "and right next to him is Mike Gray, who's in charge of game acquisitions for Hasbro."

That stopped me. "What's Hasbro doing out here?" I said. "I mean, I know the company owns Wizards of the Coast, but this isn't really the Parker Brothers market, right?"

Mike gave a kind smile through his bushy black beard. "It's my job — my honor, really — to go out into the world and find great games for Hasbro. Sure, a lot of the games here aren't going to work for us, mostly because we have to be able to sell millions of dollars worth to be able to put out TV ads for them, but sometimes we find a gem or two. Also, I used to work for TSR back in the day."

"So this is like a kind of homecoming for you?"

"That, and I love to play games. You should see my basement. Every wall of it is filled with shelves of games from top to bottom. I have the greatest job in the world."

The way he said it, I couldn't help but believe him. The joy of playing games shone right through him.

"Do you have some time to play something with us later?" Martin said. "We're going to be testing out a few new designs with Mark and Eric here."

"I'd love to — honestly — but I'm not sure I'll have the time."

“If you get the chance, be sure to let us know,” Eric said. “And good luck with *Mojo Poker* tonight.”

I gave him a nervous shrug. “I don’t know if I have a chance with games like *The Game of Games* up there.”

“There’s some stiff competition this year,” Eric said. “But as they say, it’s an honor to be nominated.”

“I’ll try to focus on that.”

And I did. Right up until the moment I spotted Matt walking up to the bar’s low stage and taking up the microphone the bar’s manager handed him. That’s when I fell apart again.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

“Welcome back to Gen Con!” Matt said to a resounding cheer from the assembled crowd of gaming industry professionals. “And welcome to this year’s Diana Jones Award!”

He held aloft the trophy, a Plexiglas pyramid that encased pieces from a burnt copy of the *Indiana Jones Roleplaying Game*. It had wound its way through many hands before it wound up with the Diana Jones Award committee more than a decade back, and since the committee had started handing out the award, it had traveled to the homes and offices of some of the best game designers and publishers in the world — and even once to the land of Irish gaming convention charity auctions, which raised tens of thousands of dollars every year for great causes.

This year, I hoped it might find a home on my desk. I knew the odds were stacked against me. *Mojo Poker* was my first game, and while some rookies had come out of nowhere to win the award, it wasn’t common. Also, there was the fact that Matt was one of the few known members of the Diana Jones Award committee, and I could see how he might not want to give the award out to a game based on one of his books. The appearance of a conflict of interest might be too much.

Of course, the game had garnered a spot on the award’s coveted shortlist, so it had already overcome many of the problems before it. Now it just had to beat out the four other greatest things in gaming that year, which was no small order.

I'd played or read all of the other entries, of course, and I knew how amazing they were. Having *Mojo Poker* placed into that company truly was an honor, although that didn't stop me from wanting it the top award. If I lost, though, I had other games in the works, including a new roleplaying game coming out at this show called *Possession*.

In *Possession*, you played the ghost of a murder victim, out for revenge against the people who killed you. The trick was that you couldn't do much, not at first, but as you grew in power and influence, you could use your abilities to scare your killers to death. It differed a lot from *Mojo Poker*, but I had high hopes for it.

Darren Orange over at Reactor 88 Studios was already looking at optioning it for a low-budget film, and his writer Jeff Dohm was itching to start on the screenplay. Ben Dobyns and Matt Vancil over at Zombie Orpheus Entertainment — which produced *The Gamers* films, as well as the web series *Journey Quest* — had been interested in it too, but they'd had a hard time figuring out how they could make something funny out of a topic like that.

*Mojo Poker* has sold well — a lot better than I'd hoped, and I'd been told I had unrealistically high expectations to start with. I knew that some of that came from the pull Matt had within the gaming industry, and another part came from the notoriety I'd gained after saving Tollak Spielmacher — the drug-smuggling owner of International Entertainments — from being killed by those two assassins last year. Still, those things had only gained the game attention. Getting people to buy and play it after that had been a whole different challenge, and I was thrilled at how many people enjoyed it.

"You all right?" Nikki slipped up behind me and held my hand. "You look lost."

"Just thinking about Tollak," I said. "I have to testify in his murder trial tomorrow. At this point, I'd like just have it all behind me."

"That's one topic sure to get your mind off the award," Nikki said. "Or has the award been taking your mind off that?"

I leaned over and gave her a tender kiss on her forehead. She



knew me all too well.

“And now,” said Matt, who’d been thanking the party’s sponsors and running through the entries on the shortlist, “the moment we’ve all been waiting for!”

I squeezed Nikki’s hand maybe a little too hard. She squeezed mine right back.

“The winner of this year’s Diana Jones Award is *The Game of Games*, by Kevin Wilson, Eric Lang, and Darrell Hardy!”

A huge whoop went up from the far side of the room, and three men stormed out of the crowd, hollering in glee. They leaped up onto the low stage, grabbed the trophy from Matt, and held it over their heads in triumph.

I was thrilled for them and heartbroken at the same time. Much as I’d tried to tell myself that winning didn’t matter all that much, I’d wanted that award, and I couldn’t deny that.

“Thank you!” Darrell said as he took the microphone from Matt. “We’ll make this short and sweet.”

“Yes!” Kevin said into the mike. “Thank you so much. You don’t know what this means to us.”

“Thank you, gamers!” Eric said, leaning between the others. “You all rock. We’d also like to thank Christian Petersen of Fantasy Flight Games, who hired us all at one point or another and gave us the chance to learn our craft.”

A cheer went up in the crowd, and the tall, blond Christian stood up and accepted the kind remark with a wave. Fantasy Flight created some of the greatest board games in the industry, especially if you liked expensive, complex games that weighed many pounds. These weren’t for casual players but for hardcore hobbyists who wanted to spend days digging into a game and then playing it for weeks or months or more.

Their *Battle Royale* game — a massive gladiatorial arena game pitting the greatest warriors from across time and space against each other in mortal combat — had been up for the award too. Christian seemed to be taking the loss better than me. He’d been at making games for far longer than I had, many of which had won all sorts of

awards, and I supposed that helped.

“We’d also like to thank the folks at Mayfair Games for taking a chance on this game and bringing it to market,” Darrell said, beckoning for that crew to step up on to the stage with them.

Pete Fenlon, Coleman Charlton, Larry Roznai, and Bob Carty joined them to a resounding round of applause, each of them grinning like fools. Pete took the microphone to speak for them all. “We want to thank the Diana Jones Award committee for recognizing the amazing work our whole team put into this game, but especially these three men up here, who brought us such a fantastic game. We loved it from the moment we first played it, and we’re thrilled that so many of you did too.”

“You going to be okay?” Nikki said.

I gave her a wan smile. “There’s always next year. Besides, I don’t design games for awards, right? I design them for the players.”

“But awards are still great.”

“Icing on the cake. I still get the cake.”

I turned around and saw that I had a group of people waiting for me. They included a good chunk of the Margaret Weis Productions crew — Cam Banks, Clark and Amanda Valentine, Jeremy Keller, Phillipe-Antoine Ménard, and Rob Donoghue — who’d worked on the *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying* game and *Leverage: The Roleplaying Game*.

“We’ve lost awards before too,” Cam said. “You need a drink.”

“Both of you do,” Amanda said to Nikki.

I broke out into a wide smile. “You know, I think we’d like to take you up on that.”

Now that I’d lost the award, the worst part of my night was already over. I didn’t have to deal with all those wild hopes anymore. Even having lost, it was a relief to be able to put all that behind me and just enjoy the show.

Nikki and I had a wonderful time chatting and catching up with old friends and making lots of new ones. People congratulated me on the nomination and offered me condolences — not on losing the Diana Jones Award but on not winning it. I found the distinction

made a real difference, at least to me.

Nikki even cheered me on as I tried to ride the mechanical bull at one end of the bar, which I'm sure wound up on YouTube only minutes later. I did all right, but I still fell short of breaking the record for the night, which Matt had set earlier.

"I spotted your fatal flaw there right away," Matt said, laughing as I staggered out of the cushioned ring around the bull. "You see that guy over there?"

I glanced in the direction Matt nodded and spotted the man in charge of the bull. He'd told me how to get onto the machine and given me some free advice for how to hold on too. "The one with the joystick in his hand?"

"He can make your life miserable up there — or easy — with a simple flick of his wrist. You forgot to slip a tip into that tin bucket in front of him before you mounted up."

I smacked my forehead. "Ah!"

"Here," Ryan Macklin said, handing me a flask decorated with the title of his podcast *Master Plan*, which he'd pulled from a bandolier of them he had strung across his chest. "This'll help take the edge off the bruising."

"I don't think I landed on anything too hard," I said.

"He means for your ego," Lillian Cohen-Moore said, stifling a laugh as she arched an eyebrow at me under her bright pink hair.

"He's pretty tough there too," Nikki said, slipping an arm around my waist.

"I'm going to take that as a compliment," I said. I took a belt from the flask and had to fight the urge to cough through it.

"Careful with that," a tall woman with long, black hair said next to me, flashing me a smile. "That's lethal stuff."

I tried to answer her, but I couldn't yet find my voice through the liquor. She stuck out her hand. "I'm sorry. I'm Jennifer Steen."

"Of *The Jennisodes*?" Nikki said for me. "He listens to your podcast all the time."

"Pleased to meet you," I managed to say in a voice worthy of the croakiest frog.

“You going to survive?” Ryan flashed a mischievous grin.  
“Let’s hope,” I said. “It’s just the start of the show.”

## ***CHAPTER THREE***

I managed to get up and out of our hotel room in the Omni Severin the next morning with only the smallest hangover, nothing that a few ibuprofen and a hot shower couldn't fix. I kissed Nikki before I left, trying not to wake her up, and then left for work. It was only a block and a half away, but even in that short walk, I could see Gen Con had returned to Indianapolis in full force.

The streets were packed with people in shorts and T-shirts strolling over to the Indianapolis Convention Center, most of whom toted backpacks or rolled luggage carts filled with games of all kinds. As I walked up West Georgia Street, which had been turned into a beautiful promenade that would be filled with food trucks later in the day, I saw the line for Gen Con registration already emerged from the building and wrapped down South Capitol. That meant the queue of patient people stretched nearly a block already, and it would likely get longer as the day wore on.

According to Adrian Swartout — the woman who ran Gen Con for its majority owner, Peter Adkison — the line was always bad in the morning, but especially on Thursdays, the first official day of the show. Two years ago, I'd bought a four-day badge to the show, and I'd had it mailed out to me. I understood that not everyone could make plans for the convention that far ahead, but I was thrilled to not have to stand in that line.

Last year I'd gotten a staff badge for the show, since I was working as Gen Con's liaison with the Indianapolis Police Department. It was

a part-time gig I'd thought would be mostly honorary, a simple thank you for stopping Jewel Yin from killing any more people the year before that. It turned out to be a lot more work than anyone could have guessed, so much so that Adrian had hired me on as a full-timer right afterward.

This was my first show working as Gen Con's new director of security, and that had me almost as nervous as I'd been at the Diana Jones Award party the night before. The main difference was that last night I couldn't do anything to better my chances of success. When it came to improving security at the show, though, there was always something more I could do.

That said, Gen Con couldn't keep every one of its guests safe a hundred percent of the time. Of all the killings that had happened during the show over the past couple years, only one had actually taken place inside the convention center. Jewel had murdered Stephen Blair for stealing games, slitting his throat in the exhibit hall and leaving his body in the GameQuest booth, much to the horror of the company's owner, Rob Stone, and the man who'd found him, Leo Lamb.

The rest of them, though, had happened in the streets of Indianapolis, which had a decent reputation as having a fairly safe downtown area. Maybe the fact I came from Detroit colored that a bit by way of comparison, but I'd never felt threatened while walking the city's streets. Indianapolis depended on tourism and conventions and sports events — especially racing — for a huge chunk of its livelihood, and the city's government worked hard to protect that by making sure that people felt safe and happy to visit.

Even so, I'd come up with and implemented all sorts of security plans, including contingencies of any kind I could conceive. I'd worked closely with Commander Tubbs, the massive man who ran the Indianapolis Police's downtown district, making sure I knew what the city's resources were and how I could call on them when needed. We'd gone over the plans time and time again, and I'd drilled the staff through them until they were all sick of them.

If anything happened this year, though, I wanted to be ready for it.

"Liam!" Adrian said as I stepped into the office. She had a mysterious look on her face, but she gave me a hug anyhow. "Why aren't you answering your phone?"

"I'm not?" I checked it. The ringer was off. "Shit. I silenced it last night to make sure Nikki and I could get some sleep. You didn't try calling the room?"

"I figured you were on your way over here and that your bride deserved her rest."

I waved at the rest of the team there in the office: Derek Guder, Cliff "CJ" Jones, Jeannette LeGault, Scott Elliott, and a number of volunteers rushing back and forth. I'd been in town and working with them since Sunday, so we were past the meet-and-greet stage and full on into the job. They each nodded or waved at me and went right back to work.

"Thanks. I think. So what's up?"

"They want you down at the courthouse soon," Adrian said.

That baffled me a bit. "I didn't think they were going to need me until this afternoon," I said. "I explained to the prosecutor that I couldn't just sit in the courthouse all day long. I have a job to do here."

"True." Adrian took me by the shoulders and turned me around, and then walked me out through the show office's door. "And today, a big part of your job is helping to make sure that Tollak Spielmacher goes away to jail for a very long time."

"As much damage as he did to the show, I'm surprised they didn't go for the death penalty with him," Peter Adkison said as he walked up. "Not that I'm for the death penalty, but that is an option in this state, right?"

"Peter!" Adrian frowned at him.

He grinned. "Hey, I'm just asking."

"They do have it here," I said. "It's only available if the crime was committed with certain aggravating circumstances, and I don't think any of those apply in Tollak's case."

"Didn't he kill two people? That's not enough?"

"It could be, but the second one was arguably manslaughter. For it

to be murder, the prosecution would have to be able to convince the jury that Tollak meant to shove John Yau over that railing. Since he was attacking me at the time and he also went over himself, there's little chance of that getting through. I'm lucky I wasn't charged with manslaughter myself."

"Shouldn't that be considered self-defense?" Adrian's wrinkled her brow at me.

"That's what I would have had my attorney argue, of course, but the police never charged me on it. They're really going after Tollak for the murder of David Cheevers. The evidence for that isn't quite as clear, as no one saw him commit the crime."

"But they've found evidence to link him to the murder, right?"

I nodded. "They discovered bloodstains on some of Tollak's clothing, and the DNA on that positively matches that of Cheevers. The police also found a few witnesses who saw the two chatting in the bar that night."

"Couple that with Tollak's motives against Cheevers, and it should be an open-and-shut case," said Peter.

I shrugged. "I hope so. A good lawyer can stuff all sorts of doubts into a juror's mind. Maybe the blood came from a cut Cheevers had on him while they were talking."

"Or maybe they'll plead temporary insanity?" Adrian said. "After all, he had to be in a pretty rotten state of mind after two of his employees were killed before that. I mean, Anthony died not even an hour before that happened with Cheevers."

"They've already tried that," I said. "That may have had something to do with them not seeking the death penalty though. Jurors might have sympathized with Tollak over that. Also death penalty cases are horribly expensive. The prosecution really needs to want to end the killer's life to make it worthwhile. It's actually cheaper to keep someone in prison for the rest of their life rather than go through all the appeals and legal rigamarole required to have someone executed."

"Did you just say 'rigamarole'?" Peter asked. "You don't hear that every day."



“Hopefully it won’t come up again, but I’m going into a court of law today, so I can’t guarantee it.”

Peter clapped me on the back. “Better you than me, kid.”

“Why do they want you in there at all if they’re only trying him for the Cheevers murder?” Adrian said. “You didn’t have much to do with that.”

“I made the link between the two men through my investigation, and that’s going to help establish why and how the police went to get a warrant for Tollak’s arrest. Honestly, they might not need me, but they want to make sure they cover all their bases.”

Peter shrugged. “And in the meantime, you get to watch Tollak squirm. I’d almost go over there and do that myself except for one thing.”

“What’s that?” I said.

He threw his arms wide and gestured to the entire convention center. “I get to be here at Gen Con instead!”

## ***CHAPTER FOUR***

I hoofed it over from the convention center to the courthouse. It was only five blocks away, and after last night, a good walk in the morning air felt great. I went north on Capitol for one block, then turned right on Washington.

I bucked the flow of gamers headed toward the convention center. It made me smile to see hundreds of not thousands of them converging on the place. So many of them were noticeable for who they were.

Some of them had their badges already hanging from lanyards around their necks, whipped and twisting about in the sharp breezes that sliced between the downtown buildings. Those were easy to spot. Others wore the kind of clothes you wouldn't see on most people heading to work on a Thursday morning: T-shirts and shorts and sneakers. A few dressed in full costume, strolling down the street and grinning like they were on their way to a party.

The gamers on the streets often moved in packs of three or more, friends who'd come down for the show together. Sometimes they'd all play games together, but they could usually find the time for that back home, so other times they'd split up for hours at a time and reunite to catch up over meals and drinks later in the day. On the streets, though, they chatted with passion about the plans they had, the things they'd done, and the games they hoped to bring home with them.

As I got closer to the courthouse, the flow of gamers thinned out,

and I found fewer people on the streets. Most of these were professional people walking from one building to another with a strong sense of purpose. There were also a few of Indianapolis's homeless adults.

I'd encountered a number of these folks over the years. Part of my job as the director of security for Gen Con was to make sure that our guests felt safe, and so Commander Tubbs and I had chatted about the people living on the streets a few different times. While Indianapolis did have a number of homeless people in the downtown area, they also had some excellent programs for them. It was often just a matter of getting the people to check into these places, which wasn't always easy.

One recent initiative included installing homeless donation boxes in the downtown area. These asked you to slip some money into the boxes rather than hand it to someone on the street. That way the money would go toward proven programs that could help these people rather than to anything illicit or unhealthy.

My favorite one of the homeless guys, though, was a man who often sat on a corner a couple blocks east of the convention center. He carried a cardboard sign with him that said, "Why lie? It's for BEER." At least he was honest.

When I reached Delaware, I cut through the small park in front of the City-County Building and strode in through the front doors. Commander Tubbs stood waiting for me in the lobby.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Parker," the tall, dark man said as he flashed me a welcoming smile. "It's been all of a day now, right?"

"Did you miss me?"

"Not as much as I miss my wife and kids," he said. "Between this sideshow and Gen Con, I'm working long days this week."

"But we're putting away the bad guys, right?" I said. "So it can't be all bad."

"No, it's not," he said. "Let's get you a cup of coffee and get you upstairs."

I waved him off. "That's all right," I said.

"You don't drink coffee?"

“Sometimes, but I don’t need it to get going in the morning.”

“Uh-huh. And have you spent a lot of time in a courtroom?”

I shrugged. I’d visited one while I was in the police academy, but that was it. “Not really.”

“Then trust me,” he said. “You’re going to need the coffee.”

We passed through a metal detector and the security station without trouble. Tubbs looked at me as I emptied my pockets. “You don’t carry a sidearm?” he said.

“I have one at home,” I said. “I bought it back when I was training to be a police officer. I don’t travel with it though.”

“We have concealed carry laws here,” he said. “I can walk you through the process to get set up for a license.”

I shrugged. “I don’t really like guns,” I said. “I mean, if I’m wearing a badge, that’s different. I’m an authority figure then, a man on the side of the law. If I’m walking around with one under my jacket, I’m just another civilian looking for trouble, right?”

Tubbs shrugged. I could see he wasn’t close to convinced, but he was far too polite to call me an idiot.

“When you carry a gun around all the time, it’s becomes trouble waiting to go off,” I said. “Arguments that might otherwise devolve into a fistfight wind up with someone dead instead — and it’s not always the person you’d want.”

“I can see your point,” he said with a rueful shake of his head. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen some idiot pull a gun when he’d have been much better off just cussing someone out.”

“And then he winds up in here, fighting for his freedom,” I said. “I don’t want to be that guy.”

“Suit yourself,” Tubbs said. “But a man in your position isn’t just a civilian, and with the troubles you’ve had the last couple times you’ve been around for this convention of yours, I don’t think anyone would blame you for carrying a weapon with you.”

We grabbed a couple cups of coffee at a stand on the first floor. Tubbs filled his with sugar and milk, while I took mine black. Thus fortified, Tubbs escorted me upstairs in the elevator, to the Marion County Superior Court.

"Guns aren't allowed in Gen Con anyhow," I said.

"What?" Tubbs made a face at me. "Seriously? I've seen people with gigantic guns and swords running around that place."

"They're all replicas. The guns don't fire. The blades aren't sharp. The security team inspects and tags them with colored zip ties as they come into the center."

"I know they sell replica weapons in the hall. What about those?"

"We ask that they be packed away and secured in a bag or box before being removed from the center. We take this seriously. The last thing we want is for someone to get hurt at the show."

"Yeah, and can you imagine the publicity if someone decided to play *Highlander* in the middle of that convention? Whoo-ee."

I rubbed my forehead. "Don't give anyone any ideas. Please."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I don't think anyone here's heading over to the show. At least not until Friday night."

"So how do you think this is going to go?" I asked.

"The trial?" Tubbs shrugged. "Should be pretty open and shut, but Mr. Spielmacher's attorney's going to drag it out as long as he can. He gets paid by the hour, after all, and his client is happy to wrangle as many days as possible outside of our fine state prison. He's been up in Michigan City for most of the year, awaiting trial. We moved him down here now that it's finally going to happen. He's staying in the Marion County Jail Two."

"Two?" I asked. "Is it a sequel?"

"It's a privately operated prison that's only a few blocks from here," he said. "The Marion County Sheriff's department runs the prisoners back and forth as needed. It's close enough they could just walk, but it's less trouble that way."

"Privately run?" I said. "That doesn't strike you as being rife with the potential for trouble?"

"I don't recall anyone asking my opinion when they set it up," he said with a grimace. "It's not a bad place, though, and much newer than our other facilities. So far, they manage it pretty well. Or so I hear."

"So how long do you think the trial will last?"

“Could be a few hours if there really was justice in the world. Might take days. Even weeks.”

“Much as I love you all down here, I have a honeymoon to get to next week.”

“They shouldn’t have you in there for long. They’ll get to you today or tomorrow. In the meantime, just try to stay awake. These things can get pretty dull.”

I took a sip at the coffee to steel myself, then walked into the courtroom. At first, no one turned to look back at me. All their attention was focused on the men standing in the front of the room, before the bench, behind which sat an fierce, black-robed woman with steel-colored hair.

I didn’t recognize one of the men up there, although from his stylish suit and slicked-back silver hair, I picked him out as Tollak’s lawyer. The man next to him, of course, was someone I would never forget: Tollak Spielmacher himself. He wore a suit at least as stylish as that of his attorney, rather than a prison uniform. His attorney must have convinced the judge that having the man show up in jailhouse clothes would prejudice the jury against him, no matter how rightfully so.

“He looks good for someone who spent the last year behind bars,” I said to Tubbs.

Tollak’s lawyer spun around then and spotted me. “That’s him,” he said, stabbing a finger at me. “That’s your real killer right there. Bailiff! Arrest that man!”

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

Confused and surprised, I stopped where I was and looked behind me to see if Tollak's attorney was pointing at someone else. By the time I turned back around, every eye in the room had turned toward me. I'd been hoping to just slip unseen into one of the benches in the back until they needed me to testify, but it didn't seem like I'd be able to get away with that now.

"He does mean you," Tubbs said. "Pretty sure about that."

The judge gave me a hard stare from her perch behind her high-topped desk. The nameplate in front of her read "Hon. Judge Marie Ewald."

"Mr. Parker, I presume?" she said. "Would you mind approaching the bench?"

I did as she requested and walked down the courtroom's central aisle until I stood right in front of her. She sized me up like I'd come there to date her only daughter, and she glared like she wanted to show me the door.

"Some people tell me you're a hero," she said.

She just left that there, waiting for me to answer. "I wouldn't say that. I was just doing my job."

"It sounds to me like you did a lot more than that."

"Indeed he did, your honor!" Tollak's lawyer said from behind me. "Not only did he commit one of the crimes of which my client has been accused, he did it while trying to murder him in cold blood!"

I glanced back to get a better look at him. He wore a perpetually disgusted look on his face, the kind that made you want to punch him in the nose just to see if you could change it. One look at the judge convinced me that would be a bad idea here.

"Your client is not on trial for Mr. Yau's death, Mr. Lamont," Judge Ewald said. "Let's stick to the incident with Mr. Cheevers, shall we?"

"The incident with Mr. Yau goes to show the prejudices this witness in the Cheevers case bears against my client," Lamont said. "How can we trust the testimony of a man who tried to kill my client?"

"I saved his life!" It surprised me how much Lamont's lies pissed me off. "If it hadn't been for me, you never would have had the chance to meet your client. He'd be dead."

"Just as you intended," Lamont said with a smarmy smirk. "You claim there was this so-called, mysterious second gunman up there on the balcony with you —"

"More than a dozen people saw him go up there with me."

"If I can finish!" Lamont said. "Do you think you can let me finish?"

"Gentlemen!" the judge said. "We are not doing this out here. Not now." She banged her gavel. "In my chambers. The jury will take a ten-minute recess while we work this out."

I turned to my right and saw the fourteen people sitting in the jury box stand up to leave. I hadn't even realized they were there, but you can bet Lamont had been playing to them the entire time. I cursed the slick bastard under my breath.

I looked back to Commander Tubbs to see if he planned to accompany me into the judge's chambers. He gave me a "you're on your own" shrug along with a friendly smile, then sat down in the back of the room. I would get no help from that quarter.

The prosecutor, though, stormed right after me. She was a sharp-faced woman with shoulder-length black hair and just a hint of crow's feet wrinkling around her eyes. She looked well-rested and ready to go, a real fighter ready to take down her opponent with a



series of well-placed legal blows.

"Nomiki Stavros," she said, putting out her hand for me to shake. "Don't worry about a thing. We'll get you through this."

"I'm not even sure what this is yet?"

"You're about to find out."

We filed into the judge's chambers, which had a long conference table in it. The judge sat down at the far end of the table and motioned for us to join her. Stavros and I picked the chairs arrayed along a wide set of windows that let in a bit of the morning sun. Tollak and Lamont sat opposite us, facing north and glaring at us.

Tollak gave me a pitying smile as he leaned back in his seat. I could see that he didn't share Stavros's convictions that I wouldn't be the one who wound up going to jail here.

"My client has the right to be heard," Lamont said as he leaned back into his chair. Somehow he managed to blend a look of both disgust and glee on his face as he eyed me. "This man tried to kill him last August, and somehow *he* winds up in jail!"

"You can cut the theatrics," Stavros said. "The jury isn't here in the room with us, and you're not fooling anyone else. We've gone over this before. Mr. Parker's involvement in that incident on that night has been fully investigated, and he has been cleared of all wrongdoing."

"Just because his pals on the police department were willing to take the word of his many friends in the so-called adventure gaming industry doesn't mean the truth has been told. They discounted just about everything my client had to say about that evening."

"You mean, they saw through his lies?"

"I think that's for a jury to decide rather than the police, don't you? And since we happen to have one handy..."

"Enough!" Judge Ewald said. "You two will not behave like this in my courtroom. This is not some tabloid TV show."

"If that's so, then where's justice, your honor?" Lamont said. "It's possible that the evidence the police found was fabricated, either by them or by the witness sitting across from me, and I should be permitted to explore that line of questioning."

“Possible doesn’t mean probable or even plausible,” said Stavros. “If you’re looking for speculative fiction, I suggest you head down to Gen Con this weekend for the Writer’s Symposium instead. It’ll be of a much higher quality.”

“We have Pat Rothfuss as a guest of honor this year,” I said.

“Ooh,” Judge Ewald said. “He’s good. I hear John Scalzi might be there too.”

I smiled at her, pleased to have found a fellow fan, even in these chambers. Lamont wasn’t so impressed.

“You see, your honor?” he said with feigned exasperation. “This is exactly what I’m talking about. This young man uses his popularity and notoriety as one of these purported ‘geeks’ to earn a free pass with those of his kind.”

The judge leveled a devastating glare at Lamont. “Are you calling me a geek, counselor?”

The notion flustered Lamont. “That’s not what I meant at all,” he said, backpedaling hard. “I would never treat your honor with anything less than the utmost respect.”

“Respect would start with being honest with me,” the judge said. “So, let me be honest with you. You already had your chance to explore this avenue of inquiry during the pretrial discovery. You had the opportunity to interview Mr. Parker about the night in question then, and you failed to do so. In my courtroom, you will restrict your questions and commentary to the case at hand and not grasp at whatever straws might come your way, no matter how ridiculously thin they might be.”

“But, your honor — !”

“It’s all right,” Tollak said, cutting off his attorney’s objection. He looked me dead in the eyes. “Liam and I both know exactly what happened that night. If he can live with the truth being buried as it has, I suppose I can learn to do the same.”

I knew he was just trying to get me to misbehave, and I wasn’t about to fall for it. “You’re welcome,” I said.

He arched an eyebrow at me. “For what?”

“Saving your life.”

"Was that before or after you pushed me over the side of that balcony?"

I smiled at him. "Next time you're on a balcony, don't charge at someone standing next to the railing. Oh, wait. That shouldn't be a problem for you. They don't have too many balconies in prisons do they?"

"You self-righteous little prick." Tollak's cheeks reddened. "You come into my industry, where I've been working for twenty years, and you frame me for a murder I didn't commit. What the hell did you have against Derek Cheevers anyhow?"

That put me back in my chair. "Are you — did you lose your mind in prison? I didn't even know about Cheevers until after he died. And I have a great alibi for the time of the murder, if you don't remember, with a dozen police officers who can back me up. I was finding Anthony Gallela's corpse."

"If you hadn't come along and ruined everything with Jewel—" He steamed at me. "Forget it. It wasn't you, was it? Not you alone. It was that whole goddamn industry that drove me to this place in my life." He stood up then, his eyes blazing with fury, and stabbed his finger into the table between us, emphasizing each word. "*That whole! Fucking! Show!*"

Judge Ewald slapped her bare hand down on the table. "That's enough!" She turned toward the door. "Bailiff! Come here please!"

"You don't need to do that," Lamont said as he tried to decide who needed to be calmed down more, the judge or his client. "Everything is under control."

"No, it is not!" Tollak glared down at me. "This little bastard has fucked up my life two years in a row. Well now it's my goddam turn, isn't it?"

"And how do you think you're doing to do that from behind bars?" Stavros said. As the words left her mouth, I started to wonder just what the man had planned. Was this just an impotent jailhouse threat, or had he made some kind of arrangements with the outside world?

"Just you fucking watch!"

The bailiff burst into the room and marched straight for Tollak. At that exact moment I spotted a red dot that appeared on Tollak's chest. It took me an instant to realize that it shone with the intensity of a laser pointer, the kind my professors had used in college to emphasize details on the projection screen during their presentations.

I glanced at Stavros and saw she wasn't pointing anything at the man but an expression of disgust. The light must have been coming from somewhere behind us, I realized. Someplace outside.

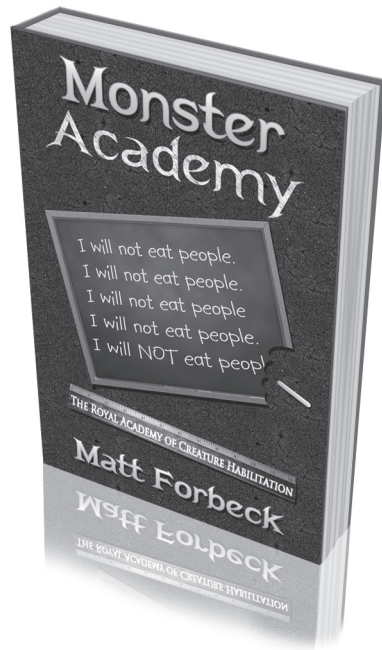
It wasn't a light from a simple laser pointer. It was from the sights of a gun.

# School Is In!

The king orders all monsters put to death, but when a vampire turns his granddaughter into a young bloodsucker, the king repents and founds the Royal Academy for Creature Habilitation, a.k.a Monster Academy.

Under the watchful eye of Mr. Mortis, the undead wizard who serves as the academy's headmaster, Ruddy — an orphaned young dragon who takes the form of a skinny teen — must deal with a demonic girl, goblin quadruplets, and a troll-orc bully, as well as teachers who threaten him with punishments ranging from detention to execution. Along the way, he makes friends with Princess Addy and becomes best pals with a werewolf boy too.

Soon, Ruddy learns the secret of what really happened to his parents and how the Great Evil was defeated. Armed with that knowledge, he and his friends must choose sides and grow up fast, knowing that if they fail these final exams, the entire kingdom may fall with them too.



## Coming Soon