

## The Writers – A Continuation

By Shiloh Skye

I twiddled the pads of my thumbs, looking down at the table as the feral kitsune lit up another cigarette. My nose twitched at the smell of the sweet smoke wafting in the air, filling up the makeshift interrogation room the detective had pulled me into. Saliva gathered on my long canine tongue as anxiety from the night's events drudged up the call of old vices.

"So, you're relatively new to this crowd, am I correct?" detective Steele asked, his nine tails draping across both arms of the ornate red chair he sat upon.

"Uh, yeah. Honestly, I was just kind of happy to be included earlier, but after what happened, I'm a bit shaky. FtD really can't remember anything about what happened?"

The kitsune shook his head. "He's still recovering, but he says he has no memory of anything before Vixyy's speech."

"Damn. Well, at least he's alive. He's been really nice to me all this time, and I think his work's great, so it'd be really sad to lose him."

The detective's whiskers twitched as he sucked a few millimeters of embers toward himself. He looked down at me, puffed again, and let silence keep me talking.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I know much that'll help. I haven't really seen or heard anything this whole time."

"Oh, but I think you have, Skyewriter. If that is your real name."

I blinked.

"Does anybody use their real name here?"

"That's besides the point, kid."

"Well, I'm not really a kid. I'm twenty-eight." I said, scratching nervously behind my own floppy ear.

"Plus, I can't be a suspect, right? I mean, because I'm so...uh...new...to the...prompt..."

Detective Steele let me trail off, staring at me with a *steely* gaze until the message finally clicked.

My eye twitched.

"But...but....why me?!" I asked, my voice growing into a canine whine. "Why am I a suspect? I just got here!"

"It is precisely that fact that makes you a suspect!"

"What?!"

"A new dog arrives in town and suddenly, by some coincidence, a murder occurs. Now tell me, Skye, how do you explain that?"

*"Attempted murder!"* I protested. "And these people are the only writers I've ever found who actually read each other's writing! Do you know how rare it is to find a writing group like that? Why would I hurt any of them?"

"You're dodging the question."

"Because it doesn't make sense! Just because I'm new doesn't mean I did it. Anybody could have tried to kill him. Somebody could have a grudge after he hit them with one of those face slug things, or maybe they're jealous of how good his writing is, or maybe he used too many adverbs and somebody finally snapped."

"Precisely!" The kitsune smothered a cigarette in the ash tray and lit up a second. He blew a cloud of smoke into the air that brought a bead of drool to the corner of my mouth. "Continue. What else could have happened? Be descriptive and prove to me why you shouldn't be a suspect. Remember, show don't tell."

I cocked my head, struggling to figure out this detective's angle.

"You want me to just...make something up? Like, make a story about what could have happened?"

"Indeed. Make something up. Go ahead. I'm listening."

The detective simply stared at me for an uncomfortably long time, watching as I tried to piece his motivations together. I had never been good with puzzles, much less mysteries. Was this some roundabout way of getting a confession out of me? Was the fox playing me for a dumb puppy? Or...could it be...

My muzzle fell open.

"Oh my god. You're trying to solve this mystery with stories, aren't you? You're having everyone come up with wild stories and hoping somebody writes the correct explanation."

The kitsune grinned.

"It's experimental detective work, my boy."

"It's ridiculous detective work. Who's behind that avatar? Jessica Fletcher? Is this restaurant in Cabot Cove?"

The detective squinted.

"What do you mean?"

"You're a detective! You haven't heard of *Murder, She Wrote*?"

"I'm more of a Kolchak fox."

"Of course you are."

I sat back and crossed my arms in a huff. My tail curled up between my legs and I played idly with the beautifully-rendered golden fur as my thoughts ran in circles. The ever-present scent of cigarette smoke inflamed my temper.

“Writers are liars,” I finally said. “You’ll get a thousand lies before you get even one fact about the case, and even then that fact will be some elaborate way of saying the sky is blue.” I sighed, shaking my head. “I can try to think of something, but I don’t really know much about these people. I came here to get to know them better.”

“Then write what you do know. First story. Give it to me.”

I shrugged. “Alright. I’ll see what I can do.”

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You walk out of the room and light up another cigarette after interviewing the Labrador. You shake your head and frown, rolling your eyes. The lab knew nothing, and was particularly insistent about it. Perhaps getting a prompter who knew this crowd better would be of greater benefit to your investigation.

You start down the hallway toward the opulent dining room where the rest of the prompt writers await you. There will be no shortage of people to interview. The night is still young.

But as you walk the halls of this virtual complex, you pause. The sound of something dragging across the floor rounds the corner in front of you. Your detective instincts immediately kick in, imagining the sound as that of a body being dragged across the carpet. You press your side against the wall and shuffle to the corner, peering around it to find the source of the noise.

But it isn’t a body at all. It’s the sound a bloody axe tip being dragged across the floor. Red eyes glow in the shadow of the hall as a figure stumbles nearer and nearer. You want to run away, but your desire to glimpse the villain keeps you cemented in place. The figure comes mere meters away from where you stand. The shadows recede just enough for you to identify the perpetrator.

Helix, the silver-haired tiger who had seemed so sagely a mere half an hour earlier, now stumbles with crazed eyes, foaming at the mouth, toward your hiding place.

“I can sense it,” the tiger yells. “This story is being told in second person! The fourth wall is broken! The framing is bad! I will find you and kill you for this, you poor excuse for a writer!”

The tiger rounds the corner and swings the axe at your head, splintering the wood-paneled walls. You duck and run.

“Where are they! Where is the amateur who didn’t read guide four!?”

You run back to the room. Skye emerges from it and looks toward you, startled.

“Run, Skye! Ru—”

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“Wait, hold on.” Detective Steel leaned forward, two more cigarettes into his binge. “What the hell is this?”

I shrugged. “Sorry, I don’t really write mysteries, and the only mystery I’ve ever read was this choose your own adventure book Joshiah wrote forever ago. It was in second person. I don’t think Helix likes that. Especially with a bad frame.”

“What’s a frame?”

My eyes darted around the room. “Uhhh, you know, I’m not sure,” I said, letting slip a nervous laugh. “I gotta reread his writing guide on that, I guess. Anyway, we’re getting off track. I’ll try for real this time.”

“Please.”

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FromTheDead had lost track of time exploring the halls of the rest of the building. He had simply slipped away from the dinner to use the facilities, but his curiosity got the better of him. The complex attached to the restaurant was huge. He wanted to get lost in it, so that’s exactly what he did.

He wandered the ornate halls, admiring the wood paneling and its lovingly-rendered carvings, pondering the size of the endowments on nude marble statues, and playing with the occasional ornamental weapon that had been mounted on the walls, letting out “hyaa”s and “take that”s as he sparred invisible foes.

But as he fenced a particularly skilled imaginary dragon, he caught the scent of chlorine in the air. FtD dropped the sword and hurried off to chase the smell, hoping it would lead to what he guessed.

Indeed, when he opened the door at the end of the hall he found himself in a pool room, thick with the smell of pool water and alight with the sun streaming through huge skylights. FtD squeed in delight, noticing a hot tub and sauna across the way. This place had everything!

The little blue guy ran forward and jumped into the water, crashing down into a cannonball and sending water splashing up onto the shore. He paddled around with his tiny arms, laughing as his robe billowed around him and wondering what shenanigans he could pull on the others if they joined him for a swim. Maybe he could put some slugs in the deep end and have them all attack at once. Brilliant!

But remembering the other writers also made him remember the dinner. He yelped, realizing that more time had passed than intended, and he began looking around for an exit from the pool.

He turned his head, scanning the shore.

He paddled in a circle. Once. Twice. Three times.

No pool ladder. No stairs.

FtD swam to the edge of the pool and tried to reach up and grab the edge, but his gloved hands simply clipped through the concrete and fell back into the water.

“Uh oh...”

He tried to jump up but couldn’t get the height he needed. He tried pushing himself into the wall and glitching himself to shore. No luck. Finally, he tried moving from wall to wall, searching for a place where the glitch on the pool’s edge wasn’t present, but he found nothing.

“Fine, I’ll just log out.”

FtD brought up his VR screen and clicked the button. Impossibly, the button was greyed out. He was stuck in the game. He felt himself beginning to panic.

**“Hehehehehe.”**

A robotic voice cackled from behind FtD. He circled around to meet it.

Upon the shore across the pool sat a mechanical fox.

“Alex? Is that you?”

The fox laughed again.

**“Oh, no. Not Alex. She’s still at the dinner using my sweet liquid body to chat people up. But don’t worry about her. She sent me to take care of this little task instead.”**

FtD’s head spun.

“Oh my god. You’re Paula, aren’t you?”

**“Bingo.”**

Paula ran her paw across the edge of the pool, scattering ripples across the water’s surface.

**“It’s a great alibi, you know—sending your character to—”**

“It’s so awesome to finally meet you!” FtD yelled, the yellow dots of his eyes shifting into stars. “

Paula froze, staring at FtD as his eyes shimmered.

“I’ve read all your stories! I’ve even written some fanfiction! Oh, but you probably wouldn’t want to see that. Some of it’s not, uh...Wait, can you sign something for me? I just gotta find a way out of this pool first and then I can find something you can sign. Can you wait a sec?”

Paula continued to stare as FtD twirled around in the pool, still looking for an exit. She played the sound of a sigh from one of her speakers.

**“As I was saying...”** she continued. **“Hacking in and removing the pool ladders was easy. Alex got the idea from that old game, remember? Where you could drown people by removing the ladders? So much fun.”**

FtD stopped paddling and turned back to Paula, starry eyes reverting back to circles.

“Wait, you took out the ladders? You’re...you’re trying to kill me?”

**“That’s the goal!”**

“But...but why?!”

Paula paused. Her eye lights flickered.

**“Honestly, I don’t know. Skye’s writing this, and he hasn’t come up with a motive yet. Hold on a sec.”**

A long time passed with only the sound of FtD treading water to ease the tension.

**“Aha! I’ve got it. You’re a cyborg and I’m a cyborg. This groups not big enough for the both of us! That’s good enough, right?”**

“Wait, I’m a cyborg?”

**“For the purposes of this story, yes.”**

“Oh no.”

**“And unlike me, you’re only water-resistant for a limited time. Enjoy your swim!”**

Paula turned to leave FtD to his fate, mechanical tail swaying behind her.

“Wait, Paula!” FtD called. “You can’t do this!”

**“Why not?”**

“Because it’s inconsistent with your characterization!”

Paula paused, tail falling still.

**“Alex gave me a villainous arc. Sue her, not me.”**

The cyborg fox left the room, leaving FtD to drown and be found by HAAS\_Bio\_Fox soon after, his cyborg body having barely kept him alive.

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“Hmmm, intriguing...” Steele said, sitting back in his chair. He smothered the butt of his fourth cigarette into an ash tray on the table.

“Really? You liked it?” I asked, beaming with a hint of pride.

“Well, it needs revisions to make sense, but with some editing...”

“That’ll take me like a month. We don’t have that kind of time.”

“Fair enough.” The detective lit up a fifth cigarette. “Next story, please.”

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Hauke cut into a piece of chicken, impaled it on his fork, and placed it delicately in his beak. The cockatrice swallowed, washing the poultry down with a glass of red wine and dabbing his beak with a napkin that left crimson stains upon the white cloth. He smirked, satisfied by the juiciness of the food and the sweetness of the alcohol. Virtual food may have been virtual, but it was also virtually quite delicious.

He looked down the long table at his fellow writers who chatted about anything and everything as they chowed down and awaited whatever second speech Vixxy would inevitably give.

His meal was interrupted by the buzz of his phone upon the tabletop. He grabbed it immediately, having waited all night for this call. Hauke pressed the answer button and a blue-robed, yellow-eyed FromTheDead appeared on screen.

“Hey, Hauke! How’s dinner going? Has it descended into chaos without me yet? Haha.”

From floated on his back in a pool, beads of moisture smeared the image on the outside lens of the camera as he held it above himself in selfie-mode.

Hauke smirked. "It's going fine. I'm sure it'd be a lot more chaotic with you here, anyway."

"What? I'm the picture of calm. I've never brought chaos to anything in my life."

"Sure, kid."

"Well, anyway, you were wrong. I didn't find that portal to a secret level at the bottom of the pool. Maybe somebody else got to it first. But I'm calling you while I'm still in the water, like you told me to."

"Great. Now make sure to look at the phone screen, alright?"

"Okay. Are you gonna show me somethi..."

Hauke removed his protective glasses, revealing his basilisk eyes.

FtD's yellow eyes shrank to pinpricks as a small "eek" escaped him. Hauke watched as FtD's petrified body capsized, dropping the phone into the drink and shorting out the video.

Hauke smiled and put his phone in his pocket.

"That's what you get for calling me a chicken, Blinky."

The cockatrice took another drink of wine.

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"Does basilisk petrification work through video chat? And in VR, no less."

"I don't know. Want to go test it out yourself?"

"I'd rather not," said the detective, lighting another cigarette. "Anyway, your story assumes FtD called Hauke a chicken at some point. Did he ever actually do that?"

"I don't know." I admitted. "I've seen other people do it, so I figured it probably annoys him. I mean, I thought he was a rooster when I first joined the prompt. It's possible."

An awkward silence lingered between us, the detective's judgment falling heavy upon me.

"I told you to write what you know."

"I'm trying! Like I said, I don't know much." I huffed, crossing my arms and slumping in my chair. My tail wacked furiously against the seat as I tried to think of a new story to tell. I had nothing.

"What did the others write, anyway?" I asked instead. "The ones you've already interviewed."

"Well, Walt was first,"

"Of course."

"And he fell asleep in the middle of the interview."

"That's fine. The guy writes so well he deserves a nap."

“Wertyda and his friend Diego claimed the death was probably a prank.”

“Good character analysis. That would be on-brand for Dead.”

“Zakaridus described himself going to find something to drink rather than investigating the murder.”

“Relatable storytelling. If only that were me.”

“FCNeko came in here with a dozen people all fighting over wanting to be interviewed first.”

“Those would be his characters, yeah. They’re amazing.”

“Marmelmm blamed the butler.”

“Guy doesn’t waste any time. Short, sweet, and to the point.”

SpottedHyeness gave me a lesson on clipping through objects, and suggested it could have been used in the attack.

“Oh, that’s clever! Good use of the setting, too.”

“SeaDragon actually confessed to the crime himself, but said he was only doing it to see if a confession would ‘end the game’.”

“Pretty unique take. I love meta stuff like that.”

“TheFireTiger and his robot brought up some video footage that proved he and a few others weren’t the culprits.”

“Ooh, bringing in surveillance footage as a plot device. Good angle.”

“Vixyy accused me of being an AI, here to prove I’m a better writer than you all.”

“Trust me, if you were an AI she could prove you wrong all on her own.”

“Alex also accused me of being an AI, but one that had destroyed the world and had uploaded your consciousness to this program.”

“Ooh, high concept. She writes the best AI stuff.”

“Morning-Mist turned the whole room black and white when he walked in, and I was honestly too distracted by the smooth jazz that played the entire time he was here to remember his story.”

“They’re so good with moody stuff. I love it.”

“And Duroc was more horny than helpful.”

“There’s always one.”

I sat back and contemplated all of the answers, trying to piece them all together in my mind. So many stories. So many great ideas and quirky characters from so many great and talented people. From the sound of it, they had all shown off their strengths, too. Every one of them had worked so hard to try to write great stories and solve this mystery for a nearly-departed friend. It made me smile.

“I have one more idea,” I said. “And I think this one might be my best.”



"Lay it on me."

I took a deep breath.

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FromTheDead dove into the pool. It was shallower than he thought. He hit his head on the bottom and passed out. HAAS\_Bio\_Fox found him a little while later. The end.

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The detective stared at me.

I stared back.

"That's it?"

"Ever heard of Occam's razor?" I asked. "Simplest explanation is usually the right one."

The detective chewed on his tenth cigarette.

"Go on."

"Drama is fun. Stories are fun. But sometimes they muddy the waters and make us want real life to be more interesting than it actually is. That's why I don't like your 'experimental detective work'. It takes a normal situation and blows it out of proportion. You've essentially had me accuse three good people tonight. If you continue, it'll result in awesome writers getting blamed for things they didn't do, and they can't post to Furafinity from prison."

The detective sighed and shook his head. "You make some good points. I suppose this was a long shot, after all." He put out his cigarette, which spilled over the edge of the now-filled ash tray. "Well, it was worth a shot. In the absence of evidence, perhaps we must chalk it up to an accident and leave it be, like you said."

I nodded.

"Can I go back to the party?"

"Please."

I stood up and walked to the door of the room. I placed my paw on the doorknob, sighed, and turned back. "Detective?"

"Yeah?"

"Your method might be flawed, but...at the very least, it was fun. Everybody got to write some great stories about each other, so...don't be too broken up about it."

Steel smiled. "I appreciate that, my boy."

"Good luck on the investigation."

I opened the door and slipped out, retreating down the hall to rejoin the party as Steele lit up yet another cigarette.

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Skye sipped at a glass of amontillado. He had heard of the stuff, of course, but had never tried it himself. Hopefully he wouldn't be bricked into a wall for having some. The sweet dry liquid swirled in his mouth as he analyzed the taste.

"Isn't it great?" FromTheDead asked. The blue-robed writer sat next to Skye at the long dinner table holding his own glass. "I taste notes of tobacco, hazelnut, and hydrochloric acid"

Skye raised a whiskered brow. "How do you know what hydrochloric acid tastes like?"

"Pro science tip! Never put your drinking water in a beaker. You'll mix it up with the rest of your chemicals."

Skye grinned and shook his head, cutting into a slice of steak and finding it medium rare, with just enough blood. He popped a piece into his mouth and chewed on it, savoring the taste as it paired with the wine.

"Oh! Skye, I meant to tell you," FtD said. "I ran a new experiment yesterday and the results were amazing. Check this out."

FtD's eyes blinked out. A yellow loading bar appeared on his face instead, running up to a hundred percent in a matter of seconds, and ending with a loud ding as if cookies were ready to come out of the oven.

"There we go. So, you know that story you're working on that's taking you forever to write a second part for?"

"Zweihaender?" Skye asked, chuckling. "Don't remind me. I'm still moving at a crawl. It's so emotional and hard to get right."

"But you know what's going to happen in it, yeah?"

"Of course. I have it all planned out."

"Well, so do I!"

Skye squinted and looked over at FtD, whose yellow eyes had turned into upside down half circles of glee.

"What do you mean?"

"I've created a program that can predict with 98.7% accuracy exactly how a story is going to pan out!"

"No way."

"Here! Take a look!"

FromTheDead reached into his robe and produced a piece of paper, handing it to Skye.

The Labrador took it in his paw. He read the header.

*Synopsis of Zweihaender Part 2*

"Read it and tell me how accurate it is."

Skye laughed.

"Dead, there's no way. I worked too hard on this for it to be that predictable."

"C'mon, read it!"

Skye rolled his eyes and returned to the piece of paper. Well, the synopsis was only a page long. What could it hurt? It couldn't possibly predict everything. The errors would at least be entertaining.

Skye read the synopsis...

Then he read it again...

And again...

He read the synopsis three times, a grim countenance growing on his face with every read.

It was all there. Everything in its exact place. Everything that would happen to Gareth and Naya in the coming second half. There was even a paragraph analyzing the subtextual elements and the overarching themes and the symbolism.

Skye swallowed, a shadow falling across his face.

"From, this is...it's..."

"Cool, right?"

The Labrador lowered the page and stared at FtD, his paws shaking.

"Not just cool. Incredible!" he said, smiling and pointing at the paper. "How'd you manage this? Did you just feed the first part in and it popped out a summary for the second?"

"Yup! That's all it takes."

"That's borderline magic."

"All science! I swear. The dragon's blood and fairy dust are only used for their chemical properties."

"Sure they are," Skye laughed, taking another sip of wine. "Well, it's pretty awesome, but I'd be careful with something like this. It could spoil a lot of people's endings, and they might be a bit more upset about it than me. I like it when people are able to put the pieces together, but some writers are worse about that than others. They might end up killing you for it, or something."

"Haha! Can you imagine?"

Skye and FtD shared another laugh as they continued sampling the amontillado and dining on steak.

"Oh, Skye. One more thing I've just got to ask."

"Lay it on me," Skye said, taking a swig from his wine glass.

"What's a Lancarian?"

Skye froze, still as stone, the swig of wine falling still in his mouth.

“I also created a program that can figure out what people are going to write next! You know, up to a few years down the line. It’s not perfect though, so it can’t get past the title and the first few chapters. A lot of your books had that word all over the place. Lancarian. What is it?”

Skye put down his glass of wine, which scraped upon the wood table. He swallowed, dabbing his muzzle with a napkin, which stained the white linen with crimson spots. He looked at FtD and cracked a slow smile.

“I’ll tell you later, Dead. But first, did you know this place has a pool?”