



# HANK WHITSON - FICTION PORTFOLIO

---

[hankwhitson.com](http://hankwhitson.com) | [linkedin.com/in/hank-whitson-iii/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/hank-whitson-iii/)

626.818.6648 | [rhwhitson@gmail.com](mailto:rhwhitson@gmail.com)

## CONTENTS

---

P. 1-3: Viral Video Script Samples | P. 3-7: Interactive Fiction Samples | P. 8-14: ARG Writing Samples  
P. 14-17: Short Fiction Sample | P. 17-25: Long-Form Fiction Excerpts | P. 25: Links to Short Stories

---

## SHORT VIRAL VIDEO SCRIPTS

---

*The following scripts were written on spec as potential viral content to promote a streaming series starring a violent ex-military vigilante. The assignment specified quick, low-budget scenes with a mix of action and psychology.*

### Intervention

We see Grant Bastion holed up in a motel room, preparing his arsenal, when we hear shouting one room over. After trying to ignore it, the sounds change to obvious violence, with screams and sobbing. Sighing, Grant goes to knock on the door. A brute of man answers, bloodied handle of liquor in one hand, and a woman sprawled on the floor behind him. Grant and the abuser look at each other for a beat, then the fight begins. Grant's internal monologue plays calmly over the audio of the fight.

GRANT VO:

"I'd like to think the Demon has the right idea."

The man swings a left hook, and Grant steps back, then headbutts the man in the nose. He shakes himself, apoplectic, and then swings the forty in his right hand.

GRANT VO:

"I'd like to believe a couple broken bones are enough to put somebody back on the right track."

Grant catches the man's wrist before the bottle can make contact, and almost casually snaps his radius and ulna. His pulse hasn't raised by a beat. The man collapses to the ground howling, clutching his ruined arm. The beaten woman gets up and gets out, murmuring half-heard thanks. Grant begins to leave.

GRANT VO:

"If only the world were that soft and fluffy."

The brute rises and lunges for a handgun on table. Frank pauses in the door, looking over his shoulder. We cut to the exterior as a gun reports. Back in the apartment, the Penalizer stands over the dead man, stone-faced.

GRANT VO:

"But I know better."

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 2

---

## Over the Counter

Open on a 24-hour pharmacy. Grant Bastion walks in and goes to the snack aisle.

GRANT VO:

"Lots of vets have problems with pills. Get hurt over there. Get hooked back here. Others start when they get home. Looking for a way to plug the holes. Dull the pain."

We see a pharmacist handing a white bag to an elderly woman who thanks him, all smiles. Then we hear the snarl of motorcycles outside. The bikes screech to a halt and seconds later, four bikers burst into the store, all armed. The leader rushes the pharmacy, grabs the pharmacist and demands everything on a list. The other thugs corral the terrified shoppers in a corner of the store. Except Grant. Who is still inspecting the snack aisle.

GRANT VO:

"Me? I've never had that particular issue."

A biker sees Grant and levels his sawed-off shotgun at him.

BIKER:

"Hey! Are you retarded? I said--"

The biker takes a step forward and Grant grabs the gun, uses it as a lever to twist the man's hand unnaturally. Tendons pop, bones snap, and the gun shoots wild. The other bikers look at the sound of the disturbance. Grant yanks the biker in front of himself as a human shield. The biker's back erupts with gunfire as his friends unload at Grant.

GRANT VO:

"Way I see it, if a guy gets to know pain, they can become buddies. Swap war stories. Speak each other's language."

Grant waits for the salvo to clear, and then fires his remaining shot, catching one of the other bad guys in the head. Two down. He advances on the guy robbing the pharmacy, ditches his human shield, and swings the empty gun at the third biker's throat. He falls to the ground, choking and dropping his handgun.

GRANT VO:

"And after a while..."

As Grant turns to face the remaining biker, a bullet catches him in the shoulder and he drops. The remaining biker jeers as he steps forward, manic and menacing.

GRANT VO:

"...Nothing can hurt you."

---

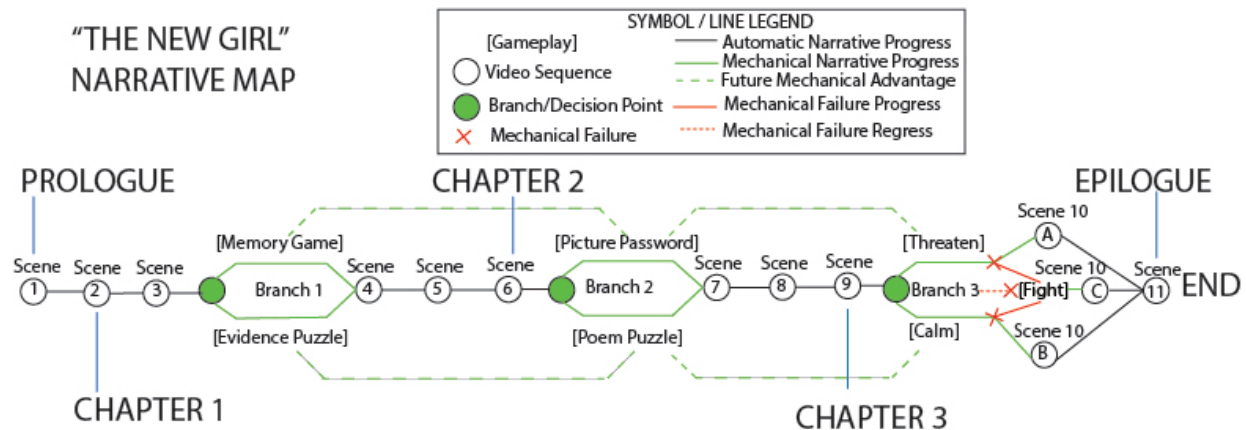
# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 3

Grant grabs the dropped handgun, whips around and shoots the guy in the ankle, the knee, the thigh, groin, upward until he is striped with holes. He falls to the floor, writhing, and then Grant shoots him one more time.

Panicked shoppers run screaming out of the market, while the checker and pharmacist look on, dumbstruck with fear. Grant inspects the bullet hole in his shoulder. He grabs an ace bandage off the shelf, pauses by the snack aisle and grabs a bag of gummy bears, then places a \$20 on the counter before walking out.

## INTERACTIVE FICTION 1 - APP BASED FILM

*This is a piece of interactive fiction, designed as an app-based film with simple interactive components. The prompt called for a murder mystery story, accompanied by mechanics that would lead to narrative branches. See the flowchart below, followed by the opening chapter.*



### Sequence 1: Coming To

Dani wakes in the woods with vomit on her chin and cheek. It's just before dawn, and the faint howl of sirens approach in the distance. As she tries to push herself up off the leaves, she realizes that her hands are covered in blood. So is her blouse. And her jeans. A hoarse whimper escapes her throat.

DANI (VO)

How did I get here? What happened?

Flashback to the party. Everything's a blur. There was a lot of drinking. Dancing. Some stupid party game. Dani remembers laughing at something, but the joke and the face of whoever told it are gone. The last clear image she has heading upstairs—towards her parents' bedroom—with Brandon and Nora.

The sirens continue to grow louder, but then they stop, punctuated by the slam of a car door which snaps her back to the present. Looking around, she sees that she is up the hill behind her parent's house. From the ridge, she can see three police cars and an ambulance in the early morning light.

Then she notices something glinting among the fallen leaves. A bloody knife.

Dani panics and runs.

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 4

---

## Sequence 2: Flight

Dani narrates her flight through the woods:

DANI (VO)

My name is Danielle Hancher, but I call myself Dani. Other people used to call me Dani too, before I became “new girl.” I moved to Palladio, California last August. It’s too far from a real city to be a suburb, and too small to be a city of its own, despite what it may tell itself.  
Just a mountain podunk in Mono County.

Dani stops, breathing hard as she looks at a collection of big buildings through the trees.

DANI (VO)

My high school is a just under a mile away from my house. Mom and dad told me that like it was something to be excited about. Today it might save my life.

Dani reaches the school quickly, and hops the chain-link fence separating the sports fields from the surrounding woods and road. She sees that the door to the gym is open.

DANI

Lucky break.

## Sequence 3: Locker Room

Cut to the girls’ locker room. Dani strips off her outer bloodied clothes and steps into the shower. She has some nasty bruises but she isn’t seriously injured despite all the blood.

As the water hits her face, Dani remembers her boyfriend, Brandon shoving her away and brutally backhanding her friend Nora. Dani’s scream in the memory chases her back to the present moment. After changing into her PE sweats and hoodie, she sits on the bench.

## Interactive Branch 1

The player can make Dani try to think back to the party [“Try to remember what happened...”], or dispose of evidence [“I need to get rid of these bloody clothes...”].

### Try to Remember (Memory Minigame)

Dani sits on the bench and tries to clear her head. [The player is presented with a simple memory flip and scramble “card” game. Each time you flip three “cards” with a matching image, you are awarded with a flashback of the party.]

- The first chronological reveal is a VO from Dani: “Nora and I planned the party to happen during my parents’ trip to Europe at her house, on her computer.” [This memory will make a puzzle in DECISION 2 easier.]
  - The next chronological memory is more VO: “I didn’t invite Alice, but she showed up anyway with a plate of brownies. I said she could stay, but Nora told her to get lost.”
  - The next memory is a video flashback where Nora is kissing Dani while Dani laughs and protests. Brandon is at the other end of the room, taping the show with a phone.
  - The next memory is a frozen image of Dani lying on the bedroom floor, next to Brandon in a pool of blood, holding the knife she saw in the woods.
  - The last is another VO: “Everybody was passed out or vomiting. Somebody screamed to call 911.”
-

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 5

---

## Throw Away Clothes (Evidence Examination Puzzle)

When Dani throws away her clothes, she discovers there are already bloody clothes in the trash: the outfit Nora was wearing. Digging through them, she discovers a cellphone. After trying to unlock it, you check her locker, which is empty except for a calendar. *[To unlock the phone, you need to look at the calendar for her birthdate and enter it (October 28th). Once the phone is unlocked (1028), you find several strings of texts, a photo, and a video. The calendar will also reveal that the party was scheduled for October 11th, a Friday night.]*

- The earliest chronological reveal shows a string of text messages between Dani and Nora, revealing that you planned the party during Dani's parents' trip to Europe.
- A text from Tess has the next timestamp: "Glad you got Alice to leave. I prefer parties camwhore free." Nora wrote back: "IKR? Good riddance. Brownies are good tho."
- The video is the next most recent. It shows a clip of Nora kissing Dani in her parents' bedroom while she laughs and playfully protests. Brandon's voice eggs them both on from behind the camera.
- The next piece of evidence is a text from Josh, dated a couple minutes after the video: "Sorry to interrupt up there, but Taylor and Megan are REALLY sick and I don't feel too good either. I think there's something wrong with the punch..."
- The photo has the latest time stamp, and it shows Nora holding a knife, lying on the floor next to Brandon's body in a pool of blood.

## INTERACTIVE FICTION 2 - BRANCHING NARRATIVE BOARDGAME

---

*This is the mechanical prototype and narrative conceit for a narrative-driven boardgame project I worked on in collaboration with Spin Master.*

### Featured Mechanics

These mechanics structure the choices you can make and ultimately determine the outcome of the story.

**Time:** At certain points in the investigation, players will have to choose how to spend Time. Their total Time score will affect what options are available or directly affect the outcome of the mystery. Not all decisions are created equally, and not all expenditures of Time are wise.

**Evidence Envelopes:** at most decision points, players will have the option of receiving a new envelope immediately or investing Time to receive one in a later scene. Envelopes contain evidence descriptions, witness testimony, and usually open up new decision points. This allows for a degree of replayability and should help improve immersion in the detective role.

**NOTE:** Generally speaking, you want to solve the mystery as quickly as possible, but you need to be thorough enough to open up new leads in each scene to avoid backtracking and ensure you have enough evidence to make your case stick.

### Scene 0: The Epidemic

Thirteen. The body count just hit thirteen in a span of three weeks.

Death is a constant in big cities, and so is murder, but this many casualties in the span of a month is something else. Something monstrous.

The department kept things quiet while we tried to work out a pattern, but there's no thread to follow.

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 6

---

Different murder weapons. Vics from every walk of life. No consistent location or calling card of any kind. Now the public is beginning to panic and the press is eating us alive. People are jumping at shadows, calling in false information and accusing their neighbors, burying any real leads beneath irrational terror.

You are a newly minted homicide detective. Some of your esteemed colleagues claim that it was a field promotion, including your senior partner, Wolfe. He thinks the department is desperate and you are too green to be working this beat. But you know what you have what it takes to provide a breakthrough.

And you better be right. Number fourteen could be hours away.

## Scene 1: Estrella Reposa's Apartment

It is 7:37 AM on Saturday, June 2nd. Estrella Reposa, 20, lays dead on the couch of the living room in her two-bedroom apartment, burst vessels in her eyes impossibly read against her now-blue skin. She was undressed and her clothes lay scattered on the floor. The hand-shaped bruises around her neck suggest strangulation as the most-likely cause of death. It happened while she was still warm, at the very least.

The only points of entry are the front door and a fire escape that connects to the window in Reposa's Room. Minimal signs of struggle and no apparent theft. The victim's cellphone is next to her clothes with no missed calls or texts.

Erica Todd, Reposa's roommate, was the one to discover the body. Reposa was an undergraduate drama major. Todd is a psychiatric post-doc at the local hospital.

Forensics is dusting for prints and taking photographs. Todd hovers at the door, speaking to one officer, and a neighbor, Judith Partridge, is speaking to another. Partridge claims she saw nothing but is eager to condemn her younger neighbors as noisy and promiscuous. You also notice what appears to be a doorbell camera at the entrance of the apartment.

- Check Reposa's room (Open Envelope 1A)
- Ask Todd to view the doorbell camera (Open Envelope 1C)

## Envelope 1A: Estrella Reposa's Room

Reposa's room is in a state of casual disarray. Bed partially unmade. Scripts, call sheets, and entertainment magazines are strewn about the floor next to clothes and shoes. There is a vanity mirror against the interior wall buried beneath a mound of make-up. One tech is dusting for prints, and another is shining a UV light across the floor. They report that they haven't found anything unusual.

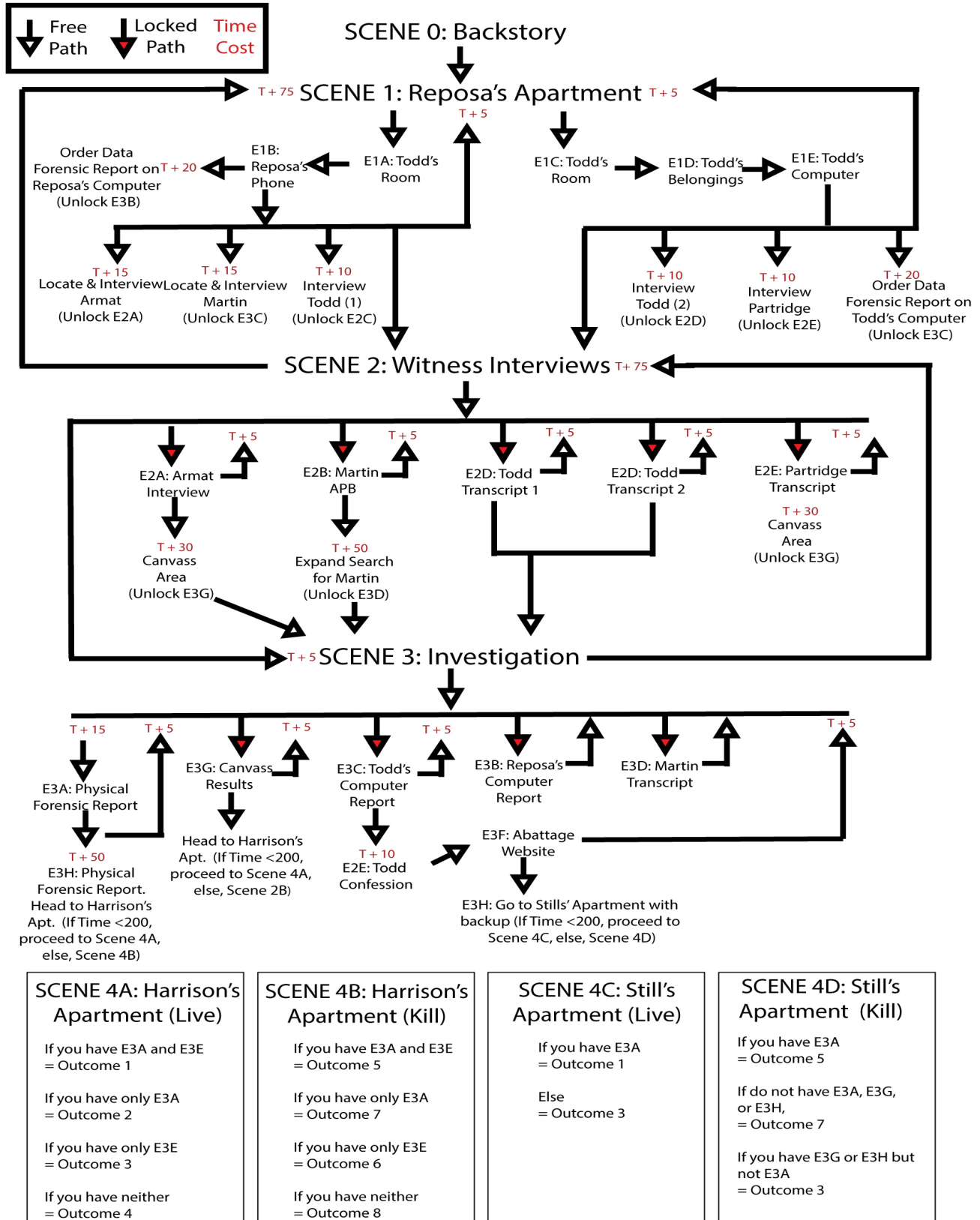
You notice the window to the fire escape is open. A quick look outside reveals a staircase snaking back and forth to a ladder lowered to the alley. A plausible point of ingress.

A laptop is on a nightstand, half covered by a playbill for Carmen. You approach and carefully open the computer. It is out of battery, or possibly broken; both the keyboard and monitor are dusty, like they are seldom used. There is a fresh-looking post-it note on the bottom of the monitor. It reads: NEW PIN – 9598

- Order a data forensics report to review later (receive Envelope 3B in Scene 3, Time +20)
  - Try the PIN on phone (receive Envelope 1B)
-

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 7

## Abbatage Beat Map & Flowchart





# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 8

---

## ARG WRITING - I DARED MY BEST FRIEND TO RUIN MY LIFE

---

*A small sample of the supplementary fiction I produced for the alternate reality game (ARG) accompanying the YouTube film series, "I Dared My Best Friend to Ruin My Life."*

### Team Takedown Manifesto - In-Universe Document

*This is the online mission statement of the film's primary antagonists, Team Takedown.*

#### Our Mission: Total Social Revolution

The leaders of this world have failed us. They sit on their thrones, turning our earth's precious resources into more power, ravaging the environment.

The American dream has died. The global order teeters on its last legs. Fear, poverty, sickness, and distraction are the new order. Environmental collapse is imminent. The ability for the people to meaningfully rebel has been taken away. But the balance of power is shifting. Who controls the narrative, controls the future. And the narrative is up for fucking grabs.

Deepfakes are our pipe bombs. Distrust is our weapon of mass destruction. One by one we will topple those who have made this world hell, and make way for what is dying to emerge.

#### Who We Are

Team Takedown is the solution to a society run on vanity, greed, cowardice, and idiocy. We are the only people who are truly awake in a supposedly "woke" world. We brandish common sense and hard honesty against complacency, coddling, and the incessant push for nebulous tolerance. If you are tired of the tide of complacency eroding our lives, you are already one of us. It is time to step up and take action.

Our targets waste their potential and revel in their deficiencies. They will choose comfort over genuine progress eleven times out of ten. We challenge ourselves to do better. We control the conversation, reframe the narrative, and write our own endings. We make it harder to ignore the real issues. We disquiet the stale and shallow.

We increase the minimum required effort.

#### What We Do

We ruin the people ruining the world.

Our philosophy is action over activism. That means we do not pull punches, and use every tool available to get the job done. We identify targets through member nominations and forum discussion, and then we work as a collective to bring them down, by any means necessary. We do not stop until they are broken beyond the point of return.

The goal is to make examples, not victims. Direct, guileless attacks garner sympathy for our targets and hurt our cause. These people thrive on persecution. Physical violence is a crude tool that paints targets on our backs. Therefore, we fight smart, hard, and dirty.

#### How We Work

Familiarize yourself with our framework. Review the boards. Study the targets. See how you can contribute to the cause before you nominate a target for takedown. Once you've found a target, apply yourself. Anything goes to achieve the goal. Hack personal accounts. Expose their hypocrisy with private documents. Publicly shame them on social media for their crimes. Shadow them to learn their secrets. After you've proven yourself, nominate targets. Good work will be recognized, and the mods will make new opportunities available to you.

---



# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 9

---

## Isaac's Journal - Character Development

*The goal with these journal entries was to develop a character in the movie (Isaac), who had less than 5 minutes of total screentime throughout the film, while providing context and significance for his sudden death.*

### Entry 1

Been another bad day.

Some people are born main characters and I figured out early on that I'm not one of them, but it feels like there's no place for me at all. Like, I have things to offer. I can contribute. It's easier to be myself online, but that "safety" seems to cheapen the interactions. And lately, I feel unseen, even when streaming.

Honestly, I'm not even sure why I bother anymore. It's not like I'm going to become featured. Everybody and their dog want to be internet famous and make a living off playing games, but my personality isn't that loud, and being a student keeps me just busy enough that I can't really commit to it full time. Too much competition.

I dunno that learning programming will go better. Like, sure, I will get a job. But will I land a gig in game development? Probably not. Definitely won't end up at a AAA studio without connections, and I'm too shy to network.

For example, a new roommate moved in today. Mia's brother, Zander. She's so nice, and I'm sure he is too, but when she introduced us, I just froze up—as usual—and he gave me that "Oookay, he's a freak," look that I get all the time. I hate that shit. But what should I say? How do you break the ice without it being obvious, and forced, and lame, and shitty?

Agh. I fucking hate this.

I hate all of it.

### Entry 2

I made a friend. Or somebody made me his friend. I'm not sure which. Maybe it doesn't matter?

His name is David King. He's like the polar opposite of me. Confident. Driven. Intense. A little bit scary too, but like, I wish I had some of that. When people look at me, sum me up, I can tell I'm always "Harmless" or "Mostly Harmless," and nobody wants to hear that guy's story. Nobody wants to date that guy or follow that guy on social media, because "Harmless," and "Nice" and "Safe" are boring AF. Like, I know this. But that doesn't mean I can do anything about who I am.

Anyway. Friend.

David is this Tyler Durden type. He talked to me about how there are so many fake-ass people around us, and how the world is ripe for a revolution. There are too many of us who just do the literal bare minimum to get by and don't actually give a shit about what we have. He said I don't do that, and that he respects that about me.

Truth is, I think I'd be as fake as everybody else if I was less terrified of being judged, but it's nice to hear. Like, I didn't even approach him. He just told me that he respected my work ethic, and that he was working on a personal project. A way to make bad people pay for their bullshit, and make decent people try harder. He wondered if I'd be willing to help.

I told him I'd think about it.

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 10

---

## Entry 3

Only been a few days but A LOT has happened.

I decided to help David with his project, which is like. I dunno how to describe it. "Cancel Culture, but make it Batman," maybe? Grayhat Hacktivism? Doesn't matter. It's called Team Takedown, and I'm a founding member. :D

Basically, we set our sights on people who make the world a worse place, either through selfishness, bullying, willful neglect, or other stuff. Not like murderers or rapists, but everyday bad guys. We find out everything there is to know about them, then show the world their dirty laundry. Air out the skeletons in their closets. Or, when warranted, we use deepfakes to reveal who they really are.

Turns out I'm really good at research. Like, think next-level Google-fu and Facebook stalking.

...Okay, that sounds wrong and bad and weird, but it really is for a good cause. And it's fun to see all the shit that the algorithms have scraped together. You can learn almost anything about anyone if you know where to look and how to do the most basic script kiddie bullshit.

It's exciting. I've been helping new members along, and we've already nailed like 3 scumbags.

Haven't even felt the need to stream lately. This is way more important.

For the first time in my life, I'm part of something.

I'm bigger than who I was a week ago.

## Entry 4

David told me today that he needed me to spy on Zander and Mia. :(

Apparently, David went to High School with Zander, and Zander is like, his model for a team takedown target. He was vague on the details, but apparently they dared each other to ruin each other's lives, to "increase their minimum effort required." But then Zander went way too far, and stopped trying like the whole thing was a joke.

Zander *is* kind of self-absorbed and vapid, but like. I live with the guy. He trusts me. It's one thing if you are taking out a stranger. Much riskier to hunt where you sleep, you know? And it feels less fair.

When I asked David if he became my friend because I lived with Zander and Mia, he sort of shrugged and said "It was a factor." A factor. Right. I have a better sense for how this guy thinks now, and I'm guessing it was the primary reason he reached out. He thought I could be useful.

And I mean, I have been! We've taken down dozens of shitty people on Team Takedown, and the other members know me and respect me. Except for Cain. He's like... He's David's general, and he has some serious issues. I don't want to say he's bloodthirsty, but I also don't know what other word would work.

Anyway, I just hit send on my first "reconnaissance report." What else could I do?

Something. I dunno. I'm having second thoughts about this, but I think it's already too late.

## Entry 5

I didn't really think this through.

David had me loosen the pipes in our kitchen, and now our place is flooded. It didn't really hurt me, since I knew it was coming. I was able to move my comics and electronics away from the water level, and the

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 11

---

leak never really reached my room anyway, but...

I've started really thinking about what I am getting out of this. Like, our sink is broken now. Sure, it pissed off Mia and Zander, made them more desperate but is that really a victory for me?

I don't think so.

I've never nominated a target on the TT forums. At first, I figured it was because I didn't have any good ideas, but now I'm beginning to think, maybe it's because I don't want to hurt people. Even people who deserve it.

Guess I just don't have that killer instinct.

The community is falling apart too. There's this tension between Cain and David on the TT forums. And the now that recruitment is slowing, fewer people are coming to me for advice. I feel kind of forgotten, to be honest.

It's like I'm back to square one. Maybe I never advanced to begin with.

## Entry 6

I'm trapped. For real. I am scared for my life.

Cain threatened me yesterday. I don't know how he noticed I was getting scared—maybe he has people keeping tabs on me, maybe he's been spying on me himself—but he basically said that if I back out, or if I talk to anyone outside of Team Takedown about what's going on, we'd have a "conversation." And he made it clear that conversation wouldn't involve talking.

Before, it was just the guilt, and honestly, that was bad enough, but now I realize just how dangerous these people are. The same people I've been helping. The same people I've been training in Deepfakes, photoshop, and basic scripting.

I can't keep doing this stuff. And I have nobody to tell. My parents wouldn't understand. They'd just be mad at me for getting involved in the first place, and tell me to figure it out. Or disown me, like Zander's parents did.

David was my only "friend," and he was just using me to fuck with Zander and Mia. The rest of the people on Team Takedown only used me as a resource. Everybody is just using me and nobody actually gives a shit.

I just wanted to belong somewhere. I wanted to feel valued. Now I'm scared and alone again, which is what got me into this mess in the first place. So I'm not going to be a coward anymore.

I'm going to warn people. The other members of Team Takedown. Publicly, on the forums. They aren't all bad. I imagine that most of them are like me, scared, alone, and angry.

Cain will come for me. And when he does... Well. I'm not running then either. If he attacks me, I'll fight back. And if I lose... well. I lose.

It's over.

I can't tell you how much that scares me. But I need to try to do the right thing.

Even if it kills me.

## Interactive Script - Bully Recruitment Hotline

*I wrote an interactive script for several of the ARG's "Missions," including a telephone-tree like maze that supposedly assesses one's aptitude for bullying. It was designed with humor and replayability in mind.*

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 12

---

## CHEERFUL VOICE

Hello, and welcome to the You Might Be A Bully Hotline! This free predatory assessment service will gauge your capacity for cruelty, cleverness, sarcasm, aggression, and general antipathy. Qualifying callers may be entitled to a position within our organization! Please listen closely to the following options, as our menu has recently changed. Calls maybe monitored or recorded for quality assurance.

- To begin the automated assessment, press one. *[PROCEED TO CHOICE 1]*
- To speak to a manager, press two. *[PROCEED TO CHOICE 2]*

### Choice 1

First question: You are attending your best friend's wedding. Before the ceremony, you observe your best friend's fiancé having an affair with the maid of honor. How do you respond?

- Press 1 to blackmail them into being your slaves. *[PROCEED TO CHOICE 3]*
- Press 2 to throw the entire wedding cake at your best friend's fiancé. *[PROCEED TO OUTCOME 1]*

Outcome 1: Thank you for your interest in the You Might Be A Bully Hotline! Unfortunately, you are better suited for attention-whoring than bullying. We thank you for your interest and wish you the best of luck as a drama queen. Goodbye, and have a nice day! *[END]*

### Choice 2

We applaud your aggressive initiative, but all of our agents are currently busy! How does that make you feel?

- Press 1 for "enraged." *[PROCEED TO CHOICE 3]*
- Press 2 for "apoplectic." *[PROCEED TO OUTCOME 2]*

Outcome 2: Thank you for your interest in the You Might Be A Bully Hotline! Unfortunately, you do not meet our criteria for bullying, but your word choice indicates a tremendous capacity for pretentiousness. We recommend you pursue a career in condescension or pedantry instead of bullying. Goodbye, and have a nice day! *[END]*

### Choice 3

Your nemesis has posted a sad story on Facebook and is asking for positive vibes.

- Press 1 to offer insincere encouragement and awful advice. *[PROCEED TO CHOICE 4]*
- Press 2 to remind them of that time their dog died. *[PROCEED TO OUTCOME 3]*

Outcome 3: Thank you for your interest in the You Might Be A Bully Hotline! Unfortunately, it appears you are a sociopath, potential serial killer, or merely an awful person. We recommend you seek professional help, and/or become better at masking your true nature. Goodbye, and have a nice day! *[END]*

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 13

---

## Choice 4

Would you prefer to answer a question about politics, or popular culture?

- Press 1 for politics *[PROCEED TO CHOICE 5]*
- Press 2 for popular culture *[PROCEED TO CHOICE 6]*

\*These options deliberately lead people to the opposite topic of their choice.

## Choice 5

What is your favorite superhero movie?

- Press 1 for *Green Lantern* *[PROCEED TO OUTCOME 4]*
- Press 2 for literally any other movie than *Green Lantern*, including films that do not actually feature superheroes *[PROCEED TO CHOICE 7]*

Outcome 4: Thank you for your interest in the You Might Be A Bully Hotline! Unfortunately, it appears you lack any semblance of taste and/or common sense. While those qualities are not strictly required for bullying, we do not have space in our organization for you at this time. Goodbye, and have a nice day! *[END]*

## Choice 6

How do you feel about the current political climate in the United States of America?

- Press 1 if everything is completely fucked. *[PROCEED TO CHOICE 7]*
- Press 2 if everything is perfectly fine. *[PROCEED TO OUTCOME 4]*

## Choice 7

You are presented with two buttons. One button will end hunger forever, but make all forms of cancer incurable. The other button will cure all cancer, but result in a permanent famine.

- Press 1 to smash both buttons simultaneously. *[PROCEED TO OUTCOME 5]*
- Press 2 to unplug the machine that powers both buttons. *[PROCEED TO CHOICE 8]*

Outcome 5: Thank you for your interest in the You Might Be A Bully Hotline! Unfortunately, it appears you are an unrepentant smartass. Normally, this is a commendable quality in bully candidates, but we will be moving ahead with other applicants to meet diversity requirements. Goodbye, and have a nice day! *[END]*

## Choice 8

Your lover and your mother are stranded on thin ice that is cracking. There is only enough time to save one person, while the other will immediately drown.

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 14

---

- Press 1 to save yourself *[PROCEED TO CHOICE 9]*
- Press 2 to ask for more information about this hypothetical situation *[PROCEED TO OUTCOME 6]*

Outcome 6: Thank you for your interest in the You Might Be A Bully Hotline! Unfortunately, you have drowned in an ice lake while nitpicking the details of a situation that was clearly constructed to present an abstract moral quandary. We are not currently accepting deceased candidates due to federal labor laws. Goodbye, and have a nice day! *[END]*

## Choice 9

Congratulations on reaching the final question in our questionnaire! What do you think is the most important quality for an exemplary bully to possess in modern society?

- Press 1 if you are secretly working for Zander Jones. *[PROCEED TO DAVID'S MESSAGE]*
- Press 2 to increase the maximum required effort. *[PROCEED TO DAVID'S MESSAGE]*

## David King's Message

Well, well, well. Color me impressed. You actually made it through my maze. I don't actually know how you answered that last question, because it really doesn't matter. Whether you're here to sign on with me or spy on me for Zander, the results are clear: you are bully material, my friend. Not some cut-rate microblog troll or forum flame warrior, either—but a real challenger. Because that's all bullies are. We force people to check themselves. We tear down weakness, and our so-called victims either stay down or become challengers themselves. That's what this is about. Correction. Growth. And having a few laughs along the way.

## Live Social Media Writing

*Throughout the ARG and film launch, I portrayed the characters Team Takedown, and David King on Twitter, live-writing responses to participants and other actors. Both characters are the primary antagonists in the film, with David beginning as the founder of Team Takedown, and ultimately abandoning the group at the eleventh hour.*

Team Takedown: [twitter.com/T3amTak3down](https://twitter.com/T3amTak3down)

David King: [twitter.com/DavidRex2600](https://twitter.com/DavidRex2600)

## SHORT FICTION - COMMISSIONED CHARACTER BIOGRAPHY

---

*Short pieces of fiction I've written for roleplaying game characters. I do not own the locations, world, or all of the characters referenced in these accounts, but the narrative events are my composition, intended to add depth and an emotional attachment to the characters in question.*

## The Chronicle of Nadir: Backstory

I have heard several people in the tavern inquire about Nadir's past, and his curious name. He has always demurred with a variation of "This suits me best," or "Just 'Nadir' will suffice," and once, when he was

---

## HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 15

---

uncharacteristically well into his cups and feeling flirtatious: “I’m much more intriguing as a question, don’t you think?” But after each of these inquiries, his smile grows rueful and distant, and the tongue behind it stills. So you can imagine my surprise when he arrived at Haven’s archive, and offered to share his story with me, if I was willing to write it.

“I have some demons that could do with exorcising” he explained, an almost-ghostly smile hanging on his lips.

“As you and others have likely surmised, I was once a Gurzan Nomad. Born to the Shem tribe. One of the reasons I wanted to share this with you is that I worry that people assume I am ashamed of my heritage, and that could not be further from the truth. The tribes of Gurza refer to each other as ‘The People,’ a term that may sound broadly encompassing, though it carries elect connotations. We are bound together by the shifting sands of the dunes, and the swaying grasses of the steppe. Those motions shape us together. And while there are feuds and fights between tribes, on occasion—I suspect that is a criterium for humanity—we are still *The People* to each other.

“Many arcane practitioners and ivory tower academics would likely dismiss my aunt as a sand witch, but to the Shem she was a shaman, a figure revered for her gifts and guidance. She recognized the same potential in me and tried to foster it. Many people in my tribe told me my mind was too sharp for its own good—warnings I misjudged and wore with great pride. I cannot help but wonder what might have been if I had a little more humility and respect for our ways.

“Again, do not misunderstand me; I do not wish to perpetuate the myth that Gurzans are hidebound or culturally stunted by constant travel. We—they—are people ruled by tradition, yes, but they advance. They refine the techniques that help caravans weather the desert, and assimilate technologies from the broader world through trade. Again, they saw this capacity in me, and fostered it.

“I pushed the boundaries of my arcane studies past what my aunt was comfortable with, and hungrily hunted for knowledge of the civic world—mathematics, science, and modern technology—to the point that my tribe was shy of me when conducting trades, lest I pester learned-looking merchants. They forgave me these things, but it was not enough.

“In seeking knowledge, I violated a...” He pauses, squinting at the table. “The closest word in Oh’s Tongue is ‘Taboo.’ But that could be misunderstood as a gaffe, insult, or other breach of etiquette. Taboos are laws shaped by our entire history, and the offense caused is not social, but...fundamental. Breaking a Gurzan Taboo is a blasphemous act against both nature and magic.”

Nadir pauses for a moment, reaching for a cup of water, reflecting. After a minute, my curiosity grows too great and I prod him: “What was the blasphemy?”

“Late at night, when our campfires began to wane and the dawn was distant, I would listen. I would look inward, meditating on what I knew of the world, and reach out for answers beyond it. And eventually something answered.”

His voice was gentle, but those words had a haunting gravity. After all I’ve heard from Haven’s adventurers, I am not a man easily unsettled, yet his words raised every hair on my arm. The room was silent and generously-lit for the sake of writing, but I felt the compulsion to look over my shoulder.

“I came to know it as Aransur; a name I will speak here only once, and ask that you do not repeat or print. It whispered knowledge of the Chalice with me, a concept you may be unfamiliar with, though it is foundational to mages studying both Boon and Creation magicks. The latter was the source of my fixation, the

---



## HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 16

---

fulcrum of my arcane fascination. These insights kindled my powers, opening new avenues of thought. But I asked the entity the wrong questions. And I realized too late that I was dealing with an Ifrit.”

“They are the oldest of Demons. Their common signs and associations are fire, smoke, crystal, and lacewings, but it appeared as a mere shimmer or flicker in my mind’s eye until I realized, sharply, what I was dealing with. Then the signs were rife in my memory, as if I had seen them all along and refused to process them. A fire that bled smoke in the shape of a man. A swarm of butterflies with wings of stained glass.”

“By that point it was too late to seek my aunt or the elders for help. I had already earned the threefold brand.” Nadir held up his right hand and removed a glove revealing a scar of three rings. “One ring will see you banished from your tribe. Two is enough to banish you from all of Gurza, barring... extraordinary exceptions. But three? You are to leave the desert as fast as your feet will carry you, speak to no one, and never return, upon pain of death.”

“What of the Ifrit?”

“What indeed? He whispered to me as I fled, expressing sadness, but also perplexed amusement. ‘My curious friend. You now make me curious. Why leave if you don’t have to? And make no mistake, *you don’t have to do anything.*’ That statement chilled me. To this day, I know not what he intended for me. There are countless tales of these creatures leading entire tribes to their ruin, though the actions of a single prideful fool. In other stories, they are wish-granters and lesson teachers. Tricksters that themselves become tricked by... more innocent brands of cunning. I suppose I hoped for the latter, thinking there might be some storybook intervention... because you must understand, I was terrified of leaving my people.”

“We—they—don’t think of parents in the same terms as the rest of the world. There is a special affection between the people who birthed you, but... you are never in want for parents. The Shem are strangers to loneliness. And as for love... to keep our blood healthy, marriage contracts are negotiated at a young age. The enormity of such a promise... it can make things awkward at an already awkward age.

“I was promised to a woman who could not be more different from myself. She was being groomed as a martial protector of our caravan. Some called her handsome, but to me she was beautiful. If I saw her looking at me, I would smile and she would look away. Though far more often, those roles were reversed. In the last few years I spent with the caravan, we shared but a handful of moments and they are jewels in my memory. All save the last, which is a splinter in my heart.”

He took another drink of water, suddenly looking years older.

“When I was three days into my exile, she found me on horseback, at dawn. This time we stared at each other, and neither of us smiled or looked away. Then she asked me ‘shall I join you now or later?’ And I shook my head, and said ‘Neither. I would never wish this upon you.’ Her smile in answer... it was like nothing I had ever seen. Somber as death but... warm. Loving. Like a gravestone in the noonday sun. ‘I was not asking ‘if,’ My Promised. I was asking ‘when.’ Then she turned and started to ride away. ‘If you will not have me now, I will have you later.’”

“You can’t imagine... I never knew what I meant to her... or what she meant to me until that moment. Affection, yes, but.... She was no iconoclast. She lived and breathed Gurzan tradition. And honestly, the tradition I was most grateful for was her waiting hand. The fact that she would consider... You can’t imagine what it meant in that moment.”

Nadir was right. I cannot imagine. The young man bowed his head and for a moment I feared that he would break down. But he looked up with dry eyes and the sort of smile men smile when they have a spear in

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 17

---

their gut.

“What was her name?” I asked.

“Bilita Shem Dakina,” He said. “And I pray wisdom finds her before she decides to find me. Because I now know what it is to lose a tribe. Not just a family—that is something everyone endures if they are lucky to live long enough. But to be cast adrift in a world that does not understand you, a world with no apparent need for you, after having security and purpose... the only thing worse is to know it is entirely your own fault. That is a well one cannot climb out of.”

I did not know how to respond. I sat stunned and set my quill down for a moment.

“The rest is unimportant,” Nadir said as he stood and stretched from his seat. “Banal adventuring. I paid my way through Kesh with my arcane talents, onto Savwall. And I continue my pursuit of knowledge, insights, and wisdom, because anything less would denigrate the sacrifice of my people.”

“Is there anything else you wish readers to know?”

He paused, color and a certain wryness creeping back into his face.

“Not really, no. If there’s a moral to my story, somebody wiser than me will find it. And if it’s all folly, lighter hearts can laugh at it. But if you can come up with something witty or profound, feel free to attribute it to me.”

## LONG-FORM FICTION EXCERPTS

---

*Amagia is my current passion project; the first novel in a series serving as a nexus for associated short stories and a related board game that I am currently developing.*

### Amagia - Jacket Blurb

*The ‘jacket blurb’ for my forthcoming novel, Amagia, which informs the next two selections, and demonstrates my ability to sum up complicated plots and premises succinctly.*

*The scholar-warriors of the Amagium are sworn to a sacred charge: governing humanity’s inherent capacity for magic. Through a complex licensure system, they decree which spells and arcane artifice are permissible for public use. But as citizens chafe under these strictures, dissent grows violent, and law officers known as Keepers struggle to maintain order.*

*In the city of Arroyo, the once-decorated Keeper Detective, Sevardin Harker, languishes on suspension, searching for hope in a world hollowed by the loss of his partner and lover. Alinore Valmont, a prodigious aspiring Keeper driven to uphold her family’s legacy, is primed to graduate with unprecedented honors. Her record-shattering matriculation is rivaled only by Haze Matthews, a haughty but exceptionally gifted aspirant wrestling with the burdens and biases imparted by his unique parentage.*

*Thrown together in the wake of a tragedy, this fledgling team must face terrorism, treacherous fae, and trained killers while peeling back the layers of a conspiracy within the Amagium itself... or the horrors of unfettered magic may ravage the world once more.*

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 18

---

## Amagia - Epistolary Excerpt

*An in-universe excerpt that fleshes out the world of Amagia by providing context—a great example of the type of writing I can do to help realize alternate reality games and complicated fictional universes.*

### Athens' Ashes

The site of the First Cataclysm remains a harrowing  
testament to the cost of unchecked magic.

It has been 2355 years and Athens still burns.

Our captain and guide, Harzo Anagnos, slows his cruiser to a halt roughly a mile from the maelstrom; a curtain of roiling, iridescent smoke that has consumed the horizon. Periodically, briars of orange electricity and plumes of verdant flames flicker in the cloud, vanishing so quickly I find myself wondering whether I am imagining them. The faintest hint of ozone mingles with the scent of sea brine and salt. Harzo kills the engine, and silence swallows the boat.

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

"This is as close as we go."

His gestures and voice are mild, but his emanations and the look in his eyes will suffer no debate. His ship has been warded to withstand the known spectrum of urdic radiation as well as kinetic fields to buffer us against the devastating winds that periodically rip through the region. Today, the skies are clear and the blue waters between us and the Cataclysm are almost blasphemously calm. By every objective metric and principle of magic, we should be safe.

But as I stare into the storm, I feel a hollowness reaching up from my stomach, paired with implacable vertigo. It is as if the storm could inhale me on a whim, and I would fall into it forever. A faint buzzing sensation prickles the periphery of my wyrd, like a long-numbed limb waking up, and a faint tinnitus grows in my ears as I search the swirling dust. A voice in my head tells me to turn away, but I stare until Harzo shakes me gently.

"You've been looking for five minutes," he tells me. "Take a break for fifteen."

We still do not understand it. Ask any child what happened, and they will tell you Athens was destroyed with a spell. But it is impossible to imagine a single entity possessing such power—even the semi-mythical Arch Mage Homer. If the spell could be contained by letter, gesture, or rune, the language has been lost to time. Surviving records of the event are inconsistent in their accounts. Many describe an incandescent tower of light. Some speculate that he summoned the wrath of gods or the last dragons to eradicate the Ancient Feudalists. Others descriptions wax poetic. High Archon Jotham Tolkien wrote: "Homer knew the Name of the peninsula and scratched it from the ledger of the universe." Dramatic words, but they scarcely do reality justice.

The Artificers, Arcanists, and other Amagium scholars on our voyage alternate between studying the storm visually and checking their instruments, with Harzo periodically prying them away when they become entranced. They speak excitedly, crack jokes, and make loud exclamations at their inconsistent and inexplicable readings. The stereotype of the somber, tight-lipped scholar-warrior is nowhere to be seen, even among the Keeping Venture that has been assigned as our security detail.

Despite this apparent levity, their emanations and body language carry an unmistakable nervousness. Energy driven by the thrill of eminent danger. At any moment, the weather could turn, casting the maelstrom's caustic dust out toward us. Life of any kind is extremely scarce in the region, but extremely dangerous

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 19

---

monsters—creatures warped by the area’s ambient energies--have been reported on multiple occasions. (Hence the security detail.)

It is also possible that I am projecting. Aside from Harzo, Jamyn and I are the only asfalís passengers on the ship. Even after dozens of expeditions in their company, it is difficult to acclimate to the raw *presence* of an Amagia’s *wyrd* and the power in their emanations. Even among their researchers, one feels like a child in the palm of a giant.

Homer’s thesis was that humanity was given *wyrd* so that he might know the horrors of godhood; a test of restraint. He placed the privilege of magic in the hands of Amagia; originally imagined as men and women who would “abstain from the games of gods and kings, and swear themselves to safeguarding *wyrds* from violence.” For all intents and purposes, human history began in earnest in that moment. We still count our years backwards from the First Cataclysm.

The First Amagium fell with the Roman Empire in 381 AA. War and plagues presided over Europa until Esmeryl Chaucer, commonly known as the Dread Witch, ended the Crusades with the destruction of Jerusalem in 1600. But I have also looked upon the ruined Holy Land, treading its expanse of irradiated glass in protective artifice. While haunting, it is a far cry from this. This is a hole in the world. This is a wound in reality.

After Jerusalem, Chaucer’s Amagium invented the first system of magic licensure. And for a time, humanity flourished. Freed from the lockjaw of medieval feudalism, we deepened our knowledge of the resting laws and rediscovered long-lost principles of spellcraft. We explored. We built. We grew.

But as artifice advanced and societies progressed, the second Amagium slowly dissolved, Athenaeums surrendering their sacred charge to fledgling nation states, chapter by chapter. Under asfalís governance, magic was quickly put to militant purpose. The two Great Wars that followed razed every corner of the earth. After the Allies annihilated Tokyo in 2289 with enchanted bombardment, the world was supposedly united once more.

A Third Amagium for a Third Cataclysm.

Now, less than a century later, Anticordance sentiments have soared, climbing ever higher in the wake of Keeping brutality complaints, economic scandals, and political conspiracies. At home, it is easy to curse the lexiclave lines and condemn a system that could be improved in so many ways, even as exemptions and reforms are passed at an unprecedented rate. But looking into the eye of a storm that has outlived two millennia, those concerns seem trivial. Here, the stakes seem grave enough to justify anything.

Just before the sun succumbs to dusk, Harzo raises anchor. The lead arcanist begs him for another half-hour of study, to see how time of day has affected the cataclysm, almost like a child bargaining with her father to watch a show airing after her bedtime. But when her tone turns heated, I am filled with an irrational fear: she could bind him with a flicker of her fingers or a few whispered syllables. If she was determined, there is nothing I could do to stop it. And even though the argument ends in laughter, imagined threat vanishing like the lightning in Athens’ ashes, a chill chases me back to shore.

Written by Kareth Cobain with photography by Jamyn Grohl. “Athens’ Ashes.” *National Geographic*. Edited by Dr. Davnim Robbet Jones. Pages 42-50. Published by National Geographic Partners on Taurus 1<sup>st</sup>, 2355 in the New Atlantic Union, Washington.

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 20

---

## Amagia - Chapter 1: Old Haunts

—Sevardin—

*The fire was quirked.* It began with a familiar orange and red flicker, flames dancing beneath the pluming smoke, but as the grimoires were set alight, jets of azure, purple, and teal flared bright in the archives' cavernous darkness. And their tongues took strange shapes. Some moved like living creatures, while others were molded by arcane geometry, forming sigils, runes, and other unnaturally perfect, purposeful patterns.

Sevardin struggled to remember exactly what they looked like. Some desperate, hungry part of his brain believed that there was a reason written in the blaze. An explanation for the night that took his life. *All I need to do is picture them clearly.*

He swirled the memories around his head like the scotch in his glass, eyes closed, nodding his head ever-so-slightly. He felt like an alchemist's solution. *Shake me enough, stir me just right, and eventually the truth will shine through.*

The sharp crack of pool balls broke his reverie.

He downed the rest of his drink and flagged down Hodd for another. The ruddy bartender regarded him warily. It was plain that he had something to say, and while he wasn't one to mince words, he weighed every vowel and consonant carefully. *You think I've had enough?* Sev gestured for him to speak up.

Hodd began in blunt speech, naked words and gestures unaccompanied by urdic emanations:

"I'm shooting a hole in my boat here, but I'll tell you a secret." He slid into the more polite mode of conversation, using his wyrd to project wry sarcasm and warmth along with his voice: "At a certain volume of consumption, it's more economical to buy booze by the bottle and drink it at home."

Sevardin smirked at the scarred reflection in his scotch, the pale ghosts of nicks and gashes shining against his dark skin. He finished the glass and slid it back to Hodd.

"I'd be lost without your warm companionship and sage advice."

Sev meant to emanate good humor, but his weariness shown through his wyrd, and the token gesture made him come across as all the more flippant. Hodd didn't seem to mind. He snickered, filled the glass for the sixth time, and slid it back.

"Forgive the observation, but you don't seem particularly 'found' at the moment."

Sevardin just smiled. *Oh, I know exactly where I am. I am shipwrecked on the shores of despair. I am pouring gas on the fires of perdition. I am sitting in your shitty little dive bar, Hodd, trying to drink a hole in my head so I can fall asleep tonight without dreaming.*

Even as he thought it, he knew it wasn't fair.

The Drowned Book was a far cry from Arroyo's nicest bar, but it definitely wasn't shitty. There were plenty of watering holes that welcomed thirsty Keepers, but the Book was Sev's favorite. He even treated fellow regulars with a little extra respect on account of them having good taste. *The name's a Dowland reference. What surer sign of class could there be?*

After he lost Yuel and Jecia, he had stayed away—couldn't bear the memories. But when he returned to active duty, it was too painful to stay away. And after the subsequent suspension, the place's memories

---

## HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 21

---

were the only thing holding him together. He slid from regular patron to semi-permanent fixture. *Behold Arroyo's champion, now reduced to human furniture. And to think I showed such promise.*

The bar was built like an iceberg. Its back-alley entrance opened to a cramped ground floor with a short counter, and a smaller second floor that had just enough space for a handful of stools. But the basement was like an old-world beer hall, big enough for eight tables and twenty booths, with room leftover for darts and billiards. The scent of old smoke hung in the air, along with the strains of classic songs unspooling from crackly, quirked speakers. That evening, it was Picasso's original rendition of "Hey Jude."

Sevardin hummed along with the chorus, tapped his finger on the counter to the beat, trying to force a shred of liquor-slicked cheer into his head.

It had been a month since he had been suspended for "Crucial Inaction." *We were just talking. Sure, the boy was pointing a gun at me the time, but what else is new? I had it under control. He wasn't some hardened malefactor—just a kid with priors who ran at the sight of us. Dumb and desperate. But smart enough to know he was in over his head and scared enough to listen. Willing to consider the possibility of laying down arms, and coming quietly.*

Then Espinoza ruined everything.

*No. Espinoza was scared too. He saw the boy's hands shaking and assumed he was working up his nerve to shoot. It was Mills who ruined me.*

Sev didn't know if it was a matter of his age, race, or accolades, but his subordinate officer, Stevron Mills, hated him from the start. *Still. I never expected him to spin attempted de-escalation into negligent hesitation. "You've got to have that killer instinct, Harker. If you had the heart to pull the trigger, Espinoza wouldn't have a hole in his shoulder."* Something ugly roiled in Sev's stomach at the memory, and he took another sip to settle it. *True enough, Mills. But everyone is still breathing, and I stand by my decision.*

After a long moment, Sev realized Hodd was looking at him, half-knowingly and half-expectantly. The bartender was a big, imposing man with a magnificent beard. Still, there was a challenge in his expression, and Sevardin answered with a look that dared him to follow through. *You have something else to say to me, friend?*

"Listen, Harker. You know me. I like telling people their business even less than I like them telling me mine, but I think you should go somewhere. Do something. Talk to somebody who can talk back worth half a damn."

"I don't know where to go," Sev admitted, sticking to blunt speech.

"There are counselors, aren't there?"

"Already been through my psych evaluation. Going back will just raise questions. And whatever you say in those 'confidential sessions' has a funny way of coming out."

"No, not your people. I meant private practices. You can't be a priest or a politician, but I'm pretty sure there's no Homeric law against seeing an asfalid doctor. The same ones war vets and asfalid cops go to see. Hell, pretty sure there are therapists out there who specialize in—"

Sev cut him off with a lazy gesture and blunt speech:

"I don't feel like paying a stranger to ask me questions I already ask myself."

*You think you know us, Hodd. You give us refuge, pour us drinks, hear our complaints, and watch us*

---



## HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 22

---

*interact, so you think you understand, and assume that others like you can do the same. But you're still on the opposite side of the line.*

Folks loved binaries. Little distinctions drawn in the sand to make yourself feel special and others feel other. Soldier versus civilian. Clergy versus laypeople. Black versus white, man versus woman, gay versus straight, and so on 'til judgement day. Sev had long since come to realize that they were almost all bullshit. As time went on, those constructs either crumbled or grew more complicated and nuanced.

*And yet.*

*There is the Amagium and there is the rest of the goddamn world.*

People feared Amagia, but the nervous glances and baseline apprehension were easy enough to adapt to. *It is far worse when somebody isn't afraid. When they treat you like a person, only to recant your humanity after witnessing your power in action.*

Yet it wasn't really the magic. Everyone could do magic, just as everyone could make music, by singing, whistling, or what have you. But like music, magical talent varied wildly and was unevenly distributed. Most amagia had powerful wyrds. Deep, ethereal lungs with loud voices that spoke in sorcery. Some had intensely reactive wyrds that easily harmonized with anima to perform complex contract magic. Others could understand runic code like a performer sight reading sheet music.

Talent didn't scare people, though. There were plenty of gifted folk who were smart enough to lead normal lives. They made due with conversational emanations, simple sorcery, and the benign sort of exempt contracts taught in public high schools. Spells for sunscreen, buffers against wind, and weak bindings to keep your footing or temporarily hold two objects together. Some of those talented people went on to earn professional licenses that granted access to a broader selection of spells, but at the end of the day, they were still *safe*. To others. To themselves.

It was the training that turned a person an amagia. It was the training that made others afraid. *Those with meager talent often pay their way into the athenaeum. Others are recommended, or, in certain countries, recruited. But almost all of us are isolated from society before our eighth birthday. From the moment we arrive on campus, we are tested.*

Sev remembered his assessment tests, doing contracts over and over until his eyes spotted with exus. He thought back to the living texts he had to study, mazes of hallucinations and whispers that threatened to crack his mind in exchange for mastery over the elements. And looking at the scars on his hands, he remembered the brutal martial training that began at age sixteen, when his teachers first started training him—conditioning him—to kill.

For that reason, of all the Amagium's nine disciplines, Keepers stood farthest from asfalis life. They were the most celebrated and feared. The most reviled and storied. Mills' voice drifted back into Sev's head. *"You've got to have that killer instinct, Harker."*

Sev scoffed. *Sure. Right. People already look at us the same way they look at monsters and the fae. Something not of this world. Something dangerous. And they aren't wrong. But we can be more—we should be more—than executioners.*

*You don't understand, Hodd. And neither will an asfalis shrink.*

Sev drained his glass once more, stood from his stool, and placed a fifty on the counter.

---



## HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 23

---

Hodd slid it back.

Sevardin gave him a challenging look, but this time the barman held his ground.

“That’s not charity,” He insisted. “It’s an investment. I’m buying the rest of your week. Take a hike. Go to the beach. Put it toward a shrink you wouldn’t want to pay for yourself. Do anything other than.... this. If it’s all horseshit, come back next Lunday and I’ll start taking your money again.”

Sevardin nodded, now unable to meet Hodd’s gaze. The kindness undid him. He stuffed the bill into his pocket and walked up the steps to the ground floor.

Dusk had fallen over Arroyo. *The City of Bridges and Roses. Home sweet home.*

It was old by the Ercian west coast’s young standards, founded one hundred and forty-five years ago. Before that it had been occupied by the First Peoples for centuries. Greener than much of the surrounding desert climate, thanks to the water flowing through the gullies that divided its plateaus into an archipelago of small landlocked islands.

That irregular topography gave the city an unusual grid with twisting roads, and an odd, tiered layout. Business hubs topped the flats, while suburbs were nestled into the banks and valleys of the broad gulches. Narrower cracks housed little parks and pockets of genuine nature. And everything was connected by a network of bridges.

At first, they merely forded the river tracks, but as the city became renowned for them, architects started connecting random buildings. There were spiraling bridges, glass bridges, and elevated greenways. The most famous bridge crossed the city’s namesake—a wide gulch that bordered the city’s west side. It was a piece of the old world, built by the Amagium when they first established their presence in the southland. Its tall, elegant arches were famous, featured in countless films and symvision commercials, ferrying cars along Arroyo’s central traffic artery. Sevardin often found himself crossing it unnecessarily for the sheer pleasure of it. The world knew it as the Calle Colorado Bridge, but he always called it by its grimmer, local name: The Suicide Bridge.

Since childhood, Sev had always been intrigued by that darker side of the coin. The flipside of everyday things that nobody ever talked about. *Crime. Violence. Our darker urges. Maybe I’m sick. Or maybe I just have a kinked sense of humor. Maybe both.*

Old Town—the lively sprawl that grew out of Calle Colorado—was buzzing with the energy of encroaching summer. To Sevardin, it seemed profanely vibrant. Bluebies seemed to be everywhere, and then he remembered graduation was just a few nights away. Another reason Sev appreciated the Book was that Hodd and his bartenders would serve aspirants nothing but water until they traded their light-blue training uniforms for the robes of their chosen discipline.

He watched a pair of young pups recounting their Keeper exam in anguish, blindly praying to God for a passing grade. *So fresh-faced and bright-eyed. So eager to get out there and save the world. You poor fools. Go into any other branch of the Amagium, or better yet, quit now and live safe, long lives. Make do with humble, exempt magic, like every other sane person on the planet.*

Sevardin ate a meal he wouldn’t remember later, then resumed his revenant stroll until night slid toward morning. The haze of his earlier drinking receded with the pre-dawn light, at which point he returned to his bike and stoked it to life with his key.

---

## HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 24

---

It was completely mechanical. Not a trace of animate energy or spelled artifice. It wasn't unheard of, but still decidedly eccentric, requiring a special, state-issued driver registration, since it relied on completely manual control. Fuel cost as much as Gygax Vessels, but you could go further on one tank. Even though components occasionally needed to be replaced or tuned, a motorcycle would never develop the supernatural anomalies—quirks—that gradually grew on magical artifice. As long as you diligently upkept the bike, you could ride forever. It demanded responsibility in exchange for reliability, which was an arrangement Sevardin could respect.

Besides, tinkering was his opus. The little task that restored his wyrd's stamina. Anything with gears gave him a small charge. Full-functioning motors were better. *But things get really good after you add fuel into the mix.* After a long day of magic, working on electrical or combustion engines truly scratched his itch.

As he threaded through the light traffic, he imagined Jecia pressed against his back, her arms wrapped around him, one hand on his chest and another on the top of his thigh, teasing what waited at home.

But she had disappeared and taken home with her.

He drove without a destination in mind, adapting to the road and traffic without consciously registering either. Memories carried him south, to the very edge of Arroyo's city limits, and he finally came to a stop in front of the decommissioned anima plant.

Arroyo was one of the first cities to adopt a modern, magic-powered grid, but the original plant was based on an old paradigm of energy coalescence. Red-robed animathurges had to use contract magic to channel power from massive bonfires and "other elemental wells" to meet the city's needs. Less than a decade later, Gygax Engines were invented, obsolescing manual operations overnight. The engines transformed renewable resources like sunlight into a streamlined form of energy akin to electricity. Their only adverse effect was a form of short-lived, temporal radiation that caused adjacent materials to age at rapid, chaotic rates.

Now, the old plant's once-opulent architecture looked like it had been subject to Gygax aging itself. It's metal fences and gates were rotted with rust, it's gardens overgrown.

*Here lies a humble monument to premature progress. A cautionary tale against early adoption.* Sevardin chuckled. *Hardly a romantic locale.* But the place resonated with him. It drew him with a powerful gravity; a subtler sort of magic than anything you could do with anima or wyrd. Since Virgo, he drifted there at least three times a week.

It was his beginning with Jecia, the place where he truly met her. Sev closed his eyes and opened his mind to the memory.

Technically, Jecia Singh had been transferred to Sev's venture from San Francisco a few days earlier, but those early conversations were all business. Stilted, nice-to-meet-you-sir bullshit. He was physically attracted to her at first sight, and noticed that she was capable, but there was no initial spark of flirtation. Not until he passed by on his bike one late Ophiuchus evening, and saw her standing beyond the chain link fence meant to deter vagrants. She was staring at the dry fountain in front of the building.

She noticed his approach when he hopped the fence, sparing him a glance before turning her attention back to the fountain. He asked if everything was alright, and she just laughed. The details of her transfer were confidential, but Sevardin could feel the hurt and anger coming through her emanations.

"I'll tell you if you really want to listen. But you need to hear me carefully, because once it's off my chest, I don't plan on repeating myself."

---

# HANK WHITSON: FICTION PORTFOLIO - 25

---

He nodded and they started to stroll the abandoned plant. After a few minutes in the garden, she casually entered the main building and he followed, two law officers, blithely trespassing. They edged through the fun house of empty vats, kilns, and lens arrays once used to spin magic from thin air. Talking. Listening. And when she finished telling her story, they were both surprised to find that dawn had risen.

Jecia had earned her first Monstrum and Malefaction assignment a year earlier. Being a relatively fresh face with promising skills, some idiot decided to put her undercover. She was captured and tortured for information by an inept, yet exceedingly cruel Unbranded terror cell. They hacked apart her mind with psychic magic, searching for truths that weren't there, leaving her memory fragmented.

*"I feel like they cut me loose from myself. And it's like I still haven't come back."*

*She was where I am now. And now she's gone.*

Sevardin stopped pacing the grounds as his mind gagged on the thought.

*No. They couldn't find a body.*

Before he enrolled in the Amagium, his mother and father raised him on the sort of stories where there was always hope until the heroes found a dead body. And despite everything he had learned on the job, he had managed to hold fast to that optimism.

*She's too strong to die. Just lost in the Faed, waiting for me to find her.* He chuckled at himself as he watched the sun rise behind the plant's derelict spires. *No. She would never wait. She's fighting her way back to me, struggling to give me a sign so I can do the same.*

He could still feel her touch in his wyrd. He knew it in his bones. But he also knew that bones could be mistaken, stories told pretty lies, and magic was a doorway to madness.

## SHORT STORY LINKS

---

*A selection of short stories set within the same universe as the novel above can be found at:*

**[HankWhitson.com/Stories](http://HankWhitson.com/Stories)**

**Grim Business:** A damaged mortician makes an unexpected discovery.

**Two Dog Night:** A homicide reporter with a secret pursues a dangerous vendetta.

**Shoveling Doubt:** An exorcist contends with a crisis of faith. Also, demons.

**Volumes of Silence:** Magic librarians deal with an intrusive, dangerous presence.

**That Dust Life:** A small-time drug dealer gets in way over his head.

---

## THANK YOU FOR READING!

*Don't find what you were looking for? Be sure to check out my Non-Fiction Portfolio as well, or if you want to see what I can do for you specifically, let me know and I will compose something to spec.*

---