

GAMECHANGER



David Michael Williams

©2020 ONEMILLIONWORDS

FEINT

*a movement made to deceive an adversary;
often an attack aimed at one place merely to serve as a
distraction from the actual intended target or point of
attack.*

(In other words, a trick.)

Asher closed the cover of the *Monstrous Manual* when he heard the sound of tires on gravel.

She actually came! he thought with a smile.

“She actually came,” Lorenzo muttered from the swiveling chair beside him.

Ignoring the disappointment in his best friend’s voice, Asher tossed the battered book onto his bed and dashed into the hallway—though not fast enough to miss another almost-under-his-breath remark from Lorenzo:

“I still don’t know why you invited *her*.”

Over his shoulder, Asher yelled, “The more, the merrier!”

He might have added that Mezzo-Earth had plenty of room for more players. Or he could have mentioned that every good company of heroes—from the Fellowship of

the Ring to the Companions of the Hall—benefited from a diversity of skills and abilities.

Besides, he thought as he sock-slid across the hardwood floor, two adventurers were partners at best. But *three*? Three was the beginning of an actual party!

Asher's enthusiasm hiccupped as he opened the door and saw the girl astride her bike in the driveway. With her grinning-skull T-shirt and ripped jeans, Makayla Schmidt didn't look like the type who'd geek out on games, let alone what Asher had planned that afternoon.

But she had come. There was hope.

"Hey, Mak." He nodded at her hockey stick. "Did you come right from practice?"

Mak dismounted, letting her bike crash to the ground. Reversing her grip on the hockey stick and holding it up so it looked more like a sickle than a piece of sporting gear, she chuckled. "Practice starts at the ass crack of dawn. I've been home for hours. I just brought my stick in case I ran into any douchebags on the shortcut through the woods."

Asher winced, praying his mom was out of earshot of what she called "coarse language."

"Well, you might as well bring it inside with you," he said. "Depending on which weapon you choose, it could make a good prop. Think of it as Plan A."

"I thought you said this was an outside game," Mak replied, following him into the house.

"It is, but you need to create your character before we can start."

When they reached his bedroom, Asher closed the door behind them, putting a couple inches of wood between his parents and Mak's conversational cussing.

Then he waited for his two guests to acknowledge each other's existence.

Lorenzo didn't look up from the *Dragonlance* book he had pulled off Asher's shelf earlier that morning. Mak set her hockey stick against his headboard, looked around the room, and said, "Wow."

It was the first time a friend other than Lorenzo had entered his inner sanctum of nerdiness. Suddenly self-conscious of the dragon poster, hand-drawn maps of Mezzo-Earth on his desk, and row upon row of fantasy novels lining the walls, he looked to his best friend for support.

Lorenzo turned the page and kept reading.

Unable to decide whether to sit on the bed or stay standing, Asher adopted an awkward position halfway between the two, his leg bent painfully beneath him. "So, Mak, how much do you know about larping?"

Mak leaned against his dresser. "Just what you guys told me on the school bus yesterday, right before you said I could try it out today if I wanted. You pretend to be elves and fight monsters and whatever."

A sigh from Lorenzo.

Asher smiled patiently. "It's a little more complicated than that. I'm the gamemaster...or GM...which means I guide the story. I also play the role of Elvish Presley, an elf minstrel. Lorenzo is Sir Larpsalot, a human paragon, which is basically a paladin."

"A what?" Mak asked.

Another sigh from Lorenzo.

"A holy knight," Asher said. "Up until now, we've been the only two heroes—"

“Ooh, so I get to be the villain?” Mak asked, her eyes widening.

Lorenzo tossed his book aside. “The GM controls the enemies. If you’re gonna play with us, you have to be a hero too.”

“But I get to make up my own character, right?” Mak asked. “Is this the part where we roll a bunch of weird-looking dice?”

Interrupting Lorenzo’s third sigh, Asher said, “We’re not that formal. In tabletop games, like Dungeons & Dragons, there are a lot of rules and restrictions. Lorenzo and I have a more casual approach. Plus its larping, so it’s mostly theater of the mind.”

Mak stared blankly at him, perhaps regretting her decision to delve into the dorky lives of her fellow seventh graders.

For the next few minutes, Asher did his best to summarize—and simplify—the world of Mezzo-Earth, which had started out as a parody of Tolkien’s setting but evolved, over the past year, into a full-fledged fantasy realm in its own right.

As he explained the types of creatures that populated Mezzo-Earth and the adventurer categories he had invented, Mak plopped down on his bed and started thumbing through the second-hand bestiary.

“Then there are foresters,” Asher continued. “They’re a lot like rangers from D&D and tend to be good at—”

“This.” Mak turned the *Monstrous Manual* toward him and pointed at the hulking form of a half-man, half-bull.

“A minotaur?” Asher asked.

“Yeah, I wanna be a minotaur.”

Lorenzo laughed. “You can’t be a monster.”

Mak glared at him. “I can’t be a bad guy. I can’t be a minotaur. If you say I have to be some sad-ass fairy princess, I’m gonna kick *your*—”

“You can be minotaur,” Asher quickly interjected. “They’re usually fierce melee fighters, but we can explore other classifications if you want.”

Looking down at the page, Mak said, “This is what I want. Big muscles, a huge axe, horns...you can’t get more metal than that.”

Lorenzo crossed his arms. “Sounds like your character is a real brute.”

“A *berserker*,” Asher corrected.

“So why would I, a paragon of virtue, and you, the noble Minstrel King, ally ourselves with a minotaur berserker?” Lorenzo asked. “Sounds kind of farfetched, even for Mezzo-Earth.”

Asher was about to point out that a noble Knight of Solamnia became fast friends with a minotaur in the *Dragonlance* books, but then Mak jumped up from the bed to loom over Lorenzo. The boy almost fell out of his seat.

“Keep giving me attitude, Lopez, and I’ll pound your character into polygon paste.”

Lorenzo raised his hands in surrender. “I’m just saying our alignments probably don’t...you know what? Never mind. Asher is a pro at spinning stories. I’m sure he’ll make it work.”

In truth, Asher’s mind was already stampeding ahead with possibilities. “So what’s your character’s name, Mak?”

She smiled darkly. “Brutus.”

“Brutus?” Lorenzo asked. “That doesn’t sound like a girl’s name.”

“That’s because Brutus isn’t a girl. Is that gonna be a problem too?” Mak looked from Lorenzo to Asher.

“Not a problem,” Asher replied at the same time Lorenzo said, “Nope.”

Eager to escape the confines of his bedroom—which seemed too small for both suddenly-too-cool Lorenzo and hot-headed Mak—Asher led his friends outside.

As he opened the door, a boisterous blur of red-brown fur leaped up at Mak.

“Jabber, down! *Down!*” Asher tried to grab hold of the dog’s collar but missed. “Sorry. He just gets excited when somebody new shows up. He must’ve been out been back when you got here.”

Mak dropped to her knees and scratched behind the golden retriever’s ears. Jabber licked her nose, and she laughed. “Look at this tough guy. Such a good guard dog, aren’t you? Aren’t you?”

Asher could only stand there, amazed and amused to see the girl acting so...*girly*.

Still running her fingers through Jabber’s long fur, Mak asked, “Can we bring him along?”

Before Asher could answer, Lorenzo said, “No way. We’ve tried that before. Jabber just gets in the way and ruins the game.”

Mak patted Jabber’s head, looking to Asher. He didn’t want to say no to her, but Lorenzo was right. They had once cast Jabber in the role of a wily young dragonling—the Jabberwacky—and spent more time trying to wrangle

the excited dog than waging anything akin to a battle against him. Even the times they brought him along because Asher's parents forced them, Jabber whined non-stop from the tree they tied his lead to.

"Sorry, Mak," Asher said. "Not this time."

Mak glared past Asher at Lorenzo. "Are you sure *you're* not the villain, Lopez?"

Lorenzo rolled his eyes. "Where do you want to do this, Asher? The camp on your property? The creek at Hobbs Woods? The corn fields?"

Hoping to regain some goodwill with the prospective party member, Asher said, "It's Mak's backstory. Why don't we let her decide?"

Mak kicked one leg over bike and slung her hockey stick across the handlebars. "Hmm...where would a tough SOB like Brutus hang out? Wait, I got it...follow me!"

Without warning, Mak spun her bike around and sped down the driveway, back toward the country road.

Asher was still nudging back his kickstand when Lorenzo pulled up next to him. "This is a bad idea. Mark my words."

Lorenzo put on his football helmet—a stand-in for Sir Larpsalot's noble helm—and rode after Mak.

Asher hurried to catch up. "If you'd lighten up a little, you might actually have some fun."

"I know you're excited to have another player." Not even the helmet could hide Lorenzo's frown. "Just don't get your hopes up too high. Makayla Schmidt is not like us. She's a neighbor, not a friend. I'm not even sure she *has* friends."

"We'll see," Asher said, wrapping his homemade cape around him so it wouldn't get stuck in the spokes.

“I just don’t want her to ruin our game.” Lorenzo increased his speed, leaving Asher, literally, in the dust.

Stifling a cough, Asher couldn’t deny that today could change the game forever. The old two-player sessions worked well enough, but Asher craved a wider cast of characters. He needed to find a way to show Lorenzo that growth was good.

And to do that, Asher would have to keep control of the narrative like never before.

Asher watched Mak skid to a stop a couple of feet from the drop-off.

“We’re here!” she announced with a mischievous grin.

The boys stopped much farther back from the ledge and exchanged uneasy looks.

“The quarry is off limits,” Lorenzo stated, sounding more like his lawful-good alter-ego than he probably realized.

Mak dropped her bike to the ground. Hefting her hockey stick against her shoulder, she said, “What, you scared, Lopez?”

“Of the quarry? No. Of getting caught trespassing? Uh, *yeah?*”

Glancing across the enormous chasm, which appeared deserted this particular Saturday afternoon, Asher suspected Lorenzo was more worried about his parents finding out than being spotted by any quarry employees. That’s exactly how Asher felt anyway.

Mak scoffed. “Brutus lives in the mountains. This is his territory.”

Looking out at the deep hole, Asher felt both friends' stares boring into him. Today was about balance. If he was going to make this session fun for Lorenzo and Mak, he had to keep both players happy.

He cleared his throat. "As it so happens, our adventure begins in the Crooked Spine Spires, on the *summit* of the tallest mountain."

Lorenzo shook his head. Mak grinned.

Brutus the Bullheaded was stubborn, even by minotaur standards.

Some in the Steer Clear Clan attributed this to a tragedy in Brutus's youth, when, during the young minotaur's first raid, he watched his father, Beau Vine, get butchered by the brave defenders of a frontier burg. After that, Brutus's bloodlust became insatiable, as though every villager he beheaded might somehow bring back the clan's old patriarch.

"Wait, Brutus is a raider? Are you sure I'm not the villain?" Mak asked.

But as Brutus grew from a scrawny half-calf into a muscular bull-*man*, he began to question the wisdom behind sacking the same three towns over and over again. He dreamed of greater glory, a greater purpose—

"And greater challenges," Mak prompted.

—and greater challenges.

Brutus the Bullheaded often locked horns with Black Angus, the dark-furred chieftain who had stepped up after Beau Vine was cut down. Black Angus had been a rival of Brutus's father and seemed to relish any opportunity to chastise Brutus—which only made the young warrior more rebellious.

One fateful evening, during the annual attack on the human settlement of Boon's Dock, Brutus was forced to make a choice that would decide, once in for all, whether he would live a life of submission or fully embrace his insubordination.

"Spoiler alert. I'm totally gonna kick that other cow's ass."

"Please tell me Sir Larpsalot and Elvish Presley are staying at an inn in Boon's Dock," Lorenzo said.

Asher shook his head. "No, our heroes' stories do not intersect this auspicious night."

"Seriously?" Lorenzo whined.

Steer Clear's battle trumpets rent the otherwise silent night. It wasn't long before Brutus was performing a deadly dance among the village's woefully weak defenders. Lost in a symphony of carnage, Brutus hardly noticed when one victim fell and another terrified human took his place. All of their faces looked the same.

Until he glimpsed the visage of a man with a twisted nose and a scar etched across the length of his neck.

A nose once broken by Brutus's father.

A neck that had bled after getting gored by Beau Vine's horn.

Yes, the grizzled veteran across the battlefield—a middle-aged man clad in dented full plate and wielding a serrated curved sword—was none other than the warrior who had slain the clan chieftain so many years ago.

Asher paused for dramatic effect.

"OK," Mak said, "how do I kill the bastard?"

Bellowing an anguish-filled battle cry, Brutus the Bullheaded thundered across a village green painted red with blood. He barely felt the sting of a guardsman's

dagger as it grazed his shoulder, hardly noted the reflexive jab of his battle axe as the spiked tip pierced the insignificant man's face.

"Plan A."

"What?" Asher asked Mak.

"The name of my axe is Plan A," she explained. "Isn't that what you said back at your house?"

Brutus raised the blood-slicked axe above his head. Plan A had seen him through a hundred battles. With his father's weapon in hand, Brutus never needed a Plan B.

Yet the scarred man was no novice himself. He spied Brutus's charge out of the corner of his eye, spun to face his roaring adversary, and easily sidestepped the overhead chop of Plan A.

"Oh, it's on!" Mak declared.

Asher scooped up the broomstick handle Lorenzo had requisitioned for Sir Larpsalot's sword a few sessions back and glowered fiercely at Mak.

"You'll not find me so easy prey, you bestial abomination," spoke the man who had butchered Brutus's father. "Prepare to die!"

Asher swung the broomstick at Mak, not in slow motion but not too fast either, giving her plenty of time to dodge or parry. At first, he thought she was just going to block the attack—as Elvish Presley and Sir Larpsalot would do during their sparring matches—but Mak swung with her full might.

Hockey stick struck broom handle with an echoing thwack, sending the mock sword clattering over the side of the cliff.

Lorenzo groaned. "Now what am I gonna use for a weapon? If I ever get to play again, that is..."

Ignoring Lorenzo, Mak said to Asher, "Now I chop off his head."

The sheer power behind the young minotaur's attack had caught Nikolai the Gnarled off guard.

"His name is Nikolai?" Mak asked, incredulous.

"What's wrong with Nikolai the Gnarled?" Asher asked.

"It sounds too cool, and that's better than he deserves," she replied. "How about Norbert?"

The sheer power behind the young minotaur's attack had caught Norbert off guard.

Norbert hadn't survived this long by lingering on an unfavorable battlefield. He knew when he was out-matched. Rather than reach for the dagger at his belt, he turned his back on the people of Boon's Dock and fled into the night.

"I chase after him!" Mak shouted, running toward Asher, her hockey stick once again raised over her head.

Asher took a big step back.

With the taste of vengeance on his tongue, Brutus broke ranks, confident his longer, more muscular legs would easily outpace the armor-laden human. However, before he made it five steps, Black Angus barred his passage.

Asher looked to Lorenzo expectantly.

"So I get to play today after all?" he said with a sigh. "But it's a character I know nothing about?"

Asher whispered some key information in Lorenzo's ear while Mak eyed them suspiciously.

"We must take our spoils and go," Black Angus told Brutus. "The townsfolk have hired a company of mercenaries. We have lost five of our herd—"

“Clan,” Asher corrected Lorenzo.

“—five of our *clan* already.”

“*Brutus says...*” Mak started to say, but then she started talking in a lower, guff tone.

Brutus said, “I have finally found the man responsible for my father’s death. I *will* have my revenge!”

Black Angus grabbed Brutus by the arm, earning him a baleful look from the younger minotaur. “I am the clan chieftain. You will obey my command!”

“Eat manure,” Brutus the Bullheaded growled. He shoved past Black Angus and sprinted after Norbert.

Mak gave Lorenzo a shove, and before either boy could stop her, she disappeared over the edge of the quarry.

Asher ran up to the ledge, fully expecting to find the girl lying like a lifeless ragdoll at the bottom of the pit.

Ten feet below him, Mak looked up from a rocky shelf. She held up the broom handle. “I’m going after Norbert. Is the dude unarmed, or did he grab another sword when he ran off like a coward?”

Exhaling a sigh of relief, Asher called down, “He’s got a dagger. That’s it.”

Mak laughed triumphantly and proceeded farther down the steep wall of the quarry, sending a spray of stones skittering down into the massive hole.

“We can’t go down there,” Lorenzo said softly to Asher. “Just tell her she caught up to Norbert and killed him or whatever.”

Asher could have done that—arguably *should* have done that—but noticing a flat, almost stage-like out-

cropping farther down, he had a sudden idea for this larp-ing session's finale.

"She seems to be doing OK," Asher said, watching Mak navigate the rocky terrain deeper into the quarry.

"It's dangerous," Lorenzo argued.

Still watching Mezzo-Earth's newest adventurer chase her invisible prey, Asher smiled. "Yeah, but danger always makes a story more interesting."

Brutus reached the hidden camp of Steer Clear Clan just before sunrise. His rich brown fur matted with blood, the minotaur acknowledged the sentries, Jersey and Holstein, with a tired grunt.

He was eager for rest, but when a shadow fell over him from behind, he knew he would not avoid a final confrontation before reaching his tent.

"Brutus!" Black Angus cried. "You broke the rules, and by defying my orders, you put the clan in danger."

Without turning to face the chieftain, Brutus said, "I did what I had to do...for my father."

Black Angus snorted. "Your father is at peace. He died a warrior's death many seasons past. Your behavior today dishonored his memory and your entire bloodline."

"Oh no you didn't," Mak mumbled to Lorenzo.

Brutus's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What do *you* know of honor, Black Angus? What glory have you brought our clan since stepping into my father's shoes?"

Mak paused. "Do minotaurs wear shoes?"

Asher shook his head. "They have hooves."

"What glory have you brought our clan since stepping into my father's hooves?"

“So much worse,” Lorenzo whispered.

Black Angus squared his shoulders, then crossed his arms. “You leave me no choice. Because of your insubordination, I hereby banish you from the clan.”

“That’s bullshit!” Brutus sneered.

All three teens laughed at that one.

“If we see you in our territory again, we will kill you.”

With that, Black Angus turned his back on the outcast. The sentries followed suit.

“Who put this asshole in charge, anyway?” Mak asked Asher.

“He was the strongest warrior in the clan when Beau Vine died. No one challenged him to the title of chieftain.”

“I challenge you,” Brutus said in a low voice.

Black Angus lurched as though struck from behind. He spun around to cast a withering look at Brutus. “You cannot be serious.”

“Deadly serious.”

Black Angus laughed. “Trials by combat are fought to the death, Brutus. Are you ready to feed your body to the land and water the grass with your blood?”

“The real question,” Brutus replied, “is whether you’re ready to be put out to pasture.”

“Nice one,” Asher said.

“Thanks,” Mak replied.

Despite his fatigue from last night’s battle and the chase that followed, Brutus felt a sudden surge of conviction. Black Angus was confident, *too* confident. The chieftain was bigger, but Brutus was faster, especially when the older minotaur swung The Prod, his enormous battle hammer.

Plan A had never failed Brutus before. He knew it would not today.

Asher smiled slyly.

Except a minotaur duel would demand a more intimate means of violence—the transparent glass-bladed daggers of Clan Steer Clear’s most ancient ceremonies.

Mak looked down at what Asher had just handed to her and Lorenzo. “Why are you giving us granola bars.”

“Best I could come up with for daggers.”

The battle that followed was the most brutal the clan had seen in generations.

Atop the flat-topped ledge, Mak took a swipe at Lorenzo, who caught her wrist and countered with a jab to her midsection. Mak twisted to avoid the granola bar. The edge of the wrapper grazed her T-shirt.

Although Brutus managed to dodge Black Angus’s hungry blade time and time again, the chieftain supplemented each swing with a fist or a foot. Every collision added another bruise to Brutus’s poor, punished body.

Lorenzo pantomimed a punch to Mak’s cheek, then another to her ribs.

His strength sapped, Brutus could only fend off the deadliest of the assaults and had little offense of his own.

Mak lashed out with her granola bar, which went far wide of Lorenzo’s chest. Lorenzo followed up with a stiff-arm that sent the girl backpedaling.

All seemed lost for young Brutus the Bullheaded.

Mak’s heel came down past the edge of the stone platform. Her arms pinwheeled as she tried to catch her balance. Mak fell five feet, crumpling at the base of the battle stage.

* * *

“Mak!”

Asher shared a panicked look with Lorenzo before scrambling over to their unmoving friend. Kneeling beside her, he gently rolled her onto her back. An angry red gash above her eyebrow dripped blood down the side of her face.

“Is she OK?” Lorenzo asked, still perched atop the stone shelf.

“I...I don't know...she's breathing...”

“Is that *blood*?” Before Asher could answer, Lorenzo added, “I *told* you this was a bad idea.”

Asher brushed some of the quarry dust from Mak's arm, but her skin remained white from the fresh scrape—white flecked with red. The girl didn't flinch.

He looked up at Lorenzo. “We need to get help.”

“No,” someone whispered.

Asher gasped and turned back to Mak. Had she spoken, or was his mind playing tricks on him? Eyes closed, Mak still looked like she had been knocked out cold.

“She could have a concussion or something,” Asher told Lorenzo. “I'll stay with her. You climb out and bike to the nearest house.”

“No,” the whisper returned, “get him to come down here.”

This time, Asher was quick enough to see Mak's lips move as she breathed the words “down here.”

“What?” he asked.

Mak sighed, opening one eye. “Haven't you ever heard of playing possum?”

“Is she awake?” Lorenzo called down.

Mak’s mouth curled into a half smile. Quietly, she said, “Black Angus is a lot stronger than Brutus, right?”

Relief and confusion scrambling his thoughts, Asher found himself answering automatically. “He’s on a much higher level, and he had a short rest while you were battling Norbert.”

“Right,” Mak whispered. “Which is why I gotta trick him.”

At this point, Lorenzo had reached the bottom of the quarry. “Mak, are you...”

Mak sprang forward, knocking Lorenzo onto his back. Straddling his chest, she pressed the edge of her granola bar under the boy’s chin and slowly drew the jagged wrapper across his neck.

After a moment of stunned silence, Lorenzo said, “Wow.”

Wiping blood from the side of her face, Mak said, “Even with one eye, Brutus is a beast!”

Holstein, Jersey, and the rest of the gathered minotaurs gazed in reverent silence as Brutus the Bullheaded slit Black Angus’s throat.

Then the warriors erupted in shouts of celebration, hailing Brutus the victor and new leader of the Steer Clear Clan.

“You should loot the body,” Lorenzo told Mak.

“What do you mean?”

“Sometimes enemies have valuable gear on them,” Lorenzo explained. “And Asher likes giving bosses the good stuff.”

Mak looked at Asher. "I want to do the looting thing."

Despite the deafening cries around him, Brutus heard a low, rumbling voice inside his head. At first, he feared Black Angus had somehow survived the finishing blow. But when he looked down at his fallen enemy, the only sign of life he saw was the strange pulsing of the copper bracelet wrapped around Black Angus's bicep.

The voice seemed to come from the curled piece of metal.

"Brutus," the Tuff Cuff called. "I have been worn by every chieftain of this clan, and now, by right, I am yours."

Brutus bent down and pulled the copper bangle off the dead minotaur's arm. He never heard the talisman talk again, but he would always remember how the Tuff Cuff seemed to speak with the voice of his father.

"Three cheers for the new chieftain!" Holstein shouted.

The warriors of Steer Clear Clan raised tankards and wineskins in toast to their new leader.

"So I'm the boss now?" Mak asked.

"If that's what you want," Asher said. "I didn't think you'd actually win."

"Wait...I was supposed to die?"

Asher smiled. "No. The Goddess of the Stampede would have shielded you from the killing blow. Or maybe Black Angus would have let you live, broken and disgraced."

"But if Brutus stays with the clan, he'll never meet Sir Larpsalot and Elvish Presley," Lorenzo protested. "I mean, we could definitely use some extra muscle in the party."

Asher hid a smile and shrugged. "It's up to Mak. If she wants to keep playing, we'll find a way. But if she doesn't, this is a fine ending for Brutus the Bullheaded."

He risked a glance at Mak, who took a big bite out of her granola bar.

The ride back to his house took longer than the trek to the quarry had. Climbing up the steep sides of the gorge had been more work than any of them anticipated. Now Asher's legs ached as he pedaled along the highway. Countless scratches adorned his arms and knees.

But he didn't care. He couldn't remember ever having so much fun larping.

Even Lorenzo wore a grin as they coasted down the driveway up to the old farmhouse. Jabber greeted them with excited barks, tugging against his lead. Mak eased her bike over to the dog, who lifted his head for some much-needed chin scratches.

"Do you want to come in and clean up?" Asher asked her. "We have some bandages..."

Mak shot him a smirk. "Nah. I'm good."

"What are you gonna to tell your folks...about what happened?" Lorenzo asked.

Mak wheeled up to them. "That some mean boy pushed me off a cliff."

"What?" Lorenzo exclaimed. "It was an accident, and I already said I'm—"

She cut him off with a laugh. "Relax, Lopez. I get more roughed up on the ice. No one will probably even notice one more scar. See you guys next time."

“Next time”—the words filled Asher with so much excitement he feared his chest might explode.

Hockey stick in one hand, the other on her handlebars, Mak rode away. Over her shoulder, she said, “And Asher?”

“Yeah?”

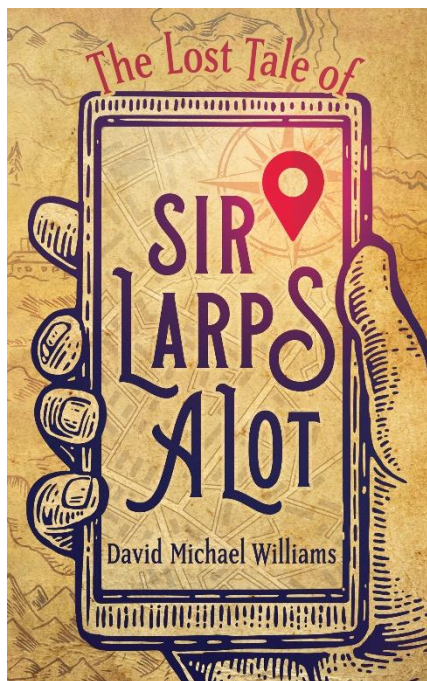
“Thanks for inviting me.”

Beside him, Lorenzo leaned his bike against the house and said, “I’m going to try to get some of this dust off of me. If I’m lucky, my parents won’t ever figure out we went down to the quarry.”

Asher let him go. His mind was already weaving a bizarre set of circumstances that would place Brutus—self-exiled and eager for new challenges—in the path of a certain human paragon and elvish minstrel.

Watching Mak vanish around the bend, Asher knew the encounter would change the lives of all three of them for the better.

THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES IN...



WIZARDS & WANNABES

Mistaking the teens' costumed characters for actual warriors, a sorceress summons Sir Larpsalot, Elvish Presley, Brutus the Bullheaded, Master Prospero, and Tom Foolery to her world to complete an impossible quest.

To succeed, they must become the heroes they only ever pretended to be. And if they can't find a way to win, it's **GAME OVER** for real!

COMING TO AMAZON OCT. 6, 2020



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Michael Williams has suffered from a storytelling addiction for as long as he can remember. His books include the sword-and-sorcery trilogy *The Renegade Chronicles* and *The Soul Sleep Cycle*, a genre-bending series that explores life, death, and the dreamscape.

He lives in Wisconsin with the best wife on this or any other world and their two amazing children.

Learn more about the author and his works at

David-Michael-Williams.com