

Genrenauts: The Shootout Solution

By Michael R. Underwood

Prologue

Inciting Incident

Mallery York pressed her back against the outer wall of the saloon while bullets flew in Main Street. Her breath came fast as her hand fumbled, ripping the hem of her skirt and tying another bargain-basement tourniquet around her right arm. It'd keep the bleeding down, but she'd taken three hits, and addressing them all would transform her outfit from "Western" to "Jane of the Jungle."

The report of gunshots came around the corner, impacts sending splinters of wood flying in the dusty street. Mallery flinched at each one, every hit refreshing the sharp pain from only moments ago. She'd gotten lucky, in that "not all bullet wounds are created equal" kind of way. But no matter what, the mission had gone down the latrine and it was time to bug out.

Mallery dug into her petticoats for the polished chrome and Gonzo Glass phone. Doubling over to make herself a smaller target, she pressed the big red button, shielding the phone from view. Even with bullets flying, she kept to the concealment protocol, just as regs demanded.

The call picked up on the second ring.

"This is King. What's your status?"

"Floundering in a sea of gunfire and dust."

"Just hold on," King said. The voice of her boss and mentor was a life preserver. She grabbed it and held on for dear life.

"The showdown was a bloodbath. Our White Hats are down to the last man, and I saw him turn tail and run a minute ago. The bandits are going to finish off the wounded in a minute, and I need immediate evac."

Someone moved on the other end of the line, set to speakerphone. Probably Preeti rolling over to another station. "What happened?" King asked. "You said you had the posse assembled, they had their bonding scene around the card table and everything."

“Tell that to the three dead deputies in the street, boss. What’s my ETA on an extraction?”

Low chatter between Preeti and King. Then, “Roman will be there in ten minutes. Can the story be salvaged?”

Mallery risked a look out into the street, concealing the phone beneath her sweat-and-dust-stained hair. The bandits were tying bags from the bank to their saddlebags, but the gunfire had calmed down.

“Not today. We’ll need to assemble another posse.”

“Understood. Stay out of harm’s way, and Roman will be at your location in fifteen.”

Mallery winced. “I thought it was ten?”

“Dimensional disturbance. Preeti has plotted a new course, but it’s going to delay the crossing.”

“Well, I’ll just hang out here and bleed some more, then. No big problem.”

“Try to keep that to a minimum,” King said.

“Aye aye, captain.”

“Preeti will stay on the line with you until Roman arrives. Be careful, Mallery. King out.”

“Careful isn’t going to stop the bleeding,” Mallery said, watching her skirt go red. Next time she came to Western-land, she was wearing the chaps. They were at least something resembling armor. Though they couldn’t be turned into bandages nearly as easy. You give a little, you get a little.

“Roman is on his way. We’ve got your location locked, so just sit tight,” Preeti said.

“You know, this is why I prefer Romance world. At least there I’d be having mortal-danger makeouts while under fire.”

“I’ll put in the request on your duty roster. More mortal-danger makeouts.”

“I don’t know about more, but I’ll take it.”

Preeti stayed on the line, trying to engage Mallery with small talk, keeping her bleeding friend focused when the world started to go black. Mallery leaned into the conversation, shutting her eyes and focusing on Preeti’s story about spending all Saturday digging through the source text archives to find her favorite childhood storybook.

Mallery ducked her head out to check on the bandits. The Williamson gang had finished loading up and was riding for the hills with half of the town’s silver. “When I get back, I am so kicking someone’s ass.”

Another impact hit mere feet from her head. She ducked and said through clenched teeth, “This is *not* how the story was supposed to end.”

Chapter One

Everyone's a Critic. Even drunks. Especially drunks.

Leah Tang was dying on stage.

She knew she shouldn't expect too much from a college bar crowd, but this was beyond the pale.

Her *The Last Action Hero* bit? Interrupted every ten seconds by the table full of bros up front yelling for her to show some flesh.

Her breakdown of why the *Star Wars* prequels failed, from the lack of a scruffy-looking-Nerf-herder rogue figure to the bungling misuse of the Jedi Order? Nothing but heckling.

Even her story about the Epic Ice Fortress Snowball Wars from when she was in middle school fell flat, and that bit had killed before.

It sure didn't help that the drunk first-timer before her had gotten a hooting-and-hollering standing ovation with nothing more than five minutes of boob jokes.

He'd primed the audience so much that when she took the stage, one of the bros up front asked her to flash him. It was a testament to her professionalism that she didn't just dump her water on his head to start off her set.

In fact, so far the only person in the room who seemed at all interested in her routine was the intense black guy sitting on his own in the second row by the entrance. He hadn't taken his coat off even though the bros up front were sweating in the lights. This guy, this one appreciative audience member—he liked her genre commentary, so she'd be happy to oblige.

This guy had been at her last open night too, if she remembered right. So he was either digging her work, a creeper, or maybe both. Hopefully not both. That wouldn't bode well for her future fan base. "I'm huge with the 'overly intense and creepy' crowd!" Not so good.

Not that she had a fan base to begin with. The rest of the crowd—the townies at their regular tables and the drunk-ass students up front—the best they managed was polite disinterest.

Leah heard her father's voice in her head. "Oh, Leah, don't go to the coast and become a comedian. Make a responsible choice; stay here with your family and go to optometry school like your brother."

The bros up front catcalled again, asking for her number for the third time.

“Come down here, baby!” one said. “I’ll make your fantasies come true.”

Cal, the owner, had a very high bar for throwing out belligerent hecklers, so she was on her own. It was three strikes and you’re out here at the Attic, and she was in the middle of Strike Three. So she might as well enjoy herself.

“Fantasy, eh?” Leah asked.

Perform for the audience you have, not the audience you want, she thought. She grabbed the available segue and ran with it, squaring off to the audience and zeroing in on the bros in the front row.

She affected a coquettish bedroom voice. “Let me tell you about my fantasy.”

That got the bros’ attention.

“My fantasy” -- hooting and howling nearly drowned her out. She resumed, trying to shut them out. “Discovery. New races, new kingdoms, new magics. I loved that when I opened a fantasy book or found a new author, I knew I was in for a tour through someone’s imagination.”

The bros were crestfallen, their interest shorted out. But the guy in the coat leaned forward, elbows on the table, his drink sitting forgotten beside him.

“But as I grew up, I realized something that was incredibly rare in fantasy: people that looked like me.

“In most fantasies, an Asian girl like me only shows up as a topless witch in need of rescue or killing, with snakes crawling over her boobs. And that is just not my scene.

“My fantasy is less about the whips and the PVC, more about self-actualization and hope. And you know what? That’s just as sexy to me.”

That got a chuckle out of one of the college guys up front. From the look of him, thickly muscled, wearing a tank top that read “No Fat Chicks,” he was probably not laughing at the joke the way she meant him to be.

“In my fantasy, girls like me can do anything we want. We can be fighters, wizards, and rogues. We can save the day and fall in love with the person we want, not be de-powered or married off as a prize for the square-jawed hero.

“When I was a kid, I read so much fantasy that I was convinced I was The Chosen One. My parents yelled at me for introducing my friends as my Sidekick or my Nemesis. Because heroes in fantasy can do it all—they learn magic, pick up languages in a montage, and become master swordsmen in a month on the road headed from their village to the Dark Lord’s tower, winning the heart of the elven princess and besting the champion swordsman from the pointy-hat-wearing Pseudo-French kingdom along the way.”

She saw a dim flicker of light coming from the back of the room, right next to the million candle power spotlight that would have her seeing dots through the weekend. It was Alex, the host, giving her the one-minute warning.

At least she'd caught the signal this time. Last month, she hadn't even seen the timer and they'd cut her mic when she went over.

Even low on time, she plowed ahead.

"So when I was eight, confident that I was The Chosen One, I decided to begin my heroic skills acquisition. I spent six months awaiting my parents' tragic death with Wednesday Addams-level fascination.

"Thankfully, they lived, and I forged on un-orphaned. First, I tried to become a master alchemist. My parents bought me a My Little Scientist kit, but even after eight weeks, all I could do was almost blow up our garage. My older brother's bike is still stained mad-scientist red, more than fifteen years later. Whatever, it's not like he was using those eyebrows.

"So I gave up on alchemy and focused on riding—every good fantasy hero can ride, right? Except it wasn't fourteenth century England, and I wasn't royalty, and my parents unsurprisingly did not accept my argument, in a bad British accent, that if they didn't max out their credit cards on horse-related expenses, that an evil wizard would rule the world." Leah made the sad trombone noise into the mic. That was good for a couple of chuckles.

"And that's when I knew. Sword fighting. Every good Chosen One knows their way around a sword. So I guilted my parents into enrolling me in a fencing class, and I tell you what. You have never seen someone happier than ten-year-old me running around with a kid-sized epee pretending to be Aragorn or Inigo Montoya." Leah mimed some slashes and thrusts.

"I practiced and practiced—stayed with it way longer than anything else. Even got into some tournaments. I got all the way to the finals in my division.

"And you know what happened?"

She waited a second, let the suspense build.

Another flicker of light from the back. Her time was up. Just as she was getting some momentum.

Leah stopped, turning to the audience. She'd keep practicing her blocking and timing, even if she was performing to an effective audience of one.

“What happened is I got my ass handed to me six ways from Sunday by a kid from Iowa that had been fencing since he was four.

“I was fuming after the bout. But my parents made me go congratulate him. He introduced me to his parents, and guess what? They were farmers. And the kid? Adopted.

“You can’t *decide* to be the Chosen One. You just *are*.”

The guy in the coat nodded, his arms crossed.

“And you know what? That kid sent me a friend request two weeks ago. He’s headed to the Olympics.

“But even though I never won a tournament, I found something I loved even though it was hard, even though I would never be the best. Those stories made me believe in myself. That’s what fantasy means to me.”

Alex approached the stage, not remotely happy with her for going over time. His little light was flashing like a raver strobe.

“But I tell you what—if you come across a farm boy and an old wizard, shiv them, take their horses, and go make your own destiny.

“Thank you, and good night!” She bowed (shallow, so as to not give the bros anything to look at), then clomped off-stage, still grumpy about acquiescing to Cal’s creepy demand that all women wear heels to perform. Flats were wonderful, she loved flats. Even heels couldn’t make her tall on stage, so why even pretend?

Alex gave her a falsely enthusiastic high-five, resuming his thankless job as host.

“How about that Leah Tang. Quite a kid! Keep it going now for our next comic, Kyle Jones!”

One person’s solid applause and another half-dozen golf-claps were her reward for the night. Well, that and the free booze. Cal’s one bit of generosity. Even if you washed out, open mic performers always got a drink on the house.

Leah made a beeline to the bar and ordered her customary post-gig Jack & cola. She preferred Laphroaig on the rocks, but her comps didn’t go anywhere near that far. And she was expecting a whole lotta nothing in tips.

Though surprisingly, No Fat Chicks tossed a ten-dollar bill in the can Alex walked around for her. That’d pay for her cab home, at least.

“Not the best night,” Inez the bartender said, mixing the drink. Inez could be counted on to enjoy the show, but she couldn’t play favorites. Not since her very noticeable dislike of a misogynistic-as-hell show a few months back got her in hot water with Cal.

The bartender kept her black hair short, since she “hated ponytails worse than she hated well tequila”—an exact quote that Leah had logged away for use in a future set. Leah had a thousand little lines like that jotted across a half-dozen notebooks that she used to stitch together ideas on the whiteboard in her room.

“I think the guy in the coat was paying attention to something other than my ass.”

“It’s a fine ass, kid. You should be proud of it. But if it’s ass they’re looking for, they should be at Whistlin’ Dixie’s, not here.” Inez topped off Leah’s drink with an extra pour of Jack.

Leah raised the drink to salute the bartender, then took a long swig.

Someone appeared to her right, and Leah turned to see No Fat Chicks, drink in hand. Up close, she saw how sloshed he was.

“That was fantastic, dude,” he said, slurring. “Hot and funny. Plus,” he whispered, “I’m really into reptiles and I think you’d look amazing covered in snakes.”

So not only had he completely missed her point, now he was going to sloppily hit on her. Sigh.

“An impressive performance, Ms. Tang,” said another voice, stepping from around No Fat Chicks’s broad shoulders. It was the dude in the coat.

Perfect timing.

“Thanks, man,” she said to the bro, then turned to face the guy in the coat, hoping her other admirer would get bored and wander off.

Leah saluted with her drink. “I wish a few more people here shared your perspective.” She took another sip.

The drunk bro stood there like a loading cursor, trying to figure out what to say.

“Perhaps your insights might be better used elsewhere,” the guy in the coat said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card with a Johns Hopkins logo.

“I’m Dr. Angstrom King, Department of Comparative Literature. I run a narrative immersion laboratory, and I’m looking for new staff. I think you might be an excellent fit.” King had the upper-class Yankee accent that she associated with the Ivies, but he wore it well. Some folks used that accent like a weapon, a constant reminder of their superiority.

He wasn't coming off as scary, thank goodness. And Leah knew from scary, thanks to her share of sketchy dudes trying to pick her up after sets.

Speaking of which, 'No Fat Chicks' had lost interest and wandered off. Thank goodness.

"Immersive Narrative Laboratory?" Leah asked, looking at the business card, which announced King as a Visiting Professor of English. "Mind de-academia-ing that a bit for me?"

"My team are narrative specialists working with stories in very much the same way that your routine did. We have a big project running right now, and I could use someone with your perspective."

"I've got a job, thanks," Leah said, turning her back to King and reacquainting herself with her drink. She'd put college in her rear view several years back and was glad of it. This "Immersive Narrative Laboratory" was a load of crap if she'd ever heard of one. And while working the reception desk at the accountants' office was far from glamorous, it kept her afloat financially and didn't expect her to work overtime.

"I understand your reluctance, Ms. Tang. The Refusal of the Call is especially strong for persons of your generation. But we pay very well, and the benefits are quite hard to beat."

"Going Campbell on me isn't going to change my mind," Leah said, taking another drink, "but I could stand to hear more about the pay."

Leah looked to Inez for confirmation one way or another. "Is this guy legit?"

Inez nodded. "Word is he helped Tommy Suarez land that HBO special."

Leah froze. Oh, he was *that* kind of weirdo. The "eccentric as all get-out but really well-connected and potentially very useful" weirdo. She perked up.

Tommy hadn't made it big yet, but he'd gone straight from working the regional circuit to an HBO special, which did not happen in the normal world. And if this was the guy who helped Tommy make that jump, she could take the time to check out this "lab."

Plus, this place was tapped out, so she'd need a new lead. She'd made the rounds in the Baltimore circuit, and she was getting nowhere. She needed a break.

"You should have had Inez vouch for you in the beginning," Leah said.

“It means more if you do the asking for yourself. If you’ve changed your mind, I’d like to introduce you to the team tonight. And if you come along, hear me out as I explain what our team does. I’ll ensure that you have a weekly gig here or at any other club in the Baltimore-DC area you want for as long as you like.”

A steady gig, indefinitely. She hadn’t gotten close to graduating out of the open mics. If this guy could guarantee her a steady gig, give her time to sort out her material, find an aesthetic that could connect with audiences . . . Leah tried to avoid salivating at the idea.

Leah checked her phone. “But it’s eleven o’clock. Your team work that late every Thursday night?”

“Tonight we do. Shall I bring my car around?”

Leah shifted her weight from one hip to the other. She took a long swig and asked, “You have to tell me if you’re going to axe murder me, right? Some kind of professorial code of conduct?”

King’s expression brightened. He mimed a posh British accent. “Indeed. It’s a condition of my tenure. Along with the requirement that I be absentminded and wear tweed jackets with patches.”

“Well, if that’s the case, sure.” Leah finished off her drink and left a tip for Inez, who made the glass and bills vanish with her magic.

King lead the way and Leah followed, reassuring herself that her mace was in fact where it was supposed to be in her jacket.

The two made their way out into the ever-humid Baltimore night. King worked a key fob and a too-nice-for-a-visiting-professor Mazda came alive three spots up the street.

“Where’s this lab of yours?”

King opened the door for Leah. “South of the city. Shouldn’t take but twenty minutes to get there.”

Leah held the door as King went to the driver’s side, not quite ready to climb in and commit to doing something quite this dangerous. “And a reminder. No axe murdering.”

King climbed into the car. “Ms. Tang, if I wanted to find someone to kidnap and axe murder, I’d be looking for victims that are far more trusting than you. And I wouldn’t be hunting in Baltimore. Things tend to go poorly for men that who look like me when we’re suspected of crimes in this city.”

“Point.”

King started the engine, which purred to life, running quiet. “As a university professor, I specialize in the disquieting reassurance. It means that my office hours are blissfully uneventful.”

The sound system turned on, leaping into an Eddie Izzard CD. One more layer of resistance peeled off, and she took her seat.

To find out what happens next

Pre-Order *Genrenauts: The Shootout Solution*:

[Amazon](#)

[Kindle](#)

[Barnes & Noble](#)

[Nook](#)

[iBooks](#)

[Kobo](#)