The background of the entire slide is a silhouette of a person, likely a woman, in a martial arts or fitness pose. She is standing with her back to the camera, her right arm extended horizontally to the left, and her left hand near her head. The background is a warm, orange and yellow sunset or sunrise sky. The text is overlaid on this background.

# Writing Killer Fight Scenes

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**Capclave 2018  
Sep 28-30 - Rockville, MD**

# Agenda

## **PART 1: All About Violence**

- Myths About Violence
- How We React to Danger
- How We Handle Violence

## **PART 2: Crafting Fighting Scenes**

- A Useful Framework
  - Maximizing Impact
  - Writing Tips for Action Scenes
- 
- *Totally Shameless Plug*
  - *Workshop Evaluation Form*



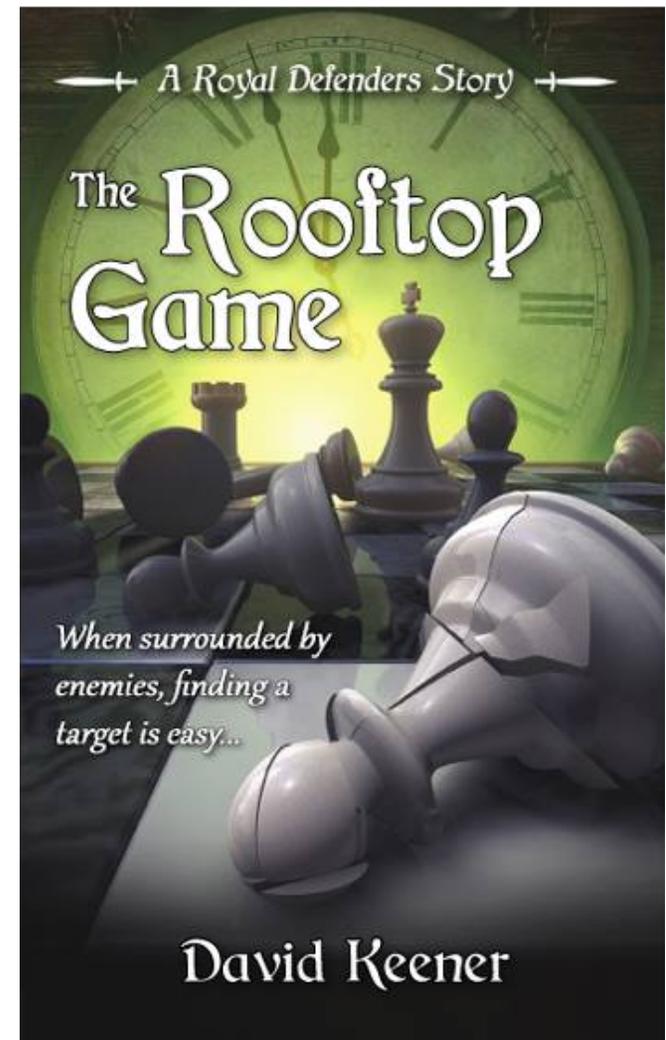
**Part 1**

# **All About Violence**

# Who Am I?

## David Keener

- I Write Genre Mashups...
- Most of them with Fighting, Crime or Military Combat
- Novelettes/Novellas
- Anthology Editor
- Defensive training with an ex-SEAL



# Exercise 1: Who Dies?

## Cop vs. Man with Knife

- They're 21 feet apart
- The Cop's gun is in his holster
- The Man's knife is drawn

Who lives and who dies?

# Answer 1: Who Dies?

## The Cop Dies

- “How Close is Too Close?”
  - By Dennis Tueller
  - An article in SWAT magazine from 1983
- Modern “triple-retention” holsters are even slower

# Myths About Violence

- Violence Never Solves Anything
- Only the Ignorant Engage in Violence
- Only Men are Really Violent
- Violence is the Result of an Improper Upbringing



# **VIOLENCE WORKS**



# **VIOLENCE WORKS**

This Shouldn't be true...  
We Don't Want it to be true...  
But too often this IS true.

# Rape Stats

## OUT OF EVERY 1000 RAPES, 994 PERPETRATORS WILL WALK FREE

**310** are reported to police



**57** reports lead to arrest



**11** cases get referred to prosecutors



**7** cases will lead to a felony conviction



**6** rapists will be incarcerated



**RAINN**

National Sexual Assault Hotline | 800.656.HOPE | [online.rainn.org](https://online.rainn.org)

Please visit [rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system](https://rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system) for full citation.

Rape is just one type of violent crime. Consider other crimes such as:

- Robberies
- Murders
- Muggings
- Car Jackings
- Violent Abuse
- Intimidation
- Others

It's frightening how often violence works for perpetrators.

# Types of Fights

- Monkey Dance
- Group Monkey Dance
- Attack from Advantage
- Ritual Fight
- A Fair Fight (very rare)

# Monkey Dance

- So universal it's clearly instinctive
- Two guys trading escalating insults...
- Pushing on each other's chests...
- Until one of them throws a roundhouse punch.
- Then they punch and wrestle...
- Until people around them intervene.

It's (usually) a male dominance fight

# Group Monkey Dance

- Going into “danger” with your tribe...
  - A bonding experience
- Examples:
  - Tribal hunters venturing out on a hunt
  - Soldiers on a combat mission
  - Mugging a tourist...to get into a gang
  - Becoming a “made” man in the Mafia
  - Enforcing group rules, e.g. punishing traitors

# Attack from Advantage

- Why start a fight you might not win?
- It's called "self-defense" for a reason...
  - You're already losing when the fight starts
  - The enemy has picked the location, the odds, the weapons, etc.

# Ritual Fight

- A Fight with well-defined “Rules”
  - Boxing, wrestling, kickboxing
  - A duel with swords or pistols
  - A bar fight
    - “Let’s take it outside, bucko!”
    - Can be a more organized “Monkey Dance”

# A Fair Fight

- Not as rare as a Unicorn but...
- Ex. – A chance meeting of two evenly matched military units

# Women and the Monkey Dance

- Not hard-wired like men
  - Can exhibit it as a learned behavior...
- Can decide how to react
  - Men tend to punch; women can do anything
  - Makes women more unpredictable in a fight
- Men also tend to underestimate women

# Adrenaline and Men

- “Adrenaline” is a built-in reaction to Danger
- It’s very much a mixed bag
  - It promotes Raw Power and Speed...
  - But Depresses usable Intelligence...
  - And can cause Clumsiness and Tunnel Vision
- Takes training and experience to overcome the downsides of adrenaline

# Adrenaline and Women

- For Women, “adrenaline” builds slowly...
  - Then peaks and trails off
  - Never peaks as high as Men
- Men peak early and high...
  - Men can go into a “combat rage”
- Since Women build more slowly...
  - They have time to plan their “combat rage”

## Exercise 2: Who Wins?

### Female Jogger vs. Male Attacker

- 25-ish female jogger
  - With some self-defense training
- Early 30's attacker: A Bodybuilder
- He attacks, she fends him off and even kicks him in the crotch

Does she attack or run?

## Answer 2: Who Dies?

### **She RUNS for her life**

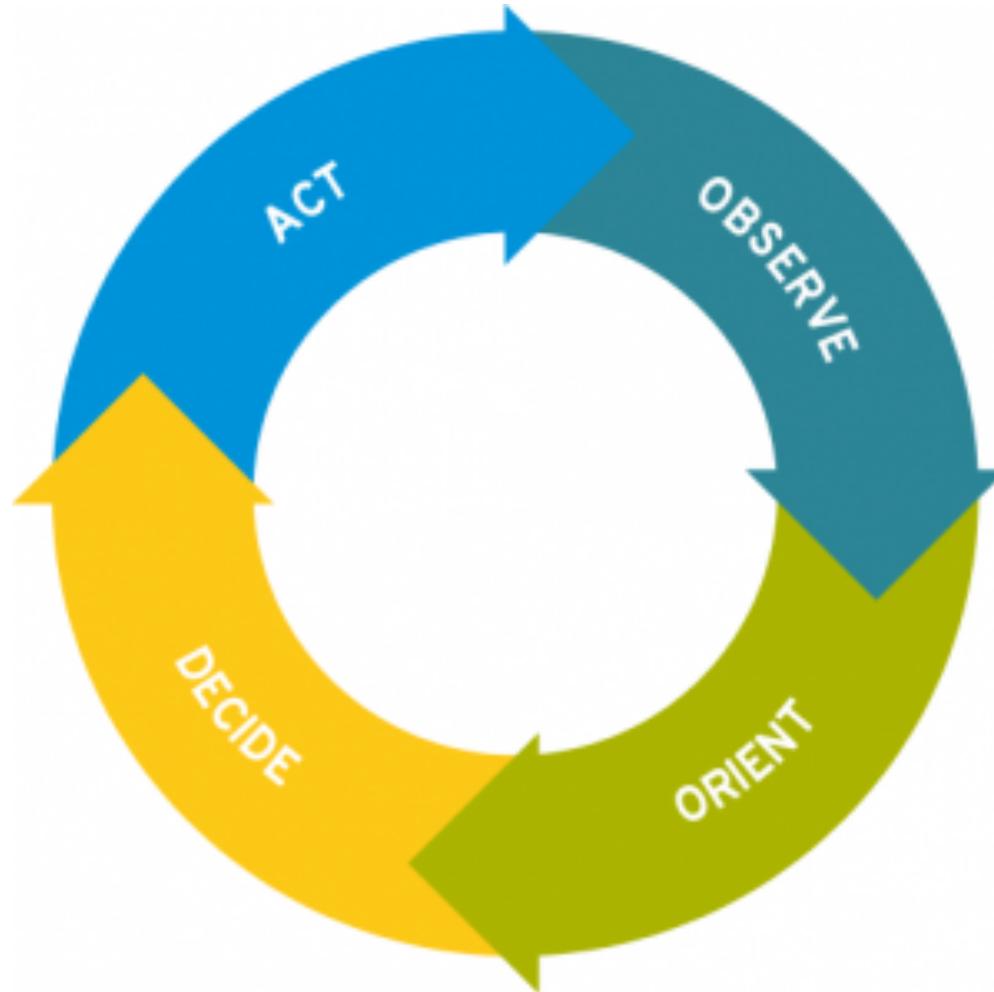
- He's stronger and faster at short distances
- If he grapples her, she's DEAD

In real life, she runs and gets away. Identifies the man to the police; he's a serial rapist out on parole. He's already killed two other joggers in the area.

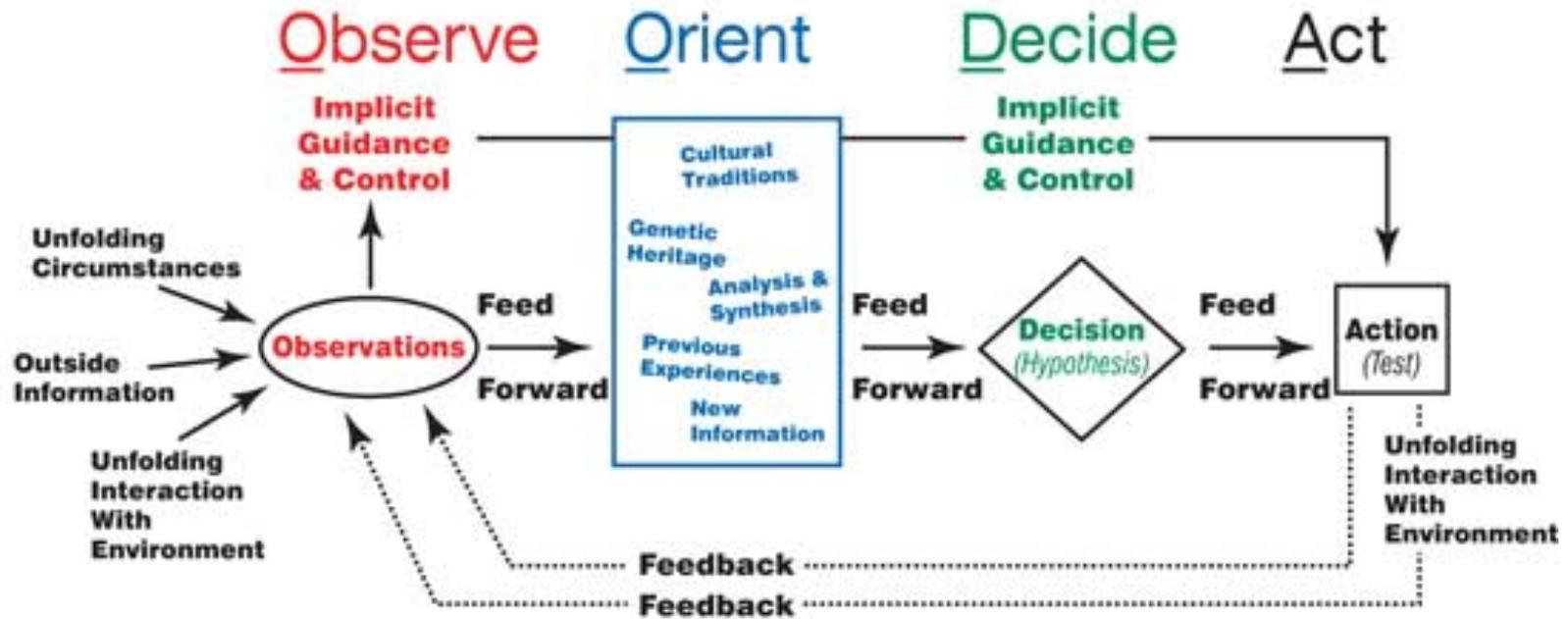
# Cognitive Bias

- People don't expect to be in danger
- Often don't recognize danger when it appears
  - May not realize *pop-pop-pop* is gunfire
  - May rationalize away what they see...
- Difficult to “win” when you don't realize what's happening until it's too late
  - Active shooter scenarios, muggings, etc.
- Bias is typically overcome by training

# OODA Loop



# OODA Loop Details



# Looping

In a fight...

- You act physically based on your OODA Loop
- As does your opponent
- Your actions are his observations
- His actions are your observations
- Decide faster to disrupt his OODA Loop
  - And take control of the fight

# Exercise 3: Beach Attack

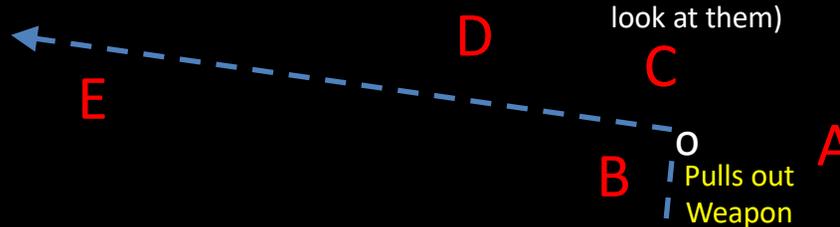
For each Group: Fight, Flight or Freeze?

Hotel

Shops

Beach

(Shooter does not  
look at them)



Pulls out  
Weapon

Shooter's  
Path  
(weapon concealed)

Water

## Answer 3: Beach Attack

- A. Flight (into the water)**
- B. Doesn't matter – They're Dead**
- C. Freeze or Fight (actually Freeze)**
- D. Flight (or play dead)**
- E. Flight**

**If you survived, you either did something right...or you just got lucky**



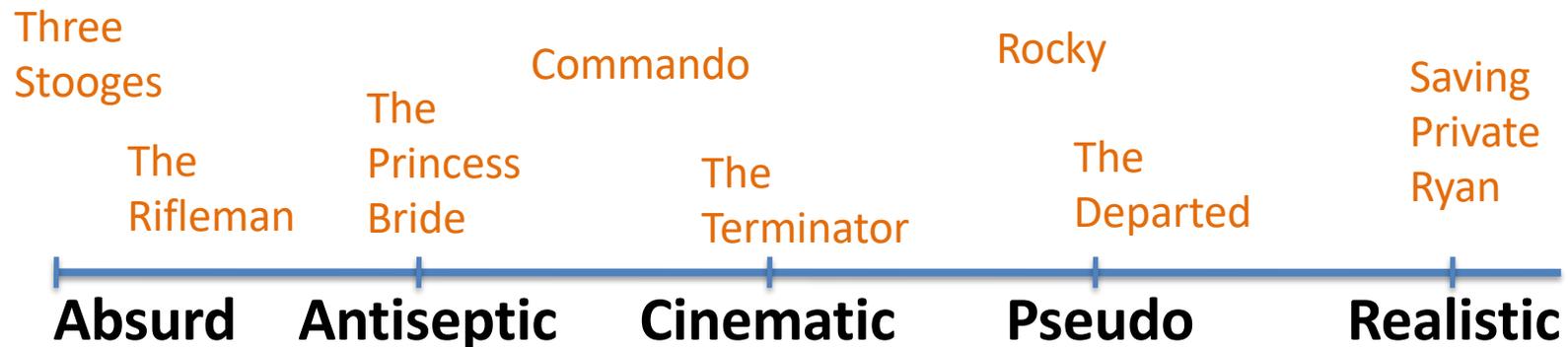
**Part 2**

# **Crafting Fight Scenes**

# Level of Realism

Your First Decision is...

How real do you want it?



From Comments: There's probably a category for "Gory" to the far right; sometimes used by horror writers...

# Realism By Genre

- Military SF: Pseudo, Realistic
- Fantasy: Antiseptic
- Horror: Realistic, Gory
- Thriller: Cinematic, Antiseptic
- Romance: Cinematic (and short)
- Humorous: Absurd, Cinematic

# Paradigm

## A Simple Paradigm for Fight Scenes

The complexity is in the Details...

- Setup
- Opening Moves
- Middle Game
- End Game
- Aftermath

# 1. Setup

- Establish context, e.g. – local geography
- Establish Stakes
- Establish Rules, e.g. – “first blood” in a duel
- Tell what we need to know before fighting starts
  - You won't be able to later on
  - Don't be afraid of “shorthand”
- If the opponents are talking, it's usually here

## 2. Opening Moves

- The Fight begins...
- Opponents feel each other out
  - Some trickery may start here
    - Ex. – Faking an injury, etc.
- The “plan” gets tested for the first time
- Terse Dialogue, if any
  - Unless aiming at Absurd or Cinematic
- If the opponents are talking, it’s sometimes here

## 3. Middle Game

- The Fight really kicks into gear...
- Surprise: (Optional) – “I’m not left-handed”
  - May cause transition to the End Game
- Most likely No Dialogue
- Takes hero to the edge of his/her abilities
- Throwing in some details adds to the realism
  - Can’t do a full sword swing in a stairway
- Do NOT do blow-by-blow descriptions

## 4. End Game

- The Conclusion of the Fight...
  - Win, Lose, Draw, Delayed
- Payoffs: From any surprises or trickery
- Minimal Dialogue (but Key)
  - “Luke, I am Your Father.”
  - “I told you you’d never amount to anything.”

Goal: Organic outgrowth from activities, but hopefully surprising in its details

## 5. Aftermath

- What happens because of this Fight?
- How does Life change for those involved?
- If the Fight matters, it's got to have consequences
  - Otherwise, cut it out
- Opportunity for more dialogue

# Writing Action

- Typically written tightly
  - No extraneous words (inc. adverbs)
- Short sentences, short paragraphs
- Dynamic words
- Only absolutely necessary descriptions
- No dialogue (or very little)
- Your Fight scene is probably under 1000 words
  - With Setup the longest
  - Aftermath can be short or long...

## Exercise 4: The Duel

- **Blaze Conner** – son of a minor noble (age 22)
  - Some sword training; not a duelist
- Caught with Esme Yavin (19), Duke's daughter
- Patriarch offended at Blaze's marriage proposal
- Challenges Blaze to a duel, using the top duelist in the city...the dreaded **Payter**

Blaze wins the duel. Write the action where Blaze wins. In 100 words, tell us how he did it...

## Answer 4: The Duel

- **The right answer is “anything that your readers find entertaining and plausible”**
- **Most Likely: Blaze wins by accident**
- **Still not common, but the biggest threat to a master duelist is an amateur...**
  - **They do stupid, unexpected things**
  - **Sometimes they get lucky**

## My Answer 4: The Duel

Somehow, Blaze parried Payter's thrust, only realizing too late that it was feint.

Off-balance, he saw Payter's blade line up for the killing thrust he had no way to stop. He moved—not enough—and then stumbled.

Payter's blade took him in the shoulder. He screamed, dropped his sword and fell to his knees.

As his opponent tried to pull his sword out, Blaze drew his dagger and stabbed him in the stomach again and again and again until the dagger became too slick with blood and slipped out of his hands.

93 Words

# Make it Matter

- Fights must move story forward, not interrupt
- Fights should reveal character
  - And not just the hero
- Something about the Fight should be unexpected
  - Don't be too predictable
- Amp up the Stakes
  - Make us care what happens

## Exercise 5: How?

- What can we do to make this Duel matter?
- What do we want to show about characters?
- Where does the story go after the Duel

## Back to Blaze (examples)

- Fights between nobles officiated by a Judge
  - From the Society of the Blade
  - Gives speech: “Gods reveal Right through the outcome of the sacred Duel.”
  - Duel is to the death
- Patriarch tells duelist to make Blaze “suffer”
  - Duelist: “As you wish.”
  - Daughter is horrified

## Back to Blaze (2)

- Judge asks Blaze for choice of weapon
  - Duelist: “I’ll use my sword. He can use whatever he wants. It won’t matter, anyway.”

Reveals character for Patriarch, daughter, Duelist and Judge. And legitimizes Blaze’s use of sword & dagger

# “Chaining”

- With an extended conflict, you can chain your Fight scenes...
- The Aftermath of one Fight...
- Becomes the Setup for the next Fight
- Gives you rising and falling action
  - You can't peg the needle all the time

# My Story: Clash By Night (Chaining)

Basic Setup: Monumentalists rescue lost artwork. On a retrieval mission in a war zone. Unexpectedly opposed by Mercs hired to move the artwork.

- Initial Contact
  - Light skirmishing and electronic warfare
- Rearguard Action
  - Fighting while heroes rescue/load treasure
- Break Containment
  - Heroes escape initial effort to surround them
- Ambush
  - Heroes ambush bad guys during chase
- Bait and Switch
  - Heroes run a scam and escape with the treasure

# Beats for a Fight

- Can be useful to outline the beats in a Fight
- What facts need to be communicated in Setup?
  - Ex. - Blaze has a dagger
  - Ex. – Opponent said he could use “anything”
- What actions represent the ebb & flow?
  - Do not provide blow-by-blow commentary
  - Just enough for flavor and beat coverage

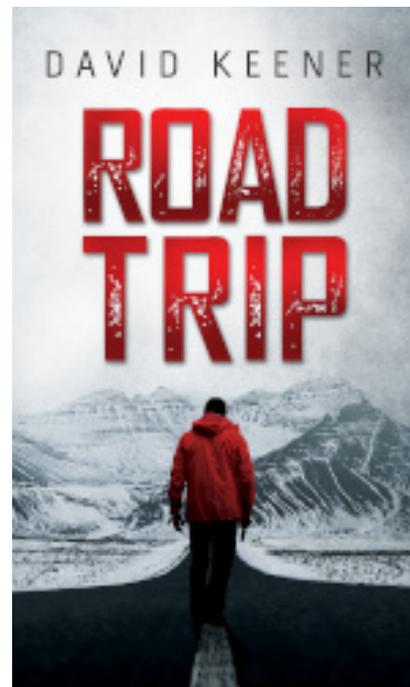
# Conclusion

- Fights don't just happen
- They develop for a reason
- Structure them to accomplish what your story needs
- Real-world actions and reactions make your story work

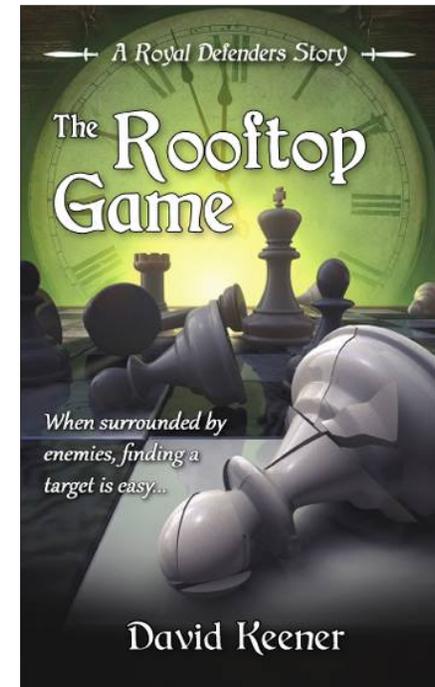
# Totally Shameless Plug



Futuristic art heist  
behind enemy lines



An urban fantasy,  
Faerie, law enforcement,  
paramilitary mash-up



“Die Hard” on the roof  
of a castle tower...

# Upcoming Projects

**Boxcars:** Short Story. A hopepunk story about a troubleshooter investigating a mysterious train heist.

**Bitter Days:** Novelette. A crime story set in the same gritty fantasy world as “The Rooftop Game.”

**Finders Keepers:** Novel. Futuristic detective story, with a dog as a partner.

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