

October 2025 - Downward Spiral

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Writing Prompts

It's October, which means it's time to write some horror! I've been reading some Stephen King to get in the mood.

Ideas

A guy needs to recover something from a haunted house. Why? What is keeping him inside?

Social media content maker is going to spend the night in a haunted house to "prove" it's not haunted. But of course it is.

Trapped in a cave by a cave-in, need to get out to get help for a trapped friend. They are convinced something is in the cave with them. Then the friend disappears.

A board game from a thrift store promises thrills and chills - and delivers. Each card reveals personal information about the player that should be a closely guarded secret. The cards threaten to reveal the info if the player refuses to continue. The cards threats start vague but get frighteningly specific as the game continues.

Outline

Seth's favorite holiday is Halloween, as his birthday is October 31st. During a Halloween party at Seth's he reveals that he bought a spooky game at a thrift store and they should try it out. The party gets busted by the cops and he persuades them to return to his place to play the game at midnight since his parents are out of town.

The four return to Seth's and he introduces the game. The game involves drawing cards and doing what they say to move their pieces toward a final goal. It is very similar to Truth or Dare. Success is adjudicated by each player placing two fingers on a central device and pressing down harder on one finger to represent succeed or fail. All players must agree on succeed or the player moves back a space and must try again. The game warns that it must be played to completion before dawn or there will be unnamed consequences. They sit down to play.

It quickly becomes clear that the cards vaguely hint at knowledge of the secrets of the players and push them toward related dares.

When a player refuses to continue and leaves the game, then notice the clocks are stopped and doors and windows won't open. Ominous shadows move in the darkness outside, approaching the house. Time starts up again when they agree to continue playing.

More secrets are revealed. Friendships are strained but they press on as the shadows outside grow closer to the house and the lights are starting to dim.

Final truths come out and leads to confrontation. Friendships are shattered. The shadows recede and dawn finally breaks. The four go their separate ways.

Story Elements

The phantoms/ghosts are each associated with a secret of one of the characters. Revealing the secret eliminates the ghost or renders it powerless.

The characters choose their pieces at random. Each piece is a different color that correspond to an element of their costume.

Time stops when a task has been assigned but not yet completed.

Each character has a minor and major secret with corresponding ghosts. There are 3 rings on the board. The first ring reveals secrets which are trivial, then minor, and finally the major secret in the third ring.

The game board has the paths cross and join when a secret involves multiple people in the game.

Characters

The story centers around four friends who are high-school seniors.

Francine

Beautiful and popular, Francine seems to have it all - friends, good grades, status as the editor of the school paper, and a relationship with Travis. She is fiercely intelligent and driven. She loves to write and eventually decides to study writing in college, on her way to a law degree.

First Secret

She still loves writing about Awesomonia and has continued to write fiction about it. (with Jonesy)

Second Secret

Francine has decided to attend a different school from Travis and is afraid to tell him their lives are taking different paths.

Third Secret

Francine got pregnant over the summer and secretly had an abortion because she knew Travis would insist on keeping the baby. (with Seth)

Other Secrets

Travis confessed to her that Bill was driving the car that crippled Andy.

Costume

Cheerleader who has been attacked by a zombie and is covered with bite marks (color: red)

Travis

Captain of the football team, Travis is popular and has a boy scout reputation. His Christian faith is strong although he doesn't draw attention to it. He's dating Francine and plans to attend Duke after graduation along with her. His secret: during Junior year he succumbed to peer pressure and got drunk with his friends, got behind the wheel, and crippled Andy - Jonesy's brother who was on the Track team who was running in the dark (with lights and a reflective vest). This led to his embrace of Christianity and moral behavior. He pretends to help Jonesy seek the driver in hopes it will lead suspicion away from him.

First Secret

Knowing that Travis is on the football team and has dealt with injuries, Andy asked him how to get painkillers without a prescription and swore him to secrecy.

Second Secret

Travis knows it was Bill's sports car that struck Andy and Bill had the car repaired in secret. (with Francine)

Third Secret

During Spring semester of Junior year, Travis got lightly drunk at a party at Bill's house with the football team. Seeing that Bill was about to drive drunk (a joyride in a sports car brought home by his father), Travis took the keys. During the drive, the other players distracted Travis, who struck Andy who running along the side of the road. They pressured Travis to leave the scene of the crime. Andy became paralyzed as a result of the accident. Bill was able to get the car repaired at his father's shop by threatening the shop manager.

Costume

Green-skinned zombie (color: green)

Jonesy

A childhood friend of Travis, Jonesy is a bit counterculture in contrast to his brother who was a popular jock until he was crippled in a hit and run the year prior. He has since become more cynical and is determined to learn the identity of the driver who crippled his brother Andy. It's Travis! His secret: he has been a close friend of Francine's since childhood but he downplays it since she is dating his childhood friend.

First Secret

He has heard rumors that a vehicle was repaired off the books at Bill's dad's dealership the day after the hit and run.

Second Secret

Jonesy and Francine meet up regularly in secret to collaborate on a collection of stories set in Awesomnia (with Francine)

Third Secret

Jonesy is secretly in love with Francine but decides against telling her when she begins dating Travis, who he suspects is a better match for her. He has been subtly steering Francine away from Travis in hopes that she will date him instead.

Costume

Raoul Duke from Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (color: yellow)

Seth

A talented student, and member of the drama club. He considers himself a creative and is known for flashy clothes and speechmaking. He wrote and has the lead role in the Senior Play, *Enemies Abound*.

First Secret

Seth outs himself as gay. Nobody is surprised. (with Francine)

Second Secret

Need a good second secret here

Third Secret

Seth manipulated Francine to brainstorm and eventually write the script for *Enemies Abound* that got him the lead role that he wanted. When she revealed that she wanted the authorship credit, he persuaded her with subtle threats that revealing her role in the play result in him revealing what he knows about her secret abortion. "Friends keep secrets for each other", etc. (with Francine)

Costume

Samual Clemons aka Mark Twain (color: white)

Minor Characters

Andy

Jonesy's younger brother, Andy is an introvert who struggles to make friends. He seems to be on a good path when he joins the Track team with his brother's encouragement, but he falls into a depression after the hit and run which leaves him paralyzed.

Bill

Bill aka "Billdozer" is the team's star Offensive Lineman, known for his ability to push through the opposing team's defense through sheer strength and power. His father owns a successful auto dealership and the family is wealthy. Bill's parents are divorced and Bill's father is an alcoholic. Despite his size, Bill's father is large enough to intimidate him and keeps weapons in the house. Bill's dad is abusive and expects him to follow in his footsteps, be a hero to the town, and keep up the family's reputation.

Backstory Timeline

Childhood

Jonesy and **Travis** are childhood friends, having lived on the same block and meeting in elementary school. They are best friends and engage in all sorts of creative play, imagining a world in which they are two young princes whose kingdom, **Awesomnia**, has been overtaken by monsters led by the king's secretly evil wizard, **Szyslak**. Travis plays the honorable knight while Jonesy prefers trickery and subterfuge.

Middle School (6-8th grade)

Francine, **Travis**, **Jonesy**, and **Seth** were all in the same English class in 6th grade (first year of middle school) and got along well, bonding over their shared interest in creative writing. The four met for lunch and after school. Travis and Jonesy revealed their Awesomnia story and Seth and Francine eagerly joined, Seth becoming a famous Troubador and Francine playing the role of a beautiful maiden who has learned the art of magic, both from a distant kingdom and washed ashore after a shipwreck.

In their fantasy scenario the four called themselves the **Wardens of Awesomnia**, shortened to "**The Wardens**", dedicated to defeating the wizard and returning Awesomnia to its former greatness.

The friendship continued since then, despite them connecting to different social groups according to their interests. They spent less time in creative play as they got older but still reference their characters and adventures when together, or as inside jokes when around other people.

Jonesy is romantically interested in Francine but is afraid to act on it for fear of damaging their group friendship.

Seth is secretly gay, reflected in his character's tendency toward flamboyant songs and actions while always dismissing smitten maidens as "unworthy".

HS Freshman Year

Travis goes out for the football team and makes it, starting his high school sports career.

Francine makes the Girls Volleyball team (which is not very good)

Jonesy finds friends among the counterculture stoner kids.

Andy is overweight and struggles to make friends in high school. He plays video games online with strangers who are immature and seem to be a bad influence. Jonesy is concerned that his brother is becoming a misanthrope.

Seth finds friends in the theater department.

Knowing that **Francine** still does creative writing in her spare time, **Jonesy** suggests that they work on stories from Awesomnia. He's also eager for time alone with her, which he hopes will lead to romance. The two share stories. As their writing evolves, Jonesy notices that Francine's stories are evolving from fantasy adventure to mystery, with her character unraveling complex plots among the characters in the stories.

HS Sophomore Year

Aware of **Andy's** unhappiness in high school, **Jonesy** encourages his brother to begin running track and get fit. Andy loves the track team, finds his friends, and starts getting in shape.

Romantic tension grows between **Travis** and **Francine**, which **Seth** encourages but **Jonesy** discourages as he has been interested in **Francine** romantically since middle school.

Seth reveals that he is gay to **Francine**, who is not surprised. He asks her not to tell anyone, fearing his parents will punish him or even kick him out. He seeks out her advice and goes to her for support on occasion. **Travis** and **Jonesy** notice but Francine tells them they're just friends and keeps his secret. Seth assures her that he will out himself to at least Travis and Jonesy in his own time.

HS Junior Year

Travis makes Varsity Football and is considered one of the most valuable members of the team.

Francine's friend **Stacy** tells her **Travis** wants to date her and would make a great boyfriend. Francine considers Travis an old friend and is reluctant to make the relationship romantic. Stacy tells Travis that Francine likes him and he asks her out. They begin dating.

Andy sets a personal goal to make the Varsity Track team in the Spring. He gets lights and a reflective vest so he can train after dark.

Jonesy, who had been planning to ask Francine to the Junior Prom, is secretly against her relationship with Travis, claiming that it could ruin their friendship if things don't work out.

Travis finished the season at the end of December and is voted MVP. Popularity soars. He begins hanging out with football players and other jocks as his primary friend group.

Over the winter break, **Travis** and **Francine** promise each other to attend UC San Diego as their first step to build a life together on the West Coast after high school.

Seth fails to get the lead role he wants in the Spring play. Knowing that the Fall play traditionally uses a student-written script, and the author often gets the lead role, he determines to write a script over the summer. He wants it to be perfect and struggles to develop ideas and characters that he considers "worthy".

During the spring semester, **Travis** attends more parties and events with the jocks and drinks more. After one party, **Bill** is going to drive very drunk and Travis insists he drive instead. On the drive, the players distract him and he hits **Andy** who is running along the road in the dark (with lights). Travis and the other passengers swear an oath to never speak of the incident.

Andy is left paralyzed after the accident with little hope he will walk again. He starts to become isolated from his Track friends and starts to gain weight and spend his free time alone, playing video games. **Jonesy** encourages him to maintain his friendships but Andy is clearly struggling to be hopeful about his recovery. Andy smokes pot with **Jonesy** and begins asking about prescription painkillers.

Travis becomes depressed but refuses to talk about it.

Andy asks **Travis** for advice on getting prescription painkillers and swears him to secrecy.

Jonesy, seeing **Andy's** declining mental health but unable to do anything about it, swears to find the driver who crippled his brother and take his revenge. **Seth** and **Francine** offer to help but **Travis** tells him it's a waste of time and won't change anything.

At Junior Prom, in a moment of weakness, **Travis** he reveals the hit and run to **Francine**, but only after swearing her to secrecy. He tells her the car's owner, **Bill**, was driving and feared the truth would put him in danger from his violent and alcoholic father. She attempts to console him and the two sex, resulting in her pregnancy.

Francine's cousin sister **Judy**, visiting for the holidays, helps Francine realize that a Law career would be a perfect match for her interests and encourages her to attend Law school instead of pursuing a teaching job.

Summer after Junior Year

Wracked with guilt over the hit and run, **Travis** swears off drinking and begins to spend more time doing church and volunteer activities. He claims he wants to be a better person and increase his odds for his college application.

Francine discovers she's pregnant from their sex after the Junior Prom. She tells **Seth** but swears him to secrecy.

Francine contacts Judy for advice. Judy suggests Georgetown as a better path to law school and advises Francine get an abortion. Francine agrees but decided not to tell Travis as he is too fragile to handle the total destruction of their plans.

Francine has a secret abortion, telling Travis it's a road trip with distant cousins he's never met and avoiding questions about the trip.

Seth, having failed to create a script he considers good enough during the school year, confides to **Francine** that he needs help and he knows she's a good writer. She agrees to brainstorm, in part to distract herself from Travis' trauma and her recent abortion. She pours this intense emotion into the brainstorming, eventually coming up with a great idea. When Seth struggles to realize her vision, she reluctantly agrees to write a draft which eventually becomes the final work.

HS Senior Year

Seth submits **Francine's** script, *Enemies Abound*, as his own work. The script is a complex mystery with engaging characters dealing with hidden trauma. It is selected and Seth gets the lead role.

Francine begins working on her application for Georgetown, telling herself that she probably won't get accepted so she doesn't have to share the plan with Travis.

Travis joins the football team but refuses to drink and continues his volunteer work. **Francine** encourages him to reveal the secret but he refuses because he knows he was the driver, not his teammate (Bill). Travis seems to be holding on strongly to the idea of leaving town for California with Francine after college to "get their real life started".

Jonesy reveals that he's learned that **Bill's** car was damaged the same night as the hit and run and he suspects Bill caused the accident. He keeps this information to himself because he knows **Bill** and **Travis** are teammates, although their friendship has cooled.

Story takes place on Halloween Night, fall of Senior Year.

Notes

High School football season typically runs from late August through December.

Boys Track and Field has a spring season (outdoor track)

Girls' volleyball season is late August through early November

College application are submitted between August and January of Senior Year

Prologue

Janet could barely hear the door knocking over the music. It was just past 11 and there had not been any trick-or-treaters in the last couple hours. Regardless, she had promised her brother she would make sure the neighborhood kids got their candy in exchange for letting her join the party with his high school friends. She pulled down her China doll mask with the bleeding eyes, grabbed the almost-empty candy bowl, and swung the door open as ominously as she could manage in a room crowded with dancing monsters and pounding techno music.

Two cops stood on the doorstep, flashlights out and looking pissed.

Janet froze. "We've received some noise complaints and it's after 11 PM. Are your parents home?", asked the officer with the bushy moustache. He sounded almost bored, like a question he had asked a million times before. His eyes were already darting about the room, looking for something to have a problem with. He took a step forward.

Her brother Pete had been very clear: if the cops show up, tell them to wait outside and come and find him ASAP. "Don't let them in", he had said firmly, holding her gaze to drive the point home. "Be polite, tell them to wait right there, and come get me, fast."

Remembering she was still wearing the doll mask, Janet quickly pulled it down and held up a hand. "Wait right there please, I'll go get my... the person in charge." She turned on her heel and raced back through the crowded living room. Behind her she heard a frantic voice yell "COPS!" and everyone started running.

Scene 1

A few houses further ahead on Grant Avenue, a green-skinned zombie in tattered clothes was gesturing frantically toward a dark driveway between the pooled light of the streetlights. "Over here!" he shout-whispered into the late-evening silence of the suburbs.

A cheerleader covered with blood and ragged bite marks, a youthful Mark Twain in an ill-fitting white suit, and a convincing imitation of Hunter S. Thompson in a red Hawaiian shirt ran up, out of breath and unable to speak, and dodged into the welcoming darkness of the driveway. The zombie pushed them behind an almost invisible row of pine trees and held his finger up to his lips before realizing nobody could see him in the darkness. Over the next minute the chorus of heavy breathing subsided and the night was quiet once more.

In the darkness the zombie whispered, "Let's stay here for a few minutes and keep an eye out for cops."

"We're blocks away from Pete's." said Twain, dropping his characteristic drawl for the first time since the group first arrived at the party three hours ago. "I doubt they're still patrolling the neighborhoods this far out."

The cheerleader sounded worried. "Probably not, but if the police drive by and see us out here walking in costume this close to midnight they're going to stop and talk to us for sure. Let's get off the street as quick as we can."

Hunter S. Thompson whispered, "Seth, your parents are out of town right now, aren't they? And you live the closest to here. Can we hang at your place for a couple hours, ditch the costumes, and walk home afterwards? The streets will definitely be empty at that point."

Seth smiled in the darkness behind his bushy white mustache, which was barely hanging on after the frantic run. "Yes, great idea." he said. "In fact, I've got a perfect way to pass the time while we wait. I picked it up at the thrift store last week when I was shopping for this amazing costume. Follow me, I know a way back to my place that will keep us off the bigger streets." Without another word he disappeared into the darkness with his friends following close behind.

Scene 2

Seth flopped down on the ragged couch in his family's musty wood-paneled basement den. He peeled off the enormous Mark Twain mustache with a sigh of relief, glanced around, and stuck it on a mannequin in a fur-trimmed broad-brimmed pimp hat to keep it from getting lost in the avalanche of decorations and costume bits that covered the walls and filled most of the surfaces in the room. Seth had performed in almost every theatrical production at West Elm High and had a starring role in many of them. Many of the costume accessories were souvenirs from shows in middle and high school. Now, solidly into his Senior year, he had enough pull with the school's Drama Department that his opinions about dialogue and creative direction were usually heard and incorporated into their shows. Their current production, *Enemies Abound*, was already cast and well into rehearsal. It was the first of his scripts to be approved by their exacting Drama teacher, Mr. Haverty.

Jonesy sank into the usual ragged recliner that he had claimed as his own since early middle school, despite it being in his friend's house. They had all gathered in this room for years to relax, gossip, smoke a little pot, and generally recharge from their busy lives. He smiled as he looked around, satisfied to have made it back to a safe place after paranoid slinking through the dark streets of their neighborhood. He kept his costume's main accessory, an authentic TarGard cigarette holder, Hunter S. Thompson's trademark accessory along with his iconic Aviator sunglasses, clamped firmly between his teeth. The cigarette had fallen out somewhere during their frantic run from the party.

Travis and Francine were both packed into the small bathroom, door open, wiping the zombie and victim makeup off their faces and arms. The couples costume had been Francine's idea. Travis had loved zombie movies, and horror movies in general, since the two had first become friends Freshman year. But then, sometime last summer, he had gotten serious about his Christian faith and made some abrupt changes - he decreed that he was giving up alcohol and pot for good because they were "tempting him down the wrong path." His interest in horror movies had faded at the same time and he started volunteering at the church and at school. His friends on the football team had given him shit about it, but ultimately found it unsatisfying to tease a friend for wanting to be a better person, so they just stopped offering him drinks at parties. He had started dating Francine around the same time. She still drank and smoked on occasion, especially when Jonesy was around, but she seemed to have lost her taste for it as well.

By the time Travis and Francine finally emerged from the tiny bathroom, still lightly smudged with makeup, Seth was setting up a game on the battered coffee table in the center of the room. A square central board featured a series of spiral paths that crossed each other at intervals and they wound toward a circle in the center. Four game pieces and a single six-sided die were set aside on the table top along with a large deck of cards with an unsettling pattern printed on the back. Jonesy picked up the single page rule sheet and was reading intently.

Travis and Francine settled into their usual chairs, a pair of faded recliners with wooden arms rubbed pale from countless hands over the years. Seth had told them when they all first became friends at West Elm Middle that the basement furniture was there when they first moved in and his father had proclaimed them "Good enough for a basement hangout room."

Francine was eyeing the game board and pieces. "This looks pretty straightforward. Roll the die, move your piece toward the center, follow instructions and draw cards along the way. Sounds perfect for a game we're starting at midnight!" she smiled.

"I agree completely", Seth said with a grin. "Let's add to the atmosphere. It is Halloween night, after all." He popped up off the couch, opened a cabinet half-hidden behind a large papier-mache mushroom (a leftover from their much-celebrated performance of Alice in Wonderland), and pulled out a squat glass bong and a small ornately-carved wooden box.

"Justin Bong has joined the party!" he said with a flourish as he unrolled a baggie of weed from the wooden box and started rolling it between his fingers.

Jonesy was leaning forward with anticipation. "Now we're talking! We're stuck here for a while anyway. Tomorrow is Saturday, Seth's folks are out of town, and it's my favorite holiday. Hell, this could be the last Halloween we all spend together. We'll probably be getting baked with our college friends next year." He traced an imagined tear slowly down his cheek. "Let's all get stoned and play this weird game. Travis, you in? For old times sake?"

"You know I gave that stuff up, Jonesy. You said you wouldn't hassle me about it."

"Yeah, I did say that. It's just... this feels like the end of an era for all of us, you know? Graduation, college, real life... it's all right around the corner. We may not get an opportunity like this again anytime soon. Maybe never. Let's have a couple drinks, smoke up, and celebrate all the fun times we've had together before we go our separate ways. Come on man, we've been friends since our playground days. What d'ya say?"

Travis looked over at Francine. Hoping she would jump in to tell Jonesy to back off in that disarming way she had. But she was silent, watching the exchange with a wistful look on her face.

Jonesy followed Travis' gaze. "Frannie, you're going to partake tonight, right? It's a special night, let's not waste it."

"Yeah, I'm in." she said, looking briefly at Travis before averting her gaze.

"Frannie's in. Seth's pretty obviously in." He gestured to Seth, who had just finished packing the bowl and was reaching for a lighter. "I'm in. And I'll be honest, I could use a night like this after what happened to my brother at the end of last year. Andy's not making any progress in physical therapy and he's losing hope that he'll ever walk again. He's on a road trip with my folks for the next few days getting a third opinion from a joint specialist at the Mayo Clinic. It's pretty grim around my house these days. Come on, man, I could really use a taste of the good 'ol days again. This can be your last night ever smoking the Devil's Lettuce. I promise. Let's do it for Andy. What do you say?"

Travis looked pained. He was staring at the floor between his feet. "Alright man, I'm in. Just like old times. Let's do it." He looked up at Jonesy, his expression still grim. "For Andy."

Seth clapped his hands together. "That... was intense. Now lets lighten up the mood, dim the lights, and get started. This weed is extra-special and this game is not going to play itself." He took the first long draw on the bong while the rest of his friends listened to the bubbling water in silence.

Scene 3

Hazy wisps of smoke drifted lazily around the crowded basement. Ventilation had always been poor and the room was often uncomfortably cool in the winter and warm in the summer. For that reason an assortment of mis-matched blankets and electric heaters had made their way down the creaking wooden stairs to the basement and found homes on seat backs and crammed into random corners. Fortunately, this Halloween night was comfortably pleasant outside, cool and clear with wispy clouds slowly rolling across the kind of bright, almost-full moon that lights the sidewalks for safe trick-or-treating while creating inky-black shadows that must surely be filled with clutching hands and sharp teeth, or worse.

The group of friends gathered around the coffee table in Seth's basement were perfectly comfortable, however... stoned and laughing, setting aside the ash-filled bong and reaching for the game set up and ready before them.

"It's called *Downward Spiral*." Seth proclaimed using his stage voice, loud without shouting, perfect for getting a chattering audience to settle down and direct their attention to the performance about to begin. He held up the game's box, made from dark wood and featuring a spiral design similar to the game board.

"That's a cool box." commented Jonesy. "You don't see a lot of wooden game boxes anymore. It must be old, but all the cards and game pieces look brand new. Whoever donated this didn't get much use out of it."

"Yes, it's very cool. I'm a savvy shopper" Seth replied with a small grin. "I was originally thinking it would make an interesting prop for *Enemies Abound*. You know, that scene where they visit Hannaman's Antique Store. It hardly even looks like a game. You know how most board games have a picture on the box where an implausibly happy family is playing the game with huge smiles on their faces, having a great time? This box just has that creepy spiral on top. At first I thought it was a puzzle. Now shut up and listen while I explain the rules.

"Everybody choose one of the four game tokens and place it in the starting square with the matching color. Starting with the player sitting closest to North, each player rolls the die and moves their token the indicated number of spaces. Follow the instructions on the space where you land. When complete, the next player takes their turn. The order of players proceeds in a clockwise direction. Players may not change the turn order after the game has started. The game is over when all players reach *The Void* at the center of the spiral.

"That's it for the rules. I expect more will be revealed as we land on the different squares. Oh, and then there's this note at the end. It reads,

Downward Spiral is a journey into the unknown. Choose your players carefully. For best results, begin playing after dark but no later than midnight. Once begun, your journey must continue until all players reach The Void.

and finally,

TRUTH IS FREEDOM

"This game doesn't exactly sound... fun." Francine stated, her eyes downcast. Travis was nodding.

"Oooh, scared already, and the game hasn't even started! Just what I was hoping for." He glanced around the room, thinking. After a moment he pointed toward the stairs over her left shoulder.

"That's north, more or less. Good news, Franny. You get to go first!" He placed the single white die in front of her with a broad smile. "Let the game begin!"