

# Madison Figg Writing Samples

## 1 - King Arkan

I had spent my entire career searching for the lost tomb of King Arkan, an elusive monarch who had been mysteriously erased from history over a thousand years ago. The mere whisper of his name sent shivers down the spines of scholars and treasure hunters alike.

So you can imagine my shock when, after venturing into an undiscovered tomb and pushing open a heavy stone doorway, I found myself face-to-face with the man himself. He had a youthful complexion, radiant amber skin, and warm dark eyes... much more striking than the only portrait said to exist of him made him seem to be.

The sheer absurdity of what I saw sent my mind into a temporary shutdown. "A-Arkan?" I managed to squeak out, causing the man to glance up with a welcoming smile.

"Please, come in, come in! I heard you coming and put tea on the stove. Koshary to your taste?" He moved gracefully past elaborate pieces of furniture, putting down a book in his hands, seemingly unaffected by the confusion plastered across my face.

"I... Am I dreaming?" I asked aloud, taking a mindless step forward into the lavish space. Colorful decorations and pottery lay across several carved tables, and the walls were adorned with all manner of art and busts.

"I can assure you, you are not," he replied from the other side of the room, now hidden from view. A few clatters echoed before he reappeared, holding two golden cups filled with aromatic, steaming liquid. "You are in shock, my friend. Please, sit."

Accepting the tea with a wide-eyed nod, I complied, lowering myself into one of several matching, well-crafted wooden chairs.

"How is this possible? Shouldn't you be... well, uh..."

"Dead?" Arkan laughed, gesturing around us with a wave of his hand.

"That is, quite obviously, not true. But as for how..." His expression hardened as he paused to glance at me intensely. "It is best that you do not know."

Despite my astonishment, I knew I had to press him further. If this was real, and not some facet of my subconscious, the academic in me needed to seize this opportunity. Think of the knowledge he could possess! The historical clarifications, the insights and endless breakthroughs!

"Please," I said, trying to disguise the desperation creeping into my voice as I clasped my hands together over my eyes, taking a deep breath. "I have to know. I've been searching for your tomb since I was a child, and after seeing this... I... I can't just leave."

"Oh, you won't be leaving, my friend..." Arkan replied, his voice now deeper, almost amused.

I quickly lowered my hands to stare at him but found nothing but darkness. The chamber around me was now cloaked in shadow, save for the blurry outlines of the nearby chairs.

"The truth is, you aren't the first to have found me, nor will you be the last." The words echoed from all directions, and I instinctively began to scramble back toward the entrance.

As my fingertips reached out to touch the stone slab, I felt my body contort and rise into the air, held tight by some invisible force. I attempted to scream but found my body uncooperative and unmoving.

Arkan's voice returned, now accompanied by a flicker of movement as a form began to shamble into view. Laughing with sunken sockets, protruding bones, and linen-wrapped limbs—the living husk spoke one

last time before my heart ceased beating. "As long as I am found, forever I shall exist."

## **2 - Surmise of a Samurai**

The expanse of ancient sugi trees pierced into the sky above, only allowing faint rays of midday sunlight to filter onto the forest floor. Okuda Haruki continued to ride carefully down the overgrown path, guiding his mounted kisouma around the gnarled trunks with taut reins. He had been traveling since the early morning, ears and eyes intensely alert, looking for distant movement or any signs of life.

An old forest, such as this one, held more than just the danger he now sought. It was a place where spirit gathered, and the veil between worlds became thinner. Making it easier for entities to root themselves in the physical realm and unleash chaos and death upon the unsuspecting or unworthy.

Okuda knew that there was no room for error. A virtuous opportunity was finally within reach... he would not allow this inkling of purpose to slip through his fingers. It was determination fueled by desperation. An existential need to regain what he had lost, and to serve something greater than himself once more.

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A mere day before, he had moved deliberately down the well-paved road, the small metal scales of his kozane-dou armor clinking together rhythmically with each stride. A single ashigaru soldier had flanked on the right, leading him past the reinforced ninomaru and towards the intimidating gates of Liyama Castle.

"Have you been graced by my Daimyō Matsudaira Tadateru's presence before, rōnin?" the meagerly equipped ashigaru asked coldly as they grew closer, passing a few servants tending to flowers in the gardens.

“I have not had the pleasure,” Okuda replied respectfully through clenched teeth, ignoring the rueful pang within his chest at the reminder of his status. Honourless in the eyes of those who would have once been beneath him.

“He should be pleased to hear that the word of his enlistment has spread,” the man continued indifferently, maintaining a forward gaze.

“Is he in need of many men?” Okuda asked with a level voice, curious to learn more about what exactly the opportunity might be. After the Sekigahara war, there had been little to no demand for larger militias, or armed forces. What could he, or the Tokugawa shogunate, be fighting?

The ashigaru seems to hesitate for a moment before speaking, his tone more subdued and serious, “That still needs to be determined,”

Interest piqued, Okuda continued to follow in silence, eventually climbing up a set of small stairs towards the castle doors. Two stationed guards blocked the entrance as they approached, their faces emotionless behind fortified helmets.

“What business does this one have with Daimyō Matsudaira?” one of them asked gruffly, eyeing Okuda and his attire with an air of distaste and recognition.

“This rōnin has heard of our master's call for adept fighters,” said the ashigaru rather bluntly, then turning towards Okuda. “Please stay out here while I seek you an audience,”

The guards grunted and stepped aside to let him past the doorway before returning to their former positions with succinct movements. Okuda could sense judgment radiating off of them, their long spears held with tight fists, expressions unwavering.

‘What did they know of loss and shame?’ He thought ruefully, shifting to face the rows of cherry blossoms as he waited. It was those who still

retained their ranks that held the most ill will towards rōnin. Unable to comprehend choosing to live a life without dutiful reverence.

Yet, it had not been his choice to make.

Okuda had mourned the loss of his master as if it were his own...but had been ordered not to follow him in death as punishment for his gullibility. Having placed trust in those who had been undeserving, brought death, disaster, and shame. The blood that was spilt was on his hands.

Being unable to fulfill his final act of loyalty, Okuda decided to travel in search of gaining favor with a new lord. With his fate ripped away from him, he yearned to find a place of belonging and meaning once more.

The creaking sound of the doorway reopening signaled Okuda back to attention, only to find the ashigaru waving him in. "The Daimyō will see you now,"

Nodding, he abided, entering within to find an elaborate foyer with the subtle scent of pleasant herbs filling the space. Brought to the upper level, an older man was found sitting at the head of an open floor; an eboshi cap matching the ebony shade of his braided hair, juxtaposed against a set of expensive emerald robes. A few additional guards stood watch around the perimeter, maintaining a stoic and unmoving stance.

Approaching, Okuda knelt on the floor, his body bending forward into a respectful bow. "Thank you for seeing me, Daimyō Matsudaira Tadateru,"

"Please state your name for me, ronin." Matsudaira said, his voice projecting loudly with force.

"My name is Okuda Haruki." Okuda replied dutifully with a pounding heart, careful to ensure his inflection displayed the right amount of respect. "I served Daimyō Maeda Toshitaka, under the Maeda Clan."

"And yet, here you find yourself before me - undevoted and seeking employment," he replied with displeasure, the wrinkles under his eyes

deepening as he squinted. "I've been informed you have come in response to my call for recruitment, correct?"

Matsudaira allowed a pause to hang in the air as Okuda tilted his chin downward in an affirmative gesture - the sting of the Daimyō's earlier words still fresh.

"There is a situation that I need someone to deal with," he continued a strain added to his tone as he furrowed his brow further. "To speak plainly, my people are going missing."

"About a month ago we noticed that shipments of supplies weren't arriving as scheduled. Then reports of farmers disappearing began, and so I sent a few of my men down the trading route to scout. Assuming they'd find evidence of a wild animal or attack and report back - but they too have not returned."

The older man took in an inhale of breath, which filtered out of his mouth as he kept speaking, "I have only been the Daimyō of the Shinano Province for a year. I am hearing whispers about rumors spreading, questioning my ability to protect and command. I need someone capable to go and get me information on what is happening, or to stop the cause of these disappearances outright."

Sensing a conclusion to his explanation, Okuda prepared to speak before finding himself forcefully interrupted.

"If you prove your capabilities by locating and remedying the problem ... I will consider granting you a position within my personal guard." the Daimyō added with conviction, a dead smile lifting across his thin lips upon hearing Okuda voice his response without hesitation.

"It would be my honor, Daimyō Matsudaira."

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Evening twilight brought distant cries of wild animals remarking at the moon. Okuda had started scanning for a proper area to set up camp when a far-away light caught his attention through the expanse of trees. Dismounting from his kisouma, he tied its reins around a sturdy tree before heading off to get a closer look.

It was a small rudimentary hut that appeared to be misshapen from many years withstanding the elements. Vines and roots had intruded upon the structure, slowly reclaiming the space in a tendril-like grasp around the exterior walls. Yet, despite its aged appearance, there was a soft glow of light within, signaling a human presence.

Moving his feet carefully against the forest floor, Okuda quietly approached, his hand hovering over the hilt of his katana. Stopping fifteen feet from the entrance, he noticed a sound. It was singing... a soft and haunting melody emanating into the twilight air through a broken window.

“Who is there? Reveal yourself.” Okuda stated loudly, adrenaline beginning to pump through his veins in anticipation. Could this be a kodama spirit that had come to seek revenge? A ghost haunting its forgotten home?

A soft clank could be heard from within the hut, feet padding against the ground before a woman flew through the entrance, eyes wide and frenzied.

“Daku is that –” Upon seeing Okuda standing in his worn tatami armor, she began to weep, then fell to the ground pitifully in a thin tattered kimono. Her knees crashed into the dirt.

“Who are you?” Okuda asked again loudly, dismayed by what he was seeing. What maiden in her right mind would remain alone in these woods past sunfall?

“C-chinen Yukiko,” she sobbed, lifting her face through tendrils of hair to look up at him.

“My husband Daku Yukiko was a guard working under Daimyō Matsudaira ... when I had heard he hadn’t returned - ” she sniffed, “- I- I had to go look for him. I found this hut and decided to wait for him here, you have to understand,”

“You should go home. It isn’t safe out here,” Okuda said sternly, taking the opportunity to glance around them into the increasing dark.

Scrambling to stand upward, Chinen bowed urgently in front of Okuda - her voice sounding less distraught and thankful. “Of course, you are right sir. I will head back at first light”

Using a free hand to wipe away a few tears from her pale cheek, she glanced back towards the hut. “May I offer you some tea before you continue on your journey?”

Deep within, Okuda could sense a hint of remorse for his coldness towards this woman... knowing himself what it was like to face grief. The inability to accept a world in which you were missing an intricate piece of yourself. All alone.

“Yes, thank you,” he responded after a moment's hesitation, choosing to follow Chinen into the tiny abode. A moment's rest would likely do little to harm his pursuit, and a hidden piece of him felt concerned over this frail woman’s safety. As he entered, a single room was revealed - furnished only by a hanging lantern and a small central stove where a traditional kettle could be seen warming up against the flames.

“You could stay the night if it would please you, sir. I have plenty of food to spare,” she added with a gentle smile, closing the door behind him with a soft thud.

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Suddenly, Okuda stirred awake, a thick sense of confusion spreading throughout his body in an instant. He felt lighter... Colder. The absent

weight of his armor was a strange sensation that induced a building panic.

'Where am I?' he thought bewildered, brain spinning against his skull while struggling to recall what had happened. Groaning, he tried to pry open his eyelids with difficulty, peering into the dimmed room.

"Ah, you have finally awoken," a low hissing voice said from the shadows, causing Okuda to shift in surprise and stumble hitting the floor. Only then finding his wrists and ankles were bound, and limbs substantially weakened.

"Chinen?" he called out incredulously, pulling against his restraints and pushing his head into the rotting planks in an attempt to return to a seated position.

"I hope you enjoyed my hospitality, rōnin..." the same voice replied with a cackle, echoing off the walls ominously.

Managing to shift onto his knees, Okuda watched as a spectral face began to manifest through the darkness... Clumps of black hair floated like serpents from what appeared to be Chinen's skull, her skin stretched tightly against protruding angular features with white, sunken, eyes.

Aghast, Okuda realized that below the neck the rest of her body was gone... a spectral tail projecting her head forward through the air in its place.

The last thing Okuda witnessed was her curled unnatural grin before descending upon him. Rows of jagged pointed teeth then pierced into his throat with a gurgled scream - the wet searing pain causing his consciousness to slowly fade into obscurity, body ravaged beyond repair as she continued to feed.

As the last bit of breath escaped his lungs, Okuda felt a brief moment of peace. Now released from the purgatory he had been clawing to escape from, and set adrift into emptiness.

His penance fully paid.

### **3. Gagarin City**

"We had a deal,"

The low pitch of Astra's voice blended in with the menial chatter of the dimly lit establishment, her salacious body language disguising the gravity of the situation at hand with a subtle motion. Brushing a few soft fingers against her companion's arm with a smile, she paused at his wrist, warm eyes flicking upwards in a wordless taunt.

"Y-you don't understand--" the man seethed, shaking off her grasp to lean into the rickety table with palpable paranoia. Reaching for an almost emptied glass of firewater, his head tilted away from a few passing patrons with an uncomfortable sound of displeasure. "They'll know."

A pregnant pause fell between them before he continued with added fervour, "If I speak, I'll be dead the second the mist lifts."

'And?' she caught herself thinking, irritation further dissolving her patience as she leaned back into the chair with a soft exhale. It had taken weeks of scrupulous planning to line up this rendezvous - a keen act of persistence that Astra had begrudgingly applied against her better judgment.

This whole arrangement had been aberrant from the beginning. Starting with an anonymous encrypted message a few months prior, one that had contained a generous up-front payment that had been difficult to ignore. Tactile incentives, while appreciated, generally had little to no weight in the woman's eyes when determining whether to accept a contract. What mattered were gained connections and information - the fodder and instruments that were a means to an end on this forsaken landscape. And in this case, the upwards of the six-figure number presented for completing the objective was undeniably monumental. The final

component needed for what she'd been working all these years to accomplish.

It was the same underlying motivation that drove the majority of denizens of this dystopian metropolis; securing a means of passage and ditching this living nightmare like a bat out of hell. An act that was easier said than done considering the current state of the city's defenses and politics - but the contagious paranoia only seemed to push more individuals into hastily attempted coups. Propelling the missing body count into higher numbers each day, only proving the predictability of human desperation. Locked in behind walls, scratching to get out.

Lifting a pre-rolled smoke to her curved lips, Astra used the pretense of reaching for a lighter to subtly scan the ramshackle space around them. She was intimately familiar with Wagner's bar and its usual patrons, having provided several of them with various unsanctioned items. That included the surly barkeep who, as restitution, graciously allowed the brunette to use the establishment to conduct her business. Even throwing in a few free drinks here and there for loosening customers' purse strings with a little harmless flirting when it fancied her. The crowd tonight, however, held a different air of dissonance - the regulars were now surrounded by a myriad of personalities of different allegiances and lifestyles.

The rotations of the ever-shifting toxic mist were becoming increasingly unpredictable, making it commonplace to end up sequestered in some corners of the Gorge district for extended periods of time. This typically wasn't an issue provided Astra had been on a bender, but in light of what was at stake tonight the added company was working against her.

Deciding to finally push the issue after hours of uncertainty, she stood upright and moved around behind the informant in an attempt to draw less attention. Lowering her mouth to his tattooed ear as she slipped by him in search of another drink, the woman allowed a tint of malice to skew her words.

"My client is paying me for intel... what makes you assume your name alone wouldn't suffice?"

Not stopping to check if the statement had inflicted the desired effect, she moved listlessly past a huddled group of maintenance workers speaking in hushed voices. Savoring the taste of the tobacco on her tongue with a long pull, she lifted her eyebrows at the barkeep with a nod to signal another round in a soundless interaction.

At a glance, she could have passed as a hired mercenary or a defector. The deep grey shade of the long-sleeved utility suit stopped her from standing out, and the added tactical straps and belt kept undesirables at a distance. Pushing the dangling mask at her side out of the way, an elbow found purchase against the nominal countertop as the smoke bellowed out of her lungs into the muggy recycled air.

As a series of shots were presented in front of her, Astra smiled in thanks before throwing one back with the ease of consistent practice. Now - to wait.

#### **4. Chaos Magic**

There it was again—that smell, a subtle waft of burning ozone followed by a muted crackling, the air shifting with invisible, obstreperous bursts. A female figure instinctively crouched against the rough bark of a gnarled tree, her dirtied fingertips darting back to hover over the lip of a scuffed leather quiver.

Ayra paused, and for a moment, there was undisturbed silence. Nothing but the sound of her shallow breaths filled the void as it stretched, her heart pounding.

Her lanky figure appeared leaden in its detailed armor, muscles straining to remain motionless in her defensive position. Long dark brown hair was pulled back into a messy tattered bun, forcing thin wisps to stick to her pale freckled forehead and neck.

She scanned the foliage ahead with controlled anxiety, years of training forcing her to maintain control despite the impending sense of danger.

Up above, distant tendrils of sunlight filtered down through the layered canopies, casting speckled shadows across the damp grass in a hypnotic waltz. It was then - without warning - that a small explosion of energy detonated up ahead, seemingly depositing a figure on the plush ground with a dull thud of dust.

It had only been a mere few minutes earlier that she had arrived similarly. First running through the dark forest in furious bounds one moment, then finding herself in this clearing the next.

All Arya remembered before that was waking up to screams, her convoy fearfully scrambling around her in an attempt to flee from... something. She had frantically turned to follow when she saw it. The eyes. Impish orange orbs that ignited in the dark, their disembodied form sending out clamoring flames in a deathly display—

“Friend or foe?” she heard finally as the figure stood, revealing himself to be a towering man with unusual facial features. In the time it took for him to recover, she had grabbed an arrow, holding it taut against the bowstring with a concentrated expression. His attire was elaborate, fitted pieces forming a blend of red and yellow elements that couldn’t be mistaken for any other allegiance. The Altray Coven. Those whom her faction vehemently opposed.

“Neither,” she yelled back gruffly with effort, not budging from her locked position. He could easily be an illusion or a malevolent creature playing a trick on her. Where had everyone else from her caravan gone?