

# TEN KILLS, ONE LIFE

# JEWEL EVANS



In *Ten Kills, One Life*, Jewel Evans, arguably the most controversial and compelling winner to emerge from SOTF-TV in recent years, offers a chaotic and free-wheeling memoir that covers ground from her favorite music to her early childhood to her opinions on SOTF game theory. Packed full of details on her experiences and mentality, it gives unique insight into the woman who took on ten opponents and came out on top.

Evans' voice is developed and engaging, full of the same incisive humor and brutal candor that made her an instant fan favorite. She relates graphic details of her most fearsome fights in much the same way as offhand observations about her hometown, inviting speculation that such topics might be closely related after all.

Coming mere months after her season's conclusion, this book numbers among the most raw and risky SOTF writings ever published. Miss it at your own peril.



Jewel Evans, a long-time fan of SOTF-TV, achieved the title of co-winner of Season Sixty-Six by eliminating ten other contestants. Born and raised in Whittree, Oklahoma, Evans now resides in Los Angeles, where she serves as a freelance consultant for SOTF. This memoir is her first published work.

## **ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *TEN KILLS, ONE LIFE***

“Throughout Season 66, one question reigned supreme: Jewel Evans, crazy or genius? *Ten Kills, One Life* puts the debate to rest with a conclusive answer: both!”

Don Westerman, *SOTF Insider*

“Unapologetic and unafraid... the best exploration of what it means to accept the mantle of villain.”

Natasha Flores, *The Danger Zone*

“4.5/5 – Excellent!”

James Lee, *Highland Beach Tribune*

“I have a copy but I haven’t read it. Maybe on my next long-haul, I’m sure it’s worth a look.”

Kenny Yamana, Season 3 winner, actor

“Shockingly lucid and insightful... Evans proves that her success was no accident, displaying an analytical knack and retrospective voice unprecedented at such a short remove from her season.”

Dr. Cecelia Warren, Season 66 mentor, author of *No Killer An Island*

“To borrow a word from the author: brutiful.”

Lisa Vance, author of *Collared Desperation*

“The repugnant gloatings of an unrepentant murderer. Repulsive to anyone possessing empathy or taste, it will no doubt be a tremendous success with the average SOTF fan.”

Susan Crawford, Season 65 mentor, author of *Satan’s Gladiators*

“Jewel takes the reader down a strange path, meandering between teenage girl and ruthless killer, surprising insight and crude non-sequitur. For better or for worse, *Ten Kills, One Life* is perhaps the best insight into just what makes Jewel Evans tick.”

E.L. Hawley, SOTF-TV profiler

“Evans’ greatest strength is that she doesn’t give a single fuck... Most people would ask themselves if printing these sorts of musings was a good idea, but such concerns don’t seem to cross her mind.”

Verline Attaway, Champions Premier League caster

“Evans illustrates exactly why she shouldn’t be anyone’s role model, but at the same time lands a great audition for the role of devil on your shoulder.”

Bradley McCutchen, *Denton Daily News*

“As a passionate fan, Evans knows when to tease and when to deliver, crafting a revelatory narrative that nonetheless preserves the most tantalizing aspects of her mystique.”

Basil Kovac, *SOTFInsight.com*

“I have to admit, when Evans won I was livid. Now, though, I’m thankful for her survival. Her book is a stark reminder that the villains are people too, and that they can be smart and damned funny ones.”

James Mertz, *The Death Island Dispatch*

“If nothing else, my playlists got a little hipper and I feel like I have a tiny bit of actual goth credibility now.”

Loretta Hadfield, SOTF-TV broadcast technician

# Ten Kills, One Life

by

Jewel Evans

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[sofmini.com](https://sofmini.com)

*This book is dedicated to the memory of  
Zachariah Johnston.*

*You deserved to be here far more than I do.*





## Preface

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This all started because my therapist suggested that I write down my thoughts. I was having trouble sleeping, and it was, she said, a way to work things out and a way to look back more productively. It let me catalogue topics to talk about, and it let me reflect on my day and my life. I wasn't sure at first. I've always been pretty good with words, but I never considered myself a writer. I was more comfortable communicating through a paintbrush than a keyboard, at least when it came to the big ideas; typing was for meaningless chats with friends or shotcalling in SOTF Champions. Soon, though, I found myself missing sleep not because I couldn't drift off but because I was too absorbed in chronicling everything I could. I'd tell myself, just a little more, a few minutes more, and then before I knew it the sun would be threatening to rise again. This book is the result of those long nights.

I feel like I should give it to you straight right now about what this book is and what it isn't. First off, it's mine. No, more than that: it's me. A lot of winners put out books, but you wouldn't believe how many of them get ghostwriters. I didn't. I did this all on my own, and while my editor very kindly offered suggestions and critiques, at the end of the day I could and did tell him to piss off and insist on it being how I wanted. And here it is, coming out anyways. Ah, the perks of my position.

What this book is not is a blow-by-blow retelling of the season from my point of view. It's not a defense of my actions. And, sorry to disappoint, it's not a breakdown of my deep dark secret motivations and thoughts. Oh, there's some of all of those things, but only when I feel like it. See, what this book actually is

is my show, my life, my past and my dreams and my future. It's me, good sides and bad, truths and lies and pride and regret.

So welcome, but be warned: between these covers, you're mine. You're my audience, my friend, my jury, my confidante, but I'm calling the shots and I'm only going to give you what I'm okay with you having. "Why, Jewel, why?" you say. I've been asked that by far more persuasive voices than yours, and my answer remains the same.

But, what is this in more concrete and literal terms? What is it, besides me? It's a chronicle of my thoughts, my feelings, my opinions and my obsessions. It's part memoir, telling you all those juicy details about who I am and who I was before you had any reason to know my name. It's part essay collection, breaking down my feelings on the construction and history of the SOTF game and its various mechanics, as well as its future and the optimal way to approach it. It's part diary, exploring how I've felt and how I've been struck by my experiences, complete with the inside scoop on anybody whose lawyer isn't scarier than mine. It's part listicle, because I like lists and I know a few things about them and I have some topics I want to talk about now that people will listen.

And, alright, there might be one or two answers hiding between the lines. Just don't hold me to that.

There are ten chapters to this book (I'm sure you might have an idea or two why). Each one is made up of three subsections plus a concluding ten-item list. If that sounds like something you're interested in, I hope you like what I have to say. If you don't care, don't say I didn't warn you. Take this back to the bookstore, or regift it to a relative you hate. I don't care. If you stick it out, that's your choice and I gave you every warning

and opportunity to change your fate. You have nobody to blame but yourself, and I disavow any and all responsibility for physical or psychological harm, destruction of cherished and romanticized images of me and/or other contestants and/or SOTF as a whole, and general pissed-off-ness that an awful bitch like me could get away with it and then go write a book gloating about it.



Still with me?



Good. I'll try to be vaguely gentle.  
I hope this is half as fun for you as it's been for  
me.



**1**

**Mixtape Track:**

**“One Hundred Years”**

**by**

**The Cure**



## The Fish

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Starting at the beginning is, I believe, more difficult than people think. Every story, but especially the sort of story experienced by a viewer of SOTF, actually begins days or years or decades ago. I could tell you about when I was pulled out of physics, and how all I could think was, damn, if I'd known this was coming I wouldn't have spent three hours cramming last night. I could tell you about the very first kill I ever saw, a close to live broadcast, Mary Dominguez slitting her boyfriend's throat. I could go back further, tell you about what life was like for me as a kid, how I loved school but would cry because I was the last one in class to learn how to read. Maybe some of that would be interesting, or useful, and some of it I'll tell you about later, but there's really only one proper beginning point for a story like this.

I'm going to tell you about the very first time we met. I'm going to tell you about the first time you noticed me, the moment that set me apart from everyone else and made you sit up in your seat and lean a little closer to the screen and go "That Jewel girl is one to watch."

I'm going to tell you about the fish.



Waking up was hard. If you've read the behind-the-scenes stuff, you know more or less how the gas works; they give you a hit to put you under and keep you out while they set you up wherever they want you, then give you a hit of something else when they leave and it wakes you up in ten to twenty minutes. It usually leaves you a little fuzzy, so you can't just turn around and murk the poor fucker behind you who's taking a little longer to return to consciousness.

I didn't even think about doing that to Nina Riddhi. I probably could've, and, you know, the funny thing is that's more or less what eventually happened to her anyways. But that's getting ahead of ourselves.

I woke up, and my head hurt, and nothing was clear until I saw the fish tank. The fish were bright, and orange, and moving, and that made them more interesting and real than anything else. The rest of the world fell away. My fears and hopes and plans weren't real quite yet, and neither was the situation, but the fish were, and I went over and looked at them and their tank and then I saw that they had an automatic feeder set up with three weeks of food, and that's when I got pissed.

These fish, I thought, would be alive after I and a whole lot of people I cared about were dead. Three weeks would see them through any season that didn't break the record, and then someone would come and feed them again. They had better chances than I did, and I couldn't improve my own position so I snatched one of them instead. It was all I could think to do, even though it meant soaking my coat. I think maybe I was going to kill it, but the cold seeping through my sleeve finally brought some clarity and I realized I was being stupid.

Nothing going on was the fish's fault, though that didn't really matter. No, what I realized was that the fish in my hands was probably going to die whether I killed it or not. If I walked away, somebody else would come along and do it instead, or the tank would get destroyed in a crossfire. And while I could hide or fight or plan, the fish couldn't do any of that. It wouldn't even understand what was happening. It couldn't leave its tank. It was entirely at the mercy of forces outside its control. Forces like me.

So I threw it back and left.



I'm not special.

I know that's not a great thing to put near the start of my book, but it's true. Or, at least, I'm not especially special. I used to think that I wasn't special at all, that I was fated for a supporting role in the drama of life, but I know now that it isn't quite like that. I don't think I'm much more special than anyone else, though. I don't think most people are.

That's really what makes SOTF so magical, when you think about it. It takes normal people and puts them in a situation that forces them to exceed the limits they believe they have. For people like me, it presents a choice: accept that you're more, or die.

The important thing, in this case, is that I knew that my own impulse to kill the fish wasn't unique. I knew that the fish didn't have much better odds than I did. I thought it would be a toss-up which of us died first.

I'm writing this book. The fish are all dead.

It was Anzu Sakamoto who killed them. I don't think it was for any sort of good reason. I don't think she thought things through like I did. I don't think we were ultimately much alike. Anzu heard that one of her friends had been killed, and she threw a tantrum, and she smashed the closest thing that would shatter into a thousand pieces. She casually killed helpless animals to make herself feel better. I didn't know her super well, but based on that I don't think we would've gotten along.

She was a good friend of a good friend of mine, and she ended up taking ownership of the weapon I carried for most of the game. That's one of the beautiful things about SOTF, that web of connections and

coincidences. When she shot herself, though, it wasn't with my gun. That's almost a shame.



Some days, I think I like animals more than people. It's such a cliché, but when people talk about it I really understand. For an animal, nothing it does is personal. A fish eats pellets because instinct tells it to. Out in the wild, food is limited, so a fish given access to too much food will eat and eat and eat until its organs burst and it dies. This is natural selection—survival of the fittest. A fish's instincts to gorge itself serve it well when food is scarce, and so those fish that stockpile are the ones that are most likely to survive and reproduce. After long enough in a controlled environment with an overabundance of food, those fish that overate would die out and fish without those instincts would be the ones to survive to procreate, and the instinct would be bred out of the species.

If a shark tears a chunk out of your side, or a mosquito sucks your blood and gives you malaria, or your cat eats your corpse after you die of a heart attack, it's not because they're mean or evil or cruel. They're just doing what their whole existence pushes them towards. It's the result of thousands of years of trial and error.

Even the seeming malice of a housecat maiming a baby rabbit is explained by instinct. I read once that domestic cats so rarely get to indulge their hunting instincts that, lacking the survival necessity of an empty stomach (and the suicidal overindulgence of a fish) they'll let their prey go only to capture it again, prolonging and savoring the experience of fulfilling one of their biological purposes as long as possible. It's a lot like sex, when you think of it that way. Nobody wants to just come right away.

My family never had pets. We were too poor, at first, and my parents weren't sure we could take care of them properly, and my dad had a minor allergy. My best friend had a cat, though. Her name (the cat's, I mean) was Evangeline, but we called her Eva. She was old when I met her already, and she was the friendliest cat I've ever seen. I would sit on my friend's bed and Eva would sit in my lap and lick me. She would lick and lick and lick for hours if you let her, and my friend and her family all were pretty much over it, but I loved it. I would sit on the bed with her in my lap, watching SOTF with my friend, and Eva would lick my arm with her rough little tongue, and I'd have to move my arm from time to time because it would get sore and raw from how much she licked, but I never minded.

She died three days before Christmas in my junior year, and I cried all night because I wasn't there and I didn't get to say goodbye. Eva died, I mean. My friend's still alive, and when she dies I don't think I'll be able to find any tears.



I could have a pet now if I wanted to. I've thought about it, a lot, but I don't think I'll get one, not now and probably not ever. I don't think it would be right or fair of me to.

Corin got a dog, I think. It must have been one of the first things he did. Zalika Attwood tweets pictures of her cats. I hope they're good pet owners. Me, I can't keep to a schedule. If I can't feed myself reliably every day, how could I take on the responsibility of feeding something else, something that would die if I didn't? I get angry and I shout and I throw things. You can find it online, I think, the very first time I tried to stream. I smashed a very expensive laptop because I got too frustrated and needed to vent.

I would never hurt a pet, but I think I could and would create a bad environment for one to live in. I wouldn't be around enough and I wouldn't be able to give it the attention it needed and deserved. I'm busy and I'm temperamental and I like the freedom to do what I want when I want. I could pay somebody to take care of my pets, but then why even have them?

It's strange to me, because I don't think a lot of people think about this stuff. They think about pets as toys or as fashion accessories or as resources or as food. Eating animals always felt weird to me, always, even before I stopped doing it. I'd be pulling the meat off a rib and I'd think, oh my god, this is a bone in my hand, this was part of a pig that was living its own life a few months ago. Last Mother's Day, my family went out for hamburgers and I was halfway through mine and I thought, this is Mother's Day, and this burger, this burger had a mother too, who maybe also got ground up or maybe not, who knows, but this thought that the burger I was eating had a mother just wrecked me and I couldn't finish it. I told my family I was full, my stomach hurt.

I don't hate people who eat meat, to be clear. I'm not Morrissey. I don't care if you eat hamburgers every day. I just hate people who don't think about what they're doing, who don't understand that something died for their meal, who lie to themselves and abstract their actions away instead of looking them in the face.

I think that's why it was easier for me to kill ten people than a single fish.

## Firsts

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The first kill of any version is one of its most important moments. It's the first piece of real action with final repercussions, and in most circumstances represents the first elimination. I think it goes further than that, though. I think that the first kill fundamentally affects the viewing experience for the entire version, creating a promise that everything after either lives up to or chafes against. It's a big responsibility.

Even an opening suicide can have significant ramifications and implications. Take the much-maligned Season Forty-Seven, for instance. Matthew Lowery, hoping to cling to one final moment of happiness, killed himself rather than face the realities of the game. This was echoed by the game's conclusion, in which Kendrick Larue, who had watched Matthew's suicide, killed himself in turn, believing incorrectly that he had succeeded in ensuring a game without a winner. In between, the season was marked with accidents and anti-climaxes, potential built up only to be wasted.

Take a step further, to the first actual kill, and you'll find the theme holds. Season Forty-Seven's first kill was Kristina Pacheco's ambush of Mary Drew, a quick blow to the side of the head from a cudgel, a girl who likely died unaware of what hit her and a girl who realized too late she hadn't really meant it. It was a blindside in a game of blindsides, a game that saw Victor Frazee blunder his way through the fires he lit, killing almost everyone who offered any incentive for emotional investment. In fact, one could argue that even the season's concept was thematically on-point. It was an entirely self-inflicted disaster, with the mix of schools creating a situation in which social stakes were

sure to be low due to most students utterly lacking familiarity with each other.

A first kill can establish a player as one to watch. Karen Ruiz was the sole killer prior to the first announcement in Season Sixty-Five, which laid the groundwork for her largely-uncontested ascension of the killboard. On the other hand, it can also establish a killer as more complicated and nuanced, as when in Season Twenty Cordelia Monroe killed Macy Robinson, twin of eventual-winner Daisy, in self defense. While nobody viewing the fight from an objective stance could fault Cordelia, her actions nonetheless factored heavily into her own death. Macy's demise sowed the seeds that blossomed into Daisy's revenge.



I didn't know I was the first killer until after the fact. It was a surprise. Lately, it's seemed to take some time for games to kick into gear, and I think part of that is due to the introduction of teams.

Teams offer an additional factor that needs to be weighed and grappled with. They offer new hopes and fears and opportunities. What if my boyfriend's on my team? What if one of my allies got a really good weapon? What if I hide and still get out because my teammates do all the work? People take time trying to figure out who's on their team, as well as making other little alliances and agonizing over how they're doomed to be temporary, unlike those enforced by the bandannas.

I forgot to put my bandanna on at first. I'd been so caught up with the fish and getting moving that I didn't even realize I wasn't wearing it until my collar beeped. It made me feel pretty stupid. The powers that be are generally patient if they know you aren't jerking them around on purpose, at least. I was happy



to be on the Black Team, because even if Pete Finch was an incompetent asshole in Sixty-Five, at least the colors looked good.

I dug through my whole bag. I talked with some people. I moved around. Other people did this too. Other people got into fights, well before I did. When I entered the daycare center, I stepped over a little heap of viscera. There was no reason to think that nobody had yet managed to seal the deal, and I guess that helped me some. There wasn't much pressure. I wasn't thinking about setting the tone for everything that followed, or making a big statement, or anything like that. I had a backpack full of headsets and a clay vase I'd found on a windowsill, and there was a boy lying there with an eye gouged out and a gun in his hand.

From a pragmatic perspective, I think everyone with familiarity with SOTF can agree that Davis Todd was effectively dead before I ever laid eyes on him. I don't say that to push responsibility away from myself, or to claim that what I did was a mercy. The game casts its participants in different roles, roles that don't necessarily correlate to who they are in their normal lives, but roles that will define them forever in the minds of most of the audience. I accept that I was and am a villain. Hate me if you like. I don't mind.

Davis intrigued me because his mentor was Jared and because he represented a unique opportunity to further my position and try things out with a relatively low level of risk. I wasn't sure I could or would go through with it until it was done. I want to say it was a huge moment in my life, the sort of thing that lasts forever and changes who you are, but it wasn't. I felt bad for Jared, because I did take a swing at him because he was the top dog. I actually ended up knock-

ing his team out of the game. He made fun of me on Twitter. That's life. I still like him a lot.

I never really knew I could be as strong as I was when I swung that vase. I'm not a very physical person. I've worked out more in physical therapy than I think I ever had in my life before the game. I hated gym class. I hated wearing those ugly shorts and t-shirts. I hated messing up my hair and makeup with sweat. I never thought I could hit someone hard enough to even knock them out, but I guess having something heavy and a pressing need can do a lot for you. It was quick and more or less clean and I'm proud of that. I laid my groundwork, made my plan, and executed.

I don't regret a thing.



Any first is a personal milestone of a sort. I have a lot, and I'm sure you do too. Before I was picked for my season, I always thought that a first kill would be a huge one. I thought it would be up there with losing your first tooth, your first day at school, losing your virginity. It's not really. I mean, I guess it has ramifications that last forever, but in this way that's a little hard to explain.

Comparisons may be useful. When your first tooth falls out, that's a change to your body. A part of you dies and falls out and never comes back. It gets replaced by a better version, but it's still gone, and you'll never really be whole again. And you don't know for sure, you don't have the experience of a new tooth growing in yet to fall back on. It's scary. A first kill, it's a change where you've seen that you can do something, but really it's just a shift in perspective. Once you've done it, you realize you always could've. That

power's been within you for a long time, potential just waiting patiently to be tested.

A first day at school is a real broadening of your world. You're separated from your parents and thrust into the midst of strangers, and you have to complete tasks and play by rules you don't understand. It's an introduction to society, if you think about it. You learn that the world is bigger than your tiny piece and you either adapt and flourish or spend the rest of your life fighting against it. Killing, you step outside society in a way, but in SOTF it's still part of the whole experience. It's within the rules.

I joke about how I miss it, and sometimes I'm not joking, but it's not really the physical aspect that gets me nostalgic. I don't get anything out of the act of killing. It's not like it was more satisfying up close than shooting someone or anything like that. No, what I miss is living in a world where it's okay.

Killing someone is a very efficient and permanent solution to complicated problems. Do I trust him? Will he betray me? What happened to him? What will our future hold? A quick blow and half of those are answered and the other half rendered irrelevant. And of course, some people just deserve to die. I mean, we'll all die eventually, but some people deserve to have it happen quicker and more violently and in the game I could make that happen if I felt like it, even though nobody I did it to really deserved it. That's the crux of it, I think: it was okay for me to kill people who didn't deserve it, but now I'm surrounded by people who do and I can't do a thing.

When it comes to virginity, I think maybe that's the closest comparison because society tells you that it's this whole big thing, like you have sex and then you're an adult, or you have sex and then you're taint-

ed and damaged goods and nobody will want you, or you have sex and your first is going to be this special person who means something to you forever. Really, though, you have sex and what's so weird and big and crushing is the weight of all these expectations and fantasies and norms. I guess killing's kind of like that, because when it comes down to it it's a physical act and you can't become not a killer any more than you can undo letting a guy stick his dick in you but it doesn't really change who you are unless you let it.

One thing I'll say for sure, though: getting my first kill was a lot more painful. But your experience may vary. My words of wisdom on the subject are, if you hit somebody with something heavy, try to make sure it won't shatter and shred your hand when it collides with their skull.

## Mentors

Or:

## Fuck You, Karisma Chandra

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Season Sixty-Five shook the SOTF formula up in a number of ways. Teams and the ten-kill release were the most obvious, but each brought with it a number of other, minor mechanics, and among those one of the most complicated and divisive was the inclusion of mentors. I suspect that, originally, they were introduced primarily to give each team a slightly more cohesive presence, an identity and a figurehead. While they served passably in this capacity, the flaws and potential quickly became apparent, leading to the innovations and failings seen in my season.

Examining the cast of mentors for Sixty-Five, you can quickly tell that selection was somewhat haphazard. A number of the mentors (Lieutenant Colonel Briggs, MarWIN, and Jared Clayton chief among them) seemed geared to provide tactical advantages and useful advice. On the other hand, you had Susan Crawford and Dr. Smith, clearly included primarily to stir up drama and controversy. These categories were rounded out by mentors brought in for cross-promotion or through nepotism (Marie Roux, Pete Finch) or on the strength of a single gimmick, acting an artificial persona to the hilt (Drake Fortune, Rose Wolfe).

Then there were the meme mentors, intentional and otherwise. The Mysterious Stranger was a terrible moment of forced and artificial intrigue in a show already packed to the brim with the real thing, Mike Patterson got the gig by drinking too much soda, and Wilson Howards had probably never watched an episode of SOTF in his life. While none seemed inten-

tionally cast to be useless, and in fact most seemed intended to land somewhere else in the spectrum (Howards and Patterson in the cross-promotion category, and the Stranger stirring drama), a loose-at-best handle on the specific responsibilities expected of them left them largely without guidance, for better or worse.

In the context of Season Sixty-Five, none of that was too big a deal. Mentors were new. When Howards broke into a tense moment to cluelessly plug his product, it was funny. Some of the best highlights featured the mentors. When Jared told Amber to take Sterling's cock out of her mouth and focus on staying alive, that was priceless and iconic. But not everyone had that level of impact. Without reaching for Wikipedia, can you remember who Aiko Yoshida was? I doubt it. I think she was a journalist for some medium-traffic website or network, but as far as I recall she never even managed to get its name dropped. She harangued her team to be careful without offering any tangible advice or resources, and unsurprisingly they were one of the first to be eliminated.

The trial run for mentors was a learning experience for all involved. By the end of the season, the actual purpose of mentors had become somewhat more clear, though it still pulled in divergent directions. Being a mentor, it turned out, could be a great way to bring utility to your team, to offer little hints and tactical tidbits that might make the difference between life and death. On the other hand, taking the job was also amazing exposure and promotion for the mentors themselves, and often the road to the audience's hearts was not through analysis or advice but through brazen humor and bravado.

This greater understanding can be seen in the new slew of mentors in my season. The memes were more or less gone, aside from Randall Rochester, who was cast as such with obvious intent. While one-dimensional sorts remained, they now each had a clear relationship to SOTF, as well as information and utility they could theoretically offer. Cross-promotion was still prominent too, but instead of dragging in dried-up has-beens the focus was on others with some actual connection, however tenuous, to SOTF. Xylenz played Champions at a pro level. Dr. Cecelia Warren wrote academic papers about the show. Claudia Ghoul brought up players in a bunch of her songs. Dr. Toby Schrieber and Xavier Powers were both insiders with actual roles in the production. Jared was back, the only returnee from the last batch, and he was now joined by two other winners: the infamous Brandon Parker, and Sixty-Five alumnus Mason Ross.

And then, there was my mentor, Karisma Chandra.



I've tried, at great length, to figure out how Karisma landed the role. Almost everyone else has some obvious connection to the proceedings; even Caesar Knight had spoken about the show prominently. Karisma is known solely for her connections to actually vaguely talented or successful people. She has no accomplishments, no presence, and the only reason to think she'd offer a team anything is that her nice-girl act is a transparently fake and largely unsuccessful attempt at manipulation, a skill which, when practiced at a level far exceeding her capacity, can be useful in SOTF.

Naturally, Karisma's interjections to most of the team consisted almost wholly of self-aggrandizing

bullshit. She spoke in patronizing tones, talking to her charges like an aunt coddling an infant. She had the gall to refer to a stab wound as a “boo-boo.” She promised the world and claimed insight into the workings of my teammates, but clearly had no clue what they were doing.

That wasn’t overly unique or surprising. But the tone she took with me made things personal.

She spoke to me first when I was in the middle of working a very, very tense situation involving a boy I ultimately killed and another who broke my knee days later. She insinuated that I was stupid for giving them one of my assigned weapons, a set of five headsets allowing for communication throughout the arena. The analysis she provided was a combination of obvious and wrong.

Here’s a little secret: I’m not stupid. In fact, I am pretty fucking smart, particularly when it comes to SOTF. I did not play a tactically clean game. I’ll be the first to admit that. What I did do was play my own game, my own way, and guess what? It worked.

But okay. Maybe Karisma didn’t trust me yet. I can get that. Two kills later, though, when I’m once again in the middle of a tense confrontation, she calls me and tells me it was okay I blew her off because I got results, but also that I’d been stupid and needed to have a backup plan. She told me I was in a high-stakes situation.

No shit. And you know what’s not helpful in a high-stakes, life or death situation? Having some nobody movie director’s daughter screeching obvious shit you already have a handle on and calling you stupid.

Later, I found out that Karisma had read my file and had said the following about me: “Ah, this one is



going to be good. As long as she listens to me, she can leave her mark. No promises on winning, but she'll get the pot stirring." There's some unintentional wisdom going on here, which made me smile. First off, we see the obsession with being followed on display; Karisma fancied herself a puppetmistress, forcing us mari-onettes to dance for her glory. Secondly, she implied I probably wouldn't win if I listened to her. I don't think she meant it quite like that, but so often we speak the truth mostly by mistake.

After her second interjection, I resolved to show Karisma just who the stupid one was. I formulated a plan to shut her up and get her off my back. Each announcement cycle, I thought, I would ask her a question. I'd start small, get her name, because in her infinite wisdom she neglected to introduce herself or give me any reason to have confidence in her. I'd build from there, pry out little details, learn about how she got the job, her home life.

Mentors are only allowed one substantial interaction with each team member per cycle. All I had to do to make sure Karisma couldn't interrupt me was get her to waste her allotted messages answering my questions. She was vain, so it would've been a cinch. I never put it into practice, though. I was interrupted right when the announcements played next, and then one thing led to another, and she stopped bothering me so I let it slide. I thought she'd wised up, figured me out a little more, come to grips with my process and relegated herself to a supporting role, where she belonged.

Turns out, she'd just abandoned me, along with everyone else on the team.



What happened to the mentors in Season Sixty-Six? It's one of the questions whispered in the fan-

dom, one that has, to my knowledge, never had a satisfactory official answer. The second cycle of mentors was permitted much greater interaction than those in Sixty-Five. Each mentor could contact each individual member of their team once every twelve hours, rather than being forced to choose only one member upon whom to impart a message. And yet, by the second day, the vast majority of the mentors had fallen totally silent, never to comment again. In fact, with seven communications, Karisma was the third most-vocal, trailing only Dr. Warren's eight and Mason Ross' nine. Despite greater opportunity to engage, the mentors in many cases said less than their predecessors. One, Dennis Rourke, had a cast page put up but never made an appearance and by all accounts was never seen on-site, leading to speculation that he canceled at the last second and no replacement was available.

I can't clear the mystery up. I don't know what happened. They were pretty careful to keep a lot of the mentor-related information confidential, and most of the behind-the-scenes footage is locked away or lost. Dr. Warren and Mason were there through the end, though not always quick to interject. Aside from that, though, there's little but speculation and rumor.

What I can do is add to that pile. I believe that it's certainly possible there was some sort of backstage scandal or incident leading a number of the mentors to either depart or be removed prematurely. More likely, though, I think they were struck by a combination of burnout and apathy.

Being a mentor in Sixty-Five was easy, flashy, and geared towards self-promotion. Most of Sixty-Six's mentors had this as their model, but it's clear at a glance that the expectations from the production team were tuned more towards legitimate advice and contri-

butions. Suddenly, an easy gig was a brutal struggle. Suddenly, the reality that five kids' lives were in part in your hands was inescapable. Suddenly, you were expected to stay up and keep up and track five students at once, ready to chime in at a moment's notice in real time, always unsure whether you should do so or whether it would be better to hold your one chance until a later, more desperate moment. That's stressful and painful and scary. I get that. I think it got too real for some of them, and others who'd never cared saw no reason to and found an excuse to blow it off, and by the end the only ones talking were the true believers.

I was never a huge Mason fan, I'll admit. He was just a peripheral figure in Sixty-Five for me. Come Endgame, he was my second choice for winner, but a distant second and largely because I had issues with everyone else. I was pulling for Odile. But that he came back so soon after and stuck it out to the bitter end with his team proved that he deserved it. It showed his character in a way nothing in his actual season did, and it left me with incredible respect for him. If every mentor had been like Mason, Sixty-Six would've completely vindicated the concept.

Instead, Karisma couldn't be bothered to wake up a girl sleeping in a danger zone.

## The Ten Best Songs By The Cure (Sort Of)

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The Cure is my favorite band ever and is criminally underappreciated. That may sound strange, given that a number of their songs still get airplay today, but those tend to be their lesser works. The Cure is really not about “Friday I’m In Love,” and to help you understand that (and, by extension, understand me a little bit more) this first of ten lists I’ve cultivated is a collection of the very best songs by The Cure, complete with explanations of why I love them.

Of course, if this was a straightforward top ten list, a number of interesting and strong albums would be totally eliminated just due to the dominance of the original gothic trilogy. To avoid that, I am limiting this list to one song per album, and as a result giving you a nice broad view of the band’s range. Rankings are sorted from least awesome of the awesome to literally the best song ever written.

### 10. “Just Like Heaven” from *Kiss Me Kiss Me Kiss Me* (1987)

I guess I’m obligated to include at least one actual love song on this list for the sake of variety, and “Lovesong” isn’t even in the top three tracks on its album, and fuck “Friday I’m In Love.” So, “Just Like Heaven” it is. Light, bouncy, catchy, and dirty in a subtle enough way to still make it to the radio, this is a great moment when The Cure is being straightforward and romantic without overshooting into cheesy territory. Naturally, there’s an awful cover out there with breathy female vocals that gets played in department stores.

### 9. “The Caterpillar” from *The Top* (1984)

Something else light and fun, but it's not a love song. It's a song about infatuation, but the self-aware sort. The narrator pines for the Caterpillar Girl, but he knows that she'll inevitably fly away. But let's be real, this one isn't on the list for the words. It's all about that bouncy percussion and the xylophone and the "ooh, ooh, ooh-ooh." Something can be fun without being completely profound.

**8. "Killing An Arab," a non-album single collected on *Boys Don't Cry* (1980)**

"Jewel, how can you include this super racist song?" Yeah, read the lyrics, dumbass. The guy getting killed happens to be an Arab but it would be the same song with any other ethnicity or primary trait. That's not the point at all. It's actually an interpretation of a classic French novel, and more than that it captures perfectly the nihilism and conscious choice that goes into taking a life when you're truly aware of what that means. Actually, coming back to this now I'm tempted to bump it way up the list, but that's the beauty of tastes: they can change.

**7. "10:15 Saturday Night" from *Three Imaginary Boys* (1979)**

The first song from the first studio album The Cure put out finds them not quite inventing goth yet but pulling some of the essentials together, especially when it comes to minimalist character study. The music mirrors the content, almost every element evoking the drip drip drip of the sink as the neurotic narrator convinces himself, rightly or not, that his girlfriend is cheating on him. An anxious breakdown just about to erupt in musical form.

#### 6. “Where The Birds Always Sing” from *Bloodflowers* (2000)

Spoiler alert: this is the most recent song on this list. Like a lot of great groups, The Cure had a super fruitful period of productive genius but it couldn't last forever and most of their modern stuff plays it too safe or just doesn't quite hit the mark of true greatness. This is a dark and painful wake-up slap, though, all the more for its blunt delivery. The world isn't fair or unfair. There is no God. Some people live and others die and that's just how things are. This makes sense in a way so many other things don't and I think it has some really important lessons that can help you parse SOTF too.

#### 5. “The Lovecats,” a non-album single collected on *Japanese Whispers* (1983)

This song is actually a lot more romantic than “Just Like Heaven,” with which it shares a seaside setting, but it's about carrying out a suicide pact together so I can't quite call it a love song. It's okay if you didn't realize what it's about; the jazzy instruments and upbeat tempo make it easy to get lost in this one. This is a song to dance with your partner to.

#### 4. “A Forest” from *Seventeen Seconds* (1980)

*Seventeen Seconds* is The Cure's second studio album and the first of their “gothic trilogy,” three consecutive albums which happen to be the strongest they ever recorded. I feel a little bad for picking probably the most famous track off the album, but dammit it's earned that title for a reason. This song is space and movement, build and climax, fear and aggression and loss. It's a song about being led astray by false prom-

ises. It takes almost two minutes for the words to come in, but you won't even notice it's so smooth.

### 3. "All Cats Are Grey" from *Faith* (1981)

*Faith* is the second gothic trilogy album and it's a lot better than *Seventeen Seconds*, which is saying something. You could honestly make a case for almost any song off this album to hold this spot, but I've picked what I have because it best captures the ruminative side of The Cure, putting you right there in the caves, alone, contemplative and somewhat afraid but also starting to understand and see the world through new eyes.

### 2. "Plainsong" from *Disintegration* (1989)

This is the second best song The Cure ever made, no ifs and buts. Some days I almost even want to give it top billing. I've talked before about space and contemplation, but "Plainsong" goes beyond that and becomes absolutely transcendent on a musical and lyrical level. It's not about anything huge, no complicated philosophies or deep narratives, just a quick little moment in time, a snapshot of a conversation that somehow means everything in the entire world.

### 1. "One Hundred Years" from *Pornography* (1982)

I've praised The Cure's restraint and minimalism and use of space, and some of that's present here, but set it to the side for a moment. *Pornography* is a whole different animal, a life-changing record if ever there was one, harsh and beautiful, brutal and inspiring, a world of shadows and pain you yearn to get lost in. I can hear it sometimes, even when it's not playing, drums pounding and music cutting through my life,

less a soundtrack than an invasion. All of that starts with this song.

“One Hundred Years” is a statement of purpose. It’s nihilism incarnate, and while “Where The Birds Always Sing” posits a neutral world void of meaning, “One Hundred Years” realizes that that lack of reason inevitably becomes pain. The world is pain and suffering. No matter how good your life is, no matter who you love, what you accomplish, none of it matters. That first line says it all: “It doesn’t matter if we all die.” There are two meanings there. The first, the obvious one, is: “If we all die, that does not matter.” It says that we’re meaningless, that we’re not special, that the world goes on without us. But the second is darker still: “If we are inevitably to die (and we are), then nothing matters.” That’s it. That’s the meaning of life: we’re all going to die so do whatever you want. The universe doesn’t give a fuck and it all ends up the same no matter what you do.



2

**Mixtape Track:**

**“Red Light”**

**by**

**Siouxsie and the Banshees**

## Disembowelment

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I am not sexually aroused by disembowelment. It seems prudent to state this for posterity, in the permanence of print.

I don't have to change my panties when I think about slitting someone's belly open and watching their intestines spill out. I definitely do not get horny when imagining somebody cutting me open. As far as turn-ons go, that's pretty close to the bottom of my list.

Pain can be sexy. Blood can be sexy. I'll cop to getting off on some freaky shit. But I made a few little mistakes when it comes to saying things on the internet, and now Pandora's Box is open and I know this won't fully squeeze the troubles back in again but I really think it's a good idea for me to have it crystal clear, on record, in a widely-distributed book, that gutting people is not my kink.

And yes, I do know that's exactly what a disembowelment fetishist would say.



It all started innocently enough. Since winning, I've spent a lot of time hanging out with SOTF employees, and of course discussion tends to turn to the game. Everyone has something to say about past seasons, tactics, that sort of thing, but one night I was hanging out with some of the interns in the costume department and somehow we were having two conversations at once, one about awesome kills and one about the sexiest scenes in the show's history.

They'd brought me this little bottle of Bailey's Irish Cream and that was causing a bit of a reaction with my medicine and somehow it all mixed together in my head and I was like, hey, you know, what's the sexiest way anyone ever got killed in SOTF? And it

stumped everyone. I mean, of course someone went “There is no sexy way to be killed,” but really everybody knows that’s bullshit, so once we got that out of the way we started debating.

Right away, we agreed to rule out getting praying-mantised, which means getting stabbed or shot or whatever while you’re actually fucking. We threw out getting literally fucked to death too, because I’m pretty sure it’s never happened to anyone on SOTF and it’s also surprisingly far from sexy, like, just imagine the chafing. So those exclusions led to a certain measure of redefinition, and we settled on the most erotic way to be killed, so people could talk about it without implying that they were personally into it. You can acknowledge something as erotic without finding it sexy, you know.

The next day, I was thinking about this more, because we hadn’t really come to any sort of agreement. The nominations were stuff like drowning, getting choked, having your throat slit, getting shot and slowly bleeding out, and so forth. Taking a while was key, because if you just die right away that’s not really erotic. It’s like, sex needs foreplay, you know? Getting killed is like that too. It’s no fun if you just immediately blow your load and it’s over.

Once I realized that, the answer became pretty obvious to me: disembowelment. It combines a lot of things that are pretty classically hot. First off, it happens mostly in close combat and being up close is definitely hotter than ranged attacks. It’s personal. It builds a moment between killer and victim. You get to kind of know each other, get some time to look at each other and realize what’s going to happen and try to stop it or come to terms with it. Then, your clothes probably get fucked up, and your belly gets split open.

I think bellies are really underrated as far as sexy body parts go, like there's a reason schools get weird about crop tops. Bellies are smooth and curved and soft or toned, broken by your navel, which is sort of a sign of vulnerability because it makes you think of when you were in your mother's womb.

So take all of that and then split it open like you're stabbing a watermelon and see what falls out. Insides are erotic because they're something you almost never see in normal contexts. They're the unknown, the unknowable. Even I've never seen my guts, you know. So it's this super private part of yourself suddenly laid bare for the whole world to see, and that's crazy hot. It's taking something intimate and forcing it into the public view, and that sort of vulnerability is incredible, and then you add in the more intellectual interest of seeing what really makes a person work, what keeps them running, and it's perfect.

I guess it gets me a little hot, alright? Only a little.



I bring this all up because I want to be very clear that what I did to Lisa Toner wasn't a sex thing. It was just about chopping her up with an axe because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time and decided to do something dumb as fuck. She showed that she was angling to get an advantage out of the whole situation, that she was looking for supplies, and also that she thought I was an idiot. I'm not really sure where that assessment came from, but I was offended by it and I had an axe and she froze up and that was enough.

I think part of it was that I hadn't really gotten enough time to fully process what had happened with Davis, and then all of a sudden more people were

turning up and making things complicated and I wanted to be left alone and I'd just learned that I could make that happen pretty well by killing people. Once that becomes an option, every situation is calculated totally differently. It can be an easy solution to reach for, especially when you're still getting used to it.

My first kill was very quick, because that's what happens when you get a headshot. My second was not quick at all. I'm not super strong, and it turns out it's pretty hard to hack into someone. There are all these bones in the body, ribs and the sternum and such, and even with a pretty sharp axe you don't just slice through that easily. In fact, an axe has a lot of heft and weight to it and there's a pretty big crushing component to using it effectively, and I wasn't used to that yet. I had to hit her again and again because I wanted to do it right, to make sure she was dead, and I didn't know if she'd suddenly realize she didn't want to get hacked up and start resisting effectually or get offended that I was killing her and whip out a grenade to take me with her or what.

I watched her die, closely. I mean, what else could I do? Obviously I had seen people die before when watching the show, and I'd just killed someone else and seen that play out, but it's different when it's messy and sloppy and I was just kind of struck by it, trying to make sense of it all, that I'd done that to someone and that it wasn't special or unique. I was thinking, you know, this is probably what's waiting for me. I was thinking maybe I'd learn something or puzzle it out if I paid good attention.

But I was not getting off on it. That would've been weird and creepy and gross. And even if I was the sort for that, she totally wasn't my type. My type isn't so chubby and doesn't wear loads of pink and

floral shit and actually puts up a fight when someone starts chopping them up.

## Jokes And Lies

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I think I can be pretty funny.

You may or may not agree, of course. My sense of humor is heavily shaped by my scene, goth, which is actually a very funny genre for the most part. It's just, goth dares to laugh at things that make everyone else shudder or scream or cry. Goth looks at the world, at all the fucked-up shit happening everywhere and every day, and it can find the levity in that. I've laughed a lot while writing this book. I laugh when composing my Tweets. You saw me laugh during the game. Really, I'm my own most important audience, and if other people get it that's just a bonus.

I've often heard that explaining your jokes sucks all the life and humor out of them, but I also think that people may not quite understand everything that happened in the daycare center and why so much of it was actually pretty funny. So I'll go ahead and take the risk and if you're not laughing by the end that's okay. I will be.

Lisa came in and she looked the room and me over and she said that Davis had promised her his stuff. It was obvious bullshit but that's what she came up with. She figured out I'd killed the boy, tried to talk herself or me into believing she wasn't upset about that, and then asked—no, demanded—that I give her his belongings because he'd promised her that she could have them.

This was her master plan. She thought that I, as someone who was obviously willing to kill a boy for whatever reason, would not only believe her but feel obligated in some fashion to see Davis' idiotic deal through, to give her the prize of my labors just because that's what the guy I just killed would've wanted.



Because, you know, I obviously cared a lot about his desires and emotional needs, and that's why I killed him, that's exactly what he was hoping would happen.

I should take a moment here to note that, yeah, I checked with the casting crew and Lisa was definitely not developmentally disabled. She did well in school. If she had really just been mentally handicapped or something I'd feel pretty bad making fun of her now, I mean I would've still killed her probably because fuck, someone's going to do it and I had a perfect opening, but that would've been that. But no, whatever was wrong with her was on some level I don't get.

I mean, go back and watch her tapes. See what she did before our paths crossed. She didn't take a single thing seriously. She spouted whatever crossed her mind and made light of Davis getting his eye gouged out and seemed totally divorced from the reality of the situation, totally unsympathetic about someone getting maimed right in front of her. I don't feel awesome about everything I did in the game, but this is one I don't feel even a bit bad about, and that attitude of hers is a big part of why. If she'd had the opportunity, I have no doubt she would've done the same thing to someone else, probably while laughing.

So back to her claim, and my joke: that's why I had to make light of the whole thing. She made up this absurd story that nobody would ever believe, much less expect to work, so what could I do but go along with it for a moment? I played the fool, let her think the impossible would happen, and used those seconds of hope to improve my position. And the punchline was that she was undone by her own overconfidence, tripped up in her own trap, and she died for it.

Obviously, I didn't have the whole thing laid out like that at the time in my head. Sometimes when I do

things, it's based on instinct, but my instincts are pretty good. I saw the moment and I knew on some level that it was funny. Landing a joke is a lot like scoring a kill, really. If you see an opportunity, even if things aren't totally clear or perfect, you have to jump on it and do your best to make it work.



I also lied to her, of course. A joke built on the foundation of a lie doesn't magically escape the category of untruth. I don't really care. She lied to me first, and lying isn't a big deal in any event. If you watch much SOTF, you'll quickly realize that lies are all around, one of the core facets of the game.

If I'm pretty funny, I'm an amazing liar. A lot of people tell lies and get tripped up in them because they overlook little details or spend too much time focusing on pieces nobody cares about and in doing so overcomplicate their story. If you're going to lie, you want a happy medium, providing enough details to ring true but not so many as to seem obviously fabricated.

The weird thing about lying is, people do it for all sorts of reasons. You'd think that normally there'd be a big point to it, but often that's not the case at all. A lot of people just tell lies to make something easier in the moment, without thinking of how hard the deception will be to maintain. People also will often just lie on impulse without taking any time to make their lies even vaguely plausible. That was Lisa's mistake: her lie was bad and it wasn't going to accomplish anything she was hoping for. It could do nothing but worsen her position.

Me, I learned to lie as a kid. I lied to stay out of trouble. When I first started watching SOTF I lied about it some to my parents, until I could figure out

how to frame it so they'd be okay with it. I also lied a lot to my best friend, not to hurt her or anything, but because she had strong feelings about a lot of subjects that didn't line up with my own opinions and I didn't want to fight with her. She thought video games were stupid, so I'd say yeah, video games are stupid, I play one or two sometimes if I'm super bored and want to entertain my sister but that's it. Then I'd go and spend six hours grinding ranked in SOTF Champions.

I guess lying is kind of like joking in that way. You need a plan and you need to do some analysis, either directly or on an intuitive level. A good joke and a good lie will both rely on a twist, a turn, something that seems plausible until suddenly you realize it's just a little bit wrong.

Joking and lying are both more art than craft. I think there's something beautiful and admirable to be found in the competent execution of either. Lies make me laugh a lot of the time too, even if they aren't part of jokes anyone else could understand.

And here's a truth for you, in case you're wondering: I do lie in interviews sometimes. I lie on Twitter. I lie to fans when I meet them and chat. I've lied in this book. I do it for a thousand different reasons, but I'm not going to tell you what they are. If I did that, you'd be able to figure out exactly where it is that I'm not being honest.

## Why Do You Think I Did It?

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That's not rhetorical, by the way. I really do want to know.



I know that a lot of people want to know why I did what I did. I mean, obviously, it's a pretty big question. Some of you care. I appreciate that. Some of you totally fucking hate me and think it'll help you justify that, or else think it will somehow make me lose all the good things I've gotten, like it'll tear off the mask and the whole wide world will see me for the monster I am. Okay. Some of you just need a label to make sense of the world, and you think that you'll be able to apply one to me more easily if I come out and explain everything.

"Oh," you'll say, "Jewel's a psychopath. Okay. That makes sense."

"Oh, Jewel was scared and misunderstood."

"Oh, Jewel's a sadist."

"Oh, Jewel was putting on a show."

"Oh, Jewel just wanted to live."

But, you know, the interesting thing to me is nobody really seems to ask why I don't talk about it. They just accept that I don't and think someday that will change, and maybe they'll pry everything out of me, or I'll feel a burning need to come clean and confess or argue my perspective.

I do want to be understood, of course. Everyone does, I think. It's natural. You say something and you try to communicate with the world and if it doesn't work out that's painful and frustrating and isolating. So yeah, I wish that people totally got me. It's just, there's something else I want more. There's something I was willing to risk my life for—no, something I was

willing to die for. I thought, from the moment I woke up until I was actually being carried out of the arena, that I would die for it, and that maybe I wouldn't even get the thing I so desperately wanted. That was my biggest fear.

I got it, and I lived, but if I told you my "why?" then the game would be up. I want to explain everything, but I don't think I ever will. If you figure out what it is that I wanted, then you'll know everything else, but I won't tell you that either. I'm sorry. We don't always get what we want, and all we can do is try our very best to take hold of what we value the most.



The other contestants were also pretty interested in why I decided to do what I did, but I didn't really get much from that because their motives were mostly selfish. They wanted to know not because they were following along with my progress or because they cared about me or anything like that, but because they were either hoping to use it against me (probably by stopping me from doing to them what I did to the others) or because they wanted to wrestle back a little control of their world. If they understood me, if they could put it into words and predict my actions, then the universe would make more sense, and they could feel better and safer.

SOTF is an incredibly disorienting experience. Generally, people have their ideas about how the world operates and these ideas are pretty fixed. More than that, they have an idea of their role in the order of things, and they can't really imagine being shaken out of it. I know, because I was like that too.

Have you ever fantasized about being in SOTF? I bet you have. Not, you know, fantasizing about it like it's something you really want to have happen to

you, but more like daydreaming about it, sometimes whether you want to or not. It's like imagining your own death, or what would happen if everyone you loved got murdered or something. It can be scary but also thrilling. I also believe that you can learn a whole lot about yourself from what you imagine you'd do in this sort of situation. I think what you think you'd do in SOTF is almost as important as what you'd actually do, even or especially if they don't quite line up.

I spent tons of time thinking and talking about what I would do if I ended up in the game, but the funny thing is whenever I said I'd be a huge player and kick everyone's asses that was mostly just me talking shit with my friends. It's banter, you know, like yeah I'd kill fucking everyone, I'd make Victor Frazee look like the amateur wimp he is, that sort of thing. I think everyone says they'd kill a bunch of people at least once or twice. With me, my friend group would joke and argue about it, and talk and figure out our own little death orders and shit.

We basically always ended up at the same place. I had a best friend. I've talked about her before, even though I kind of try not to, but not to the degree that I've had to refer to her by name. Well, that's changing here. Let's call her Kristine, though that's not her actual name. Anyways, Kristine was the leader of our little group, and she was my best friend as long as I can remember having one. We hung out a lot with a bunch of underclassmen, and basically everyone agreed that if we all got scooped up for SOTF Kristine would go the furthest. She just had that air, the right sort of ruthlessness and assertiveness.

I didn't have that. My friends always said I'd go out towards the end, but just because Kristine would be watching out for me. They thought that either I'd

get killed, get shot or get stabbed and bleed out, giving her the motivation to go on, or else that she'd reach the point where she had to cut me loose or only needed one more kill for ten or something, and then she'd sadly put me down.

The weird thing is, you know, I thought they were most wrong in how far they figured I'd make it. I always pegged myself as being one of the earlier ones to fall, just because I'm not that special. I know a whole lot about SOTF, but does that mean anything when you're actually in the game? Not really. We've seen fans falter again and again. In fact, often having too clear of an idea of how things play out from an audience perspective can leave you prone to different, unforced mistakes, as you get caught up pandering or expect others to play the same way as past contestants or have the same base understanding that you do.

I thought I'd get betrayed, or picked off, or that I'd try to play and just not be able to do it very well. I actually thought about my maximum kill potential and had it pegged at, you know, maybe four kills if I was really really lucky.

Funnily enough, not one person in my friend circle ever suggested that I might betray Kristine. I didn't consider the possibility either.

I think, though I'm obviously not sure, that most people imagine themselves winning SOTF. In their fantasies, they're the special person who makes it out, and I get that. It's fun to think that you're cool, and it's so easy to think that you're special because in a lot of ways you're the most real person to yourself. You're in your own head, with yourself every moment of your life. All the other people in the world, even the ones you're really close to, don't quite stack up. But for some reason, I couldn't do that. I couldn't imagine

myself winning. Even when teams were introduced, when we talked about what would happen if we all got grouped up on one team, I figured I'd be the one to not make it, blown away tragically right at the end. They'd remember me, and cry for me, and I'd get my name in the dedications of Kristine's book.

That's not to say that all my SOTF imaginings ended in me dead, though. No, actually, I didn't talk about it much, but my secret fantasy, the one I came back to again and again, was a lot simpler, and I lived. I didn't live because I escaped, or because someone saved me, or anything like that, though. I lived because I was never chosen in the first place.

I would come into school, and everyone would be nervous. They'd know it was coming, and I'd talk with my friends, and we'd all promise each other we'd still be friends no matter what. We'd agree to ally, to have each other's backs. A few classes in, they'd come and start calling names. I'd be sitting next to Kristine, and her name would be called, and we'd lock eyes and we'd both be about to cry. They'd walk her away and then say, okay, that's it. Nobody else. And I'd jump up, I'd say, no, what about me? You can't take her but leave me. I'll go, I volunteer. And they'd say no, they had everyone they needed. Let me take her place then, I'd beg, let me do something. I have to do something for my friends. But they'd say, no, that's not how it works. The chosen are chosen and the rest go home.

So I'd go home. I would watch, just like I always watched, and it would gut me if Kristine died, and maybe I'd slash my wrists but not enough to actually die. Or maybe she'd pull through somehow, do the impossible and win, and I'd be right there, cheering for her all the way. I'd scream when she fired the final shot of the season, scream so loud the neighbors all



came running, and I'd be jumping up and down, crying and laughing and celebrating. And when she came home, I'd hug her, I'd be there for her, I'd help take care of her, help her with her injuries. I'd support her. I'd tell the press all about her, how cool she was, how she was my best friend. She'd be in the spotlight, and I'd be in the shadows, nobody important to anyone but her, but that would be enough. I'd be there. That was what I always envisioned for my dream SOTF story.

Of course, Kristine wasn't picked for Season Sixty-Six. She stayed home, and I went. I imagine she watched, but I can't say for sure. I don't know if she cheered for me. I want to think she did, but I don't quite believe it.

You see, when I got out, one of the first things I did was try to get in touch with her, but she didn't take my call. We haven't spoken since December 14, 2020. My whole fantasy of SOTF was always to be there for her, to help her, to support her. But when I truly needed a friend, she turned her back.



Colin Pigeon wanted to know why I killed Davis and Lisa. I think, for him, it fell into that spot where he wanted to know because he thought it would somehow keep him out of trouble. After all, he'd wandered into the daycare center between what I did to Davis and what I did to Lisa, and had a front row seat for the latter, so he knew that if I wanted to I could make his life both bad and short.

I think, when he suggested that we talk it out, that wasn't actually quite what he meant. I took him literally, and assumed he was looking for a communication and probably a negotiation, but in retrospect I'm pretty sure he was just groveling for his life in the

best way he knew how. It really threw me at the time, though, because he was saying all these things that made it seem like we could find some common ground or work something out but then when the time came to actually try he expected me to put in all the effort.

That, as I pointed out in the moment, was a pretty unrealistic expectation. I held the power. I had a weapon and he didn't. I'd shown I knew how to use it and he'd shown that his reaction to someone getting chopped up in front of him was to shout "Oh shit" and freeze like a deer staring down an eighteen-wheeler. I probably should have just shot him and left. I didn't because, I don't know, I wasn't quite there yet. I'd killed two people back to back, more or less because I could, and that was a big shock and a thing I was adjusting to still. It was to an extent what I'd set out to do, but I hadn't expected the reality to be like it was, so I was trying to get my footing back. He took advantage of that.

It actually still upsets me that he didn't make more of an honest attempt. Maybe he thought he was doing me a favor, giving me an opportunity to monologue to the cameras by proxy. It wouldn't surprise me too much. A lot of casual fans of the show think that monologues and pandering are good decisions. I think it's because those things tend to be rewarded with immediate fan approval and understanding, but they almost always fall off in the long term. Remember this, because we'll come back to it later.

In any case, Colin wanted me to spill my guts and didn't want to guess, and that was also upsetting because it showed this great lack of imagination, empathy, or both. I feel like if I was put on the spot, I could take a stab at why almost anyone did almost

anything that's ever been broadcast on SOTF. I might be wrong, but I could at least come up with a pretty good theory. Take, say, Todd Hudson's fatal plunge in Sixty-Five. It doesn't take a genius to deduce that chemical alteration was in play. Add another scene or two of his, and you can take it further and say with a good level of certainty that it was a combination of accidental drug use and terminal stupidity.

When asked why I did it, Colin gave the following possibilities, though I doubt he meant any:

1. I killed by mistake and was trying to cover up.
2. I killed in self-defense due to an attempted robbery.
3. My evil alter ego emerged and did the killing.
4. I just didn't like how my victims looked.
5. I was actually completely mad.

Let's go through one by one and see whether he was actually trying, shall we?

If I had killed by mistake, a slip of the hand, how would that gel with the situation as he observed it? Davis, maybe, could be written off as an accident given that it was still prior to the announcement and without knowing the cause of death or having seen the exchange. But I killed Lisa while Colin was in the room. Did he really think I accidentally threw something at her, mistakenly ran across the room, and without purpose or malice hit her over and over with an axe until it got stuck in her so deeply I had to brace to tug it loose? Where were those charitable interpretations later in the game?

If I was acting in self-defense, how did anything that transpired between me and Lisa make sense? Again, he was there the whole time. He watched her come in. He surely heard her ridiculous request, and he was definitely aware of my response. In what world

could that have been a robbery? In what way could I be read as anything but the aggressor?

When it comes to split personalities, I suppose you could make a case for his total lack of familiarity with me making such a possibility seem plausible. The thing is, though, as far as I know scientists aren't even sure if Multiple Personality Disorder actually exists. If it does, it's incredibly rare. More than that, I don't think I was acting too differently with Lisa and with Colin. He didn't know me, so why would he ascribe my actions to some suppressed doppelganger? Would it not be simpler and make more logical sense to assume that I acted as I did because that's the sort of person I am?

With regard to my not liking their faces, I'm not totally sure what he meant, and obviously I can't ask him now. Perhaps, to give some benefit of the doubt, he simply was referring to my acting arbitrarily, without any real reason. Perhaps he meant to suggest that I was the sort to explain it all with a simple "I don't like Mondays." Were that the case, though, I struggle to see why I would play coy. If I had no reason, why not be upfront? Or maybe, to be less forgiving, he was insinuating that I'm a racist. Obviously, I'm not; that my first two victims happened to be people of color was a quirk of fate, and I tangled with plenty of white people later on, but okay, Colin wouldn't know that and I wasn't shooting him and he was white. He'd met a couple of my classmates, and maybe he read our accents as kind of Southern. I don't know. I didn't think of this one until just now and it kind of pisses me off actually but that's how it goes sometimes, and I can't go tell him to fuck off or shoot him to prove it wasn't this now.

So that just leaves me being crazy, which I suppose is a fair but uninspired guess, and one that further makes the armchair MPD diagnosis baffling and redundant. He opened his mouth and gave five reasons why I might have done it and all but one and a half were shit, and even those were basic.

Like, could he not even try? I was giving him a chance. I was trying to help him help himself, you know. People who don't know how to commit, who don't go out on a limb, they don't go anywhere in the game. They die as nobodies. They're forgotten. I bet the only reason you remember Colin is because I'm talking about him now, and because I had that conversation with him and because of the fallout that resulted from it. Aside from that, he's that guy that Ashley Namath shot.

For the record, my biggest regret about our encounter is that I didn't get to pull the trigger. Yagmur interrupted us right when I'd more or less resolved that I was going to.

## The Ten Most Erotic Ways To Be Killed

Yeah, I'm not over this. Come find me on Twitter and tell me why I'm wrong if you want, but I think I have a solid ranking going here.

### **10. Freezing**

Freezing to death is an underrated way of going out, in terms of eroticism. The thing of it is, it takes a long time and is full of odd sensations, by all accounts. Your body slows down, your mind turns fuzzy, you get numb and lethargic. I'm told that in the later stages of frostbite, you sometimes start to actually feel very hot, leading many people to take their clothes off. It's protracted but comparatively peaceful, and you leave a nice, well-preserved, potentially naked if slightly blue corpse. All that said, though, this is the one I have the most personal experience with because I was maybe a quarter of the way there and it's really not that sexy in practice. I don't know, maybe it would've been better if I didn't have a broken knee and wasn't stuck in a plastic lawn chair.

### **9. Betrayal**

This one's really about emotional pain, so it's stuck down on the list because not everyone's into that. The advantage to it, though, is that it can come up in just about any situation, including one that's more erotic in other ways. Betrayal is getting killed by the person whose hands you willingly entrusted your life to. It's looking them in the eye and realizing that you were wrong about them, but still not quite being able to hate them as much as you should, even as the world fades away.

## 8. Murder-Suicide

This one makes the list because of the sheer aggressive possessiveness of it. Nobody ever said that sexy had to be functional for long-term relationships; sometimes you just want that burst of passion. What could be more passionate than someone deciding that their own last act, the one thing they'll do before removing themselves from the world, is snuffing your light too? This is commitment, ladies.

## 7. The Long Goodbye

Blood loss, slow-acting poison, the right sorts of concussions... this can take a lot of forms, but the unifying factor is it takes a long time to die and you're with someone who's destroyed by seeing you go. They hold you close, they cry. Maybe you say it's going to be okay, that they should go on without you, that you want them to win. Maybe you sob and say you don't want to leave them. Maybe you beg for help. In any event, you're not alone in your final moments.

## 6. Torture

I don't think we need to get too far into the gory details of this one. Torture can be very sexy, but you have to do it right. There are lots of components: the careful application of pain in specific areas, the horror of loss of control and loss of bodily function, the permanence of being marked or mutilated. Sometimes emotional torture is enough. It's really easy to fuck up and make torture nothing but gross-out, though, and who wants to watch that?

## 5. The Heroic Sacrifice

No, I'm not changing sides. I can just appreciate a real moment of all-encompassing passion when I see

one. To die for your friends is one of the most mind-blowingly appealing things out there. Just thinking about someone throwing themselves between me and someone trying to kill me, losing their life to protect me, really gets me. I'm actually sort of jealous because I don't think anything like that can ever happen to me now. It takes a really special person to die for their loved ones. This is how Zach died, with a side of Long Goodbye, and I've never seen something more emotionally affecting. The only reason this doesn't win outright is it's often too sad and too pure and chaste to be a real turn-on.

#### **4. Strangulation/Suffocation**

This is the classic erotic death, and for a reason. As oxygen is cut off, your brain dumps all sorts of crazy chemicals and you get this huge rush of endorphins and sensitivity, or so I'm told. There's a reason people choke each other during sex, and that reason is that it gives a major high and makes all the erotic sensations pop in this incredible way. Getting drowned lands here too, though getting hung doesn't unless they fuck it up and fail to break your neck.

#### **3. Suicide Pact**

Mm, like murder-suicide but tastier. It's just you and a loved one, deciding to cement your devotion for each other in the only truly permanent way possible: by ending your existences together. In the particular context of SOTF, this often has a really noble and tragic tinge to it, too, as the two of you choose to die rather than let your love be tested and potentially found wanting by the game. Like sex, death is more fun with a partner.



**2. Getting Praying-Mantised**

Yeah, this is my list so fuck it, I'm un-DQing this because it is really really sexy. It's where you get killed while you're actually actively having sex with somebody, by the person you're having sex with. This can go down a lot of ways, but usually it's a nice clean quick kill, because otherwise you're stuck in a compromising position with someone you just fatally injured. On a tactical level, this is how you get someone who's your physical superior to take off all their clothes, put their weapons away, and drop their guard. It can be a pretty neat trick if you don't mind using sex as a tool and weapon, and if you're alright getting fucked on live TV. Of course, there are a lot of little calculations and choices to make here, like how far do you go? Do you finish before you pull the trigger? After? It can get a little messy and awkward, but that can also be part of the fun, and if you're the one dying at least you go out with a bang.

**1. Disembowelment**

You knew it was coming. You know the reasons. I stand by it. I'm right. Deal with it.



3

**Mixtape Track:**  
**“Grimly Fiendish”**  
**by**  
**The Damned**

## Whittree, Oklahoma (Part 1)

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You've probably never been to Whittree, Oklahoma. Most people haven't. In fact, I'll take it a step further and speculate that, prior to Season Sixty-Six, you'd never even heard of Whittree before.

There's a good reason for that. Whittree is a small town. According to its website, which hasn't been updated in some time, the population is six thousand, one hundred, and twenty-seven. There are no major centers of commerce there. It has a handful of restaurants, a few gas stations, a pair of competing supermarkets. It's not on any major roads, and while there's a hotel, it's often mostly empty. There are three high schools in the area, but aside from Whittree Secondary School the others are a tiny private Christian school and this sort of remedial vocational institution.

Long ago, Whittree was a farming community, according to local legend. There are still a handful of farms around, but they're an even split between artisanal organic operations and these legacy farms that seem to primarily leech government subsidies. Generally speaking, Whittree is a place where people live, not where they work. Every morning, a caravan of cars and buses sets out for Stillwater, and every night it winds its way back.

My job was in Stillwater. My parents worked there too. Stillwater is a bigger city, though that's a very relative term. Growing up, Stillwater seemed exciting and tremendous, but for every person who lives there, roughly two hundred and fifty live in Los Angeles, where I am now. But Stillwater at least has some interesting things to do. Stillwater has Oklahoma State University, so it has college students and parties and all the amenities that cater to such things. In fact, it's

not too uncommon for less wealthy college students to rent rooms or apartments in Whittree. Whittree's primary virtue is that it's not too far from Stillwater but is notably less expensive.

I'm not sure what will happen to Whittree now that it's on the map. I imagine its value will increase, and the local businesses are probably already working to capitalize on the potential tourism boom. If you're thinking about making a pilgrimage to check it out, though, I'd advise you to think twice. I haven't been back since winning, and I doubt I'll ever set foot in the place again. There's nothing left for me there, and I don't think there's anything for you either. You won't come away with answers or understanding. You won't see me there, and you aren't too likely to meet any of the other families. All you'll discover is a little nothing town like any other little nothing town in America, the sort of place where the people who can run away do and the ones who can't spend their whole meaningless lives trapped, just waiting to die.



I will say that it pissed me off quite a lot when I stumbled on some fan discussion from the early stages of my season that made repeated references to Whittree as "the Southern school." Whittree is located about sixty miles to the north of Albuquerque. What was actually meant by the description was something more insidious: we were cast as the hick school, the conservative school, the stereotypical nuclear-family Christian-morals school.

That assessment, of course, isn't particularly accurate. Whittree certainly has elements of a traditional, "family-friendly" environment. It has several churches. Lots of people worship Jesus. The town is fucking in love with baseball, but I think mostly because it's the

only thing it's really successful at. There are farmers, and there are old folks, and when they bother to show us on the polling maps, we certainly go red with some frequency. But that's just one side of Whittree, the obvious side, the side people see because it's what they're expecting.

The underside of Whittree looks a little different. There are students living there, but also professors and other workers for the university. While representation may be limited compared to urban California, there are a wide number of faiths present, and one of the churches is non-denominational. Most people there are white, but not by an overwhelming margin; I think we're actually a little bit more diverse than Stillwater is.

There are atheists, too. I'm one, mostly. Or, I guess you could say, I don't believe in God and I'm not religious. My parents weren't and my best friend's family wasn't and I wasn't raised with it. I knew people who were (you saw some of them during the season), but we nonbelievers weren't shunned or targeted or anything. The worst we got was occasional passive-aggressive invitations to churchy Christmas shit.

There are gay people, and bisexual people, and I know they catch some shit for it but that's true almost anywhere, and nobody's getting strung up for it. At school, at least, most of my classmates were pretty open-minded and understanding.

There are plenty of smart, interesting, educated people trapped in Whittree. They're there because it's cheap or convenient or because they've tricked themselves into thinking that they like it or that they can't do better.

So when I see fan discussions spouting off about Whittree like it's Hicksville Alabama, what it tells me is that they're buying into the narrative without analyzing

it. See, contrast has been a pretty important part of SOTF's use of multiple schools for as long as the element has been in play. Go all the way back to Season Six, and you've got New York City paired with San Diego, West Coast vs. East Coast, New England vs. SoCal. Twenty-Four set Massachusetts against Tennessee, an actual North vs. South pairing. Forty-Seven tried to give everyone a hometown team to cheer for, prioritizing representation of half a dozen distinct regions over even basic elements of game functionality.

Sixty-Five brought the North and South back, but with a twist. Silver Dragon Academy was an elite private school in a Texas city a bit bigger than Stillwater. Detroit Central High was the sort of inner-city school your racist grandmother probably frets about. It was, thus, also a battle of privilege, of rich vs. poor, of mostly-white vs. integrated. North and South can be shorthand for all of that, but comes nowhere near capturing the full story.

My season was, if anything, a continuation of and expansion upon the economic themes of Sixty-Five. Whittree Secondary was old and slow to adapt with the times. When I was a freshman, the seniors talked about what a nice change it was that the computer lab had finally been upgraded from Windows XP. All the sports teams had to share playing space and plan around each other, and if you were into something less mainstream than sports, if you were for example an artist, then good fucking luck extracting a cent of school support beyond the absolute legally-mandated minimum. There was a lot of talent and passion at Whittree, and a bunch of it was squandered due to lack of support and general disinterest in fostering it.



By contrast, those behind SOTF knew damn well that Davison was top-of-the-line, because they paid for it. I watched some video tours of Davison while I was recovering and I almost cried at everything they took for granted. Every classroom was clean, spacious, full of tools and technology. Their art room had brand new easels, canvasses lying around, multiple pottery wheels. Their fields are floodlit. I was thinking what I could've done, what my classmates could've done, with that sort of opportunity.

So, no, Sixty-Six wasn't liberal vs. conservative, smart vs. stupid, urban vs. hick, diverse vs. homogeneous, and it damn sure wasn't North vs. South. It was haves vs. have-nots. It was over-privileged vs. under, and we, the Whittree kids, we were the under, the have-nots.

And you know what? We kicked their asses. They scored twenty-one kills. We had forty. The top three players? Whittree. Both winners? Whittree. When we had the opportunity, we seized it.

We'd just never been given the chance before.



In retrospect, Whittree was a good place to be a child but a bad place to be a teenager. For kids, the atmosphere is great. It's small, safe, generally wholesome on the surface. You get to know your neighbors, and the people at the store learn your face, and there are a lot of other families so there's always someone to hang out with. The pace of life is relaxed, and children actually still go and play outside.

It's a place where if you don't have a lot of money, you don't have to feel like a freak. I can't remember the days when my family was on food stamps, but we never had the newest or nicest things. We ate a lot of stuff that was about to expire. My dad would buy

pies with just a day or two left, and we'd pop them in the oven to warm them up and have them for dessert. If there were no pies about to go bad, we probably wouldn't have dessert. But it was okay, because I wasn't the only one going to school in clothes that didn't quite fit right, and I wasn't the only one in after school programs because my parents were both at work. It was pretty normal.

Kristine and I met in fifth grade, and by the time we started sixth my family was making a little more money, though not as much as hers did. She'd let me come over to her house all the time, and her parents cooked dinner themselves every single night. By that point, it wasn't about getting a free meal, but something else, something more. It was like having another family, and I'm not sure that's something you really get in bigger places. We'd do each other's hair and listen to music and she was like another sister, a cooler sister, because my actual sister was cool but in the way kid sisters are, and I didn't want to be around her all the time.

But times change, and Kristine and I got older, and we realized that a lot of our other friends were judgmental bitches after all, so we carved our own path. I still remember the day she called me and told me I had to come over, she'd found the coolest thing, and I went over and she'd got an old copy of Nick Cave's *Murder Ballads* on CD and we sat on her bed listening to it all the way through, hanging on every word. I thought to myself, oh fuck, I didn't know you were allowed to make music like this. I didn't know people like this were out there.

My whole life changed that day. Kristine had been exploring some darker things for a bit, and we made the jump together. I went with her when she got

her piercings done, and she came with me when I got mine. She helped me pick out clothes that looked good. But there was no scene in Whittree. Nobody got it. People thought we were weird, but nobody wanted to learn more.

In Whittree, after you turn about thirteen, there's not a lot to do. There aren't good places to hang out besides friends' houses, unless you like open countryside. There's little in the way of shopping, and it's hard to find any sort of employment before sixteen besides, so you probably don't have much money if your parents don't just give it to you. Bands don't play in Whittree, unless you count unknown local groups. There's a tiny public library, I guess, but it's outdated and has limited hours.

As a result, you end up with an environment that tends to foster creativity, reckless depression, or both. If you're going to have fun, you have to make it yourself. Sometimes that's through the internet, which can be a form of escape, if not a physical one, from the small-town monotony. Sometimes it's through alcohol and drugs. There are dealers, though they're generally small time and it's unlikely you're going to score much besides a little pot without going to Stillwater or having a really good contact. College students will almost always buy you booze, though, or you can steal it from your parents.

Then, of course, there's the sex. People might not be open about it, but if you've got a bunch of bored, horny teenagers with nothing to do then the only thing stopping them from fucking all the time is how hard it is to get privacy and escape notice when you live with your parents and they probably know all the clerks at the handful of stores that sell condoms.

People find a way, though. Some of them mess up and get pregnant and end up the next generation of bitter, trapped Whittree inhabitants. Others are smarter about it. Even the good Christian kids can get up to some freaky shit. You can do a whole lot while still technically maintaining your virginity, trust me. My very first boyfriend, my parents set me up with, and he was real religious so they thought I couldn't get into much trouble. He was a total asshole, but definitely got me into trouble until I wised up and dumped his hypocritical ass. He always used to say it didn't matter if I sinned, because as an atheist goth I was already going to burn in hell. He said that giving oral sex was a sin, but receiving it wasn't.

I can't help but feel like if I'd grown up in a bigger city, I would've been smart enough to see through that a little bit quicker. So thanks, mom and dad. You really set me up for success.

## On Trial

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Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, we gather here today to decide the fate of Jewel Evans. The defendant is charged with the following counts, all taken from her own words:

1. Being “really slutty.”
2. Being blond.
3. Being a cheerleader.

The defendant has pled not guilty on all charges. We will examine them in order of escalating severity, which so happens to be reverse order. Acting against legal advice, the defendant has chosen to represent herself and to testify in her own defense, thereby waiving her Fifth Amendment rights to avoid self-incrimination.

This being a legal matter of the gravest import, all within the confines of this chapter are sworn to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help them nonexistent god.

Are we ready?

Good. Let’s begin.



Thank you, judge. My, it’s odd being up on the stand. But okay, let’s go.

For the first charge, of being a cheerleader, I would like to present as evidence the words of Søren Rosendahl. For context, the situation which led to my being here in court today began simply enough. I wandered into a bowling alley, I heard three boys talking, and I caught one of them, clearly in a state of great distress, demanding that Søren describe to him two of his (Søren’s) classmates: Alice Young, who nobody really cares about now, and Jewel Evans, who is me.

Given that the announcements had just revealed me as the killer of two of this guy's classmates, I figured he might not want to know who I was to come find me and shake my hand and tell me what a nice upstanding citizen I am. So, you know, I thought I'd get a better idea of what was going on and maybe throw them off the scent, or else if the situation allowed it maybe even play things risky, travel with them for a while and let one thing lead to another and end up wherever we ended up.

I said to them, verbatim: "Alice is this little shy girl, brown hair, short, looks like she's maybe thirteen. Jewel's a really slutty blond cheerleader. I hope you don't mind me helping. I think I know them better than Søren does. They're bitches."

Then Søren said, and this is relevant to the charges: "Wait, that's not right, Jewel. You're not a cheerleader."



Alright. Jurors, note Mr. Rosendahl's statement is potentially admissible as a dying declaration, given that the defendant shot him in the head seconds after it was made. This means that, though not under oath, his statement is presumed to be true to the best of his knowledge.

Moreover, based on what we know of Mr. Rosendahl, he was an honest boy, quiet, moral, pacifistic. His character suggests that, if he stated the defendant is not and was not a cheerleader, and she agrees with that, claiming any information to the contrary to have been a deception, most likely she is indeed innocent on that front. Our records indicate nothing in her past even relating to notable amounts of school spirit, though she did contribute art to the yearbook in all her years of attendance.

But a new complication arises, because Mr. Rosendahl's statement quite clearly implies his belief that the other two charges are true. So, Ms. Evans, what do you have to say for yourself?



I'm not blond. No shit, you say, your hair is obviously black. Well, yes and no.

I'm sworn to tell the truth, so here it is, much as it pains me to admit: I dye it. Naturally, I'm a brunette, and light brown at that.

I first dyed my hair a week after I graduated from middle school. My best friend, Kristine (that's not her real name, but I might get sued if I identified her accurately), had taught me about being a goth, and had become one herself, and getting my hair dyed was sort of my initiation so I could be one too. Kristine, by the way, actually is blond, and not the nice platinum blond but the dirty farmer's-daughter sort.

So I went with her and got my hair dyed, and I'd never done it before. I'd never really done much with my hair before then, because I hated how curly it was, how it wouldn't play nice. If I tied it back, strands came loose all over the place and I looked like shit. If I wore it short, I looked like a boy. If I wore it long, it took tons of time to brush and wash.

After the dye job, though, it was different. I looked in the mirror and I was shocked, because for the first time I could remember the girl looking back at me looked mature and clever and cool. Ever since, I've done my absolute best to keep from seeing my natural hair color. This may sound weird, but it isn't me. It has nothing to do with me. It's a genetic accident, some cosmic fuck-up that we're lucky to have the science and technology to rectify.

Since we're here in court, in this legally-binding setting, I'd like to take a moment to make my official, on-the-record statement of my living will. If I ever get beat up really badly, or get in a crash, or OD on a bunch of drugs or something, and if I end up like Danielle Austen, in a coma forever and ever, I want anyone with the power to do so to make sure they keep dyeing my hair.

I don't care if I'm brain dead. I don't care if there's no chance I ever open my eyes again, or if I'm reduced to a groaning shell. I don't care if nobody sees me. If the doctors say to harvest my organs and stick them in orphans, sure, fine, whatever. Do it. But you make damn sure they touch my hair up every other week until I flatline. I don't want to die a brunette.



An interesting, but logical enough argument. While the defendant's hair color is indeed not naturally black, she claims that it's also not blond. This sounds like it can be cleared up easily enough through some simple laboratory tests, and an objective answer found that will satisfy all. We do warn, however, that if "light brown" is too light, light enough to qualify as, say, honey blond, the defendant will be held in contempt of court and publicly lashed.

And yet, one charge remains, and the most serious at that. The defendant is accused of that most heinous of sins, the crime so dark and horrific as to render all found guilty of it pariahs, banished from polite conversation and sought out only by desperate boys who want to get off and aren't going to be stopped by little things like how disgusting and disease-ridden the object of their attentions is.



Ms. Evans, how do you answer to the charge, straight from your own mouth, that you are a really big slut?



I know semantics are never a great way to start a case, but before we go further it's important to acknowledge that the definitions of a few terms in use here are pretty heatedly debated. What, exactly, makes someone slutty? Is it the simple fact of having sex? That seems unlikely. Is it based on the number of partners? The time elapsed between them? The variety of positions engaged in? The zeal with which they're undertaken? Are there certain specific acts one can commit which brand them forever slutty? Can a slut lose their title through a self-imposed period of chastity? And what, for that matter, takes one beyond the realm of normal slutty and into the territory of "really slutty?"

I think, then, that the only way to come to the proper conclusion is to lay out the evidence, to come clean as it were, and then leave the passing of judgment to those so inclined.

I have had sex. If that's enough to mark me a slut, so be it. I've had it outside the context of marriage, and I've had it in quite a few positions, and I've had it with more than just one person (ever, that is, not at a time. Yet).

My parents didn't allow me to date anyone until the start of sophomore year, and I generally stuck to that. In eighth grade I kissed a boy because I was dared to, and it was weird and exciting even though he was ugly. I remember thinking I was cool for having done it, but that's all. I don't have any romantic reflections about it. I didn't like him even then.

My first boyfriend I've talked about elsewhere. He was a Christian, but a hypocrite. He believed in abstaining from sex until marriage, but he was also a horny teenager, and he thought I was a slut because I dressed in black and showed some skin. We did a lot, or I should say I did a lot to get him off in the three months we dated. He got me to strip for him and suck him off and do this thing where I basically rubbed myself against him without any underwear on. I didn't get much out of any of it besides the vain hope that he might really care about me as a person. He didn't. He dumped me because I told him I wouldn't let him fuck me in the ass unless he actually did something that felt good for me first.

I lost my virginity in the middle of my junior year, with my third boyfriend. It didn't mean a lot. I thought I loved him, but I didn't. I thought doing it for him would make him love me, and I don't know, maybe it worked. I don't know what he thought. We didn't get to do it often, because my parents or my sister were usually home and he lived with his grandmother as well as his immediate family and she was always around. It was okay, I guess. He tried to make it good for me and I tried to make it good for both of us but a lot of it was just awkward and didn't work great. He'd always worry that the condom would fall off, and he'd either come really quickly or take way way too long, and I hadn't quite gotten the hang of multitasking and helping myself get there yet.

I figured things out a little more over my next few relationships. I got my tongue pierced in part because this guy I was dating heard it helped you give really good blowjobs, but it turned out to not be quite that simple. Fuck tongue piercings.

I wasn't just hopping into bed with guys right away. I think I should be clear about that. I moved from relationship to relationship and sometimes I felt close and comfortable enough for sex and sometimes I didn't. I wasn't unique in that respect. Kristine actually had a bigger number than I did. She started before I did, and she told me a lot about her experiences and I told her about mine. I'm sure there's an interesting tell-all book deal in the works there, but she's lazy and doesn't write well, so fuck her, I'm beating her to the punch.

The sluttiest thing I ever did was let a total stranger fuck me at a party. It sounds bad when I say it like that, but it only happened once and a lot went into it. I'd just been dumped by a guy I really cared about, literally two days before. Kristine and I were going to this party in Stillwater anyways, and I wanted to stay home and cry but she told me I just had to go, that she'd make sure I had a good time and that what I really needed to do was to just forget about my ex. So I went, and the party had a bunch of kids at it from a Stillwater school. This was right before the start of senior year, the last big hurrah of our last summer as high school students. There was a lot of drinking, and Kristine had had a couple drinks made with Smirnoff or something. We'd told her mom we were going to a screening of some old black and white vampire movie.

I wasn't really into it. I'd had a drink but I couldn't get drunk because one of us had to make sure we got home. Kristine was checking out these cute guys from the other school, and she said, "Which one do you think is the hottest?" So I picked one, and she said good choice, and then she went over and talked to them for a while and left me stuck by the snacks. The music was awful and I was miserable and I want-

ed to go home, but Kristine was laughing with them and I couldn't ditch her. And when she finally came back, she told me, "I checked and he doesn't have a girlfriend, so I told him you wanted to fuck him but were too shy to say so yourself. So now you have to fuck him or I'll look like a liar, and I'm trying to make something happen with his cute friend."

I thought she was kidding. I laughed. She just smiled at me and a little while later the guys came over, and we all ended up chatting and the one I'd pointed out was flirting with me really heavily, and before I knew it he was saying he wanted to show me something on his phone but he left it upstairs. So we went up to this empty room and he showed me some funny videos, we made fun of Pitchfork's intro to goth, and then he put his hand on my leg and leaned in and kissed me.

We ended up making out, and then clothes started coming off, and I got scared because this wasn't what I'd been planning at all and I wasn't really prepared but he had a condom, and so I lay on a pile of our clothes on this old couch and he fucked me. In fact, he'd actually been fucking me for a minute or two before my mind really caught up, and I thought, oh my god, this is real, this is me, I'm actually doing this, I just met this guy and now I'm having sex with him. And it's hard to explain. The whole experience, it was this crazy mess of things, I felt scared and ashamed and excited and sexy and powerful and cool. It was something I didn't think real people did, something that happened in stories but that I didn't think I was brave enough for, you know. He was really, really cute and he didn't coerce me or anything, he took things slowly and whenever I got nervous he reassured me, and he paid attention to me and made sure I was hav-

ing a good time, and the whole thing was so weird and unexpected but also so hot. I hope he watched my season and thought “That looks like that girl I fucked one time,” and I hope he reads this and shows it to all his friends and goes “See? See? I told you it was her.”

I don’t regret it. Honestly, with the right opportunity, I’d probably do it again. And you know, I think it’s funny, because afterwards when I told her about it Kristine was like “Oh my god, I didn’t think you’d actually do it, you’re so slutty,” and I don’t know, maybe I am, but I bet that guy’s friends all high-fived him. If a guy picks up a cute girl at a party and gets laid, that’s good for him. Boys are allowed to be horny, and to sleep around. Girls are expected to be uptight and guard their virtue and only sleep with guys they’ve been with for a long time. Nobody tells girls how to have fun with sex. It’s a tool, a tool to make guys stay with you or do what you want, and I think that’s really shitty. For me, if it’s not enjoyable on its own, why even do it? The best thing you can do for girls when it comes to sex is tell them they can have it for themselves too.

If that makes me “really slutty,” I guess I can think of worse things to be.



There it is. The charges are laid, the statements made. Guilty? Innocent? Jurors, that is for you to decide. The court of public opinion is what it is, and I’m sure the verdict will become apparent on Twitter. For now, the defendant has stories to tell. Leave her to her damnation or absolution.

## Killing A Classmate

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Let me be clear, I did not know Søren well. We were not friends. I knew of him, in the way I knew of almost everyone in school, but that didn't mean he meant much to me. Most days I more or less forgot he existed. But we still were classmates.

I've seen commentators who actually state that my only killing of a Whittree student was my last. On the one hand, I'm sort of flattered by that. It shows that people, to a degree, understood where I was coming from, what was important to me. But it's wrong, and it also misses part of the point.

It's not that I was proud of Whittree as a school or place. I had precious little affection for the institution, and one of the biggest blessings of my victory is that I got to move away from Oklahoma. Yeah, I said some things about how I'm proud that me and my classmates kicked the Davison kids' asses, but that pride doesn't stem from any reverence for the place we all hailed from, which was more a disadvantage than anything to be proud of. No, what my focus was on was always the people I knew and cared about. Some faces in the hall rose to that level. Others didn't.

There were a number of other situations where I considered killing classmates. Ultimately, I didn't for a lot of reasons. After I shot Søren, I thought, god, does he have a younger sibling? Is my sister going to have to sit in class and look at his kid brother and both of them know what happened between us? And what about my friends? I don't give a fuck, but what if they do? What if I just killed someone's crush, or the only person to listen when they had a bad day? What are the freshmen and sophomores who hung out with Kristine and me going to think?

That whole web of interconnection wasn't there with the Davison students. Yeah, every kill rippled, but it rippled among other strangers who had no reason to care about me anyways, and whose opinions were meaningless to me. It was just different, somehow.

At the end of the day, I pointed my gun at someone I went to school with, someone I grew up in the same town as, and I pulled the trigger. I'm reminding everyone because I don't want to let myself forget it. Everyone I killed made an impression on me in their own ways, but Søren's was unique because of who he was to me, even if that wasn't actually really much of anybody.

All the same, I wouldn't say I regret it. Right at the end, I laid it out pretty clearly for Lily: I don't kill people I ate lunch with.

Søren should've picked a better table to sit at.

## The Ten Best Weapons Of My Season

Weapon draws are a big deal. They can mean the difference between success and failure, life and death, and they are one of the few aspects of the show that is both entirely out of the contestants' control and also emphatically unequal. A good weapon draw won't win the game for you, and a bad one doesn't mean you're necessarily totally fucked, but your options are dictated by your resources and your manner of play will vary accordingly. Could Karen Ruiz have gotten rolling the same way if she'd pulled a pair of tweezers instead of that Glock? What might, say, Saachi Nidal have accomplished with an actual useful implement of destruction?

Thus, with the benefit of hindsight, I've ranked the ten best weapons from my season. I should be clear, though, this isn't the ten most powerful guns or the ten objects that saw the greatest use. It's my ten favorites, some of which were utilized to great effect and some of which were worthless garbage and some of which were incredible advantages squandered by their recipients. This is the stuff that carried its wielders far or that had potential left untapped only by chance or that was funny enough to actually leave an impression.

### **10. Digital HD Camcorder**

Utility weapon draws are, in my opinion, among the most consistently underrated elements of the show. There are a number of reasons for this, but I think in the end it boils down to their efficacy being much more heavily gated by user intelligence and creativity. Anyone can shoot somebody or stab with a knife, but it takes a certain sort of mind to make



something happen with a bunch of flares. The camcorder never saw any real use, and that's a damn shame because a recording is a tiebreaker in any disagreement about the truth. It's also a freebie come announcement time (you just have to record them and then you have all that information for as long as your batteries last) and a way to get messages back home even if you don't make it.

### **9. M67 Grenades**

The thing about grenades is that they're amazingly powerful both in practice (land one right next to someone and they're basically dead) and also in potential (threaten to blow someone up and they have to either call your bluff or do what you say). More were given out this season than usual, notable also because you can divvy them up with some allies if you so choose. These caused some real carnage, and also messed up parts of the resort, which is amusing to me. Here's a fun little piece of trivia for you: whatever the model numbers on the files say, these are probably actually less potent than stock devices; after Forty-Seven, explosives have often been watered down to prevent any repeats.

### **8. Mr. Potato Head**

RIP Chip and RIP Sarah. A pretty random and pointless joke of a draw, what let Chip ascend into something more was the personification Sarah gave him. Sometimes, even an inanimate object is good enough to talk to, especially when you can't trust anybody alive. I have to admit, when I first watched the tapes, I was like what the fuck, Sarah? But by the end, I was livid when Ashley put a bullet through him.

### **7. Full Set of Team Bandannas**

This would be way, way higher if not for its being a repeat. In Sixty-Five, this was the best weapon in the game, but now it's a known possibility and also there have been some explorations in stealing bandannas off the dead and such, somewhat dulling its power to catch off guard. Still, used properly, these offer an incredible advantage and a perfect chance for a surprise. They can be pretty trash if you don't manage to back it up with some acting and capitalization, though. Just join a team without any endgame in mind, and you'll end up like Ben Grayson: dead anyways.

### **6. Chatterbox Communicator Headsets**

Yeah, these rocked. The ability to stay in contact with others is so underrated. I didn't play it tactically (and I hope I gave my mentor an ulcer because of that) but I still feel like I got what I wanted out of them. I could keep tabs on those I deemed interesting, could guide them where I wanted them, and could give myself an audience if I so desired. And, of course, a team intent on coordinating a more cooperative strategy could've torn the place up with these.

### **5. X-Force 850 Pro**

I think crossbows are, in many cases, better than guns. They're way quieter, ammunition is reusable, and they're not that much harder to use. The good models have a crank to help you load them if you're not very strong. Sure, you only get one shot in most situations, but that's not so different from certain horrid pistols with axe blades affixed to them. I pretty much wrote Alice off just because of who she was, but this carried her a good long way, and I think was a unique alternative to more conventional firearms.

**4. Pony Pogo Stick**

Okay, a meme for sure, but like seriously, how many fucking people got beaten to death with this thing? More than one. It just goes to show, when life gives you trash, use it to bludgeon somebody else until they die of massive head trauma.

**3. Rondel Dagger**

These are normally a little bigger than the one used in Sixty-Six, but its size was to its advantage. It turns out someone snuck up on me with this in their pocket twice, and then I carried it around for ages without anyone realizing. It was concealable, sharp, easy to use, and really really painful. This got me out, which I guess makes up for the scar on my thigh. I don't know, just means I have to own it during bikini season I guess.

**2. Alejandro Sniper Rifle**

Actually sniping people is really difficult, as we see again and again; most people don't understand the theory behind holding a steady aim and even when it works out for a bit it can leave you vulnerable and draw lots of unwanted attention (hello, Hope Neiman of Fifty-Eight). The thing is, though, it's still a big powerful rifle and getting shot by it up close can fuck you up something fierce. Corin brought a cannon to a gunfight and his first kill was what ultimately set him up for everything that came after and paved his way to the win. A weapon that put Ramón Fuentes down quickly and kept him there was critical.

**1. Complete Set of Team Rosters**

Ugh, another underutilized one but this is so, so good. It's like playing a video game with the strategy

guide on the couch next to you. You can learn so much about alliances, circumstances, who to be wary of and who to seek out. This can tell you if a team is coordinating or is useless, and can give a heads-up on where each team stands in terms of potential to go the distance, which is massive if you're planning to be in Endgame. Also, knowing who you're looking for in advance is invaluable, especially if your team is mostly made up of strangers who you won't otherwise be able to search for.

**4**

**Mixtape Track:**

**“Shadowplay”**

**by**

**Joy Division**

## GLHF

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Sportsmanship is an interesting topic in general, and it becomes even more fascinating in the context of SOTF. When your life is on the line, can or should you be expected to play to any notions of fairness? Does it make sense to talk to others before opening fire on them? Is it imperative that you allow any foe the chance to defend themselves, even when doing so may make it far more likely that you die, either in the ensuing fight or due to unnecessarily-accumulated wounds slowing you down later?

In my experience, most fans have clear feelings on this subject, one way or the other. Typically, the strategists advocate a sort of total war approach to the game, where you pursue your objectives with as much efficiency as possible and any concerns about humanity or emotion are weaknesses to be purged. This is the Karen Ruiz school of play, and it's certainly one that can bear fruit, as she demonstrated.

On the other hand, fans of narrative and character and the nuanced web of interactions that runs through the game tend to despise such blunt and detached conduct, feeling that it cuts short promising plotlines and leads to unceremonious and preemptive ends for standout figures. If they're at all accepting of such behavior, it's only in cases like Karen's, where the play is a clear result of the player's personality, thus offering a certain measure of satisfaction in what would otherwise be an unfulfilling string of events. And even then, you know somebody's going to be pissed off.

I, however, fall somewhere in the middle. I think there's a pretty big range of acceptable and interesting actions in the show, even (and often especially) when it comes to those that don't really improve your odds

of winning. I don't think tactics are bad, but I also don't think it's a flaw to treat others, even those you plan to kill, as human beings. As with anything in life, there's a world of shades of grey, but most people are hellbent on reducing everything to black and white.



In SOTF Champions, it's customary to type GLHF at the start of every match. This stands for "Good Luck, Have Fun." This is done in a variety of circumstances, most commonly right before game loading begins in your own team's lobby, but also frequently in cross-team chat while everyone is taking their initial positions. This latter variation is a particularly interesting norm because the bulk of what you spend your time in Champions doing is making sure the other team has as little fun as humanly possible.

The thing about GLHF is that it's not universal. In most lobbies, once someone says it everyone will echo it back or go "You too," or something like that. Sometimes, though, someone will take umbrage and attack the speaker, or else will use it as an opportunity for jokes. One of my friends used to always reply with a tongue-in-cheek "I hate fun." Others will flat out flame you. So, to use the phrase is to take a risk, test the waters, or both.

A bad reception in character select allows you to exit before the game actually begins, potentially avoiding wasting an hour of your life playing with assholes. If you're not the sort to drop out of the game, though, then you're gambling that your positivity will be met in kind or at least tolerated. You're extending your hand in a gesture of trust, hoping that you won't get grabbed and pulled into the jagged embrace of a stun gun shoved into your gut.





I'm not stupid. I think I've mentioned this before. Back before I was picked, I watched a whole lot of SOTF, and I analyzed it carefully. My favorite elements were all the interpersonal relationships between contestants and the drama and the psychology on display, but the action was cool too. I paid attention. I did my homework. I know tactics.

The thing is, sometimes those things fall by the wayside. Sometimes you've just killed three people, including one you went to school with, and you're tired and the conversation's seemed okay so far, and you've weighed your options and figured you could probably kill everyone around you if you wanted, and so by extending your hand you're signaling that you aren't planning to do that. This was, I believe, the original purpose of a handshake. Both sides are left vulnerable for a moment of physical connection, weapons to the side, trust on display.

I can't say why Naomi Young attacked me, but the thing is, I don't blame her for it. My error was my own, unforced, but I don't regret it either. I chose to treat her with respect and trust and she chose to capitalize on my good nature for a tactical advantage. The thing is, she miscalculated more than I did and she couldn't finish what she started, so instead of being treated like a person she died like a dog. That's how it goes sometimes. That's taking a risk and not seeing it pay off.

It could've easily worked out for her. If she held the connection a little longer or if I actually was stupid and didn't know how to handle a tug of war for a weapon or if Cathryn decided to intervene then I would've died and she would've had all the fruits of my earlier efforts plus a major mark next to her name for offing the biggest killer to that point. She took the

tactician's play, but unforeseen factors did her in. Fair enough.

But the thing that maybe she didn't know and maybe nobody watching knew was that I wasn't walking up to her to pull a sneak attack of my own. I wasn't planning on killing her. She didn't have to end up dead. We didn't even have to end up fighting.



Sometimes, the person saying GLHF doesn't mean it. Sometimes it's unconscious habit, or passive aggressive, or sarcastic, or just a feigned pretense of civility in hopes of evading a ban. Normally, it's impossible to say, but sometimes you get a pretty good idea. Sometimes you get an asshole who spent all last game flaming you for every little mistake, and he calls you out by name in the lobby and says GLHF and you know he's figuring out how to mess with you. Sometimes he has a name like "SuckMyDick420" and you can make an educated guess.

So sometimes, when that hand is extended, you can't trust it. And that makes sense and isn't personal. There's no way to know. There is, really, no reason to expect someone who's killed three times to suddenly want to talk.

When a game of Champions is over, if you want to be polite, you say GG or GGWP. This means "Good Game" or "Good Game, Well Played." There are less polite variants out there, though, like GGEZ which means "Good Game, Easy" or "You idiots played like monkeys so we kicked your asses up and down the map." Then there's GGWP No RE. That's "Good Game, Well Played, No Rematch." It's not super polite but it can be genuine. It means the game was solid but conclusive. There will be no round two.

The point that needed to be made has been, and maybe your face should be rubbed in it just a little.



GGWP, Naomi.

No RE.

## Cathryn Bailey

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When I entered the orchard and saw Cathryn Bailey and Naomi Young conversing, the bulk of my initial attention was not on Cathryn. I'm not really sure why. Cathryn's the one I knew, albeit not well. It took me a moment to recognize her. A lot of things felt fuzzy at the time, maybe because of the cold and maybe because so much had happened in such a short span.

I remember worrying a little that Cathryn would out me if I lied about who I was. I also remember looking at the pair and wondering what they were doing together. It seemed strange to me that they would trust one another when they didn't share a team or any familiarity from before the game. That confusion was nothing compared to when I went back and watched what had happened to get them to that point, though.

I did not know that Naomi had a boyfriend. I did not know that he'd been traveling with them but had stepped away and gotten turned around. That little detail could've come back and bit me in the ass really hard, actually. He had a gun and he'd robbed a girl. He killed others later. He was playing for keeps just like Naomi was, and that made for a dangerous combination indeed when paired with a bond stronger and older than anything forged in the game. Had they gotten rolling, they could've been a real force, a more murderous Shawn Morrison and Mae St. Clair.

Shortly after waking up, Cathryn was offered a chance to join a different group, a group including Zoe Walker and Lukas Graves. Those two were planning to try to stall out the game, or make their way through without compromising their morals. Putting aside for the moment how self-righteous such an idea

was, it was also impractical and almost certain to lead to disaster (and indeed it ultimately did; Lukas shot himself for his principles and Zoe let go of hers before killing one of her own teammates for terrible reasons). Cathryn saw, right from the start, that those two were doomed. She told Zoe as much, and left them to their fates. So why, then, did she join up with Naomi?

Naomi and her boyfriend, Chris Schwartz, were suspicious as fuck. They had their little private conference, one where, with the benefit of collar mics, us viewers became aware that Naomi was gunning for the ten kills. Cathryn was smart. She could see that something was up, surely, and yet she chose to go with them anyways. They could've killed her and dumped her body as soon as they were someplace remote. Maybe that was even their plan before I turned up and fucked it up. Cathryn could've chosen to go with Lukas and Zoe. Their plan was stupid, but there was no threat from them. They could've been useful tools, protection and pawns that posed relatively little risk. Instead, Cathryn rolled the dice with an astoundingly dangerous combination of loyalty and ambition.

And yet, she came out on top. She kept coming out on top, all the way to fourth place.



I'd like to take a moment to discuss how I chose to use and allocate my assigned "weapon," a set of five linked headsets that allowed communication between various parts of the arena. One I kept for myself, until it got broken in a fight. One I never did anything with, and it was ultimately destroyed. The other three I gave away, one to Dougie Sharpe and Erik Lowell, one to Cathryn Bailey, and one to Anastasia "AnArchy" Arcadia and Jackson King.

If you pull back a little and examine the way the game ultimately panned out, you'll notice that that list includes four of the six Endgamers, plus Erik, who never actually had notable possession of the headset and who died shortly after Naomi because he ran into me again. Now, if you look at the other two Endgamers, you'll find Yagmur Tekindor, who I agreed to a ceasefire with that had Endgame as its explicit point of termination, and Corin Albanesi, who I never bumped into. In that context, it becomes pretty apparent that I played oracle when it came to potential. I reached out and picked five other students, and all of them made it to the very end.

This wasn't an accident. I mean, I'm not going to pretend that I knew they would make it that far, but if you look at what I did it should be clear that I wasn't giving headsets to just anybody who I crossed paths with and didn't kill. I picked the people I thought would be around for a while, and more than that the ones I thought would be worth keeping tabs on and having the opportunity to communicate with. Each one of them stood out in some way, each one grabbed my focus and revealed something above and beyond the average.

This is part of why I resent the implication that I was clueless or tactically incompetent. I saw a lot of how the game would play out, and I figured out who was a risk when and how much I could get away with at any moment. I didn't play cleanly from the perspective of constant, maximum-efficiency murder, but that was never my goal. If anything, I over-performed as a killer and that led people to mistake me for what I wasn't and dub me less successful than I was.

But even in that light, with my prescience on the table, I have to admit that Cathryn surprised and impressed me at every turn.



Killing people isn't as straightforward or easy as you might think, and that goes doubly for killing people slowly. There are two aspects at play: the physical one, where killing somebody is a struggle because they're generally trying not to die, and the mental one, where it's actually pretty emotionally draining to be stuck in constant life or death struggles and to be watching someone looking up at you, eyes wide with terror, wishing and hoping and praying that something will stop you but nothing can stop you except you and you can't stop so you just have to finish killing them.

Sometimes, you think it might be easier to kill someone by surprise. I don't know if it actually is or not. I think Davis was the only one I took totally by surprise, and he was my first so I had no frame of reference and I wasn't as experienced as I became. But what is definitely not easier is starting to suffocate someone and then having to ride it out.

Cathryn did just that. She traveled for a time with Nina Riddhi, talked with the girl, shared stories and impressions, and then when Nina felt secure enough to go to sleep, Cathryn found a towel and used it to smother her to death. Nina woke up and fought, but Cathryn held strong and saw it through. She ambushed a girl she'd spoken with at length on friendly terms, and killed her in one of the slowest, most brutal ways you can.

It's my single favorite kill from the season, actually probably from the last few years. Even at the time, with everything else going on, when I heard that on the announcement I was like, fuck, it takes some huge

balls to do that. I should've known before then, but I wasn't paying close enough attention. Cathryn stuck to my errand for exactly as long as she thought she had to, but when she figured out I wasn't monitoring her she fucked off.

That was really her MO: she played along when she thought it would get her something or keep her out of trouble, but she could turn on a dime and do what needed doing. She was a pragmatist, but lacked the follow-through to play a pure ambush game, or maybe figured she wasn't going to win the race for ten due to her late start.

By the end of the game, Cathryn was in third place by kill count, but that doesn't tell the whole story. Of her five kills, the first was the smothering, but the next three were taking out other killers. She finished off Alice Young, put down Zoe Walker, and settled the score with Lucia del Pirlo. That last one in particular stands out because it was personal. It was revenge, and where someone else might have been moved by the girl's pleas, Cathryn was ruthless. Watch it again, if it's been a while. It's chilling.

If I'd known what Cathryn was capable of when I saw her and Naomi, I'm not sure what I would've done. Maybe I would've just walked away, let nature take its course. I think Cathryn would've come out on top, ultimately.

If I'd really been playing it safe, though, I would have shot her as soon as Naomi was dead.



Of the five who actually made it to Endgame, Cathryn was my favorite to win (sorry, Corin, you're still the hottest and the most-alive, so you're a winner in my book. Literally). I wasn't close with her in school, and I regret that a lot, because from what I



saw I think we would've been great friends. Strange as it is to say, I look up to her some, and people better not forget her when the season falls out of the spotlight. She didn't make it home, but she tried, maybe harder than anybody else.

Her death is something that sticks with me and sticks in my throat. It makes me sad and scared and enraged all at once. She didn't deserve what happened to her. If Cathryn had to die, it should've been something dramatic or else something quick and merciful. I think that's what anyone can hope for, really. Cathryn did so much to set herself up as public enemy number one for Endgame, but it was stolen from her by AnArchy, and so too was her hope, her life, and her agency.

Everything Cathryn did seemed to be geared to give herself control, over her situation and over her chances of survival. AnArchy took that away. The girl took advantage of Cathryn's weakness and injuries and tormented her to death, because ultimately I guess she was a sick little freak after all. All Cathryn could do was take one last desperate stab, one shot, and she scored a hit but it wasn't enough, and she died. It makes my throat hurt. It wasn't right and it wasn't fair. Cathryn took some of the satisfaction, she played a role in AnArchy's downfall, but it wasn't enough.

It might sound strange, but it's so easy for me to imagine myself as the one lying there, broken and totally at the mercy of someone else and wanting more than anything to live, and trying my hardest only to have it snatched away. It's just about the scariest thing I can think of. So that's another reason I should've shot her, maybe, to spare her that. It all could've gone differently, and maybe better. She wouldn't have had to do any of it, but selfishly I'm glad she did.

I don't believe in an afterlife, but if I'm wrong and there is one I hope Cathryn's resting peacefully.

## Albinos

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This may sound pretty bad, but I didn't realize Naomi Young was an albino when I was killing her. It's just one of those details that kind of slips by in the rush of everything going on. It was dark, and I realized she was really pale but I thought it was, I don't know, just a trick of the weird moonlit forest surroundings. I wasn't really paying too much attention to her eyes, or to her features or anything. I'd just been starting to really take her in when she shocked me.

I figured she was just a really pale blond. Now, though, I'm torn between thinking it doesn't matter and feeling stupid for not figuring out there was something else up with her. It's a little thing, a mistake I think anyone could've made, like I don't think Cathryn really noticed or said anything about it either, but it still gets to me because I can't help feeling I should've been better. Paying attention is important. Okay, Naomi being an albino had absolutely no tactical or practical value whatsoever, but maybe that's part of what makes it easy to grapple with like this. It couldn't have cost me my life, so it's easy to unpack and laugh at myself over. It's not the same as failing to realize there was a missing member of their group, armed with a shotgun.

The other thing is, if I had ultimately died in the game, Naomi probably would've been part of my only claim to fame.



As it turns out, I'm the only person ever to kill an albino on SOTF. That's a spectacularly niche and pointless accomplishment, but an accomplishment nonetheless. According to my loose research online, somewhere between one in ten thousand and one in

twenty thousand people is born an albino. SOTF has, in its entire time on the air, seen somewhere between two and a half and three thousand contestants pass through it, with over a hundred surviving. As a side note, that means that, over a decade and a half, the show has been about twice as deadly as the sinking of the Titanic was in a single day.

The point is, statistically it's not too surprising that there haven't been tons of albinos on the show. In fact, that there has been even one is somewhat improbable. That doesn't tell the full story, though. You see, there are a lot of rumors about casting, but the truth is that the process is a mix of a lot of different factors but is definitely not completely random.

From what I've gathered, it all starts with finding a school or set of schools appropriate for the concept of the season. I've touched a little on the contrast style, pitting two or more schools against each other, but even single-school seasons often pick for effect. The intention behind the choice can be more or less obvious; Season Twenty, for instance, chose an all-girls school and as a result had a strikingly different visual presence and general vibe than much of what surrounded it.

Even if it's not something that significant, the choice of school can greatly affect tone. Cast a small town Southern school, and you may have to worry more about subtitles and general comprehensibility. Cast a dense urban school, and the students may be less familiar with each other due to the high population. Pulling students all from a single course, as seen in Season Nine, or a handful of extracurriculars, as in Forty-Nine, can affect relationships, alliances, and interactions, suggesting groupings or making sure all present are at least somewhat aware of and familiar

with each other (and accordingly increasing the odds of preexisting grudges, romances, and friendships).

Do the students come from a school based in an area of similar climate to the arena, or will they be thrust into an unfamiliar situation? A miscalculation there can lead to a surge of accidental deaths, as was seen in Season Twelve when it turned out that Salem, Oregon wasn't quite Redwood Country enough to let its students reliably navigate a misty forest valley without fumbling into Danger Zones. It can also be a concern when students taken from a temperate climate all of a sudden find themselves somewhere snow-covered without proper clothing or without the awareness to navigate the hazards of the cold.

Generally, it seems like variety is a huge priority, and I think that's a good thing. One school's population may resonate more strongly with one chunk of the audience or another, but each new season shakes things up and gives everyone an opportunity to see someone like them in play. This also means you, as a parent or student hoping to avoid casting, can't just select schools that are different from anything ever used in the past and expect to be safe, and that's big. SOTF could end up anywhere, and could take anyone. I never thought it'd come to fucking Nowheresville Whittree, Oklahoma, but there it was and now here I am.

But while school selection may seem to be this big, abstract, far-away consideration, things get a little more personal the next level down. After all, even within the population of a chosen school, not everyone is lucky enough to be selected to fight for (and most likely lose) their lives.



I don't think Davison was picked because Naomi was there, but I do think that once the school was selected she was more or less fucked, and the reason for that was her albinism.

After a school is picked, a class has to be selected. This is almost always juniors or seniors, though. I think there's a pretty obvious reason for that: a more mature cast with more time spent getting to know each other and develop and grow and learn makes for a more exciting and explosive show. Picking sophomores would make it just feel sort of weird, because they're so young and comparatively unsophisticated. They still really feel like kids. Also, there's the whole sex appeal thing, which gets really hard to sell if you drop the bracket too low. Plus, nobody wants to watch a couple fifteen year olds awkwardly lose their virginities to each other in a two-minute fumble session, and pulling older students helps avoid that.

But then, unless the school is tiny, specific members of the class have to be chosen. Some of that's arbitrary, probably a lot more than you'd expect, but not all of it. They don't just throw darts at the attendance roster, or not exclusively at least.

If there's somebody really notorious, or interesting, or promising, then they're probably going to end up cast for SOTF. More than that, unless there's some high concept reason not to for a particular season, the pool is usually drawn from a diverse array of students. This can be achieved just by checking grades and the school-affiliated activities each student is enrolled in, but it can also come from interviews and the like. The profiles on the website come from somewhere, and usually it's buttering up some of the class gossips and some of the guidance counselors.

Having a diverse cast is great because it lets anyone get invested in the season. Like, me, if I'm watching the show and see a cute goth girl then I'm rooting for her already because I can put myself in her shoes more. Some three hundred pound football guy doesn't have that. Yeah, I may eventually end up liking him more. Maybe he's super interesting and deep and sympathetic, but if I look at the promotional images he's not going to grab me and they want someone to grab anyone. That means if you're the only one who's into some subculture at your school, you've got a good chance of being picked, while boring, straight, middle-class white kids are a dime a dozen and treated accordingly by the selection committee.

If you've got something really stand out about you, if you're some mutant with an extra eyeball or you have your hair styled in some crazy rainbow mohawk or something, you're a lot more likely to get grabbed. There's no time for super in-depth research (look at the Chester Jacobsen/Jacob Chesterton debacle from *Forty-Nine* for a prime example of rushed, sloppy execution), but if it's something that can be spotted easily it just makes sense to take you. Even if it doesn't pull in some weird niche demographic, it can at least make for a striking visual effect. You don't see an albino every day, after all.

It's just a shame that sometimes that special, striking student you cast gets taken out early in a place too dark to even notice.



I don't think I was cast because I'm a goth. I don't think they grabbed me because I'm especially sexy, either (and I'm pretty sure that's absolutely a thing that happens, and to both genders. It's no accident that a bunch of winners go into modeling). There

weren't a ton of goths at Whittree, and a lot of the others were sophomores or juniors, but they could've just as easily taken Kristine. For sexiness, maybe not her, but I'm realistic enough I wouldn't have put myself in the top ten girls at school.

I just happened to have my number come up. That's all there is to it, no big story, no special expectations. I was there to fill things out. I was the last one cast, actually, and that was due to some really boring situation involving mentor contracts. They didn't want to do a loner again, but one more mentor than expected had RSVPed, so instead they had this two-person team, but that meant adding somebody to the pool and that somebody was me.

It's weird to think how different my life could've been if that hadn't happened. It would've actually been sort of sad, I feel like, if I'd been missed but the rest of it had been the same. I would've spent the rest of my life wondering, either about what I would've done or what my friends could've managed had they been cast. I mean, there was Sarah, but just her. Most of the other people I really cared about stayed home.

I guess that's how the world works. You always think of how things could be different, but the truth is they can't.



Aside from being a goth, the only way I stood out was that I was a good artist. That's the source of my other big regret when it comes to Naomi. An albino, that's not something you see every day. That pale, almost pure white skin must've contrasted amazingly with her blood, but it was so dark. It could've been one of the most beautiful shots of the season, but it was just another death. That's my fault, my inattention.



I'm sorry, Naomi. You were different. You were special. You deserved better, but I wasn't paying enough attention to make it happen.

## **The Ten Most Bangable SOTF Winners**

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So, I have to admit, this one's partially recycled. What I mean by that is, it's based on a list I made before I got picked for SOTF. Kristine and I would trade thoughts on a lot of stuff related to SOTF, with each other and with some other fans at school, and we got talking about who was most fuckable, because it's a pretty interesting discussion that naturally comes up if you watch the show enough, and teenage girls are actually kind of thirsty too.

Anyways, my parents gave away or destroyed basically everything I owned before the game, but you can't do that to a Google account, at least not easily. So a few weeks after I won, when I was still mostly laid up and bored, I checked and my account was still there and when I was digging through my old docs I found my list.

It was originally a top five but mostly just guys, but I'm a little more comfortable with myself now so I fleshed out the list accordingly. It's winners-only because we're being realistic here. And, you know, if any of you read this and it gets your gears turning, call me. Maybe you can come over to my place for coffee sometime, or to chill watching our old seasons.

### **10. Ash Wilson-Black**

What can I say? I have a thing for loyalty. Ash was way, way over-hyped but that doesn't change the fact that he's charming and hot, and I have a real soft spot for somebody willing to give his friend a chance even when nobody would blame him for shooting first. Since his win, he's been a total bitch about SOTF, but there's something alluring about somebody

damaged, and I don't think he quite deserves the flak he gets.

### **9. Ryan Arryn**

Ryan is so much my style that xe was on my list even when it was, like, the really closeted I'm-totally-straight-honest version. We can agree that Forty-Two was pretty flawed in a lot of ways, but Ryan's aesthetic game was always on point, and xe has a real ruthless streak that only came out at the end. I love someone with a good sense of fashion, and I love a big personality. Confidence and a willingness to do what you want is exactly what sexiness is all about.

### **8. Ryan Butler**

I know we're getting into kind of fucked up "call me daddy" territory here because this Ryan is like eight or nine years older than me or something so when he was shooting people I was maybe ten, but I don't care, I'd still probably let him choke me. Ryan was the original fan-turned-contender, the one who showed that knowing your shit could actually take you all the way, and he's totally owned his position ever since. Personality and intellect really do it for me, and someone still running one of the big sites today obviously has both in spades.

### **7. Stephanie Cahill**

Fun fact: following me on Twitter instantly makes you at least twice as sexy as you were before. Flirting with me on Twitter makes you three times sexier assuming you were cute to begin with. Don't forget, Stephanie, I owe you torn fishnets and a slinky black skirt an inch too short for comfort, and in turn your "friend" gets to tie me up. There's no deleting

Tweets to save yourself when someone puts it in a book.

### 6. Jonathan Ricardo

Okay, I know that I'm including a lot of pretty handsome good guy sorts on this list, and I do want to take a moment to reassure everyone that I'm not turning away from the darkness and I don't just get hot over sports dudes. It's just, most of the very best villain guys got killed, or else have something about them that just doesn't quite do it for me, like a tendency to knock girls up and then flee the country or whatever. And Jonathan's special for me because he was my first, you know. My first winner, that is. Before Forty-Nine I'd never seen a season wrap live, and I've always had a thing for real friendship. I cried at the end, and I'd hold Jonathan and let him sob into my shirt.

### 5. Adriana Elliot

Confidence, Adriana, confidence. Sexiness is all about confidence, so just think where you might land on this list with a little more of it. You're cool. You're goth as fuck, and you have an album out and a new one coming, and I don't care if people shit on your season. You look good, and more than that you're smart and interesting. Before our panel, I thought you were kind of a poser but I was totally wrong, and I think if you open up like that a bit more you can get back into the spotlight and stay there. You deserve it.

### 4. Elliot Rakowski

Yeah, Elliot. Fight me. So the thing about villains (and I'm not calling you a villain if you don't want me to be, Elliot, just saying that some other people have lumped you in that category) is that they're

interesting because they're complicated. They're the people making the hard choices, the ones willing to compromise and give up some of themselves to get what they want. Elliot did some shit that people still give him grief over, but he did it because it felt right and because he could make sense of it, and he stands by his actions, and that's crazy attractive.

### **3. Ivy Jain**

Um, yeah, I don't think this one will be super controversial somehow, but Ivy is sexy as fuck. Like, a lot of winners are pretty hot, especially given how messed up they can get during the game, but Ivy's a model for a reason, you know? And she has the exact sort of kickass attitude that completely gets me going. She's interesting and wild and knows how to have fun, and if there's anyone out there I'd let snort coke off my inner thigh it'd definitely be her.

### **2. Corin Albanesi**

This one kind of kills me because I can't help feeling like I could've definitely made something happen here if I'd noticed Corin more back at school, but I didn't. It's like, SOTF brings out all these fascinating parts of people you don't normally see, and sometimes that makes someone who's just kind of passingly cute incredibly hot. All the other winners still feel different on some level, like I'm still coming to grips with the fact that I'm one of them and we're all alike, but I don't have that with Corin. He's someone I saw around school, and then he went and won SOTF, and that's amazing and super sexy. I wish we'd met during the season because I feel like then we'd have more of a connection or something, but our paths never crossed. Kissing him is the only thing that makes Pais-

ley lucky. I never liked her to begin with, and when I saw that, I liked her a whole lot less.

### 1. Jewel Evans

So I don't mean to brag but I've seen Jewel naked lots of times and she's pretty alright. Pale, skinny, knows how to take care of herself. Keeps up with her shaving, and I don't just mean legs and armpits. Nice tits. She's got some scars now, but they're the sexy sort. More than that, she's fun, smart, interesting, and pretty fucking kinky. She's the sort of person to publish her wishlist of scene personalities she'd love to get with in a book where they'll definitely hear about it, and to go into great detail about her past sexual experiences in the same book. In fact, this may sound weird, but every time I've gotten off she's been involved in some capacity. If that doesn't make her the most bangable winner, I don't know what does. But if you're on this list too, maybe you should take a shot and let me know if you agree, hm?

5

**Mixtape Track:**

**“Permafrost”**

**by**

**Magazine**



## Choosing Villainy

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I've said it before, but I know I'm a villain. I'm not Elliot Rakowski. I wasn't surprised that some fans hated me. It's okay for you to feel that way. I did some mean, horrible, nasty things. I'm not sorry. I would do them again, with some adjustments sure, but the core I'm pretty happy with. If that offends you, tough shit. You're the one who made it this far into my book. I'm not going to lie to make you happy.

It's okay if you wish I'd died. That's me with plenty of winners from past seasons. Or, you know, it's not exactly wishing someone died usually so much as wishing someone else had lived. That's part of the game. I'm not offended. I know that most people don't cheer for the bad guys. Actually, SOTF is better about that than most. You can be a villain and you'll still reach some people. And as far as fandoms go, I think that the villain fans tend to be some of the most interesting, empathetic, introspective, decent people out there. Sure, there are some assholes who just like the blood and guts, but they're the minority.

Most of the time, if someone's into villains, it's because they've actually put some real thought into the show, the specific contestant they like, and the very nature of villainy.



Let's back up a step. I'm a villain, and I'm okay with it. Okay. But what, you ask, is a villain? What does accepting that label mean?

SOTF is unique because the situation comes about due to factors completely outside the control of the contestants. They don't volunteer for the game. They probably mostly don't want to be there. They're not responsible for being picked. Give them a choice,

and I bet at least ninety-five out of a hundred would immediately leave without hurting anybody. But they don't get that choice. The rules are simple, and they state that the only way out is over a path paved with the corpses of the other contestants.

That restriction is imposed from above. If there is an actual, grand, overall villain of SOTF, it's not anybody in any given season. It's the show and its mechanisms. But the show wouldn't exist without an audience, so maybe that isn't quite right either. The people most responsible for the deaths broadcast on TV are all those hungry viewers who tune in every week to sate their bloodlust. I'm not saying you're worse than me if you watched my season, to be clear. I watched a shitload of SOTF before I got picked and I still do now, plus I also killed people. I'm definitely more guilty, but you share some of the responsibility.

Or maybe that's not even fair. Blame the government. Blame society. Blame God, if you believe in one. Blame the first microorganism that wriggled out of the sludge at the beginning of existence. The point is, villainy is relative, and nobody in the game bears particular responsibility for the state of affairs, only their actions given the situation.

So, then, villainy is relative. The morality of the normal world is set aside, and all that remains is measured by comparison to itself and to past seasons. In this context, we can define a villain as one who acts out of selfishness, for their own good rather than the good of everyone else. A villain is motivated by self-interest. But is it that easy? What would you call someone who leads half a dozen of their classmates through an escape, solely because they want to feel like a good person and without any actual care about the fates of their followers? Would the leader of this suc-

cessful escape be a villain, despite having always behaved with seeming kindness and compassion and for the good of their allies? I don't think the label fits, but I don't think you could call such a person a hero either.

Perhaps, instead, we could define a hero as someone who goes out of their way to make the general state of affairs better for the majority of their classmates, and a villain as one who makes their own state of affairs better at the expense of everyone else. That gets us a little closer, but still isn't quite right. Someone can try to do what's right for everyone else but be totally misguided about it.

Look at Amy Dyne from *Forty-One* and her scattered, hypocritical attempt at establishing a legal system. Judged purely on her intent, you could argue Amy as a hero, but anyone with a shred of common sense would laugh at you for it. But a purely results-based approach falls apart instantly as well; after all, what's the calculation for the moral impact of Victor Frazee's infamous wayward grenade?

There is no universally accepted answer. Fans have fought about this since the start of the show (and in fact the verdict is still out on whether Brandon Parker is hero, villain, antihero, none of the above, or some entirely different category). There are plenty of contestants who blur the lines, but when it comes to the big examples, it's one of those things you know when you see.

Maybe that instinctual sureness is part of why most fans don't think much harder about the villains as people instead of just as obstacles and motivators. If they did, they might realize that, really, the villains are often the ones making the biggest sacrifices and showing the most personal courage.



I have, for a very long time, been a fan of villains. Almost from the start of my fandom, I preferred following them, got more invested in them than anyone else, and cried hardest when they failed and died. My love for them wasn't due to what most people expect. I wasn't enamored with the gore. I didn't care about being a contrarian. I wasn't wooed by snappy one-liners or continuous action. No, what drew me to the villains was a combination of agency and emotional complexity.

If you step back and rationally look at the odds of surviving SOTF, you'll find they're pretty bleak. In the very smallest game, all else being equal, we're talking a base of one in twenty, or five percent. A lot more goes into surviving than just pure equal chance, but even if you account for idiots and suicides and people who try but stand no chance, the odds are just not good. You'll probably die, and I think most contestants are aware of that. Many accept it. The ones who don't, I believe, most often make up the more active heroes and villains.

If you're doomed to die, the question then becomes, who do you want to die as and how do you want to go out? SOTF being televised complicates this further, because whatever you do, it'll be your legacy. The world will see it and judge you for it and maybe you end up known as the guy who was dumb enough to swallow a chunk of bread with a razorblade in it because a cute girl said you should. Most people want their families to love them and think well of them and care for them. I get it. It's okay to want that. I wanted it too. I think most villains do. The thing is, for the non-villains, they accept their place and their fate and they don't take risks that might jeopardize their sure

bet of perishing tragically and beloved. The villains, though? They realize that, as much as they want to be decent people, as much as they want to be remembered fondly, they want something else more. And then they go after it with all they have.

Playing does not make you that much more likely to survive. In fact, the verdict is very much out on whether it improves your chances at all in the context of a normal season; this, I am told, is one of the reasons behind the introduction of the ten-kill rule.

If you kill, especially early or wantonly, there are plenty of mechanisms in place to make it likely that your actions are punished. You're outed on the announcements, a target drawn on your back for everyone out there who cared about your victims. You have to actually do the killing part, and since most people don't want to be killed that often involves a fight. Someone playing defensively need only fight when challenged, and someone who gets killed only has to worry about that one final fight, which they presumably throw their all into. If you're on the hunt, though, each encounter you have is probably somebody else's desperate last stand, where they throw whatever they have in the tank towards killing you or fucking you up badly enough that you can't continue. You have to make it through five, ten, a dozen of these fights, and they take their toll. You accumulate injuries and expend resources and with every success everyone else left alive gets a little more likely to shoot you on sight.

Playing is an act of desperation. Villains are, by and large, desperate people. They're the ones who want something, and it's not always as simple as staying alive. Sure, you have Karen Ruiz doing her best to ambush and gun down anyone she can just to get out, but that's the exception. Often it's about something

else, something less obvious and concrete. Control is a very common motivator. Being selected for SOTF wrenches your destiny out of your hands. By killing, you reclaim your grip on it, just a little. If a killer dies, it's because they fucked up, picked the wrong fight, weren't good enough. If someone dies to a killer, on the other hand, it's because that killer did that to them.

Villains also attract attention. If you want to leave a legacy, sure you can do it by getting far or saving people, but those things are much harder to manage. Everyone notices killers. It lets you make sure you won't be forgotten, at least not right away. And there are so many other reasons. Maybe you kill for someone else, sacrificing your morality and planning to give your life to offer the one you care for so deeply a greater chance to survive. Look at Season Twelve's Reece Cutter in *Endgame*, doing all she could to save a girl beyond help. That's love and tragedy.

More than that, villains are the ones who do things. They create the problems that everybody else has to react to and try to solve. Without villains, there would be no SOTF, or at least, it would be unrecognizable. A villain trying to kill you is the only thing that can stir many an apathetic contestant to action. Villains progress the game by thinning the numbers, and give purpose and direction to everybody else. The others band together and try to stop the villains, to convince them back to the side of good or to restrain them or to kill them. Villains are the only reason that "heroes" can even find action.

And yet, villains are widely reviled by more casual fans. I sort of get it. It sucks when you invest so much of yourself in caring about and empathizing with somebody and then they get gunned down by a guy who makes a shitty pun about it. And I think, as

humans, we don't like to see misbehavior rewarded. We want the world to be a reasonable and fair place, a place where being kind and doing the right thing produces the best results, and whenever some villain wins and lives and goes home and makes millions of dollars and attracts a following on Twitter and writes a book extolling the virtues of being a nasty evil bitch, that offends our sensibilities by reminding us of the truth, that the world just is what it is and sometimes selfish people prosper and kind people die.

But villains usually aren't one-dimensional. We're people too. We have wants and fears. We have things we'll balk at doing, and we get scared and emotional. Look at Lucia del Pirlo, from my season. She did some awful shit, but you could tell she was just about ready to piss herself the whole time. She was a villain, no doubt, but not due to malice. Take her gun away, and maybe she becomes the scared girl hiding in the back of the group whose purity and goodness you fawn over. Sometimes, being a villain is just a thing you fall into due to opportunity.

In SOTF, the villains are the cruel, the violent, the insane, the hurtful. But we're more than that, too. We're the thinkers. We're the risk-takers. We're the emotional ones.

We're the dreamers.



It's not all sunshine and roses being a villain, of course. It can be tough. It can be tough to look at a scared kid, lying on the ground, pointing an unloaded weapon at you and pulling the trigger that might as well be putting a bullet through his own head and then to go, yeah, okay, time to die motherfucker. It can be tough to turn yourself off enough to not wonder what his family's like, what his friends will think. It can be

tough not to worry that someone'll do the same to you come morning and then it'll all be pointless, you'll be selling your soul for nothing.

Then again, sometimes you've just been electrocuted and you're pissed and Jackass there happened to try to bluff you and you're not having any of that shit, and it feels really good to make a statement.

I'll let you guess how it went for me and Erik Lowell.



## Reunions And Spiderwebs

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An interesting truth in SOTF is that when you say goodbye to somebody, most of the time you'll never see them again, at least not alive. You'll get yourself killed, or they'll get picked off, and maybe one of you stumbles upon the other's burnt and mutilated and picked-over carcass and maybe you just hear what happened on the announcements. Any parting has an air of finality about it, even if you swear it won't be like that. It's a strong enough probability, in fact, to make reunions feel different or special somehow. If you meet someone again, that's the outlier, the rarity, the interesting moment.

Especially if you then kill them.



I didn't really expect to see Erik Lowell again. Sometimes, you just get a feel for people, their style and their chances, and Erik had something interesting about him but it was mostly his gun. He was just a dork, and I could tell from the first time we met. I wasn't afraid of him. He had a crazy shotgun and I had a bunch of headsets and I was more worried about Dougie Sharpe, who'd been assigned a plush toy.

I thought maybe Erik would get picked off by some other early-game player, but I guess that there weren't that many of those, really. If you look at the kills on the first announcement, most of them were in self defense or accidental or done in a panic. I guess you can call what Marcus Redder did something else, maybe, and Taylor DeVasher was a whole other story, but there wasn't too much to thin the herd otherwise.

Actually, I'd wondered whether Dougie might do Erik in. I didn't know him very well. Dougie, I mean.

I'm sure it became apparent, but I didn't really understand him and I wasn't any good at predicting him. He took me by surprise a lot, even though I think I was more or less a match for him. I thought maybe he'd take Erik's gun, or try to do so and get into a struggle over it, and once it went that way I didn't see Erik walking away. But Erik did walk away, and so did Dougie.

I was thus pretty surprised when Erik came across me in the aftermath of my killing Naomi, but I wasn't afraid. I'd met him, had talked with him, so I knew the score. I knew him, enough at least. I knew he wasn't really a threat, no matter how big the gun he had was. He tried to get me to back down and that was funny, in a way, because it showed how powerless he actually was. If you have a good weapon and the will to use it, then you don't have to wheedle and beg. You can give orders and if they're not fulfilled you can impose your will with violence. That's basically what I did. That's the core of getting your way.

Erik should've had the advantage, but because it wasn't our first meeting, I knew he didn't. Also because it wasn't our first meeting, I felt more comfortable escalating the situation. In the time since we'd first met, I had changed and he had not. I'd killed four people and he'd roamed around with a friend and seen some kind of scary shit but not been personally involved.

The only reason I didn't make a move on him at the start was Dougie. I'm not sure if I would've killed Erik, but I wanted that gun and I was pretty sure I could take it. Dougie I didn't get, though. Dougie I couldn't predict, but I didn't think he'd be on my side, so I didn't do it.

Alone, Erik was easy prey. It sort of sucks to say that about someone, but that's how SOTF is. If there are easy kills, that has to be somebody's fate. I don't think he was a bad guy, but he had no chance in the long run. If I didn't take advantage of the situation, somebody else would've, and probably pretty quickly. Shadi, Gene, and Pia were getting started by that time, and any of them could've nabbed him. He could've gotten caught in a crossfire, or else holed up with Will Brackenrig for a while and accomplished some more nothing. He had no chance.

If he'd had what it took, I would've died there instead of him.



In SOTF, it's interesting to trace connections between contestants. They wind and spiral around each other like spiderwebs, intricate networks that could so easily unravel with a tug on a single strand. It's fascinating to take one weapon or contestant and make your way from there as far as you can manage. Unless your point of origin is some total loser who opted out right at the start of the game, you can probably make an eventual connection to just about everything else of interest that happened during the season.

Let's take Erik, for example. Erik was one of the first people I talked to, but not the first I saw (that was Nina Riddhi). Nina was asleep at the beauty parlor and I could've smothered her to death before she woke up. She was smothered to death in her sleep, eventually, by Cathryn Bailey... who I gave a headset to and chose to spare after killing Naomi Young, minutes before my second encounter with Erik.

In my first meeting with Erik, he walked in on me talking with Dougie, who was the very first person I exchanged words with. Dougie was also the last per-

son I talked with, right before I was taken out of the game. I held back from making a move on Erik because I thought Dougie might object and take action to stop me, and later he did just that, breaking my knee.

Between our meetings, Erik stumbled upon Gabriel Munez in the aftermath of his killing of Lucy Williams. Gabriel was one of my assigned teammates and had, prior to killing Lucy, been allied with Yagmur Tekindor and Lisa Toner, an alliance which fell apart when he attacked Davis Todd and gouged the boy's eye out. Davis, of course, was my first kill, partially picked because of that injury. Lisa was my second, and Yagmur came back belatedly to rescue Colin Pigeon from me.

After Erik left him, Gabriel wandered before eventually succumbing to the wounds he received from Lucy. He finally fell outside the hotel, where later I would score my penultimate kills and meet up with Sarah Bourne. With his dying breaths, Gabriel attacked Sebastien Bellamy, who was traveling in a group of four along with AnArchy Arcadia, Shawn Thornton, and Jackson King. This group had relocated to the hotel soon after an encounter with Dougie, and after moving on following the confrontation with Gabriel, they ended up running into me... but that's for another chapter.

Erik, meanwhile, had teamed up with Will, but stepped away from his ally long enough to get killed by me. Will, I later learned, caught wind of what had happened and ran off. He ended up at the museum, where he met Cathryn Bailey (who had recently set off in that direction on a mission I tasked her with) and Bella Bianchi. They were soon joined by a pair from the Golden Hyenas team, comprised of Gene Steward

(who would soon kill Will) and Yagmur Tekindor, who had ditched Colin in favor of his assigned ally. Colin, abandoned by his savior, would soon encounter Dougie and his traveling companion, Lily Ashburg, the latter of whom eventually played a pretty pivotal role in my game.

Disrupt any one of these situations at any stage and the whole mess falls, cascading dominoes leading inevitably to a totally different conclusion. That's part of the magic of SOTF, though. You can see how each decision, each interaction, no matter how seemingly unimportant, builds to something greater. It's a story of moments, of details, of people.

To me, that's beautiful.

## Staring Down The Barrel

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For all I talk a big game, I do know that if I'd been wrong, Erik could've easily killed me. That gun he had was dangerous. I'm not a gun geek, not really, but I looked it up later. It's called a UTAS UTS-15, and it's some Turkish shotgun. If it had been loaded and he'd pulled the trigger, at the distances we were at, he probably wouldn't have missed.

Shotguns fire a spread of pellets usually. These don't cover as wide an area as you see in video games, but make up for it by tearing up everything within their spray. If you get hit by a shotgun, you're not getting away with a single clean wound unless you're incredibly lucky. Your flesh can get shredded, your belly opened up and your guts perforated with lead.

I think about it still, sometimes, how I could've misjudged him. I didn't. I didn't think it was a realistic possibility even then, and I was willing to place the bet, but still. He pulled the trigger and the gun was empty and sometimes at night I ask myself, would he have still pulled the trigger if it had been loaded? Would he have had the strength and mental fortitude to take my life like I took his?

For all he seemed to be a loser, I don't think he was an unkind boy. I think, if he'd been properly equipped, he would've probably fired the gun over my head or at the ground, to show he wasn't fucking around, even though in doing so he would actually be fucking around. I think there's a good chance that he would've been unable to handle the recoil, and the shotgun would've launched itself out of his hands, and if that had happened I would've been on him in an instant, shoving him to the ground and capitalizing on his mistake, making him pay with his life. On the other

hand, if he'd kept hold of the gun and had acquitted himself well and had then pointed it at me again and demanded that I leave, I probably would have, slowly and carefully.

But still... what if? What if he'd tried to give me a warning shot but messed up and clipped the side of my head, tore out my eye and destroyed half of my mouth and left me bleeding and sobbing on the ground, bits of shot in my brain but not enough to immediately end it? Would he have choked back his panicked apologies long enough to finish me, or would he have been overcome by emotion and fled, leaving me to die slowly and cruelly?

I was thinking about that at the time, a little, but the funny thing is it's more upsetting to me now than it was when it was an actual possibility. I guess that's what you call perspective.



I always had this idea that my death would be quick and brutal. I thought about it quite a bit during the game. That's what you do in SOTF, I think, if you're at all smart and introspective, because death suddenly changes from this far off possibility to something coming for you at great speed. It's like when you're seven and you're imagining Christmas in March compared to when you're imagining it on December twenty-third. It's a difference of scale.

It's strange, because I really should have known better. That bit above, about half of my head getting blown off but me having to writhe in blood and flecks of my own brain until I finally passed, that wasn't something that was really on my mind in the moment. I thought it would be a clean shot, maybe one that tore me open and splashed my guts all over or maybe

one that took my head clean off, or at least obliterated any trace of who I was.

I've heard that it's impossible to perceive your own death, because of course once you're gone you no longer have any perceptions. That makes a lot of sense to me, but it doesn't really clear things up. What is death, even? If you don't believe in a God or an after-life, it's just nothing. It's hard to explain, and it's scary, but it's also not a thing I can worry too much about. It'll happen eventually and I can't do anything about it, and nothing will matter in the long run and nobody will remember except a bunch of people who will also die and not matter. It can actually be kind of liberating to view the world in those terms.

I was somewhat worried about what would happen to my body after my death, though. That concern got more and more prominent as the game went on, because I pissed off a lot of people and I know that makes it more likely that someone messes with your corpse. People want a feeling of control in SOTF, but they don't really have any hope of finding agency, especially if they're the sort of people who get mad enough at players for doing their thing to try to get back at them. So if a player's body gets found by someone whose buddy they killed, then maybe that person is upset that they can't do anything to hurt the player anymore so they shoot up their body or cut them up with a knife or something.

I knew it wouldn't matter to me after I died, but I still didn't want that to happen. I'd upset so many people, and I thought that someone might cut my head off or maybe even fuck me or something. People do crazy, fucked-up things to try to feel better, to get one up the only way they can. I probably shouldn't be writing this, really, because someone in a season or



two is going to have read it and go, “Oh, that evil bitch Jewel was afraid someone was going to fuck her and carve her up after she died so now I’m going to do that to the dead players in my season because they probably thought the same and it’ll be good revenge.” If you’re reading this and thinking that, well, it’s on your own head if you do it. I’m being honest, and while it’s gross and degrading to have your body violated and mutilated posthumously, it’s way more disgusting to be the sort of person to do that.

I think it’s the helplessness and the objectification that get to me. I don’t mean objectification like when you whistle at a hot girl and scream out your car window that she has a nice ass, but like literal objectification. You’re dead, so you’re an object now, so you have no say. People can do whatever they want to your physical remains, and that’s whatever but that body still has your face, your hands, your brain inside. The life is gone, but the shell holds memories and meaning for the people who cared and in a way it serves as a symbol for the person it once housed.

On a related note, if I’m wrong and there is a hell, I hope AnArchy is burning in it.



The closest I came to death was not when Erik pointed the gun at me. It wasn’t when anyone was actively trying to kill me at all. Yeah, each of those moments was big and scary and could’ve seen me dead with a half inch of different positioning, but being in a scary situation or a situation where you could die isn’t the same as being close to death.

The closest to death that I came was in the moments right before and after my knee was broken. I was sure my end was going to happen, not right away, but still inevitably, inescapably. My choices weren’t

gone, but they were so drastically reduced it felt as if they were.

I'd thought it would be speedy. I was sure it would. Somebody would shoot me in the heart, or slit my throat, and I'd go scared and suffering but fairly quickly and quietly. It could've been like that. Another swing or two of the metal bar, similar force applied to another body part, and my skull would have been crushed. My chest would've caved in, puncturing my lungs or pulping other vital organs. It would've ended brutally, more slowly than I'd hoped, but within the expected range of results.

But I was left to die on my own instead, crippled. I wasn't going to kill myself, wasn't going to give Dougie that satisfaction, but what else could I do?

The thing I talked about, being afraid my body would be messed with, that's why I dragged myself outside. I made myself as comfortable as I could, and I sat there in the cold and I closed my eyes and let the darkness take me. I thought I might be harder to find there, and I thought even if someone did find me, with any luck I'd be frozen solid by then. I'd be kept pretty well preserved until the end of the game, even if that took a while. They'd bring my body back and give me back to my family, and my parents would probably spit on me and have me burned and throw my ashes in a ditch, but it would've been their choice, their actions that they'd have to live with.

And, you know, I'd take that any day over fucking AnArchy popping my eyes out with a spoon and eating them.

## **The Top Ten Mistakes To Avoid In SOTF**

People often ask me what they should do if they end up in SOTF, or what advice I'd give to someone picked for the show. The truth is, it's such a vast question, with so many little nuances and situational details, that it's impossible to give a good reply in anything less than a book at least as big as this one. While "Jewel's Tactical Guide To Winning SOTF" might be a fun future project, it's outside the scope of what I'm doing here. Still, I will go ahead and catalogue ten of the biggest fuck-ups I see again and again, and if you avoid these you'll be well on your way to not dying, or at least not dying an idiot.

### **10. Don't Talk To The Cameras**

Way back in the dawn of the history of SOTF, talking to the cameras, and through them the audience, was a novel way for contestants to set themselves apart from the pack. Then over a decade passed and dozens if not hundreds of people did exactly the same thing, hit the same beats, made the same appeals to emotion and humanity and so on, and now it's boring as fuck. Talking to the cameras is an amateur move, one that says you want to shape how the audience perceives you but don't actually know how to do it. Unless you know SOTF through and through and have your finger on the pulse of the show and know you're bringing something new to the table, don't try a camera monologue. Nobody wants to hear your boring-ass soliloquy, and half a dozen of your classmates are doing the exact same thing. Interesting people don't have to convince the viewers that they're worth paying attention to.

### **9. Don't Fret Over Food**

Usually your pack contains enough food to keep you in good shape for two or three days. Often this is made up of an assortment of items provided by sponsors. Figure out what's perishable and eat that first; a sandwich is going to be stale, slimy, and gross after a couple days. Don't ration. Rationing is for losers and idiots. The last two seasons ran about four days, and most land somewhere between there and a week. The longest game ever, Sixty-One, took seventeen days. Most people won't make it anywhere close to the end, and starvation actually takes a long time to kill you. Being underfed early on, by comparison, makes you sloppy and weak. Eat your food when you're hungry and if you stay alive you'll have plenty of opportunities to pick more off the bodies of fools who didn't make use of the advantages they were given. And even if you do run out, you just aren't going to starve. Related: food is never, ever worth risking your life over unless you have diabetes and it'll kill you not to get it or something.

### **8. Don't Fight Everyone You Meet**

Every fight is a chance to gain something, but also a chance to die. Even if you aren't killed outright, you can be fucked up to such a degree that the next fight ends you, or the one after. Players who just fight all the time don't win. They burn bright and get all sorts of hype in the early and mid-game and then they crash and die and get forgotten. You don't have to be a god of tactics to know not to pick conflicts that land you at a huge disadvantage. Nobody cares how big your dick is, and if you want to get a chance to use it again it won't do to get it ripped off by the football captain you could've just walked away from, or shot in

half by the quiet girl you thought you could take even though she had an AK.

### **7. Don't Underestimate The Value Of Friends**

Relationships don't vanish when the game starts. Emotions don't go away. It's not a whole new world, just a new set of ways to interact and a new slew of opportunities and risks. People who cared about you before probably still do. They may be out to win, but odds are if they can't survive they'd rather see someone they like take it all and make it home. At the same time, betraying a friend is a perfect way to make sure nobody else will trust you for the rest of the game. Think very carefully before you attack the one person who might keep watch over you no questions asked while you sleep off a fight where you killed three people. And think very carefully about who you want to win if you can't, because it's not going to be anybody you stab to death.

### **6. Don't Be Afraid To Take Opportunities**

Often, contestants get paralyzed by indecision or fear or moral qualms. This can get you killed incredibly quickly. SOTF is a game that favors the proactive. Whoever takes the first swing can potentially end a fight before their enemy can even retaliate. A weapon snatched away in the early stages of the game can keep you safe for its entire duration. Whoever gets the best setup the quickest has the best chance to be carried by that. All bets are off in the final ten or so, sure, but if you make it that far that's a huge step above the majority who end up in the game. If fate gives you a gift, don't throw it away.

### **5. Don't Rely On Gimmicks**

Alternate win conditions are great. If your team can carry you, or you can manage ten kills without getting fucked up and before anyone else does, awesome. Good for you. But these things rely on factors outside of your control. If your mentor saves your ass, that's great. You're lucky. But it doesn't mean he won't hit the punch bowl at the staff party too hard and be AWOL next time you're in trouble. Anything outside the core of the game is a bonus, not a certainty, and you should expect to play it out in traditional fashion. Only stretch for something else if you're positive you can manage it, and don't be surprised if it falls apart anyways.

### **4. Don't Take Resources For Granted**

Everyone gets a whole lot more than they realize. The first aid kit is stuffed with all kinds of tools and materials. Every bag includes a flashlight, and any weapon complicated enough to need it has a manual telling you how it works. I can't begin to describe how fucked I would've been without an illustrated walk-through on how to load the axe-gun I got from Davis. Everyone gets a costume, two spare tops, and a spare set of pants. If people are gunning for you, shaking up your look can throw them off for a key moment, and if you want to find your team having a shirt in their color can make your alignment more obvious at a glance. It can also be secondary proof if someone stole your bandanna, or you can use it to test the honesty of someone approaching you; if they don't have a shirt that matches their bandanna, they better have a good explanation why. The flashlight can be used to light your way, signal, or blind foes. A condom can hold a lot of liquid. And, of course, there's an almost endless

amount of stuff to find around you in most arenas. Think about this stuff and make the most of its potential and you'll be so much better off. I rag on Karen a lot but when she had to sleep and knew she couldn't trust anyone she made a makeshift alarm out of shit she found lying around. That right there was when I started to think she might actually make it.

### **3. Don't Trust Anybody, Including Yourself**

People lie for good and bad reasons. They do all sorts of dumb shit. Be prepared for that. You've read this list, so you know better than to stab your bestie in the back, but maybe she's actually stupid or has been harboring some grudge over the time you fucked her boyfriend after prom or just panics more easily than you know. Expect surprises. If you shake someone's hand, have it in your mind that they might knife you. I'm not saying to be paranoid, just prepared. Trust others knowing that you're choosing to do so and with a backup plan in mind. And do not, absolutely do not, let yourself get overconfident. You are fallible. You may be wrong, in your tactics and your theories and your assessments of others. Remember that. Don't let preconceptions blind you. Never over-commit.

### **2. Don't Get Caught Up In The Past**

You're an SOTF fan, I bet. How do I know? Well, you're well into a book written by a winner, for one. Fans tend to think we've got the game figured out better than anyone else. Whether or not that's right depends on the individual, but even if it is it pays to remember that times change and circumstances vary and a tiny variation can result in a massive divergence of consequences. By all means let winners and events of years gone by inform your own choices, but

don't rely on them as a map. Your season is unique, probably packed with all sorts of unprecedented situations and dynamics that nobody can predict or prepare you for. Stay limber and aware, and don't think what I did to get out will carry you through no questions asked.

### 1. Don't Give Up On Yourself

Nothing else is as important as this. Nothing. If you're alive, if you're breathing, you're still in the game. You still have a chance. A bunch of the others will give up, actively or passively and to different degrees, the moment their names are called. It's very tempting, and it makes a certain sense, but you have to resist. If you don't think you can live, then nothing you do really matters. It's all just a complicated, brutal form of suicide.

Here's a secret: anyone can win SOTF. Anyone. You could do it. I have no idea who you are, but I know you could do it. The fan favorite, the handsome, strong soccer star who's friends with everyone, he can do it. The quiet girl who's never hurt anyone and has never watched the show and doesn't want anything except to be left alone, she can do it. The overweight geek who gets half his hand shot off in the first ten minutes, he can still do it. And the normal girl, the girl with some good friends who mostly didn't get picked, the girl who never imagined that she would be chosen, that she would be anything at all, the girl who fantasized about dying more than about winning, the girl who thought for sure it took someone special, who thought if all that intelligence and compassion and humanity and a vast knowledge of the game could get you was five kills and a shallow grave in the sand then what the fuck could someone boring and simple like



her hope for, the girl who really did give up and started to just pass the time until her death, even she can do it. She can wake up, she can step back from the ledge at the last possible second, she can take a deep breath and decide to live. And if she can do it, then anyone can.



6

**Mixtape Track:**  
**“Temple of Love”**

**by**

**The Sisters of Mercy**

(The original 1983 version, not the inferior 1992 rerecording)

## Costumes

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I've been asked one question a few times. The words have differed, but the basic idea hasn't. Jewel, people ask me, why did you wear the slutty costume?

The answer could be because I'm really slutty, but the verdict's still out on that. No, I know why I put it on, and it's not exactly why you'd probably guess.

You see, I wore the costume because of mutual respect.



Let me tell you a little about how costumes are assigned. First off, there's a decision to be made as to whether they even will be used in any given season. More and more consistently, the answer has skewed towards yes, and I think it's mostly because costumes offer opportunities with relatively little in the way of drawbacks.

Yeah, it pisses some fans off, but the argument that having costumes makes the whole game less serious or more artificial-feeling doesn't hold water. Nobody's forced to wear their costume. You get the clothes you wore in, plus a generic set, plus an extra branded top, plus the costume. If you put it on, it's because you want to, and if you want to traipse around dressed like a toreador you probably weren't going to take things entirely seriously anyways.

Meanwhile, costumes offer some good opportunities for striking visuals and iconic looks even among the more fashionably-challenged. Alice Young could have been any nobody without the red cloak. Taylor DeVasher's whole run was encapsulated in that dress. Costumes, at their best, offer a unique appearance, which can be a big deal when most contestants tend to

dress in the same general styles popular based on their location and the time of year.

So costumes are a good idea that aren't going away, but there are some complicating factors, and that's where the assignment process comes in. You see, a season tends to have forty to sixty contestants, and while there are certain things known about each even before they're officially cast, that doesn't include tailoring measurements. People come in weird shapes and sizes, and some stuff you just have to eyeball anyways, like you're not going to lift up every girl's shirt to check her bra size. Students are held for less than a day between initial selection and the start of the game, and much of that is wrapped up in transit time, the briefing, and so forth. There is absolutely no time to give much individual attention.

How the costume department gets around this is they have a massive collection of stuff in all shapes and sizes. They aren't tailoring it up right then, but they've spent time between seasons buying good quality options and making other sets from scratch. They tend to focus on the more common body types and base each on what they think the audience will have the most fun with and the contestant will be most likely to wear or react to in amusing ways. It's not an exact science, though; you won't necessarily be more likely to get a bikini if you're dead average than if you're four hundred pounds because the four hundred pound girl is more of an outlier and they might want to give it to her as a joke, or because she's so oddly sized and shaped they really do have to make it on the spot and bikinis are easy. If you get some shapeless, all-concealing or one-size-fits-all shit, that often means that you're either out of the normal range or else that they're running low on stuff in your size.

There is a bit of a personal touch, though. They look at you and make little judgments, and that has a big impact on what you get. If you're a particularly attractive girl, for example, maybe you get something skimpy so that if you put it on the viewers really get a show. If you look like you have no sense of humor, you get something that will be funny to watch you sneer at and throw away or that's just kind of bland and boring. The really good stuff goes to people they're guessing will wear it and will go far, because nobody likes spending half a week embroidering a complicated period naval jacket just to see it get tossed in a dumpster after a moment's consideration.

That, of course, is where the mutual respect comes in. You see, the costume department looked at me and what they noticed right away must have been that I had Zach on my shirt. So they said to themselves, okay, this girl really likes Zach, let's hook her up. And they did. The costume they gave me may have been a bit hard to figure out, because it was the super slutty girl version and mostly it just looked like a lab coat over a strapless white crop top and miniskirt, but the thing is it was the slutty girl version of Zach's costume.

The costume crew took the extremely limited information they had about me into account, took a few extra seconds to dig around in the closet, and gave me something that was actually geared towards me as an individual. They treated me like a person when they had absolutely no need to do so, so I had to wear it for them. It was about letting them know that I appreciated it, that I was grateful for them and their work and the little moment of dignity and kindness they'd shown towards me.



There are a handful of typical styles costumes come in, and I do actually have some gripes with this part of the whole costume affair. Generally, I'd designate costumes as sexy, cool, or funny, with some landing in multiple categories.

Sexy costumes are there to titillate, often by showing some tit. These are the skimpy, slinky costumes, the ones that leave you more exposed than whatever you were wearing to begin with. Generally speaking, for girls this can mean short skirts, low-cut and/or navel-bearing tops, or even various forms of swimwear or lingerie. For boys, it can be revealing shorts or briefs and a handful of accessories. These sorts of costumes often go to the people who'd look good in them. If you're choosing to wear a sexy costume, it's usually because you're pandering to the audience and think you can get them to like you for your sex appeal, because you're trying to use your body as a distraction or tool, because you're doing it ironically and aren't taking it very seriously, or because you have no other option. Some examples of sexy costumes are the bunny girl outfit worn by Sidney Rice in *Sixty-Five*, the bikini worn by Sarah Miller (or "Bikini Sarah" to those of you on the fansites) in my season, and of course my own slutty scientist getup.

Cool costumes are the ones that convey a sense of power or competence. They tend to be well-fitted, and often cut dramatic shapes or draw from respectable sources. These are the costumes that tend to look like they had the most work put into them, and also are typically the costumes with the most practical purpose. Cloaks and capes usually fall into this category, as do a number of costumes based on professions or media properties, like army outfits or Clint Eastwood ensembles. If you're wearing this sort of cos-



tume, it might be because you're pandering to the audience or trying to cast yourself as an ice cold badass, it might be because you don't have any better options, it might be for a morale boost, or it might be because your costume actually provides some concrete tactical advantage (such as, say, being warmer, obscuring your form, offering hiding places for weapons, or being in a pattern conducive to camouflage). A couple of cool costumes from my season would be Vahka's cloak and Corin's admiral duds.

Finally, funny costumes are jokes. Sometimes they need to be donned to get the best punchline, but often these are the costumes intended to be picked up and then thrown away with a wrinkled nose. As a result, these sorts of costumes are frequently cheap, store-bought, or carelessly tailored, though there are exceptions that involve a staggering amount of effort for dubious payoff. This is the category for mascot suits, visual puns, and themed partner costumes. If by some odd chance you actually put one of these on, you're almost certainly pandering or goofing around. If the former, you're not great at it because the only thing wearing a joke costume ever turns you into in the eyes of the fandom is a meme, and if the latter you're probably fucked because you're sacrificing advantages for no reason. On infrequent but not unheard of occasions, though, funny costumes can provide an edge, frequently by obscuring the wearer's identity or allowing for the concealment of weapons or tools. Funny costumes include Panya Bishara's full-body bear getup from Sixty-Five and Jackson King's mariachi outfit from my season.

Costumes that cross categories are a little subjective, but I have a few examples that I think that people will mostly agree with. Alice's Little Red Riding Hood

thing sat between cool and funny; it was a joke about her looking like she was maybe twelve, but she took the cloak and made it into its own thing, outside of the fairytale reference. Nina's superhero deal was on the line between sexy and cool; it was an empowering nod to an iconic character but still showed a lot of skin. A sexy/funny hybrid would be Taylor's dress as he wore it, which is to say going commando. Another example could be themed novelty lingerie.

That's all very well and good, but where my issue comes up is the ratios. Put simply, if you're a girl you are notably more likely to get a sexy costume, and if you're a guy you are notably more likely to get a cool one. Funny costumes seem about evenly distributed. I mean, I get it, it's fun to see cute girls in compromising, revealing clothes. It's fun for me too. But I think it's important to be fair about it. If a third of the female cast is going to be risking nip slips whenever they get too active, I want an equal chunk of the boys to have to worry about drooping out the sides of their banana hammocks. I don't think that's too much to ask.



Once I was all changed, I wasn't too uncomfortable, but the road there was nerve-wracking. I've always wished I was really really hot. I think most girls do. It's this whole societal thing where we're taught that a big part of our value comes from how fuckable we are, and I know that's patriarchal bullshit and all that, but I still like feeling sexy. The problem is, wanting to feel sexy isn't the same as actually feeling sexy, and like most people seem to I have a bunch of little insecurities.

I had this really cute bikini I got from a mall in Oklahoma City. It had skulls all over it, and I put it on

in the changing room and was blown away. I thought I looked so cool and daring, and I actually kind of liked how much of me it showed off. It's like, I got my belly button pierced and basically nobody got to see that because there weren't many opportunities to wear crop tops in Whittree and I felt sort of weird in them anyways, and that's a big change to my body. Getting to kind of flaunt that seemed amazing. But the thing is, I never went swimming. I spent sixty bucks on this swimsuit without any occasion to ever wear it, and whenever I thought about finding one I'd come up with excuses to wimp out. Oh no, it was too cold to go to the pool. Oh no, it was too slutty for being out in public, even though it was just a damn bikini.

And it was the same with myself, my body. Was my makeup too heavy? Were my breasts too small? Too big? Was I too bony? Was I gaining weight? Were my legs shaved recently enough? Would boys look at me and think I was attractive and want me, or would they laugh at me behind my back? Kristine didn't help. She'd always tell me when something was wrong, when I slipped up and a boy could've seen up my skirt or when my hair was bad or when it was obvious I was hiding a zit. I always told her she looked great and helped her look better.

It was easier to go the classic goth route, which is sexy but in a refined, untouchable way. Any skin on display is still clearly off-limits, and it's more about the implication and suggestion. And yeah, I know people found me hot enough. I even thought that I was, sometimes. I had boyfriends, I got laid, and I've seen the fan art people have done of me (though it seems like a lot of them think I need a boob job).

The funny thing is, I don't care as much anymore. I mean, obviously knowing that loads of people

want to fuck me is pretty good for my self esteem, even though it's probably not because of how I look but because of who I am. But the other thing is, I have a bunch of scars now. I will never be perfect. I don't have to expect that of myself anymore, so I can just focus on being me and liking how I am.

Anyways, with the costume, the big issue was to put it on I'd have to get undressed. I was too scared to take my tights off, and besides, it was cold. But I had to take off my shirt, and that was scary.

What ultimately let me do it was knowing how SOTF works. I knew right about where the cameras would be in the bathroom, so when I changed I could have alright control over what got shown. So if you're wondering how I changed my top twice but didn't get pictures of my tits slapped all over the internet, there's the answer: I made sure the camera was pointed at my back.

And of course, once I was dressed, everything else mattered a little less. My costume was about getting me into less, but it felt empowering because it meant that someone out there had been watching out for me, just a little. It was a connection, and it was a legacy, almost. If I was to follow in Zach's footsteps, I just couldn't disappoint.

## The Trigger Not Pulled

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I don't want to waste too much time on the girl I met right after I got changed. I crossed paths with a lot of people, and aside from giving me a heads-up about AnArchy and happening to be carrying the dagger I later got stabbed by and then wielded myself, there's not a lot memorable about her. She seemed erratic, and Pia and Paisley killed her. The end.

The thing, though, that I really do think bears pointing out is that I could've killed her if I wanted to. I had a gun. I was aware. She wasn't moving fast, and she couldn't really have stopped me. The reason she walked away is that I walked away, because I didn't want to end her life.

And, believe it or not, that wasn't a particularly unique occurrence.



I'm known for killing a lot of people. I get it. It's not unfair. I did kill a lot of people, and I'm not mad that that's what defines my game. I do think, though, that I sometimes get blamed for some of them to a degree that's not entirely merited. Again, I'm not saying that I'm not ultimately at fault for the deaths or whatever. I'm the villain, remember, and I'm okay with that. I know it. I'd just rather that people hate me, if they're going to, for the right reasons.

The fact, hard to swallow as you might find it, is that about half the people I killed dug their own graves. That's not counting edge cases, either; Søren, for example, took an aggressive action against me by blowing my cover in front of some guys who clearly hated my guts, but he didn't actually physically attack me so I'll take responsibility and the blame for deciding to shoot him.

But if we move on to Naomi, it's quite clear who threw the first punch and it sure wasn't me. She took me off-guard with a cheap shot and tried to kill me from ambush. And she wasn't the only one. Shawn Thornton did the exact same thing. So did Asa Rosen. And Lily asked me to kill her, almost begged me for it. The other six, okay, you can argue I started that shit, even if I don't think it's always quite that unambiguous, but with those four they all could've walked away freely.

You may not believe me. That's okay. I'm a liar. I can't make you accept that I'm being honest here, but I can point to similar situations and how they turned out when I tell you that I wasn't planning on killing them.

The three who attacked me, they took shots at me for their own reasons. They escalated to violence, and then because they couldn't finish the job they died for it instead. I do get their choices, of course, or at least I think I do. It's a pretty common emotional thing to want revenge if someone hurts or takes away somebody close to you. I killed their friends, unprovoked, because I could. I was the scary monster hiding in the darkness for most of them, because I was taking out their classmates and basically only their classmates. I killed more than a fifth of the Davison students. Even if someone from that school didn't care about any of my specific victims, they could look at me and think to themselves that I was probably just waiting for an opportunity and then would be stabbing them in the back.

Sometimes it's just good, pragmatic tactical sense to try to get the drop on a major threat. I do think it's easy to go too far with that as conventional wisdom, though. Like I said, people died because they attacked

me, people I would've otherwise let go. When I chose kills, when I sought them out, it was in each and every case because I was getting or learning something specific from it. I mean, yeah, nobody else knew that, but they knew I was dangerous and they knew I wasn't attacking them right away, and they decided nonetheless to make it an issue.

I guess what I'm saying is, if you start something with a player you better be damn sure you can finish it.



I'd like to take a moment to talk about some of the people I chose not to kill. There are a lot, and fans I think forget that because it isn't as exciting to watch a big player just let somebody go, especially without even a struggle. But I let a lot of people live when I didn't have to.

I could've killed Nina, right at the start. She was still asleep and I could've done whatever I wanted to her, given her the worst wake-up ever or made sure that she didn't even get that much. I didn't, because I didn't have anything against Nina and I was caught up with my own issues. The fish were more interesting.

I could've killed Colin. I had him alone, defenseless, and at my mercy for a long time before Yagmur came and fucked it up. Yes, I do admit I'd basically decided to kill him before I was interrupted, but that wasn't a forgone conclusion. It was due to his own actions, his stubborn unwillingness to engage with me with notable effort or good faith. If he'd been a bit more social, I would've let him go even without intervention.

Speaking of Yagmur, I could've probably gotten him, either when he was holding me up or in ambush later. I considered it, but I didn't try for it. It was a combination of risky and unsporting.

I didn't kill Brendan O'Toole the first time we met. I could've, almost certainly. He was shocked and slow to act. The real threat was Amir, who bailed. I gave Brendan a warning and a promise and I left him alone.

I could've killed Cathryn, easily. I talked about that earlier. Instead, I let her go.

After the fight with AnArchy's group, I probably could've taken out at least one more of them, maybe both. If I'd just been out for blood, I would've played the whole thing differently, shot Jackson second and then waited to see how the fight between the others resolved and picked off the winner or else sprayed them both while they were distracted.

I could've actually lured everyone I gave a head-set to and tried to kill them when they turned up, but it's okay if you don't want to count that as a missed opportunity because it is a bit more ambiguous.

Sarah, I definitely could've killed. I was better armed than she was and she trusted me. If I were the sort to do so, I could've turned that against her.

Finally, I could've killed Dougie. Here's a secret: the knife the girl at the transportation center had, the knife that Asa stabbed me with, the knife that ultimately carved my path to freedom? That knife was in my pocket the whole time. While Dougie was standing around with his thumb up his ass deciding whether he'd even talk to me, I had a knife and I could've slipped it loose and stabbed him. I didn't.

So it's okay if you define me by the ten people I killed, but by my count that's another ten I could've ended but didn't. Think about that a little, if you would, and maybe see how it gels with all the other things you think about me.



## AnArchy

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I think I should thank AnArchy, probably, and be grateful that I didn't shoot her when I had the chance. After the game, people were pretty pissed at me and at the fact that I lived. I'm told I actually got burned in effigy near Albuquerque. Nobody back in Whittree will give me the time of day. There are fans all over the internet going on and on about how unsatisfying it was that I got away with it, that I never got my comeuppance, that I lived when so many others died.

But the strong feelings towards me, the hatred and fury and disappointment, that has nothing on how much everyone fucking loathed AnArchy.



It says something that, of the four decently serious contenders for the title of most infamous villain of Sixty-Six, three of us have at least five kills and the other has only a single one, and that targeting one of the others on the list.

I killed more than anyone else, by a lot. I made a name for myself mostly by picking off the Davison kids, and I was able to pull it off and win. You probably know my deal, my claim to the villain's crown.

Vahka was a big menace, a major physical threat who fell back on intimidation a lot. Honestly, he was on my radar at the start of the game but he fell off it quickly, and the big spike that catapulted him into undisputed second place came in the announcement I missed because I was being taken to the hospital. We never met in the game and I didn't really know him outside it. His style, it wasn't mine. That's that.

Cathryn I wrote a whole section about. Cathryn wasn't necessarily quite as high-impact, but she was

the final-stretch villain, and what she did pull off was masterful. Going into Endgame, she was the one to watch out for, and for good reason.

And then there was AnArchy, who had no kills before the very end but was so despised half the finalists made killing her a top priority. AnArchy, whose evil deeds were not murders but more personal violations. AnArchy, who didn't seem capable of giving a fuck about almost anyone else as actual people, just as objects and props for her little make-believe world.

We'll get to that. We'll look at her and ask how she became so reviled, whether the response to what she did was deserved. But it took time for everyone else to realize the truth, time for the mask to come off, and we'll give it time here as well. For now, we'll talk about how she got there, what she did and what she lost.



What AnArchy had going for her, and what was particularly unique in the context of Sixty-Six, was the charisma and force of will necessary to get others to follow her. A lot went into this, of course. You could argue that she had a huge advantage in starting near several friends from outside the game. Certainly, it seemed at multiple points that it was only preexisting trust and affection that kept the group together. Still, the only groups of at all comparable size and longevity were the similarly-advantaged band and the alliance of Scarlet Panthers, and neither were as functional as AnArchy's cadre (which is saying something, as that group was largely defined by its blatant dysfunction).

AnArchy worked her followers on an emotional level. I don't know if it was conscious. I've watched her stuff a few times now, and I'm honestly baffled as to why anyone put up with her. I get wanting to stick

with someone you care about. I get lacking confidence to go it alone. I've been pushed around by people I trusted, and talked into doing things I otherwise probably wouldn't have done, but at the same time, SOTF is an order of magnitude more serious than being coaxed out of your comfort zone in a party, and AnArchy just didn't have anything to back her words up. I don't know. Clearly, I was immune to whatever spell she wove, as became evident when we collided.

Her marriage with Shawn took me by surprise for a few reasons. It was a moment of sheer, undiluted, delusional optimism. There was no way it was going to end well, and I honestly felt kind of bad when I watched further and realized that they never even got to fuck. I don't know. I don't think it was real love, but what do I know about that? Still, it gets to me kind of, that I broke that up. I don't feel guilty or anything. Like I said, I didn't start that one. They fucked up and called down the thunder. But it's still sad in a way and disturbing in a way, because I think that loss was a big part of what sent AnArchy into a complete death spiral.

Come to think of it, this was the second couple I shattered. Maybe that's why I've never had much luck with relationships. Maybe it's some sort of preemptive karmic thing, or maybe everyone thinks I'm a crazy bitch and can just smell it.

Anyways, AnArchy kept her friends close and they stuck with her because they cared about her, even though it was pretty clear right from the start that she was bugshit mad. She gave them cutesy names, let them feel like they belonged, and that was enough. That was emotionally satisfying, and gave a feeling of control, and that's what so many people want out of SOTF, just a little promise that they're not helpless.

Of course, they all were helpless. They were used as minions and meat shields, but they only figured that out at the very end, when she truly went too far. By then, it was too late for them to escape. They were caught between her and me.

One of the most fascinating things to me is that Jackson King never really turned on her. He saw it all, and he was ready to throw in with her anyways, to march to her mad tune into the very gates of hell. When he told her that, when he said he was with her no matter what, I think that was his big moment of commitment. I think that was when he chose darkness, just like I did, but AnArchy wouldn't even let him have that. In a brief spell of supposed clarity, she sent him away, denying him even his nihilistic, suicidal purpose.

It shouldn't be a surprise that someone who went by the name AnArchy was unstable, chaotic and mercurial. I'm a little proud, then, that I was able to keep up with her, and that, when the final reckoning came, I was the one who won.

You see, the truth is, for all her monstrosity and pretense, I was never afraid of AnArchy. If she was a force of nature, it was less a hurricane and more a frenzied skunk backed into a corner. She could douse others with her scent, could scratch and bite and try to squirm free, but she ultimately died like anything else.

## The Top Ten Underrated Villains From Mediocre (Or Worse) Seasons

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I love villains. I know, a huge twist this far into the book, right? Often, though, villains fall between the cracks or are quickly forgotten, especially those who have the misfortune to perish before the final act or who are in seasons that are rarely revisited.

I am thus taking it upon myself to offer this list of shout-outs to some contestants of the past who I feel have been unjustly left behind. These are ten actually solid villains from seasons they were too good for, ten students who didn't make it big but could've been stars if things had just gone a little more in their favor. I've kept it to one per season, and I'm omitting other great choices, but I think this should give everyone some good weekend binge-viewing.

### 10. Jennifer Yang (Season Thirty-Two)

Jennifer tried, and that's more than you can say for almost anyone else in this mess of a season. Obviously at the end of her rope from the start, Jennifer provided much-needed drama with her deterioration, and I actually appreciated her slower burn. Yeah, she had some bad moments where she just made eyes at Georges Foster for ages, but it served as nice contrast to her final fall. She eventually did take a stand, calling Blake Smithson out even as she killed to try to protect him. Okay, her kills were sloppy to the point of incompetence, but I love that even in her anger she wanted to help her friend when he wouldn't help himself. I'm also a defender of the Heidi Abbot alliance. Maybe the reasons were bad, and it certainly ended awfully for Jennifer, but she was willing to go out on a

limb, when almost everyone else was playing it boring and safe as possible.

### **9. Brian Bennet (Season Twelve)**

One of the earlier wannabes, Brian has some real charm because of two things. First, he came by his idolization of Kenny Yamana honestly. He must've bought into it when Kenny made the whole thing seem easy and cool, and he tried to do the same, following his natural instincts even when they led him consistently astray. Second, he actually pulled off a solid collection of kills (even if you ignore the one with the grenade that, yeah, probably should've been Reece Cutter's). Fans didn't like him because he totally failed to be Kenny 2.0, and the expectation was somewhat self-inflicted, but he becomes an interesting and tragic figure when you view him as a boy doing what he can to survive and clinging desperately to the persona of someone who made it.

### **8. Jake Fenwick (Season Sixty)**

Jake's the only one on this list who's still alive, and thus probably the only one who might benefit from this. The Season Sixty clusterfuck resulted in dozens of nobody survivors trying to claim their moments of fame, and was a wreck overall, albeit a fascinating one, but one boy tried to prevent all of that. Jake was an early killer turned low-performer until the escape was well underway. At that stage, however, he tried to turn things around and get business back on track. Despite his collar having been rendered inoperable early on, he murdered one of his fellow escapees in her sleep, then tried to clean out the camp, though he was quickly subdued. And why would he do that? He wanted to win, not to be an anonymous face who suf-

ferred for nothing. I get that. The thought of going so far just to find out it was all meaningless is wrenching, and I can see a situation or two in which I'd be very tempted to follow his lead. Jake, if you read this, hit me up sometime and I'll get you a signed copy and buy you a drink.

### **7. Cameron Song (Season Thirty-Five)**

Cameron was a tactical player, and one who didn't get to flourish as a personality, but that's alright. He had some good kills (can you tell I have a thing for people who kill others while they're sleeping?) and more than that, he provided the catalyst for Tristan Kim's and Ashley Wilson-Black's final burying of the hatchet. I wouldn't have wanted Cameron as a winner, but he performed his role beautifully and was the glue that ultimately held this season together.

### **6. Ashley Mei (Season Fourteen)**

Ashley got an odd reception at first because everyone expected her to be a big cuddly teddy bear and then she was more like an actual bear, fucking up absolutely everyone she could in melee. Who even needs guns? Not Ashley. Ambushes and brawls were her specialty, and she was a super effective antagonist for Hatchet come Endgame. Ashley was an incredibly potent villain who transcended the gimmicks of her season to establish herself as iconic, but at the same time she didn't quite have that special something, that pop that makes the truly great truly great. While an amazing role-filler, I'm not sad that Ashley fell at the end. She died to give Hatchet one of her greatest moments, and for that we should be thankful to her, even if she's not as sympathetic and relatable as a lot of the others on this list.

### 5. Kel Wayne (Season Forty-Two)

First off, yes, it is pretty bullshit that Russian Roulette got demolished before they actually had to reckon with their untenable alliance. It hurts my soul that they didn't get a better conclusion, and keeps Kel lower on this list than he could be, but he still rocked. From his brutal and chilling introduction to the group to his dubbing of the team to his sketchy attitude and callous disregard for the safety of his allies unless it was of benefit to him, he had style and force. It's just, without the others at his back, there was nothing to keep him in check, and so he soon overstepped and flamed out. If he had made Endgame, I think he would be a classic even given what happened to the rest of Roulette, but as it is it feels like the situation robbed him of what should have been his defining moment, when the group finally spun the cylinder and pulled the trigger.

### 4. Davy Cotton (Season Twenty-Seven)

The small nerd who strikes back, Davy was a figure with a story so powerful and relatable it's hard to imagine it not resonating with anyone who's ever been on the wrong side of the popular kids. The only thing is, Davy took all those deep dark imaginings about what you'd do if you had your tormentors helpless and then made them real. He hurt people to deal with his own hurting, and it made him as reprehensible as he was irresistible. It also led him into conflict with the season's other biggest villain, in a showdown that would've been one for the ages had they, as well as most of the remaining cast, not been suddenly killed in an accidental explosion set off by some nobody. What a shame.



### 3. Jamie Lukasdatter (Season Sixty-One)

Poor Jamie. Season Sixty-One was mostly dull as shit, but this girl almost turned that around. I always feel for the fans who end up on the show, I guess because they're pretty relatable, and especially the ones who put their money where their mouths are and don't immediately turn around and do all the stupid, whiny shit we complain about online. Jamie's early death is especially tragic because of just how much carnage she managed in one of the slowest seasons to date; she had seven kills under her belt when she landed on the wrong side of Armand de Christophe's house of death, including a 1v3 triple kill, and she managed to bring her killer down with her. She almost matched me, and I can't help but wonder how things might have looked had we landed in each other's seasons. Maybe she'd be putting me at third place on her list right now.

### 2. Miami Schreiner (Season Twenty-Eight)

Miami was a stuck up bitch with a temper, but that's exactly what I loved about her. She was willing to prance around in a skimpy costume and try to get the boys to follow her by showing off her tits, but the second someone made fun of her or bet she wouldn't actually fuck them up, it was time for brutal, close-combat murder. Miami had a real gift for timing, especially when it came to stumbling upon people right when they were saying just the right things to piss her off and send her into a livid frenzy. Unfortunately, this impulsive nature led her to blow through all her ammo and try to bring a bat to a gunfight, which spelled the end of one of the most interesting contestants of the season unfortunately shy of Endgame.

### 1. Jane Day (Season Twenty-Four)

Carina Fryar gets the glory, but Jane was the real villainous star of *Twenty-Four*. Deep, conflicted, and smart enough to see her inevitable doom but not to turn away from it, Jane is one of the few contestants whose camera confessionals I'll defend forever. She didn't want to be a villain, but more than that she didn't want to die, and especially not at the hands of her ally. Those conflicting wants, and the defeat of the moral need to be a good person, that's exactly what being a villain is all about. Jane was violent and cold, sneaky and slimy, and while it might've seemed an act at the start, by the end it was who she truly was. She engineered Miguel Rey's death because he might've replaced her, acting in that moment just like Carina, but somehow never quite found the courage or strength to turn on her leader. It was only after completing one final killing that Jane realized that, in her efforts to delay the expiration of her usefulness, she had also burned through all her opportunities to find a better ending for herself.

Jane is one of the single most sympathetic contestants I've ever seen on the show. A follower, a girl who wanted to be part of something, to be cared for, she let herself be shaped into a monster she abhorred. She wanted things to be different, but she couldn't make that happen, and the end she gave everything to avoid was made inevitable by those very efforts. I still choke up a little when I think about it.

7

**Mixtape Track:**

**“Show of Strength”**

**by**

**Echo and the Bunnymen**

## Anarchy

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It's easy to say you thrive in chaos, but another thing entirely to mean it. AnArchy thought her namesake her ally, but she was wrong. When the shit hit the fan, she was just another bystander caught without an umbrella.



I'm going to take a moment to break down what happened in the casino between AnArchy's group and me in as clear and unbiased a fashion as possible. I think it's helpful to have a portrait of just the events, to better track the moving pieces and the decisions that each participant made.

When I entered, AnArchy had just finished up telling the others that their little alliance was coming to pieces. She'd posited that the violent students in the game were in fact actually evil, and, unbeknownst to me, I was her primary example. I came in following Jackson King, whose costume had drawn my attention. I greeted those assembled, asked what was happening, and requested permission to join them.

Sebastien Bellamy dubbed it all "a trainwreck." Jackson insisted it was merely a discussion. Shawn Thornton welcomed me, introduced himself, and requested that I disarm and identify myself. AnArchy puffed herself up and said I was welcome to join her cause but that there would be trouble if that wasn't my objective.

I wasn't so sure about that. I introduced myself but told them I wasn't ready to trust them enough to disarm right away. I also told AnArchy that one of her classmates, the girl I'd most recently not shot, had suggested I kill her.

Shawn tried to talk me into putting my gun away. AnArchy, however, said she didn't care anymore. She said I had two choices: I could either prostrate myself before her and swear to change my ways, or I could turn around and leave under pain of death. Neither sounded good to me, and I said as much, and also told them, once more, that they might have reason to take a swing at me so I wasn't going to put my weapons away and leave myself defenseless.

Throughout this, Shawn had been readying a pistol behind his back. Jackson called out to him and hurled a knife at me, hitting me in the shoulder, but knives are very hard to throw if you want to do actual damage so I wasn't badly hurt, just a little bruised. Shawn drew on me and took two shots, but he missed, and I returned fire and didn't.

He dropped. AnArchy screamed. I went and retrieved his gun as AnArchy howled at her remaining partners, threatening them if they didn't attack me. Sebastien, however, tried to pull AnArchy's gun out of her hands. They grappled, and she drew a sword, scoring several wounds on the boy as Jackson hid.

I thought about leaving. I could have, but I decided not to. I took a moment, aimed, considered who to target, and shot Sebastien three times in the back. Jackson blindsided me, wrenched the gun out of my hands, then tried to shoot me, but he also missed. Then AnArchy called out, telling me to leave, offering me amnesty if I did so. She told me that I should stay out of her way, that I should hope I wouldn't see her again.

I considered her offer and I considered trying to kill them, and ultimately I decided to go. I dropped a headset, wished AnArchy and Jackson a merry Christ-

mas, because Christmas was indeed coming up, and I left.



In my entire game, this was one of the points where things could have most easily gone wrong and gotten me killed. If Shawn had aimed a little better, I could've been shot. If Jackson had slammed into me with a bit more force, or had turned the gun on me from closer range, I could've been incapacitated and critically wounded or straight up executed. It was scary, but not as scary as it probably should've been, and a lot of that was because I've watched so much SOTF so knew a few things the others didn't.

People think guns are easy, but they aren't. If you don't know what you're doing, how to hold one and how to stand, then you can easily miss even at close range. Shawn fired too quickly, while he was still moving, and the second shot will almost always be worse than the first if you rush it because recoil throws your aim off. I'm not great with guns. I was incredibly lucky to nail Sebastien; I think he was one of the furthest shots I took all game, and he was not that far away from me. With my primary weapon, though, I was a lot more calculating. Most of the people I shot, I could've taken a step and touched. That's how you get around the skill factor, one of the ways. The other method is to shoot as much as you can and let volume of fire replace accuracy, but obviously you can't do that with a single-shot gun.

As soon as Shawn fell, everything went to pieces, and that's a big part of why I was able to come out of the situation as well as I did. The group was fractured, dysfunctional. I could tell that from the start, from the way they bickered even in describing what they were doing. Subjected to real stress, AnArchy's freakish

charisma didn't matter. It's easy to be a leader, to be the big fish, when there's no true opposition and no immediate crisis. It's when you're put to the test that the truth comes to light.

AnArchy obviously bought into her own hype. That's part of why the others followed her, I think. She had the conviction of the narcissist, the bluster and bravado that got others to think she could back up her outrageous promises. Maybe that's why she picked a fight with me, but I'm not sure it's the whole story.

I think AnArchy thought that I was like her. I think she thought that I was also a fake, that I too chose insanity as coping mechanism. She thought I was another amateur, someone begging for attention through shock value and mindless transgression, the tantrums of the petulant. But I wasn't and I'm not. I acted with understanding and awareness and that meant that, from the moment she decided to threaten me, she was out of her league no matter how outnumbered I was.



Why Sebastien? Why shoot him instead of AnArchy? That's a question people ask me sometimes, and it's one I'm actually willing to talk about.

The short of it is, I wanted to make a statement. AnArchy threatened me. She demanded I swear fealty to her. She frothed with disrespect and false grandeur, and that actually pissed me off. Shawn shot at me, but it was AnArchy who picked the fight. I wanted to talk. I wanted to see what was going on, to weigh my options, but I wasn't about to start shooting against a whole room full of people. As I've said, I could've died so easily. It wasn't worth it.



But then, once the chaos kicked in, my position changed. I was the one without much of a stake in the outcome beyond my own. I killed Shawn, and after that Jackson made himself scarce and AnArchy and Sebastien fought. I had free reign to do whatever I wanted, so I took my time and sized things up.

AnArchy had tried to establish herself as above me, as the one to dictate my fate, so I decided it was only fair if I returned the favor. I could've left them to finish their fight, but that would've felt wrong. I was involved, so how could I just walk away? No, I felt like I had to finish things, to shoot somebody else, so as to make it clear that I wasn't just going to stand for how they'd treated me and retaliate only to the barest minimum necessary. They made a huge mistake, so they had to pay for that.

In retrospect, I should have shot Jackson first. I didn't expect him to interfere. His apparent cowardice fooled me, so I disregarded him as uninteresting compared to the fight. If I'd taken him out first, then I probably would've had a much more involved heart-to-heart with AnArchy, and might well have ended up killing her too.

I shot Sebastien because I couldn't get what I wanted by shooting AnArchy. I wanted her to know she'd fucked up. I wanted her to know we weren't the same. I wanted her to know I wasn't afraid of her, and I wanted her to know that she was the only one playing pretend. I also wasn't about to be anyone's hitman, and I had been asked to shoot her, which made me inclined not to do so.

Shooting Sebastien let AnArchy know that I could've shot her instead. More than that, it put her in my debt. I intervened on her behalf in a fight that she'd started. I ended it before she could get hurt, and

before she could score a fatal blow of her own. I took her little problems into my hands and dealt with them casually, with no regard for her feelings or for her as a person. I did what she pretended she could do.

That's part of why I took her offer to leave. I'd done enough. I wasn't afraid of her. I was tired, and I'd made my point, and her game was pretty obvious. She couldn't bear to lose, so she said she was letting me go, but I think we both knew the score. I was the one who released her, by walking away.

The only fear of her I held was that she'd somehow encounter me when I was broken or dead, when someone else had already done the work. She was that sort of creature, a scavenger who made up for her impotence with perverse atrocities. I guess it was all she had to cling to.

## Unforgivable Crimes

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Could you forgive me for what I did? For the killings, for the pain I inflicted, for the lies? For getting away with it and living to tell the tale? Could you forgive me for not regretting my actions? Could you forgive me for being happy?

I know that the answers will depend more on you than me. You'll have to do some soul-searching, maybe. That's okay. There's no hurry. The truth is, those are rhetorical questions anyways. I don't really care what you decide. I'm not asking for forgiveness.

Plenty of people do forgive me. People find me interesting enough to listen to. People want to know about me. You're reading my book. For me, that's enough.

The people who meant the most to me before I was taken have, by and large, decided they can't move past what I did. My family won't take my calls. I have no idea where my parents even are; I'm told my father moved and I'm told they're getting divorced. Kristine won't talk to me, but she'll talk to everyone else about me, trying to take advantage of me one last time, trying to pretend she's relevant because we were friends.

Maybe someday they'll come around. Maybe they'll decide they don't care so much about my actions when they need money really badly, or when they're old and lonely. By that point, though, who knows? It may well be too late then. It may even be too late already. You see, I've been looking inside myself too. I think I'm a pretty forgiving person most of the time, but to be okay with the people who should have had my back but turned on me at my lowest? I don't know. That's a tall order.



I ask whether you could forgive me not to start you thinking about me, but rather to set the stage for a discussion of the game as a whole, and the various unforgivable actions that take place within it. In my season, I don't think I was the most unforgivable contestant. I don't think it was Cathryn, or Vahka, or Ashley, or Marcus. Poll the fans online, and I strongly suspect you'll find a majority agree that the most reprehensible, irredeemable person in that resort was AnArchy.

What made her so repulsive? It wasn't her violence. She was aggressive, of course, but not in a particularly effectual manner. No, I think what made her so distasteful was a combination of hubris and ghoulishness and victimization.

AnArchy was full of herself. Maybe it was a coping mechanism to cover for privately poor self esteem. Maybe she really was delusional. I don't particularly care. She cast herself as combination between prissy princess and petty tyrant and it wasn't a good look. She berated and derided her friends, which is a great way to piss off the audience. Strangers are strangers, and there aren't too many expectations of how you deal with them, especially if you're one of the bad guys. If you're going to fuck with your friends, though, you have to do it in specific ways.

Look at how much flak Daphne Rivers gets for using and then sacrificing her boyfriend. Look at what people say about what Ivy Jain did to her girlfriend. Both of those were big, meaningful events where the pain and regret was clear. They were betrayals, but not casual ones. They were horrible, wrenching decisions made because of the extreme situation, and they still pull hate from the audience at large. Now, compare AnArchy's words and actions towards Sebastien and Jackson. She threw a prima donna tantrum and threat-

ened to kill them if they didn't charge an armed foe who'd just cut down one of their friends.

But that disrespect would just make AnArChy garden variety horrid. What put her over the top was the way she messed with dead bodies and the helpless.

I'm a goth. I am very, very used to jokes about drinking blood. I enjoy a nice big glass of pomegranate juice now and then (I think wine is nasty but I guess I'll have to develop a taste for it one of these days). I've accidentally cut my finger or bit my lip and sucked on it, but I don't really care for the flavor. I'd never intentionally drink someone else's blood, though, and not just because I'm a vegetarian. It's not sexy, or romantic, or mysterious. It's degrading. It's a defilement if it's not consensual, a way to treat someone else like trash, to dominate them completely by consuming part of them. Except, you know, not as sexy as that makes it sound. It's more a way to get AIDS.

AnArChy drank blood, and I'm not sure if it was because she was really into it or because she thought it would be a cool unique gimmick with the viewers back home. I don't care. First off, if you're intentionally crafting and forcing gimmicks then you're an idiot because that's transparent and nobody likes a faker. And besides that, all her little Dracula routine did was reveal how little respect she had for anyone else. Other people were toys for her, or food, or trash to be discarded. I killed her boyfriend, and that made me bad because I took away her favorite plaything.

I've talked a bit about it, but messing with bodies without a good reason is fucked up. It's denying and taking away the humanity they once possessed. Sometimes, yeah, you need to pull off a trick and a body is among the materials you have on hand and you have to do what you have to do. I won't hold that against

anyone. Sometimes you're in a bad mental state and you lash out on impulse and you smash in a corpse's face because you can't get control back any other way, you want revenge and that's all you can get. I will hold that against you, but it sort of makes sense at least.

But AnArchy? It wasn't even that. It wasn't revenge. It wasn't a fit of passion, at least not every time. It wasn't tactical. It was pure sick degradation. She had to put others below her, no matter what, even if they were total strangers and even if they were already dead. That was her, at her core: she didn't want to be strong or powerful, only more strong or more powerful. She didn't care if she was good, only if she was better, better than everyone she could be better than, and she achieved that mostly by tearing others down.

When I saw what she was doing in the tapes, it made me so mad, but at the same time I knew right away that it would take a miracle for her to survive. Her actions were those of someone who'd let go too much, who'd given up even if she hadn't realized it yet. Takes one to know one, but the difference was that there wasn't enough left in her to let her pull herself back from the chasm.



Incidentally, this all ties into an interesting issue that comes up from time to time in fan discussions and which I would like to add my two cents on: other unforgivable actions, and specifically sexual assault in the context of SOTF. It happens, obviously. We know what Dylan Calloway did when he got his hands on a rapist and a toaster. But it's rare. Not even relatively rare; it's something that appears as an element in a notable minority of seasons but in most does not occur.

Why? That's what fans want to know, for reasons curious or perverse. I didn't really understand un-

til I was in the game myself, but now I actually feel like I get it perfectly, and there are a few sides to it.

First of all, sex in general is a difficult thing to manage in the game. If you're having sex, that means that you're at least partially naked, distracted, and in a physically compromising position. If someone bursts in on you (like, say, the Lou Becker intrusion when Amber Lyons was blowing Sterling Odair in Sixty-Five), then you're at a massive disadvantage and may just be flat out killed. "Getting caught with your pants down" isn't a common phrase for no reason. Plus, it can be hard to find somewhere comfortable, to quietly disentangle yourself from any allies, and so on.

Now, add in an unwilling participant, and things become exponentially more dangerous. There's a good chance your victim will fight back all the harder, because they know there isn't help coming and they know there's a strong chance they'll just end up getting killed and dumped at the end anyways, so why not fight it with all they've got? And even if they can't keep you off, if they make noise, maybe someone else turns up and intervenes on their behalf, or just kills the both of you.

I think, though, that there's a bigger reason than the in-the-moment practical, and it has to do with the mentality of villains. I've said it before, but it's worth repeating: we, the villains, we're the dreamers and the optimists. We're the ones who can see a future worth killing for, who have something for which we're willing to risk our lives. If survival is the goal, then there's probably also more to it.

Winners aren't just the lucky ones because we get to live longer. We get lots of other perks. There's money, fame, prestige. Right now, that you're reading this, that's only happening because I won. If I was just

some random eighteen-year-old, any publisher on the planet would've laughed me out of their office if I came to them with a combination diary/journal/essay collection/music recommendation list. But I'm also an SOTF winner, and one people want to know about, so instead here we are.

You know what has a big impact on a winner after the game? How well-liked and marketable they are. And, remember, everything that happens gets broadcast. Maybe you'll forgive me for killing ten people, but that's because SOTF is the kill-lots-of-other-people show. You may not like what I did, or that I got rewarded for it, but it happened because it's explicitly in the rules. Getting ten kills is an official objective, laid out for all of us. I wasn't the only one in the running for it, just the best.

What's not explicitly in the rules is rape. Yeah, you can do it. Yeah, there probably aren't going to be tons of consequences, but only because you'll soon be dead just like everyone else. Except, that's not true if you're planning to win. If you rape someone and then win, you may not be arrested or anything, but that's who you are forever. You're the rapist winner. Fucking nobody is going to like you. You think they hate me in New Mexico? That has nothing, absolutely nothing on the reaction you would get everywhere you went if you raped someone on live TV. I can't think of a better way to make sure the life you're fighting for isn't one worth living.

So, then, there are three situations in which someone might do it anyways. The first is that you're too stupid or detached from reality to get what the fallout will be. That's where AnArchy fell, I think, and that's not a recipe for a winner. The only way someone like that gets through is if they shape up or get



lucky, and usually they get picked off in short order or struggle to make their half-baked schemes manifest in reality.

The second option is that someone has hit a point where they no longer feel like they can win, so they're taking control however they can. The thing is, if you're in a spot where you really think you can't win anymore, you're probably also too fucked up to pose a real threat to anyone. If you have enough left in you to rape, you probably have enough left to do more important things, like try to survive.

The third, and maybe the most common, is that you somehow convince yourself that what you're doing is okay, and that it's not actually rape. Check out Marvia Jones from Sixty-Five for this in action. You know what was going through Marvia's head when she drugged and took advantage of Nate Chauncey? I bet it was something like, oh, it's her fault. I didn't force her to take the drugs, just implied they were something besides what they were. And everything was totally consensual, she was fine with it. And then I stole her clothes and stuff because this is SOTF and that's the name of the game, and she should consider herself lucky I didn't kill her.

You have to be dumb as fuck to think that stuff, but she went on to travel with Harold Smythe for long enough that I think that goes without saying. It's a rationale that relies on self-deception and little mental omissions. Nate sort of went along with stuff... because she was drugged. She took the drugs willingly... because she thought they were aspirin. You get the idea.

The plain fact of it is, if you rape someone on SOTF, whether or not you realize it, there's nothing for you to come back to. You'll get torn to shreds by

the audience to such a degree that Victor Frazee will look popular. And if you decide to roll all of this together, to commit necrophilia (or even to threaten it without following through)?

Well, there's a reason I'm not too worried about my reputation. I'll always have AnArchy for comparison.

## Announcements

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The announcements are a fascinating part of SOTF. They're one of very few intrusions from the world outside of the game; in fact, prior to the introduction of mentors in Sixty-Five, they usually represented the only contact contestants had with anyone besides each other. The announcements are far less personal than mentor interactions. They're almost exclusively one-way, and while they have a characteristic tone, it's that of whoever is at the helm and carries from season to season largely unchanged, for better or worse.

I wasn't actively watching when Bill Naylor was replaced by Leonardo Dahnke, but even going back and watching it later the tonal shift is notable. Seasons Thirty-Three and Thirty-Four are both pretty middling, but Dahnke's edge and flair imparted the latter with a more vicious, cynical, humorous vibe. Dahnke was the voice of the show for a long, long time, and when I first started watching I guess I thought that he always would be.

That changed, though. It's hard to put a finger on exactly when it occurred, but at some point along the line he got complacent. Cutting dark humor was replaced with lowbrow edge, which was bad enough, but you don't have to dig deep to get into rumors of him going into takes cold and with minimal notes at best. The gulf between Dahnke's legendary "Holy shit," in Thirty-Seven and his Ghalib flub in Sixty-Four is so vast as to almost defy description. Come Sixty-Five, his entirely neglecting to announce the deaths of Tristan Hart and Simon Porter and crediting the latter for one of Vincent's kills was unfortunately par for the course.

It was still a shock to be there and not hear his voice, though. Ritzy was okay I guess, but I don't think she quite got it. She was trying too hard to fill Dahnke's shoes, not bringing her own spin, and it didn't help that the gimmick they obviously wanted to use with her went over like a lead balloon. SOTF is at its best when it's authentic. That's what we've seen, time and again. Adding an external soundtrack, even briefly, flies in the face of that. It's a reminder that it's all contrived, an intrusion not quite on par with Fourteen's inexcusable "Play of the Day" that cost Lenny Hodge his life, but too close for comfort.

Maybe Ritzy will get there. Maybe they'll roll the dice again and try someone new (you know where to find my agent). What I really want to see, though, is a paradigm shift, a new way of doing things that takes into account the changes and developments the game has seen.



Have you ever made a bucket list? If you're not familiar with the term, it's a list of things that you want to accomplish or experience in your life before you die. It comes from the phrase "to kick the bucket," but I have no idea where that expression originates.

Anyways, near the end of sophomore year, my English teacher had us make bucket lists. That's where I first came upon the concept, and it seemed pretty weird and kind of edgy as a school assignment but I'm actually really glad I had to do it. I think the idea was that we'd think about our lives more and try to do cool things with them and avoid getting stuck. I don't know precisely why that lesson seemed so imperative to teach us, though. Just maybe, Ms. Rollins was having a little personal crisis because she was turning thirty-eight and was still unmarried.

Whatever the case, it was actually pretty tough to figure out fifty specific things I wanted to do before dying, and even harder to make them all school appropriate (Kristine and I made our own addendum bucket lists with stuff like “get spit-roasted by two hot SOTF winners”). I ended up scrambling for stuff and picking some kind of out-there goals for myself, like the basics were easy (graduate high school, graduate college, get married, get a good job, go to a Cure concert) but when I got stumped I had to start dreaming big. And my biggest, craziest, most out-there stretch is one that I’ve now checked off, kind of.

The very last item on my school bucket list, big number fifty, was to give an announcement on SOTF. It’s the sort of thing that didn’t seem realistic at all, that no possible set of circumstances I could foresee in my life could land me at, but it was there, in print. I actually felt a little weird about it later, like, oh, now I’ll die without actually completing all the stupid shit I said I wanted to do in tenth grade, but there were other improbable things too and Kristine pointed out that all the stuff on our private lists was also more than a little unlikely.

And then I got picked for SOTF, and I got the headsets as my weapon, and I wasn’t even really thinking about my list, ever, but I guess maybe it was lurking at the back of my mind. And once I’d handed out three headsets, I thought, you know, fuck, I can do it. I’m going to die anyways. All the rest, graduating and getting married and whatever, that’s never going to happen, but I can have my own announcement, right now, broadcast on SOTF, heard by at least some of the contestants and by everyone watching at home, and nobody’s ever done this before.

If life hands you that sort of opportunity, you just have to take it.



My announcement was quite tongue in cheek, of course. It was a joke, and one that made me laugh. But it was more than that too.

I left my headset turned on a lot. I wanted to let the people I'd met know what I was doing. I thought they'd be interested, and I was right, at least some of the time. Dougie certainly had some strong feelings about my course of action. Most of the time, though, I kept the earpiece muted, because I didn't really care what they were doing or were going to say and I needed to focus and there were enough noises to distract me without anyone shrieking in my ear that I was an awful monster.

But I did turn the sound on every once in a while. What did I hear? Nothing. Nobody else was interested in talking to me, or to each other. They weren't doing much with the gifts they'd been given, which bugged me. After all, I picked the recipients I did for a reason. I picked people I saw potential in, people who I thought could go far. I was, as I have reminded the world more than a few times, totally correct. Endgame was Corin and the people I gave headsets to or made truces with an Endgame expiration date with.

I encouraged everyone to chat. They didn't. I don't think Cathryn was even paying attention anymore by that point. I told them what I'd been doing, and, yeah, I taunted them, especially AnArchy. It was a control thing. She'd acted like she was in charge, like she was high and mighty when she "let me go," so I paged her and made fun of her dead friends and ignored what she said back. It wasn't nice, but we've es-

tablished that she was a horrible monstrous bitch so who cares?

And, of course, no announcement is complete without Danger Zones, so I made up my own. Just, things there didn't quite work out like anyone, even I, was expecting.

## The Top Ten Semi-Obscure Goth Albums

This was originally “The Top Ten Goth Albums Not By The Cure” but my actual list was a bit too underground for that. If goth is something that interests you (and it should be, it’s loads of fun), then the best place to start is with the music. A lot of the stuff people call “goth” isn’t, but the original classics are fairly well established and I think it’s a waste of my page space to regurgitate the undisputed canon to you. There are a thousand websites that can tell you to listen to Joy Division, Nick Cave, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and Bauhaus. They’re right; those are all great artists. But what I’m going to bring you is some deeper cuts, some albums that are too dark or too weird or just too goth for mainstream appeal.

This is, of course, based on my tastes of the moment, and my mind changes a lot. I’ve also kept it to one album per artist. I’m always posting stuff I like on Twitter, too, so check in there for further recommendations and discoveries.

### **10. *Phantasmagoria* by The Damned (1985)**

I almost kicked this off the list for being too mainstream, but fuck it, lots of people know The Damned more for their punk stuff and this album is an absolute piece of brilliance top to bottom. It explores the playful, knowing side of goth, with surprisingly pretty harmonies backing up Dave Vanian’s incredibly dramatic voice. The instrumentation here is pretty varied, with a lot more synth than you might expect from a Damned album but still plenty of propulsive percussion. “Grimly Fiendish” is about a comic book character I don’t really know anything about, but it’s a perfect encapsulation of a lot of goth themes and



ideologies and feelings, and Vanian's look in the music video hits the same perfect note (he could basically be Sweeney Todd). If you like this one, also check out *The Black Album* (also by The Damned, not one of those other inferior *Black Albums*). *Strawberries* is also okay, but a notch below the other two.

### 9. ...*If I Die, I Die* by The Virgin Prunes (1982)

Weird and prickly, this one may not be the easiest introduction to goth but definitely captures its visceral, freaky side. Album opener "Ulakanakulot" is an instrumental that builds not in momentum but in density and atmosphere, falling into a mesmerizing cycle of repetition before morphing into "Decline and Fall" so cleanly you wouldn't know they're separate songs without me telling you. The start of the album packs such a punch that the rest can't quite live up to it, but that's okay; it's still totally essential.

### 8. *Thunder and Consolation* by New Model Army (1989)

An opening track called "I Love The World" doesn't sound super goth, but give it a listen and read the lyrics and maybe you'll change your mind. It's fascinating how something can be so left-field yet also totally unironic, a celebration of the impending destruction of civilization. "Stupid Questions" might as well be the theme song for my feelings in most interviews, and "Green and Grey" is a song with some specificity behind it but one that resonates with me a lot when it comes to Whittree. This album also shows just how much you can do when you're not afraid to go acoustic from time to time.

### **7. *Savage: Songs from a Broken World* by Gary Numan (2017)**

The newest album on this list, but by an artist who's no newcomer to the genre (and is one of the founding influences on some very notable subgenres). Sometimes you need to turn not electric but electronic, and sometimes you need to really dig deep into a narrative. It can be hard to fully parse what exactly this one's about (it's a science fiction story we're hearing only snippets from), but the power and emotion and darkness of the songs is crystal clear. But, like any good bit of gloom, there's passion and action and a glimmer of hope underlying everything.

### **6. *Friends* by The Bolshoi (1986)**

Dramatic yet playful, biting yet self-effacing, this album can be hard to get into if you need everything to be completely serious but at the same time is likely to send you running if you're after a comedic experience. Every other line is a twist or a wry observation with a hidden barb. Good thing it also sounds great; this one's quick and snappy and has plenty of choruses to get you singing along. There's a box set that has everything The Bolshoi ever did that you can get for like twenty-five bucks, and I really do recommend it even if some of their late-period stuff isn't essential. Also check out "T.V. Man" on their third album for some fascinating observations.

### **5. *The Shadow of Heaven* by MONEY (2013)**

I know this one's going to be a bit controversial because they're not exactly the traditional classic goth sort of sound, but fuck it, if Dead Can Dance and all the stuff kids in the late 1990s with layered hair liked can get called goth then there is absolutely no excuse

for omitting MONEY. Intelligent and nihilistic would be how I describe this, and from those two points pure beauty is born. Wise and grand to the point you can't even fully grasp all of it, this whole album is perhaps the heir to "Plainsong" by The Cure. Also, check out their second album, *Suicide Songs*, which is as close to a perfect direct album sequel as it comes.

#### **4. *Virus Meadow* by And Also The Trees (1986)**

There's this weird thing where a lot of people think of goth as a primarily urban phenomenon. I think it might have to do with how iconic London is. The truth is, though, that nowadays you're as likely (or even more likely) to find the gritty, grim world of goth in rural locations, little dead-end nowheres. This is the music of those places, replete with space to build and grow and waft its tendrils about. The visuals here are amazing and staggering, and it's the rare album where the lyrics read well even when isolated as poetry.

#### **3. *Any Day Now* by The Legendary Pink Dots (1988)**

A goth experience if ever there was one. If this album was just its first song it'd probably still be on this list; "Casting the Runes" is just that good. Fortunately, the rest of the album actually lives up to the high expectations, taking you on a crazy surreal journey through a world that sees an apartment building as a collection of heads in boxes, that imagines children riding giant locusts and killing the unwary with rocks to devour them raw, and that posits a love so deep you'd blind yourself for it. This is a Hieronymus Bosch painting in musical form. Also very much not to be missed is the Dots' earlier *Asylum*, which is just as good.

## 2. *Script of the Bridge* by The Chameleons (1983)

Here's where we enter the territory of best albums ever, full stop, take goth out of the equation. Full of echo as it is of insight, this is a really staggering artistic accomplishment. This album is passionate and wise, the sort of thing you can look to for inspiration and answers, and not just in the words. The music is mind-blowing, telling a story all on its own. Pulling tracks to discuss is almost impossible, but the whispers behind "Less Than Human" say so much and speak to me in a way that I can't describe, and you can listen to the album a dozen times or more before noticing them. Also very worthwhile is everything else The Chameleons did. "Swamp Thing" is my personal breakdown song.

## 1. *And Did Those Feet* by The Dancing Did (1982)

Here we go. I talked about spacious rural goth, but this is the opposite. It's dense rural goth, rural goth crammed to the seams with all those little things that make living far away from anywhere a laughable, painful, beautiful hell. From the very first chime of a church bell, you know this is going to be something different. The songs are about roadkill, petty thugs, grave robbers, ghosts, and old farmers morphing into ogres in the minds of the horny young men stealing into their daughters' bedrooms. The only form this is easily available in now comes with a shitload of bonus tracks and alternate and live versions which are all also worthy of attention. There's really nothing out there like this, either musically or lyrically. Get it. Listen to it. You won't regret it.

8

**Mixtape Track:**

**“Here in the Black”**

**by**

**Gary Numan**

## Ditching My Own Party

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I never intended to show up at either of the places where I told my audience I was going to hunt. I did think about it at least a little, though. I thought that I would keep my chosen on their toes by telling them plans I wasn't going to follow. I thought I'd run them around, either chasing after me for revenge or out of some sense of heroism, or else flushing them from their hiding places in fear.

What I said I'd do, going and setting up a shooting gallery, opening fire wantonly on whoever had the misfortune to stumble across me, I'm slightly surprised any of them took it seriously. It wasn't my style at all. I don't really understand the people who can light someone up without looking them in the eyes. Whenever I killed somebody, I at least wanted to know their name if possible. It seemed only polite. I did really well, too, up until Sebastien. It bothered me when I was giving my announcement and realized I didn't know his name, but it bothered AnArchy more so I'm okay with it now, especially since later I could go back and find out.



That, by the way, is one of the most surreal parts of winning SOTF: you get to go back and watch your season and see how it all looked to the rest of the world. It's so strange watching yourself do things. I don't know if I like it or not. Sometimes I'm impressed by myself. I can remember how things were, how they felt, how I was scared and tired and in pain, but it doesn't always show. I held it together more than I felt like I was doing. But sometimes I look stupid or weak, or it's obvious I have no idea what I'm doing, even when I thought I was being cool.

The worst is my voice, though. I've heard that we all sound different to ourselves than we do to the rest of the world, but I hate it. In my head I sound, if not amazing, at least normal. I sound like me. I'm the voice I hear more than anyone else's, both when I'm actually talking and when I'm thinking to myself. It's the default, the norm. But when I hear myself on recordings, I can't recognize how I sound. It's like the sonic version of a warped mirror. It's like they hired someone not quite right to dub over me, except they get the inflection and pronunciation and emotion dead perfect. It's the right feelings but the wrong sound.

Anyways, as I'm sure you've figured out, I went back and watched everything. I started very soon after I got out, and I went in unspoiled. I wanted to know what all happened, what led to the situations I found myself in, what became of the people I let go. It was fascinating and incredible and gave me a whole new appreciation for SOTF. My little story, my time in the game, felt so big to me but really it was a pretty small sliver of the overall experience. There were lots of people I didn't even think of, and some I didn't even realize were there until later. I wouldn't have guessed Regina Aston had been picked, for example, but there she was, living and dying.

It was interesting to see how others viewed me, how they acted when I was around compared to when I wasn't. I provoked some strong feelings, which I guess is natural as a major player, but I wasn't everyone's bogeyman the way some of the big killers in past seasons have been. I guess maybe that's because I wasn't doing all that much to make my own classmates scared of me; to them, I was a loose threat at best, while to the Davison students I was a stranger who could've been anyone.



I tried to watch the season like someone uninvolved would've, like I would've if I hadn't been on it, but I couldn't do it most of the time. There was just too much familiarity and external knowledge when it came to everyone I went to school with, and anytime I was directly involved in a scene I was right back there, remembering it all and feeling the pain again in a lot of cases. I could sort of manage it when it was just some Davison students on their own, but that wasn't very frequent and most of the time didn't involve much action since they scored so many fewer kills.

I think I'd have liked myself pretty well, if I was just a spectator. I think I can be proud of how I conducted myself. But I'm not sure what I would've made of ditching the meeting I more or less called. From a distance, maybe it looks more like cowardice, but it wasn't. I wasn't afraid of any of them, it was just that I wasn't quite ready for round two yet.



I went into the woods all on my own. I was cold and sore and I needed to rest, just for a little. I hadn't met anyone else since I fought with AnArchy and her group, unless you count Gene Steward's severed fingers in the popcorn machine in the theater, but I still felt a little overwhelmed. I wasn't listening to everyone else through the headsets, but that didn't mean that I wasn't thinking about them.

It was nice to spend some time in nature, though I didn't much care for the path. It was too clean, sanitized even, so I went off it. I was waiting for disaster the whole time, on guard for an ambush, and I don't even know why. By that point we were past the half-way mark, and it was cold, and anyone with any sense was searching for shelter. When I watched the tapes, I

remembered how I thought someone would turn up at any moment, but I was entirely alone.

Only one person entered the nature walk after I did, and that was Naomi Skye, who stumbled her way through when it was a Danger Zone but managed to die of her own accord before her collar could detonate. I guess maybe that was a mercy for her family. I guess probably that let them have an open-casket funeral, because, you know, she died out in the cold and in one piece so she was most likely pretty well preserved and there wasn't much to come around and eat bits of her.

Personally, though, I would've been a lot more pissed about how she went out than if she had gotten stuck by mistake or had gotten killed by a player or something like that. It's like, to die of dehydration takes a special kind of stupid. It's not suicide. It's not an accident. It's the sort of terminal idiocy that brings lasting shame on one's family. I mean, all the buildings had running water. I can't even guess how she stopped drinking, or if they called it wrong and it was actually exposure, or what.

Regardless, I was all alone. I took my time and stood until I got cold and then I went and found somewhere else to ride out the night, not one of the places I'd named. I thought I was being clever, and I thought that I'd successfully avoided any unfortunate rematches with anyone I'd antagonized.

And then, of course, that all fell to bits.

## Promises

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I try to keep my promises. I always have, though I haven't always been very good at it. If I say I'm going to do something, and then I force myself to make at least an attempt at following through, it keeps me from pissing people off by being a flake. It's important for me because I actually change my mind a lot (I know, a huge surprise when everything I've said in this book has been so consistent, right?) and otherwise I'd probably never actually leave my room, just cancel on people at the last second.

Sometimes this lets people take advantage of me. Kristine knew I didn't like breaking my word so she'd get me to say I'd do things and then would check back and if I didn't follow through I'd feel terrible so I'd just do what she wanted. I didn't really mind because she was basically my second sister, but now I look back and I hate myself a little for how much I let her push me around.

There's one big exception, though: if I'm pretty sure I'm never going to realistically be called on to actually cough up, I'll promise anything without hesitation. What's the harm? It's just this polite little social convention, you know. Say you meet someone on the bus, and they tell you that they write poetry and suggest you check out their site, so you smile and nod and say yes, of course, but you know you don't want to read their amateur bullshit except maybe to make fun of it and you're certainly never going to email them.

I've touched before on how unlikely it is to meet someone again in SOTF. I've talked about all the ways you can die, how big the arena is, how many other concerns are going on. I met a few people twice or more, but most of the time even the ones I wanted to

keep track of faded away and out of my awareness and if I'd died there I would've never found out what happened to them. That's just the game.

What I'm getting at here is this: when I told Brendan O'Toole I'd kill him next time we met, I wasn't really planning on having to actually do it.



You've probably noticed, but I'm not a huge physical threat. I'm just not very strong. Killing people with the axe was really hard for me. I didn't win fights by being bigger or more powerful than other people. In a straight contest of brute force, I was probably in the lower quarter of my season. Maybe I could have wrestled Alice if I had to. Maybe not. If what drew you was strong people clobbering those weaker than them, you were probably more interested in Vahka.

Brendan was pretty big. I'm tall for a girl but he was a lot taller than me. He was strong. He played football. His physical presence was actually a big part of why I wanted to play things a little more carefully the first time I met him, because I could see how badly the situation might turn if he hated me and decided he wanted to ruin my day.

The thing is, I learned a lot about Brendan in that first meeting. He was hesitant. He was scared. He didn't know the score. He had a lot of advantages over me, but he was deficient in a few ways that prevented him from bringing his strengths into play. So when I saw him again, I didn't really respect him. He told me to stand still, and I did, and then I asked him what next.

For some reason, nobody ever thinks that far. Colin, Erik, and Brendan all asked something of me, and each seemed totally blindsided when I granted it for a time. Each could've found a very different fate, I

think, if they'd just taken the time to imagine a world where I was reasonable and if they had made a contingency plan for that.

Anyways, Brendan wavered. He had me at his mercy and instead of doing anything with that he gave me room and time to maneuver and seize the initiative, so I shot him. It doesn't really matter if you're way stronger than someone if you've got a bullet in your shoulder. It doesn't matter if you're the physical superior if you get caught flat-footed by someone who wants to win the fight more than you do.



I actually did win most of my fights. Not cleanly, not easily, but in the end I'm still here and ten other people aren't, and a lot of them tried to keep me from shooting them or cutting them up or whatever. My trick was simple, and it was something that I took from watching a lot of SOTF. It's something I think a lot of fans should be able to intuit, but that's surprisingly difficult for most people to apply.

Basically, my theory of fights was that whoever scored the first big hit would probably win, and whoever kept going the hardest would probably win, and whoever had the better presence of mind would probably win. Fights are usually either quick and brutal or slow and torturous. If you don't figure out which one you're dealing with, you're fucked. Unarmed combat tends to be slow, though there are exceptions. If there are weapons in play, though, it'll almost always be a fast fight because weapons fuck you up quickly and permanently.

I had no idea what Brendan's weapon was. It turns out, it was the thing that the killer in *No Country For Old Men* used. It fired a bolt designed to punch through cow skulls. If that had been pressed against

my chest, or my temple, or the actual bone of my arm, it would have either killed me or else maimed me to such an extent I'd probably have never made it out alive. I was quick, though, and I kept a clear head, so I got away with a gash instead.

Brendan never got a chance to go on the offensive. I attacked and he was flustered and that let me land the hits I needed. A deep cut can make you bleed to death, but it can also wreck your muscles and tendons. Any injury leaves you weaker, and the blows I landed counted for more. I leveled the playing field.

Being strong and skilled and overpowering is great in theory, or if whoever you're fighting will play your game, but it doesn't do much against someone who fights more decisively. The way to win a fight in SOTF is to treat it like it's your last. Once it starts, you do whatever you have to in order to win. If that costs you a hand, so be it. Obviously you don't want that, but what good will having both hands do your corpse?

All our lives, we're taught to hold back. We're taught not to fully commit. We're taught to keep ourselves in check. To beat someone bigger and tougher, you need to let go of that. You need to let go in general. Strong doesn't win fights. Crazy does.



I kept my promise. I saw Brendan again and I killed him. That is, really, what it was about. I could've let him go. I don't think he had it in him to be an actual threat to me if I didn't force the issue. He had the opportunity twice, and twice he faltered. Somebody else would've taken care of him for me, probably in short order. He only made it as far as he did because he was never properly challenged.

I didn't want to kill him. I was tired of killing. If I'd wanted another fight with someone I'd met before,

I had much better options. I could have gone to meet someone who I'd given a headset. They had potential. Brendan didn't. He was nothing to me. I didn't care about him. I wasn't afraid of him. I'd almost forgotten he existed.

But I told him I'd kill him next time I saw him, on TV, in front of everyone, and if I'd seen him again and then actually not killed him that wouldn't have been right. Sometimes you say you'll try to go to a party thinking you'll get an excuse, and then your excuse doesn't come through and you have to go. Sometimes you just have to suck it up and carry out your obligations.

I just wish it hadn't hurt so much.

## A Mole I Had

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I have a few moles on my body. Not big ugly hairy ones, luckily. Little brown ones, like larger, irregularly-placed freckles. I have one at the base of my pinkie on my left hand, and one on the bottom of my right foot, and a couple by my shoulders. I used to have one on my left forearm, but it's gone now. Instead, I have a scar.



Brendan's weapon did a real number on the skin of my arm, but I can't really complain. I was lucky beyond words that it didn't do worse. It took a chunk of flesh about an inch and a half wide and maybe half again that long out of my arm, tore and shredded it, and there were scraps of skin still there on the edges that I tried to fold back over but it didn't cover everything. Some of it was just gone, I guess maybe torn fully off to fall on the floor or get caught on the bolt of the weapon or something. I'm not sure; I watched again but you can't really tell on the tapes.

Anyways, part of the skin I lost had that mole on it. I didn't realize until I was getting patched up in the hospital, but when I did it fucked me up a lot. It's not that I thought the mole made me cuter or anything. I barely even noticed it. It was just part of the landscape of my arm, which is part of the bigger picture that's me. But then, all of a sudden, it had changed. The injury wasn't just a cut anymore, wasn't just a big gash to heal. It was part of me, gone. A small, pointless, insignificant part that I guess had no purpose except maybe to morph into skin cancer in fifty years or whatever moles do, but a part nonetheless.

The game resulted in bigger changes to my body, to me, than a missing mole. We'll talk about some of



those later, but even Brendan's attack had more serious effects. That chunk of skin that got torn away, that didn't just grow back perfectly. There was still a little bit of flesh covering the bone, so at least I didn't have to see that, but it took some time to get properly treated and until then I just had a pad of gauze over it. I sterilized it alright, and they took very good care of me in LA, so nothing got infected, but there was still a big tear and nothing to cover it properly.

I'll spare you the exact details, but suffice to say I have a really obvious scar there now. Sitting here writing this, it's this bright pinkish brown color, and it's obviously not normal skin. I'm told it may fade a little bit over the years, but I'll always have it.

The doctors offered to do a skin graft, to slice a strip off my thigh or my ass or something and use it to cover the injury, so that it'd be less noticeable, but I told them not to. It just felt sort of stupid, you know? I'd rather have a huge scar on my arm that I got from killing someone on SOTF than a small scar on my arm and a medium scar on my ass because I was vain.

Every time I look at it, though, I remember how I got it. It'll probably always be that way. Some details of what happened in the game were fuzzy even by the time I started watching, but those moments, those seconds when it was all or nothing, when I had to do my best or die, those will never fade. They can't. I can wear long sleeves and cover them up, but they itch sometimes, and they don't grow hair like the rest of my arm does. They whisper to me and remind me of who I am and who I was, and they remind me of the boy who gave them to me.



One of the things I said on my Twitter that most seemed to resonate with people was this: "Scars are

just reminders to be better next time.” I was actually, in part, talking about why I don’t delete things that I post online, even if I look at them later and they make me feel stupid or dramatic or whiny.

I think there’s value in having a visual record of your mistakes. It’s so easy to rewrite your history, to change things in your mind so you were cooler or better or right. It’s tempting to do this as a way to avoid actually grappling with your problems, too. It’s harder to forgive yourself for something than it is to pretend there’s nothing that needs forgiving.

My actual scars are why the metaphor came so easily. Each one reminds me of something I did imperfectly.

I have a scar across the palm of my right hand, from when I smashed the vase into Davis’ face. I didn’t account for the force making my improvised weapon shatter, and as a result I lacerated myself while killing him. It hurt a lot, but it didn’t fuck up my mobility or my ability to fight. If it had, I almost certainly would have died, because I’m right-handed and the fights I got into were close even with me functioning properly.

I have the scar on my left forearm from what Brendan did to me. It’s this sort of wiggly oval with jagged edges. I got it because I reached out to push his weapon away, which I had to do because I was charging straight at him. My weaker arm was an acceptable sacrifice. But the only reason I was in that position was that I hadn’t killed him with my gunshot, and the only reason that was even a concern was that I didn’t pay proper attention to security when resting. If I’d gone upstairs, he would’ve probably never found me.

I have a thin scar across the bottom three fingers of my right hand, on the first joint of each digit. It

lines up when I make a fist. It's from when Asa Rosen hit my hand with an axe. I was too slow, too careless, and he got the jump on me, and that's why I have another scar, too, one you probably won't see much of. It's a circle about the size of a quarter, on my right thigh, from where he stabbed with a dagger and then pulled and twisted. I tried to play nice, and for that I could've had a vein cut and then bled to death, or gotten my fingers chopped off. I actually thought they were dead, at first. I thought they'd never work again, but it turns out he'd just cut some of my tendons and those can heal with some help.

I have a long scar that runs from the top of my right knee to the bottom. It's clean and straight because it's not a scar I got from someone trying to kill me... well, not exactly. It's from my knee-replacement surgery. My knee was crushed and that's something that never gets better on its own. If I wanted to walk even kind of normally again, the best option was to just cut a lot of stuff out and replace it with metal. Dougie did that to me, and he was able to because I never imagined that he would do it.

Everyone responsible for my scars is dead, excepting me and the doctors who fixed my knee. But I'll never forget the ones who are gone. Each left their mark on me.



I like a lot of body modifications. I think piercings can be really interesting and sexy. People have asked me if I'm going to get any more, or any tattoos, though, and while I absolutely intended to prior to being selected for the game, my answer is now a fairly firm no.

Piercings, it's just that I've run out of good stuff to pierce. I have my earrings and my nose ring and my

bellybutton ring. I tried a tongue ring but fuck those. I could get my eyebrow or my lip done, I guess, but I don't think those are quite my style, and I don't want to mess with my features too much now that being recognizable is part of my brand. What's left, then? I could get an industrial bar in my ear, but I wear headphones a lot and that would make the healing brutal. I thought about getting my nipples pierced, but that seems sort of pointless because most people wouldn't get to see. Same deal with getting my clit done, plus if something goes wrong there it's really, really bad news. I just don't want anyone sticking needles in my junk.

Tattoos are weirder. I thought I'd get something matching with Kristine for a long time, but fuck that, I'm glad I was too young because I'd have to carve off some of my skin if I had and that'd be another scar. That gives me some perspective, too. I thought maybe I'd do something related to *The Cure*, but I've seen pictures online of people with tattoos related to me and it weirds me out. I couldn't do that to someone else. Also, there was someone in my season where tattoos were his whole big thing, and I guess it just would feel disrespectful to go get inked up myself, like I was intruding on his territory.

But the biggest thing is that tattoos are art, and if you let someone tattoo you, that's giving them part of yourself, committing part of your body, your being, to that artist. It sounds cool and romantic in some ways, but I'm already carrying too many marks belonging to other people. I have so many reminders, so many parts of myself that are no longer fully my own, and that feels strange and wrong to me.

The rest of myself, I'm keeping.

## The Top Ten SOTF Contestants Better Than Their Seasons' Winners

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I specifically avoided doing a simple “Top Ten Winners” list because now that I’m a winner too that means I actually end up interacting with a lot of the other winners and I didn’t want to start shit by snubbing anyone. “Most Bangable Winners” was acceptable because, hey, everyone has their own tastes, plus there are plenty of totally bangable winners not on the list, plus, hey, you never know if it’ll get someone’s gears turning and end up somewhere fun.

This list, however, is almost certainly going to start shit anyways. Oops. I guess I should preface it by saying that I don’t necessarily think any winner I’m saying wasn’t the best of their season was bad. I mean, yeah, I hate some of you fuckers, but not universally. There are some people here I respect a lot, some who would’ve been on that “Top Ten Winners” list. It’s just, you happened to share seasons with truly exceptional people who didn’t survive.

I’m not saying I wish the winners whose seasons I’m focusing on here were dead. I’m not saying you suck. Believe me or don’t. I just want to take a little time to appreciate the ones who didn’t make it but should have.

### 10. A.C. Bones (Season One)

Really, Bones should be higher up on this list but that she got totally fucking robbed is such old news that it’s barely worth talking about anymore. She was unique, resourceful, and dramatic; her parting words to Dalton Suzuki were pure badass. We could’ve had a fascinating, eerie winner to set the stage for everyone

who followed. Instead, we got Parker. Yes, you can argue that Bones would've lost her last fight without Parker's intervention, but that doesn't really matter to who should have won, and I think she had a real shot against Jake Halderman even without the assist.

### 9. Dario Tejada (Season Fifty-Four)

Heresy, I know. At least it's not Jared Walker, right? Can you forgive me? When Fifty-Four was live, I wanted Stephanie to take it as much as anyone. She won me over and I still think she's not just a good but a great winner... and yet, I think her victory had the unfortunate effect of sidelining Dario and making everything he did about Stephanie. The thing is, if Dario hadn't been picked for the season, or if he'd died before Endgame, Stephanie would've won just the same, still been extracted and treated and ended up surviving. Dario comes off as just a speed bump, a hiccup on the way to the proper conclusion, but he was more than that. He was a friend and a follower, and all too often the leaders are the only ones to get the glory. Dario had the chance to strike out for himself and become someone, and he put it aside. That actually means he definitely deserved it, though, and I'm really curious about what sort of winner he would've been, whether if he'd taken it I'd be ranking Stephanie here instead or not.

### 8. Eric Cerrone (Season Thirteen)

This one got a good resolution, in fact one I'm sure most of the audience preferred, but that's actually a big part of why I wish it had gone the other way. The enmity between Eric and winner Monika Trace is still legendary, spanning from the moments while she was waking up to the very finale of Endgame. Eric

had a ruthless streak (to put it mildly; I've talked about murdering people in their sleep before) but also a strange sort of honor and understanding. He knew who his rival was and gave his all to catch and kill her, but he fell short due to a tactical blunder at the final hurdle, and Monika punished him as brutally as she could. It was a classic tale of hubris, but that's part of why it doesn't quite sit right with me. Eric tried, and he treated his foe with respect. She didn't return the favor, which makes me think maybe the better person didn't actually come out on top.

### **7. Vic Valentin (Season Twenty-One)**

Yeah, I can be on the side of player-hunters and other antiheroes sometimes. Yeah, I know Vic might well have wanted things to end exactly how they did. At the same time, though, he was dark and romantic and charismatic and fascinating. He said just enough to let us into his world a bit, to tell us there was something real and pure behind the mask. I wish he'd made it just so we could have learned what made him go to such lengths for Yvain, but at least his exit was about as beautiful a gesture as it could be.

### **6. Jane Day (Season Twenty-Four)**

I talked about Jane before in the context of underrated villains, and I'm bringing her up again here. Jane was the best part of her season beyond any shred of doubt, and she was gearing up to actually challenge Carina, but she didn't quite make it in time. I think, given another day, she would have figured out the inevitable endpoint to their partnership and perhaps pre-empted it with violence of her own, but she just wasn't quite quick enough and Carina must have sensed the

same thing, given how she finally discarded her long-time ally.

#### 5. Muriel Villalobos (Season Five)

I barely count Jonathan Stone as a winner, given what happened, but Muriel sure as fuck didn't win so she gets to be on the list. One of the iconic early-season villains, she stood out to me because of how she obviously unraveled over the course of the game. She was willing to use whatever she had to if it got her what she wanted; she actually praying-mantised Aaron Brodbeck which wins her so many points with me. She was brutal and stylish and if she'd lived Season Five would be a story of beautiful contrast, rather than the escape-centric (though still pretty solid) beast it is now.

#### 4. Lionel Wilson (Season Forty-Eight)

Yeah, I'm not the biggest fan of Rena's sudden assassination. I know that's not a terribly controversial stance, but I watched this one right when I was first starting to get really into SOTF, right after Forty-Nine (the first season I watched live), unspoiled somehow, and I was incredibly into Lionel and when he died it hit me in the gut but when Maria's head got popped I was pissed beyond words. Lionel was interesting because he was violent, but not at all indiscriminate. He only killed those he thought deserved it, and he put himself on the line for someone he didn't know super well. That's real selflessness, and I think if I'd been in Maria's shoes I would have fallen for him too. If he couldn't make it, I wish he'd at least gotten to die in her arms.



### 3. Kendrick Larue (Season Forty-Seven)

Was Kendrick a villain? It doesn't matter in this context, but it's important to me, and I'd actually answer with a pretty clear yes. Kendrick's mental deterioration was a slow, painful process, but he turned from a boy who couldn't put another classmate out of his misery when begged to do so to one who coldly and calmly gunned down a boy who was just trying to talk to him. Kendrick was, by all rights, the actual winner of his season, but he threw it away with preemptive celebration, shooting himself before Victor Frazee could fully bleed out. I wish that Kendrick had managed to survive, aimed badly or something, but failing that I wish he'd just shot Victor once in the head to be sure. It would've been a better, if nihilistic, conclusion.

### 2. Alyssa Raleigh (Season Thirty-Three)

Alyssa was robbed. Yes, I realize that if Lara Oliver was taken entirely out of the equation, there's a good chance this would've ended up another Season Five. Even with medical staff on-call, it would've been tough to get to Alyssa in time. I would've been upset had that happened, but probably not as upset as I am about the success of the great "hide from everything then cry about how that makes you better than everyone who actually tried" technique. But, Alyssa. Alyssa was scared but never gave up, even when she actually had half her hand blown off. She did all she could to live, and I just wish she'd taken it home. At least it would've been someone who wanted it enough to pursue the goal.

### 1. Zachariah Johnston (Season Sixty-Five)

I'm sure this isn't a big surprise, but fuck it, it's true. Zach was the perfect package. Smart, caring, pas-

sionate, cold, and violent, he also knew his way around the game. He had everything that should've in theory let him go far, and he held his own for a long time, despite clearly having some issues with his alliance. The odd one out due to being on a different team than his unrequited crush and her boyfriend, he nonetheless did all he could to keep both of them safe. This, rather than some other failing, proved to be his fatal flaw.

If Zach had just let Shawn die on that beach, he would've walked away with everything he wanted. He would have lived, Mae would have been suddenly single, and more than that he would have been one of the biggest threats left in the game, armed and experienced and ready to roll. I have a lot of affection for Mason as a winner, especially in retrospect, but Zach was everything I ever wanted. For a long, long time I couldn't understand how someone so special could fall like he did, but I think I get it now. He cared, and he trusted, and ultimately that was a mistake.

9

**Mixtape Track:**

**“Swamp Thing”**

**by**

**The Chameleons**

## Sarah Bourne

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I imagine some of the people I was close to back in Whittree were quite surprised to find out that Sarah Bourne was a friend of mine. I won't spend too long on the whole story and what exactly we were, but it was very different from Kristine. I guess, in retrospect, maybe it was a bit more real. That's not to say we were closer; I think even with all the shit that's happened Kristine's about as close as I've been to anyone. It's just that with Sarah I knew where we stood.

We both played SOTF Champions. It was nice to have someone I could play the game with and then talk with about it, because most of my friends thought video games were for losers, or at least pretended to. I wonder sometimes how many of them are actually closet gamers too. Maybe a lot. Kristine was legitimate in her total disinterest, though; there's no way she could've hidden something that major from me.

Anyways, Sarah and I duo queued sometimes. I mained Midlane. It was nice to know someone on my team wouldn't be trash. I was able to get to Gold rank, and without ever really putting as much time or focus into it as I could've; I liked Champions a lot, but I also had a bunch of other things going on in my life that took up attention. I still do, actually, even more now, plus it was hard to play while my hand was healing. I mean, I only really use my right hand to click, so it could've been a lot worse I guess, but it still caused some distracting pain, and on the whole frustrating situations weren't very good for me (and probably still aren't) and Champions is very very frustrating.

I think Sarah was better than me. I mostly played RPGs and turn-based things aside from Champions. I liked the flashy characters, the complicated ones, but

my execution always was lacking. But Sarah was really good, and she played a bigger range of other games.

She also played drums in this band with some of the other girls who were on the season. It was Sarah, Anzu Sakamoto (the one who killed the fish), Caroline Leveson (the first girl who Ashley shot), and Valerie Fitzroy (the girl who Gene pushed down the stairs for the pogo stick). I don't know if their band was any good. I didn't go to see them. They were named after something from a game too geeky for me. I'm not actually sure if they mostly played video game music. Probably not, now that I think about it, but I always just sort of assumed they did. You can probably find out if you really want to. I'm sure somebody's dug up their Bandcamp page since Sarah plugged it in the game, and even if one of their parents shut it down or something I'm positive it's been pirated and rehosted.

Music is very important to me. Sometimes it felt like the only thing that could keep me together, or else the only thing that would let me fall apart. At its best, it has incredible emotional resonance, but video game music doesn't really do that for me. Game soundtracks are serviceable, sometimes effective in context, but I rarely get more than that from them. I don't get how people can listen to just game music; usually if it evokes a reaction it's because it brings back memories of scenes it soundtracks, in which case it's the game's writing doing the real work. Music can be so much more. It can stand on its own. When I play *Champions*, I always do it with the music muted (sorry, all you *Champions* composers maybe reading this) and with my own custom playlists as a soundtrack. It just works better for me.

You may, of course, recognize now that most of Sarah's band met up and worked together in the early

game. That was a big deal, and they could've really gone somewhere, except for a string of incidents that shattered them. You can argue it began with Valerie's death, but I don't think so. I think the blame lands fairly squarely on one set of shoulders, and Sarah came to much the same conclusion.



When I went back and watched Sarah's game, I was confused as fuck at first. She didn't take it seriously, and I guess that fit her personality, but talk about a bad first impression. If I'd been watching a stranger, instead of a friend, I'd've probably gotten annoyed and hoped someone would put her down before there was any chance of a Todd Hudson repeat.

She talked to the cameras (and sorry, Sarah, but you didn't elevate or transcend the tired tradition). She was so painfully casual with Ashley and Anzu when she met them. She faded into the background a bit when they linked up with Caroline.

Wait just a sec, you say, Ashley? Who's Ashley? Ashley wasn't in that list of band members a moment ago. And you're absolutely correct.

Ashley Namath was some kind of hanger-on of the band's. I don't know the details; like I said, I didn't actually go to their things. She was on Sarah's team, and she knew everyone, and that got her brought into the fold.

I think you could probably guess where this was going even if you hadn't seen it. A group of three girls with a long-standing history of cooperation and familiarity, plus someone else who a couple of them kind of liked I guess. Ashley was the oil to their water, totally failing to integrate into their group dynamic. She had that somnambulant episode or whatever, if that's even what it was (I have my suspicions that she was faking

to get attention or to draw the others out of position) which totally fucked up Caroline's attempts to explain her plan. And then, of course, she shot Caroline.

Some people say it looked mostly accidental. I don't know, and it doesn't matter. Ashley killed Caroline, and that broke Anzu and set Sarah on a course for revenge, a course which saw her decide to stop the killers and then realize that, ultimately, there was only one she truly was committed to finishing off.



Sarah could have killed me. It would've been easy, and not just because I was injured and weak. She didn't intervene for or against me while I was fighting for my life right in front of her. I don't hold it against her. She didn't quite understand me then. We hadn't had enough time to talk, and she hadn't figured out my perspective.

The big reason Sarah could've easily killed me is that I would've let her. Or, at least, I wouldn't have tried to stop her like I tried to stop all the strangers who tried to kill me. Killing Sarah was not an option. Even hurting her badly, I couldn't ever do. She said that maybe she should kill me, and all I could think to do was wait and see what she did and explain where I was coming from. Maybe I could've run, though I doubt I would've gotten far. Begging would've been pointless, and beneath me besides. We were friends, and I treated her like a friend, and that was all it took to get her to understand that I hadn't changed, at least not where it mattered.

Sarah had changed by then. By the time we met, any levity remaining in her was brittle. She was on a mission, but she'd already failed once. She'd met up with Pia Malone and Paisley Hopkins, a minor player and her hanger-on respectively, and she'd snarled at



them a little but walked away without actually trying to stop them in any material way. Given that, I was probably never in much danger from her. She'd become someone I would've followed with fascination if I was watching at home. She was struggling as much with herself as with anything external, and I wish I'd understood better and been in more of a position to help her. I was hurt and scared and tired, so all I could do was stay with her for a time and give her my gun.

I'm not sure if it was enough.



I lied to Sarah multiple times, for multiple reasons. Some of the lies were for her benefit and some were for others' and most were for both. Some of the lies were clumsy, designed to smooth things over in the short term, unable to withstand a close examination because they'd never receive one. The greatest lie I told her, though, I don't think she saw through. I don't think anyone did. It wasn't a lie about what I'd done or what I was going to do. Depending on how you count, you could argue that it wasn't a lie at all, but I won't bullshit you here. It was a deception, and a massive one.

"Don't shoot someone if you aren't sure," I said. "You can't take it back, no matter how much you want to. Trust me."

All the components are true enough, but the implication was clear: I was suggesting regret over my actions. Here, now, by this point in my book, you must know I feel little of that. If I could go back and do it again, I'd pull the trigger more often, not less.

I said what I said for a lot of reasons. I guess I wanted Sarah to think of me in a certain way. I figured, then, that maybe she would make it home and maybe I wouldn't, which is part of why I gave her my

weapon but was also partially caused by that. I wanted to give her every advantage I could. I thought about how she'd talk about me afterwards, what she'd feel when she remembered my face or logged into Champions and saw my old account, forever logged out on her friends list.

There was more, too. I said what I thought Sarah needed to hear. Her ambivalence was clear. I thought maybe she'd take some time and really muse and decide if it was worth her life to continue her hunt. I don't know if she reflected as much as she should've. I don't know if she was at peace with her choices and with the death she got. I hope she was.

In her shoes, I sure wouldn't have been.



Sarah and Ashley killed each other. They were on the same team, but that didn't matter. I cut them some slack for that. Their fight wasn't about tactics or winning or anything of the sort. It was about emotions, about punishment, and about mutually assured destruction.

Sarah got what she wanted. She laughed at the end. But if she had another chance, if she could do it again knowing how it would end up, would she make the same choices?

I hope she would, but I can't be sure of that at all.

**GGWP**

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Asa Rosen came closer to killing me than anybody else in the game, and that was only partially because I let him. The funny part about that is that he probably had the least reason to try. I wasn't attacking him. I wasn't even insinuating that I was going to attack him the instant he gave me an opening.

As far as I've been able to discern, Asa wasn't after me for revenge. At the time, I figured it must have been something like that, some tactical concern, or a grudge about something I did, but I really don't think that was it at all. His entire game was bizarre, but in this way that I grew to respect a lot. I'm not sure what would've happened if he hadn't run into me, but I really wish I could have seen it. I don't regret killing him, not exactly, but at the same time I do have this strange feeling of mourning for lost potential. I regret that we ended up in the situation we did, where the only natural conclusion given each of our immutable paths was a fight to the death.



I'm not stupid. I've said this a lot, but I feel like I have to repeat it because there are some pretty decent reasons for casual fans to assume that I'm an idiot based on some of the choices I made. In hindsight, it's easy to look at what happened with Asa and ask whether I was suicidal to shake hands with him like I did. If he hadn't stabbed me, though, it'd be a totally different discussion.

I've talked about the custom of saying GLHF at the start of Champions matches before, but there's a bit more to say on the matter. Champions is a social game. You don't have to play with friends, but there tend to be incentives to do so; sometimes you flat out

get bonus in-game items for it, but most of the time it's just more fun to have people who you like on your team, people you know won't throw whiny tantrums or fuck with you or try to lose out of spite.

Sarah was someone I particularly liked playing with, but she wasn't the only one. I'd queue with a handful of other people I knew from school, but some of my partners were people I'd met through the game, people with whom I'd joked around enough to form a rapport or had met when some other friend invited them. Sometimes I'd talk with them on voice chat, but mostly only with people I knew offline. For the rest, I tended to use text chat.

There were a lot of reasons for that. Part of it was that I just got shy. Also, sometimes guys get weird with girls online. I mean, I got some of that anyways because of my in-game handle. Come to think of it, it's probably good to get that out there anyways, since I haven't used my old account since winning and people are probably wondering what happened to me. I was BlackHairedGirl2, because someone else already had BlackHairedGirl. It's only partially because I'm, you know, a black-haired girl; mostly it's a bit from my favorite song by The Cure. So, yeah, if you were curious what happened to me, now you know: I got pulled to play SOTF for real, I won, and then the Champions developers gave me an unlocked account under "Jewel Evans" so I've just been playing on that. If you were on my friends list, you can add me on my new account and I'll friend you if I can remember who you are and didn't secretly hate you.

Anyways, if you're in a lobby with people you've chosen to play with, you tend to be on either your best or your worst behavior. Whatever the case, it's for the same reason: you want to impress your friends. Maybe

that's by being nice and acting like the model of politeness, or maybe it's by showing off and making fun of some losers and flaunting your wit. I can be a total bitch, and I think I'm pretty funny, but there's a time and a place for that and the game lobby isn't it. You want everyone actually trying to win when the game starts. If you're going to talk shit, wait until it's over or you're so far in the hole there's no chance of a comeback without a miracle.

I shook hands with Asa, thus, in part because Sarah was watching. I knew he could fuck me over. I hadn't forgotten what Naomi did, and I was totally aware I was putting myself in the same position. It's why I brought the stun baton with me, so I could do to him what she'd done to me if it came to that. But I was doing it for Sarah, and I guess I was paying too much attention to her, worrying too much about her reaction and if she saw that I was really putting effort into it, and so Asa yanked me off balance and stabbed me.



Asa's course through the game was a strange one. He seemed all set to be a laughing stock, a hapless figure to be derided and ridiculed, kind of like Sixty-Five's Todd Hudson or maybe, to give a bit more credit, Jonas Jeffries. When I saw that Asa had struggled to even get off the ice where he woke up, I thought, wow, fuck, how did this guy almost kill me?

But things changed. Asa hated the game with a passion. That was crystal clear in most of what he did at the start. He schemed to destroy and disrupt, but he couldn't figure out how to make it happen. He was aided, or maybe hindered, by Dee Dixon, who was pretty much a circus freak at school and who was a total lodestone in the game. I mean, is it that hard to

post a watch so you don't get blown up by a Danger Zone in your sleep? But Asa stuck with her for some time, and put forth real effort towards finding something to strike back at the game with instead of just rolling over and accepting it or shooting himself or playing the idiotic wait-it-out pacifist game like he was going to be Lara Oliver.

I don't think he had a chance. The game is what it is. It's well-made, and there are people paid really absurd amounts of money to make sure it can't be easily derailed. Season Sixty was a once in a lifetime catastrophe, and that was itself the result of gross oversight on the part of the tech team. The students didn't really do anything to earn their release except catch an obviously fatal flaw. There was nothing of that sort in my season. Asa wasn't going to do anything except maybe piss off everyone watching and make them hate him.

And yet, sometimes I thought that he was onto something. After he ditched Dee, his style shifted. I couldn't always tell what he was trying to do, but it was much darker, scarier. In his exchange with Alice, I thought he might do something really awful at any moment, stab her or tell her to strip or something. He was always popping up in just the right place to make things a little more unsettling, and he was shadowing me in this strange way I'm sure he didn't realize. He too ran into Brendan multiple times. He got into it with Lily and Dougie, right before they split. And, of course, right before my little announcement I'd found Gene Steward's severed fingers in the popcorn machine, and who do you think was the sick fuck who put them there? Asa, of course.

I loved it. I've said it before, but the reason I'm so much more into villains in SOTF is that they're the dreamers, the proactive figures, the ones with ambi-

tion. I don't know whether Asa should be counted as a villain. I don't really think so personally, but there are lots of divided opinions about that online and I'm personally invested to such a degree that it's hard to even approach objectivity. I don't care, though. He was different, he was driven, and he was always working an angle, and I hate so much that we didn't get to see it run its course.

Yeah, he might well have run afoul of someone else pretty quickly. Then again, maybe not. Maybe he could've won. There's no telling. We were deprived of the conclusion to one of the most unique contestants that's been on the show in a long time, and the worst part is I did it. I didn't give a fuck about most of the other Davison kids when I was watching, but with Asa I got really invested, and the whole time I had this awful feeling inside of me because I knew how it would end. Every time that I fuck something up because my fingers aren't fully healed, that's a reminder. Every time that I get undressed and see that scar on my thigh, that's another. It eats at me, just a little.



GGWP, Asa. I really mean it this time, unironically. Sometimes, after a long, back-and-forth, close game of Champions that's all you can say. Sometimes you don't want the game to end, but it has to. Someone wins and someone loses, but it doesn't actually matter all that much. The experience is what's really important, that one perfect game, the sort of memory that keeps you queuing all night long no matter how many trolls and flammers you get stuck with.

Sometimes, you stay after the game and chat a little with the other team, trade compliments and reminisce. Of course, if it turns out the other team's full of assholes, that can be disappointing, but if they're cool

people too then it can be almost sublime. You give credit where it's due, give each other tips, work to improve. Maybe you friend each other and queue together in the future, on the same side this time.

Obviously, there's no post-game lobby for me and Asa. He's gone, mostly but not entirely. You see, it turns out that Asa kept a blog. Some of my followers sent me the link as a fucked-up joke or something, and I read it all the way through wondering what the twist would be. Of course, at the end they told me and it really, really fucked me up. It was like, I'd spent some real time reading all his stuff, getting to know his thoughts and opinions on SOTF but also just on normal life. It was personal and revelatory in probably the same way this book is. Like, imagine for a second that you've just gotten to this point and you suddenly realize that you killed me. All of this, everything I've put here, everything I was, you ended that and you're only now grasping the real scope of it.

Of course I knew that everyone I killed was a real person with real thoughts and dreams and lives outside of what they became in SOTF. It was different with Asa's writing, though, because I liked him. I didn't agree with everything he said, but I always felt like he was thinking things through, and I felt like we could've sat down over a cup of tea or cracked open a couple of pilfered beers and had a reasonable discussion about everything. I think he had some really good ideas, and it showed me exactly how he was able to make such an impact in the game. Reading it made me hate myself, just a little, the same way I hate Karen for what she did to Zach.

I'm okay. I've talked a bunch with my therapist about this. I don't actually for-real hate myself, not on the whole. It helps that what happened between us



was absolutely, unequivocally not my fault. But it still sucks that it had to happen. It sucks that it couldn't end some other way.

So congratulations, Asa. You didn't kill me, but you got me good. Wave a magic wand and wipe the scars you left on my body away, and it won't make a damn bit of difference. The impression you left on me is there to stay.

## Breaking

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When everything is falling apart, sometimes you just need to break something. I think it's a pretty common human instinct. I've definitely thrown things more often than I'd like to admit. It feels really good to destroy something. Smashing stuff makes me feel powerful and in control when I'm lacking those feelings in other parts of my life.

I guess it makes sense that other people feel those things too, maybe even more strongly. I guess it makes sense that sometimes the most satisfying thing to break can be another person.



When Asa hit the back of my right hand with his axe, he severed the extensor tendons in my bottom three fingers. This meant I couldn't straighten those fingers properly (I could sort of force them open with my other hand). I didn't really understand what had happened at the time. I thought maybe they'd never work again, and honestly that was the most likely outcome because getting them fixed required surgery and recovery time which I only had access to outside of the game.

I don't think Asa meant to damage my hand like he did. Oh, I'm sure he was trying to fuck me up however he could, but I doubt it was a calculated move to cripple or maim. We were fighting, and in fights these things happen. I'm sure I did similar to plenty of the people I killed, just they died soon afterwards so it didn't matter much.

It messed with me, though. It's still messing with me. In the early stages of writing this book, the splint made it very hard to type, and I was doing so against medical advice. I hate to admit it, but I mostly two-fin-

ger type, so I guess it could've been much worse. My thumb and index finger have always been my primary tools, and they were fine. Still, I found all those little places I'd normally hit a key with my pinkie or something. It made me so much more aware of my own process. I'm mostly healed now, but I still have to be a bit gentle, and it'll be a few months before I'm completely at full capacity.

You take things like your fingers working for granted. It just seems such an intrinsic part of being, but it can be taken away in the blink of an eye. The doctors told me it wasn't that big a deal, that it happens to normal people in daily life sometimes, they slip with a knife or slice themselves on broken glass or somehow stretch too far and just snap a tendon. That terrifies me. In SOTF, you expect to get messed up. You can get your face carved up like Jared did, or even more, be beaten so badly they have to piece your features back together like Ivy. You can lose an eye. But that's just a part of the violent, exceptional circumstances. It shouldn't happen when you're just going grocery shopping.

I don't like feeling grateful for normalcy. I don't like feeling privileged to function like everyone else does. In fact, that is exactly the sort of situation that winds me up and makes me want to smash something.



When Sarah left, I trashed a decent chunk of the condominiums. I imagine Shannon Gant was beside herself, but she couldn't be bothered to do anything useful for Sarah or the rest of her team and I'm sure the value of the resort went through the roof anyways, so fuck her. She could probably recoup any losses I caused just by selling the tacky garbage I smashed online. Auction it with a screenshot of me throwing it on

the ground, and you just know some crazed collector will want it.

Anyways, I broke what was within reach because that was what I could do. I didn't want Sarah to leave. I didn't want to be alone and hurt and in everyone's crosshairs. I wanted some space and time to pull myself together, but that was impossible so I just let my feelings out however I could, which was tipping over chairs and tossing books on the floor.

I probably didn't look very cool while I was doing it. It's hard to fight an inanimate object and not look stupid. It's especially hard when you hurt yourself kicking something. I don't really care, though. I did what I needed to keep myself at all together, and I burned off the feelings that were choking me. Without that release, I don't think I would've been in the right frame of mind to survive what came after.

I made my way to the top of the condominium building, sat for a little, listened to the announcements, and then came back down. When I returned to where I'd left my gear, I found that I wasn't the only one working out some destructive impulses.



Dougie trashed everything he could. He figured out that it was my stuff pretty quickly. It wasn't hard. I still had my clothes, the ones I wore when everything started, in my bag. I was the only one wearing a Zach shirt, and I had my last headset in there besides (the one that I'd been wearing for most of the game got crushed while I was fighting Brendan).

Dougie didn't only fuck up my shit, though. He tore a bar out of the wall, because he didn't have anything else to use as a weapon I guess. I'm sure Gant didn't appreciate that either.

We looked at each other. We talked. But there was something else, something more that passed between us. It was a challenge. We both knew it on some level, I think. We were waiting, sizing each other up, seeing who would snap first. Who would break.

I had a lot of thoughts when I saw Dougie. I expected him to attack me or to try to talk to me. I knew what I would do in either case. I had this whole thing worked out, this speech I'd give him if he tried to tell me to stop killing. I was going to tell him that he could stop me right then and there, that all he had to do was let me kill him. I was going to do my best to get him to agree, to put down his weapons, to bare his neck, and then I was going to let him go.

But I never came close to having a chance for that. We stared each other down, and we waited to see who would break, and he broke, and then he broke me.



I can't describe how having my kneecap shattered felt, not in any way that can do it justice. It hurt, but before that came a feeling of cracking, of crunching, like when you snap a pencil in half. I fell, and I lay on the ground, and I thought, this is it, I'm dead. This is how I'm going to die, right here and right now, he's going to beat me with that bar until my skull is the same, he's going to crush every bone he can, turn my face into pulp, and all I can do is lie here and hope it's quick. But he didn't. He turned around and ran away. I guess that was one more breaking point.

I expected a lot of things from Dougie, not least for the unexpected to crop up at every turn. He was strange, different. I didn't understand him. I thought I had the basics, but I was wrong. I don't think he understood me either. Our very last conversation proved

that clearly. Maybe I could have asked him what he thought went through my head, but I doubt he would have answered.

If I'd known what he would do, though, I would have tried a little harder to avoid that outcome. What happened to my knee, you see, isn't something that heals cleanly like severed tendons. It's a fragile, complicated joint, and it got completely wrecked, and so they ended up removing a lot of the bone and totally replacing it. I can walk again now, but not like I could. I'm still in physical therapy. I have a cane. The doctors tell me that I'm young, that I don't have to worry too much, I'll still have a full life and I'll heal and I'll be okay. But they don't tell me I'll be back to normal. I won't. It'll hurt for the rest of my life, not constantly, but every now and then. I'll be more limited in how I can move, how hard I can push myself, and it'll take a lot of work to do what normal people don't even think about. And knee replacements aren't even forever. In a decade or two, they'll probably have to cut it back open and change it out and I'll have to do the whole thing over.

Dougie and I broke each other, again and again. The best I can hope for now is to be glued back into a shape that's more or less right.

## The Top Ten Unusual Roles For Winners

There are a lot of things about winning SOTF that you don't really think about from the outside. I'll spare you the details about direct contract negotiations with the organization, but suffice to say, if you're cooperative and actually interested you can get a really good deal, while if you're an asshole who's clearly going to be sabotaging your season's success at every turn you'll still get a payout but it won't be a very impressive one. If you're somewhat popular, though, and show yourself willing to engage with the public without being a total liability, other people and brands will be tripping over themselves to offer you deals, court your endorsement, and generally try to get you to do or be something of use to them. These potential roles you're presented with come in many different shades of financially-sound and batshit-insane.

For this list, I've culled ten of the options to reinvent myself that I've been offered, choosing the ones that most tickled my fancy. That's not to say they're all things I want to do; some of them you'll see I've already involved myself in, while others I've politely declined. Some I'm still deciding on. If there's anything you'd like to see from me, do let me know on Twitter.

### **10. Frozen Dinner Saleswoman**

Obviously, you get a lot of product placement offers when you're a public figure of the magnitude of most SOTF winners. I keep getting approached to do all sorts of crazy ad concepts. The better ones are related to stuff I actually did during the season (I'm going to be on the boxes for this special edition of the headsets that I used, for example), but often brands

just want me shilling this random shit. A company my lawyers have advised me not to name wanted to do a whole campaign based on me selling frozen meatloaf and was very disappointed when I was like “I don’t eat that garbage.” Pardon me for not signing any paper put in front of me, but I have a reputation to consider too and if I’m going to plug something I have to personally believe in it. In the long run, that’ll make the endorsements I do give more valuable anyways.

### **9. Published Author**

If I wasn’t a winner, who would print this book? Nobody. Even if by some miracle it did get released, it wouldn’t sell for shit. A random girl writing a rambling combination diary, essay, and listicle is a hack. When it’s me, though, I’ve done things interesting enough that people want a peek behind the curtain, and so here both of us are.

### **8. Wife To Stranger(s)**

I’ve probably received less marriage proposals than the winners who are models and shit, or who are a bit older, but I’ve still had enough that I have my assistants filter them out now. People take crazy stances, like, oh, Jewel, wouldn’t you love to marry me and come live on my chicken farm in Alabama? I’ll have to feed my current wife to the pigs, but that’s okay for you. You’ll be happy and provided for, it’s not like you’re making good money with what you’re doing now or anything. I’ve included my toenail clippings and a picture of my wrinkled, fifty-year-old testicles to show you I’m serious about my desire to inseminate you so that your fertile young body can bear my children.



Honestly, I don't think I'm ever going to get married, and if I do it's going to be to someone who I like, picked, and approached. And there will be one big fucking pre-nup.

## **7. Voice Actress Playing Myself**

You may already know this from the behind-the-scenes features, but I helped with designing my kit in SOTF Champions. It was an amazing experience to get involved in the game I've spent so much time playing, and I don't plan on leaving things there. I did some extra voice work for some promotional bits and an announcer pack (as I'm sure you've noticed) plus recorded alternate lines for a secret project that I'll be able to talk about sooner or later. In general, I like helping out with games, even ones I haven't played yet. It's great to meet the people who make them, and I like making sure I'm being represented properly. Oh, and it's also cool to do photo shoots and modeling for the teams that design skins and concept art. I get to wear interesting costumes and to be the center of attention and it's way lower pressure than a lot of the other things I do. Plus it means I can nip it in the bud if they want to give me gigantic tits in the splash art or something.

## **6. Guest Star/Celebrity Cameo**

I've been invited to do a bunch of walk-ons for podcasts, shows, movies, and so on. I've had to turn the majority of them down, just because there aren't enough hours in the day, but I hope the invitations keep on coming. There's nothing quite like revealing you're sitting in on a podcast where a couple of psychologists are armchair diagnosing you. Yeah, most of this type of thing doesn't really pay amazingly (or at

all), but I enjoy getting involved in people's passion projects and if something speaks to me I'm happy to do it for free or in exchange for a donation to some worthy cause or other.

### **5. Convention Panelist**

I never got to go to conventions before I was cast for SOTF, just because there was nothing good near Whittree. Now, though, I get to go and talk to audiences in a more direct and personal fashion, and to work with some of my biggest inspirations and role models. It's like a big crazy weekend-long party for the people who are most passionate about the show. I love the feeling of connection, of being part of one big incredible community. The first time I saw someone dressed up as me, I actually cried, and I view every appearance I make as giving back to the people who supported me the most.

### **4. Disability Ambassador**

This one I declined. This group was all like, "it's perfect, you show that disabilities come in all shapes and sizes. Take a glance at you, and you'd never guess that you're spending an hour each day screaming your way through PT because somebody broke your knee and they had to cut it out and replace it with a chunk of metal. You could do so much good in the world." Yeah, sorry, I have to live with my injuries enough without rubbing everyone else's faces in them too. It's a worthy cause I guess but not at all how I want to be thought of by the world.

### **3. Graduation Speaker**

I have no idea why, but a few high schools and even a college have tried to tap me for graduation cer-

emonies. Here's a tip: if your graduation speaker is younger than everyone there, and only got her diploma due to heated negotiations from her legal team, maybe she's not who you really want for your event. I considered accepting one just to fuck around, but I don't think it would be fair to steal the thunder from a whole class of people on their special day. Maybe in a decade or two when I've done more we can talk, but for now you should go ask Kenny Yamana instead.

## **2. SOTF Consultant**

It's true, I am in very close contact with some departments of SOTF still. I'm at HQ almost every day. I can say almost nothing about this due to non-disclosure agreements, but keep an eye on upcoming seasons. Whether you see me directly or not, my fingerprints will be all over them.

## **1. Porn Star**

This is why I made this list. I got a call from a porn studio saying they wanted to offer me a starring role in their latest film. Their concept was something like "You're stuck in a room and you have to get ten people off in an hour and a half or you die." I think it was probably written for a Karen-lookalike, because it sure didn't fit me. Anyways, I did some research and these fuckers have been sending this sort of stuff to winners for the last year or two, but only the girls. I guess maybe they're afraid some guy'll think it's not such a big deal to fuck a bunch of porn stars for loads of money.

Anyways, I can't stand for that, so I took things into my own hands. I didn't turn them down outright. Instead, I told them that their script sucked, but that I would do something for them... but if and only if they

can get half a dozen other winners to sign on for the project. I'm not going to let some random dude with an elephant tattooed on his dick fuck me on video. My rule here is, it has to be winners only (because you just know there are a bunch of desperate fucks from Season Sixty who'd do anything to get back in the spotlight), all reasonably attractive, all tested and STD-free. Since that means roughly ten percent of the show's alumni would have to commit to banging me and/or each other on film, I think I'm pretty safe, but I guess I've been surprised before. But hey, a deal's a deal and this way everyone else should be getting these phone calls too. You're welcome.

**10**

**Mixtape Track:**

**“The Mercy Seat”**

**by**

**Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds**

## Whittree, Oklahoma (Part 2)

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I was born on February 12, 2003, in the Stillwater Medical Center, just a little ways from Whittree. By all accounts, it wasn't so bad for my parents. There were no complications. I was in good shape, a healthy weight. I don't remember any of it, of course.

In those days, my family was not well off. We probably would have been poor if not for the house. About a year before I was born, a few months before I was even conceived, my maternal grandparents died. They were driving home after a night out in Stillwater and hit an icy patch and their old car didn't handle it well. They lost control and their brakes didn't work right and they spun off the road and crashed into a patch of trees.

The police and paramedics claim they were killed more or less instantly and painlessly, but I'm told such statements are often untrue, made only for the benefit of those left alive. I'm told it wasn't their fault, they were going a little fast maybe but that's all. They were wearing their seatbelts. I've been past the place it happened a hundred times, maybe more, though it was a long time before my parents pointed it out to me. The trees are pretty far from the road, so they must have flown quite a ways.

I heard stories about my grandparents while I was growing up. They were named James and Meredith Lund. James was a carpenter, and Meredith had worked in a school at some point in her life but soon became a stay-at-home mom and then just a housewife. My mother was their only child, and so when they died she inherited their house, and that was the house I grew up in. My parents had been living in an apartment in Stillwater before the crash, but they gave

it up when they got the house. There was still a mortgage on it, but that was actually comparable to what they'd been paying in rent. The house was bigger, though, big enough for all of us. I had my own room, upstairs. It was nice to have my own space. We were luckier than a lot of people, even if it feels weird to say that when we only got what we did because my grandparents died.

My mom missed them a lot. She told me that I looked so much like my grandmother, but I've seen the pictures and I don't think it's true. Meredith Lund was a pudgy woman with a big smile. I guess maybe our noses are a bit alike, but that's all. My mom would tell me things about what it had been like for her, growing up in the house. My room had been her room when she was a kid. She'd tell me that maybe someday I'd have a daughter who would grow up in that room too, but that won't happen now.

My dad's parents live in Georgia. I won't write their names because I doubt they'd appreciate the attention. We were not close to them. I don't know the whole story. I met them a few times, and they'd send me twenty-five dollars in cash on my birthday every year, wedged in store-bought cards. They seemed nice enough, but distant. I also have an uncle somewhere on my dad's side, but I can't remember where he lives. I think he's a plumber. I don't know what my surviving grandparents did before they retired.

Mostly, growing up, it was just me and my parents and then my sister.



My parents named me Jewel Evans. That's it. Most people have a middle name, but I do not. I don't know why. I'm glad they didn't name me after my



dead grandmother. That would've been a mistake and would've probably messed with my head.

Jewel is an odd name. It sounds kind of like a name you'd give to a princess, or a really spoiled child, though I guess it could be a whole lot worse. I went to school with a girl named Bunny Barlowe, which is just about as stripper-name as it comes. She was the person Gene beat to death with the pogo stick. The second person, I mean.

When I was little, my dad would often tell me that they'd named me Jewel because I was more precious than any gemstone. I loved hearing that. I'd ask him again and again to tell why I was named Jewel, and he'd always say. Then I got a little older and so did my sister, and one day she was there when my dad was explaining and she was like, "Oh, why am I named Chloe?" and after that my dad didn't say it anymore.

My parents both worked in grocery stores. For a while they worked at the same one, but then my dad transferred to a different branch to become assistant manager. It's as dull as it sounds. When I was little, they didn't make good money and most of it went into keeping us fed and paying the mortgage and making sure the car ran. As I got older, though, things got better. We got another car. I got clothes from department stores more than thrift stores. We went on a vacation, one year, to Colorado. The mortgage was paid off and they started putting money away for retirement.

It was a boring, normal life. That's pretty much the story of my family, almost as far back as anyone can remember. My mom did some genealogy stuff all throughout my childhood, I think to sort of try and make more sense of her place in the world, because after her parents died she was all alone. Well, it turned out we had a bunch of scattered, distant relatives, but

they were all those weird branching cousins that you wouldn't even know where to start contacting, and most of them were other unexciting nobodies. We had some old ancestor who died in the Civil War, fighting at Gettysburg for the Union. I guess it beats the alternative. And then, way back, we're apparently descended from this woman who was also a pirate, which is pretty kickass but there's not too much known about her, she wasn't one of the famous ones or anything.

So I guess our claim to fame is me. Now all those distant cousins are probably going to look over their charts and go, oh shit, Jewel Evans is our ridiculously removed cousin and she's an SOTF winner. Then they'll either put it in their school reports if they like me or pretend they never found out if they think I suck.



I was pretty happy with my childhood. I loved going to school, just because there were so many more people to meet and spend time with. I hear most people are introverts or extroverts but I don't know which I am, or if either label even fits me. Sometimes I need to be alone to figure things out or recharge myself, but sometimes I get into these deep funks and the only thing that can get me energized again is other people. I guess, ultimately, I'd go crazy quicker if I was totally alone than if I was never alone, for what that's worth.

My best friend was Kristine. We were like sisters. We always sat together at lunch and tried to get our schedules to match as much as possible. I would go to her house every week, usually two or three nights, and she would come to mine, though not as often, every week or two maybe. I went to her house more often because she liked it better that way. She's an only child, and I always got the feeling her parents wished

they'd had another kid. I don't know why they didn't. I never asked. Maybe they couldn't, or maybe I'm just wrong.

Her dad was gone for work a lot, but her mom was usually there, and she made me feel like I belonged there too. She'd give us enough space to be ourselves, and she supported us as best she could. She drove us to Oklahoma City a few times, and to Tulsa, so we could go to Hot Topic and buy clothes and jewelry. My dad would take me sometimes too, but he was never all that excited about it. Kristine's mom would chat with us the whole way, let us play our music and even sometimes sing along. It probably sounds weird, but in some ways I got along with her better than with my mom. I mean, we had our issues too, but she never made me feel like I was worse than her daughter, and sometimes when Kristine and I got into arguments, she even took my side.

My mom wasn't on my side a lot. I thought she loved me, and maybe she did. She probably did, until SOTF. But she really didn't like what I was into. She thought SOTF was horrible, thought it was morbid and sick and wrong and would teach me bad lessons. Did it? I don't know about that. If I didn't know as much about it as I do, I'd probably be dead instead of writing this. Maybe that's what my mom would've preferred. Me? I'm happy with where I am.

My mom would always say that goth was just a phase. She'd say that for a little when she was in high school she was into grunge, but she got over it and thought it was silly now. I don't know if she really thought it was dumb or if she just didn't think adults were allowed to like it anymore. I don't like grunge. It feels like fake authenticity to me, but maybe that's what drew her to it.

Neither one of my parents graduated college. My mom never even applied. My dad went for a little, to Oklahoma State University, which is how he met my mom. She was working in a little cafe near campus, and they started dating in the middle of his freshman year, and he dropped out a year and a half later when they got married. He grew up in Georgia with his parents, but he didn't like it, and that wasn't where they were originally from. He was born in Maine, but he said he only remembered little snippets of it. He always wanted to go back, but I think he was also afraid to. I think he thought it wouldn't live up to those early memories. I think he wished his family had never moved. In any case, we never went there.

My dad would usually listen to what I had to say, and a lot of the time he'd admit when he was wrong. We got along well, better than my mom and I did, because he didn't make fun of the things that were important to me. He'd also get my mom to back off sometimes. He's the one who convinced her to allow SOTF in the house, and he used to watch it with me and my sister. I think he liked it more than he'd admit. I know my sister did.

I'm not sure if any of them watched my season, but if I had to bet, I'd say they did. I don't know why they'd refuse to talk to me otherwise.



I didn't lose my life in SOTF, but I did lose other things. The biggest loss was my family. They won't talk to me at all. They wouldn't even give me the courtesy of a goodbye or an explanation. I've left messages, sent mail, but none of it has yielded any sort of response. The only interaction we've had was by proxy, when this team of SOTF lawyers went and got things sorted to get me legally emancipated.

Normally, that's a process more for people like Karen, who piss off their families and are still going to be minors for quite a while, but it was important for me to get done because the first few months can be make or break when it comes to establishing yourself as a winner and can also account for the majority of your earnings, and I didn't want my parents to pull something sneaky and give all my money away to spite me or anything like that.

That's pretty much what they did with all my old stuff. My computer, my clothes, my childhood toys, all of it went to thrift stores or got burned or something. I have one plush that got rescued and smuggled to me by a friend, and that's it. All my art is gone, and that really hurts. I spent a lot of time on it, and I don't know if it's worse that a lot of it got thrown away or that a lot of it got stolen and sold to fans. It's part of why I'm not sure if I'll go back to it again.

My parents are gone from my life, so I guess I can vanish from theirs too. I cared about them, but maybe I've hurt them enough. I wish they could understand, but it's okay that they don't. But I hope they don't think they can just change their minds in a couple years when the heat's off and they decide they could really use a financial hand. That's not how it works. You can't cast me aside when it's convenient and then try to take me back later. That goes for Kristine too. We were like siblings, but she won't take my calls. She sure will talk shit about me to the press, though, and do whatever she can to cash in on having known me. I've read some of what she's said, and a lot of it's just lies.

I don't know how Kristine's mom feels about me now. I don't know if I even want to know. We've fought before, Kristine and me, but never in a lasting

way. Her mom would always tell us that we'd work it out, that we'd always be close. I believed it. But now it can't be like that, and so I don't think it's right for me to approach her. She has to be on her daughter's side, and that's okay. That's right. It's what a parent is supposed to do, and I hope she knows that I don't hold that against her.

My sister is a more complicated issue. I try not to talk about her very much, because somebody tried to kill her shortly after the game. I'm told that she's recovering well. She'll be okay, eventually. They haven't caught the perpetrators yet, but it was someone local, someone from Whittree. I'm sorry it happened. I'm sorry that ignorant, mean-spirited fools feel the need to drag in the uninvolved. My sister hasn't talked to me either, by the way, so whoever did it, congratulations. You attacked someone who probably feels the same way about me that you do. Did you do it to punish her for being related to me by a quirk of fate, I wonder? Or did you do it for my benefit? Were you trying to hurt me by attacking someone I care about?

And, if that was the case, how can you look at me and then look in the mirror and still say that I'm the one who's evil?

## Choosing Life

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One of the strangest things about my journey through SOTF was its end. I was faced with an almost unprecedented opportunity. When my back was against the wall, when I was at my lowest, I was given the chance to choose whether to live or die.

It was a harder decision than you might expect.



When Dougie broke my knee, I was pretty sure that was it. I was fucked, I thought, completely and utterly. I couldn't walk, and in SOTF that's just about a death sentence even if you don't happen to be one of the most hated people left alive. Even Samuel Allen, the guy in Season Three who started the game with a broken leg, had crutches and had gotten his bones set already. He could at least hobble around on his own. I couldn't do even that much.

If you can't stand up on your own, you can't get away from anyone who wants to kill you. You can't fight back with any sort of efficacy. It's hard to hide or barricade yourself in somewhere, and even if you manage, you're probably just delaying the inevitable. The time limit to escape Danger Zones is ten minutes. It took me close to that to drag myself across the room, open the sliding glass door, and pull myself up into a plastic chair on the porch.

That journey was the single most painful experience of my life. Nothing else comes close, not the actual impact that broke my knee, not getting stabbed with a dagger or chopped with an axe, not getting cut up and stitched back together in the hospital. I had to half crawl, half drag myself, and every movement I made jostled my shattered knee and tore at the gashes in my arm and fingers and leg. My wounds weren't

particularly well healed beforehand, but I managed to make them worse anyways, ripping them back open.

I wasn't too worried about that, of course, because I was crawling outside to die. I said this before, but I figured I could just sit in the snow until I froze, and then I'd be out of the way and well-preserved and harder for anyone to hack apart or eat or whatever. I thought it would be an okay image, too, me on the chair, frozen solid, light gone out of my eyes and some snow dusting my head and shoulders. I'd be like Jack Nicholson in the end of *The Shining*. It could be a great thing to put on the cover of one of the DVDs, maybe, not the last one because that one would be all about Endgame, but the one before that. After all, with me out of the picture, the dynamic of the game would change.

One of the biggest things people look for in SOTF is control. It's scary and painful to realize just how much of your fate is out of your hands, and often choosing the manner of your death is the best you can hope for. I wanted to go out composed. I'd cried on my way outside, but I wanted to end my life with a little bit of dignity. I wanted to be strong. I wanted it to be on my terms.

I know that wasn't a sure bet. Anyone could've come and found me. I'd left an obvious trail. I was visible from the entrance of the unit, and I hadn't stood a chance of closing the door behind me, so the wind was blowing through the inside, making it even easier to realize where I was. If someone who'd wanted to torture or kill me had come, they would've been free to do as they wished. All I had to defend myself with was a dagger, stashed in the pocket opposite the hand in good enough condition to wield it.



I knew all of that then. I'm not religious. I don't pray. But I hoped, very very hard and with all of my heart, that I could just be left alone.

Instead, Lily found me and saved my life.



I wasn't happy to see Lily. I didn't want her to be there. I didn't think she would kill or hurt me, but that didn't really matter. I wanted to sink into nothingness, to fade away and just get it over with. I'd decided I was done. Anything delaying that end, anything pulling me back from the brink, was just a distraction, and all it could do was cause me more suffering.

It haunts me now, sometimes. I think, what if Lily had changed her mind? What if she'd been scared away by my demeanor? What if she'd gotten frightened and realized she didn't want to die after all? I can't hold these things against the imaginary version of her that leaves me to die. It wouldn't be her fault, and it wouldn't be wrong of her. She owed me nothing.

We weren't close. We weren't friends. We didn't talk a lot. We both did art, and she was alright, but I was better. We sat at the same lunch table once or twice, knew each other's names, maybe said a quick hello if we passed in the halls or bumped into each other outside of school, but that was it. She had no real reason to care about me, and I had no real reason to care about her.

That's a big part of why it almost didn't happen, I think. We were both thinking about ourselves, for most of our conversation. We were both being selfish, and the funny thing is, we both wanted the same exact thing.

I just explained wanting to die on my own terms, to die strong and with dignity, to die and have it mean something. Lily wanted that too. She wasn't someone

who could fight. I guess she'd figured that out by that point. She couldn't bring herself to kill herself directly. Fair enough. I was the same. I was going to let the environment do it for me. I don't know what Lily was looking for, but what she found was me, and I think in me she must have seen an opportunity to have her death really matter.

My ninth kill had been announced. I only needed one more, and Lily knew that. She knew that if I killed her, then I would get to leave. I would live, and it would be because of her. I would owe her my life, and her death wouldn't be like any of the other deaths in the game. Her death would be a trade, a life for a life. It would be the most meaningful it could possibly be, would leave a legacy in my continued survival. Even writing this, I'm almost jealous. I get why she wanted it. I get it more than you can imagine.

But, you see, I wanted my ideal death too. I was freezing and broken and I am not someone who changes gears very easily. I had come to terms with my fate. I had accepted it, I thought, and part of that was getting so used to it that I yearned for it too. I knew, in my mind, what would happen after I died. I'm not going to tell you what it was, but it was so real to me. I wanted it more than anything, and I'd talked myself into really believing I'd get it. If I didn't, who cared? I'd be dead anyways. I'd never know.

Lily tried everything she could. She tried to goad me. She tried to tempt me. She used logic. She didn't understand me one bit, though. I could see straight through her. I could read her like a book, because we were the same, but she had no idea. That's what made me sympathize with her, though. I mean, some of the other things didn't hurt. I had never really considered that I might live, and I didn't have a clear picture in

my head of what sort of fate that would be. But what really got me was when she begged.

I saw the need in her, saw her desperation, and I broke one last time. We both wanted our perfect endings, but only one of us could have it. And, ultimately, her claim was better. If I gave in, she would get what she wanted, guaranteed. If I didn't, it wasn't totally certain that things would go my way. And, of course, I came out better if I did what she wanted than she did if I followed my own selfish desires.

When I killed her, I did it suddenly. It was as quick and clean as I could make it, and I don't think she saw it coming. I hated her for making me care, for making me give up what I wanted so badly, but I also felt for her. We were the same, so I did everything I could to spare her the pain I was feeling.

She'd made me second guess myself and my perfect ending, and it tore me to pieces. No matter how angry I was about that, I didn't want to inflict the same thing on her. I didn't want to leave her any room for doubt.

## What Came Next

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I was evacuated from the arena by a pair of men. They had to lift me over the railing of the porch and they didn't do it cleanly. When Karen got her tenth kill, there was a big announcement from her collar, and Jared flew out personally on a helicopter to whisk her away. I guess that's what you get when you're the first. Me, I got a van that showed up when they felt like it. I got no special protection, no personal announcement. I was never in the same room as Karisma, but as we've established, that was probably to her benefit.

I did not get my beautiful, dignified death. Instead, I got an awkward, uncomfortable, embarrassing recovery. I don't think anybody was expecting me to actually make it. At one point, maybe they'd been prepared, back when I was sitting on nine and hadn't yet given away my best weapon or been crippled. By the time I clinched it, though, all the gambling sites had counted me out. I made some people a lot of money, the faithful who still believed or more likely the crazy willing to take long odds.

The drive away from the resort was hazy and strange and uncomfortable. I wish I could say that I blacked out and don't remember a thing, but that's not true at all. They got my collar off pretty quickly. I hadn't realized what a lightening it'd feel like until it was gone, and then once it was I almost felt like I'd lost something. The extraction team that picked me up included a paramedic, but only one. I'm told they'd reviewed my injuries and determined nothing was life-threatening and didn't want to over-commit the primary extraction team with Endgame potentially just about to erupt. I didn't get Marisa Vyland, which was

a shame. Mostly, they just told me to hang tight, because what I needed was involved treatment in an actual hospital, and for that they were going to take me to Los Angeles, to their own facility.

The van was very warm, and that was so strange to me after days in the cold. I remember talking about that, a little, but I don't think I was very coherent. I tried to shove the pain out of my mind, but I didn't have too much luck, even though they gave me some heavy duty drugs right away. I looked out the window and watched as we drove through the trees, and it was like I'd gone back in time two hundred years. The snow drifted down slowly and the world was still and there was nothing but the road and nature. It felt like for a long time there were no other cars. Finally, we passed through a checkpoint. It was staffed by a man and a woman in these bright yellow vests, and they seemed pretty curious about what was going on. The woman looked like she was only a few years older than me, and she peeked in the window and when she saw me she waved. I feel bad that I didn't wave back, or smile, or anything like that. I looked at her and I tried to nod, but I don't know if she could tell.

The driver was slow and careful but still we'd sometimes hit little dips in the road or have to slow down quickly and when that happened it jostled me and that made me scream. I think that made everyone there except the medic uncomfortable.

We finally came to a small private airport, and I was transferred to a plane and rushed to LA. The medic came with me and sat next to me, and I told her that it was my first time flying and she said I should look out the window. I did, and I had this fantasy that the plane would crash, that the weather would throw us off somehow and we'd go down and I'd die any-

ways, and I thought that would actually be a pretty good way to go. It would be tragic, poetic, and a lot of people would think it was justice. I'd done so much, come so far, so wouldn't it be great if there was a twist at the eleventh hour to rip it all away? Wouldn't that be perfect? I thought I was still okay with dying, and I said that to the medic too, and she gave me more pills.

Later, of course, I realized it wasn't actually my first time flying. They didn't drive us from Oklahoma to Oregon. I was just unconscious the first time, and was so caught up in the game that I didn't even consider what had happened between Whittree and its beginning.



That's just the story of what happened to me, of course. Back in the resort, while I was en route to LA, a lot of other things were going on.

There was an almost complete player turnover. Ashley died fighting Sarah. Vahka killed Marcus and a bunch of other people, shooting to second place on the kill charts before Yagmur got him too. Cathryn stabbed Alice. Something similar had happened in Sixty-Five, when Karen took out Zach and then Vincent keeled over, but I think my season recovered better. Cathryn was a force going into Endgame, responsible for the deaths of two of the killers she superseded. Combined with Yagmur's fight with Vahka, it created this sense of continuity and culmination. Madelyn, by contrast, always felt like a second-stringer to me, and Odile just fell apart.

Endgame was called, once again, at the final six, but Dougie never made it to the show. I don't know what he was thinking, and I try not to dwell on it too much. For the first time, Endgame actually included two members of the same team. Jackson and Yagmur

were both there, both on the Golden Hyenas, with Mason as their mentor. I'm told that fan expectations were massive. A winner's team, with a numbers advantage? It seemed perfect. But naturally, Cathryn killed Jackson first and that torpedoed any chance of multiple winners. I mean, if you don't count me, that is.

I'm sure you watched how it all wrapped. I'm sure you saw Corin come out on top, if not unharmed. You don't need me to explain it. For some of you, it was probably satisfying. For others, disappointing. The consensus doesn't seem perfectly clear yet. So often, a season's legacy only becomes apparent in hindsight. That's fine. The game ended, and the viewers took that how they took it, and the world moved on for those of us still left in it. Families mourned and buried their children, or else pretended they'd never existed. Mentors went back to their normal careers, some with a new measure of fame, others having squandered their opportunity. Repairs began on the parts of the resort damaged during filming.

It's not an ending, not really. The only people whose stories ended were the ones who died. The rest of us just moved on to the next chapter.



My recovery has not been easy. I've had a lot of ups and downs, medical and otherwise. For the first few weeks, I was very difficult to be around. I was in pain and I was frustrated with my comparative helplessness and immobility, and I was isolated from all of my support networks. I was emotionally unstable and I lashed out frequently, and the very people most responsible for helping me and putting me back together bore the brunt of my suffering. I'm sorry for that. It was unfair, and I owe a huge debt to those who stuck with me and were kind to me despite my actions. I

won't promise to do better, because I know that I'm imperfect, but I guess I can say here that I'll try.

A turning point came when I was able to connect with fans more. My initial forays were stumbling. The clips from my first stream are pretty easy to find. After I started maintaining a Twitter account, though, things got better. I found out that I wasn't alone. I made connections with the people who'd followed me with interest during the season, as well as with mentors and other SOTF alumni. I was able to share my thoughts and feelings, and that felt good.

Since then, I've done a lot. I've worked with a number of game developers, and that's something I've enjoyed and hope to keep up. I've spent as much time as I can talking with other winners (or at them, sorry, still a fangirl at heart). The winner community is actually like one big family. Yes, there are the outcasts, the hated ones and those who turn their noses up at the rest of us, but the fact remains, we have a major, shared, unique experience. That's an instant bond, one you have to consciously turn your back on to avoid.

I've been to conventions, as a casual attendee and as a guest. I've been on the radio, on talk shows, on podcasts. I'm so busy I barely have time to myself, but I actually really like that. And, of course, I've been in close contact with the inner workings of SOTF. I've done some consulting work, a bit of the official, paid sort, but also a lot of just hanging around different departments (mostly the ones where people don't totally fucking hate me for being a bitch while I was healing) and watching them work and providing feedback. It can actually be very useful to them, I'm told, to have an inside perspective and to know how their choices really affect us.



And, last but not least, I wrote this book. It's been a long journey. There are pieces in here that I put together in the first days, when I felt completely alone and I could barely sleep for the pain. There are words in here that have yet to be written as I type this sentence. In all, it's been an incredible, frantic journey to get this out of my head and into your hands. I know it may not be the book you wanted from me. It doesn't have all the answers. It doesn't tell you everything about my game. It's a collection of thoughts and hopes and fears and dreams. It's me, scars and all. That you've stuck with me this long, that means a lot to me. I couldn't have made it without you.

Thank you. We're just about at the end. I'm eighteen now. I can walk again, as long as I don't take it too hard and use my cane. My season is over, but another is coming soon, and another one after that. The whole world is waiting for us. I guess that's what comes next. I guess it's the rest of our lives.

## The Top Ten Things I Want To Do Before I Die (2021 Edition)

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This one's for me as much as it is for you. It's a brand new bucket list, a set of goals that sound cool to me right now. Some of them are vague and others are concrete. Some are simple and others fantastical. Will I get them all done? Only time will tell.

### 10. Reach Diamond In SOTF Champions

My highest rank ever in Champions was Gold, which isn't bad. It's in the top third of ranked players, which is decently impressive. The thing is, though, I got there all on my own, playing with higher ping than I get now, not putting that much time into it. Now that pro players think I'm interesting, I can probably coax one of them into coaching me, and now that I can actually spend as much time on this as I want, I can really try to grind my way up the ladder and prove I'm decent at this damn game. It's not my top priority right now, but someday I will do it. I know I can.

### 9. Browbeat Kenny Yamana Into Following Me On Twitter

Hey, Kenny, you're cool. I know you don't really care a lot about me yet, and that's okay. You don't have to be my fan like I'm yours. That said, I'm not going away. I'm part of SOTF and I'm part of the fandom and you may not realize it yet but I have a lot of pull and it's only going to increase. Why don't you throw me a bone now, when you get the advance reader copy my agents are sending you, instead of getting swarmed by all my fans asking why you're giving me the cold shoulder for the rest of eternity? It'd be so

much easier. So, so much easier. C'mon. It's just one little click.

### **8. Get Some Part Of Davison Secondary School Named After Me**

I plan to donate a bunch of money to Davison Secondary School just as soon as I can be sure that it'll buy me naming rights on a room or hall or something. Why? Because New Mexico, and Albuquerque specifically, really fucking hate me. Okay. Fair enough, but if you've decided we're going to be enemies, I'll be treating you as such and as I showed all game long I don't let people threaten me or make fun of me or push me around without consequences. I think that "The Jewel Evans Auditorium" has a nice ring to it, don't you?

### **7. See My Favorite Bands In Concert**

Originally this was just The Cure, but I figure there are so many groups I like, why not take the opportunity to see as many as I can? Some of my most beloved bands I'll of course never be able to catch live, because they've been broken up and/or dead since before I was born, but for the rest I can have this as a reminder to make time and not miss any opportunities, because you never know if they'll come again.

### **6. Go To College**

I mean, I guess I should, right? I wasn't that into school, but I always wanted to do more and specifically to go to art school. I was so worried because I didn't have enough money and I wasn't that special when it came to my grades. I applied to a few places but hadn't heard back yet when the game started, and I'm sure my family burned the letters whether I got ac-

cepted or not. I wouldn't go right away, anyways. I just have too much to do, and I don't even know what I'd major in now. But at some point I want to go back to school and graduate, just so I can say I did it, and also I guess maybe to learn something.

### **5. Travel To Another Continent**

I've never been outside of the United States, let alone North America. That has to change. There's a whole wide world out there and as soon as I get the passport I recently applied for it'll be open to me. I've always wanted to see Paris. I used to talk with Kristine about seeing the catacombs, and it'd be sad to make that come true all on my own but I think also healing, maybe. But why stop there? I want to get out and live, and make the most of the time I have, now that I really understand how precious it is. And of course, I'm lucky enough to be someone people in other places find interesting too, so I'm sure I'll be able to keep myself busy.

### **4. Find Love**

Now we're at a big one. I want to find love. I've talked about it on Twitter, but I actually have a pretty specific definition of love that encapsulates a lot of things, including compatibility, caring, and sex. It's something big and special and rare, and I've never quite gotten it right. I don't even know for sure if it really exists, but I want to find out. It doesn't have to last forever, and I know it may be hard. I know I'm scary and difficult to deal with, and I know that the sort of person I'm drawn to may not be the sort of person drawn to me. But I can dream, can't I? I can try.

### **3. Have A Threesome With Two Other Winners**

I'm not sure if this will be easier or harder than love. On the old list I specifically said I wanted to be spit-roasted by two hot male winners, but I'm a little more open with myself now and realize there are a lot of very bangable female winners out there too. I mean, there's always the chance this ends up being way easier than I expect, if that whole porn thing comes into being, but I doubt it. I'll just have to plant the seeds at a convention sometime.

### **2. Write More**

I really think that writing, both on Twitter and in this book, has helped me keep a handle on myself and has been very important for my mental state. I don't want to lose that. I always thought that I was okay at English class and its assignments, but writing wasn't something I'd have classified as being important to me. Now, though, I see how nice it can be to be able to go back and change your words if they don't say quite what you wanted them to, and how fulfilling it can be to see others react to what you've said. I'm so excited to hold these pages in my hands that I can't even describe it. I don't know what my next projects will be, whether I'll publish ever again or start a fansite or do features for the official SOTF site or what, but I've got so much to say I could just about burst.

### **1. Stay Involved In SOTF**

SOTF put my life in danger but in a lot of ways also saved it. This show has pulled me from nothing and given me a life and confidence and a purpose. I want to give back. I have so many ideas for how to make it better, for the viewers and the contestants and every part of the organization. I know I may not get

everything I want, but I'm going to try. It means too much to me to do anything else. Whatever may come, however it all develops, I'll be there. You haven't seen the last of me.

## Postscript

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So, that's it. We're done. You're released. Kill the lights. You made it out. You survived, and I did too.

I feel like we both know each other a little bit better now. You've learned a lot about me, or at least you've had the opportunity to if you've been paying attention. You probably didn't get everything that you wanted, but I never promised it to you. I warned you that you might not. I hope the trip's been interesting enough to make up for that.

And, of course, I've learned some about you too. I don't know your name, or what you look like, or even your gender, but I know now that you're either the sort of person to stick with my little book all the way to the end or the sort of person who doesn't care too much about doing things the proper and orderly way, the sort of person who maybe pages through as they please or else who jumps ahead right away to the finale. Whatever the case, I respect it.

There are just a few more words I'd like to say, a few people I'd like to thank and a few last bits of tidying up.

First off, this project would not exist without Christie Jarrett, my therapist. It was her suggestion that got me writing, and she's been invaluable in helping me put myself back together. I rag on her, and on therapy in general, more than I ought to on Twitter, and I guess I should just say that most of the time I truly am grateful.

That this is readable is due largely to the tireless work of my editor, Benny Newton, who you may know from his longstanding tenure and wide body of work in the publishing arm of SOTF. He took time he didn't have out of a very, very busy schedule to fix my

typos and argue with me about tone and then see to it that this got released even when I vetoed half of the changes he wanted.

Tremendous thanks are due to my two lovely proofreaders. Irina Morozov read the entire manuscript out loud and pointed out all the parts where my phrasing was bad, while Elena “Namira” Hawke went through ruthlessly eliminating those last few typos, and also made me tone down some of the sex parts. Yes, this is the toned-down version.

I’m a difficult person to manage and I know that a lot of what I do and say pisses people off. Trust me, though: it would be a dozen times worse without the tireless efforts of my publicist and my lawyer, Shirley Loving and Pauline Hutton respectively. I don’t always take your advice, but that keeps you in a job, right? I owe each of you a bottle of very fancy wine, to help you drink away the frustration of working with me.

A book without a cover is nowhere near as sexy as a person without their clothes, and I wouldn’t feel half as good about this whole project as I do without the amazing talent of the artist who is credited here as Kotorikun, who breathed life into a shot from my season and made it into something more, something with the perfect flair and attitude. Thanks are also due for the wonderful job on my author portrait, and for putting up with me wanting a portrait done in the first place. Check out [kotorikuns.tumblr.com](http://kotorikuns.tumblr.com) to see even more truly incredible work; you won’t regret it.

Thank you to all the people who work for SOTF and who interfaced with me, directly or indirectly. I was not an easy person to deal with after my win. In fact, a little secret: I’m still a bit challenging. I’ve been treated with nothing but patience and kindness and professionalism, though, even from the people who



obviously can't fucking stand me. Yeah, that's right: I know some of you hate me, and I know who. It's okay. It means a lot that you've done right by me despite that.

It feels weird to say this, but I'm also very grateful to my victims and their families. I literally would not be alive without them, and I know most of them saw or see me as a monster and hey, maybe I am. Still, as one can be grateful to the animal they consume for the sacrifice it made to bring them pleasure, so too am I thankful to those I hurt and tormented and killed, because it's them who gave me this life.

As a winner of SOTF, I am standing on the shoulders of giants. I am where I am because of the efforts and actions of so many past contestants, winners and losers, players and pacifists. Ours is a story without an ending, but I do want to tip my hat to those who authored the chapters before mine. I especially want to thank those other winners who have been so kind and welcoming and supportive to me in really unconditional ways. I want to be like you. You all have been my heroes for so long, and it means so much to make it here and realize most of you actually really are awesome, sympathetic, brave, kind people.

To my Twitter followers: I love you all. You've been with me through so much since my victory, and you've seen me when I was cool and clever and also when I was hungover and raging at the universe. In a way, this book has been like our little conversations in macrocosm, freed of arbitrary character limits. I hope you felt at home between these covers. I'll see all of you around there still, hopefully more than ever.

And, finally, to all the fans who followed me with something more than apathy during my season, thank you. Whether you loved me or hated me,

whether you wanted me to live or eagerly anticipated my death, you made my life worth something. You took this boring, normal little goth girl and turned her into a star. You rescued her from normalcy and mediocrity and you opened the doors of the world.

I've said it again and again, but this isn't an ending. I have so much left to do, so many things I'm looking forward to, some of which I'll hopefully be talking about very soon. Everyone who's come with me, if you'd kindly follow me just a little further down the path, I promise I'll do my best to make it worth your while. And you know, of course, I always do my best to keep my promises.

Jewel Evans  
Los Angeles  
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