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THE GOOD FAMILY

by

James Hannigan

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Construction Engineering Technology/Creative Writing)

The Honors College

University of Maine

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ABSTRACT

The Good Family is a story following a group of seventeens in their historic and scrutinized '68 Birth-Night Battalia. The characters, who have trained since as early as age twelve and as late as fourteen – with heavy combat training for up to a year and as little as six months, are well prepared by the Tokien system. Demonstrating their Link-worthy will be a challenge that none of them can fully imagine, as this year is the unveiling of a Tokien-engineered tech development that will undoubtedly change the course humanity rides in the closing of the 22nd century.

List of characters

Charlie Leaders	Charlie Partners
Jude Graff	Katie Ryan
Cal Good	Daniel Lipson
Dori Chase	Haley Farsee
Dominic Torruscio **	Dori Chase
Cane Biggs	Wes Driggs
Cage Nicholls	Ike Sinclair
Jollara Seymour	Jered Sandoval
Pricilla Carroll	Fury Russell
Terry Hale	Yuri Carr
Dak Guerrero	Roland Wood
Benny Morales	Quinn Norris

** Dominic is traded because of his parent's switching professions and subsequently moving home districts

DEDICATION

Mom, Dad, Jill, Molly – I love you all.

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THE DROP OF YOUR LIFE

Thursday August 25, 2168
12:00 PM
Montessori District, 207S

He'd been told by hundreds of Tokien citizens in the markets and shopping plazas, where families go to spend their money on the mandate shift¹, they'd be holding profile cutouts in the stands and hollering his name. The Tokien Surveillance System²-Press believed this year was Checkpoint Charlie's to lose. A report had got leaked from an unnamed source about three weeks prior naming Cal Good and Daniel Lipson as the anonymous dynamic-duo that had been lighting up the HUB Arena for nearly two months now.

The pair had allegedly rocketed their avatar names to the top gameboards while simultaneously shielding any TSS tracking technology from accessing their IP addresses or physical locations. A lot of Tokien seventeens who grow a bit of hubris before The Battalia³ want to get access to live combat action in the most up to date HUB software: the 240i cell. Announced in front of a small room of press, the HUB tech engineer teams revealed that 2168's Birth-Night celebration⁴ would be the unveiling of the first tech release in the last decade. Subsequently the press clued onto the boys because of a few words mentioned during the announcement of such a festive release date.

¹ Mandate Shift – time that is ordered by the TSS and Edifice to be utilized however fit to an individual or family for entertainment, leisure or relaxation.

² TSS – an AI operated system of surveillance that runs throughout every outpost and assists district links in keeping peace within outposts.

³ The Battalia – simulated rite of passage offered to candidate seventeens to bypass The Fields and become links as an eighteen.

⁴ Birth-Night celebration – September 1 every year is the day for Tokien citizens to gather and celebrate again another calendar year in human history.

Roy Good and Craig Lipson, the fathers of Cal and Daniel, led the tech engineer teams. That had been their position since they graduated The Fields, nearly thirty years ago. In their time in The Fields they had proved worthy of starting up their own research team to replace what was already believed to be the most immersive mixed reality experience possible. Roy and Craig, and their small team, were convinced that they could synthesize a gel from plant extract with a potential for variable viscosities. After nearly six years of research the team unveiled a demo video of their first prototype and called it a “concept 240i”. The name stuck and after an additional few years of collecting the funding to build a manufacturing center addition big enough to build the new cells in the abandoned subway tunnels of what was one day New York City.

Roy and Craig’s wives, Amy Good and Jane Lipson, had facilitated a terrific launching and were preparing the post-conference gathering when they heard from the stand one of their husbands utter, “Our sons and daughters will be lighting up the gameboards with this technology for generations to come.”

The sound-bit stuck to the headlines of memes and news posts on the HUB social networking apps for a few days. Craig was the first to publicly deny that the statement was about their actual sons. Roy had supported Craig’s statements the same day. Amy and Jane were both in public denial and unison support of their sons.

The situation had become so public that private meetings had been ordered a week prior to the Battalia to verify that Cal and Daniel weren’t in collusion with their parents. The Edifice had ordered the meetings without clearance from the TSS, inducing a potential conflict of interest because of how dually embarrassing it was to have the TSS potentially unable to track the HUB activity of two seventeens without a 240i cell to their name. All

the parents participated through the Augmented-Meeting mode available from the standard Tokien HUB menu. The boys rode the transit tube up from their district 351, through district 603 and along the coast that led to the central district, 207S. Their beasts had to wait outside the door, avoiding any way to record the meeting. And they'd been scheduled to complete their daily training in the Montessori's public gym – a good PR move from the Charlie camp, a week before the biggest night of the year and the boys' lives.

Considering their names being littered in the news. The Edifice had informed the boys to answer that they're in the central outpost to submit the Charlie leader list for the Battalia. Information not due until mid-week, the boys had made it clear that they were already decided on who would lead their squadron during their showtime.

Without any evidence to bring against either family, the Edifice began the meetings that took nearly half a work-day⁵. The conclusion that the Edifice had reached was that the boys were innocent claiming there was zero evidence that the boys could even be pulling this sort of feat off. They were busy every day with training and both held impeccable attendance records. Even while the boys were actively present in the meeting with the Edifice, the two usernames in question (rIcer5421 and D44-doe) allotted over four million Tokien coins in winnings.

Exiting the Edifice's building, situated on the top of the East End of the Montessori district's central outpost, the boys grabbed lunch along the cobblestone streets. The streets in the central outpost were lined with old box trucks mounted on cement blocks with big windows cut out of one side and a kitchen along the opposite cargo wall. Cal chose to snack

⁵ Work-day – Tokien work days last eight hours. Three shifts allow the economy to continuously be producing and working.

on some tortilla-wrapped tofu skewers and sautéed mushrooms. He ordered a protein shake from another box truck down the dirt sidewalks that lined either side of the ankle-breaking cobblestones.

Cal's mom had taught him how to appreciate the flavors available in a Tokien diet. With only seeds and seedlings hidden in disaster shells surviving the transition that Tokien developed from when the anarchy was overthrown after the bombs dropped, 150 years ago now, the Tokien diet was heavily based on plant-nutrients and renewable supplements. Each district outpost had a greenhouse big enough to house hydroponic style farming that fed every citizen in the outpost happily, three times a day. A shift from livestock had occurred because of livestock's depletion in the nuclear fallout and the footprint that livestock adds to humanity. The box trucks are supplied by the outpost greenhouses in each district as well, so Cal needed only to raise his arm and scan his wrist tag⁶.

Waiting for the confirmation ping, Cal popped the two multivitamins and fish oil pill in his right pocket's plastic baggie. He turned to find Daniel standing in a sun-shined line that served up veggie gyros and Daniel's guilty pleasure – veggie-based gelato. He too held pills in his pocket and when he made it to the front of the line, ordered and gladly accepted his arugula and purple cabbage gyro with protein-packed chickpeas and quinoa, he popped the pills back dry.

⁶ An RFID barcode tattoo given to each Tokien citizen at birth storing all necessary personal information.

Tuesday September 1, 2168
7:58 PM
Montessori District, 207S

The thousands of cameras flashing from stands to stage, capturing the anguish, anxiety, and excitement on the faces of the 160 candidates⁷ approaching their first moments as contestants⁸, had blinded Cal temporarily. It wouldn't be until Cal dropped under the stage that the blaring white spots muddling his vision would dissipate. Still, he waved and smiled cheerfully towards the raging Tokien crowd.

A voice buzzed through Cal's coms⁹, "The example you set tonight will become a part of history for generations of next to use as a standard to live up to. It's all in our system and the Tokien way works – they've had it working for one hundred years." He imagined Jude, the Checkpoint Charlie squadron leader, placing the notecards she always reads from back in her chest pocket and chuckled to himself.

Darkness overcame Cal's vision as he was beginning to make out the surroundings below the stage. All the contestants were being ushered five stories down on a crawling descent to the charging ports the 240i cells. The 240i's operating system generated a lot of heat and need to be buried in engineered frozen ground system to avoid overheating. Lights flicked on, illuminating a set of stairs that would bring each candidate straight from the dropping stage pad they'd been standing on to their 240i capsule sliding door.

Another voice came in through Cal's earpiece, "The next four hours will feel like fourteen. Time is slowed in The Arena. The temperatures will change this year, and

⁷ Candidate – The term given to Tokien children over the age of ten who are chosen to begin training for their district's representation.

⁸ Contestant – The term given to seventeens who are inside The Arena during their Battalia.

⁹ Coms – communication headpieces fixed into the contestant's human headsets.

everything is filmed.” The voice paused to allow kids to digest the first wave of information, “Look down to your right wrist. You should see your avatar’s extremities by now and you should see two black bands. Remove one and fit it on your left wrist, so that it doesn’t cover your HUB watch. Speaking into the left wrist is a public communication line – with the ability to reach the ears of all your teammates. The right wrist is private coms and only can be heard by your partner.”

Cal identified the voice as Paladin. Paladin, the city planner of outpost 207S, was Cal’s grandfather. He also served as the Battalia-training advisor to Daniel Lipson and was the youngest Elder to assume a high position such as city planner, at the age of sixty-eight.

Seventeens around Cal were still busy placing bands on the appropriate arm when Cal’s vision returned to fully clear. The booming voice of Paladin resumed, “You’ll all end up in random locations. Get to your safe house and loot up before executing your district’s battle plans. Oh! And you’ll all be given the same basic equipment, plus one specialty item based on your skillset¹⁰. For the most part, if you don’t know how to use something from your inventory; watch your fellow contestants.”

Paladin began speaking as Cal looked around the room to see each candidate descending their set of stairs, “Your avatar suits are all waiting in the safe houses, so good luck without them – a simple stab will probably hurt without a shield or any additional health. The last thing is that all your teammates will appear as red dots on your watch’s mini map. All mini map displays are blown up and live-feed projected onto The Arena’s

¹⁰ Skillsets are determined solely by the Elder’s Edifice.

sky, along with some other desirable information. Be wary as though the map in the sky this year can suck you in.”

The lights were cut again, and some screams began until the second set of lights appeared. The 240i HUB capsules at the bottom of each set of stairs were now illuminated in each district’s team color. Enough light filled the room to reveal that everyone in the room was naked. Cal looked down to realize that his pants no longer hugged the skin on his ass, calves, or thighs. His boots, that resembled the same olive green the Tokien Links¹¹ wore in their protective duties, were the only piece of clothing on his body. His family necklace, an Iris flower¹² being wrapped up by the slender body of a Marten ferret¹³, still dangled from his neck. His aunt, a silversmith in the aboveground Checkpoint Charlie district outpost, had sculpted the pendant for Cal’s fourteenth Birth-Night as a reminder of how far the Good family had come.

Standing at the base of the HUB capsule that read the number fifty-six on the top silver battery cell, Cal shot his fists into the air in a wheeling celebration motion. He climbed the two steps. Inside the capsule were two platforms big enough for a candidate’s feet. He raised his knees, one at a time, to stand on the platforms. A strap dropped from the top of the 240i’s glass cylindrical capsule. He strapped the waist band around the top of his buttocks like a belt would sit on his lower love handles. He inserted the standard issue HUB contacts and attached the breathing mechanism. Smacking the red button on the wall, Cal

¹¹ Tokien-Links are an army of elite-trained soldiers who protect the well-being and honor of each and every Tokien citizen.

¹² National flower of Croatia.

¹³ National animal of Croatia.

smiled as he looked down to see the sparkly gel start to ooze out from the drain below his feet.

Cal looked around to see Daniel struggling to find one end of the Velcro Strap. Cal chuckled until he could feel the gel dropping from the top battery cell's opening too. His hair and face were immediately globbed. The gel had made its way up past Cal's shins as well, clothing his naked body to the surrounding candidates.

"Who's ready. How can you not get up for this?" Cal asked the group.

Quin was the one to normally speak up second, "You forreal Cal. Let's get locked in." Lights were out as the rising gel fully engulfed Cal's head and he was alone with his thoughts.

TENNIS CLUB

Tuesday September 1, 2168
8:01 PM
Montessori District, The Arena

From Cal's eyes...

A wave as tall as the horizon smacked him in the face.

Drinking water was what he was literally doing. Not the way he was taught in his mother's training sessions. His mother's method was to blow a bubble out his nose. If done with enough vigor, the HUB simulation would let his avatar breathe as normal, underwater.

After the burning in his lungs caused Cal's vision to begin staining blood red and pulsating to distort clarity, he decided to start treading water. His diagnostics became clear in the sky to read as he drifted, in place, over each cresting wave. His health was down to 26 hitpoints¹⁴ and he could see that he was about five hundred feet from his district's safe house.

Cal twisted his body, scooping his hands into the icy ocean current as he kicked his feet in order to swim towards the shore. "Danny!" scouting a radius, Daniel couldn't be seen. "Danny!" Cal's voice stayed low enough to not be heard from far away. Cal stopped when he felt the warmth of the water increasing as his feet fell to an upright stance.

Cal now stood in waist-deep water as he had reached the beach's tidal shelf. He whipped his drenched hair so that it smacked the back of his neck. The water drained from the overgrown dreadlocks running in the Good family for its fourth generation shined bright in the sun. His distorted vision still couldn't identify a single contestant. Cal glanced into the sky and searched around the diagnostic live feeds to find the information that would

¹⁴ Out of one hundred health hitpoints.

show how long the Charlie safe house would be safe – the clock in the lower left corner of the visible sky read 25:24 and was continually counting down by the second. Cal decided against wasting any more time waiting to potentially find where his partner dropped. He resumed his swimming to shore until it was shallow enough to get back onto two feet and sprint for the dry sand.

Daniel sprinted onto the shore behind Cal's right. His coughing ashore was a pleasant surprise to Cal. Cal watched from the edge of the tall beach grass growing along the bottom of the cliff edge as Daniel propped himself to one knee first and then rose to two feet in a crouched run. As he flattened his back to the rock wall that Cal advanced to, Daniel dry heaved a couple times until he coughed up the salt water in his stomach. Cal waited as he made a few more dry heaving attempts to get what seeped into his avatar's lungs out. The blue of the ocean was clearest to Cal as he looked over the horizon that set a gorgeous backdrop for what commotion would come of the 100th annual Battalia. "Did you suddenly black and come to?" Daniel choked over his coughing a bit more as Cal watched he stood and wiped the sand off his legs and buttocks.

"Jeez, Danny." Cal started scoping in and out of the points on horizon as he spoke, "I found this Barret 50 in the weeds here. When you get your health back, I'll gift it to you 'cause I know it's your favorite. We gotta move to a spot in the sun¹⁵."

Daniel's distressed panting gave way to words, "We're close to the Trefethan; it's just around this peninsula." He pausing for a few coughs, "In the cove that has that boat launch." Daniel pointed so that Cal could see. As the two waited for one to make a plan, a

¹⁵ Sunlight regenerates avatar's health at a rate of one health hitpoint per second of being in the sunlight. In contrast, shade only regenerates health at a rate of one health hitpoint every three seconds.

bullet whizzed down, and the planning was over. The compass on the top of his peripheral vision had an arrow pointing to the hash¹⁶ that read two degrees from the N, “358” Daniel screamed.

“They’re above us, not shooting at us though, hold your fire,” Cal instructed.

Daniel scurried forward along the thin path that was naturally created by a thin strip of beach sand where the grass doesn’t grow nearest to the rock façade. “Let me know if you find another weapon, I’ll switch it for this sniper. Then we can both defend our position,” Cal whispered to Daniel through their private coms.

Daniel’s head popped upward as he turned to address the limp body that fell from the sky above. Cal moved into the tall grass to scavenge the dead body as Daniel spun around again to see if anybody was going to make sure the flying body was, in fact, dead. No avatars leaned over the edge. “What’s he got, Cal?” Daniel asked.

“He had found two guns. Now we both have one. They don’t have any bullets though.” Cal explained as he shuffled one step to the right as Daniel had joined him in the weeds now.

“I’m going to keep the deagle¹⁷,” Daniel’s voice was enthusiastic like he had discovered a childhood toy. Cal didn’t respond at first, instead he advanced towards the tennis club.

¹⁶ Enemies who fire weapons reveal a temporary ping on all opponent’s (within a small vicinity) coordinate line. Coordinate lines displays above every Avatar’s field of vision throughout the entire Battalia.

¹⁷ Deagle – IMI Desert Eagle

Cal began advancing father down the path as the second round of firing came from the edge of the cliff. He stopped behind a trunk to wave along Daniel and see that the contestants on top of the cliff were now firing out into the ocean at contestants still making their way to shore, “Who’s able to provide some cover fire from the tennis club?” Cal spoke into his left wrist. “Danny and I are approaching your South, 210 maybe,” Daniel took a step back as Cal turned to shrug his shoulders.

No reports flooded into Cal’s coms and he began running as Daniel sprinted past the tree that he waited at. He thought about calling out again but figured it better to get a bit closer before trying again. A hollow boom came from in front of the boys and a whizzing bullet zoomed forty feet above to quiet one contestant’s shooting.

They had cover from Jude, her hawk eyes protecting her kin. The next prey fell as the second bullet sliced through the sky. Cal turned to watch the screaming royal leader fly through the air into the tall grass. Much like the unfortunate contestant from the Island that had fallen earlier.

Cal didn’t wait to begin sprinting again. He reached the driveway just after Daniel. Cal tapped Daniel on the right shoulder and watched as he crouch-sprinted his way to the door that Jude propped open with her shooting stance, eyes still downrange fixed to her scope.

“Let’s go, Cal,” Jude screamed out.

She relinquished the sniper rifle to Daniel as Cal began to sprint toward the same door. Approaching the green wooden door split down the center with a crack. Daniel may not have needed anything else the rest of the night, except for his avatar skin, of course.

“What will you use?” asked Cal, arriving to the door and accepting the Scar-H assault rifle that Jude pulled off her back.

“Nothing, I have a pistol on my side. I need to go back inside and help organize materials for everyone. Please, come inside and grab your avatar skins – Dori has already hung them in the closet inside the door here, to your right. Then guard the next wave of charlies to arrive and buzz Jered when you need an additional piece. The rest of arrivals are to help you and make sure everyone arrives safely.” Jude whipped the door completely open before whispering in Jered’s ear as Cal bolted through the opening.

“Check out my skin, Danny,” Daniel made his way into the walk-in coat room closet as Cal’s flashy iron man suit was beginning to cover his no-skin torso. The rockets in his palms and foot soles were glowing bright halogen-white and he flexed his finger tips and foot muscles to test the rocket power.

“Put that shit away, brotha.” Jered spoke softly from the door frame, “Daniel what did you choose? You two have got to hurry.”

“We’re definitely avatars now. My health and shield are filled,” Cal exclaimed.

“I chose a simple camo ghillie suit.” Daniel answered Jered as Cal watched his extremities begin to be cloaked in a frilly mess that mimicked the Good family’s gangly heads of hair. As the frills continued to cover Daniel’s no-skin avatar body the camo began to resemble the background of the coat room’s wooden interior decorative architecture. In seconds, Daniel was invisibly cloaked into the background like a chameleon. The trio

appreciated the lethality of Cal's aggressive choice and Daniel's ingenious choice of shield-skins¹⁸, chuckling as they turned to exit the coat-room closet.

"How'd you get lucky with this job, Jered?" Daniel asked as he moved to let Cal walk through the elegant oak door frame.

^^^^^^^^^^^^

Wednesday August 31, 2167

The eve of the '68 Battalia...

"Mr. Daniel H Lipson?"

Four TSS agents stood, arms crossed, behind the man and woman in suits who each held a white manila folder and were finding their seats. Opposite the pair of agents sat Daniel and next to him Paladin.

She kept her folder tucked under her forearms as the man next to her opened his folder to the first page, "Fuck it. My name is Rita, his name is Rico."

"Wait! Huh, hold on." Daniel made out his profile and saw his mugshot as the man slammed his folder shut. "Rita, you can't." he was taller than Daniel remembered. Probably because when Rita stood up, he was short again.

"This isn't something written in the Tokien handbooks, Rico. We've been playing a charade and I'm tired of it. Nobody's ever monitored the candidates like we have been, and we've got zero dirt on this kid. Let's just talk to him, fuck." she pulled his shoulder down.

¹⁸ Increase shield to one hundred hitpoints and disguises the avatar's identity with a character of the contestant's choice.

Daniel sat up in his seat and scooted it forward when she turned back across the table. “What does the TSS need from Daniel today? It’s the eve of the biggest night of his life.” Paladin leaned into the conversation, resting his forearms in a manner that one-upped Rita’s posture.

“We’re actually here today to thank Daniel for his service to the TSS and offer a chance to review the process. It’d be just a few questions, of course.” The man spoke sternly. He reopened the manila folder and Rita followed suit.

“Okay, let’s get on with it then.” Daniel responded quickly.

~~~~~

*From Daniel’s eyes...*

Tuesday September 1, 2168

8:09 PM, The Arena

“Not sure, luck of the draw I guess,” Jered responded and chuckled as Cal and Daniel turned their backs to him. Daniel immediately looked for access to the roof. He found a fire escape that ran up the white siding to what looked like a maintenance entrance to the attic. A good start, Daniel rushed to the first rung. A peek around the corner and Daniel saw Cal working his way toward the southeast corner, Daniel presumed Cal was going to scout the front of the building. “Cal, cover the front of the building. That hill is bound to have a couple charlies barreling down, don’t ya think? I’m going to find a way to the roof and then you can shift to our blind side on the North side of the building.”

“Yeah, that’s a kosher plan, Danny,” Cal responded and cocked the barrel of a pump shotgun.

The maintenance entrance did lead to the attic. The attic housed the HVAC system for the building's cooling, heating and ventilation. It had insulation laid in between the roof trusses and ceiling joists. Zero signs of daylight and the musty aromas filling the room were enough reasons for Daniel to exit.

Back on the fire escape, Daniel noticed a second fire escape. Daniel smiled and raised his left arm, "Thirty seconds, Cal, and I'll be on the roof to give you some eyes."

The top of the building had a noticeable wind. Daniel tucked on the right side of the peak and worked his way towards the center where he pulled an anchor out of his inventory. The anchor had been the item selected, as Daniel's role in the Battalia was: specialized sniper. The Edifice has seen it imperative that Daniel carry an anchor.

The HUB sniping anchor comes in a cylindrical capsule the size of some combat water canteens, when the top is taken off two buttons appear. A red one and a green one. Daniel smashed the red button first and saw that the anchor claws were now exposed. He raised the metallic capsule without aiming and pressed the green button. From one end of the anchor, a steel cable projected and struck through the roof frame – something that only The Arena's physics could allow. From the other end a hook popped out of the button's housing cutout. Daniel fumbled around his waist until he found the carabiner that had also been custom fastened to his startup gear by the Edifice.

Safely attached to the structure, it only took a simple press of the blue button on the side of the capsule to retract, in the case that Daniel would need to scurry off the roof. His blond hair tossed in and out of his scope. He ran along the angled roof's green shingle-covered peak, hoping to get good vantage points of the front lawn to the Charlie safe house.

“Be careful, you dipstick, I can see you pretty plainly,” Cal waved from his spot at the corner of the building’s front sun porch.

“Gotcha! I couldn’t see you,” Daniel responded, “I won’t stay here for long. It’s just I can see a lot up here!” A sudden noise came from the ground and both boys scrambled to locate the chaotic shouts and incessant banging. Daniel made his way to the roof’s edge, feeling a jerk back from the anchor as it reached its maximum length as Daniel leaned the barrel of his sniper over the outer edge of the roof. His fingers remained on the trigger and his eyes peered through the scope, revealing a glimpse of Cane. Raising his left wrist, Daniel spoke softly, “Jered, let in Cane. He is the one banging on the door.”

“10-4,” Jered responded. A swinging door was audible to Daniel from below.

“Danny, I’m around the back on the docks. Get back to the front and I’ll look to the South from the back here. Can you get a good look to the North and East?” Cal’s voice came in over the coms.

Daniel spoke back into the private coms on his right wrist, “Yeah, can do. 10-4, brotha.” Daniel found a seat on the center of the roof’s peak and entered into architecture mode to construct a small shooter’s coup out of the 130 metal panels<sup>19</sup> that he had auto-generated. His shooter’s coup took two of the preset shapes Daniel had designed himself to build. Inside the safe cover Daniel decided to check his mini map for some updates on possible teammate locations.

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<sup>19</sup> Metal panels are 4 feet by 4 feet squares that contestants can build protective cover for themselves with. It auto generates at one panel per second and has a maximum allotment of five hundred panels. Contestants often utilize the customizable five inventory spots.

A pack of three seemed to be making their way along the same beach Cal and Daniel approached from. They were bound to make it to the boat ramp in a few moments, “Jered, get a few more weapons ready – you’ve got three more coming. Ninety seconds, maybe.”

“Yessir, I’ll be ready.” Jered responded.

“Make that thirty seconds, Jered.” Cal followed up Daniel’s report, “I’m posted up on the end of the wharf, here, behind the Tennis Club. I have them in my sights.”

“We’ll have a few weapons to choose from,” Jered responded. Background commotion muffled everyone’s voices, “Flag them towards me, you two.”

“Cal, get them in safely. There’s a few coming down the hill and I’m going to back them up.” Daniel scoped over the edge of his cover, “Charlies inbound 110.”

He saw Fury, Ike and Cage huddled behind the retaining wall built to create the side of the driveway that led towards an abandoned Island cottage. Cage was working his way up to a higher vantage point behind some of the patio furniture off to the right of the cottage’s deteriorating foundation.

The HUB simulation had added a tail to each bullet. Plenty flew between the three fighting charlies and the three contestants across the road. Daniel impulsively fired when he saw the tail one bullet enter the gut of his red-headed teammate, Fury. The attacking contestants moved from their cover and pushed forward to crowd Ike and Cage, who suddenly were outnumbered. Fury crawled, tightly bracing herself to the retaining wall and gaging how bad her injury was.

“How many do we still need to collect?” Dori chimed through the communication feed abruptly, snapping Daniel’s focus.

“There’s five of you out there and seven of us in here.” Jude spoke swiftly.

“I have eyes on three survivors who are in a battle. Cage and Ike have now downed two Mountain contestants who they ran into. Fury is down, she might survive. That leaves five that we don’t have tabs on,” Daniel settled the score.

“Count Jollara too. That’s four left,” Jered mentioned.

Jollara’s deep voice was unmistakable, “Cal, I’m coming to support your spot. Still on the docks?”

“Come around the left of the building and meet me, Jollara” Cal instructed.

Scanning the area to the East, eyes still pressed to his scope, Daniel noticed the enemy contestant had now downed Ike. Cage was struggling to secure a position to fight the last Mountain seventeen. Daniel opened fire, connecting in his first shot. A gurt<sup>20</sup> belted from Ike. Daniel moved his scope to find Fury who bled horribly now, she raised her hand high – her thumb struggling to rise for an ‘ok’ signal. Ike was right next to Cage when the shooting subsided, subsequently Ike became the first to receive Cage’s attention. Ike was also a medic, fitting that he be revived to help the near bleeding out, Fury.

“Saved the kill for you, Cage,” Daniel mumbled inaudible to the coms. Cage put another bullet through the royal’s no-skin avatar after reviving Ike. “Cage and Ike are trying

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<sup>20</sup> Gurt – a deep baritone growl distinct to Charlie candidates, contestants, and links.



to get Fury down to the safe house – things aren't looking good for her though," Daniel reported.

Ike, a trained medic, sprang into action – tending to Fury's wound. "She ain't leaving us like this," Ike assured.

"Daniel, get your survivors to hurry up. We're waiting on them now," Cal's voice was comforting.

"We have four more out there, don't we?" Daniel asked.

"No! Benny came running in just after Jollara did. They dropped next to each other." Cal was below Daniel, "I'm headed inside."

"Let's get them in here, Daniel," Jude chimed in over the coms. Daniel scoped back to see the trio on the move. Fury had just dropped her parachute backpack and was frozen at the entrance of the tennis court's fence.

"Cage, you, Fury and Ike get inside!" Daniel figured Jude must be watching because he was thinking of saying the same, "Daniel, get down from up there."

Without hesitation, Daniel strode towards his anchor and slammed the blue button as he rushed the capsule. The steel cable swung like the body of a cobra, dancing straight into its home. The small capsule then synched to Daniel's waistband above his right butt cheek.

Turning to descend, the ladder shook, and Daniel watched rust flake off around the ladder's anchor bolts. He paused when he saw the chimney to his left. Voices of his teammates projected from the brick opening. He hopped back onto the green roof and made

his way up to the chimney. He had read some funky truths about HUB Arena physic phenomena – the chimney chute was one he'd never tested.

Surely, just like Mario and Luigi in the old Nintendo mazes that led to epic battles against Bowser and his motley crew, Daniel stood atop the chimney's opening for a second before falling, quick, through the soot covered chimney walls. Daniel tumbled out into the main ballroom that made the first floor of the Trefethan club. Everyone stopped briefly to see Daniel's dramatic introduction before returning to see what would happen with Fury being the only Charlie left outside. Daniel took note of everyone's avatars. They had released team's choices last night – he just hadn't taken the liberty to look. Cal was examining the rockets on the palms of his crimson red Iron Man suit a bit more. Daniel imagined the biggest smile on Cal's face was hidden below the metal shell of his avatar skin. Jude and Katie elected to represent their strong woman-pride by choosing the GI-Joe female characters from the US and from Great-Britain, respectively. Cane tested a few web shots; he had chosen to be the Spiderman from the Amazing Spiderman movie series. And Dori was a fearful Katniss Everdeen. Daniel knew the names of the contestant's chosen characters only because of the collection of 21<sup>st</sup> century pop culture that had been saved by Tokien's original edifice and copied for each Tokien child's cultural development. Art and artistic expressions of all genres of literature had picked back up amongst the Tokien citizens in the past half century, the TSS and Edifice used the 21<sup>st</sup> century pop-culture collections saved in the surviving disaster shells to subsidize the cultural teachings that they wished to induce on their youngest citizen.

All the non-leaders chose their favorite training characters as their avatar skin for the Battalia. Nothing, in Daniel's mind, was as good of a choice as his. The ghillie-suit – literally the most iconic thing in Tokien archives. It's downloaded by everyone in Tokien.

Illiterate grunts sang in unison as Ike and Cage entered the ballroom. The cries began deepest in the diaphragms of each male seventeen. Shouting into the ground with eyes shut, the charlies intertwined their arms, locking them on each other's shoulders. Swaying with the humbled beat a ring formed in the center of the room as people watched the clock built into the floor at the spot that centered the Charlie's gurning circle. "We have less than five minutes until we are live on air. Let's get into the water and get swimming so our parents have something to cheer for!" Jude had made her way around to the back side of the ballroom, ushering candidates towards the backdoor that lead down to the docks.

"I picked the spots this morning. The locations will be appearing on the screen on your watch once you're in the water, so yes keep your eye out for that." Katie explained as she followed out the door in line with the first wave of candidates to exit the ballroom. Wes, Yuri, Jollara, Roland and Dori had trained extra sessions in The Montessori pool. The strategy was to get them across the short channel as fast as possible. The aquatic scouts were to check and see if the trees that Jude and Katie had chosen were clear for the rest of the charlies to join. They would realistically have a short window. Jude had specified that the group should only be about a hundred seconds behind and they need a clear coast, or the group would be sitting ducks, "Stay in your pairs, we designed the roster very strategically so don't you dare disrespect me or I'll put an arrow in your neck first."

Jude and Katie stood next to each other looking out the window as they blocked the door from swinging open, unleashing the Charlie squadron. Behind them, the group was

beginning to see what the two Charlie leaders were seeing. Daniel first noticed the surrounded perimeter just as he was about to ask what the delay was for. Out each window in the ballroom an enemy avatar was crouched behind a boulder or kneeled next to the bumper of a car. The countdown for the safe houses was ticking down under one minute now.

“Why the fuck are there avatars everywhere I look?” Cal asked.

“Can anybody tell what district they are?” Jude asked.

“What district is the yellow lights?” Dori asked.

Daniel thought to himself yellow are the contestants from The Fields, “Yellow is from the Fields, if I’m not mistaken.”

He watched Cal walk to a window, knocking out the glass with the barrel of his gun, and firing a few times up the small hill that made up the landscape’s profile to the safe house’s northern lawn, “Well, they can’t hurt us in here yet. So, fuck ‘em.”

The shots from his barrel infuriated Jude and she strode to knock the gun down from the window’s broken opening, “Did I give you the order to shoot?”

“No! You were too slow. We have a minute. Well, we had a minute, where they couldn’t shoot at us. We should all be hitting them,” Cal explained.

“Yeah and down like a half dozen so they can just revive each other. Think outside the box, Cal. You can fly, Cane shoots webs out of his hands and Daniel is fucking invisible when he’s sniping.” Jude refuted as she turned back towards the majority of the Charlie squadron that still stood near the double door leading back to the docks built onto the

Trefethan Club's wraparound deck, "Let's get into a defense position. Daniel and Wes, hop back onto the roof and give some cover for the group that's going to rush them. Cal you lead that group, take like four with you and just hit clusters of people first. The rest of us will shoot from in here using as much natural cover as we can."

The clock in the center of the ballroom counted down to zero and Daniel read the clock change just as the first bullet whizzed in through the front window panes that created the structural wall holding up the front end of the building. Arena physics made the glass panels resistant to just one shot. It took nearly a full clip to shatter. Daniel turned to find Wes, who was working on lying down in front of the sooty fireplace – he must have noticed Daniel's descent from the roof. As Wes inched his way so that his head was fully covered by brick shadow, his body shot out of view and Daniel sprinted to mimic. Going face first, up the chimney, Daniel could smell the soot this time. Surprised by the delightful campfire aromas that had been packed into the Arena's coding.

The wind hadn't let up at all, nearly blowing Daniel off the roof he grabbed his anchor off his belt. Seeing that Wes had already lodged his anchor into Daniel's previously built-up cover, Daniel climbed over to the Northern side of the roof peak and slammed his anchor into a meaty roof truss, "Wes, you acting as decoy?"

"I guess so. You are invisible, aren't you," Wes replied.

"Let's get it then," Daniel began scoping in and out of the horizon, unable to find Cal and his chosen team of slashers<sup>21</sup>. Daniel could notice that most of the attackers were

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<sup>21</sup> Slashers – a term given to assassins who rush opponents in battles, attempting to throw off their strategy and teamwork. Often the most lethal killers.

advancing their positions, pushing towards the Charlie safe house. He fired a shot towards an avatar that ran ahead of the swarm. The avatar managed to stumble along for a few more steps but fell like a 12-point buck in the woods outside of the Crane Estate<sup>22</sup>.

“Cal, what’s your status?” Daniel asked over the private coms by raising his right arm.

“Come to the front of the building,” Cal was grunting and grimacing the entire time he spoke. Gun shots also blocked some of the words from fully getting through to Daniel’s coms. Daniel moved from his Northern vantage point to see if he could find Cal out front. He posted up under the metal panels of his preset sniper hideout, realizing how genius it would be to invisibly snipe just below where his decoy hid.

Daniel fired three times, “Count it, times two. Check your six, Cal.”

Cal spun around in Daniel’s scope to see the crawling no-skin avatars, he finished them off by firing a few more rounds into each. Daniel watched as their bodies vacuumed into the air, split by an invisible force into millions of tiny pixels. Cal waved on his crew. Cane extended his arms to gain high ground. He swung between tree limbs as the group along the ground, led by the Iron Man crimson red, worked their way around to the south side of the building, as the front was now clear from Field contestants.

Daniel realized his useless position, “I’m going to head out back to check that vantage point. Wes, let’s move.”

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<sup>22</sup> The name of the mansion that Daniel Lipson, Cal Good, Jude Graff and Dori Chase have been living at for the last six years of Battalia training.

“Right on your hip,” Wes replied. The two whipped around the anchor’s fixed point and stretched the cables to their maximum. Looking out at the end of the docks, it appeared that nobody was there disturbing any peace. Daniel scoped in and out, he could hear Wes doing the same. Daniel reached behind him and stepped backwards a couple times to reach the anchor capsule. He retracted the device and walked to the edge of the roof toward where Cal had run.

He saw five charlies huddled at the top of the boat ramp just as confused. Cal got a glance of Daniel and the two shared a shoulder shrug, just as the first shot from inside ran its shotgun melody. Daniel jumped clean off the roof, landing on the ceiling of the southern porch, he continued descending and landed near Cal. Standing upright, he began running towards the doors that would lead inside. The guns had stopped again by the time the group reached the porch. Jude held an enemy contestant at gun point in the center of the room and around her there were a dozen one-on-one hostage situations. Charlies holding guns up to the forehead of Field contestants. Other pairs, the Field contestants held the advantageous gun position and in a few cases contestants from both districts shared a barrel pressed against their forehead.

Daniel reached down to hold the doorknob, instantly having his hand covered by Cal, “We don’t need to add anything here, just yet, Danny.”

On cue, Wes came tumbling through the chimney soot and set off the circus of gunshots that saw avatars falling to the ground as they began to crawl around in their no-skin human avatar.

Cal twisted the knob for Daniel, “Go!”

Inside the door, Daniel moved to the left so that Cal could rip three quick shots off. Daniel picked off one that approached Wes to end his night. The Field contestant dropped to the floor as the ticking from Daniel began, “Semtex!”

“Don’t look back!” Cal instructed from ahead. Daniel said nothing. His eyes raised and noticed the few able-bodied charlies sprinting for exit doors, as he was.

Tuesday September 1, 2168

8:48 PM, The Arena

Daniel spent a short minute on the coast picking a couple of shards out of his arms. Cal’s suit didn’t collect the shards in the explosion because his shell was metal. He had lost a few shield hitpoints though. The sunlight<sup>23</sup> on the shore was busy replenishing that for both Cal and Daniel. They didn’t speak until the last shard came out, “Are you good to climb?”

“Yes,” Daniel responded.

The coast was mostly composed of cliffs and Daniel bouldered up to the where the tree’s roots held firmly to the ground. He watched Dori conclude her ascent, pushing aside a limb with the liveliest evergreen leaves the size of Daniel’s torso like it was a hanging bead partition in a hipster’s bedroom.

Daniel stuck the metal talons extending from his fingers into the wood’s fiber. Each rip out of the trunk revealed a view at the fresh flesh the TSS programmers had designed the trees to be filled with. A residue caked layers of itself on with each talon’s stick and climb. The size of leaves only grew as Daniel sped toward the entrance that Dori and the

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<sup>23</sup> Sunlight also replenishes shield at a rate of one hitpoint per five seconds.



others were entering the canopy through. Daniel entered the canopy and let the light shining through light pockets<sup>24</sup>, warming avatar shield-skin.

Looking around, Daniel noticed Jude and Cal sitting side-by-side on a sturdy limb about as high as the meatiest limbs reached, “Where are you gonna post up, Danny?” asked Ike, “Haley, welcome! Follow Jollara, please. You can gear up there if you need and then find a good limb to get comfy in, I think Jude’s new orders are that we’re going to be in this canopy for a bit.”

“I’m going up. Gonna see what Cal and Dori are talking about.” Daniel grabbed his suppressed sniper rifle from its resting spot, propped against the trunk. The frills coming down Daniel’s helmet blew in front of his eyes and he grunted with frustration before ripping the bucket off his head. “Who are we still waiting for?” Daniel asked.

“No one,” Jude responded.

Dori strutted straight towards Daniel and squeezed him tight, interlocking her fingers between Daniel’s sweating back and the padding of his backpack. Her breasts made a nice cushion for the straps around his torso, “I didn’t get to tell you yet. I like your shield-skin. I kinda wish I had chosen something that clever.”

“Says the one sporting a Katniss Everdeen shield,” Daniel responded as he reached for the arrows that poked behind her braided pigtails. He peeked upwards to find that Jude and Cal no longer huddled. Turning back and smiling goodbye at Dori he worked up a few limbs to where he last saw Cal sitting.

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<sup>24</sup> Pockets of light that shine through the canopy big enough to look out and see the surroundings.

Balancing with the ball of his feet and gripping the roundness of limbs with his toes and fingers, Daniel used the strength in his skinny forearms and his meaty palms to hoist himself up the limbs like a ladder. His shoulders burned from the beginning, residue of the fatigue from climbing the trunk. All the muscles in his arms throbbed, shaking hard enough for him to rest his rifle next to him. The scaffold limb was three times as wide as Daniel's footprint. He decided to rest his muscles by lying down for a moment.

"You better be enjoying a snack. Or I'll remind you to keep your eyes peeled, soldier." it was Cal's comforting voice.

"Almost as green in here as these pistachios. You want one?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, where are they?" Cal continued the questioning.

"I'm just about to pull them out. Not my fault you caught me when you are always watching for me to slip up!" Daniel responded.

Like it was rehearsed, Daniel mouthed the words, "I wasn't watching you," as Cal cried them out loud. The two chuckled. It wasn't a secret that Cal always kept an eye on Daniel.

The food issued to each avatar skin was given to replenish the third meter under the health hitpoints and the shield hitpoints. Energy hitpoints<sup>25</sup> could only be replenished with HUB calories. Snack bars and fruit could be found throughout the map, under trees or in abandoned structures. It was imperative that avatars who survive a battle eat some calories to avoid passing out and becoming helpless in defense.

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<sup>25</sup> Energy hitpoints drain as avatars work harder and when the energy drains, user experiences are simulated as more realistic. As avatars rest in The Arena or if they eat a snack, the energy hitpoints replenish.

“Where you posting up?” asked Daniel.

“Just below you, I have a nice bunch of pockets. I can see quite a bit of land to our North. Our scouts picked some good trees. Really tall and really dense! If you know what I mean.” Cal responded with a wink that made Daniel’s food reach his throat, “If you’re going to stay here, you should see if you can see above the other tree and scout to our West.

Daniel raised to his feet and passed the packet of pistachios. He peered through a few pockets of light. “I can see over the canopies, pretty easy. I have a huge blind spot though and can’t see a thing on the ground.” Daniel reported as he took the packet of pistachios back and stuffed them inside his chest pocket.

“What about to the south? Can you see the coast?” Cal asked.

“Yes. I can see straight down the path that led us up here and into the yards of a few abandoned houses off the path,” Daniel responded. He stepped back, offering Cal the chance to peek.

“Lemme just get a look really quick so we’re on the same page.” Cal couldn’t reach half of the sightlines Daniel checked – Daniel gave him more room, so he could use his tippy toes to see. “Alright, keep an eye on that trail to the south and I’ll have Benny cover your blind spot by posting up far below us and reporting directly to you. Sound good?” Cal instructed.

Daniel nodded, beginning his assigned watch as Cal braced his descent to the next lowest limb. The sound of switching guns provoked Daniel to peer over the edge and observe Cal scoping in and out of sightlines that were much more in favor of his height.

Sunday December 20, 2168

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*Ten months until the Battalia...*

*“Danny,” the man interviewer paused at Daniel’s puzzled look, “Thanks for coming in today.”*

*The woman interviewer nodded and even the link-agents standing, in formation, were put off by the tension. Daniel spoke, “Cal’s really the only one that calls me Danny.”*

*“Oh, well that’s okay. We can respect that, I think,” the man interviewer responded first.*

*The woman interviewer was quick to confirm, “Yeah, I think we can remember that. You want to start over?”*

*The two nodded, neglecting to see if Daniel felt less awkward, “Hello again, Daniel. Can you hear us well? And see us?”*

*Paladin leaned forward so that his seat screeched against the tile floor, “Yes, the connection is remarkably strong right now. Let’s dive right in.”*

*“Okay, well, we’re not in the interview room with you because of the annual TSS training seminars. Continuing to work with us is greatly appreciated. How are things going in the house? You made it to the revealing<sup>26</sup>, correct? And all the utilities are still holding up after last week’s storm?” asked the man interviewer.*

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<sup>26</sup> Revealing – A banquet, held during the spring of each year to honor those Tokien seventeens who start the Tokien-calendar year as official candidates for the Battalia.

*Daniel leaned forward to grab hold of the black microphone built into the table. “Everything’s good in the house. The fireplace keeps everything warm, I don’t really think we used much heat during that storm. Just closed up the windows and doors.”*

*Nobody said anything, so Daniel felt like he should answer the last of the interviewer’s questions. For the first time, Daniel realized how white the walls in the interview room were. He realized how impeccably off white the tile floor was and wondered who decided against a classic white tile or a dark, maybe metallic, grey. “We did attend the revealing and were excited to see our competition.”*

*The two interviewers nodded, and Daniel really noticed the lag in communication that was developing between the two communication feeds. “Okay, one more question. Then we’ll let you go.” The woman interviewer glanced at her notes quickly, “Have you heard any howling calls at night yet? That sort of intimidation comes around the end of the first month, usually.”*

*“Not yet, Ma’am.” Daniel responded.*

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*Or you'll be left in the dust*

*Unless I stuck by ya*

*You're the sunflower*

*You're the sunflower*

Post Malone

## ABOVE THE MAPLES

Monday March 14, 2167

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*Seven months until the Battalia...*

*“Mr. Raymond C Good? Nickname: Cal.”*

*Four TSS agents stood, arms crossed, behind the man and woman in suits who each held a white manila folder and were finding their seats. Opposite the pair of agents sat Cal and next to him Amy Good, Cal’s mother.*

*The man immediately slouched in his chair and turned everyone’s attention towards his female partner who was enjoying a sip of her latte.*

*“Welcome back from winter retreats, let’s get started. This is what? The fourteenth weekly review?” the woman interviewer asked.*

*Her man counterpart wasted no time responding, “Fourteen, in deed.”*

*“And that’s gotta mean something like 200 days until the Battalia?” she asked for clarity again.*

*Adjusting the microphone to reassure that everything is captured and can be called upon later, “Indeed. 213 days until the big show.” Cal wanted to break his suddenly mocking jazz hands. His snarling was enough to force the man interviewer’s hands back to the confinement of holding the microphone.*

*“What sort of stupid questions are you going to ask me today? I have training in twenty minutes, across the building,” Cal burst out.*

*“Cut your tongue, mister,” Amy grabbed at her son’s arm. The tension settled around the table as she seemed to tame the young juggernaut. The two interviewers scanned their document and cross referenced what they wanted to ask first.*

*“Who’s your bunkmate nowadays? Out in the Crane Estate?” The question worried Amy’s face. Cal kept his steadfast face because he didn’t have to lie this time. Usually they skip over these type of buffer questions.*

*“Danny boy, like it always is,” Cal watched the tracker stay straight. The interviewers whispered, in awe. Attached to Cal’s ten fingers, the TSS agents in uniform had fixed a lie detector’s monitors and his results were impeccable as he lied straight through the answer. Straighter than before he had been lying.*

*TSS engineers had developed a new lie detector back in the eighties<sup>27</sup> that read the temperature of your blood. Studies done at three of the six Tokien universities claimed that the human activity lying, even as simple as white lies, creates a miniscule temperature change. They called it, “the warmth of creative juices.” The same test was put through the Elders and the other three universities had their opportunity to verify the testing before it was put into production, in conjunction with three teams from the Charlie outpost’s engineers three years later.*

*The man took lead, “That’s a consistent answer, Cal. How come we have evidence that you’ve been sleeping with Ms. Jude?”*

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<sup>27</sup> 2080’s, not 1980’s.

*“That ain’t my concern. Is it? I passed your fancy lie detector test, and I did it impeccably,” Cal responded. He rested back in his chair, pulling the chair’s loose arm off-kilter, and looked to see what time the clock read.*

*“Don’t worry Cal, we only have a couple more questions for today,” the woman received clearance from her partner, “Have you four decided who’s going to be on the top of the leadership poll? And if so, how do you feel about where you currently stand?”*

*“Yes. We have decided and I’m actually very content with where I rank on the list,” Cal responded. He scooted his cheeks to the edge to erect his confident posture again. Another straight line.*

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*From Cal’s eyes...*

Tuesday September 1, 2168

9:03 PM, The Arena

Buzzing on Cal’s left wrist was accompanied by Jude’s voice, “God fucking damnit! Give me any reports, please. How did we manage to lose half of our squadron this early?”

Cane choked over his own gasping for air, “Let’s just start with a count and figure who the fuck is still here, huh.”

“We got hit hard in that ambush,” Cal shuffled through his inventory as he spoke. The others could see that he was scrolling through a menu and Jude slapped his arm to force redirect his attention, “What? I’m scrolling to get a snack.”

“Pick one. We’re trying to discuss what the hell we’re going to do now,” Dori’s voice never ceased to be bitchy in tone.



Daniel stood up from his knelt position, “Come on, Cal. Your energy isn’t going to drain anymore. We’re just standing here.”

“We have eight left. Let’s just start talking about what we’re doing next. It’ll be a good subject change,” Jude paused as nobody came forth with an idea, “Any ideas?”

“I need some sunlight in my life. My avatar’s diagnostics are getting low,” Jollara made her way closer to the canopy line, reaching her arm into the sunlight. Small pockets of light shone through the natural cover as each leaf stretched for its daily nutrition. Ike followed and the two shared a square of sunlight big enough to begin replenishing their avatar’s health and shield hitpoints.

Cal’s hitpoints were still untouched and he looked to Daniel to gauge whether he had been hurt in the onslaught of what was their safe house. Daniel shared a look of content when the two’s eyes met.

Dori took center stage and was waiting for something on her watch to load or come into clearer vision, “The water will be rising to our elevation in one hour. We can’t stay here for too long because that means the ground’s going to be flooding within the hour.”

“So, let’s make a move for the abundant island?” Cane was speaking from a lookout pocket opposite the canopy to where Ike and Jollara basked in the sunlight.

“No, it’s way too early for that. We can make a move for the smaller of the Diamond Islands. I’ve read about teams wasting time out on the water when their numbers run low though. Should we think about something like that?” Jude’s question didn’t sit well with Cal’s stomach.

“Hell no. We aren’t even at low numbers,” Cal paused to look down and read how many were left in the Battalia, “There’s only forty contestants left, Jude.”

“Yeah, I bet the weaker teams have nobody left though,” her persistence was weak, “So, move to the second Island. I think that’s smart, there will be boat access there and we could probably be the earlier ones if we leave now.”

Cal caught a look at Dori who stood with her eyes pressed in a gaze out the canopy at the sky. She didn’t move, her face was covered in sunlight and her gun was still resting on a limb behind her. Cal began to walk her way and could feel the attention of the group shifting to his movement, “Dori!”

She still didn’t move, so Cal strode a bit faster, “Dori! What do you see?” Her body whipped around instantly. The black hood of her cloaked Raven character hid her bloodshot eyes until Cal stood feet away from her, “What’d you see?”

“Three teams are out. The Montessori’s, The Mine’s and The Field’s colors are missing from the sky’s intel screens,” Dori responded.

“Replenish your energies,” Cal lectured over the first bite of a nutrition bar he pulled out of his chest pocket. He turned and walked toward where Cane was still enjoying his view of the coastline. Cal found a pocket hole big enough to poke his assault rifle barrel through and he bullied more leaf covered branches to make the hole bigger. He looked down to see a small backyard stream running along the footpath that lead from a relatively intact island cottage towards a swimming spot along the rocky coast. Cal could see the dock just off the rocks and the boat that was tied at the end of the boat and debated agreeing

with Jude's plan of sailing around the harbor until numbers were definitely in the Charlie favor.

Peering back along the path's sightline one last time, Cal tried speaking into his wristband, "Movement, 125 on the ground. Check the big bush where the sunlight first hits. I think there's someone hiding in the shady part of that bush."

"What?" Cane was drawing his weapon now.

Jude's voice chimed in, "Copy."

"Permission to engage?" Cal asked.

"Permission denied." Jude had made her way back towards the tree trunk to secure her gun, "I want one full perimeter report. If there's one there could be more."

All the charlies were put to a job.

We've got more tangos. They're all huddled in a canopy to the southeast," Daniel reported, "Less than a dozen but they look ready to fight."

Dori's voice broke all other silences, "Fourteen degrees northwest; three tangos." A slight pause and then, "Over."

"I got one more in the bushes. Over," Haley reported last.

Scrambling circulated through the limbs. Most of the noise came from people reaching for weapons strapped to their back; everything from sniper rifles, assault rifles, to bows and rocket launchers.

“Everyone stays ready to fight. We don’t need to instigate anything though,” Jude’s command came just as Cal locked in on the nutcracker-inspired helmet of an unsuspecting contestant that was unaware he now was partially exposed by the moving sunlight.

“I have a tag on the first one we identified. Trigger ready too,” Cal stated.

“Tagged and ready here too. I got the one still in the shaded bushes,” Haley mimicked.

“Those are the Alfaro twins. Our attackers are from The Strip,” Jude reported, “They are strong attackers who like to fight on the ground. So, we have that advantage if we don’t fall into their trap! Do not engage.” Cal peered over his shoulder to watch her struggling to put away the notecard that she’d ripped corners off. The pockets of her chosen GI-Joe action figure inspired military leader weren’t meant for something as delicate as paper.

“We’re in the trees and so are they. Perfect time to engage,” Dori protested.

“Not when they have bodies on the ground and more that can hit us from above. We need to be careful and not assume that our first option is the best one,” Jude responded.

Cal spun so his sightline to look through the pocket of light that revealed the huddle between Dori, Jude and Daniel. Each contestant’s weapon pointing to the ground must have served as enough of a sign to those from the Field.

“Charlies, gear up and shoot through the tree’s cover.” Jude’s voice was louder than the gun shots being suddenly unleashed. Cal wasted no time plugging back into the pocket where he’d last seen the first Alfaro twin.

Bullets were flying. From both trees, with no hesitation. As he watched the first shots reign down Cal called out, “Count it. Tango, down.” He picked Justin Alfaro breaking across the stream. “Pull out your rifles and let’s have a field day. They have no idea what’s really in these trees.” Cal pulled the trigger on queue and voices cheered in his ear as he sent the sprinting avatar crashing lifeless into the Mack truck-sized roots.

“Count it!” Daniel’s voice sparked a Cheshire grin from Cal.

“Trunk threat is terminated.” Cal screamed into his left wrist, “Haven’t heard much yet.”

Cal ducked behind a meaty branch that covered him from shots coming towards him. He raised his right fist, knuckles out, and held it next to his rested barrel.<sup>28</sup> Cal peeked over to see if others were offering up peace. Everyone still worked their way around branches and through leaf cover that crowded the canopy all over.

“Let ‘em fly, charlies,” Daniel commanded.

“Let’s rush them,” Cal spoke out loud as Daniel hugged the same trunk.

A unison cry of hoots and hollers swung through the rest of the canopy obstacles and let out a rain of hell’s bullets. Their gunfire cut through each canopy as the squadron’s remaining contestants shot across the footpath and stream to the ground. Daniel nodded in response to Cal’s suggestion and the first metal panels pitched to the sky creating a ramp angled at 45 degrees was laid. Breaking straight out of the canopy, the sprinting ghillie suit

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<sup>28</sup> This salute was the charlies sign for hope. Something used while candidates wait for comrades to respond.

and the rocketing Iron Man forced the entire Strip brigade to pop above the tree's natural cover.

Cal flew through the sunlight, fired off rockets and hit the trunk hard with explosives that would slowly take down the behemoth structure, "Let's force them into the open, keep me covered, team!"

Saturday July 4, 2167

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*"Do the prophecies surrounding your partner frustrate you at all?" the woman interviewer asked.*

*"No. Protecting Daniel is a privilege and there's not a doubt in my mind that he'll live up to the hype Tokiens have sculpted for him." Cal's fiery response raised eyebrows across the table from the man and woman interviewers.*

*"The elders that make prophecies are nutjobs anyways. If he isn't the hero that the media has touted him, the system will pick you two up and someone will realize that you're worth a good job while you work in The Fields. There's not much actual pressure on you, remember that, Son." Amy interjected, out of turn.*

*"Mom. We're going to win this Battalia. For ourselves and for all the charlies back home." Cal shifted towards the interviewers and eyed the mirrored glass behind the agents in formation, "And to get these TSS interviewers off our back."*

*Chuckling came from the two interviewers and a concerned look from his mother put a frown on Cal's face. The man interviewer collected himself enough to speak, "Boy, if you think winning the Battalia will get people off your back, you're delusional."*

*Cal asserted himself, “Regardless of what attention we get – we’re still going to win.”*

Tuesday September 1, 2168

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9:29 PM, The Arena

The Charlies quickly continued to eliminate the Strip contestants that couldn’t make their way above the canopies before getting mowed down by the quicker Charlie squadron. Still, the yellow bar indicated that somewhere out there as a Strip contestant, at least one was still alive.

“Let’s push up to the house ahead of us and reconvene inside there. There could be some supplies.” Cal watched Jude reload a few of her weapons as she instructed her squadron, “Good job, charlies.”

## GOODBYE JUDE

Tuesday September 1, 2168  
9:32 PM  
Montessori District, 207S

*From Jude's eyes...*

Jude watched as Cal switched the assault rifle he had been carrying for a pump shotgun. Her thirst quenched by the thought of glistening sweat on his broad shoulders during training. His avatar was standing on the second story landing that joined the hallways to each bedroom. He consulted with Ike and Haley about how to utilize the house. Jude had heard over the coms that the house was already stripped of whatever resources it offered. She shuffled around, scuffing her feet to a rut in the dirt driveway. Her assignment still was to wait for reports. Daniel paced next to her, he too dug a rut into the driveway.

Haley emerged through the front door, "Jude and Daniel, we figure we should just keep moving." The abandoned cottage's layout wrapped around the staircase inside the house; Jude could see the interior through the windows that had rock-sized holes in most of them. To her right was a wide-open yard extending to a stack of precut wood at the edge of a property. If there were no resources in the house, she agreed there's no reason to stay.

The first couple drops of rain hit her lips as Jude asked, "Are we going to travel through the woods here? Or keep traveling along the road?"

Cal's voice broke through the coms, "We haven't decided that yet."

Lifting her arm to respond, Jude was cut off by Haley, "I say woods."

"There's more opportunity to strategize in the woods and natural cover. I agree with Haley," Jude finished her agreement before letting her left arm fall limp.



Cal made his way onto the front porch, the sunlight hit his face forcing Jude to resist smiling against all urges. He propped his assault rifle's barrel on the staircase's railing and raised his left arm, "I just want to get to the next island before we have to swim. What's the point of avoiding the rain if we are just gonna take twice the time and get soaked."

"We'll make it if we run," Jude suggested.

"Sprint? Maybe," Cane contested.

"Yeah, I just can't see us making it. It's another half mile and the tide closes in fifteen minutes. You gotta think if we have a quick battle mixed in the woods too – we'd be swimming. One hundred percent," Cal defended his position as he made his way down the steps. Step by step, slamming his assault rifle's barrel down with each stride to draw more and more attention.

Jude strode to the front door, "If we go down the road, we could get into a fight too."

Cal smiled as she made his point for him, "Yeah, but we can make quick work of peeps in the road. It's wide open and we're a bunch of assassins."

Daniel's voice was no surprise to Jude's ears, "We could take out a full squadron with our accuracy if there's no cover."

Dori spoke up, "Uck. You're all so fucking cocky."

"Let's just choose one here," Jude backed onto the gravel driveway just as the first shot was fired.

Thursday August 25, 2167

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*One week until the Battalia...*

*“Number 9. Impressive, Ms. Graff,” the man interviewer chipped away at the awkward silence that lingered from Jude excusing herself to the lavatory.*

*“We’re all impressed by Jude’s success in the final days of training. It reflected her hard work over the past eight years,” Sgt. Raley smiled and blew a kiss at her tribute. A fitting Tokien gesture for their interview.*

*Sgt. Raley, the general of the TSS armed forces, managed a few thousand of the most elite trained Tokien citizens – she usually didn’t get by with such nice words. In her first four years of assuming the position, ten years out of The Fields, she reduced levels of crime allowed within the outposts by thirty percent. Sgt. Raley had been assigned as Jude’s advisor to establish the connection that would lead to Jude, ideally, assuming the general’s position of the TSS armed forces.*

*“It’s in thanks and part to many people who played crucial roles. I had a lot of influences in life and even more role models to draw from,” Jude squirmed up in her plump pink armchair. The interviewers had insisted that they conduct their final interview in Jude’s dwelling. The elders, likely against advice from TSS experts, must have really wanted to promote the strength of a female outpost leader, “Are you doing this special with Katie, as well?”*

*“We already shot her final interview. The idea for this special came hot off the presses this morning. So no, we aren’t.” The female interviewer was standing in the corner of Jude’s kitchenette.*

*Jude responded, “Well that’s not really fair. She placed tenth.”*

*The room was filled with more awkward silence and it took Sgt. Raley standing up and requesting a water refill for a muscle to move in the room. Then everyone felt it acceptable to shuffle for a more comfortable position. “Can you tell me anything about where I’m going to get placed on Saturday?” Jude asked, “I know you all know the answer. You probably just aren’t at liberty to say. Or some other excuse.”*

*“Jude!” Sgt. Raley was startled enough to hand her glass to the water boy instead of taking the pitcher to pour a glass herself, “You can’t be asking these questions.”*

*“How come?” Jude stepped forward to defend her questioning.*

*“I’ll tell you,” the man interviewer surprised them all and collected everyone’s attention as he still sat at the interview table, “You’re going to be placed somewhere in the fields with the goal of finding your life partner. The sooner you just go along with that truth – the rest will just seem meaningless compared to the bigger picture.”*

Tuesday September 1, 2168

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9:40 PM

“Contact, North. Zero Degrees,” Jude moved her gun fire toward the first enemy she saw. “Retreat charlies. The coast is our friend, we defend in line.” She made her way around the corner of the abandoned house, using the fence as cover from the shots. Cal got hit for the first time by a bullet in his shoulder. He stood in the backdoor frame with one foot a step lower on the porch.

Jude watched as Cal looked down to his right shoulder, his suit had harmlessly deflected the bullet. Attackers would have to use a much higher caliber weapon to pierce

the metal armor of Cal's suit with a single shot. Until he got a plug, his health would drain slowly from whatever damage the bullet did. Jude ducked from a wave of assault rifle shots coming from the stump of a maple tree to her left just as Cal dodged back into the abandon house's cover.

Cal's stance remained confident inside the living room and Jude could feel herself getting droned back into watching the Charlie kill-leader, "Dori, do you have a plug? I got sunk with a bullet above my chest."

Dori's charming voice came as a joy to Jude, "Yes, I'm behind the house." Jude could make out her attacker's footsteps rushing towards the fence. Jude shot the panel of fencing in front of her until it disappeared. She wasted no time switching to a shotgun and pulled the trigger as the slashing avatar's pre-set training skin faded into a no-skin human avatar. She noticed the accented lines of red that ran up and down the no-skin suit and thought that she had just killed a contest from The Island district.

All the red lines on his shirt were converging toward his chest, overlapping and intertwining like blood vessels. Jude bullied the royal contestant's fetal position until she could cleanly see the radiating red circle; she shot once, and the contestant's avatar dissipated into pixels entirely. She looked up to the sky just in time to catch the tally of contestants remaining tick one closer to zero, reading thirty-six now.

Scanning around, she could hear the bullets behind her and she remembered that she had ordered everyone to retreat. Two dots remained separated from the rest of the group. Jude was one dot and she was close to the second red dot, her teammate. She sprang into action and backtracked to the front corner of the foundation. Jude gauged that she'd

have to sneak across the front of the house to get to the side of the house that had the big open field. Her mystery teammate seemed to be creeping closer to the open field. Nothing was coming in over Jude's coms and she pushed the concern away, thinking the distance must have been too much to catch the feed from the beach.

A full crouched sprint ensued when gunshots could be heard in the direction she faced, hiding behind the foundation. Looking around at the property perimeter, Jude realized how run-down the vehicles were and how parts of the house were flirting with falling off. She knew the TSS did their best to design The Arena to what the world had been like before Tokien and she'd heard stories, folklore she had been reminded a number of times, of how run down the world was before organized resource allocation and the absolute peace that Tokien citizens enjoyed was available. She'd even seen pictures of The Crane Estate before TSS builders put their touch to it. The cracked windows in this TSS Arena simulation reminded her of the empty windows The Crane Estate was lined with in the late 2000's.

Bringing her momentum to a halt, Jude leaned around the corner to get a look at what she was about to attempt saving. She nearly blurted out into the coms when she saw the group dragging a lifeless no-skin avatar body. She couldn't make out the face of the dragged Charlie and looked to her watch for confirmation that the red dot was making its way farther away from the house. It was a Charlie. Jude looked back to see if she could recognize any of the enemy avatar skins to be put on her hit list.

She could only identify a tall, black cloak-covered, man with an emerald green scythe and gold horns – A Loki character, she guessed. She knew that Loki was on the list of squadron leaders chosen avatar-skins; the name beside Loki escaped Jude's memory and

while she bounced between remembering what district squadron had a Loki character and how she should save the day. She raised the barrel of her sniper rifle, thinking it might be best to take out the squadron leader and deal with the three guarding gunmen after. As she centered the hashes of her scope just between Loki's golden antlers, her lights went dark and the only sensation Jude could feel as she lay on the ground was the throbbing of her head. She could hear speaking over her; the sight of combat inspired cowboy boots came next, followed by the mold covering the first two or three siding panels. She chuckled as she heard the backswing of a striking weapon.

Jude rolled to her right, avoiding the swing of a heavy Viking ax sharper than the butcher's knives off route 133. The open-street market runs through the heart of the abandoned town of Ipswich that marks the most southern tip of The Montessori district. An outpost is set up on the waterfront properties for the Elders. Thousands of Tokiens over the age of sixty-five lived in their single or duo pods, situated along the river that crosses the city-center perpendicular to the, once busy, main road. Just like the current of the Ipswich River, Jude rolled over the tough gravel with little effort. She grabbed hold of her pistol, all her inventory had spilled after the first blow when she lost her avatar shield-skin. The standard TSS issued Arena-pistol was weak in power; Jude knew how to use it though – blowing two shots straight into the contestant's temple as she rose to her feet.

Her head still throbbed as she stepped back to watch the boy's no-skin human avatar disappear into pixels with Jude's forth headshot. She could sense the pulsating of her Arena-injury. Just like in training, she reminded herself to fight against the urge of pain. Those urges piled on as she was reminded of her potentially kidnapped teammate's screaming.

Rushing toward the corner of the building's siding panels didn't relieve the pressure that built within her avatar skull. Ringing began to take over her thoughts and she could do nothing but grab for her skull with both hands, covering her ears and crouching to the ground. Some of the ringing sounds gave way to footsteps and Jude spun to see the bullet fly into the attacker's skull.

Thursday January 3, 2165

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*Three years until the Battalia...*

*"You can't quit on me, Good," Jude smacked the hazy eyes as she instructed the bleeding Cal to hold tightly to his hip. A part of the Tokien Battalia training is being hit with your first bullet. And Cal was handling his first bullet like a typical pussy would. "Remember, the pain is in your head inside the caliber technology. You're never actually getting hurt," Jude reminded.*

*"Yeah, but it's so overwhelming!" He rushed through his words, "It feels so damn real," as his hands clamped below the gun shot at where most of the pain harbored.*

*"Move your goddamn pressure to the wound. It'll hurt like a bitch, but the bleeding will stop, and you'll gain more focus." Jude's hands were convincing just like her words. She wasn't wrong about the pain, touching the bullet hole felt like digging at his flesh with a hot knife, "The longer you wait the higher chance you have of infection."*

*"I'm doing it," Cal responded, "Give me a medkit so I can fix myself."*

*Jude used her index finger to indicate the minimap on her left wrist's watch, "No, you have to ping the medic."*

*Cal raised the minimap to his eyes, “What’s the medic for my training session’s code?”*

*Jude replied, “I can’t give you that information, you’re supposed to have looked and remembered the code before the exercise.” The training exercise came to a sudden end when she reached to her right armband and removed the band from where it covered her only tattoo. Jude watched as the smoke inside the HUB 140i<sup>29</sup> that carries the electron tracking technology allowing the HUB servers to accurately track the training candidates without fully simulating the sensation of what The Arena will bring the prestige worthy seventeens. Cal’s naked body was aggressively yelling and banging at the glass. Until the doors opened fully, Jude imagined what sort of positive words could be coming out of his mouth.*

Tuesday September 1, 2168



10:25 PM

Jude couldn’t push the no skin off as he began to scream in pain, responding to the pain associated with receiving one of Cal’s headshots. He eventually spun himself to the gravel next to Jude and now her throbbing head was matched with a bruised feeling throughout her torso. She struggled to gasp for breath and tried to clear her throat, only to struggle and cough halfway through what she needed.

“I have no more, I’m sorry, Jude.” Jude accepted her fate. Dori started again as she brought her sprint to a halt next to Jude, “I got one of those pills that takes the pain away and keeps you alive for a minute.”

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<sup>29</sup> HUB 140i – the fourth prototype produced by HUB engineers. Released in 2128, it’s famous for previously claiming to be the best possible VR experience.



“You’ll be good, Jude. Were there any other survivors?” Cal asked. Haley nodded in agreement and couldn’t find words to contribute. Instead she decided to spin and check the horizons a few times. Jude accepted the pills from Dori and swallowed them whole. She coughed a few more times, closer to the relief she hoped for.

“Yes, one of us got kidnapped out in that field,” Jude reported as she got to her feet. The pain had subsided, and she felt the full strength she began the Battalia with. A clock counted down in her face: 58, 57, 56; as she began to speak again, “That’s why I’m still out here and didn’t fight with ya’ll on the beach.” Haley watched Jude shuffle her badly injured prone body, allowing Cal and Dori to loot the dead Island contestant that had delivered the second blow.

Haley attempted to lighten the mood as she switched a pistol hanging out in her inventory for a minigun lying in the tall grass that Jude had choked out her final Battalia kill, “Those kids from The Island district had some good loot.”

“Everyone’s dead other than us four?” Jude looked towards the shoreline that could be seen through the trees. Haley took note of the immaculate shape of Cal’s new avatar skin as the sun hit his body, so he looked more like a silhouette of the assassin he’d grown to become in his Battalia.

Jude chuckled, “Did you get downed too, Cal?”

“Did I what?” Cal followed Haley’s eyes towards the cresting waves a few feet high in the distance.

“Your skin is untouched. Did you have to use a medkit too?” Jude asked again.

Cal answered, “I did have to use a medkit.”

“I gave him that one too!” Haley responded. Jude’s brows rose, and she spun to address the cloaked avatar skin. Haley felt her heart sink as her squadron leader’s eyes weren’t pleased.

“We’re lucky to have you this Battalia, Haley!” Cal filled the silent void.

“Oh, very lucky to have you!” Jude concluded.

Dori was walking to the beach, “So how do we link back up with Cane and Ike?”

“I’m sure if we hustle we can catch them.” Cal responded as he walked toward the water. Haley made her way behind the other two, stopping to look back at Jude.

Haley asked, “There’s nothing we can do for you?”

“Cane. Ike. Do you copy? That’s what you can do for me; win it,” Jude shouted over the coms. The clock counted down from three as she spoke her final words, “Copy?”

Dori’s voice reassured Jude’s orders, “Haley, let’s fucking go!”

Jude watched Haley’s feet move immediately as Jude’s extremities began to pixelate. None of Haley’s hair was visible, protected by her long black cloak that included a leatherweatherproof hood. Jude looked down to watch her torso disappear in a pixel cloud as her vision went pitch dark.

## DANNY BOY

Tuesday September 1, 2168  
10:32 PM  
Montessori District, The Arena

*From Haley's eyes...*

“Haley, cut down the path on your right. We should head there,” Cal was pointing as Haley twisted to see what direction he gave her. “I bet that’s how everyone’s getting across the Bay’s channel,” Haley warmed to Cal’s suggestion. She was a natural sailor. Her dwelling growing up connected to the Saco River’s ocean river mouth. All the Charlie candidate reserves stayed in the high-rise complexes built off Route 208’s coastal road.

Haley shook the memory, “I can take the helm.”

Cal exclaimed, “Let’s do it.” The group tip-toe-sprinted down the gravel path as it began to widen to a dirt road big enough for summer boat parking. The gravel road eventually brought the fearless trio to a main road and they divided to scout either side of the opening.

Haley initiated the reporting, “Clear.” Dori was opposite Haley nodded her head in agreement.

Cal called out, “Let’s go get our prize!” The three charlies sprinted, in unison, until they could hurl their avatar bodies over the hull’s edge. Cal rocketed his way, gracefully, onto the deck and began to raise the small ship’s sails. Dori and Haley scoped in and out of the perimeter, once upright on the boats deck. Once the sail was raised, Tokien physics pushed the boat off the sandy coast and Haley steered the boat towards where Cal and Dori pinged their waypoints.

The ride across the cove was short and the contestants located Cane and Ike. Their accompanying red dots appeared in the sky, on Haley's diagnostics, inside the cove that looks out at the abundant island. She looked up to speak, "Cane and Ike must have made quick time across the channel, they have pushed along the Eastern coast and are approaching the next yacht cove."

Cal tossed an anchor near a spot on the rocky coast that seemed to have a trail created to get to the top of the cliffs that lined the island's shore. The trio climbed up to where they could look down on the cove that Cane and Ike's red dots were still fumbling around in. Working their way, a few hundred feet down the coast, Haley got her first look at the sporting yachts that docked in the cover for the contestants to evade attackers on the shore of the abundant island with. She smiled at what she saw until she watched the bullet tail penetrate Ike's skull. Another two shots followed, both entering Cane in the torso. The two Charlie boys now hung onto railings built into the yachts and crawled around, hoping to avoid the fatal shot.

Cal's voice forced Haley to regain focus, "Who's shooting at them?"

"The shots came from that bunker, up on the hill." Dori was already making her way down the path that wrapped two switchbacks around meaty Maple trees, bringing contestants from the top of the cliff down to the yacht-full cove. Haley wielded her assault rifle again and sprinted to follow Dori. The path was narrow, and it took them a while to navigate its winding shape.

As Haley turned around the second switchback, she heard the rockets on Cal's palms. He, in fact, flew past the two hustling Charlie girls. Haley shook her head at the

smile that Cal happily sported as he waved on Dori and Haley, “You two should go blitz that bunker. I’ll see if I can get a detailed report on what’s waiting for you inside it and cover you two while you work down the next path.”

Dori lead Haley down a path that had greenery growing taller than both their avatar’s heads. As Haley made her way into the gravel parking lot that led toward an opening in the stone-concrete bunker structure, Cal reported four that he could see in the bunker. Dori whipped out her shotgun and an explosive Semtex. Dori and Haley approached the bunker opening and looked into each other’s eyes, standing on opposite sides of the opening and listening to the whispering inside. Dori nodded once before clicking the engage button on her Semtex. Holding it for three seconds, Haley watched as she smiled before humming it into the center of the room.

Following the explosion, Haley ducked into the room first. Dori tapped her shoulder as she followed in the opposite direction. Haley searched through the debris inside the room and heard Dori’s shotgun twice, “Count ‘em.”

Haley popped the scope of her assault rifle up to her eyes when his hands showed around the façade of a structural column, resisting failure following the explosion. She fired three clean shots. The enemy contestant dropped to a fetal position, holding his face. His screams were temporary in Haley’s mind as she saw the glimmer of another weapon shining against the little sunlight that made it in through the wall’s slim window slits.

She pivoted her hips and knelt to one knee, making her target smaller as she was trained. Haley’s blue eyes shone the true warewolf character hidden under her cloak, “Count it.”

Wednesday August 24, 2167

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*One week until the Battalia...*

*“Haley, there’s a news bit for you today. Do you want me to send it your way?”*

*This was the first time in nearly a year that Haley had received news from the royal capital.*

*“Yes, I’ll share it with you after I look at it. Send it over, please,” Haley scurried back into her room, wrapping her damp towel tighter around her breasts and under her armpits so that the cover wouldn’t slip for all the candidate reserves to see – she figured they were watching. Inside of her dwelling space she flicked the corner lights on first. The room lit up in a dim colorful hue reflecting the multicolored mini-lights off the pale white walls. Her sound system connected with her HUBWatch and she mocked the “Paired” signal from the software before she began to jam out to her favorite playlist – Nappy Roots.*

*She opened the news-bit sent to her by Caroline the messenger and the music cut out with the first line she read. In fact, everything cut out; the message simply read, “Haley Farsi, congratulations! You’ve been selected as the replacement for Dominic Torruscio. Expect to hear from a Charlie representative after brunch this fine day.”*

*The hardwood floors were enough to knock Haley completely unconscious. Luckily for her, on her descent she knocked over a few of the jewelry organizers on her dresser, shattering the glass and pottery sculptures and drawing the attention of her condominium neighbors. Banging on her door from Caroline – who had waited outside the door for the news since she watched the towel-covered Haley scurry across the hallway – rose Haley from her temporary blackout. “Come in,” she groaned as she rubbed her nose and chin.*

*“You’re bleeding, did you faint?” Caroline asked as she made her way out of Haley’s foyer and into the main dwelling space.*

*“I got called up to the Varsity squad for the Battalia on Thursday. I gotta do some laundry and pick out my few Sunday finest. I’m going to the Crane estate tonight, I’d imagine,” Haley began wiping the blood off her face and working to secure a broom to clean up the mess she had now left herself while speaking back to Caroline.*

*“We’ve got to get some food into you, spring chicken,” Caroline offered to take the broom and dustpan from her foyer closet to clean up the mess and Haley nodded while she entered the bathroom to properly address her bleeding face. “Did the news-bit give you any other information?” Caroline asked, her voice deflecting off the wall, barely curving its way into the bathroom.*

*Haley heard what Caroline had asked and made her way to the front door to make sure it was closed. It wasn’t. Haley slammed it shut after peering both ways down the hall to see that no one else had clued in on any good news. She walked back down the foyer to hear Caroline asking the same question again as she rose to her feet with the mess of broken glass and pottery cleaned, “They only told me to expect another call after brunch with more instructions.”*

*“Well, let’s get to brunch then.” Caroline tore off Haley’s shirt and bra in the same movement before rubbing her tummy, poking Haley’s newly exposed belly and giggling towards the shower. “Nobody watches us here, let’s take advantage of that while you can. Huh, Haley?” The sound of hot water pouring out of the open tube that protruded the concrete showers dedicated to the non-candidate recruits enticed Haley. She thought about how she’d soon be bathing in stainless steel and gold accented, single-person, showers with diamond knobs and flowery aromas instead of mold. She’d be watched by cameras everywhere she went and couldn’t act as free spirited as she could in the Montessori recruit*

*stacks. Haley poked Caroline in the stomach a few times and jumped into the water before rubbing from her neck to her curves as the water soaked her golden skin.*

Tuesday September 1, 2168

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11:04 PM

*From Daniel's eyes...*

“Don’t you dare try to fucking escape you little Charlie-prick-ass. I’ll put a bullet in your avatar no-skin’s head and explode you for everyone to see,” the freak in the Bendie-esque shield-skin threatened Daniel as he leaned backwards to catch the world’s spin on the gangly sofa bed he knelt on.

Jerry paced back and forth down the center of the room. Daniel continued to crouch on two knees with his back straight and head forward. The vision in his eyes was clearing and he could begin to read the basic diagnostics that ran through a no-skin avatar’s feed. He had sixty-four health points left. Nothing was left in his inventory aside from the few candy bars he had managed to gather while they rummaged through the abandoned house on the bigger of the Diamond Islands.

“What do you want from us?” One of the other captives coughed a couple times after blurting out his question. He was holding his left side, just below his ribs and a cloth was pressed up against the soaking blood from what appeared to be a stab wound or a bullet hole.

“We need something to help this captive,” Jerry spoke into his coms, “Can I get a medic in the sunporch?”



Before Daniel could reposition himself onto his ass with his feet crossed under him, a medic entered through the double doors on Daniel's right, "Can I use a plug, or do they need the full medkit?"

"I'm going to shoot him right away if you use a medkit. So just throw it to him if you can't use a plug." Jerry moved out of the way to let the medic get a closer look, "You assess him. I'm going to address the group while you do so, thanks."

The inertube-armed avatar stood in the center of the room as he conjured up his last thoughts, "We've spared your lives, giving you a chance to still contribute. After Stripboy over there gets himself patched up, we're going to release the special pods engineered by the royal-specialists. They'll induce a couple minutes of coughing and lung burning, then you'll say what ya'll have to say about the planned entry points for each of your outpost survivors. We'll send you off the cliff and if you can swim, good-luck to ya!"

Jerry cocked the barrel of his pump shotgun, "You done with Stripboy yet? I got my shotgun loaded up." A simple shot to the head and the candidate from out in the deserts of Nevada would be right back to a no-skin avatar. The injured candidate finished applying his medkit. With his torso wrapped, the padded healing technology blinked and glowed the same Strip yellow that his no-skin avatar's clothing flashed on his injured body, before.

Obviously, Jerry didn't recall what the boy's avatar shield was. On the second Mississippi that Daniel counted, the boy disappeared. His avatar's special ability was to have spurts of invisibility. Jerry panicked and fired uncontrollably when Stripboy pulled off the invisibility-cloak trick. Jerry picked all the spots he thought could be a likely spot

for the newly invisible avatar to be running or hiding around in the room, then hesitating for nothing before firing his shotgun any way his instincts took the barrel.

Jerry fell to the ground suddenly after his fourth arbitrary shot, tripping over the near-limp body of an Island no-skin avatar. His gun fired a shot just avoiding the two candidates who kneeled farthest from the double door entrance. Stripboy became visible as he tackled Jerry. The medic was on one knee with his gun pointed at the rogue prisoner. Still, nothing was mentioned over the coms. Daniel watched the medic's lips crease to begin speaking until Stripboy, in one motion, pulled the pistol from Jerry's hip and shot the medic between the green eyes.

Daniel was farthest from the window, closest to the bloody action. He could clearly hear royal candidates inside the ballroom of the abundant island's banquet house cluing in on the unexpected gun shots. Stripboy sprang to his feet and was the third candidate to hop out the window hightailing it across the lawn. Daniel was now alone in the room, with a dead royal and an unconscious royal. He snagged the submachine off the hip of the dead medic, took three long strides and busted out another panel of Arena glass, crying out his best gurt scream.

Daniel spotted a trail that was farther to the East than where the other two escaped captures had run. He figured it worth trying to elude the attention and duck behind the side of the late-nineteenth-century foundation. The grass to his right was a few feet tall and it shielded his crouching sprint well with the moss-covered concrete-stone to his left. He could hear commotion stirring inside and behind him. The shooting from the sunporch sped his sprinting feet toward the foundation corner that revealed the property's cliff edge and the channel of water that splits through The Arena islands.

Daniel saw that the beach was down a small rock ledge. He thought about looking at his minimap. His attention was taken by the sight ahead of him. The sunlight reflecting off the waves, the lush greenery on all the islands, the unique nature symphony of coastal wildlife was enough for Daniel to pause in the open. There was a dot on the diagnostics hanging in the sky. Out in the water a white sailboat navigated up and over each wave. Daniel glanced back up at the sky's mini map and saw that, indeed, he must be looking at surviving charlies.

In a full-out sprint, Daniel made his way down a dirt path that led through a ceremonial staged area on the front lawn. Turning along the cliff's edge, he darted along the outer façade of the sunflower line towards a set of stairs that led down to the coast. He got down to his knees to figure how far the jump down to the beach would be; maybe a couple stories, it was worth it if it was the only option.

"Freeze, you grimy Lipson boy," a voice jumped in behind Daniel's ears.

Daniel weighed his options before hurling himself over the ledge. He concentrated enough to land and roll behind a boulder at the base of a coastal tree. Shielding him from the enemy vantage point on top of the ledge. His bottom half throbbed, and he rested against the trunk, relieving pressure from his feet, "Charlies in the harbor, 180 degrees. Look on top of the ledge!" Daniel grunted into his left wrist hoping that they were close enough for the coms to connect.

"Danny?" Cal's voice was accompanied by a booming shot, "Count it. We're coming to get you brother. Swim out to us."

Haley instructed, “Daniel, I’ll pull right out to you. Just make it past the shelf.” The boat pulled up to where the shelf dropped off just as Daniel reached the edge.

“How many are left?” Daniel asked. Daniel sprinted into the water and swam out to where the shelf dropped off, he treaded water and watched the sailboat with his Charlie friends pull up.

Daniel used a ladder fixed to the outside of the hull to climb into the vessel, “Just the three of us are left now. Four now.” Cal chuckled as he hugged the soaking wet Daniel.

“They took your shield?” Haley asked.

Cal continued patting Daniel’s back as they stepped away from each other, “Good thing Dori grabbed one from the contestant’s medkits we killed back in the bunker.”

“Very true. Heads up, Daniel. I want to get information from you too,” Dori said. The medkit was cased in a green metal container and the words MED on the front painted in red. He clicked the box open and removed what contents he found inside. A cloth, a syringe and an ointment fell out as Daniel turned the contents upside down. There were no medic specialists left in their group.

As Daniel spoke he began applying the medkit himself, “They had seven left last time I was able to count. They had three of us captive and a slip up on their part allowed us to escape. I rushed out last.” Daniel re-established eye contact as he had recalled as much as he could.

“Okay. We have four, let’s say they have seven now and there’s fourteen, overall. You said there was four captives. Were they all no-skins, like you?” Dori asked.

Daniel paused, “Three captives, but yeah they took away all our shields.” He lost eye contact again, “One kid, from The Strip was given a medkit. So, he got his avatar skin back. He’s the one that caused all the commotion inside the abundant island’s mansion. He’s the reason I escaped.”

“Wait, the numbers don’t add up,” Dori protested by grabbing Daniel’s arm just as the medkit began to glow, indicating its application was finished. “How many escaped?”

“I don’t know. I escaped after the other two.” Daniel responded, “Four, they’re seven. That’s eleven. So, there’s an extra contestant left somewhere.”

“That’d make sense. We eliminated a group before we got onto the sailboat and the numbers were pretty low then too. So, I’m guessing it’s getting to the tail end of things. We’ve gotta make a serious push for the win,” Dori froze with her hand removed from Daniel’s arm, “Right now.”

She ducked behind the contour of the hill when the sound of bullets began. Daniel rushed behind her, drawing a sniper rifle that Haley was dangling over the edge of her helm position, “We need to push for the win.”

“Copy. I’m swimming toward the beach. I’m gonna flank the right and go up the rock wall picking off as many as I can. I need Danny to cover fire for me until I can get in position,” Cal was jumping off the front end as Daniel fought the urge to protest his plan.

“Copy,” Dori responded by firing her rockets toward the house atop the small island’s hill. Daniel watched as the people scattered, “Haley get us protected behind something.”

Daniel watched Haley scan the horizon, “Daniel, take the sails down?”

Each sailboat from the yacht club sports a thirty second burst of engine power and Haley had saved it exactly for this moment. Daniel’s head whiplashed with the engine’s roar. The hull crashed into the fort built onto a landform in the middle of The Arena harbor. Daniel’s impact damaged his health twenty hitpoints and he looked to the sky to watch the sunlight tack on another hitpoint almost immediately.

Dori followed Daniel and he ducked behind a boulder after she tapped his shoulder to re-establish his focus, watching her switch weapons to a sniper rifle behind the cover of the wrecked boat. She looked up and the two made eye contact. Daniel noticed the quiver in her upper lip, he saw the sweat running down the bangs that glued to her, “Let’s snipe from here and try to give Cal as much cover as we can. We can push for the abundant island once he’s safely on the rocks. Ya know, up and over the rising ocean.” Daniel followed her pointed index finger to where the waves crashed into the rock-built dock. Daniel investigated around his diagnostics in the sky and saw a clock, counting upwards, blinking between legible and solid blood red. It ticked upwards from 4:02, 4:03, 4:04...<sup>30</sup>

“Let’s do it,” Daniel responded when she grabbed his shoulder again. Daniel breathed deeply, before whipping his shoulders around the corner of the boulder. His shoulders raised to a position where a tango had been pinged. When his crosshairs hovered over the unsuspecting royal candidate’s avatar head, Daniel released his breath while pulling the trigger. Just the way he’d been taught in training, he reported: “Count it.”

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<sup>30</sup> This clock is the clock that counts upward to five minutes. When the number of contestant’s dips below twenty the clock starts and simultaneously the water level of the TSS Arena began rising. In five minutes, the only land mass available would be the abundant island and the end of the Battalia would be imminent.

Dori grabbed his shoulder again and pulled him below cover, “Daniel, quit looking in the sky so often. You do that when no one’s around and you’re gonna be stuck looking at it as a sitting duck.”

He pivoted, “I won’t. Let’s go get what we deserve now.” Daniel re-positioned his arms and aimed for a cluster of more royal candidates. Daniel pinged the location he aimed at as he began to move to a different cover position behind the crashed boat’s hull, “Haley, nabe my last ping.”

“10-4!” the rocket’s fire whizzed across and landed close enough to down the helpless quartet, “Three royals left.”

“One left,” Cal added. “Never mind.”

Daniel stood beside the boulder now. He looked across and saw Cal nestled into a crease formed by two large boulders resting against each other at a point high above, “How many overall?”

Daniel looked at his watch as he spoke into the coms, reading what Cal reported back, “Eight overall.”

Four opponents. “Let’s build over,” Haley suggested. Daniel up-built ramps to get high enough that his vantage would be protected from the ground. He raced Haley to his right and Dori behind him to the left, scoping in and out of horizon points.

“I’m not seeing anybody,” Daniel reported. He whipped his avatar’s hips right and began building away from Dori and Haley, “I’m going toward Cal. We’ll be two and two that way.”

Daniel's sprint was beginning to drain his energy hitpoints and he could feel the simulation ramping up the weight of his legs. He pushed onwards, with his settings set to lay flat ramps one by one as he sprinted, "Cal, I'm on your six."

A bullet tail flew in front of Daniel's eyes and he dropped backwards to the ground. Lying on his back now, he saw the sky's blown-up map that showed Dori and Haley flanking one side of the Abundant Island's northwestern rocky shore and now he and Cal would be flanking the opposite side of the same beach. A faint knocking noise approached Daniel.

Cal's metal avatar skin's distinguishable clank pulled Daniel from his longest trance, "Get your frilly ass behind some cover."

Daniel twitched his shoulder back from Cal's grip as he raised to a sprint toward the wall panels that Cal had built up, "So, there's only two left. One's the royal that the girls pinged in the house, I saw blue on the intel screen. The one who shot at me must be from The Mountain, 'cause I saw orange on the intel screen too." Daniel stopped ranting to catch his breath only for a second, "Dori and Haley are flanking the left side of this beach right now. We need to push toward the house, so we converge on whatever royal is still harbored inside. Then we can work on Mountainboy."

"What are we waiting for then, Danny? Let's go," Cal assertion tailed off in volume as he sped off in a sprint for the mansion sitting perfectly perched on the hill to block the setting sun entirely. Daniel sprinted behind Cal and noted the first few drops of rain falling from the sky. He looked upwards to see the thick clouds covering any sort of intel. A glimmer in the horizon behind Cal sank Daniel's heart. He raised his sniper rifle's barrel



and scoped in to see the skydiving mountain candidate release his parachute. “I can hear him, Danny. Where is he?”

Daniel tracked the soaring avatar adorned in a black tuxedo with a tommy gun poking out behind his back. Breathing deeply, he pulled the trigger of his gun confidently when the avatar’s head drifted right enough to fit within the crosshairs. “Count it.”

“Danny! Hell of a shot on this one, I tell ya,” Cal exclaimed, “I’ve always been telling ‘em that! Woo!”

Daniel peaked at his watch to notice that Dori and Haley already had positioned themselves outside the front of the abundant island’s mansion. He stepped onto grass and hid his crouched body behind the same shrubbery that Cal knelt behind. They waved forward, and both moved quickly along the northern edge of the property that lead towards the entrance into the sunflower garden. Turning around the final corner, Daniel appreciated the bright yellow popping above the shrubbery line less than the faces of his female Charlie teammates.

Dori spoke first, “How do we want to approach? Cal, you first.”

Cal smiled at Daniel, “I think if we split up. Two from the attic down and two from the basement up.”

Haley took a step forward, “What if the house is jerry-rigged.”

Daniel held his tongue to see Cal’s reaction. He reacted well and didn’t contest her point. Daniel leaned forward, “May I?”

The depleted Charlie squadron reluctantly turned the floor to Daniel, so he started, “I think we should circle the perimeter of the house. Does anybody have explosives?” Dori drew three Semtex grenades and Haley pulled out a pack of explosive dynamites sticks, “Okay, that’s good. So, I say we surround the perimeter and try to flush the last contestant out before messing with whatever they have waiting for us inside the mansion.”

Haley nodded and spoke when Daniel bowed his head to her, “And if that doesn’t work, then we should try to get high ground and wait him out.”

“We do still have the numbers in our favor,” Cal continued the train of support.

Dori put one Semtex in Daniel’s hand and one in Cal’s, “Okay, it’s settled then. Let’s get this piggy out the house.”

“Woo. Woo,” cries rang from each Charlie. The four spun and Dori pushed open the gates that brought you onto the mansion’s property. Daniel admired the sunflowers for the final time as he ran past the garden entrance gate on his left. He re-focused his gaze on the white mansion that housed his ticket to Tokien destiny. Cal ran straight to the front door and, counter-intuitively used it as cover. Daniel nodded, when the two made eye contact, before darting down the same cold and moss-covered foundation that he had fled as a no-skin, nearly an hour ago.

Turning another corner of the foundation, Daniel stopped where he could clearly see the broken panes of glass that led into the sunroom adjacent to the first-floor ballroom-styled open floorplan. He raised his left wrist to his closed mouth to avoid chewing on a ghillie-suit feather, “Since this was technically my plan, I’m taking the liberty to count it down. Everybody ready and in position?”

“Yessir.”

“You know I am, Danny.”

“Let’s do it.”

“All right, Haley, throw the dynamite in a second-floor window and we’ll throw the Semtex grenades into the first floor,” Daniel paused to listen for protests and none came, “Three, two, one. Light ‘em up.”

Daniel’s hurl flew through the broken glass panel and straight through the sunroom’s double door entrance. He watched the red lights on the Semtex blink for a third and fourth time before exploding, “Does anybody see him?”

Just as Daniel finished his sentence, some movement in a bathroom window caught his eyes. He lay down and blended into every other pristine blade of grass in a matter of seconds, “I have eyes on the last tango. In a bathroom on the southeast corner of the first floor.”

“Clean shot?”

“Not yet,” Daniel responded to Cal’s question. He crawled a bit so that he lay in the shadow of the maple trees to his right, avoiding a glare of the sniper rifle scope that Daniel whipped off his back. Daniel held his breath and aimed just below the curtain rod, he moved the barrel to find the shower head and the slightest hint of something bright red. “Someone make a move into the house and try to draw him out of the bathroom, I’m set for a quick shot,” Daniel mumbled into his coms.

Nothing changed in the scope of Daniel's sniper as he worked to reposition his left arm to brace the barrel's recoil properly. Daniel took another deep breath and held it, hoping that something would expose itself. Gun shots came from another part of the house and pulled Daniel's eyes away from the scope. He saw Cal and Dori shooting into the ceiling and banging their feet on the first floor, chanting that they'd come kill the last contestant if he didn't come out to play with them. Daniel whipped his eyes back to the scope and found The Mountain contestant, leaning to get a see at what the commotion really was. His masked face was red, Daniel recognized him as a Deadpool avatar skin.

Daniel breathed deeply and pulled his trigger. He lowered the barrel to see the avatar's head fall through the glass window and pulverize into pixels immediately. The roaring cheer from Checkpoint Charlie's crowd rang through Daniel's ears and the mixed reality experience took on a slow-motion state as the simulation drifted to a black screen.

## PALADIN'S ADDRESS

Friday March 15, 2165

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*Seven months until the Battalia...*

*"Shoot Danny!" the annoying voice came in through Daniel's audio device, "Miss."*

*"If you wanna tell me when to shoot, get down here and shoot it yourself. Come on, Cal. I can do this, just let me shoot." Daniel dropped the tip of his assault rifle barrel as he pleaded for mercy. Cal simply nodded. His lips zipped shut with his arms folding across his chest.*

*Daniel spun around, took a quick aim down to get his feel back then waved on the machine to his right. The light flicked green and Daniel raised the Scar-H halfway, waiting for the air to release. A loud bang followed a flying disk and Daniel tracked its arc until his hips aligned well with the joints of his ankles. Feeling the sweet spot of the form his parents had taught him the week before, Daniel pulled the trigger and smiled while the bullet made a blue cloud about fifty feet in the air – diluting slowly towards the Earth, "There you go, Lipson! That's some Danny shit."*

*He waved to his right again, barrel still held up ready to aim down another flying disk. The same green light and then a flying object that flew lower this time and traveled away from Daniel. He tracked the disk until his hips came to a stop – they weren't like his parents taught him and he fired uncomfortably at the disk as it kept on tailing off to the horizon, "Fuck"*

*Cal had made his way down from his coaching porch above, “Danny, start by placing your front foot more towards the machine. You can always step with the trajectory. If you stand more aligned with where the disks are coming from you can shoot at the ones that fly away from you, much faster.” Cal was demonstrating the step motion a few feet away from Daniel. He saw how Cal used his right leg as a back-pivot foot and only moved his feet by shuffling them along the concrete pad.*

*“I can try that.” Daniel mimicked the motion.*

*“Make sure to keep your head up and really keep your feet firm from A to B to C.” Daniel paused to watch as Cal’s left foot shuffled twice to demonstrate the second and third points to step to while practicing in The Shooting Gallery, “Let’s serve you up here, Danny. You got this one.”*

*“I better.” Daniel reloaded his assault rifle as he waited for Cal to climb back to the overhanging coaching booth. He heard the footsteps above again and waved on the machine, the trajectory was towards Daniel and he shot right away as he scoped in with his hips aligned right over his feet from the start. The cloud of blue drifted close enough to cover a part of the concrete pad that Daniel shot from. He waved on the machine again, and this time the trajectory was farther away, Daniel waited as his hips passed position A, moving his feet to B. The shuffle was more uncoordinated since he wasn’t looking down in live speed; Daniel’s hips aligned with his feet just as the target reached the crosshairs of his raised aim at point C and another small blue cloud filled the scope of Daniel’s Scar-H.*

*“Nice shooting, Danny!” Cal pounded on the floor with his feet to razzle Daniel a bit. Daniel wasn’t fazed as he watched the next target fly out before he could wave it on –*

*Cal must have been pushing the buttons available to coaches. Daniel hit the target as his hips were sturdy shifting back to B. Daniel waited for the next disk. Two came, at the same time, and Daniel missed them both. Shooting twice at each as they fell to shatter in a cloudless crash with the ground.*

*“Two at a time?” Daniel threw his hands up in protest.*

*“Point that barrel down. They’re not going to always come one at a time inside The Arena, Danny.” Cal responded clicking the button to release another disk.*

*Daniel whipped his hips back and planted his feet firmly on the concrete pad, shuffling for Foot position C. He found the flying blue disk traveling away from him and wasted it, “Count it.”*

*Daniel made his way off the concrete pad and trotted up the stairs, towards Cal, “Let me try the time trial.”*

*“Danny, it’s your third day inside the shooting gallery. Let’s focus on two at a time, first.” Cal responded meeting Daniel at the top of the stairs. He wouldn’t move, and Daniel tried to shimmy past him.*

*“Come on. I just want a water.” Daniel stuck his right hand under Cal’s armpit and lifted it off the handrail. Cal reluctantly let Daniel up into the coach’s domain.*

*“The water is behind my seat; there’s a faucet coming off the wall.” Cal’s instructions were correct, and Daniel grabbed a small plant-based organic cup, filling it a handful of times.*

*“Thank you. Seriously though, let me do the easy time trial. How many at a time do I have to hit in the medium setting?” Daniel asked.*

*“I think the last wave is three at a time in the easy time trial.” Cal concluded, motioning Daniel back to the concrete pad for more training.*

*“Let’s do it then. I can hit enough to earn me some skill points and shut the haters up.” Daniel pleaded as he walked down the first couple of stairs.*

*“Daniel you have over two years to prove to them you can hit targets. We don’t have to rush into anything. Even if you start putting up impressive training sessions and build up your skill points –” Daniel watched Cal look to the ceiling of his coaching cabana for the words to finish his point, “They’re going to always tease and harass you – it’s their way of getting into your head.”*

*“Let me just try it.” Daniel pleaded at the bottom of the stairs now as he wrapped the strap of his Scar-H around his shoulder.*

*“Let’s have you try to hit three at a time. If you can do all three, I’ll gladly let you punch out the Easy time trial.” Cal suggested.*

*Daniel didn’t bother responding. He walked straight to the center of the concrete pad, standing firm with his feet separated into position A that Cal had just taught him. He waved the green light from the machine, initiating the first disk. Cal pressed the button twice from above him, Daniel could hear the two secondary bangs. The first disk was obliterated almost as soon as it flew into the sky. The second flew through the cloud of Daniel’s first shot and he waited until his feet reached position B, followed by the lining up of his hips. Then firing, Daniel created a second blue cloud in the sky.*



*“There ya go, Danny!” Cal cheered on.*

*Daniel pivoted again and waited for the stars to align over foot, hip and disk position A. Through the scope, no disks flew to position A. Daniel moved around the barrel of his gun to try and find the flying disk, “Where’d the last one fall?”*

*“Out far in the field. It traveled away from you, Danny.”*

Tuesday September 1, 2168

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11:46 PM

“Tokien.” The crowd was the biggest that Paladin had ever spoken in front of. He’d practiced in front of the edifice of elders several times and they’d revised his routine a number of times. Now that the Battalia was over and everyone had enjoyed their banquet style debriefing for the new year.

Citizens are chosen at random each year to attend the birth night celebration. Enough citizens from each outpost are chosen to fill the two thousand seats designated to each district. Kids sit at kid’s tables and discuss what privileges will be awarded because of their additional year. They also are lectured on the new learning modules that need to be performed before year’s end. Adult tables would have discussed new technologies in the workplace, new practices to bring into the households of healthy relationships. Occasionally, new members of outposts or a citizen changing outpost workstations would be introduced, as necessary.

“Tokien, we gather here – in this great theater. To honor the Tokien way – a way that’s worked for one hundred years.” Paladin began his national address over, “It’s an exciting night for me. Who else is excited?”

The dead silence of the crowd, allowing Paladin to speak, morphed into a mosh pit of jeers and cheers from the thousands that had been chosen as visitors to the birth-night ceremonies this year. Paladin basked in the roar of his crowd. He pointed to the screens he knew were being nationally broadcasted to everyone not in physical attendance and he winked to the cameras. The crowd roared as his wink was also displayed on the big screen. The audience was fully enticed in the greyed man's wisdom and lusted for the words he was to share in this year's epic birth-night culmination ceremony.

The disruptive noise from the crowd subsided as Paladin began to motion for silence with his arms, bending his knees to demonstrate how low he needed their voices to stay, "We have a lot to share with you all! I got the cards from the edifice a few minutes ago and we're going to reveal our newest links after a roar of applause for all the candidates who participated in this, 100<sup>th</sup> Battalia."

Paladin's movement away from the center of stage was complimented well by the biggest screen flicking on and revealing a shot of the banquet hall below the stage – where all the candidates gathered, waiting to emerge towards the top of the stage and receive love from their loved ones face-to-face for the first time all night. "Let's bring them on stage, huh?"

The kids on the screen began to march up a set of elegant stairs off the screen's right. The volume of Paladin's crowd escalated with his cheerful smile and waving arms that timed well with the face of the first candidate to emerge onstage. "First, the victors. From the Mid-Atlantic outpost, your 2168 victor-candidates are Charlie born." Paladin removed his fedora cap to respect his alma mater. The crowd erupted louder. Their crowds for the charlies mostly flooded with jeers for the royals who emerged in line after all twenty

Charlie candidates made their way onstage. The Mountain outpost was third and The Strip contestants made up the fourth leg of the long candidate line. The candidates from The Island, The Mines, The Fields, and The Montessori followed suit.

Paladin eventually spun full-circle to gauge the crowd. “Look at this sight. It’s a delight,” pausing for people to acknowledge his rhyme, “let me jump right into the twenty links the edifice has chosen.”

Paladin exited stage left and stood at the podium just barely visible in the stage’s spotlight. Paladin sipped on a glass of water that waited his arrival, “Without further procrastination, our first elected link this year is: Jaquan Ridley.”

A roar surged throughout the crowd, “Jaquan is the only Montessori outpost link elected this year. The second link is from The Fields as The Mines have not earned a link this Battalia.” A mix of jeers added to Jaquan’s deserved cheering. He stood center stage now and had a singular spotlight shining down on him as he gorged in the final bits of appreciation he’d be allotted.

Paladin enjoyed running through the links from The Fields, and The Mines. Five kids stood inside the candidate semicircle now. Adam Ryu and Ophelia Candor from The Fields stood beside Cato Ropier and Damion Weis from The Mines.

“Joe Creole, Patty Swift, Brit Dansby, and Walter Brow.” Paladin’s voice prompted a spotlight to shine down on each candidate from The Strip. After watching them take in the love and form a line of nine links, Paladin began again, “Dominic Torruscio, Vinny Drago, and Minnie Zella from The Mountain outpost.”

More spotlights shone down on the three who fell down on two knees in appreciation, “Please, come forward and join your fellow ‘68 links.” The kids basked in the cheering crowd’s appreciation while the link-line made itself twelve strong. “As for the royals.” the crowds erupting roar cut out at Paladin’s words, “Diana Roseline, and Jack Roiter.” The crowd erupted. The royals had never had a number that low after the Battalia.

As the crowd’s volume eventually returned to a hush, it became time to announce the six Charlies that were going to be awarded link status for their hard work over years of training, culminating with their performance in The Arena. “On their hallowed eighteenth birth-night,” Paladin paused for the clapping to subside, “The following six leaders of the victorious district: Jude Graff, Daniel Lipson, Cal Good, Haley Farsi, Dori Chance, and Cane Biggs.”

Lights restored themselves in The Arena as Paladin concluded and confetti fell from the ceiling as the seven Charlies were invited to join their newest cohort. They nodded, shook hands and smiled with everyone distinguished away from the semi-circle of peers. Paladin watched and listened to the energy from the crowd as he imagined what each of the kids was thinking.

“You’re the first twenty.” Paladin’s voice boomed over the speakers and people’s excitement was temporarily contained again, “In ten years, you’ll have a full squadron of Tokien links represented by your graduating class. Keep working hard because some of you original twenty ‘68’s, may not be in the final ‘68 class. Your recognition is something you should be very proud of and rejoice as it’s earned, not gifted. Continue to earn what you’ve been awarded.”

Paladin shifted his focus back to the crowd. “And for the rest of us, we always need to commit ourselves to training or working, loving and acting the best we absolutely can with each other and towards each other. If we continue to uphold these high standards, we will excel in the face of any challenge. I believe in Tokien; do you?”

The crowd roared back in unison, “Yes!” Paladin rose his hand in a fist facing the majority of his crowd. “Goodnight, Tokien.” All the candidates were escorted off stage as the newest links continued to bathe in the incessant cheering of their outpost’s patrons<sup>31</sup>.

The End.

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<sup>31</sup> Those who invest in the training of the candidates. They also bet on who’s going to win and who will individually be chosen as link.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

*The Good Family* is a novella. The story invites its readers in a not-so-distant world that has recovered from a horrific nuclear fallout. Thousands of survivors across the globe who waited out the apocalyptic aftermath in bomb shelters designed to outlast the most inhumane acts of violence imaginable will converge on the continental United States. Generations will build a new infrastructure and cultivate unique cultures. Vowing to live in isolation from the wilderness, Tokien citizens become increasingly self-sufficient and self-sustainable with each passing generation. As Tokien citizens Cal Good, Daniel Lipson, Jude Graff, and Haley Farsee participate in the one hundredth annual Birth Night Battalia, it becomes evident that the tail end of the twenty-second century Tokien world is destined for a great change.

As Tokien seventeens, approaching their eighteenth Birth Night celebration, *The Good Family*'s main characters are desperate to prove their link-worthiness to the Elders. Tokien Link-Soldiers are the most elite trained citizens and vow to ensure the safety of each citizen as well as the unified safety of each district outpost. Secrets and white lies plague the seemingly perfect Utopia and threaten each of the seven districts across what's left of the United States. Cal and Daniel lead the Checkpoint Charlie squadron on their conquest to bring their home district the ultimate pride. The 2168 Battalia becomes marked by the rumors surrounding Cal and Daniel's alleged illegitimate usage of the new HUB technologies engineered by their parents.

Falling under the science fiction genre, *The Good Family*, uses flashbacks to highlight the scrutiny surrounding the Charlie squadron leaders and sheds light on the sort

of pressure Tokien contestants are under. In the flashbacks, each character experiences interviews with two TSS agents, Rico and Rita. Questions mostly surround the children's preparation – but venture past the standard questions as the drama continues to surround the leadup to the historic '68 Battalia. As the Tokien children prepare for adulthood, I find myself pulling experiences and interactions from my own battle through American academia. Each character handles the interviews in their own way; my intention for this was to highlight the true nerves in each character.

In order to shape the world of Tokien I utilized Google Maps and a 3D map generator, HeightMapper (Heighmapper). The Tokien Map can be seen as reference for readers in the Appendices at the conclusion of *The Good Family*. I utilized *Fortnite* video-gameplay to generate the style of virtual battling that takes place in The Arena. *Fortnite* (Fortnite) and *Call of Duty* (Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II) weapons inspired the weapons each character uses in the Battalia. This is part omen to my childhood and part foreshadowing to what sort of video-gaming experience is coming down the modern-day consumer pipeline with new mixed reality technologies.

The immersion process that takes the contestant's perception of reality from below stage to the virtual world that is The Arena was something that I developed mostly on my own. I drew from *Ready Player One* (Cline) for the type of equipment used by each human contestant. Especially the machines used by Parzival and Art3mis when they visit Ogden Morrow in Seattle.

The notion that each Tokien child is given the opportunity to prove their worthiness in the Battalia is not a draw from *The Hunger Games* (Collins). Rather I drew this idea from a Netflix series titled *3%* (Aguilera). In the Portuguese-Brazilian Netflix series, young

adults must prove their worthiness to escape the cavern that ensures most of the fictional population lives far below the poverty standard. The teens in 3% are tested on their mental capacity to think outside the box, utilize what they already have for resources at hand, and how long they can remain steadfast with their strongest urges, temptations and emotions. My story's proof of worthiness appears to be similar to the *The Hunger Games*' violent battle royale. However, the purpose of the televised event is not to demonstrate Capital control over citizens. The Birth Night Battalia is the first chance for Tokien children to prove their link-worthiness.

The districted makeup of the Tokien economy and political bodies are a draw from stories such as *The Giver* (Lowry) and *The Hunger Games* (Collins). Having specialized district work carried out and distributed evenly as needed is an idea that I can't get away from when I begin to worldbuild. Each Tokien district is responsible for producing their own greenhouse grown diet and the only Tokien livestock is produced in The Fields, shipped around to district outposts only for each national celebrations. Education of the youth and fostering of the elders is conducted in The Montessori district. Technology is developed and engineered in the Checkpoint Charlie district. The Mines harvest the plastic and precious metals needed to build up Tokien's infrastructure. The Mountain district supplies all districts with labor and job management, as needed. The Strip is a district full of independent contractors who fill any voids in the Tokien economy – jacks of all trades. And the royal district, The Capitol, produces consumer goods and luxury products. All Tokien Links are native to the royal district but are shipped out across all the districts to carry out their protective duties.



The sort of surveillance and services given to each citizen that ensure the sort of Utopian universal offering are inspired by my readings of *Plato's Republic* (Bloom). Embedded in Plato's writing and thinking, there's an idea that if everyone is given what they want/need, there's no reason to lash out and act immoral. This teaching goes hand-in-hand with the argument he carries out with his friends about pursuing a "perfectly moral city". In order to have the perfect city, you need to have universally perfectly moral beings. This argument falls apart when you accept (and you have to) the notion that humans are inherently imperfect. Though I argue: striving for the closest thing to perfect, think of an asymptote shape, has to be the most effective way to achieve perfection.

The idea that the Tokien utopia, present in 2168, is cracking and imperfect draws from my reading of *The Giver* (Lowry). Jonas realizes that keeping everyone in a mellow and neutral state of emotions and experiences is not the way to produce an effective nation and subsequently revolts in the only way that makes sense to him. In similar fashion to Jonas leaving his community, the characters in *The Good Family* will be leaving the safety and surety of their district outposts in sequels to come as the cracks in the current Tokien regime become apparent to more characters.

The reality that Tokien is not the perfect world it seems to be, and my alluding to monumental challenges coming down the pipeline for my main characters is a metaphor for the changes and challenges I think the next chapter of my own life will provide. This metaphor helps to explain my inspiration for doing this project. As I've figured out, I can't possibly foresee where this path that has led me to Washington, DC will end. I will grow in ways I cannot assume and develop an understanding for the world that will provide me

with, one can hope, the content for the rest of my Tolkien world-building. And explain to the people closest to me how I see the world around me.

I poured more time, more effort, more emotion and more frustration into this project than I ever could have imagined. The hard work took its toll on my body and my mind. My thesis feels like the thing in my life that's worth the least and at the end of the day that's what I have the hardest time accepting. I did more for my honors thesis than I did for all the other academic assignments in college and I'm still on the fence about what I produced.

The need to share my ideas comes from the feeling that my generation will face some of the issues Cal, Daniel, Jude, and Haley face (namely nuclear war and environmental crises). I'd love to be a part of the conversation that hopes to solve those problems. I aim to live in the moment and will work hard to not let the ideas in my head cloud the experiences I have with loved ones. I saw, first hand, the toll it takes on my friends and family as they watched me pour my emotions and total focus into a personal notebook and accompanying word documents. The amount of nights where I yearned to be present in the moment but couldn't escape the writing was a nightmare I couldn't get away from. Above all the other things that I consider in hindsight – I wonder if the thesis process was too much for me. Did I forfeit too much of the world around me, in the pursuit of something I may or may never achieve. And if I did – will it be worth it in the end? If I return to the ideas in a later age, with more wisdom and backed by a support group that promotes my taking chances – then all will be fulfilling.

Until that day comes, I vow to continue reading, continue watching the world around me and continue questioning the actions of individuals who lead my generation and the generations to follow me. Learning is a passion bore into me at a young age and a fire

that will continue to blaze my heart, my mind and my soul as I aim to inspire those around me. The day that I have children, the day my children have children and the days that my loved ones pass – I will turn to my own words and reflect on my own understanding of what world surrounds me. As it is in reflection, thanks be to Albert Camus for teaching me this, that we learn the most and we see most clearly.

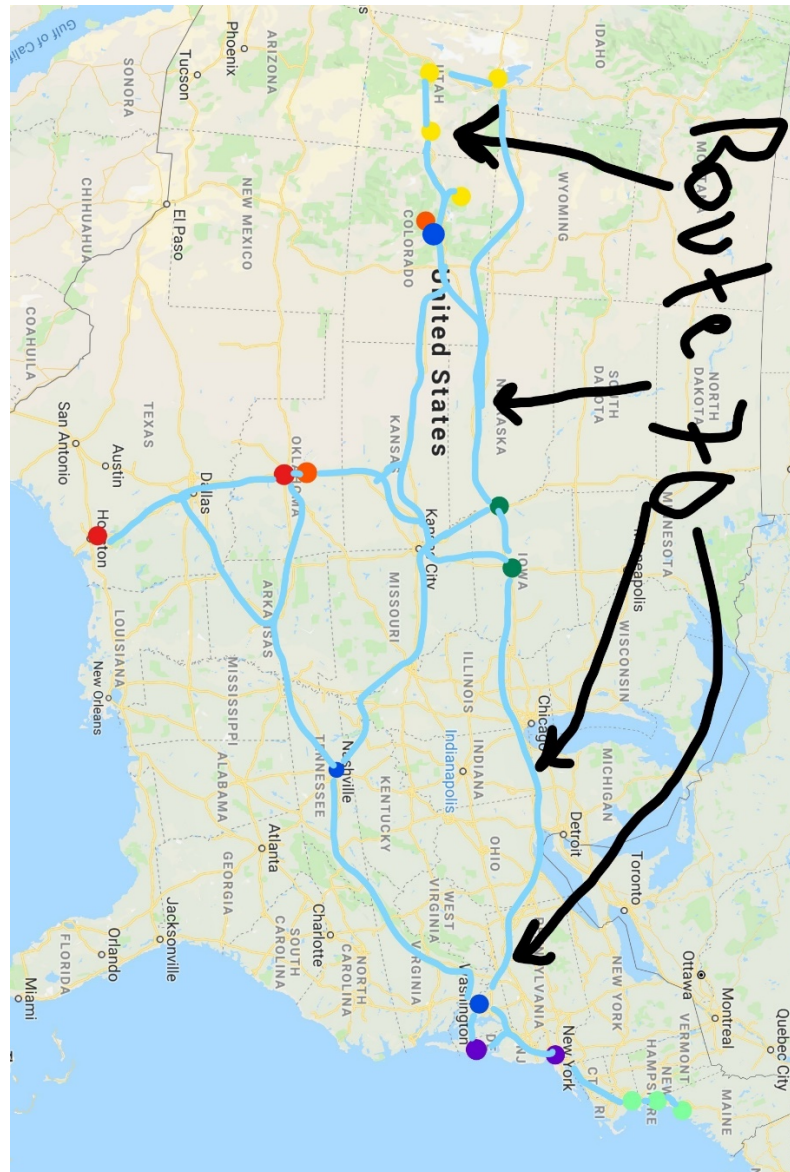
*The Good Family* began with a whim and was sculpted into a compelling story; it will give way to a rewarding series and a bounty of ideas to spark conversations amongst my peers. Tokien will redefine itself in sequels and light will be shed on the true background of what the characters were exposed to during their Montessori upbringing. Leaders will fail, followers will lead and some who deserve to lead will be suppressed – though, all will be good in the end.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A



1. Lime Green – The Montessori District (3 outposts)
2. Purple – Checkpoint Charlie District (2 outposts)
3. Royal Blue – The Capital District (3 outposts)
4. Evergreen – The Fields (2 outposts)
5. Yellow – The Strip (4 outposts)
6. Orange – The Mountain District (2 outposts)
7. Red – The Mining District (2 outposts)

## APPENDIX B



The Trefethan Tennis Club – Peaks Island, ME



- Purple cross – Where Daniel and Cal land
- Red crosses – Battle sites
- White line – Main character's route
- White hashed line – Daniel's captive route

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

James P Hannigan was born in Portland, Maine on December 10, 1995. He was raised in Southern Maine and graduated from Cheverus High School in 2015. Majoring in Construction Engineering, Leslie has a minor in Entrepreneurial Engineering. He is a member of the University of Maine Men's Club Ice Hockey program, serving as club president his senior year. He has received the university's flagship scholarship, the annual AGC student scholarship, the annual NETTCP scholarship and the Robert and Elizabeth Nanovic scholarship.

Upon graduation, James plans to make a move to Washington D.C. and begin a full time career as an entry level engineer in the field of construction management.