

# THE BRIEFING

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## Archivist's Note

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These accounts have been gathered by Phoenix Project operatives, and collated by me. Additional records can be found in the Phoenix Archives, subject to possession of the proper clearances.

— *Randolph Symes III, Phoenix Project*



## Our Past

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One of my biggest regrets about all this is how much knowledge we've lost.

There were hints and rumours that things were changing for years: unexplained mass deaths in the oceans, the rise of jellyfish populations, melting polar ice caps. No connection was made between all this and the viral pandemic scientists were dealing with in coastal regions all over the world.

Of course, there were people who did suspect what was going on: operatives of the Phoenix Project and its predecessor organizations recorded and documented these events as best they could to prepare us for the confrontation they knew was coming. If they hadn't, I doubt humanity would have survived to have this last chance to strike back.

The 'Big Egg Incident' of 2027 was the moment when most people found out what was really going on. The Halpine-Mcallister oil rig, 'Echo Gamma 18' was attacked by creatures that came out of the sea and eventually engulfed by a huge biomass. A rescue helicopter evacuated

three survivors and when one of them uploaded his mobile phone footage to YouTube, the game was up.

The first sign of the mist came in 2029, when a cloud formed in the middle of the South Pacific. Heightened military tension between China and the United States of America turned into open warfare as each side accused the other of experimenting with biochemical weapons. The debt-ridden US economy quickly collapsed under the strain, as decades of budget deficits and a lack of a modern manufacturing infrastructure came back to haunt them. When the mist came to the land, the last remnants of the union fought to hold themselves together as their citizens died, or just silently walked into the water.

After the mist retreated, old arguments and fractured truths pitted nation against nation. Cyber warfare, conventional warfare, financial warfare, chemical warfare: all of it brought the world to its knees. By the time the remaining world leaders accepted who the real enemy was – an unknown biology from the sea – it was too late. Most of the world's global communication networks had collapsed and the oceans had become enemy territory.

Corporate factions rose out of the ruined territories. Leaders with passion, religion, money and guns proclaimed their solutions to the world crisis. Zealots preached their personal brands of napalm and xenophobia to refugees and survivors who yearned for something to believe in.

Then the mist came again and the loudest voices became screams before they finally, fell silent. This time the land changed too. Plants and animals mutated, reclaiming and suffocating the broken concrete jungle of our past.

We can't be sure exactly how long it's been since those days. Most people reckon about six or seven years, so that makes this year, 2047. We've noticed signs that the mist is

building again, returning to throttle out the last of humanity.

If we're going to survive, we've got to fight back. The resistance has to start here. Otherwise, in a year, no-one will be left alive. We need to learn from the past to find new solutions – better ways to take the fight to the enemy.

Knowledge and violence will be required in equal measure. There must be a strategy to our resistance that turns this war, otherwise this will be the end for us, one way or the other.

If you have any ideas, now's the time to speak up.





## The Phoenix Project

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TRANSCRIPT OF A SPEECH to new Phoenix Project recruits  
by General Newton Sumrall (May 7th, 1971).

*THE PHOENIX PROJECT ain't just an organization. It's an idea; it's a belief. It's what made people run back into the Library of Alexandria while the flames roared. It's what made the crew of the K-19 sacrifice their lives to prevent a nuclear meltdown. It's that something inside of us - call it faith, call it philosophy - that makes us look at a situation that threatens not just us as individuals, but us as humanity... and, once we're done shittin' our pants, makes us go "alright, how can we fix this?"*

*If you look at our files, you'll see that it says that the Phoenix Project was founded on October 24th, 1945, when some smart folks realized that maybe instead of killing each other, we should worry about the fact that our whole civilization, all the things we love and hate, all our values and religions and whatnot, are built on this tiny rock floating in a great black sea full of things we don't understand, and maybe that's a more serious thing to worry about than where we get to stick our flags.*

*That's what the file says, but it ain't quite the truth. Truth is a tricky thing, right? Takes lots of digging to find. And the truth of the Phoenix Project is, we've been around a long time. Keep getting shut down... defunded... exiled... even executed... but that human spirit, you see, it keeps coming back to life. Thus our symbol.*

*There was a Phoenix Project in America, in the 1930s. There was one in Russia in the 1920s. 19th-century Britain. 18th-century France. 15th-century Ottoman Empire. Our earliest records, if you'll believe it, go to back a man called Ibn Rushd, in a place called Al-Andalus. A man of science in the Middle Ages. But even in the records from that time, there are hints that they were continuing in an older tradition, reaching back to Rome, and Greece, and Egypt... and who knows how much further back. The names change, but the spirit remains.*

*Now, I don't want you going and thinking we're invincible. We're not some all-powerful secret society, like some of the more paranoid folks out there might say. Our history is long, but it's full of gaps. Sometimes the torch gets dropped and nobody picks it up for centuries. So keep in mind that there's no secret plan, no arcane knowledge, and no guarantee that we'll succeed. We're just ordinary people following in the footsteps of others, trying to do the right thing for humanity, even when humanity thinks we're the bad guys.*

*One phrase keeps recurring in all our records. It's from the writings of Horace, that is Quintus Horatius Flaccus. "Sapere aude." Dare to know! You see, what we've been finding - our scientists, our thinkers - is that the universe is pretty damn terrifying, and we are very, very small. Drives some people to madness. But you gotta face that. Gotta face the darkness, and the madness, and say - hey. We're the humans. And we're here to stay.*

## Selected Accounts

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“These fragments I have shored against my ruins.”

–T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*



## The Claimed Idol

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EARLY MORNING IN THE RAINFOREST. There's never true silence out here. The undergrowth teems with life, each individual competing for their time to eat, breed, fight and die. This is nature undiluted, at its apex.

It's five in the morning and I'm sweating as I walk. I'm always sweating out here, even now, when the heavy tropical air is a little cooler. My glasses cloud and slip, unable to maintain their customary perch. There's no respite for my pale European skin in this oppressive heat. The exhausted feeling it brings as you move makes everything a struggle.

Ahead, the flashing machete of my guide Laura rises and falls. There's just the two of us out here. She's a local and I'm the adventurous tourist keen to see something 'off the track'. We've been away from our camp, just off the Piura river, for about three hours. She says there are old things out here, idols and artefacts left behind by a forgotten civilization from thousands of years ago.

"Matthew, hurry up!"

I think she likes me. She's attractive, unmarried and speaks good English. A strong, independent woman who's

made a life for herself and her family. Am I the handsome foreigner, who comes to town and sweeps her away? Hardly. Twenty-five years ago perhaps, but she would hardly have been alive back then.

“Matthew!”

She’s out of sight. I struggle into a run to catch her up. She’s cut a path, but you still have to pick your way through. My backpack jostles me and I stumble, nearly falling face first into the living earth, cursing myself as I do.

“Matthew!”

I push through the brush and find her, standing on a rock, pointing.

Wow.

In front of us, covered and claimed by the jungle, a huge arch, carved from a single slab of stone. Its three times my height, covered in creepers and carvings. I move closer and I can see pictures and words in a language I will never know how to read. This is old, very very old.

“Look up there,” Laura says.

I gaze where she is pointing. There’s a carving decorating the lintel – the image of a woman holding a staff in each hand. There’s something strange about the shape of her body. The proportions aren’t—

“You got here just in time,” Laura says. She beckons me over and I climb up and onto the stone to join her. The top of the slab is perfectly flat, as if it’s been placed here. It has been placed here.

“Watch.”

I look at the arch. The sun bathes the interior as dawn’s fingers creep through the jungle. The stone carvings on the inside are made gold by the power of morning. I see depictions of men, women and children, all facing away from us towards the light. I realise the construction has been perfectly aligned by its maker for this, to let long

forgotten idols renew themselves in the glow of our eternal life giver.

“That’s amazing,” I say.

“It happens once a year,” Laura explains. “In this moment we are one with the ancient people who stood here and witnessed the same beauty.”

“What happened to them?”

“Like all things, they had their time. Only the forest remembers them now.”

After a few minutes the moment is over. I walk down to the arch, examining the workmanship. Long forgotten faces stare at out of the stone. I see flecks of paint, all that remains of their outer skin. Every person looks toward the same spot, the moment of light. It must have taken incredible skill to align every gaze perfectly like this.

There’s one figure that’s different. A twisted body dressed in robes, turning away from the sun towards the others. Its larger, perhaps twice the size, its hands and arms outstretched. To embrace the crowd or give warning?

The robed carving’s face is obscured by bright green suckered tendrils that grow out of the wall. I reach into my pocket for my penknife, dig it out and flip open the blade.

A hand closes over my wrist. It’s Laura. “Do not,” she says.

“Why not?” I ask. “No-one’s going to notice.”

“The forest has claimed that one. We do not interfere with what the forest wants.”

I laugh and look at her. “I’ll just remove the growth around his face. I just want to see what he looks like. A tiny cut. It’ll grow back in a day or two.”

She stares and me for several moments, then turns away. “It is your doom,” she says.

I focus on the carving and the bright green plant. The latter is unusual. I can’t see anything like it anywhere else. I

trace the shoots back to a carved hole. They are twisted up amongst others, like the cables behind a television set.

I put my knife to the growth around the figure. There's resistance at first, but then the life beneath my blade gives way and the creeper is gone, revealing the face beneath.

There is no face. There are no eyes, no nose, no mouth. Instead a mass of tendrils erupt from beneath the folds of that hood, all sculpted in horrible detail.

This is no human being.

There is a loud wailing cry somewhere in the distance. I'm suddenly cold and shivering. I look around. "Laura?" I call.

There is no reply.

I walk out from the arch, back from the shadow into the sun's balm, but it fails to warm me. "Laura!" I shout again.

In response, the ground erupts. Vines, thicker than my legs vomit from the earth, screaming into the light. They swirl, as if tasting the air, then they reach for me.

Now I scream and back away, running for my pack and the stone slab. I make it, but I'm pursued. I feel the touch of a finger against the skin of my bare leg and I scream again, turning, slashing wildly with my knife, but three inches of sharp metal will do nothing against these ancient roots. Suckers clamp onto my legs, needle-like feeders within them tear through flesh and feast greedily on the blood beneath. I feel my life and freedom drain away, taken by a power older than I can comprehend.

Sometime later, the remains of what I was, is dragged into the earth as punishment for my crime.



## The Tomb of the Phoenix

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I MUST BEGIN my report by assuring you – and I hope that in this I am supported by the doctors who have watched over me – that, fantastic as the events I am about to describe may appear, I am entirely sound of mind. I will not dispute that my stay in the sanitarium was indeed a necessity; but that unfortunate period should not be taken as a sign of some congenital irregularity of mind. Rather, it represents the difficulty with which even the most rational mind can grasp events of such magnitude that they challenge all heretofore believed.

You may remember the tragic words of the ill-fated poet Wilfred Owen, writing of the Great War that now threatens to repeat:

*Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?  
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,  
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,  
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?  
Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,  
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?*

*Ever from their hair and through their hand palms  
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished  
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?  
—These are men whose minds the Dead have  
ravished.*

*Memory fingers in their hair of murders,  
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.  
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,  
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.  
Always they must see these things and hear them,  
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,  
Carnage incomparable and human squander  
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.*

*Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented  
Back into their brains, because on their sense  
Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-  
black;  
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.  
—Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,  
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.  
—Thus their hands are plucking at each other;  
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;  
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,  
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.*

Such indeed was my state, and the state of my fellow survivors, when we returned from our expedition; but as we do not doubt the reality of the war because it has broken a soldier's mind, so I hope you will not doubt the reality of my account, though unquestionably it did, for a while, break me.

II

The expedition was organized by Boston University, no doubt in part for the publicity it might bring. It came in response to claims, repeated with increasing sensationalism by the yellow press in the fall of 1937, of a mysterious island sighted in the Bellingshausen Sea, off the coast of Antarctica. The accounts – for which no credible source could be discovered, with some at the university quietly suspecting they had been entirely fabricated – ranged from merely describing an unknown, strangely-shaped landmass to detailing the presence of ancient stone structures. It was, of course, the latter idea that inflamed the public imagination, aided by a blurry photograph that might, in all honesty, have been anything.

How I wish I could determine the origin of this story! Though we investigated it before we left, our explicit instructions were "not to look too hard" – the opportunity was too good, and even if the story turned out to be false, the expedition itself might prove valuable. Such is the state of science in the modern world, that an opportunity to seek understanding must be gained through trickery and politicking.

But it would be hypocrisy of the highest order to claim that I was not then myself part of the problem. You see, I was a philologist, in the original sense of the word: a lover of the word. I treasured above all else stories, myths, poetry – all that is divine about human thought, or so I then believed. Perhaps it would be accurate to call me a Romantic, with little time for human science and industry.

It was the Romantic in me, then, who caused me to join the expedition. I had written several papers on the recurring motif of "lost worlds" – Atlantis, Mu, Agartha, the Plateau of Leng, and so forth – in works ranging from

classical antiquity to Theosophy to (somewhat controversially) the stories published in pulp magazines. My participation would allow me to write either about the discovery of a true lost world, or – more likely – the strange psychological impulses that lead us to return to this myth again and again, even as modernity has stripped away much of the mystery that defined previous ages of discovery.

The expedition was led by one Professor Chambers, a good-natured geologist prone to bouts of uncontrolled enthusiasm. Other notable members included Professor Emerson, a loud-mouthed biologist intent on studying Antarctica's unique fossil record, Professor Johnson, a stern but respectable physicist, and Shklovski, a quiet Russian-born geographer. Our ship, a former whaler named the *MV Pontus*, was commanded by the avaricious and deeply unpleasant Captain Tremaine, to whom I took an immediate dislike. There were also any number of sailors, assistants, and – naturally – various students who had foolishly volunteered in hopes of academic recognition.

You may be aware that there exists at many universities, and in the academic life in general, a kind of childish antagonism between the social and physical sciences. To them, our work is meaningless babble; to us, their science is superficial, neglectful of the human spirit. All of us, apart from Shklovski, were prone to such opinions, and as a result I spent much of the journey in my cabin, working on a book about the great nautical writers, with particular attention paid to Melville and the unjust treatment of his work by his contemporary critics. There was little difference between my cabin and my excessively small office at the university, so although we were moving ever further from humanity and civilization, I felt as if my everyday life were continuing uninterrupted. Only when vast icebergs began to drift by my window, some of them so great that

one might imagine entire cities could be built upon them, did I realize we had left the world I knew behind.

III

As the location of the island as described in the press was vague at best, we were forced to search according to an ingenious pattern devised by Shklovski, the details of which I cannot claim to understand. In any case, we spent days doing this, during which time tempers began to fray, culminating in a fistfight between Emerson and one of the sailors. The sailor had taken Emerson for a weakling due to the man's profession and tendency to speak too much, but that was a foolish assumption; Emerson had grown up in poverty in West Virginia, the son of a coal-miner, and for all his academic knowledge and refined language, he fought like a professional pugilist. Suffice it to say, it did not end well for the sailor, which greatly endeared Emerson to the rest of the crew, who disliked the sailor for his thuggishness and subservience to Captain Tremaine. I must admit I felt some jealousy, then, for Emerson expressed a kind of truly American dynamism that my more reticent nature denied me, though the Romantic in me longed for it.

I note all these details so as to accurately describe the mental state we found ourselves in when we came upon the island. It is true that we were not in the best of spirits; but we were not, as I have heard claimed, lost, hungry, or on the verge of madness. If anything, from the moment we sighted the island, everyone's spirits lifted immensely and a surge of enthusiasm swept the boat.

It was Chambers who spied it first, which was unsurprising, as he was the most convinced of its existence, and spent the most time on deck or staring out through the portholes. He came running down to the mess, where the

rest of us were assembling for breakfast, shouting incoherently. When we realized what he was trying to say, we followed him to the port deck. At first we thought he had been wrong, and all we were seeing was a particularly large iceberg, but then Chambers pointed out what appeared to be stone cliffs, and what he thought might be structures. Shklovski agreed, which swayed the rest of us. Chambers ordered Tremaine to head straight for the island.

As we drew closer, excitement grew. It was becoming apparent that Chambers was right. The island did not exist on any of our maps, and it certainly wasn't an iceberg. Whether the straight lines we saw atop the cliffs were artificial or natural was another issue, but one that could be cleared up soon enough. It would take us some time to reach the island and to find a good place to drop anchor, but we were well-rested and the sun was always in the sky, so we began to prepare for our first landing.

#### IV

The island was surrounded by steep cliffs and treacherous currents. When we finally found a large but well-protected bay to lay anchor in, several hours had passed, and we were itching to start exploring; Emerson joked that Chambers was ready to just swim to the island. As soon as the nautical procedures were complete, a small group of us – including myself, Emerson, Chambers, Shklovski, five or six sailors and two young students whose names escape me – rowed to shore in small wooden boats, taking with us a batch of scientific equipment, climbing gear, supplies, and tents.

The cliffs were steep and of a strange dark color, a kind of rich grey I find hard to adequately describe, and which the photographs we took do not properly evoke.

Beneath the cliffs stretched a beach of rough pebbles; this beach was devoid of all life, even such as one may find in Antarctica, but as we drew closer, we saw that the numerous splotches of white, which we had previously taken for ice, were in fact skeletons. As soon as the first boat touched land, Emerson burst forth like a cannonball, followed by Chambers. Emerson headed for the nearest skeleton; Chambers headed for the cliffs, to examine the nature of the exposed rock. He was the author of a world-renowned monograph on the different types of geological strata, precisely the sort of work I looked down upon as illuminating nothing valuable about the human condition.

The others, likewise, all busied themselves with their respective specialities. Strangely, only I looked up. What I saw froze me in place, shivering with a premonition that seemed instinctive, ancestral.

Emerson began loudly exclaiming that the skeletons were most unusual – his excitement so genuine that a trace of his natural accent, suppressed at the university, slipped back into his words. These animals had been seals and penguins, he said, but of a kind no-one had ever encountered before. Strangely, few of them seemed to match up, each skeleton having unique features, as if each and every one of them represented a new unknown species. Moreover, some of the unusual shapes in the bone structure seemed very hard to explain rationally. But could so many animals in one place all bear terrible deformities? What could cause such a thing?

Chambers, meanwhile, was both excited and confused. The stone, he proclaimed with a puzzled expression, was unlike any he'd ever seen before, rich with fossils of creatures he could not recognize. He asked Emerson to come take a look, but Emerson noticed me staring at the top of

the cliffs, and turned to look. Then he fell silent, and this was unusual enough for all the others to look as well.

The straight lines we had seen, which the others had forgotten in all the excitement, were artificial. They were a wall.

## V

Strange fossils and deformed skeletons suddenly seemed secondary. Here, in a region of the Earth no-one had visited for millennia, where even in today's technological age only few dared venture, stood a massive fortification that would have been the envy of any of the great civilizations of the ancient world. Who had built it, and why? Though elements of its design immediately led one to think of cultures as varied as the Egyptians, the Chinese, or the Mayans, even from this first look it was possible to tell that it belonged to none of them.

We felt a profound awe; but I also felt a terror I could not explain. I was caught between wanting to know what was beyond that wall, and wanting to run as fast as I could. I might in fact have run, or might have stayed locked between impulses forever, if Shklovski hadn't suddenly pointed to the eastern part of the cliffs. There, carved into the strange dark rock, were stairs.

The plan had been to establish a very basic camp on the beach, then carefully scale the cliffs and proceed inland. The existence of the stairs disrupted that plan. Emerson wanted to proceed upwards immediately, but Chambers wanted to further examine the rocks. Shklovski stayed out of it; I wondered whether he was experiencing the same primal fear as I was. Finally, it was agreed that Emerson and myself, along with one of the students and two of the sailors, would go and "have a look." Emerson



swore it would be no more than that, but it was clear he did not mean it.

We ascended the stairs carefully, although they seemed to be in nearly perfect condition despite their apparent age. It took some time; the cliffs were frighteningly high. I have never suffered from acrophobia, but during that ascent, I was haunted by frightful images of falling to my death that still sometimes trouble my dreams. But unlike my dreams, the actual ascent did not present any problems, and we reached the top without anything terrible happening.

The stairs led directly to the base of the wall, which was built out of blocks of stone that would put the pyramids to shame. How could any ancient culture have built this structure, particularly in so remote and inhospitable a place? It was baffling and unsettling.

Further on, a second set of steps ascended the wall. We headed for these, looking down occasionally, seeing the other men building a camp on the beach. They seemed further away than they were, as if we had ascended to another world. That feeling of separation from known reality, however, only fully set in when we ascended the final part of the way and looked over the wall onto the vast plateau that was the heart of the island.

## VI

Surrounded by the wall we had just climbed stood a vast necropolis of gargantuan buildings and half-crumbled statues, whose size and splendor, even in ruin, matched that of humanity's greatest accomplishments. I found myself murmuring, under my breath, the words of Shelley:

*I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone*

*Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
 The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:  
 And on the pedestal these words appear:  
 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

As with the walls, even more so with the city itself, the style of the architecture seemed at once familiar and entirely alien. What people of antiquity could have built this vision? I felt as if we had entered a region of myth, and the most likely answer was – this city was built by the mighty Cyclopes of legend, with stone blocks carried by flocks of Pegasi. Yet even that fancy seemed inadequate, for this city surely predated even those beings.

Emerson wanted to have a closer look; curiosity overwhelmed me, and I agreed. He and the student headed for what appeared to be a temple, or at least somehow evoked the idea of a temple in our minds: a structure at least three stories high, its entrance surrounded by pillars. Shklovski and I headed for one of the crumbled statues, which stood upon a base almost as large as the MV Pontus herself.

Only the feet of the statue still stood. The rest had fallen backwards and shattered, destroying several buildings in the process. From the look of it, this had happened a long time ago, but it is not always easy to tell in such a frozen land. The base of the statue held a lengthy inscription, which was why I had agreed to Emerson's proposal

that we explore further – I desperately wanted to know what manner of writing this civilization employed.

I stared at the writing for a long time as Shklovski attempted to reconstruct the shape of the statue from its fragments. He walked around with his sketchpad, taking notes, while I brooded.

Allow me to explain. Not all philologists are linguists; not all linguists are polyglots. But it so happened that, due to my interest in certain ancient myths, I had spent a good many years learning some of the most ancient languages known to man, so that I might read the foundational texts of our mythologies without the distortions of translation.

The language on this immense pedestal was not any of these ancient languages; yet it seemed to be all of them. I could never have imagined such a thing on my own, despite all my knowledge, but seeing it now everything fell into place. This proto-language was the missing link between all human languages, the root of words spoken continents and millennia apart. This, too, was the origin of writing; the First Language, foundation of all that I treasured. No-one without my specialized knowledge could have understood this, but I could almost read it.

My reverie was broken by Shklovski, who returned with a complete sketch of the statue. His face was ashen. Looking at the sketch, I did not understand. It seemed to be a rather bad, distorted image of a man holding a rod. Shklovski was a talented artist; why had he drawn the man with a strangely elongated head, unusually long arms, and a decidedly unlikely torso? Judging from the feet, this statue was of a realistic kind, not abstract like the mysterious statues common in Cycladic art. Had the poor man let the fear we had both felt overwhelm his senses?

I looked at Shklovski again, and I saw in the clarity of his eyes that he was entirely rational. Only then did the

abhorrent thought my mind had clearly attempted to suppress manifest itself, and I stared at the fragments of the statue, trembling. No, I thought, this could not be. These were men, men such as ourselves. Nothing else was possible!

As if struck by the same idea, the same need, Shklovski and I began to run, looking for another statue like drowning men looking for air. Finally we found a statue that had fallen, but not broken. From behind, it seemed like any statue you would expect to come across in an archaeological site, save for its unusual size. But when we rounded it to see its front, Shklovski screamed – or perhaps it was I. These were statues of men, indeed, but not not men such as ourselves. Though surely they were of the genus *Homo*, they were not *Homo sapiens*.

## VII

The one man who might be able to answer the myriad questions that flooded our minds until we could barely speak was nowhere to be found. Neither Emerson nor the student who had accompanied him answered our calls, though all was silent and our voices echoed amongst the dead monuments. We entered the temple they had headed for, thinking its thick walls might have kept them from hearing us, but they did not seem to be present.

The walls of the temple were covered in murals depicting the history of these non-human hominids, with extensive writing in the proto-language we seemed to have inherited from them. I wanted to study these, which surely were the most remarkable cultural find of the century, if not all time, but Shklovski and I were now getting seriously worried about the wellbeing of our fellow explorers. At the

back of the temple, where the shadows were deepest, we discovered a seemingly bottomless pool of unfrozen water, above which hovered a thin, inexplicable mist. This unsettled us deeply, in the same manner as the sight of the city walls had earlier, but we approached as far as we dared. At the edge of the pool we saw a piece of cloth that looked suspiciously like Emerson's scarf; further objects, which might be other articles of clothing, were floating in the dark water. On the smooth rock that surrounded the pool, there was a single wet footstep, as if someone standing in the pool had hesitated, taken a step back before plunging in.

I do not know what impossible phantoms were haunting Shklovski's mind at that moment, whether he was imagining the same terrifying scenarios as I was, or whether he was managing to keep the demoniac aspects of his brain under control, but we both agreed that immediate retreat was our only option. We moved briskly, not fully acknowledging what we both feared, but heading back to the safety of other human beings as quickly as safety allowed.

As we descended the stairs, we heard the agitated ramblings of Chambers echoing up at us. The one word continuously repeated in his monologue was one I had thought frequently in the last few hours: "impossible." He was not speaking about the necropolis, however, but about something seemingly far more mundane: rock. The usual warmth of his enthusiasm had been replaced by something bordering on hysteria. When we finally reached the camp, he grabbed me by the shoulders, asking me over and over where Emerson was. I tried to respond, but he did not have the patience or the mental stability to listen to a complex explanation. There was too much iridium, he shouted. Entirely too much iridium! And he could not recognize the

fossils, not at all. He needed a biologist to tell him that he was wrong.

It was Johnson, the stern physicist whom I barely knew, who managed to calm everyone down. He came over from the ship and announced loudly that we were behaving like savages, not scientists. That insult cut deep, and it was to defend our pride that we finally set aside our fears and began to talk. Chambers, in carefully picked words, clarified that he suspected we were standing on a piece of land that was not of the Earth, but the result of an ancient impact on our planet. Asked to guess the point in time when this had occurred, he estimated at least two and a half million years, in the Pleiocene Epoch.

At this point I spoke up, and with Shklovski's help outlined what we had discovered. The others evidently found it difficult to believe our assertions regarding the hominids who had built the necropolis; they also could not understand our terror at what we found in the temple. And I will admit that in the bright sunlight, in the presence of friends and allies, it was hard to fully recollect that feeling. Perhaps our companions had just gotten lost somewhere in the ruins, and what we'd seen was merely our imagination playing tricks on us. Shklovski seemed less reassured. It was agreed by all, however, that finding Emerson and the missing student should be our first priority.

More men came over from the boat and about twenty of us returned to the necropolis to search for our fellows. As we ascended, we were full of determination, but when we crossed the wall and the ruins stood before us, silence fell over the group. I have heard of people being overcome with awe upon seeing the pyramids of Egypt, or the Parthenon, or the Roman Colosseum; what we saw before us dwarfed these in size and antiquity, and despite the great difference in form, somehow matched in dignity and

beauty the greatest of the Graeco-Roman works, which I would count as the most accomplished yet conceived by *Homo sapiens*.

This time it was a sailor who broke us out of another strange state of mind, by employing a rather colorful swearword that I won't repeat here. We laughed, and I feel grateful to him still for that one moment. I wish I remembered his name, as I wish I remembered the name of the student who had gone missing with Emerson. If one of you reading this has access to the expedition's documents, I would kindly ask you to inform me, as knowing their names would bring me a certain degree of peace.

We split up into half a dozen groups and began surveying the necropolis as best we could. Shklovski and an assistant began walking the wall and attempting to create a map of the city. Myself, Johnson, Chambers, and the cursing sailor, returned to the temple-like structure. The mist hovering over the pool was gone, as were the floating objects. The footstep had dried. But Emerson's scarf was still present, proving we had not been hallucinating. The sailor walked up the pool and stuck his hand in. I tried to warn him, but it was all too quick, and I'm not certain what I would have said. As it was, he merely commented that the pool was cold and deep, and that if Emerson had somehow ended up at its bottom, we would require a diving suit to retrieve him.

The notion of anyone entering the pool terrified me, but since it seemed likely that something had happened to Emerson here, I sent the sailor back to the ship to retrieve the diving equipment. Not long after he was gone, we heard a peculiar howling, which we soon realized was a gale blowing between the ruins; a storm was upon us.

## VIII

The storm was of such suddenness and intensity that we were forced to take shelter wherever we were. In our case, that meant staying inside the temple. The temperature dropped precipitously. There was nothing to do but wait.

As the hours passed, I began a rough translation of the writing on the temple walls, aided by the stylized but remarkably detailed images. What I found unsettled me to the very core my being. I will attempt to recount my findings here, but it is my hope that a better translation could be produced by linguistic experts studying the photographs I took. I would be glad to assist in such a project.

The story told in the ancient words and images was that of a great civilization that arose long before modern humanity, on a continent now lost to the sea. Like us, they struggled upwards from humble roots, rising from ape-like being living in caves to become civilized beings living first in villages, then towns, then cities. They placed great value upon the development of the spirit, which to them encompassed both the sciences and the arts. They explored the other continents, where they found less developed peoples; they described twelve different species. I wished again for Emerson's expertise; Chambers, who knew a little of paleo-anthropology, suggested that one of the images on the wall looked like *Homo habilis*, one of our ancestors.

The discovery of the primitive peoples caused a great conflict within the ancient society. Two factions emerged: one advocated subjugating them, the other considered them intelligent beings deserving of freedom. A terrible civil war followed, in which the anti-imperialist faction was victorious – but the victory rang hollow. Many cities had fallen, millions had died, and the infrastructure of the land was in crippling disrepair.



All might have been well, had a new star not then appeared in the sky. It would seem that the ancients had great knowledge of astronomical matters; they considered this star not like the others, which are constant and reliable, but similar in character to the planets, which wander about the heavens. Their scientists, using equipment much like our own, calculated that it was on an orbit entirely unlike that of the other planets. Here Johnson helped me, because of my own regrettably limited knowledge of scientific matters. All the planets we know so far, including the recently-discovered Pluto, rotate around the sun on the same plane. But scientists have long speculated about the existence of another trans-Neptunian planet, moving at an orbit perpendicular to that plane, in an elliptical orbit that takes it to the furthest reaches of the solar system, only returning from the outer darkness once in many thousands of years.

It was precisely such a planet that the ancients discovered, calling it – if I translated the sounds correctly – Yuggoth. They also discovered that its orbit was such that only upon the rarest occasions did it come close enough for the sun to have any effect upon it. But that year was such a time, and when it entered the regions of the sun, a piece of Yuggoth was expelled towards the Earth.

The destruction caused by the impact was devastating. Waves as high as mountains swallowed much of the ancient homeland. Even this the ancient civilization might have survived, given time; but something had come down from Yuggoth. It began as a growth, a fungus of some kind, but little attention was paid to it, understandable given the situation. Things began to change; a strange mist was seen, and rumours of monstrous creatures. The imperialist faction, defeated but not gone, seized upon this, claiming Yuggoth was the home of the gods, and the star

that fell from the sky a warning that they were on the wrong path. Some took this further, claiming that the gods had sent them a way of ascending, of becoming more than the inferior beings who had failed to conquer the primitives. They embraced the transformation, becoming abominations that wreaked havoc upon their fellow hominids.

There followed one final war, in which the best and brightest of the ancients devised a way to stop the growth of the alien infection; but the price of victory was unimaginable. In some manner I cannot fully understand – to translate their scientific terminology would require far more time – they created an opposite to the virus, a kind of poison.

I had called the place a necropolis because of its eerie emptiness; I had been more right than I could have known! This was their last monument, a celebration of their history and a warning to the future. They had destroyed themselves to save the other races of the Earth.

## IX

When things go wrong, they often go wrong rapidly. So it was that day. Just as the storm was abating, still lost in thought as I considered the writings of the ancients, I heard a dripping sound. The others had fallen asleep, having been awake longer than they'd realized in Antarctica's permanent sunlight. So, as I was the only one awake, much of the blame is mine. I ignored the dripping, thinking it had been caused by the storm.

Emerson and the missing student had risen from the pool. They were not as they had once been. I only caught a glimpse of the student as he grabbed Chambers and dragged him into the water; I will swear by all that I value, however, that the poor man had turned into some manner

of abominable fish-creature, so deformed that I doubted he would live long. Emerson I saw more clearly as he fell upon the sleeping men; his arm was no longer human, but could only be described as a claw, not unlike that of a crab. His skin, too, was changing.

He tore through the men like they were made of paper; I have never seen so much blood. Only Johnson survived; he was sleeping further away than the others. Emerson turned to face me. I knew then that it was time to make my peace with God; but as he approached me, Emerson hesitated. For an instant, there was something human in his eyes, and he spoke one single word to me: run, he said. And I did, managing to grab only one roll of film.

Johnson and I screamed as we ran, trying to warn the others. Emerson was following us, his humanity extinguished. Shklovski joined us, fleeing from another creature, one that had once been his assistant. We ran towards the stairs that led to the beach, but at the top of the wall our way was blocked. It was the sailor I had sent to retrieve the diving suit. He was still holding it, though his hands were twisted, transforming into something alien.

I wondered, for a second, what we would have found at the bottom of that pool. I thought this might be my final thought, but Johnson did something remarkable: he threw himself at the creature. I do not know if he intended for both of them to go over the edge of the wall, but I think he did. It was the sort of man he was – stern, dedicated, putting what was necessary before what he wanted, like those other humans (and they were human, though they were not us) of so long ago.

More creatures came following us, but many of them seemed deformed like the fish-man I'd seen. Running past the bones on the beach, I thought that this might be their

cause – some lessened form of the infection, or some remainder of the poison. These, apart perhaps from Emerson, were not quite the creatures that had destroyed the ancient civilization; but they were enough to destroy us, so we fled.

I wish the story ended here, but there is one more event I must describe, as it relates directly to my credibility. When Shklovski and I had reached the ship, we realized to our horror that there were three more survivors on the island: two of the sailors and an assistant. They appeared on the top of the wall, waving and shouting, fighting off the creatures using some of the equipment we'd brought as makeshift weapons. I told Captain Tremaine not to go, to give them time; there was a chance that they might survive. But he, having none of the humanity so many of the others had demonstrated during this hellish journey, turned the ship around and left.

When I realized what he was doing – when I heard their screams as they fought their way down the stairs, begging us not to leave them – my mind finally snapped. I remember it as something that happened to another man; as if I was outside myself. I took hold of Captain Tremaine and beat his head against the ship's wheel with such force that I heard his skull crack. I repeated this action multiple times, until Captain Tremaine was no more. The next thing I remember is the sanitarium.

## X

Allow me one final remark. The last image I saw in the temple, the one that accompanied the description of why the ancients chose to sacrifice themselves, was a symbol familiar to us from our own mythology, no doubt derived from dimly-remembered encounters with their people: the

## The Briefing

phoenix, rising from the ashes. When they made that impossible choice, they expected themselves to die; but they did not expect humanity to die. They expected their civilization to end, but not all civilization. They had fought a war to guarantee our freedom, and they died so we could flourish. They believed in the betterment of the spirit, through art and science; they expected us to carry forward that work.

There is only one human species left now; there are no second chances, no others to defend the human spirit. But Yuggoth is still out there, waiting in the darkness; and terrible things may still linger under the ice of our own planet. Sooner or later, this threat will come again, and we must be prepared. We must increase our technology and our powers of production to the outmost; we must invest heavily in science, in understanding the methods by which such threats can be countered. And we must not neglect the other side of the human spirit – we must embrace our humanity, in its infinite beauty and variety.

We will need these things when the darkness comes again.

*Though much is taken, much abides; and though  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are*

—  
*One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

## Harbinger

---

I'M SITTING in a dark canvas tent by the door, listening to the rain. It's absolutely hammering down, but I'm still considering waiting out in the street. That way I could avoid the resentful looks and whispers.

*She shouldn't be here, they say.*

Maybe they're right.

---

THERE'S a soldier standing just outside. He's wearing a waterproof and holding a rifle, while he stares out into the street. If I wasn't dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, I'd join him.

The sullen faces around me are thin and pale. I can see signs of the virus here and there. Others are struggling with life-ending conditions. Most people wouldn't be visiting the emergency health centre on a day like this if they had a choice.

I look away and stare into the world we're sheltering from. Black clouds piss on the smouldering remains of the

old doctor's surgery across the road. Rioters torched it a week ago. That was when they had to call in the National Guard. How much difference three hundred teenagers and twenty-somethings in army fatigues will make is anyone's guess, but for now, Greenville isn't tearing itself apart.

"Ms Owen? The doctor will see you now."

I get up and walk into the depths of the tent, feeling those angry eyes judging me with every move I make. I know what they're thinking – *she's not ill* – and they're right. I'm not.

Not anymore.

"This way, Ms Owen." The girl escorting me is in beige army camo. She can't be more than nineteen. She's wearing an ID badge that says 'Miller'. That could be her name or just the jacket she pulled on this morning.

I'm taken through a flap of canvas into an empty space and through there into a temporary office. There's a man sat behind a desk. He's also dressed in army gear with a hazmat suit over the top. His hood is pulled back to reveal his balding, sweaty head and face. The breathing mask is on the table. The man looks up at me and smiles as I enter.

"Hello Ms Owen, I'm Doctor—"

I hold my hand up, cutting him off. "I don't care. Where's Doctor Grant?"

"We've taken him out of town. The situation out here is... a little too demanding for a civilian, general practitioner."

"Okay."

The doctor picks up an envelope from the table. "I have your final blood test results for you." He holds it out. I take it and tear it open. The letter inside is short and sweet, with numbers, percentages and technical details. Doctor Grant would have sat me down and gone through this, but I doubt I'll get the same treatment from the military. The

words “remission” and “all clear” should make me feel happy, but instead I’m numb. I know what this cure cost.

“Congratulations, Ms Owen,” the doctor says. His eyes flick to the entrance. “It’s nice to be able to give someone good news these days.”

I don’t reply.

He bites his lip, as if he wants to say something else, but reconsiders and waves me out.

I leave as swiftly as possible, keeping my head down as I walk back through the tent. It’s mid-afternoon. The rain has eased off, but the clouds remain dark and angry. Its foggy on the street. It’s always foggy these days and there’s a stale smell to everything. The authorities say we shouldn’t panic. The media points to falling temperature averages and every channel takes turns to slag off climate scientists who preach Armageddon from the sea.

Whatever man. Deal with your world, I have my own issues.

My house is three blocks from the National Guard encampment. The windows are boarded up, but we got off lightly. My parents left three weeks ago. I decided to stay. I’m thirty-three years old and four months ago I was diagnosed with terminal cancer, so they couldn’t really argue about how I wanted to spend my last days.

I shouldn’t be alive and in a way, I’m not.

The old sofa is where I’ve always sat to watch television. Dad used to kick the arm when he thought I was being lazy or he wanted something. After they found the tumour he let me be. We had an argument about it where I told him I didn’t want his pity.

He cried. I’d never seen him cry before.

I’m sat in the chair again now, staring at the blank screen. There’s no point in turning it on. The stories will all be the same. Variations on, ‘this is the end of times’. It’s



funny how people get religious when they contemplate death.

There's a knock at my door. I sigh and get up to answer it. A man is standing outside. I recognise him from the medical tent – one of the sullen faces. He's carrying his son in his arms. The boy looks thin and weak. There are lesions on his face.

I know the signs.

“Are you Lisa Owen?” the man says.

I stare at him. “Please go away,” I reply.

The man shakes his head. “I can't... my son needs you.”

“You don't know what you're asking,” I say.

“I need you to heal my boy.”

“What I do for him won't heal him.”

“It will. I have faith. I've seen it.”

“You've seen what you wanted to see. Please, don't ask me to do this.”

“What other choice do I have?”

I stare at the man, but his desperate question can't be denied. I open the door and step aside. He enters the house and carries his dying child into the living room, laying him down on the couch.

I retake my seat. I can hear the boy's rattling breath. It's six-thirty in the afternoon. He'll die before morning unless someone intervenes. “What's your name?” I ask the father.

“Roger,” he replies.

“Well, Roger, there's beer in the fridge. Best you bring two for you and two for me. We'll be needing them.”

---

WHEN YOU HAVE CANCER, they suggest all sorts of expen-

sive therapy. The whole healthcare system in this country is shot to shit when it comes to incurable diseases. That ‘buy now pay later’ philosophy you see in car show rooms is basically how it works these days. Only difference is, you’ve only got one body, so you can’t shop around.

Medical insurance isn’t worth crap, unless you’ve been identified as a ‘priority citizen of the New American Republic’. They say things are better over the border in Independent California, but I doubt it. We still get their news channels and nothing looks better. In fact, it all looks worse, closer to the sea.

I got diagnosed four months ago. Like most people who get cancer, I went on chemo. I started losing my hair two weeks in. For some people it grows back when the body adjusts, or afterwards. For me, I know it’s never coming back.

All part of the ‘cure’.

Roger comes back with the beers. He cracks one open and offers it to me. I take a swig and ease back in my chair. Roger sits on the end of the couch, stroking his son’s hair. “What’s his name?” I ask.

“Matthew.”

“How long since he got infected?”

“A few days I guess,” Roger says. He’s blinking hard, trying to keep back the tears. I guess it’s taken a lot for him to come here and beg me for help. “We probably tried to deny what it was.”

I nod and we sit in silence for a while, sipping from the bottle. I need to give him the speech. I’m working up to it. The alcohol should help, but it doesn’t. I just feel even more dislocated from who I was.

“You need to understand what you’re asking, before I’ll agree to do anything,” I say at last. “You have to let me

explain what I know and accept what'll happen to Matthew."

"Okay," Roger says. "Anything you want."

I sigh. They're always like this, fixated about what's in front of them rather than what'll happen after that, but I have to try. "A month ago, I was a terminal cancer patient. I contracted the Pandoravirus, collapsed and was taken into intensive care. My body's immune system was shot to shit, so the medical diagnosis was that I'd last about forty-eight hours.

"No-one expected me to get better."

I take another swig of beer and lean forward in my seat. "They flew some of the top doctors in the country to my bedside and took every sample they could from me. Even bone marrow, which, trust me, is not something you ever want people doing. I was cat scanned, x-rayed, the works. Once they had every piece of data they could get, they discharged me and sent me home. I've had regular blood tests ever since. The tumour in my gut literally got eaten by the new bacteria, but after it was done, it didn't stop." I point at Matthew. "Only difference between me and him right now is that for some reason, my body accepted the changes and let it all happen."

Roger is looking at me and nodding, but I can see all this is washing right past him. He can't think further than his son right now. but I still need to tell him, otherwise it'll come on me back later. "I heard you healed a little girl called Rebecca," he says.

I shake my head. "That's what I'm trying to explain, she isn't better."

"I spoke to her mother, she said she is."

"What's walking around now isn't Rebecca, it's something else in her skin."

Roger doesn't reply to that. Instead, he flinches away

from my stare, swallows and looks at his son. Maybe I've got through to him?

I continue my story to fill the silence. "They found a new strain of the virus in my body. According to the scientists, it's like the stuff Jenner found when he was looking for a smallpox vaccine. Only difference is, they don't know what it does. They tried injecting samples of my blood and bone marrow into other patients with the virus and other patients with terminal diseases. None of it worked, people were dying overnight. After that, they discharged me. A day later, people like you started showing up. Seems somebody in the CDC decided to blab about me and what happened. I'm a freak, nothing more."

I can hear Roger quietly weeping. His tears run down his face and onto his son's. "I have to believe you can help us," he says in between shuddering sobs. "We've nothing else to try."

I sigh. "You have to understand what you're asking. Rebecca's mother Jacqueline came here with her three days ago. She put her on that couch just the same as Matthew. I went to the kitchen, got a syringe and took a sample of my blood. We injected it into Rebecca. In less than an hour, she was awake and could sit up and talk to us. After three hours, the lesions had begun to fade. Jacqueline and Rebecca left soon after. I don't know why she survived, but she did. I've seen them since and I've looked into her eyes. You might think she's recovered, but she hasn't. She's changing, just like I am. She's not Rebecca anymore."

Roger raises his head. "You healed her. You can heal Matthew."

I shake my head. "No, you're not listening. I didn't heal Rebecca, I—"

Abruptly Roger stands up, looming over me. "I heard

every word you said. I just don't draw the same conclusion as you. My son means everything to me. I want him to live. Are you going to help us or..." he leaves the sentence hanging between us.

I look at his hands. They're clenched into fists.

Damn.

"The syringe is in the kitchen," I say. "There's needles in a sealed packet in the fridge. You'll need to put the kettle on and properly sterilise both, then bring them in here with some tissues."

"You do it," Roger says. "I'll watch you."

For a moment, I consider resisting. I've a half empty beer bottle in my hand. I could finish it, get up and use it as a weapon. Knock him out and get away.

Where would I go? How could I do that to a man who is just about to lose his son?

Right now he has hope. Maybe I'm being a coward by fanning the flames in his heart, but I've tried to explain.

I'm in the kitchen. The kettle has boiled and I'm washing what we need. He's right behind me. The sobbing has stopped. He's committed to do whatever's necessary. I've seen that look. It's the moment where civilisation ends.

"There's a box of tissues on top of the fridge," I say.

I turn around and silently, he hands them to me.

"Thank you." I take one from the top and jab the clean needle into the crook of my arm. The pain is familiar. I pump my fist and the vein quickly yields a syringe full of blood. I wipe the wound with the tissue and hand him what he wants. "Make sure you hit a vein," I say.

"Thank you," he says. His hard expression crumbles. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Yes you did," I say. "What's done is done. Just remember, if he survives and you tell anyone, the army will take Matthew away from you."

“Okay.”

He leaves the kitchen, going back to his son. I’m feeling light headed, but I can’t stay here. First Rebecca, then Matthew. I’ve been lucky that it’s only been two of them, but that won’t last. Roger will talk, Jacqueline will talk. They’ll all come now and I’ll end up dead.

I need to leave.

Roger doesn’t hear me slip out the kitchen door and walk away down the drive.

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TWENTY MINUTES later and it’s getting dark. I’m on the highway just outside of town, walking south.

I haven’t prepared for this, but in that moment when I handed Roger the syringe, I knew what would happen if I stayed. I remember those looks in the tent. Once it gets out, no matter what I tell them they’ll come for me. I’ll be bled dry as a martyr to false hope, creating new horrors out of the diseased decaying flesh of those who should be left to die.

This world is going to hell. The only option we have is choosing how we meet our end.

The road is quiet. It used to be busy, but no-one’s moving around anymore. The mercantile wheels of society are grinding to a halt. The panicky exodus further inland happened weeks ago, all that’s left are the army and the people who haven’t given up and accepted their fate.

Is that me? Am I still fighting to survive? No. I just don’t want to accept what’s planned for me.

There will be a checkpoint up ahead. They’ve been trying to establish a quarantine zone around the town. Helicopters go up every day, shooting animals in the woods, while barbed wire fences go up either side of the

roads. If I want to get through, I'll have to get off the road and think of some way to avoid all the security.

I think back over what's happened. I haven't really recovered. I don't feel the same as I did before the cancer. Something changed after I got the virus. There's something cold about how I see the world now. I'm disconnected and not me. I know what I should care about, the miracle I should be grateful for, but instead, I feel empty and hollow.

I know I've passed this curse on to those children. If Matthew survives, he won't be the same. Rebecca's already gone. All three of us are changing into whatever comes next. Nature has to evolve to survive, perhaps we're what's to come?

I hear an explosion in the distance and turn around. It came from back down the road, near Greenville. Another explosion, then another. There's an orange glow on the horizon. I don't know what that means.

The rain starts again, soaking through my t-shirt, but I'm not cold anymore. The water feels like silk against my skin, the despair and exhaustion washes away. I remember being a child, splashing through puddles, swimming in the sea, holding my breath and diving down and into the murky black. I loved all that. How could I forget? How could I—

Headlights cut through the evening mist. I hear the throaty growl of a large engine. Truck or SUV I guess, or maybe an army APC? Doesn't matter. I stick out a thumb. There's a change in the engine tone as driver passes me and brake lights confirm that whoever it is has decided to stop.

It's a big eighteen-wheeler with a canvas-covered trailer. As I get close, the back opens up and three people jump out. They are wearing long coats that reach down to

their ankles. Light from inside the back makes them dark shadows in the fainting sun. They are walking towards me.

I stop and hold up my hands. "Hey," I call out. "I just wanted a lift through the checkpoint. You can drop me off at the next gas station. You mind your business and I'll mind mine, that okay?"

"Are you Lisa Owen?" A woman's voice, one of the three.

She knows my name. Not a good sign. I take a step back, trying to keep some distance between us. "Look, forget it, I'll walk or wait for the next car. Sorry to have bothered you."

"We cannot leave you," the woman says. She stops, about a yard away. She's wearing gloves and a hooded coat, almost like a robe, She carries some kind of long walking stick and her face is covered by a decorated steel mask. Her companions are similarly dressed and wait behind her.

"Sure you can," I reply. "You just get back in your truck and carry on driving."

"You must come with us."

I take another step back. "Please, just let me go," I say.

"Ms Owen," the woman says. "Our people have been searching the country for you. There were two cars on the road, following you. We have dealt with them, but more will come. The checkpoint ahead will not let you pass. The only way you will escape is if you accept our help."

She kneels in front of me. Her companions do the same.

There's a flash of lightning and a moment later, thunder booms from above. I'm tempted to run whilst their kneeling on the wet tarmac, but where would I go? How would I live?

"Where do you want to take me?" I ask.



## The Briefing

The woman looks up and gazes into my eyes. She reaches a hand to her chin and removes the mask. Now, I can see her face. Her skin is wet and shining and she's breathing hard. There are marks on her – a strange whorl of tattoos and fresh scarring. I recognise the signs: she's been infected.

The robe she wears is bloodstained and torn. There's an open wound along her right shoulder and down her arm.

"We will deliver you to a sacred place," she says in answer to my question. "You will find nowhere safer in this world."

"What's the catch? You want me to cure you?"

"No. I need no cure. The worthy survive the blessing of Anu."

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "I don't know what that means," I say.

The woman stands up and reaches out her hand. "You must learn to accept what you have become," she says. "You can guide us all to salvation."

"You're insane."

"What is insanity? Is it insane to cling to a decaying world without hope? Humanity has put its faith in all sorts of answers to our doom. We offer you a haven from all that you fear. All we ask is that you join us and learn to belong."

Thunder rumbles again. The rain is glorious, but I can't stay out here alone without food or shelter. "Take me as far as the gas station, like I asked," I say. "I promise I'll listen to whatever you're selling, but if I want out when we get there, you have to let me go."

In response, the two other figures stand up and join the woman. They are men, similarly clothed and masked. "We agree to your terms," the woman says. All three of them hold out their hands to me. "Now, will you come with us?"

“I will,” I reply. Before they can react, I march straight past them, ignoring their strange welcome and make for the cab of the truck. I yank the passenger door handle and clamber up. The bearded driver looks around at me in surprise. “You’re not supposed to—”

“No-one said I had to ride in back,” I say, waving my hand dismissively. “You people want to recruit me, fine, but do it here. Be honest about what you want.”

The driver shrugs and laughs. “Sure, okay,” he says. He has the same whorl tattoo on his neck as the woman, but he’s dressed like me. His white shirt is also stained with blood. “I ain’t a pretty talker anyway. I just do what I’m told.”

“Suits me,” I reply. I glance around the cab. The wind-screen is cracked and there’s broken glass everywhere. I brush some away and sit down. “Let’s start at the beginning. My name’s Lisa Owen.”

“I’m Jed Ganns.”

“Good to meet you, Jed.”

“Likewise.”

## Factions: Speeches and Notes

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## Disciples of Anu

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### **DoA-009b**

Excerpt from a speech given by a Disciple of Anu acolyte at a nearby haven.

*Hear me, good people of this haven! You know the world is an evil place; and you know it has been made evil by the corruption inside us. No, I do not speak of the mists and the changes in our bodies. We all know the corruption is much older than that; it is as old as the very beginning of Man.*

*Many of you will remember the world that was. In the Gospel of the Exalted, it says: "Man rose up from the apes, yearning for the divine presence in the skies; but he did not cast from him the vestments of the ape; and so his spirit remained impure, by reason of his impure body." And is this not true? Was the old world not riddled with injustice and sin? Were all good things not drowned in the mire of human nature? Did we not put our faith in science and systems, and were rewarded with suffering? Did we not turn for help to the spiritual men of the age, and were rewarded with despair?*

*For none would speak the one truth: there is no hope for the human race! For humans are incomplete; insufficiently evolved! We are still apes, yearning for the sky, but wallowing in filth! We cannot save*

*ourselves - but we can be saved! For the Exalted has brought us hope, and faith that the devastation of the old is the birth of the new. Through the miracle of Communion, we can rid ourselves of the corruption in our flesh! All those who are worthy can be transformed, their bodies purified by the divine Spirit from beyond this world that speaks through the Exalted!*

*But beware! All those who cling to their corrupted flesh, to the imperfection of unevolved humanity, are damned! For even if they could turn back the tide and reclaim the world, their sins would follow them; and all that they built would be imperfect, and unjust, and their empires would crumble once again!*

*Join us, and together we will follow those who have left behind Man's corruption into a brighter tomorrow! Join us, and discover how to free yourself from sin! Join us, and you may learn the great secrets all others would keep from you!*

*Join us, for we will show you the path to the divine!*

### Phoenix Project Comment:

Preliminary analysis suggests that the Anu cult is a syncretic religion that arose in response to the global catastrophe, synthesizing elements of major Abrahamic religions with the beliefs of several pre-existing doomsday cults, some of which may have been previously investigated by the Phoenix Project. (It should be noted here that we have an index file that references an extended investigation into groups with apocalyptic beliefs matching certain patterns, but most of the actual files appear to have been lost at some point in the 2020s. If backups or hard copies exist, it would be tremendously useful to locate them.)

The worldview of Anu cult is deeply misanthropic, seeing human nature as inherently (biologically) corrupt and technological civilization as incapable of saving itself. They view the mist as both punishment for human hubris

and as an opportunity for salvation. Although details are scarce so far, particularly due to the group's secretive, extremely hierarchical nature and obscurantist language, it would appear that they are attempting to deliberately mutate human beings using the effects of the mist, while somehow making sure human intelligence is maintained in the resulting creatures.

The process appears to be far from fail-safe, but failure can easily be explained within the group's theology as insufficient belief in the teachings of the Exalted. The latter appears to be their spiritual leader and representative of a higher spiritual entity that may be referred to as "the Dead God" - but further research is necessary before we can even begin to guess at the potential significance of any of this.

Our encounters with the disciples of Anu have been peaceful; so far the frenzy to which the priests will frequently drive their followers seems to be mainly directed inward, as an expression of self-negation and dedication to the cause of physical transcendence. Their relationship with Synedrion is neutral; reports suggest that Synedrion is dedicated to respecting religious freedom, but philosophically hostile to hierarchies and obscurantism, and thus conflicted in its response to the Anu cultists. Hostilities seem more likely to break out with the genetic purists of New Jericho, but so far the two groups seem to be keeping their distance.

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## **PHOENIX PROJECT**

### **DoA-001**

This text is purported to be a copy of the Gospel of the Exalted, the founding holy text of the Disciples of Anu

movement. It appears to be in widespread use, although its canonicity and authorship are unclear.

## **The Gospel of the Exalted**

### **Chapter 1**

Here follows the Revelation of the Divine Flesh, which the Dead God gave unto the Exalted to show unto his servants, that they might know the things that must shortly come to pass in the Heavens and the Earth.

Blessed are they who read, and they who hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things that are written therein: for the time is at hand.

A great voice spoke to me from the heavens, saying: write down these things, that the peoples of the Earth might know the vision of the Dead God.

And I raised my eyes to see the voice that spake with me. And I saw a black sky, in which rose the Heaven of the Dead God, once lost among the stars but now finally upon us, as was promised long ago.

And there, upon his throne, I saw the Dead God, with seven sacred beasts before him; and at the feet of his throne was an eternal desolation.

And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his many hands upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the first and the last; and though I am dead, behold, I will be alive for evermore, and I have the keys of the universe.

Write therefore the things which are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter.

### **Chapter 2**

Behold, the seven sacred beasts each held a book, and each book was written with the blood of the Dead God. And the beasts opened the books, and I beheld the salvation and damnation of Man.

In the first book were written the crimes of Man; for Man rose up from the apes, yearning for the divine pres-



ence in the skies; but he did not cast from him the vestments of the ape; and so his spirit remained impure, by reason of his impure body.

And many were the crimes of Man and his corruption. For he made war upon himself, and upon his world; he was driven by lust and greed to evil doings of a shameful nature. There was no honour and no justice, but hunger and thirst were plentiful.

All this was written in the Book of Sins, and all who read it must weep.

### **Chapter 3**

In the second book were written the acts of Man and their corruptions; for by the corruption of Man's body and soul, all his acts became abominations.

Here were written the names of all of Man's cities, and all his nations; and all were dust and memories. No glory could last, no empire endure, for within Man was the seed of destruction, and all his creations were imperfect.

Here too were written the names of all Man's kings and emperors, who believed themselves immortal; and they too were dust.

All this was written in the Book of Follies, and all who read it must despair.

### **Chapter 4**

In the third book were written the lies told to Man by false prophets, for in seeking to escape his imperfection, Man turned to many deceivers.

Here were written all the names of all the faiths that had misled Man, promising salvation in the future world, yet offering nothing in the world of flesh. Yet Man knew in his heart that it was the flesh that was corrupt, and it was there that the healing must begin.

Many abhorrent and wicked things were written here, that had been told by false prophets, whose flesh was as

corrupt as that of all men; and there was no hope in the world, but the hope that comes from above.

All this was written in the Book of Lies, and all who read it must rage.

### **Chapter 5**

In the fourth book was written the promise of the Dead God, whose throne lies in the blackness of the sky; for it is he who offers Man salvation from the corruption of his body.

Behold: the nature of Man is not set in stone. All that is written may change, and Man is but the writing of Nature; and Nature is the writing of the Dead God. Man has rejected Nature and strayed from his path, corrupting all the world; but the Dead God is not of the world, and Man's corruption cannot touch him.

And all that is done in the name of the Dead God is protected from corruption; for such acts are not committed in the name of Man as he is, but in the name of Man as he shall become, pure of body and spirit.

All this was written in the Book of Hope, and all who read it must rejoice.

### **Chapter 6**

In the fifth book was written a vision of the tribulations to come; for the sins of Man, his crimes and his deceits, must be cleansed from the Earth before the new beginning.

Here was written that a star shall fall upon the Earth in its last age, and the name of the star shall be Wormwood; and at the appointed time, the star shall turn the waters bitter, and many men will die.

And the sea shall become an abyss; and there shall go up a mist out of the depths, as deep as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air shall be darkened by reason of the mist.

And out of the mist shall come forth locusts upon the

earth; and power shall be given them, as the scorpions of the earth have power, to poison and to torture Man for his sins.

And the kings of the earth, and the princes, and the chief captains, and the rich, and the strong, and every bondman and freeman, shall hide themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains; and they shall say to the mountains and to the rocks, fall on us, and hide us from our sins, and from the wrath of the Dead God.

But some shall raise their eyes and look at the Throne of the Dead God, and give thanks; and they shall be led to the Waters of Life. There they shall mortify the flesh, and embrace a new birth.

All this was written in the Book of Tribulations, and all who read it must repent.

### **Chapter 7**

In the sixth book were written the ways of Man's advancement; for only through the Sacred Mysteries shall his flesh be transformed by the Waters of Life.

Here were written the secrets of Kenosis, of Transubstantiation, and the Wormwood Covenant; and here were revealed the powers of the Vessels, and the Divine Apparatus, and the Hallowed Machines.

But these are too great for all men to know; for Man's corruption is still strong, and there are many unbelievers. Therefore these mysteries will be entrusted to the Skeuophylax, and the Anagnostes, and others who have purged their human sin; and all who serve the Dead God faithfully shall join their ranks in time.

All this was written in the Book of Mysteries, and all who read it shall marvel.

### **Chapter 8**

In the seventh book was written the secret of the Liturgy of the Divine Flesh; and when I read it, the sacred

beast that held it commanded me to speak of it to no-one, until the End Days were upon us. Great was my delight at what I read, and great my sorrow that I could not share it; but be of good cheer, for the day approaches, and salvation will be ours.

Thus ended the revelation, and the voice in the sky fell silent. But my heart was filled with hate of this world and its corruption, and love for the world that is to come when the flesh and the spirit are purified. And all those who share this hate and this love are welcome in my Church, for it is the church of Man who is to be, and the God that shall be alive among us.

Behold, he comes with the clouds and the rain; he comes from the sea and the stars; and every eye shall see him, and all the tribes of the Earth shall mourn. But those who exult in his coming shall be uplifted.

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## PHOENIX PROJECT

### DoA-002

As the Church is extremely secretive, it has been hard to determine the exact nature of its hierarchy. This is a rough sketch of the information so far assembled.

The leadership appears to consist of seven ranks (the number seven occurs frequently; it may be related to the number of holy books described in the Gospel of the Exalted).

The first representative of the Church to contact another organization is usually the **Apostle to the Once-Born**. This individual does not have the authority to make any decisions, but may pass on requests or demands from the higher-ups.

Next is the **Keeper of the Threshold**. This indi-

vidual will contact an organization that has aroused the interest of the Church in some way. His or her purpose is to decide whether the organization is worth engaging with further.

Those who have proven themselves may then interact with the **Voicless Hierophant**. As the name suggests, this individual does not have any political power as such, only relaying decisions, but the hierophant may introduce others to the very first of the Sacred Mysteries.

Should an alliance with the Church continue to prove useful, one may be put in touch with the **Blind Legate**. This is the first individual with actual authority, acting as a proper ambassador of the Church and capable of offering various deals.

Next is the **Shadowed Hierarch**, an individual of great influence in both local and global affairs. His role seems to be intentionally ambiguous, allowing him to interfere in many Church matters. This is not someone to be underestimated.

Only those who have been of great service to the Church may speak to the **Synod of Yearning**. Our reports suggest this is some manner of compound being consisting of more than one human. The melding of multiple humans into one entity appears to be considered a symbol of humanity's yearning for transcendence. The Synod has authority in all matters except spiritual doctrine.

The leader of the Church is a being we have very little information on. It appears to be called the **Exalted**, and to exhibit a highly advanced but surprisingly stable degree of mutation. It has absolute authority in all matters, but seems more concerned with prophecy than politics - although we may be misunderstanding the dynamics of the Church.

## PHOENIX PROJECT

### DoA-003

Some rough notes on the titles of various other members of the Church hierarchy. Due to the frequently chaotic nature of Disciples of Anu havens and religious events, this information is still sketchy.

The leader of a haven appears to be called an **Exarch**. He only has authority in local matters.

A **Hiereus** is both priest and warrior; an **Archiereus** is a higher rank within the same branch.

A **Skeuophylax**, or Keeper of the Vessels, appears to be a type of engineer in charge of the Hallowed Machines. This position is treated as sacred, and there are few Skeuophylakes.

An **Anagnostes** (sometimes called a **Lector**), or Reader, is something like a scientist, allowed to read the texts of the Sacred Mysteries. This position is also treated in religious terms.

A **Taxiarch** is a military leader, apparently the equivalent of a brigadier.

## Synedrion

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FOR CENTURIES, humanity has fought itself in some strange corrupted mockery of Darwin's theory. The arrival of the alien changed all that and provided us with an opportunity to unite.

We believed we were the Earth's masters, that we knew better than nature. In our arrogance, we exploited the resources of our world, striving to dominate the ecology that birthed and supported us. It was only a matter of time before we were supplanted, just like the animals before us.

Now we must form a new society, learning from our wounds and the scars of our world. The alien is not our enemy unless we choose to oppose it. Our existence is not determined by this, nor defined by the destructive capacity of our predecessors.

So, we must begin again and go back the start. We must look at biology, chemistry and archaeology with new eyes, taking into account what we've learned.

The work has begun. Already we have made inroads, identifying weaknesses and sources from fragmented

records. Collecting the knowledge of the past is essential to us finding a place in the future.

Whatever bred these creatures and destroyed our civilization came from our oceans, the most remote parts of our ecology. Nature evolved answers to germs and viruses. It is in nature we must look for answers. Life is diverse, resistant and powerful. Life evolves and finds strength in subtle ways, but this process is slow and wasteful. We don't have thousands of years, we have hours, days, weeks and months. Only by experimentation and ingenuity can we shortcut this process.

Life has always found a way. In flora and fauna we will seek out answers that will allow us to defend ourselves, establishing safe territories where we can build new settlements for future generations. The destruction of our past is an opportunity for us to learn humility, to find a new path that leads us to co-existence with whatever comes next. We cannot seek to dominate this world, we must learn to accept being a part of it.

### Declaration of Principles (Version 2.1)

The following are the core principles of Synedrion, as voted upon by its citizens:

**FREEDOM.** The freedoms cherished by Synedrion include freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of belief, freedom of assembly, and freedom of movement. They also include freedom from hunger, freedom from violence, freedom from exploitation, freedom from arbitrary/stereotypical cultural norms, and freedom from hierarchies.

**RIGHTS.** Synedrion fundamentally values all human beings equally, and asserts that all human beings have inalienable rights. These rights exist regardless of talent or



ability; they do not need to be earned, but must be defended.

**ECOLOGY.** Synedrion understands that humanity occupies a unique role in the ecology of the planet. As the only species fully conscious of its impact on its environment, humanity is both uniquely valuable and uniquely responsible. This does not mean taking a mystical or idealist approach to the natural world, but employing reason to create a system of industry that allows both humanity and the global ecology to flourish.

**COMMUNALISM.** Synedrion rejects the notion of private ownership of the fundamental resources and tools of society, instead placing these in the hands of all citizens. Systemic decisions must be driven by reason, not markets. From each according to his ability, to each according to his need; this is the basis of true individualism.

**CONFEDERALISM.** Synedrion is not a nation state, but a confederation of municipal popular assemblies, a community of communities rooted in direct democracy and common principles. Synedrion does not have a leader, only representatives.

**REASON.** Science and technology are the greatest achievements of the human species; their correct application, previously hindered by outdated systems, will allow the creation of a free and ecologically functional society. The alien threat must neither be mystified nor demonized, but treated as a material phenomenon that can eventually be understood and dealt with.

**PACIFISM.** While the use of violence in self-defense may be inevitable in certain situations in the current state of the world, the citizens of Synedrion assert that long-term solutions to systemic problems must come from structural change and scientific progress, not merely the destruction of an opposing force.

## Phoenix Project Comment

Synedrion represents an intelligent and articulate ideology that has found its voice amidst the devastation of the past. The old ways are lessons of history for a new path and a new society. Great thinkers, ignored in previous struggles between neoconservatives and neo-liberalists are redeemed in the Synedrion vision for a different future.

In many ways, Synedrion is our competitor and a potential colleague. Much of its vision is an enlightened alternative that looks to make a new civilization out of what remains of the old that accommodates the changes to our world. These people intend to press forward in creating a new global nation that seeks a partnership with its citizens and its environment.

Synedrion shares our goal in preserving important knowledge from the past, but looks to adapt this knowledge into a new ecological equilibrium with our world. This equilibrium extends to the alien, who they believe should be accepted as part of their new environment and incorporated into a wider plan of co-existence. Essentially, the alien threat is seen as one amongst many ecological imperatives, which up until now, humanity has attempted to tame or ignore in much the same way as it has attempt to define itself in a subjugated hierarchy.

In practical terms, the decentralized but interconnected organisation of resources and knowledge that is part of Synedrion's philosophy relies on stable communication networks. Where these don't exist, the individual settlements become more fragmented from the whole and prioritise self-sufficiency. That said, their philosophy of preservation and sharing can be advantageous to us, unless we are seen to contradict their cohabitation strategy and are seen as regressive.

## The Briefing

If this happens, it is likely they will no longer work with us.

Synedrion's approach may not be decisive enough to take the fight to the alien. Their coexistence doctrine is counter to the principles of the Phoenix project.

## New Jericho

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EXCERPT FROM A SPEECH by Tobias West, founder of Vanadium Inc. and leader of New Jericho:

We are the last of humanity and we must unite.

The virus came here and broke us because we were divided. The politics of nations, the racism and prejudice, the hubris and selfishness. All of it, left us weak and vulnerable to something unexpected.

They came at us and defeated us. Individually, we are lucky to have survived, to continue to exist as a species.

I refuse to accept survival. Earth is ours, I will not forsake it. We can rebuild and create a future for our children if we raise our heads and work together, accepting our lot and our common cause.

In rebuilding and resisting, we must be vigilant. The alien is subtle and twisted. The blood of the xeno runs in the veins of the weak. Many have accepted corruption in order to live, but they aren't really survivors, inside they are already dead.

## The Briefing

We must liberate them with the gun, the knife and the sword.

Across the world, there are secret bases where people can find safety. We test everyone, screening blood and DNA to ensure there are no infected amongst them. Those who come to us have a chance at a future. Life is hard, but fair, children learn about the what we once had, what we will have again.

I have a plan to defeat the alien. I have faith in the ingenuity of our species. Humanity has defeated every challenge it has ever faced. This is the ultimate test, to defeat an enemy that wishes to supplant us. Only through the our collective will can we overcome what seeks to destroy us.

The night is coming, but we will not go quietly. Only by being brave and loud will we pass through the dark and onwards into a brave new dawn. If we can't win, we will make an end that carves our fate onto the flesh of our foes, taking them with us into hell.

### Phoenix Project Comment:

It was to be expected that in a moment of crisis, those without hope or understanding would gather around leaders who project confidence and some sort of solution to the world's problems.

An external enemy provides a focus to distract from division and in this sense, the concept of 'New Jericho' - a united human nation, created to oppose the alien threat, is in itself a romantic vision of resistance; or would be, if it wasn't a risk to our very existence.

The leaders of this movement see warfare and military technology as the sole solution to our predicament. Many of them refuse to accept that blunt solutions failed in the

past, during the Third World War. There is a cult of personality around them, a belief that they will succeed with the same tactics as others who failed before them.

Tobias West rose to prominence during the 2020s. His security and technology firm, Vanadium Inc developed a respected reputation escorting the world's largest shipping containers as they criss crossed the globe. West's people were amongst the first to encounter the mist and its inhabitants. Survivors from Vanadium Inc expeditions quickly became consultants for different countries as they tried to resolve the issue, but, according to West, they weren't listened to, as national governments preferred to blame and turn on each other instead.

West is American by birth but has cultivated an international reputation, anchoring his business interests in India, East Africa and China. It is this broad cultural experience that makes him charismatic and appealing to those who see no other solution. He served in the US Army before the secession and war, completing two tours in Syria, reaching the rank of Major. After this, he resigned his commission, founded his business and spent much of the next decade abroad. His voting record was right leaning and Libertarian, and he made significant donations to senatorial campaigns prior to the 'big egg' incident of 2027, which his company were peripherally involved in, having supplied two security guards to the Halpine-Mcalister oil rig, Echo Gamma 18.

The rise of the New Jericho movement in the last five years has seen West return to people's attention. His radio and video broadcasts are distributed via any means possible. Live transmission is dangerous, but still something his organisation chooses to risk. Otherwise, recordings on portable formats are taken from settlement to settlement,

bringing hope to those who thought they'd been forgotten and abandoned.

At its core, New Jericho retains the Vanadium Inc objective of enhancing humanity's capacity through technology. Much of the developed resource and research was lost during the war and the difficult years that followed, but the principles were retained and a new generation of scientific thinkers are being drawn to the central hub of the movement.

The aims of New Jericho are useful to us, but there is a need to be cautious when dealing with them. Their manufacturing base for a variety of conventional military hardware is extensive and they have begun research and development into deploying innovative technologies on to the battlefield. However, the wide base of the organisation means a wide spread of conflicting ideas, some of which threaten to splinter them before they can achieve their aims. Their appeal for a 'united humanity' hides a prejudice against those they do not define as human.

