

# PHOENIX POINT THE BRIEFING #3



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# **The Briefing #3**

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[Snapshot Games](#)

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## Classification Context

This collection is provided for context and background to base commanders and base sub-commanders only. Permission to share this documentation outside of your field rank and authorisation will be rejected. Special requests must be sent to central commander via a secure 'channel 2' protocol encryption.

The events described in this dossier occurred sometime last year, in AD 2046. Additional information on these events and what occurred afterwards can be requested, but again, please follow a 'channel 2' protocol when making your inquiry.

Some additional material has also been included for background. Neither you nor I need a reminder of why we have taken up arms against the alien, but the words of our leader do remind us of the sacrifices our people make every day and night as we continue our struggle to survive, and defeat the invaders.

# **Tobias West Speeches:**

## ***On Loyalty***

*At the core of our beliefs, at the core of everything we've built here at New Jericho, lies one singular value: loyalty.*

*But what is loyalty? Is it blind obedience to a man, to a leader? No! A man, no matter how great, is just a man. Loyalty to a man would mean loyalty to a man's flaws as much as his virtues - and that is how countless rebels and revolutionaries have failed to change the world.*

*Is true loyalty then to a nation, a state, a race? Never! There is no greater folly than to think oneself superior due to some accident of birth. Through this unearned pride the poison of communitarianism enters the bloodstream, erasing individuality and freedom.*

*What about loyalty to an idea? Here we come closer to the truth. An idea is a pure thing, worthy of what distinguishes us as a species - our capacity for rational thought. But what distinguishes an idea from a fantasy? Many who thought they believed in an idea were merely lost in utopian daydreams. Loyalty to an impossible idea is madness.*

*What is true loyalty, then, if not loyalty to a person or a community or an idea? It is something greater.*

*At New Jericho, our loyalty is to the Earth. The Earth that was, the true Earth, with its systems of competition and evolution, and the apex of those processes - Homo sapiens, the rational animal that thrives in freedom.*

*To stand against the invaders, against the corruption of that system, is what brings us together. It is an idea rooted in history and biology, giving birth to a voluntary community under a leader whose sole*

*purpose is to build a future where all that is strong and good will flourish, and all that is weak and corrupt will wither, the way it has always been on this Earth.*

*As long as we are driven by that loyalty, a loyalty born of the Ego, of that unalienable core that makes each of us unique, not even the most powerful abomination will be able to stand in our way.*

# Fort Freiheit

My name is Colonel Jack Harlson. I am commander of this facility.

Fort Freiheit is a permanent home to six hundred and fifty-three individuals, with a maximum capacity for one thousand. There are three hundred and sixteen military personnel with the rest of our number made up of civilian specialists and associated dependents. Everyone who comes here gets tested for infection, tested for aptitude and put to work. In exchange, they get a life and a purpose. We're part of something here. Some kind of future.

Most days, life is tough, but morale is good.

The base is built on a solid stone base, three miles due south of Garnet Peak. Our facilities exist on seven levels, with our classified chambers carved out of the rock itself.

We're connected to the central supply network by automated train. Our long-range radio communications are run through a broadcast antenna in the command tower. On a good day, I can talk to our allies on the other side of the world.

Good, reliable old tech solutions. Sometimes they're the best.

This place was originally commissioned as a nuclear shelter back in the 1960s. In 2021, Vanadium Inc purchased the land and the concrete for bottom dollar, when a dollar was worth something. I think Tobias West said he was going to build a water treatment plant.

Some of that old kit and equipment still comes in handy.

Twenty-five years later, in AD 2046, we're fighting a war on several fronts. Our first enemy is thirst and starvation. Thankfully, our proximity to a series of natural creeks and reservoirs means we can

pump surface water directly into the base, as well as exploiting our underground reserves.

Food is more difficult. We maintain an uninfected hydroculture in a series of tested basins. PV contamination is a constant threat to what we consume, so that means as a species, our steakhouse days are over. Food is fuel for men, women and children who all spend their days doing whatever needs to be done to keep our little stone, steel and cement world going.

Then there's the real enemy: *the alien*.

After the last war, I thought we were beaten. Right at the end, the governments started talking, but by then it was too late, and they were falling apart. Organisations that size were a target and couldn't shake off the wave after wave of attacks long enough to get on the front foot.

The last radio signals we got were from Moscow. My Russian isn't up to much, but there's not much to translate when a man's screaming in agony down the wire.

Since then, things changed. Humanity adapted. Settlements are small, intentionally so. We don't draw unnecessary attention to ourselves by blasting away at everything we see. That way we survive, and we have time to plot, plan and prepare.

Sure, Tobias always said he had a plan, but there's a difference between putting your trust in someone and seeing for your own eyes. Now, I've seen it. Project Hecate is a glimmer of hope for people who've lived without hope for a long time. It's not ready yet, but it will be soon, if we do everything right.

At Fort Freiheit, we've got a crucial part to play, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let anyone here fail.

Not on my watch.



# The Interrogation

*By Allen Stroud*



My phone alarm goes off at 0530 hours, like it always does. Another day in Fort Freiheit.

As usual, I'm already staring at the cracked screen. It says, "Wake up Alex." That always makes me smile. Alex isn't my name – my name is Irina – but I haven't changed the display.

I can't rely on my body clock to get me up on time, there's always a hint in the back of my mind that it'll let me down, but perversely, I seem to be awake ten minutes before any alarm I set, no matter what time I set it for.

My mobile phone is a treasured possession. People don't have these anymore. I found it a year ago when we were excavating some of the old caves near Fairburn. Four hikers had set up camp out there and died decades ago. Must have been running from the first mist incursion I guess. They'd been there for weeks or months. There were signs of a pathetic struggle between them, probably over food and water, but all their equipment was pretty much intact.

I got the mobile phone. No-one else wanted it. The networks have been down for decades, but for me, it's a little piece of the old days in my pocket. Alex had turned it off, so there was still some power left in the battery. Later I found a charger I could use. The phone reminds me what we're aiming for, what we're trying to do. The list of numbers, the

messages and everything on internal drive is a precious memory of a lost world. It's important I don't forget that place. We all need these memories, so we know what all the sacrifices are for. These ones are far better for me than any reminder of my old life.

Whoever Alex was, I hope she found peace in the end.

I roll out of bed and over the mirror and washbasin. These duty dorm rooms are for specialists on call during a watch shift or called up for designated duties. We come in here with our stuff and stay overnight until the next rotation when we go back to our assigned homes.

In this case, I don't get to leave until my task is complete.

My rank means I don't have to share with anyone. I live out of a bag when I'm here in scuffed shoes, wrinkled combat dress and a battered ID card. Thankfully, uniform inspections aren't something this army cares about.

I stare into the mirror. I look like I haven't slept. Battered face to go with the battered ID it seems. Water and a little soap improves things a bit, but doesn't banish my tired look or the bags under my eyes. Makeup might've fixed that, if I was alive twenty to thirty years ago, when we didn't know about the virus. We've all seen pictures from that time, when lives were ignorant and disposable. Amazing what the end of the world can do for gender equality.

My handheld radio pops into life, making me turn around to where I left it last night on the floor. "Ops to Lieutenant Petyaeva?"

I pick it up and reply, "Petyaeva here, what's the problem?"

"Your subject has been asking for you."

"I'm due to chat to her in an hour and a half, she'll have to wait."

"She's being pretty insistent."

"I'm sorry, I'm not making any allowances today."

"Understood."

I sigh and rub my face, trying to focus. I expect this kind of behaviour from Amanda. It's a tactic designed to unsettle me before we talk. Last time she did this, I rushed down there, expecting some kind of revelation or secret knowledge, but there was nothing. She greeted me with a little smile, pleased with how she'd been able to manipulate me into being there early and unprepared. I'm not going to fall for that again.

No, not Amanda – *Subject 16*. That's another little way in which she's got into my head.

I get dressed and walk across the hall to the bathroom. I wash slowly, using the time to ready myself mentally for our daily battle of wills. This task is difficult and dangerous. Every time I finish a meeting with this

girl, I have to come back and take a shower. There's something about what she says, the way in which she looks at me that makes me question everything we're trying to do. That's one of the reasons I keep the phone in my pocket – a reminder of the world we're trying to get back to.

A world I'll probably never live to see.

A world she'll certainly never live to see.

Breakfast in the mess hall at this hour is a lonely business. There's a couple of recruits sat at a table on the far side, a man and a woman. They look nervous and they're talking to each other in low voices. The words don't carry, and I don't want to join them. If I walk over, they'll have to stand up and salute. I get a coffee, a protein bar and some hot slop. The mess sergeant calls it porridge, but I've no idea whether he's telling the truth.

As I eat, I stare into the bowl. I'm thinking about the girl. No, she isn't a girl anymore. I need to remember she is a monster – the enemy. The minute the infection was discovered, she changed from being someone we protect to someone we will destroy. She looks human, she sounds human, but she isn't human anymore. Eventually, the last vestiges of who she was will disappear and she'll change. By then, she'll have outlived her usefulness. At that point, in some ways, the whole situation becomes easier for me. Fighting monsters is what I signed up to do.

Interrogating and executing teenage girls wasn't.

"Mind if I join you?"

I glance up. Colonel Harlson is standing over me. I'm getting up instinctively, but he lays his mechanised hand on my shoulder. "At ease, Lieutenant. Don't let me disturb your breakfast any more than necessary."

I nod and resettle myself in my seat. "You're up early, sir. Something important?"

Harlson shrugs. He's balding and in his late fifties, but there's no sign of his military physique running to flab. He gestures around the room. "Some days, the weight of all this preys on your mind. This morning I was thinking about your guest."

"Subject 16?"

"Yes, Subject 16."

Harlson sits down. We've not spoken much and never talked one to one. There's something damaged about the way he looks at me. Those watery blue eyes have seen their fair share of pain and loss. "How's she holding up?" he asks. I know instantly who he means.

“She’s lasted longer than the last four subjects,” I reply. “The virus appears to have infected her lymph nodes and brain stem. My reports have been detailed and covered all of the—”

“Yes, I know I could read the reports, Lieutenant. I’m asking you about her.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat. “Apologies, Colonel, but *Subject 16 is not a person.*”

Harlson smiles and suddenly, those watery eyes harden into chips of ice. “Exactly, Lieutenant. She stopped being a person the moment she got infected.” He runs a hand through his thinning hair. “I saw your last conversation with her. Are you sure you’re up to getting what we need?”

I can feel my face getting red. “If you think someone else should be doing this, sir, I’ll let them. I didn’t sign up for this kind of work.”

Harlson leans forward, putting his elbows on the table. “Petyaeva, no-one signs up for this kind of work unless they’re psychotic and if they’re psychotic, I don’t want them here. I tasked you to do this job because I think you’re the best person for it. Just don’t get attached.”

“Understood sir.”

“Remember, once your report is complete, we’ll move into the dissection phase.”

“Yes, of course, sir, thank you.”

Harlson gets up. “Don’t mention it,” he says and walks away.

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I finish breakfast without an appetite. The last thing I want is anyone commenting on a change in my diet or something else that gets me more undue attention.

The interrogation rooms are in the second floor below ground. I make my way down there. Subject 16 has a wing all to herself, she’s that important.

As I make my way down the steps, I’m going through my orders again. I remember the briefing material. *Project Vulture is an important part of the war effort. Trusted officers across multiple settlements will be given specialist training to question infected subjects so as to best evaluate the mental processes an individual goes through when succumbing to the Pandoravirus. Base commanders will consider these assessments and forward them to the Jericho Defense Network (JDN). We believe there are some forms of communication link with certain infection types. These types are of particular interest to our research...*

Specialist training? Yeah, right. They selected me because I took some psychology classes before I signed up for the military academy. I went to that briefing after I was recommended for the programme. Forty minutes of ‘situation simulation’ that listed all the techniques outlawed by the Geneva convention and then explained how to implement them, followed by a short video from our glorious leader, Tobias West telling me how important my project was to the war effort. He looked old in the video. I don’t know how long ago it was shot...

I reach the bottom of the stairs. It’s pretty dark down here, with intermittent lighting. Maintenance is not a priority. I can hear the electronic connections sizzling as the overhead strips flicker on and off.

Subject 16 is secured in the section to my right. I open the door. There’s a soldier sat in a chair in the messy office. He rises slowly as I approach and flips me a lazy salute.

“How’s the night been Thomson?”

“Pretty normal, Lieutenant. She slept until about five, then started shouting for you. I put through the call, but they said you’d be here at the usual time. After an hour, she gave up and sat down on the floor. She’s not moved since.”

“When is your shift change?”

“Another hour yet.”

“Okay.”

Corporal Thomson knows the drill. We’ve been out on assignment together before. He’s in his forties, a little older than me, and from Maryland, when Maryland still existed. He worked as a teaching assistant before joining up. He picks up a big batch of keys from the desk and unlocks the inner door, then opens it for me. I make my way inside.

Movement activates the lighting and more overhead LED strips burst into life, illuminating the thick glass room in the centre of the space. Subject 16 is sat in the centre of the confined area, behind those glass walls. She’s staring at the floor, her face hidden under a cloud of long brown hair. She’s wearing a one-piece overall, fastened with Velcro, and soft shoes. Her bed, toilet, table and chair are in there with her, along with an assortment of ‘safe’ entertainment. There’s a locked door into the room, but it won’t be opened until she’s dead. Meals are deposited through a hatch. When the infection takes hold, those meals will be withdrawn.

At that point, the last of her humanity will be gone.

“Good morning,” I say, trying to inject some energy into my voice that I definitely don’t feel. “Did you sleep well?”



She doesn't answer, indicating that the game has begun.

I take my seat. It's next to a small desk. I have a notepad and pencil that are kept here so it's available for all the interrogators who might be working with Subject 16. I'm pretty sure that's just me, but it never hurts to check. I always flip through the pages first, taking my time, using the silence just like she is using the silence – to gauge what response might come next, to plan a move ahead, shape and craft our tactics and strategy. In here, we have competing goals. We're both playing to win. Subject 16 is my fifth interrogation candidate. I know what my objectives are, but I'm never quite sure who I'm playing this game against – a poor afflicted teenage girl or an intelligent predatory virus, determined to wipe out my species.

Next to the notepad is a file – her file. I don't need to remind myself of its contents. A summary of her life before infection is all there, right up to the day we caught her in the random screenings. Her human life is irrelevant now, any consideration of it will be a distraction.

Cameras record everything in here. The posted guard reviews the footage, but isn't permitted to enter the room unless there's an emergency. The only time anyone comes in is when someone else can be sat at that desk watching the live feed.

I've no idea if anyone else can watch. I expect Harlson has access to the footage, either live or recorded. I could probably find out, if I wanted.

Today, I start with a mild threat. "If you didn't sleep well, you need to let me know. It might be a sign of your condition worsening." I turn and look at her, leaving the possibility hanging in the air. She takes the bait, raises her head and smiles.

"So, if I say nothing about how I slept, nothing changes."

"No, we'll make an assessment from the bioscanners in your body and camera feed."

"You'll do that anyway. What I tell you won't make a difference."

She holds my eye. As usual, I'm the one to shrug and turn away first. She's right of course, but it would have been nice to get her to open up. A narrative record of the process of decay from the subject is part of the point of this experiment.

"Okay then, how are you feeling now?"

"What do I gain from answering that question either?"

That answer makes me smile as I'm looking at blank pages in the notebook. As part of the briefing, I watched black and white films from the University of Yale. They experiment on rats as part of their *motivation in learning* study, looking at reward motivation and pain

motivation, the latter was always more successful. Rats would do anything to avoid being electrocuted. Even murder one another. Will that work on the virus?

Subject 16 is not stupid. The two intelligences contained within her body have goals and agendas. She is using this line of questioning to frame our relationship, attempting to engage me as a rewarder, so she can establish, understand and exploit the rules of our meetings. She wants me to provide a reward system and see it as a means of progress. That will start us down a road towards 'fairness' and everything else that leads to redefining her as a rational and intelligent human being.

She is not a human being. I have to keep reminding myself. She lost that status some time ago.

I raise my head again and meet her glare. "Eventually, you know as well as I do, whatever infected you is going to take over. Why not do humanity a favour and tell us about what you're experiencing? You can be a legacy to the survivors. Your name will be—"

"I don't have a name anymore. You told me that."

I sigh and scratch my head. "The point is, you'll be remembered."

"As a lab rat."

"Well, that's better than nothing."

She scowls at me, her expression challenging as ever. She hasn't given up, despite the data and the facts given to her. "There's other settlements where people don't act like this when someone gets ill. There's people who survived as well."

"Who told you that?"

"You hear the stories. That stuff about the woman in Greenville. Everyone knows."

I shrug. "Those are just legends. Some settlements would have killed you the moment you were diagnosed. We didn't do that."

"You want a prize for being nice?" She stands up and walks towards the glass. "You think I should be grateful for living in a box?"

"We don't get to choose our fate anymore," I reply. "We all have to do our part." I'm wondering how much of this is the virus talking? If it is sentient it might be concerned about being isolated. The motivations of both intelligences in Subject 16 are unified in wanting to be free. If I can demonstrate their separation as part of the interrogation, we might learn something new.

"Suppose we could cure you and release you. Would you want that?"

She frowns. Her anger transforming into distrust, right in front of my eyes. "You can't offer me that," she says.

“Maybe I can.” This feels wrong. It’s cruel giving what remains of this frightened little girl hope, but I have my orders. I need to stop thinking of her as a person. “The research team on base have just received a whole set of extra vaccines to try. Why do you think we’re keeping you alive?”

“Not because you want to save me.” She says the words to shut down the conversation, but I can see she wants me to continue. If there’s the slightest chance, part of her still wants to believe it.

“We need to test the vaccines,” I say. “However, if they prove successful, the next step will be trialling a reversal process.”

“I won’t live long enough for that.”

“Some subjects have survived a while after infection.” I tap the papers on the desk. “We need to know how you’re feeling, the way things change for you. If you let me help you, bring me in to give you advice on what you might do to stay in control.” I’m making an assumption here about who I’m talking to, but that’s okay. If the virus is aware, maybe it’ll believe I’ve let my guard down. That could be something to exploit.

She chews on her lip and looks thoughtful. “You want to know how I feel?”

“Yes, that’s all I’ve ever wanted to know.”

This is a crucial moment. I can see the proposal being evaluated. Slowly, Subject 16 turns and around and goes back to sit on her chair. There are two consciousnesses trying to work out the best way to approach this, attempting to manipulate me to their advantage.

“My name is Amanda,” she announces.

“Yes, that was your name. I know that from your file.”

“No. You don’t get it. My name *is* Amanda.”

Her insistence makes me flinch and look up at the camera recorder on the wall. I know what she’s trying to get me to accept. She wants me to call her by her name, so I’ll start seeing her as a human being again. That’s the path Harlson warned me against at breakfast. People are watching. I need to tread carefully. “I’m sorry, but until you’re no longer infected I can’t call you—”

“My name is Amanda, Amanda Salter. I grew up in Topeka, Kansas, just as the world went to crap. I’m fourteen years old and both my parents are dead. I’ve lived here in Fort Freiheit for the last two years. People know me, people remember me.”

She falls silent. “Are you finished?” I ask.

“Kinda. I need you to accept who I am.”

“I’m sorry. You aren’t human anymore. You need to accept *that*.”

Her face colours and she's glaring at me again. "You're asking me to hope, but then denying I exist?"

"If you recover from the infection, we can talk about this."

She shakes her head and clenches her fists. "You want my cooperation, I'm naming my terms. You want me to share my humanity, you have to acknowledge it exists."

---

An hour later, I'm back upstairs in the mess hall, staring at a cup of coffee in a plastic cup and trying to think my way through this.

The situation is impossible. Harlson wants results, Subject 16 wants me to see her as a human being. If I do the latter, I'll be breaking protocol and disobeying orders, but I might get what Harlson is asking for.

The girl has a point. How can I encourage her to fight for her humanity if we don't acknowledge that something inside her is still human? If we're going to divide the intelligences, we have to give what's left of Amanda a reason to resist.

I feel awful about lying to her, creating false hope by mentioning a cure that doesn't exist.

I take out the phone from my pocket and stare at the cracked screen. There's the remains of a person in here, an Alex I will never know. Something I've kept as a memory of what we were. It's the same as the part of Subject 16 that's still Amanda, only she's still here. She might still have a chance, for a little while at least.

In another life, she could have been my daughter.

*No, I don't want to remember my life.* Instead, I think about the last few days those four hikers in Fairburn had. I can't imagine what that last fight must have been like, knowing they were all going to die. That's what Amanda's facing.

Not Amanda – *Subject 16*...

*Damn this is hard!*

I look around the hall. It's got busy in the early afternoon. The ritual of lunchtime maintained over generations as these remnants of humanity seek companionship between work shifts. Soldiers, scientists, engineers, families doing whatever they can to help us all survive. The thriving community is a testimony to our resilience after years of defeat and death. Individuals are defined by the people they love, even when they die.

Right now, we're still here.

Right now, Amanda is still here. In that body that we're keeping locked up in the basement.

A small voice in my mind objects. We know the infection causes a growth in the brain. We've seen a cyst that develops, but we don't know how it interacts with the human brain. We know ultimately, the virus intellect takes over, but in the meantime, we don't know if the two voices manifest separately, there's never been a study where some kind of multiple personality disorder can be clearly defined. We don't know what bleed there is between the two.

I'm way out of my depth here.

Corporal Thomson comes into the room. Looks like he's finished his shift. He makes himself a coffee from the machine and takes a seat on the bench, smiling briefly at someone who says hi. Underneath that smile he has the same battered expression I saw in the mirror this morning. Looking after the girl must be wearing him down too, even though he didn't mention it.

There's no way I can be sure the conversations I'm having are solely with what was Amanda, but this is eating me up. So long as I'm safe, and I take precautions, I might be able to do something that helps make her last days a little better and gets Harlson what he wants.

Yeah... *hopefully*...

---

Being a tech is a lot like being a doctor I guess. We both fix machines. When I was a kid, I used to help my uncle in an old auto shop, after our family emigrated here from Omsk. That's another reason why this whole Project Vulture thing doesn't sit well with me. There's no solve. At least with a truck, you can get it running, or a rifle, you can strip it down, clear the jam and put it back together.

Best place for me to start is with the machines. That's work I know about.

After finishing my cold coffee, I make my way to the repair yard. We've got a hundred years or more of old kit lying around out here. When the virus first showed up, the first thing that ground to a halt was our reinvention of electronics. Economies wasted millions and billions of dollars renewing and replacing perfectly good kit for more bandwidth or an extra pixel or two. After World War III, all anyone wanted was things that worked, so the trash piles and landfills were raided for stuff you could use. As things got worse, people stockpiled tech in the same way they stockpiled food.



Of course, Vanadium and Tobias West had a different approach. I guess the old man was a tin foil hat guy whose theories got proved right. The only difference between him and those people who built bunkers in their backyards is in scale. West's foresight meant by the time he launched New Jericho, he'd bought out hundreds of tech companies who had the best kit, lying around in warehouses. Vanadium didn't care about turning a profit because Vanadium knew the world economy was doomed. That's the only way I can explain it. So much of our gear is shiny and remanufactured from whatever we can find. That look is all part of the sales pitch. We're fighting for a new world.

Our camera surveillance system runs on an old CAT8 IP network with original specs designed in the last century. There's some pretty cool programming done to work around the restrictions of the old equipment, but at its base, that's what it is. Once you get past the encryption layer, feeds and recordings have individual signatures and addresses. Just a case of scheduling some maintenance and assigning a recorded feed address to a live feed.

The repair yard is pretty quiet. There's two mission teams out, so the duty techs will have been given a downshift. Means when anyone gets back, the yard will be double staffed. I find a terminal in the corner and get to work, organising what I need.

If I get caught doing this, they'll shoot me. Lieutenant authorisation gets me everywhere I need to go, but it also leaves a trail. Someone will check my account activity. My hope is that tangible results I get from Subject 16 will outweigh any desire of people to put a bullet in my head, or I can get some time to erase my tracks afterwards.

*Unlikely.*

While I'm hacking the network, I take a look at the access list for the interrogation wing. Just as I thought, Harlson has been viewing the recordings. There's two other accounts as well. The first one is Samuels, E. She's a member of the research team, the other one is a generic military account, which means it could be anyone of captain rank or higher. Probably someone prepping for the dissection phase.

Yeah... the more I think about that, the worse I feel.

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5.28am and I'm back in my duty room, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. I haven't slept. The first part of the plan is ready. Now I have to wait for the signal.

Ninety seconds later, I'm staring at the phone as the alarm goes off – "*Wake up Alex*" – I'm not smiling this time. I get out of bed and throw on my clothes, then make my way quickly out across the yard to the staircase and down into the holding area.

As soon as I'm in the outer room, I can see something is wrong. Thomson is stood up, leaning over the desk and the microphone in front of him. "Back away from the glass!" I hear him order in a loud authoritative voice. "This is your third and final warning, I—"

I knock loudly on the glass. He turns around, seeing me there for the first time. He frowns, walks over and opens the door. "Lieutenant, I was just about to call you."

"I guessed you might be, after yesterday," I reply. I glance around the room. Everything is as it was before, apart from a tray of unappetising food sitting on the table. "That for Subject 16?"

"Yes, but she's being difficult. I was about to ask for taser authorisation."

"No need, I'll take it from here." I walk over to the tray and scoop it up, then pause in front of the locked entrance to the detention space. "It gets to all of us sometimes. Take a minute for yourself. Grab a coffee or something. The recorders are on, I'll be fine."

Thomson hesitates, giving me a confused look, but then he smiles. "Sure, okay, Lieutenant." He picks up his keys and opens the door. I make my way through.

Behind the glass walls, Subject 16 is sitting on her chair, staring at me.

I walk to the table and put the tray down. I take out the mobile phone and gaze at the displayed time. When it flicks from 5.45am to 5.46am, I stand up and walk towards her. She does the same.

I place my hand on the glass. She copies me.

"Hello, Amanda," I say.

"Hello, Irina," she replies.

I take my hand away and point up at the cameras. "The recordings are deactivated for scheduled maintenance. This is the most common time for that to happen, but you already knew that. That's why you tried to get me down here yesterday."

"It was a signal," Amanda admits. "I've had a lot of time to plan things."

"I need to know if it's really you," I say. "I need to know what you can feel and sense of the virus."

Amanda nods. "Okay, I'll try to describe it for you as best I can."

“Please, and do it quickly.” I walk back to the table and pick up the notepad and pen. “We don’t have much time.”

“Could we work and eat?” Amanda points at the tray. “Sorry, but I’m starving.”

“Just a few questions first,” I say. “What’s it like? Tell me.”

“Like someone’s watching you on the inside,” Amanda says. “Like there’s an itch in your mind, working away to its own agenda. It doesn’t sleep, which means I don’t want to sleep. I’m terrified of letting go and waking up to find its done all sorts of shit whilst I’ve been unconscious.”

“Can you control it?”

“I don’t know.” She’s blinking hard and starts to cry. “I’m terrified it’ll take over... I’ve been so alone. Every moment of weakness, every time I forget something, I wonder if...”

“Is it getting stronger?”

“I—I can’t tell...”

She turns away from me, her body shaking as she sobs. A poor, confused little girl, caught up in a nightmare, powerless to do anything as another mind eats away at her soul.

“I’d really like some food...”

“Sure.” I pick up the tray and make my way to the slot. Amanda is the other side. She smiles at me again; thankful and grateful through the tears.

I hear the glass breaking and something wraps around my arm. Then there’s pain, like a dozen sharp teeth biting into my arm. I’m dragged forwards towards a child’s smile as it twists into a wide, hungry grin.

I scream and kick out. My foot catches the edge of the glass and I push off, tearing myself away from the girl. She looks the same as before, except for the tendrils extending from her wrist into mine. I can feel them digging in, burrowing into me. I cry out again and twist away. There’s a popping sound as I tear myself loose of her and fall in a heap on the floor.

“I’m sorry,” Amanda says. She’s still smiling at me through the tears. “I had no choice.”

Alarms echo around the room. I can see Thomson returning to the monitoring office and looking around in confusion. I scramble to my feet and charge towards him, forcing my way through the door before it seals automatically.

“What happened? Your arm is bleeding, did she—”

I don't stop. My forearm smashes into his jaw and he goes down. Thomson has fifty or sixty pounds on me, so the only way I'm going to overpower him is to attack and attack and attack until he stops fighting.

I grab his hair and slam his head onto the concrete, once, twice, three times. His eyes go glassy and unfocused.

I let go and breathe in shame. My life here is done. *Don't get attached*, Harlson said. I failed, I got attached. I believed in her – Amanda or Subject 16. Either, it doesn't matter.

The mobile phone in my pocket buzzes. I pull it out. There's a message, I open it up. Coordinates? Who could be—

Voices outside disrupt my thoughts. I have a choice to make. Do I give myself up or try to escape?

I glance at Amanda. She's still standing there in her glass room, staring at me. The tendrils from her arm have disappeared. Apart from the hole in the wall, it's as if she's just the same as before.

*As if nothing happened...*

I'm straddling Thomson, searching his pockets. I find his passcard, his keys and his sidearm. I take them all and start for the door, then stop. The alert will send the base into lockdown, soldiers will be mustering at every exit. An armed response team will be on their way down here. They'll notice the issue with the camera feed and work out my actions were premeditated. As soon as I leave the room, I'll be under surveillance. I'll have to fight to get out, injuring others like Thomson, murdering people, maybe.

*I can't do this.*

I turn around and walk back into the holding area. Amanda – Subject 16, whatever her name is, watches me approach. "Don't..." she says.

"I'm sorry," I reply. "I have no choice. I can't let you live like this."

I raise the gun. The first shot cracks a pane of the glass. I rush forward and tear at it, ripping out slivers with my bloodied fingers, making a hole.

I take aim at Amanda. Her gaze doesn't waver. Inside, I know she's screaming. She's been screaming all along to be released – to be free. I'll remember her like that in my mind, for as long as live.

The alien part of her is screaming too, trying to contact its people. *We can't have that...*

The gun roars and Subject 16 drops – her head an exploded mess on the wall. Whatever she was; alien, human, or both, it's over. Now, she can find a little peace in the dark.

There's shouting nearby. Voices behind me. I drop the pistol and sink to my knees, placing my hands behind my head.

# The Legend of Fort Bacon

*By Jonas Kyratzes*



*Prison cell audio: Subject 17, formerly Lt. Daniel Stoller.*

So, you may be wondering how a good New Jericho boy like myself ended up in a New Jericho prison. Well, it's quite the story. Not sure it's a good story, but at least it's, uh, memorable, I guess? And since I figure y'all don't have anything better to do, how about I tell that story, like we used to tell stories around the campfire when we were out hunting...

I was born in 2024, and the world wasn't all too pleasant a place even then, though things were still holding together. I was five when the first mist came. I remember seeing it on the television, people disappearing and all. Scared me real good, but also made me think let's go fight that stuff, find out what makes it tick and kill it, like a superhero taking out the bad guys.

Anyhow, my dad worked for Vanadium, Tobias West's company, so when West founded New Jericho, we were right there, part of it from day one. That's why I'm loyal to New Jericho, even now, and always will be. They saved us when nobody else would. They can be harsh, and they have a lot of rules, but those rules ain't for nothing. You know how many government shelters went down because they let in one guy who swore he wasn't infected? You see, what they didn't fully understand back then, and I suppose it ain't that different now either, is the infection doesn't work at the same speed on all people. Sure, most folks go



immediately, but not everybody. With some, it's slow. Those crazy-ass Disciples even say that with some folks, it's just the body that changes, and the mind stays free, but our scientists say it's just a matter of time, and I'd trust one of our eggheads over an Anu freak any day of the week.

I signed up for military service the moment I was eligible, which made me a full citizen. That's how it works with us, you see. You gotta prove yourself to get anywhere, not like with Synedrion. No disrespect, I mean I know y'all mean well, I'm sure your havens are very nice, but New Jericho is about merit. Loyalty, too, but you have to earn that loyalty first. Ain't no such thing as a free lunch, West used to say.

In my training it turned out I had a pretty good eye for shooting stuff at a distance. Give me a sniper rifle and half-decent conditions, and man, I can hit anything, moving or stationary. On my first day of training, I took out one of them crab-men in one hit. Boom. That got attention, and pretty soon I was out in the field with a real squad, taking down the enemy one headshot at a time.

I was pretty good at the whole military discipline thing, too, at least at first. I like my day to be structured, makes it so much nicer when you do get to relax. So long as I was stationed in the capital, I was all good. But I was itchin' to do more, to really get out there and do some damage. That's how I ended up here at Fort Freiheit. Did you know that's German for freedom? Seems funny to me now, what with my current situation and all.

So, where was I? Right, I asked for a transfer, and I got one. Seeing Fort Freiheit for the first time was a real eye-opener. In the capital, you can sort of imagine we're all safe, that no matter what the enemy throws at us, humanity ain't going nowhere. Guess that's probably what it feels like in all the Synedrion havens, and that's one of the big problems with you folks. No disrespect, I know you're trying to build a better world and all that, but the world ain't good, friends, it's awful, and it'll keep being awful until every last abomination out there is put down. That's what I came to realize out here.

You see, this place really got battered something good. Without Colonel Harlson in charge, I'm pretty sure there wouldn't be a single soul left breathing. Still, you could tell it'd taken a real toll. On my first day, I saw a guy with a big black stain on his uniform. Nobody would ever dare walk around like that back home, let me tell ya.

The squad I got assigned to had a nickname: the Hunters. There were five of us: Sullivan, Bennett, Jacobs, Cole, and myself. Now, I was very good at being a Hunter, but it took some adjusting first. See, the Hunters

didn't work like an ordinary squad. We didn't patrol, didn't wait for orders, didn't follow a plan. We roamed, we tracked down nests, we looked for opportunities and we seized them. We were out there more than just about anybody else, taking down some pretty big beasts without getting a scratch. While everybody else was trying to hold down the fort, we were thinning out the enemy population.

Sometimes it was almost like the stories you read about how the world used to be: five friends sitting around the campfire somewhere out in the wild, relaxing after a long day of hunting, talking and laughing without a care in the world.

Strange things start happening to you when you're out there a lot. When you're in a haven, safe behind the walls, your day nicely divided up into tasks, your mind stays focused. But out there, your imagination starts to wander. You get all kinds of funny ideas, and all the rumors you've heard suddenly start seeming like maybe they could be real. Who knows what's out there in the mist, right?

This one time, we met some folks from another haven, one of the independents. They were out scavenging, nearly got themselves trampled to death by a Chiron. After we saved them, we got to talking, and because we told them we were the Hunters, they told us this story they'd heard, about some New Jericho guys who got so sick of New Jericho grub, they started their own haven. And they actually go around hunting the same abominations we do, or did, and they don't just kill them - they eat them! And get this, they called their haven Fort Bacon, cause that's what they've got that we don't.

Now, we were all pretty sure this was just a tall tale, but it got us talking. Man, Sullivan said, the grub really is shit. Them protein bars, God knows what's in 'em. And how many potatoes can a man eat? Jacobs said she'd kill for a real burger, and Bennett said he'd give an arm for a slice of bacon, and then it just got worse and worse, our stomachs all rumbling at the thought of foods we couldn't have. We used to make fun of Synedrion, called you guys tree-huggers, but turns out you guys grow meat in a lab. New Jericho, you know, we don't hold with that gene manipulation stuff. I mean, that's what the enemy's doing to us, why do it to ourselves? We have real cows, real sheep, pure as pure can be, but we'll need them when we rebuild the Earth, so real meat is real expensive. On my salary, I could barely afford to buy a steak once a year, and in any case here at Fort Freiheit there were no such luxuries.

You know how it's like when you get to talking? Especially when you're hungry? I mean, I bet you get that too. Sometimes the rules

you're supposed to be following don't seem so important anymore, and you start wondering. First as a joke... then as just a theory, not something you'd ever do, not you, but if somebody did... and then... then suddenly you're roasting a mutant leg over a fire to see if it tastes like bacon.

And you know what? It did. I swear to God, it did. Not like chicken, you know, like they say? Tastes like chicken. No, it tasted like thin, crispy bacon. Oh man. When I think about that, I almost don't regret it. Course I do regret it, very much, because poor Cole turned almost right away. His skin started changing, going hard. We knew it was too late.

I've heard it said that New Jericho kills anyone mutated, but it ain't true. We got protocols. If it's just an arm or a leg, we amputate, fit you with a prosthetic and you're right as rain. But if it's in the bloodstream, if it's right inside you, changing you, then it's not just a matter of duty, it's a kindness to put you down. Cole begged us to do it, to let him die a human being. We obliged him, and I ain't ashamed to say I had tears in my eyes.

We talked about what to do next. Jacobs said we're such dumbasses, we should blow our own heads off and be done with it. Sullivan said we should go back, turn ourselves in, see what happens. Maybe we'd get lucky. Bennett looked like he'd gone a bit crazy. I ain't going back, he said, and I ain't killing myself either, not unless I start to change. I don't want to live like this anymore, this damn misery at Fort Freiheit. I'm gonna find Fort Bacon and join 'em. I laughed and told him there was no such place, but he said he didn't care, he'd find something like it. Jacobs damn near shot him right then and there, but I stopped her. We'd already lost one friend.

So, we let Bennett go. Last time I saw him, he was heading west with nothing but his rifle and enough water to last him a couple of days. I doubt he made it far, but some part of me hopes he's still out there.

Sullivan turned as we were heading back. Jacobs put him down. Not much later, she told me she could feel her mind becoming distant, like she wasn't herself anymore. Before I could do anything, before I could even say maybe you're just tired, maybe it's nothing, she put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger.

When I got back, every single alarm went off the moment I walked through a Purity Checkpoint. But I'd already made up my mind to tell the truth.

Like I said to Harlson, I'm real sorry we disappointed everyone. But you know, we were just a bunch of dumbass kids. We should have been getting drunk at frat parties, not hunting mutants in the wasteland. We

messed up, but that doesn't mean we're traitors. I'm not Subject 17, I'm a New Jericho soldier, and if you give me a chance, I'll prove it. No matter the cost.

# Putting Bullets in Monsters

*By Jonas Kyratzes*



*Prison cell audio: Subject 21, formerly Private J.P. Richter*

Look, stop trying to interrogate me. You wanna know the truth? I joined New Jericho to kill mutants and chew bubblegum, and bubblegum production ceased after World War III.

Seriously though, yeah, I joined New Jericho to put bullets in monsters. That's it. I don't give a crab's ass about the ideology, about Tobias West and his grand plan to save humanity. I mean, if you're trying to figure out why I didn't obey orders, that's why. I'm not a traitor because, frankly, you have to be part of a cause to betray it. Sure, I slept in New Jericho barracks, ate New Jericho food - which is crap, by the way, no wonder people are trying to eat the monsters now, if you don't improve the quality of your grub, they'll graduate to cannibalism next - and... uh, where was I? Right, I lived the New Jericho life, but honestly, I just never bought into it. Any of it.

I remember the world before the apocalypse. Not well, I was a kid when it all went to hell in a handbasket, but well enough to remember that every nation was sitting on top of a spectacular damn arsenal. We had armies coming out our ears. Think about it. There were more soldiers back then than there are human beings now. Plus we had tanks and helicopters and bomber jets and drones and... well, everyone knows how much of a difference that made. You can't kill a virus with a tank, although I bet they tried.

Remember when we had cities? You could take every haven left in the world today and put it together and the result would be smaller than a place like New York or Istanbul. All the speeches we hear every day go on and on about the capital, how amazing it is, a fortress of humanity in this new world and all that stuff, but I mean, have you seen the place? Try comparing it in your mind to what we used to have on this planet. Seriously. We're... diminished. Just a fragment of something that used to be pretty awesome.

I basically grew up in an independent haven, you know. It was a small, honest community. Good people trying to make the best of it. I'm not being sarcastic. They were some of the best people I've met. Smart, too. Worked tirelessly to improve their defenses, to prepare for disaster. We had special alarms, shelters under every building, all that good stuff. In school, there were regular training sessions to prepare us for surviving contact with the enemy. These folks wanted to build something that would last. They wanted to survive.

You know how long the haven held out when the mist came? Two days. Two. After that it was over. All the preparation was for nothing. You see, they hadn't thought about scale. The sheer amount of freaking monstrous abominations in this world. I remember sitting in the shelter when one of the adults whispered to another, trying not to upset us, that they'd run out of bullets. Bullets! They'd been scounging every last bullet they could find for years! I should know, I was training to become a scavenger.

The mutants just overran us like the world's ugliest tidal wave. We appealed for help to New Jericho, and I gotta give you guys that much, you came through. Of course, the haven was gone by then, and all that was left was us kids, hunkered down in a shelter, listening to the screams of our parents as they got torn apart or taken. Fun times.

That's how I ended up joining, although I'm sure you know that already, it probably says so in my file. Anyway, I was young enough to fit in, I accepted the routines, did everything right. But I didn't become a soldier because I wanted full citizenship rights, or to work my way up. To want these things, you need to believe there's actually a future. You need to put your trust in the big walls and the big guns.

You really don't get it, do you? It's funny. You guys believe so strongly that you can take back the Earth, but you've isolated yourselves from reality. Most of you have only ever seen the outside through armored glass. Well, take it from me, the post-apocalypse sucks. It sucks on a scale you can barely imagine. There's so much suckage out there, New Jericho is just a blip by comparison. The idea that you can just

shoot your way out of this is nuts. You'll just run out of bullets. It's just as stupid as those Synedrion people and their fantasy that they can somehow co-exist with the suckage. The only plan I've heard so far that makes any sense is to embrace the crazy. Yeah, the Disciples, their plan might work. Adapt to the enemy. Personally, I'd rather kill myself than join them, but hey. Props to the mad cultists for figuring it out.

So why did I join? I already told you. To put bullets in monsters. I see you're wondering why, if I'm so cynical, I didn't just put bullets in myself instead. The problem is that you've misunderstood me. I'm not cynical. I just think we're screwed. If I could go back in time and convince our governments not to cut funding for the Phoenix Project, I would. But they did, and here we are. We've lost the planet and we're not getting it back.

Still... I remember the old world, and I love what we used to be. We were kings, man! We made a lot of mistakes, but just think about... like I said before, think about New York City, or Istanbul, or Shanghai. We were awesome. And now it's over, and God's honest truth is that I just want to kick the enemy in the balls as many times as I can before we go out. I want to be such a pain in their collective mutant ass that they might even remember us after we're extinct. That's all.

So, the reason I broke ranks? I wanted that big bastard thing to die. It had killed so many of us, and it was getting away, and I don't care that letting it get away was the strategically superior choice. I really don't care, because we've already lost this war. I just wanted to win that one battle. And I did, and I got infected, and that's fine. It's fine, because I put a dozen bullets into that thing and watched its head explode like brain-flavored confetti. When I die, I'll be thinking of that moment, and I'll be smiling.

I know that there's no way out for me, or for any of us here in this prison. But I know they're coming. You know it too, I can see it in your eyes. So please, tell Harlson: I didn't survive the fall of one haven to die in the basement of another. When the time comes, I'm willing to fight. Not for New Jericho, not for Tobias West, but for the memory of humanity. The bastards might end up eating our world, but I'm gonna make sure they get indigestion.





# ‘Heavy’

*By Allen Stroud*



“Name and rank?”

“Corporal Isaiah Thomson.”

“Please take a seat, Corporal.”

The woman sat in front of me is wearing a haz-mat suit. She’s the first person to come and see me since I was isolated. I guess this is what I have to get used to now. I was the jailor, now I’m the inmate.

I sit down and stare at the face under the plastic hood. I have concussion from the fight with Lieutenant Petyaeva and I’m struggling to focus. She’s white American I guess, and wearing glasses. I can’t remember her from the canteen or anywhere else on the base. On her chest is a small camera, its active recording light winks at me.

“Corporal, firstly, I’d like to apologise to you on behalf of this facility. Your exposure to what should have been a contained subject is something we take very seriously.”

“Yeah, I know.” She means what she says. I did, when I said the same words to people we kept down here, but I didn’t understand what they meant from the other side.

I do now.

“How long has it been?” I ask.

“Approximately seven hours,” the woman says.

“And who are you?”

I’m staring at her and she flinches. “Please don’t make this more difficult than it already is, Corporal,” she says.

I nod, understanding immediately. Personal connection with people who are infected is discouraged. It's probably why no-one I know has been down here. They're already pulling away, trying to insulate themselves from me. "Okay, why do you need to talk to me?"

"This is a preliminary assessment of your condition. I need you to let me know how you're feeling."

"Like shit. I was betrayed by Lieutenant Petyaeva. You know that right?"

"Yes, she betrayed all of us."

"You're the one in the suit, Doc, not me. I get to stare at the concrete walls."

She flinches again at the casual use of a title, as if she's going to deny the label, but I know it's accurate. She has to be from the core research team, shipped on the train I heard arrive earlier. One of the junior members I guess, that'd be why she's been given this task. "So what number do you have for me, Doc?" I try to keep the question casual. Am I seventeen? eighteen?"

"Twenty-two, Corporal Johnson. Now if we could get back to the—"

"You want to know my symptoms? Right now, I'm sweaty, stressed and dehydrated. After the containment protocols were applied, I had the shakes for about an hour, pretty much the same as when we get back from a mission. Usually, we're issued pills, but down here, I guess I missed out."

"So, nothing unusual then?"

"Not at the moment, *Doc*."

She picks up a piece of paper from the table. I can see a list of handwritten notes. I know they'll incinerate anything that's been exposed to me after the meeting is over. They'll probably burn the suit too.

"Are you suffering from any memory problems?" she asks.

"Sure. I struggle to remember my kid's faces, but then they died twelve years ago in the war. Some days I don't want to see them again; not the way they looked, all broken and twisted when I found them."

"Corporal, that isn't what I—"

"Yeah, I know."

I could get angry with her, but there's no point. She's doing the task they've given her, that's all. I know what I am, what the lieutenant turned me into.

I grew up in Hyattstown, Maryland, in a military family. My Dad, Private Ben Thomson, served in Afghanistan. My grandfather, Sergeant Louis Thomson, fought in Vietnam. My grandma said, he didn't talk

about what happened. When I was a kid, a couple of his war buddies would come around and they'd all sit on the porch together while I played with my toy cars. I remember them sitting in silence, drinking beer and staring down the street. At the time, I thought it was weird. When my friends came around, we talked a lot, catching up on stuff, telling stories, all sorts. These old men just sat together. What was the point in that.

I asked my grandfather about it once. "Sometimes you just need people to be there," he said to me. "Reminds you what you shared and why you keep going."

Right now, there's no-one here for me.

"When was the last time you ate, Corporal?"

I shrug. "They pushed a tray through the door a while back." I point to where it is on the floor. "I finished it off. No point in missing a meal when it's offered."

Stuck in the suit, the woman has to turn her whole body to see what I'm looking at. She stands up to make things easier and to ensure the camera gets a picture of what I've gestured at. "Your test results haven't come back yet, so in the meantime, we have to take every precaution. A team will be in shortly to organise all this," she says. "It really should have been done by now, but we've had some problems."

"What kind of problems?"

She looks at me. "Containment problems."

I nod. "It's okay, I can wait." Truthfully, I can. Right now, I'm not a priority, if Harlson and his people haven't managed to lock down the base. I've stewed in my own shit before, sitting around the blood guts and stink of my mission team whilst waiting for vehicle extraction. You die a little inside in moments like that; in moments like this.

"We need to get you wired up," the woman says. She hasn't sat down again and edges out from the chair, leaving the questionnaire on the desk between us. She reaches into a pocket and pulls out a pen. "Take a look through the rest of this and answer anything you can. A clean up team will be along shortly, please follow their instructions."

"Sure thing, Doc."

"Thank you for your time, Corporal Thomson."

"It was my pleasure."

---

I believe in the mission.

Twenty-five years ago, I was an eighteen-year-old kid with a pretty good GPA. My Mother did not want me to enlist like my father and grandfather, but we couldn't afford college. She got me odd jobs helping out around a kindergarten. Miss James, the principal, must have seen something she liked in my work, because gradually she gave me more responsibility.

Back then, people were worried about gun crime. Staff like me went on emergency response courses, taking us through what we should be doing if some crazy guy showed up and started shooting at the kids. I was pretty good at all the tasks and afterwards, the instructor told me I was wasted working in a school. He gave me a card for Vanadium Inc, Tobias West's company, and said "People like you are going to be needed. Really needed."

A couple of weeks later, I rang the number and after a short phone interview, accepted a new job. I never went back to Miss James and the school. Instead, I packed a bag, left home and got picked up by a guy in a black SUV down the street.

I never went back, or saw my family again. Sure, I checked in on them, using Facebook and shit to find out what they were up to when I could, but I didn't pick up the phone, write a letter or make a trip. If I had, they would have tried to talk me into coming back home. I wasn't ready for that, so I just avoided the conversation.

Maybe that's running away from my problems eh? Thing is, being here, being part of Vanadium and New Jericho means something. Sure, back then I could help kids, watch them learn and grow up, taking opportunities I never had, but here? People live or die based on what I do.

Besides, I'd never have survived the civil war, the mists or any of it, if I hadn't been part of the plan.

Back when I joined, Vanadium was a smaller company, not small, but smaller. I met Tobias West a few times and got put on his security detail for a couple of years. He always struck me as a guy trying to do the right thing. He had a way of taking complex problems and breaking them down, so we could all work out what we needed to do.

In the worst days, we needed individuals with a plan; a vision for how to make all this right. People came to the Vanadium facilities looking for answers. They stayed, because they found them.

For me, it was always a simple equation. This is our world. It doesn't belong to aliens. We have to defend it for our grandchildren, in the same way previous generations sacrificed themselves for us.

I got to play with toy cars on the porch because father and grandfather did what they did. Sure, you can argue about that if you want. I mean, Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Korea, Japan and Germany weren't exactly on the doorstep, for any of us, but we knew the enemy then and we know the enemy now.

Except, now, at the moment, I'm the enemy.

The clean up team comes in. They're all wearing the same bulking anti-contamination gear. I can't tell how long its been since the woman was here, but enough time has passed for the girl's body to stink out the whole room. I'm pretty used to the smell you get from dead bodies when the bowel muscles relax. They don't put that in the books or the films.

They lead me out into the corridor. The whole place has been lined with a flexible plastic tunnel, to keep every bit of me away from anyone else. It's overkill, but necessary. At this stage, the majority of pandoravirus infections are not contagious and unless there's significant biological interaction, I'm unlikely to infect anyone else. I can't see any of these folks looking to get naked and dirty with me any time soon.

The probability of me having caught the virus from this containment breach is almost zero, I know that from experience. We go on away missions all the time and when we do, we take precautions when we encounter the enemy, but we're still breathing air and coming into contact with plants, rocks, and stuff.

The aliens don't care about us unless we make them care about us. When they do want you, they take you. To them, infection is a weapon, just like a gun. Sure, we fight to survive, but we don't pick on the creatures we can't handle. To the biggest land predators and whatever lurks in the oceans, we're less than nothing. We survive by staying that way. The minute they think we're an itch to be scratched, we get wiped out.

Something must have made them target us, using that girl, *Subject 16*.

Something Colonel Harlson is doing. Or something Tobias West ordered him to do?

I'm placed in an empty cell; a small box in a bigger room, with transparent walls, a single chair, a bucket and a mattress. The same conditions the girl had. Once the door is locked, the clean-up team disappear quickly, leaving me alone.

My head really hurts. I sit on the chair and stare at the bed. I'd like to sleep, but I know I won't – I can't, not with a concussion. I need to do is sit here and go through quarantine. Eventually, things will settle down.

They'll test my blood and saliva and when it comes back negative, they'll let me out.

I'm thinking about Lieutenant Petyaeva. Instinctively, my hands ball into fists. Why did she do that? Why risk both of us and the rest of the base?

I'd love to ask her those questions, but I don't trust myself to be in a room with her, not after what she—

"Corporal Thomson?"

I look up. Colonel Harlson is standing in the guard post, twenty feet or so away, leaning over the microphone, his grey hair making him instantly recognisable. I stand up and salute. He returns the gesture with his artificial hand. "At ease soldier, you've earned a rest today."

"Not sure I can take the opportunity, sir. I took a pretty hard hit to the head."

"Yeah, I heard." Harlson limps out of the room and up to the glass wall in front of me, favouring his mechanised leg. He looks up at the ceiling and I follow his gaze, noticing the cameras...

The red recording light isn't on.

That means cameras are switched off.

"I need you to do something for me, Corporal," Harlson says. "It's kind of a *special* mission."

"Of course, sir."

Harlson nods. "Yeah, you might not have joined the U.S. Army, but it's in your blood. That's why I need you. I need someone I can trust implicitly with this."

"You can count on me, Colonel."

"You know we were recruited by the same person? The guy who spoke to you on the phone was Albert Siennes. You were his last just as I was his first. Al worked for Vanadium all his life before the cancer got him. Just think, if you hadn't talked to him, you'd be dead."

"I didn't know Mr. Siennes, sir. We only spoke once."

"Yeah, well, we're connected." Harlson looks down and shifts his feet awkwardly. "Your test results will come back shortly. They will indicate you're infected with the virus. I'm really sorry, but we need you to be declared infected."

I frown and walk around the table, closing the distance between us. "*Declared infected?* Sir, what does that mean I—"

"It means you have a special mission, Corporal, like I said." Harlson raises his hand. Metal fingers touch the glass in front of my face. We're inches apart, but separated by the screen. I can see he's sweating. He's asking for something that unsettles him, something that goes against his

nature. “You’ll be kept in quarantine, following the usual protocols, just like the others, but you won’t be interviewed, I’ll see to that.”

“Sir, I don’t understand—”

Harlson taps on the glass. “You’re not supposed to understand. Just do as you’re told. Something will happen, and you’ll be let out and given instructions by me, along with the other inmates. If you complete the task assigned to you and there’s any other survivors, your orders are to terminate them, got it?”

“Terminate... the survivors?”

“The other infected subjects, yes.” Harlson steps back and runs a hand through his hair, composing himself. “Once that’s done, you are to travel three clicks due west of here to Colby’s Break. Follow the stream for another two K’s. There will be a retrieval team waiting for you. They’ll take you to a secure facility, you’ll be retested, and everything will go back to normal.”

I stare at him. At face value, these orders don’t make a lot of sense, but he’s right in a way, do I need them to make sense? This is a way out – a way to get back to my life. All I have to do is trust the base commander, something I’ve been doing ever since I came here.

Will he betray me?

An alarm sounds and Harlson turns around, walking quickly back to the guard post. He presses the microphone. “Our time is up, Corporal. Remember what you’ve been told.” He flips me a salute. I hesitate, but then return the gesture.

A moment later, he is gone.

I need to decide what I’m going to do.



## About the Authors

**Jonas Kyratzes** is a writer and game designer, best known for his work on *The Sea Will Claim Everything* and *The Talos Principle*. In addition to co-writing Phoenix Point, he is also working on *Serious Sam 4* and a number of unannounced projects. His work can be found at [jonas-kyratzes.net](http://jonas-kyratzes.net) and [landsofdream.net](http://landsofdream.net).

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Allen is editor of the British Fantasy Society Journal and *Revolutionaries*; the roleplaying game set in the War of Independence. He also reviews books for the BFS, SFBook and Concatenation.

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