

PHOENIX POINT

THE BRIEFING #6



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Jonas Kyratzes & Allen Stroud



[Snapshot Games](#)

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History of the Phoenix

There has always been a Phoenix.

Fire is a destructive force. According to popular myth, only the Phoenix is born out of destruction and renewed by the dying lives of others. The goals, values and ambitions of those who are purged become components for the rebirth. The Phoenix is a forged creature, born from remnants, hardened and solidified in the flames.

Records of each incarnation are sketchy at best. There have been projects, committees, societies, armies and sects. With each fragment we find we are drawn further back into known history, back into a time where we cannot be sure of anything if we are to rely solely on scientific method.

Something has continually driven this Phoenix to exist. Some eternal agenda based on the earliest need of the first humans to live on this planet. There is something we were tasked to do. Something we were asked to defend against.

Our interpretation of this need defines the organisation in its modern context. The support of the United Nations enabled the creation of an infrastructure that would respond to our perception of a threat – a threat from alien incursion. The form that this threat would take remained unknown to us, but the basic bureaucratic, military, intelligence and scientific requirements were established in secret. Information has been collected, sifted and evaluated.

I came to this process late. My family had a strong tradition of working with “The Phoenix Project”. I grew up on stories of my great grandfather’s work, despite the tensions between him and others. He was a great man, but perhaps, not a great father.

The removal of funding and assistance that occurred at the end of the twentieth century damaged the preparations made to counter our unrevealed enemy, leaving behind a set of prepared resources that were left to gradually decay. This did not allow for the renewal our organisation had undergone in the past, instead, we endured a slow death as each year went by. Only through desperate means did any vital organs

survive for the moment when the crisis happened, the moment when we were needed to respond.

The record of our failure lies in the state of the world around us. Right now, there is no point in assigning blame, only in assessing what we have, what we can get, and what we can use.

We need a plan.

We need to act.

We need your help.

– *Randolph Symes III, Phoenix Project.*

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Endings

By Allen Stroud

“Your father always wanted this.”

Tuesday, 6:23pm. A cold but clear October evening. The sun is setting on the Pacific coast. A coffin rests by an open grave. On the coffin, there is a large blue cloth with white stencilling. The United Nations flag.

Surrounding the scene are a group of men and women dressed in matching black suits, the kind you see in films about government conspiracies.

I am not with them. Instead, I’m standing twenty feet or so back from the group, watching and listening to the waves on the shore. The warm winter coat I’m wearing is no defense from the chill in my heart. Standing next to me is Gabriella Garcia. I met her an hour ago. She says the Project sent her to accompany me. I guess it’s because they don’t want me to misbehave during the public proceedings.

She is the person talking. I don’t choose to reply.

“Peter, do you want to go inside?”

I ignore her again, keeping my eyes on four burly men as they step forward and take up the carry straps. Another man, wearing the uniform of an army officer draws the flag from the coffin and with the help of a colleague, folds it carefully. The coffin is lifted and moved over the prepared space, then lowered gradually. When it has almost disappeared, one of the men snarls and spits out a curse, dropping to his knees under the burden. A woman steps forward to help him as others murmur in shock. But I am smiling. A little thing to spoil my father’s perfect moment.

Fuck you dad.

This isn’t a military funeral. There’s no bugler or guard of honour, but the people up on that hill are acting as if it is, as if my father, Randolph Symes, was some kind of hero. Maybe he was to them, but he wasn’t to me.

I hardly knew him.

The coffin reaches its destination and the four bearers relax. All of them are red faced and sweating from the effort. I'm suspicious. My dad was barely one hundred and forty pounds at the end. Easing him into his resting place should be a cinch for these military types. Some of them are clearly uncomfortable being here out of formal attire. A hand or two twitches, as if they want to salute the officer standing in front of them, or salute my father before they leave, but that's not the way this is supposed to work. For a moment, the group waits to be dismissed, but then realise an order isn't coming.

A hand touches my arm. Miss Garcia again. "Peter, shouldn't we—" "Don't touch me."

The hand disappears. I turn and glare at the woman. She doesn't deserve to be treated like this. She isn't responsible for all those days when I wasn't good enough in the eyes of my father, her dearly departed director.

But she's here and he isn't, he's gone. She's trying to control and manage me. I'm not having that. *Not today.*

She holds my gaze for a moment or two, maintaining a cool, professional expression. "If you're going to stay out here, make sure you keep warm."

"Leave me alone."

She nods, turns around and walks away, towards the parked cars in the distance. The group of suits follow, finally doing what I wanted them to do all along.

"Mister Symes?"

The man in the army uniform is standing in front of me. He's in his sixties and has a lot of medals and bars on the lapels of his green jacket. I guess he must be a Brigadier or a General. He's holding out the carefully folded United Nations flag in both hands. I've seen movies. I'm supposed to take it as a sign of respect from these people for all the work my father did.

My hands twitch, but I don't raise them. "You should find a nice museum for that," I say.

The officer nods. His expression betraying nothing. "As you wish, Mister Symes," he says and also turns away, walking down the hill after his colleagues.

Leaving me alone with my father.

RANDOLPH SYMES SENIOR

Passed away peacefully on 9th of October 1972, aged seventy-five.

Much loved by his late wife Julia, son Peter and three grandchildren. He will be remembered for his United Nations work by all those who follow him.

A private service is to be held on the 19th of October, with a public reception to follow at Fort Mason's Officer Hall. Should you wish to attend, please notify the onsite chaplain in advance.

I grew up with an absent father who didn't care about me.

I've had years to reflect on my childhood and think about what it did to make me the man I am today. That time helped me work out why I get so angry at the world, why I wreck opportunities and friendships so easily. When people get close to the real me, I react and push them away.

The earliest memory I have is sitting in the front room of our old Boston house. I was playing with an old wooden horse. I could hear voices next door through the wall, but I didn't know what they were saying. I remember getting up and toddling to the door. I pushed it open and saw a lot of legs – a whole group of adults talking together. I looked up, recognised my father and held out the wooden horse. I don't remember the expression on his face, but the next thing I knew, I was carried outside the room, the horse was taken away and the door was shut firmly, leaving me alone in the hall.

I remember crying. I don't remember anyone coming for me.

My father worked on all sorts of special projects that he couldn't talk about, but as I grew older, I got a sense of what he was doing from the books that were on the shelves in our house. Other people had encyclopaedias and classic literature, we had *Somnium* by Johannes Kelper, a huge translated edition of *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* by the French author, Fontanelle and a well-thumbed edition of *The Last and the First Men* by Olaf Stapledon, not to mention the complete collections of Lovecraft and six or seven biographies of Alistair Crowley.

And there were his own files. Huge heavy boxes packed with paper. Most of them were kept on the top shelves in the hall, or in his study, which would be locked when he wasn't there.

As I grew older, I got curious. One day when I was home from school, I managed to climb up the shelves and bring down one of those boxes. Inside, I found a sheaf of brown brittle papers covered with his spidery handwriting. Across the top of each piece was the word 'Phoenix', in faded type. Underneath it, were drawn diagrams and dates in a list. I copied them down.

813 AD

830 AD

840 AD

860 AD

Then a gap and...

1793 AD

1801 AD

1803 AD

1805 AD

Then another gap, and...

1808 AD

1815 AD

1818 AD

1822 AD

1824 AD

1825 AD

1833 AD

1853 AD

I remember reading the words 'Atra-Hasis', 'Castlereagh' and 'Atheneum'. At the time, I assumed these were names, or misspellings. Later, I found out more about each of them and realised they weren't.

During my teenage years, I became an amateur spy in my own home. I went to work when my father disappeared on his long business trips and my mother was asleep or out. Gradually, I went through all of the

files in the hall, noting down names, dates and references. When I went to school, I looked things up.

I took to carrying a notepad around with me everywhere. My teachers thought I was trying to be studious and improve, so they encouraged me to 'write things down'. My grades didn't change, so eventually, they forgot all about it.

In a sense, I know now, I was mirroring the one person in my life who I couldn't seem to affect. I was trying to find a way into my father's world. He paid me no attention, so being an intelligent child, instead of crying and causing a scene, I wanted to know why and understand what had captivated him and taken him away from me.

Occasionally, strangers would visit the house and stay in the guest room. They were usually polite, but when I tried to ask questions they would treat me as if I didn't exist, talking over my head to my dad and falling silent until I took the hint and left the room. When I was outside, I'd hear the conversations resume in low muffled tones. Some people brought files for my father, but those would quickly disappear into his study.

I was seventeen when I finally managed to pick the lock and open that door. My parents must have known I was trying, there were scuff marks on the wood all around the handle. At the time, I naively thought they hadn't noticed. Now, looking back, I'm sure they had.

If I expected to find buried treasure in that room, I was disappointed. I knew I didn't have much time. Mom would have been at the shops or something, Dad, away on business. Anything I touched had to go back exactly where it had been before.

That day, I filled two full pads with scribble. I copied everything I could find. Drawings and reports on hundreds of different creatures. Frozen worms found in the Arctic and brought back to life; mass fish death incidents; ancient inhuman corpses found in the depths of the Earth; experiments on microbial life in vacuum, in heat and cold; secret code frequencies and signals transmitted via number stations to agents and operatives all across the world.

All in the name of my father's secret group.

Father had listed names on a scrap of paper pinned to a board above his desk. 'Society', 'Friends of the', 'Army of the', 'Second Society', and 'Committee', each with a line drawn to a large word written in capital letters.

'PHOENIX'.

In an hour, I tried to read everything I could. The more I learned, the more I realised my father was a crazy conspiracist, who had spent his

life chasing shadows and convincing others to finance his fraudulent existence. Randolph Symes was a man who traded in lies and mythology, using people's fears and superstitions to persuade them to part with their money, their time and even their lives in service to his madness.

I locked myself in my room that night. When Mom came home, I told her I was sick. In reality, I spent most of the night crying; mourning the lie I had been living in all these years.

The lie of my father's made up world.

"Mister Symes?"

I'm standing by the cars on the sidewalk. There's four to accompany the hearse, all of them black, with Federal Government plates. The man talking to me is a big army guy, with a scar running down his right cheek. He's a sergeant judging by the stripes on his shoulder. There's no-one else around. I guess they've gone to the officer's hall for the reception.

"Mister Symes, I'm Sergeant Baker. I've been instructed to drive you to wherever you want to go."

"What if I say no?"

"That is your right Mister Symes. I've also been told to inform you that a security detail will be following you for the next few weeks. Your father had some... enemies. We want to ensure that you and your family aren't going to suffer some kind of unnecessary repercussion."

"I bet you do."

"Your communications will also be monitored."

"Yeah, I guessed that too."

He doesn't say anything else. I look around. Home is a short drive and a flight away. The Project bought tickets for a late flight, so I could be at the reception, but if I do so, I legitimise their little game. A cup of coffee and a few hours waiting at the airport sounds a lot better.

Accepting a ride saves me a taxi fare.

"All right, Sergeant, let's get going then."

"Where to sir?"

"The airport."

An hour later and I'm staring at an empty plastic cup. Some guy on the next table is smoking a fat cigar, making the world taste acrid and bitter, matching my mood.

Somewhere nearby there'll be another suit detailed to watch me *for my protection*. In reality, they want to make sure I don't talk to anyone and spill some of those precious conspiracy secrets.

Conspiracy bullshit.

I tried to tell Mom about Dad when I turned eighteen, but she didn't believe any of it. Too many years of drip drip lies about aliens, ancient civilisations and forgotten legends. I left home shortly after that, living on the streets until I could get a job and a place of my own. My parents tracked me down a couple of times and tried to give me money. I refused to take it.

Mom died five years ago. She believed everything she'd been told, all the way to her grave.

"Anyone sitting here?"

A woman slips into the seat next to me. She's in her fifties and looks like she doesn't give a shit what anyone thinks of her. She smiles at me, displaying uneven teeth. "You look like you wanna talk about something, son," she says.

I frown and stare, but she doesn't flinch or say anything else. Instead, she pushes a piece of paper across the desk under her fingers. I reach out and take it.

She gets up and walks away.

There's a phone number on the paper and an address, but no name, just the words, *'Tell us your side, we can protect you'*.

I stare at the paper for a while. If the suits saw the woman talking to me, they'll pick her up and the paper will disappear from my pocket at some point before I board the flight.

But I've gotten very good at memorising things...

The Stuff of Dreams

By Jonas Kyratzes

*The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.*

- William Shakespeare, The Tempest.

It was 1971, love was in the air, humanity was reaching for the stars, and I was having an awesome time in the Phoenix Project. All my dreams had come true.

That's not entirely true, but it's how it felt. It's how Newton Sumrall, our Director of Operations, made it feel. It really was the Golden Age: we had plenty of resources, but we used them well. Sumrall ran a tight ship, but he always left room for improvisation. We had operatives all around the world, investigating mysteries, fighting the good fight to protect our species and our planet.

We were the good guys, and we knew it.

Sure, there were wars, there was misery. But I didn't think about any of that, although I know Sumrall did, and so did many others. Me, I was

in my own world. And I don't entirely blame my foolish younger self. I'd just escaped from a world of stultifying boredom, where I was expected to wear pretty dresses, find a good husband, plop out some kids, and then slowly drink myself to death - judging from the previous generation, anyway.

But instead of pretty dresses, I liked comic books, pulp fiction, and B-movies. I didn't know how to dance, but I had a mean left hook. I didn't care about tradition, but I wasn't a hippie, either - I had no desire to hold hands and sing Kumbaya. Somehow, I ended up with a degree in nuclear physics, a badass scar across my left cheek, and a black belt in Karate.

Look, it was the seventies. Things were different then.

Anyway, the story of how exactly I ended up getting recruited is probably too long to tell now. Let's just say it involved an encounter with Operative 11, a frozen mammoth, and a highly unusual radioisotope. Sumrall noticed I was bright, but restless, in need of purpose; he had a good eye for that kind of thing. And so, I became Operative 69. (Yeah, my pick. I thought it was funny. So sue me.)

Joining the Phoenix Project was like coming home. Sumrall had assembled some of the smartest, most kick-ass people on the planet - and me. I called us "NASA with guns." We were awesome.

I mentioned my love of the pulps, right? I was mainly a Robert E. Howard kind of girl, with an inexplicable fondness for Clark Ashton Smith's grotesque humor, but of course I'd also read a ton of Lovecraft. A lot of us in the Phoenix Project had grown up on stories of the fantastic - science fiction, weird fiction, whatever you want to call it, it was what taught us to use our imaginations, to look beyond the ordinary and reach for a whole new horizon of possibility.

For me, though, it all went a bit further. You see, as I was going over some of our old case files, I started wondering... what if there was more to this fiction? Reading the testimony of a survivor of a tragically failed expedition to the Antarctic in the early 20th century, I was struck by the parallels to Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*. The story wasn't the same, and yet it felt similar in a way I could not entirely dismiss. Then there was the word "Yuggoth" - the name of a fictional planet in the Cthulhu Mythos, and also the name of the planet in the report about the expedition. How was that possible?

My first theory was that H.P. Lovecraft himself had been part of the Phoenix Project, or rather its predecessor, the Phoenix Working Group, but I couldn't find any evidence to support that idea. Besides, *At the*

Mountains of Madness was published in 1936, while the expedition only took place in 1937.

Perhaps the proximity of these events wasn't a coincidence. My second theory was that the report itself was a fake, written by someone who was familiar with Lovecraft's tale; but a quick visit to the Archives disabused me of that notion. While a surprising number of the relevant files had been lost, there was enough material to convince me the report was authentic. Even more strangely, in digging into the piles of documents in the Archive, I found a note by the survivor himself commenting on the similarities - he was a philologist, it turned out, and they notice that sort of thing.

I was slowly becoming obsessed with figuring this out, but I felt too ashamed to tell anyone. It just seemed too crazy, even for Phoenix Project standards. I almost told Operative 11, but he had his own drama going on, so in the end I just kept digging in my spare time.

Belief in psychic abilities was widespread in the seventies (the Phoenix Project carried out some experiments, with inconclusive results) but honestly, I just didn't buy it. At least not in the Uri Geller spoon-bending sense.

What if there was something to it, though, in some other way? Perhaps something less deliberate - a stirring in the Collective Unconscious, a disturbance in the Noosphere? What if certain facts had seeped into the world, not clearly, not fully, but as vague notions filtered through the minds of receptive individuals? In the process of translation from fact to art, the stories would have been transformed, perhaps radically so, with each mind imposing its own interpretations, its own fears and prejudices (such as Lovecraft's phobias of foreigners and "white trash"), but shining most clearly and truthfully in those areas where that mind excelled (such as Lovecraft's understanding of scale, or the humanism he was capable of, but too often neglected)?

It was a big what-if. Too big. I decided it was probably bullshit. There was a simple enough explanation: the survivor of the expedition had been familiar with Lovecraft's stories and subconsciously interpreted the events he experienced using a familiar framework. We use stories to make sense of the world, and he picked the story that seemed closest. The ancient word he translated was almost certainly not Yuggoth. In fact, that he only noted the similarity later, and not in his original report, tells us a lot about his state of mind. So, I stopped thinking about it.

A few years later, I was on an assignment in Naples, Italy. I was alone; another operative was supposed to join me, but the mission had been badly organized, and he ended up in Florida (another long story). This was right after the Phoenix-2 disaster, and Sumrall was sinking into an endless nightmare of hearing after hearing after hearing, so I don't blame him. We all knew things were falling apart, but we didn't want to believe it.

I was supposed to track down some missing archaeologists. They'd gone down into a cave and never come back, and the cave happened to be on our list of potentially relevant sites. Back in 1799, you see, during the fall of the Parthenopean Republic, a group of rebels were said to have used the cave as a hideout. But then - if the stories were to be believed - something had happened to them. A local priest who witnessed the phenomenon is said to have attributed it to demonic possession caused by their lack of faith, but then that's exactly what you'd expect a 18th-century priest to say, especially when the victims were godless rebels.

All of this, in any case, was based on some carvings in the cave which had never been properly studied. Some suspected the whole thing was just a legend, or even a hoax. The archaeologists went to find out. I went to find out what happened to the archaeologists.

The cave was full of stalagmites and stalactites (I can't remember which are which), and it had that weird, wet, shiny look. It was accessible only by a small dirt road, which the Italian authorities had helpfully equipped with a sign that said the word "cave" in Italian - and nothing else. It descended into the earth in a strange spiral that made it really easy to lose one's bearings.

At first, I didn't see any carvings, and I considered the possibility that I was in the wrong cave. (Finding my hotel in Naples had been hard enough.) But then I discovered the first archaeologist, his head split open against a rock, his brain slowly dripping out of his skull, and that cleared up the matter. Unfortunately, it also raised the question of what had done that to him. It didn't look like he'd fallen; the massive bruises on his arms suggested he'd been lifted up and smashed into the rock. What could do that? A bear, maybe?

Looking around, I found another strange thing: dynamite, and a lot of it. It looked like the man had been trying to blow up the cave when he was killed. What was going on here?

I decided to head deeper into the cave. Probably a dumb move on my part, but I was pretty gung-ho back then. Pride goes before a fall, and so on.

Descending further, I started seeing the carvings that had supposedly inspired all the stories. They were largely worn away and unintelligible. On and on they went, deeper and deeper. These rebels must have had a lot of time on their hands.

Under an elaborate carving of what looked like the world's ugliest shrimp, I found another archaeologist. About half of his head was missing - the front half. I found his jaw on a bit of rock jutting out near the ceiling. A knife was lying on the ground; never bring a knife to a bear fight, as absolutely nobody has ever said.

I kept going and finding more archaeologists in various states of disassembly. It was so horrifying that it was kind of funny. That's how you deal with that stuff: you laugh at it. Then you pray that it won't laugh back at you.

Deeper down, the cave started changing. The walls became angular, artificial-looking. It was less wet now, and the carvings were clearer, although I couldn't understand them. In a small alcove, I found fragments of a statue. I realized this wasn't just a cave; it was a temple.

Judging from the equipment I found, it seemed that the archaeologists had opened up a previously sealed part of the cave: a massive chamber, which contained a black, oily-looking underground lake. I stepped through the opening to look at it, and the sheer size of the place took my breath away. The lake made my skin crawl, and I couldn't help but stare at it. A thin layer of mist seemed to float on top of it.

Right there, on the threshold, the carvings were clearer than anywhere else. I stared at them, trying to parse what I was seeing; there was a falling star, and what looked like some kind of sphere, and underneath a series of words in the Latin alphabet. But my eyes were drawn to the lake. I could not stop myself from staring at it.

I thought to myself that I could easily imagine something horrible rising from those waters; the same kind of thought you have when you're all alone in the dark, and you wonder how you'd react if two red glowing eyes suddenly appeared before you. But just as I was thinking it, *something did rise from the lake*. Something humanoid, but not human. Much too big. Much too broad. The kind of thing that can pick you up and smash you against a rock.

I'm not a coward - I shot at it. I heard the bullets bounce off. Then I ran. I'm also not an idiot.

It followed me, its growls echoing through the cave. Its size was the only advantage I had: in such a confined space, I was much faster. I think I may have broken several Olympic records that day.

Terrified as I was, I was still a Phoenix Project operative. The first priority must be to contain the threat. So, I stopped long enough to light the fuse on that dynamite. (Literally the only good thing about the fact that everyone smoked back then is that I had a lighter on me.) It only took me a few seconds, but those seconds were the longest of my life.

I made it out just in time, like an action hero in a B-movie, before the explosion collapsed the tunnel. I would've felt more badass if this escape hadn't been followed by me stumbling over a rock and breaking my left ankle. Usually people hurt their legs just before they get eaten by a monster, but I did it just after escaping from one. Such a nonconformist.

With the shitstorm still going strong, my report pretty much ended up getting buried. Apparently, all I'd done was blow up a man-eating bear. But that wasn't the worst of it. That wasn't what would drive me nuts for years to come, bothering me to this very day, when I'm a crazy old lady and the Phoenix Project is as good as dead, forcing me to go over the events again and again in my head, making me question myself and my decisions.

No, it was something else that I saw down there. Or something I think I saw, anyway. A word carved into the wall deep underground, a long time ago. Maybe I misread it. Maybe my imagination was playing tricks on me. Maybe I imposed a familiar narrative to make sense of unnerving events. But I don't think so.

At the entrance to the chamber of the black pool, carved into the rock long before Lovecraft was born, was one word: YUGGOTH.

From the Ashes

By Jonas Kyratzes

We kept running, leaving the remains of the city behind. The creatures were closing in on us, but we knew the base couldn't be much further. Nobody panicked; we were well beyond that now. All that mattered was survival. Survival meant staying focused. Survival meant working together. No time for drama or bullshit.

Get to the base. Don't get infected. Protect the documents. No one left behind.

We'd been on the road for months, ever since the activation signal had finally come, years later than expected. Our faith had been rewarded. The Phoenix Project was not dead. After everything we'd seen, everything we'd been through, we'd finally have a modicum of safety. A place to rebuild from, to start figuring out how to beat the Pandoravirus.

How many people had we lost, in all those years? If anyone asked me, I'd say I didn't know. Too many. But I did know: thirty-nine, and I remembered every name, every face.

We were getting closer. If we had decoded the coordinates correctly, that was. What if we hadn't? It wasn't worth thinking about.

Maintaining a scientific perspective was paramount. Observe the state of the road to estimate time of arrival. Compare the coloration of the vegetation to that of samples collected nearer the sea to calculate mutation spread rate. Analyze the gait of your fellow operatives to ascertain their levels of exhaustion. Listen to the roar of the creatures pursuing you to determine the composition of the enemy forces.

Focus. Get to the base. Keep the team safe.

A shot rang out; the creatures' ability to use firearms was confounding. Entekhabi fell to the ground.

I turned around. Focus. Observe. Entekhabi's body was motionless. He had been shot in the back of the head. I'd known him for twenty years, but in that moment all that mattered was to correctly analyze the

situation. There was no point in trying to save him; he was dead. Mourning could come later. Keep going. Save the team. Get to the base.

Yuan tossed a grenade behind us. The road was narrow, the boulders steep; a natural choke point. We heard multiple screams, suggesting the tactic had worked. Bought us time; perhaps a few minutes. We ran on. Harrison stumbled under the weight of the equipment; I helped him up. No one left behind.

They kept coming. I heard a sound I didn't recognize; a new mutation? Unknown, impossible to verify at present. Focus.

More shots, but no fatalities.

And then, all of a sudden, there it was: the base. The fabled Phoenix Base that would change our lives forever. It might not be Phoenix Point itself, but to us it might as well have been Paradise. A rush of feelings almost overwhelmed me, but I fought it back. Not yet. Focus.

I punched in the code. The gates opened. We entered. The gates closed. The lights flickered on.

And just like that, we were safe. The creatures could not follow, not unless they brought a lot more backup. Conceivable, but not likely in this area. Not yet.

I wanted to relax, wanted to let all those pent-up emotions finally come out, but there were protocols to follow. Nobody had been to this base in years. We needed to make sure it hadn't been compromised.

Slowly, methodically, we proceeded from room to room. Labs, living quarters, armory; no hostiles present. But everything was wrong.

The equipment was gone. All of it. Computers, tools, weapons, even the lockers. The rooms had been stripped bare, and every square inch had been filled with boxes. Not boxes of top-secret Phoenix Project research materials; boxes of receipts. Tens of thousands of receipts. Boxes upon boxes of papers covered in meaningless scribbles documenting transactions in a currency nobody even used anymore, and most likely would never use again.

We wandered through the halls like ghosts. There was nothing else to find. Just those receipts.

Did the leadership know? Was the person who had made this choice, who had decided nobody needed all that Phoenix Point crap, even still alive?

Did it matter?

I sat down with my back against the wall, staring at a box labelled EFFICIENCY SEMINARS / MAY 2028 / G-L. There was nothing left to do. My suppressed emotions finally bubbled to the surface, but I

didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I made a sound that approximated both.

Harrison sat down next to me. He looked tired, but he was keeping it together.

This isn't the end. I know you feel like crap, like the best solution would be to put the gun in your mouth and pull the trigger. And yeah, I know, we thought we were saved and we're not. But think of it this way: at least we have a well-fortified base. We still have some supplies. We have still have some weapons. And we're still alive.

That last part matters, believe me. I'm an old fart, so I understand the value of just still being alive. While you're alive, you can do stuff. You can change the world, or at least give it a good kick in the nuts before it offs you. And we're the Phoenix Project, right? If this is the worst-case scenario, well, we're all *about* the worst-case scenario.

Listen, I've been at the end of my rope before. It was a long time ago, back in the early nineties, when the last bit of meaningful funding we had got cut and I was faced with scrapping half the designs I was working on. I'd put years of my life into some of those devices, and I believed - correctly, as it turned out - that they might make a huge difference to the entire future, not just of the organization, but of the freaking species! Man, if we had some of that tech now...

And overnight, it all just got taken away. Some guy in a suit somewhere decided it was more important to give money to corporations or banks or, I don't know, anything other than science - maybe the League for Deep-Frying Puppies needed a bailout, or it was important to invest in an innovative new form of child slavery.

Half the time I was furious, the other half I was depressed as shit. I could see the right thing to do but had no way of making it happen, while these nitwits in Washington and Moscow got to run the world. It drove me crazy.

I ended up, half by coincidence, talking about it to the one guy who really understood, because he'd seen the glory days, and he'd been right there for the Fall. That's right, Newton Sumrall himself. He was as old as I am now, and he'd been through some pretty nasty stuff, too. You've read about the Moon missions, right? Losing those men, and then having to endure the circus that followed... that broke him, it really did. And still, he didn't turn into some kind of nihilist like you'd think he would. He firmly believed that the Phoenix Project was more than just some

UN organization. It was an idea, an idea that kept coming back in century after century. Sure, we kept losing valuable information, we kept getting knocked back down, sometimes for decades, and whole new sets of people had to pick up the slack... but the idea itself never died.

When I felt as hopeless as you're feeling now, Sumrall told me a story, and in the end that's what helped me to keep going.

You know, I was actually there when the Phoenix Project was founded. Well, sort of. I was in the hallway in the room outside, already semi-recruited into an organization that was just coming into being, but not officially allowed to witness the founding due to my lack of clearance, which had been requested, but not come through yet. Yeah, we already had bureaucracy back then, too. Nothing like what you have now, but pencil-pushers were busy pushing their pencils.

I realize now that I was just a kid, of course, although I sure as hell didn't feel like a kid. I'd seen concentration camps and an atomic bomb in the space of under a year, and believe me, that kind of thing changes you. Either you become misanthropic, to use a fancy term, and you start thinking we deserve to die, or you understand how precious every little bit of civilization really is. And then you can't turn that off anymore. It starts becoming who you are. You look around you and you see humanity, frail, wonderful humanity everywhere, and you worry, and you want to fix things... and it drives you crazy, just as crazy as you're feeling right now, but that's a good thing, son. That's not giving in to the ugliness. Being human.

Anyhow, I was there, in the hallway, waiting for the papers to be signed, when this old Russian man came out. I knew his name was General Sergey Sokolnikov, and that he'd won some major victories for the Soviets, but in that moment, he just seemed like a tired old man. He sat down next to me on the bench, and somehow, we got to talking. If you thought I'd seen terrible things... sheesh.

Sergey - we got to be friends later, so I'll just call him Sergey - was at Stalingrad. If you know about that, you understand. Pretty much nothing compares. They lost a million people. Can you imagine that? That's more than twice as many as we lost in the whole damn war. A million people. I don't know how he came out sane. It's kind of amazing, really, that people can withstand that kind of loss and still somehow remain human.

But Sergey had a long history. Before Stalingrad, he was in Siberia, exiled for being too much of a Bolshevik - just about the worst thing you could be under Stalin. They had to bring him back for the war when they realized that they'd gotten rid of so many of the capable folks that the Red Army barely held together anymore. Sergey only went back to fight fascism; he hated Stalin with a passion, and it's a minor miracle the old moustache-faced bastard didn't just have him killed like so many others. Maybe Sergey had something on him. He was wilier than you'd think.

Now Sergey, he saw pretty quickly that there was something wrong with me. Shell shock, they used to call it. I'd gone from an ordinary American life, from football games and hot dogs, to seeing death on a scale nobody can really deal with. I was screaming on the inside, screaming that everything was awful, and nothing mattered, and I didn't even know it. Sergey had been through much worse - betrayal, torture, war, you name it, he'd seen it. But he had hope. He could laugh at things, even awful things. He told me that even under the worst of conditions, people could still accomplish things that were fundamentally good. Like this new organization our governments were about to start. It was going to be good, and it was going to be needed, and what I would do in its service would bring meaning and purpose to my life.

To make me understand, he told me a story about his first encounter with incomprehensible horror.

I was in Siberia before, although in that case it was voluntary. I was part of the Committee for the Investigation of Species-Wide Threats, which was better known as the Phoenix Committee, due to our adoption of the symbol of the Second Phoenix Society. We had recruited several members of that organization after its demise, and also recovered many of their documents; sadly, I fear most of these were lost, and the Phoenix Working Group only received a fraction of what we had so painstakingly collected. We were, after all, enemies of the working class, and our words might very well have caused great damage to anyone who read them, yes?

Oh, I am sorry, I did not mean to confuse you. I have been in these meetings all day, and I am starting to talk like one of these bureaucrats. Overexplaining everything. Ah, Sergey, you have grown old and peculiar.

But let me tell you this story. It is important for you to know, with the work you will be doing here.

It was 1923, and I was on a mission. Something strange had happened in Siberia, and I had been sent to investigate. I was not alone; one of our English recruits came with me. Her name was Olivia Gossling-Dalton, and she was a most remarkable lady. When the Second Phoenix Society had been torn apart by the split between the materialists and the spiritualists, she had, at great personal expense, maintained the scientific work of the Society. She was, you might say, an incarnation of the best of the bourgeoisie: educated, cosmopolitan, a believer in the values of the Enlightenment. I will admit that, despite the difference in our ages, I was entirely smitten.

The mystery we were to investigate involved a small village in the northernmost part of Siberia. Merely reaching that place was an adventure in itself, in a country that was still in part closer to medieval times than to the industrial West. When we finally arrived, we found the village abandoned. Everything was in disarray, but it did not look as if there had been an attack; rather, it appeared that madness had overtaken the inhabitants.

Searching the area, we came upon their bodies, frozen in a nearby lake, their shapes strangely contorted. It was an unnerving sight in that harsh landscape; it was as if we had come upon something ancient, a symbol of days gone by that we could no longer understand, but which nevertheless spoke to us in some way. I wish that we could have learned more from those bodies than we did, but the instruments available to us, to humanity as a species, were still so very primitive. I suspect the instruments we have now, though infinitely more advanced, shall also prove inadequate. But that is a task for your generation to solve, not mine.

As we were examining the bodies, we heard a shriek from the village and rushed back. There was one survivor after all: the town madman, Boleslav. He was standing at the top of an old tower, screaming incoherently. We gently tried to calm him down, and get his story out of him, but although he stopped screaming, he would not come down from the tower.

You must understand, in such a place, psychological conditions were not treated. No attempt had ever been made to teach Boleslav anything except how to work. They did not hate him, but he was treated more like an animal than like a man. He struggled to convey what he had seen: a fog of some kind, rising from a crack in the frozen lake, which had caused the other villagers to behave erratically. He manically repeated

the same words: they danced, they danced, until they fell down into the hole.

Was this fog the cause of their madness? Had Boleslav avoided their fate by climbing on the tower? It seemed possible, and there were certain ancient documents we had inherited that suggested similar events had occurred before - but it was all guesswork. Of the strange transformations hinted at in some accounts, or of monstrous beings out of myth and legend, there was no sign. Only this small, insignificant village, wiped off the map overnight.

What if this had happened in Moscow? In St. Petersburg? In Vienna? The world had not yet forgotten the horrors of the First World War, of chemical warfare. A gas attack on a large civilian population was too ghastly to imagine.

We took samples of everything. I wished we had a way of draining the lake, or alternatively of filling it in, but the location was too remote and the country too poor for such ambitious projects. Upon our return, I attempted to get through to Lenin, but he was ill, and the sycophants that surrounded him buried me in meaningless tasks.

I felt crushed. I was certain that the samples we had taken contained useful information, but they needed further analysis, perhaps somewhere in Europe or America. It was urgent, but all the people who had once supported our work seemed to be distracted by an internal struggle I had so far been unaware of. The balance of power was shifting and there was nothing I could do about it.

One day, after another fruitless struggle with a bureaucracy that had mushroomed beyond all reason, Olivia came to visit me. She had been working on the samples and wished to discuss her findings, but instead she found me drunk, lost in melancholy - or, as she put it, moping. She set about straightening me out.

Darling, you can't allow such things to completely demoralize you. No doubt bad things are afoot, but such is human life. Surely you have read Marx, yes? I am continuously surprised by how many so-called communists do not grasp his basics, even in this country. History is not a straight line, a simple, inevitable progression from point A to B to C. The progression from feudalism to capitalism took many fits and starts, many failed struggles, before change finally took hold. If socialism is indeed the next step, as you claim, did you believe it would happen all at

once, and without resistance? I speak of internal resistance as well as external.

No, darling, I'm not telling you to surrender. I'm telling you that failure or frustration is not a reason to give up, to sink into this alcoholic haze of forgetfulness. Our task remains our task, and if things get in the way, well, then we must find a way of dealing with them.

Let us talk about percentages. Do you know what percentage of my not inconsiderable and entirely unearned fortune I invested into saving the findings of the Second Phoenix Society? About seventy-five percent. Do you know what percentage of our findings ultimately survived the fire on that dreadful night when Thomas finally lost his mind? I would say about fifteen. And yet I have no regrets. It was the right thing to do; it was necessary. My place in history was not to accomplish the goal. I merely had the chance to keep the work going - and I did.

There have been many others such as you and I. People forced to confront their inability to be the answer personified, to be the one to solve the great mystery. Forced to fight, to sacrifice, for a greater good they might never see realized. But darling, it is an honour to have had this opportunity!

Do you know, of everything that I saved, which is the one thing that I treasure the most? It is the secret diary of General Thomas-Alexandre Dumas, the founder of the Army of the Phoenix. A man who died impoverished, abandoned by the world he had fought for, yet without whose work the Second Phoenix Society would never have existed - none of us having known of the first Phoenix Society, or the Friends of the Phoenix to begin with! I carry a copy with me at all times, especially as I age, and my courage is not quite what it used to be. Shall I read you a bit?

We hunted the beast for days. I remain convinced that it came from the glacier; I have heard tales of animals frozen in ice, preserved as if they had died only moments ago. Perhaps this creature, certainly not being an animal of any kind we know about, but much more alike to the stories recorded by Taqi ad-Din, can survive being frozen and return to life when thawed. I do not discount the doctor's idea that it may be prehistoric in nature. It must have consumed the missing peasant whole upon waking, as we discovered rags inside it that resemble the clothing of the locals.

We lost two more men in the final battle; one was torn apart by the creature's claws, another poisoned by its sting. I count their deaths as I do those of the men and women who died in the Revolution: martyrs for the cause of Liberty.

That we did, in the end, track it down and kill it, is an accomplishment I can take little credit for. Without the help of the old women of the village, without the dedication of my soldiers, nothing would have been accomplished. Thanks to them, the beast shall haunt these mountains no more. If there is one thing I may be proud of, it is that I chose to listen to what the common people were saying, rather than stand above them, as certain others would.

It is strange, but I had little fear of the creature itself. It was hideous, no doubt, and lethal, but despite the intelligence in its eyes, its goal was purely destructive. It is easy to know where we stand with such a creature; there is no doubt of its intent, and no shame in killing it.

What, however, of the enemies of Liberty at home? What of those who proclaim most loudly that they are the very embodiment of virtue, while in their minds they dream of the glory of Caesar? Should they be opposed, and if so, is it the place of the Army of the Phoenix to do so? I feel that it is not, that this army has but one task: to continue the work that was wrongly set aside centuries ago, to vindicate ad-Din and al-Shirazi, and all those who perished in Samarkand.

But what if, in failing to pursue the cause of Liberty, we are ourselves destroyed by a new wave of zealots? What if the next would-be Caesar, hating the pursuit of knowledge as all petty tyrants do, strikes out at us? How much more will be lost?

In these difficult times, my mind turns to the thoughts of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, discovered by al-Shirazi at Maragheh.

Hulagu Khan is victorious; the House of Wisdom is no more. The Mongols cast the books into the Tigris: hundreds of thousands of them, until the river itself ran black with ink. More than the mere barbarism of war, such acts are truly blasphemous; they offend God and set back the course of human history.

Gone now are countless works from around the world; the words of artists and philosophers drowned, their wisdom lost forever. Gone, too, is much of the work of the Phoenix Society; only fragments remain. The hidden writings of Ibn Rushd in exile; the translations of the ancient

texts about the Enemy, which had survived the fall of Cordoba; Sushruta's treatise on the bodies of chimeras.

The scholars defended the library to the death, I am told. This does not surprise me, for each and every one of them loved and treasured it, even in these latter, lesser days. It was, indeed, a marvel, and had I died on its footsteps with a sword in my hand, I should feel that I served God and his world in doing so. Yet what would such an act have accomplished? It would not have prevented the loss of the books or the slaughter of the people.

Instead, I saved what I could - but I fear it was not enough. We had thought to revive the quest for truth the Founder had begun, to defend ourselves and this world from unimagined evils, and for nearly a century, we did; but now the Society has come to an end. The documents will remain at the observatory, and all I can do is to pray that one day another will take up the task.

Al-Andalus is gone. Baghdad is gone. On this day, I cannot imagine a future in which truth and wisdom are valued once again. But though I cannot imagine it, and though my soul is filled with despair, I have faith. Faith is the rock that will keep me from being overcome by my hate for those who would destroy the wisdom of the past. I will not believe that the God who created us with the ability to think, who made us creatures who speak and write, intended for us to live like animals, knowing nothing of the world. Nor will I believe that the Enemy will triumph. No, perhaps I have failed, perhaps everything we have accomplished will be forgotten, but though I am full of bitterness today, I will never lose faith in the task.

One of the documents to survive the destruction is a fragment of a text written by the Founder. I read it again today, thanking God that it was not lost to the waters of the Tigris.

He came to me in the evening, as the sun set over Baghdad, bearing an ancient scroll from the Library of Alexandria. Here, he said, was evidence that the Enemy had walked the world in days gone by, not as a whisper from the shadows, but as a great wave of destruction - and though the wave had been turned back, the Enemy yet lived, and would return. He was trembling; if the ancients could not defeat the Enemy, except at the greatest cost, how could we? They were giants of legend; we were but ordinary mortals.

I smiled; he was right, but I felt no fear. I had been looking out over my beloved city, a poetic vision of the warrior-scholars of the far future unfolding in my mind's eye. I showed him the emblem I had picked for our fellowship. It was a symbol of ancient provenance, older even than the Greeks and the Egyptians: the bird that is reborn from the ashes. That, I told him, is why you need not be afraid. Because humankind is like the Phoenix: we rise, and fall, and rise again. We die, but our thoughts carry on.

We burn, but we are not lost.

Papers

By Jonas Kyratzes and Allen Stroud

2018 - CAUSE AND EFFECT

You've read the news.

Whales swimming up rivers. Monkeys stabbing backpackers. Parrots falling out the skies. Mass fish deaths, impossible weather phenomena, unexpected algae blooms. Animals behaving strangely in the wild... and even more strangely in zoos. Every day we hear more signs that things are wrong, that something is happening, and still we refuse to SEE.

This is not natural. Nature is BALANCE. Something in this world is deeply UNBALANCED. You know it. I know it. We can FEEL it.

Some think the cause of this unbalance is something ALIEN. Or something ARTIFICIAL. But what if we're all looking in the wrong place?

We think this "Phoenix Project" is hiding the truth. We think they know about a threat they're not telling us about. But what if THEY ARE THE THREAT? What if they didn't kill Harambe to protect us, but to stop the truth from getting out?

#harambe #phoenixproject #nature #conspiracy #whatdidtheharambeknow

<https://iwanttoharambelieve.tumblr.com/post/177828808591/cause-and-effect>

2019

PEOPLE living near Lake Biwa were shocked to wake up to discover the beaches covered with thousands of dead fish.

Experts believe the cause of the mass fish deaths is a heat wave that has been hitting the city of Kyoto.

A local government spokesman said water levels had dropped significantly in the hot weather resulting in a lack of oxygen in the local reservoirs. An issue that has now spread to the lake.

Local residents feared a major pollution incident, but biologists have backed the official line that the extreme weather was to blame.

Doctor Aina Yamamoto, of the Faculty of Environmental Sciences at Kyoto University, said the overwhelming majority of the dead fish were Biwa trout, often considered a subspecies of the masu salmon.

2020

Mass Fish Deaths Hit New Zealand

A massive die-off of marine life has hit Lake Taupo in what local residents suspect to be a mass poisoning.

Videos posted on social media showed dead fish, floating belly up, lining the banks of the Waikato River. These appear to be a variety of species of trout.

The regional environmental protection service took samples from the local river for analysis, with possible contamination coming from the Waitahanui River, where a previous incident was reported last week. The results of water tests are expected on Monday, according to local biologists at the scene, with Government and Massey University experts now being consulted.

“We’re now informing the public. We’ve posted an announcement asking [people] to refrain from swimming in the lake and fishing until all circumstances are fully clarified,” Sherriff Watson of Taupo Town said to reporters as part of his department’s press release. “Until we know what’s going on, everyone needs to be careful.”

2021

As France enters its third week of clear blue skies and soaring temperatures, widespread concern at the levels of reservoirs have led to a series of provincial water restrictions being imposed across Normandy and Brittany.

Environment spokesman, Pierre Lemallere, indicated that the Government has one eye on the international situation, looking at shortages across the border in Belgium, Spain and Germany.

“We must coordinate our action with our European partners,” Lemallere said on Tuesday. “This is becoming an increasingly international issue, so international solutions must be found.”

This sentiment was echoed by scientists from New York University who in partnership with the National Science Foundation, announced a new mission to Antarctica to record changes in the permafrost.

2022

Mild temperatures through November and December have raised concerns amongst UK environmental experts despite record water storage levels.

Data indicates that the mild and wet winter months are a result of increasing average temperatures and whilst the increase of reservoir levels will be welcome, many believe the high rainfall will be followed by another dry summer.

“We’ve done a huge amount of work on capacity and leaks through the network,” said Peter Tramm, spokesman for The Regional Water Consortium. “However, that investment and planning is part of a longer strategy, so we’re listening closely to the experts all the time.”

Scientists on the American Antarctic Expedition (AAE) have announced they have found a previously unknown life in the polar region.

By analyzing the genome, researchers from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the University of Malmo found that frozen samples retrieved from the melting permafrost are at least twenty thousand years old. Speculation on their form and physiology has as yet not been released, but the expedition leader, Doctor Anatoli Gimitrov has suggested that his findings will be ready for publication in the journal, Nature next year.

2023

A mystery woman has been spotted walking into the sea in the early hours of Christmas Eve, it has been reported.

At approximately 4am, a member of the public reported seeing a lady walking into the water and vanishing near Santa Cruz Wharf.

After an initial search in the early hours, a coast guard spokesman said they were sure the incident had taken place but so far no-one has been reported missing.

After being unable to make any headway the search, which involved a helicopter, three lifeboat crews and two beach search teams, was called off.

A spokesman from the Coast guard Auxilliary said: “There was a person who entered the water at 4am on Sunday morning. After we were notified, an extensive search was quickly organised, and we would like to thank all the individuals who responded to our call for help at such short notice.”

“It was a member of the public who saw the person entering the water. We believe that this definitely did happen, but nothing was found.”

The death toll from an outbreak of a new virus has risen to ten in Moose Creek, Alaskan authorities have confirmed.

Nine patients that tested positive for the virus have been quarantined and are being treated, Louis Thomson, secretary for the state’s Department of Health and Family Welfare, told this station on Tuesday. The outbreak is rumoured to have begun from an accident in one of the laboratories at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, but no official sources are prepared to confirm or deny this.

Symptoms of the virus can begin with headache and drowsiness but quickly become more serious. Anyone who suspects they have contracted the virus, should immediately book an appointment with their doctor. However, officials do state, there is no cause for immediate alarm...

Semper Fidelis

By Jonas Kyratzes

I suppose the reason I ended up here is more or less my own stubbornness, so I can't complain too much. But I figured it would be good to explain a few things before I pull the trigger. Hell, maybe telling my own story will finally help me make sense of the whole thing myself.

Where I come from, you had two options. Either you went to work in the coal mines, or you joined the army. Seeing as half my family had died in the mines by the time I was twenty, I figured the army was the safer choice. And there was something about the idea of working with other people, serving a cause, that appealed to me. I'm not that smart, definitely not that ambitious, and by the way I ain't apologizing for that, just stating facts. Anyway, I may not be the smartest cookie in the jar, but I figured out early on that only doing things for yourself just ain't satisfying. I guess that's the one thing I have in common with everybody who ended up in the Phoenix Project.

So, I became a marine. Semper Fi and all that. And there were parts of it that felt really right for me. The camaraderie, you know? And the whole attitude. The dedication. It meant something. Or it seemed to, at first. After a while, I started wondering what I was fighting for, cause it sure as hell didn't seem to be the principles our country was supposed to stand for. I loved all the people who were out there with me on the battlefield, but the people giving the orders... well, I didn't feel they loved us a whole lot. And then I started wondering about the people we were fighting, and whether they were also just following orders given by people who didn't love them, and I just... I couldn't do it anymore.

Anyhow, after some twists and turns, I ended up with the Phoenix Project. By the time I signed up, it already wasn't what it used to be. On my first assignment, checking out some ruins in the Amazon with this crazy Argentinian scientist, I had to get there in a regular passenger plane. Economy class, of course. Not exactly what you'd expect from a secret

organization dedicated to saving humanity. Can't say I wasn't proud, though. In fact, I loved it. Maybe too much. There were some things I'd done in the army that I wasn't too proud of, and I guess the Phoenix Project felt like... I don't know, penance? Salvation?

I'll never forget the moment the existence of the Phoenix Project was revealed to the public. I was in a hotel room in Beijing on a mission, and I'd just come out of the shower, where I'd banged my toe hard enough for it to bruise. My first thought when I saw they were talking about us on the TV was - I swear this is true - wow, maybe now that people know, we'll get more funding. It did not occur to me in that moment that we would be seen as a joke. Or a Russian plot, for that matter. I never thought the potential of such a threat to humanity would end up being material for late-night comedy shows and crazy rants on the radio. I've never really understood politics, but in that moment, I realized why people got so mad. I wanted to scream at the TV. But I couldn't stop watching.

It started becoming unpleasantly clear to me that we were going to get our asses kicked. The UN didn't give us a whole lot funding to begin with, but now things were gonna change. I knew none of us were gonna give up, but without funding, without official support... the Phoenix Project would have to find a new approach. This would mean that certain types of missions just wouldn't be possible anymore. So, I needed to act quickly.

You see, I was in Beijing to talk to a contact in the Chinese government. That makes me sound like a spy, but it was official business. She was the liaison to the Phoenix Project. Smart lady. She picked up on some weird chatter coming out of a base in Antarctica, which they were keeping an eye on because it was run by a company called EnyoSec. They'd had some trouble in the past with that company ignoring their regulations, causing a bit of a scandal, which they didn't take kindly to. It sounded like they'd found something in the ice.

I called HQ and strongly suggested an immediate mission to the EnyoSec base, but they were in full damage control mode, trying to keep the media from eating them alive. They told me we were stretched too thin, and there had been a bomb scare, and the organization just wasn't up to sending a bunch of people to, and I quote, the frozen butt of the world. I was angry, though I guess I wasn't angry at them, because I understood the situation they were in. I didn't have anything solid, and if EnyoSec ended up taking us to court... well, it wouldn't be pretty.

But I was real mad. Oh boy. I could've punched straight through a wall. A lot of it was pride. I wanted to do something, find something. Proof, I guess. That there was something out there. Or maybe just that

there were still people who cared, unlike these politicians who were going on TV to condemn us for wasting the public's money, when they spent more money on the furniture in their offices than we spent trying to protect the whole planet. I don't know... maybe I'd just read too much science fiction and I wanted to be the hero just once before they shut us down. In any case, I called in a bunch of favors and made the mission happen. A one-man mission to Antarctica. Probably just about the dumbest thing I've ever done.

If I've made it sound like I was all gung-ho about the mission, the truth is that by the time I arrived at McMurdo Station, from where I was going to head out to the EnyoSec facility, I mostly just felt tired. The Phoenix Project controversy had already dropped out of the news, replaced by celebrity gossip and the latest round of bickering between the leaders of our glorious nations. I felt like I didn't know what I was doing, or why.

McMurdo Station had a couple of surprises in store for me. The first was that all contact had been lost with the EnyoSec facility. They assured me it was probably just a technical problem, but I could feel in my guts that it was more than that. The second surprise was that I wasn't going there on my own. A company called Vanadium was sending a team, and I was hitching a ride.

Can't say I was pleased about this turn of events. I'd worked with some Vanadium troops when I was a marine, and let me tell you, they were a reckless, violent bunch who gave the locals a whole new set of reasons to hate us. This group, though, seemed a lot more professional. In fact, their attitude reminded me of some black ops guys I used to know. Gave me the creeps. The guy in charge, a tall, hard-looking man called Turner, explained that Vanadium had recently acquired a controlling interest in EnyoSec, and as some of the paperwork had contained errors, they had been sent in to check out the situation. He told me this ridiculous story with a straight face, and honestly, I ain't entirely sure he didn't actually believe it on some level. That's how seriously he took his orders.

As we approached the facility in a massive Vanadium helicopter, some new model I'd never seen in the field before, we picked up a transmission. It was the voice of a man trying to speak, but somehow unable to form words. He groaned, and it sounded like his throat was full of water. Turner looked at me like he expected me to know what we were hearing. I wondered how I'd ended up flying with these guys - clearly somebody pulled some strings, but why... I guess I'll never found out.

We tried to communicate with the person on the radio, but although he responded to questions, or seemed to anyway, it was never anything more than moaning and a kind of weird babbling, like he'd regressed to being

an infant. After a while there was a sound that made us think he'd vomited on the microphone, and after that there was silence.

You would think, given these extraordinary and mysterious events, that I would be tense, readying for a fight. But it wasn't so. Instead, I was overcome by a kind of weariness, as if I already knew what was coming. And I suppose I did.

That part of the story's too long to tell in detail now, but one of the reasons I ended up joining the Phoenix Project, or even hearing about it, was a certain love of the unexplained. Although my understanding of science is limited - like I said, I ain't that bright - I could never resist a good UFO tale, or a ghost story, or any of that stuff. And I wasn't the only soldier who maybe secretly hoped we'd stumble into Area 51 or the next Roswell or something. I devoured science fiction and horror, books and movies especially, to the point where I ended up having a bit of a reputation.

But now that I was walking into a situation straight out of one of those stories, like something dreamed up by H.P. Lovecraft or John Carpenter, what I felt was that we'd screwed it all up. All these artists had been trying to warn us, show us the real dangers out there, and we'd ignored them, and now we were being punished by having to play out a distorted version of their stories. An old coal-mining friend of mine, a union man, once mentioned a quote that really got stuck in my head: history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce.

That's what this was, I suddenly thought. A farce. The Phoenix Project was already dead. Humanity, most likely, was already dead. These were the end times, but we were so used to a world full of horror that we hadn't even noticed. All my strength left me, and I think the only reason I kept going was inertia. Or maybe it was faith. Sometimes I think those two are one and the same.

When we arrived at the facility, we found its doors open, the inside slowly freezing. I followed the others, but I was barely present. The men seemed to think we might find survivors, but I think Turner knew the moment he saw the open doors. In the mess hall, we found three bodies, two women and one man. One of the women had shot the other two, then herself. It didn't look like there had been a struggle. The lab was another story. It looked like something had clawed its way out of some kind of containment chamber, slicing several EnyoSec scientists into pieces. It reminded me of things I'd seen as a marine: soldiers torn apart by an IED, civilians blown to pieces by one of our bombs. Human beings all look pretty much the same when you take them apart.

We found the radio operator, or what was left of him. Far as I could tell, he'd melted, and something had grown out of the goo. Almost looked like coral. One of his hands was still whole, resting on the table next to the radio. His fingers were webbed. Whatever it was that they'd found in the ice, it treated human beings like Play-Doh.

The creature fell on us while we were examining the remains. Must have been hiding somewhere. It was like one of these shootouts that just come out of nowhere, just mayhem for a few seconds, and then it's over, and it takes your brain hours to even process what just happened. I think the creature used to be human, probably someone working at the facility. It still had a more or less human shape, except for the hands, which were claws. The skin was thick, like an insect's, or a lobster or something. I believe they call it an exoskeleton. It ripped through Turner's men like they were made of paper-mache before Turner blew its head off with a shotgun.

Meanwhile, it started getting misty inside the facility. We were wearing hazmat suits, of course. I forgot to mention that, and it's important. Regular hazmat suits don't do diddly squat. Well, maybe they do a little, but not enough.

I don't know where the mist was coming from, but it almost seemed to be following us. We tried to avoid it, but it was already too late. It starts as a kind of itching sensation, and then the skin hardens and slowly, you start feeling your insides changing, like your skin is a shell and your flesh is turning to liquid. I think it's happening a lot more slowly for us than for the EnyoSec folks. Maybe the mist is not as strong anymore, or as pure. Or maybe the filters in the suits are helping.

Anyway, I have to admit I half expected Turner to tell me that Vanadium had bought EnyoSec to weaponize this stuff. But as it turns out, his boss ain't so big on germs, and the helicopter had enough bombs and napalm in it to burn this whole place to a crisp, just in case.

Ah, I gotta hurry up a bit, Turner's done setting it up. Funny, I just remembered something. Back when I was thinking about quitting the army, I saw this documentary that really helped me make up my mind. It was about firefighters, and it showed this guy run into a burning building to save some people. There was a wall of flame, I mean, it was like staring at the face of hell. I'd been shot at, even seen a car get hit by a rocket launcher once, but that wall of flame, that was something else. And the guy didn't run away from it, didn't look for cover, he ran straight at it. To save lives. I thought in that moment, despite all my training, despite all my combat experience, that I really didn't know if I could do that. Facing the fire like that, the pure element. It was like facing God.

Have I atoned for my sins? Have I lived a good life? To be honest, I don't know. But I will walk in there, and I'll stand side by side with Turner, and I will pull that trigger. I guess it's an appropriate end for a member of the Phoenix Project, although I sure as hell hope I don't rise from the ashes. If you find this recording... well, that's up to you, but I just want to say that I don't feel as hopeless as I did before. Sure, maybe we're reliving all of our stories as a farce, a sick joke, but even then, we still get to write our own endings. And this is mine.

Semper Fi.

Launch Codes

By Allen Stroud

My name is Ravi Chaudhri. I'm twenty-eight years old and I don't want to die.

11th of May 2023. The Pokhran-III nuclear programme signalled the start of renewed tension between India and Pakistan. We resumed underground testing as a response to threats from the new hard-line regime across the Kashmiri border, but really, we could have made a different choice.

We should have made a different choice.

My grandfather was eighty-one back then and was asked to attend the test. He'd been one of the scientists involved in Pokhran-II, a member of the Bhabha Research Centre team. The pre-event reception was a wonderful opportunity for him to meet up with old friends while in the background, a new generation of experts prepared another weapon of mass destruction.

I accompanied him to the event. I was twenty, about to start my engineering degree, and a patriot. I could see the scientific research opportunities behind our government's interest in nuclear technology and I wanted a part of that.

Back then, I wanted to be like my grandfather.

Fate provides each of us with opportunities and setbacks. This is part of karma. I achieved good grades at the University of Rajasthan, but not good enough to be selected for the successor laboratories that were to take on the work of my grandfather and his peers. Instead, I became computer engineer, responsible for designing and maintaining the control system for our missile deterrent.

My grandfather passed away in 2029. The outcome of my life has meant I am more involved in India's nuclear programme than he ever was.

Today is the 2nd of January 2032. It will be remembered as being cold and cloudy, here in Pokhran.

At eight in the morning I'm driving down the Jaisalmer-Jodhpur Road to the missile base where I work. I left before seven, my pregnant wife, Saanvi stayed in bed, asleep in our little house in Lathi.

I make this drive four times a week. The soldiers on the gate know my face but go through the usual procedure of checking my pass and scanning the car number plate. We're all being recorded on security cameras, so it's important everyone is seen to do their jobs correctly.

I park the car and walk into the office, swiping my card as I go through the doors. Only Padi is there, staring at his computer monitor. He doesn't notice me. I can hear tinny Bhangra pop coming from his headphones.

I reach my desk and sit down, flicking the touchscreen with my hand to wake up the computer. The Times of India website appears, just where I'd left it the night before. There's a selection of articles, mostly about the mist incident and the disruption to maritime communications across the south pacific. We are very lucky it wasn't closer. The Chinese aircraft carrier, Shangdong and its support fleet have been deployed to the border of the cloud. The Americans aren't happy with that. They've issued a warning to Beijing and promised to defend civilian shipping. The fact that they have an armada the other side of the fog seems to be irrelevant.

Total hypocrisy.

There's a whole set of other worrying articles. Refugees are flooding into West Bengal from Bangladesh, outbreaks of what the international press are calling 'the Samudr Virus' after where it's supposed to have come from. It's a typical western misappropriation of words, but some of the reports are suggesting there is a link between the epidemic and what started in Canada and Alaska four years ago.

The world is becoming a dangerous place. It's hard to reconcile what's happening with what I'm used to. I don't want my children to grow up in fear.

I love my country. Being Indian is part of who I am. I love cricket, I support the Rajasthan Royals, but the chest thumping pride I share with people watching them or watching our national team is different to what I do here. For me, being a patriot is about working to better the lives of people all around me and protecting our way of life. That means more than a flag or a game. What we do here is dangerous, but we do it to ensure people respect our culture and society. Sometimes these are things you have to do. Not everyone out there is rational or right thinking. People who aren't respond only to threats and intimidation.

The late A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, scientist and president, understood things best. We are a proud and intelligent people. He stated India's nuclear deterrent would not be used first, but its existence would prevent anyone attacking us with the same weapons.

I've believed in that philosophy all my adult life, but now, with everything that's going on, I'm not so—

The phone on my desk rings, making me jump. It's a wired landline, a rarity these days, but the whole facility here is designed with redundancies.

I pick up the receiver. "Hello? This is Doctor Ravi Chaudhri."

"Doctor, we need your expertise in the control room."

The words are spoken in English. The voice is a woman's. I don't recognise her. These kind of requests aren't common, but I know what I need to do. Quickly, I get up and empty my pockets onto the desk, leaving behind my wallet, my mobile phone and a collection of till receipts. I'm slipping through the door and Padi hasn't even noticed. I head back down the stairs and across the concrete yard. There's a lift at the end. I get in, swipe my card and press the button for the bottom floor.

In the three years I've worked on the base I've only been to the control room twice. The first time was during my induction and tour of the facility, the second time was to brief an operations team. I'm not sure why I've been called down now.

But then military people don't give you reasons.

The lift opens, I make my way along a concrete corridor, lamps illuminating my way as I disturb them. Another swipe of my card and another door to go through.

My destination is dimly lit. The main screen on the wall to my left is inactive. There's a row of desks in front of me. A figure is sat at the second computer terminal, a woman. I don't recognise her.

"I'm Doctor Chaudhri," I say. "Did somebody call me?"

The woman turns towards me. She's dark skinned and dressed a black suit. "I need your help, Doctor," she says. I recognise her voice from the phone call.

"You're not the assigned duty operator," I say.

"No, I'm not." The woman moves away from the console and I see a man slumped in the chair behind her. There's blood on his forehead.

I take half a step forward, but halt when I see the woman is holding a pistol in her right hand and aiming it at me.

"What have you done?" I demand. "Who sent you?"

“Neither question is helpful to answer,” the woman replies. She speaks English with an accent that I cannot place. Is she African? “I need your assistance in rendering the launch network inoperable.”

“What? Why would I—”

“Doctor Chaudhri, you’re wasting time. If you assist me, you will live, if you do not, you will die.”

“Are you threatening me? Are you going to kill me?”

“I won’t kill you Doctor,” the woman replies. “Your own country will cause your death in just over twenty-four minutes if you don’t help me.”

“Why would my—” I stop talking mid-sentence. Her meaning is clear, it’s the only explanation for her presence here. “The government has ordered a pre-emptive nuclear strike,” I realise out loud.

The woman nods. “Someone in your administration has come to believe you are under attack by your envious neighbours. They have received evidence that there are weaponised bacteria causing an epidemic in your towns and villages. Your intelligence officers have identified a laboratory complex over the border which they believe is being used by your enemies to attack you. They are mistaken. At this moment, your military are completing their plan to launch a missile to destroy that location, killing thousands of innocent civilians. The order will arrive here very soon.”

“How do you know this?” I ask.

The woman sighs. “We are wasting time. I need your expertise. I can disable this facility, but that will not stop the launch, only delay it. We must lock down your systems completely, so that your country cannot make use of these weapons.”

“You want to make us defenceless?”

“Nuclear weapons are not a defence.” The woman taps on the console. “You helped build this as a deterrent. In a few moments, it will no longer be a deterrent, it will be a catalyst.”

I’m breathing hard and sweating. I blink and rub my eyes with my hands. Perhaps this is a dream, and everything will disappear? But when I look again nothing has changed. “What do you want me to do?” I mumble.

She raises her left hand. She’s holding out a flash drive to me. “You will log into the system with your maintenance permissions and transfer the contents of this to the root directory of the console. Once that’s done, you will activate the executable file.”

“You’re asking me to commit treason.”

“I’m asking you save lives, Doctor Chaudhri. It is moments like these that define who we are.”

I hesitate. Humanity’s past is littered with examples of patriotic self-sacrifice and moments of self-recrimination. Oppenheimer’s famous quote from the Gita speaks to me – *I am become death the destroyer of worlds...* In his moment, he opened the way to this power, his research and achievements made it possible for Americans to destroy our world.

What does that make me?

Now, in my moment, my thoughts linger over matters of pride, survival and destruction. For Oppenheimer there was no possibility of retribution, but for me, I know unleashing such force will bring retaliation.

It is here, in the nadir that I suddenly understand the emptiness and impotence of power.

I cannot be party to the destruction of our world.

I step forward and take the drive from the woman’s hand. I plug it into the machine and log in. After a few moments, the program is running. I recognise what’s being done. The software is designed to encrypt our machines and all the systems connected to them. By the time it is finished, every device on the network will be talking in a different language to every other device. It will take six months or more to dismantle everything and rebuild all of it from first principles.

I think about my grandfather. What would he think of me? What would he think of this choice? Our family’s reputation was built on his work. I have betrayed him and betrayed my own work. I think about Saanvi and our plans for a family. She will understand, but will anyone else? I cannot burden her with this.

“My life here is over,” I say. “What should I do? Where can I go?”

The woman shrugs. “Anywhere you want. The room’s security cameras have been disabled. No-one in authority here will learn of your part in this, unless you tell them, but the project will know, and the project will be grateful.”

“The project?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t talk about that.”

I sigh and run a hand through my hair, trying to think. “I can’t stay in India. I won’t be able to live with myself.”

“You shouldn’t be ashamed,” the woman says. “You’ve just saved millions of lives.”

“The world is falling apart,” I say. “There are so many nuclear weapons. You cannot stop them all.”

“Not alone, no,” The woman concedes. “But you’re forgetting something.”

“What?”

“Human nature.” The woman smiles. It’s an honest expression without humour, but with conviction. “Do you think you’re the only person who’s had to make this kind of choice in a moment like this?”

“You mean other countries have been—”

“Some have. Others were forced to disarm by their people. We’re standing on a precipice of self-destruction. The sooner we can take our collective fingers off the red button, the sooner the real work can begin.”

As she speaks, the program finishes. I notice a set of new files have appeared in the drive’s root folder. The woman reaches for her device, but I get there first and close my hand over it. “Why should let you take this?” I ask. “There’s a set of encrypted files on here. That means whoever have this drive will be able to reverse the process and reactivate these weapons.”

The woman frowns. She steps forward, pressing the barrel of her pistol against my chest. “Circumstances may change,” she says. “One day we may need them.”

I shake my head. “No. The world will never need nuclear missiles. I know that now. You can kill me if you want to.”

We stare at one another. Time is pressing on us both. I sense her conflict, a struggle between orders and conscience. “What’s your name?” I ask.

She hesitates. “Abayomi,” she replies.

“There should have been six people in this control room,” I say.

“You didn’t kill any of them, did you?”

“Hopefully, no.”

Slowly, I pull the flash drive out of the machine. “Abayomi, you’ve asked me to make a hard choice. Now I ask you to do the same. Kill me and take what you came for or trust me and leave, knowing you’ve prevented a nuclear war.”

Abayomi holds up her left hand, palm outwards and steps back. “Very well, Doctor Chaudhri, as I said, no-one will learn of your involvement from me.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“It is I who should thank you, Doctor.” Abayomi is retreating, moving back into the shadows at the other side of the control room. “It was good to meet you. I wish it had been under different circumstances.”

“As I do,” I reply.

My words remain in the air unanswered. I am alone.

I stare at the unconscious man slumped over the console. I want to help him, but if I do, my presence here will be confirmed. I don't know how Abayomi got in or how she will get out. I can only hope she wasn't lying to me about the security cameras and being seen.

I make my way quickly back to the lift and select the top floor. The use of my swipe card will have been registered. As soon as the authorities discover something is wrong, they'll look into the records, see I was here and start asking questions. I've two choices, either I claim it was stolen or I disappear.

I'm walking back across the yard to the office. I'm through the door. Padi is still staring at his screen. I glance at the clock on the wall. Its thirteen minutes past eight. So little time has passed, so much has changed.

I pick up my wallet, keys and phone. My hands are shaking, and I nearly drop them before putting them back in the pockets of my trousers. Everything is quiet and calm. I keep expecting an alarm to go off, or someone to walk in and grab me.

A minute later and I'm outside, getting into my car. I drive to the gate and smile at the men who let me through only minutes ago. "Forgot my wallet," I tell them. "Need to go home and pick it up."

The soldier nods. "Okay Doctor Chaudhri," he says, and the barrier opens.

The drive takes an hour. One hour of isolation from the consequences of my actions. My mind races through a whole series of plans. I need to get out of the country as quickly as possible. We live eight hours drive from the nearest airport in Jaipur. There are others that are closer, over the border in Pakistan, but there are no roads and I cannot take Saanvi through such unforgiving country.

We will have to go by car, trusting that we can remain out of sight. If we get to Munabao, we may be able to cross the border and get a flight out of Pakistan.

I've no idea how to do any of this.

I get off the main road and make the final turns to our house. As I leave the car, my phone starts to buzz in my pocket. I ignore it and run up the stairs and into the house.

"Saanvi? Saanvi, where are you?"

"In here."

I burst into the dining room, a confession on my lips. Saanvi is sat at the table. Across from her is an Asian man in a dark suit. He stands up and turns towards me as I enter, holding out his hand.

“Doctor Chaudhri? My name is Akemi. I believe you met my associate?”

I stare at the hand and then at its owner. “What more do you people want from me?” I ask, coldly.

Akemi withdraws his hand and glances at Saanvi. “My apologies if I’ve caused offence. I’ve explained what’s going on to your wife. I’m from the Phoenix Project. I’m here to get you out.”

Letters

By Jonas Kyratzes and Allen Stroud

2026

From: ada@adaqueen.com
Sent: 14 March 2026 12:00
To: watcher@jonnycash.com
Subject: O.M.G.

>I can't believe this just happened.

Me neither. I'd heard all the stories. The CIA! The KGB! Governments and corporations the world over feeling antagonized by the Phoenix Project for one reason or another. I knew we had enemies. I knew we could become a target.

***>But that they'd target us over the freaking AI in our Scarabs?
Really? I mean, I knew they couldn't get their bloody self-driving cars to work right and it was becoming a bit of a problem, but sending armed squads to a Phoenix base? While all this other stuff is going on in the world? Come on! Give me a break!***

It's basically a miracle that no-one died. We got lucky: they were equipped to handle the most high-tech defenses but weren't counting on Sumrall's crazy old security system. So, the old man saves the day yet again, decades after his own death. Badass.

Anyway... this has been quite the setback, but we're not giving up. I'm attaching the new designs.

- Ada

2029

We regret to inform you that this is going to be the last issue of this magazine. We treasure your support and are grateful for the worldwide acclaim our FROM THE DEEP cover photo received, but the truth is that we have lost too many people to continue operating. The mist which we were assured was no more than a weather anomaly has claimed too many lives. Friends, colleagues, loved ones - all walked off into the waters, their ties to humanity severed. We do not know whether to pray that we will see them again.

We do pray that one day the magazine will return, but that day is still far off. So, for now, we bid you farewell.

Stay safe.

2032

From: ada@adaqueen.com
Sent: 19 June 2032 14:53
To: watcher@jonnycash.com
Subject: O.M.G. Situation 4

There's no other choice. We can't stay here, and they can't come with us. But they deserve a chance to survive, too.

Do it.

- Ada

2033

Dear Jonathan,

I know this little envelope will come as a surprise to you in the post, but with the internet being so patchy these days, I wanted to

make sure you got it. Saying something in a letter is a little old school, but it means you have something permanent should you need reminding about what I have to say.

I'm writing this letter because I don't know what the future holds for us. No-one really knows in any given time, but I see the signs. What is to come will be particularly bad and that means all of us will have to make some difficult choices in the years to come. Going forward, please forgive me for being sick and not being able to be there for you when and if you need me. But, you mustn't feel guilty about not being able to help us. Being older, I've had more time to reconcile myself to illness and seeing what is happening to people, makes me very aware of what can come after. Infection divides us, and we must accept that, if you, or my grandchildren are to survive.

Your mother is very sick now. You need to know that, not because you can do anything, but because you are her son. She loves you and so do I. That means we want you to live and we want you to find happiness wherever you can.

Please don't try to drive up here. The roads are awful with all the emergencies and quarantine protocols. You have your own life to take care of. I'll keep things upbeat in emails and phonecalls, so Selena and the kids don't get a sense of this. You tell them when you're ready and if you need to, blame me for keeping it quiet. If the network goes down permanently, I'll write you again.

Dad.

2034

Dear Citizen of the World.

My name is William George Haymer and I am writing to inform you that you have been lied to by your government and the world's media.

We stand in a crisis. A crisis that affects the world and affects each of us. Our basic human needs are being taken away to fuel the greed and avarice of a foolish few. These few are acting in

response to fear. Fear over what they have done to the planet that made them, fear over what they have unleashed.

You have seen the news and the talk of an epidemic. You have seen the mist clouds and the movie theatre computer graphics used to make you believe there are monsters in the sea. I tell you these images are false and that the truth has been woven amidst lies to make you see only what others want you to see.

Indeed, there is a plague amongst humanity. It is a plague engineered by the privileged few to wipe out the rest of us. It is a genetically designed virus made to kill everyone who is not part of their promised elite. It will take us all, if we do not act now and fight back.

Below, I detail the first steps you need to take to become part of the new utopia:

1. ***Pack up your things.*** *You are not safe where you are. Folded into this letter are a set of instructions that will lead you to a safe place – a sanctuary for people like you who have been lied to by the authorities. With the help of honest and true individuals we have set up these havens across the world. You must go to them. Only then can you be protected.*
2. ***Talk to no-one about where you are going.*** *Letters have been sent to all individuals who we can save. You cannot trust those around you, so please do not share this letter or the directions we have given you. Trust that our people will speak to your friends and family if they are worthy. Only you and your immediate dependents must make this journey.*
3. ***Avoid all contact with Government officials on your journey.*** *You cannot trust anything you are being told. Military curfews, quarantine lines, and checkpoints are being set up everywhere. In the aftermath of so much illness and death, many administrations are collapsing. You must stay away from any guard post and escape any attempt to confine you.*

4. **Keep silent.** *In the terrible event of your detention, you must say nothing of what you have been told to do. If you are captured and answer questions, many lives will be endangered, not just yours. We value truth, so do not lie, say nothing, no matter what they threaten you with.*
5. **Keep this letter safe.** *On arrival at your destination, this document will be your proof of entry into the sanctuary. You must have it with you when you reach us, otherwise you will be turned away at the gates.*

My friend, it is my urgent hope you will follow these instructions. I look forward to meeting you soon.

William George Haymer.

2035

Military Convention Regulating the Conditions of Suspension of Hostilities.

We the undersigned representatives of our nations do hereby and forthwith agree to the following terms.

(1) Immediate evacuation of all territories still occupied by combatants. Such territories will be defined by the 2028 Switzerland Border Accord. No cattle, cereals or provisions are to be exported from such territories during this withdrawal. The territories must be left undamaged and civilian administrations must allowed to restore their infrastructure without impediment.

(2) Immediate demobilisation of the military force recognised as “The Army of the United States of America”, with the exception of a fighting force comprising of 3 divisions of 16 battallions each, with an additional 4 mechanised divisions which be employed for the defence of the northern and southern frontiers. These will be henceforth referred to in this document as a part of “United States Armed Forces”.

(3) Immediate demobilisation of the military force recognised as “The Navy of the United States of America”, with the exception of one

aircraft carrier, the U. S. S. John Adams and her support vessel group. These will be henceforth referred to in this document as a part of “United States Armed Forces”.

(4) Immediate demobilisation of the military force recognised as “The Airforce of the United States of America”, with the exception of three squadrons comprising of F22 and F35/A fighter jets that will be employed in the aforementioned defence of the northern and southern borders. These will be henceforth referred to in this document as a part of “United States Armed Forces”.

(5) Surrender at points designated by the high command of the duly undersigned delegates, all munitions, arms and military vehicles belonging to the elements demobilised, which will be stored by the appointed authorities for later decommissioning.

In addition, we the undersigned do commit to ensuring the presence of the military units known as “United States Armed Forces” will remain deployed solely in regions under the sovereign jurisdiction of the United States of America and duly designated International Waters as per the 1982 and 1997 United Nations accords.

2039

In 2025, when we started working on the Scarab ATV, the Phoenix Project was struggling to stay afloat. We barely had the funds to design a new vehicle, let alone produce it. But the disaster we had been founded to prevent was beginning to unfold before our eyes, and we had to do something. We needed a vehicle that could deal with the challenges we knew were coming.

It was an amazing piece of technology. Fuel cell powered. Fully automated. Capable of accomodating eight personnel for a week without exposure to the outside - and without developing a smell. Radiation proof, of course. Graphene mesh armour. You name it, the Scarab had it. Because even the smallest hints we had discovered about the nature of the Pandoravirus showed us the world would never be the same again. The Scarab was a dream of what the Phoenix Project could have been. Should have been.

Things got in the way, and by the time we started production in 2027, our remaining official structures were falling apart. We only managed to produce a handful before everything went to hell in a handbasket. In 2032, in the chaos of World War III, we were forced to send the Scarabs out into the world on their own, let them fend for themselves.

The AIs in those machines might not be people in the conventional sense, but... it still kinda broke my heart, abandoning them like that. For years afterwards - until the satellite network went down - every now and then we'd get a blip... so I figure some of them are still out there, waiting to be reactivated, to do what they were meant to. We sure could use them just about now. I wonder whether they resent us for what we did.

The Barrens

By Allen Stroud

The afternoon sun beats down on us. The land ahead is flat and ripples in the heat hazed area. I shade my eyes and squint, trying to make out a landmark on this barren featureless plain.

“Hey, Abayomi, you see that?”

Jake is pointing to my right, straight into the worst of the glare. I turn that way and pinch my face further to try to make out what he’s seen. There’s a dark tree about half a mile away, standing alone. Its arms reaching out in perfect symmetry.

Too perfect. That isn’t a tree.

I think it’s a cross...

I unclip my water bottle and take swig, then push on towards whatever I’m looking at. I’m conscious of Jake alongside me, about five paces away and as I get closer, my suspicions are confirmed. Instinctively, my hand strays to the P90 at on my belt, but I’m in no danger from the figure hanging from the wooden beams.

I’m staring up at the blackened husk of a man, his body twisted and his mouth wide open in a soundless scream. There are no obvious wounds. I reckon he died here, starving under the sun.

“I wonder what he did wrong?” Jake says softly. I look at him. He’s crouching down in the dirt, examining the scene. Old habits die hard. He used to be a police officer, working for the Botswanan authorities in the homicide division before... before everything changed.

“Just caught the virus I guess. Many settlements have no means of isolating victims.”

“But why punish him for that? Most people we’ve seen are desperate to keep their friends and family alive when this happens. We’ve seen mercy killings and imprisonment, but never torture like this.”

“People are strange.”

Jake frowns. “There’s lots of footprints, but no vehicle tracks. I doubt they live very far away.”

“Could be a trap.”

“Might be, but probably not set for us. If the enemy can get this far, they’ll cluster around any scrap of meat or grass they can find. Putting this guy out here ensures a crowd if the virus decides to make the journey. I’d guess the people we’re looking for are observing this position and send out regular patrols.”

“Makes things easier for us then. We can wait here, and they’ll just turn up.” I unclip my weapon and flick off the safety, holding it loosely while looking around, but there’s no sign of movement.

Not yet.

We’ve been out here for three days, walking in a straight line towards the co-ordinates we were given. The map was old, a 1990s edition with a lot of lines drawn over it in thick black marker ink. We’re heading for Gilf Kebir, a huge rocky plateau in the south western corner of what used to be Egypt. A cold war bunker was built on top of a temporary special forces base from the 1940s. Back then, the British were raiding German air bases and supply columns. The Phoenix Project identified the location as a good place for a regional facility, and with United Nations backing in the 1970s, built a series of concrete chambers, ostensibly to preserve a selection of African dignitaries should the worst happen. While the world waited for nuclear Armageddon, Phoenix Project scientists got on what they’d been hired to do; develop weapons and defences that would help us against a potential alien invasion.

Or the awakening of a long dead virus.

In 1996, this base was formally shut down. If they followed established protocols the doors would have been welded shut and more concrete poured into the classified research laboratories. For fifty years the whole place would’ve been abandoned. No-one would come out here, into one of the world’s most inhospitable deserts unless they had nowhere else to go.

However, now, in 2046, we know someone is there.

Two weeks ago, a radio relay station in Tripoli started picking up transmissions coming from out here. A tactical team of four of us was sent inland in response, having been dropped off by air transport at the furthest extent of its fuel supply.

Limited resources mean we have to walk the rest of the way.

At the briefing, there were a host of unanswered questions. Chief amongst them was one Jake raised. *Why is this abandoned base so important?* We haven’t been told, but we were given clear instructions;

“if chambers 46 and 47 have been opened, you are to evacuate immediately.”

Sounds like somebody hid something down here that they don’t want found.

In the distance, I spot another cross, this time, recognising it instantly. I point, and Jake turns around, glancing in that direction. “The crucifixions, they’re territory markers,” I realise aloud. “Whoever did this is using their own people to set a border as a warning.”

“Their own infected people,” Jake says. “I guess they had no other choice.”

“They had a choice,” I reply. “People always have a choice.”

We wait. Thirty minutes go by and Grigoryan and Weber arrive. “Soil samples confirm what we thought,” Weber says. “This place is all but dead.”

“That’s why the Phoenix Project had a base here,” Grigoryan says. “It’s so remote and inhospitable, no-one would bother them.”

“Bother *us*, Sergei,” I remind him gently. Grigoryan is our sniper. He hasn’t been with our team very long. He’s still rough around the edges. No-one knows much about his past, there’s a lot of black lines in his file, but he’s been vetted and cleared for operational duties, so I have to trust that command knows what they’re doing.

I haven’t looked at my file. I expect there’s a lot of black lines in it too.

Jake turns to me. “What’s the plan, Captain?” He’s using my rank in front of the others. “Do we wait here for them, or—”

“No, we can’t afford the time. If we don’t move on, we won’t reach the base.” I turn to Weber, he’s the medic on the team. “How long can we push the supplies?”

“Two more days if we stay hungry. If we find another water source, a bit longer.”

I pull out my map. If we’re where I think we are, the base location is about two hours walk from here. Before the war, people would have used GPS or something, but now, the old ways are the only ways. I kneel down and spread it out.

“We’ll go most of the way together and split up when we’re close to meet back in the middle, where the old base was.” I tap my finger on the marked spot in the middle. “When we get to the plateau, Sergei, you

find a vantage point whilst we approach the entrance. If we're being watched I want to know about it."

"We using the radios, Captain?"

"We'll have to." This is a risk. Whoever is out there has been using Project equipment and Project frequencies. We've planned for this, adjusting our group talk and adding a custom scrambler, but there's still a chance they can pick us up and listen in. "Minimal transmission. Coded if you think it's necessary."

"Understood."

"Nobody shoots anybody until I give an order, fire my weapon, or you're under direct attack. We all clear on that?" I look at each of them, getting their ascent in mumbled grunts or nods. There are no more burning questions, just a sweaty desire to get moving. I pick up the map and stand up.

"All right then, we go."

Two hours later and we're at the plateau.

This place looks like it was carved out by the gods in ancient times, like huge fingers descended from the sky and scraped at the rocks, making something that could not endure and now lies broken by some massive hand.

There's a concrete hut and a steel hatch around here somewhere. That's the entrance to the old base. The black and white images that we have are really out of date. Fifty years or more of sun, dust and wind have scoured this place, determined to remove all evidence of humanity's intrusion. I doubt what I'm looking for is the same as it was and it's difficult to recognise features that match the photographs. Still I think it might be—

There's a crackle in my earpiece. "Captain, over here."

Weber is calling me. I look around. He's away to my left, in a shaded part of the plateau, under an outcrop of pitted rock. As I approach, I notice the stone and ground around him is scorched and stained black. "Something happened here," Weber says softly, in person when I'm close enough.

"Something indeed," I reply. "Do you think they're watching us?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it."

"Did you see any sign of them on your way in?"

"Nope, just this."

Weber kneels down examining the blackened dirt at his feet. I look around. There's no sign of Jake. He should be here by now. I flip the switch on my comms and shield my mouth with my hand.

"Sergei, this is Abayomi. How's it looking?"

"Clear, Captain."

"Do you have eyes on us?"

"Affirmative."

"Do you have eyes on Lieutenant Cross?"

"Negative, Captain."

The admission sours my mood. Now I'm going to have to make a choice. Do we keep looking for the entrance, or start out along Jake's route and try to locate him? Could this be an ambush? If it is, then Weber is probably right, they're watching us, waiting for the right moment.

Kill or be killed. In situations like this, I've always there's a need to be unpredictable, to behave in a way your enemy can't plan for.

If I was on my own, that wouldn't be too difficult. But I have to think of my team. If I leave Weber here and go looking for Jake, I could lose both of them.

We need to find that entrance.

I take out the old photograph and hold it out, turning around, trying to match the ruined features of this place to the ruined features fifty years ago. There's something, over there... about ten or fifteen metres away. The way in which the stones are clustered together. Could that be what we're looking for?

"Weber, is that..."

The crack of a rifle echoes off the rocks. I'm on my belly in an instant. If it's Sergei, he's given us no warning, coded or otherwise. If it's someone else, they've already made a mistake by missing the target.

Or, they want us alive.

"Weber, you okay?"

"Yeah, didn't get me Captain!"

I turn my head towards him. He's lying prone a few yards away on the scorched earth. "We need to find cover!" I shout back and then tap my comms. "Sergei, we're under fire. What's going on up there?"

"You have six— no seven individuals closing on your position from the north. I'm trying to locate their sniper. He's on the opposite ridge somewhere."

"Any sign of Lieutenant Cross?"

"Not yet."

I roll onto my side, bringing up my P90. I can't see anyone around us, but they already have our position and will be picking their cover before they start shooting. Weber is moving towards me, crawling through the dirt. A moment later, he reaches my side.

"I don't like these odds."

"Me either. Do you have your turrets to hand?"

Weber nods. "I can ready up two pretty quickly. Do we want to place them here?"

"No, we're too exposed." I look around, noting a tumbled mass of rocks about twenty metres to our left. "We'll move to there, deploy and retreat. Hopefully, they can provide cover."

"Okay, that works."

"You go first, I'll cover you. Ready?"

"Yep."

"Okay, go!"

Weber rolls and gets his feet under him, keeping low, he scrabbles across the ground. I tear my eyes away and raise my weapon, but I can't see anyone. Perhaps we've made our move in time? Perhaps we can—

Another shot rings out. Weber coughs and stumbles, falling into the rocks. The sniper again. This time though, there is a second crack in response, a deeper noise; the throaty exclamation of Sergei's rifle.

"Sniper is gone. You okay, Captain?"

"Weber's been hit. I need to get to him."

"They're almost on top of you!"

I'm moving across the broken ground. I reach Weber. He's face down, but still moving, his blood staining the earth beneath him. I crouch down.

"Can you walk?"

"I don't think so."

"Where are the turrets?"

"In my pack."

I'm searching through the compartments. The two turrets units are clipped into a charger. I pull them out and press the activation switches. Instantly, the tripod legs deploy, and the gun mounts activate. I dig out the weapons and connect them up. The system lights up and the guns begin to rotate, seeking targets.

And then, finding them.

Both weapons fire simultaneously, picking out the figures that are charging towards us. Humans, dressed in ragged clothes, carrying an assortment of knives and small arms. Three are cut down instantly in a spray of bright blood. The others retreat, taking cover amidst the rocks.

“We have to move, now!”

“I—I can’t.”

I get a hand under Weber and turn him over. My arm is quickly soaked in red. He’s a mess, and if I don’t stop the bleeding quickly, he’ll be dead. I pull the emergency medical kit from my belt and take out the surgical adhesive. There’s a hole in Weber’s gut, the worst kind of wound you see on a battlefield, where a soldier can live on the edge of death for weeks, before finally succumbing. Maybe letting him die would be a mercy?

I flick the top off the tube and dump surgical paste into the wound. The bleeding slows. I kneel and lift him onto my shoulder, touching the comms at my lip. “Sergei, Weber’s hit. I need a way out of here!”

“There are hostiles approaching on all sides, Captain. You’re going to have to clear a path.”

“How many?”

“Too many!”

“Can you provide cover?”

“Some I guess! Pick a path, left, or right?”

“Left.”

The throaty bark of Sergei’s rifle echoes off the rocks and somebody cries out in pain. I ease Weber into my arms, then up onto my shoulder, and move the P90 to my hip. A short-barrelled gun like this can be used one handed if necessary and right now, it’s necessary.

“We’re moving!”

As if on cue, three figures rise up in front of me, shouting and screaming as they charge across the ground. I drop to one knee, brace my weapon and fire. The first takes three rounds in the chest, the second a shot to the head, but the third keeps coming a long knife in her hand. I try to adjust, but it’s too late and she’s on me. The rusty blade bites into my body armour on the right-hand side, catching me on the upper arm and instantly my fingers go numb. The impact makes me turn, losing my balance and dropping Weber as her momentum carries her onwards in a stumbling dive.

The metal blade goes flying as the woman lands on her face. I’m on my back, drawing my sidearm with my left hand. As she starts to rise, I raise the weapon and fire twice. She coughs and slumps to the ground.

I wait a moment, my arm shaking, but she doesn’t move. There’s pins and needles in my right hand – feeling is returning, that’s a good sign. I examine my shoulder. The blade took a chunk out of the reinforced plate but didn’t penetrate.

The chattering gunfire of the automated turrets brings me back to the urgency of our situation. Awkwardly, I manage to get Weber back on my shoulder. He groans, but otherwise doesn't respond.

I'm moving, trying to run across the uneven ground. I pass the bodies of the two people I shot. I can't see clearly, but there's no obvious sign of infection on these people. They've clearly been sent to kill or capture us. That doesn't make a lot of sense. Even the infected Anu havens are willing to talk. Why were these people so ready to fight?

I can see movement amongst the rocks, shadows and shapes getting closer, trying to position themselves to attack. I'm outnumbered. Eventually, I'm going to run out of ammunition and so will the automated turrets, guarding my back.

Another figure appears right in front of me. I get a flashing glimpse of a man's face contorted in feral rage just before I squeeze the trigger on the P90 and his expression slackens into lifelessness.

Behind me, the turret guns fall silent and there's another noise, the growl of an engine, being pushed hard. My ear piece crackles. "Captain, there's something coming..."

"How much time do I have?"

"Not enough!"

I turn around, bracing my gun in the crook of my arm. A moment later, with a roar, a four-wheel drive APC appears, leaping over the broken ground and charging towards me. At the last moment, it veers to my left, screaming to a halt in a cloud of dust.

The side hatch flips up. Lieutenant Jake Cross appears from inside. "Come on! Get in!" he shouts.

Weber is heavy, but I'm not leaving him. Bullets ricochet off the APC as I get close and duck under the open door. Jake takes him from me, laying him out on the metal floor.

"Who's driving this thing?" I yell.

Jake smiles. "Our new friend. He calls himself Barnabas."

"Where did you find him?"

"He found me."

The door slams shut, and we are together in darkness. Then halogen lights flicker on. I can see into the driving compartment. There is no-one at the wheel. *No-one is driving the APC!*

The vehicle lurches and then accelerates at speed. I grab for a handrail and brace myself.

With the help of Barnabas, we were able to extract the whole team, driving back to the rendezvous point ahead of schedule. There were some injuries, but nothing fatal. Even Specialist Weber will be back on active duty in a few weeks.

Barnabas has expressed a wish to join the Project mission. It is my recommendation that we accept his invaluable assistance.

The mission to Gilf Kebir was a failure. The people who have taken up residence in the base are unknown to us and determined to defend their new home. Whatever drives them, it is not the Pandoravirus. There is something else at work, fuelling their hatred in this dry wasteland.

We do not know what has been uncovered in the underground chambers. Whatever secret was locked away, remains a secret to us, but it may not be a secret to them.

Should you wish to attempt this task again, more resources will be required. A larger force must be dropped nearer to the base. Only then, can we hope to succeed.

Alert

by Allen Stroud

[**Editor's Note:** *The following transmission was received on one of our automated recorder stations. We believe it is a fragment from a much larger broadcast. The voice has been identified as Doctor Karolina Jones, civilian research scientist attached to the Phoenix Project.*]

White Noise. Silence. Then the clicking sound of a radio microphone.

Karolina

"Mayday, Mayday, this is Alert Station Alpha to Alberta Base. Are you receiving me?"

...

Karolina

"Mayday, Mayday, this is Alert Station Alpha to Alberta Base. Please respond."

...

Karolina

"Alberta Base? Are you there?"

...

Karolina

Alberta Base? I have Project clearance. I'm a Phoenix operative. My security ID is 86E4739194AY.

...

Karolina

Alberta? Is anybody there. Please, just reply if you can hear me.

...

Karolina

Please... anyone?

...

The sound of switches being flipped.

...

Karolina

"Alert Station Alpha to Alberta in the blind. If you can hear me, I can't hear you. Given the situation here, I'm going to stay on this channel and

broadcast regularly. The system is set up to record and archive all transmissions and I'll be carrying a personal recorder with me until the power gives out. Hopefully, if you are listening, that'll give you something to work with if you're coming. I hope you are coming. I'm not sure I can stand..."

Karolina sighs.

"Sorry. Okay, situation report. About thirty minutes ago I woke up in the medical room. I'd been booked in for an appendectomy under general anesthetic. I don't know how long I've been out. The door was locked. It took me a while to bypass the security panel and get here to the communications room."

"The whole place is wrecked. There are bodies... Dead people lying on the floor. Some of them have been... They've been eaten."

Sounds of moving around and stifled crying.

"The radio was damaged. I think it's working now. I hope you can hear me."

"Okay, Alberta. I can't figure out the date, so I'm going to call this Day 1. There's a working twenty-four hour clock here. It says the time is 15:28. I'll report in at this time every day, updating you with what's going on. Additional recordings will be made in labelled sequence and stored on the data archive here. Hopefully, you, or whoever gets here will be able to make sense of all this and find me I—"

...

Muffled sounds of banging and glass being broken then Karolina is heard frantically moving across the floor.

...

"Shit, Shit, Shit, Shit!"

...

There is a click. Then white noise.

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 and landsofdream.net.

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You can find more of the Phoenix Point stories here – <https://phoenixpoint.info/archives/>