

Alpha Gamers

by Griffin Barber, ...

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“Careful... once you have the crosshairs on him, squeeze the trigger like I told you.”

The rifle’s report rent the morning quiet.

James watched as, two hundred yards away, the target folded around the shot and started screaming. Its companions quickly converged on it and started the feeding frenzy. Within moments the twisted steel and broken asphalt of what remained of the Bay Bridge was dripping blood into the Bay again.

“Got him in one. Good job.”

His son lifted the custom molded-plastic mask every one of the Island’s residents were issued once they were assigned guard duty and smiled over the butt of his gun.

“Ready for another?”

“I want to try for the head, Dad.”

James shook his head. “Waste of ammo, trying for that kind of shot.”

“Mao taught me to use the reload bench, remember?”

“Until the primers run out.”

Jalen looked away. “I don’t want him to scream. Used to be human.”

“But it ain’t anymore. Once they turn, whatever made ’em human is gone.”

“All right.”

“And put the mask back on. Best get used to sweating under it, the zombies like cheek meat.”

Jalen sniffed but did as he was told.

“Again, take your time, pick your target, aim, keep your breathing as even as you can...” James kept up the steady stream of calm instruction and watched the kill zone, mind elsewhere.

Better part of a year since the Fall, and the zombies were still thick as shit on what remained of both spans of the Bay Bridge. Temps just didn’t get cold enough, long enough, to give the naked fuckers a good killing-off. Mild temperatures combined with good rainfall made for easy living for zombies, too.

His son’s sudden shot made James flinch. The head of a zombie splashed across the front of a Buick.

“Jalen.”

“What, Dad? I was aiming for his chest, honest.”

“Little man just rolled a crit, James,” Mao said.

James’s head snapped around to see his oldest friend standing just outside the watch post.

They bumped fists. “Mao, you one sneaky motherfucker.”

A bright smile. “Did I scare yo black ass?”

“Shit, yes,” James said. “Trust a brother with a Chinese name to creep like a ninja.”

“Ninjas are Japanese, Dad.”

James shot his son a look, testing him. “And how would you know?”

“Shayu told me.”

He glanced at Mao, who was hiding a smile behind a hand. “She did, did she?”

A serious nod from the twelve-year-old. “And the Magus backed her up.”

“Well then, it must be so.” It was pointless to ask Jalen to use Sam’s actual name: the younger generation had all grown up hearing the nicknames their elders earned sitting round a table, gaming.

“Speaking of the Magus: James, she wants to see us. Looks like we got a job.”

“All right. You got this, Jalen?”

“Sure do, Dad.”

They found Sam with Drake and Shayu in what they’d come to call the war-room. They joined the ladies at the big circular table that always reminded James of *Doctor Strangelove*.

“Marc and Tanya are running a bit late. Some maintenance issue with the boats,” Sam said, hiking up her robes to sit down. Her nickname was a better match for her than the monikers of the rest of the gamers who made up the core of the fighting arm of Treasure Island’s survivors. It wasn’t just the robes, either. Had it not been for her, none of them would have survived. She was the wizard who made sure they all got the vaccine in those first weeks, smuggling it out of her lab

in the last days before the Fall really got going. She'd come a little unglued back then, taken to wearing one of her cosplay wizard robes all the time and failing to answer to anything but Magus, but she'd come through—and kept coming through—for all of them.

Marc bumped his leg as he took the next seat over, drawing James from his thoughts.

Once everyone was settled, Sam opened the meeting: “So I wanted to discuss going in after the ammo Louis told us about before—” she stopped abruptly, swallowed.

“Before he ate his gun,” James finished silently. He didn't blame Louis for killing himself, not really. James figured Louis had done a lot more than most: his skills at the helm of the little Coast Guard boat brought most of the survivors out of their initial, failed attempt to hold out in the Port of Oakland. He'd survived the death and destruction of his entire command, and the sinking of the local cutter... yeah, he'd done a lot. Couldn't blame him for giving up when it became clear just how unrelentingly cruel the new world was.

“Which armory?” Mao asked, his deep voice filling the room.

“Coast Guard range. Should have a couple thousand rounds of nine mil, an equal number of twelve gauge and five five six. Should be a number of guns in the safes, too.”

“Think it's still there?”

Sam answered that, “Louis said not a lot of people knew about it, so yes.”

“Do we really need it?” Mao asked, pointedly putting his machete on the table.

“If we're ever going to get off the islands like we all agreed we need to in order to start over again, we have to secure a landing somewhere. To do that, we need guns and ammo sufficient to shoot everything that slobbers and howls, not to mention a shit-ton of other supplies. That in mind, if this proves as easy as we hope, then we'll start planning a mission to the air rescue facility opposite it. They should have medical supplies as well, and the chopper is still sitting on the tarmac.”

“All right, but won't everything be locked up?” Mao had mad skills with a blowtorch, come to that, but it was time-consuming work and the equipment was heavy as shit.

“Yes, two big gun safes. Louis gave us the combinations.”

“Combinations?” Shayu groused. The Shark thought herself a real-life rogue, practicing to pick every lock she'd found on the islands once they'd been cleared. Even with all the practice, she was still slow as fuck at it. The same could not be said for her skills with a sword, at least no one who had seen her in action against the Lord of the West back before everything went to shit or against any number of zombies in the time since...

James shook his head. Swords. They had a new lease on life these days. Not rapiers and shit, but Conan the Barbarian-type: straight, heavy-bladed weapons that cleaved bone and chopped limbs. Had to in order to stop zombies.

“As to the layout, Marc has some pictures.”

Marc stood up, powered up the laptop and the projector. “As you can see, concrete rubble shore to a height of eight feet at low tide. The backing-stop berms for the range rise to a height of twenty-five feet on the water side and ten feet on the sides. Other than that, there's lots of flat terrain, which will make us easier to

spot. The safes are in this doublewide Louis identified as the office. The whole facility has chain link around it on all sides topped with razor wire. The land side has that thin aluminum privacy crap, so viz in and out of the range is minimal. Only problem is that the gate to the parking area is open and might be broken; I couldn't get a good look. That said, most of the fences between the airport, warehouses, and hangars are still up and capped with razor-wire, making it a bit of a maze beyond the range.

"Can't count on that to slow any zombies, at least not for the first few," James said. They had a lot of experience, by now, but Marc was a mariner, and had less experience on the ground with the howlers than the rangers and fighters. James also believed in reminding everyone of the simple shit they should already know. Simple shit got you killed when it was overlooked.

Marc stopped.

James explained: "Any that get attracted from a distance will likely be slowed, but the first ones to respond... got to think they're like any predator, and familiar with their territory by now."

"Right... well, aside from that, the zombies should be fairly thin on the ground relative to the numbers we've seen in the more populous areas of the Bay: no big source of water, nothing to eat, and not a lot of resident population on the water side of the freeway to begin with. Then there's the lack of wildlife. Each time I took a look, I saw zero activity, but I kept at least two hundred yards from shore to avoid drawing any in."

"So, we go in on the RIB and creep?"

"That's the plan. Old-fashioned unless things get out of hand, then we go hot. Rangers in first to scout and try to get the gate closed, fighters to follow. Marc and Tonya's Mariners to provide covering fire from the boats if it hots up. Because of the shape of the coast there, they should be able to get a good crossfire for everything between the berms and the offices."

They couldn't have done this sort of thing just a few months ago. The zombies were too thick on the ground, even where the population had been relatively thin before the apocalypse. Now, though, they'd proven their tactics worked. It wasn't easy, and required some balls, but it could be done.

"Just make sure they shoot the right targets," Mao rumbled.

As soon as Marc and Tonya signaled they were in position at the other side of the point, Drake nosed the RIB up against the rubble.

James and Mao slipped over the side and put in rat lines to hold the boat close. That done, they swarmed up the rocks as quickly as their postapocalyptic war-gear would allow.

At the top Mao pulled his bolt cutters and set to work.

On overwatch with the compound bow, James felt sweat start to pool under the motorcycle gear and distracted himself by keeping to his job: they were in between and behind the backing berms, which limited their field of view, but James could see the target of their little raid about fifty yards away.

The place was not the pictures, but it was close enough: the doublewide range office sat like a fat brown log on the expanse of gray concrete, a couple blue

shitboxes and series of converted shipping containers with a porch running their combined length.

The gate, though, was a wreck: all bent to shit down at the ground—there was no way they could get it closed.

No movement or noise other than the water lapping the rocks and the repeated sharp clicks of Mao's progress through the fence.

If there was one thing about the postapocalyptic world that took the most getting used to, especially for a city kid, it was the total lack of mechanical noise, music, or even the periodic shouting—or shooting—matches between neighbors.

Mao rolled the fence back to the posts and wired it in place, leaving a huge triangular opening. Always better to have space you didn't need than need space you didn't have.

He signaled Drake and Shayu, who came ashore clanking and took up positions at the fence.

The door to the office was open—a bad sign. Adjusting his mask and pulling his hatchet, James nodded at Mao.

Mao quietly pushed the door wide.

Taking a deep breath, James entered as quickly and quietly as he could, nearly bouncing off the far wall of the tiny room he found himself in. A single, closed clerk's window was right in front of him, doorway on his right, battered door lying on the floor beyond.

The smell hit: shit, rotting flesh, and the large-mammal unwashed stink of zombies. Problem was, he couldn't tell if the smell was fresh or not.

Mao's bulky shadow crept in behind on silent size 18s.

Clicking the LED headlamp mounted in his mask, James led the way through the next doorway.

Larger room, counter on the left, beyond it: wrecked space full of human remains... quite a few people, and from the lack of meat on 'em, an old kill. A doorway at the far end, dark.

Something pushed James's button, made him pause.

Mao edged up behind him, his very nearness asking a question.

James looked around, trying to find the source of his unease... he saw it after a moment: a well-worn trail through the wreckage—human and otherwise—leading to the doorway.

He hefted his hatchet and nodded that way.

A tap on his shoulder to acknowledge the signal. Mao didn't normally use the headlamp mounted in his mask, preferring to avoid notice until things got ugly. It had worked in their favor in the past, with the zombies rushing toward the light, never seeing Mao till the bigger man cut 'em down.

Picking his footing with care, a sweating James slowly closed on the doorway. Despite his precautions, and in standard horror-movie fashion, James stepped on something—perhaps some finger bones—that crunched loudly underfoot.

Snort, then snarling, and a tall, rather big zombie appeared in the beam of James's headlamp. It rushed him with the reckless abandon they all showed.

James timed its approach and brought his hatchet down in a fast overhand blow that intersected the zombie's forehead with a crisp thwack and a spurt of blood. A practiced turn of the wrist broke the weapon free.

A second zombie stumbled over the corpse of the first.

Cursing under his breath, James backpedaled.

Mao stepped from the darkness, machete edge a glittering arc that swept across the zombie's neck. Blood shot into the darkness as the zombie fell at their feet.

James ignored the female's gurgling death-throes, making sure there wasn't another one. He cleared the back office, finding a nestlike setup he hadn't seen before.

"No threat," he announced before exiting the back office. Mao had almost got him once, back in the early days, when James had come out of a room unannounced.

"No threat, got it."

James came out, found Mao already cleaning his machete on the heavy drapes someone had installed in an effort to hide from the zombies.

Mao nodded at the safes: "Looks like Luis was right."

One safe was open, ammo boxes spilling from the shelves to the floor. The other two were closed and, presumably, locked.

"Hope the combos work," James said. Suddenly overheated, he took his mask off and whipped it around, cast-off sweat pattering amongst the pooled blood already soaking the floor. He put it on the counter with his gloves and pulled the edge of his chain coif up to unzip the synthetic biker jacket.

He kicked aside some bones—a pelvis or something—to get in front of the first closed safe. A quiet moment spent recalling the combinations, he began spinning the tumbler through its paces, came up empty. He moved to the other safe and tried the same combination. This time it worked.

The safe opened with a satisfying clunk. It opened to reveal a rack of ARs and two shelves filled to the top with ammunition.

"Nice."

Mao moved to the door, summoning the others.

Drake and Shayu entered as quietly as they could. Plate and mail wasn't exactly quiet, even if it wasn't quite as loud as the role playing games they'd all played would have it.

James started the third combo on the other locked safe.

"Need me?" Shayu asked, hopeful.

"Nah, I got this," James said, hoping it was true as he rolled the tumbler to the last number and tried the lever. Thankfully, it swung under his hand.

James winked at her as he pulled the heavy door open.

He immediately regretted the wink as the air horn rigged to blow once the safe was open went off with a thunderous blast that went on and on.

James leapt nearly out of his skin.

Shayu was saying something as the horn finally ran flat with a noise not unlike the tightest asshole farting a dirge.

"What?" he shouted, ears ringing and heart racing.

"You didn't check for traps, did you?"

“What? Traps? Fuck, no! Why the fuck would I check—”

Shayu pointed at the horn. “That’s why. First rule of opening treasure chests: check for traps!”

Mao’s bulk darkened the door. “What. The. Shit. James?”

“What?” James shouted, reaching for his gloves. “Fuck, man, I can’t hear shit.”

The first few howls were a ways off, but loud enough for James to hear.

The rest of the party certainly made sure he knew why the zombies were coming as they all scrambled to pack as much as they could into the duffel bags Drake and Shayu had brought.

“Jesus, James!” Drake said.

“It was fuckin’ inside the damn safe, how was I to know? Who the fuck does that, anyway?”

“Hell, could simply be some vindictive dick making sure any looters attract the zeds,” Drake said.

“First one in the perimeter,” Mao rumbled from the outer door, statement quickly followed by the hum-slap of a bowstring and a grating shriek.

“One down.”

“Ammo only.”

“Right,” James answered, slamming boxes into the duffel.

“Group coming about... ten, but they are looking for a way through the fences...”

“No time,” Shayu said, heading for the door.

“Fuck,” James agreed, looking helplessly at the guns and ammo still remaining in the safes.

A sweating Drake nodded. “Let’s go.”

“They’ve almost found the gate. Flare up,” Shayu called over the hiss-pop of the flare launching.

The mariners opened up a moment later. The chatter of Chinese-made AKs always reminded James of the worst night of his life prior to the apocalypse. Now, though, he was happy to hear the sound.

Gunfire naturally led to more howls. But the zombies would be more likely to rush to the guns than go after the quieter shore party. Zombies might be hell on wheels for sprinting, but they were shitty swimmers. As in, they didn’t.

James and Drake each carried a heavy duffel to the door, where Drake handed his off to Mao.

Despite the murderous fire from the boat and his slowly recovering eardrums, James could still hear howling from behind as he and Mao ran past Shayu and Drake on their way toward the boat. The fighters would take on any leakers that made it past the fences and the mariner’s guns.

Leaving Drake and Shayu to cover their retreat was standard. Rangers were always the first in and usually first out because, as the less heavily armored team, they could carry more of any recovered loot. Mao quickly outpaced James, even carrying the heavier duffel. Sometimes he couldn’t help resenting Mao’s many gifts.

The guns went silent as the mariners reloaded.

James swore.

They weren't supposed to go empty at the same time, but shit happened. Several zombies howled as they charged toward the shore party.

Behind James, Drake muttered something.

A meaty *thunk* and wet *plop* as a heavy blade dropped a zombie.

Shayu's high-pitched giggle followed. "You see that?"

Drake grunted something that could have been an affirmative. "Watch your six."

"I got it." Again the wet hammer sound of a blade cleaving flesh.

The clatter resumed as both fighters started jogging after the rangers.

"Did you see that?" Shayu asked.

"Yes," Drake grunted. Fifteen years older than Shayu, he was breathing hard. Drake's plate and chain might be custom fitted; that didn't make it light.

Another giggle. "I mean, not every day you see a zombie trip on his own guts trying to get at you."

The AKs started chattering again. Zombies started squealing.

Mao was between the berms, James a few steps behind. The boats always seemed farthest away when you were being chased by a horde of slaving zombies.

Mao went through the fence and reached the water's edge. He started down the rubble shore as James reached the top.

James turned to check on the fighters, found the pair in a clattering jog between the berms. A lone shadow moved behind them, eventually resolving into a zombie that had escaped the fire from the boats and was pursuing the shore party on silent feet.

Shouting a warning in such circumstances almost always summoned more problems than it solved, so James dropped his duffel and started pulling his bow out. He was nocking an arrow when Shayu spun on one heel and her sword flicked out.

Shayu had already resumed her jog when the zombie hit the ground, half its neck severed.

"Show-off," he muttered as they ran up.

Another giggle was her only reply.

The mission debrief seemed to take forever, what with everyone giving James a ration of shit over failing to check for traps. He was past ready for a distraction when Marc walked in.

"What's up?" Sam asked.

"We got a radio message."

"From someone new?" It had been a while since there had been any new contacts. The last year had seen a declining number of holdouts on the radio as the zombies overran sanctuaries, or people ran out of power, components, or simply the will to live.

Marc started to shrug, then nodded. "You could say that."

Sam went full Magus, drawing herself up in her seat. "Could? What does that mean?"

"They claim to be the good ole U. S. of A."

"No shit?" three or four people said, all at once.

“No. Shit.”

“And they want us to do what, exactly?” Sam asked.

James was pretty sure he knew what she was thinking: Been getting along just fine despite the failures of government—local, state, and national—over the last year. His own thoughts were less abstract, and more angry.

“For now: keep the flame alive.”

“The flame?” she snorted. “It actually says that?”

Marc shrugged and handed her the transcript.

She read incredibly fast: “They say the President—er, that would be the former Vice President, now President—has been restored to power... that they want survivors to rejoin the union as and when they are able.”

James got up, chair grating against the floor as he pushed away from the table. Dimly, he saw Mao getting to his feet.

“James?” Sam asked.

He barely heard her, blood rushing in his ears as he set the knuckles of his fists on the table.

“No.” James did not realize how loud he’d been until he saw all the looks on everyone’s faces.

“No, what?” Sam asked.

“What if we don’t want to *rejoin the union*? It never did anything for me but put me behind bars.”

“That was the State of Californ...” Sam trailed off.

James looked down at the table.

Mao answered for him: “Doesn’t matter.”

“Look, I’m no fan of the way things were run around here before the Fall, but we can do better, make things better...” she trailed off again, this time with a helpless shrug.

“I didn’t fight to restore anything. I didn’t bleed to bring us back under some distant government that doesn’t give a fuck about me or my kid.” He spread his hands. “I fought to keep us alive—killed all those zeds—to build something out of the ashes and shit the old world order left us in.”

Mao was nodding. The rest looked... uncomfortable in a way they hadn’t in a long, long time. It gave James pause. He spent a moment examining his anger. It was burning more brightly than at any time since before the Fall. Carefully, he put the leash on it. The men and women at this table weren’t the people he was angry with. Most of *those* were long dead.

He snorted, shook his head. “Been a long time since I had to worry about my supposed *place* in things. My anger hasn’t forgotten, though. Not one bit. Right back to being mad as fuck.”

Mao was nodding again.

Sam gave an uneasy smile. “I’d like to see some changes in government, myself.” He remembered Sam used to call her politics “anarchist with a strong social conscience,” whatever that meant. She gestured at the transcript: “May be a while before they get this far, anyway. So far they’ve only been active around San Diego.”

“Still, though, we ought to get our questions answered before we agree to anything,” Marc said.

James shrugged. "It doesn't sound like they're asking, more like they are assuming we're gonna want to go straight back to the way things were. I ain't down with that."

"Me neither." She thought a moment before going on, "I'm no scholar, but it seems to me there might be some room under the old U.S. Constitution for some alternative forms of democracy. Something that more equally represents us all. We might be able to work from that, get the folks we've managed to keep in touch with to agree to a Congress—"

"No way the Delta Free State Militia will agree to that."

"Or the Alameda Axis," Marc added.

"Not right away, but they may see reason once we are up and running with a plan..."

James shook his head. "We had a plan, one we told each new arrival: Stay alive. Rely on one another. Never let them do this again."

"James, I'm not saying we don't have problems to work through, but shit-canning the whole idea without—"

He interrupted with her own words, said to each newcomer that survived quarantine on the Island: "Them being some distant government or faceless organization that spread the fucking plague in the first place, us being: everyone contributes, everyone gets a share. Know who you work with. Know them. If they can't hold their end, help, but don't go under with them if they can't—or won't—learn. This ain't no suicide pact."

Sam hung her head. "I know my own spiel, James. Ghu knows I've said it enough myself."

A bitter retort slamming against clenched teeth, James took a deep breath and tried to find an answer that wouldn't do more harm than good.

Sam surprised him when she looked up. Silent tears were rolling down her cheeks. "I..." she started, voice shrill. She stopped, held up a hand, swallowed once and then continued more steadily: "I don't know if I can go on making these decisions for us, James. I'm not built for it. I feel them, like fucking spears in my side: Vic, Rachel, the families that turned in quarantine, all of them. I want to hang up this responsibility. I want someone else to run the game... I need a break, otherwise I'll break, and I... I'm afraid I'll take us all down with me. This—this news from the old government—is the first bit of good news we've had since Luis blew the bridges and we got set up here. I... I think we owe it to ourselves to consider how we'll contribute to the greater good and the saving of fucking humanity! If that means working with the remnants of the good ole U.S. of A, then that's what we'll do. It's at least a start."

James and Mao shared a long look. After a moment Mao gave a spare nod.

"Shit," James said it slow, savoring the word while he considered things. After a moment, he went on, "I'll go see if the library's law books cover any odd shit like how far we can get from the old system and still be protected by the Constitution." Prison hadn't just made a gamer of him, it had made him interested in the law, and given him the time to make a study of it. His interest wouldn't have meant shit without the law library left behind by some lawyer who'd lived on the Island before the Fall, but some days God smiled on a brother.

He even smiled a bit as he left the room. Gamers were creatives of a different stripe: give them a world to play in and some rules to govern it, and they'd have the system suiting them in no time. James figured all he had to do was learn the basic rules and how they applied, and the group would pull together to make it happen.

Like they always had.

"Alpha Gamers," the local game store owner had called the group.

He'd no idea how apt the name was.

