

# **Introduction To Isolation**

**By Claus Holm**

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The soldiers arrived in the middle of period five. Jess was standing in front of the blackboard, patiently going through the assignment from Monday (a three page essay on George Orwell's "1984"), and reading bits of the various essays aloud. He was right in the middle of Mike Paulson's paragraph about how the Thought Police was the next step for the Patriot Act, when the classroom door was ripped open by two soldiers with rifles. Jess turned his head, and lowered the paper in surprise. The soldiers were in full uniform and wearing what looked like gas masks on their faces.

"What's going on?" he asked. The first soldier took a step forward and raised his rifle, making the students give a collective shriek. Several of them ducked under the tables as they had been taught to do in case of a school shooting.

*"Everybody get to the back of the class!"* the first soldier shouted. His voice was muffled by the mask. *"This is an emergency!"*

Jess took a step towards the soldiers. "Is it a school shooting?" he asked, immediately regretting it. It had to be something much worse. No soldier would be wearing a gas mask for a shooting.

"Just get to the back, sir. Control your students. As of right now, you're all considered enemy combatants and we will not hesitate to shoot."

Jess felt a horrible chill fill his heart. Enemy combatants? The codeword for "no rights" in the United States that had arisen since 2001. He held up his hands, making it very clear from his body language that he was complying. "All right. Everybody, we'll do exactly what these gentlemen want. Everybody gather in the back and sit down. Let's all try to take it easy." The last he said with a sideways glance at the soldiers.

The second soldier raised a walkie-talkie and spoke into it. "Room eighty-four secure."

"Acknowledged," a voice came back.

"Can you tell us what's going on?" Patty Beecher asked. She was a mousy brunette with glasses whose fairly plain exterior hid a sharp brain

"The school has been quarantined, due to a terrorist incident. That's all you need to know right now". Soldier Number One took a few steps towards Jess's table, sitting down on the edge of it. None of the two soldiers were wearing rank insignia, Jess noticed, but soldier Number One seemed to be in charge. He waved at Number Two, who moved closer to the center of the room, rifle still held ready at the shoulder.

"Well, you have to be able to tell us something!" Patty continued. "Are we in danger?"

"Patty," Jess said, but Number One seemed to focus on her behind the tinted glass of his mask.

"I said that's all you need to know right now. Sit down and shut up or I will not be held responsible for the consequences. "

Jess grabbed her arm and made her sit down. Patty's expression was both angry and determined. It looked to Jess as if she would be ready to risk getting shot to get answers.

He sat down next to her, putting his arm round her shoulder for a moment. He turned his head and looked at the rest of his class. There were fifteen of them, and most of them seemed more confused and amused than actually scared. He could see Murphy Bracknell, always a troublemaker, fiddling with something in his backpack which he had grabbed from his seat on the back row. He looked up once in a while at the soldiers, but then focused his attention on the backpack again.

"I am going to need all your cell phones, pagers, or anything like that." Soldier Number Two spoke up for the first time, and pulled a big plastic bag from a pocket in his belt. "Turn them off, and put them into this bag."

He handed the bag to Ross Nelson, who sat on one end of the group. "Why?" he asked, as he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket.

"No communication goes in or out except through us." Soldier Number Two said. "Just do it, kids. In the bag."

Ross turned his cell phone off, giving a faint beep, and then stuck it into the bag. He passed the bag back over his shoulder to Dave Pelsen, who took it and let his iPhone follow Ross's old Nokia.

Slowly, the bag made its way through the group of students. A few of them looked like they wanted to make trouble, but none did. When the bag was full, Soldier Number Two picked it up and put it in the corner.

Jess, who had put his phone into the bag as well, felt very alone when the bag was closed. He had no doubt his students felt even worse than he did. They were used to their friends and family being only a single touch of a button away, texting or writing on social media. Now, they were alone – perhaps for the first time in a long time.

From somewhere else in the building, a shot rang out. Just a single one.

"One down" squawked the radio. "Repeat, one suspect down. Unknown if it's a genuine one, but reacted hostile."

Number Two looked at Number One. "Should we help them?"

"They've got it covered. We do what we were ordered to and hold this group. If they want us to do something else, they'll tell us."

Patty began trembling against Jess's arm. He looked at her. "Hey...it's okay."

"It's not okay...they just shot someone! You heard them! They didn't even know if it was who they're looking for, but they shot anyway!"

She stared at him, her eyes frightened behind her glasses. "Do you think they will hurt us, Mr. Jamison?"

“No, Patty, I don’t think they will. They have no cause to...”

“Hey you!” Number Two shouted, “Stop that!”

Jess saw Number Two pointing to Murphy. He had pointed the rifle at the boy, and now took a step towards him.

Murphy stopped whatever he had been doing in his backpack and looked up. “I’m not doing anything, trooper. Relax.”

“Show me what you have in your backpack!” Number Two said. Number One, still sitting at the table at the head of the class got to his feet and raised his own rifle.

Murphy reached into the backpack slowly and pulled out something small and grey. To Jess it looked like a hand scanner from Star Trek, until he realized what it was. One of the old Tetris games they used to sell in the discount stores for a dollar.

“I was just playing this to kill the time.”

Number Two didn’t come any closer, but Number One did. He reached out a hand and Murphy put the game in his hand. He smiled at the soldier in the way that always made Jess think of a medieval court jester.

Number One took the little grey game and looked at it. “You were playing this, huh?”

Murphy nodded. His carrot colored hair bobbed up and down when his head moved.

Number One shifted his rifle a little, and pushed the game’s buttons. Nothing seemed to happen. Suddenly, Number One raised the gun again and fired.

Murphy was thrown back against the wall, his arms and legs flying to all sides. He landed in an odd angle, and slid down to the floor, seemed to struggle for a second and then flopped to his back, lying still. A red spot spread over his chest.

The class became pandemonium. The students screamed, trying to get away from the soldiers and Murphy at the same time. Jess jumped to his feet, not really knowing what he was going to do. Jump two armed soldiers? He wouldn’t have a chance in hell, despite being in good shape.

Number Two fired another shot into the ceiling. “*Sit DOWN!!!*” he shouted, his voice sounding like nails on a chalk board. The students froze, looking back and forth between the soldiers, Jess and Murphy who now lay completely still.

“*What the HELL!*” Jess shouted back at him, standing as if he would put himself between the soldiers and his students. “What in blue blazes is going on? You just shot a boy!”

“We shot an enemy, sir. “ Number One turned to him and now pushed the rifle directly into his face. “Are you going to make me shoot one more?”

“Why?” Jess could feel tears in his eyes. “Why did you shoot him? What did he do? Play a fucking computer game?”