

The Ranch

dan mcenroe, ©2009

The armored cars and humvees filled with masked men and firearms have fallen back a good hundred meters or so, and I believe I can hear a helicopter in the distance. Time has grown short, so I will be brief. But there is much that you need to know if you are to understand what has happened.

My name is Paul Stephen Bellstone, I am a captain and physician in the United States Army who until recently had been stationed at a military hospital in the Washington, DC area treating wounded soldiers who had returned to the United States from Iraq. I first met Corporal Ryan Spencer when I interrupted what was no doubt an awkward moment between him and his fiancée; she had just realized she was sitting on the bed in the spot where the lower half of his right leg would have been had it not been left in the streets of Baghdad. The moment could not have been made any easier by the intrusion of three men in faceless biohazard suits.

I cleared my throat. “Excuse us. Ms. Cullen? We need to speak with your fiancée alone. Please accompany one of these officers. I’m afraid this is an urgent matter.”

Corporal Spencer exhaled slowly and smiled joylessly. “I’ve got it, haven’t I? I’ve got that damn bug. Now you people are sending me to that goddamn ranch, aren’t you?”

“What’s going on? What’s happening?” Ms. Cullen asked as she looked first to her fiancée and then to us for some explanation.

“Please, Ms. Cullen. Please go with one of these officers. We will take care of everything,” I said, in that tone we doctors use when we attempt to keep a patient who has every reason to panic from doing so.

“Go on, honey, it’ll be alright,” Spencer said to her – apparently Marine corporals are taught to use the same tone of voice. “It’s OK.”

One of the men took her hand and began to lead her out. She looked back towards her fiancée one last time. “Honey...?”

Spencer forced a grin. “I’ll be in touch as soon as I can. Don’t worry about a thing.”

As soon as she was out of the room, Spencer locked his eyes with mine and clamped his hand over my wrist, hissing, “You clean her up, goddammit, you make sure she doesn’t have this fucking thing.”

“We will do everything we can.”

“You’d fucking better.”

I realize that those of you outside the field of military medicine may be unfamiliar with the aggressive strain of multiple drug-resistant bacteria we have nicknamed the warbug, so I will offer a brief overview of its evolution as best as we understand it.

The first cases of multiple drug-resistant bacteria were noted shortly after the United States’ invasion of Iraq in 2003. *Acinetobacter*, a fairly common pathogen found in traumatic wounds, seen not only in combat areas but also after natural disasters such as earthquakes, was blamed for a rash of infections aboard the US Navy hospital ship *Comfort*. The strain was hardy but not invincible and the outbreak was soon brought under control.

The *Comfort* outbreak was only the beginning. Soon outbreaks began occurring all along the evacuation chain, from field hospitals in Iraq, to military hospitals in Europe, and finally reaching stateside facilities such as Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland. These outbreaks became increasingly harder to control as the bacteria adapted to the drugs we had that could fight it. By 2005, our arsenal of weapons against the bacteria had become so depleted that all we had left were drugs so toxic that one pauses before prescribing them to people recovering from severe injuries.

Concern outside of the relatively small military healthcare community was minimal; when carried into the outside world, *acinetobacter* would prey only on the sickest of the sick, and the elderly or diseased dying from an infection makes no more headlines than a wounded soldier succumbing to his injuries. All of us were greatly concerned, however, and in late 2006 the British began sequestering all wounded soldiers returning from Iraq in isolated military hospital wards. And then, in late 2009, all hell broke loose. Not only had the bug mutated to such an extent that none of our arsenal of drugs had any effect on it, but it now infected the healthy as well as the sick.

One returning soldier who had been colonized by the bug succumbed on his honeymoon; his bride joined him two days later, neither ever leaving the Caribbean

hospital where doctors quickly saw to it that the bodies were cremated and their belongings incinerated. (The diplomatic row caused by the bodies being cremated before the families could bury them here in the States continues.) A returning Marine infected his hometown's mayor during a welcome home ceremony; the Marine in question lingered a few weeks longer than the mayor. A nurse from Bethesda Naval Hospital appears to have been patient zero for an outbreak that wiped out every child who attended her nine-year-old daughter's birthday party. The list goes on. These are the cases that stick out in my memory at this time.

I should at this point describe what I mean when I say the patient "succumbed" to the bacteria. It kills in a variety of ways: catastrophic fevers, blood sepsis, spinal infections, pneumonia, and more. No one is entirely certain how the bacteria came to be such a threat. The consensus among us today is that the policy of immediately prescribing a broad spectrum of antibiotics to wounded soldiers in order to prevent any possible infection gave *acinetobacter* precisely the information it needed to rapidly evolve from a minor concern of military healthcare workers into a genuine threat to the health and well-being of the average citizen of the United States of America.

One thing was certain: the outbreak had to be in some way contained. With little or no existing political will to immediately cease hostilities overseas, the only option for stateside physicians was to push for the most effective possible solution that respected the dignity of the returning soldiers.

But what we got was the Ranch.

The Ranch is located some fifty miles outside of Washington, DC. In a former life it was a horse farm; now its grand house is a ward and its lush fields a shantytown for the more robust, asymptomatic soldiers who can withstand being billeted in a temporary shelter. The Ranch is quite possibly the only medical facility in the United States outside of the federal prison system ringed by electrified razor wire and monitored from a watchtower. Ostensibly, the wounded and infected are sent to the Ranch for treatment and "special rehabilitation;" at least that's what the soldiers are to tell their families. But everyone in there knows what it really is: a stealth quarantine, a

quiet exile within the borders of the United States. You don't come back from the Ranch – not until we find a way to kill the damn bug, anyway.

The Ranch is full, bursting at the seams, and I hear rumors of similar facilities being established elsewhere in the United States and at other locations along the evacuation chain. With the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan draining both needed funds and manpower, the Ranch was initially staffed by other wounded and/or infected soldiers, but pneumonia-stricken amputees proved ineffective orderlies and PTSD sufferers made poor night watchmen. Medical and military police personnel were finally lured into service at the ranch by the offer of hazardous duty pay; in many cases, this hazardous duty pay is higher than the combat pay of the soldiers they are assigned to treat or guard. The remaining manpower shortage has been alleviated by the hiring of highly paid “private contractors” – that polite euphemism for mercenary that has become common parlance.

I don't take hazardous duty pay for my work at the Ranch. Maybe the nurses who join me on my thrice-weekly excursions there do. I've never asked. It seems impolite. I wouldn't blame them if they did. None of them has ever worked there with me long enough for me to get to know them well enough to feel comfortable asking.

Why the turnover? The Ranch burns you out.

Before leaving for the Ranch you scrub your skin raw in a harsh, 30-minute decontamination shower and put on a hermetically sealed biohazard suit. The shower is to minimize the risk of tracking a dangerous infection into the Ranch. The suit serves two purposes: it traps whatever you may already have on your body in with you so it can't prey on the already sick and it keeps the warbug out of you. The suit has enough air for six hours. If we need to we can swap out a fresh tank from the supply stored at the Ranch but for obvious reasons we try to avoid that. Our driver, however, has no such luxury. Since wearing a biohazard suit would rob him of the peripheral vision needed to safely operate a vehicle, he sits in a sealed cabin with its own six-hour air supply. We burn at least one hour of the driver's air on the way to the ranch, and another 20 – 30 minutes as the van is decontaminated before it can enter the compound, leaving us with three to three and a half hours to visit and treat the nearly 800 patients sequestered at the Ranch. Obviously, this is impossible, so a strict triage

system is in place. I'm not sure I've yet seen the same patient twice. After the three hours or so are up it's time to go, as the van must again be decontaminated before it can leave the compound and drive back to the hospital. While we drive back we pray the van doesn't get trapped in one of Washington, DC's infamous traffic jams and the driver suffocates while we wait to get on the Beltway. Once we're back at the hospital the van is decontaminated again – at this point the air in the cabin is terrifyingly thin, and even though the driver does this three times a week and hasn't died yet panic starts to grow in the back of his mind. Once the van is decontaminated our biohazard suits are removed, we are rushed into another 30-minute decontamination shower and still-raw skin is scoured once again.

As I said, the helmet and mask of the biohazard suit effectively cut off your peripheral vision, and both are secured at the neck so you can't turn your head; you have to turn your whole upper body to see what's on either side of you. The nurses and staff who accompany me to the Ranch often come to see the limited vision afforded by the mask as a blessing. It forces you to focus your attention on whatever task is immediately before you and spares you the sight of the burned, broken men who surround you, men struggling to reacquaint themselves with shattered bodies while battling devastating fevers, debilitating diarrhea and bloody coughs.

Given the small number of medical professionals willing to work at the Ranch and the relatively covert nature of what goes on there, treatment has become little more than hospice care. We do what we can to alleviate the symptoms the warbug brings on, but beyond that there isn't much we can do and we're certainly no closer to eradicating the bug than we were when the Ranch was opened.

That was the situation until three weeks ago. Looking back, I can't believe how quickly everything since has happened, although from the beginning I knew what was to come was inevitable.

* * *

Campbell James was a big man, but a lean one, and that physique made him an almost perfect cornerback and nearly ideal Special Forces soldier. Thanks to a fire in his

armored vehicle caused by a roadside bomb, that physique was now topped by a gruesome parody of a head with indistinct features that looked as though they had been molded by a child. He was still fast, though, and knew how to maximize the momentum his charging body created. He hit the MP guarding our transport van from the left side, where his suit's mask created a blind spot that a man twice James's size could have exploited. The MP went down hard, and as he struggled to his feet he groped for his sidearm. The thick gloves of his suit made it difficult for him to draw the weapon, and even when he got it out he found it impossible to turn off the safety. James, inexplicably, did nothing but watch the MP during the seeming eternity it took him to prepare his weapon. When it seemed as if the MP was about to figure it out, James delivered a kick to his abdomen that left the inside of the guard's mask coated with mucous and spit. James then knelt down next to the gasping man as he struggled to get to his feet again. He plucked away the guard's weapon gently, almost gingerly, before leveling it at its owner's head.

"Is this what you wanted? Is this what you were gonna do to me?" he snarled through his lumpy, diagonal slash of a mouth. "I don't think so. I don't think that's going to happen today."

"Please ... don't ..." the guard wheezed.

James kept the weapon pointed at the kneeling MP as he addressed me and the MP's who had surrounded him. "You know what is going to happen today?" he said. He pointed to our driver, who had slid over to the van's passenger seat – as much of a retreat as his sealed cabin would allow. "This guy's taking me home. This guy's taking me off of this goddamned ranch!"

"You know we can't allow that. You're infected," I said. I am not a hostage negotiator. But I reasoned – guessed – that as the only unarmed man present I might be able to defuse the situation somewhat.

"Infected? Bullshit. I feel fine," he said.

"Today you feel fine. Tomorrow you might develop a slight fever. By the day after that you will see blood in your urine and blinding pain will grip your abdomen. It will be the last thing you remember before your condition rapidly and irrevocably deteriorates."

“I got a kid. A daughter. I’m gonna see my kid. Why did you goddamn people even bring me here if I was never gonna see her again? You should have left me in the fucking fire,” he said. He was becoming more agitated. This was going badly.

“You could very well be the death of your child if you see her. Please, put the gun down,” I said.

Perhaps it was the wrong choice of words, perhaps logic wasn’t the way to reach him. He growled and hauled the guard to his feet. He clamped down on the back of the guard’s neck with one hand as he began to smash at the driver’s side window with the pistol grip. “You are taking me home!” he shouted at the driver. “You are taking me home!”

The other guards began to move in but James put the pistol back against his prisoner’s temple. “Don’t do it. Don’t even fucking try it! I am going home!” he shouted again.

“Not like this, Campbell,” said a voice from behind us. We turned to see Spencer hobbling towards us on a pair of grimy crutches. He hobbled right through the guards’ perimeter as if it wasn’t even there. “Not like this.”

“I can’t do it anymore! I’ve got to get out!”

“Come on, Campbell, you heard the doc. You see your girl before they know what to do about the bug and she’s most likely good as dead. And besides the burns you’re still in pretty good shape, so you’ll probably bury her.” He paused. “Come on buddy, use your head. Use your head.”

James thought about it for a long moment, released his grip on his hostage, held out the gun to Spencer and began to sob, tears welling and pooling in the irregular contours of his face. Spencer hobbled over, tucked a crutch into his armpit and took the gun. He held it out, grip first, towards the MP’s. “Someone grab this?” he asked. An MP took it and Spencer put his hand on James’s shoulder. The big, scarred man embraced the amputee, and they stood there in the mud as James began to cry in earnest. Two MP’s finally, gently led James away.

“Thank you,” I said to Spencer.

“Don’t mention it, sir. I’ve gotten to know him pretty well. He’s been through a lot. We all have. But I didn’t want to see him make it worse by doing something stupid,” he said.

I found it impossible to relax as we drove back to the hospital. The way James just stood there as the MP fumbled with his weapon – the way a trained soldier gave an opponent he could easily defeat time to prepare a lethal counterattack – it wasn’t right. Something wasn’t right about the whole incident.

After my decontamination protocol I went to my office to gather a few things before heading home. I entered to find a lieutenant named Roger Bowens seated at my desk, using my phone. I cleared my throat to get his attention.

“Yeah, just a sec,” he said.

“Lieutenant, this captain would like to get into his desk.”

“Sorry, I’ll be off in a second.”

“You don’t seem to realize that I outrank you.”

He cut short his call and hung up. “I didn’t think you doctors went in for that kind of formality,” he told me.

“Doctors who reek of chemical disinfectant and whose skin is so raw they can count the threads in their shirt do go in for that kind of formality. Now, please, my desk.”

He got up – finally - and stood aside. “I assume you’re here to debrief me on what happened at the Ranch today?” I asked.

“Well, we got the gist of it from Sgt. Corrolla over there, but if you have anything you’d like to add we’d like to hear it.”

“There will be more incidents like this one. I believe that we were being probed today.”

“Oh, you guys do intel analysis at the hospital now?” he asked.

“Lieutenant, I have been in the army for more than twenty years. A man learns things that are outside of his immediate field of expertise during that time.”

“Twenty years, huh? Join up for citizenship? I can’t place your accent.”

“I grew up in Africa. This made me valuable to the Army during the first conflict in Iraq because I had experience with treating gun shot wounds from an AK-47. I am

valuable during this conflict in Iraq because I have been in a plague zone. That is all you need to know about my motivations.” The boast was more true than he realized – in Africa, without access to appropriate treatment or equipment, we could do little more in our “plague zones” than make our patients as comfortable as we could until they died. Very similar to what we did at the Ranch.

If my statement made the lieutenant uneasy in any way, he recovered from it quickly. “Right, well, about the Ranch,” he said as he handed me a file that I began to read. “That situation’s becoming a bit of a risk. Everyone involved’s been playing along until now but we think we’re running the risk of one of the patients telling someone something he shouldn’t. We’re gonna cut the wi-fi access.”

I looked up from the file he had handed me. “You’re going to isolate them?” I asked. Obviously, no physical mail could be allowed in or out of the Ranch, but laptops with wi-fi access were provided in order to give the patients some contact with the outside world.

“No, we wouldn’t do that to the poor bastards,” he replied. “We’re going to install a landline so all the e-mail goes through one of our servers. That way we’ll be able to screen the e-mail and not have to worry about some clown hacking the wi-fi signal. We’ll be sending the gear out with you next week.”

I held up the file I had been reading. “This protocol. What triggers it?” I asked.

“Let’s put it like this. We don’t think there’s going to be an uprising like the one you’re afraid of. But if there is, we’re ready to deal with it.”

I went to the hospital early the next morning for a videoconference with Sergeant Ann Marie Carolla, head of security at the Ranch. I liked and trusted her – I suppose having to deal with an insane situation on a daily basis had bonded us. I rarely saw her outside of her biohazard gear, though, and had difficulty picturing her without it. Had she not occasionally seen me unprotected on a small, pixilated video player window I doubt she could picture me outside of my gear, too.

“Sergeant, I need to talk with you about Corporal Spencer.”

“The guy who broke up that hostage situation yesterday? He’s a good man. He’s been a tremendous help to us since he arrived.”

“In what ways?”

“Look, Captain, for obvious reasons a lot of the patients here don’t like or trust us. Hell, I don’t like myself much after a shift here. But we need to do what we do. Spencer seems to get that. He’s become our face to the patients – a face that doesn’t have a mask on it. He’s been helping us organize triage for your visits, coordinate access with the laptops, manage petty disputes on the wards, he’s just become invaluable.”

“Has his reliability and willingness to help resulted in him being granted any special access or privileges?”

“Nothing important.”

“Keep it that way. Is there any chance I could speak with him?”

“I can track him down.”

“Please do and call me back.”

A half hour later I was speaking with Corporal Spencer over the video link.

“Corporal, I’d like to thank you again for your help yesterday,” I said.

“And I’d like to thank you for going easy on James. Everyone in here is practically in prison as it is. There was no real reason to punish him,” he replied.

“Thank Sgt. Carrolla for that. It was mostly her decision,” I said. “She says you’ve become quite an asset to her operation there.”

“Just doing what I can.”

“Why are you bothering?” I asked. My hope was to provoke him, hoping he would say something in anger that might give me a clue as to his intentions.

“I’m sorry, did you just ask me why I’m bothering?”

“You have a bacteria we can’t treat. We have imprisoned you in a hellhole we can’t let you leave. I wouldn’t be nearly so helpful.”

“And yet you’re here three times a week. How’s that working for you Doc?” He was angry, but not angry enough to slip.

“I sleep in my bed. In my home.” I let that point hang for a moment, and added, “And I know there’s no one else in my home in my absence.”

That nearly provoked the reaction I had been looking for, but Spencer regained his composure. “You familiar with Viktor Frankl, doc?”

“Of course. Psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz and later wrote about his experiences.”

“Right. Frankl was able to endure his suffering, even find meaning of it, by being of service to others,” he said.

“Frankl also sustained himself with the thought that he would one day see his wife again. Do you think you will see your fiancée again?”

“I’m holding out hope,” he answered.

“He never did see her again. She was buried only yards away from him while he was at Auschwitz and he never had any idea.”

He would not rattle. He shrugged. “You just let me know if you need anything from me when you get out here tomorrow.”

I wanted to believe him, to believe that he had decided the best way to deal with the madness of the Ranch was to dedicate himself to service, as he had no doubt done when he volunteered to serve in the Marines. But I couldn’t let myself believe him; I had no idea why he would do that, primarily because I only had the vaguest idea of why I did what I did at the Ranch. Sgt. Carolla had said he had become our face to the patients. What bothered me was that he was becoming their face to us.

* * *

A week later, when they finally moved on us, it was fast, efficient, and brilliant in its simplicity. Exemplary military planning. Spencer had arranged the triage and volunteer details so that a relatively fit, healthy patient he trusted was in position to subdue and disarm virtually every MP and contractor in the outdoor wards and take my staff and me prisoner. As they had learned during the incident with Campbell James, the biohazard suits interfered with the guards’ ability to defend themselves – so much so that the action was almost bloodless. Almost.

A short firefight erupted when the patients attempted to take the main house, and one of them died for his trouble. There was a brief standoff until Sgt. Carolla ordered her people to stand down – Campbell James had threatened to begin shooting hostages and Ann Marie was unwilling to see any of her people killed or kill any more wounded veterans. I watched this as a patient bound me with zip cuffs, wishing all the while that I had had a chance to speak with her about the contingency plan our

superiors had developed for an occurrence like this one. She wouldn't have surrendered.

But that wasn't the most explosive of unforeseen circumstances that occurred during the uprising. Our transport van's driver, realizing that this crisis would likely last longer than his air supply – and knowing that he had no suit to slip into – panicked, and attempted to flee the compound at high speed. He didn't get far. No fewer than a half-dozen men concentrated their fire on the van's sealed cabin and the driver was dead before the out-of-control van had finished overturning.

Campbell James was outraged. "This is great," he shouted. "Just fucking great!"

Spencer hobbled towards him flanked by a bodyguard. "We knew this might happen. We planned for this. We can work around this."

James wasn't convinced. "We needed that van! That was our lifeboat if it went bad!"

"We won't need a lifeboat. We're holding two aces," he said as he gestured towards us. "We've got them, and we've got time." He limped over to Sgt. Carolla, also bound with zip cuffs and kneeling in the mud. He knocked on her mask. "Air's getting a bit stale in there isn't it? Thought so. Did you sound the alarm before you came out of the house? Does the Pentagon know this is happening?"

"Never got the chance."

Spencer gestured towards her with one of his crutches and his bodyguard quickly crouched down in front of Sgt. Carolla and pressed his gun against her mask. Spencer also leaned over as far as his crutches would allow. "I'm going to ask you again. And you know there's no point in lying to me because we'll all find out soon enough. You sound the alarm before you came out of the house?"

"Yes."

"Good soldier. You see Campbell? Just like we planned." He turned his attention back to us. "You guys might not want to breathe too much. Clock's ticking."

Within two hours, military vehicles had formed a silent perimeter around the Ranch. They simply rolled up, parked, trained their weapons on the compound and then did nothing. "What the hell are they doing?" Campbell James growled.

“I don’t know,” Spencer replied. “Trying to wait us out, maybe. That’s insane. They know we have hostages.”

Spencer took a detail of men and hobbled over to the razor wire. “We’d like to state our demands. If these demands are met we will release our hostages unharmed,” he called out. The soldiers at the perimeter were silent, almost impassive, a clay army for a dead emperor. Spencer continued, “Our demands are reasonable demands. We want only to inform the outside world of what is happening here. America deserves to know what is happening to us.”

I don’t know what went through Spencer’s mind at this point; as I had already seen, he was nearly unflappable. He stood there for another moment before he realized they weren’t going to answer him one way or the other. A similar attempt several hours later had a similar result, as did another attempt the following morning.

We hostages had our own problems. Our captors quickly tired of keeping track of whose oxygen tank was about to expire and swapping it out, so they slapped together an improvised, ramshackle compressor system that distributed air to us through a snaking pile of surgical tubing. It didn’t inspire much confidence in us, but it was no more nerve-wracking than having someone with an untreatable bacterial infection open the seals of your suit to install a fresh oxygen tank. As if that weren’t enough, we hadn’t been able to eat or drink anything for nearly two days, and our bodies’ waste was pooling in our suits, fouling the air inside and spreading a painful itchy rash across our legs and groins. We were still zipcuffed and seated cross-legged on the ground, a position that made us easy to guard but exacerbated the problem of stewing in our own waste. In short, we were feeling less than charitable when we saw Spencer and his bodyguards approach.

“Captain Bellstone, Sgt. Carolla, I need your help.”

“Okay, you know how this is going to go, don’t you?” Ann Marie said. “What possible incentive are you going to offer us to get us to help you? Better food? A hot shower? Let’s face it, all you’ve got is duress and I’d appreciate it if we just skipped over the overtures of friendship and got right to it.”

“Don’t rush me,” Spencer shot back, and then he turned to me. “You’re the highest ranking officer here who spends any time outside this compound. You must have

access to information that Sgt. Carolla and her people don't. Now, why aren't they saying anything?" he asked me as he gestured with one of his crutches towards the perimeter fence.

"Look out there," I began. "What do you see? Humvees, armored cars, fighting vehicles. You know what you don't see? TV news trucks. Traffic helicopters pressed into duty to cover a breaking story. Nothing like that. At the Branch Davidian compound in Waco media vehicles outnumbered law enforcement vehicles. This tragic affair is getting less media attention than a Civil War reenactment. And that's how it's going to stay. They cut the wi-fi, didn't they?"

"Almost immediately after we attacked."

"They will not talk to you. Any attempt at communication – any exchange of information – increases the likelihood of that information being leaked. They will not talk to you. That way, you do not exist. It is our misfortune to be here, now, as we have ceased to exist right along with you."

For the second time in two days Spencer's unflappable nature almost failed him as he processed what I had told him. "Well, than what the hell will they do?" he demanded.

"They don't yet know." I was lying; I wasn't ready to do otherwise.

Spencer thought it over for a moment, and said, "I'm not sure I believe you, Captain. Which means it's time for that duress Sgt. Carolla and I were just talking about."

The duress began innocently enough. Two relatively able-bodied men spread out a blanket on the ground in front of us. Campbell James joined them shortly thereafter pushing a cart filled with food. There were scattered curses among us as we realized what was coming next. "And now," James began, "a picnic!"

James and the two other men spread bottles of water, various leftovers and unopened hospital meals between them and began to eat. Vigorously. "It's funny," James said. "Yesterday, when I had to eat this stuff, I couldn't stand it. Today, I love it." He and the other two men ate for another minute, and then James held up a pre-packaged hospital sandwich. "Look at this, for example. I don't even have the slightest idea what

the fuck kind of meat this is supposed to be. But I can't wait to tear into it. You know why? Because you assholes can't have any." With that, he did indeed tear into it.

"Fuck you, freak," snarled one of the private contractors.

"Whatever," James replied. "I'm getting a bit thirsty." He opened a bottle of water, and then made an exaggerated pantomime of spilling it into the mud. "Oopsie! My bad. Oh well, it's just water. No big deal, unless you're one of the assholes who can't have any."

"Jesus Christ, if I weren't in this suit," said the contractor.

"Yeah, well, you are, pal. You're sitting there in a hefty bag drowning in your own shit and dreaming of wiping your ass. That's where you are and that's where you're going to stay."

"Son of a bitch," the contractor said as he got to his feet and charged James and his fellow picnickers despite his hands still being cuffed behind his back. He had no chance of reaching them – his makeshift umbilical cord didn't have nearly enough slack to allow that. But that didn't stop one of the James' men from drawing his pistol and firing a round straight into the contractor's chest.

"What the hell did you just do?" shouted James.

"I...I panicked," stammered the shooter. It was probably true – he wouldn't be the only one here whose nerves had been shattered by a tour of duty in Iraq.

I jumped to my feet and strained at my own makeshift umbilical. "Untie me! Cut me loose!" I shouted.

"Not gonna happen, doc," James replied as he knelt over the contractor.

"Damn it, I can help him! But only if you cut me free!"

James looked at me and seemed genuinely unsure of how to proceed.

"Do you seriously think one unarmed starving doctor is going to overpower you and your men? Untie me!"

James finally complied, and sawed off my thick plastic restraints with a box cutter he had scavenged from one of the Ranch's storerooms. It seemed to take forever for the short blade to cut through the restraints. As soon as my hands were free I yanked the air hose out of my suit so I could reach the downed man. My air hose hissed viciously as it dropped into the mud, where it continued to writhe and sputter.

I had seen men shot in the chest before, and I was used to seeing the deceptively small puncture in the victim's garment quickly drown in the spreading red bloom that surrounded it. But this time it wasn't like that – the bullet had seemed to vanish into the bulk of the contractor's suit and I couldn't even accurately tell where it had entered his body. If the bullet had entered his body slightly higher than where the small puncture in his suit indicated then it probably went through the shoulder, possibly shattering his left scapula and rupturing his sub-clavian artery. Lower than that and it would have entered his lung – should I disconnect his air hose to prevent the compressor's air pressure from collapsing his damaged lung? If the bullet had entered somewhat to the left of where it seemed to then there was no hope for him: it would have torn through his heart. I heard no cries of pain or desperate sucking for air – both bad signs. I was going to have to open up the suit, and I didn't want to do that out here in the mud. “We need to get him into one of the wards, now! Help me carry him!” I ordered. I took him by his ankles while James lifted him by his shoulders. He was heavy, and did nothing to help us. Carrying him was hard work and my exertions burned up what little air I had left in my suit.

We laid the contractor out on a bed in one of the treatment rooms. By this point I was light-headed, possibly beginning to hyperventilate. I tried to undo the seals on the contractor's suit but I could barely use my fingers – were my gloves interfering? Was I blacking out? I pointed to James. “Get his suit off!” James hesitated, uncharacteristic for a soldier like him; was his guilt over an interrogation gone bad paralyzing him? “Do it now!” I ordered, and James finally began to remove the contractor's suit.

I staggered over to a corner, my vision beginning to blur. I desperately fumbled with the seals to my own mask, yanked it off, threw it to the floor, and breathed.

My own crisis averted, I rushed back to the bed and helped James finish with the contractor's suit. My worst fears were confirmed: the bullet had gone directly through the man's heart. I cursed loudly and slammed my fist down on the side of the bed.

I was done with it. Done with it all. Done with intellectual rationalizations and logical reasons to do one thing or the other and half-measures made so because the need to be reasonable prevented us from fully committing.

Spencer entered with one of his bodyguards. “What the hell is going on –“ he froze as he saw me standing over the contractor’s body, with a portion of his bloody chest visible through his sterile, crumpled exterior of his half-removed suit.

“Jesus Christ, Captain ... Doc. Your mask ...”

I nodded. “Yes. Looks like I’m one of you, now.”

Spencer half-smiled. “Don’t get carried away now, Doc.”

“Listen to me. There is still a chance you can salvage this. But you have to trust me and you have to do what I say.”

“I don’t think you’re in any position to make demands, here.”

“Position? Here is my position: I’m hungry, I’m tired, I’m standing in my own urine and this room smells of a dead man’s blood. Now, you will listen to what I have to say.”

Spencer considered for a moment, and said, simply, “Okay.”

“They have tried to make you invisible and unheard, but there is still a way to get your message out. The truck that you almost destroyed when you took over the compound has equipment in it to establish a hard line Internet connection. They were going to install that in lieu of the wireless, which they felt they could not sufficiently control. That is how you can get your message out. Is there a signal corps officer here?”

“Probably,” Spencer said.

“Find one. When they see you approach the truck they may attempt to intervene. Give them a distraction.”

“I’m not ready to start shooting at them,” Spencer told me.

“There are other distractions. I have a nurse on my staff who has a wedding coming up in a few weeks. She’s been on a diet so as to look good in her bridesmaid’s dress. Not eating or drinking for the past few days has affected her more than most of us. One should not die because of a desire to look fetching in taffeta.”

“They won’t just welcome with open arms anyone who comes out of this compound.”

“The power hose they use to decontaminate the van before it leaves: we’ll spray her down with that before she makes a run for their perimeter. This will ensure we have their attention.”

Spencer thought for a brief moment, and nodded. "Okay, let's do it."

"There is one other thing. If you desire my continued cooperation, I must have a shower and a hot meal."

Spencer nodded again. "I can live with that."

As I walked back to the patch of mud where they were holding my staff and the MP's, crowds parted before me like bait fish scattering before a shark. I guess since I had voluntarily sunk into this hell, I was contagious even to them. Or maybe they thought I was just plain crazy. Even Ann Marie's eyes widened in shock when she saw me without my mask on. "What have you done?" she asked me.

"I'm getting you and your people out of here. Mine too."

Ann Marie looked towards the perimeter fence. "They must have heard that shot," she said. "They're not coming in, are they?"

"No. Nor will they. They won't risk any of the patients escaping during the chaos of a firefight. Listen, it's going to get bad."

"It's already bad," she hissed. "How much worse do you think it can get?"

"Worse than you know. I'm going to get you out."

"I don't suppose you're coming."

"Tell Nurse Pavel she's leaving. I'll be back with you shortly."

As I walked off to bathe and eat, my cell phone rang. I had nearly forgotten it was tucked into my shirt pocket under my suit, and honestly, as I had never expected to hear it again I at first didn't recognize the sound.

"Hello?"

"Hand this phone to anyone else and we'll jam the signal." It was Lieutenant Bowens.

"Naturally," I replied. I realized that my actions had probably been observed by a sniper or some other lookout.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm going to take a shower and then I'm going to have something to eat. I stink and I am very hungry."

Bowens' voice dropped low. "That thing we discussed in your office. It's going to happen."

“I’m amazed it hasn’t happened already.”

There was a pause. “I’ve done what I can,” Bowens said.

“Do it again. I have managed to arrange for the release of one hostage within the hour, and I believe I can have the rest out by morning.”

“There’s not much else I can do. It’s been determined that no one’s coming out of there. Do you understand? No one’s telling this story.”

“No, I do not understand!” I snapped. “Damn it, every single one of the people being held hostage here has managed to keep the truth about this place a secret and there is no reason to believe they will not continue to do so! Now, all I’m asking you for is time. I need nothing else.”

There was a second pause, this one longer. “I’m pretty sure I can hold them off until tomorrow morning.”

“That’ll do,” I said, and hung up on him.

* * *

Nurse Pavel was so weak by the time her of her release that Campbell James had to help her to her feet. She looked frankly terrified when she saw James coming for her but he was gentle and reassuring in a way I didn’t think anyone who had shared this ordeal would ever be capable of again. He led her to the gate, where Spencer was waiting with one of his bodyguards and a second man holding the decontamination power hose.

As the gate rolled back weapons were cocked and aimed. Spencer stepped forward – away from the group, away from any cover he might have had from sniper fire – and addressed the soldiers. “We’re reasonable people,” he called out. “We have no interest in causing any undue suffering. This woman needs to eat and drink right away. We’re returning her to you.” With that, James, Spencer and his bodyguard retreated to relative safety behind the gate, leaving Nurse Pavel standing alone, unsteady on her feet.

And then they hit her with the hose.

Even though I knew it was the only way to guarantee her safety, I could barely watch. Even on its lowest setting the decontamination power washer was powerful enough to knock over a healthy, fit adult male, to say nothing of a five foot eight, one hundred twenty-five pound woman weak from hunger and dehydration. First she dropped to her knees, then after a moment the pressure forced her on to her stomach. The man working the hose was actually able to use it to roll her over to a supine position so he could wash her front. From my vantage point inside the main house, I could see that several of the soldiers maintaining the perimeter looked ready to break off the line and intervene – which meant that this was the ideal time to send someone to the van.

The signal corps officer we had selected, Hector Alvarez, broke for the van crouched in a low run, as though he were under fire. He managed to get the back door open only to see that the van's contents had been thrown into to complete disarray when it overturned. I could see him curse as he threw himself into the jumbled pile of medical supplies, food, files, and electronic components looking for equipment suitable to what we had in mind.

It took too long. A woman Nurse Pavel's size simply doesn't need that much disinfecting, and there was no way they could subject her to the power wash for much longer. They turned off the hose and closed the gate. Two soldiers from the perimeter ran forward, took her by her shoulders and ankles and brought her behind their line. We no longer had the cover of that distraction. A few moments later, a sniper realized what was happening in the van and opened fire. The wounded and ill in the compound made an almost comical effort at scattering while the healthier and calmer among them raised side arms and scanned the treeline for the sniper, not that any of them had a weapon with sufficient range or accuracy to return fire. Alvarez was pinned down, with high velocity rounds ripping through the van's thin panels. I watched him wrap his body around the components we needed, watched him offer himself as protection for them even though no one else in the compound had the technical knowledge to take advantage of them.

Then I did something I will never have the time to analyze why. I ran from the shelter of the main house towards the van. The sniper fire stopped for a moment as the

shooters took a moment to acquire this new target that had presented itself. I stopped in my tracks and raised my hands in a gesture of surrender. "I am a hostage!" I shouted. "Don't shoot!" Another moment without gunfire passed, and I then I broke for the van again. I reached it and told Alvarez to run for it. "Go. Now. I'm right behind you." He looked confused. "I will be between you and the bullets. Go!"

He went. I followed close behind him, walking backwards with my hands before me like a comic-book super hero protecting Alvarez with some kind of magic shield.

We finally reached the main house where Spencer and James were waiting. "Jesus Christ, doc," Spencer said, shaking his head. "That was ... Jesus Christ."

Before I could reply, my phone rang again. Spencer's eyes went wide. "Your phone works?"

"To an extent. If I try to call out they will jam it. Excuse me. I should probably take this." It was, of course, Lieutenant Bowens. He sounded generally exasperated. I pitied him, almost – he had never bargained for dealing with a situation like this.

"What the – what the hell are you doing?"

"I am trying to save as many lives as I can. I had to concede some information."

"You realize this accelerates the timetable on our end."

"No, it doesn't. You can't let that happen. I need until the morning, as you promised. Look, no damage has been done here. They don't have anyone on this end with the technical know-how to take advantage of what was stolen from the van. I threw them a bone. Nothing else. Give me my time."

"I'll do what I can. Which isn't much at this point. I think you should know that." He hung up.

Spencer and James glared at me as I put away my phone. "What the hell game are you playing?" James demanded.

"No game. I'm trying to get my people out of here alive. Nothing else," I replied.

James turned to Spencer. "I don't like this one bit. We can't trust this guy."

"Stop it," I snapped at him. "Enough. Enough of your paranoia. You just heard me lie to them. I put my own life at risk for this plan not even five minutes ago. Enough!"

James looked to Spencer, who simply asked, "What happens in the morning?"

There was no point in delaying this conversation any longer. “It was decided after the first incident here, the one you staged to probe our security, that they would never storm this facility and attempt to retake it should there be a full scale uprising. Too risky. Some of the patients could escape in the chaos of the melee, and the soldiers sent in to retake the facility could be infected with the bacteria. They couldn’t let that happen. Of course, they can’t exactly let you hold the facility either – the longer this goes on, the greater the risk of your story getting out.

“Here is what happens in the morning. There will be a helicopter on a routine training flight. It will be carrying live weapons. As its flight path takes it over the facility, its fire control system will malfunction, and an incendiary explosive will be dropped on this facility. The helicopter’s pilot is unaware this is going to happen. He will live with it until the day he dies. It is hoped that the intense heat from the explosion will destroy the bacteria as well as pacify the situation.

“There will be questions, from your families, perhaps from some members of Congress, maybe from certain corners of the Internet. They will never be answered, and therefore soon forgotten.”

Spencer and James stared at me for a long moment. “Holy shit,” Spencer finally said.

“We’re going to round up some men. Punch a hole through their perimeter and make a run for it,” James said hurriedly.

“Get real,” Spencer snapped. “We’ve got a few pistols and three assault rifles. You think we’re punching through that perimeter with that? Half of us can’t even walk.” He gestured to his own amputated leg for emphasis.

“So what’s left?” James snapped.

“Your message. Get your message out,” I said, pointing to the equipment we took from the van.

“Can you do anything with that stuff?” Spencer asked Alvarez.

He nodded. “The wi-fi’s dead, obviously, and they’ve disabled the cable coming in to the place. But the wires are all still there. There’s a line tester here – it’s designed to send out a signal to ensure a cable’s integrity. I can hook that up to one of the servers

here in the main house and we can send out our own e-mail – well, at least until they figure out what we're up to."

"So, we have to figure we're going to get one, maybe two messages tops," Spencer said. "If that many. I'm guessing there won't be any way to test if it's working?"

Alvarez shook his head.

"How long do you need?" Spencer asked him.

"A few hours."

"Well, if it's all we got, let's do it."

"No it isn't all we got," James snarled. "We got hostages. Maybe we can't fight our way out but they won't shoot at us with hostages in front of us. I say we get the hell out of here."

"Haven't you been listening?" I snapped. "I just told you they're ready to drop a bomb on your hostages. You think they won't shoot? Do you?"

"Then how the hell are we getting out of here? What was the point of doing this if we aren't going home?" he demanded.

"We were never going home," Spencer said calmly.

James spun towards him. "What?"

"We were never going home. Don't tell me you didn't know that. Did you really think this was going to get us out of here? Did you really think that even if we pulled this off they weren't just going to warehouse us in some other hellhole? They can't let us go home. They'll tell us it's because we're sick, but it's because of what we know. What we know they can do. What we know they've already done.

"And tell me this: did you think the country you left would be capable of doing this to you when you came back? Did you think you would be the person you are today when you came back? For God's sake, we've taken unarmed civilians, medical personnel tasked with our care, as hostages. Would the man who left have done that? Because you have. So have I. Let's face it – once they shipped us out, there was no turning back.

We were never coming home."

"I just want to see my kid," James said, quietly. He –all of us – had finally been stripped down to what mattered to us, finally had all bravado and aggression scoured off.

“And I want to see my fiancée. But it’s not going to happen. But we can tell our families the truth about what’s happened to us. And we can tell them why we died. It’s all we’ve got left, and it will have to be enough.”

Spencer hobbled over to the big scarred man and put his arm around him. James nodded, and said, “Okay.”

“I’m going to need to get to one of the utility poles along the fence line,” the Alvarez said. “I’d appreciate it if they weren’t sniping at me while I was up there. I mean, I know we’re not getting out of here, but I do want this plan to work.”

“We’re going to give you a distraction. Doc, we’re going to release the rest of the hostages. We’ll hose them down at the main gate like we did for the nurse,” Spencer told me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“What about you? You going with them?” he asked.

“They’ve seen me with my suit off. They won’t take me. I’m going to stay here.”

Spencer nodded. “I understand. Campbell, you start getting a detail together to handle the release and to lay down suppressing fire if they start shooting at our guy on the pole. We also need to be ready if they charge the compound anyway. I’ll be along to help you in a minute. No one else needs to know about this conversation, is that clear?” he asked.

“Clear,” James said, and he left to carry out his orders.

“I’m going down to the server room to get started,” the technician said. He gathered up the equipment and left.

“We’re going to transmit the message to my fiancée,” Spencer told me. “I set up an account that I could send e-mails to that I knew the military censors wouldn’t know about,” he told me. “We’re probably going to have our hands full, so when the time comes I want you to send the message. I’m going to type something up I want you to attach. Feel free to do the same.”

“Thank you,” I said. “So you’re not going to tell the rest of them what you know?”

He shook his head. “You saw how I had to talk Campbell down. No way I can do that with everyone here. No way. I’ve got to keep it quiet. It’s funny – this morning, you

took off your mask and announced you were one of us. Well, now I'm one of you, you son of a bitch."

* * *

I had one last errand to run before I could start working on my message. I returned to the patch of mud where my people and the MPs were being held. I knelt down with Ann Marie. "You are going to be released shortly. It will be the same as it was with Nurse Pavel. But listen to me: as soon as you can, as soon as they've finished with the hose, run. Put as much distance between you and this compound as you can. If they let you through their perimeter, keep going. Remember: distance. Tell the rest of the hostages but no one else."

"Why?" she asked. "What's going to happen? What did you do?"

"Distance," I said, as I got up and began to walk away.

"Thank you, Paul," she called after me.

Then, I sat down at the laptop, and began to type.

I struggled through the night to find the words to describe what has happened here, as so much of it must seem fantastic to those unaware of this place, of the truth of this place. Ms. Cullen, your fiancé is a remarkable man. He loves you very much. You must always remember this. He cannot tell you this himself because he also hears the helicopter in the distance, and has grouped the remaining hostages by the gate, opened it, and turned the hose on them. From my position I can see hesitation from the men on the perimeter, as though they want to move forward but are awaiting an order to do so. The hostages are running as best as they can for the perimeter, now. This is good. The helicopter is now very close – I hear gunfire, and see the signal corps officer who has been working to make this communication possible on a utility pole near the fence. He is clutching the utility pole as bullets splinter the wood around him. He looks towards me and gives me a thumbs-up. Ryan sees this too, nods to me, and then turns his attention to the helicopter which is almost immediately overhead.

I am sending this message now, with no certainty it will ever be read.

Message received 04/06/10. Mark message as spam?