



THE HEARTBEAT WAR

Jake Phillips

CHINESE SOLDIERS TAKING VACCINE FORCIBLY FROM ARGENTINE-BRITISH LAB

"I've put this out on the internet everywhere that I can and I'm typing as fast as I can. I am a research specialist epidemiologist assistant on the Isla Sebaldes Banhoff-Argentine Station (also called the Jason Islands southern end isle) which is part of a multinational firm headquartered in Oxford, England, and we have developed a successful working vaccine for the novel virus. This was reported in clinical literature two days ago. About twenty minutes ago, Isla Sebaldes was overrun by soldiers and they are moving in on this complex. I strongly believe these are PLA soldiers, these are Chinese forces, and they are taking it. They are taking everything. I can hear them entering the wing further down. This is an SOS. I don't think they want to be standing in line if a billion people need this vaccine solution now and I don't think they are being too secretive about this either. I could see 8 ships on the ocean coming in this morning and I don't know how many troops that represents. Our radio is down and internet is about to go, I'm positive of that. Please get this out to CNN, BBC, or everywhere and anywhere "

Posted to Reddit, 30 minutes before this narrative below begins.

HEARTBEAT WAR

WHAT IF A WAR COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE?

ONE.

The virus causes you to go mute. You are able to speak but you do not wish to. You become withdrawn, dazed, in muscle pain, so much so that the headaches cause you to sleep 16 hours a day.

And then it kills you. As it has done with nearly a billion people.

The world is collapsing.

And then a motherfucking cure is discovered in an Oxford Banhoff Lab on an island near Argentina.

And the Chinese are not waiting to be invited to partake in it--they are moving now. Right now.

But the British, the Americans, and the Russians are not going to just stand by and let them take it.

And thus begins the most important war in history: a war that could save your life.

No one knows all of what is happening at this moment but me.

"Did I ever tell you why I was hired, originally, I mean?"

"No. Who cares?"

"You don't care why you're putting a 26 year old with no proper clearance in a Pentagon secure briefing room?"

"Listen, you little fuck. You have no idea the stress we're talking about here. I've got... do you not see that every street in America has sleeping bodies littering the streets from this disease? My brother brings an AK-47 to make meat deliveries to a Kroger's and he's just happy he has a job. What I *need* from you is *silence*, and a set of eyes for about two days, while I run interference with the Sec Def and the President on reconnecting mobile command groups properly. You're going to sit your ass down and keep me informed every time I check in. That's it."

"I got it."

"You *better*."

"I'm all alone here?"

"For now. Who gives a shit? Why are you talking?"

"I'm sorry. I'm..."

"Pick up the headset. Watch the screens. And, Eric, I don't want to be contacted unless it's beyond urgent. I will get to *you*."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm the Navy. I say, 'yes, sir.' You're a White House intern. You say... I don't know what the fuck you say. Just don't leave this room. Not even to piss. Hear me?"

"Yes."

"I mean that. You shit and you piss *in this room*. One *second* away from these screens where I could miss some information, and I'll kill you. You are here because you're what I got to work with. Everyone is sick, everyone is moving stations, I need a set of stable eyes, that's you, can that be you?"

"Yes."

"That has to be you, Eric, alright? Are you with me?"

"Yes."

"Are you with me?"

"Yes, I am absolutely with you."

"Ok. Good. Don't fuck me on this."

And he's gone, and I'm staring at a screen, and here's what I know. This is so fucking classified God and the President are the only other people with this much information. And he thinks I don't know this is a secondary listening position that the Sec Def and JCS don't even know about, but I'm not going to ask questions, which will only get me--

What the hell is going on.

Jesus Christ.

This is a bodycam. This is a fucking bodycam feed from one of the SEALs going in. I'm seeing this live.

Okay, who is this guy. Name on the bodycam feed is JEFFERSON. Let's figure this out on the Mac.

That's him. Herc Jefferson. OIC O-3 Hercule Jefferson. That is one big black dude. Glad he's on our side. Okay, Herc, let's see a little bit about what you've been up to.

Lieutenant Hercule Jefferson is one distinguished Navy SEAL. Decoration, decoration, decoration, I don't even know what the hell all these awards are. Guy is huge. Fucking huge. He's old, though. I mean, grown daughter who's a nurse--he paid her way through medical school *and* threw in some for her best friend who couldn't afford jack shit-- God, they have so much in here. Poor schmuck has no idea what the US military knows about him.

This poor bastard has to get into that lab and get that COVO22 antibody or everyone on earth is fucked, but you want a guy cool under pressure, I'd say it might be the guy who...kept eating in the El Torito when a COVO plague victim came in half out of it and started shooting at everyone in the restaurant. Herc took him out without even getting up.

It might be the guy whose team neutralized that uprising in Texas before it got started. Herc has half a dozen wounds and he walks out of there on his own feet. That's 17 heavily armed wannabe confederates he took out. Might be he didn't need to shoot the leader, but after-action with CIA oversight says the group was white supremacist, so maybe it was a necessary move. Or a perk of the job.

No. This guy's pretty straight up. No hothead. Follows orders to the letter. If he took the leader out, he had to.

Oh, I love this fucking guy. Off-duty time, he retrains horses that have been abused by people with the COVO who literally fell asleep at the wheel and stopped feeding their horses and letting them out... They were out of money... he tried to convince them to prepare for this, some of these local people, but they fell ill, and...let me just read this a second... says here he... took in 3 of the horses. How much does it cost you to feed 3 horses?

This is too good. His daughter, now a nurse, working her ass off no doubt, plaguefighter 24/7, she helps him pay for the feed.

One... wait a second... one little confidential bio note here. He... Oh, shit, he has to have something.

Everybody's got something.

Guy has two wives. Literally. They have no idea the other one exists.

Hey, Herc. Your employer knows about this. Hope your life insurance policy is...

Go. Fuck. Go, go. Herc. Yes. They got through the fence perimeter, they're looking at the lab buildings. How'm I going to describe this to Yarrett? Looks like, tropics, nighttime, Hawaii, Cuba, palm trees and--God, a lot of foliage... would he want me to describe this? No, he doesn't want that. Fucking facts, man. That's it.

The Americans have breached the fence at the Argentine lab.

Oh--Jesus. We're in a firefight. Who the hell are we shooting at?

Herc's saying something.

What is going on.

We have engaged the Chinese.

Mother of God.

This is it. This is the war starting. This is the Third World War. The Americans have engaged the Chinese on a tiny little island off Argentina--I mean, this is British property, this is a U.K. private business, what are they going to be--

And there's the fucking British.

They're firing back.

I thought this was all supposed to be secret.

You can't blow up shit like this and keep it secret.

Well, every motherfucker here knows this is going to save lives. It's going to save your country's lives. If you got to wait eight, ten months for this vaccine to get scaled up, and your country is at the end of the line, how's that going to work? It's not going to work.

"Yarrett?" I fumble with the phone. "Yes, sir, can I tell you over this line? Okay. I understand. It appears we are engaging. Our SEALs against what I assume are British Special Forces and a line of Chinese troops, a lot of them, they do not look like a commando operation, I'm seeing...this is a lot of forces in there..."

He hangs up.

What the hell does that mean that he hangs up?

Ok. But he already knew this, right? He had to know this much. I thought he was with the President in that meeting.

Regular CNN is even scarier. The entire Chinese Navy is lining up outside this little island, and we've got a carrier group in hot pursuit. This is getting so fucking crazy.

Yarrett calls back. I pick up. He's hard to even understand he's going so fast. It's not just the Chinese. It's the Russians. They're coming. It's four navies converging near that goddamn island.

And then I hear Herc on the cam. He's swearing. Whispering. He's trying to breathe.

Oh.
My.
Fucking.
God.

Herc is unstable. He's fallen sick. He says he's dizzy. He won't be able to talk in a minute. He won't be able to hear.

He hid this til now.

He kept this fucking hidden.

He's got it.

TWO.

A lot of gunfire, everything is blowing up. Shit. What the hell do I know about this.

Herc signals the B2 next to him. He's trying to explain what's going on... indicates his head. That he has the infection. His hearing must be going.

What is that like.

The whole night going up in flames and gunfire and you feel it fade, all going to silence.

A silent movie, but a horror movie.

He's running. The SEAL team is headed for the lab. Fanning out. A burning palm tree lights up the ferns ahead. The lab is some low-tech looking shit. Did I read that right, it was Argentine and British money? This was the longshot? This lab?

Who is he trying to get to?

Ok, I can't see jack shit right now. Blackness and guns and technical shit, it sounds like a Tom Clancy game except I feel like--I mean, these are real people.

Everything seems like a dream these last few weeks.

My sister has the COVO. This could save her life.

If the Chinese get out with this vaccine, what is that saying--that *we* don't get it for a year? Two?

Fuck that--Who is in that lab? What do we have on that? Looking through these files, it seems like we have a little on everything. The lab director is a thin, graying Argentine who the CIA says is highly distinguished, if maybe timid and hesitant in his writings and findings, perhaps hiding promising evidence even to his superiors. Speaks in an accent. Known to be charming when confronted with superiors, twice got the lab maintained after budget cuts and...

A wife and two kids back home in Argentina. Got them British citizenship. Interesting. Well, that's why you fight for your lab. Everyone wants this stuff. Can't fault the guy.

Victor Prieto. Intel says he has an ulcer, stomach always hurting. They know that much?

He carries the weight of the world, it says. That's some fricking irony, when was that written?

I'm losing picture.

Woah.

What is that.

Why can't you see anything in the damn dark, I need to see this.

There are helicopters taking off. And those are civilian helicopters, that says, the side is Union Jack, a logo on there... British choppers.

So our guys are running. The vaccine is on one of those helicopters.

Whose this doctor got with him?

Victor, who'd you just give that to, on the chopper?

Yarrett calls back. I tell him what I know, what I see happening, which is like an exhausting guerilla battle over a lab in the darkness, choppers heading up after a fire in the night. "What do we know about the Brits protecting this place?" I ask him.

"The ones stationed there? We got a folder on that. Check the D-SET. It's in folder three or four, can't remember. You see it?"

"Yeah," I tell him. "The British forces they put in there at the lab are S.B.S. There's a Lieutenant Patrick Norrington, Royal Marines prior, built like a little tank, strong, looks like a wrestler, background says he's a fierce bastard. Action in Iraq, Syria, and grew up in India with a diplomat dad. Chess player nut. Just like Herc. Oh, shit, they play together online. They knew each other from a training exercise in Kuwait. Interesting."

"What the hell is happening in the operation?"

I look back at the collection of laptops and desktops strewn around this tiny office. Every one of them is showing me hell breaking loose. The TV has CNN blaring the collision-course of the Russian, Chinese, British and American carrier groups... the bodycam feeds are giving me our SEAL team, which, it sounds like just chaos and shitshow to me, but I don't really know what I'm seeing...

"There are civilian choppers, British marked, that just took off from the lab. It looks like SBS is defending the lab. Our guys are moving back now."

"Eric, did we lose anybody? Jefferson still there?"

"All good."

"Good, then it's not over. The lab is moving their supplies out."

"Maybe only one of the choppers, though. Which one has it?"

"Huh?"

"I'm thinking which one has the vaccine supply? It's like a shell game."

"Well, fuck, Eric, that's why we have a carrier group out there coming in. What's Jefferson doing?"

"Herc? He's... his B2 has called back in the choppers, they're going to EVAC out..."

"No. I'm going to tell you what they're going to do. They're going after the one Herc thinks carries that antibody vial, or vials, or whatever they got the vaccine in. That guy's got a nose."

"What if he's wrong?"

"Then we got other help coming in."

"Jesus. Fuck. If he chooses wrong, we could lose the vial. Someone else could get it. One of these other operatives could--"

"Eric, I am a goddamn U.S. Navy Lieutenant. If the United States Navy wants to get hold of those choppers, every one of them, we will do so. You got that?"

"Yes. I, yes. I mean, I know."

"Alright," says Yarrett. "So they're getting on a chopper. You keep watching. Tell me everything going on here. I'm calling you back in about 30 minutes. Do not sleep. Do not leave."

"I got you."

Thirty minutes passes like a breath.

He calls back.

Serious shit is going down at that point.

The SEALs are in a single Navy chopper headed after one of the flyers from the lab. But the others have broken up, and have flightplans all over the South Atlantic. Which helicopter is the one that matters?

Now, if I'm the British SBS guy, I've got to already know which chopper has the vaccine supply, so me, Eric Davies, *I'm* trying to figure out where SBS Lieutenant Norrington hightailed it too. So I've called in to CIA and NSA to connect me somehow with the UK angle, but no one on our side knows who the hell I am, and we and the Brits have parted ways long ago anyway. It's every fucking man for himself.

So, lucky for Uncle Sam, Herc had eyes on Norrington and he's pursuing him. And these two understand each other's minds, from what I gather.

Thing is, once people start firing at each other, things get weird.

From what I'm seeing on this poor man's command center, the Brit airship is taking fire from attack helicopters and they ain't ours. They're Chinese. And the Chinese--having failed with the operation onland maybe--are furiously firing on the lab's helicopters before they can get to the British carrier, which would be harder to take down.

"Are they out of their minds?" Yarrett is asking me.

"I have no idea what they are thinking."

"The second you get a chance, you figure out what they're thinking. Give me whatever any file says on the Chinese operatives there, I know we have something on them, they had been moving in on the target island for two weeks..."

"Okay, I'll get on it."

"Not now. What are you seeing? Eric, what are you seeing?"

"The Chinese are going after the same chopper as Herc is. Or maybe they're going after all of them, I don't know. But, sir, there's something I've got to tell you."

"What."

"Herc Jefferson sounded to me... he indicated on his feed that he is suffering from the onset of the virus. He's got it."

Quiet on the line.

I venture on, "I don't know if you could hear me. He has the virus, he's already showing onset of loss of hearing, neurological damage..."

"What neurological damage?"

"He said--"

"He's got the fucking country in his hands, that guy. What neurological damage?"

"Seemed like compromised hearing and... dizziness."

"Well, we can work with that."

"Yes, sir."

"Because I got some fucking news for you. I got half the staff I'm with right now who've got the virus working in them. I mean, if that stupid SEAL bastard doesn't get that vial out of that chopper, well, the President dying is one thing, but we've got a top-down fucking situation here, you see what I'm saying?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Can you hear what they're saying to each other? The SEALs?"

I listen to what's going on. Report it back: "Herc's B2 is saying they've made a big mistake, this is...he's saying it's not here, Herc wants out of this--"

"What do you mean?"

"I can't really understand it..."

"You have to understand it."

But it's confusing. The SEAL, Herc, has to be suffering worse as the virus moves through his coursing blood, because he's writing messages out to his B2. I guess to keep it on the downlow, and--the B2 takes them and I only see a blur of what's going on aboard that chopper.

Meanwhile, I can hear a lot more going on at sea.

On the feed coming in from the carrier *USS Ford*, fighters are being scrambled. And huge batteries somewhere are sending flares into the night. Jesus. What is happening.

"I'm seeing a lot of action on the *Ford*."

"Be quiet, Eric, I have to listen in on this meeting. One second."

He comes back after a moment. Says, "We're firing from the *Trenton* to the *Nanchang* and *Longhu Shan* and whatever hostiles are in that region. It's very possible we have a sub in the area, going to take them out."

"We're going to fire on the Chinese ships?"

"They're fucking history."

"Lieutenant Yarrett, I'm seeing...that chopper came in on the *Longhu Shan*. It's down. So if you're..."

"The sub should have connected by now."

I see it on my screen and I want to vomit. "Yes, sir. I guess it's a torpedo. Oh my God, oh my God. It's going up. It's huge, the fire is terrible. That chopper was trying to recover, and it didn't, it's going down with it."

"They sunk the Chinese ship? Is that the *Longhu Shan*?"

"The Chinese ship is going down with the chopper."

That's it, then.

We repeat ourselves because I don't think we can deal with it.

We just sunk the cure to save the world.

THREE.

There's a lot of noise on all the screens.

Yarrett is trying to get through to me, but I can't really think right now.

Then he's quiet. He asks me very calmly, just report what you're hearing.

I say, "The SEALs are realizing...the doctor isn't there, not on any of the flights. They never saw him get aboard. Herc and his B2 think it's all decoys. All of it. The doctor *back at the lab* has the vaccine vials."

"Where the Chinese are? The Chinese have the island now."

"Herc is requesting permission from his command to go back in, and take on the Chinese at the island..."

"There's not enough of them."

"I--"

"They're a SEAL team who are down one guy. They're not going to take the island."

I tell him, "He has approval to do it. They're going back."

I'm trying to concentrate on what he's saying--mostly more swearing and thinking out what Herc has already figured out, somewhere over there above the ocean, that Doctor Prieto, the researcher, must have kept the crucial supplies with him.

The vaccine materials are still on that island.

"The US military," Yarrett says, "is going to be putting together an amphibious recovery of that Chinese ship, probably boarding it right now before it sinks--in a hostile environment to say the least here--and, are you telling me... there's nothing on that ship?"

"I'm saying the *SEAL team doesn't think so*. They're backtracking."

"That's going to take them a little time," the Lieutenant tells me. "So here's what you're going to do real quick. Figure out from the things I gave you who is going against them there. I want to know the Chinese Spec Ops leader who holds that island, and, Eric, there's an entire Russian assault crew that has to have gotten mobilized by now."

"Yeah."

"So if I can assist the senior advisors on this, you and I are going to become something very serious in Washington--so read up on the Russian Spec Ops as fast as you can. That guy is coming. And he's coming there fast."

I can barely breathe. The minutes pass so fast it's like I'm in a device Einstein invented in hell.

I read as much as I can but concentrating is an issue.

I got a fix on the Chinese Spec Ops leader who holds the island, and I think, if CIA guessed the right Russian, I've got a sense of the Russian commando that Herc Jefferson and our SEALs will be meeting up with in a few short minutes.

The Chinese soldier is bad.

The Russian is worse.

Hard to tell from a file, but here's what I got. Here's what I'll tell Yarrett in a few minutes when he calls me.

The Chinese Special Forces Soldier is uncommon within his ranks. His file is disturbing, and yet you have to relate to the guy. He is no cookie-cutter Army villain that the Pentagon could point to as simply cold-blooded or vile. What he is? Very good at his job and highly, highly motivated.

This is him. Captain Yiming Bao, considered to be the elite of the elite in martial arts combat within the special forces, and well connected, not least because he is a bit of a business genius who helped put together a kind of Asian Grubhub that literally runs on its feet, evading traffic in extremely congested areas. This put him in well with the party, and good thing: he has six children and also supports his six nieces.

If he does not perform well, those children are not exactly going to excel at the challenges of life.

He is every bit the lean, mean killing machine version of our SEAL team, with some unique experiences in what the CIA thinks was quiet actions in Africa, where the Chinese have mining operations.

Sniper work is what we think. An entire warlord's heavy crew taken out at long range--and their bloody boat left adrift with the bodies, including a 12 year old boy who might have been armed, it's not clear.

Actually, he has a few boy soldiers he's targeted in African enterprises.

Okay. He's working for a giant family. But he has no compunction about killing children if they could in any way pose a threat to him.

Yiming has seen the pain of the COVO plague. He has volunteered to bury bodies--thousands of them in China. Just like America, some people, wandering, dazed, untalkative, mute because of the neurological disorder, just drop on the street. Alive but out for the count.

Oceans of people littering the streets and bridges of the world like left-behind ragdolls.

Cars trying to evade them in a world not running very well anymore.

So the sleepers, too, which cover the streets of Beijing, are often woken and given water by Yiming, a trained killer who nevertheless makes time for them.

A very complex figure--the intel reports say he may also be responsible for killing people who rubbed him the wrong way or ran afoul of his business interests, and the body count is considerable.

And then there is the Russian.

Leonid Glasnov is the product of a prison family who taught him how to fight at an early age. Pumped up on steroids since he was a teenager, he became a punisher for a local drug dealer, who eventually was killed by young Leo. His sister working as a housemaid for a prominent Kremlin general later assisted Leo in entering the military, and he became a brutal marvel at any skill useful for killing. He saves the life of several soldiers in a training fire--but later

after arguing with them, tries to drag two of them back to the inferno.

He's intensely loyal to his fellow soldiers, but is known for volcanic anger. Amid the Russian steely cold of the usual command structure and tone, his passion is notable, and feared.

Glasnov has his team coming ashore on the island; Yiming is already in place.

Herc is riling a hornet's nest.

FOUR.

The news is going ballistic. Something leaked.

The gaggle of reporters is trying to pin down a totally unflappable Pentagon spokeswoman.

They shout, "We are hearing shots fired toward the Russians, can you confirm--"

"Absolutely not," spokesperson says, "I don't have anything on that. I think if war were erupting somewhere near the Falkland Islands again, you would be getting some briefings on that, don't you think? Thank you, that's all for now."

But from where I'm sitting, they're all looking the wrong direction.

Lt. Herc Jefferson is heading into that island, and his helicopter just went down with all SEALs aboard.

I can see it but there is nothing I can do.

It is the most helpless, awestruck feeling you can possibly imagine.

There's not a fire. From what I see on Herc's bodycam, they're getting out of the wreckage.

The night makes it hard to see.

They are near the lab, in the jungle area beyond the broken perimeter fence. I hear shots, so the Chinese who have taken over the lab must be onto them, or else there are still British forces fighting the PLA soldiers.

Herc and his team get out, heading for the lab along what looks like a stream in a jungle lit up with flares, tracerfire, God knows what just beyond where I can see on this 15-inch laptop.

For Herc, it must be fascinating. He is going through the beginnings of the viral spiral as they call it. He'll be getting dizzy, can't hear, sluggish thinking. Just what we need when this is the guy who can literally get us the cure to what is eating the country apart.

Thing that amazes me, the connections he doesn't know about.

As that helicopter was headed for the Argentine lab, I have been reading over what we have.

Our SEAL Herc here has crossed paths with the Chinese sniper on his trail before...

Five years ago, Herc's team was sent into Niger on an anti-terrorist mission. He completed the task, which was to take out the leader of an offshoot of Al-Qaeda just getting started. But on evac, someone took shots at him. Herc was heading out of a hot schoolhouse in the African region, having brought down the terrorist leader in direct proximity to the schoolgirls under assault--and as he left, someone sent a few shots slicing across his head and his torso. Herc got out. Figured it was locals who were not part of the American covert ops, some of the Al-Qaeda shits he pissed off somehow.

But it was Yiming. Those were warning shots. Yiming gets what he aims for. So Herc should've taken it as a rite of passage.

Yiming and Herc had shaken hands a year before that when the SEALs had taken part in a show of force with Taiwan,

training operations the Chinese were allowed to observe as if it were all friendly.

Herc had no idea this same guy had him in his sights again, now.

My boss of the moment, Yarrett, calls me back. Says he's coming over. Wants everything we know about Herc's adversaries.

If only we had more time.

God, time. *None* of it is what we have.

By the time Herc actually gets inside the lab--with a horrific explosion from his boys supplying a convincing distractor--he is face to face with Captain Yiming.

I've got a front seat to the hand to hand combat.

My heart is a prizefighter trying to get out.

I can't even speak.

What I'm seeing is shaky bodycam insanity. But Herc is holding his own. He is seriously compromised, beginning the downward trend of the new COVO in his bloodstream, but his B2, that guy De Cortona is there--pulls Yiming back, slams him down--Herc's alright, he's recovering.

The Chinese team leader is down, and in the hallway of this lab, I see Herc exchange a long testy conversation with the Argentine doctor, Prieto... there is a white case of vials. Herc takes it.

His team is out into the night and the forest before you can process what's happening.

I see paratroopers coming in--which means Herc sees it.

He may even know from his intel background report who's coming for him.

Somewhere behind Herc is the Chinese Spec Ops leader Yiming. But in front of Herc--there's a good bet that's the Russian killer Leonid. His team is flying in from the Russian naval group 80 miles away.

He's falling from the sky, gliding in with six others behind him, maybe more.

These are some scary fuckers.

Leonid has handpicked them, trained most of them from the worst of the worst in Russian prisons.

And Herc has met up with Leonid Glasnov before, too.

These guys have all crossed paths.

I know from the files that Herc and Glasnov were partners in a joint wargame in snowy conditions years back, a training exercise that got a little too real when the two men and their ops team were taking out a faux separatist Muslim terror group in Croatia.

The report is pretty damn vague, clearly some shit went down that's diplomatically a no-go, but Herc and Leonid left that fake city in Eastern Europe with a lot more bullet holes in the walls than originally intended.

The sit-down these two must have gotten from their bosses...

And yet. Herc must come away with respect for the Russkie because he gave him his father's knife. Or else Leonid took it; it's not too clear from the report.

I'm just marveling at these connections, because the Brit in charge of defending the lab, this poor Norrington dude, he links up with both Herc and Glasnov in chess games played online, though *Herc* doesn't know Norrington.

They like to size each other up, these guys.

By this point, Herc has evaded the incoming Russian team... he got his hands on a shot-up landcruiser and he's torn off with the other SEALs down a long and very dangerous road. They're in a town now. I didn't know there was civilization on this island, but it's pretty extensive... lots of narrow turns and nighttime pedestrians. I'm not sure but I think Herc's truck drives over some of the virus sleepers on the streets. He's under fire from what I think are the Russians immediately pursuing, and the Chinese are in on this too. Choppers and stolen land vehicles both.

The car is smashed. Herc and the B2 end up in--to me, the whole area looks sort of like those favelas, those neighborhoods in Brazil of tight, old buildings with shacks and lean-tos woven in among them--

I think they're in a church. I think Herc's in a monastery or former church--it's torn open now, Jesus--the Russians just drove literally through the wall with a stolen truck--

Gunfire again--

The B2 throws the vial case back at Herc. He's got it and runs out.

This big church is quickly divided up into warring factions--U.S. guys in one corner, Russians behind the truck, and the Chinese crawling up to higher ground at the balcony with what has to be an extremely pissed-off Yiming...

And then behind me, Yarrett comes in yelling. Wants to know what the hell I know.

"I'm not sure what you can do," I tell him, out of air, "but if you can get some support in there, our Navy SEAL has everything this country needs to survive this plague and he is starting to lose his mind and I think I mean that literally."

"Eric." He says, closing his eyes for calm. "He'll have anything he needs. The President just admitted to the JCS he's coming down with the virus. The generals want him out."

FIVE.

Maybe I'm coming down with the virus because I feel like I can't keep up mentally.

The SEAL team onscreen breaks out of the church.

A cat-and-mouse firefight is going on in all these little cubbyholes and shacks and tall stone buildings.

In the room I'm in, Yarrett is telling me we are facing a sick President and Vice President and a dispute over whether the Speaker of the House should step in or the military assume control, and the President hasn't yet weighed in.

We know that on both coasts of the United States, American forces are being hazarded by Russian jets.

This is feeling like a fever dream.

On the news, we are learning now that the British Prime Minister is being targeted in some terrorist operation or some Russian operation meant to *look* like terrorists--but he is being sped out of 10 Downing under fire in London.

This is the world unraveling.

"Stay with me, Eric."

"I'm. This is going to be okay. I'm alright."

"Everything just has to hold together a little while longer. That SEAL team has the vaccine. We just got to get them out."

"If we can prevent nuclear war until then."

"Oh, Eric, you don't even know. The brass I'm with on the other side of town thinks we probably have a nuclear sub commander sitting there in a giant submarine filled with sleeping, half dead sailors..."

The contagion is everywhere now.

Herc and his team run through an abandoned resort, looks like a shopping mall never finished, dark and quiet, like in a surreal thriller.

I can't imagine the state his mind is in.

Herc starts to stumble. His B2 looks back at him.

I'm kind of in shock as the B2 rushes toward Herc on his knees--slams open the case--and a second later plunges the syringe into Herc's arm.

"What'd he do?" Yarrett says. "He's got it?"

It's brilliant, I think to myself. Why the fuck not. "He's got the antibodies in his blood now. He's a walking cure, no matter what they do."

Herc gets up.

He seems to be in bad shape, but there's no time to assess. What's left of the SEAL team is running through the empty mall to find a way out.

"We've got new forces en route, headed for that city square," Yarrett tells me. "They'll get out."

"If the Russians, the Chinese, or the British don't blow them all to Kingdom Come," I'm muttering. "Are we really at war with our allies too?"

I just kind of can't get my mind to work.

"You fucking kidding me? We're at war with everyone. The French have subs coming into that area."

I pinch the bridge of my nose and try to slow a headache brewing. I think it's a natural one, borne of stress, but it could be something else.

Who knows at this point.

"Herc's got to stay alive long enough for us to get the exfiltration teams in there. Just keep watching. I have to step out and take a call, Eric. Stay awake."

"I will." How the hell could I not?

Yarrett leaves the room. Now it's just me and the noise of a world tearing itself to shreds on a bevy of small screens.

CNN is following the full-scale assault now going on in the Atlantic.

They aren't that dumb. A Chinese ship is sinking and at least two international navies are fighting over its scraps. There's talk of international divers and private recovery crews wanting in.

The Chinese have shot back at the U.S. carrier group. An Aegis ship is hit but surviving.

Our jets are tangling. One of ours is reportedly downed.

There is no dialogue between the governments. They are denying it all and have shut their doors.

The technique of gaslighting each other has gone global.

What in God's name am I watching?

Yarrett steps back in. Very quiet. The cellphone is still in his hand. He looks deep in thought.

"What is it?" I ask him. "Is it the President?"

After a moment, he answers, "No. I'll check in over there in a minute. I was talking with my girlfriend--forgot what her voice sounded like after all this time, I don't even..." He trails off, regaining his thought-tatters, and continues, "She works at the CDC, and she says..."

At first he doesn't finish.

"She says what?"

He looks me dead in the eye. "We are beginning to see recovery. Natural recovery."

I gaze back at him blankly.

He clarifies, "The human body is finally fighting this virus. Effectively."

So it starts to dawn on me. His words finally hit.

And he figures it out first, I can see from his expression. This isn't elation. This isn't the face of victory.

I'm an idiot because it takes me another beat or two.

We just took on the rest of the world's navies for no reason. The vaccine is not essential. And as I'm taking this in, and I realize the implications to everything, I hear the news reporting, "This is not any rescue operation we have ever seen before..."

They say, "The Russians are opening fire on the U.S. ship as well."

Everyone did everything right. And it's not going to matter one damn bit.

You can't call back a gunshot.
