

Charlie's Requiem: Contagion

As the Russian contingent and government tyrants begin to lose control of the country, they turn to bioweapons in their fight against the growing resistance. Charlie, Dr. Kramer and the rest will be tested as no American soldier or patriot had been challenged before. They will face a concerted biologic weapons offensive as the powers controlling the city try and turn the tide of the civil war in their favor. Infected mosquitos carrying the modified strain of Malaria is released into the rural water supplies and the results are devastating. Battling a growing Russian military presence along with displaced gang members, the patriots now must suffer the ravages of this ancient disease and are pushed to the brink of annihilation. Can they survive and more importantly, can they win? The fate of the nation rests on their resolve. Here is an unedited sample of the book, due this spring.

PROLOGUE

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Three years before the EMP

unedited

Emmanuel Bwana hefted the nylon mesh bag over his young, broad shoulders and lugged the rocks he had just mined down to the river. Nearing his twelfth birthday, he was older and bigger than many of the other artisanal miners. Boys as young as six were hard at work, digging

into the nearby rock-filled hillside. Their common goal was to find dirt and stone that carried the valuable minerals that the western nations so valued.

The young man brought his ore to a panning station. A rivulet of water had been diverted from the mountain waterway. The cold stream surged down a long, wooden trough where the soil, rock and stone were separated using gravity and flowing water. It was the same equipment that had been used for many generations. It was a cheap, effective and simple technology. Perfect for their jungle location deep in the heart of the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo).

It wasn't unusual for the young man to have chosen mining as a career. It had become the most common profession in the country, ever since the Europeans had discovered rubber, gold and diamonds in the African nation's rolling hills.

The people of this impoverished nation had been kept in near slavery since the late nineteenth century, when the king of Belgium used the people of the region to reap the jungle's bountiful treasures. King Leopold II, the Belgian leader at the time, would sometimes wipe out entire villages if they refused to harvest the jungle's natural resources. Those that agreed to work were conscripted and anyone who failed to make quotas often had their hands cut off as motivation to the others.

Things weren't much better today. The Democratic Republic of the Congo was now technically free of their former Belgian overlords but is still being slowly raped by the rest of the world's advanced countries. The nation's resources are invaluable to the modern, electronic world.

Coltan mines provide the mineral used to create tantalum capacitors, critical in computer and mobile phone production. Wolframite is in

abundance as well. It is the chief source of tungsten, used in all industries as well as armor-piercing ammunition. Cassiterite mines provide tin, which is a critical component of super-conducting magnets. Top all of that off with the country's older gold and diamond mines and you have one of the most mineral rich pieces of real estate in the world. Yet, despite all of these natural treasures, the DRC has one of the lowest standards of living on the planet.

All of this was lost to Emmanuel. He simply knew that he had to work from dusk to dawn, just to get enough to survive.

He watched as his load was dumped into the wide, wooden trough. Several children, under the supervision of an adult, began to refine his haul. By the time his load of rocks was processed, and the metal shavings removed from the pulverized earth, he might claim a quarter of a pound of coltan ore. Then, when the mine collected enough ore, it was transported several hundred kilometers to the large city of Bukavu where western buyers would pay anywhere from eight to twenty dollars per pound.

Out of that, he had to cover other costs. First, the coltan separators had to be paid. Using hand magnets that pulled the metallic mineral from the rest of the pulverized mixture, they would set aside a portion of the ore as payment. The people that transported the final product to market also needed to be reimbursed. They often had to pay tributes along the way to pass through various areas under the control of militias. Finally, once the ore made it to the city, the government officials would have to be bribed. By the time Emmanuel's ore made it to the plane that would carry it out of the country, he'd get to keep about fifty dollars a month. It wasn't much of a living, but it would keep everyone in his family fed.

The young man wiped his brow and stepped into the flowing river. He tore a leaf from a nearby philodendron plant and wrapped it onto itself, creating a natural ladle. He scooped up some of the fast-flowing water and greedily drank it. The rushing mountain brook was cool and crisp, sending a shiver down his spine. It was wonderful and sadly, one of the few joys he'd experienced that day.

Emmanuel tossed the leaf and squatted down, dipping his head into the rolling liquid. A moment later, he climbed out of the stream and moved back up the winding, muddy path. It was a good twenty-minute walk back to his shovel. There was still plenty of daylight and another load would make him a few more dollars.

The oldest of four children, he'd assumed the role of provider when his own father had died in a mining accident. Most of the holes dug into the side of the mountain were tunnels barely large enough to crawl through. No support beams. No safety helmets. When the tunnel his father had been in collapsed, they hadn't even tried to recover the body. Now, he had a mother and three younger siblings to feed. This next haul would pay for another few weeks of school for his brother and two sisters. Education was not cheap and if he could pull even one of his siblings out of the cycle of poverty, it would be worth it.

As Emmanuel climbed up the winding path, he failed to notice a sharp-featured white man watching him from the edge of a nearby clearing. Once the young man had disappeared, the stranger carefully made his way down to the river where the mine's "supervisor" stood watching the refining process.

The men talked and a wad of folded money was passed between the two. The white stranger, a short and muscular man with several facial scars and a military trimmed haircut, turned and disappeared down the jungle trail as the Congolese supervisor counted the folding money. The bribe had been paid in euros, not the worthless Russian currency that the man had originally tried to use. Unlike the ruble, this western money spent almost anywhere.

Three hours later found Emmanuel back at the refining site. After turning over his load, he was approached by the site's supervisor. A five-euro bill was handed to him with instructions that he should stop at the medical center in Bunyakiri and ask for Doctor Sokolov, where he'd receive an additional twenty euros if he completed a task for the man.

Emmanuel hesitated. He'd heard about white men who preyed on young Congolese boys. Even though this person was supposedly a doctor, both the supervisor and Emmanuel exchanged a knowing look. Twenty euros was more than he'd make in weeks of backbreaking work but was it worth the risk? The young man queried the supervisor for more information, but the older man was told nothing more.

Emmanuel was given a tally of his haul for the day, nearly a kilogram of ore. Depending on the exchange rate at the airport and the transportation fees he'd have to pay, he'd net between two and three dollars after all expenses were paid. A very good day's work.

He began his journey home. The trip to the medical center was just an hour out of his way and Emmanuel used the time to think about the offer. The closer he got to town, the more determined he was to stop and

speak to the doctor. Twenty euros would pay for months of schooling for his siblings.

He had so many questions and more than his share of fears about the man. As he approached the outskirts of the large city, he found himself moving towards the town's medical center. He arrived as the sun dropped behind the western hills.

Finding Doctor Sokolov wasn't too difficult. Multiple portable structures had been set up in the parking lot next to the center, all surrounded by a chain-linked fence topped with a nasty looking barbed coil. The Russian flag was painted on the outside of each of the metal prefab structures along with the universal western symbol of hope and medical care; Giant red crosses covered each building.

Emmanuel was taken aback by the site, until he remembered that there was a rather nasty malarial outbreak just a hundred kilometers away. The World Health Organization had sent a number of teams to combat the disease and the Russian group was likely part of this contingent.

The thought of the mosquito borne disease gave the young man pause. Was the doctor interested in using him for an experiment? Why him and not someone else? The young man's concerns had just multiplied, but the lure of money pushed him forward and he approached a gated entrance. A guard shack held two men armed with AK-47 rifles. They stood sentinel at the opening and Emmanuel cautiously approached.

"Stop!" The Congolese guard commanded.

Emmanuel froze. The nasty looking weapon was pointed at his chest and the man's finger was on the trigger.

"What do you want, little man?" The guard barked.

“I...” Emmanuel stuttered. “I was told to ask for Doctor Sokolov”

The guard gave him a curious look before leaning into the shack’s door and speaking with his companion. After a few moments, a white woman appeared from a nearby structure and took him into the compound. They entered the largest of the units.

“Hello.” An older man said in perfect French, the nation’s national language. He extended his hand and Emmanuel tentatively reached out and shook it. “I am Dr. Sokolov. Thank you for accepting my invitation.”

Emmanuel had so many questions. The big Russian doctor must have seen his confused and unsure look. The old man smiled broadly and motioned for the boy to sit down at a nearby table.

Sokolov assessed him as he sat on the cold, aluminum chair. Emmanuel glanced around the sterile room; his eyes wide as he took in all the technology that had been installed into the space.

The mobile command center was crammed with gear. It had all of the equipment needed to run the medical facility. There was a communications station with its short wave, VHF and satellite electronics. Another part of the giant container building had a bank of industrial refrigeration units, all used to collect and store medical samples while the rest of the interior was outfitted with a large table, chairs and a kitchenette. Sokolov smiled as he watched Emmanuel gaze longingly at the kitchen’s apartment-sized refrigerator. The young miner was typical for boys in the region. Tall and thin with wiry muscles, Emmanuel had developed his body through years of hard work and a substandard diet.

Sokolov knew just what to do to win the young man’s heart. The big Russian grabbed a plastic plate and fork, then opened the refrigerator and

pulled out the remnants of the group's recent evening meal. A small pile of pork sausages, still warm from the oven, was placed in front of the boy. His youthful eyes went wide. He'd heard of meat sausages, but never had seen any in person. Emmanuel's experience with meat of any kind had been limited to the rare piece of wild, smoked game or the occasional roasted dog that found its way into a cooking pot. He'd eaten more grasshoppers than animal flesh and gotten most all of his protein from beans, often mixed with root vegetables or rice.

The old man grabbed some locally produced bread called kwanga, a cassava root mixture which was fermented and baked.

Emmanuel stared at the sausage, unsure how to eat it. Sokolov patiently waited for the young boy to eat, but finally broke off a small piece of the sausage and stuffed it into the soft, starchy kwanga. Sokolov popped the doughy sandwich into his mouth and contentedly chewed. That was all the encouragement that the pre-teen needed. A few minutes later and Emmanuel had dispatched with nearly half-a-pound of the imported meat, most of it in his stomach while some of the links found their way into his pocket when he thought no one was looking. They'd be given to his mother and siblings. It was more animal protein than he'd eaten in the past two years and his family would soon taste this heavenly food.

"You liked it?" Sokolov asked. Emmanuel nodded with a smile. "I'm glad." The old man said contentedly.

Emmanuel's guard went down a little. The white woman who'd brought him to the building was still present, which was a positive. Also, Emmanuel didn't get a bad vibe from the grey-bearded doctor. Like most

survivors, he'd developed a good ability to read people. Sokolov didn't raise any warnings.

"Thank you." Emmanuel cautiously replied, unsure how to proceed. He didn't need to worry as Sokolov continued the conversation.

"I am sure you are wondering why I asked you here." The researcher began. "You see, I have a task for you. It is very simple. I need you to retrieve a package for me."

Emmanuel's mind raced. Such an easy thing and yet so much money. Emmanuel knew that it must be dangerous. His facial demeanor revealed his concerns.

"It is not hazardous, and it is not illegal." Sokolov assured the young man. "I need you because of your knowledge of the area you must travel."

Sokolov brought out a map of the area and pointed to a village about fifty kilometers north west of the city.

"Do you know how to read this?" The old man asked.

Emmanuel just nodded his head. He didn't know how to "read" the color-filled map, but he understood enough to figure it out.

"This is just outside of the infection zone." Sokolov said. "So, you shouldn't have a problem with the malaria."

Emmanuel now understood why he had been chosen. The village was in the direction of his family's shack and about another day's walk further from his home. He had an aunt and her family who lived in that area and he'd made the journey many times before.

After a few more minutes of instructions, Emmanuel was sent on his way. Sokolov gave the boy a bag full of food and promised him the twenty euros when he'd completed his journey.

“He seems like a nice boy.” The doctor said to the assistant.

The tall, muscular woman simply nodded. She had been at the doctor’s side for the last few months as they studied the malarial outbreak. Their teams had collected hundreds of mosquito samples from the area, all in an attempt to quell the growing pandemic. Unfortunately, none had contained the new, more deadly malarial infection.

But her job was far more insidious than the doctor’s. Where Sokolov was looking for a better cure for the disease, hers was to find a sample of the mosquito that carried the most recent outbreak and get it back to Russia. The specimen that the young man was going to retrieve would be the golden ticket she and her superiors at the GRU were looking for.

The GRU, the clandestine arm of the Russian military, had identified a rather nasty strain of the parasite. Marsh or swamp fever, as malaria is often called in Africa, has a one in four chance of killing the host when it becomes cerebral and affects children far more than adults. On the positive side, the parasitic infection only made it to the brain about 1% of the time.

The recently identified strain had shown remarkable efficacy in penetrating the blood/brain barrier. Fully a quarter of those infected, young and old, became cerebral in less than a week and the movement to the brain was twice as rapid as prior outbreaks. Further, its mortality rate with treatment was over 50%. With a twenty-five-fold increase in brain penetration and twice the lethality at twice the speed, it was a potential bioweapon. This was why the GRU had sent her to work with Sokolov in Bunyakiri.

She was a spy among doctors and other than her clandestine associate, a former Spetsnaz operator who was assigned to the

contingent's supply team, all the others were here to help stop the spread of the disease.

Both Sokolov and the woman left the administrative building and went their separate ways. Sokolov wound his way to the living quarters while the woman went to the supply hooch. She reported to her cohort, the man who had initially recruited young Emmanuel back at the mine, that the mission was moving forward. The young boy was expected to complete his task and return in about 48 hours.

Both spies made their way to their quarters where the woman joined the other medical personnel for a movie night gathering. The man, on the other hand, retrieved his satellite burst transmitter and dictated his report. The file was compressed and encrypted, then sent in a microsecond burst to an orbiting satellite. The momentary signal bounced off the man-made moon and found its way to the communications center at the GRU. With a two-hour difference in time, the information was passed onto the night watchman in the Moscow facility where it was placed on the African case worker's desk. The clandestine operation was finally bearing fruit and the bioweapons scientists were about to get a new toy to play with.

Two days later, Emmanuel delivered the metal cylinder he'd been given at the small village. It had been a pleasant and uneventful journey. The aluminum tube was cold to the touch and although curiosity urged him to open it, he resisted the impulse. His instructions had been crystal clear. If he opened the package, he'd lose the money.

Sokolov gave the cylinder to the female assistant. The woman placed the refrigerated container in their larger freezer unit. The new tube contained multiple mosquitoes that carried the deadly parasite.

The old doctor pulled out a twenty euro note and gave it to the eager young man. He added a brown bag of more food, mostly smoked meats, and gave it to the boy who gratefully accepted the gift.

“Thank you.” Sokolov said. “It is getting late. You need to get home.”

The boy had arrived well after dark. He’d pushed past his family’s shack on the journey back in the hopes that he could make it home in time to show his mother how much money he’d earned. It would relieve so much stress in the family.

“Merci, beau coup.” Emmanuel replied happily. “Let me know if you need me again.”

“I will, young man.” Sokolov replied. “Be careful.”

Emmanuel nodded and sped away.

“Such a nice young boy.” He said absently to his assistant. “Keep his name. He’s seems very reliable.”

“Yes, doctor.” She replied.

Both of them sat down to finish some paperwork. A few minutes later, a gunshot echoed across the compound. Sokolov looked up with concern. The assistant picked up a Baofeng radio and put the earpiece in. She contacted the front gate and waited for a reply. After a few moments, she smiled.

“Nothing to worry about.” She said. “There was a pack of stray dogs in the area and they scared them off.”

Sokolov just nodded and went back to his research. The new specimens should be quite a find and would give him and the rest of the scientists a chance to develop a more effective anti-parasite medication. He might even be able to publish in one of the more prestigious western

journals, which would allow him to travel to London or some other big city. The old man smiled as he relished the idea of saving lives.

A few hours later, after Sokolov and the woman had departed the administration building, the male spy replaced the cylinder holding the newer strain with an identical vessel containing mosquitos infected by the normal, less virulent parasite. He quickly mounted his motorbike to take the new samples to the airport where the contagion would be placed on a military flight back to Russia. He rode to the front gate.

The two guards were there. He pulled up and waited while one of them came out of the shack. The night before, he had been talking on his mobile phone within earshot of the two men. He made sure they heard that the young man was returning that next night and that he was to be paid twenty euros for his work.

He fought the urge to ask the two soldiers about Emmanuel. Eliminating the boy wasn't absolutely necessary. After all, the courier that had given the young man the cylinder at the remote village was already dead. He'd seen to that. But he took his job seriously and thoroughness was a hallmark of his work.

The soldier stood in the doorway and waved him through. He hesitated and was about to ask about the boy but stopped when he saw the man take a bite from a smoked sausage.

The spy simply nodded. He knew that the doctor had given Emmanuel a stash of Russian delicacies. There was only one place where these two thugs could have gotten the meat.

The single gunshot he'd heard earlier meant that Emmanuel was lying in the nearby jungle, where insects and animals would quietly dispose

of the body. Twenty euros was a lot of money in the DRC, and he had no doubt that these two thugs were each ten euros richer. He pulled away from the medical center, sure that no one could trace the samples back to their facility. All in all, it had been a very good night.