

# CHAPTER II, SECTION 3: RICKY KRONE

place at the head of the table, Ringman beside him, and asked everyone to be at ease. He then very deliberately saluted the Commandant, the general, and the admiral, who returned the gesture, and they all sat. Also around the table were six besuited individuals, five males and one female, clearly not military. Landry stood again and began to meeting.

“Gentlemen, ma’am,” he said, “I am General Thomas Landry, and I’ll be heading up the president’s plague task force in this matter. You’ve all been called here because of your importance and expertise for this mission. We don’t have a lot of time to waste, so I’m going to cut through as much of the preliminary fluff as possible and just get right to the point. Things are <em>bad</em>, very bad. We need to get this response right, we need to get it right quick, and we need to get it right the first try. There’s no time for second thoughts and no room for second place.”

Landry looked around him and saw everyone looking at quite intently, a rarity at meetings like this. None of the civilians had been briefed yet, so the real gravity of the situation in Mexico was not yet clear; it was, therefore, remarkable to have the entire group paying attention to him, when typically they’d be texting or reviewing their calendars or watching *Transformers* on their iPods. But here they were, paying attention. It was remarkable.

“So let’s just get this rolling by introducing ourselves. I’ve already told you who I am. This is Colonel James Ringman, my assistant. If you need anything from the Air Force or from this project in general, he’s your man.” Ringman stood, nodded to the group, then sat again. Landry introduced the military officials present, then asked each of the scientists to tell everyone else who they were and what they were doing there. They were mostly probably well-known to each other, but anyone not directly affiliated with the Air Force or the CDC was unknown to Landry, which meant just about all of them at the table, so he gave them the chance.

The first man, seated to the left of General Giordano, was a stereotypical scientist. His suit was at least twenty years out of date, he was wearing black plastic-framed glasses and he was continually having to push up the bridge of his nose (which he did with a single finger at the middle, rather than by readjusting them at the sides), and his hair was slicked to the side in a basic left part that made him look like he hadn’t washed

it in weeks. Even his voice tended toward the stereotype. “Dr. Richard Talbot, microbiology, Northwestern,” he said. “Most of my work in the past ten years has been with single-strand RNA viruses. I’ve never worked with a hemorrhagic fever, but I hope I’ll be able to contribute something in the field.”

The second, next after Talbot going around the table, smirked a little at Talbot and rolled his eyes before identifying himself. “Rob Emerling,” he said, “University of Buffalo. I’ve dealt with some hemorrhagic fevers before, especially Ebola and other Filoviridae.” Filoviridae was one of the four main groups of hemorrhagic fevers; Landry had ensured that there would be at least one specialist in each of the four present at this meeting. Emerling had an easy air about him; Landry placed him at about forty-five or fifty based on the lines on his face and the salt-and-pepper in his hair. But his overall air was just cocky, which Landry didn’t like.

The next was a woman, about fifty years old. “Kim White,” she said, “epidemiology, UCLA. I’ve done some work with Venezuelan fever and Lassa fever in South America, and I’ve worked pretty extensively with Brazilian fever in the lab for the last seven years. Pretty heavy experience with Arenaviridae.” She named another of the four groups of hemorrhagic viruses. She seemed very quiet, confident, and most importantly competent; Landry suspected that she’d be easy to work with and manage.

The fourth scientist, a young man of about thirty or thirty-five, went next. “Jim Tortella,” he said, “epidemiology at Buffalo.” Landry made a mental note that Tortella and Emerling probably knew one another pretty well; he needed to find out if the relationship was good or bad. “Worked a lot with yellow fever in Africa during my residency. I have a lot of experience with the other Flaviviridae.”

The next was another forty-five- to fifty-year-old, his hair completely gray. He was clearly confident, but didn’t have the cocky air that Emerling had. “Bill Sims,” he said, “Johns-Hopkins. I’ve worked with about every Bunyaviridae on the planet, but most especially Rift Valley fever. I’ve been working with the hemorrhagic fevers my whole career.” Landry liked this man; he’d probably be the one who figured out a vaccine, if any of them could.

The last at the table was opening his mouth when the door swung open; the whole party turned to look. A young lieu-

tenant stood there holding the doorknob; when he saw the prestigious gathering, including two generals and an admiral, staring at him, he became suddenly clearly nervous and swallowed. He saluted Landry. "General," he said. "Dr. Krone is here." Landry waved his perfunctory salute in return.

"Thank you, lieutenant. Send him in." Emerling smiled the smile of one who's in on a secret that someone else doesn't know.

"Her, General," he said. "Dr. Tortella and I know Dr. Krone well; you choose well to include her." He still had that "I know something you don't know" smile on his face, and Landry decided that he definitely did not like Emerling. Upon Emerling speaking, the lieutenant (Marshall, Landry knew; a good man who'd go far if he decided to stick with the service) simply looked at Landry, as if wondering whether the order "send him in" would really apply if Dr. Krone turned out to be a her. Landry looked back at him.

"Lieutenant," he said, "I can't help but notice that Dr. Krone is still not with us." Marshall gulped and saluted again.

"Yes, General." He turned back out of the door, and shortly thereafter Dr. Krone entered, and Landry learned what Emerling was so smarmily smirking about.

Dr. Krone was indeed a her; she was a her who couldn't possibly be more than thirty, a beautiful woman with fiery red hair and eyes so green that they shined through Landry's glasses like emeralds in a necklace of pearls. The woman was short, only three or four inches higher than five feet, but well proportioned. She was wearing a calf-length green skirt and flats, along with a red blouse that matched her flaming hair. Thirty, Landry reflected, seemed an excessive estimate; she might be as young as twenty-five from her appearance, though how she could be "Dr." Krone were that the case he didn't know. She was fiddling with something in her purse when she walked in, looking down at that; when she looked up and saw everyone staring at her, she smiled a bit sheepishly and put her purse back beside her body.

"Sorry I'm a bit late," she said, and Landry was surprised to hear her voice come out with a British accent. "Getting a flight from the Congo's a bit difficult on short notice." Landry smiled at her, the smile of a man who's probably almost old enough to be her father, and stood, gesturing to the only remaining free chair.

"I'm General Landry," he told her. "We were just introducing ourselves. Why don't you have a seat and get organized while we finish up?" Dr. Krone nodded and smiled back at him.

"Thank you, General," she replied. "I will." She walked around the table and took her seat while the sixth man began his introduction.

This was a younger man, as well, between thirty-five and forty, with very stylish rimless glasses and a blondish mop of hair that reminded Landry inexorably of Luke Skywalker. When, he wondered, had late 1970s and early 1980s haircuts become popular again? "Dan Cheetman," he said. "Epidemiol-

ogy, Duke. No particular experience with hemorrhagic fevers specifically." And so Landry turned to Dr. Krone with a smile.

"Dr. Krone?" he said. "It appears to be your turn now." Dr. Krone had taken out a very beaten leather organizer and placed it on the table in front of her, scribbling furiously with a pen; she now looked up and smiled around the table before answering. Landry was internally amused, despite his cold and pounding heart; this girl's not only breathtakingly beautiful, but she knows it. It's going to be hard not to like her.

"I'm Ricky Krone," she said, "from the University of Leeds. I just got back from the Congo looking at what appeared to be an outbreak of a similar hemorrhagic fever, though I didn't get much time to study it. I've spent my entire career studying hemorrhagic fevers." She sat back and said no more about it. The other labcoats, as Landry still privately thought of them, were nodding their heads; clearly Ricky Krone's expertise on the matter was not only well-known, but quite well-respected. Given that Emerling and Tortella knew Ricky well from somewhere, he wondered if their pride in their own expertise—he checked his notes—in Filoviridae and Flaviviridae respectively—was wounded by Ricky's evident success. He took another look at Emerling; he was old enough to have been Ricky's professor, and Tortella young enough to have been a fellow student. Landry made a mental note to watch very closely for any residual baggage on the issue.

"Well, then," Landry said, standing up again. "Here's where we are. We know each other, but we still don't know the stakes yet. News travels fast, but this Mexican plague travels faster, it seems. Colonel Ringman will give you a briefing."

Landry sat down and Ringman got up, proceeding to give the table substantially the same briefing that the Mexican government had given him early that morning. It didn't take long before everybody's jaws were figuratively resting on the table; Landry himself kept his face steely and calm, but he could understand their sentiments, and personally got even more nervous about it seeing all these massive minds scared so thoroughly about it. The only one who didn't seem surprised, though she did seem alarmed, was Ricky Krone—Landry couldn't help but think of the woman, who looked young enough to be his daughter, by her first name—who nodded and scribbled on her notepad throughout the briefing. When Ringman was done, he sat down, and everyone just sat silently for a good two or three minutes; finally, General Reilly—the Marine commandant—banged his fist on the table in evident frustration.

"This is ridiculous," he declared. "I've gone from private to general, faced death a hundred times on four continents. Why should a damned virus scare me more than that? The president told me I needed to be concerned, which is why I'm here in person, but I had no idea it was as serious as this." He looked up at Landry. "General, the Corps is at your disposal. I suggest a full-scale quarantine of the Mexican border and freezing all flights into the country from anywhere south of Texas." Landry nodded.

“Absolutely, General,” he replied. “That’s already in the works. Admiral, may we rely on the Navy to blockade the ports?” Thompson nodded.

“Damned right,” he replied. “We’ve got fleets in Norfolk and New Orleans at port, getting ready to shove off for the Gulf; I’ll divert them temporarily. And I’ll get in touch with the Coast Guard, too; we’ll need them if we hope to do a real quarantine on the sea side.”

“Illegal border crossing is going to be a big problem,” General Giordano noted. “We can’t even stop it when there isn’t a deadly threat to the south pushing everyone north. What’s in place on the ground at the border?” Landry nodded.

“Nothing yet,” he answered. “The National Guard’s gathered and going. I was hoping I could rely on you to make a real line, though. I know you’ve got substantial manpower commitments elsewhere, but the president has declared this a national emergency. Are you willing to mobilize your forces and get them to the border as fast as you can?” Giordano nodded.

“Of course,” he replied. “How many?”

“As many as you can spare,” Landry said. “We need a solid line along the entire border, no gaps where people can get through. If there’s one thing we’ve learned from what’s happened in Mexico, it’s that we can’t allow any possible vectors for this thing into the country. Its communicability is much too high.”

“Ludicrously high,” Emerling put in. “If I hadn’t seen the pictures I’d’ve never believed it. Nothing in history has ever been able to spread like this.” Landry nodded in Emerling’s direction.

“As Dr. Emerling says,” he said. “But we also have to remember that, in the event of outbreaks within the United States, we’ll need men to keep order, so I’d suggest activating the reserves and ensuring that they’re ready to depart at a moment’s notice.” Giordano nodded.

“I’ll get to work on it as soon as we’re through here,” he said. Reilly spoke up again.

“General,” he said, “what can I do?” Landry looked at him.

“General,” he replied, “I know the Marines have no shortage of excellent combat and special operations troops.”

“The best in the world,” Reilly said proudly; Admiral Thompson, who’d been a SEAL in his younger days, visibly squirmed as he suppressed verbal protest. Landry himself smiled, also.

“I’d like you to get your best unit together,” he said. “About a thousand men. Air Force Special Forces will be joining them.” He took a deep breath. “Colonel Ringman didn’t brief you all, ladies and gentlemen, on one matter: there has been an outbreak in the United States.”

Gasps, and cluttered talking as everyone demanded more information at once. Landry held up his hands, demanding and getting peace. “We’ve gotten word about a Mexican na-

tional crossing the border at Brownsville. He was apparently contagious, but it doesn’t appear that he stopped anywhere but for gasoline on the entire trip. He was looking for a job, we’re told.” He took a deep breath. “Now he’s stopped, though. A local hospital in southern Virginia made the report of a death from what appeared to be hemorrhagic fever in Josephsville, Virginia. Population is about ten thousand. Air Force Special Forces have already been dispatched and have blocked off the main roads; they’re also patrolling the skies in Comanches—the new-generation attack helicopter, very fast and very powerful—and are confident nobody’s tried to get out any other way yet. We’ll need your men to completely seal off the town.” Reilly nodded.

“They’ll be there in two hours.” He immediately got up, saluted (which Landry returned), and left the room.

Landry continued. “Once that town is sealed off, I suggest we retrieve anybody who had personal contact with this national—Juan Alvarez—and bring them to the best-equipped plague center we have. Mr. Cellano?” He now addressed the director of the Center for Disease Control. “I assume that would be Atlanta?” Cellano nodded.

“It would,” he said. “And our doctors will be available to assist your team however they’re needed.”

“Do you think that’ll be enough, General?” Ricky Krone had asked the question, and her cultured British accent made it sound at once distinguished and humble. “It’s clear to me from the reports from Mexico that the virus is transmitted aerially, and that it’s extremely virulent. We’ve never seen airborne transmission of a hemorrhagic fever on this scale. I think it’ll be important to keep a very close eye on the town itself, to see how it spreads from person to person.”

“That’s good advice,” Tortella agreed. “It’s clear this thing is spreading a lot differently than other hemorrhagic fevers.”

Landry held out a hand to request more explanation. “How so?” Tortella looked at Ricky, who responded.

“Well, typically humans aren’t the real host for a hemorrhagic fever. We’re just sort of a stop-off point for them, like a gas station. Their real hosts tend to be arthropods and rodents. Yellow fever, for example, really lives in mosquitos; it just happens to get into humans sometimes when a mosquito bites one of us. It only infects humans by accident, really.”

“That’s why outbreaks tend to be pretty limited,” Tortella agreed. “Since humans aren’t really their preferred hosts, they don’t pass from one human to another very easily. Sometimes, but not much, not like real human plagues like influenza.” Why can’t these labcoats, Landry thought irrepressibly, ever just call it the flu like everybody else? “But this is obviously passing from human to human extremely easily. We need to study how that happens.”

“All right,” Landry agreed. “How about this. Dr. Tortella and Dr. Krone can proceed to Josephsville and observe the epidemic’s procession. Let Colonel Ringman know what kind of equipment and help you’ll need and he’ll have it for you within an hour or two. Mexican doctors believe they’ve iso-

lated the virus and have sent a sample to Atlanta; the rest of you can proceed there and start work there. Will that work?”

Everyone seemed to agree. “Very well; let’s get to it. Thank you for your help, ladies and gentlemen; a great country owes you its gratitude.” Landry started to stand up, but Emerling spoke up.

“General,” he said, “I respect what we’re trying to do here and all, but you do realize that you’re asking us to do the impossible?” Landry looked back at him, his eyes blank.

“What do you mean, sir?” he asked.

“Well, this whole project. Nobody’s said so, but we’re all here to get a cure or a vaccine for this virus ready before it spreads into the United States, right?” Landry nodded.

“That’s right.”

“Well, it’s impossible, that’s all. Nobody’s come up with any kind of cure for a hemorrhagic fever, and we’ve been working on it for over a century. We’ve got a vaccine for yellow fever, but it takes years to develop vaccines, even at best. The way this thing’s spreading, we don’t have years; we have weeks. It just can’t be done.”

The table was quiet for a moment; most of the scientists were nodding slightly. And what Emerling said was true; even isolating a virus would take weeks, most likely, even assuming that what the Mexican doctors had isolated could be confirmed as the infectious agent. But Landry simply stood and took his cap under his arm.

“If you wish to be excluded from the effort, Dr. Emerling,” he said, “simply let me know and you will be. Remember that you have already signed nondisclosure papers before you came here, and that violation of those papers could carry criminal penalties.” He nodded his head to the table. “Colonel Ringman will be arranging your transportation and lodging. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.” He walked out of the room back into his office, sat down, took a deep breath, and got out his bottle of bourbon again. After a drink, he picked up the phone and called the president; he needed to ensure that all flights were stopped as soon as possible.

His heart was still cold and thumping; but the bourbon warmed him slightly.

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