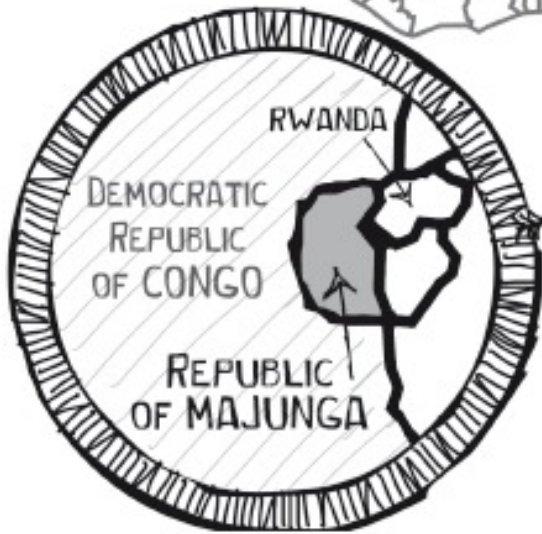
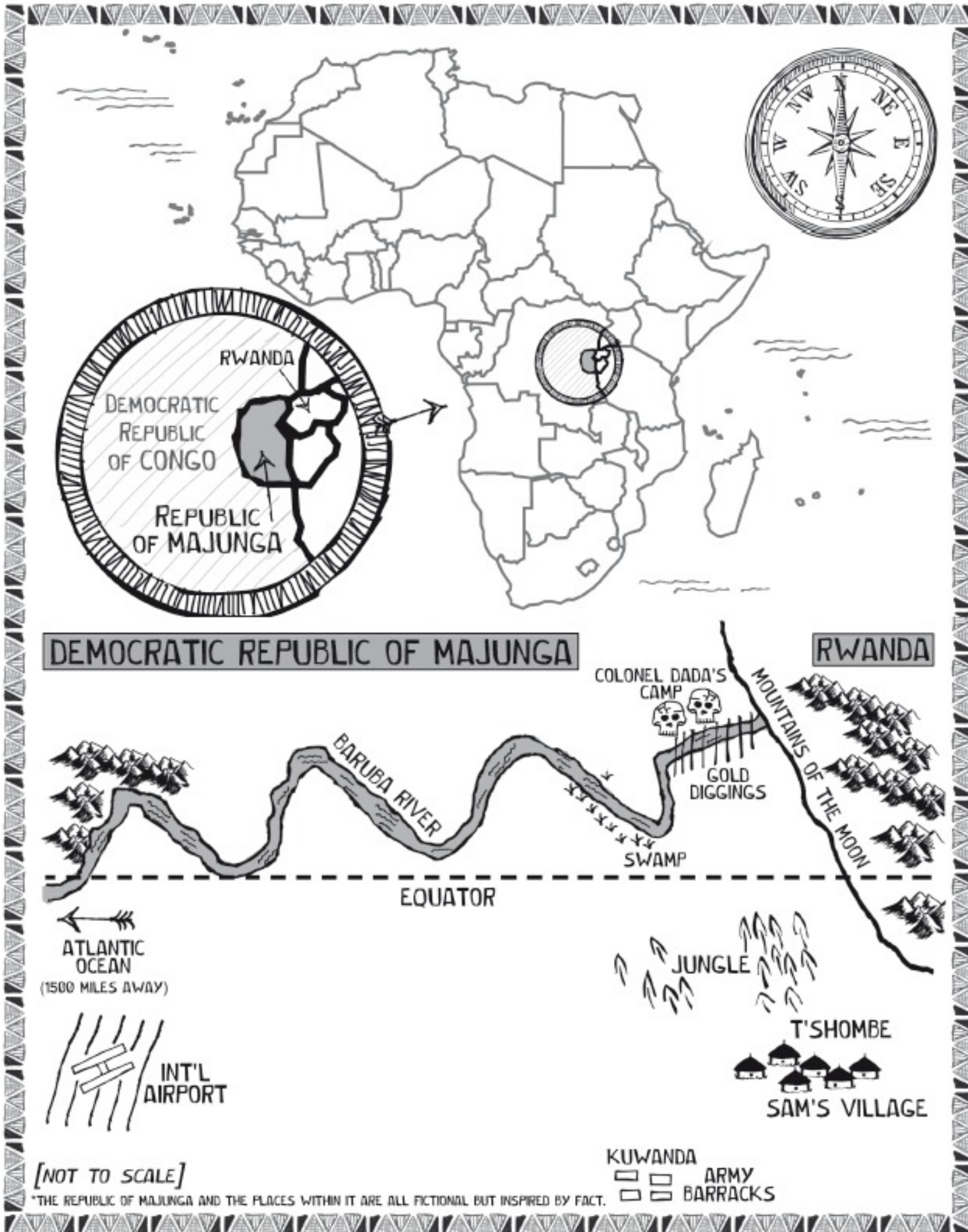
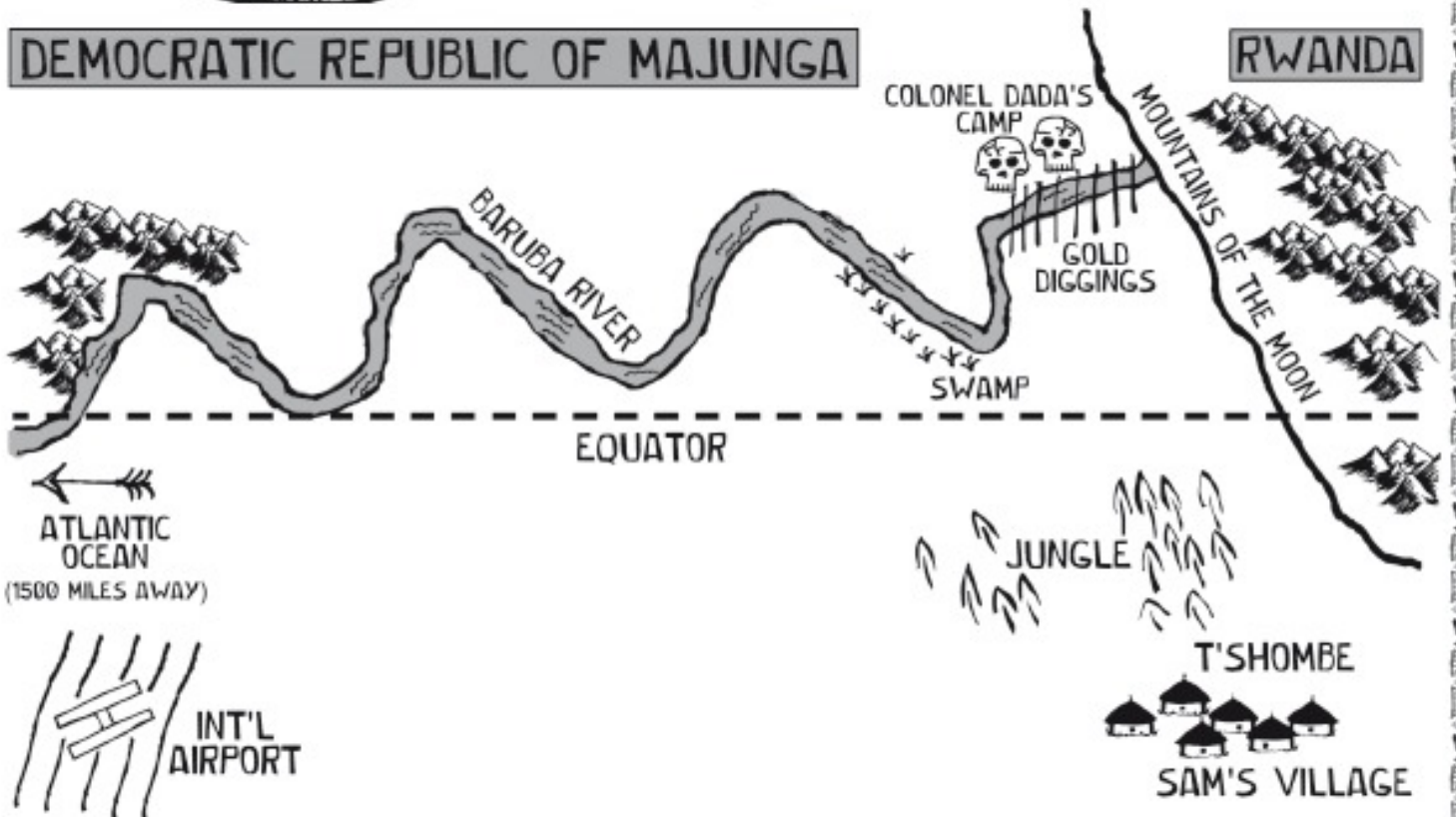


DEAD BOY'S CLUB



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF MAJUNGA

RWANDA



[NOT TO SCALE]

*THE REPUBLIC OF MAJUNGA AND THE PLACES WITHIN IT ARE ALL FICTIONAL BUT INSPIRED BY FACT.

KUWANDA
□ □ ARMY BARRACKS
□ □ BARRACKS

THE MAJUNGA HERALD

Established 1934

‘Peace and Prosperity to our Nation.’

GOD’S FREEDOM ARMY SACKS VILLAGE

Eastern Province – Reports are coming in of an attack two days ago on a remote village near the border with Rwanda by the God’s Freedom Army faction of rebels. The dissidents, many of whom were reported as being children under the age of twelve, attacked the village of Tshombe last Tuesday, July 23.

Francis Mlindi, 62, the village headman, described what happened as, ‘Terrifying’.

‘They came out of nowhere,’ he said. ‘Children firing guns. Killing people and destroying our livestock. Then they took away our young people, boys and girls, and set fire to the village.’

Mr Mlindi was himself brutally assaulted and had a hand cut off by the rebels. He spoke to us from his bed in the regional hospital and pleaded for greater protection from the Army.

Minister of the Interior, Patrick Mumba, told the *Herald* that Majungan Army units were tracking the rebels and would soon bring them to justice. ‘There is no place in our country for cut-throats like this,’ he added.

The God’s Freedom Army faction is led by the self-styled ‘Colonel’ Dada, a former priest who claims to be guided by religious visions. In previous years, Dada has turned parts of Uganda and Rwanda into a war zone. However, he has recently stepped up his attacks inside our own Eastern Province. This latest outrage will be of the greatest concern to all our citizens.

The *Herald* calls upon the government to take strong and immediate action.

Chapter 1

Something was wrong. Sam's eyes flicked open. He was not alarmed – just curious, in a half-awake sort of way. Thirty seconds later he was not so sure. He pushed himself up on his elbows. Was that people shouting? From a long way off? He put his head to one side and listened intently. Nothing more. The sound of his mother and sisters' breathing filled the hut with familiar intensity. Dawn was coming. Thin strips of grey light were starting to show between the slats of the bamboo blind that screened the entrance to the hut. Sam listened to the faint slap-slap they made in the early morning breeze.

His father had fitted the blind only last week, at the end of his army leave. Sam had helped him. Together, they had nailed two pulleys on either side of the doorway, run ropes under the blind and then back up again. And hey presto, it worked. Well, it did after a fashion. Despite their best efforts, it still sagged to one side. His mother had been less impressed. She did not say anything at the time, but her shrug said a lot.

The light was strengthening. In an hour's time, the sun would scorch down and the outside air would shimmer and distort. Now though, it felt cold and the boy shivered. The warmth of the bed rose around his neck and shoulders, tempting him. Gratefully, he snuggled back under his blanket.

His mother mumbled something but he did not catch what she was saying. He held his breath, willing her not to wake up. Obliging, she drifted back to sleep. Sam was more than happy to lie in bed for a little while longer. All too soon it would be time to get up and begin the day. His sisters would bring back water from the village pump while he got the fire going. That was his job. His mother did the cooking and made the strong, red-coloured tea they always had for breakfast. Then in the afternoon, he would walk out into the surrounding bush and gather the wood they would need for the evening.

A dog barked. It sounded very close. Sam heard both surprise and uncertainty in its growl. The dog must be right outside. Its growling grew

louder and more threatening. Sam sat up. He was right. Something was different this morning. Where were all the cockerels? None of them were crowing. Every family in the village had a rooster and half a dozen hens as well. Normally they would be making enough noise to wake the dead. So why were they being so quiet today?

He pushed his blanket back and padded across the floor. One of his sisters was awake and called after him. He pushed past the blind and stood, bleary-eyed, outside the hut. It was full dawn and the land was flooded with brilliant light. Across the river on the far side of the village, a range of low hills flared into glowing bands of orange, red and purple rock.

A family of goats was feeding on a nearby patch of grass. Otherwise, no one else was about. He was glad to see the fire had kept going overnight. There was a dull glow deep inside the heap of wood ash. He stooped to pick up a handful of sticks and drop them on top of the glowing embers. He yawned and scratched his bottom.

The dog growled again. It was standing just metres from the hut. It stood motionless, its tail held rigid. He picked up a pebble and threw it at the animal. The dog ignored him and started to snarl. It was really angry about something. He found a large stick and hurried over to see what was bothering it. It could be a jackal, but it was much more likely to be a snake. He came up behind the dog, scolding it in a low voice with a hand held carefully in front of his eyes. It might be a spitting cobra. There were a lot of them about.

He stopped abruptly, his mouth opening in disbelief. There were boys running towards him. His own age. Armed with rifles. Wearing some sort of uniform. Fifty metres away. A long line of them, racing towards his village. There were men too. Four or five of them. With machine guns. Coming out of the low scrub not far behind. Urging them on.

Sam yelled at the top of his voice. The dog bounded forward, barking hysterically. There was a burst of gunfire and bullets thudded into the ground. He saw sand kicking up in front of him. Panic stricken, he turned and ran.

He knew who they were. Rebels! Killers! Every one of them. Crazy children, high on drugs, scared of nothing and nobody. 'If they ever come here,' his father had warned, 'drop everything. Just run and hide!'

And now they were here! God's Freedom Army, or whatever their name was. 'Bringers of blood and suffering.' That's how Father Benoit had described them.

There was more firing now over on the other side of the village. Bursts of gunfire that sounded like swarms of angry hornets. More bullets ripped over Sam's head and tore into the sides of huts. People were swarming out into the open, shouting and confused. Sam skidded to a halt beside his own hut and saw his mother standing in the doorway, staring wide-eyed at him.

She was shouting. He saw her mouth moving but couldn't hear. He grabbed her by the arm. 'Run!' he screamed. 'It's the rebels! They're coming! Get away!' A man barged into him. Sam slipped and fell. There were others close behind him. He flung himself to one side and rolled out of their way. Close by, a child was screaming. A horrible, animal shriek that went on and on. Sam scrambled to his feet, coughing as a cloud of dust enveloped him.

Somehow he got clear and began searching for his mother. He tried to fight his way back towards the hut but the crowd was too dense and carried him along with it. He saw faces he knew all around him. Terrified faces that kept coming and going. There was more firing. It was everywhere. The crowd stumbled and hesitated and backed away like a herd of uncertain cattle. He had a sudden glimpse of one of the rebels. A boy like himself, not much more than twelve, firing a gun into the air. He was grinning. Broadly.

The sight of that boy soldier decided Sam. They were not going to catch him. He must get away. Fast! There were places he knew out in the bush where he could hide until this horror was over. Only God knew where his mother and sisters were. And he must find them.

He forced his way through the melee – ducking, side-stepping and fighting to get by. Voices rose in a wild hubbub all around him. There was more shooting. Where did they get all the ammunition from? Were they shooting people or just firing into the air? The crowd had come to a clumsy halt so Sam guessed the rebels had them surrounded. Terror seized him. Had he left it too late? He thrust past a pregnant woman, cursing her protests. She must get out of his way. Why couldn't she see that? He had to get away. There was thick bush beyond the village and clumps of trees and patches of head-high elephant grass. Perfect hiding.

He staggered out into the open and was shocked to see a rebel right in front of him. One of the adults. He was in full combat kit with a spare bandolier of ammunition draped across his chest. He was looking the other way and yelling at someone. Sam did not hesitate. He put his head down and ran. There was movement at the corner of his eye. He looked and saw a group of boy soldiers pointing at him. He heard them shout. There was a single shot then a fusillade. He heard the bullets zip past. Then he was racing towards the line of scrub.

There were more yells and another ragged volley. Sam ran with bursting lungs, knowing they must be following him. If they caught him . . . He thrust that thought to the back of his mind. Seconds later, he snatched a look back. They were still there. Six of them at least. Maybe more. The ground in front of him was broken and littered with rocks and patches of loose shale. One false step and he'd be down with a twisted ankle.

As he ran, Sam felt a cold dread rising inside him. He hadn't made a clean break and now they were after him. Boy soldiers, much fitter than he was and no more than sixty or seventy metres away. He stared in front of him then looked around wildly. He didn't recognize anything. There were no familiar trees or rocks. Nothing he could remember. His mind had gone blank. He was lost! But how could he be? All those hiding places. Where were they? Vanished like the early morning mist. He was running for his life with a pack of predators at his heels and no idea where he was going. He sobbed. He couldn't help it.

He made himself snatch another look behind. There they were. Bobbing shapes, following him with the 8 determination of a pack of hyenas. 'When hyenas find a really old lion, they follow it for weeks until the lion is too weak to fight. Then they move in and kill it,' his father had told him. 'Hyenas never give up. They're like those Canadian Mounties. They always get their man!' He had laughed and slapped his thigh at the joke.

Was that only last week? It seemed a hundred years ago. And at that moment, he saw the bush. It was not really a bush. More a huge tangle of undergrowth that over the years had spread and wrapped itself around a clump of thorn trees. It took up most of the shallow ravine below him. Without hesitation, Sam ran towards it, dodging between a dozen or more towering anthills. They would screen him. The slope was steeper than he expected and he raced out of control down the side of the valley. He ran around the bush, searching for somewhere to get in. After an eternity, he found it.

With a prayer there would not be a puff adder sleeping there, Sam closed his eyes and burrowed inside. He could feel thorns slashing at his face and arms and ripping his red T-shirt. There was no feeling of pain. That would come later. As soon as he was in cover, he stopped to listen. Silence. He laid his forehead on the ground and listened to the pounding of his heart. And waited . . .