

CHAPTER 4

“This is London,” the radio announced in a polished English accent, followed by the uplifting theme of the BBC World Service News.

Listening to the headlines had become a regular suppertime ritual at the MedRelief base. The team were bored and irritated with each other, so a daily dose of current events was required to provide alternative topics for conversation that had nothing to do with the medical programme, the war, or the local staff.

Alan had never taken any notice of the news beyond the sports results. His arrival in Kugombwala changed that, for the conflict was a major focus of media attention, and it was encouraging to hear the country’s regular mention in the headlines. Were his friends back in Britain listening to the news and thinking of him? He hoped so.

But over recent weeks, there had been a drop in reports about Kugombwala, following the departure of the United Nations peacekeepers. Western media had lost interest in the incomprehensible squabble between rival clans in a faraway continent, and without the presence of U.N. troops, the conflict held little international news appeal.

Jules turned up the volume to broadcast the headlines. That night, like the previous fortnight, there was no mention of Kugombwala. He turned down the sound after the main stories had been announced but kept the radio playing so he could still hear what was said. Fifteen

minutes later, he interrupted Paula's monologue about incompetent local colleagues.

"Shh," he ordered. "It's a report from Kugombwala."

They all fell silent to concentrate on the radio.

"The recent withdrawal of the United Nations from Kugombwala has caused the country to disintegrate into a multi-factional civil war that regional peacekeeping soldiers of the Organisation of African Unity's African Battle Group—known as AfriBat—have failed to contain. Kugombwala is now divided into separate territories controlled by different militia groups, who tax the local population for food and funds when they are not fighting each other. One of these factions, the Kugombwalan Patriots—or 'KP Nuts,' as they are locally called—is, however, an army with a difference. For it is an army of small boys."

There was a perceptible pause in the narration, as the reporter allowed time for his statement to resonate.

"I travelled for six hours through thick jungle to meet the leader of the Kugombwalan Patriots. Major MacAmos Buo is a young man in his early twenties and has created a remarkable rebel force comprising youngsters half his age. He is known to his troops as 'boss-brother,' and I asked him why he was using children in his liberation struggle."

"My man," broke in a slurred voice, edited to follow the narrative, "I no can make them come; they is coming by themselves. Every day, more boys come to me. They want to fight, and I make them into warriors. I teach them how to kill. I show them that small boys can be stronger than big men."

"But, Major," the reporter interrupted, "what makes these boys come to you?"

There was a slight laugh. “Them boys can want payback. They see their fathers and brothers killed, their mothers and sisters raped. I give them new family, and I give them a weapon for to get revenge.”

The report then concluded. “A senior UNICEF official has expressed concern with this latest development in the Kugombwalan civil war. There are unsubstantiated reports that the KP child-soldiers kidnap young boys during their attacks on villages, who are then forced to become fellow warrior slaves. This is Mark Jeffreys in Ougawa, Kugombwala.”

Jules turned off the radio. There was a stunned silence, broken by Lorna.

“I was expecting this to happen sooner or later. We’ve seen this before in Africa: Mozambique, Uganda, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Those wars have shown that kids make the bravest and most loyal soldiers—and also the most vicious.”



Worphans. The orphans of war.

Kugombwala’s conflict had spawned a new word for the English language to label the crazed kids who carried Kalashnikov rifles. Suddenly, they were everywhere in the upcountry areas outside Ndombazu: manning—or kidding—checkpoints and hassling the few who dared travel without an AfriBat military escort. Negotiating these roadblocks added a new trauma to the war, a series of hurdles on the major routes that led into the anarchic interior.

“Another checkpoint,” MacGarry the driver announced to Alan and Megan. It was the fifteenth they had encountered that day on an

exploration mission to assess the health situation in the rural area beyond Ndombazu.

Fifteen. The five brats in the distance looked a fraction of that age. Butterflies fluttered in Alan's stomach as the vehicle slowed its approach to the roadblock. A confrontation was inevitable in a game where two sides play with different rules and a loaded dice. Once again, Alan wished he were somewhere—anywhere—else.

MacGarry drew the car to a halt some thirty metres before the checkpoint. "You two can stay here. I go present our papers."

Alan was grateful to remain in his seat. His heart beat faster as he watched the tall driver walk over to the three plastic Coca-Cola crates and their miniature guards. On reaching them, the full difference in their heights became apparent: a surreal sight of five dwarfs with their machine guns surrounding an adult man. The ensuing conversation was drowned by the idling engine, giving Alan the sensation of watching an old silent movie—the exaggerated gesticulation of the kids, the pointing in his direction, and then a rifle butt rammed into MacGarry's groin, forcing him to keel over. Whereupon, more rifle butts were bashed into his body.

What now? Megan stifled a scream while Alan watched aghast as the horror unfolded before their eyes. Paralysed by helplessness and fear, they could do nothing other than stare as the worphans attacked MacGarry like a pack of hounds bringing down a stag. And just as dogs differ from deer, so, too, did the infant warriors appear to belong to a different, inhuman species.

The silent movie continued—a few more rifle butts into the defenceless driver, and then a round of kicks from over-sized wellingtons once he hit the ground. They then stopped and stood

back. MacGarry got up and hobbled back to the vehicle, both hurt and humiliated.

Their reunion was awkward.

“You all right?” What else could Alan say?

The driver struggled to respond. “What can be happening to my country?” he asked, to which neither Alan nor Megan could answer.

MacGarry entered the vehicle, and they drove slowly to the checkpoint and the five brats who guarded it.

“Where you can go, white man?” a boy no more than ten years old chirped. At his age, Alan was in the Cub Scouts, enjoying the childhood innocence of those distant campfire days. Had this kid lost that innocence, or was this mere child’s play for him?

“I c-c-can be going to Ngolindi village,” Alan stammered, attempting a local accent in the hope of bonding with the boy.

“Get out the truck, white man,” another child ordered, sticking the barrel of an AK-47 through the open car window towards Alan’s face. He looked a little older, perhaps twelve, with a perceptible meanness etched into his features.

The thought of leaving the relative safety of the Land Rover filled Alan with a fresh dose of fear. What would they do to him? Subject him to the same ordeal as MacGarry? Or worse? He had no choice. The muzzle of the machine gun was pointed at him, demanding total obedience.

“My man, how can the white man be getting out of this truck when you be putting that blunderbuss through the window?” MacGarry asserted, having regained his composure.

The barrel was duly withdrawn; a psychological victory had been scored, and with it, the orphans had lost their upper hand.