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Opening extract from

Little Soldier

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CHAPTER ONE

'Here, man, come an' have a deck at the hole in Ken's arm. Show 'em your arm, Ken!' Theo Julien was trying to work up a crowd in the school yard like a market-stall man in Thames Reach - with Kaninda Bulumba his stock-in-trade. 'Come on, Ken, give 'em a show!'

But Kaninda's eyes said 'No! Get off! Don't touch!' The healed-over bullet hole in his arm wasn't there for using like street kids would, begging for shillings. It wasn't there for stares and chicken clucks. This hard little pit which his fingers kept finding in the night was what he'd got away with when the bullet holes in his family had done much worse and killed them. Over and over.

'Be more of a giggle seeing what other 'oles he's got!'

'I'm in for that crack!'

'Erk!'

'Seen his arm,' someone said. 'Seen it in PE. My mum done worse to my uncle...'

Theo grabbed at Kaninda walking away. 'Don't blow me out – only trying to make 'em feel sorry, man. Bleed for you.'

'Don't want bleeding, you got me?'

Theo clapped him on the back, Mr Broad-grin Bigheart. 'No? What you want, then, Ken?' He'd lost the punters.

Kaninda said nothing. He looked up at the school roof, at the steep angle of the satellite dish which told him the same thing every day – how far away from home he was, where the dish of the Nile Hotel sat as flat as a posho bowl. If he knew the angle of this one he could work out the miles. If he knew the maths.

He came back to Theo, growled. 'What I want? My land, and kill Yusulu killers.'

And Theo Julien had to go along with that.

Kaninda clutched his pet chameleon tight under his chest, wasn't going to let go ever, not in this world or the next. He tried to make his mind go as dark as the night outside, tried to think of nothing, be *dead. If the government soldiers came back through the door they didn't have to see any*

life in here, man or animal – nor pick up the tick of any thinking going on. When the Yusulu left a district dead, they left it dead – dead down to the last flat sack of a dog's body. Kaninda had to lie as still as a corpse, share the wet mud of his family's blood on the floor, pant in mosquito breaths, take no notice of the burning in his arm where he'd been hit by the bullet coming through his mother's belly – and pray to God the soldiers were too fired up with killing to burn down the house.

'Is your seat belt fastened?'

The steward in his uniform was leaning across the woman to check. His pinky-white face pulled Kaninda back from where he'd been, and the chameleon against his chest became his own tight fist.

'It's morning. We're landing soon. Shall I open this?'

The man didn't wait for a yes or a no – as if he knew what was best for refugees. He slid up the light shield on the window.

'That's better,' the woman with Kaninda said, 'now we can see where we're going an' all.'

But Kaninda couldn't. All he could see were the rolling tops of the clouds like miles of up-country

scrub, dyed pink by the rising sun: the colour of blood wetting a dress.

The steward went away, checking on others who were waking from their sitting-up sleep, those other kids brought out of the camp at Bikoto. *The lucky ones*, as they kept being told. Kaninda slewed his eyes for a look at this woman next to him, Captain Betty Rose. Big, not so black as him, sitting up in her seat like a teacher for a school photograph, going along obediently with the aeroplane orders for coming down out of the sky.

'Cabin crew – positions for landing.'

Captain Betty Rose patted Kaninda's knee as the plane went down into the mash of the clouds. 'Not long now, boy. Here comes London, an' your new home.' But her smile was directed up at the sky, not at him.

Kaninda shuffled the blanket on his lap; and beneath it he found the seat belt buckle and unfastened it. His eyes were slits, his mouth was dry closed. His life was finished. He didn't care what happened. If the plane crashed he *wanted* to die. He hoped it would. But he would never do what these people said. He took no orders from them or from anyone. His orders came from The Leopard – Colonel Munyankindi – and Sergeant Matu; from soldiers in the rebel army – to lie

still, to fill plastics from puddles, to collect goa beans, to stand guard, to shoot and kill. The only other orders Kaninda Bulumba obeyed were given by himself. And the big one, if the aeroplane did not crash, was to turn round, go back and join up again with the Kibu rebels and help them do to the President and his Yusulu clansmen what they had done to his mother and his father and his little sister Gifty. A thousand times over.

At Heathrow Laura Rose stood waiting with her father for the flight to come in. *Landed* it had said on the screen; now they had to wait for the God's Force party to clear Immigration and come through with the orphans and their baggage. And as a welcome in case the press were there, Laura and the rest were in their red and gold uniforms; red for the blood of Christ and gold for the gates of heaven. With black lacy mini-briefs underneath for the rebel way she was thinking these days. Where Jesus couldn't see – and wouldn't look if He could.

Her dad put his arm round her epaulettes. 'Good to see her down safe, eh?'

'Yeah. Excellent.'

'No more chips!'

'And no more peace.'

Her dad backed off. 'She ain't that bad!'

'Not her. The boy. Kaninda. My new *brother*. God knows what we've got there.'

'Whatever we've got, he's had a terrible time. Left for dead when his family was massacred. No living soul in the world to love him. It's small enough sacrifice to make.'

Laura looked up at her dad, only a lieutenant while her mum was a captain and a minister. He always *said* the right thing, but it never came out as if he believed it with all his heart and all his soul. His prayers probably ran out of push halfway up to Heaven, while you bet her mum's got there on fast track.

But there was no fast track about coming through the airport gates. Everyone else from the flight came past and then there was a long wait with nothing happening.

'Were they on it?'

'Immigration,' Laura's dad told her. '"Asylum seekers" – loads of paperwork...'

And when they did come through, Laura's mother seemed to be holding it all in her hand, sheaves of it, flapping the refugee children on, six blank-faced kids dressed in white and grey. But Captain Betty Rose big and smiling. 'Hallelujah!' she called. 'God be praised indeed!' – even before she said *Peter* or *Laura*. All the same, the hug she

gave to her daughter was a drop-everything affair.

Which Kaninda watched, kicking the trolley wheels.

'This is Kaninda.' All around them Monis and Mangengas and Nanous were being introduced to their new God's Force brothers and sisters, the rescue project completed, praise the Lord.

Or just started. Kaninda stood as still as a slave being inspected for use in the home. Peter Rose had to lift the boy's hand to shake it. Laura said 'Hi' but the boy stayed silent. And to get on with life the way life had to be got on with, Captain Betty led the contingent through Terminal One to where the God's Force minibus was waiting in Short Term Parking.

A white minibus, fourteen seater. The same sort of carrier that used to race the streets of Lasai City picking up passengers for work or market, the driver shouting the route – before the President's clansmen commandeered them, when what came out of the windows were bullets to clear the crowd.

It was still early morning in Britain, and three hours back on the clock. What was 9.00 a.m. Lasai time was 6.00 a.m. London, so the road into the capital was clear. And this was a road without potholes, where even the side streets were tarmac instead of rutted red earth – the big buildings not

much different to Lasai City except for no shell holes, and the housing blocks and small shops neater and going on and on and on.

Kaninda leaned his head against the window and when it bumped against the glass he let it bump, let it hurt, bad as it liked. Because these roads were never where he wanted to be. This was all just the dog luck of being separated from the Kibu rebels and getting rounded up with stupid soft refugees.

It was the river. Uebe. Rivers were water, were drink and food, were a wash. They were roads, too, but on the attack orj on the run, rivers were sometimes dividers that had to be crossed.

Their force led by Sergeant Matu had come far up country to gather with The Leopard and the main rebel army at Kibu. Their guerrilla attacks on government patrols and their ambushes on troops were only flea bites on the mangy dog, but now the army was joining up to start the liberation. Radio messages, talk in the villages, leaflets on the road, they all told in secret code what the squads had to do. Head north. Assemble. So days were spent on the trek, pushing through sedge and flooding; sleeping under guard in the thatched huts of far villages; hiding up in the markets and small towns when the government lorries came shooting through. Because

the rebels' day was going to come.

And everything was going well – till a traitor or a tortured prisoner spilled something he shouldn't spill, and a platoon of government soldiers got onto the tail of Sergeant Matu's men – good trackers and with helicopter help. Rotors flattening the bamboo, Kaninda had to dive off the track and sink himself neck deep in a narrow channel of the Uebe: saving himself, but losing the rest, and good luck for him, too, because the killing was soon over with bullets to waste, and Sergeant Matu and the rest would never make the rendezvous, not in this world. But risking the crocs and swimming the river, Kaninda took the wrong turn, into the sun instead of away from it, and going through one village too many he found himself in the saving hands of the Red Cross. No gun. No bullets. No story, except the lie that after the shooting-up of his home he'd wandered and wandered in a dizzy state and kept himself alive by thieving. While the hole in his arm had healed itself.

No, he did not want to be here. Not in London, not at this house where the carrier was stopping, where this Mrs Captain Betty Rose was looking at the building and giving off another 'Hallelujah!'

The place was like many he'd passed on the road

from the airport. It was joined to the houses on both sides, going up to second windows like something in the centre of Lasai City. And it was grey, dull, *dingy*, and a world away from his war. It was not like their house had been outside the city, plot number 14, Bulanda Road, one floor, painted white with the first halfmetre in ochre so the splashing of the heavy rains didn't throw earth stains up the walls: cement paint all bright in the sun; till it was suddenly death bright with blood all over it where the goat and the dogs were shot.

They got out of the carrier. Captain Rose's man was going on somewhere with the other people who had ridden with them: two stupid refugee girls in white shirts who had not said a word since Bikoto, and another boy, younger than Kaninda. And no words needed now, as Kaninda followed into the house, not carrying anything because he had nothing to carry. There was just him, and he was too much.

He trailed inside, into a narrow passage, where the woman looked all round like inspection time. He stood turbulent just inside the door, wanted to run at that wall with his head and smash himself to the next world.

'Come on,' said the girl. 'Your room's up here.'

Kaninda followed, looking at his shoes as his feet

felt the soft of all the furry matting on the floor.

'Carpet,' she told him. 'Is that new to you?'

So? It was, after weeks of dry track, wet track, grass and mud, when the first proper concrete floor he'd stepped on had been at the airport; the first under his feet since that bloody night at home...

'Here you are. And, 'case you're wondering, I'm Laura.' The girl opened the door of a room just round from the top of the stairs. 'Bathroom's back there.'

Kaninda went on past her into his room.

'Hope you like it. Hope you're happy here.'

He slammed the door.

But it wasn't two minutes before it was bustled open – time only for a stare at the window.

'So, Kaninda, how you like your room? Pretty com-*for*table, eh?' The woman had come direct in. Even his own mother used to shout, 'Open!'

'You got a cupboard here for hanging up your clothes, an' a chest-of-drawers for your underwear and socks, and here by your bed's a Bible. And the bathroom's—'

'Seen.'

'Good.' She stood facing him, took up all the space between him and the door. 'Now we got to settle what you're going to call us...'

Kaninda turned away and looked out of the

window; shut her out. Over and between roofs, he could see a river.

'I'll give you some things to choose from. *Cap'n Rose* – is who I am. *Aunt Betty* , or *Tante Betty,* is what some family people call me. Or, I don't mind – I'd like – please the Lord – Social Services an' the judge giving us their blessing – if you picked on calling me what Laura does.' There was a long space with just the breathing going on. 'Which goes by Mum.'

Still just the breathing, and the look from Kaninda continuing at the river and the funnels of a ship.

'Eh? What you think?'

Somehow he kept the pin in his grenade, thought of Sergeant Matu's orders – the orders he'd been obeying since he'd fallen into the hands of the Red Cross. *'If you're taken, lie low, submissive as a cringing dog, an' wait the chance, an' when you can, run!* run! *You got me?'*

'Well, something'll come. "Patience is a pain, but it pays." Peter – he's put you some things in your wardrobe. You have a look. Then we're going to have a proper English breakfast. I'll get Laura to give you a call an' all.'

She went, and Kaninda stayed fixed on the river. *Fix on something outside the cell.* And he knew his

geography from Social Studies at school. He knew that all the rivers of the world joined up with all the seas; and all the waters of all the seas joined up along all the coasts of all the countries. Which meant East Africa, too, joined with the sea along the white sand beaches and at the ports where they sent out the sugar and the coffee.

Not being a bird he couldn't be joined by the air, the way they'd come. But the sea, that was different. Ships, boats, they could join things up.

He looked down at his bony arms, getting to look like a famine boy's, the scarred hole gone dead in colour. And he asked himself, could he eat enough of this woman's food to give him the strength to row halfway round the world? Because if hate and anger were strength he could do it, just.

The other side of the bedroom wall, Laura was taking off her God's Force uniform having shown the flag of Christ; not that anyone at Heathrow had taken the least bit of notice. *Hallej-bloody-luyah!*

She looked at herself in the mirror, the underneath her. She was pale, more of her father's white than her mother's Seychelles gold, and not bad for thirteen on the figure front.

'Laura!'

And throwing the black briefs behind the bed

before the door could get flung open.

'Yeah?'

'Call Kaninda for his breakfast, will you?'

She pulled a face at the mirror. *Kaninda!* She was going to wish the sound of that name a lot further off before she was too much older. Like the name of *God's Force*. There was more wrong with life than right, and that was the truth of it.

But she went, and knocked on the boy's door; not expecting, and definitely not getting, any reply.