

Indoctrination
By Calum Chrystal

A shape sat in the tangled shrubbery. Above this mess of roots and greenery, stood rows upon rows of interlocking trees. They had large jagged leaves and together formed a canopy of copious exotic fruits. Down in the undergrowth, beneath the looming trunks of these gargantuan trees, there was a small place where the green stopped. The roots had turned dead and brown, the soil too barren to have held any life. This left a small space of darkness, adverse to the lush, overwhelming beauty of the forest which surrounded it. In the dark, the figure was near indistinguishable from some startled animal, but upon closer inspection it became clearer. It was a young boy, dark in colour and small in stature. He was poorly grown, with small limp arms, barely any bigger than the rotten roots which encircled him. If he had remained still and lifeless in the bush, then perhaps he could have blended in. But the boy could not. He trembled uncontrollably as if on the verge of a violent seizure. These sudden convulsions were not caused by any danger within sight or even his own need for self-preservation, but the noise. The noise of a village melting and collapsing amid bellowing flames. The terrified screams of men, women and children, interrupted by a barrage of gunfire. The pleas for mercy, left unanswered by both God and attacker. The boy had heard stories of this rogue militia and their attacks before. Perhaps an uncle, or an old family friend had been killed in a raid, but it had never felt so close to home. Only now, when he didn't know whether his family was dead or alive, did it truly become a reality. He had lost track of how long he had hid in the shadow of the trees, but time was not important to him anymore, only fear concerned him now. As the cacophony of screams and thunderous gunfire began to die down, the boy began to feel that he might be safe. The sounds of war and violence began to subside, until all he could hear was the occasional footsteps and muttering of the raiders. Perhaps he was finally free, maybe they would leave him be and simply move on. He wanted to leave the shelter of this living sanctuary and search for his family. If his father was gone then Nina was his responsibility now. He could picture her standing in her good Sunday clothes, paralysed by the sight of their home consumed in a relentless blaze. Or perhaps she was already gone. He hated himself for even considering it. He had never felt such a compulsion to hold his younger sister in his arms. Now he would have to be strong enough for them both. He felt the urge to burst free from this hollow and rush toward their home, there were still some voices and frequent screams, it was possible she was still alive. If he could reach her in time, then there was still the prospect of escape. But he could not. Fear coiled around him, tightening. The boy could hardly stop himself from being sick, let alone dash into the face of danger and almost certain death. His own cowardice sickened him. The boy sat in the hole, no freer than if he was chained to the spot. He waited and waited, as the light began to dim and the darkness began to encroach. Soon there were no more screams, but the hushed whispering of a few men. The boy could not tell where the voices came from, but they soon became louder and louder. The footsteps became louder too. He now heard the snapping of branches and the squelch of the wet grass rather than the crunching of gravel on the

sandy main road. The boy clasped his hands tightly and prayed for salvation. Could God still exist in a world like this?

A rifle barrel poked through the tall grass opposite him. The boy hoped that it would fire and end his misery. He did not wish to look upon the man who had destroyed his village and made him feel so worthless. He did not know if his heart could take it. He was afraid such an encounter would poison his soul, an eternal stain that would never leave him. But when the grass separated, he saw that it was not a man, but a boy. This boy looked of equivalent age to him, although he was of a lighter complexion, and held a rusted machine gun in his hands. He had soft features and large eyes that conveyed how tired and surprised he was; a far cry from the monstrous figure that the hiding boy had imagined. The most striking feature was a large brand that he had on his cheek, it was faded and obviously old, but the pinkish skin was still scarred in a noticeable horseshoe pattern. On the side of the branded boy's gun, several letters had been poorly carved into the stock K-O-F-I. Perhaps that was the branded boy's name. He had been stunned by his discovery of this terrified boy in the bush; he stood for a few seconds looking at him in disbelief. For a brief moment, the hidden boy thought that he would let him go. The branded boy's face looked uncertain and his eyes seemed to show a hint of sadness. But this feeling quickly faded as he raised his rifle and turned to alert the others of his discovery. "Please..." pleaded the boy to an uncaring and indifferent killer. The branded boy had shown a trace of compassion but now he had hardened again to become a wall. He grabbed the boy from his dark place of comfort and security. The daylight burned his eyes as the others were alerted to his presence. The boy cursed him in this moment; he fixated on the branded boy's face and wished that one day he could inflict the same pain and torment on him.

As he was dragged through the mud and grass the boy couldn't help but look upon the destruction. The village was almost completely gone. Any remaining structures had been turned to shrivelled, black husks. Bodies littered the ground, some lay in puddles of dried blood, while others had been scorched by fire leaving charred remains. It was hard to believe that these were ever human. The boy couldn't bear to look any longer. He didn't understand how another person could do such horrific things to their fellow man. He shifted his view towards the band of raiders and murderers that had destroyed his life, and again he was left bewildered. They were a diverse group of men and children, some of whom were barely any older than him. The group seemed to have formed a circle around another older figure. He wasn't particularly muscular, but in height he was a towering giant above the group of juveniles that surrounded him. The man was black, but a far darker colour than many of the others, the boy thought that he must be from the far South of the continent. He wore a green military issue jacket, with red and yellow patches on it, but it was far from pristine. It had been cut at the sleeves with frayed, ragged edges and it was covered in holes and rips in the fabric. This man may have been part of a structured

military once, but now he was nothing more than a killer. He had a calm expression on his face as if he was lost in thought in a faraway place. But when he saw the boy his expression changed to a wry smile. The man took off his faded red beret and did a sort of curtsy, as a twisted formal greeting. The boy refused to meet his gaze, looking back towards the ground. This caused the man to chuckle to himself, but after a few more seconds of silence his grin turned into a far sterner look.

“What is your name, boy?” the man questioned, in a thick accent.

The boy remained silent. He hoped the man would leave him alone if he remained quiet; if he didn’t interact then he could still flirt with the notion that this was not real. The man was practically seething with anger, the veins on the side of his head noticeably protruded.

After a few more seconds of silence the man made his frustration known. He grabbed the boy’s chin and forced him to look towards the burning houses.

“Is that why you refuse to answer me?”. The boy tried to remain straight-faced, but there was a noticeable change in his eyes. The man noticed this weakness.

“Which one is yours?” he said gesturing to the smouldering wreck of homes.

The boy looked towards the homes, not for the man, but for his own sanity. As he suspected he could not see his home any longer. It had been a small shack comprised of mostly wood and clay; the fire had entirely consumed it. There was nothing left.

“It’s... it’s gone.” Mumbled the boy, fearing the consequences of not responding.

The man was pleased.

“Oh, so you can talk. Well, I’ll ask you again then what is your name?” he said, kneeling down to the boy’s level.

The boy knew what he was trying to do. He couldn’t believe the man would dare to act so casually after everything they had done. The boy felt compelled to lunge towards him, but he had to stop himself. He stared into the man’s eyes. They seemed almost empty; the only light he could see was reflected from the fire. The boy didn’t know what this man would do and he didn’t wish to find out.

“My name is....Issa” he admitted.

The man accepted this and returned to his previous kindly façade.

“Since we’re sharing I’ll tell you my name...” he took a pause as if this were a performance. “Well it’s more of a title. You can call me Kiongozi – that means I’m the leader. I assume you’ve heard of us?”

Issa nodded, remembering the tales and warnings he had heard over the last couple weeks. His father had spoken of them, how they killed and stole all in the name of ‘freedom’. He had labelled their campaign as a ‘corrupt rebellion’.

“I have a proposition for you. I’ll allow you to become one of us... as long as you prove yourself”

Issa’s eyes lit up; he didn’t understand. This must be some sort of sick joke, this man – Kiongozi - had burned his home and likely killed his family, and now he was attempting some sort of bargain.

“I can tell you’re confused. That doesn’t matter. What does matter is your decision. You can either join or die. The only way you’re of use to me is if you join the fight,

otherwise I may as well kill you like all the rest” He allowed Issa a moment to consider his words before he continued. “I understand it’s overwhelming, but it’s probably the only time in your life you’ve ever truly had a choice.”

Issa stared at him intently. He was a mad man to be sure, but he was allowing him a chance to live. Issa was certain that this encounter would end with his death, so this chance at escape was a shock to him.

Earlier, death may have seemed like a potential prospect, but that was when he was in the thralls of fear, he would have chosen anything to make those feelings cease. Issa didn’t want to die. No matter how he justified it in his mind, he would not willingly give up on life. If dying was not an option then his only choice would be to join. He could never forgive them for what they had done, but living was more important than what was right. Joining with this band of murderers and marauders was a sacrifice he was willing to make to continue living.

“I...I don’t want to die! I’ll do whatever it takes!” he finally confessed, defeated.

Kiongozi looked at him with a wide smile on his face, but this time it was not a mocking one, but far more sincere and genuine. Kiongozi’s smile turned into a wide grin and then eventually he erupted into a hearty laugh as he grabbed Issa and flung his arm over his shoulder. His demeanour had now completely changed, he had gone from confrontational and aggressive to friendly and jovial.

“I’m glad you made that decision. We offer no mercy here for cowards, and I would rather not kill you.”

Issa felt a surprising sense of companionship in this moment.

Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad, Issa thought. He wouldn’t be an outsider anymore. He might have lost his family but had found protection and security in a group of people who would die for him. He couldn’t imagine doing any of the horrible things that they had done, but some of them younger than himself had adapted to it, perhaps in time he could as well. Somehow Issa could see himself living this kind of life. Not only Kiongozi had changed, but the atmosphere of the whole group had lifted, some of them now revealed smiles rather than sneers; a sense of friendship rather than hostility. Kiongozi brought him to one of the boys in particular.

“This is Kofi; he’ll be showing you the ropes” said Kiongozi, gesturing towards the familiar boy.

The two boys shared a knowing glance. Part of him still felt contempt towards Kofi; he could have left him alone but he chose to pull Issa into this new violent life. Kofi said very little at first, but it was apparent that he was not as cold and calculating as Issa had originally imagined. His unusually quiet persona made him seem more insecure than stoic. Although his scars told a different story. He had little cuts and bruises all over his body, it was apparent he had been through some amount of trauma. The most obvious was the brand burned into his cheek; Issa couldn’t imagine what he had done to receive it, but he was sure that the crime wouldn’t justify this punishment. Issa didn’t like him, but he obviously had experience with his weapon and had faced his fair share of conflict. If he stuck with him then perhaps he could survive. Issa looked around at the others who surrounded him; he no longer feared

them but felt compassion, they were trapped in the same way he was. They weren't good people but Issa began to feel that he could understand them. Some of them may be too far gone - Kiongozi was certainly some sort of maniac - but others seemed like people just trying to get by. Some were so young that they probably never knew another life. And this was his life now as well, so he thought he'd better get used to it. For a time, he felt like he had returned to some semblance of normalcy. He met the others and shared an occasional word or two with Kofi; he felt like he was growing on him. Yet Issa couldn't help but occasionally stare back at where his house used to stand. It was as if his past was reaching out for him, begging him not to leave. But there was nothing left for him here. The village was husk of its former self, absent of all life. Issa promised himself that he would only look for a while longer, then he would turn his back on this home and his life here forever. That was when something caught his eye.

Among the bodies that littered the path towards the homes, he noticed a shred of familiar clothing. There was a blackened corpse which had been mostly reduced to ash. Its bones had become so brittle that they had collapsed in on themselves creating a truly inhuman shape. Although the corpse was black, it was still possible to make out part of the clothes that lay upon it. It was a small linen dress, and although it had been stained by ash and soot, it was still as clear as the last time he had seen it. It was hers. It was Nina's dress, the one which he had pictured so long ago. He studied the corpse in an attempt to confirm his fears. The skin still bubbled and sizzled, although the fire had subsided. The face had melted away and collapsed in on itself, so much so that he could not be certain it was her. This uncertainty did little to ease his grief, for in his heart he knew that it was her. Issa did not know what to do, all the feelings of dread and pain came flooding back, it felt as if they had never left. In what kind of Godless world could this kind of pain and torment befall a young girl. He looked towards Kofi and the others, they had done this to her and he could barely contain his rage. The hate swelled inside him for Kiongozi and their whole corrupt group, but Issa had to take pause, for he realised where the brunt of this anger was directed. There were no words for the true animosity and hatred that he felt towards himself. He too had felt the pull of this lifestyle, and that was what he hated most. That he would have inflicted this kind of pain and suffering on someone else simply for his own continued survival, was something that hurt him to the very core. If the day ever came when he became one of them then he wouldn't be able to live with himself. And for the first time in his entire life, Issa seriously considered his own death, and how the world would be a better place without him.

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The orange flames of the torches flickered beneath the deep blue sky; it was like a dark ocean that flowed all around the fire, looking to extinguish it. Issa swayed from side-to-side, barely able to remain standing. His hands hung at his sides, covered in cuts and stained in blood. He watched the breath leave his mouth as it floated up

into the air, it was not cold, so this smoke must have been from the nearby fire. Issa felt a slight sting from behind. He ran his hand along his own back, it was covered in bumps and gouges that made it feel more like jagged rock than skin. It was painful, but not fatal. Issa was lucky that it hadn't been anywhere more sensitive. The bleeding seemed to have slowed, although he couldn't get the distinct taste of iron out of his mouth. Issa stared to Kofi and then back to his blade. This was always how it was going to end; only one of them could survive and Issa knew that it had to be him. Kofi wouldn't have thought twice about killing him. Perhaps this was why they forced him through this initiation, so he could prove what he was willing to do to survive. Kiongozi had said that he had a choice. He could choose between becoming a murderer or allowing himself to be killed, and that was really no choice at all. Kofi looked more aware of himself now and began to slowly move again despite his mangled leg. Issa watched Kofi's futile attempt to escape and decided this would be his only chance to end it. Issa looked to Kiongozi who goaded him with a disappointed look; he did not believe Issa could do it. Issa raised the blade above his head preparing to strike. He hesitated, staring into Kofi's eyes as they flooded with tears. His lips quivered as he tried to speak.

"Please..." was all that he could muster.

This struck Issa as all too familiar. He stood for a moment, trying to understand this strange feeling. He had felt this somewhere before, but he didn't know exactly where. In fact, he could barely remember anything at all. He went over the last day, and some of the day before, but after that it all condensed into a blur. That missing time scared him; he didn't want to remember what had happened during it. He realised that he had lost focus. Kofi was getting further away now; Issa tried to forget this feeling and return to the task at hand. But this feeling wouldn't leave, it burrowed down deeper, revealing memory after memory, until eventually it found its relative. It had been so long ago, but now Issa remembered it as clear as day. He remembered when their positions had been reversed; when he was the scared boy begging for his life, begging to be left alone. And when Kofi ignored his pleas for mercy and revealed his presence to the others. It didn't matter if he was conflicted about it, in the end Kofi had doomed him to this life of pain and violence. Issa didn't care why he had done it or what pain he had gone through to end up at this place; it was his fault, all of it. It was only fitting that Issa would be the one to punish him for it. Issa didn't dignify him with a response. Why should he care? There was no God watching them after all.

He brought the blade down with all his force slamming it into Kofi's neck.

Contrary to Issa's thought, Kofi was not trying to escape, he couldn't even raise his hands up to defend himself. The blade went through almost his entire neck in one cleave. Blood was already pouring everywhere, over the blade and drying into the dirt. Issa felt such a rush from this that he ripped the blade from the neck and brought it down again even harder, severing the head from the shoulders completely. It was surprisingly easy to cut off, Issa thought to himself, Kofi was barely any older than a child after all. Issa allowed the blade to fall from his hand and stood

completely still. He stared at Kofi's eyes, they still gleamed a little reflecting the fire, but there was something missing. The head was still mostly intact, with eyes and ears, a nose and a brain, but it did not belong to anyone anymore. Issa stood there for what seemed like an eternity, watching the puddle of blood spread further and further until it was almost at his feet. It looked black in the firelight. Eventually Kiongozi approached him, he displayed the same kind of smile as when Issa first joined them. It took Issa a while to recognise him, his surroundings appeared blurred and unnatural, as if he were in a dream. He grabbed Issa's hand and flung it up into the air, declaring him the victor to all the others.

"We have a new brother amongst us. One cannot become a warrior until they've shown that they will survive no matter the cost and you, my boy, certainly have" The crowd erupted in a cheer and the celebrations continued as if nothing had happened. They really were completely unfazed by this whole violent display. Kiongozi patted Issa on the shoulder and congratulated him.

"Well done. We'll get your back patched up after this. But first, I think you deserve a minute to rest and enjoy yourself." Kiongozi beckoned one of the boys from the crowd who came over holding a bottle of liquor.

Issa was still trying to come to terms with what he had just done. Could there really be no consequences for killing someone like that? It took him a moment to realise before he accepted the bottle.

"You are one of us now Issa. We will always be here for you, as long as you follow the rules and stay strong. You've seen what can happen if you let yourself become weak".

Issa tried not to look towards Kofi's remains, which were already being wrapped up and taken away.

Issa nodded and with a pat on the back that stung a little, Kiongozi sent him back into the crowd. He didn't know what to do, so he just stood there, alone. People congratulated him and offered him drinks and chanted his name, but he couldn't respond to any of them. He didn't recognise them, and he didn't want to. He stood by himself until he noticed a young girl in the crowd; she looked younger than everyone else. She was beaming, with a large grin on her face. She sprinted over to him and shook him excitedly. She began to chatter on and on, as if she had been saving all this conversation up for some time. She spoke to him with familiarity, as if she knew him well, but he couldn't even remember her name. He couldn't hear what she was saying at first, his ears were ringing. He just silently stared at her in the hopes she wouldn't notice his fatigue. Eventually her words came into focus.

"... wasn't that brilliant. What did it feel like? They say it never feels the same as it does your first time."

Issa couldn't believe what she was saying. He may have felt a rush in the moment, but now all he felt was a sinking feeling. He felt worse after every passing moment. He had done this to himself, and it was something it he couldn't take back.

"...and to think you were worried about it. I suppose it's like anything else; the more you do it, the easier it gets. I think you have a knack for it. Don't you think?"

Issa didn't want to respond to her. Why did they make him do that? Why would she be happy about it? She seemed to look up to him. But that wasn't what hurt him the most. It was that she reminded him of *her*. The memories of his sister came flooding back as well and with each one he felt a sharp pain in his chest. This girl had been twisted and contorted by her time with the others. Children made up more than half of Kiongozi ranks; Issa considered how many childhoods he had destroyed in this way. Issa had become a murderer, just like all the others, and the same fate awaited the children beneath him.

"Issa? What are you doing?"

His eyes burned as tears streamed down his face. He hoped that she would understand, being so young, but her look was more comparable to disgust. He remembered how they all looked down in disdain at Kofi as he lay crying and broken; this look reminded him of that. He looked around as others began to notice his tears and his weakness; some began speaking in hushed whispers while others stopped their celebrations and simply stared. He had to get away from them before they all turned on him. Issa took one last look at the disappointed girl. He wanted to help her, to show her that this life was wrong, but there was nothing that he could do. He was a coward now, just like Kofi, they wouldn't accept him anymore. He had failed her in the same way he had failed his sister. He turned and ran into the tall grass.

After a short while the grass gave way to marshland at the edge of the camp. He didn't want to go any further in case they mistook this as an attempt to escape. He slowed to a crawl and eventually sat down on a little mound of grass that overlooked the water. The sky had now turned a deeper black, becoming a dark backdrop for twinkling stars. Despite being away from the torches of the camp, he was not in darkness, for the moon shone more brightly than ever. The way the moonlight reflected off the marsh made it look almost beautiful. Issa sat and took this in for a while. He was finally alone, more alone than he had ever been, and he liked it. He was surprised to find that he still held the bottle Kiongozi had gifted him in his hand. He lifted it to his lips to have a sip but stopped as he noticed a drop of blood trickle down his arm. He followed the trail back up to his wrist and was shocked to discover that there was blood everywhere. He dropped the bottle and was too afraid to move for a second; Kofi was still with him, stained onto his skin. How had he not noticed this whole time. Issa knelt down to wash the dried blood away in the stream. But something stopped him. He stood perfectly still staring at the hands he has used to kill his only friend. It seemed to have grown completely silent. Only the buzzing of fireflies and the clicking of crickets remained. This blood was all that remained of Kofi; by washing his hands of him, Issa would lose the final part of Kofi forever. Issa refused to kill him again, he wouldn't let them win. Issa sat back down, examining the creases and wrinkles on his hand that were barely visible behind the layer of crimson. He wished that he hadn't killed him, Issa didn't know the consequences of refusing but he was certain that it would be better than what he was feeling now. He looked back towards the water. Just as it reflected the moonlight it reflected himself.

Although Issa didn't recognise this at first. It had been so long since he had seen his own appearance. It was as if someone else was staring back at him. His hair had grown long and unkempt, he was covered in cuts and bruises and his arms had taken on a more muscular tone. In fact, he now looked far closer to Kofi than his original self. This comparison ignited some surge of understanding within him. Kofi must have gone through the same thing once; he would have been forced to kill another child and he would have done it. Kofi was like him once, a scared child who was taken captive by this group and later, by their ideas. And eventually it was them that killed him. The same fate awaited Issa if he didn't do something. Issa was once the pleading child scared for his life, and now he had become the murderer. That is how Kiongozi recruits; he hurts them and shows that the only way to live is to hurt others. Those encounters the boys had shared, where one begs and one ignores, will repeat over and over again until there are no children left to use. He could not allow history to repeat itself, this situation should never occur again. Issa would not allow himself to become Kofi and he would not allow some other poor soul to become himself. Without children, Kiongozi would never be able to win his war, so that is what Issa must ensure. Issa thought of the broken girl who had spoken to him, and he thought of his sister. He wouldn't allow people like them to be hurt anymore; he would do this not for his own sake but for theirs. He would end this cycle of indoctrination and betrayal. His sacrifice wouldn't stop Kiongozi, but he couldn't be the only one. Perhaps this would inspire others to escape as well, they certainly never would have considered his more permanent method. The cycle seemed insurmountable, but Issa was sure he could make a few cracks show. Issa lifted the bottle back from the ground and brought it down on a nearby rock; the bottom shattered splashing the contents over the grass. It left a jagged edge that could surely cut the skin. Issa took one last look at the environment that surrounded him. He had once been scared by this kind of darkness but now he embraced it. Even in a place as desolate and unfamiliar as this there was still beauty to be found. The darkness, the moon and the water had enlightened him. He looked down towards his bloodstained hands and he was happy for he had made his final choice and he was not alone.