**A childhood lost.**

Lying in a hospital bed, brow sweating and stomach aching. Was it the drugs wearing off? Was it a horrific lucid dream? Or was it the fever taking its toll on Mukisa.

Drifting in and out of consciousness vivid images from a happy childhood were coming and going. Memories of being in school and finding out what his name meant, meaning “good fortune” he was proud to be called Mukisa, playing in the lush green forest with his friends seeing who could chase off the most monkeys, catching the biggest fish out of the boys in the village and his mother cooking it for his dinner.

Going home to his mother and father was Mukisa's favorite part of the day. Every evening they welcomed him home from school with open arms. His parents loved him unconditionally and believed a bright future awaited him. Mukisa adored playing football with his father and three brothers and scoring the winning goal just before mother called them all in, to sit down together and enjoy the lovely food she and his two sisters had spent the day preparing for them. And just as the sun was setting the family would sit by an open fire and sing songs of prayer. They would talk with one another late into the night about school and all the fun he had there playing with his friends and learning new skills.

Lying in bed at night Mukisa could hear the monkeys howling in the jungle near his tradition Ugandan hut. He liked to imagine they were talking to him, telling him the great things that would happen to him and the amazing adventures he would embark on.

Bar-tailed trogon birds squawked and danced in the sky in the early hours every morning, just as the glowing sun rose behind the towering greenery. Every morning Mukisa awoke with a smile on his face. He appreciated all living things big, small, tall or short. He valued all life and was taught all living things were just as important as each other.

Hearing the stream running every morning made Mukisa excited about catching the fish with his brothers down at the river.

All these things, all these routines, all these memories made Mukisa normal. Yet after the day that changed everything, he realized that he would never experience normal again.

Lying in the hospital bed he cradled his stomach hoping it would relieve the intolerable pain. The room was swirling and the sickness rising through his body. Buckets of sweat pored off his head, drenching his hospital gown.

**The day it all changed**

It was just like any other day. Mukisa was walking home from school with his father discussing his day and all the exciting things he had been doing. However, Mukisa had never realized how quickly his life could crumble, into tiny worthless pieces.

When the jeep pulled up and the men jumped out, bystanders had the sense to run in fear but Mukisa and his father couldn’t. Before either of them could speak soldiers with guns and heavy boots had a tight grip on the young boy and his father.

“Is this your father?” demanded the tall intimidating man with the large gun. Mukisa was so terrified that when he tried to speak no words came out. The soldier repeated himself becoming more infuriated with each time he didn’t answer. The deafening roar of the man’s voice almost sent him into shock. After answering the man Mukisa realized he would regret it for the rest of his life.

Do not lie. This is what Mukisa had always been taught. At home and at school. So, when the man asked him a question he answered truthfully, “Yes he is my father” Mukisa replied through a blanket of tears that were covering his face. His hands were shaking. For a split second he shared a glance with his father. He saw the panic and desperation in his eyes. Mukisa was always taught that running from fear was not weak, it was intelligent. As much as he wanted to run, he was paralyzed with fear.

Suddenly the soldier had a gun to Mukisa’s father’s head. His father was begging and pleading with him to let him and his son go, yet the soldier just looked at him with cold, stern eyes. The soldier grabbed Mukisa by the scruff of his neck and dragged him towards his father. Grabbing his hand, the soldier forced Mukisa’s finger onto the trigger…

It all happened so quickly. He was dead. And Mukisa was responsible.

Tears streamed down his shocked face. His lifeless father laid down on the dusty floor. Mukisa closed his eyes and tried to let go, however all he could think about was the guilt and pain of killing his own father.

The soldier lowered his gun and forced Mukisa into the back of the camouflage Jeep. The ride was bumpy and Mukisa jumped about and constantly hit his head on the hard aluminum roof that hung low above his head.

Mukisa could feel the time passing but felt as if the journey would last forever. Night turned to day and again day turned to night on the journey to the camp. Mukisa couldn’t sleep and was not offered anything to eat or drink. His mouth was dry, and his stomach flipped to the point were he thought he may be sick, he had never felt so vulnerable and frightened.

Thoughts of his mother and siblings waiting for them to come home, not knowing what had happened to them haunted his mind and made him feel sick to the stomach.

It was a while longer until they reached the camp. Mukisa was forced out of the jeep and into a wooden shack with at least seven other boys. Their eyes looked empty and scared and wounds cover their bodies. Their eyes automatically darted towards Mukisa and the soldier stood behind him. All the young boys jumped to their feet and saluted towards him. Mukisa looked confused as to why the boys were doing this, yet when they realized Mukisa hadn’t joined them in their salute their faces grew curious and their voices faded into a faint mumble. They stared at him in astonishment.

Mukisa was shoved into the dull corner of the hut and was handed a wooden create. All the other boys’ eyes lit up at the sight of the box. Mukisa wasn’t very sure what they wanted him to do, so using his common sense, he opened it.

In it was a gun similar to the one he had used to kill his father. Underneath the gun was a brightly colour bandana. As he looked around, he noticed that all the boys had different coloured bandanas around their heads. He held it up to the soldier as if to ask him what he should do with it. Then the soldier explained that it was to do with their ranks. His bandana was a light, pale, greenish colour. This was to show that he was new and was a part of the lowest rank.

Inside the box there was also a smaller hand gun and many boxes of ammunition. He was told this was his and he had to look after it. He was shown how to store the guns and keep them clean.

When the soldier left many of the boys crowded round shouting at him, demanding his name. Finally, he told them his name was Mukisa after they had paused in their shouting. However, some of the boys hung around the outskirts of the hut, peering in at Mukisa with caution in their eyes. None of them entered the hut as that was against the camp rules, but as Mukisa looked at some of them he realized that their guns were loaded and had their fingers on the trigger.

The boys seemed very violent, something that Mukisa wasn’t very used to. The first night was the hardest. The ring of gun shots continued all throughout the night, Mukisa didn’t sleep any way. He couldn’t. All he could think about was his poor family waiting for him and his father to return, deep down knowing they never would.

The next morning Mukisa woke to the boys kicking him and screaming at him until he got up. Soon he realized it was because the soldiers were coming. When they arrived, they placed five trayed of mouldy looking gloop onto the mucky floor. At first, he was quite bewildered at the fact that there were now eight boys in the hut and only five trays of food.

The boys turned savage. They raced towards the trays grabbing as many as they possibly could. Mukisa was pushed up against the wall of the boys fought over who was going to get to eat that day.

Although he hadn’t been there long, Mukisa soon realized he was going to have to toughen up if he wanted to survive there. It simply came down to Kill or be killed.

**The camp.**

Four months had passed since Mukisa had first arrived at the camp. During this time he had moved further and further up the ranks, he now had a purple bandana and was classed as rank five, to say he had only been there for a few months this was very impressive.

While working his way up the ranks Mukisa had been given basic military training and was now very fit. He had learnt to clean and carry the weapons around the camp. His responsibilities around the camp included keeping it clean and sanitary, he had to keep all the weapons clean and carry them around for superior officers.

Mukisa was on the verge of moving up to rank six and receiving his red bandana. However, unknow to him to rank up he would be faced with a very difficult task, he would have to kill someone.

One morning all the rank five boys were called to the center of the camp. When they arrived, a long line of captured men were stood waiting for them. Suddenly Mukisa’s stomach dropped and a gut-wrenching feeling washed over him when he looked in the men’s eyes. He recognized the look from when he and his father were held at gun point. The fear and desperation in their eyes. Almost as if they knew they were going to die…

Each of the boys were handed a gun and were allocated a place to stand. The gravel under Mukisa’s feet felt rough and scratchy, he looked down in shame as he knew what he was going to be forced to do. The gun was heavy and weighed down his arm. The soldiers shouted and the boys saluted. Then the first boy took his shot and the man was dead.

Mukisa’s heart was racing. His hands were shaking. It was his turn. He stared his victim in the eyes, the guilt had already hit him as he raised his gun. He steadied his arm and set his aim. Then he pulled the trigger.

He was dead. The man was dead, yet the world kept turning. This was Mukisa’s first kill.

The recoil of the gun knocked him backwards. When the shot was fired a sharp pain hit his shoulder, he hadn’t been holding the gun properly and it showed.

The first was the hardest then soon murder was no big deal to Mukisa.

He had now achieved rank six and claimed his red bandana. The past few months of de humanizing Mukisa had paid off, he now felt proud of his new rank.

**Ten months later**

Months had passed since Mukisa shot his first man. Since then Mukisa had killed so many people he had lost count. He was now in possession of the blue bandana and was up to rank nine.

tonight, was going to be Mukisa’s first raid. He was instructed to attack a small village (very much like his own) and kill as many of the villagers as possible. His plan was to invade through the jungle and aim from there. As soon as he was armed up and ready to go, he was in the back of a sandy beige jeep heading towards the chosen village.

His head was scrambled. The pain in his stomach felt as if his insides were being ripped out. Memorizes taunted him as he squirmed and rocked the hospital bed.

 When the jeep arrived at the village all was silent, the village was asleep. Mukisa joined half the group of boys and ran of into the jungle, the other half of the boys ran straight towards the shacks. Terrified screams rang out from the village. This was Mukisa’s key to attack.

Flames rose and danced in the sky as the soldiers set alight the innocent people’s houses. Guns were fired and hand grenades were thrown. Mukisa tried his hardest to block out the screams of the defenseless children being hauled into the army of jeeps. Mothers screamed and begged for them not to hurt their children as they were beaten bloody. As much as he knew he had to he couldn’t bring himself to kill anyone in the village, yet he couldn’t understand why.

For days Mukisa was trapped in his own head, thinking of the new recruits being marched into the camp and the poor beaten women left for dead. He couldn’t help but wonder about his mother and sisters, whether they were lying in a ditch somewhere half way to death.

After days of absence he was called to the main base of the camp. When he arrived, he noticed other boys of a similar age wondering around the camp aimlessly, their eyes where red and blood shot, their skin was grey and coarse. Fear washed over Mukisa.

Needles were scattered across the floor and syringes with an unknown liquid rolled under his feet. A soldier approached him holding the needle and grabbed his arm. Before Mukisa could pull away he stabbed the needle into his arm, it was like a sharp pin prick feeling that he had never experienced before, it was very unpleasant and sent Mukisa into a senseless daze.

All Mukisa could remember was wandering around the camp in a bleary haze. His head pounded and his body ached with desire for more of whatever the soldier had given him. He decided to wander over to the base to see if the soldier was there again.

Soon Mukisa was drugged up daily. He loved how it took all the pain and negativity away. When he raided villages he shot to kill with no pain and regret. Everything became easier for him.

**When the helicopter gunships arrived**

Mukisa had now been at the camp for a few months over a year and had been transformed into an emotionless killing machine. Even receiving his new bandanas and weapons didn’t excite him. Nothing could bring out any human emotions in Mukisa anymore.

For days he and his team had been preparing for a huge raid, guns were loaded, and the soldiers were ready. The day passed slowly, yet Mukisa has no sense of time or awareness of what was going on around him.

Just as the boys were loading up the jeeps and checking their guns were loaded an alarmingly deafening rumble roared its way through the camp. Soldiers shouted commands and held their guns tightly. Confused, Mukisa didn’t know what command to follow but, instinctively he knew a dangerous situation was unfolding.

Over the canopy of trees the loud rumble became apparent it was a helicopter gunship, it was providing air support to the government forces. The last thing Mukisa could remember was the explosion as the helicopter gunship rained missiles down on the camp. Mukisa was lucky to be only knocked unconscious as many others were killed by the missiles or by the government forces.

**The day it all changed again.**

The glare of the bright white hospital lights alarmed Mukisa as his puffy eyes started to pull open. A tall fair skinned woman was looking over him. She was like no one he had ever seen before, her piercing blue eyes stared into his and her golden silky hair was a mystery to Mukisa. It became apparent that she was a nurse, as the translator explained to him that he was in a military hospital.

Mukisa panicked and reached for where his gun would have been, the nurse cautiously took a considerably large step back and told him she wasn’t going to hurt him.

Over the next twenty four hours Mukisa drifted in and out of consciousness. This wasn’t a horrific lucid dream or a fever. This was him coming down off the drugs.

Everything he had experienced and suffered was real and Mukisa had the scars to prove it.

Over the next few months Mukisa had been weaned off the drugs and his body was starting to function normally again without them.

Sitting outside in the warm sun Mukisa was approached by a tall slim man who introduced himself in his native tongue as Akello, he explained to Mukisa that he was from Child soldiers intonational. He then went on to explain to Mukisa that he would be supporting him on his journey into rehabilitation.

Akello spoke to Mukisa of the days when he had once been a child soldier himself.

Over the coming months Mukisa and Akello became very close and shared many stories of what they had experienced. Unknown to Mukisa this was Akello’s rehabilitation counseling process taking place.

As the car swung down into the long drive leading to the colonial building Mukisa notices a large sign reading ‘Child Soldiers International headquarters’.

After being taken inside Mukisa entered a small office where two women sat. One was a translator who was there to explain to him the situation. Mukisa was being placed in a home for children who have suffered or experienced extreme trauma at the hands of the Ugandan conflict.

**Months later.**

Mukisa had been living at the home for a significant period now and was familiar with the staff and the other children. He liked the fact that he had been given his own room and that he had a responsibility to look after it.

Mukisa had an English tutor who he saw daily and who taught him to read and write along with basic math.

The thing he loved the most about the house was the sense of security it provided him with, it hadn’t been quick but at least he become comfortable to sleep at night. He also loved the food they made for him, on special occasions the cooked him fish (his favorite). He liked to imagine it had been a fish he had caught with his brothers down at the stream in his village.

Mukisa also thought highly of the games they played, he liked the games he could play by himself, he especially liked to arrange the pack of cards by colour. He liked to play in the garden sometimes with a football he had been rewarded with for doing so well with his English.

Slowly, very slowly he started to feel like a child again.

**The reality.**

Mukisa wouldn’t have been rescued and most likely he wouldn’t have survived. Mukisa was lucky, he reclaimed his childhood but for most child soldiers all they will ever experience is their rights being violated. Right now, there isn’t a happy ending for these child soldiers in Uganda

Currently there are eight to ten thousand child soldiers fighting in Uganda.

This story is based around true events that are happening today and the exploitation of children is now a global one. With wars and conflict spread from Uganda to Syria, Iraq, Libya and most other conflicts taking place around the world, more and more children become victims of human rights violations year after year.

 Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (Hart) are working to reverse this sad situation. They are doing lots of amazing work all throughout Uganda, and I would like to raise awareness of this in our school. Please see Harts Website and join our campaign.

Charlotte Cirino Year 8 Walton Le Dale High School, Bamber Bridge, Preston, Lancashire.