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Opening Extract from...

The Vorrh

Written by Brian Catling

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CHAPTER ONE

The bow I carry with me, I made of Este.

She died just before dawn, ten days ago. Este had foreseen her death while working in our garden, an uncapping of momentum in the afternoon sun.

Este was born a seer and lived in the expectancy of her departure, a breeze before a wave, before a storm. Seers die in a threefold lapse, from the outside in.

Her long name was Irrinipeste, and she had been born to Abungu in the Vorrh, the great brooding forest that she said was older than humankind.

We said goodbye during the days leading to her night. Then all of my feelings were put away; there were more important rituals to perform. All this I knew from our first agreement to be together as it had been described, it had been unfolded.

I stood before our wooden table, where her body lay divided and stripped into materials and language. My back and hands ached from the labour of splitting her apart, and I could still hear her words. The calm instruction of my task, embedded with a singsong insistence to erase my forgetfulness. The entire room was covered in blood, yet no insect would trespass this space, no fly would drink her, no ant would forage her marrow. We were sealed against the world during those days, my task determined, basic, and kind.

She had explained all this to me while I tried to serve her breakfast in bed on a rare rainy morning. The black bread and yellow butter had seemed to stare from its plate with mocking intensity, the fruit pulsing and warping into obscene ducts and ventricles. I perched on the edge of the bed, listening to her simple words glide with the rain, while my fear turned them into petrol, burning into my oxygenless, hidden core.

I shaved long, flat strips from the bones of her legs. Plaiting sinew and tendon, I stretched muscle into interwoven pages and bound them with flax. I made the bow of these, setting the fibres and grains of her tissue in opposition, the raw arc congealing, twisting, and shrinking into its proportion of purpose. I removed her unused womb and placed her dismembered hands inside it. I shaved her head and removed her tongue and eyes and folded them inside her heart. My tasks finished, I placed the nameless objects on the wooden draining board of the sink. They sat in mute splendour, glowing in their strangeness.

For three days I lived with the inventions of her and the unused scraps, the air scented by her presence, the musk-deep smell of her oil and movement. The pile of her thick, unwashed hair seemed to breathe and swell against the bars of sunlight that turned the room towards evening. These known parts of her stroked away the anxious perfumes, the harsh iron of her blood, and the deeper saturated smoulders of her unlocked interior. On the third day I buried her heart, womb, and head in the garden in a small, circular pit she had dug with her very hands a week before. I covered it with a heavy stone.

I obeyed with perfection, tearless and quiet, picking up the arrows that she had made and walking back into the house for the last time.

The bow quickened, twisting and righting itself as the days and the nights pulled and manipulated its contours. There was a likeness to Este's changing during her dying, although that

transition had nothing in common with all the deaths I had witnessed and participated in before. With Este, an outward longing marked all, like sugar absorbing moisture and salt releasing it. Every hour of her final days rearranged her with fearsome and compelling difference. Every physical memory of her body, from childhood onwards, floated to the surface of her beautiful frame. I could not leave her. I sat or lay next to her, fascinated and horrified, as the procession gently disgorged. Her eyes waxed and waned memory, pale transparency to flinted fire. She was dimly aware of me but able to instruct and explain the exactitude of the living object she would become. She did this to dispel my anxiety and pain; also to confront the ecstasy of her control. In the evening of the third day, the memory in my dreams began to show itself. It refined our time together, the constancy of her presence. Since leaving her village, we had never been apart, except for those strange weeks when she had asked me to stay inside while she dwelt in the garden day and night. When she returned, she was thin and strained.

The bow is turning black now, becoming the darkest shadow in the room. Everything is very still. I sit holding the two wrapped arrows in my hands. Out of their turnings come hunger and sleep, forgotten reflections of my own irredeemable humanity.

From the cupboards and the garden I juggle anticipant food, flooding my senses with taste and smell. Citrus and bacon rise in the room; sage and tomatoes, green onions and dried fish, unfold.

My hands tremble holding the bow, the arrows between my teeth. The moment has come. The two arrows that Este made are white, an infinite, unfocused white without any trace of hue or shadow. They absorb the day into their chalky depth and I grow sick looking at them. I lift the bow, which I must have strung in my sleep, and nock one arrow into its contrast. The

other is wrapped away and saved to be the last. She said it was for another to shoot, a bowman who would come after me. I will make all the other arrows.

This was her last instruction. I draw the bow back with all my strength and feel this single gesture brace every muscle of my body, feel the tension lock in as the grace of the string touches my lips. I feel as if the world stops to hold its breath. I raise the bow skywards.

The arrow lets itself go, vanishing into the sky with a sound that sensually pulses through me and every other particle of substance and ghost, in or out of sight.

It is still travelling the spirals of air, sensing a defined blood on its ice-cold tip. For a moment I am with it, high above these porous lands, edging the sea, its waves crashing endlessly below. Above the shabby villages and brutal tribes, singing towards the Vorrh. This arrow is in advance of my foreseen journey into the depth of the forest, but it will never be my guide. She said that it was for me, but never to follow.

The pain calls me back as I stand dazed in the garden. The inside of my arm is raw from where the bowstring lashed it, removing a layer of skin with the ease of a razor, indifferent and intentional. Stepping forward, I pick up my sack and quiver, steady my looping stance against the bow, and begin to walk into the inevitable.



Tsungali sat, a lone black man on the mud parapet wall of a colonial stockade.

Far to the south, twilight was tasting the air. Swallows darted and looped in the invisible fields of rising insects, restless arrowheads spinning in the amber sunlight. One moment, black silhouette, Iron Age. The next, tilting to catch the sun, flashing deep orange, Bronze Age. Dipping and rotating in giddying time: Iron Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age.

Watching them were his yellow eyes. Tsungali attempted to gauge their distance and speed, making abstract calculations across the infinite depth of sky, a solemn assessment of range and trajectory for a shot that could never be made. Across his knees lay his Lee-Enfield rifle, a bolt-action firearm of legendary durability, in perfect working condition and untouched by any other hand since he was given it in his early manhood. The excitement of possession, matched by his pride at becoming a member of the bush police.

He and the gun bore cuneiform scars and indentations. They had been written into. Prophecies and charms marked his face, talismans against attack from animals, demons, and men. The butt of the Enfield was inscribed with the tally of the twenty-three men and three demons it had officially dispatched. It had been years since Tsungali had worked for the police and by extension the British army. So he was confused and disturbed at being called for, summoned to the enclosure he had known so well and loved as home, the same compound he had seen turned into the bitter kraal of his enemies.

They had come looking for him, not with troops and threats like before, but quietly, sending soft, curved words ahead that he was needed again. They wanted to talk and forget the crimes of before. He had smelt this as a trick and set about carving new protections, constructing cruel and vicious physical and psychic traps about his house and land. He spoke to his bullets and fed them until they were fat, ripe, and impatient. He waited in docile cunning for their arrival, which had proved to be calm, dignified, and almost respectful. Now he sat and waited to be ushered into the fort's headquarters, not knowing why he was there and surprised at his own obedience. He gripped the Enfield to fence it off.

The Possession Wars began when the True People, Tsungali's people, rebelled against the British occupiers. Once a policeman, Tsungali then became a leader in that bloody uprising. Tsungali should have hanged for treachery and murder, for betraying the position of responsibility given to him. Over three days, a peaceful and obedient community had turned into an inflamed, rampant mob. The church and school burnt down. The resident officers butchered in their astonishment, radio equipment torn to pieces. The airstrip and the cricket pitch had been erased, scrubbed out. Not a single straight line was allowed to exist anywhere.

By the time the British officers had arrived, they found a squalid churn of destruction. Everything that had been achieved with, or given to, the natives had been intentionally eradicated, mangled back into their own stinking, senseless history. Tsungali stood at the centre of the carnage, triumphant and exhilarated, wearing only his tunic jacket and his peak cap, ridiculously turned inside out. Feathers, bones, and cartridges were entangled in his hair, and his teeth had been resharpened.

Before this, when the colonial forces had first appeared, they were mysterious and powerful. Their ignorance of the world was forgiven. The quantity of wonderful goods they brought and the manner of their arrival startled the True People. Cautiousness made their hands hesitate and quiver over the treasures they were offered. There were gifts for everybody. Tsungali and his brothers watched their kindness with distrust and bewilderment, watched the endless flow of impossible things: animal meat in hard, shiny shells without bones, killing irons of great power and accuracy, rainbows of cloth, talking cages, and a swarm of other things and powers with no name.

When the strangers were given permission to cut the trees and shave the ground, nobody could have expected the consequences. Tsungali had seen the first ones in the sky when he was

small. They floated belly side up like a dead lizard in a pool, streaking the sky with straight white lines. Tsungali asked his grandfather what they were, those dagger birds with long voices. His grandfather saw nothing, heard nothing; the sky was empty; they did not exist. There was no template in his perceptions for such a thing. And, if some did see something, then it must be from another world, and therefore dangerous and best left alone. The magicians said they were the dreams of young fathers still to be born, and that their growing frequency told of a vast future fertility. No one had an explanation when one came down to nest on the shaved strip in the jungle; the strangers simply had great power to be able to catch one so easily. Tsungali walked to the clearing with his grandfather, hand in hand. They stood and stared at the gleaming hard bird. Its shell was the same as the shell around the meat without bones. The old man shivered slightly and saw only the clearing with the strangers hurrying back and forth. He saw them because they were men, or creatures in the shape of men.

The excited child stepped forward but was yanked into a standstill by the old man's rigidity. He was rooted to the spot and his tugging grandson would not unbind him. The boy knew better than to argue, and tears of frustration filled his eyes. The old man wept too. One solitary tear crept through the scars of his face, through the diagrams of constellations and the incised maps of influence and dominion. A liquid without name, it being made of so many emotions and conflicts, each cancelling the other out until only salt and gravity filled the moment and moved down through his expression.

The airplane was full of possessions, more than had ever been seen before; astonishing things that made the young feel rich and honoured, making them far greater than neighbouring tribes, who had nothing. The plane also carried a priest. Over the next few years, the strangers settled in and brought families

and new belief to the village. They said they had changed, coming from different lands now with different ways of speaking, but this seemed untrue, like so many other things that were discovered later. They instructed the True People in the way of the one world, with its god that was ashamed of nakedness. They taught them how work might bring them those precious things that were previously given. They brought books and singing and exchanged the splendour of an invisible god for all their carved deities of wood and stone. And somewhere in that sickly trade, suspicion became woven into the fabric of trust. The insistence of guilt was converted into the notion that the True People must have already paid the price for something, something they had never received, something that just might be possessions.

The airstrip was carefully maintained and the goods continued to arrive. The empty planes were filled with the disgrace of their vanquished homes. Old weapons, clothing, gods, and kitchen tools were stacked inside to be sent away, shabby totems of a discarnate history, expelled. Clean pictures, metal furniture, and uniforms filled their spaces, or at least appeared to.

The flint to the great conflagration was a man named Peter Williams.



Peter Williams had joined the far-flung outpost just after the rainy season. His journey there had begun in conception. Khaki bedsheets, stained dark by khaki spunk, his father having carried the rifle and the flag for three generations. There had never been any doubt; he was to be a soldier. From the day of his birth to the day of his disappearance, there was only ever one road.

A great yellow sun had spun in the bluest of Wiltshire skies. His birth had been abrupt and easy, his brilliant red head bouncing in the warm light. The sun was always to be his principle, and he sought to embrace it.

He had been given a choice of posts, and the remote backwater was his most favoured. He desperately wanted to escape Europe, and England. The scars left by the gutting rope of the Great War were still fresh, if those words could ever be used in the same sentence. The rotting trenches had carved gangrene into the heart of the old countries, which clung together like so many old maids in a storm, friends and foes alike. He had been in a slithering ditch at Passchendaele for two years, where no sun ever warmed the forsaken earth. When there was daylight, it was contaminated and heavy, so that it hung densely on the black thorn hooks of splintered trees, the few verticals in a sea of mud, smoke, flesh, and metal. The only clear light he remembered was the light that had not existed. He had been one of those who witnessed spectral visions floating over the smeared remains of men and mules. Angels of the Somme, they had been called. An illumination of purity, squeezed out of corruption to flicker in the wastelands. He never really knew what he had seen, but it had helped him survive and erase the impossible reality of that carnage.

At the age of twenty-three, he had been ready for a far-off land of heat and life. From the moment he'd stepped from the plane and onto the rough-shaved clearing, he had felt satisfaction, as if the place had greeted him with a smile. There was something about the aroma of the jungle and the humidity, something about the teeming life that pulsed in every inch of the land, that had reassured him. Perhaps it was the ecstasy of opposites or the certainty that what he had witnessed could never happen there. Whatever it was he inhaled into his soul that day, it had grown stronger as he had walked through the singing rain forest to the barracks, with the step of a prodigal son.

The outpost was to the southeast of the Vorrh, two hundred miles from the city and two thousand years away. The tribe who owned the enclosure had been there since the Stone Age; their

land was an isthmus at the mouth of the great river, which ran from the sea to be swallowed by the great forest. They said it was the other way around, that the forest bled from its heart to invent and maintain the sea. They called themselves the True People, and they had been that forever.

The sublimation of the True People had led to the survival of their race and the obliteration of their meaning. As the twentieth century had made its entrance, it was deemed necessary and desirable to focus on the tribe's development, especially if the trade route via the river was to thrive after a long period of poverty. Three European countries had forcibly assisted their evolution. The British were the last to join the noble crusade, and they did it with their characteristic munitions of charm, cynicism, and armed paternal control.

The outpost was an elaborate undertaking. When he had arrived they were just finishing the roof of the church, complete with a joyless bell to summon the newly converted. There were six professional soldiers, two with families. A priest and a dozen bush policemen, aged between forty-two and fifteen, had been wrangled from the more significant members of the tribe. They took their positions very seriously. What they actually policed was a matter of speculation, since no set of formal laws had been introduced, and the previous mechanisms of agreed existence were fast being rubbed out. At least that's what the invaders had believed.

Williams had been an armourer in the Great War, and he was there to equip and train the new police force with weapons beyond their expectations. He had arrived with a cargo of arms and ammunition, which he lovingly unpacked from their solid crates.

All the hopeless carnage he'd experienced only proved to him that greed, pride, and blindness, once rolled together, created a mechanism of appalling velocity, and that humans out-

side of imagination are best kept caged and regulated by severe controls. Never, in all the conflict and the infinity of wounds, had his love and enthusiasm for the firearms changed. Yes, these beautifully designed and crafted machines had only one purpose, but they did not breed it. He knew that their sole purpose, the taking of life, would have been operated anyway, even if the tools at hand had been sharpened sticks and heavy stones. Indeed, he had seen trench warfare move into hand-to-hand combat, where the bayonet was too distant a weapon, where handmade clubs and honed steel had hacked flesh apart in slippery, sightless fury. If men were to be butchered, then better it be done professionally, with a precise tool in skilled hands. With this dislocation as a balm, he could continue.

He had been unpacking a crate of Lee-Enfield rifles when he realised, to his surprise, that they were not reconditioned stock as expected, but a batch of gleaming new models in mint condition. In fact, none of the order had matched his paperwork at all. Among them was a special prize, a Gabbett-Fairfax Mars pistol. A self-loading semiautomatic with an astonishing ballistic power, it looked like an axe or a hammer and possessed a rudimentary L of a body, an ugly, unique elegance of top-heavy dense steel, smooth and uncluttered. The rear end of the pistol was infested with a knurled mechanical contrivance of the breech, hammer, and sights. The Mars was intended for military mass production, but it entered the world backwards, and at the wrong time. It came with the same consideration that sent the mounted cavalry into the gas and machine guns of the First World War, with the pedigree of a medieval killing field: It could stop a horse. It sounded like the end of the world. Its recoil could break the shooter's wrist and spit hot, spent cartridge cases back into his face. The imagined accuracy was never achieved because its marksman, having taken the first shot, shivered and flinched so greatly before squeezing the trigger that it was impossible

to aim. It was the most powerful pistol ever conceived or constructed at the turn of that century, and nobody ever wanted to use it. Fewer than a hundred were manufactured.

He understood little of the local people. Their language was impenetrable, their ways oblique, and though their humanity was blatant from the beginning, all of their methods were questionable. But he had begun to be fascinated by the way they watched without looking, bemused by their laughter, which seemed disconnected to events, and intrigued by their shock at new objects and gestures. In fact, his curiosity was fusing him to them in direct proportion to the extent that he was becoming separated from all the other colonists of the outpost. He had not known this. His day-to-day work of demonstrating the weapons and organising target practice had consumed introspection and nullified his nagging doubts. It was only the incident with a girl named Este that forced his dislocation and pinned him up against isolation and the threat of court-martial.

Williams knew that the Dutch priest was a man of one gear: forward. A dauntless missionary, he had finished his church in a record two months. It was filled with the faithful every day, or at least what looked like the faithful. But on this day it sounded woefully empty as he stood outside, sheepishly peering into the moaning interior. A group of onlookers had started to form around the newly painted entrance steps, and the abnormality could be heard by nearly the whole village.

"Padre, what's wrong?" asked the first of the senior officers to arrive at the priest's side.

"It's one of the women," he replied. "She has gone mad."

The lieutenant pushed past the priest and opened the double doors to take control. The church still smelt of paint, its whiteness disorientating and off-key. In the aisle, halfway to the altar, a young woman knelt on the floor, surrounded by books, with one heavy foolscap tome open before her. She was naked and

menstruating heavily. A low, inhuman groan rumbled constantly from deep inside her, the kind of sound that is heard at a distance, from the centre of a glacier, or lethally close, when it growls from the sleek, unseen darkness of a big cat.

The lieutenant looked back to the priest and understood his reticence. "It's only a girl," he said, the greatest lie he could manage, because he, too, had begun to shrink back in fear. His testicles were sucked up into his pelvis and his hair was standing on end. Whatever was in the church was a girl only in the curves of its black surface: Its essence and action were not from the known world. What was in the girl was altogether alien to a trained modern mind, and it was rewriting the rules of phenomena in a language that had an irremediable taste of pure terror.

A second officer and a group of onlookers had begun to bustle at the entrance of the church. The officer had a revolver in his hand already and had pushed it through the door like a crucifix, ready to dominate anything into submission. He saw a blur that shivered. Its sound unbound him, made him want to flee. He smelt the fear of all those around him, and his bladder started to weaken and leak. Pointing his shaking defence down the length of the aisle at the hideous black confusion, he shut his eyes and squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened. The hammer had dropped, but only onto the flesh of the left-hand ring finger of Peter Williams. He had grabbed the pistol and restricted the action, twisting it around and down, forcing his colleague to his knees in yelps of pain. He took the gun away and tucked it into his belt. After looking down the aisle for a moment, he walked to the young woman, knelt beside her, and closed the book. The silence was instant, the fears and shuddering vanishing immediately.

"Coat," he called back to the door.

Moments later one had arrived and was brought almost to

him, it being thrown for the last few feet. He covered the girl and helped her to stand, then slowly escorted her from the church, a trail of blood left on the new floor. Once outside, he had expected her to walk off or to be collected by one of her own. But this did not happen. Instead, every time he stopped, so did she; when he moved, she began to walk. So they walked out of the camp together, and thirty minutes later they were deep in the bush.

It was then that he stopped to look at her, wiping the sweat from his face with the backs of his hands. She was now calm and without the faintest sign of perspiration. Lifting her head, she stared through him, her eyes the colour of opals, bright and unnervingly clear as they gazed into a distance that he preferred to ignore. Then she spoke a word that seemed out of sequence with her mouth: "Irrinipeste."

He did not understand until she said it again. He heard it deep in the back of his head, in a place where the old brain skulked. Only part of it clung, and he repeated it: "Este."

She nodded a kind of agreement and waited. To hear his name, perhaps? He said it slowly. Halfway through its second pronouncement, she started to twitch, then shake. He thought that perhaps she was going to spasm again; the blood was flowing down her legs at an alarming rate. But she gathered herself and walked forward, pulling him behind her.

They walked on, into a clearing with six or seven large and ornately decorated dwellings. A few chickens scurried about in their passing, and a peacock watched them and shrilled. He looked about them and was ready to call out, when the old man was suddenly there. His tattooed and bangled arms held out for the girl. She folded into them and let Williams leave the clearing. As he looked back, he saw her beauty standing between them. It was detached, older, and breathtaking.

