

THE WARRIOR
(A Short Story)

By

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The sun refused to go down in defiance of tradition. But I was there, ready.

A medley of anxiety, anger and revenge had matured into an obstinate lump in my throat. I turned my head from side to side ceaselessly to make sure that he did not sneak away scot-free. Not that he could; we had virtually surrounded him, see. Waso was lying in wait like a veteran lion just behind the rocks to the wind-side. Poya was in charge of the sunset front, perched skillfully like a bat, in the village-tree that stood visibly invincible in command of the central entrance. And you could not distinguish Mwoti from a stump of a tree as he stood guard on the sunrise path. I was blocking the mountain-side.

Actually to be perfectly humble about it, the idea was not mine. I first heard it from the mouth of a wise friend of my father, and then confirmed it by reference to the mobile chronicle himself. The "four-pillar strategy" is imputed to an inter-village war strategist going by the name Kavilo, who earned his living by setting one community against another. The war declared, he would then offer himself to both sides simultaneously as both peace-maker and general adviser on war tactics. My father found the idea revolting, so did I in fact. But now that I was at war myself, I was forced to doubt the wisdom of my prejudice. But that is another story.

There was Mamba too, lying low beside me in a state of excitement, wagging his tail and occasionally casting an inquisitive glance at me. True, tradition said nothing about participation by canines; but I couldn't remember anything in it either prohibiting general employment of canine teeth. At any rate, mine was more than a traditional role. I had a personal interest in Ndal.

And not only because he was a circumcisor. He was a *foreigner* by profession, hailing from across no river, behind no mountain; with no plume of an extinct bird affixed to his hat. To nowhere he would mysteriously disappear, only to emerge again unannounced, armed, as always, with his sharp and shiny circumcision-knife. For some inexplicable reason he was unfailingly absent during the rainy seasons. That's when we all armed ourselves with hoes, shokas and pangas, and invaded our fields to plant, weed, clear the bush and guard the millet from parasitic birds. His presence was a sure thing at the end of harvest-time.

Sometimes he would appear at that rewarding period when the maize matured for roasting, and disappear soon thereafter.

You could count on his absence too during the times of famine. Somehow he was able to leave a strong foul odour of his presence behind, so that it didn't feel that he had left the village at all. (By the way, his smell was so foul that, Kidevu, my father's billy-goat, would sometimes become jealous, raving and butting other goats in an attempt to re-establish his supremacy of bad odour over them.) Anyway, only once do I remember Ndalú returning before the famine was over. And that was when, one evening, having given up any hope for food, my father gathered us children and announced that we would be dining on meat. We knew our father to be a real genius for what we baptised 'the final rescue'. He would always come up with something edible at the last minute. But the last thing we expected that evening was meat. Meat! From under the skin of which animal? Naturally we greeted the pleasant news with jubilation, accompanied by wetting of mouths and whetting of knives.

Then Ndalú came out of the central hut with a calabashful of steaming boiled meat. Had it not been for the fact that I hadn't eaten a thing for the previous two days, I would have abstained from that meal.

I regretted later not to have had the courage to do just that all the same. I say 'later' because Ng'aNgumi unfolded the story behind the meat. Of all my father's wives, Ng'aNgumi was the only one with enough sense to act as a detective for us children whenever the grown-up world conspired against us. According to her, and I had every reason to believe her, especially when it came to anything to do with Ndalú, the meat we had just eaten was sheep-meat. Sheep-meat! But what of the tradition? We ate only goat meat, chicken meat, cow meat, deer meat and dick-dick meat. My father didn't even own a single sheep. So where did the sheep meat come from?

"Ndalú brought it along," Ng'aNgumi confirmed my fear.

"And father let him do that?"

"Child, this is famine."

And so, as I paced up and down my post-command waiting for the sun to set, that was one of the spurring memories vying for room in my crowded head. And I'm not counting the countless number of times I had to flee from pre-circumcision. I knew he had developed an uncontrollable desire to circumcise me. Witness the day he ambushed me on my way from tending my father's cattle.

It was the eve of the rainy season, whose advent was everywhere evident. The sky was buzzing with migrating bees flying

menacingly low beneath trees. Ngoso, the village-bird was singing joyously before sunset. Mukunungu, the head alligator, was reported to have been seen strolling majestically away from his hole; and the 'foul flower', that most reliable harbinger of the season, had, in its dramatic fashion, burst from a cloud of dust, sweating with the droplets of the mood of the time. I too greeted this guest of honour, as usual, with a tune from my sorghum-reed flute. I abandoned myself, and my father's cattle, totally to the fragrant aerial complements of the season; so that we, I and the cattle, became part of the season. And I had a feeling that Kang'au, the general leader, gave me her full support, judging from the hooved rhythm and the harmonious pace she set for the rest of us as we marched home from the grazing fields. The setting sun set an unprecedented pageant of 'sun-arrows', piercing the dust cloud mercilessly in front of us and ending uneventfully in our shadows behind us. There was no talking, no mooing, no chewing, no cud-swallowing. Only the sound of hooves punctuating the tune of my flute.

Thus tuned, we were marching tail in hand, hoof in foot towards the cattle-shed, when, suddenly Kanga'u stumbled, throwing us all out of rhythm and causing general confusion. I looked up, and there in front of me, advancing against the homeward direction and waving his circumcision knife, was Ndalú. I turned and ran, dropping and breaking my flute in the process.

And that was not all. When that evening I related the incident to my mother, I got nothing for my pains but derision, disdain and rebuke for being cowardly and unmanly. I shouldn't have been scared of him, I should have stood up to him and stared him in the face, man to man. Little boys had to develop courage and firmness of character; suppose it had been a wolf that had attacked the cattle...; I was not a worthy son of my father; she was ashamed of me...; and so on and so forth. Warning enough not to appeal to my father for a better verdict, there would have been no 'final rescue' for me.

But now? Now was the time to retrieve my lost manhood, time to summon my courage, to re-establish firmness of character; time to make up for all those lost times I had to flee from this foreign circumcisor to prove once for all that I was in command, worthy of my father's son. The past had to be purged of all humiliation and renovated into a bright new self.

Darkness was now setting in. The moment of trial was almost there. I had gathered all the weapons I needed for the task; a heap of 'wet-balls' from a mixture of clay and cattle-dung. I would have liked something more potent than a soft ball of mud that would merely fall apart on hitting the target. I would have preferred a serious weapon, say a stone launched from a catapult, in a manner evocative of David against Goliath. But tradition

denied me this. Which is why I solicited the services of Mamba.

I wanted to remain faithful to the verity of the legend. At those real times, you invaded a village, showered poisoned arrows on the inhabitants and took off with their cattle and women. Or you kidnapped young girls and made wives of them. In fact wife-kidnapping was the only way a man could get himself a family, and the practice became so profitable that some people made it into a profession, hiring out their services to bachelors. That's how the idea trickled down to the present, long after it had ceased to exist. Well, that's what my father said anyway, which makes it authentic.

True, today you still carry away the bride at night. (And, come to think of it, that's precisely what they had done to my sister the previous night.) But the object of 'kidnapping' is no longer the girl, but her personal effects. And so, this morning, as tradition would, Ndalú, the foreigner -- who else could it be? -- came to 'kidnap' my sister's kyondo. That's the basket containing her personal effects: copper chains, bracelets, beads, bangilis and even the magic lion grass nodules I had given her the other day! The indignity of it! The very prospect of this circumcisor making off with all that was so enraging that I shot out a spiteful spittle into the air in wrathful protest.

Our traditional assignment as young warriors of the village was to prevent the 'kidnapper' from accomplishing his criminal intentions, just as our ancestors had done on similar occasions. A cunning 'kidnapper' could get away unscathed, and there was no denying that Ndalú was not wanting in cunningness. I knew what his strategy was; Ng'aNgumi -- may she rest in peace in her grave -- told me all about it: he would create a false atmosphere of fear by making noises about uncircumcised boys and constantly threatening to cut off their offensive foreskins. Once he had made us scared enough, he would then shoot out like an arrow and take off with the basket. But I for one wasn't about to be intimidated. My very credibility as a man was at stake. I had my pride too to think about; and a plan to go with it.

The content of my plan was as follows: besides the suicide commando -- I'm referring to that proud pride of battle-hardened cubs answering to the names Waso, Poya and Mwooti -- I had organised a reserve army of untried conscripts between the ages of two and four seasons. These were under orders to remain concealed in the bush lying low like bushbucks until I cued them into action. Then I manned the ammunition department with a fresh-blooded squad of toddlers code-named "Ghost Shadow" in honour of their highly developed propensity to disappear suddenly at the moment of need. (I dislike justifying my actions, but I will allow myself a single compliment in their favour: they were of the reddest blood known to mankind.) The rest of us, those of the older

and more experienced generation, that is, between five and seven season, were to engage the enemy as soon as he reared his ugly head. I was to release the first shot, after which all would gather around and overwhelm the enemy. Should he prove too fast for us, there was Mamba to do the hot pursuit. In any case I could always plead ignorant of Mamba's canine interests in human traditions.

When the last glimmer of light sank behind Mutuluni mountain, (tradition dictates that action shall begin only after the sun has gone to sleep, presumably because ancestral kidnaps took place only at night) I kept my eyes dutifully fixed on the entrance of the hut. At first nothing seemed to happen. I was beginning to wonder whether in fact the kidnapper had not dug a hole in the hut and escaped, like the clever fairy in the anecdote. But then a familiar head peeped through the tiny entrance and surveyed the surrounding area. I took my 'ready' position and signalled everybody else to do the same. Mamba got into a heightened state of alert. But the head suddenly withdrew into the hut just as I was about to greet it with a pellet. Noticing this, the three post commanders relaxed. That was a mistake. It was a tactical measure that the circumcisor exploited to his advantage. For then, no sooner had he withdrawn than he was out speeding across the heath, heading towards the sunset. To this day I never found out how he knew that this was my weakest front. Poya was the least attentive of the three commanders, and the slowest. When I was briefing him on the probability of just this sort of surprise attack by the enemy, he was sucking at his thumb and picking his nose all the while staring at butterflies. Besides, he had not quite recovered from his latest attack by diarrhoea; but he was all I had on this post. Had the enemy headed towards the sunrise, Mwooti would definitely have intercepted him and knocked him out of action, that I knew. But I couldn't tell before hand how the foreigner was likely to behave, I swear it. As it was, he had gambled and won.

So I ran at top speed while shouting a warning to Poya to wake up and fight for his life. I intended to intercept the enemy myself because I was sure he would overrun Poya and escape. I commanded Mamba to make the best of his four feet. This Mamba did with absolute exactitude. Meanwhile Waso and Mwooti had left their command posts. Those were not my instructions. They, and the rest of the warriors, the reserve army and the "Ghost Shadow," were now pursuing the enemy, yelling, whistling and aimlessly shooting valuable pellets. Instead of aiming at the enemy, who was far ahead of them anyway, they simply threw the pellets at all directions. No wonder they succeeded only in hitting each other and turning an otherwise well-organised campaign into one mess of civil fist-fights.

Anyway, when all the warriors had lined up behind the cir-

cumcisor, he dodged left and right for a while before he swiftly darted to the right and ran towards Waso's command-post.

"Waso, get back to your position, quick," I cried at the top of my voice.

I don't know whether he heard me, but I saw him steeple-chasing across the heath in the direction of his post.

To the rest I commanded: "Surround the enemy, surround the enemy!"

And a multitude of uncoordinated warriors fell behind the enemy, falling and stepping on each others' heels, completely out of formation. Tragic. But I was too busy to be of any help to them.

I took one deep breath and leapt forward. I was on my way towards Waso's post. He had managed to corner the enemy all right, but he was too tired to deliver a useful blow at the target. It was Mwooti, the commander of the sunrise post, who finally registered a direct hit. "FINALLY!" I cried in ecstasy, "good old Mwooti." There are people on this earth from whom you can always get a direct hit.

I came running, almost out of breath, but prepared: out went a pellet, charged with so much anger it disintegrated in the air. I let another follow, with such a powerful jerk of the arm I lost my balance and fell on my face. That too, I learned later from reliable sources, had also failed its mission. I jumped up immediately and ran.

It took me a while to realise that I was running in the wrong direction. Everybody else was running in the opposite direction. The fall had disoriented me for sure, but I wasn't vanquished.

I turned round to see the enemy heading towards the mountainside, towards my command-post!

That was the catastrophic climax of the whole campaign. The worst humiliation I had suffered to date, inflicted as had been the previous ones, by the self-same creature.

So that's why he had lured me away from my position by engaging the weakest flank. It now appeared, far from recuperating from the diabolic presence of the foreigner, and thereby regain my rightful honour as a warrior, I was in fact about to be degraded all the more and made a renegade prematurely. The thought was too ghastly to contemplate, so I bit my lower lip and dashed towards my command-post. But for what good? Before I got there the cir-

cumcisor had long defiled my headquarters. All my balls had been smashed into a lump of formless mud.

That was it, another victory for him.

I honestly didn't feel like pressing any further with the struggle. For me all was lost.

But then, just at that very moment of despair, my eyes caught a solitary figure negotiating the last set of shrub barricades.

Now was the time to stop him. Now or never. I acted quickly.

I scooped a sizable amount of mud with my hand and made for the shrubs. I arrived on time to deliver a fistful of it to the target..

All evidence showed that the mud flew into all directions in bits and pieces. Realising this, the enemy took his time to wade across the remaining shrubs while I stood hopelessly by and watched him go.

The rest of the warriors had long given up. The enemy had dodged them so deftly and skillfully they just couldn't keep track of him. But just to save face I gathered enough courage to shout one more command: "Follow me," and followed the way of the enemy, running as fast as my legs could carry me.

As soon as I attained enough distance from the homestead, I stopped. I knew I was not running after the enemy, but from the ignominy of defeat. What I wanted most at this moment of humiliation was a very strong dose of sleep. "Sleep is the god of peace," my father used to say. If only he were there now to see how much my life depended on those words....

Luckily the village 'tree of the spirits' stood invitingly just in front of me. To it I fled for exile.

It has its legend too according to which, after a long drought, our forefathers gathered under its drooping branches and sacrificed a young bull to the rain gods. That night a black cloud appeared and poured an endless amount of rain.

As I lay under its protective wings trying not to remember what had happened, I couldn't understand what happened. But what went wrong? Why did it all come to that? I had made all the right plans that should have guaranteed a certain amount of self-redemption. I wanted to..., to give the village community something good to talk about after I was long dead, just like my

father's grandfather. He had slaughtered the terrorist walking snake and won himself a place in the entire posterity. Instead I found myself forsaken, dejected and betrayed. Even Mamba had abandoned me. Yes, he too joined the traitors.

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It rained the following morning just as I wanted it to. But for me, I say it unwillingly but it is true, the age of self-renovation came to an end.

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The harvest-time had come and gone. I knew it to be true because my father's patriarchal commanding voice woke me up that accursed early morning.

They huddled us together and drove us cattle-style across the heath to the novices' shed. We arrived there long before sunshine as willed by tradition.

All the wailing, the moaning, the groaning, the cursing and the gnashing of teeth ensuing from the operation hut had little or no effect on me. I was determined this time to keep my own tears and thus deny him moral victory over me, at least. And when my turn came, I marched in defiantly.

He was there, in the process of wiping out the blood of the previous candidate from his knife. He looked up and our eyes met. His face shone with delight, his eyes bulged with gory impulse. He gnashed his tobacco-stained teeth at me and curled the left half of his upper lip, like Kidevu, the billy-goat, when tasting the urine of a nanny-goat to determine if she was ripe for fertilisation. He nodded his ugly head at me as if to say, "Soo, finally we meet, and now the last word is mine." His women assistants grabbed me and dragged me down in front of him. They pulled my legs apart and spread me, as one does a fresh hide. Then they held my hands tight behind my back and pushed my testicles into their scrota. I was ready.

The circumcisor stuck my head between his legs and squeezed them against my jugular veins, so that my nose almost touched the outer end of his anus. (Pooh, how he stunk!) Then he leant forward whetting his knife on his left-hand palm while humming an evil tune to himself. Suddenly he shoved his whole trunk further down; then I felt him gather my manhood in his hands..., all of it!

I refused to feel the cut of the knife; I simply turned off pain from my system.

Tradition has it that, in the transition from elementary to intermediate warriorhood, all boys had to lick the blade, as it were. But I had been apprentice to my father's skill in skinning goats. Remember? Surely, it couldn't have been fortuitous that the position under which I was now being subdued was precisely that of a slaughtered goat. No, this circumcisor knew exactly what he was doing. It was all registered on his face. But he didn't have to make it so unprofessional. That's why I wept.

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