

FRANK SCOZZARI

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## Too Old for War

Old Makatiku looked wearily upon young Katanuku. A pillar of youth he was, standing more than two meters in height with broad shoulders, a head full of shiny black hair, skin that was taut and clear, and muscles that rippled like the palms in a tree. His shadow stretched out on the African earth like that of a giraffe. And from his position below, seated in his thatched throne, Makatiku knew he looked old and weak and worn from a life lived fully.

*It was me,* Makatiku thought, staring up at the young *shujaa* warrior, *forty years past. But I was taller, and even stronger, and I did not have this look of pity in my eyes.* “You must answer,” demanded Kantaku.

The council sat anxiously waiting. Makatiku glanced over at them. Among them were the elders and friends, and many brave warriors he had fought along side of in the internecine wars, all in their colorful, ceremonial tunics.

*If only there was a way out, gracefully,* Makatiku thought.

He glanced back at the towering young Kantaku.

But there was none.

*Every spear has two edges and each side cuts with equal depth,* he thought. If he agreed to the challenge, he would face a humiliating defeat. He was no match for a man one third his age. Is this a fit way to end it? Doesn't a good life deserve an honorable end? After all the wonderful years of ruling with dignity and benevolence, having his face rubbed in the dirt now was something he could not bear. The

thought of it offended his soul. Yet if he refused, he would have to abdicate the throne. It was law.

But Kantaku stood waiting. And behind him was his entourage of young Maasai warriors.

“Are you sleeping?” Kantaku asked impatiently.

“I am thinking.”

And when Makatiku finally did speak, everyone seemed a bit mystified by his confident tone, and by the small grin that formed on his face, and by the cleverness in his eye.

“I accept the challenge,” he spoke loudly. “It is a great tradition and it is the people’s right to see the challenge answered, although I doubt that you are up to the task. I doubt that you, or any of your young followers, have the strength, nor the will, nor the intelligence to win such a match.”

A sigh came from the council, as did all the villagers who were gathered around. Kantaku too seemed a bit surprised by Makatiku’s willingness to accept his challenge but welcomed his words nonetheless, and the chance to move the event along.

“Okay then, let’s get on with it.”

“There is one condition, however,” Makatiku added.

“Yes?”

“I would like to choose my own weapon.”

“Weapon?” Kantaku asked.

The young Maasai warriors standing behind Kantaku exchanged curious glances.

“Yes, I ask that I be allowed to choose my own weapon in this case.”

Kantaku looked over at the council. It had been more than fifty years since a challenge for the throne had been decided by a fight with weapons, a fight to the death. The Kenyan and Tanzanian governments had long since outlawed the practice and tribal leaders throughout the Maasai Mara had come to accept the notion of a bloodless succession.

“Do you accept my request?” Makatiku asked.

“A request for weapons is evidence of your antiquity. You are an old man stuck in old ways.”

“Nevertheless,” Makatiku said calmly. “It is in the book of laws, and has never been distorted. Though foreign governments have tried to rid us of our ways, the rules have never changed. It is the challenger’s choice of weapons. But in this case, I ask that I be allowed to choose my own weapon.”

Kantaku glanced over at the council again as though expecting some form of intervention from them, but there was none.

“I know tradition,” he replied.

“It is the warrior who chooses peace over war,” Makatiku said, “but also the warrior who chooses bloodshed over defeat and humiliation.”

Kantaku then ran his eyes through the crowd of villagers and raised his chest high, presenting himself tall and confident. “I accept old man!” he said.

Makatiku nodded his head pleasingly.

*And then there was the issue of an aged body?* he thought. *What an abomination it would be if no animal sought his meat!* In all his years, he had seen it less than a dozen times. And the remembrance of Old Nampushi, who had died of some terrible, western disease and had been left in the sun for the buzzards, but no buzzards came. And how a spotted hyena came by and sniffed his dead body and walked past it without even taking a simple bite. *This will never do.* A corpse rejected by scavengers was seen as having something wrong with it and was cause for great social disgrace. Makatiku’s eyes dropped down to the red dirt beneath him. Nor was burial and option, he knew. It was harmful to the earth. *To place a rotting corpse in the ground was to defile the earth!*

“Also,” he then spoke, “I will need five kilos of ox fat and blood, placed in the care of my good friend Jakaya.”

Makatiku turned and looked over at his old friend who sat with the other elders on the high council.

Jakaya nodded his head.

Kantaku looked at him curiously.

“It is not for me,” Makatiku said.

Kantaku chuckled. “We will see who it is for, old man. Anything else?”

“Nothing.”

Kantaku signaled two young boys who hurried away to the butchery to gather the kilos of fat and blood.

“And the weapon you will choose?” Kantaku asked, his voice now revealing a tone of disgust.

“I would like to know the weapon you choose first? If that’s permitted?”

Kantaku looked around at all the villagers, knowing anticipation was building. “Okay, if it is your wish. A long spear,” he said boldly.

The young warriors behind him exchanged spirited words, voicing their pleasure of his choice. A long spear was the ideal weapon for mortal combat between two men. Its long shaft enabled a thrust from a great distance. Its barbed headpiece,

once in, could not be retrieved, at least not without causing substantial additional damage. And when thrown properly, it could pierce the stretched cowhide of a Maasai shield.

“And you?”

“A *simi*.”

“A *simi*?”

“Yes, a *simi*,” Makatiku said firmly.

A lively discussion erupted, not only among the young warriors, but among the council members as well. A *simi* was not a weapon designed for warfare. It was a simple tribal knife with a blade not more than fifteen inches, used ritualistically or for skinning animals.

“This is silliness,” Kantaku said.

“It is the weapon I choose,” Makatiku replied.

Kantaku looked back at the warriors behind him. Then he glanced over at the council members.

*What form of trickery is this?*

All his life he had been taught to be suspicious of gifts from adversaries, and he was weary of Makatiku now, of his deception and cunning. Weapon, a *simi* was not; yet skillful Makatiku was, in the art of combat and killing. Kantaku’s father had told him all the stories, of how Makatiku had overcome a group of five *Kaputiei* warriors by hiding in the dead, rotting corpse of a water buffalo, and how he sprung from the corpse with bow and arrows and had killed all of them. And how he had been chased once into a steep canyon by a herd of crazed elephants, only to start an avalanche that crushed and killed most of them. His feats of bravery were legendary and his acts of cunning, something to be wary of. For Makatiku to choose a *simi* now, Kantaku thought, in a fight that would determine the end of his reign and perhaps the end of his life, surely there was some form of trickery behind it.

*And he could throw a knife further, Kantaku thought, than the length of any long spear. And the two-sided blade of a simi was perfect for finding a place to stick after sailing end over end threw the air.*

Makatiku sat quietly in his rickety throne, waiting.

“And I will take a tall shield,” Kantaku said unflinchingly, “along with my long spear.”

Again the warriors behind him nodded their heads and whispered cheerfully to one another. Everyone knew the protective capabilities of a tall shield. Two-thirds the length of one’s body, it was capable of deflecting a barrage of arrows. It could easily deflect a single, hand-thrown knife.

“It is a wise choice,” was all Makatiku said.

Despite his arrogance, that which comes along with youth, Makatiku was fond of Kantaku and tolerated his youthful ambitions. Of this new generation of warriors, a generation that Makatiku did not like or understand, with cell phones and a desire to live in cities, Kantaku stood apart. It was he who most cherished the traditional ways. And he was most clever. The others were merely ‘warriors’ in name and appearance, Makatiku thought, who posed for photographs and dressed the part only to satisfy the expectations of the safari lodges.

*It is not an easy thing*, to make way for a new generation of warriors, some of whom had exchanged their spears for cricket bats and text books. It was to accept a contradiction of all he was, and all he knew, and of all that his father and grandfathers were and all that they knew.

*But this one, perhaps, had a chance*, Makatiku thought, watching Kantaku’s eyes, *if he was forced to eat hyena.*

He noticed a digital watch on the wrist of one of the warriors. *Ab! The New World!* he thought. *It is a pity that life must evolve, and change, and end.*

And standing way in the back was another young warrior wearing a New York Yankees baseball cap, no doubt given to him by one of the safari tourist. He quickly removed the cap when he caught Makatiku’s eyes upon him.

*Yes, too many changes had passed*, Makatiku thought.

He had seen it all, the erosion of customs over many years, from one governmental program to another, each designed to strip his people of their traditional ways. And the unstoppable inflow of technology, like a giant dust storm of locust that he could not keep out. Commercial cotton and the synthetic clothing had long since replaced the traditional calf hide and sheep skin, and beadwork, no longer of stone or wood or ivory, was now made of glass or plastic. He glanced down at the feet of the warriors and realized that half of them wore sandals soled with pieces of motorcycle tires, and one even wore a beat-up, old pair of Nikes basketball shoes.

And too came the digital age. It was all too much, this new world that invaded his land and sweep through his people like a foreign disease. He recalled the electric pumps brought in by the new government to filter their water, and what happened when they broke and they had no water for three days because the unfiltered water now made them sick. And how the doctors poisoned their children with injected medicines, making them ill for one week when they were otherwise well; and how lion hunting was now banned by the Kenyan government. *What kind of obscenity is that!* And yet he had heard about the recent events in northern Tanzania, tribes of his flesh evicted in favor of fee-paying trophy hunters under a new government plan

to create a 'wildlife corridor.' *We cannot kill lions to protect our herds, yet foreigners can hunt them for trophies?* The government had gone so far as to denounce warriorhood, declaring it illegal. It was not a world that Makatiku liked, or wanted to be in.

"Bring two tall shields," Kantaku said confidently to a junior warrior. The young warrior, a boy not more than fifteen years old, went off to gather the weapons.

"Wait," Makatiku said, and the young warrior stopped in his tracks. "It is not what I desire."

Kantaku looked on, waiting.

"I would like a short shield," Makatiku said.

The sound of snickering came from the villagers.

*Again he mocks me!* Kantaku thought. He ran his eyes through the crowd and tightened his upper lip. "Follow his wishes," he said angrily.

The boy hurried off to gather the weapons and shields.

"Anything else?"

"No. It is quite enough."

Nothing more was said, and the boy returned quickly with the *simi*, the long spear, and the two shields. And now it was time for Makatiku to rise from his thatched throne and face his young challenger. And he did so slowly, feeling the pains of his arthritic joints, but gloriously, rising to a height equal to that of Kantaku. Despite his age of nearly sixty-two years, his broad shoulders and lean muscles were still well-pronounced. His *kunga*, of red and blue, and pink cotton, wrapped loosely around his trim waist and angled down over one shoulder and across his protruding chest. Everything about him symbolized tradition, and the customs of old, and the seniority of his rank, and the success of his reign; from his graying, long hair, that was woven in thinly braided strands and fell to the middle of his back, to his brightly colored anklets. His earlobes were pierced and stretched in a manner reserved only for royalty, and there was the symbolic beadwork that embellished his body and told of his meritorious past; of a life lived long and fully.

The boy handed Makatiku the short knife and the small shield. Makatiku examined the knife, running his finger along the edge of it. It had a finely honed metal blade and a wooden handle with cowhide for a grip. Then he studied the small shield, flipping it over and looking at the face of it. *It is correct*, he thought. It bared the *sirata* of a red badge that signified great bravery in battle and was only permitted to be painted on the shields of the highest of chiefs. Still, it was a decorative piece at best with a diameter less than twenty inches, not truly designed for combat.

The boy then gave the long spear to Kantaku, and the tall shield. The shield, made of stretched and hardened buffalo hide sewn to a wooden frame, nearly cloaked his entire body. The spear, made of the finest dark ebony wood, held upright in his hand, rose more than a meter above his head.

There was laughter among the villagers, and Kantaku realized how ridiculous it must have looked.

Makatiku smiled broadly and ran his eyes through the crowd. His considerable stature dwarfed the small shield and *simi* in scale, even more so than their actual size. He glanced over at the council members and nodded his head appreciatively. Then he raised the shield and knife high above his head to the applause of the villagers.

Kantaku waited for the applause to die down.

“Now you must answer,” he spoke brazenly.

Makatiku stared at him, long and deliberately. *Could young arrogance be so foolish?* Then, seeing the muscles on Kantaku’s chest and shoulders tighten, Makatiku’s face became gaunt and serious. *It is time!* he thought.

He quickly squatted down into a combat stance, holding his small shield firmly in front of his chest and the short knife high and aggressively in his right hand.

Kantaku likewise firmed his stance, ducking low behind his large shield and raising the spear in a throwing position.

The two men stood there momentarily, opposite one another on a small mound of earth, the old and the new. The time for talk had ended. The differences between the traditional and modern were past them now, and Kantaku did not wait. He was certain Makatiku had a plan and would spring it upon him quickly if he gave him the chance.

He wielded his spear way back, holding it cocked high to the side of his head, and with perfect aim, not wanting to give Makatiku time to strike first, he thrust it forward with all his might.

At the same moment Kantaku released it, Makatiku dropped his shield and short knife to his side and pushed his chest forward. He stood there poised and relaxed with his chest exposed as if it were impenetrable to the spear.

The blade of the barred spearhead flashed in the morning sunlight. All the villagers looked on in wonderment as the spear hit him squarely in the chest, slicing through his flesh and bone and coming out his back.

For a perceptible instant, Makatiku remained upright, impaled by the spear. It was as though his body defied gravity, held high by the soul and the pride of a great chief. Then he dropped to the ground, dead.

The dazed villagers looked on in disbelief, as did Kantaku. The suddenness of it was shocking. Their great king, the fierce warrior who had fought and won so many battles, had not even lifted a finger to fight. His natural ability to dodge and deflect, and to strike back, failed to invoke at the time he needed it most. Though he had out-witted many opponents in the past, he had left them now without a strategically plan; without the tactical display of brilliance they had all come to expect.

Jakaya summoned the young warriors.

“*Mnakamata!*” he said. “Take him.”

The spearhead was quickly removed. The shaft of it snapped when Makatiku fell to the ground making it easy to extract. The entourage of warriors gathered him up, and upon Jakaya’s directions, carried him to a place outside the village, down near where the river flowed out onto the savannah. The five kilos of ox fat and blood was also brought down and set beside the chief’s body.

“*Enda!*” Jakaya shouted to the young warriors. “Go! Go away!” And they did so, solemnly, without looking back.

Jakaya knelt down and took a moment to look over his fallen friend. His face was sullen and old, and had the dark lines that come from oldness. His face was pale and gray with all the signs of death but his expression still revealed a regal presence. He was king, once more, Jakaya thought. *And now was cut the umbilical cord between heaven and Earth.*

With a wooden ladle, Jakaya covered Makatiku’s body with the ox fat and blood. He covered every inch of it, making sure no place was left exposed. Then he sprinkled the body with beads of black, green, red, yellow and white, which mimicked the colour sequence seen in the animal life cycle. He added more white for the decade of peace he had brought to his tribe; and blue for the water colors, which ran clean and fresh until the machines of government destroyed it; and more red for the warrior’s blood and bravery.

“Come feast little *Oln’gojine*,” Jakaya said. “Come taste the meat of a great warrior.”

Jakaya left, back to the village, to the cluster of mud houses where he hung Makatiku’s small, red shield, and his *simi*, outside his *inkajjik*. Then he went to join the others in the celebration of the new chief.

Though Katanuku sat in the thatched throne in full ceremonial dress, he found no joy in his heart. He had achieved the throne, but had not won a victory. Even in death, Makatiku mocked him. *He laughs now*, he thought. *There, down by the river of life, he revels in laughter!*

The coronation was quite subdued. Though all the villagers gathered for the festival, it was not full of song and dance like the great celebrations of the past.

“It was Makatiku who threw the spear,” one of the villagers said.

Katanuku looked down at him and quietly hung his head.

“Makatiku is still King,” another villager said.

Down by the river Makatiku’s body laid in the hot African sun. All day it lay there and by late afternoon the tsetse flies had gathered and the smell of the fermenting ox blood rose across the savannah. Before the sun had completely set, three spotted hyenas came across him. They encircled him and sniffed the earth around him, and the kunga that wrapped him. Their nostrils filled with the scent of human, but there was also the smell of the ox blood and fat, and when they tasted the meat, they found it to be unique and flavorsome. On through the night they feasted, gnawing down on the bone and flesh and stealing chunks from one another. By morning when the villagers returned, nothing remained of Makatiku but a stain on the earth.



**FRANK SCOZZARI** resides in Nipomo, a small town on the California central coast. He is an avid traveler and once climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa. His short stories have appeared in various literary journals and have been featured in literary theater.