



AGE OF FANTASY

SONG OF THE KAD'WALA



SHORT STORY

SONG OF THE KAD'WALA BY PIERRE MORTEL

Banura stood atop the rock, scanning the horizon. The rolling hills were calm in the dim light before sunrise. Westwards the mountains rose, jagged teeth strangling the sky. To the east was the savannah like a sea of tall grass.

Banura tasted the wind, saw the birds moving and the trees swaying, smelled the dust in the air. His senses amplified by his shamanic powers, he could feel the life around him, from the termites in a rotting trunk to the vulture soaring high above. He lifted his staff and the Kad'wala clan emerged from the bushes below.

Some of them were Waheni like him, descended from the Hyenas of the southern savannahs. Others were Ndoli, descended from Lions, accompanied by Ndwari centaurs.

Following his silent instructions, they split into small groups.

The hunters hurried down towards the wooded valley below, tracking the prey their shaman had spotted. The rest of the tribe moved more slowly as they started foraging, picking herbs, tubers and berries, checking the traps they left the last time they came to the area.

Banura looked at them as he came down from the rocky outcrop. The delicately weaved fabrics of their clothes were faded and patched over. Their steel weapons, buckles and jewels of fine ores clashed with the tools of bone and wood, with the pelt bags and woven baskets.

The shaman knew there was a time when his ancestors would have scoffed at the idea of relying on hunting and foraging to survive, and this knowledge was a constant bitter taste at the back of his throat.

By midday the sun was harsh and burning. The tribe had reached a crumbling tower facing the mountains, with walls half eaten by vines and a deserted temple behind. They would wait here for the hunters to return.

While the elders, mothers, and cubs rested in the shade, sitting by the pond and sorting through the food they had collected, Banura took the older cubs to the temple to instruct them. They cleared the moss and branches from the stone floor and sat in a circle as the shaman spoke.

He talked about the fort where they stood, once a mighty bastion steeled against any foe of the Beastmen's realm. How time alone had brought down its sturdy walls, for ruin came from inside the realm, leaving the border forts pointless.

He pointed east towards the savannah, towards the wound at its centre. Skarenda, the gigantic rift that tore the earth in two, that swallowed most of their people's cities and vomited endless swarms of daemons to assail the survivors. His voice was strained with grief as he went through each stage of the disaster that turned the Beastmen from prosperous merchants into nomadic foragers, slowly pushed outside of their lands as they fled from the daemonic raids.

He told the youths about the capital city and the Sacred Tree within it, the one that blessed them with sentience thousands of years ago. The cubs were listening passively, for they knew the story by heart. The cities of old were a distant fairytale to them, Banura thought.

He himself had only known one person who had seen the Sacred Tree with her own eyes, an old chieftain from his childhood. But it was his duty to keep the memory alive, to maintain the tradition so that they could one day rebuild the Beastmen kingdom.

Suddenly a fight broke out.

Kanedwa, an Ndoli cub, had been teasing his Ndwari neighbour, calling him a wildling because he'd never been able to remember the full prayer to the Sacred Tree.

The centaur, a fiery youth named Watebo, had snapped and leaped at his tormentor hooves first, wailing on him before he could get away. The others started yelling immediately, cheering the fighters on, and running around in excitement.

Watebo was heavy even for a young Ndwari, but the shaman threw him to the ground with the ease of a seasoned warrior.

He grabbed both youths by the scruffs of their furs and scolded them sternly. Kanedwa lowered his gaze and bowed in contrition, but Watebo stared into his teachers' eyes with barely contained fury.

"Forgive me, master." Even as the youth apologized, Banura was taken aback by the rage he could feel. He made a mental note to keep an eye on Watebo. Such a strong spirit needed a hand just as strong to turn him into an asset to his people.

Banura was about to resume the lesson when one of the hunters came into the temple to speak to him. Daemons had been spotted by his party just a day's hike away. They needed to move fast; the lesson would have to wait.

The tribe walked out through the ruined gate. The peaks above were already blocking the sun, casting a dull blue shade over everything. Banura contemplated the line of his people making their way down the ancient stairs, careful not to step on the crumbled sections while heading for the valley below.

A chilly wind was lifting his cape, a cape that used to belong to a priest of the Sacred Tree, long ago. Now its edges were worn and dusty, and the shaman himself could not read most of the faded runes on it.

He looked one last time towards the east, towards the savannah and the dead city of his people; once they went down into the valley it would be out of view.

"One day", he promised himself, then turned away and headed down the stairs. Down below, at the front of the pack, young Watebo was running like the wind into the forest.

Watebo moved slowly, step by step, brushing aside the branches in his path. The undergrowth was thick and he could feel thorns piercing his hide. He ignored the pain, focusing on the tracks in the sandy loam.

Wild hogs were a rare prize around here, and the tribe needed it: winter was almost here. It was a large male, but Watebo was no longer a cub. He hadn't been properly initiated as a warrior yet, but he was already heavy and strong, and hunted with the adults as their equal.

He tensed up as he spotted footprints. Another hunter. The shape of the prints indicated an Ndoli's hind paws.

Watebo remembered that his young friend Kanedwa had been sent to guard one of the entrances to the valley the tribe was camping in. He'd probably seen the tracks and decided to try to catch the hog. It was not uncommon for a guard to do this if he spotted prey, as food was scarce and the valley isolated.

Watebo smiled to himself. Kanedwa was slender, but eager to prove his worth.

Following the tracks towards a clearing, he saw the hefty mass of a male hog lying there in a pool of blood. He felt a pang of disappointment, realising he was coming too late. Then he saw something else. Another body, right beside the hog's carcass.

"No."

The limbs were bent, the torso cracked open, steam still rising from the entrails in the cold morning air. Kanedwa's spear lay there, snapped in half. His beautiful fur was coated in blood and his eyes were bulging, as if they were staring at something in horror.

Watebo's heart was pounding as he circled the clearing, axe ready to strike. There was no one around. He inspected his friend's mutilated corpse, trying to control the rage he felt rising inside him, teeth clenched, vision blurred by tears.

He needed to think.

"Who could rip a hunter open like a fruit, break their limbs as for some evil ritual..." then the realization hit him. "No..." he looked around frantically, searching for tracks. daemons had never come this close to the mountains. Maybe an isolated one, a lost scout?

Then he heard screams coming from the valley.

Watebo stopped looking for tracks, stopped thinking, and broke into a gallop towards the camp, breaking branches and leaping over dead trunks. There were more screams, blades crashing, rallying cries. "They found us again."

His hoof slipped on a mossy rock, he stumbled and barrelled into the shallow river by the camp. The water was ice cold but he did not feel it. He jumped up and looked around.

One tent had caught fire. His people were running in all directions, some of them gathering the cubs or scrambling for weapons. He saw his aunt lying on a collapsed tent, dead. He felt dizzy. Then, on his right, he saw them.

They were War Daemons. Towering, muscular figures, their bodies coated in blood, their heads bare horned skulls with infinite darkness behind the eye sockets. They wielded huge swords of ornate designs, and the metal of their weapons shimmered impossibly as they shifted.

Beastmen warriors laid dead at their feet, broken like twigs.

The daemons were strangely immobile, as if they'd paused to observe their work, unconcerned by any foe. Watebo thought that this was his time to die. No living thing could slay one of these monsters.

But then a spear whistled through the air, fast as a blink, straight through the neck of the tallest one, who collapsed into a gurgling mass.

Banura the shaman stood tall at the other end of the camp, a second spear at the ready. Behind him a dozen warriors had assembled in formation.

"Attack, hunters! Slay the beasts!"

Watebo's vision cleared and, as if a veil was lifted, the daemons did not seem invincible anymore. He broke into a charge as the other hunters advanced. The closest daemon saw the centaur running at him and got into a fighting stance. Just as Watebo closed in, the daemon leaped forward at once, swinging his axe with incredible speed.

The blow knocked Watebo's axe out of his hands but he slammed into the daemon, grabbing him with all the strength he could muster. The monster clawed at him with sharp talons as Watebo bucked, lifting it high in the air. With all his weight he slammed it down on the rocky ground, feeling the thing's back break. The daemon kept struggling for more than a minute as Watebo pummelled it into the ground, blind to the fighting around them.

Watebo moved slowly, blood dripping in his path, dragging his axe behind him. Half his body was numb and the rest was pain. The daemons were dead. The battle rage had worn off.

He was following the trail again, back to the clearing, back to his friend. When he got there, he chased the carrion birds that were already inching closer and started washing the body.

Kanedwa always took great pride in his appearance. He would comb his fur with great care, and kept his cape spotless even in the muddy season.

Banura entered the clearing. Sombre and weary, he knelt next to Kanedwa's body, helping Watebo comb his fur. Following the funerary rites, he started singing a prayer.

"As I went from the ground to the Tree

To the water to the mother

To you

I pray the Tree-

"Stop", Watebo growled.

"What is it, young warrior? Don't you want to say farewell to your friend, ask the Tree to welcome him?"

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The Ndwari Centaur stood up, fists clenched. He turned his face away. "The Tree... it does not hear us. It is dead."

Banura huffed in shock. He rose and got in front of Watebo, meeting the youngblood's gaze. "You speak out of anger and despair. The Tree gave us life!"

"Is this what the Tree gave us? A life of running away? Chased by monsters, ever colder, ever hungrier, clinging to the mountains?" Watebo was screaming now, his voice hoarse, his face twisted in rage.

"Our life is hard, Watebo. I know that. But we need to keep our faith. Once we retake the temple, we can begin to rebuild our realm, and one day our children's children will prosper again in the Sacred Tree's shade."

"We haven't even seen the temple for two winters! And that was the last one we held! Open your eyes, Shaman: the old realm is lost. It is the daemons' domain now."

"And what would you have us do?"

"We can go north to the green plains. There are many people there, living easy lives. We could take what we need and prosper!"

"Turn our back on the Tree and become looters? War hounds? I would die of shame! And our people, and Kanedwa? The daemons slay your friends and you won't avenge them?"

Watebo's voice was barely a growl now. "The daemons didn't kill Kanedwa. The old ways did. The Tree did. You did!"

Banura slapped the centaur, who leapt at him with a furious cry. They rolled in the dirt. Watebo's weight gave him the advantage but his opponent plunged his fingers in an open wound. Watebo howled in pain and threw the shaman against a rotten trunk that shattered in pieces.

Breathless, with his back on fire, Banura looked up at the young centaur towering above him. Watebo picked up his axe with stiff, absent movements. His gaze was hazy.

Banura held up a hand.

"Watebo..."

The centaur spit on the ground, bucked and ran into the forest. He was headed north.



Banura led the hunters along a rocky path. The cliff below them was impressive, hundreds of feet of hard granite weathered by the winds. They walked with a cautious urgency as the sun was already behind the mountains. They needed to reach camp before night swallowed everything.

The path led them over a pass and into a small valley. The mountains loomed over them, giants in the darkness, as they made their way through a sparse wood of pines and larches.

At the end of the valley, they reached a massive jumble of bones, gigantic remains of forgotten creatures. The sentinels had spotted them a while ago and the tribe was already waiting for them, standing outside their patched-tents or sitting on top of the monstrous skulls in which they stored the dried goods.

The Shaman stood back and watched the hunters greet their families. There was tenderness and relief, but also bitterness as the hunt was disappointing. They had spotted daemons near the old temple again and had to hunt in the upper hills, where game was scarce.

Nevertheless, the old routine started taking place, the elders preparing the meal, the kids gathering firewood and the adults skinning and butchering. As night engulfed the little tribe, they all sat around a roaring fire, their bellies somewhat full, piled under heavy pelts to shield themselves from the wind. The little ones were nodding off as Banura told the same familiar tales which he had told their parents.

"...and so, our realm fell and the Tree was taken. This is why you must grow strong, little ones! You will chase the daemons away, avenge your ancestors..."

The shaman stopped. No one was really listening. They were tired. He was too. His joints were stiff and his back hurt

He was too old for these hunting trips, but without his powers the risk of an ambush was too high. He should have trained a successor, but there was never time for anything but survival. One by one, the beastmen went back into their tents to sleep until Banura was by himself, looking at the light of the flames dancing on the broken bones that towered above him.

After a while he got up with a groan and walked a distance away from the camp. From this vantage point, on a clear day, you could see the savannah beyond the eastern hills.

A long time ago cities would have lit up the horizon, thousands of lights like stars gathered around the life-giving Tree. Now there was only darkness, and the wind howling like a mad daemon.

Banura was walking back to the fire when he heard something behind him. He turned around, brandishing his staff.

"Intruders!"

"I thought you'd spot me sooner, shaman. You're getting old."

The intruder had a low voice, and spoke the beastmen's tongue. Banura relaxed slightly. "At least it's not a daemon."

He did not drop his guard. The voice was familiar but he couldn't make out the silhouette, half hidden in the shadow of a giant skull.

"Show yourself! Who are you? A lost hunter?"

The silhouette chuckled.

"You could say that." From the shadow, clad in dark steel, a large war axe at his hand, adorned with battle trophies, a centaur emerged.

"W-Watebo?" The shaman couldn't believe his eyes. "I thought you had died out there in the wild!"

"I did, in a way. I became someone else. For five years I roamed the northern plains. I found others like me, and we are strong now. We take what we want. We have a good life. No need to pray to a dead tree."

As he spoke, Watebo walked slowly towards his old mentor, with the heavy gait of a warrior.

Banura widened his stance, ready for a fight. "Why did you come back? You know I'll never forsake the old ways."

"I didn't come back for you. I came back for them." Watebo pointed behind the shaman, to the tribesmen peering out from their tents, woken up by the conversation.

"You don't have to starve in these mountains!", Watebo yelled.

He grabbed a daemon's horned skull from his belt and brandished it. Magical flames still swirled in the empty eyeholes. "I do not flee my foes, I slay them! You are my kin. Come with me!"

"They'd never betray me!"

"I know, Banura. Their loyalty to you is the only reason they're still here. But they would follow me if you were gone... I take no joy in doing this."

Watebo bent down and picked up a handful of dirt. He threw it towards the shaman. "I challenge you."

Some of the warriors in the camp picked up their spears, unsure of what to do. In response, Watebo made a sign and several other centaur warriors emerged from the darkness, all clad in heavy plate and armed with steel blades.

"Spare your people another losing fight."

"Only one needs to die tonight."

The shaman looked at the warrior. "I've served the Sacred Tree my whole life. No matter what happened. I never faltered..." His voice was strangely frail, uncertain.

Then he steadied himself. "I accept the challenge."

The two circled each other three times as the custom demanded. They inched closer, weapons high.

Then Banura leapt. The centaur stepped to the side in a blur. His heavy axe sliced through the shaman, who collapsed.

Watebo looked at him, laid down on the ground in a pool of blood, and raised his axe.

"Forgive me, master." Under his grimacing helmet, the warrior's voice was strained.

"M-maybe you're right, Watebo... perhaps I was an old fool..." the shaman said between two raspy breaths. "You still remember the song, right?"

"Of course." The centaur brought his axe down. There were a few muffled cries from the tribesmen.

Watebo knelt down, red snakes from the fire nearby dancing on the edges of his armour. He took off his helmet and started combing Banura's fur.

He had trouble remembering the tune at first.

"I pray the Tree takes you

From the ground to the Tree

To the water to the mother

To me"



The next morning the skies were clear. Watebo stood on a large boulder at the edge of the valley.

He was looking at the tribesmen carrying their belongings, protected by his armoured soldiers, heading towards the northern plains. Some were still wary of him, but they would come around. When they saw the riches and the freedom, they'd understand.

"We can make our own way."