

Man of Calibre by Baka Barakove Bina

Excerpt from Chapter 1: The Brawl

Up in the house, Pele's ears stood up. He poked Moho Maghe in the ribs as he heard Tóhamo throw down the challenge.

Moho Maghe had Saesae still suckling and was running her hands through Loito's head to put her to sleep. She cocked her head in annoyance. She was not pleased to be awake at this ungodly hour and fretful that Pele would go out into the chilly night.

'Did you hear that? That was Tóhamo. Did I hear him call you a girlie-girlie? Surely he is not throwing down a challenge for you, is he? Nókasu must have said something for him to ask you to go down there to face him. Can you do something to sort out your nephew or cousin or whatever he is to you? This is going on too far. That idiot keeps on dragging you into all of his arguments,' she yawned.

'Ah! It's too cold be going out there,' Pele responded. 'You know what? If I go there, one of the young boys, either Simon or Jackson will see me and then use that excuse to get into Tóhamo.'

'I hear one or two of the boys have a grudge against him. I think he forced one of them to get off the bus he was driving at Mando and the poor boy had to foot slog from there, some eight kilometres of it, and the young ones are itching to fight him. Me going down there could give them an excuse to do just that. Let them cool down a little bit and then I'll go to the fence and ask the boys to pull Nókasu home.'

Moho Maghe sighed resignedly. 'What is he raving about? Does he want what we have? We don't have much though. He does no work, yet he feels that he's been wronged and still calls you a girlie-girlie.'

Moho Maghe had said more than enough. The rebuke shot more than a surge of blood, bad blood, through Pele's veins. Nevertheless, he calmly finished pumping more air into the Coleman lamp, made sure the pressure lock was tight in place and stood up with it.

'You're not taking the lamp with you, are you?' Moho Maghe asked.

'No! I'm going to hang it up here. Just make sure that it doesn't play up,' he retorted with annoyance.

The abruptness of his reply made Moho Maghe turn and look at Pele. She saw the blaze in his eyes and noticed that his angry spot swelled even more. Moho Maghe felt sorry for him, knowing that, being the pacifist that he was, all the pulsating anger would dissipate when he got to the fight place.

But Pele was more than angry. He was on fire.

'Daddy, *Bubu* Nóo is fighting,' Jumo mouthed quietly to him, she too feeling the change in her father.

'Bring back *Bubu* Nóo for me.' Loito chipped in loudly, indifferent to all that was happening.

Pele tried to smile at his children but could not. The name-calling coming through the night air was heavy, thick and fast. Each word uttered was accompanied by swear words, making him more and more irritated. It irked him that his children were getting a bashful of such

swear words. He knew that he had to do something about it.

Despite the cold, Pele wore only a T-shirt. He could do with a jacket but he refused to put one on. He opened the door and slipped out into the chilling darkness muttering nothings to himself.

‘This has to stop,’ he muttered to himself. The anger growing within him had reached saturation point. He felt his head was hot as with fever. Why was he mentioned and dragged into the fracas by these two men, both of them useless and wastage in the village. There was no utility for their presence as men of the village and why was he burdened by them. He sliced the dark night angrily with his hands. He pumped the air in frustration and anger.

He fronted up to a banana plant and quickly went through the motions of disarming a person, as he’d been taught during his army training at the Goldie River depot near Port Moresby. He made out the spot where the head would be. He’d go for that soft spot. He fisted the banana at the spot. Suddenly he stopped. He was moving into dangerous grounds. He paused to let the throbbing in his head slow down.

Painful memories of an incident when he was a soldier, several years back, crowded to the forefront of his mind - memories that he had successfully banished for quite some time and had never shared with anyone in the village, not even Moho Maghe. He cursed himself for allowing those memories to reappear. Even now he only had a vague recollection of what had happened. But the consequences, to his undying shame, were always with him and even more vividly now that his anger was up.

There’d been a fight, that much he remembered. An afternoon of drinking at a local tavern had led to an altercation with a brother soldier who, without warning, attacked him with a flurry of punches. Pele wasn’t really much of a fighter. Indeed, he’d always preferred to talk things out than fight. He had tried to reason with his assailant, to no avail. So, with so many other members of his platoon looking on, he knew he had to respond to save face and retain their respect.

Somewhat half-heartedly then, he retaliated, and in the middle of an exchange of punches, Pele’s fist landed hard against the side of the head of his assailant who fell immediately on to the tavern’s floor. The sound of the crack as his head hit the concrete overrode all other noise in the tavern. Pele’s assailant lay limp and still, and Pele could still recall the enormous horror he had felt at what he’d done, even as his comrades scurried in to pull Pele away and attend to the injured man.

After a long recuperation in the hospital, where Pele visited him every day, the man eventually recovered – but not completely. The injuries to his head had impacted his brain so much that he suffered major long- and short-term loss of memory and he could no longer be a soldier. The only work he could do was to sell *buai* on the street.

Pele had never drunk any alcohol or thrown any punches since that day and he had vowed to live a peaceful and exemplary life as recompense for the injuries he’d caused his comrade.

Now, with the throbbing in his head subsiding and, having recollected his wits, he made his way, in quick strides, down the slope behind the house to the creek. He was careful with his footing as the track was slippery with the night’s freshness. He kept as quiet as he could as he didn’t want those hurrying along the highway to see him. He made it safely to the fence and scrambled over it onto the road. He stayed in the shadows away from the flickers of the kerosene lamps that many of the elderly people had with them. He did not want to talk to these people. Nor did he want them to see him.

Up ahead, Gonkonume was walking briskly with her kerosene lamp. She felt it her duty to rebuke Nókasu. Nókasu was always fighting with her husband. She knew that what Nókasu

was saying about Tóhamo was true. But Tóhamo was her husband and she must be seen to support him.

She didn't see Pele scramble over the fence.

Through the weak rays of Gonkonume's lamp, Pele saw that Tóhamo was being restrained by some men, and Nókasu was struggling to pull away from the grip of two giggling boys who were trying to frog march him away from the milieu of people and noise.

Neither man really minded their temporary restraint. They continued with their war of words, tit for tat and tat for tit. They tried to compete with the noise of the growing crowd of onlookers and the volume of their words rose above the merriment of the night.

Pele remained in the shadows. His mind again drifted quickly went into a revision of the classes he'd attended during his army training days. The mind pushed pictures of the lessons in unarmed combat to the fore with vivid details of the vital parts of the body. Where would be the most lethal place to place that punch he was planning?

He snapped out of it when he realised that his thinking had ventured onto dangerous ground. Wasn't this the reason he had always walked away from all confrontations? The two men were family. He had to let it go. He shut his eyes and ears for a time to calm himself down. Pele knew he should just walk back to the house and let them duel it out. But, just as he turned to go back, another dose of words made him stand in his tracks.

'Tell your son to come here! I am a man of calibre!' Tóhamo ranted from behind a man who was trying to stop him from going near Nókasu.

'What will your son do? *Em bai tanim graun o wonem ha? Yu tokim mi!* Ah! You tell me. Will he turn the world upside down or what? Me, I am village man. *Yu sa-ve, kaliba ya!* Me ya, man of my own calibre, ya!'

'Eh, you talk about my son,' Nókasu replied back with his fading voice. '*Maski long yu, Yu ya nothing! Em mekim wonem na yu daunim em istap ha?* I don't think about you. You're nothing. What has he done and you continue to disparage him. *Eh tru ah, yu ting em mangi-mangi bilong yu?* It's true, yeah. You think he's your child?'

Nókasu looked up at the faces of the young boys holding him.

'Kevin! Apo! Fight him for me. Fight that man for me. He's saying all these things against Alonaa's father. He's not saying anything good about him. Please Kevin, fight that *pipia nogut tru* for me.'

The two boys laughed at the absurdity of the request. They thought it was funny that they were asked to fight Tóhamo on his behalf. They had no biff with Tóhamo.

Exasperated, he called up in his best screeching voice towards Pele's house. 'Hokoluto!'

Suddenly the air chilled. The noise level dropped and the women stood in awe and shock. A man pummelled a screeching child who wimpered away to show the serious of the moment.

'You hear that!' another said in hushed tones. 'He's calling those ghosts names, something that you don't do at this time of the night. You just don't go calling people's big names in the middle of the road in the middle of the night. I think some people have gone *long long* with a bit of a loose wire in the head.'

A woman finally spoke up in hushed whispers, loud enough to put in a few words of admonition.

‘Eh, watch who you are calling, Nókasu. You’ve called a name that even the children don’t know. The *masalais* and ghosts of the bushes and creeks must surely have heard the call. Are you sure that you’re in your right frame of mind to call that name in the middle of the night?’

Pele had, by this time, had slipped in behind the throng of women and he did his best to not reveal himself.

A few of the women saw him and they hushed up, fearful of a fight between Pele and Tóhamo. They whispered to each other, anxiously, about what Nókasu had called Pele. He had used Pele’s big name and had breached custom by using it here on the road!

Nókasu was unaware that he had created a new scandal. He screamed over the noise again berating Tóhamo and praising Pele.

‘*Yu no ken toktok na kapsaitim em! Yu, yu ino inap long em!* You cannot talk about matching him. He has accomplished things that you should have done.’

Tóhamo shot back, still very mad. ‘That’s your own thing. It has nothing to do with me. *Em wokim wonem samting long mi?* What has he done for me?’

‘How is that idiotic son of his better than me?’ he mused to himself. ‘I don’t do women’s yucky panties. I would grow old very quickly if I washed nappies. The children have got our strength already and if I wash nappies they further erode my strength and that’s the type of son he has. That son of his listens too much to his wife and the senile old man gives him praise. Bah!’ He kicked a mound of earth on the side of the road.

Nókasu had said too much. He was frothing and wanted a pail of cold water. He was also becoming slow.

Tóhamo lunged at Nókasu. But two young men held him back by the collar of his tattered shirt and blocked him off.

Pele kept his cool. The chill air mellowed him and the anger that he had felt at the house had ebbed away. He felt sorry for the two men. ‘We are family. Tóhamo and I are cousins. And Nókasu is uncle to us both. Where did all this anger come from?’ he wondered.

There was no fight in him. He was going to get Nókasu and either drag or frog march him back to the house. Both Nókasu and Tóhamo had said enough for the night.

As he stepped into the centre of the crowd, Tóhamo made another lunge at Nókasu. In the next instant, Tóhamo was airborne and he landed in the side gutter with a short sharp grunt and passed out.

This was too much for Pele. Either by way of a mental lapse or simply by reflex, his hands left his side and intercepted Tóhamo with a good upper cut just under the chin. The crack of fist on bone was heard a mile away. Then he lifted Nókasu by the scruff of his shirt and whacked him across the skiff of his chin.

The whacking slap suddenly chilled night air even more.

Without a word, Pele turned and strode back towards his house. Those watching looked on incredulously, mouths agape. The brutal strength that Pele had displayed was now something for the fireplace story time. They had not seen Pele do something like this ever before. The *suga-suga mahn* could, after all, pack a punch and quite a punch at that!