



**TURBULENT
TIMES**

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*For my children,
Busi, Nomfundo, Nokwanda, and Menzi.*

Preface

During the middle of the eighteenth century, there was an uncertain political situation in the eastern part of South Africa, a place called Swaziland and a part of Mpumalanga province. This is a story of war and the loss of many lives due to greed for power.

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Lonzaba was not happy at all. She preferred to walk on her own than together with other women who were also married to the chieftain. The women were married to her husband's brothers while four were married to her husband, Chief Mambo. It was early in the morning; they were travelling a little bit long distance to fetch water, and she was following behind the chattering group of women. Her mind was busy taking this and leaving that; she thought she must prepare herself, because tonight they would take her to spend the whole night with the chief. As the elders said, so the sunrise it shall set. She was disturbed because she had overheard the two old women discussing her yesterday.

She was living in agony; her life was like that of a slave. It started four months ago when her mother told her that the chief had approached her father and proposed to marry her. It was a short time after coming from the forest to collect firewood, and she was busy making a log fire in kagogo, a hut situated in the centre of the homestead, when her mother entered.

“Was it not difficult to find dry wood in the forest today, since it is almost empty of dry wood?” said her mother, looking for a goatskin on which she would sit.

“It was a bit difficult. Had it not been for Nomzamo we would have had to come home empty-handed; she always knows where to find trees that provide dry wood.”

“She is wise that girl. She inherited the wisdom from her mother. Her mother and I grew up together.”

“You always mention that when Nomzamo’s name crops up in our conversation.”

The smoke was strong in the hut.

“Nomzamo’s mother had a way of dealing with her suitors. Most of them would return from her embarrassed while we were watching as young women, and it was fascinating. Tell me, do you have anybody who waits for you by the fountain?”

“Ha! Mother, how can you ask a question like that?” She was surprised and ashamed by her mother being carefree, because she knew her mother to be strict about matters of love and disapproved of young women mixing with young men.

Untold silence existed while the smoke was slowly evaporating, leaving the hut through the main door and up into the sky.

“I am asking because whoever wished to take flower with him must forget because our ancestors have chosen the great to take such a precious flower, and ordinary men must fear and respect and stay away,” said her mother in a humble and religious manner. Her mother had changed from the gay mood and become a serious woman. Although Londzaba did not understand the meaning of the riddle, she felt her stomach tighten and

she was gripped with anxiety. She was a beautiful young woman, with light skin, and it was difficult to describe her with one word. Many people would come up with different words from all spheres, but to sum up all their conclusions was the word beautiful.

“What do you mean, Mother?” Those were the only words she could manage to utter, given the situation.

“I mean you are needed by the chieftain so that you do what your ancestors brought you to do in this world, to service your own people, whom you love.”

Londzaba could not swallow the news well. Instead of continuing with the conversation, she remained silent, waiting for her mother to conclude the matter. She had been taught by the elders at an early stage that you do not talk when you do not know what you are talking about.

“Your father had an audience with the chief. The chief intends to make you his wife.”

It was suddenly very hot in the hut, and Londzaba had to go out. She could not swallow the news easily. I am dreaming a very bad dream, she thought. Her mother followed her.

“I don’t want to be a chief’s wife. I don’t want to be part of it. Please, my mother, help me. You have never abandoned me. Please, Mama.” Londzaba was crying, begging her mother. It turned out to be a comforting conversation, her mother assuring her with words of hope, and when Londzaba continued to show dissatisfaction, her mother said, “I do care about your feelings, my beloved daughter, but this is our culture. If you do not agree with the proposal, the whole family will be in hot water, and no

one will protect us from the chief's wrath. As for your father, he will get favour from the chief; maybe the chief can appoint him to be a high official, and he will also have many beautiful cattle walking into this homestead. Our neighbours will respect us, and we will also chase hunger away from us, my loved one. You will get used to it, I promise. We all have travelled the same way. The elders say you consult those who have travelled pathways for directions and conditions ahead."

It was a month after their disturbing conversation that the emalobolo ceremony took place. It was early in the morning when a group of men driving cattle arrived at Londzaba's home. They heard a negotiator announcing their arrival. He called Londzaba's father by his clan name, requesting entrance to the homestead. He then described each of the beasts they were driving, the bride's price.

The group was ushered into a big hut, in the centre of the homestead. Not long after they had settled down, pots of sorghum beer and food were brought into the hut. They were in no hurry; they knew it was still very early for the occasion of the day, and all they had to do was to wait.

Later in the morning a boy came with a tray and put it in front of the negotiator in the lead and left. The negotiator murmured something to his men; the empty tray was saying that the father of the bride cannot talk before his mouth is opened by those who seek his audience, which means they must give something to open his mouth. A young goat was taken out in the grass bucket to the boy who was waiting outside. Effortlessly, he

accepted it and disappeared into one of many huts. So the process of negotiations began.

After many small haggles were performed, it was time for the main occasion.

The bridegroom party waited with tense anticipation. Although they were coming from a noble family, they knew it was not going to be easy. There was no father of a bride who wants his daughter to be taken cheaply, which is why the lead negotiator was chosen carefully. If the lead negotiator made a mistake, a fine would be demanded and his name would be tainted.

Londzaba's father walked into the hut flanked by his two brothers. He was the firstborn and he was faced with huge responsibility. He was to maintain the balance between two things: one, he was to make sure his daughter was not taken below the standard value, and two, he should not kill the in-laws by overcharging them. Hence, they were to build a good relationship. He was grim when they exchanged greetings, yet he knew almost all the men in the house. He was not in his usual talkative mood today and allowed his younger brothers to drive the discussions of the bride's price. Occasionally they left the hut to consult among the three of them.

It was time for the negotiator to identify the bride, for there is a saying that you cannot negotiate about something you have never set your eyes on. This was one of the tricks played by the bride's father to ascertain whether they had done their homework. If they failed, they would be fined.

Londzaba, entering, was dressed and prepared for the occasion. She was accompanied by five young women from the neighbourhood. After entering the hut, they knelt down and moved on their knees to sit on the mats that had been prepared for them.

“Since you requested to pick the flower from this house of my father, you may as well show us who among my many daughters is your cherished flower,” challenged Londzaba’s father.

The lead negotiator rose from where he was seated. Carrying a beautiful pot decorated with colourful beads, he went straight to where Londzaba was seated and put it in front of her. There was a murmur of approval in the hut as the women were led outside, moving on their knees, their heads bowed.

Finally they settled on fifteen beasts as the bride price, and after that more sorghum beer and meat were served to celebrate the agreement, and before the sun set a beast was slaughtered to seal the relationship between the two families. The old men slept on the other side of the hut while the young were blessing themselves with sorghum beer until the early hours of the morning.

The following day was a happy day in the village. Early in the morning young women who were ripe for marriage escorted Londzaba to the river in order to bathe and prepare themselves for the day. This day there would be a lot of meat and beer for everyone who had come to celebrate. Two groups each from the families would compete in dancing and singing. Everyone would be well dressed. Young men would be washing their eyes

over beautiful women; some would even make advances in secret of course.

The girls escorting Londzaba returned from the river singing. The few in the front were dancing, their waists and breasts encircled by many strings closely packed together, and each string was carefully decorated by colourful beads. When they danced, their anklets made sounds that moved with song. They lifted one leg up such that the foot was level to the head. When this happened, all eyes of the watchers would rush to certain parts of the girls' bodies, but the strings would reach there long before the eyes.

Londzaba's attire was different from all of the girls. She was wearing sidvwaba, which was a beast skin turned into a skirt, an indication that she was no longer a girl but a wife and must be respected. All young women envied her, but she was the most worried person. She tried to hide her feelings, but because all eyes were on her, it was difficult. Only some people thought it was fear.

It was time for the main meal of the day. Inside the kraal, men ate according to their age group. Imiqwembe, wooden trays, were served to different groups by assigned men. There was a tension in the larger group of young men, emajaha, for it was known that fights took place during this time. It was time for grudges to be solved and debts to be paid, with pain of course. On this particular occasion, the attention was on two powerful adversaries.

Gundwane was a tall, slender young man. He was bronze in complexion, his nose was flat with small holes in a beautiful

way, and his shoulders were narrow. He walked with his head bowed, and this made people look at him with contempt, but he was quick with his sticks. His strengths lay in skill rather than in strength.

Men of substance in the tribe occasionally slaughtered a beast and a few goats to celebrate the harvest or express gratitude to their ancestors for whatever reason. It was at this occasion at Seselo's homestead when Gundwane humiliated Lentuka, a fat young man who had a look of self-importance. Gundwane was assigned to cut meat for his peer group.

There are different kinds of gluttons; some can persevere and hold themselves while grilled meat is cut into small pieces, hiding their feelings. Others cannot wait. Lentuka fell into the latter group.

Gundwane was deliberately slow. His mouth folded like he was doing an important task. "There is no need to keep us waiting long. Why don't you dish out the meat that you are through with and let us eat while you continue with the rest?"

It was Lentuka who had lost his patience long before.

Gundwane looked up at Lentuka, who was standing. Their eyes met for a moment. Gundwane hesitated, his purpose wavered, but then Lentuka was not his man and everybody was looking at him and he was on the wrong side. He gave three big pieces to Lentuka and the others followed. After a minute Lentuka was coughing, the big piece of meat jammed in his throat. He bent down, trying to relieve himself, but the piece remained in the throat. It was clear that Lentuka was going to die.

An old man who was nearby came to his rescue; he instructed two young men to lay him down and he kicked hard between his legs, just below his manhood. The piece came out flying out of Lentuka's mouth, and he stood up coughing at the same time and immediately went out of the kraal followed by laughter from the men.

A few days after Lentuka's humiliation, Gundwane was wooing a young woman called Mbazane. He had been trying for several weeks without any visible success; the woman was not cooperative. Gundwane had to wait until the clay pot full with water was on her head before he could hold her hand.

The woman, fearing the water pot would fall and break, would wait to hear words of proposal. It was during one such special moments when Lentuka arrived at the scene and intervened, purposefully setting Mbazane free. This action angered Gundwane, which was what Lentuka had hoped to achieve. Gundwane could not allow himself to be humiliated in front of the woman he loved. He fetched up his two fighting sticks he always carried.

Lentuka was waiting with his fighting sticks when Gundwane came, his forehead folded. Gundwane struck repeatedly, aiming for Lentuka's head, but Lentuka had done his homework, and he repelled all the strikes effortlessly and patiently waited for his chance. The anger had been so intense that it blinded all Gundwane's fighting skills. He soon got tired and also noticed that his opponent was not fighting back. It was when Gundwane was trying to read the situation that he

received a powerful blow on his head; his knees filled with water and he fell down.

Mbazane let out one loud, fearful cry while Lentuka left the way he had come, leaving the two of them alone. Mbazane quickly went on her knees to inspect the wound because blood was all over his head, soaking his jet-black hair. Mbazane cleaned the area around the wound and let out a half sob sigh. The wound was deep—no wonder. Lentuka was big and fat. Finally Gundwane somehow managed to go home unaided.

Gundwane had seen his enemy among a certain group of emajaha, and the tension inside him grew. He touched his healed wound and looked away. His friend Msobho noticed the gesture and smiled; he had solved Gundwane's problem. Msobho remembered the day when Gundwane came to him asking, "What has made Lentuka attack me? Is he busy with Mbazane?"

Msobho reminded him of the day when Lentuka was humiliated after eating the meat from him.

"Everybody said you put a piece of meat under your foot so that the meat was jammed in the throat of the man you had given meat."

"But he ate quickly and he did not chew the big piece very well because of hunger. He has himself to blame, not me."

"My friend, that is the sole reason he took you by surprise. Hear me out—I am not talking for him, which is what everybody thinks."

After everybody had eaten, it was time for dancing and singing. Everybody in the kraal formed a circle and created a big

space in the centre, and a song would be led by any man who felt like singing. The leader would march into the centre as his peers and friends shouted his own personal song praise; then he would lead a song and dance.

Gundwane waited for three dancers and then he found himself in the centre dancing and leading a song at the same time. Everybody sang and clapped their hands with anticipation; they knew their eyes would rejoice.

In order for Lentuka to show his bravery, he placed himself in front so that Gundwane would not have difficulty finding him; otherwise, people would think he was a coward by standing behind others. The sun was up and, mixed with human heat, it was hot in the kraal. Gundwane was soaked with sweat, but together with everybody he did not feel the heat that much.

Suddenly after a single song, Gundwane went straight to Lentuka and hit directly near his feet and reversed, looking back at him. He did not reach the centre. His enemy, Lentuka, was with him. It took all his strength and skill to repulse Lentuka's wrath, which was coming to him like a heavy rainfall. The speed of striking sticks was breathtaking and eluded the eyes of the spectators. The only thing that helped the spectators follow the fight was the sound of a stick against a stick. Lentuka used a moment when the sun shone directly into Gundwane's eyes, disturbing him to register a powerful blow. Immediately Gundwane was bleeding directly above his eye, and he was gripped with fear that he was going to fail for the second time and, worse, in front of the multitude. He was fighting with one eye, and one of the elders came into the stage in an attempt to stop

the fight. Lentuka went to the corner of the kraal to dance and celebrate his victory, but Gundwane dismissed the elder and declared himself fit to continue with the fight. The only mistake Lentuka committed was to underestimate the one-eyed Gundwane. He came back with a broad smile.

Gundwane was able to register his first blow not at the head where Lentuka guarded most, but at his big tummy. Lentuka received the blow with a bold face. Many spectators did not notice the blow; only those who strained their ears noticed. Gundwane registered another blow, followed by another, until Lentuka could not take it anymore. He came down to Gundwane with great force, but he swayed to one side and accompanied him with a powerful stroke at the back of his head and he fell. He lay still without moving.

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