

LEGENDS OF THE LOST SACRED KINGDOM

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Based on the book by

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EXT. SOUTH AFRICAN SAVANNAH - PRE-DAWN

Stillness in the air, the day unborn.

Plains of golden grasses wait in shadow.

Silhouettes of animals stand silently beneath the flat-topped acacia trees.

The sky is washed with colors, which softly rise before the dawn.

And an immense lake: Fundudzi. Its surface still like a mirror, reflecting each new moment.

The sun cracks the horizon.

And rising with it, out of the water, is a dark dome. As the dome rises further, it becomes the bald head of a wizened, elderly man -

DAMBUWO (70s), a wizard of the Vhangona tribe.

He glides toward the shore, his movement impossibly smooth. Reaching the shallows, emerging from of the water, Dambuwo turns and looks to the east.

To an immense MOUNTAIN, dark against the sky.

At the mountain's base, two carefree figures bound along, approaching the forested slopes -

MAKHADZI (flawless ebony skin with laughing, sparkling eyes) and her friend TSHIBUMBA. Makhadzi turns, waving to Dambuwo -

MAKHADZI

Good morning, Grandfather!

DAMBUWO

Good morning, Makhadzi, Tshibumba.
Where are you going this early?

MAKHADZI

To collect firewood. While the
elders take baths, some of us have
work to do!

The hint of a smile crosses Dambuwo's face.

DAMBUWO

Where would our tribe be without
you! But take care - do not wander
to the top of the mountain, past
the flat--

MAKHADZI

Flat lands with *mivhula* trees, or
the Unspeakable One will skin our
bones. We know, we know!

Dambuwo nods, a bemused smile playing across his lips.

The girls wave goodbye and head into the forest.

Dambuwo steps out of the lake, watching them go, until -

HSSSS! Dambuwo looks down - he's almost stepped upon a snake.
The serpent slithers away, racing toward the mountain.

Dambuwo frowns.

The girls have disappeared from sight. Dambuwo's gaze rises
to the mountain top. Somehow it looks as though the morning
sun does not reach it - the peak is still as dark and ominous
as ever.

The lines on the elderly wizard's face deepen with worry.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

The girls gather firewood, humming together and venturing
further up the slope. Birds twitter and insects hum.

TSHIBUMBA

(calling to Makhadzi)

I thought bathing in Lake Fundudzi
was forbidden.

MAKHADZI

The rules don't apply to Dambuwo.

TSHIBUMBA

Your grandfather is so weird! But
sexy, for an old man.

Tshibumba giggles, knowing she'll get a rise out of Makhadzi.

MAKHADZI

Hey! He's the only family Madembe
and I have left.

Makhadzi stops, seeing something far ahead, in a patch of
sunlight - a lush, ripe fruit hanging from a vine.

She paces forward, putting down her firewood and stepping up
to the shining fruit. Dust motes dance in the shaft of
sunlight.

Makhadzi grabs the fruit, sinking her teeth into its flesh...

Juice dribbles down her chin. It's delicious.

Makhadzi sees another fruit, further on ahead. Runs for it -

TSHIBUMBA

Makhadzi?

MAKHADZI

Fruit, even in the drought! You
have to try one!

Tshibumba follows as Makhadzi tosses the second fruit to her.
Tshibumba bites into it - and her eyes go wide in surprise.

Spotting another fruit further ahead, she runs for it.
Makhadzi sprints, beating Tshibumba.

The two girls laugh as they race further into the forest,
gobbling down fruit, the sound of their carefree voices
carrying through the trees.

Tshibumba bursts through a patch of brush -

- and finds herself in a flat, sandy clearing that stretches
on and on. It's dotted by dwarf mivhula trees, each one
looking like a gnarled, twisted creature.

Sitting in the open before her is a stack of firewood.
There's something eerie about it, its arrangement too
perfect.

What's more - there is absolute silence. No birds, no
insects, no rustle of leaves in the breeze...

TSHIBUMBA

Makhadzi?

Tshibumba glances about - glimpses her friend disappearing
between the trees ahead, having already picked up one such
bundle.

TSHIBUMBA (CONT'D)

Makhadzi!

She hurries after her friend.

TSHIBUMBA (CONT'D)

I don't think we should be here!

MAKHADZI (O.S.)

The firewood is perfect! We'll just
take a few bundles and leave.

Tshibumba rounds a clump of trees, catching sight of Makhadzi, who bends down and hoists a second bundle.

And then something ROARS up ahead. Unearthly, deafening.

Makhadzi blinks and looks around, as if becoming aware of her surroundings for the first time.

MAKHADZI (CONT'D)
(whispering)
We shouldn't be here...

Makhadzi turns - something is coming through the trees, just out of sight.

TSHIBUMBA
Makhadzi, RUN!!!

The girls turn and flee, Makhadzi dropping her bundles -

But the pieces of firewood trip her up -

She slams into the ground face first.

Looking up, coughing in the dust, she sees not firewood but SNAKES all around her.

Tshibumba, running, hears a blood-curdling SCREAM. She turns back -

A look of sheer TERROR contorts her face.

Something off-screen ROARS again - now much louder and much closer.

In sheer panic, Tshibumba turns and flees for her life.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Two rocks strike together, sparks jumping forth.

The rocks are held by MADEMBE (late teens, youthful yet with the hint of something noble in his features). He's crouched on a wide tree branch.

He strikes again and again, trying to ignite a pile of wood and kindling that is carefully balanced at the fork of the tree branch.

DENDELE (O.S.)
My grandmother starts fires faster
than you.

Madembe's friend DENDELE (late teens, with quick, bright eyes) waits on a lower branch.

MADEMBE

You want to switch places?

DENDELE

I would, but I am the brains of the operation. We cannot risk the brains.

MADEMBE

You just *think* you are the brains.

DENDELE

Yes, I think! Who thought of building the fire in the tree? Who traded with Veveru to get the secret herbs?

A spark finally catches, the kindling bursting into flame.

Dendele passes up a bundle of herbs, which Madembe places upon the fire. Thick smoke blossoms upwards.

Madembe walks backward along the tree branch, reaches up - and pulls himself onto the next, much thinner, branch.

Below, Dendele wafts the smoke upward with a fan of woven leaves.

As smoke swirls about him, Madembe paces forward, one foot in front of the other. The smoke is joined by something else... *BEEES*.

At first, just a few. But as Madembe eases forward, the bees increase in number, BUZZING all around him.

His goal: at the heart of the swarm, a BEEHIVE attached to the tree, honey dripping from its combs. Herbal smoke wafts over the hive, keeping the bees strangely docile.

DENDELE (CONT'D)

My grandmother harvests honey faster than you.

The breeze shifts, blowing the column of smoke away from Madembe. Bees begin to land upon him.

MADEMBE

(through gritted teeth)
Your grandmother also fans faster than you.

Dendele fans harder, sending smoke back to Madembe and the hive.

The bees that have landed crawl across Madembe's face. His eyes betray fear, but he forces himself to stay calm.

With slow, precise movements, he reaches a knife to the hive and begins to cut away part of the honeycomb.

And then a frantic voice reaches his ears -

TSHIBUMBA (O.S.)
He took her! He took her!

In the background, we glimpse Tshibumba racing between the trees.

DENDELE
Don't react, they will sting you!
The village will help her.

Madembe remains focused, until -

TSHIBUMBA (O.S.)
He took her! He took Makhadzi!

This gets a reaction from Madembe. Just a small jerk, but it's enough. A bee stings him. He slaps it in pain.

DENDELE
Oh, shit.

The swarm vibrates with sudden hostility, swirling about, stinging Madembe again and again.

Both young men scramble out of the tree, the swarm chasing them down.

They sprint through the forest, over logs and under branches, nearing a river. Madembe passes Dendele -

MADEMBE
Your grandmother runs faster than
you!

The bees converge on the slower Dendele... who, thinking quickly, grabs a dried reed growing on the bank. He runs to the river and dives into the cloudy waters.

Bees buzz angrily on the surface, waiting for their prey to reemerge.

But only the hollow reed pokes up - Dendele's breathing tube. He's safe, but trapped until the swarm loses interest.

Madembe looks back to his friend and grins, both impressed and amused by his predicament.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Madembe runs to the huts at the village outskirts, finding a cluster of VILLAGERS surrounding the weeping Tshibumba.

TSHIBUMBA

He took her! I tried to help,
but...

Sobs cut off her words. Madembe forces his way into the cluster, kneeling down beside Tshibumba.

MADEMBE

Where is my sister?

He shakes her.

She looks up - sheer terror in her eyes.

MADEMBE (CONT'D)

Where is Makhadzi? Who took her?

Tshibumba mumbles something.

MADEMBE (CONT'D)

Tshibumba! Who took her!?

TSHIBUMBA

(whispering)

Dada... Dada...

(yelling)

Dada took her!

At the name "Dada", the other villagers cover their ears and make a loud HISSING sound, trying to drown Tshibumba out.

Madembe also looks fearful. But he whirls on the villagers.

MADEMBE

Quiet!! It is just a name.

They hiss louder, so he yells back -

MADEMBE (CONT'D)

DADA! DADA! See? Nothing happens,
it is just a name!

The villagers scurry back in fear, muttering amongst themselves.

Madembe turns to Tshibumba.

MADEMBE (CONT'D)

Where is she?

But the girl is too shaken to say more, her eyes darting around, seeing unseen terrors with each new hiss.

Madembe sighs. He doesn't really need her to answer his question. He raises his eyes up, up, up...

...to the mountain top, which looms darker than ever.

INT. CHIEF THAGALU'S ROUNDHOUSE - DAY

Several villagers, including the ELDERS, have crowded into the dim interior. ELDER NEMULEMBETU (60s), a member of the tribal council, is the most revered - and the most severe.

In the center, Madembe cradles Tshibumba before the seated CHIEF THAGALU.

ELDER

They should not have entered the flat place with the dwarf trees. Every Vhangona child knows it is the way to Death Valley.

VILLAGER

Fools!

ELDER 2

But *he* who lives on the mountain is a master of deception. The girls were tricked.

ELDER NEMULEMBETU

Tricked into bringing his presence into our village. Do you not smell it? She is *tainted*. If she does not go, all could suffer.

MADEMBE

But we don't know what she saw. What if it wasn't even Dada?

Many in the room hiss at him. Even Chief Thagalu reacts -

CHIEF THAGALU

Do not invite his presence with his name.

MADEMBE

I am sorry, Chief. I only wish to say that no one has seen *him* since - since the legends were born. Let me and my friends search for Makhadzi. We will turn back at the first sign of trouble.

ELDER NEMULEMBETU

At such a sign, it will be too late.

(turning to Chief Thagalu)

When the old follow the young, all are lost. Let us banish the girl, then we can be assured of our people's safety.

ELDER 2

Perhaps if we seek out Dambuwo -

ELDER

Dambuwo is nowhere to be found.

ELDER NEMULEMBETU

Typical. Of what use is a wizard who disappears just when he is needed? This leaves the matter to -

Chief Thagalu holds up his hand, silencing the others. He stares at the girl, deep in thought.

CHIEF THAGALU

There will be no reckless search mission. But I will not cast out a daughter of the Vhangona tribe, or give up so quickly on another.

(standing)

Make ready to travel - we seek the counsel of the Great One and his sangoma.

An excited murmur passes through the villagers.

EXT. MAPUNGUBWE - LATE AFTERNOON

In the distance, grey clouds roll across the savannah.

Groups of people stream from all directions to Mapungubwe, the seat of power of the Vhangona kingdom.

Chief Thagalu leads the elders and other members from his village, entering Mapungubwe along a dry, dusty path.

CHIEF THAGALU
 (observing in the
 distance)
 Grey clouds...

ELDER NEMULEMBETU
 But not the kind that bring rain.
 The gods torment us with hope that
 the drought will end, but the
 clouds are an ill omen.

Bringing up the rear of the group are Madembe, Dendele and
 BUKUTA (late 20s, an easy-going nature in a giant frame).

GOMBOZA (O.S.)
 Madembe! Madembe! Dendele!

The friends turn to see GOMBOZA (early teens, a bundle of
 naive energy) bounding up with a calabash gourd. Milk sloshes
 out of it.

MADEMBE
 What are you doing here, little
 one? This meeting is only for men.

GOMBOZA
 Then why are you here? A Vhangona
 is not a man until he is married.

BUKUTA
 He has a point.

GOMBOZA
 And I bring milk to share.

Gomboza grins, offering his gourd to them. Dendele accepts
 and tastes it.

DENDELE
 Ah, fresh goat's milk. But...

Dendele pretends to be perplexed by the flavor.

DENDELE (CONT'D)
 There is a strange sweetness to
 it... Ah yes, I recognize it! It
 has the taste of *stolen* milk.

MADEMBE
 Gomboza...