

Chapter 1 – The Midwives of the Bush



As the sun sank behind the tree line, and the glow on the horizon receded before the darkening sky, Norah Ziyambi scanned the bushes on either side of the path. Although she saw nothing, an icy feeling gnawed at her. Her aching foot made her limp, and now her calves ached. The faster she tried to walk, the slower was her progress. Regular stoppages to rest her sore foot threatened to end her homeward journey, but that was not an option.

Tadiwa's warning now preoccupied her mind. Her best friend tried to dissuade her from undertaking such an arduous trip in her condition, and on her own. She reminded her of the recent attacks on people walking alone in the bush, but her words fell upon deaf ears. Norah was determined to visit the n'anga (witchdoctor) who would cast bones and foretell the future of her unborn child. She attempted to reassure her friend by recalling that the attacks all occurred after dusk. She would be home long before then.

Earlier that morning, seven months pregnant, hot, tired, and sweating, she'd stumbled along the rough bush path. She'd stubbed her big toe on a clump of dry grass stubbornly clinging to the path's rock-hard earth, beaten down by innumerable passing feet. Before long, her foot throbbed with every step. She wore canvas tackies (tennis shoes), but they'd done little to protect her.

Under normal circumstances, the walk to the n'anga's village would take about two hours, but her aching foot slowed her progress. The cool of the morning soon slipped away, and by eleven o'clock, the relentless sun was taking its toll. Only an occasional twittering bird or startled grasshopper braved the blistering heat. The first rains were late this year. Each afternoon, promising storm clouds taunted the villagers before drifting into a cloudless distance.

Nobody, other than Norah, braved the late-morning heat, and the silence of the bush emphasised her total isolation. Her thoughts wandered as she walked along the dry, interminable path. It helped to keep her mind off her sore foot and the draining November temperature.

Her late mother, Dorothy, worked for many years in the great city of Salisbury as a maid for a wealthy Jewish family. She brought back many stories to the village, keeping young Norah and the other women enthralled. While the other children ran about barefoot, Dorothy insisted her daughter wear shoes to keep her feet slim and soft. In time, the other children developed thick soles on their feet; much thicker than the soles of Norah's tackies. Her sore foot was the price she now paid for her mother's indulgence.

Dorothy also encouraged young Norah to study hard at the mission school, so one day she could get a job in the city. She told her daughter to look for work only in the best Salisbury suburbs. It would lead to better pay and working conditions and ensure a good future for her family. Norah took her mother's advice to heart and was now taking the first step to secure the future of her unborn child.

A little past noon, Norah arrived at the village of the respected n'anga. As she entered the quiet village, a woman emerged from a hut. 'Why have you come here, sister?'

'I've come to ask the n'anga about my unborn child's future.'

'Have you brought money with you? You will need ten US dollars.'

'I only have five US dollars.'

'Stay in the shade of that tree. I will ask the n'anga if he will see you.'

A short time later, the woman emerged from a hut carrying a chipped, white enamel mug. 'Here, sister, you look like you need a drink of water. The n'anga is eating his lunch, so you will have to wait.'

Norah gulped down the cool water. Only now did she realise how thirsty she was. She was grateful to sit on the log under the shady tree and rest her foot. The throbbing was easing a little, and Norah hoped the worst was behind her.

A mangy looking old dog lay in the doorway of a hut, and two thin hens scratched in the dirt, searching for insects or spilled grain. Norah thought it a vain hope, given the late rains and poor harvest. The villagers needed to be careful to avoid any waste of their meagre resources.

The wait for the n'anga to finish his lunch stretched out, testing Norah's patience. Half an hour, then three-quarters passed. When the woman next appeared, Norah looked up expectantly. It was not good news. The n'anga rested after lunch and she would have still longer to wait.

Even in the welcome shade of the tree, the ambient air proved hot and repressive. Norah waited for the woman to return, hoping for another glass of water. Time passed with no sign of her. The delay and the oppressive heat dulled Norah into a mindless stupor. When the touch on her shoulder finally came, it gave Norah a start.

'The n'anga is waiting for you.'

Norah struggled to her feet, feeling stiff. She'd sat too long on the log. The woman led her through the village to a large hut set apart from the others; clearly for someone of importance.

The woman took the five US dollars and motioned for Norah to enter the darkened doorway. Once inside, Norah stood blinking, trying to adjust her eyes to the gloomy interior. At least the windowless, musty smelling room was nice and cool, in contrast to the outside air.

‘Come, sit,’ said the gentle voice. An old man sat on the ground with his legs crossed. A small square of carpet lay before him. Norah advanced with slow, deliberate steps and sat down opposite him.

‘You have come far; you are limping. Why have you come to visit me?’

‘I am with child, so I came to ask about its future. It should be born in January.’

‘I will scatter the bones and see what they will tell me.’

On the carpet, besides small pieces of wood and twigs, lay a chicken’s foot, the skull of a rodent, and a piece of fur from an unknown animal. An old Zam-Buk tin lay to one side.

The old man picked up the sticks, and muttering inaudible words scattered them across the square of carpet. He studied them while stroking his chin. ‘Where is your husband? I see he is no longer with you.’ The n’anga rearranged two or three sticks as he spoke.

‘I have heard nothing of him since I told him I was with child.’

‘Yes, the bones tell me he will never return.’

‘Then I will raise my child on my own.’

‘Yes, but that is well. He would not be a suitable father for your child.’

‘Will my child suffer without a father?’

‘No, it will make your son strong. You will give birth when the rains are heavy, and the sky is dark with clouds.’

‘Will he make me proud?’

‘He will make you proud, and he will disappoint you.’

‘How can that be?’

‘Many men will fear him.’

‘Can that be a good thing? I want my son to be loved, not feared.’

‘Important people will respect him. But I cannot tell if he will find favour with the spirits.’

‘Is there anything else?’

‘No, that is all I can see. Now, rub this ointment on your feet before you go.’

He handed her a folded square of greaseproof paper containing a dab of ointment he’d scraped from the half-empty Zam-Buk tin.

‘Is that to make certain my child’s future will be as you have seen it?’

‘No, but it will comfort your sore feet for your journey home. Trust in the spirits to protect you.’

Norah thanked the old man and backed out of the hut, nodding her appreciation as she passed through the doorway. She walked to the log under the tree, where she sat and rubbed the strong-smelling ointment on both her feet. The immediate cooling effect, together with her period of rest, made them feel much better.

She waved goodbye to the woman who’d earlier helped her and set off on her journey home. The heat was less intense than earlier in the afternoon, and the sun’s position suggested the time was around four or four-thirty. It would be a more pleasant walk home.

After an hour, walking along the path, her foot ached once more. It got worse and worse. Half an hour later, she was limping more noticeably. In the cooler evening, she’d made better progress than during her morning walk, and estimated she’d be home within the hour.

The sun was sinking fast, and Norah tried to increase her pace. Her legs ached and sharp pains stabbed at her foot. She cursed her stupidity at using all the ointment as she sat on the

log in the n'anga's village. If she'd kept a little, it would have helped her now. Her foot felt a lot better at the start of her journey home, and until the pain resurfaced, she'd not given it another thought.

Now, with the sun behind the trees darkening the sky, it reminded her of Tadiwa's concerns about her ambitious visit to the n'anga. The icy gnawing twisted at her stomach as she considered the dangers she faced. There'd been several attacks on villagers in the past few months.

A hyena attacked a girl returning from school in broad daylight. People said it was rabid, and the authorities hurried to track it down and shoot it. One night, a drunk man was returning home from the local beer hall. Hyenas followed him back to his village before attacking and dragging him into the bush, where they ate him. Rumours claimed a leopard took another missing man. And the police warned of two instances of women going missing under suspicious circumstances. They were bleak matters to contemplate for a woman walking alone in the dusk.

These thoughts troubled Norah as she limped along the path. Then she noticed it, a movement in the bushes to her right. She hurried on, peering into the undergrowth, straining her eyes to see what disturbed the bushes. There! A large spotted hyena walked parallel to her in the bush. Oh! And another one walking a few feet to the rear.

Dorothy, her mother, called hyenas 'the midwives of the bush.' Those evil creatures had the gruesome habit of eating their prey alive. They didn't kill their unfortunate targets first, as would a lion or leopard, but simply feasted on their struggling victims. African wild dogs were the same. So impatient were hyenas for their meal, they often didn't wait for the birth of a baby ungulate, snatching it straight from the mother's birth canal. And often, the mother became a victim too.

And now these dreadful beasts were following her. Hyenas often feigned a disinterest in their intended prey, lulling them into a false sense of security, until they were close enough to seize them in their jaws.

Norah trembled. She was aware hyenas identified injured or weak animals for an attack, and they would have seen her limping. She steeled herself to walk as normally as possible, trying to ignore the excruciating pain in her foot.

But then, didn't the n'anga foretell of her son's future? That must mean she'd be safe. He said to trust in the spirits' protection. People said the n'anga was never wrong. While Norah was a believer, her faith was being tested.

Now the number of hyenas increased to four. Norah's thoughts went back to her days at the mission school where she learnt about Christ, faith, and the Holy Trinity. As an added insurance, she prayed for her safety. But it was impossible to keep Tadiwa's warning and the accompanying hyenas out of her mind. She pictured the evil creatures tearing open her abdomen and ripping the foetus from her womb. Would her baby's first cry be its last? Norah's trembling returned, even stronger than before.