

Chapter 2 – A Predator Abroad



Norah walked on, trying to ignore the hyenas keeping pace with her, only four or five metres to her right in the bush. If she looked at them, she feared she would draw their attention. But they were aware of her presence, and she understood their motives.

Hyenas, once thought of as cowardly scavengers, were now known to be bold hunters that challenged lions and leopards for their kill. They were becoming more dangerous to people as drought, poaching, and other encroaching human activity took a toll on their natural prey.

Norah prayed for someone, a large man, to come walking along the path. There was safety in numbers. Two people together might deter the hyenas from any aggressive action. But she knew it was unlikely in the receding daylight that anyone else would appear, given the spate of attacks on the local villagers. Then she heard the sounds that chilled her to the bone. The cackles and wooooo-uppps that attracted more members of the clan to join the hunt.

To Norah's surprise, the hyenas turned away and hurried off into the bush. The calls came not from her accompanying hyenas, but from distant family members. No doubt they'd spotted a tastier meal than she presented.

At last, Norah walked into her village to the relief of Tadiwa. When she related her day's adventure, her friend was angry about the risk she took. Norah accepted the scolding with grace. The trip was a near disaster, and she hobbled about for the next week. In her attempt to show the hyenas she wasn't injured, she tried to walk with her natural gait, which only made her injury worse and brought more scolding from Tadiwa.

'Why consult a n'anga? You cannot change your fate. Trust in Christ.' Tadiwa's visits to the mission church on Sundays gave her alternative points of view. She also followed the traditional beliefs, but was quick to switch between the two when it suited her.

The end of November approached, and the dry weather continued. Rumours persisted that the government was going to make it rain. It was called cloud seeding.

Tadiwa was quick to react. 'The government can't make it rain. They are not gods. Only the Lord can bring the rain.'

The villagers thought Tadiwa spoke the truth when the radio announced the seeding programme had failed because of unsuitable clouds.

Only a week later, the first rains arrived, cooling the oppressive heat. The showers were welcome but fleeting. Each afternoon, brilliant sunshine would follow the brief downpour, and by next morning, the ground was bone dry.

By Christmas, Norah's time was near, and she was impatient for the heavy clouds bloated with rain. Tadiwa's husband, Michael, was back on leave from his job in Salisbury. As expected, Norah's husband did not appear. Tadiwa gave Norah a share of the food items Michael had brought home with him.

The new year arrived, and Michael needed to return to his job in Salisbury. A friend came to the village in a borrowed car to give him a lift to the city. The workers' migration back to the city was underway. Michael put his suitcase in the boot and got into the car. As he did so, a mighty crash of thunder split the air. There was no warning, and everyone jumped. Soon, the car disappeared into the trees at the bend in the road. A flash of lightning followed by another clap of thunder rattled the village, and the sky darkened.

The lightning flashes and rumbling thunder continued through the night, and in the morning, heavy grey skies sat low over the village. The smell of rain hung heavy in the air. In mid-morning, fat drops of rain pockmarked the soil before a torrential downpour took hold.

Norah held a hessian sack over her head and hurried next door to call Tadiwa. 'My baby is coming.'

'Has your water broken? Have you started contractions?'

'The n'anga said my son will come with the dark clouds and heavy rains.'

'Don't be foolish, sister. Many days will have dark clouds and heavy rain.'

Two hours later, Norah's son was born.

'What name will you give him?' Tadiwa asked.

'John. He will be called John.'

'What is his traditional name?'

'His name will only be John.'

Tadiwa shook her head. Norah's mother had filled her mind with ideas from the city. They were white people's ideas, foreign to the villagers. 'It is not good to give up our traditional ways. He should have a Shona name.'

'You can't talk, Tadiwa. You question the n'anga's wisdom and prefer the church and the mission's teachings.'

'Both can live together. I don't abandon either.'

Norah relented and agreed to a traditional Shona name for her son. 'I will call him Mauya, but we'll never use that name. He will be John Mauya Ziyambi.'

Nine months later, Tadiwa's daughter, Aneni, was born. Michael's Christmas visit had been most productive.

Village life continued as normal for Norah and Tadiwa. As soon as he could walk, young John followed his mother everywhere. His world was the village centre and the two women who cared for him. The dozen or so huts formed the borders of his existence.

Then one day, the villagers' peace was disrupted when a third young woman went missing under suspicious circumstances. Norah's village was unaffected, but now three neighbouring

villages mourned their missing woman. It appeared the culprit was doing the rounds of the villages in the area. Everyone was on edge, wondering where the evil may strike next.

No remains or a blood trail led the police to dismiss the possibility of wildlife being responsible. No, they believed it was the result of human activity. Perhaps someone lured the women to the city with promises of money and the bright lights. Worse still, they may have been abducted and murdered. The police now looked for a local serial killer or a visiting stranger.

Either way, the alternatives both needed a means of transporting the women, dead or alive. Anyone with a vehicle came under suspicion from the nervous villagers. This caused disputes, fights, and an increased number of visits to the n'angas.

One Sunday afternoon at the beerhall, a visiting stranger drew the crowd's attention. He said he was searching for a long-lost relative, but the crowd's agitation grew when he could give no clear details of the relative's name, or where she might be. Soon, the hotheads were shouting he was the one who'd abducted the three women.

The man claimed he was driving to Umtali and only dropped in to enquire about an aunt living in the area. His protests of innocence fell on deaf ears, and the young men in the crowd struck him with sticks and threw stones. 'Finish him,' a voice shouted, and the violent frenzy grew.

'Are you all mad?' the frightened stranger screamed. 'Call the police. I'm innocent. I've done nothing.' The man's protests grew weaker as the blows rained down on him, and soon, he protested no more.

The noisy crowd fell silent and then melted away as those present realised the gravity of what they'd done. Later, no one spoke about the tragic incident, as if not mentioning it negated its existence.

The next day, the police swarmed the area, questioning everyone who'd been at the beer hall. An elderly woman came forward to claim the dead man was her nephew. The sobering news affected the entire area.

Everyone insisted they weren't at the beerhall, or if they were, they'd left long before the violence began. The older folk blamed the young hotheads, who, in turn, blamed the contrite mature villagers who didn't intervene to help the stranger.

But the police possessed loyal informers and were not fooled. They arrested several of the young hotheads and took them to Chikurubi prison on the outskirts of the city. Worse still, the true culprit was still at large. A period of quiet followed, but a shadow hung over the area. This was the situation when Norah needed to make a big decision.

John was three years old. Norah remembered her mother's words and was ambitious for her son's future. Now she needed to prepare for it. She'd long considered a move to the city to look for a job. So when she spoke to Tadiwa one day, it came as no surprise to her friend.

'I won't find a job in the city if I have a child with me.'

'No, you can leave John here. I'll look after him. He'll be company for Aneni.'

'I may be away for some time.'

'That's OK.'

'But I'll come for him when he's old enough for school.'

'He can go to our mission school.'

‘No, he needs a city school. I don’t want him to be a village boy tending to the cattle and goats.’

‘The children in the city learn bad ways.’

‘I will send him to a good school where that doesn’t happen.’

‘How can you afford such a school?’

‘That’s why I want a job.’

It irritated Tadiwa that Norah always spoke to John in English.

‘If he goes to school in the city, he may forget his Shona.’

‘No, I’ll make sure he doesn’t. It’s important for a person to speak both languages well.’

‘Ah well, he’s your son, so you must decide what’s best for him. But he’ll miss you. How can you leave your little one?’

‘One day, he’ll understand and thank me.’

‘I hope so, my friend, but I’ll also miss you.’

‘I’ll collect John in two or three years.’

‘That’s a long time.’

‘I will be back for the holidays.’

‘Hah! If your boss will let you.’

I’ll find a boss who allows time off for holidays and long weekends.

‘I think you have much to learn, Norah.’

Norah planned her departure. She was loath to leave her little boy and often deferred the event. But she worried how she’d get to the city, as all the buses travelled along the distant main road.

‘I’ll walk if I must.’

Tadiwa wouldn’t hear of it. ‘You can’t walk. It’s too far and too dangerous. Remember when you walked to see the n’anga? Remember, the police have not caught the person who abducted those three women. Wait until someone with a car visits the village. Then they can take you. Perhaps, all the way to Salisbury.’

‘But when would that be? Cars seldom come here.’

‘Well, at least wait and see. Let it take a little longer.’

Norah was impatient, but what choice did she have? She kept her suitcase packed and ready to go.

Only a week later, a government driver travelling with a nurse came to the village to teach the women about birth control.

‘We’re driving back to Salisbury tonight,’ said the nurse. ‘You can come with us; there’s room.’

There was one problem. Young John was on a ramble with the other children and Danai, the village’s young female babysitter.

‘I can’t leave without saying goodbye to my child.’

‘Well, we can’t stay any longer,’ said the driver. ‘We’ll be late getting back.’

‘Perhaps it’s best if you don’t say goodbye,’ said Tadiwa. ‘You’ll just upset him. I’ll explain you’ve gone for a short trip and will be back soon. By the time he realises you won’t be back too soon, he’ll be used to your absence.’

Norah's heart was heavy at the prospect of not saying goodbye to her son. But she realised this was a rare opportunity to travel to the city. When might her isolated village offer another chance like this? She grabbed her suitcase and purse, hugged Tadiwa, and jumped into the back of the Land Rover.

The driver turned the vehicle and eased the car onto the track leading from the village. As the Land Rover bounced and bumped along the rough dirt surface with its ruts and potholes, Norah waved out the window to Tadiwa.

Only minutes later, Danai and the children returned to the village. When Tadiwa told John his mother would be gone for a short while, the little boy's face crumpled as tears ran down his cheeks.