THE WITCHELEPHANT

of the

LIMPOPO

Chapter One

I HAD A GARDEN in Africa, at the foot of the Molongong Hill. The Tropic of Capricorn runs through these highlands, a hundred miles to the south, and the garden lay at an altitude of over three-thousand feet. An elephant ate it.

No sooner would my basil begin to fill out, or the tomatoes turn red, than the elephant would come out of the Limpopo, ignore thirty or forty farms on the way by, and head straight for my vegetables.

If it even was an elephant. Opinion differed on that. The fact that elephant tracks are pretty hard to mistake didn't prove anything. And these tracks were even harder to mistake than usual. Only one elephant in the world could have left them. The tracks around my garden were completely smooth.

Elephant feet are like tires. They are crisscrossed with grooves, and new ones leave deep ridges in the sand when the elephant puts his foot down. As the elephant gets older, his treads wear away and the ridges become fainter. Nobody ever heard of an elephant living long enough to wear his treads all the way off. Elephants don't get that old. But the one who raided my garden had. Which was one more reason people thought he wasn't an elephant at all, but a sorcerer.

The Sorcerer-Who-Cannot-Die is very old and everybody knows that, some nights, he comes to our village in the shape of an elephant. And that he's held a grudge against us for so long nobody can even remember what we did to offend him. "He is three meters tall and lives beneath a moonlit lake in baYei country," Talkie would tell people waiting at the clinic.

"The baYei People," I said, "live far to the west. The elephant comes from the east. Out of the Limpopo."

"That just goes to show how powerful the sorcerer is," Talkie nodded wisely.

Three meters tall? The people shuddered. A sorcerer who was three meters tall could lift the roofs off houses and watch the people sleeping inside. No wonder he could turn into an elephant.

"He lives beneath a lake?" a seventeen-year-old who was waiting for the results of his HIV test said one day.

"Mmmm," Talkie agreed. "That is the way with sorcerers."

"We should look for this lake," the boy said.

"You can look," Talkie said, "but you will not find it. The lake is on the far side of the Ghost River."

Ghost River? A bout of shivers ran through the people waiting on the benches.

"It is an ancient, dry river," Mma Batsalelwang said. "It has not held water since Elephant Times."

"We could get a map and find this lake," the boy waiting for his test results said.

"No," Talkie shook her head. "This lake does not appear on any map."

Doesn't appear on maps? "The government makes the maps. That sorcerer is so powerful he can force the government to keep his lake off . . . ?"

"The lake isn't there," Talkie said in a hushed voice. "It is hidden back in Elephant Time before Matsieng stepped out of the fountain and led the Ancestors to Africa. If you try to find this lake, you will become lost in Elephant time. You can only go there if the Sorcerer sends his elephants for you."

"Why doesn't he just bring you himself?"

"Would a kgosi lead you to kgotla?" Talkie shook her head at the innocence of the villagers. *It is not the job of the chief to lead people to the place of meeting.*

"There are many elephants in this country," the boy said, "even far to the west in baYei land. How will I know these elephants when I see them?"

"You want to find the Sorcerer?" Mma Batsalelwang stared at the boy.

"I want to learn how to find this sorcerer," the boy said. "If it is not too difficult I might . . ."

"It is never difficult to be a fool."

"The Sorcerer's elephants are red," Talkie said. "That is how you will know them. He will send red elephants to lead you to him. If he wishes to see you."

“How can they be red?” the boy said. “Elephants aren’t red.”

“He is a sorcerer. A sorcerer can make his elephants any color he wants.”

“So can a paint company,” the boy said. “But that doesn’t mean I would follow a painted elephant across . . .”

“If the Sorcerer does not send his red elephants,” Talkie said. “You will not find your way to the moonlit lake. Instead, you will become entangled in Elephant Time. Remember Rra Ntema?"

“Rra Ntema crossed the Ghost River looking for one of his cows and was never seen again,” Mma Batsalelwang said in a very soft voice.

“When Rra Ntema did not return home, two of his brothers went to look for him.” Talkie paused for a minute. “They vanished, too.”

Rra Ntema and his brothers hadn’t been the only ones. Entire families had crossed the Ghost River and never been seen again. Talkie knew the names of every member.

Piston didn’t believe in ghost rivers any more than I did, or in sorcerers, and he checked the internet to find out how to keep elephants out of a garden and discovered chili peppers. Put in a row of chilies, the internet said, and elephants won’t come anywhere near your garden. They have very sensitive noses.

Instead of shooting the elephant, which is what I wanted to do, I did the responsible thing. I kept my rifle out of sight and ordered a dozen packets of seeds from Mexico. If ordinary chilies would keep elephants out of a garden, habañeros would keep them out of the whole district.

I offered the seeds around the village and a few people took some, but they were just being polite. Nobody had any intention of planting any. If peppers were all it took to keep elephants away, everybody would already be planting peppers. The villagers laughed at my white-guy innocence and were glad the sorcerer hadn’t taken an interest in their crops.

They were right about peppers. The habañeros didn’t protect my vegetables any more than if I’d bought a magic rope from the ngaka and laid it around the garden. The night the elephant came back he may even have munched a few on the way by. The

following morning, the villagers shook their heads and exchanged glances with each other. They'd warned me what would happen.

Piston went back to the internet and discovered tin cans. String enough cans and, presto-digito, no more elephant problem. The mere rattle of a tin can is enough to put any elephant off his feed for days.

Maybe any elephant, but not *this* elephant. To the elephant who came to my garden, the rattle of tin cans was the call of a dinner bell. And he had very big ears.

Next we tried compact disks. Elephants don't like shiny things at night, the internet said. To an elephant, moonlight reflecting from a CD can mean only one thing. A farmer with a flashlight. And a farmer who waits in a field with a flashlight is a farmer who is likely to have a few other things in the field with him. Like a rifle and a box of bullets.

Piston signed us up with a charity in Canada that sends music to the Third World and, a few weeks later, thousands of Bono disks arrived. It was a good deal all around. Bono got to dispose of a lot of unsold CD's in a tax-deductible sort of way, and do good for the planet at the same time.

The charity got to help the downtrodden, music-deprived children of Africa.

And we got thousands of mirrors to hang around the garden.

Even the elephant got . . . well, it's hard to say what the elephant got out of the deal. I don't think he was a U2 fan. Maybe he just liked to admire himself because, the morning after he brushed past the CD's, we found his footprints going from tree to tree, and from bush to bush where he had checked out the disks. Some even had trunk prints on them, as if he'd been doing a bit of preening before chowing down on my vegetables.

Next, Piston discovered a website that knew about ditches. Big and powerful as elephants are, even a huge bull can't jump a ditch. They aren't built that way. So I went to the kgosi to see about getting a ditch.

He called a kgotla, and the village discussed the situation for weeks. Lots of people agreed that a ditch might be just the ticket to keep an ordinary elephant out of a garden. But when a sorcerer was involved, nobody saw the point. A sorcerer could fly

to the other side of a ditch as easily as he could fly from the moonlit lake to the Limpopo, so what was the point? In the end, we employed convict labor.

The kgosi believed in sorcerers as much as anybody, but he also believed young people ought to display the same courtesy and respect to elders that he'd displayed when he had been young. And, when courtesy and respect didn't turn out to be as important to a young villager as it was for the kgosi, the kgosi would call him in for a private audience. After which, traditionally, the young villager made a point of being respectful to everyone he met. Not many people, young or otherwise, ever cared to have a second private audience with the kgosi.

Even in Tsebthanjwe there's enough hip-hop and bad American television for rudeness and disrespect to have taken root and, before word got around, a lot of young men had the opportunity to demonstrate their renewed commitment to the traditional ways by installing a few meters of ditch. By the time the discourtesy problem was cleared up, my garden, and Rre Mbele's sorghum and mealie patches, too, were thoroughly elephant-proofed.

The ditches worked. At least for a while. I'd go out in the morning and find sorghum and maize flattened on all the neighboring lands. But not in my garden. Or in Rre Mbele's sorghum and mealie patches. I couldn't have felt smugger about it if I'd written the script. A big bull can down five hundred pounds of crops in a night, and none of it was mine or Rre Mbele's.

Things were going so well I scheduled a party at the lands and invited everybody who still believed in witchelephants to come pick some of my vegetables since they wouldn't be harvesting many of their own this year. I even had a little speech worked up about low-impact agricultural practices, and co-existing with nature.

It's a pity I never got to deliver it. The day before the party I went out to admire my garden, and it was gone. And so was most of Rre Mbele's sorghum and mealie. I don't think World War I battlefields could have been as torn-up.

From the looks of it, the bull had scuffed dirt into the ditch and, when he'd scuffed enough, ambled across and started munching. The whole sorry episode cost me whatever white-guy credibility I had left which, I was sure, is exactly what the elephant had in mind.

Now I don't want to make too big a deal of this, or I'll get deported back to the States and Uncle will lock me in a VA hospital and shoot me full of pills and give me a big increase in my disability payments, but the villagers were wrong. It didn't take a sorcerer to trash my garden, an ordinary elephant would do just fine. And it was personal.

Chapter Two

WHAT THE VILLAGERS DIDN'T KNOW was that there had been bad blood between me and that elephant for years.

Not that I blame the elephant. I can see his point of view and I'd be happy to let bygones be bygones. It's just that he and the other elephants had been in the wrong place at the wrong time and there wasn't anything I could do about it. Kit and Shadrach and I had been crouching behind logs waiting to get the drop on a squad of fighters from the African National Congress when the elephants walked up the ditch from the other direction and sprung the ambush.

It wasn't much of a ditch, just a depression alongside a trail, but we'd filled it with antipersonnel mines. When we cut loose, we knew where the ANC would jump, and it was going to be Fourth of July and Remember-the Maine and Day of the Dead all at once down there.

I wasn't supposed to be involved in ambushes. I wasn't even supposed to be carrying a rifle, but there was no way I was going on patrol without a weapon. And when I got those bastards from the African National Congress in my sights, well I knew what they'd done and I was going to pull the trigger. But I never got the chance because the elephant showed up first.

I thought about shooting him, but that wouldn't have worked. The ANC would have heard the shots.

Then I thought about trying to scare him off. But I couldn't see how I could do that without shooting and, either way, the ambush would be sprung and we'd have to hightail it out of there. If we could get out of there. If the ANC didn't do to us what we would have done to them, and ambushed us on the way by. But if I didn't shoot, the elephant would set off the mines and every guerilla in the district would be gunning for us, anyway.

I glanced toward where Kit was hiding, but he didn't know what to do any more than I did.

He signaled down to Shadrach, and pointed at the elephant. I don't know whether Shadrach gestured back. The day was getting late and Shadrach would have been hard to see in the shadows, even if the sun had been high and he'd been nearby.

When I looked back at the ditch, it wasn't just one elephant, anymore. A second elephant had appeared.

And then a third, strung out in single file about fifty meters apart, one behind the other. I knew those elephants. We'd been following them since we set out. Or, at least, we'd been following the ANC and the ANC had been following them.

The ANC were famous ivory poachers. All the revolutionary movements were. It's how they supported themselves, with illegal ivory and money and guns from the Soviets and Chinese. The ones we were following must have thought they could pick up a bit of spare change on the way home.

We'd caught up with them near a dry lake a few kilometers back. Piet and E Man stayed on their tail while Shadrach and Kit and I cut ahead to set up the ambush. An ANC base camp was somewhere in the area and we didn't want to let them get too close before we cut loose, we didn't need to stir up that kind of trouble. The fact that the elephants turned around and came back along the ditch, that was just the elephants' bad luck. And ours.

And good luck for the ANC.

The lead elephant could tell something was up, and stopped walking, and put his trunk in the air and sniffed. Elephants don't see all that well, but they've got plenty of olfactory tissue.

The elephant in front of me gave a low rumble and the other two stopped walking.

And raised their trunks and sniffed the air, too.

There was a fourth elephant, somewhere. I hadn't seen him yet, but I knew he was enormous. He had joined the others at the dry lakebed, his tracks frozen in the hardened, cracked mud, as if the lake had been wet and the mud soft an hour or two before.

The first three were huge, full-grown bulls and their tracks were big, big as garbage-can lids, it seemed to me. The tracks that came out of the lakebed made theirs look almost dainty, like prints from half-formed adolescents. There was another difference, too, that I didn't think much about it at the time, but where the tracks from the first three were spider-webbed with wrinkles, the fourth elephant left tracks that were completely smooth.

After a while, the elephant in front of me rocked forward on his front legs, one knee cocked, toes to the ground.

He put his ears out, and began turning his head from side to side like a radar beacon scanning for a target.

He must have heard something because, all at once, he charged down the ditch toward where Kit and Shadrach were hiding.

And triggered three Czechoslovakian antipersonnel mines in a Vesuvius of explosions and flying steel.

And screamed and stumbled forward, his front legs shredded below the knees. It's surprising how human that scream sounded and, for years, I would hardly get to sleep before I would hear that scream again.

He rolled onto his side, thrashing his legs, spraying blood over the red clay, and against the log I was crouching behind. It was the Fourth of July and Remember-the-Maine, down there, and Chinese New Year, too, and Bastille Day and Day of the Dead, all at once.

I slid lower behind the log, not wanting to get hit, listening to my heart pound. Or, maybe, it was the explosions. By then, it was hard to tell which was louder.

The elephant took a long time to die.

Before he did, a couple of more mines went off.

Then another.

After that, everything was still.

Then more thrashing, and he tried to trumpet, I think, but it came out as a low moan, almost below the range of my hearing.

When I finally looked, he was lying in the ditch. One of his tusks must have taken a direct hit, because the side of his face was filled with splinters of ivory. The other tusk was untouched. There's just no accounting, sometimes.

The second and third elephants were nowhere to be seen. That's something elephants can do, walk fifteen meters away and vanish. Then, for a quarter of a second, maybe, I caught a glimpse of the fourth elephant watching from the shadows. He was enormous, even bigger than I had imagined. Than I could ever have imagined.

His tusks reached almost to the ground, and he was looking straight at me, as if memorizing my face, it was hard to tell. I was having trouble paying attention because there was something wrong with my ankle. Then, he turned and disappeared into the trees, leaving me to clutch at my boot. I guess I hadn't hidden as well as I'd thought, because blood was dripping between my fingers.

The ankle didn't look bad, just a couple of small punctures and the blood was seeping rather than gushing. We bandaged it and slit the sides of the boot so I could get my foot back in. Nothing even hurt, at least not at first. The ankle just felt numb, as if I'd taken a shot of Novocain instead of a couple of bits of shrapnel.

Then we got the hell out of there. There was no way we were supposed to be anywhere near that place. Not wearing East-German uniforms. Or carrying Eastern-Bloc weapons.

Piet and E Man must have heard what happened, and we hoped they'd done the smart thing and made themselves scarce. But the radio had stopped working and we didn't know.

That was a quarter of a century ago, as hard as it is to imagine and, for years, hardly a day went by that the memory of that afternoon didn't become more real, and at the most inopportune moments. And the look that huge elephant gave me longer and more searching until, sometimes, it seemed he was gazing at me still.

Everybody knows elephants are smart. From the size of their brains, smarter than you, most likely. And they remember. And hold grudges. No bull would hike all the way from the Limpopo and ignore thirty or forty farms on the way by just to get at a few tomatoes and some basil, not unless it was personal. I just wanted to get that off my chest.

I wasn't about to tell the villagers what happened all those years ago, not while I'd been trying to kill people they thought of as freedom fighters. And, the harder I worked to keep that elephant out of my garden, the more foolish I began to look in their eyes. And the more they talked about the sorcerer. Especially since the ngaka who was supposed to protect us from sorcerers had walked off the job.

Chapter Three

THE TROUBLE WITH THE NGAKA started over Oteng's wife.

She had been a beautiful bride, ten years ago, the most desirable young lady in the entire Tuli area, everybody said. Rumor was, at least according to Talkie at the clinic, that the ngaka had tried to take her by force one evening, but she had kicked so hard she'd gotten away. By then, she had already been to the kgotla and announced her banns, and she wasn't about to do anything to interfere with that marriage. All the girls in Tsebthanjwe were jealous she had landed Oteng. He had more cows than any other man in the village

Then, when the marriage didn't produce children, the young wives who hadn't married rich men began to taunt her. "All those cows, and what did it get Oteng?" they would sigh as they slid their newest newborn from the sling on their back around to the front to nurse. "So much beauty and no children. It must be very hard." Having lots of children is the single most important thing in the life of a village woman, and the time came when Oteng's wife demanded that he do something.

The western doctor in Mahalapye prescribed a strange kind of spell and, for months, she carried a thermometer in a little pouch around her neck and checked her temperature every few minutes. When her temperature was just right, she would come running to Oteng in the fields or in the shebeen where he was drinking with his friends. Even when he was discussing cattle, she would come skipping up and whisper and giggle, and then lead him away by the hand.

"Oteng, Oteng," the other young wives started calling out whenever he came around, "You take me now. My heat is just right," and double over in fits of laughter. It was hard for a man, even a man with so many cows, to keep his dignity with that kind of thing going on. The time came when Oteng knew he had to pay a visit to the ngaka.

When he showed up for his appointment, the ngaka was decked out in his most formal robes. He had feathers in his hair. He was wearing an apron made from a

springbok hide, and his horn was filled with every sort of magical substance a well-equipped ngaka might need. Actually, it was a medium-sized dried gourd, but the ngaka called it his horn and Oteng was too polite to refer to it as anything else. That was just one of the many mysterious things Oteng saw and heard that morning.

The ngaka gave him a long consultation and asked all sorts of questions about what he and his beautiful young wife did in bed, and the kind of things she especially enjoyed and what she didn't like, and had Oteng tried this or that particular technique? In a culture where people don't talk about sex, the questions seemed awfully personal. But the western doctor in Mahalapye had also asked about very personal matters, and Oteng just decided the questions proved how modern and up-to-date the ngaka was. Besides, Oteng had paid a cow on retainer, and he didn't see how he had any choice but to tell the ngaka what he wanted to know.

The ngaka hmmmed a lot at the answers, and looked grave, and tapped a small bone against his horn. Then he fell silent for a few minutes, lost in thought. "Your case is very serious," he said in his darkest voice. "Very serious . . ."

Oteng nodded. He had suspected as much when the white doctor in Mahalapye hadn't been able to help him.

". . . *Very* serious," the ngaka said, in case Oteng hadn't gotten the point.

Oteng nodded again, more vigorously this time, so the ngaka would know he understood.

"A very powerful witch has cast this spell upon your wife."

Oteng nodded a third time.

"Who is angry with you?" the ngaka stared intently at three black stones he'd pulled from a crocodile-skin pouch.

"Khumo, I think. She had her eye on me when I . . ."

"Not Khumo," the ngaka slipped the stones back into the pouch. "Khumo does not possess that sort of magic. Besides," the ngaka placed the crocodile-skin pouch onto the floor, "I thought you had this marriage blessed?"

"We did." Oteng cast a quick glance at the pouch. He knew crocodiles were evil so whatever the stones in that pouch were for, they must be evil as well. And the ngaka must be powerful, too, to deal with them so casually. He had done the right thing

coming to this ngaka. Too bad the one who'd blessed the marriage hadn't been as powerful. Oteng tried to keep from thinking about the cow this was costing him.

"Who else is angry at you?" the ngaka broke into his thoughts. "We must know the person before I can work the cure."

Oteng mentioned several other ladies around the village, but the ngaka just shook his head. Then Oteng named the men who had wanted to marry his beautiful young wife, but the ngaka kept shaking his head. "Not powerful enough," is all he would say. "Think back. There must be some . . ."

Oteng thought about the time he had traveled to Selebi to buy a Christmas present for his beautiful young fiancée and had gotten into a dispute with the lady in the bus next to him. It had been a hot day, one of the hottest, and the lady wanted him to close the window. "I'll get the flu," she said.

"You won't get the flu," Oteng had answered. "How could you get the flu? It's the middle of the summer. Wait until August. Then it will be cold and you can get . . ."

"Everybody knows if you open the window on a bus, you will get the flu," the lady crossed her arms. The discussion was over. It was time for Oteng to close the window.

Ordinarily, he would have just gone on and slid the window shut, no matter how hot the afternoon was. Oteng was a polite man, even if he was rich. And the lady was older than he was, so that would have made him doubly polite. But not that afternoon.

That afternoon he was hot. He was worried about whether the bus would get to Selebi in time for him to buy the present. He was tired of people making demands and, if the truth were told, he was worried the beautiful young girl he was about to marry might be tempted by someone else while he was ou+t of town. And he was fed up with the petty superstitions people tried to inflict on each other. Flu in the middle of the summer? Who ever heard of such a thing? So he just folded his arms back, and sat in the breeze for the rest of the ride while the lady scowled at him.

"I have heard," he said, "that a very powerful witch lives in Selebi? Is that not true?"

"It is true," the ngaka said.

"Do you think she might be the one?" Oteng fidgeted while the ngaka thought over this new bit of information.

“I know of this woman,” the ngaka said. “She is very powerful, but she is not powerful enough to shut up your wife’s womb. There is someone else. Is there any other person you might have offended?”

Oteng shook his head. He tried not to offend people, even by accident.

“It is as I feared,” the ngaka said. “It is the Sorcerer-Who-Cannot-Die who has shut your wife’s womb.”

Oteng shuddered at the news. He knew that, as hard as the ngaka strove to protect the people it Tsebthanjwe, the sorcerer still worked much evil. Oteng was just glad the village had such powerful magic on its side.

“I can lift this curse,” the ngaka said, “but it is going to be very dangerous. When someone’s womb has been shut, both she and her husband must do exactly as I say or they both will be in terrible . . .”

Oteng nodded, again, and the ngaka stood up. Then ordered Oteng to come back in three days and to bring two more cows with him. The ngaka was going to be very busy in the meantime, gathering ingredients for the special ointment Oteng would need to rub into himself to lift the curse.

“Remember,” the ngaka told him once more as he left, “you will need to do exactly as I say. For your sake, and for hers, also. The ointment will be very powerful.”

Three days later, Oteng’s boy drove the cows to the ngaka’s kraal, the ngaka handed Oteng a little earthen jar of ointment and told him that he’d spent the past three days collecting plants in the Delta during different phases of the moon, and along the Zambezi, and as far away as the Great Karoo in South Africa.

Oteng knew that, roads being what they were, especially along the Zambezi, no ordinary mortal could have gathered anything from all those places in such a short period of time. And knowing it made him more certain than ever that he had done the right thing in hiring such a powerful ngaka. The fact that the moon can have only one phase in any three-day period just made the ointment all the more persuasive.

“Rub it onto yourself,” the ngaka told him. “One dose is all you need. It will work for the rest of your life. Longer, if you use it properly.” Then he watched to make sure Oteng rubbed it in exactly right.

“How can this work for longer than my life?” Oteng asked as he handed the empty jar back to the ngaka.”

“You are a perceptive man, to ask such a question . . .” the ngaka slid the jar into a pocket in the springbok-hide apron. “. . . It will work for your children, too. What you have done here today is not just for you and your beautiful young wife, it is for your entire family. The very large entire family you are going to have, yea even unto the seventh generation.” The ngaka was up-to-date on all matters magical, and couldn’t help throwing in references to the Christian bible when he got the chance.

“Oh, by the way,” he said as Oteng turned to leave. “There is one more thing. You must not have relations with your wife for one week.”

“But my wife is a very healthy young woman,” Oteng started to say. “If she goes for an entire week without having relations, she might burst with desire. I don’t know whether she will be able to . . .”

“At the end of the week, I will appear at her door,” the ngaka fixed Oteng with a scary stare. “I will need to personally open her womb. That will take me the second week. During that week, you may not go to her, either. If you do go to your wife during the week I am there, I will not be able to open her womb . . .”

Oteng nodded glumly as the impact of how the ngaka planned to open his wife’s womb began to sink in.

“. . . and you will both die during the next full moon . . .”

Oteng certainly didn’t want his beautiful young wife to die. Or himself, for that matter.

“. . . But if you do as I say, and go to her after I have left, nine months later you will be a father. Then you will remember our agreement, or an even greater misfortune will befall you.”

The agreement involved more cattle, but they only had to be paid when the beautiful young wife delivered a healthy baby. It was a contingency fee arrangement, and it seemed fair to Oteng.

When he explained the arrangement to his wife, she wasn’t at all sure she wanted to go along. At least with the part that involved the ngaka. “Can’t somebody

else open my womb?" she asked. She'd already had her run-in with that ngaka and wasn't in the mood to invite him into her bed.

"You are a rich man," she told Oteng. "Just forget about the cows you have paid the ngaka. Dikitso can open my womb. He comes around during the day when you aren't here and, well, a girl can tell what's on a man's mind and . . . Dikitso would be perfect for something like opening a womb. I'll just go over to Dikitso's house right now and . . ."

But it wasn't a matter of somebody else filling in for the ngaka. A full moon was coming and, resist as she might, his beautiful young wife wasn't going to talk Oteng out of what she had to do.

He had been right. By the time a week had passed and nobody had touched his wife, she was so ready to burst with desire she hardly struggled when the ngaka carried her to the bed. Oteng remembered the agreement too and, nine months later when he was a father, he sent his boy with the cattle to the ngaka's kraal.

A few months after that, when the ngaka dropped by Oteng's to open his beautiful young wife's womb a second time, she didn't argue. She just prepared a pallet for Oteng outside under the stars and followed the ngaka to bed. And, nine months later, Oteng remembered his agreement and sent another batch of cattle over to the ngaka's kraal.

The third time the ngaka dropped by Oteng's house, the still-almost-as-beautiful wife was dressed in a white robe. She had joined the Faith Ablaze Fellowship of Believers, and she wasn't about to let an ngaka have anything to do with her, not anymore.

When she wouldn't open the door, the ngaka reached into his crocodile-skin pouch and pulled out a handful of dried leaves. Then he lit the leaves, and let the smoke blow across Oteng's doorframe.

"You must let him in," Oteng said. "The moon will be full in two weeks and when that happens we will both surely . . ."

"You are just going to have to do something about the moon, then, because I am not letting that . . . that agent of Satan back into my bed," Oteng's wife scooped up her two very light-skinned babies and stomped to the back of the house.

Whatever the smoke from the burning leaves was supposed to do, it didn't unlock the door and, after a while, the ngaka walked away muttering to himself.

Oteng must have done something about the moon, because two weeks came and went, and nobody died.

A few months after that, his wife was pregnant again and, when the baby was born, he wasn't light like his older brother and sister. Or, like the ngaka. He was dark-skinned like his parents.

A couple of weeks later when the ngaka showed up to collect his fee for the baby, Oteng wanted to pay him just to smooth things over. But his wife put her foot down. "That ngaka didn't have anything to do with this child," she kissed the dark-skinned little boy on the head. "And you are not giving him any more cows. "Praise *Jesus*."

When she came to the Praise-*Jesus* part, Oteng knew the ngaka would be heading back to his kraal empty-handed. Nothing stopped a discussion in its tracks as thoroughly as Praise *Jesus*.

At least that's the way Talkie told the story and, if anybody would have known, Talkie was the one.