

# GREEN LION

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AARDVARK  
BUREAU

## lion

“Lions,” the bus driver called down the length of the vehicle. “This is the lions, people. You got an hour and a half.”

Con was seated directly behind the driver. As the tourists filed past him, he lingered, picking at the pilled fabric on the knees of his old suit trousers. Ever since the phone call, he’d been building a wall of reluctance between himself and this thing that he now must do.

“I barely knew Mark,” he’d said to Elyse in bed that morning. “It’s been twenty years. I can’t imagine why his mother asked me.”

“Maybe there’s no one else. Maybe she can’t go herself.”

And it was true; on the phone Margaret had sounded frail, distressed. Con frowned at the ceiling. “God. I can’t get there, anyway.”

Elyse might have offered to lend him her car, a sleek little Audi that still smelt new, but she didn’t. She had a solution ready: “The tourist bus. It goes right past the bottom of our road every day. Make a plan.”

He’d pulled the pillow over his face. The linen was suffused with Elyse’s scent – potent enough to cancel out his own. A bright synthetic note, tempered by the musk of her underarms, her sex, a fusion of what she applied and what she secreted.

“Don’t be childish, Con,” she’d said, tugging at a corner of

the pillow. “When something like this happens – something awful – you can’t say no. You have to go. It’s the human thing to do.” A moment of peevish silence. “Anyway, it’s not like you’ve got anything else going on.”

And Con had wrapped his arms around the pillow and pressed the sweet and cushioning dark against his eyes.

“Coming or not?” said the driver.

Con roused himself and stepped down from the bus. The first thing he saw, not two metres away, was the fence, standing between him and the mountain. Its silver finish was tarnished now, but still it sang with power.

He turned away from it and crossed the road. This much was familiar: the wooded mountain behind, the university below. But the parking area was brand new, paved in interlocking brick. A walkway led down to a smart modern complex, all pale stone and glass. The gloomy old Victorian zoo, he realised, used to stand on just about this spot. It was a strange mirage, these bright new buildings floating on grim foundations. He looked around for peacocks, but of course they’d have got rid of those: alien species.

Con tried to walk through his unwillingness, but it travelled a step ahead of him. The air was still and mown-grass fragrant. Not an animal smell, as he’d imagined. Not blood and meat.

At the entrance stood a tall sign in the shape of a rampant lion, cut from golden metal. *The Lion House* was engraved beneath the lion’s back paws. After Con had explained his business, the heavy-armed ticket lady let him through without paying. Here were the cafeteria, gift shop, toilets. The buildings were pleasingly designed, arranged comfortably around a courtyard where people could sit in the sunlight with their cafeteria trays of tea and muffins. Everything light and bright and open,

sandstone and pine. At the opposite end, bright specks flitted against the sky; he recognised the elegant art nouveau lines of the original aviary.

There were no obvious signs to an office, so Con followed a group of Germans from the bus through a doorway on the right. *The Den*, this building was called, the words etched into a plaque of the same bright metal. Below, in smaller lettering: *Back from Extinction! Come and meet our breeding pair, Dmitri and Sekhmet – the first black-maned lions in the Cape since 1858.*

Inside, it was entirely unlike the ominous pit of a lion den he remembered from the zoo of his childhood. This lion house had high ceilings and educational posters, documenting the usual: climate change and the countrywide drought, species loss, habitat decimation, the importance of keeping the fragile Table Mountain ecosystem closed off to people. In front of him, a party of schoolkids was being shepherded past the displays. Con noticed that many of them had toy animals dangling from their backpacks: tiny zebras, dogs, dinosaurs. The newest craze.

A doorway led into an inner chamber, where a broad, lit window floated in darkness. The glass was streaked and dusty, as if nobody had cleaned it for a while. Children clustered around it. Con peered between the heads of two Dutch tourists. A veld scene. Around him, he could feel the human herd sniffing, staring, ready to dart away or perhaps thrust someone else between themselves and danger. The weak, the lame. But nothing moved in the window, and soon the party was muttering its dissatisfaction and moving on.

“Where are they?” asked a tiny child who remained, hands splayed on the glass. “Where are the lions, Mama?”

“I don’t know, Azi. I don’t know.” His mother tugged him away.

Con wanted to explain: this clearly wasn’t the real lion cage.

The lions were somewhere else. This was merely a diorama. An unnaturally bright, flat image of Table Mountain was pasted against a blue-painted backdrop; specimens of fynbos flora had been arranged in the foreground. It was well done, if a little artificial. But as he watched, a stalk of grass twitched in the stillness, and a tiny grey bird flew off into the backdrop, which turned into sky. It was real. He was looking out onto a circular enclosure, landscaped with boulders and shrubs. The rear wall, made to look like a rock formation, blocked out the road while allowing a mountain view. To the left, the wall rose higher, its top out of sight. A black metal grid like a miniature portcullis was set into its base.

Con squinted into the vegetation. Come out, he thought. I know you're in there. Each shadow, each blade of grass was suggestive. But nothing moved, no amber eye between the leaves. The bird returned to its perch and opened its beak, mute behind the glass, although its throat was flexed in song.

A square of paper was taped to the window, down near his knees. *Apologies*, it said in a crooked hand. *No lions today due to unforeseen circumstances. Feel free to visit our dassie enclosure.* Clearly nobody had informed the international tour groups; perhaps they'd booked long in advance. Left of the display, in the corner and barely visible in the gloom, was a door marked *Staff only*. Con pushed, and it opened onto a different, sunlit zone.

Backstage. A grassy corridor was lined on one side with prefab buildings; on the other, the rear façade of the lion den was a wall of old, darkened stone, pierced by barred archways. Part of the original zoo? The smell here was more like what he had expected: old meat and straw, and under it something else, sharp and inorganic. He wrinkled his nose, conscious of breathing it in: particles of blood and bone, urine. He peered through the bars and at first saw nothing at all, just a pulsing

blackness. Then his eyes made out shapes in the gloom. The concrete floor of the cage was littered with straw, and he could see a water trough, a knot of ship's rope that seemed to have been used as a giant puppy-chew, and what looked like a gnawed cow femur – the bone of some big functional animal, at any rate, something bred to be slaughtered. Beyond that, deep shadow.

He walked on, fingers trailing across each archway. Bars, stone, bars, stone – and then a clang as his arm was smacked back by the force of some huge hot weight throwing itself against the metal. Con lurched away – for a moment glimpsing a snarling mask – and sat down hard, fingers burning, head buzzing with the savage noise. A liquid chainsaw roar. He gaped at the cage.

The creature had retreated but was still there, hidden in the shadows, pacing, growling – a bass note so deep Con could feel the vibration in his chest. He could *smell* it, a feral whiff that jolted his heart all over again.

He got to his feet. His legs were trembling, but he forced himself on, away from the cage. The ground was tilting, trying to tip him backwards. Fuck this, he thought, fuck this whole mission.

The door of the prefab sprang open and someone blocked his way: a sturdy, dark woman with a clipboard and a long grey plait draped over one shoulder. She wore a cinnamon-coloured uniform, safari style, with a gold badge on one lapel. “Can I help you?”

“I was attacked!” His voice came out comically shrill; he had to catch his breath to laugh.

But the woman's gold-ringed fingers tensed on the clipboard, and immediately he saw his mistake. “No, no – not attacked, just got a fright, sorry. Sorry.” He put a hand to his chest, manually restraining his heart. “I'm fine.” But he wasn't fine; he was racing.

She didn't smile. "You're not meant to be back here."

"I actually need to see the director. About someone who worked here? Mark. Mark Carolissen?"

"Ah." Her expression faltered. "You've come for his things, of course. We got the message. Wait, please." She disappeared into the building and came back a second later, holding a bag. "It's not much. I'm Amina Kajee, by the way. The director."

Con had imagined this moment with some dread. He'd been afraid to take possession of Mark's grisly belongings: blood-soaked, perhaps. Torn. But instead the woman handed him a clean, sporty daypack. Light in his hands. She kept hold of its strap for a moment. He could feel tension in her grip, as she surely could feel the tremor in his.

"We haven't had any news," Amina said. "About Mark. You've been to see him? He's not—?"

"He's hanging on. But I understand it's pretty bad."

"Conscious?"

"No."

Amina sighed. "Yes. There was a lot of blood." She had a small twitch at the side of her mouth, but her eyes were steady. "I'm sure I don't need to say—" she began, and then stopped short. "You must know how sorry we all are."

Con was shaking his head. "Of course," he said. "A horrible accident." In fact, he wasn't sure of the truth of any of this, had no authority to say it. But the intimacy of this exchange unnerved him; he wanted to be gone, the task done.

Amina released the bag to him. "Mark's one of our best volunteers, you know. So, ah, committed. He adored that lion."

Despite himself, Con was curious. "Was the animal ... put down?"

"We had to, of course. When there's an attack on a human, you know."