

The Last Lion in Mosul

The zoo I was in before was a paradise, I see that now. I had space to run and a tree for shade, and if the other lions were not monopolizing it, a small pool I could bathe in. I was a prisoner of course, but at least the prison was comfortable. Then the men put me in a truck and brought me here, to this squallor. My new cage is filthy; it is littered with trash that the humans throw for amusement. The floor of my enclosure is nothing but hot, lifeless dirt—who would have guessed that there would come a time when I would long for the simple pleasure of grass between my paw pads! The only shade from the relentless sun is an artificial den at the back of the cage. Its walls are a gray stone that traps the heat. The zoo is made of these gray stones — I can hear the chimpanzees shrieking for relief. And my cage, it is so small. In the old zoo we had space! I would stalk the other lions when their backs were turned, slinking silently and rushing at my victims, play-acting at the deadly games of the savannah. Through that basic exercise I was at least able to pretend at an aspect of life in my ancestral home. Now the best I can do is press my nose to the hot dirt and close my eyes, and I'm almost able to imagine I am back on the plains of my infancy, watching the antelope graze in the distance, unaware of the danger looming nearby. But in the savannah there are few sounds; the wind hissing in the tall grass; the squeaking cubs tumbling in the dust; the alphas roaring their dominance in the challenge of another. Here? There is constant noise, and the worst of it comes from the bear.

I hate the bear.

Her name is Lula. She lives in the cage across from me with her two cubs. Her fur is the dull brown of hippo dung, a substance I suspect she carries around inside her head. When I

arrived she immediately began babbling and didn't stop until the sun dropped out of sight. I was immediately startled by her lack of deference toward an alpha predator; did she not recognize the danger I posed to her? The bars of these cages cheat me of my proper respect. The constant flood of conversation did not ebb after that first day, to my great irritation. I have been here only a short time, and already I know everything there is to possibly know about this bear. Every day I am assaulted with more stories about her and her time in the circus. Always with the circus!

“I was in the circus, before I came to this place. That's where I met my handsome Misha. We were practically famous,” she says. “Oh, Marlon, you would be so wonderful in the circus! You have natural charisma. What a star they would make of you! The ringmaster would shout, ‘Here he is, Marlon the Lion, the fierce king of the jungle!’ And then you would jump through a fire hoop.”

I do not care about the circus. When I learned there were lions in the circus, I could not believe it. What self-respecting lion would willingly perform tricks for human masters? Were I enlisted in the circus, the first moment a human turned his back on me, I would kill him, and I wouldn't stop there. I would eat them in their big top, as the elephants and giraffes watched in gratitude that it wasn't them. I would not perform tricks.

Always this bear is doing tricks. She has this filthy ball, and she lies on her back and keeps the ball balanced above her on her legs. Her two cubs, I refuse to learn their names, they cackle and chirp and tumble all over each other in excitement, as though this is the most impressive thing they have ever seen. She does it every day! And of course it is an excuse for her to tell me *more* about the circus. But what is most egregious, is that she does her little performances for the humans.

All day we sit in our cages and are gawked at by humans, who must get some kind of thrill staring at superior creatures imprisoned against their will. And Lula dances for them! Whenever a human passes through our section of the zoo, she stands at her cage and shuffles like the great clumsy oaf she is, with her foolish cubs mimicking her. If I cared at all, I would teach them not to debase themselves for these people, just because they might throw an apple in your cage. But I do not care; let these idiot cubs grow up thinking that bears are supposed to dance like humans for scraps. I will never be anything but a lion, and these people will never be anything but prey.

Also, there is a lioness here. She was here when I arrived. Her name is Stella. She is okay, I guess.

Today the bear would not shut up about Misha. Misha is her mate, another fool bear from the circus. I am not entirely convinced he is even real.

“Misha is the most handsome bear in the whole world,” she says. “He was the star of the circus — he could ride a unicycle and play the accordion. Now he lives across the river in a wealthy man’s home and he gets fed fresh salmon every day, which makes his coat glossy and gives it a sheen. Except for on his head of course, because he is completely bald from an unfortunate incident with a flame juggler. He had to wear a beret when he performed and he was just so dashing.”

I do not know what a unicycle and an accordion and a beret are, but I assume they are human contrivances and as such I hate them, and I hate this Misha for his mastery of them, and Lula for her incessant fawning. Stella tells me to hush when I start to complain. It is quite bold of

a lioness to tell an alpha male to bite his tongue, but that is how this lioness has been since I arrived—*bold*. I offered to explain to her what her place was. She was raised in captivity and not born on the wild savannahs as I was, so she never knew the hierarchy of the pride. I explained that she shouldn't be ashamed of how she has behaved in front of an alpha male, though she should correct it.

“When I see an alpha male, I'll be sure to remember your advice,” she said to me. The audacity!

“When you were being fed from a human's bottle, my mane was red with the blood of dead gazelles,” I informed her.

“You were a cub when you were taken by the men!” she said, making me regret having shared my history with her. I informed her that I had my mane, though that might be an embellishment on my part, but I did not want to give her the satisfaction. The next time the zoo keeper comes by, I will make obvious my anger with my cell mate in such a way that he will be forced to move her, or me, lest he be down one lion.

Most times, I pay as little attention to the humans as possible. To acknowledge them is to encourage them. I do not care if they think I am the most boring creature they have ever seen. I think sometimes that maybe the zookeeper will send me back. He will think I am a faulty lion and request a replacement.

Except that sometimes I cannot help myself. The hunter in me will not be made a fool. There is a barrier between the humans and my bars. The span of a human arm separates the barrier from my cage; I know because some of the adolescents dare each other to lean over it and

touch the bars. They have invented a game of sitting at this barrier with their back to me. They offer themselves up as prey, willingly! I try to ignore it, but my pride as an alpha demands that I display my dominance. I roar and lunge at the bars and remind them that it is only this prison that keeps them safe. Most go screaming away, making their hyena noises. Stella says I am foolish for allowing myself to participate in their pranks, but I also see the twinkle in her eye after I have given them a good scare and shaken the bars of our enclosure with my bellows. I would never tell her I do it primarily for that twinkle.

Stella is a fine lioness, if one is able to look past the fact that she was raised in captivity. She is fond of stretching her body across the front of the cage, where she sleeps while the humans stretch their arms and tickle her fur. Lula's cubs are a constant delight to her, something I don't understand for a moment. A lioness of the savannah would see those cubs and know instinctively the best way of separating them from their mother so they may be killed for the pride. I think she would make a fine mother and a terrible hunter. I tell her this sometimes, to which she responds by irritatingly calling me "Baby Marlon" and grooming me until I must retreat to the stifling shadows of our den.

Stella and Lula have been talking about the men who have begun patrolling the zoo. They are easy to spot with their stink of grease and metal and a low-running tension, like lesser males in a pride who must always be concerned with their status; always snarling, quick to fight until the alpha reminds them where they stand. They carry the men's weapons of war, always. It is odd that men would be armed for war in a zoo. I pay them no mind; they are prey, like the rest.

“There are so many of them! And yet none of them ever gives me apples when I dance,” Lula says. “Why do you think they are here, Marlon? Do you think it has to do with the chimpanzees?”

The chimps have a reputation for flinging their feces at the humans; a distasteful practice that I nevertheless respect for the spirit of the act. But I doubt the transgressions of the apes would upset the humans such that they would dissuade them with threats of war. I suggest to Stella that word has spread of my ferocity, and the men are here to ensure no more silly games are played in front of my cage, lest I finally break free and turn the park into a bloodbath. She does not agree. Regardless, there are fewer humans walking past my cage, and that suits me fine.

Not all of the humans are worthless. There is a man who passes through the zoo daily. He walks around with colorful birds all over him, as though the spirit of a comfortable tree lives within him and the birds are content to rest on his soft flesh. Lula explained to me that he is a bird-seller. In his circuit of the park he pauses at our cages, where his routine is to stop and bow to Stella and I. Also he never gives the bear any apples, no matter how much she dances. Among the humans, he is worthy of a modicum of respect. If it came to it, I would make his death as quick and painless as possible.

It wasn't long after the arrival of the armed men that the sounds of war followed, like thunder before the storm. For many, many days, the popping and ripping and rumbling of their conflict has persisted outside our walls. There is no opportunity to relax, and we are under constant duress. I have gotten used to the sounds, but Stella still jumps at every noise. She thinks the sounds are getting closer. I say nothing, but I think this as well.

Today, war entered the zoo. Stella and I huddled in our den as the air outside thundered, as though the men had pulled the storm clouds down from the sky. Lula sat in the opening of her den, blocking her cubs inside. The zoo stunk of smoke and blood; I could hear men and animals screaming. Stella pressed close to me, tucking her head beneath my foreleg. I was terribly frightened, but for her I would not cower.

When the thunder of war passed, we crept from our cave. Smoke hung in the walkways as though the storm had left its clouds behind. Through the haze I could see men moving around, and I could see men lying on the ground in pools of blood. I could see animals in the same condition—the stately giraffe, whose slender neck was a constant feature of my daydreams, lay crumpled in his enclosure, his long neck curled unnaturally beneath him. I could hear the rattling breaths of a rhinoceros who bled from holes that had been punched in his hide. Death is a way of life; a lion knows this. But it should be on the terms dictated by nature, not left to the whims of careless human captors. I mourned their wasteful deaths.

Some nights I dream of thunder, and am awoken by the men and their fighting, the thunder an echo from my dreams, made real in the explosions outside our walls. There are no more visitors to the zoo; only men of war. This morning there was no meat in our cage, nor did the cleaner come to remove our scat, nor even the bird man peddling his colorful pets. Only men who are too preoccupied with fighting to care for the prisoners.

Tonight a mighty crash shook the earth beneath me as I slept. When I awoke I immediately panicked; Stella was not in the den. Then I heard her voice call to me from outside.

“Marlon, come look!”

Lula and her cubs were standing at their bars, looking out over the zoo. Stella saw me and then turned her gaze to follow theirs. The sky was ablaze with fire and smoke. A building had collapsed, and the wall at the back of the chimpanzee cage was a smoldering pile of rubble. Men ran all over the place, shouting at each other and dying.

“I think they used a cannon,” said Lula. Her tiny eyes bulged in the half-light. “The cannon in the circus made a sound like that. Only that cannon fired a man into a net. I don’t suppose a man fired from a cannon could do that.”

I was too distracted by the sight of the chimps to rain insults upon her. Those that survived were running, deaf and screaming, across the tops of buildings and into the blood red night. I wondered if the air outside their bars tasted as good as I imagined.

The men are gone. The last of them passed our cages yesterday. Lula stood at her bars and danced, but they paid her no attention. Her cubs stayed in their den; they do not come out much anymore. It has been many days since we were last fed and watered. I can still hear war outside the walls, but it has used up the zoo and moved on.

The zoo is befouled with the scent of death. The men took their dead with them, but they left the animals to fester in the sun. The smell chokes me and yet I find myself longing for the carcasses. It is shameful, to find the sweet stench of rot appealing like some kind of scavenger, but I would do anything to quiet the howling winds in my stomach. And I worry for Stella. She is weakening, though she does not like to show it.

“I am stronger than you, Marlon. When you die, I’ll just eat you,” she said. “Or maybe I won’t wait for you to starve to death.” She said with the twinkle in her eye.

I can feel on the air the seasons changing. I do not know how many days have passed since the last time we were fed; without the regular routine of the zoo keeper's schedule, one day just passes to the next. I can count the passage of time in the ribs visible in Stella's flank. We have only been able to survive through the generosity of humans who sneak into the zoo. The visits are infrequent as the war is not yet over; the humans move like antelope at the water's edge, always watching for danger lurking in the tall grass. Yesterday a man gave to us a slaughtered goat. It was a pitifully small meal, but a feast compared to what we have had. To Stella I gave the choicest parts of the animal. It hurts my pride to accept handouts; I am no better than Lula and her dancing. But now is not the time for pride. You cannot fill a stomach with pride.

"Sometimes I think that Misha will climb over that wall with a great big salmon in his jaws, and he will drop it at our feet. Do you dream of food too, Marlon?"

Lula stands and watches the hole in the wall where the chimpanzee cage was. I think she believes her dreams, and like a fool I catch myself watching for this imagined bear with his bald head and his gift of salmon. The lack of food has not slowed Lula's storytelling. I have begun to wonder if she does this for the benefit of Stella and her cubs, as a distraction from their suffering. When Stella sits she leans her weight against me; I can barely feel her, she is so thin.

"I worry about the cubs," she says. The cubs are but bags of bones, their baby fat melted away, leaving only bright eyes in dark caves.

"Do not worry for them my queen, they are young and strong. Lula may not have gifted them with brains, but their strength is admirable." I hope I have allayed her fears, even as I know in my heart what must be done. I fear for Stella's innocence.

At dawn this morning I left Stella sleeping in the filthy hay of our den. The light was the greyish-blue before the sun has crested the horizon, and the air was still cool and calm. It was so peaceful that for a moment I was able to forget our hardships. I focused only on the sky, and was able to pluck a memory from when I was a cub, of watching the sun crest the mountains on the far horizon, setting the world ablaze. I remembered the beauty of my home, and if only for a moment, I was transported there.

Lula was staring at the hole in the chimpanzee cage. She said nothing to me when I emerged, and I knew then what she had done. What had to be done.

When Stella awoke, she found me sitting vigil with Lula.

“Where are the cubs?” she asked, already knowing the answer. I guided her back to our straw bed. The instincts of a lioness are not erased by a life in captivity; they sleep just beneath the surface. Though she has never known the ruthlessness of the wild, and the hard decisions a mother must occasionally make, the cruel mercies they must invoke, she understood, and she never had to ask why. She pressed her body to mine and mourned in silence.

“You will make a fine mother someday,” I said.

Today the bird man returned. He had his birds with him, as though it were just another day, and for a moment, in my hunger deliriums, I thought I had dreamed all of this misery. His birds wore little hoods over their heads, the purpose of which mystified me until I watched him push one of the unnaturally placid creatures between the bars of my cage. Lula and Stella eventually overcame their grief to accept these gifts, but with Stella, it took a great deal of coaxing on my part, and she only ate the one bird. When the birds were gone, the man bowed to

each of us and departed. I have amended my opinion of the bird man: when I escape, I will not eat him, but allow him free passage in the domain of the lion, and welcome him as a friend.

I wonder what my companions endure, if our experiences are equal, or if we suffer differently. I know how I suffer: my joints ache and I have hardly the energy to move. The emptiness in me is profound. There was a great chasm near where I grew up, where the lions could sometimes corner young elephants frightened from the herd. It was deep and the wind howled through it on summer nights. That chasm now resides within me. I wonder if Stella and Lula can hear the wind howling in their own chasms.

Stella has not been the same since she learned of the cubs. She does not move. She lies next to the cage, where she would when she let the people play with her fur. Yesterday a man and his daughter brought us two chickens. Stella did not move to eat, and I had to push the small carcass to her nose.

“You eat it,” she said. “I am not hungry.”

“You must eat, Stella.”

“Not now. Lay down with me.”

The sun nestled into the hills, the light bathing the walls of the zoo in purples and oranges. Lula watched the sunset with us.

“What will you do when you are free?” she asked. She is made of much stronger stuff than I expected. I think perhaps she can feel Stella’s spirit weakening, and the maternal instinct to nurture has found a new focus. “I think I will find Misha, and we will climb off into the hills where there are fish in a bubbling spring, and maybe a quiet cave, and we can listen to the bees and smell the flowers. But first I will bathe in a river. I would never want for Misha to see me in

such a condition. And the smell! I know how you two smell, I can't imagine how I must smell. No, I must smell good for my handsome Misha. I will bathe, then I will find him, and then we will find our cave."

Lula's eternal optimism may not nourish our bodies, but perhaps it will nourish Stella's wounded soul. In my heart I am thankful for Lula at this time.

"When I die, I give you permission to eat me," Stella said.

"Do you not remember? You are the strong one, you will eat me." I tell her.

She chuffs at me and nestles into my side. I fall asleep thinking about the chimpanzees, and what they might be doing with their boundless freedom.

The morning's dawn brought to us a rainstorm, and the realization that in the night, my lioness's suffering had come to its end. I lay next to her the entire day, as the skies opened up and washed the filth from our cages and from our bodies. I did not think the emptiness in my body could expand any further. How wrong I was.

"The man who came yesterday, he has been here before, I recognize his scent. I think he is going to rescue us."

Lula has taken up the notion that every person who comes to the zoo to sneak us food or water is going to rescue us. Meanwhile we continue to lay in our own waste as frail, skeletal versions of our old selves.

"If that was true, would they not have taken us from here yesterday?" The day before, some men visited us. They took Stella and dug a hole in the ground outside my cage and placed

her in it. Had I the strength I would have torn them to pieces the moment they tried to touch her, but I can barely get to my feet. They left food and water, but I refused to eat until they left; I would not give to them the satisfaction of seeing me eat after they dared touch my Stella. Now I lay in her customary spot by the cage; I imagine I can still feel the warmth she left behind.

“Maybe they just need to figure out how to move us. If you think about it, they probably don’t want to move us together in the same cage. They probably think we’d kill each other. That must be it. Isn’t that exciting? I don’t even hear cannons anymore, do you? I haven’t heard them for the longest time. The war is probably gone, now they just have to figure out how to get us out. I wonder if they will have Misha with them-”

“We are not getting rescued!” I roar like I haven’t since before the war came to the zoo. “Do you understand, you stupid bear? We are going to die in these cages. Just like Stella, just like your cubs, and your Misha too. How could anyone survive? There is nobody coming to get us. These people who come to throw us their scraps will soon find two more dead animals to drag into holes in the ground. So just stop with your talk of rescue and let me die in peace!”

The days come and go. People come to feed us enough to keep us alive, but nobody has rescued us. Lula and I have not spoken for many days. I am filled with great shame in remembering my moment of despair.

When Lula got sick, I swallowed my pride and apologized for what I said. In her grace she forgave me. She coughs and wheezes all day now. In the night I can hear her struggling, and I barely sleep out of fear that I will wake to find that Lula has left me alone in this awful place. Sometimes, when it seems she has stopped breathing, I call to her until I hear her weak voice and know she has not left me. Worst of all, she no longer tells her stories. She hardly talks at all. She

just lies there, her chin on the ground, waiting as I do, to see who will die first. Her spirit for living has been extinguished, and I fear it was me who doused her fragile flame, and so I must reignite it. But I am so tired.

“Lula, tell me a story,” I say to her. There are people around us now. Where did they come from? Lula has somehow found the strength to stand up at her bars. I remember her dances, from before, and I think I see apples raining from the sky. “Tell me about Misha and the juggler. You never told me what happened to Misha to make him bald.”

“Misha is dead, Marlon. Besides, I think we are going somewhere.”

I think this is such a foolish thing to say, even for Lula. Then I feel a sting in my side, and I see bird feathers sticking out of my haunch, and then I sleep.

I dream of cages and trucks; of men arguing and water being poured into my mouth through narrow bars; of Lula in a box next to me, sleeping or dead, I cannot tell. I dream that I called out to her, but she does not answer.

I have been in the new compound long enough to regain the strength to go on walks. My legs do not ache like they used to, but I am still weak. There is room to run here and trees to shade myself in, but I do not let these conveniences obscure the fact that I remain a prisoner. I am grateful for my rescue and rehabilitation, but when my strength is fully returned, I intend on breaking free and making the long trek to the savannahs of my ancestral home. But for now, I rest, and reflect. I am alone in my enclosure, and I am happy it is this way. Though it is big here, there is not enough room for another lion; Stella’s memory takes up too much space.

Lula's compound is next to mine. On my walks I stop at our shared fence and I lie down, as Stella might have, and I watch her. Her new home has a den like what we had in the zoo, and she never leaves its shade. I worry that she left too much of herself behind in that cage. Every day I expect the men to put her in the back of a truck and drive her to some hole in the ground.

Today the sound of a truck carried across my enclosure. As it backed up to Lula's pen, the hair on my neck stood up, and dread filled my heart. Suddenly I was back in that zoo, terrified that my friend had finally left me to be alone. I stood at our shared fence, and I could see the outline of her great head, shaded beneath her cinnabar tree. Then the men opened the back of the truck, and an emaciated bear trundled out. His fur was the color of hippo's dung, except on his head, where he was completely bald.

For the first time since our rescue, Lula lifted her head.