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—ELENA PASSARELLO,

author of *Animals Strike Curious Poses*

WHAT WE FED TO THE MANTICORE

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**WHAT WE
FED TO THE
MANTICORE**

TALIA LAKSHMI KOLLURI



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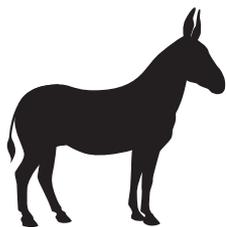
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*For Jared, who is a little bit wild.
And for Lulu, who made me a little bit tame.*



THE GOOD DONKEY



I am not pleased. Paint is dripping down my hoof and the colors are muddled together. I shouldn't complain. I agreed to it, of course.

Hafiz is putting together a zoo. And he asked me to be the zebra.

"You're a very good donkey, habibi," he told me three days ago, "but the border is closed, and everyone says prices for using the smuggling tunnels have gone up. I can't afford the zebra in Damascus, and the one in Cairo is twice that price." He gestured wildly, scattering my oats. What a waste.

I don't know much about borders, but I would do anything for Hafiz. He is more than a father to me.

And so here I am, Hafiz painting me in black and white stripes. He has hung two torches from the ceiling with strings, to use when the power is cut, and the one above me swings gently, pitching its light back and forth and making me dizzy. Hafiz has stopped in the middle, and knowing him, the paint will dry unevenly and I will look awful. And then what kind of zebra will I be?

We are in my little stable behind the house when the knocking starts. The door is flimsy. The building is flimsy. And so

things around us tremble when anyone raps on it. He should be paying attention to me and to what he is doing, but he goes anyway. It's always like this with Hafiz and me. I am here. He goes. There is always someone else. He returns. And I am still here.

This time he returns with several men I don't recognize. They're gathered in clusters, some with their backs to me. They speak in low voices, and every so often one of them grunts as though he is carrying something heavy.

"This is the man I was telling you about," says one of the strangers.

"Masha'Allah, it's good that you are here and willing to take them in," says another to Hafiz.

"Yes, yes, of course, bring them in." Hafiz opens the doors wide. "Alhamdulillah. They are alive; that's all that matters."

"Where do you want them?" asks another stranger. This one sounds angry. Or irritated. They all struggle through the main area of my stable, as though they aren't used to carrying things.

"Over here. Here by my . . . over here." Hafiz has led them to me. There is a bed of hay that I like to lie on, and Hafiz has brought them to it. He isn't sure what to call me at this precise moment. I am half done and dripping paint. I try to catch his eye so I can stare at him pointedly, but he's busy smoothing the hay—my hay—into a round and even mound.

I don't like the way these strangers smell. Sweaty, and a little like gasoline. They crowd near me with two large bundles, several men to each bundle.

"Are they sedated?" Hafiz asks.

"Yes," says the first man. He must be the leader, because he isn't carrying anything. "For the journey. Also, they are tame.

They've been hand-raised since birth. Like house cats." The leader puts his hands on his hips as he watches the others, and smiles widely.

"Have they been in a zoo before?" Hafiz stands with the leader and watches the others lay two enormous, rough cloth bundles on my hay. He runs a hand over his beard, in the same measured rhythm he uses when he brushes me.

"Yes, yes. They were in a little zoo in Beit Hanoun," the leader says. "The zoo was lucky to have them, you know." Hafiz nods. I walk closer to him and stand at his shoulder. Hafiz reaches back and starts to scratch my chin. We both watch the bundles as they start moving. I smell something musky. Familiar, but I can't place it.

"The female was stolen." The leader reaches into his pocket and pulls out a packet of cigarettes. Hafiz watches warily as the man lights one and gestures toward one of the bundles with the lit end. "She was missing for three months. We found her with a bunch of bandits. They were charging families to take photos with her. But, you know, they mistreated her, so she's skittish.

"Actually, they're both that way now," the leader goes on. "It was the airstrikes. They hit part of the zoo and much of the grounds were destroyed.

"You know," he starts up again, tapping ash off his cigarette, "I was surprised to hear there was a zoo in Gaza City. I thought it closed."

"It did," says Hafiz. "I'm reopening it on the old site. It's just down the road. I used to take my nieces there." Hafiz glances back at me and then turns to the leader. "Children are still children, you know. Even in times like this."

The leader nods at Hafiz, times like this being what they are. “I went there, you know,” he says. “To the university. The one south of the zoo.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, three semesters.”

“What did you study?” Hafiz scratches his nose and looks around. He never went to university, which is fine with me.

“Philosophy,” says the leader, laughing, “which disappointed my father. He wanted me to be an accountant.”

“And you didn’t finish?”

“No,” a pause while the leader smokes, “but, you know, now I do this.” He reaches his hand out in a sweeping motion to take in my stable and me, as if we make up the whole of his life.

“And what does your father think of that?” Hafiz asks.

“My father is dead.” Hafiz and the leader stare at each other until Hafiz looks down. “Come, let me tell you what I know about how to take care of them.” The leader puts a hand on Hafiz’s shoulder and leads him away from me.

Eventually, the strangers all leave. Hafiz absentmindedly pats my flank and then goes back to his own house, and I’m left here to figure this out by myself. The two bundles take up every inch of space on my hay. Where am I supposed to go now?

I stare at the two of them. One of them is moving more, and a gap in the fabric has started to pull apart. A large, tawny-haired paw emerges with dusty black pads on the bottom. The paw swipes at the fabric, pulls it away, and reveals an unmistakable head.

He blinks warily, yawns widely, and then pulls at the fabric enfolding his companion. Another head appears, and they both fully emerge, stretching lazily and kicking the rest of the fabric away to reveal the full length of themselves.

The male has a mane, so he's grown, but the mane looks shabby. He's emaciated. They both are, actually.

"What are you supposed to be?" asks the male.

"I'm a zebra," I say. I stand up a little straighter, stretching my neck out as long as I can. I flick my tail a couple of times. I don't know them, and honestly this is none of their business.

"I don't think that's true," says the male.

"Are you calling me a liar?" I ask.

"He didn't finish you," says the female. She is so quiet I can barely hear her, but she is loud enough for me to know I'm being insulted. "Your face is convincing enough. He did a nice job, but your back end isn't done. I can see it. And it's dripped onto your hoof."

"Yes, I know." I look down and see that the tear of white paint that had run earlier has dried. I knew it would be this way.

Hafiz. He forgot about me.

"It doesn't matter," I say loudly. "What's important is that when Hafiz is done, the children won't know the difference. They will be happy anyway. And that's what's important, you know. The *children*."

I haven't seen any lions in years. I wouldn't say that I've missed them.

Hafiz is late with my breakfast. When he finally comes in, he is carrying a bunch of oats under one arm and struggling to

carry a bucket full of soapy water and a brush with the other. A bag is slung over his shoulder and a towel hangs around his neck.

“We have to wash all that off and start over,” he says without even greeting me.

“Hello,” I say.

“Yes, yes, hello, yes. Hurry up and eat. I need the paint to dry before I take you and your things over.”

“Over where?” I didn’t sleep well. Those lions were snoring. And I didn’t like looking at them when they came in. I didn’t like seeing all their bones jutting out everywhere. It wasn’t nice. Hafiz wets the brush and swoops it down my flank in long strokes.

“The zoo. To the zoo, you idiot. Have you forgotten? You’re the zebra.” He puts the brush down and reaches into his bag.

“Right, right.” I remember. Hafiz offers me a carrot. When I pick it up, I let my lips brush his flat palm. He said once that he liked that. I like carrots. They’re sweet, and I like the texture. So crunchy. We don’t have them very often. It’s a treat. I must have been good. I know I’m the only one he has, but I really am a very good donkey for Hafiz. I’m an excellent donkey. I’m sure I’ll make a very fine zebra. I’ll do my best. I think if I concentrate on the thought of a zebra in my mind, I’ll be able to feel it in my body. *Become a zebra.* I think. . . . “Wait, Hafiz?”

“Yes?” He moves the brush up to my neck and sweeps down to my shoulders. I like the feel of the bristles. They get just past my coat, and I can feel them on my skin. I could fall asleep like this.

“My things. Why are we taking my things?”

Hafiz stops with the brush and walks to my face. He holds it in his hands and presses his forehead against mine. “You have to stay there, habibi. That’s how it works.”

“Stay? But only during the day, yes? When the children are there?”

“At night too,” he says, and goes back to sweeping the brush across my flank. I look down at my front feet and see a soapy gray mess has pooled in the dirt. This is turning my floor into mud. I don’t like it.

“But I live here,” I say quietly. “I live here with you.”

“Think of the others.” He puts the brush down and picks up the towel. He dries me swiftly, as though there is no time to waste. “What would they think if I treated you differently? If I treat you like you are special, then it might make them feel bad, yes?”

“But I am special,” I say, mostly to myself. Hafiz laughs, and now I’m embarrassed. I don’t like when he laughs at me. I’m not meant to be funny. It reminds me of when I was smaller and wasn’t used to the length of my legs, or the time when he put that bow on my tail and all the goats said I was his girlfriend. I remember yelling at them, *He’s going to eat you all!* “I AM SPECIAL!” I bray, much louder than I intend. I don’t like my voice when it’s loud. To me it sounds like unrestrained honking, and nobody takes me seriously when I do it.

“Of course, habibi. Very special.” I can hear his words spread out the way they do when he’s smiling, as he picks up his jars of white and black paint. Of course I am a joke to him. Let him see me stop carrying things, and then he will know.

Hafiz walks me to the zoo. It's a short distance down the road from the small plot of land where he keeps my stable and where we have always lived. The sign for the zoo is actually remade from the old sign. It's a long piece of wood with a crack that runs the length of it, and Hafiz has tried to cover the old name. It used to say *GAZA ZOO*, carved into the wood in block letters. Hafiz has painted over the carving in black and done his own sign in bright yellow. It says *HADIQAT AL HAYAWANAT FOR SUNNY DAYS*. The lettering was done by hand, and the paint is flaking off. The carved letters still show through. I don't want to hurt his feelings, so I say nothing, but Hafiz could have done better. He could have tried a little harder.

But there is a breeze bringing the scent of blossoms from the olive tree nearby, and the sun is warming my back. This could be nice.

My new home is a large pen flanked on each side by other enclosures. I share a chain-link partition with each of my neighbors. I have dry grass, a few boulders, and plenty of space to walk around. Hafiz has brought a few of my things—my long rope with knots, my favorite bucket, and one of my tires (I have three)—and stacked them in a corner. He has made a kind of little house, so that I can feel as if I am in my stable. On one side is a row of four large cages. In the one closest to me, he has put the lions. If I trot across my space to the other side, there is another row of smaller cages, and the one next to my pen has a trio of peacocks. Hafiz said that the lions like me, and that being next to me will make them feel less homesick, and that it will be good for me to be with them, whatever