

Four Lions

by

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“We were four,” Mulatu began. “The first, a lion took in Mozambique. The second, a leopard in Krueger.”

Mulatu with his claw-chiseled, sandstone lips wanted to leave it at that. But in Janus he had an avid listener.

“That was your brother,” Janus clarified.

“My brother?”

“The one the leopard got.”

“Aye. Jah save ‘em.”

“And the last?” Janus asked.

“The last?”

“The last one. You said there were four refugees. A brother and two cousins. Now it is just you.”

“We’re all cousins,” Mulatu laughed. “And Jah made us brothers. You, crazy baldhead, you could be my own clan.”

Janus ignored him. “What happened to the other cousin?”

“Maybe even my sub-clan.” A flame went up and Mulatu could be seen smiling before the torn fabric of the van’s sliding door. Sheafs of stinky smoke wafted towards Janus. “My cousin was stabbed.”

Janus’ disappointment was masked by the darkness. He had secretly hoped for another beast, imagining the stalking lions and a quiver of Masai warriors swaying with the wild grass, but the stabbing was real. The stabbing reminded him that Mulatu said he

came from a country where mortars were lobbed over breakfast. He clutched his knees to his chest and shivered as the cargo van rattled through the fog.

“You said you met Daliwonga,” Janus continued. “What was he like?”

“I’n’I met him, yes. Outside Nelspruit. Dem field hands didn’t help me, didn’t have no water to give. He picked I’n’I up on that hot road with the burnin’ cane stingin’ the water outta my eyes. That was before he took power. Before the devil done took ‘im. He played that electronic music – *thump, thump, thump* – what’s it called?”

“Trance.”

“Ja, trance. *Thump, thump, thump*. Trance music in his taxi. He didn’t say much, but he gave I’n’I a place to sleep. Jah live.”

Janus scribbled this information down as best he could in the dark: *Began Nelspruit. Lion. Leopard. No windows in this van. Driver? Pine Christmas tree air freshener. Transferred vehicles twice.* It was a feature article so he planned to throw it all in there and let the editor kill the darlings.

The van bumped along an unseen road with anonymous, jaw-jiggling potholes. Janus had found Mulatu peddling incense and dreadwax on the corner outside *The Argus*, but had never bought anything until he saw Mulatu step into the blue taxi. The markings were there: the curlicued window stickers, the plate number, the chrome wheels with elephant filigrees and white wall tires, exactly as his leads had informed him: the kingpin’s blue chariot. The taxi kingpin Daliwonga that no reporter had ever laid eyes upon. The next time he saw Mulatu, Janus had bought him a three-course dinner.

But now, as the van motored and veered and bounced relentlessly, he was bored:

“Tell me about the lion attack, Mulatu.”

“They came during the night. I’n’I heard them growl. Shook the air out mah lungs, Jah howlin’ to his minions tru the Conquerin’ Lion of Judah, he was! Tellin’ ‘em to come home. I told mah brother to keep quiet up in the branches, but the Conquerin’ Lion called him out of that tree. There was brimstone shootin’ from the eyes of that beast, obsidian eyes borne of volcanoes, and its teeth, the blood of transgressors and the seed of the beanie man drippin’ off ‘em, boilin’ so hot it—”

“—and the stabbing?”

Janus hated when Mulatu tried to make poetry out of his life, for it clouded the facts.

“The stabbing?” Mulatu repeated. His voice wavered. “Ah yes—the stabbing. In Salt River.”

“Why?”

The vehicle slowed down and the tires began to crunch over gravel. The van tilted forward and descended. Janus smelled sea spray. Maybe another transfer. Maybe – hopefully – Daliwonga himself. He assumed a posture of readiness and reviewed his interview questions, but after nothing happened, he asked, again:

“Why was he stabbed in Salt River, Mulatu?”

Mulatu was scraping away in his peddler’s basket.

“Because I’n’I live in Salt River,” he said.

Janus pulled out his notepad: *Salt River*. In the article, he would juxtapose savannah with suburban jungle, mini-bus taxis with lion prides, switchblades with spears. He could mention a food chain. Perhaps some social Darwinism. The editor would sort it out.

The van stopped. A door opened and then shut. Footsteps, and then a subwoofer speaker could be heard thumping a rhythm. *Thump, thump, thump*. Janus smiled, thrilled at the closeness of it, of the proximity to the truth.

“Goa trance,” he concluded.

“No, it is not Goa,” Mulatu corrected.

“How are you so sure?”

“I’n’I made the mix.”

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump-thump.

Thump.

Thump.

There were blue breasted birds there, flapping in the high-tide spume back to their chicks. It was night. A plastic grocery bag lay half-buried in the sand.

The cargo door opened and Janus spilled onto the foot of a sail-sloping dune. In the fog his face looked pale and pubescent, and his neck was a mess.

“What did he know, Mr. Daliwonga?” the driver asked, dragging the body towards some reeds.

Mulatu wiped his blade on a rag.

“Enough,” he replied.