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Zoo City

Lauren Beukes

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In Zoo City, it's impolite to ask.

Morning light the sulphur colour of the mine dumps seeps across Johannesburg's skyline and sears through my window. My own personal bat signal. Or a reminder that I really need to get curtains.

Shielding my eyes – morning has broken and there's no picking up the pieces – I yank back the sheet and peel out of bed. Benoît doesn't so much as stir, with only his calloused feet sticking out from under the duvet like knots of driftwood. Feet like that, they tell a story. They say he walked all the way from Kinshasa with his Mongoose strapped to his chest.

The Mongoose in question is curled up like a furry comma on my laptop, the glow of the LED throbbing under his nose. Like he doesn't know that my computer is out of bounds. Let's just say I'm precious about my work. Let's just say it's not entirely legal.

I take hold of the laptop on either side and gently tilt it over the edge of my desk. At thirty degrees, the Mongoose starts sliding down the front of the laptop. He wakes with a start, tiki tavi claws scrabbling for purchase. As he starts to fall, he contorts in the air and manages to land feet first. Hunching his stripy shoulders, he hisses at me, teeth bared. I hiss back. The Mongoose realises he has urgent flea bites to attend to.

Leaving the Mongoose to scrolf at its flank, I duck under one of the loops of rope hanging from the ceiling, the closest I can get to providing authentic Amazon jungle vines, and pad over the rotten linoleum to the cupboard. Calling it a cupboard is a tad optimistic, like calling this dank room with its precariously canted floor and intermittent plumbing an apartment is optimistic. The cupboard is not much more

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than an open box with a piece of fabric pinned across it to keep the dust off my clothes – and Sloth, of course. As I pull back the gaudy sunflower print, Sloth blinks up at me sleepily from his roost, like a misshapen fur coat between the wire hangers. He's not good at mornings.

There's a mossy reek that clings to his fur and his claws, but it's earthy and clean compared to the choke of stewing garbage and black mould floating up the stairwell. Elysium Heights was condemned years ago.

I reach past him to pull out a vintage navy dress with a white collar, match it up with jeans and slops, and finish off with a lime green scarf over the little dreadlock twists that conveniently hide the mangled wreckage of my left ear – let's call it Grace Kelly does Sailor Moon. This is not so much a comment on my style as a comment on my budget. I was always more of an outrageously expensive indie boutique kinda girl. But that was FL. Former Life.

"Come on, buddy," I say to Sloth. "Don't want to keep the clients waiting." Sloth gives a sharp sneeze of disapproval and extends his long downy arms. He clambers onto my back, fussing and shifting before he finally settles. I used to get impatient. But this has become an old routine for the pair of us.

It's because I haven't had my caffeine fix yet that it takes a little while for the repetitive skritching sound to penetrate – the Mongoose is pawing at the front door with a single-minded devotion.

I oblige, shunting back the double deadbolt and clicking open the padlock which is engraved with magic, supposedly designed to keep out those with a shavi for slipping through locked doors. At the first crack, the Mongoose nudges out between my ankles and trots down the passage towards the communal litter tray. It's easy to find. It's the smelliest place in the building.

"You should really get a cat-flap." Benoît is awake at last, propped up on one elbow, squinting at me from under the shade of his fingers, because the glare bouncing off Ponte Tower has shifted across to his side of the bed.

"Why?" I say, propping the door open with my foot for the Mongoose's imminent return. "You moving in?"

"Is that an invitation?"

"Don't get comfortable is all I'm saying."

"Ah, but is that all you're saying?"

"And don't get smart either."

"Don't worry, cherie na ngayi. Your bed is far too lumpy to get comfortable." Benoît stretches lazily, revealing the mapwork of scars over his shoulders, the plasticky

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burnt skin that runs down his throat and his chest. He only ever calls me "my love" in Lingala, which makes it easier to disregard. "You making breakfast?"

"Deliveries," I shrug.

"Anything interesting today?" He loves hearing about the things people lose.

"Set of keys. The widow ring."

"Ah, yes. The crazy lady."

"Mrs Luditsky."

"That's right," Benoît says, and repeats himself: "Crazy lady."

"Hustle, my friend. I have to get going."

Benoît pulls a face. "It's so early."

"I'm not kidding."

"All right, all right." He uncocoons himself from the bed, plucks his jeans from the floor and yanks on an old protest t-shirt inherited from Central Methodist's clothing drive.

I fish Mrs Luditsky's ring out of the plastic cup of Jik it's been soaking in overnight to get rid of the clinging eau de drain, and rinse it under a sputtering tap. Platinum with a constellation of sapphires and a narrow grey band running through the centre, only slightly scratched. Even with Sloth's help, it took three hours to find the damn thing.

As soon as I touch it, I feel the tug – the connection running away from me like a thread, stronger when I focus on it. Sloth tightens his grip on my shoulder, his claws digging into my collarbone.

"Easy, tiger," I wince. Maybe it would have been easier to have a tiger. As if any of us gets a choice.

Benoît is already dressed, the Mongoose looping impatient figure eights around his ankles.

"See you later, then?" he says, as I shoo him out the door.

"Maybe." I smile in spite of myself. But when he moves to kiss me, Sloth bats him away with a proprietary arm.

"I don't know who is worse," Benoît complains, ducking. "You, or that monkey."

"Definitely me," I say, locking the door behind him.

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The blackened walls of Elysium Heights' stairwell still carry a whiff of the Undertow, like polyester burning in a microwave. The stairway is mummified in yellow police tape and a charm against evidence-tampering, as if the cops are ever going to come back and investigate. A dead zoo in Zoo City is low priority even on a good day. Most of the residents have been forced to use the fire-escape to bypass this floor. But there are faster ways to the ground. I have a talent not just for finding lost things, but shortcuts too.

I duck into number 615, abandoned ever since the fire tore through here, and scramble down through the hole in the floor that drops into 526, which has been gutted by scrap rats who ripped out the floorboards, the pipes, the fittings – anything that could be sold for a hit.

Speaking of which, there is a junkie passed out in the doorway, some dirty furry thing nested against his chest, breathing fast and shallow. My slops crunch on the brittle glitter of a broken light-bulb as I step over him. In my day we smoked crack, or mandrax if you were really trashy. I cross over the walkway that connects to Aurum Place and a functional staircase. Or not so functional. The moment I swing open the double doors to the stairwell and utter darkness, it becomes obvious where the junkie got the bulb.

"Well, isn't this romantic?"

Sloth grunts in response.

"Yeah, you say that now, but remember, I'm taking you with me if I fall," I say, stepping into the darkness.

Sloth drives me like a Zinzi motorbike, his claws clenching, left, right, down, down, down for two storeys to where the bulbs are still intact. It won't be long until they too find a new life as tik pipes, but isn't that the way of the slums? Even the stuff that's nailed down gets repurposed.

After the claustrophobia of the stairwell, it's a relief to hit the street. It's still relatively quiet this early in the morning. A municipal street-cleaning truck chugs up ahead, blasting the tarmac with a sheet of water to wash away the transgressions of the night. One of the transgressions in question dances back to avoid being sprayed, nearly stepping on the scruffy Sparrow hopping around between her high heels.

Seeing me, she pulls her denim jacket closed over her naked breasts, too quickly for me to figure out if they're hormone-induced or magic. As we pass, I can feel the filmy cling of a dozen strands of lost things from the boygirl, like brushing against the tendrils of an anemone. I try not to look. But I pick up blurred impressions anyway, like an out-of-focus photograph. I get snatches of a gold cigarette case, or maybe it's a business-card holder, a mostly empty plastic bankie of brown powder and a pair of sequinned red stilettos – real showgirl shoes, like Dorothy got back from Oz all grown up and turned burlesque stripper. Sloth tenses up automatically. I pat his arm.

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"None of our business, buddy."

He's too sensitive. The problem with my particular gift, curse, call it what you like, is that everybody's lost something. Stepping out in public is like walking into a tangle of cat's cradles, like someone dished out balls of string at the lunatic asylum and instructed the inmates to tie everything to everything else. On some people, the lost strings are cobwebs, inconsequential wisps that might blow away at any moment. On others, it's like they're dragging steel cables. Finding something is all about figuring out which string to tug on.

Some lost things can't be found. Like youth, say. Or innocence. Or, sorry Mrs Luditsky, property values once the slums start encroaching. Rings, on the other hand, that's easy stuff. Also: lost keys, love letters, beloved toys, misplaced photographs and missing wills. I even found a lost room once. But I like to stick to the easy stuff, the little things. After all, the last thing of any consequence I found was a nasty drug habit. And look how that turned out.

I pause to buy a nutritious breakfast, aka a skyf from a Zimbabwean vendor rigging up the scaffolding of a pavement stall. While he lays out his crate of suckers and snacks and single smokes, his wife unpacks a trove of cheap clothing and disposable electronics from two large amaShangaan, the red-and-blue-checked bags that are ubiquitous round here. It's like they hand them out with the application for refugee status. Here's your temporary ID, here's your asylum papers, and here, don't forget your complimentary crappy woven plastic suitcase.

Sloth clicks in my ear as I light up my Remington Gold, half the price of a Stuyvesant. This city's all about the cheap knock-off.

"Oh come on. One. One cigarette. It's not like I'm going to live long enough to get emphysema." Or that emphysema isn't an attractive alternative to being sucked down by the Undertow.

Sloth doesn't respond, but I can feel his irritation in the way he shifts his weight, thumping against my back. In retaliation, I blow the smoke out the side of my mouth into his disapproving furry face. He sneezes violently.

The traffic is starting to pick up, taxis hurtling through the streets with the first consignments of commuters. I take the opportunity to do a little advertising, sticking flyers under the wipers of the parked cars already lining the street outside The Daily Truth's offices. You have to get up pretty early in the morning to invent the news.

I've got ads up in a couple of places. The local library. The supermarket, jammed between advertisements for chars with excellent references and second-hand lawnmowers. Pasted up in Hillbrow among the wallpaper of flyers advertising miracle Aids cures, cheap abortions and prophets.

Lost a small item of personal value?

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I can help you find it for a reasonable fee.

No drugs. No weapons. No missing persons.

I've resisted going mass market and posting it online. This way it's kismet, like the ads find the people they're supposed to. Like Mrs Luditsky, who summoned me to her Killarney apartment Saturday morning.

To the old lady's credit, she didn't flinch when she saw Sloth draped across my shoulders.

"You can only be the girl from the ad. Well, come in. Have a cup of tea." She pressed a cup of greasy-looking Earl Grey into my hands without waiting for a response and bustled away through her dingy hallway to an equally dingy lounge.

The apartment had been Art Deco in a former lifetime, but it had been subjected to one ill-conceived refurbishment too many. But then, so had Mrs Luditsky. Her skin had the transparent shine of glycerine soap, and her eyes bulged ever so slightly, possibly from the effort of trying to emote when every associated muscle had been pumped full of botulinum or lasered into submission. Her thinning orange hair was gelled into a hard pompadour, like the crust on crème brûlée.

The tea tasted like stale horse piss drained through a homeless guy's sock, but I drank it anyway, if only because Sloth hissed at me when I tried to turf it surreptitiously into the exotic plastic orchid next to the couch.

Mrs Luditsky launched straight in. "It's my ring. There was an armed robbery at the mall yesterday and–"

I cut in: "If your ring was stolen, that's out of my jurisdiction. It's a whole different genre of magic."

"If you would be so kind as to let me finish?" the old lady snapped. "I hid in the bathroom and took all my jewellery off because I know how you people are – criminals that is," she added hurriedly, "No offence to the animalled."

"Of course not," I replied. The truth is we're all criminals. Murderers, rapists, junkies. Scum of the earth. In China they execute zoos on principle. Because nothing says guilty like a spirit critter at your side.

"And what happened after you took it off?"

"Well, that's the problem. I couldn't get it off. I've worn it for eight years. Ever since The Bastard died."

"Your husband?"

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"The ring is made with his ashes, you know. They compress and fuse them into the platinum in this micro-thin band. It's absolutely irreplaceable. Anyway, I know what happens when they can't get your rings off. When my neighbour's cousin was mugged, they chopped off her finger with a bloody great panga."

I could see exactly where this was going. "So you used soap?"

"And it slipped right off, into the sink and down the drain."

"Down the drain," I repeated.

"Didn't I just say that?"

"May I?" I said, and reached for Mrs Luditsky's hand. It was a pretty hand, maybe a little chubby, but the wrinkles and the powdery texture betrayed all the work on her face. Clearly botox doesn't work on hands, or maybe it's too expensive. "This finger?"

"Yes, dear. The ring finger. That's where people normally wear their rings."

I closed my eyes and squeezed the pad of the woman's finger, maybe a little too hard. And caught a flash of the ring, a blurred silver-coloured halo, somewhere dark and wet and industrial. I didn't look too hard to figure out the exact location. That level of focus tends to bring on a migraine, the same way heavy traffic does. I snagged the thread that unspooled away from the woman and ran deep into the city, deep under the city.

I opened my eyes to find Mrs Luditsky studying me intently, as if she was trying to peer into my skull to see the gears at work. Behind her bouffant hair, a display case of china figurines stared down. Cute shepherdesses and angels and playful kittens and a chorus line of flamenco dancers.

"It's in the drains," I said, flatly.

"I thought we'd already established that."

"I hate the drains." Call it the contempt of familiarity. You'd be surprised how many lost things migrate to the drains.

"Well pardon me, Little Miss Hygiene," Mrs Luditsky snapped, although the impact was diminished by her inability to twitch a facial muscle. "Do you want the job or not?"

Of course I did. Which is how I got a look-in to Mrs Luditsky's purse for a R500 deposit. Another R500 to be paid on delivery. And how I found myself shin-deep in shit in the stormwater drains beneath Killarney Mall. Not actual shit, at least, because the sewage runs through a different system, but years of musty rainwater and trash and rot and dead rats and used condoms make up their own signature fragrance.

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I swear I can still detect a hint of it underneath the bleach. Was it worth it for R1000? Not even close. But the problem with being mashavi is that it's not so much a job as a vocation. You don't get to choose the ghosts that attach themselves to you. Or the things they bring with them.

I drop off a set of keys at the Talk-Talk phone shop, or rather the small flat above the shuttered store. The owner is Cameroonian and so grateful to be able to open up shop this morning that he promises me a discount on airtime as a bonus. A toddler dressed in a pink fluffy bear suit peeks out between his legs and reaches for them with pudgy grasping fingers. The same one, I'm guessing, who was chewing on the keys in her pram before gleefully tossing them into the rush-hour traffic. That's worth fifty bucks. And it's more in line with my usual hustle. In my experience, the Mrs Luditskys of the world are few and far between.

I walk up on Empire through Parktown past the old Johannesburg College of Education, attracting a few aggressive hoots from passing cars. I give them the finger. Not my fault if they're so cloistered in suburbia that they don't get to see zoos. At least Killarney isn't a gated community. Yet.

I'm still a couple of kays from Mrs Luditsky's block, just turning off Oxford and away from the heavy traffic, which is giving me a headache, the kind that burrows in behind your temples like a brain termite, when my connection suddenly, horribly, goes slack.

Sloth squeaks in dismay and grips my arms so hard his long claws draw little beads of blood. "I know, buddy, I know," I say and start running. I clamp my fist around the cold circle of metal in my pocket as if I could jump-start the connection. There is the faintest of pulses, but the thread is unravelling.

We've never lost a thread. Even when a lost thing is out of reach forever, like when that wannabe-novelist guy's manuscript blew out across Emmarentia Dam, I could still feel the taut lines of connection between him and the disintegrating pages. This feels more like a dead umbilical cord withering away.

There's an ambulance and a police van outside Mrs Luditsky's block, strobing the dusty beige of the wall with flicks of red and blue. Sloth whimpers.

"It's okay," I say, out of breath, even though I'm pretty damn sure it's anything but, falling in alongside the small cluster of rubber-necking pedestrians. I guess I'm shaking,

because someone takes my elbow.

"You okay, honey?"

I'm obviously not remotely okay, because somehow I missed these two in the crowd – a gangly angel with huge dark wings and a dapper man with a Maltese Poodle dyed a ludicrous orange to match the scarf at his neck. It's the man who has attached himself to me. He's wearing expensive-looking glasses and a suit as sharp as the

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razored edge of his chiskop quiff. The Dog gives me a dull look from the end of its leash and thumps its tail half-heartedly. Say what you like about Sloths, but at least I didn't end up with a motorised toilet-brush. Or a Vulture, judging by the hideous bald head that bobbles up and down behind the woman's shoulder, digging under its wing.

The woman falls into the vaguely ageless and androgynous category, somewhere between 32 and 58, with a chemotherapy haircut, wisps of dark hair clinging to her scalp, and thin overplucked eyebrows. Or maybe she just tries to make herself look ugly. She's wearing riding boots over slim grey pants and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. It's accented by leather straps crossing over her chest from the harness that supports the weight of the hulking Bird on her back.

"You know what's going on?" I say to the Dog guy.

"There's been a mur-der," the man stage-whispers the word behind his hand. "Old lady on the second floor. Terrible business. Although I hear she's terribly well preserved."

"Have they said anything?"

"Not yet," the woman says, her voice, unexpectedly, the malted alto of jazz singers. Her accent is Eastern European, Russian maybe, or Serbian. At the sound of her voice, the Bird stops grooming and a long neck with a wattle like a deflated testicle twists over the woman's shoulder. It drapes its wrinkled head over her chest, the long, sharp spear of its beak angled down towards her hip. Not a Vulture then. She lays one hand tenderly on the Marabou Stork's mottled head, the way you might soothe a child or a lover.

"Then how do you know it's murder?"

The Maltese smirks. You know how most people's mashavi and their animals don't line up?" he says. "Well, in Amira's case, they do. She's attracted to carrion. Mainly murder scenes, although she does like a good traffic pile¬up. Isn't that right, sweetie?"

The Marabou smiles in acknowledgement, if you can call the faint twitch of her mouth a smile.

The paramedics emerge from the building with a stretcher carrying a sealed grey plastic body bag. They hoist it into the ambulance. "Excuse me," I say and push through the crowd. The paramedic shuts the double doors behind the stretcher, signalling the driver to kill the lights with a wave of his hand. The dead don't need to beat the traffic. But I have to ask anyway.

"That Mrs Luditsky in there?"

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"You a relative?" The paramedic looks disgruntled. "'Cos unless you are, it's none of your business, zoo girl."

"I'm an employee."

"Tough breaks, then. You should probably stick around. The cops are gonna want to ask you some questions."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"Let's just say she didn't pass in her sleep, sweetheart."

The ambulance gives one strangled whoop and pulls out onto the road, taking Mrs Luditsky with it. I grip the ring in my pocket, hard enough to embed the imprint of the sapphires into my palm. Sloth nuzzles into my neck, hiding his face. I wish I could reassure him.

"Ugly business," the Maltese tuts, sympathetically. "Like it's any of yours."

I'm suddenly furious. "You with the cops?"

"God, no!" He laughs. "Unfortunately for this one," he says, nodding at the Marabou, "there's no real money in ambulance chasing."

"We're sorry for your loss," the Marabou says.

"Don't be," I say. "I only met her the one time."

"What was it that you were doing for the old lady anyway? If I may ask? Secretarial? Grocery runs? Nursing?"

"I was finding something for her."

"Did you get it?"

"Always do."

"But sweetie, what a marvellous coincidence! Oh, I don't mean marvellous, like oh, how marvellous your employer just died. That's ghastly, don't get me wrong. But the thing is, you see–"

"We're also looking for something," the Marabou cuts in.

"Precisely. Thank you," the Maltese says. "And, if that's, you know, your talent? I'm guessing that's your talent? Then maybe you could help."

"What sort of something?"

"Well, I say something, but really, I mean someone."

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"Sorry. Not interested."

"But you haven't even heard the details."

"I don't need to. I don't do missing persons."

"It's worth a lot to us." The bird on Marabou's back flexes its wings, showing off the white flèchettes marking the dark feathers. I note that they're clipped, and that its legs are mangled, twisted stubs. No wonder she has to carry it. "More than any of your other jobs would have paid."

"Come on, sweetie. Your client just turfed it. Forgive me being so frank. What else are you going to do?"

"I don't know who you are–"

"An oversight. I'm sorry. Here." The Marabou removes a starched business card from her breast pocket and proffers it between scissored fingers. Her fingernails are immaculately manicured. The card is blind embossed, white on white in a stark sans-serif font.

Marabou & Maltese Procurements

"And procurements means what exactly?"

"Whatever you want it to, Ms December," the Marabou says.

Sloth grumbles in the back of his throat, as if I need to be told how dodgy this just turned. I reach out for their lost things, hoping to get anything on them, because they obviously have something on me.

The Maltese is blank. Some rare people are. They're either pathologically meticulous or they don't care about anything. But it still creeps me out. The last person I encountered with no lost things at all was the cleaning lady at Elysium. She threw herself down an open elevator shaft.

My impressions of the Marabou's lost things are weirdly vivid. It must be the adrenaline sharpening my focus – all that hormone soup in your brain messes with mashavi big time. I've never been able to see things this clearly. It's strange, like someone switched my vaseline-slathered soft-focus perspective for a high-definition paparazzi zoom-lens.

I can make out the things tethered to her in crisp detail: a pair of tan leather driving gloves, soft and weathered by time. One of them is missing a button that would fasten it at the wrist. A tatty book, pages missing, the remainder swollen with damp,

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the cover half ripped off. I can make out sepia branches, a scrap of title, The Tree That–. And a gun. Dark and stubby, with retro curves, like a bad prop from a '70s sci-fi show. The image is so precise I can make out the lettering on the side: Vektor.

Oblivious to me discreetly riffling through their lost things, the Maltese presses me, grinning. His painted Dog grins too, pink tongue lolling happily between its sharp little teeth. "We really need your help on this one. I'd even say we can't do it without you. And it pays very, very well."

"How can I say this? I don't like people knowing my business."

"You advertise," the Marabou says, amused.

"And I don't like your attitude."

"Oh don't mind Amira, she comes off mean, but she's just shy, really," the Maltese says.

"And I don't like small dogs. So thanks, but you know, as far as I'm concerned, you should go fuck the carcass of a goat."

The Maltese squinches up his face. "Oh, that's disgusting. I'll have to remember that one," he says.

"Hang onto that," the Marabou indicates the card. "You might change your mind."

"I won't."

But I do.

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