

Parramatta Cages

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Introduction

There are places in every city where the ordinary arrangement of the world grows thin. In Parramatta, on certain late afternoons when the light turns the colour of old brass and the air carries the mixed scents of river mud, eucalyptus, and distant traffic, one such place was the zoo. As the fierce heat of the Australian sun began its slow burn into twilight, the sunlight would steep the asphalt in a heavy, golden syrup, casting long, bruised purples and deep indigo shadows across the manicured lawns.

Its pathways were tidy, its signs clear, its barriers maintained with the quiet diligence of people who believe that order is a form of

kindness. Above the enclosures, the air smelled safely of spun sugar, warm sunscreen, and the faint, chlorinated mist of decorative fountains, accompanied by the chaotic, comforting hum of hundreds of overlapping conversations. Yet barriers, like any human certainty, are temporary.

On nine separate days that season, the temporary nature of those barriers revealed itself. A railing weakened by years of weather and unnoticed stress, a platform whose bolts had loosened beyond the reach of routine inspection, a fence that simply decided, for a moment, to stop performing its duty—each failure delivered a pair of ordinary lives into the domain of a creature that had never agreed to the contract of spectacle. The transitions were jarring and violent: a sickening screech of yielding metal, the rushing hiss of displaced air, and a sudden plunge into atmospheres thick with ancient, predatory musk, pulverized bone, and damp, rotting vegetation.

The couples who fell were not adventurers. They were residents of the surrounding suburbs: people who spoke in the layered accents of elsewhere and here, who carried in their voices and gestures the residual music of other continents, who had come to the zoo, as families do, for an afternoon of managed wonder. They fell wearing the brilliant crimsons and magentas of traditional silks, the crisp, starched cotton of weekend button-downs, and the deep indigos of denim—colors that suddenly clashed with the muted, earthy, and uncompromising palettes of the untamed world they had just entered.

What followed was neither catastrophe nor miracle in the usual sense. Faced with animals whose power was real and whose patience was not infinite, the fallen did not attempt dominance or pure flight. Instead they offered what they already possessed—song

shaped by raga and monsoon memory, the geometry of classical dance, the circular stories that children learn before they learn to fear silence, the old harvest rhythms that once kept time for bees and fields. Their voices rang out, vibrating in the humid air against artificial rock walls; feet clad in everything from sandals to heavy boots, or sometimes utterly bare, stamped ancient, percussive rhythms into the foreign, sun-baked dirt. They entertained, in the oldest meaning of the word: they held attention, they made a space in which recognition could occur.

The animals, for their part, listened. Not with sentimentality, not with the gratitude humans sometimes invent for other species, but with the focused gravity of beings who know the difference between noise and address. The ambient shrieks of the zoo above faded into a breathless, heavy silence, broken only by the deep, resonant breathing of these formidable creatures and the rhythmic, hollow heartbeat of hands striking thighs. In those suspended intervals—before the soft arrival of the dart, before the careful hands of keepers restored the boundary—something passed between the caged and the briefly uncaged that neither party had language to name completely. The air between them shimmered with an electric tension, smelling of ozone, terror, and a sudden, shocking intimacy.

This book records those nine crossings. It does not claim that art conquers fear, or that culture tames the wild. It claims only that, for a short while in the dust and filtered light of Parramatta, certain human beings remembered how to speak across the oldest of divides, and certain animals, in their own untranslatable way, consented to hear them.

Chapter 1: Sumitri and the Lion

The afternoon sun was a heavy, molten weight pressing down on the canopy, bleeding a harsh, blinding gold through the trembling eucalyptus leaves. The railing failed without drama, only a soft metallic surrender, as though the iron had grown weary of its long service and simply chose to rest. It gave way with a sickening, hollow snap that vibrated through the soles of Sumitri's sandals, a sound entirely too quiet for the magnitude of the disaster. As gravity claimed them, the world dissolved into a rushing blur of bruised purples and blinding yellows. Sumitri and Arjun dropped into the lion's domain, the ochre dust rising around them in slow, luminous coils that caught the late Parramatta light and held it.

The impact knocked the breath from their lungs, replacing the sterile, conditioned air of the viewing platform with an atmosphere that was thick, primal, and suffocatingly real. The air smelled of sun-warmed grass, dry earth, and something older—musk and patience. It was a deeply animal scent, layered with the metallic tang of their own sudden spike of adrenaline and the faint, powdery aroma of crushed eucalyptus bark. Through the haze of suspended, glittering dirt, the enclosure took on the surreal clarity of a fever dream. The light down here was different—filtered, predatory, casting long, jagged shadows across the baked earth.

Raja stood already, his mane a living corona, each strand edged with gold. He was a mountain of muscle and coiled tension, his coat a mesmerizing tapestry of burnt amber, tawny brown, and the stark, shadowed black of his heavy lips. He did not pace. He did not roar. The silence he commanded was absolute, a heavy, suffocating pressure that seemed to swallow the ambient noise of the park above. He occupied the space with the absolute, unhurried authority of a creature who had never once needed to announce himself. The

rhythmic, bass-heavy rasp of his breathing was the only sound, each exhalation stirring the shimmering dust at his massive paws.

Sumitri felt the old discipline of the voice rise before fear could fully organise itself. Her heart was a frantic, fluttering bird against her ribs, but her mind found the deep, grooved pathways of her training. She sat, arranged the folds of her salwar with the same care she once gave to the temple floor in Blacktown, and opened her throat to Malkauns. The crimson silk of her garments pooled around her in stark, vivid contrast to the drab, bone-dry earth, catching a stray beam of sunlight like spilled wine.

The raga moved the way deep water moves under night—unhurried, certain, carrying darkness even beneath an open sky. Her voice began as a fragile, reedy thread in the vastness of the enclosure, but it quickly found its resonance, vibrating with a rich, mournful timber. The first notes trembled, then steadied. It was a sound of velvet and midnight, rolling across the dry grass and bouncing off the faux-rock walls. The raga deepened, weaving invisible, hypnotic threads through the stifling Parramatta heat. Sumitri closed her eyes, letting the mourning melody pull her back to the cool marble floors of her youth, channeling the ancient devotion that transcends immediate danger.

The lion, Raja, seemed to understand this profound shift in the atmosphere. His amber eyes, previously sharp with predatory calculation, softened into a gaze of intense, magnificent curiosity. The golden dust swirling around them took on a rhythmic quality of its own, rising and falling with the cadence of her breath and the heavy, rasping exhalations of the massive beast. Beside her, Arjun, after one sharp intake of breath that tasted of dust, began the theka against his thigh, the remembered pulse of the tabla from