

# FEEDING TIME

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**John Boston**

Marlese Roberts pulled into the empty zoo parking lot just after two in the morning. She was still only half awake and had just bought a large cup of coffee at the gas station. She lit up a cigarette and took a deep drag. No smoking in the zoo, that was the director's policy. It was a pretty stupid policy in her opinion. It seemed like everyone nowadays had to write their rules and policies around the one idiot out of a hundred people that would take exception to it. The other ninety-nine people's wishes didn't matter. Most days she didn't care. She had Nicorette lozenges to take the edge off when she needed a fix. She usually never spent more than a couple of hours at a time in the zoo, so she could usually get by.

She finished her cigarette and her coffee and then headed towards the employee entrance.

She was given her own key card and Shawna's keyring. Shawna was the one who usually did the overnight cleaning and other chores. She was on vacation this week. The zoo director had come to her and asked her to fill in this week. She knew this was the opportunity she had been waiting for. She had volunteered her time last year as well. She had hung in there as a volunteer when most walked away. She knew how hard it was to get a job here at the zoo. They got hundreds of applications every year for just one or two positions. For an Animal Science Major, this would be a dream come true. So many of her peers focused on school, instead of networking. Nowadays, you had to market yourself. You couldn't just sit on your laurels and wait for a great job to throw itself at you. The competition was fierce and getting fiercer by the minute.

The director handed her Shawna's keyring. She had recently been given the access code at the main gate. Most volunteers never got it. She was working her way up the ladder, slowly, but surely. Another year of shit shoveling and she would have a full-time job. All she had to do was get her foot in the door.

The zoo had several layers of security. A big, concrete fence with barbed wire at the main gate, then two layers of fencing. The outer fencing was also concrete, while the inner layer was a double chain-linked fence. The paddocks, where the animals lived, was also sealed off from the rest of the zoo. Her pass card and code only got her in the main gate and past the first level. She needed the keys to do the rest.

The prize possession of the zoo were two African Lions named Cedrick and Lulu. They were picked up from a park in South Africa when they were barely two years old. A lion in the wild will usually weigh in at around four hundred and fifty pounds. A lion in captivity, when fed constantly can get much bigger. Cedrick was now over six hundred pounds, Lulu was smaller, around four hundred pounds. They were old and lazy. They stopped being real lions a long time ago. They were both used to interacting with other people and animals. Most days, they didn't even pick their heads up when their trainer was in the cage.

Shawna never took her eyes off them. She never lost respect for them. She knew they could rip her apart in seconds and was always making safety a priority. The process for cleaning the pads was pretty simple, the lions were used to it by now. Once the paddock doors opened, they came right in, knowing there was a treat waiting for them. Once they were in the holding area and the gate closed behind them, she could clean their cages. There was also another door connecting the holding area and the cages. She would make certain both had closed before she entered.

Some of the staff and volunteers assumed that because they were domesticated, that they posed no danger to them. That type of thinking is exactly what gets people killed. A lion is genetically programmed to kill and eat just about anything it wants. It is top of the food chain and it knows it. They don't kill us because it is easier to get fed when they are nice to us.

She had also noticed that animals are much smarter than we think they are. They are constantly watching us, even when we think they aren't. They look for subtle clues they can use to predict our movements and behavior. *They aren't domesticated, they're just playing the game.*

She unlocked the outer door and walked down the hallway to the door that led to the paddocks and supply rooms. One of the rooms was used by the staff veterinarian. It had a large metal operating table and tons of equipment. The drugs were kept locked in a metal cabinet that was accessed by very few. There was a large metal gate that led from the lion cages into the backroom. It was solid steel and weighed a ton. It was controlled by a switch. Had she of been more awake or had more sleep, she would have noticed the light was on as she entered the backroom, indicating the metal door was open.

The doors are always shut and locked behind you for added security. She never even thought twice about it. She turned on the lights and went into the area that held the wheelbarrow and other tools she needed to clean the cages. She had to hose down the cages, so she got the hose out as well.

It was a very safe procedure when done properly. She had done it before, with the zoo staff dozens of times. They felt comfortable leaving her to do it herself. There was even a checklist for cage cleaning. Some of the zoo staff would just see if they were sleeping in the same cage, then lock the gate between the cages and clean the empty one while the lions were only a few feet away. The zoo did try to be safe, only tonight for some reason, none of it worked. She couldn't find the rubber boots that went over her shoes, so she went back into the medical room and that's when she saw Cedrick on the other side of the giant operating table. She froze instantly. A bolt of fear went through her body that was so severe, it almost paralyzed her for a few seconds.

*This is not supposed to happen. This is impossible.*

Her first thought was to run for the door, but he was on the same side as the door. She couldn't just run him. She wasn't that quick. He looked at her with neither fear nor concern. In an instant, she recognized the look. She had seen it before. It was the look he gets when he's about to tear into his dinner.

"Hey boy.....what are you doing in here? You know you're not supposed to be in here," she said nervously. She was trying to sound confident, but trying to sound confident in front of a six hundred lion was nearly impossible.

He just tilted his head and looked at her. For a second, she thought he might actually turn around and just walk out here, back to his cage.

*Nope, this bastard came to play.*

Her only chance was to make it to the large shelving unit up top. It was solid metal and could hold hundreds of pounds. She had to be quick. *She had to be like Usian Bolt type quick.*

She darted back into the supply area and quickly scurried up the metal beams holding the shelves in place. The shelving was bolted against the wall. Cedrick, as large as he was, still could not tip it over. She scurried up the planks and beam, just as Cedrick's teeth bit down on her rubber boot. His jaws were so strong, it ripped the boot and her sneaker off in a matter of seconds. He jumped up and tried to grab her sock foot with his teeth, but he was inches too short. He kept leaping, trying to make it, but he quickly realized it was too much work. She was safe for now.

Cedrick quickly forgot about her and slowly circled the room, looking for anything he could munch on. He found a bag of cookies, for the smaller animals and ripped it open. He had just claimed this area for himself. Nothing short of a large caliber bullet was going to get him out of here.

Marlese looked down in horror as she saw her phone laying on the ground. Cedrick stepped right on it, looking down as he smashed it.

Her heart was racing so fast, she thought she was going to have a heart attack.

*Fuck, I'm awake now.* She thought to herself.

She was literally just about a foot away from his reach. She watched in horror as he got a running start and tried to get a running start, then lunged at her. Instead of making it to where she was, his immense weight caused the bottom level of shelving to collapse. The top-level of shelving had been bolted directly to the walls. It had saved her life. Cedrick had no way of getting to her now. She was safe where she was, but she was also helpless.

*So much for being domesticated. That fucker didn't think any more of me than he did his next meal.*

She realized then, that a truly wild animal can never be domesticated. A lion kills. That's what it does. It doesn't want to be friends with you. It doesn't want to do tricks for you. It knows it can snap your neck at any time....it's just smart enough to wait for the right moment to strike and tonight is that night.

She racked her brain trying to figure out how in the hell this could have happened. This was almost impossible. The regular zoo staff fed them at five every day. Part of their job is to ensure that all paddock doors are locked. The only way the door could have been opened is if someone inside the back rooms opened it. It cannot be opened from the outside. It's designed that way. Someone left it open. Someone wanted her to die. There was no other way.

Even if a careless worker had left the door open, there is a light on near the main door, reminding you the gate is open. She kicked herself for not just turning around and seeing the red light. She could have locked him in there and that would pretty much have been the end of it. Instead, she was now locked in here with a six hundred pound killing machine. One that did not feel pity or remorse. One whose only function is to kill and devour everything it can catch. Human or not.

She had to take a step back and think this through. Even if she had her phone, she wasn't sure she could make a call. Reception for some reason wasn't very good back here. Sometimes her phone would show she had no service at all. She would go a few hundred feet away and she would have a full signal. Didn't seem to make much sense.

She had to outthink Cedrick. There was no way he could leave the back room. There were only two exits. If he could, she figured she would have seen him in the hallway because both exits lead to the main hallway.

*Wait! What about Lulu?* That was another nightmare. One lion was bad enough. Two lions on the loose was another nightmare altogether. Who else was out on the loose? They had two hyenas and two hippos. She had to get help here and fast. Anyone who entered this zoo would be walking right into a death trap.

The regular staff didn't start arriving till about five in the morning. There was a cleaning crew in the zoo, but they never went into the area she was in now. They just cleaned the sidewalks and visitor center. They were probably gone by now.

They had security. There were supposed to be two of them. One at the gate, the other one walking around making sure crazy shit like this didn't happen. Guess this one got by him.

Her only real option was to wait until help arrived. She just hoped and prayed that the lions were out in the paddocks when they came in. Cedrick might be old, but he hadn't lost a step. A few more seconds and she would be dead right now. She also had to quit smoking. She was wheezing now. She was only 22. It was time to get a new vice.

She didn't know how long she had been there. Maybe half an hour, maybe more. Certainly not more than an hour. She was in a position to see almost everything that went on in the backroom. She just couldn't see around the corner in the examining room. That was the problem. Once she got down, she couldn't get back up. If he was still in here, she was as good as dead. She also had another problem. She had to pee like a racehorse. She looked over and saw a small bucket at the end of the shelf. She crawled on her stomach until she reached the bucket. She carefully undid her jeans and held the bucket off the edge of the shelf and positioned her body so she could pee in it. She had nearly filled up half the bucket when Cedrick's massive paw clipped the bottom of the bucket and sent it flying across the room. She quickly recovered. She had just about finished. That goddamn lion was just toying with her now. Gently reminding her she was his next meal and she better get used to it. She had to remind herself that this was real. It was only going to get worse.

Her bestie at the zoo was a monkey named Chucky. He loved people and her in particular. She would spend hours with him, hanging out, playing games. He would climb on her shoulder and just stay there. After the zoo closed, they would walk around the zoo together. She needed him

now more than ever. She hoped he was okay. The poor little guy wouldn't stand a chance against this lion.

The longer she stayed sprawled out on that shelf, the more convinced she became that someone had set her up to die. This was no accident. Who the hell would do something like this? Who would hate her enough to kill her? Of course, as far as Marlese knew, the only one who knew she was coming in tonight was the director of the zoo, maybe a few others. Everyone's work schedule was posted in the break room. It wasn't like Shawna's work schedule would be hard to find. Did someone think Shawna would be in tonight? Was all this meant for her? None of this made any sense. Someone had set her up to die. That was a very bitter pill to swallow. Maybe it was just a terrible tragedy, maybe it wasn't. She had to warn others before they came into this room. Clearly, Cedrick was thinking it was time to eat. Lions are the only animal fully expected to bite off the hand that feeds them.

She didn't want to risk it for the phone. She saw Cedrick smash it. She wasn't even sure it worked. It just wasn't worth the risk. She tried to listen for any sounds coming out of the medical room that led to the paddocks and cages. She didn't hear anything, maybe he had gone back outside. She took off her other boot and threw it on the floor. Cedrick came flying out from behind the wall and grabbed it. He just looked at her and then walked back into the examining room. He was just waiting for the next poor, unsuspecting victim to come inside. He wouldn't have to wait long.

She never even heard the door open or close. She just saw Julian, the zoo veterinary technician come into the examining room. He did most of the health checkups and gave out shots. He was still in vet school.

"JULIAN, CEDRICK IS ON THE LOOSE!" she screamed as soon as she saw him.

Julian was normally a pretty easy-going guy, who joked around a lot. It took only a second for his trademark smile to disappear.

"What? What are you doing up there?" he asked.

By the time he realized why she was up on the shelves, it was too late. Cedrick came running into the room and mauled him, grabbing him by his neck and ripping it apart. Blood spattered everywhere. He was killed so quickly, he never even got a chance to scream. Cedrick just continued to rip him apart. She had to cover her ears to muffle the sounds of his bones breaking. He was nature's killing machine.

*Shit honey, this is what I do.* He thought as he tore Julian apart.

This was now officially a nightmare. One of her friends was dead. Who knows how many more he would take before the day was done. She had to stop him before he killed anyone else.

*That son of a bitch is just waiting for us to come in. Waiting.....like he's back out in the savannah in Africa or something.*

She was still in shock to let herself cry. When you are at the same point she is, crying is almost an afterthought.

*How the hell am I going to stop him?* She thought as he ripped apart Julian's vet uniform. Now was a good time to try and make it to the door. She would need like five seconds at most. Just sprint as fast as she could to the door, turn the handle and make sure it shut. He's so distracted, he might not even care.

*Once a lion gets a taste for human flesh, it won't eat anything else.....ever.* Said an old African man to her one day in the audience. Maybe he had first-hand knowledge. He had deep scars all over his arms. What had he run into?

She was just about to jump when she saw Lulu come out from behind the wall. She must have smelled the blood. Pretty soon, both of them were tearing Julian's limbs apart. It was as if they hadn't been fed in a week. This wasn't normal behavior for a lion, not at all. She couldn't make it now, not with both of them in the room. She would have to stay where she was, as hard as it was, she had to think of her own safety first. Cedrick left her to finish what was left of Julian and he slowly circled the shelving unit. It was almost as if he was looking for a weak spot. Looking for some way to bring it down to the floor, so he could devour another. He went back to the kill and now, seemed to be just playing with it.

*Dear God, make it stop. Make those horrible sounds stop. My ears can't take anymore. I will never forget what they sound like. I will be on my deathbed and still hear his bones breaking.*

She sat on the shelf and waited. An hour must have passed since she came into the building. Maybe more. They would start to trickle in here, one at a time. Once they saw the cages hadn't been cleaned and saw her car, they would start to wonder. *Somebody will figure this out. We're smarter than fucking animals.*

All she could do now was sit and wait. The lions had dragged what was left of his body back outside. Lulu had disappeared, who the hell knows what Cedrick had in mind. She had caught him once, just waiting for her to climb down. They were both playing a deadly game with one another. She looked around the room for some way out. There was a window, but it only went to the paddock. She then started looking for a weapon. There were plenty of lethal drugs in the cabinet with syringes, but it was locked and she had no key. There was nothing in here to kill a lion with, just piss it off so you died slowly. Someone will rescue her. Someone will come and put an end to this horrible nightmare.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed. An hour and a half, maybe two. Weren't those idiot security guards supposed to do a walkthrough here? Surely, they would see something was wrong. She never took her eyes off the door now. She couldn't actually see the door, but once they took a few steps inside, she could see their feet. Problem was, so could they. Her mind was racing now, going back and forth between someone wanting her dead and it just being a horrible accident. Maybe some volunteer didn't shut the gate completely. They usually aren't allowed anywhere near the paddocks or the rooms until they have been here a while. Maybe it was a friend or relative of the director. He did like to show the place off. Whoever had screwed up, was

going to pay dearly. She was going to kill that damn lion and then she was going to sue the shit out of this place.

*Shit like this just ain't supposed to happen. This is only supposed to happen in late-night movies with bad actors and girls with fake boobs.*

She saw their feet. She screamed as loud as she could

"CEDRICK IS LOOSE!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

The feet instantly stopped. Instead of turning and getting out of that room as fast as they could, whoever was there, just grabbed a piece of metal pipe to use as a weapon.

"I'll hold him off while you get down," he said

"ARE YOU FUCKING CRAZY? GET OUT OF HERE WHILE YOU STILL CAN!" she screamed.

No sooner had she said that than Cedrick came running into the room from outside. She recognized his uniform. He was one of the security guards that was supposed to be making sure stuff like this didn't happen. He took a swing at Cedrick. The bar hit him in the face. A lion vs. a hundred and fifty-pound security guard isn't going to be much of a fight. Cedrick never even slowed down and knocked the man into the wall. He took another swing at him. Cedrick backed off. The man opened the door and was almost out when he lunged at him and grabbed his hand, nearly ripping it off his body. The man screamed in horror and dropped the pipe. Cedrick lunged at him and it was over in seconds. He was dead too.

She had to do something, but she had no idea what to do. Two people were dead now because somebody screwed up. It was up to her to put an end to this nightmare.

Something must have gotten Lulu's attention. She let out a roar and Cedrick left the body and ran out of the room. This might be her only chance. She took off her belt and buckle. She rolled it up and threw it on the floor next to the wall that separated the two rooms. It was loud enough for him to hear. She waited a few seconds before moving. She jumped down and ran into the examining room. She nearly slipped on the blood that was spilled all over the floor. She ran over to the control panel and turned the switch for the door, locking the gate. It turned green and she knew she was safe. She turned and ran over to the dying man. He was just a kid. His entire arm had been torn off. He was losing blood rapidly. She knew he was dying. There was nothing she could do, but try to make his last few moments on earth as peaceful as possible.

"I was chasing that monkey.....was chasing him all over the zoo. He gets out at night. I don't even know how he does it. We have to catch him. He thinks it's a game. Smart little guy." he said as he smiled. He died a few moments later right in front of her. She didn't know what to do. It was all instinct at this point. She had to get help. She had to stop him from killing anyone else.

She checked her phone. It was smashed and had no power. She knew there was a phone in the director's office and one in the cafeteria. She just had to get there and make the call. There was no way for Cedrick to get into these areas, at least she hoped. She looked at the clock on the

wall, it was now four thirty-six. Pretty soon, the regular employees would start arriving. She was going to have to be fast.....real fast.

*Faster than God can make poor people.* As her father would say.

She ran down the hallway into the main room where the cafeteria was. She saw one person in the kitchen. She ran over to her.

"Oh my God. You have to call the police. One of the lions just killed two people!"

"Oh no. Si, I call." said the woman.

*You must think I'm loco, chica! I'm not even supposed to be in this country.* the old woman thought to herself as she continued with her morning chores. She didn't even understand all of what the girl had said. A lion? She didn't even know the zoo had animals like that. No way in hell was she calling the police. *De Ninguna Manera.*

Marlese ran down the hallway to the director's office and security room. She hoped there was a phone in there to the security booth outside or cameras. She had to know where those damn lions were. Her card got her into the security room. She looked at all the screens. As far as she could tell, they were still out in the paddocks, sleeping. No way should they be hungry. She watched two headlights pull into the parking lot. She recognized one of the volunteers. An elderly woman who loved to work with exotic birds. No time for that now, Marlese needed her. She ran out of the building, down the steps, and over to the employee parking lot.

"HEY.....HEY, STOP!" she screamed.

The old woman turned around and nearly dropped her coffee. She must have recognized her.

"Marlese, what are you doing here at this hour?"

"We got problems.....big problems. Cedrick and Lulu got out. They killed Julian and a security guard. You can't go in there. I don't know who else got out."

"Oh Jesus! Did you call the police?"

"I told one of the cooks to call. I lost my phone."

"I'm calling them right now. Marlese, there are very rare and exotic animals inside. They would be impossible to replace. We have to go in there and make sure they're safe." said the old woman

"I don't have a signal," she said, holding her phone up.

"Did you hear what I just said? There are lions on the loose! Lions! I just watched them devour two people. You can't go in there until we know it's safe."

"Do you know where they are now?"



"I locked them in the paddocks. They shouldn't be able to get out. The hyenas.....I never checked on them."

The old woman reached into her car and took out her can of mace. She shook it up.

"I think you're going to need something bigger than that."

"It's all we have. Let's make sure they're locked in. Then we can check on the rest of the animals."

"I really think we should wait for the police."

"Look, kid. I've been waiting over a decade for these black flamingos to arrive. They're the only ones still in existence. We can't let anything happen to them. By the time the cops arrive, they could all be dead."

"Fine. You know how to use that thing?"

"I took a class." said the old woman.

As they were running back into the building, the old woman was on the phone with the 911 operator. For an elderly lady, she could still move. They went back inside the main building and ran down the hallways until they got to the exam room. Along the way, she saw her buddy, Chucky. He jumped up and down when he saw her. She lowered her arms and he ran right into them. They kissed and she squeezed him tight.

"What are you doing out of your cage? You know you're not supposed to be out here?" she said, still hugging him.

The two of them stopped at the door. The light to the paddocks was still green, indicating the door was still sealed. Marlese opened the door. The old woman was horrified at what she saw. She walked over to the gate and checked it. It was locked.

"Where's the other one?" she asked meekly

Marlese just teared up and pointed to the other room. The woman stopped as soon as she saw him.

"Sweet merciful Christ." she said softly.

The old woman got back on her phone and dialed 911 again. They both forgot about Chucky. It wasn't until Marlese went back into the exam room to look for a blanket to cover Julian that she saw Cedrick only a few feet from her. She looked over at the control board and saw Chucky playing with the switches that controlled the gate. Marlese quietly soiled herself as Cedrick inched closer.

*Little fucker is pretty smart after all. Shit, we should just be paying him in bananas to clean the cages.* She thought to herself before Cedrick's giant incisors ripped into her neck.