

The last Zookeeper (Der Panther)

Fwap. Fwap. Fwap. Fwap. Fwap. Fwap. Fwap. Fwap. Fwap. Fwap. Fwap. Fwap.

The steps come rhythmic on the dry path. Good pace, Paul thinks, but he couldn't be sure. He has never jogged. But he does remember Joggers. There used to be many of them here, especially in the early hours of the morning.

The one now passing Paul with her *Fwaps*, seems to be the last of this species. The woman is wearing a turquoise sports set with long sleeves, despite the heat. Her blonde hair is pulled back into a ponytail and Paul can see the sweat beads rolling off of her respiratory mask. When she passes him, the smell of her deodorant envelops him. Underneath, something musky and animal, that Paul knows well. Then, she is behind him and her rhythm grows quieter.

Paul is on his way to the panther enclosure. The doctor will meet him there. And despite having years of seeing this moment coming, he is not prepared for it to be here now. But for Death you never are, he thinks. It always creeps up on you quietly and slowly, with moments of *Oh, maybe it's not so bad after all* and then: *It has gotten worse*. Maybe it's better when it's quick and unexpected in a way. It was like this with the frogs. Back when the protests first started, Paul had gone on his daily inspections and found them all dead in their enclosure one morning. Five frogs, lying flat, limbs splayed out awkwardly. Their golden bodies curling slightly inward, in a feeble attempt to conserve moisture. A bizarre sight and while it had unsettled something deep inside him, he remembers it as more shocking than sad.

How had his boss asked, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose, *could this have happened*. The suspicion fell on Paul's colleague Emma, as she had been the last to inspect the terrarium moisture levels. What else could it have been but a careless oversight? Afterwards (and after Emmas breakdown) they found out about what would be the first incident of many more to come: Berlin had turned off water supplies during the night - as a precaution against possible contamination with mutated algae blooms. The public only found out about the full picture in bits and pieces, as government officials kept mostly quiet about the reasons.

Now, it didn't shock anyone, when water wasn't available for hours, maybe days. Either algae or conservation during the hottest months. Sometimes terrorism targeting the pipes. Protests and strikes. There was always some reason or another. Anyway, you better had your rainwater collectors in order or emergency bottles stockpiled.

The Zoo had a reservoir in the beginning, as well. Paul remembers the noise from construction stressing out the flamingos so badly, that some of them died before they could rehome them. Collectors and proper filtering plants. But soon, the city started demanding a cut to redistribute among private housing. Nobody cares about Flamingos when their shower doesn't work. So the aquatic animals were the first to go, then the amphibians. The flamingos had been rehomed already, shipped to a partner Zoo in San Diego and according to the agreement they should have come back after the construction work but their enclosure laid empty ever since. This also meant staff cuts: Emma quit on her own. *I have a PhD in Herpetology*, Paul had seen her crying on the top floor of the aquarium, staring at the half cleaned out frog tanks, *There is little left for me here, a private collector in San Francisco has asked me to look after his Amphibians*. The dolphin trainers were, unsurprisingly, fired, along with most of the aquatics team. Paul had survived this first culling because the carnivores were still big crowd magnets, and both the zoo and the city had decided that the costs and resources needed to keep them were reasonable. *After all, the public needs things to marvel at*.

But of course, it couldn't last. And this is why he is here today. The Panther had been one of his first cubs: Paul remembers the dark eyes, fixed on his every move, constantly weighing curiosity against fear and twitching with instinct. The first time he cleaned the cage of him and his mother, the Panther had hidden behind a bucket. At feeding time, it was again the bucket, but this time Paul could see his little tail sticking up and saying, *maybe, maybe I will jump*. He did not.

It took a long time until the Panther was confident enough to engage in teasing and playfulness. He was already not living with his mother anymore, a juvenile, almost grown, when the shyness lifted. He started to question the natural hierarchy of things. In that way, Paul supposed, he was an ordinary teenager.

Paul remembers cleaning the visitor area in front of the indoor enclosure one day, right after closing time, when he could feel the Panthers eyes on him. Every move of the broom, supervised. He had suddenly become aware of the noise of his own breathing; it intertwined with the rhythmic sound of the broom on the tiled floor: *Krrrrrk, huff, krrrrrk, huff*. He didn't have to look at the enclosure to know that the eyes of the Panther were not full of curiosity but quiet concentration, that every muscle in his body was tense and still. *Krrrrrk, krrrrrk, huff*. The rhythm became unstable, trembling. Paul could feel tiny hairs on his arm rise in the quiet space between breaths. *Why won't you come in here*, the panther asked, unblinking. *Why are the things I eat already dead. You know I could...* Paul waited for a jump. Waited for the sound of the solid, muscular

body hitting the iron grid of the enclosure. But only the silence extended. When Paul turned around to face the cage, The Panther had already left to another corner of the enclosure, out of Paul's view. It is this same cage, Paul is heading towards now. As he enters, the visitor area is empty, safe for one man in beige coveralls. The doctor is wearing latex gloves, holding a gun. *Hello, good to see you.* Paul nods. *Not the easiest day today, huh?* Paul shakes his head.

The doctor turns to a hardcover suitcase and takes out a pink dart, loading it into the gun with practiced precision. Paul knows he's already done this with the rhinos last week. Practised movements.

It's not like this hadn't been a part of how the zoo worked before. Sometimes animals got sick or were too aggressive. But this felt different. Because it *was* different. Insofar as that there was no reason for it on the animals' side. Just budget cuts, human economic decisions. Rehoming wasn't a possibility anymore, most other Zoos were already fully closed. Sometimes private collectors took some of the animals, but you always had to glaze over the animal welfare concerns - and even then, there were only so many billionaires with an interest in exotic animals. So this is how the doctor gets into the picture. *Do you know* his Boss had said *how much water it takes to produce meat to feed a Panther?*

Paul nods, and the doctor starts aiming his gun. Taking the Bucket of Meat he has brought with him, Paul steps up to the bars. The smell draws him out; slowly the Panther emerges from his hiding spot behind artificial stones. Eyes curious, he meanders towards the bars. Careful, but not on guard. His ears and tail are perked up, he is interested in this change of pace - usually he does not get fed in this area, usually he gets fed in the back. *What do you have for me?* Maybe a bit playful even, the Panther inspects first the bucket, then Paul, then the doctor.

Ffffffap.

Something passes through the air, and Paul can see the panther's muscles tense. His stance drops lower to the floor, ears dart back, eyes widen and he lunges around, only to find there is nothing behind him. The animal emits a confused *mrrwep* before trying to retreat to the back of the cage, but his legs suddenly grow unstable, startling him further. The usually prideful and clever eyes are overcast with confusion. His paws scratch over the stone floor panicked, without the balance or strength to actually move his body forward. He tries to move, then he struggles to even stand and slowly his big, dark form tilts to one side, then the other and then he collapses.

Paul stands there. The silence stretches after the echoing panic of scratching, growling and falling. It had not been graceful and that is what bothers him most. How unfair to this elegant creature to go down in panic and confusion, while losing control over its own body.

The doctor coughs. *You know, I used to want to be a vet.* He says, probably in an attempt to ease the tension. *Now I just do this all day. Life's funny, huh?*

Paul doesn't give the doctor the chuckle he had hoped for. He just turns and nods. Together, they move to the back of the cage. After a moment, ensuring the sedative has taken effect, they step inside.

Paul has never been this close to the Panther. The creature seems much bigger without the separation of bars between them. And yet, also quite fragile. It is lying there, helpless, and Paul can see the shining black fur move up and down in a relaxed cycle with the rhythm of its breath.

Please pinch the neck fur for me. The doctor says, as he takes out a syringe.

Paul kneels down in front of the creature and he puts a hand on its head. Paul kneels in front of the creature and places a hand on its head. The Panther's lids are half-closed, and though he is unconscious, Paul is sure he sees a faint gleam in them—some sort of understanding. He might not be able to move, but he still knows what is happening. *I didn't think it would be like this.* The eyes say. *How do I deserve this? I am not even given the chance to you proudly?*

It's budget cuts. Paul thinks, as his hands tremble. They just didn't have the money for you anymore.

Let me out then. Let me fend for myself.

You would not know how to. You've been here too long.

Don't lose your grip. The doctor says. *It will only make it more painful. Hold the skin still, so I can insert the toxin properly.*

So Paul grips tighter.

The doctor inserts the syringe. Then he gets up, pats Paul on the back and, after lingering for an uncomfortable moment, leaves.

Paul sits there, expecting something else to happen. But of course, nothing much does. He still has his hands on the Panther's head, not gripping anything anymore. He feels the breaths growing more shallow. Slowly, slowly. And then, Paul sees the big, dark, knowing eyes of the Panther fade and glaze. And he knows it is over. He removes his gloves and touches the fur with his bare hands, feeling the warmth before it fades.

The last Panther is dead.

Outside, steps echo. *Fwap, Fwap, Fwap.* The jogger has finished her round, now heading towards the exit of the zoo. Paul gets up, legs stiff. *Life goes on.*

