

The Zookeeper

The Zookeeper walks down the well-worn path he has taken every night. His flashlight clicks, *on-off-on*, and keys swing from the ring he clutches in his hand.

Off in the distance, a cricket chirps. He checks his list, although by now he has it memorized.

The gorilla exhibit, with its glass window peering into the zoo's fake jungle, is his first stop. The male gorilla is waiting for him.

"*Gorilla gorilla*, perhaps the most unoriginal scientific name out there. But it fits. An unoriginal name for a lowly creature like yourself."

The male stares back at him.

"Humans' scientific name, also fits us. *Homo sapiens*. Wise man. We *are* wise, putting you in this cage here. We are wise, putting *all* of you here," the Zookeeper whispers to the gorilla. It's a wonder whether the beast is listening or not. The Zookeeper moves on, and the gorilla looks up into the night sky.

As he makes his way to his next stop, *Equus quagga*, that damn chirping starts up again.

"And here are the greedy little bastards. Look at all that space you have." One of them trots over and stops when it sees its keeper. It stares.

"Hey! What are you lookin' at, huh?" the man says to the beast.

The zebra only stares and hangs its head.

"Go on! Run around! Get outta my sight." He turns away in disgust, and follows the list to *Canis lupus*.

The wolves are lumbering around in their pack. A mother is licking her cub as the man approaches.

"Ugh. A bunch of dirty little beasts; that's all you are. Just taking up our space." he says to the wolves. The alpha male walks over towards the man. He stares.

"What? What could you possibly want?"

The wolf just stares.

"Your whole family is there. Go."

The wolf stares.

"Whatever. At least you're not in the forest, wit' all 'dem bears and such."

The wolf's eyes glint in the moonlight.

The Zookeeper turns away from the beasts and their stares that bore into his soul and follows the well-worn path again.

The chirping is closer now, in fact, the cricket is right in front of him. A *Gryllus pennsylvanicus* rubbing its tiny legs together like a villain plotting his evil scheme.

Chirp. Chirp.

The Zookeeper lifts his foot up high and slams it down on the cricket.

The chirping stops immediately.

The Zookeeper digs his boot into the ground for good measure and leaves for the night.

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When the Zookeeper returns for his next shift, he repeats his process. He grabs his flashlight, absentmindedly clicking it on and off again. He grabs his keys, swinging them around on the ring. He pulls out his list and walks towards the gorillas. The male is sitting by the window, waiting for him.

"What do you want?"

The gorilla just stares.

"Food? Water? It's all in there."

The staring is growing intense now, almost as if the gorilla is trying to communicate with the Zookeeper. The concept almost makes the man laugh.

“Your lady is in there. Go play with her!”

The gorilla’s brown eyes bore into him.

“Go on! ‘Git!”

He doesn’t move.

“I said GO!” The Zookeeper slams his hand on the glass. The noise seems to snap the gorilla out of a trance, and he lumbers away. But he never takes his eyes off his keeper. The man has had enough of dealing with this beast and moves onto *Equus quagga*.

The creatures are all moping around.

“What the hell could you possibly want?” he yells at them all, all the dirty beasts collected in their cage.

“Want food? Well here ya’ go! Take your fill!” He grabs a nearby bale of hay and chucks it into the night. A resounding thud follows it. The zebras look up and stare at him. A dozen beasts, a dozen piercing glares. The Zookeeper turns and follows his list to *Canis lupus*.

The alpha is pacing, *back and forth and back and forth*.

“What? Want more space?”

The alpha stops and stares.

“Oh, you want a challenge, do ya’? Come on, ya’ beast. *Show me whatcha made of!*”

The wolf stares.

And then he growls.

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The Zookeeper reports for duty the next night. There is a howl in the distance and this time the Zookeeper crumbles his list and takes off in a gallop down the well-worn path. He reaches the wolf enclosure in a matter of seconds. In a flash, he latches onto the fence, lacing his fingers through the chain-link.

“Knock it off!” he roars. The wolf stops howling and stares at his keeper.

“What do you want from me, huh? *What do you want?!*” he howls at the wind and rattles the cage. He feels trapped and when he has had enough, he turns and slinks off into the night.

He’s panting now, he’s spent. But the sound of braying sets him off and he tears down a path he wouldn’t normally take. There’s a root in the middle and he trips. Grabbing his ankle, he roars out in pain, the sound of anger reverberating through the night. Half-crawling, half-stumbling, he takes off down the path to the zebras.

“And *what do you want?* More food? More water? *You have it all. We give you everything and you still want more!*” he screeches at the black and white beasts. The sound of his anguish slices through the night. The soulful stares of the zebras remind the man of his last stop.

The Zookeeper limps down a path that he isn’t familiar with at all. How did he get so lost, so turned around? Nevertheless, it dumps him out onto the main square of the zoo and the glass enclosure is within his sight. Like nursing a wounded paw, he stays off his bum foot, slowly dragging himself across the distance. His gaze is locked onto the enclosure. The predator is stalking his prey.

The gorilla is waiting for him, almost as if he knew the man would be coming.

“You little son offa bitch. You’re the worst of them, ya’ know?” he screeches at the male. The gorilla stares, but rises up on haunches so that his eyes are level with the man’s. There’s so much expression in those brown eyes, so much *feeling*, that the man loses it. He pounds on the glass, roaring curses and pieces of half-coherent thoughts, spit flying from his mouth and landing on the glass. The gorilla just stares, taking all of the man’s devolvement in. After he has had his fill, the man quiets and begins to shake so much that the keys rattle.

"I...I know what you want. It's simple, *Gorilla gorilla*." The man turns away from the glass, but doesn't leave down the well-worn path. Instead, he pulls out his keys and hobbles to the room next to the gorilla's enclosure. He drops the key twice before jamming it into the lock and turning it. The door swings open and thuds against the wall.

There's one more door. This one leads into the enclosure. He unlocks that one, too.

"Go on, Solomon. Go get what you want." the Zookeeper says, calling the gorilla by his name for the first time in all of his employment. Solomon stares at his keeper, nods, and walks out of the door to freedom. His family follows him, each one staring at the man on their way out.

Shaking, the Zookeeper turns the key in the lock one more time. But this time, he steps inside the enclosure and pulls the door shut. He falls to his knees. His flashlight hits the ground and rolls away, causing beams of light to bounce around the cage. The Zookeeper curls up into a ball in the dirt.

"*Homo insipiens*," he whispers.

Foolish man.