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Neon Tiger

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Neon Tiger

On Monday, March 26, a new animal arrived at the St. Louis Zoo. Zookeeper Larry Post was at the receiving dock, ready to unload the feline. He went about his task clumsily, this being his first introduction. The cage was lowered off the truck and onto the menagerie floor. He supervised the vet testing for any signs of stress or disease. Larry checked the items off his list in between taking frantic phone calls from his pregnant wife. He couldn't afford to lose this job, she reminded him. They couldn't afford any more failures.

Under his observation, Luna was securely howdied into her holding habitat, a technique that allows animals to slowly become acquainted with their new environment. His job now done, Larry went about his daily tasks hastily. The general curator of the zoo was coming at the end of the week to inspect the big cats and Larry was up for his first review. Between this and his wife's impending due date, Larry was burning the candle at both ends.

The next day, Tuesday, March 27, Larry had duty at the lion enclosure.

"How's he holding up?" Larry asked Brad, another zookeeper. They stood outside the habitat watching the male, Sebastian. His white fur was dull and dusty, his frame precariously thin.

"No better. The lionesses just don't like him. They won't even let him eat with them. When he eats, that is." Brad sighed. "I'm afraid we may lose him soon."

Larry shook his head. Brad patted him on the back and left Larry standing alone, only a plate of glass between him and the miserable lion.

That afternoon Larry had Sebastian moved into the exhibit adjacent to Luna's.

On Friday, March 30, Ted Sanders, the general curator, arrived at the St. Louis Zoo. He went about the exhibits as he always did, reviewing and marking on his imposing check board. By the time he reached the holding area, Larry was practically dizzy with anxiety. Ted Sanders wasn't known for leniency, and Larry couldn't lose any more jobs.

"Afternoon." Mr. Sanders nodded to him.

"Hello, Mr. Sanders! It's good to see you, sir." Larry clumsily shook his hand.

"Sure." Mr. Sanders wiped Larry's sweat off on his pant leg. "Let's see the new cat then."

"Right this way, sir." Larry led the way through the zookeeper's entrance into the back of the observatory glass, stopping to watch the two masses of white fur as they slept beside each other. "Cute, ain't they?"

"Larry, what is *this*?"

"The new cat, sir. She seems to be adjusting nicely."

"What is she doing *with him*?"

"Um...sleeping, sir. I thought—"

"We don't cage a white Bengal tiger with a white lion! They go with their own damn species!" Mr. Sanders spat all over his check board. "Don't you realize how this will make me *look*?"

"But...but sir! I just thought it would help Sebastian! He's been so sick and lonely lately. And I introduced them properly, just like regulations say! They took to each other so fast."

"I don't care, Larry. I really don't."

Larry Post was fired on Friday, March 30, but by then it was too late. Luna and Sebastian were removed from the holding habitat and introduced into exhibits with their own species. Fifteen weeks later, Ted Sanders was called back to the St. Louis Zoo due to a rather unusual circumstance.

On Friday, July 13, Ted Sanders arrived at the St. Louis Zoo, his inbox full of frantic voicemails from the keepers and vets begging him to, "Get down here pronto!" and "Come ASAP!" He clicked the DELETE ALL button on his voicemail and entered the mammal veterinary clinic. Immediately he was bombarded.

"Mr. Sanders! Thank God you're here." Vicky Anderson, the mammal curator, rushed up to him. "We don't know what's going on. Well, we think we do. It's just so strange..."

"You've got to take a look, Mr. Sanders. It's the darndest thing!" Brad, the head zookeeper, waved him over.

The vet, Dr. Garner, also called to him. "Mr. Sanders—"

"ALL RIGHT!" He threw up his hands. "Just show me."

Ted Sanders was led into one of the birthing rooms, where lying on the concrete floor was Luna, the white Bengal tiger. She was panting and her eyes were closed, but otherwise nothing appeared wrong.

"What's she doing?"

Vicky replied, "Well, that's the thing. She's going into labor. But she hasn't mated with any of the male tigers."

"Are you sure?"

"We keep very close tabs on all of the mating procedures. We like to be prepared for something like this," Dr. Garner answered.

"Well then, it must have happened while you weren't watching," Ted snapped.

"But that's impossible," Vicky replied. "We've got cameras on them 24/7. Unless—"

"*Larry*," Ted finished for her.

"But she hasn't shown any signs of pregnancy until today, didn't even gain a pound," Brad countered. "This *can't* happen."

"Well, it *is* happening," Ted grunted. "And I'm not going to be the one going down for it."

The group turned to Luna, who at that time was struggling to move to the corner, growling at Brad and Dr. Garner when they tried to approach her. They were forced to back away into the observation room, peeking around the corner to watch her. Soon she became so fierce that even that became dangerous. Dr. Garner was beginning to worry about the health of the cubs when abruptly they heard a squeal. Vicky glanced around the door, gasped, and dashed into the room, the others close behind her.

Luna lay dead on the floor. A single, tiny cub lay beside her body. As big as an adult human's palm, the cub lay curled in a ball, eyes closed. Its fur sparkled in the fluorescent light, shining radiantly in so many different colors that there was only one name for what it was.

"Why, it's *neon*," Vicky said. "A neon tiger."

"Where did it come from?" asked Brad.

"From Luna and Sebastian," Dr. Garner replied. "It must be their cub."

"How in the world...?" Brad trailed off.

"I thought it was supposed to be a liger," Ted crossed his arms. "Maybe it's another kind of hybrid."

"That's no hybrid," Vicky smiled. "It's a miracle."

"Well, that *miracle* better not get me fired," Ted ground his teeth. "Or I'll have all your asses."

Ted Sanders was not fired. He met with the Board first thing on Monday morning, explaining how he had kept Luna's pregnancy quiet because of the delicate nature of the birth. The Board not only pardoned Ted but congratulated him on an idea that could bring much needed revenue to the suffering zoo. He was a visionary, they said. He couldn't help but agree with them.

The neon tiger was given its own exhibit and raised under the strictest security as the prize of the St. Louis Zoo. Feline specialists and experts came from all over the world to see it, not to mention celebrities, and anyone else who could afford it. The neon tiger shone a different color for everyone who saw it, which gave rise to a debate about what the tiger's colors meant about the viewers. The zookeepers who cared for the tiger (they had taken to calling him Neo) secretly thought this was a joke he liked to play on his audience, since he typically appeared in all colors for them. Neon, they called it. He was neon.

Larry Post's wife officially signed the divorce papers on Wednesday, August 15, exactly four months after their child was born. Larry didn't blame her, really. He had lost exactly twelve jobs in their ten-year marriage, all due to stupid mistakes. Nothing ever went right for Larry, so he didn't really expect things to this time. No, Larry was happy for his wife to finally have the chance to find someone better than him. He told her so that morning, as the lawyers went over last details and custody schedules. He could see his daughter every day if he wanted to, as long as he kept a job and didn't impede on his now ex-wife's privacy. That was okay with Larry. He felt he could do at least that.

About four months later, on Sunday, January 13, Ted Sanders was interviewed once again in front of Neo's exhibit about the strange circumstances of his birth.

"So, Mr. Sanders, tell us again how Neo came to be." The reporter shoved his microphone in Ted's face.

Ted grabbed it out of the reporter's hands and straightened his tie, smiling at the camera. "Well, it's a fascinating story, really." Ted stepped closer to the camera, pushing the reporter out of frame. "We always strive for excellence and innovation here at the St. Louis Zoo, and those were the ideals behind my experiment to breed a white Bengal tiger and white lion hybrid. It's never been attempted in the U.S. before, so there was a slim chance of success, but I'm a risk-taker. This time it paid off."

The reporter managed to take the microphone back. "Well, you could certainly say that. What a bit of luck! I'm here at the St. Louis Zoo with curator Ted Sanders, the genius behind Neo the neon tiger cub. Back to you, Mandy."

Later that night at a banquet in his honor, Ted Sanders was given an award by the Board of Directors. He received a plaque and a generous bonus check, which he put towards a sleek new sports car.

On Wednesday, January 16, Larry mopped the hallway at the local high school begrudgingly; a child's vomit puddled in front of the bathroom door. The final bell had rung a few minutes earlier and most of the students had already fled.

A cough snapped him out of the daze. Ted Sanders stood a few feet away, phone in hand, with a frustrated expression on his face.

Larry cleared his throat. "Hello there, Mr. Sanders." Larry nodded to him.

"Huh? Oh, hi. Have you seen my daughter around? She's making me late for an important meeting."

"I don't believe I've ever met your daughter, Mr. Sanders." Larry leaned on the mop. "Didn't exactly know you had one."

"Yeah, well, my wife really wanted kids." Ted looked at Larry for the first time since Larry greeted him. "Do I know you?"

Larry awkwardly looked at the floor. "I'm Larry Post, sir. From the zoo. You fired me a few months ago."

"Oh. Right. Larry." Ted checked his phone impatiently.

"So, how are the cats doing, Mr. Sanders? Sebastian? Did he ever get a mate?"

Ted glanced up. "What? Oh, yes." He dialed a number and held the phone to his ear.

"So, he's better? Eating and all that?"

Ted hung up and scoffed. "I don't know, *Larry*, I'm a busy man. Now, I need to find my daughter or I'm going to be late." He stomped off down the hall. Larry watched him go, a dismayed look upon his face. He finished mopping the floor with minimal skill and clocked out, returning to his one room apartment and a refrigerator full of TV dinners.

That Friday, January 18, Larry Post revisited the St. Louis Zoo for the first time since his termination, to visit the neon tiger. He'd heard the stories and wanted to know what color the tiger would show him. He waited until almost closing time, when the exhibit was clear and the street lamps illumi-

nated the tiger to him. He walked up to the fence overlooking the enclosure and peered around, searching for the famous feline.

Craning his neck and leaning over the railing, he spotted the beautiful creature. It yawned at him from inside its enclosure.

"Hey, don't do that." A voice from behind made him jump, almost falling into the habitat. He turned, leaning on the fence.

"Oh, Mr. Sanders! You scared me."

"Do I know you?"

"I'm Larry, sir. Larry Post."

"Right. You looking for Neo?"

"The tiger? Yeah."

"What color he show ya?"

"I think it's a bright orange." Larry turned back around to continue gawking. "I don't suppose you know what that means?"

Ted shrugged, inspecting his nails.

"Is it true, what they say? Is he really neon?"

"He's whatever color he wants to be. But I suppose he is neon sometimes."

Larry whistled. "I wish he would let me see him like you do. A sight like that would make life worth livin'."

"Guess so."

"My life's not been so great lately, so something like that—it'd really be a treat."

"Hm."

"My wife left me after I got fired, you know. Couldn't find another job zookeeping. She got the baby and everything. A girl. Chloe. I eventually found work as a janitor down at the high school. Been doing that ever since."

"Glad you found something."

"Yeah, I found something. You know, what ever happened to those two cats I put together, Luna and Sebastian?"

"Well, Luna died. Sebastian's not doing much better."

"That's a shame. I should have kept up with them more when I left. I just had a lot on my mind." Larry shook his head guiltily. "I guess you were right in firing me. I thought I was doing a good thing, but I suppose I just didn't have it in me." He turned around and gave one last longing look at the tiger, then turned back to Ted. "Well, congrats on this guy. At least your ideas seem to work out for you. See you later, Mr. Sanders." He walked past Ted, who, with a smirk on his face, continued to survey the exhibit.

"Yeah, see you."

The neon tiger growled inside its exhibit. Its sly eyes watched Ted Sanders as his gaze flitted across the habitat, searching for the tiger that was always black to him, blending in with the falling shadows. Larry Post paused on his way out of the zoo to pick up a penny laid heads-up on the ground.