

"I think we'll probably have a decent show tonight," the Ringmaster predicted once again wiping his brow.

"They'll certainly be anxious to perform just to get out of this hot box for awhile."

He saw the skepticism emerge on the Keeper's faces. He wagged a finger at them.

"Mark my words."

He strolled to the door, opened it, and turned.

"We'll start with the elephants and chimps," he decided. "I suspect our friends the chimpanzees will redeem themselves. They've had it much too good. Been spoiled. They'll be longing for bananas and roomy cages and air conditioning."

He smiled. Carl and Sam smiled back, but not very convincingly.

The Ringmaster clapped his dingy gloves together and turned and left.

After he was sure the Ringmaster was gone, Carl reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the small recorder he had concealed there. He hit the "stop" button with his thumb and handed it to Sam.

"You can never be too careful," Carl observed with a sly grin.

Sam looked at the recorder in his hand and grinned back.

The two Keepers left out and soon returned with buckets of food and tubs of water that they placed down along the aisle, just outside the animal's cages as the Ringmaster had instructed. Both men smiled as, after a moment, one by one, the animals dragged themselves up to the bars, following the scent of the fresh food.

"Dick might be right about us having a decent show tonight," Carl said as the Keepers made their way up toward the front exit.

"Yeah, look at 'em," Sam said, stopping in front of the chimps' cage. "They do look pretty desperate."

The chimps looked up from the enticing food outside of their doors and into the Keepers smiling faces. The chimps snarled.

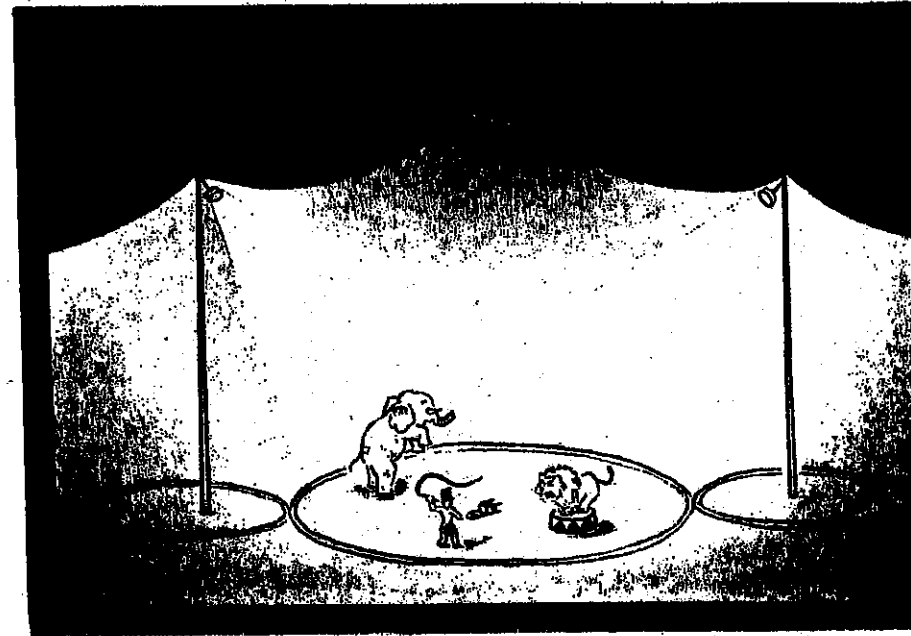
"Yeah, come on. We've still got to take care of the other range," Carl said, leading the way out of the housing area.

Once they'd left, the orangutan cried out from the front of his cage, "The dirty bastards! They did that just to tease us. To torture us!"

"Yeah! And did you see them smiling and laughing? They think this is funny!" The chimp snarled, staring down at the food.

"Well, I'll tell you what," The elephant trumpeted. "Since they think it's so funny, the next time they take us out there, we'll give them something to laugh about. We'll give them *all* something to laugh about!"

The Last Act of the Circus Animals

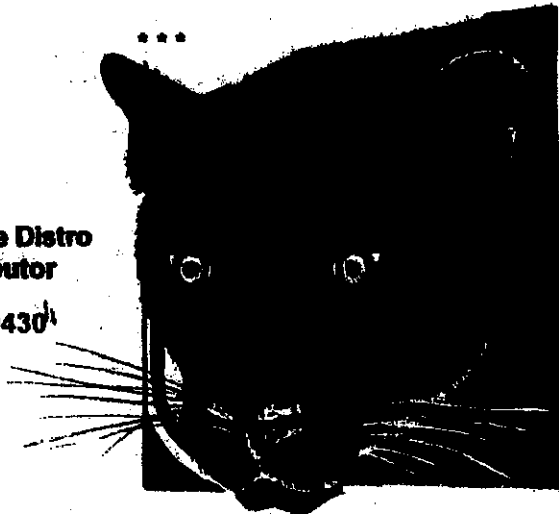


A story for children of all ages

Book 2

By Travis Washington and Sean Swain

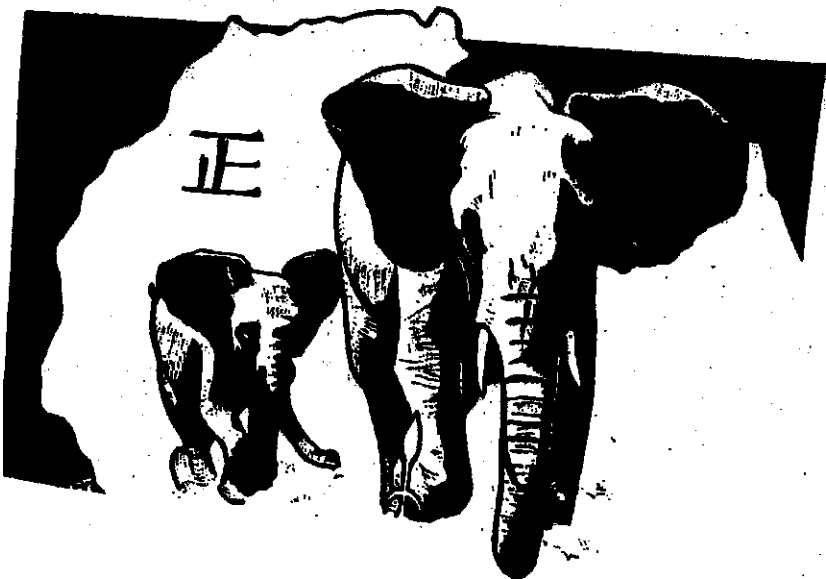
So. Chicago ABC Zine Distro
Publisher & Distributor
P.O. Box 721
Homewood, IL 60430



THE ANIMALS AWAKEN

"To be awake is to be alive"

--Henry David Thoreau,
Walden



"Power concedes nothing without demand. It never has and it never will"

--Frederick Douglas

"Liberty is the greatest menace to authority."

--Emma Goldman

"We moved him yesterday," he reported. "He's been there since. No food or water. Just like you ordered."

"The door to the freight car is closed, right?"

"Yeah. Just like you said."

The Ringmaster nodded.

"It's gotta be a sauna in there," he said. "It'll either break him or kill 'em."

He turned and met the eyes of Carl and Sam. Both of them looked down and avoided his gaze. A single drop of sweat rolled down the Ringmaster's temple and down his cheek. It dropped onto stained velvet of his shoulder, stained with the color of the grape slushy that had struck him during the previous show.

"The other animals you moved...?"

"Yeah," Carl answered. "We moved them to the other range. The empty one. We moved chimps, monkeys, elephants. No water. No food."

The Ringmaster nodded his approval.

"And the ventilation?"

"We shut that off over there too, just like you said," Carl replied. "Third shift said they went through both areas last night every couple hours or so, just like you wanted them to, turning on the lights and rattling the doors on the cages. The animals couldn't have gotten much sleep."

The Ringmaster smiled.

"No training today," he said, jacing his hands behind his back as he strolled up and down the aisle, looking in on the animals plastered to the cage floors.

"No training. And I want you to bring in food, bring in piles of it. Bring it in, along with tubs of water."

The Ringmaster stopped his stroll, pivoted, and turned smoothly to face the two Keepers.

"And then I want you to leave it sitting right her," the Ringmaster finished, pointing down directly at the floor. "I want you to put all of it here on the floor where these ingrates can smell it and see it and imagine what it would be like to taste it."

Carl and Sam nodded.

The Ringmaster stopped in front of the cage of the new tiger. He lay on the floor, his flank rising and falling in rapid rhythm in the oppressive heat.

"This one is smaller than the other one we traded off," he observed.

"We haven't had any problem out of him," Carl offered.

The Ringmaster noted that the food and water containers remained in the cage.

"I think we'll get along just fine," the Ringmaster said to the tiger.

He took a couple steps and stopped in front of the young lion's cage.

"What about this one?" the Ringmaster asked, hands still laced thoughtfully behind his back.

"Just the usual," Carl replied. "Digging, clawing at the bars. But no trouble, really."

The Ringmaster nodded.

"That's to be expected," he said. He noticed that the lion too had food and water containers still in his cage.

The Ringmaster stared into the lion's cage. Their resistance must be fading, he thought. The two new animals still had food and water. They remained unaffected, unpersuaded perhaps. Without the panther, everything was falling apart and the animals would soon all come around.

The Ringmaster smiled to himself as he slid one gloved-hand over his brow mopping up the beads of sweat that had formed there.

"Hard to stand up to anything in heat like this," he mused with a chuckle.

Carl and Sam shifted from foot to foot: the nit stains in their eyes...

The chimp looked around at the other animals.

"The panther was the one who told us himself that the Ringmaster doesn't own us," the chimp reminded. "The Circus doesn't own us. We own ourselves. And if we own ourselves, if we really own ourselves, then we don't need the panther. We don't need him or anybody to lead us or be our courage. We're our own leaders. Each one of us."

The elephant and orangutan nodded in agreement, as did the lion and the tiger.

"We're our own leaders!" the monkey screeched.

"Now, the only problem is, what if the other animals decide to give in and perform?" the chimp posed. "What if the Ringmaster breaks them and they give in, and they accept food and start performing again?"

The elephant shook his head slowly.

"No," he said with certainty. "I know the other elephants won't perform. I'm certain of that."

"Neither will the monkeys," added the monkey, staring at the ceiling of his cage, lying with his hands behind his head.

"But the chimps performed before," the orangutan remembered. "They performed but we stuck with the plan."

"That's right," the elephant affirmed. "So just because some of the other animals might break, we can still stick with the plan. A handful of the other animals giving in won't stop us from taking down the Circus."

All the animals agreed.

"We're gonna get through this," the elephant assured them all. "We're gonna get through this and if they take us to the Arena for training, we'll find some way to get a message over to the others and let them know that we're not giving up."

"They might be wondering about us right now," the orangutan offered. "They might be having the same conversation, wondering what we're going to do."

"We can hope that they are," the elephant said. "And we need to let them know we're sticking to this. We need to let them know that the panther is still alive and we still intend to take down the Circus."

As soon as the Ringmaster stepped through the door he stalked over to the remaining chimps' cage and raked his cane across the bars, the incessant noise echoing and ringing off the metal walls.

"Wake up, you little shits!" he bellowed rudely, his voice hoarse and cracking. His hair, normally slicked back neatly, now hung oily and limp upon his forehead. He sneered, his bloodshot eyes ablaze.

"Wake up!" the Ringmaster shouted, smacking the bars once more for good measure.

The Keepers standing behind him shifted nervously from foot to foot. Sweat stood out on their glistening foreheads. The chimps stirred, but none moved to get up. All of the animals remained prostrate, pinned down by the sweltering heat. This brought a sadistic smile to the Ringmaster's unshaven face as he rubbed his bristled jaw with one stained-gloved hand.

"How long ago did they shut off the ventilation?" the Ringmaster asked.

"Second shift yesterday," Carl answered. "Just like you ordered."

The Ringmaster nodded.

"It'll be a hundred and fifty degrees in here by lunch," he mused.

He turned and considered the empty space where the stubborn panther had been. His smile widened.

"It'll be even hotter for him in that freight car," the Ringmaster observed.

Carl cleared his throat.

Dawn was fast approaching as the animals stood at the bars of the cages and listened attentively to the plan the panther laid out. After he'd finished and was satisfied that the animals understood the details of the strategy, he warned them again of the cruelties that the Ringmaster would employ in response to their actions. He warned of the food deprivation, the beatings and torture that the Ringmaster would bring down upon them in an effort to force them into submission. He warned that the Ringmaster may even try to separate them in an attempt to break their collective resolve. But he assured them that their freedom depended on them sticking to the plan and that by doing so, they could minimize the suffering to which they'd be subjected. Finally he said:

"Now I must tell you all that all of us may not make it to the World of the Free. For what we are about to do is a direct threat to the Ringmaster's existence and he is going to respond accordingly. He is going to react in the same way that either of us would react if we were trapped in a corner by an enemy intent on killing us. He's going to utilize every possible weapon in his arsenal in a desperate attempt to cling on to his life. And yes, he may even resort to killing one or some of us. But we must remember that we all must die someday. However, we only have to die once. And it is our desire to die free. So we cannot give in to fear. If we allow fear to control us, we will have already lost our freedom as well as any chance we may have had of reaching the World of the Free. And we will have relegated ourselves to the fate of dying over and over again in this world of cages. So we must hold on to our freedom, even in the face of death."

After a moments pause, the panther began rapidly pacing the width of the cage, looking out through the bars at the animals. "So are you with me?" he asked. "Are you ready to bring the Ringmaster to his knees and destroy the Circus?"

Night grudgingly gave in to day and the sun was creeping up the horizon. Although the animals had not slept all night, they were nevertheless wide awake with anticipation of the day's events when they heard keys in the door of the housing area. The time had come; the Ringmaster and the first-shift Keepers were coming to make their morning rounds. The door opened into the housing area and the animal smell that the Ringmaster had become familiar with filled the air. The Ringmaster strode into the housing area in gray pants tucked into black knee high, patent leather boots; his black cape fluttering behind him. He held his black top hat in one spotless white-gloved hand. He held his cane in the other, his white wound up and hanging from his hip almost concealed by his coattails. His hair shone and slicked back, his pencil thin mustache perched above pencil thin lip. His beady feral eyes surveyed the rows of cages. He noticed it was unusually quiet this morning as he and the two Keepers began walking the aisle and looking in on the animals. As they walked by each cage, all of the animals, except the chimps, were lying down and looking up at them.

When they came to the cage that housed the orangutan, the Ringmaster asked "What's this?" pointing with his cane to the feces that had been flung through the bars the night before.

"Oh! George told us that they had a little incident with this one last night, M

Head," one of the Keepers responded. He stood a step behind the Ringmaster, his hands behind his back as he shifted from foot to foot nervously, his eyes on the Ringmaster. His partner stood next to him.

"Well, clean this shit up and get these beasts out to the Training area. Tom and Jack are waiting to go over the routines with them for the big show this afternoon."

With that, the Ringmaster turned and swept out through the same door he had entered.

The two Keepers grumbled as they cleaned up the mess made by the orangutan and then left momentarily, returning with equipment that would be necessary to transfer the animals out to the training area. The animals were taken out to the training area, where the Trainers were waiting to go over the same boring, monotonous routine with them. As usual, they baited them with food and rewarded them for compliance. Afterward, the animals were led back to the cages, where they waited for the show to begin.

The Arena lights crisscrossed the surface of the tent canvas to the strain of the pipe organ coming through the sound system while the clowns entertained the spectators as they filed in. The hum of excitement filled the Big Top as the peddlers moved through the crowd with popcorn, cotton candy, and watered-down beverages. The Ringmaster, his cape fluttering behind him and his cane gripped in one gloved hand, trotted out briskly into the center ring with the spotlights burning down upon him, the crowd welcoming him with applause and whistles. He smiled widely and removed his top hat to bow low to the cheering crowd. He stood and with a booming voice addressed the audience:

"Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages. Welcome to the Greatest Traveling Show in the World!"

The crowd gave him an enthusiastic response, the excitement moving like electricity upon the air.

"Without further delay," he announced, "let the show begin!"

In the midst of the crowd's adoration, he turned and raised his arms high as a signal for the elephants to be led to the ring. One after another, the elephants came lumbering out to center stage, their bodies dressed in Gold tapestries with intricate Byzantine designs and hanging tassels. They were trailed by the Trainers. Riding on the back of the lead elephant was one of the female performers, her blonde hair flowing about and the bright lights reflecting off of her sequined body suit. She smiled and waved enthusiastically as the elephants plodded to the center ring and lined up shoulder to shoulder.

Once set, the Trainers got into position with whips and prods and the Ringmaster raised his right hand, gripping the cane, yelling, "Up!"

With this command, for years, the elephants had all immediately stood upon their hind legs. But much to his surprise, all the elephants slowly dropped and tumbled onto their sides as if they had all been simultaneously shot. The blonde riding the lead elephant tumbled from the creature's back and found herself landing rudely on her backside with a surprising and indignant plop. Immediately the crowd—thinking this was a joke or a prank—laughed. But they had no way of knowing this was not part of the act.

The Ringmaster exchanged an inquisitive glance with the Trainers who rugged in perplexity. His eyes then darted over to the pretty performer who was still sitting on the canvas floor, looking up with a shocked expression on her face.

The tiger put his nose up into the air and took a deep breath. "Yeah," he answered, nodding. "Yeah, he's still here. And the other animals are even closer. I can smell them too."

"So what are we gonna do?" the chimp asked.

The animals all stared at one another, waiting for someone to speak up.

"Come on," urged the chimp impatiently. "What are we gonna do?"

The elephant shifted his weight, foot to foot.

"We all know what we've got to do," he said resolutely. His big ears flapped at the air.

"We do what we've been doing. We resist. We refuse to perform under any conditions. We reject the Ringmaster's bribes of food and water and str—"

"But there's other circuses," the chimp interrupted. "There's other circuses and there's the zoo, and the panther didn't know about that. He put the plan together and didn't know. He just found out abo—"

"It doesn't matter," interjected the elephant.

"Sure it does," the chimp countered.

"No. It doesn't," the elephant said more forcefully.

"How can you—"

"What's the difference?" the elephant asked angrily. "What difference can this make?"

So what if there are other circuses? And what if they ship us off to these other circuses, or to the zoo? What are we supposed to do, go back to being Circus Chimp and Circus Elephant?" He looked from the chimp to the orangutan. "Circus orangutan? Are you gonna do back-flips for bananas?"

The elephant paused while he looked around at the animals.

"Well, I know what I'm gonna do," he finally said. "Every time they take me out of here, I'm squatting on their asses. Every damned time! I know the panther's not gonna give in and I'm not either."

The orangutan sighed.

"Mr. Elephant, I'm not siding with the chimp or anything," he began. "But I'm awful thirsty. And my stomach hurts. I could use some food and water. But I know the Ringmaster is a murderer and I can't go back to the way things were. Yet and still, the panther isn't here. How are we gonna keep going without him? How will we know what to do?"

The elephant shook his head and let out a heavy sigh.

"What do you think the panther would think of all this?" He asked, admonishingly.

"What would he think? 'I'm thirsty.' 'We won't know what to do.' What would he think of that?"

The orangutan's chin sank against his chest.

"We know what to do, Mr. Orangutan," the elephant continued. "We know exactly what to do. The panther showed us. He showed us how to be. All we have to do is be like him. He's not here and we are, so now we all have to be what he was."

The elephant's eyes met the orangutan's.

"Don't you see? This is what the Ringmaster wanted. That's why he did this. The Ringmaster believed the panther was in charge, that he was behind all of this—the panther and the Siberian. That's why he moved them first; he wants to divide the rest of us so we will forget what we know and we'll cave-in and give up."

"Don't all of you get it? That's what the Ringmaster wants!"

The orangutan sat staring at his hands for a moment. A few of the chimps huddled together and whispered while the chimp at the bars eyed them with suspicion. Both the tiger and the young lion sat quietly, listening thoughtfully to the exchange.

"You're right, Mr. Elephant," the chimp agreed. "We're all acting like the panther was in charge or something."

"He was " the orangutan said.

The panther stood in the cage silently as the Keepers pushed him closer and closer to the back door of the housing area and to an unknown future. The panther savored the last view he had of the animals—all of them in protest, in resistance, every door rattling, and every voice raised.

The Keepers heaved and the cage rolled out onto the loading dock. They hurried from the housing area, turned, and slammed the garage door shut on the bedlam the animals had created. And yet, for a long moment after the door had closed, the animals continued their protest in anger and frustration. Little by little, the rattling settled into silence and the animals stood, each one alone to his own thoughts.

"Fuck!" shrieked one of the monkeys.

The elephant, still breathing hard, shifted his weight from foot to foot. The orangutan, his face pressed between the bars in his grip, stared up the range to where the panther's presence had always been and the orangutan's eyes narrowed, his lip curling into a sneer.

The Keepers returned, walking swiftly into the housing area, their eyes darting from cage to cage, and they stopped in front of the chimpanzees' cages and quickly, seemingly at random, pushed a cage of chimps down the range and out the side exit leading into the Arena. A cascade of noise followed them. But as the afternoon would grind on, they became less distracted by the animals' protests and they put their minds to their work, moving some of the monkeys and elephants over to the empty range.

By the end of their shift, they had transferred nearly half of the animals and had placed the chimps into the smaller cages—no easy task with the chimpanzees laying down limp. Before they left for the day, they passed on the instructions that the Ringmaster had left for the next shift.

"Where'd they take the panther?" the orangutan called out.

"Did they take him off to one of the other circuses?" asked the chimp.

"What if they took him off to kill him like they did the lion?" asked the monkey.

"I don't think so," the chimp replied to the monkey. "When they took the lion out, they took him out of his cage with the muzzle and all, and took him out the front door, remember?"

"Yeah, but they could still kill him," the orangutan countered. "And how would we know about it?"

"It might be that they carted his ass off to the zoo," the tiger offered.

The other animals stared at him quizzically.

"The zoo?" the chimp asked.

"Yeah," the tiger answered, sitting down at the front of his cage. "I got myself sent there once. Actin' a fool and they sent me off. It's fucked up. You don't have to perform or anything, you just kinda sit around most of the time. But it's not cool. They don't feed you worth a shit. And it's all about control. All the troublemakers get sent there, the malcontents. The ones they can't control and get to perform in the Circus. And—"

Just then, the lion, who had been sniffing at the air, tried to interrupt "Wait a minute, I—"

"—it's all about population control, man," the tiger continued. "That's what it is. They don't want you breeding if you think for yourself. So I had to fake it and go along with the program to get up outta there. If the panther's headed for that place—"

"Listen!" the lion roared, frustrated. "I'm trying to tell you all something if you'd let me. They didn't take the panther off to no circus or zoo. And they didn't kill him either."

"How do you know?" asked the orangutan, excitedly.

"I can still smell him," the lion replied. "I can smell him, so he's gotta be around here somewhere. Can't you smell him, Tiger?"

before turning his attention back to the elephants.

"Up!" he commanded again. "Up! Up!"

The elephants did not budge.

A small chorus of boos rang out as some in the crowd got impatient and started to stir at the inactivity.

With sweat beading upon his forehead, the Ringmaster nodded at one of the Trainers who was holding an electric prod. The Trainer stepped forward and applied the tip of the instrument to the elephant closest to him, resulting in a loud electrical snap. But the giant beast merely flopped its ears, remaining prone, undaunted.

The Ringmaster nodded again and caught the eyes of the other Trainer who also stepped forward. Both Trainers applied a shock to the animal and this time the elephant flinched at the increased voltage, trumpeting its displeasure. Catcalls and yells emanated from the audience and one voice cried out for the trainers to end their cruelty.

The Ringmaster, sweating profusely, removed his top hat and mopped his face as he squinted out into the darkness of the surrounding people, nervously trying to smile his reassurance.

A Paper cup of flavored ice drink landed a few feet from him and its contents cascaded across his patent leather boots.

"Stop abusing those elephants, you bastards!" someone screamed forcefully.

Suddenly aware of the audience's displeasure, the Ringmaster marched over to the Trainers and gave one of them a hard shove, pointing with his cane towards the crowd.

"What the fuck are you trying to do?" he snarled. "Get the animal rights people crawling up my ass?"

"But you said—"

"Fuck what I said," the Ringmaster growled. "Do you know how many of these assholes have cell phones? All we need is for one of them to call the local paper or the fuckin' animal lovers and tell them we're zapping innocent animals out here in the ring and we're cooked. Now, get these animals out of here. Now!"

The two trainers looked at one another perplexed.

"Is there a problem?" the Ringmaster challenged.

"Yeah," one of the trainers replied. "How do you move a two-ton animal?"

"I don't care how you do it—just do it!" the Ringmaster yelled, dismissively stalking away toward the crowd. He raised both hands expansively and displayed his best plastic, toothy smile—despite the occasional debris raining down out of the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen! We're having a few minor difficulties with the elephants, but just wait until you get a load of the cleverest troupe of performing primates in the world!"

He turned and nodded at the Trainer poised at the doorway between the arena and the housing area.

After a moment several monkeys, dressed in embroidered vests and little derby hats, scurried out onto the stage, followed by an orangutan. But before the Ringmaster could even get a command out of his mouth, the primates dropped to the ground and lay down, just like the elephants had.

"What the fuck!" the Ringmaster exclaimed.

Popcorn containers and cups of pop and slushy poured down from the hostile crowd and the Ringmaster could see the shadows of a few people moving toward the exits. He considered his situation. The elephants still had not moved and no

the primates were laying down.

"Get them out of here!" the Ringmaster barked.

The Trainers, who had been standing around the elephants scratching their heads, scurried over to pick up the monkeys. But the animals remained as loose as rag dolls, flopping in the Trainers' hands. Hurriedly, the Trainers half-carried and half-dragged the animals, arousing yet a whole new round of intense protest from the audience.

To appease the crowd, the Ringmaster quickly entered a big circular cage where an obstacle course had been set up for the big cats. With his whip in hand, he gave the signal for the cats to be let into the cage. A door slid up at the back of the enclosure and the panther and the tiger trotted out into the ring.

Desperate to give the audience their money's worth, the Ringmaster wasted no time. He cracked his whip and gave the command for the cats to go to their stands. But the cats just stood there for a moment, looking up at him. Then slowly, they began to lower themselves down onto their haunches.

"No! No! No!" the Ringmaster screamed. He cracked his whip again and came across the backs of the cats. The cats flinched at the pain from the blow but held their position. Frustrated, the Ringmaster brought the whip down on them again, this time with more force. The cats began crawling further back into the cage, cringing at each blow the Ringmaster delivered. But despite the pain he inflicted with the whip, the cats would not obey.

"Fuck!" The Ringmaster screamed, red-faced—his whip limp at his side. "Get these animals back in their cages! Open the gate! Open the gate!"

The gate slid up and the tiger and the panther quickly slipped from the cage. The Ringmaster looked out onto the crowd that began to thin out as more and more made their way to the exits, but not without demanding refunds from the ticket collectors on their way out.

The Ringmaster stepped from the circular cage, pushing open the door hard enough that it rattled on its hinges as he signaled for Carl. The sparse crowd was still making its exodus to the parking lot as Carl trotted over. The Ringmaster grabbed Carl by the front of his shirt and, speaking through his clenched jaw, ordered Carl to get the Chimps out there.

"We can count on them," he said. "Get them and hurry."
The Ringmaster stood there looking out at the empty arena. He could not believe what was happening.

But just then, the pipe organ began playing and the lights danced and the chimps in their maroon pill-box hats and vests spilled out into the arena, running and flipping and jumping about. When the Ringmaster saw them, he sighed with relief and his wide, toothy smile spread across his face. He raised his arms and faced the remainder of the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, for your entertainment," he announced grandly with flourish, "Bumbles and the Banana Gang!"



The chimps again exploded into pandemonium as the two factions argued forcefully over this new development. The monkeys shrieked nervously and many of the reasonable voices were drowned in the maelstrom.

After a moment, it ebbed and the elephant addressed the panther.

"What if it's true?" the elephant asked. "I mean, if there are other circuses—"

"Why would I lie about it, fat boy?" the new tiger interjected.

"—then the Ringmaster can split us up and divide us among the other circuses and bring in more Obedient Ones. More Circus Animals."

The panther had thought of that. If these creatures had expanded into every corner of the Free World, then they had turned everything into a giant Circus, making everyone a performer for food.

"Mr. Elephant, I don't know how far and wide these creatures have spread their system," the panther said. "And we have no way to know how many circuses exist. But I do know this: The Ringmaster smelled of fear—he is afraid. So no matter what happens, if they divide us and split us apart, I'm going to continue to struggle to get to the World of the Free. I'm going to finish what we have started here."

His eyes moved from one face to the next.

"We began with a belief there was one Circus, one Ringmaster to defeat," he reminded them. "But even if there isn't, what then? What if there are a hundred circuses and a hundred Ringmasters? The nature of those circuses is the same as this one."

"So, can you go back to being Circus Animals? Go back to jumping through hoops? Standing on your heads for peanuts? Performing back-flips?"

None of the animals lowered their gazes.

"We can never give up, never give in. Wherever they take us," the panther said. "If we can destroy one circus, then we can destroy a hundred. Or a thousand. Or a million."

"The Ringmaster can starve us to death, but he cannot starve us back into obedience."

No sooner than the panther had spoken, the Keepers returned, walking down the aisle to the panther's cage. They stopped directly before him. One Keeper stood with a hand in one pocket as he spoke to his partner and he leaned casually against the bars until he looked over his shoulder and saw the panther's intense eyes fixed on him. He stepped back from the cage with a start. The other Keeper knelt down and removed the blocks from the wheels of the panther's cage.

All the animals stood at the front of their cages, watching intently. When the Keepers grabbed the bars of the cage and tugged roughly, the cage jerked from its position and, up the range, one of the chimps screeched angrily, rattling the door of his cage.

"Where are they taking the panther?"

"Leave him alone!" the orangutan bellowed.

The Keepers cast a nervous glance over their shoulders in the direction of the animals' shrieking and screeching.

The panther stood on all fours, his eyes fixed firmly upon the Keepers. He stood calm and resolute as the two men pulled the cage into the middle of the center aisle. The noise from the cages surrounding them grew more intense as the monkeys and the orangutan began to rattle their doors.

One of the Keepers swallowed hard and surveyed the situation, his eyes wide with fear while the other yelled something unheard above the din of the banging and clanging, and he pointed toward the open garage door.

They put their backs into the job, shoving the cage forward, and the elephant crashed headlong into the front bars of his own cage, rocking it forward. It seemed to tilt precariously for just a moment before it crashed back down, bouncing the other cages off the floorboards. The two new cats, the lion and the tiger, both growled at the Keepers as they passed hurriedly, afraid

"Maybe once we get them all separated and all, we'll get them performing again," Sam offered. "They can't go without food forever. They're gonna have to perform. Right?"

They shoved the cage onto the back dock with a loud rattle and the animals listened as the noise of the Keepers grew more distant.

"I wonder where they're taking the tiger?" the elephant asked.

"I think we did it!" one of the monkeys shrieked, jumping up and down at the front of the cage. "I think we're on the way to the World of the Free!"

Many of the other animals erupted excitedly except for the panther, whose eyes remained on the open back door. The new lion, seeing the concentration on the panther's face, called from across the aisle:

"What's goin' on?"

The panther shook his head.

Just then, the Keepers came back, pushing a cage that rattled up the aisle. The animals grew quiet as they watched a tiger—a new tiger, a Bengal tiger—wheeled into the space where their friend had just been.

The Keepers put the blocks under the wheels of the cage and headed back out to the dock. The panther watched as the Keepers engaged in conversation with two other creatures who were standing just outside of the garage door. The panther turned his attention to the new tiger.

"Where you from?" he asked.

But the tiger was in no mood.

"What's it to you?" he growled.

"They just took out of friend of ours—another tiger," the panther explained. "We believe he was headed to the World of the Free."

The tiger snickered.

"I saw your friend. But where he's going, I wouldn't call it the World of the Free."

"The Savannah?" the lion asked.

The tiger shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"Savannah? What the fuck is a Savannah?" he asked, looking from the lion to the panther. "Look, I seen that other tiger, but I can assure you that he wasn't going to no Free Savannah or whatever you wanna call it. The creatures who brought me here took him back with them to the other Circus."

"Other circus?" the elephant asked. His eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about, tiger? There is no other circus."

"The hell there isn't," the tiger snorted. "In fact, this is the fourth one that I've been to. And I'm tired of them shuffling me around."

The elephant looked from the tiger to the panther. All the animals looked to the panther.

"What's he talking about panther?" the elephant asked. He watched the black cat pacing in his cage. "What's this deal about other circuses? Did you know about this?"

The panther's mind raced. He could not believe what he had just heard. Other circuses? If what this tiger was saying was true then this was much bigger than he had originally thought. There was no telling how many circuses were out there. He thought about his friend, the tiger, who had just been shipped off, presumably to another one of these caged worlds. Then a very unsettling thought occurred to him: What if he and the other animals were doomed to share the tiger's fate as well?

"What does this mean, panther?" the elephant persisted.

Up in the front cages, the chimps bickered hotly.

"I don't know," the panther admitted, shaking his head. He stood up at the front bars of his cage, looking out as the other animals fell silent.

"I don't know what this means. I devised this plan on the idea that the World of the Free was just beyond that door." He nodded toward the open garage door where the Keepers had just pushed his friend. "I did not know about the existence of other circuses."

Back in the housing area, the Keepers had just finished putting the animals back in their cages when the Ringmaster came storming in.

"What the fuck is wrong with them?" he screamed at the Keepers as he walked from cage to cage looking in on the animals, most of whom were lying down—only the elephants stood. But all were facing the front of their cages, looking out onto the range.

"I don't know," Carl replied. "But do you think they could be sick or someth'g, Dick?"

The Ringmaster pondered this for a minute, his hands laced thoughtfully behind his back as he paced between the rows of cages. It was possible they were sick, he thought. He remembered years ago when a bunch of his animals had fallen ill with food poisoning. It had been a disaster. He had had to call in the veterinarians, which in turn had brought in those bastards from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA).

The Ringmaster passed the elephant on his left, sizing him up and down with his eyes. He noticed that the elephant avoided his gaze.

Although the sick animals had gotten over the food poisoning in just a few days, the ASPCA quacks had 'suggested' that the animals be allowed at least ten days before returning to the Arena. Ten Days! The shows had to be cancelled for almost two weeks and this had cost him thousands of dollars. No! He wasn't trying to go through that again.

He was already in the red with the bill collectors and couldn't afford to lose anymore money on doctors. Besides, in fifteen years he had never seen sick animals behave in this manner.

He passed the tiger and looked into the cage and while the tiger considered him, it did not raise its eyes to his face.

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like these animals were just being plain stubborn!

He turned his head to the right and gazed in upon the panther. Immediately, he noticed the panther staring directly back at him, right into his eyes. The Ringmaster hesitated as he returned the panther's stare. There had always been something disturbing about the way this animal looked at him. A certain stubbornness in his eyes that had never quite gone away.

Speaking of stubborn, this animal had been worse than the rest. When he had first arrived, he had taken the longest to adapt, and to this day, he was the only one who still looked him in the eyes.

Stubborn. Yes. Sometimes animals got stubborn and you had to show them who was boss. He blinked and turned back toward the Keepers.

"No, Sam. I don't think they're sick at all," the Ringmaster said. "I think they've just had it too good here lately and have grown too comfortable. So take all of the straw and water out of their cages and don't feed them. Maybe tomorrow they'll be motivated to get with the program."

"If not for the chimpanzees, we would have had no show at all," Carl observed. "That would have been terrible."

"They sure earned those large cages today," the Ringmaster agreed. "In fact you ought to give them a reward. Give them all the extra bananas and let the other animals ponder over that."

The Ringmaster considered the chimps for a moment, one of them pressing urgently against the bars, squawking and pointing at the panther across the aisle

But the Ringmaster, caught up in his own thoughts, remained oblivious to the chimpanzee and his intended message. He patted the chimp upon the head magnanimously and pointed in a circle with his cane toward all the other animals.

"All these bastards cost us a lot of money today," he sneered.

With that, he stalked away.

Sam nor Carl noticed the frantic chimp pointing through the bars. Their eyes followed the Ringmaster's exit.

After he'd left out, Sam said: "He really is a *Dick*, Carl. Did you hear what he said? 'These bastards just cost us a lot of money'—as if we really share in the benefits when business is booming."

"Yeah, and you already know who's really gonna feel the pinch when shit goes bad—Shit always rolls down hill," Carl said.

"I tell you, it just ain't fair Carl," said Sam. "But what's a man to do? We got to eat, ya know...."

"Yep. Money don't grow on trees," Carl agreed.

The two men approached the cages of the monkeys and with a long, handled sickle, pulled the straw from the cage from between the bars. Neither man was eager to enter any of the cages after what they had witnessed earlier.

Carl bent down and grabbed the water container and began to give it a shove to dump out the water when a loud crash disturbed him, followed by another and another. Both men watched as food and water and some of the containers flew out from all but the chimps' cages and out onto the floor of the aisle, spilling everywhere in an incredible mess. Then the straw came out in giant clouds, fluttering down into the water and puddles of food and debris.

"Holy Shit! They just—they just threw everything out on the range," Sam observed, his mouth hanging agape.

"Aint that some shit?" Carl asked rhetorically, looking around at the mess the animals had made.

Not a sound came from the cages.

The Keepers cleaned up as quickly as possible and left out of the housing area. As the first shift neared its end and the next shift of Keepers arrived, Sam and Carl relayed with wide eyes the bizarre behavior the animals were exhibiting, as well as what had transpired in the Arena. Finally, they passed along the Ringmaster's instructions that none of the animals, except for the chimps, were to be given food or water. With that, Sam and Carl gathered their belongings and headed out. They felt they had paid more than there dues to the Circus for one day.

"So what happened after we left?" the orangutan asked.

Most of the animals stood at the front of the cages, waiting for the elephant to finish the story. The chimps in their larger cages ignored the happenings of the other animals. The tiger paced angrily in his cage.

The elephant answered, "Well, you saw when you were out there how the creatures in the stands got angry and many of them left. And how the Ringmaster—"

"He was scared!" one of the monkeys screeched. "I smelled it! He was scared!"

The other animals agreed, their voices converging in an exciting murmur.

The tiger stopped pacing for just a moment.

Sam and Carl came into the housing area to find all the animals staring at them. They exchanged a nervous glance.

"Look, Sam, all I'm saying is those Trainers think they know everything. They think they're better than us or something. Like we're dumb and they're more important than we are," Carl explained as the two men walked down the aisle between the row of cages. "So be careful. You can't believe everything you hear."

"Yeah, I know," Sam replied. "But it aint like that. They waan't talkin' to me. They was talkin' to each other and I was just listenin'."

The Keepers stopped at the back door, bent down, and lifted it. With a loud rumble, it slid up on the tracks above them, light and summer heat from the back loading dock pouring into the animals' living area, particles of dust swimming out in the open air.

Sam turned with his hands in his pockets.

"I was in the break room. I bought me a sammich and a soda from the vending machines and one of the Trainers was at the table—Jack—and he joked with me, you know, saying that if the Circus goes broke, well, we might just have to tip over the machines and eat for free or somethin'. An' the other Trainer, he said to Jack that the Circus ain't gonna go broke. That this is all temporary. But Jack said he talked to one of the girls off the tightrope and she had been outside Mr. Head's office and heard him on the phone. She said he was screamin' at some newspaper guy for a story he wrote that had the ASPCA bustin' his balls and all, and that he was thinking about suing the paper."

"Uh-huh."

"So the tightrope girl said Mr. Head called some other Circuses and he couldn't get rid of none of the animals but this tiger," Sam said, pointing up the range at the tiger's cage.

"Turns out, the other Circuses have heard that we got problems here and how the animals is actin' funny and don't none of them places want anything to do with 'em."

They started back up the range, side by side.

"If that's the case, then I wonder how he pawned off this tiger," Carl wondered out loud.

"Prob'ly because they're getting' a Siberian for a Bengal," Sam surmised. "That's not a bad deal."

"Guess not," Carl agreed.

Both men stopped in front of the tiger's cage and considered him for a moment. Sam knelt down and pulled the stoppers from behind the wheels and the two men carefully pulled the cage out into the aisle. The wheels squeaked.

"So that's it, huh?" Carl asked. "That was all you heard?"

The two men pushed the tiger toward the open garage door.

"No, the Trainers also said somethin' about a guy named Safari Joe," Sam said.

"Safari Joe?" Carl asked, eyeing Sam skeptically.

"Yeah, ever heard of 'em?"

"Yeah, that's bad news," Carl observed with a deep sigh.

"Why?" asked Sam.

"Well, that means Dick is thinking about trading off these animals to get new animals, wild ones straight from the jungle. That's what Safari Joe does. He captures wild animals. And if that's what Dick has in mind, then we'll be going awhile without putting on a show while these new animals get trained," Carl said. "And that means no money coming in."

Carl glared at the tiger in the cage he was pushing.

"These fuckers have caused a whole lot of grief," he said.

die—that is already decided. The question is how.

"As I have said, the Ringmaster—the Circus has already been killing us. And in the end, if he has his way, he will murder us just like he murdered the lion," the panther said. He turned to the elephant, "And your mother, Mr. Elephant," and he gazed down the range toward the orangutan, "And your mother, too, Mr. Orangutan."

"Remember the tiger who refused to perform—the Ringmaster left him in the cold and he died. Or the gorilla who killed the previous Ringmaster—this Ringmaster put holes into him and killed him too."

"We must be prepared," the panther urged, surveying the faces of his friends. "We must face the possibility of death—the inevitability of it in life. We must welcome it, wherever and however it greets us."

"If I should die, if the Ringmaster kills me—and he very well may kill me—then I die having known freedom."

"Me too," answered one of the chimps.

The other animals agreed solemnly.

"You realize, Mr. Chimp, that the Ringmaster will focus his wrath upon you chimpanzees because he will feel particularly betrayed. He will remove you from those roomy cages, and it may be awhile before you get water and food again," the panther cautioned.

"That's alright," the chimp assured with a rueful grin. "I didn't much care for the scenery, and I wouldn't trade my freedom for a few bananas."

The panther smiled.

"How did the tiger say it?" The chimp asked. Then, in a husky voice he mimicked:

"We're not cowards..."

He offered a wide, toothy grin.

The animals laughed, all but the tiger. He stopped pacing and glared at the chimp for a moment before his icy countenance melted away and he smiled as well.



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"Keep it down," he admonished. "Let the elephant finish."

He resumed his pacing, as the elephant, shifting his weight from foot to foot, continued:

"Yes, well, the chimpanzees came out and performed." He cast a quick glance up the range in the direction of the chimps. "And the stands were pretty empty by then. But once they started to perform, I saw very few of those creatures leaving. So there were some who stayed to the end, but they were throwing things after a long time watching the same old thing. And they smelled pretty damned mad. So I guess, if the chimps hadn't gone out there, the plan would have worked."

The tiger snorted and glared up the range with disdain toward the cages of the chimpanzees.

"If it wasn't for them, the whole crowd would have left," the tiger growled. "And the Ringmaster would be finished. I got whipped and burned and beat to get to the Free World, and those cowards kept the Circus going."

The other animals began to grumble as well.

"Not so fast," the panther intervened. "Mr. Tiger, don't think the Circus will fall overnight. It won't. Even if we had the cooperation of the chimpanzees, it would take more than one day. We will have to have patience if we want to prevail. As I have said, success will require us to be vigilant about gaining our freedom."

"You're a dreamer, Panther," the chimp piped in. "If it was easy as you say it is, that all we have to do is stop performing, don't you think the Circus would have been taken down a long time ago?"

The panther smiled one of his rare smiles.

"Well, if you remember, I told you that the tiger I met when I first arrived here did this," the panther replied. So it certainly isn't a new concept. But if you mean the plan to get all of us to stop performing, then I have to ask you—who is it that you think would have come up with such a plan if not us?"

The chimp shrugged.

"Us chimps," the chimp answered. "We would have thought of it. We're the smartest."

"You?" the panther asked, amused. "You would have thought of this plan to take down the Circus? You, in your wide, spacious cages, with your buckets of bananas and your illusions of being free? You, who believe the Ringmaster likes you and cares for you—you would have come up with a plan to gather the disgruntled animals together and bite the hand that feeds you?"

The chimp's eyes narrowed.

"Yeah, well, I bet you could go for one of these bananas now, panther," the chimp teased. "No food, no water... how long has it been?"

"Not long enough," the panther answered. "I'm not free yet. I wouldn't trade my freedom for a bucket of bananas."

The chimp scoffed and rolled his eyes.

"It's a hopeless cause," he said. "You might be able to endure all this, but do you really think the other animals can stick to it? No food, no water? Just wait and see."

"We're not cowards," the tiger called up the range. "Cowards sit up in that big-ass cage with bananas, doing tricks for their enemy and keeping the rest of us from getting to the World of the Free."

The other animals agreed and the tension heightened.

"You said this is hopeless?" the panther asked.

"Yeah, panther," the chimp replied. "Hopeless. It will never amount to anything."

"Now, you believe the Ringmaster is smarter than you and that you are smarter than the rest of us, is that right?"

The chimp nodded, "Yeah. That's why he's in charge. He's the smartest. And we're his favorites because we're smarter than the rest of you. Yeah."

"So if this is hopeless and you know it, then the Ringmaster—he's smarter than you—he'd know it's hopeless too," the panther concluded. "In fact, he'd know it's hopeless before you would, wouldn't he?"

"That's right," the chimp answered smugly.

The panther nodded.

"So Mr. Chimp, how do you explain the smell of fear that was coming off the Ringmaster?" the panther asked.

The chimp stared out from between the bars. The other chimps, sitting back behind him, looked at one another, exchanging a confused glance.

"What do you mean?" the chimp asked nervously.

"I mean this: I could smell fear coming off the Ringmaster," the panther said. He turned to the tiger. "Didn't you smell it?"

"Yeah, I smelled it," the tiger chuckled. "He was reeking of fear."

"I smelled it too!" The orangutan offered, hopping up and down in the front of his cage.

"He was scared!" one of the monkeys chimed. "Scared shitless!"

"Didn't you smell it?" the panther asked the chimp. "Didn't you smell fear, Mr. Chimp? And if the Ringmaster is the smartest and he's afraid, then what does that say? It would seem that he's not so convinced that this plan is as hopeless as you say it is. Far from it. Because he's smart—the smartest as you say—and our plan scares him so badly, that seems like added assurance that we may be on to something."

"Even the Keepers were afraid. You smelled it when they were putting you back in the cages. Why are they all afraid? What do you make of that, Mr. Chimp?"

The chimp pondered this for a moment and then scurried over to the jungle gym and hopped up, hanging by one arm. He dangled there and none of the animals spoke for a long moment.

The panther's eyes took in the reactions of the other animals as they all sat up a little straighter or smiled with a bit more confidence.

"Well, I suspect the Ringmaster is afraid because he feels threatened. Because he knows that his livelihood is dependant upon us performing," the panther revealed.

"He's scared shitless!" one of the monkeys screeched.

The chimpanzee said nothing. He swung from the jungle gym and turned his back to the other animals.

"This just might work, Mr. Panther," the elephant said.

"Well, he put a helluva beating on us earlier," the tiger said, pacing with his head down. "I don't know if I can take much more of that laying down."

"But you must tiger!" the panther exclaimed, giving the tiger a stern reassuring glare before turning to address all the animals. "We all must be willing to stand up under whatever he brings down upon us. And we must continue to control ourselves and refrain from giving in to instinctive impulse to retaliate—for violence will ruin the plan."

"So it's gonna get worse then, isn't it?" the orangutan asked.

"Yes," the panther answered. "You must remember that if we do not obey, if we do not perform, there is no show. That means the Ringmaster does not get his rewards and he goes hungry. And soon, the Circus dies."

recognizing the success of each other as our own, that we will survive and defeat the Circus."

"Well, I'm not gonna lie," the tiger said, still pacing angrily. "If you hadn't been there, it was all bad for that bastard and his whip. I might have messed it up for all of us, cause I was gonna fuck his ass up!"

"That would have been bad," the panther agreed thoughtfully. "That would have played right into the Ringmaster's hands. It would have given the Circus the excuse to engage in the most extreme brutality and possibly even kill some of us."

"You must remember, Tiger, that this is not *personal*. The Ringmaster, in one sense, is a victim of the Circus as well."

The tiger stopped pacing.

"Did I hear you say that?" the tiger asked incredulously. "Did you just say that evil bastard is a *victim*?"

"He killed the lion!" one of the chimps screamed.

"Yeah, and he killed my mom!" the orangutan piped in.

The panther nodded patiently.

"I am in no way defending the Ringmaster," the panther replied evenly. "I have no affection for him. He is a brutal tyrant, a cruel and ruthless oppressor. I am only suggesting that the Ringmaster himself is just as much a slave as any of us, a slave to the Circus, a slave to the system that has made of him a brutal and cruel despot."

"In fact, he is more of a slave than we are. He is a slave to the audience who comes in and sits down in the stands and demands a show. He must please them and if he does not, he will starve. He can eat only so long as he is useful in producing what it is they want of him."

"He is also a slave to the Circus itself. He serves the Circus and meets its demands of him. Out of desperation, out of need, he has permitted the Circus to alter him, to warp him, to turn him into what he is. The Circus has made him."

"And he is a slave to power. He is a slave to his top hat and to his gloves and his cape and his polished boots. He must do what he does—he must do what he may not want to do, what he does not choose to do, in order to keep those things, those symbols of power. He must sell himself everyday, compromise everyday, become something he does not want to be just to maintain his authority over others—over us."

The panther paused, clearing his throat.

"So you see, everything he is, everything he's become, he has submitted to various enslavements in order to maintain himself over us, and now, with all he has sacrificed for the illusion that he held power—we have stolen the illusion from him. He is powerless. We have stolen his authority and we have stolen his means of gaining food to eat. We have stolen his Circus. So, as any hungry creature would do, he must fight in order to protect his means of gaining food. He must fight in order to protect his life—his life in slavery to this system," the panther explained.

"So, I keep that in mind when he hits me, when he engages in violence and brutality," the panther said. "I understand on an objective level that the violence he directs at me is no more than an indication of the intensity of his fear. And the closer we get to the Free World, the greater the threat we pose to his survival, the more afraid he will become and the more ruthless his reaction will be to us. So ultimately, we gauge the probability of our success by the intensity of the Ringmaster's rage."

The elephant shook his head.

"That may be so, Panther," the elephant conceded. "But I tell you what—I thought the Ringmaster was going to kill you."

"Well, Mr. Elephant, the truth is, we're all going to die," the panther replied.

None of the animals moved or spoke. The panther took a deep breath.

"Yes, we're all going to die."

"Here's how it goes," the tiger explained. "We live in a world run by these strange creatures who make us perform for food. If you don't do the tricks they want you to do, they don't feed you. But they need us to put on a show so they can eat. So check, if we all stop performing and refuse to go out there and obey, then there is no show. There's no show and their fucked. The Circus is fucked."

"Fucked!" screamed one of the monkeys.

"If we don't perform, then the Ringmaster and his Keepers and Trainers—they don't get fed either. We become useless to them and the Circus collapses. And then we all go back to the World of the Free."

The lion stared for a moment.

"I don't get it," he said finally.

"Well, it's like this," the tiger started again. "We're not per—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know that," the lion interrupted, "That's not what I don't get. What doesn't make sense to me is why any of you ever performed on the first place."

The tiger looked past the lion and his eyes met the elephant's. Both of them sat for a moment. The animals had been going along with the panther's plan for just a few days; it had been just days ago that they had been Circus animals, performing stunts for food—standing on their heads, jumping through flaming hoops, performing backflips. But now, as the animals all considered the lion's words, none of them could recall why they had ever performed for the Circus.

The elephant cleared his throat.

"You know, it's like we're different animals now," he observed. "Like I don't really remember who I was when I was Circus Elephant. I can't remember what I was thinking when I stood on my head for peanuts."

"We've all come a long way," the panther remarked.

"Well, whatever you got going on here, I hope you can beat these creatures because I just want to go home," the lion said, studying the cage that held him.

"So what's it like in the Savannah?" one of the chimps asked.

The lion studied the ceiling and roof of his cage, looking for some way out.

"Well, it's like this," the lion answered. "Sometimes you're eating food, and sometimes you are food."

The chimp looked at the panther, puzzled.

"It's like this, Mr. Chimp," the panther said. "We all must eat. And in the World of the Free, no one brings food to you and puts it in a bowl. You must go get your food. All of us. It is up to you to make sure you have enough to survive and if you cannot find food to eat, you go hungry."

"And everything is food for something. With the freedom to be Chimpanzee and Elephant and Tiger comes the responsibility for your own survival. All of us eat, and all of us are food for something else."

The elephant noticed the tiger pacing again, angrily, his eyes downcast, brooding.

"That's twice that I thought you were going to turn the Ringmaster into food," the elephant observed.

"I would have attacked him if not for the panther," the tiger replied, still pacing. "I forgot everything. Lost my cool. I'm not cut out for this shit."

As he made a quick turn in the process of pacing, the tiger nodded at the panther.

"Good lookin' out," he said.

The panther returned the tiger's nod, stripes of bloody cuts and welts down his face and flank.

"Don't thank me, Tiger," the panther said evenly. "Instead, keep it in mind to do the same for one of the others. Before this is over, all of us will be tested and will have to rely upon one another. It is only through mutual assistance and cooperation, only through

"Yeah. I get it Mr. Panther. But how did you figure all this out?" the elephant asked. "How did you get to see that if we all did what the tiger had done, we could destroy the Circus?"

The panther nodded thoughtfully.

"Remember I told you that I pondered the question: Why did they have to kill the tiger? Well, what I came to understand was this—they didn't kill the tiger because he was bad or crazy. No. They killed him because He was *aware!* He knew. And that made him a threat. The tiger was right, and they couldn't let the rest of us recognize that he was right or, over time, he may have convinced others of us to be like him. No—they couldn't allow that.

"See, the tiger was dangerous because he could, through his actions, open the eyes of the rest of us and we would see that we don't belong to the Circus; we belong to *ourselves*. And if we joined him and stopped obeying the Ringmaster, the Ringmaster would lose the *illusion* of power. I say 'illusion' because the Ringmaster does not really have any. He only appears to have power as long as we go along.

"But with the tiger, we could recognize that the Ringmaster's power was an illusion. And that is dangerous because once we stop believing in the illusion, they cannot control us anymore. *We* are then in control. *We* have power, and what's more, *we know we have power*. And we cease to be afraid."

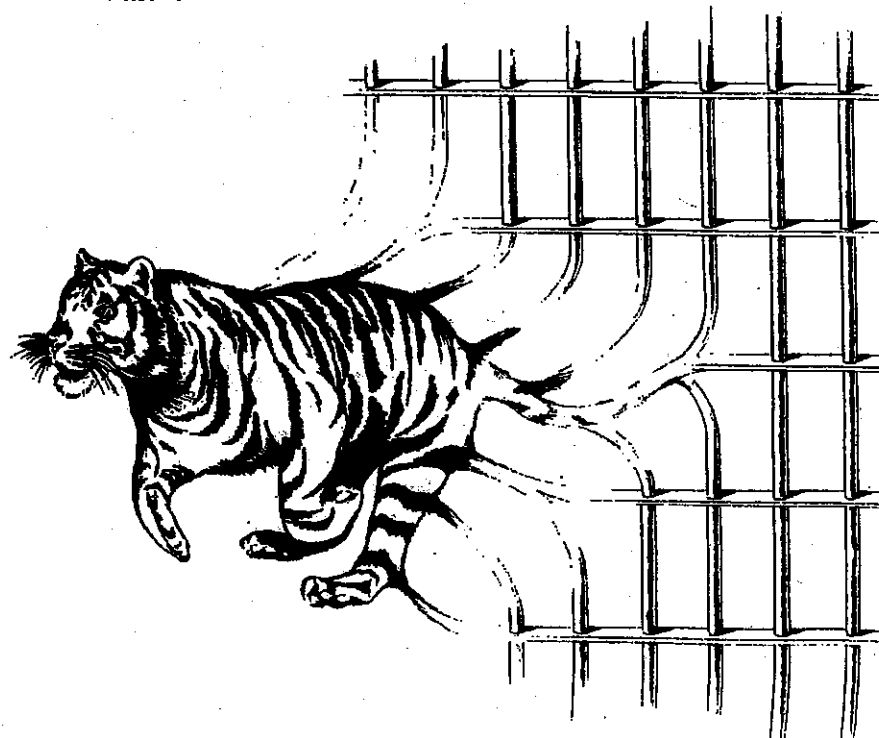
The other animals nodded solemnly.

"I'm not afraid anymore," the elephant offered.

"Yeah," the orangutan called from down the range. "Fuck a back flip! And fuck the Ringmaster!"

The monkeys squealed with delight and even the panther smiled.

"Now, we should get some sleep," the panther suggested. "We have a big day tomorrow."



The next day, the animals were still sleeping when the Ringmaster and the Keepers came in and began raking their sticks across the bars of the cages and screaming for them to get up. The animals grudgingly rose to their feet and the Ringmaster instructed the Sam and Carl to take the animals out to the training area so that he and the Trainers could go over the commands with them again.

"We can't have a reoccurrence of that fiasco that went down yesterday," he said.

Once in the training area, they went over all the cues and commands with the animals, rewarding them with morsels of food for their obedience. The Ringmaster watched as the animals carried out every command they were given, running through the routines with the utmost efficiency.

"See, I knew all they needed was a little negative reinforcement," the Ringmaster said to the Keepers, referring to the food, water and straw restriction he'd imposed the night before. "That always seems to do the trick."

Finally satisfied, the Ringmaster ended the training session and walked with Sam and Carl as they took the animals back inside. Sam and Carl rattled the doors of the cages, making sure they were securely closed upon the animal captives.

"Don't put any water or straw back in the cages until after the show," the Ringmaster ordered. "But listen. I got a call from the animal lovers earlier this morning concerning that incident out in the Arena yesterday. Now I covered you guys asses, and there's nothing to worry about."

Carl and Sam exchanged an incredulous look at this statement.

"So look," the Ringmaster continued. "They wanted to meet with me today. However, I told them we would be busy with shows all week. The idea is to stall until we roll on to the next town. But they may come snooping around here soon, so be ready to return the straw and water at a moment's notice."

The two Keepers nodded their heads in understanding and the Ringmaster turned toward the exit. As he passed the cage of the panther, the Ringmaster noticed how the black cat watched him intensely, standing as he was in the front of his cage, a perfect statue except for the movement of his eyes as they followed the Ringmaster's movements.

The panther's and Ringmaster's eyes locked for a moment as they considered one another. The Ringmaster again had the strangest feeling from this creature, the only one to look directly into his eyes. The Ringmaster nodded almost imperceptibly, and then broke his gaze.

The panther continued to watch the Ringmaster, unafraid, as the Ringmaster pointed with his cane toward the lion and, almost as an afterthought, he gave the Keepers one last instruction. With that, the Ringmaster swept out of the door with the Keepers hot on his trail.

A little while later, the panther watched as the Keepers returned carrying equipment that the panther recognized—the stick with the noose on the end, the muzzle, and the hot stick. He recalled immediately that all these instruments were normally used whenever an animal was being brought to the Circus.

Following in behind the Keepers were the two Trainers in their khakis, their hands in their pockets. This also aroused the panther's curiosity, because the Trainers hardly ever entered the housing area. It was the job of the Keepers to lead the animals and escort them either to training or to the arena, and it was in the performance areas that the Trainers took custody of them.

"We only do as what we was told."

"We shocked those elephants out there, we blasted all of them with the hose and we took their food and water," Carl reminded tersely. "That's somethin'."

"We was followin' orders."

"Yeah, well, tell that to the investigators. They can bring charges for animal abuse and put you on trial, you know. And the papers will make you out to be a monster and make the judge throw the book at you. You tell *them* that you was just followin' orders."

Sam's expression grew dark.

"And when they come and find that panther and that tiger all beat to hell and back, do you think Dick intends to take the fall for that? Do you think he's just goin' to say, 'Hey, I did that, and spare us?'"

Sam thought about it. His features pinched together and he shook his head.

"No," Sam answered.

Carl slapped his palms together.

"You got that right," he confirmed.

"So what do we do?" Sam asked. "I need this job. I can't quit. How can I feed my family?"

Carl shook his head.

"I'm not saying anything like that," Carl replied. He took a step closer and leaned in conspiratorially. "All I'm sayin' is, we both saw who really went gung-ho on those animals, right?"

"Yeah, yeah," Sam confirmed. "Sure, Carl."

"You got me?" Carl asked, eyeing his partner carefully. "We ain't gonna let this guy scapegoat either one of us, right?"

"Right," Sam agreed. "Right. I got your back and you got mine."

Carl smiled. Sam relaxed and smiled back.

"Now," Carl said, slapping his partner on the arm, "let's get this swept out and after our break we can get these animals moved."

...

The elephant stared across the aisle into the battered panther's cage.

"How are you holding up over there, Panther?" he asked hesitantly.

"I'll live," the panther cryptically replied, hobbling slowly to the front of the cage.

The elephant turned and was about to inquire about the tiger when suddenly, the lion in the next cage, still soaking wet from the dousing he received with the fire hose, charged from the back of his cage and flung himself at the front bars. He slid down into a dejected heap on the cage floor.

"Fuck!" he roared.

The panther called from across the aisle, "Mr. Lion! I know how foreign all of this must seem to you. How strange. And I know you want to get back to the Savannah. But I assure you that throwing yourself into the bars and digging at the floor of your cage will do you no good. The last lion in that cage attempted the same thing, and likely the lion before him."

The lion shook his head.

"Well, you've got me confused with a pussycat if you think I'm going to stick around here."

He dug with his claws and teeth at the floor of his cage.

The tiger stopped pacing and considered the lion for a moment.

"Check it out, youngster," the tiger said. "We've got something going on here."

The lion stopped digging at the floor of his cage, licked his chops, and turned his attention to the tiger.

darkly from behind the bars at him. It was silent except for the dripping water. The panther, bleeding from open wounds, had gotten to his feet and he too watched the Ringmaster.

They all had that "knowing" look that he had recognized in the panther's eyes earlier. He considered the ankle-deep water in which he stood.

"Here's what we do," the Ringmaster said finally. "We're gonna have bad business here for awhile—that fiasco in the arena pretty much guaranteed it. And we can't just up and move. We don't have any scheduled performances anywhere else for a week. We have to stay.

"So for now, we gotta break this thing up. We gotta end this thing, whatever it is. And for starters, move those chimps to smaller cages and take their food and water. If they want to betray me, let them live like the other animals. See how long they last. And I want that panther moved away from the other animals." He pointed at the panther. "He's somehow at the bottom of this. He even got to the chimps. So put him off by himself until I find out what to do with him. We'll see how the other animals act when we get them apart from him."

"We can put him over in the empty range on the other side," Carl suggested. The Ringmaster thought.

"No, that's no good," he concluded. "If the animals lovers come, they'll look there and they'll see him. No. We gotta put him someplace where they won't see him. Shove him out back. Out behind the dumpsters in that old freight car."

Carl and Sam both nodded.

"But, I tell you what," the Ringmaster added. "You can take some of these other animals over to the abandoned range. Divide them up. And in the meantime, I'm going to see how many of these bastards I can trade off. Replace them. Make these troublemakers somebody else's problem."

He looked around from cage to cage, and that's when he noticed—

They all stared at him. Directly into his eyes. Just like the panther.

He clenched his jaw tightly against the anger and frustration and headed for the exit, his boots sloshing through the water, his wet clothes dripping. His eyes fell upon the chimpanzees as he reached the door. They stood up to the bars, their fur drenched.

They too looked him in the eye.

"Little traitors," the Ringmaster spat. Her wagged a finger at them, sneering.

Suddenly, all at once, in a surprise attack, the chimps flung bananas through the bars, pelting the Ringmaster and forcing him to retreat. He reflexively threw up one hand in front of his face and put the other in front of his groin as the wet bananas came flying from the chimpanzees' cage in a flurry.

"Bastards!" the Ringmaster cursed, his body battered by hurled fruit. "You ungrateful bastards!"

He lunged for the door, flung it open and ran from the housing area.

As he exited, the barrage of fruit abated. A tense silence followed. The two Keepers, standing in the middle of the range, swallowed hard and exchanged nervous glances.

Water dripped. Not a sound came from the cages as the animals stood frozen.

Unmoving.

Carl scratched his head, his eyes darting to the animals staring ominously.

"I'm not liking this," Carl offered.

"It's creepy," Sam agreed.

"Yeah, it is. But it's worse than creepy, and I'm talking about the whole situation here. Not just the way these animals are acting. Think about this: Too many people saw that scene out there in the arena. And I swear, Sam, somebody's gonna blow the whistle." Sam nodded.

"Yeah," he agreed. "But we got nothin' to worry about. We didn't do nothin' wrong.

The other animals took notice as well, as the Keepers and Trainers stopped in front of the lion's cage. One of the Keepers fumbled with keys and after a moment, twisted one large, brass key in the lock. The cage door swung open with a rusty yawn.

The lion stirred at the sound and opened his eyes. He slowly lifted his head and looked around at the open door. Then, as if uninterested, he yawned and returned to his former posture, resting his head down on his paws.

The Keepers smiled and spoke to the lion in soothing tones as one of the Trainers gave him a verbal cue to sit up. The lion lazily raised himself up onto his haunches, his scrawny shoulders slumped.

"You smell that?" the tiger asked. He sniffed the air, his eyes narrow slits as he studied the action in the cage next to him. "I don't like it. I don't like it one bit."

The panther said nothing, but an ominous feeling had swept over him. His features hardened.

"What's goin' on?" one of the chimps called down from up the range.

As a safety precaution, one Keeper outside the cage slipped the noose around the lion's neck from between the bars. One of the Trainers stood with the prod ready, as the Keeper standing in the doorway of the cage with the muzzle entered slowly. The lion stared at him ambivalently.

"Don't let them do it," the tiger growled low.

"Don't let them," the elephant urged. "It can't be good, Mr. Lion."

Now all the animals were up to the front of their cages, aware that something was happening with the lion. Still, he sat harmless and glassy-eyed, seemingly oblivious to his compatriots' admonitions. When the Keeper finally got the muzzle on snugly, he took a leash from off of his belt and hooked it to the collar on the muzzle. With that firmly in place, one of the Trainers gave the command for the lion to stand. Once again, the lion obeyed and rose to his feet and the Keeper slowly began to walk toward the door of the cage, holding tightly to the leash, his eyes on the beast at all times.

The Keepers continued to speak in soothing tones as the lion stepped down out of the cage for the first time in what seemed like ages, his legs wobbly under him. As he stepped into the aisle, he looked about, peering from behind the muzzle on his face. The eyes of the other animals stared back at him gravely, solemnly.

Each of the Trainers gave the lion a pat on his emaciated flanks, sighed, and walked with the rest of the retinue as it escorted the lion up between the rows of cages toward the exit. As the lion passed each of the cages, the animals looked on in silence, contemplating his fate. The lion never so much as made eye contact with the panther or any of the other animals. He simply walked with his muzzled head slumped between his shoulders and he passed uneventfully through the doorway and the door slammed shut behind him.

In his wake, there was silence for a long moment.

"That's it, isn't it?" the tiger asked. "We'll never see him again. He's gone."

The panther looked over at the tiger and shook his head sadly.

"Where are they taking him?" one of the chimps asked. "That lion hasn't left his cage since I've been here."

"They're going to kill him," the tiger replied, barely able to control his rage. "They're taking him off to die."

The tiger began pacing rapidly, angrily.

"But why would they do that?" the orangutan asked, his voice resonating with a sense of betrayal and fear. "Is it because of what we did?"

The animals looked to the panther for the answer. They needed to know if they

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had set in motion the machinery of death that had just claimed their comrade. 14
The panther shook his head.

"No," he answered. "No, I do not believe they killed the lion because of our resistance. The lion did not resist; he was willing to perform, in fact.

"They may have killed him now in order to disrupt our morale, but I assure you that they were going to kill the lion anyway."

"But why?" the orangutan asked.
"Because he had become expendable," the panther answered.

"What do you mean?" one of the chimps asked.
"I mean he is no longer useful to them—to the Circus," the panther replied.

"Remember why we are here. We are here to do tricks and perform for food. If we don't, we aren't contributing to the Circus and so we don't eat. And the Ringmaster and the Keepers—their job is to make sure we perform and put on a show. If we don't, they don't eat. So, we are only valuable so long as we can perform, so long as we jump through hoops. If we get injured or old and can no longer perform, we are no longer useful to them. We become expendable.

"That's when they decide it is in their interests to take us away to die and replace us with another animal, a Circus animal. One who can and will perform and produce food for the Ringmaster and the Keepers and the Trainers.

"Thing is, we all grow older everyday," the panther said. "We all get closer to the day when we become expendable to the Circus. And the lion isn't the first of us that the Ringmaster has sent away to die like this. He has—"

"I don't believe this," one of the chimps interrupted. He stood at the front of the cage, his hands gripping the bars tightly. His mouth twisted into an angry sneer when he spoke. "You're trying to make the Ringmaster out to be a monster. That's all you're doing."

The panther shook his head.

"No," he replied evenly. "It happened before. I've seen it. It was the fate of the other animals before the lion, it is the lion's fate, and it will be our fate someday if we do not get to the World of the—"

"He wouldn't do that!" the chimp blurted, rattling the bars in his cage door.

The panther's eyes hardened.
"Where are the older animals?" the panther asked. He stood up at the front bars, challenging. "Where are they? Where are the older chimps and monkeys and elephants and orangutans and tigers and panthers and lions? Where are the ones so old to perform, to earn their food? Where are they? What is their fate?"

The chimp nervously rubbed his head in the silence. His eyes darted from the face of one animal to the next. He gave no answer and there was a long pause as he other animals considered what they had just heard.

"I was young when I came back to the cage after training to find my mother was gone," the elephant spoke softly, his eyes distant, staring out into the aisle. "I waited for her to come back and then I just got used to her not being there anymore. But I never considered..."

The panther nodded.

"You said the Ringmaster made sure my mom had me," the orangutan observed. And he needed me to replace her."

"Yes," the panther said gently.

"He killed my mom just like he's killing the lion, didn't he?" the orangutan asked.

The panther nodded.

"Yes."
"The Ringmaster is a killer," the orangutan said in a voice heavy with pain and

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snarled in the back of the cage as the Ringmaster unlocked the door and stepped in, whip in hand, giving the tiger a sizzling crack across the back. The tiger, unable to restrain himself, took an aggressive step forward. The Ringmaster jabbed the prod with his other hand, forcing the tiger back. He then hit the tiger with the whip again, rivulets of blood rolling down the animal's flanks as he growled and coiled like a spring, preparing to pounce.

The Ringmaster caught the tiger with the prod and sent painful voltage surging through him. The tiger crept backward. The Ringmaster strode forward, jabbing with the prod again, but the tiger's back was to the [bar] and he had nowhere to retreat. As the Ringmaster thrust the prod forward yet again, the tiger stopped it with one huge paw and the prod fell to the cage floor. In that instant, the Ringmaster's eye's grew wide with fear as he realized his complete helplessness. But from across the aisle came a roar and the tiger's eyes fell upon the panther. He had dragged himself to the front of the cage and his gaze was fixed upon the tiger. He was growling low. The two cats stared at one another for just a moment.

The tiger hesitated just long enough that the Keepers turned the spray of water on him, blinding him, distracting him. The Ringmaster turned and bolted from the cage, leaving behind the prod along with half the contents of his bladder. With shaking hands, he closed the door behind him and slid down to a seat in the water, panting hard.

The Keepers turned off the hose and rushed to help the Ringmaster to his feet. He was shaking, his eyes wide, his face pale. His wet clothing stuck to him.

"Are you alright?" Carl asked.

The Ringmaster didn't respond. Lost in his own thoughts, he nervously wiped the water from his forehead.

"Dick? Are you alright?"

The Ringmaster looked up, blinked, and tried to regain his feet, rising up from the water and clearing his throat.

"Don't stop what you're doing," he ordered. He pointed into the cage of the growling, raging tiger. "And get my prod out of there—I'm not finished."

"You want us to—"

"Get my prod," the Ringmaster repeated rudely.

Carl looked at the tiger and then turned back to the Ringmaster. He shook his head. Sam shook his head too.

"Fuck that!" Sam exclaimed.

"What? What did you say?" the Ringmaster snarled, leaning into Sam's face. "I said, get that prod!"

"We heard what you said, Mr. Head," Carl interjected. "But there's no way we're going into that cage right now with that tiger. That would be crazy. Look at that mean bastard. He's just looking to take somebody's head off."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, clearing his throat. "There's something really crazy happening with these animals right now and whatever it is, I don't think you can beat it out of them."

At that, all three men looked around them to see all the animals in the front of the cages, glaring at them.

"And with that shit in the arena for the last two days, aren't you worried the animal lovers will be popping up?" Carl asked. "The ASPCA. They come snooping around and find that panther and this tiger fucked up like they..."

The Ringmaster's eyes narrowed as he considered what Carl had just said and his anger slowly turned into fear. In venting his rage upon the animals, he had forgotten the possible danger of others poking around in his business. And if the ASPCA got wind of what happened—when they got wind—they were sure to come knocking.

The Ringmaster looked around them to see all the animals in the front of the cages, glaring at them.

They blasted the new lion who had just opened his glassy eyes, rewarded with a punch to the face from the force of the water coming from the firehose. Quickly to his feet, he scrambled to the back of his cage and coiled into a defensive position, his mane soaking wet and his eyes suddenly alert. He snarled and roared in anger and fear.

"You like throwing shit?" Carl asked the orangutan, his voice drowned out. He turned the hose on the orangutan who tumbled back from the bars like a newspaper blown by the wind.

When they turned the hose upon the elephant, he simply leaned into it, closing one eye and let the spray bounce off of his considerable head. He dipped the end of his trunk into the lake puddling about his feet and gave the Keepers a blast of his own, much to no avail.

The panther saw the Ringmaster, red-faced with eyes bulging, march into the housing area through the open door. His boots sloshed through the water. He carried a prod in one hand and a brass key in the other. He soon had the panther's cage open. The panther stood at the back of the cage, staring up into the Ringmaster's eyes as if bracing himself for what he knew was coming.

"So it's you," the Ringmaster snarled. "You black son of a bitch!"

He stepped into the cage, hooking the key back onto his belt and grabbing the whip that hung there. He swung it furiously, stinging the panther across his back. The panther cringed.

"You don't fuck with me!"

He swung the whip around again and it slashed across the panther's face, just above his left eye, leaving a deep gash. He coiled into a knot of muscles and tendons, growling in pain and anger.

Again, the Ringmaster brought the whip down on the panther, tearing at his flank; and again, across his back once more. Each time, the panther braced himself and tried to move at the last minute to deflect the blow from the tip of the whip, but he felt the terrible sting nonetheless.

Then a barrage of water hit him and slammed him up against the back of the cage, knocking the breath out of him. The water rushed into his face, blinding him, and still the whip came down, slicing him, the water at the bottom of his cage turning pink with his blood. Just as suddenly, the stream of water moved away and the panther was met with an electric shock from the prod, the force of it enhanced because he stood in the water. He felt the blast of electricity vibrate painfully through his entire body and he collapsed into the water at the bottom of the cage.

The Ringmaster turned and walked out of the cage, slamming it shut on the motionless form of the panther, and he raised his eyes to survey the scene. He expected the animals to be cowering in the backs of their cages, paralyzed by fear. But to his amazement, he saw they were all still up in the front of the cages, shrieking and growling and screeching and rattling the bars. As the pressurized force of the water from the hose hit them, they faltered only momentarily, and then rushed back to the front of the cage, furious and unshaken.

He turned to look back at the panther, still motionless. Almost as an afterthought, he reached through the bars and jammed the prod into the back of the beast in the bottom of the cage. An audible pop accompanied the surge of electricity and a small plume of smoke rose from the animal's fur.

"That ought to teach your black ass!" the Ringmaster taunted.

"Hey! That's enough!" Carl called over the din of the rushing water. "Dick, that's enough! You're going to kill him!"

The Ringmaster turned upon the Keepers, his features distorted by rage, his fists balled around the prod. "I decide when it's enough!"

He stormed across to the cage of the Siberian tiger, his fury not yet spent. The tiger

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loss.

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"If we do not get out of here and get to the Land of the Free, we will all share the lion's fate someday," the panther concluded. His jaw tightened as he sat perfectly still, fixed upon the cage across from him. For a long time, none of the animals spoke in response but joined the panther in his silent remembrance, staring at the open cage and its door hung ajar, an empty hole where the lion's life had been.



"That black bastard!"

Carl kicked the stopper from the wheels under the lion's old cage, and pulled it out of the row and into the aisle.

"Give me a hand," he called to Sam, standing by the open back door.

Up the range, the chimps drew into a huddle, whispering amongst themselves in hushed tones, one of them pointing vaguely down the range as he spoke. Then another gestured angrily and screeched loud enough that the other animals could hear.

Sam trotted up the aisle and tugged while Carl pushed the empty cage, the door still hanging open and wagging as the cage weaved and squeaked down the range and out the back door to the loading dock.

All the animals waited for a long moment.

"What's up with this, Panther?" the tiger whispered loudly.

The panther shook his head. "I don't know," he said.

Another cage came up the aisle, Carl and Sam pushing it from behind, sweat standing out on their foreheads. Unlike the other cage, this one was closed and lying inside, curled up on a pile of straw in a corner, was the form of a sleeping animal.

The Keepers navigated it into the empty space once filled with the lion's cage, put the stoppers under the wheels, and headed out of the housing area, the door slamming shut behind them.

One of the chimps broke the huddle and scurried up to the bars of the cage to see what had just happened. He gazed down the range and then whispered something to the other chimpanzees.

The elephant and tiger both looked down at the sleeping form in the cage between them.

"A lion," the tiger mumbled.

"See!" called the chimp from up the range. "They just took him out and brought him back."

"It isn't the same lion," the tiger growled. "This one is younger. Much younger. And he smells funny."

The young lion exhaled deeply, the sounds of his snoring rising and falling with his rhythmic breathing.

"The Long Sleep," the elephant observed.

"Probably came from the World of the Free," he tiger opined. Then, his powerful growl reverberated up the range at the chimps: "You fools still wanna do back flips for your enemy for bananas? You cowards and traitors are—"

"Hold up, Tiger," the panther interrupted. "Look."

The tiger followed the panther's gaze into the new lion's cage. The young lion had stirred, his snore abruptly ending as he slowly lifted his head. He opened his glassy eyes and blinked several times as if he could not register what he was seeing. He shook his shaggy mane and licked his chops.

"What's up new kid?" the tiger queried, his anger evaporating at the sight of the awakened lion.

The lion's foggy eyes blinked at the tiger but he did not answer. Slowly, as if under water, he staggered to his feet. He swayed drunkenly, and as he took a few steps toward his water container, his legs wobbled under him.

He lapped up some water and then raised his gaze to the panther in the cage across from him.

"I don't think you can beat it out of them..."

"We did it!" one of the chimps shrieked. "We took down the Circus! The Ringmaster gave up!"

"He didn't even call for us," one of the monkeys laughed, hopping up and down excitedly at the front of his cage.

Even the elephant trumpeted in triumph as the animals congratulated themselves. But in the midst of this, the tiger brooded in the back of his cage, licking his wounds, angry and bitter. He had withstood the earlier abuse but only because the panther had intervened, had taken some of the blows directed at him. The panther had prevented him from pouncing upon the Ringmaster.

The panther, for his part, paced the cage. He did not celebrate with the other animals. He knew the tiger had nearly lost control out there and he hoped that, by getting the Ringmaster's attention the way he did when leaving the Arena, it would work to draw the Ringmaster's fury toward himself and away from the tiger.

It only took one slip, one moment of weakness, and that would justify a brutal response from the Ringmaster against all of them. Just one act of violence by the animals, and the whole plan could fall apart.

The elephant watched the panther pace and grew curious about his apparent preoccupation.

"Mr. Panther," the elephant called. "Why aren't you celebrating? We did it! We defeated the Ringmaster! Your plan worked. None of us performed—the Circus is over!"

The panther stopped pacing and considered the other animals.

"This has surely dealt the Ringmaster a serious blow," the panther agreed. "And with the unity and solidarity we forged here today, we are certainly on the right path to the World of the Free. But if you believe we have already won, that we have already defeated the Ringmaster, then you have not been listening to me."

"The Ringmaster will do everything in his power to break us. He will defend himself and the Circus with all the means at his disposal. With all of his resources. You think he is finished? We have endured some of his brutality—we have gone a short time without food and water, without straw. We have endured a few instances of violence. But if you think that is all the Ringmaster has and you think the Ringmaster is finished, I have had news for all of you: He hasn't even gotten started yet."

The panther paused, as he heard the footfalls and grunts and an ominous rumbling noise that drew the scared eyes of the animals toward the door of the housing area. The noises grew louder.

"We're going to be tested," the panther said evenly. "And for us to win, we have to desire our freedom more than anything. *Anything!*"

Just then, the housing area door crashed in under the pounding water sprayed from a firehose. Both Keepers held onto it tightly, smiling wide and mean. They pointed the hose at the chimps and the punch from the cold, raging water flung them to the back of their cage and pinned them to the bars. They screeched in pain and fear, struggling against the torrent of water. Bananas flew everywhere as the water tipped the banana bucket and sent the fruit and bucket soaring into the air.

The Keepers slowly made their way down the range, turning the spray on the panther and knocking him from his feet. He slipped and slid in the gathering puddles, crouching down against the blast.

Both Keepers laughed uproariously but could not be heard over the rush of furious water. They stalked down the aisle, swinging the hose back and forth to give all the animals a good soaking.

None of the other animals did that. None of them. Just this one.

The Ringmaster's eyes narrowed to thin slits.

He's been sizing me up all this time, he thought. And now this bastard is challenging me.

The panther stopped in his tracks, his eyes never faltering. The corners of his mouth curled, almost imperceptibly at first, and then a wide, feline grin spread across the geography of his face. And before the Ringmaster could even get his mind around the significance of this, the black cat had already disappeared into the darkness beyond the exit, the gate slamming shut with a distinct, metallic clank.

Did he just grin at me? The Ringmaster thought, his face ashen.

Dazed and glassy eyed, he shook his head and turned to face what remained of the diminishing angry crowd. They jeered at him and threw trash. He pushed the cage door open and stepped back out into the ring.

It was a nightmare.

The catcalls from the crowd grew more distant as he withdrew, retreating into the sanctuary of his thoughts.

I can't believe what's happening, he thought. Yesterday these bastards all laid down, except for the chimps. Now, today, the chimps turned on me as well. No, these animals aren't sick. It's something much more than that. There's something very wrong here.

He grinned at me.

A popcorn container landed just in front of his feet, spilling its contents across the Ringmaster's patent leather boots. He kicked lazily at the popcorn and then began to walk slowly toward the performance exit.

He had learned in his line of business that some animals are highly intelligent, but something like this...?

He recalled how precisely all of the animals had performed each of their stunts just hours ago during the training sessions.

These animals are organized, he thought. Organized. They came out during the training and proved they knew all the cues and commands just so I would have them come out here during the performance in front of the crowd.

If it was one or two of them that could be chalked up to simple stubbornness—like that crazy tiger a few years back, he remembered. That could be easily dealt with. But *all* of these animals were acting strangely. All of them were acting like that tiger. *All* of them.

He grinned at me.

A beverage container hit the Ringmaster on the side of the head and splashed him with cold, wet stickiness. He brushed the ice from his shoulder without any enthusiasm.

Two full days losing money, he thought, and that's not the worst of it.

He attempted to figure in the damage done to the Circus—permanent damage—from the bad publicity that was sure to...

He stopped in his tracks.

"I'll be damned," he muttered to himself, his hands balling into fists, his mouth twisting into a snarl. In his mind everything converged together. Oh yeah, he thought, they're organized alright. They're organized and I know which one of them is behind all of this.

He grinned at me.

He stormed furiously toward the exit.

"That black bastard!"

"Lion," the panther greeted.

The lion shook his mane again.

"Where am I?" he roared.

"This is the Circus," the panther answered.

"Circus?" asked the lion. "What the fuck is that?"

The panther cast a glance up toward the chimps, hoping they had perceived the significance of what the lion had just said.

"The Circus is this world we are now in," the panther answered patiently. "Where did you come from?"

The lion yawned wide and slow, and then swiped his tongue over his jowls.

"The Savannah." He said, finally.

"The Savannah?" the panther asked, sneaking yet another glance at the chimps.

"What is The Savannah?"

"The Savannah is my home," the lion replied sternly.

"Well, what's it like there?" The panther asked. "Are there other animals back at your home like Tigers and Chimps and—"

"And Monkeys?" one of the monkeys shrieked.

"Of course, I just chased one of those little bastards up a tree the other day. But what's up with all the stupid questions?" he added, looking around at the animals in his view. "You all are acting weird as fuck!"

"Please excuse us, Mr. Lion," the panther said, "But it's been a long time since some of us were in your world, and many of us have never been there."

"Come on—you can't be serious," The lion replied.

"Yes—unfortunately I am. If you don't mind me asking, how did you get here, Mr. Lion?" The panther queried.

The lion licked his jowls, lowering his head as he attempted to recall.

"Well, I was in the tall grass sniffing for food," the lion began. The panther watched the chimps as the lion spoke. The chimp glanced between the lion and the panther and back again. He nervously rubbed his head with the palm of one hand.

"I was hunting—think it was caribou." The lion narrowed his eyes as he struggled to remember. "It was only me this time—my mate, she was with the newborns. So I was alone and I remember smelling something odd just before I felt this sharp pain in my side and everything got all ... fuzzy... just like it is now." He blinked, his eyes glassy. "Look—I'm tired. Gotta get some sleep..." he said, yawning once again and wobbling back to the pile of straw.

"Well, we'll talk later, youngster," the tiger replied. "Go ahead and get some sleep."

After a moment, the lion was fast asleep again. The tiger looked over at the panther.

"When that shit wears off, and he comes around, we'll have to let him know what's up," the tiger proposed. "Share the plan."

The panther nodded his head in agreement, but his attention was focused up the range on the chimps, who had once again formed a huddle back away from the front of the cage. They whispered furiously, one slicing hand cutting through the air, followed by fingers pointing. One of them screeched angrily. Suddenly, two of the chimps broke from the huddle and jumped atop the jungle gym, turning their backs on the other chimps. The huddle stood together for a moment. Silent. Thinking. Then without a word, one of the chimps scurried up to the front of the cage. He sighed deeply, shifting from foot to foot.

"Hey, Mr. Panther!" he finally called.

"Yes, Mr. Chimp," The panther replied.

"Well, we've been doing some thinking. We've been considering some of the things you've been saying," the chimp admitted. He paused to carefully consider his words. He sighed. "Yesterday I could smell fear on the Ringmaster. All of us could. The Keepers too. And I never smelled it like that before. Also, we all saw that by the time we came out to perform, the stands were nearly empty and the creatures who remained were throwing things at the Ringmaster."

All the animals listened.

"Then today, when they led away the lion, you mentioned that he was going to be killed and he would be replaced by a younger lion," the chimp recalled. "But I didn't believe you. None of us chimps believed you."

The chimp stopped again, staring blankly into a bucket of bananas. In that pause, one of the chimps who had remained in the huddle stepped forward and stood next to the chimp who had spoken. After a moment, two more stepped forward and joined them, then three more—until all the chimps from the huddle stood up at the bars. Only the two who had skulked to the top of the jungle gym remained separated from the rest. The two of them sat with their backs to the others, snorting melodramatically, and tossing down banana peels, chewing their food loudly.

"We didn't believe you," the chimp repeated. "We didn't believe the Ringmaster would kill the lion. We didn't believe he could be so cold—that he could so easily dispose of the lion—and replace him with a younger one. That is, until we seen it with our own eyes. How could he do something like that if he is truly our friend?"

"Yes, Mr. Chimp," the panther said. "Like I said before, the Ringmaster's cruelty has no boundaries—he is a killer!"

The chimp bowed his head in thought before resuming.

"Mr. Panther, we chimps have been made to feel special. We've gotten used to how the Circus operates, as well as our privileged status in it. We've seen these big cages and jungle gyms we swing on as freedom. And we've always seen the Ringmaster as someone who really cared about us.

"But I can't help but to think about how you said the lion was once the Ringmaster's favorite and how he used to occupy this cage. So I have to ask myself, if the Ringmaster is capable of doing what he did to the lion, then why wouldn't he do it to one of us?"

"Exactly," the panther said, nodding.

"Mr. Panther," the chimp said, "all this stuff you've been saying about the Ringmaster—about the existence of this World of the Free—we thought you were making it all up because you were jealous and bitter about not being like us.

"But then, the Ringmaster showed us a side of himself that we'd never seen before when he killed the lion—an animal that used to be his favorite. He disposed of him as if he were a banana peel. And then, in comes this new lion claiming to be from a whole different world—a world that we never thought existed. Because the Ringmaster hid it from us, allowing us to think that the Circus was all there is.

"So you have been right all along. We have been deceived," The chimp said angrily. "Us chimps have indeed been tricked by the Ringmaster. We've been tricked into feeling free by looking at the plight of all of you in comparison to our own. Because if the World of the Free is real, that means that as long as we are in the Circus, we are no more free than you."

Once again, the chimp hung his head, shaking it side to side in disbelief. The two chimpanzees on the jungle gym both cast angry, disdainful glances back at

"No!" the Ringmaster screamed bringing the whip down across the cats. "I said get the fuck up!"

Both cats winced as the Ringmaster slung his whip again and again, the tip of it tearing at the flesh of first the panther and then the tiger, back and forth.

The Ringmaster simmered with rage and would not relent with the whip, even as the spectators' protests grow in intensity behind him.

With visible gasps on their backs, the tiger and panther retreated backward toward the rear of the cage, the tiger's back to the exit gate, but the Ringmaster only stepped forward, knocking a pedestal out of the way, shoving it to the side, his face red with fury, his whip coming down mercilessly on both creatures. When he saw one of the bewildered Trainers standing next to the cage, the Ringmaster reached through the bars and snatched the prod from his hand.

Without a word, he lunged forward and the tip of the prod hit the tiger in the chest with a loud, electrical pop, sparks sizzling in the tiger's fur. The tiger growled angrily. Backed into a corner, his eyes narrowed as he calculated the timing of the Ringmaster's lunges. With one powerful paw, he could easily push the hot stick to the side and pounce upon the Ringmaster, the Free World be damned. The tiger crouched down, his muscles tight as springs, angry eyes fixed upon the Ringmaster.

The panther watched the tiger's reaction intently, and he could smell the rage. But as the Ringmaster thrust the prod at the tiger again, the panther slipped in front of the tiger and was rewarded with an electric jolt to his flank.

The tiger, his plans for taking a bite out of the Ringmaster obstructed, eyed the panther quizzically. The panther, for his part, remained between the tiger and Ringmaster, breathing hard.

The panther considered that he was no physical match for the tiger, but counted on the tiger's unwillingness to attack him in order to get through him to the Ringmaster. The tiger licked the saliva dripping from his jaws and, after a tense moment, his muscles uncoiled.

Up until now, the crowd had urged the Ringmaster to put on a show, chanting their mantra until he complied with their wishes. But now, just as the day before, they yelled in protest while food and beverage containers and other debris rained down out of the stands. A beverage container collided with the cage and exploded, sending soda and ice shrapnel flying, knocking the top hat from the Ringmaster's head. He blinked twice, confused.

The Trainers, lined up along the bars of the cage, screamed at the Ringmaster to stop the abuse and pointed out toward the audience. The Ringmaster turned and in just a brief glance he saw that those spectators who were not hurling objects at him were hurrying for the exits to demand a reckoning from the ticket takers.

"Goddamnit!" The Ringmaster exclaimed. "They scream that they want a show and when I do what I have to do to give them what they want, they throw shit at me."

He took a deep breath to regain his composure and he heard the gate slide up in the back of the cage. He caught just a glimpse of the tiger's tail as the bigger cat disappeared through the exit. But he saw that the panther did not immediately follow the tiger. Instead, he paced the width of the open exit, back and forth, swiftly, like a pendulum, his eyes fixed upon the Ringmaster.

As the Ringmaster met the cat's gaze he took a quick step back. There was something very unsettling in the depths of the panther's piercing glare. Something disconcerting. The Ringmaster tightened his grip around the handle of the electric prod as he thought back to all the times this stubborn beast had

bowling pins. The two loyal chimps who remained upright, awaiting their command from the Ringmaster, had to fend off the grasping hands of the others trying to pull them down. Despite their swats, they both hit the floor with a shocked and indignant screech.

"Get up!" the Ringmaster barked. "Get up, get up!" He motioned with both hands, but the chimps simply stared at him, unimpressed.

This can't be, the Ringmaster thought. The chimps were loyal, had saved the day just the previous afternoon and he had rewarded them with piles of bananas. More than they could eat while the other animals starved with no food and water. What could have happened?

Restive boos echoed through the big top and the Ringmaster clenched his jaw and fists. He knew it was his only choice to shut it down—shut it down, give the crowd a refund, and figure out what the hell was going on with the animals... including the chimpanzees. But he was pulled from these thoughts by a growing chant from the crowd that had started as a whisper but became a mantra, increasing in intensity:

"WE want a SHOW... We want a SHOW... WE want a SHOW... WE want a SHOW..."

Just then, all at once and without cue, the elephants rose to their feet. Taken by surprise, the Trainers jumped back, instinctively assuming a defensive posture, their prods extended in front of them, watching the elephants closely. What if the giant beasts decided to charge them or stomp them?

But the elephants merely stood and considered the trainers ambivalently, as if waiting for some kind of direction. The Trainers exchanged baffled glances and turned to the Ringmaster, who appeared just as baffled as they were.

The elephants shifted their weight impatiently and, after a moment, the Trainers slowly, cautiously approached them and escorted the elephants off stage. The Ringmaster watched impotently as the Trainers escorted the elephants and the Keepers fumbled to carry the chimpanzees from the ring. He was left with a foreboding sense that something was very, very, wrong.

...WE want a SHOW... WE want a SHOW... We want a SHOW...

The Ringmaster mopped his brow and straightened his coat tails. Well, he thought. If it's a show they want, it's a show they'll get.

He turned and strode quickly toward the circular cage, pointing with his cane so the Keepers would know to release the cats. He entered the cage and closed it behind him and, when the gate at the back of the cage went up, he raised his arms in anticipation of the tiger and panther running into the arena—but nothing happened. Nothing. He simply stood there alone in the cage with his arms over his head. The crowd behind him seemed aroused for a moment, then grumbled and murmured.

Carl sprinted over to the cage, panting. He grabbed the bars and told the Ringmaster: "We can't get the tiger and panther out the cages, they just won't budge."

"What?" the Ringmaster screamed. "I don't care what you have to do—use the prods on them if you have to—but get them out here now!" he snarled.

Carl disappeared back the way he had come and eventually the cats came trotting out. Relieved, the Ringmaster cracked his whip and gave the command for the cats to jump up on their stands. But just like the day before, the cats dropped to the canvas, laid down and wouldn't move.

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their former comrades, shook their heads and snorted in disbelief. They resumed their whispering to one another. After a moment, the panther spoke.

"Yes, Mr. Chimp—I understand. Actually, I've always been aware of your view on things. And I've understood why you have held those views. I suspect that had I been in your situation, I may have seen things in a similar fashion. But Mr. Chimp, I also know that one day you would come to see the Ringmaster—the Circus—for what it is. That one day you would see through the illusion. I was just hoping that, for your sake, it wouldn't be too late.

"But now that you know—now that you have seen the true nature of this place, I have only one question for you, Mr. Chimp."

"What's that?" the chimp asked.

The panther's eyes narrowed as he rose up on all fours, considering the chimp carefully before he spoke:

"What are we going to do about it?"

...

"Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages, welcome to the Greatest Traveling Show in the World!" the Ringmaster boomed confidently at the cheering crowd showering him with adulation. The pipe organ blared and the spotlights danced across the ring floor. Just like the day before, the Ringmaster turned and raised both arms above his head imperiously, a signal for the Keepers to send the elephants into the Arena.

Just like the previous day, the elephants came out nose-to-tail in a lumbering trot, tapestries flowing, mottled by the flashing, dancing lights while the spectators greeted them with excitement. However, the pretty girl on the lead elephant in her sequined garb did not smile quite as wide as she had the day before, nor wave with quite the same enthusiasm. She appeared a bit distracted, having just yesterday tumbled from the back of the beast to land on her can.

The elephants lined up in the center ring, shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the Ringmaster standing with his arms high and wide. Then, as if sawed down by some invisible chainsaw, the elephants hit the canvas like felled trees.

The pretty girl, almost anticipating this turn of events, deftly slid from her perch and landed gracefully, if not annoyed, on her feet. She placed an offended hand upon one hip and gave the elephants an impertinent sneer while the unsuspecting audience chuckled at what they believed to be part of the act. The girl's eyes met the Ringmaster's and she sighed.

Immediately, the Ringmaster pointed toward the Keeper at the door and out tumbled the chimpanzees. As a contingency plan, the Keepers had kept the chimps in the wings on stand-by. They now ran and rolled and bounced out to the center ring, adorned in maroon vests and pill-box hats, the gold tassels swinging in rhythm to the pipe organ.

Those elephants can lay there all night long if they want, the Ringmaster thought with a victorious smile. The chimps will take up the slack.

As the chimpanzees took their positions, the Ringmaster turned to the crowd and announced proudly:

"Ladies and gentlemen, Bumbles and the Banana gang!"

The audience laughed. And when the Ringmaster turned to give the chimps their first command, he saw why the audience had laughed. He froze. His mouth hung open. He blinked.

Of the ten chimps, eight of them were lying in a pile on the canvas like tumbled

