

An Earnest Ermine's Employment Experience

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"Running away to join the circus, huh?" The sandhill crane adjusted his waistcoat and donned his top hat as the hopeful white mustelid dusted off his sleeve. He pulled it away. "Tell me why I should be interested."

"My dad's a no-good drunk, and..."

"We've all got sob stories. Are you going to stay on, or are you going to ditch us after a few towns?" They stood in the entrance of the big tent. "What can you do?"

"Do?" She frowned.

"Juggling? High dive? Acrobatics? Look, anyone can sweep, clean or cook. You have to be able to do something more around here."

A miniature car zoomed around the side of the ring, honking, coming to a screeching halt. The door popped open and a surprisingly high number of voles began to tumble out. The last one appeared to be stuck.

The ringmaster continued. "You want to work for room and board? Well, it won't bring in more money. You're an extra person. We've got costs. Repairs." He pointed at the car. "That's twenty mouths to feed." The vole freed himself, pulling out another vole that appeared to be unconscious. "Maybe nineteen. How will you bring in more cash?"

A porcupine waddled around the corner. "Hey boss, I got it set up."

"Great, who's your new sidekick?"

"Some lynx. Sorry about that last one."

"Enh, everyone's been paid off. Let's see it."

The porcupine led them outside to a large wooden disc. A lynx in carnival dress was loosely strapped to it. Reaching behind the disc, the porcupine pulled something, and it began to rotate. "Ok, hold still Cynthia." He picked of a quiver of shed quills. Her eyes opened wide, staring at the bright red tips. "Oh, that's just nail polish. For show." With no warning and tremendous speed, he started flinging the quills. As the disc came to a stop, the lynx stared ahead, petrified. One quill had barely missed her

left ear. The porcupine noticed the crane's companion for the first time. "Who's the new girl? You wanna be her backup?"

The lynx's eyes shook with a subtle warning. "N-no, that's ok, thanks for the offer."

The porcupine shrugged. "Pfff. Your loss."

The ringmaster nodded. "Looks good. Keep it up." He started walking along the midway. The mustelid scrambled after him, glancing at the nearby posters: Out-Booze Our Badger, The Great Mesmer-Owl, Jazzy the Jackalope. "I could be... The Albino Ermine!"

The crane stared at her incredulously. "You're already white."

"Do you have some pink contact lenses and nose paint?"

"...What happens when you get your summer coat?" He watched her face fall. "Look, kid, I'd love to help you out, but I've got to be practical. Work on an act – we'll be coming through here again next year." They stopped by a closed-down stall. "You can work one of the midway booths for minimum wage, but then we move on. At least you'll be away from your old man for two weeks."

"How does this one work?" Peering into the interior, she could see hoses, targets and wooden horse shapes.

"This one's busted." He moved around the side and flicked a switch. The targets and horses lurched sideways with a loud grinding noise. "And Biff's not around to fix it, he got hurt working on the cannonball act."

"It sounds like the drive train needs to be replaced." She poked her head in. "Wow, these gears are shot."

"You know how to fix this?"

"Well, I could give it a try, if you've got the parts. My dad's a mechanic; I've picked up some things. Cars, bikes, farm equipment."

"Ok, little lady," the crane said, his tone becoming more business-like. "Let's assume this was up and running." He pointed at the four horses stuck in their tracks, and waved his wing at the hoses. "How would you rig it?"

"How much are the prizes?"

"We ship in little tiger plush dolls from South America, four bucks each. They also give us a deal on bootleg corndogs."

"Ok." She nodded, thinking. "Four-person game. Only run it for four players together. Charge two or three bucks per person. You get a prize if you win three games in a row."

The ringmaster's body language didn't give away anything. "Go on."

"The winner is the first person who gets their horse to the finish line. They move if you can hit your target with your water gun. But I can rig it so the triggers don't respond well. Give me some plumbing tools and I could make the water pressure change between games. Mess with the target sensitivity too."

"Tell me what you need," the crane said, "And if you can get this up and running in two days, and if it works like you say it can... then we've got a deal."

"Yes!" She grinned ear to ear, showing her fangs and pumping her fist in the air.

"Any other hidden talents? Card tricks?"

"Uhh." She looked momentarily embarrassed and held up a wallet. "Sleight of hand?"

The crane blinked and started patting himself. "Why you little..." he paused. "Wait, what's the I.D. in that one?"

She opened it up. "... 'Glucie Bas-Relief Treeshower'?"

"Oh, very good!" The ringmaster clapped his wings together. "Inner front pocket no less! You can keep that one. I've got five more on me. Would you be willing to... work the crowd?"

"Absolutely!"

"And how would you feel about... bribing health and safety inspectors, and other local officials?"

"Blackmail? Extortion?"

"Oh no no. We run a respectable circus here. Strictly a you-scratch-our-back, we-scratch-yours kind of operation."

She smiled again. "Give me time, and I'm sure I can help!" She paused. "But nothing involving climbing. I'm bad with heights."

The two of them walked side by side towards the ringmaster's trailer to start on the paperwork. He laid a wing confidently on her shoulder. "My dear, you might just be the new assistant I've been looking for."