

“Barnum Brown And His Tyrant King”

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(Murdock, a museum curator in a nice suit, sits at a desk. Barnum, a fossil hunter in dusty adventure-type clothes, drops a bag and paces. It is 1906.)

MURDOCK

There's no need to pace, Mr. Brown.

BARNUM

I don't cotton to being told what to do, so don't bother if I keep on.

MURDOCK

Now, now, nerves are one thing, but I believe you'll be much more comfortable if—

BARNUM

Blast it, man! I'll do as I like, till I see fit to stop.

MURDOCK

Mr. Brown.

BARNUM

Barnum's my name, you don't have to shake my hand with a feather duster.

MURDOCK

Well, I'm not quite sure what you mean by that. But the dedication's taking place in a few hours; I know the rest of us will be in black tie—you don't have to, that's fine—but we do want you ready for your speech. As curator I'm responsible for your happiness. What can I do to make you comfortable during your visit? Coffee? Tea? ... Liquor?

BARNUM

Man!

MURDOCK

Murdock.

BARNUM

That first or last?

MURDOCK

Last, if you don't mind. I try to be professional in all things.

BARNUM

And I try to get to the point. You have my find in your halls. The American Museum's had it for five years, total.

MURDOCK

That's right, and we've displayed it to great success. The public's been enamored the whole of that time, with lines round the block to see the Tyrant King.

BARNUM

I named it that. When you name a thing, you're given a certain amount of power, a grip on another creature's fate.

MURDOCK

Right, and tonight, you'll dedicate the beast as a permanent exhibit here.

BARNUM

Because I named it. I'm stating the facts to make sure you understand who's got rights in this situation and who hasn't.

MURDOCK

All right ...

BARNUM

I found it—the first of its kind—I named it. And tonight I'm taking it back.

MURDOCK

Beg your pardon?

BARNUM

I'm selling it to someone else.

MURDOCK

You—there's— You gave it to this museum!

BARNUM

And now I'm un-giving it, savvy?

MURDOCK

You can't pull our most important exhibit out from under us when we're marking its five-year anniversary! I mean, my God: we paid for your train ticket out here!

BARNUM

And I'm obliged on that score. But more to the point.

MURDOCK

You'd like your dinosaur back?

BARNUM

I'd like my dinosaur back.

MURDOCK

It isn't for sale.

BARNUM

Why? Because the museum says so? Or because it's "a crowd-pleasing monster"? That's what you wrote in your letter, isn't it?

MURDOCK

Then you understand why, financially, we can't lose—

BARNUM

That's all talk.

MURDOCK

And you are not a man of talk, but a man of action. I understand that, sir, so let me respond in kind.

(He drops to his knees and grabs Barnum's dusty pant leg.)

Please, I beg of you, don't take the creature away!

BARNUM

Gad, Murdock! Take a hanky and control yourself!

MURDOCK

I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me. I'm just—this is upsetting!

BARNUM

No simply whimpering around it, though: I get first rights of refusal.

MURDOCK

We granted you those rights when every museum in the blasted country was bidding on your confounded skeleton! The deal is finished now—you signed a contract!

BARNUM

That may be true, but my name is still associated with the thing itself; it wins me offers.

MURDOCK

Which you can't take because you signed a contract! We own the thing now!

BARNUM

That doesn't stop me from conversatin' while someone pours a whiskey glass, does it? When a friend jaws at my ear, I can't help it if a few words hit the old brainpan, can I?

MURDOCK

I see. And how much has your price gone up?

BARNUM

7,000.

MURDOCK

Someone's actually willing to pay that much for plaster and bone?

BARNUM

The Carnegie Museum is.

MURDOCK

That backwater freakshow in Pittsburgh?! You're miles better leaving it in our care.

BARNUM

You'd think so.

MURDOCK

I know so! What will Pittsburgh think of this extraordinary creature? The men and women of New York City are far better equipped to understand—

BARNUM

A three-ton lizard with tiny arms and gigantic teeth?

MURDOCK

Precisely! We're sophisticated people!

BARNUM

You're draining my steam, Murdock. I only came into your office to tell you my plans. To let you know I'll have a crew on hand to move the monster tomorrow morning.

MURDOCK

But how can you—

BARNUM

Repel down from the ceiling and hoist it out the skylight with ropes. Some showboat flyers owe me a favor, ya see, and there's no better show than airlifting a giant.

MURDOCK

I'll sue you! We have a contract, you'd be in violation—

BARNUM

Makes me no nevermind if you do or what I am! I'll find some new animal; it'll make me twice as much with the name of the Tyrant King's finder on it. Give me the power to say a bit about your museum to the press, too. And who'd give you any beasts after that?

MURDOCK

Mr. Brown, please; it's in your best interest not to do this! Because ... I didn't want to alarm you before—but if you take this action, we could go under. Financial ruin, I mean! You're shocked, I suppose, I didn't lead with this tidbit of information? Well, we have our pride, after all. This museum isn't like every other museum in the country. We need people to flood in and pay good money to see our permanent collection. After all, we pay top dollar for our finds, and we pay top dollar to keep them in good shape.

BARNUM

Do you?

MURDOCK

You've seen the exhibit! Not a bit of plaster chipped, not a digit out of place.

(Barnum opens his bag, takes out a gigantic dinosaur jawbone and drops it on the desk.)

BARNUM

Care to reverse that little statement, Murdock?

MURDOCK

Is that ...

BARNUM

It's a jawbone, teeth and all.

MURDOCK

From the ...

BARNUM

From the beast himself.

MURDOCK

It fell?

BARNUM

After I yanked it down, yes.

MURDOCK

Why the devil would you—

BARNUM

To prove to you how easy it would be. And it was easy. No one was even around to keep me from jumping the velvet rope. This was hanging on a rusted hinge.

MURDOCK

You might have toppled the whole—

BARNUM

Now wait a minute! I love this creature like I love my mother.

MURDOCK

Would you rip the jaw from her face to prove a point?!

BARNUM

Murdock, mind the tone, or I might scale the walls before your notepad jockeys arrive.

MURDOCK

What do you want from me? I will do anything, promise anything!

BARNUM

I heard that song and dance once before. When you haggled me into signing the king over, remember?

MURDOCK

I remember, Mr. Brown.

BARNUM

I've heard promises. Now I want them kept. The Tyrant's been standing by spit and shoe polish, that's clear. I mean to take it to Pittsburgh tomorrow, where it'll get a safe home and sturdy foundation. I'm bringing a train into the outskirts to haul it away; some engineers owe me a few favors, ya see, after that mess with the—

MURDOCK

What can I give you to keep it here?

BARNUM

Permission. To overhaul the exhibit, to ensure the beast is taken care of.

MURDOCK

You want to see to that personally?

BARNUM

At your expense, naturally.

MURDOCK

Sir, we have specialists in that field—

BARNUM

And a lousy job they've been doing, too!

MURDOCK

You'd bankrupt us within a week! You're bringing in trains and planes and Lord knows what gears and grinds to remove the thing! Who knows how much we'll have to bump up admission prices just to keep it sitting here?!

BARNUM

Man, I do!

MURDOCK

Is that so? And what do you require from me to fix this problem?

BARNUM

One thing. Just one thing.

MURDOCK

Oh, God, what are you going to bring out of that bag now? A grappling hook? A set of levers, pulleys and eight goons who billy-club their way through caverns and tribal warfare?

(Barnum brandishes some papers at Murdock.)

BARNUM

Tell me. Whose name is at the top of this contract?

MURDOCK

Yours.

BARNUM

Barnum Brown, that's right! I remind you because it's me you made a deal with, not the thunder lizard and not the city. It's my name and my naming things that draws people through your doors, but I think you need a reminder. So, let me fix the exhibit or I'm pulling the beast's story, tonight's speech and my name from these halls.

MURDOCK

What makes you think New Yorkers will spend its hard-earned bills to fund this

MURDOCK (Cont'd)

renovation?

BARNUM

Same reason you were willing to ply me with drink at the start of this chat. The threat of extinction.

MURDOCK

I don't ...

BARNUM

You know the public won't come back if I'm wiped from the show; it's the man taming the monster that makes the monster matter. Understand? Take something away from people and you'll gain what you wish. For now, I'll scare up a bottle. You look as if you need the belt, not me.

(He picks up the bone, gathers his things, turns to leave.)

MURDOCK

Barnum! And you'll put the jawbone back?

BARNUM

I think I ought to hang onto it, don't you? Get your boys to mix a new one up from plaster. Call this bit \$7,000 insurance. Until I've got things ship-shape around here.

MURDOCK

That's extortion!

BARNUM

Such an ugly word. I'd prefer to call it ... professionalism.

MURDOCK

You ... you ...

BARNUM

Take my advice, Murdock: name a creature and you own its fate.

(He exits. Murdock sinks to the chair behind his desk. He sputters, unable to speak. Lights fade.)