

A tiger in his late teens, queuing alone to pick up tickets to an animated kids movie: hardly the coolest of looks, but he'd won the stupid things so he may as well go see the damn flick! It's not like he was going to do anything more than vegetate at home with Netflix or YouTube on a Friday night anyway, especially now that the friend who had enthusiastically agreed to join him tonight so he didn't look like a sad loser (and so the second ticket didn't go to waste) had bailed on him at the last minute to go on a date *with the tiger's own ex*.

The feline shuffled forward a few steps as the queue progressed, then shut his eyes in an effort to calm the beast inside him that was insistent on seething at that stupid, worthless gecko who had the gall to call himself Shaun's friend. With shutters still down on his amber peepers, he forced his mind down a different track, that of pondering what he'd do with the ticket that was now going spare; maybe he could do a good deed and tell the cashier to give it to someone who looked deserving of a treat.

"Hey, Mister! I like your stripes!"

The voice startled Shaun out of his contemplation, his eyes flying open and looking around for the speaker, following the advice of the ears swivelling atop his head by looking down and behind him. His gaze alighted on a curious sight: a young girl, probably around eleven or twelve (i.e. the demographic 'A Grub's Life' was targeting), every single feature that of a gryphon – from her emerald eyes which seemed to sparkle with childlike confidence to her royal purple plumage which shimmered vibrantly in the many lamps illuminating the lobby – save one: a long draconic tail, downed in the same regal feathers that adorned the rest of her that wasn't covered by her elaborate insect costume.

"Uhh...what?" Shaun croaked, his voice caught off-guard just as much his thoughts by the sudden intrusion.

"Your stripes, I like 'em," she said again, staring up at him steadily, "Grew them yourself, I bet, huh?"

"Uhh..." the tiger uttered again, still entirely bemused by the confidence this kid was exuding, "...thanks?"

"Now, now. Don't pester the nice young man too much," came the voice of the figure standing behind the girl. Shaun raised his gaze and saw, not another of the girl's species, nor even a dragon or a gryphon which might have explained her hybrid appearance, but a matronly, middle-aged cow whose hand was resting on her charge's shoulder in a gesture of loose restraint. Catching the tiger's eye, she gave him a weary, apologetic smile before making the introductions, "I'm Martha, and this little terror is Cassandra."

"I'm Shaun..." the tiger replied, still a little uncertainly.

"Lovely to meet you, Sh-"

"How come you're here on your own?" interrupted Cassandra, her attention still firmly fixed upon the tiger.

It seemed that the girl's brusque nature was something Martha had long since given up on truly containing, as she merely sighed and shrugged at Shaun's inquiring glance. Feeling that he had little choice but to engage with Cassandra's curiosity, the feline looked back down at her. "Oh, I won tickets, but my friend isn't coming," he explained, preferring to spare her the details.

Glancing behind him, Shaun realised that those in front of him in the queue had almost reached the counter, so shuffled backwards to cover the space before his attention was dragged back by Cassandra's voice: "You can sit with us!"

"Cassie, I don't think Shaun would want to sit with us," Martha told the girl gently, "I'm sure he just wants to watch the movie in peace on his own."

Cassandra frowned up at the bovine, "If he wants to be a *lame-o*!" she grumbled, once again looking up at the tiger, "Are you a lame-o?" she asked him, her gaze challenging him to admit it.

Shaun considered, glancing between the two of them. True, he *had* been planning to watch the movie on his lonesome and it was also true that he would feel far less of a 'lame-o' were he part of a group. On the other hand, a kid and her minder weren't exactly the coolest company to be seen in.

"Next, please."

The tiger turned and took up his position in front of the counter, withdrawing the voucher from his pocket. "Hi. I won this," he told the bored vixen, handing the paper to her, "and..." he beckoned Martha and Cassandra forward, "one child." He glanced down to see the hybrid beaming up at him and, despite the awkwardness he still felt about the situation, he smiled back, happy at least to have done a good deed.

"That was really sweet of you," Martha said warmly as the three of them tramped into the theatre, laden down with snacks.

Shaun shrugged, checking the tickets clutched between two fingers of the hand also tasked with transporting his milkshake, "It was no biggie: I had a spare ticket after all." Finding their row, he shuffled along it until he reached the most distant of their assigned seats.

"Mine!" he heard Cassie cry as she stuffed her bucket of popcorn into the holder on the armrest she would be sharing with him. Grinning broadly, she flopped down in her seat, fake antenna bobbing around as she took a triumphant slurp of her drink.

The tiger, rather than feeling irritated, found himself incredulously amused by the hybrid's antics. He gave a soft laugh and a shake of the head before settling into his seat, his drink finding a home in the holder on his left. As Shaun broke into his bag of gummies the lights dimmed, the projector flickered into life, and Cassandra's enthusiastic nattering was drowned by the first of many trailers and advertisements. That didn't stop her pelting her newest friend with questions, however, but the start of the movie itself had her sufficiently entranced for the feline to indulge in his snacks undisturbed.

A little over an hour and a half later, the three of them were making their way out of the theatre and, as both Martha and Cassandra insisted on it so vehemently, onwards to the nearest pizza parlour. The bovine insisted that it would be her treat as repayment for Shaun providing the movie tickets and soon they were munching on their respective orders on a bench basking in the glow of a streetlamp, watching the light sparkle on the surface of a stream as it babbled past, wending its way through the park whose gates were shut for the night.

After discussions of the movie had worn thin - the merits of almost every character they could remember debated and favourites chosen - Shaun began to learn a little more about his

companions for the evening. It transpired that Cassandra (whose attention had begun to wander at this point) was the daughter of a wealthy family from overseas, sent to Shaun's locale with her faithful nanny to give her some worldly experience and what was perceived to be a better education. The tiger's questions about exactly where the two had come from were met with evasive responses; clearly that little bit of information was not for the ears of a common feline, so he did not persist.

As he'd reached the theatre by bus, Martha whistled up their driver to escort them all home; Shaun settled luxuriously into the leather backseat of the Mercedes that arrived, his conversation with Martha and the raccoon behind the wheel slightly hushed so as not to disturb the dozing Cassandra. She awoke in time to give him a bleary, reluctant goodbye. She shuffled across to where the tiger had been sitting to wave to him as the car drew away from the kerb, one of the antennae on her costume drooping sadly.

Shaun had thought that the evening would prove to be a one-off, that he wouldn't see either of them again but to exchange nods of acknowledgement if they were to pass in the street. As it transpired, however, the tiger found himself in their company quite regularly over the following months: at least once a fortnight he would receive either a phone call or a knock at the door from Martha, inviting him to join in with some activity in which she and her charge were partaking. He quickly began to suspect that the bovine was willing to pass on Cassandra's invitations because it gave her some respite from keeping tabs on the rambunctious hybrid. For a few hours every couple of weeks she was able to sit back and take a supervisory role while Shaun bore the brunt of Cassie's energetic personality while they played games, be they of the board or video variety, or simply conjured from the youngster's imagination. She was even permitted to sip at a cup of coffee and watch on with amusement while the young feline was used as a mixture of friend, responsible adult, and climbing frame during Cassie's birthday party. Shaun did not begrudge the matronly cow this break at all, in fact he came to enjoy being drawn back into the world of being a kid again despite it sapping every scrap of energy from him to the point that he collapsed into bed the moment he got home from his spells of babysitting.

So, when the doorbell rang one evening in the late summer Shaun fully expected to find at least one of his new-found friends waiting on the doorstep, eager to invite him over once more. He was half right: as predicted, Cassie was stood there with Martha behind her, but there was a very different, gloomy air about them today. Martha had one hand on the hybrid's shoulder, seeming to be attempting to console her as tears glittered on the regal feathers that adorned her face.

"What's up? What's happened?" the tiger asked, looking from one to the other.

Martha appeared to give Cassandra a chance to answer of her own volition, but she seemed to upset to do anything more than sob quietly and lean against her guardian. "We've been summoned back home. Well, Cassie has," the girl gave a soft whimper and clutched at the cow's shirt, hiding her face in it, "We'll be leaving at the end of the week, so there probably won't be time for a leaving party or anything like that," Martha explained, gently stroking the feathered head buried in her side, "So, Cassie wanted to say goodbye." She smiled sadly at Shaun, whose heartstrings were being firmly tugged by the scene of misery he was witnessing.

Then, quite suddenly, Cassie released her grip on Martha and flung herself at the feline, hugging him tightly around the middle. "I'm...going to miss you," she sobbed, hiccupping between the first two words.

Despite finding being in the hybrid's presence to often be energy-sapping and a little wearisome, he'd come to see Cassandra as something like a niece, or a younger sister or cousin. "I'll miss you too," he answered gently, patting her head and returning the hug before prising her off him.

"C-Can I wr-write to you?" she asked, taking a small step back and looking up at him with imploring, steadily leaking eyes.

"Of course you can," Shaun answered with a chuckle, "As often as you like."

Martha had reached out again, her hand gently grasping her charge's shoulder, "C'mon, we need to start packing."

Cassie lunged forward for another brief hug from her feline friend, then allowed herself to be led back to the car waiting for them at the end of the driveway.

Shaun took a few steps down towards the kerb to wave them off once again, fully expecting it to be the end of this briefest of chapters of his life.