

For once Benedict had succumbed to the combination of boredom and nervousness that was sitting in a waiting room and had picked up one of the long out of date magazines from the coffee table which stood in the centre of the ring of fortunately very comfortable armchairs. His selection was a copy of National Geographic from two Novembers previously, much preferring that to the gossipy alternatives. As he was no smartphone fiend, ordinarily he would have wiled away the seconds, minutes, perhaps even hours with his trusty notepad and pencil duo, sketching his surroundings or scribbling his thoughts in the form of freeform poetry: alas, the rush he had been in to leave the house that morning gave him little time to remember those things that weren't entirely essential to his day.

To make matters worse, this wasn't even Benedict's first sojourn in a waiting room that day: his job hunt and half-decent résumé had led him to being invited to no less than three interviews in the space of eight hour, this being the last of them. The first had been more than a little awkward, what with the middle-aged owner of the haulage company choosing to make conversation by vehemently disparaging all of Rodentia, apparently unaware of Benedict's mixed heritage of lynx and mouse. There was certainly no possibility of him agreeing to be their number-cruncher without a real crisis appearing out of the blue.

Benedict had only been given twenty minutes to escape the clutches of a raging speciesist and find his way to an unfamiliar building in an equally unfamiliar part of the CBD for his second appointment of the day. This one had gone far more smoothly, though the job wasn't too much about which to write home: the kindly older gentleman – a rat, no less, with a gold ring on his finger, a photo of his husband on his desk, and a poster decrying every kind of discrimination imaginable – was asking for someone more mobile than him to run his errands, fetch the coffee, and other such menial tasks all for a fairly minimal wage. This too would be a job left well alone until otherwise necessary.

But this job offer, this was far more promising: admittedly he knew nothing of the owner – or whoever his boss would be – as yet, but office work with substantial pay for such a position, excellent promotion prospects, and even a private medical and dental plan would be difficult for Benedict to overlook, bigotry or no bigotry. It was little wonder, therefore, that when he had arrived a little over an hour ago there was just one seat left free in the waiting room and he had met a veritable army of candidates on their way out of the glittering tower as he waited for the elevator; his chances of becoming the chosen one were clearly slim, but so were people's chances of scoring big on the lottery and yet they still bought tickets week in, week out. Now he was the only one left: he was the last in, so he would be the last out.

"Benedict Corder?"

He jumped, somehow startled by the very thing he'd been waiting to hear for over an hour. Closing the magazine on an article regarding the habits of pikas, he rose slowly to his feet and approached the P.A. who had spent most of the afternoon calling people's names.

Benedict far from presented an impressive or imposing figure. Though he had inherited far more lynx traits than he had mouse – hence the haulage guy feeling at ease with calling all rodents 'stinking balls of filth' – certain facets of his appearance diminished the feline majesty: his snout, up which he prodded the glasses he so relied on, was rather longer and narrower than those of a pure-blooded lynx; his tail too was longer, less fluffy, and had a slightly ropey quality to it; his ears were more rounded and lacked any more than a hint of a tuft on top; and, most noticeably, he was quite

considerably shorter than even other members of his mixed-species family – his eighteenth birthday present was cracking the five-foot barrier.

The gazelle he met by a door through which he could now see a long, brightly lit hallway was similarly petite, with a clipboard in hand and rather elaborate, gaudy earrings dangling down to her neck.

“This way, Mr. Corder,” she said briskly, turning sharply and leading him down the hallway at a march. Benedict hurried to catch up, only just falling into step behind her when they’d reached a door at the far end of the corridor. She knocked twice upon it. “The last applicant, Ms. Blackthorn.”

“Thanks, Debbie. Let them in.”

Debbie obliged, opening the door for Benedict and shutting it the moment he was inside.

The interview room had an extremely business-like air about it, as if everything within it had been infused with ‘essence of professionalism’. The colour blue pervaded all: the carpet was deep blue, the blinds were pale blue, the interviewee’s chair was covered in mid-blue leather, and even the light seemed have a bluish hue. Only three things within the room broke with the convention: the jet-black chair and the mahogany desk on the far side of which it stood, and the interviewer’s suit, also black.

When he saw her, there was little Benedict could do to stop himself from gasping. Ms. Blackthorn, as he assumed her to be, was a dragon, something made instantly obvious by the scarlet-scaled tail jutting out towards him as she faced away; it was surely four, maybe five feet long, at its base looked to be as far around as Benedict’s shoulders, and was swaying idly from side to side as she remained otherwise occupied. She was tall too, well over a foot taller than Benedict with heels that pushed that difference beyond two.

No doubt hearing his exhalation, she turned. By her features – red-scaled again with black and gold accents – she looked to be in her mid-thirties with a crisp power suit that hugged her curvaceous figure. Her bust was prodigious, yet she clearly wasn’t using it as a distraction or lure for her interviewees: the shirt of her suit was buttoned up beyond where her cleavage must surely have started, hiding it from any prying eyes. She was a little soft around the middle, something that was discernible even beneath her suit jacket, with broad hips and thick thighs; she didn’t, however, fit the category of ‘fat’: it was more a case of approaching middle-age and a desire to enjoy her doubtlessly affluent lifestyle being tempered by frequent appointments with her personal trainer.

“Coffee?” she asked pleasantly, smiling down at the catlike fellow at her midriff.

Benedict nodded, finding that both his head and his voice were in the mood for stuttering: “Th-Th-Thank you.”

“No need to be nervous,” she assured him gently, still facing him as she attended to their drinks, “This company has a strict ‘no biting’ policy.” She chuckled and so did he, though Benedict was rather more intrigued by what was happening behind her back. While she casually talked to him, her tail had looped its delicate, slender tip around the handle of the coffee press and lifted it comfortably, pouring out two cups of steaming brown liquid, seeming to know on its own the moment to stop.

“Milk?”

He nodded.

Her eyes still on him, her tail moved from the press to the door of the mini fridge beneath the kitchenette and retrieving the clear plastic bottle from within. Keeping its neck held within her coils, she slithered her tail-tip up and around the cap, unscrewing it with greater ease than Benedict's fingers often found, and splashing some dairy into one of the cups.

"Sugar? Sweetener?"

He shook his head this time, watching the milk bottle being returned to its chilly home. She had picked up the milk-free cup in her right hand now while her tail plucked a teaspoon from the drawer and began to stir the other. A moment later, after rapping the spoon on the lip of the cup, she passed his drink to him and gestured for them both to sit down.

"I'm Adrianna Blackthorn," she said, pushing a coaster across the table towards him and holding out a hand.

He took it, feeling her fingers wrap all the way around his hand and then some. "Benedict Corder," he barely more than whispered.

She smiled, taking a sip of her coffee. "Lovely to meet you, Benedict. Now, I suspect that you'd like to get this over with as quickly as possible- "

*Yes and no*, Benedict thought to himself as he too helped himself to a mouthful of the brown stuff.

"-so, I say enough with the small talk, let's get down to business."

He nodded again, drinking a little more coffee in the hope that it would calm his nerves.

"A nice, vague question to start with," she said, clasping her hands in front over upon the desk, "what do you think you could bring to this position?"

Taking a breath, Benedict started to reel off the script he had prepared in the mirror at home, or at least as much as he could remember of it. He found it very difficult to maintain eye contact with Ms. Blackthorn as he did his best to sell himself, though made a conscious effort to at least glance at her face every few seconds before going back to staring at the vaguely rabbit-shaped pattern in the grain of her desk.

As his spiel went on, he caught a hint of movement out of the corner of his eye which turned out to be her tail reaching into a filing cabinet behind her, withdrawing a few sheets of A4 which it then laid on the desk before her.

"It does look like you would be a decent fit for the role," she commented, raising his hopes, "You've got some good experience with good firms out of town. What can you tell me about your time working with Bauer and co., for example?"

He opened his mouth to answer, his brain already a few steps behind when it was distracted by something new. Apparently thinking that vertical panel separating their respective legrooms would obscure them, the dragoness had kicked off one of her shoes and was levering the other one off as he watched.

"Benedict?"

"Oh!" his head snapped up to look her straight in the eyes, "S-Sorry, just trying to remember. It was a while ago after all."

With the handy cover of wanting to keep his gaze away from her face through his obvious nerves, Benedict began to rattle off the story of when he worked at the main office for a large construction company while he watched and examined her feet.

Unsurprisingly, considering the rest of her, her feet were very large and mostly covered in red scales. Each of her four long toes ended in a talon a good few inches long, the points to which they naturally tapered having been filed down to a smooth, blunt curve. Clearly delighted to be free of their high-heeled confines, she stretched and flexed her toes, rotating her ankles, and giving Benedict an excellent view of the tendons rippling beneath the scale-free skin of her soles.

A single bead of sweat, its origin between two of her toes, rolled slowly down the ball of her foot, nudged hither and thither by the contours of the skin to which she clearly applied liberal amounts of moisturisers at least daily. Into the valley of her arch it trickled, following what must have been a familiar path towards the outside of her foot before rolling outwards again. Then it reached her heel, slowing as it worked against the slight incline, and finally tumbling to the floor where it glistened momentarily before being absorbed, finally vanishing.

“Did you ever have to work with tax figures while you were with them?”

Her left foot, during its stretching, had located a fallen pen which had rolled beneath the small stack of drawers the formed part of the desk. Rather than stoop to retrieve it – or more likely scooped it up with the third hand which was her tail – she had curled her toes around it to idly toy with it while she and Benedict discussed his working history. For a time, she simply squeezed gently, teasingly, as if telling it that she could snap it in two at any time of her choosing.

The pen was silent, no doubt enjoying the attention as Benedict knew he would have been. Not a sound it made as she flicked it into the air, sending it spiralling and rolling over and over until she caught it between two toes, squeezing the rubberised grip a moment, before starting to pass it from toe to toe, back and forth along the width of her foot.

Enthralled and with his mind just alert enough to what Ms. Blackthorn was saying to be able to respond, Benedict continued to watch as she curled all but one of her toes under the ball of her foot and spun the stylus around and around that remaining digit, stopping only once it had fallen to the carpet as its momentum expired. But she wasn't done with it yet: onto the helpless piece of stationery she placed her foot, all but smothering it and obscuring it from his view. Up and down she rolled the lucky little pen, up and down, pressing it into the carpet beneath, covering it in her sweet scent, showing it, telling it emphatically, ‘You. Are. Mine.’

“Well then, I think that will be plenty for me to be getting on with.”

She had stood up now, releasing the pen from the playful, enviable torture and had held out her hand again. Benedict scrambled to his feet, craning his neck to meet her gaze he shook what he could of the proffered limb.

“I can't tell you anything for certain just yet, but...well, don't go far,” she smiled down at him once more, giving him a telling wink.

A minute later he was being ushered back to the elevator by Debbie, ready to start his journey home after a long, productive, and unexpectedly enjoyable day. *No, he wouldn't be going far...*