

Nepotism

By Voss

The light clicking of Erin's heels on marble floor added to the din of afternoon business in the lobby of Littlelake International's regional headquarters. It was never empty during business hours and rarely outside of them, the single, fifteen-story office building abuzz with over 40,000 personnel throughout the workweek. Erin loved it, and the life and energy of the corporation fueled the twenty-two-year-old's ambition.

With a confident stride toward the elevators, the leopard shared polite, happy smiles with those crossing her path, people whom she had never met but who deserved courtesy nonetheless, as far as she was concerned. It was her attitude that there were too many problems in life to add to them by being unfriendly, and a smile costs nothing! Some seemed to disagree, her smiles returned with dispassionate stares or averted eyes, perhaps by executives looking down on her youth, perhaps by lower level office workers intimidated by her sharp, professional appearance. It never bothered her. She understood that they had their reasons. While she believed that courtesy was deserved of everyone, she also knew that many weighed courtesy on respect, and respect had to be earned.

Erin had been earning hers over the course of the last ten weeks of internship, which she thought back on as she rose with the elevator to the eleventh floor. Her reflection in the metal doors smiled back at her as she primped, with her strong, feline face framed by sleek, black hair immaculately styled into a businesslike bun. That spotted tail of hers, with gentle, subdued motions, oscillated left and right at its tip, just past the hem of her skirt. With light tugs and adjustments by manicured fingers, she settled the three-piece garment into perfection of appearance. She always strove to look as good as she strove to be, yet today was a particular occasion.

Exiting the elevator, she turned down the same hall that she had every weekday for the past ten weeks, going toward the same room. At this point, it was the epitome of routine, funny to her to think that it would be over soon. "Good afternoon, Jim," she greeted with

warm familiarity as the door before her opened, and the young goat stepped back to hold it for her.

“You look great today, Erin!” he gave a cheerful smile, hands idly reinforcing their hold on a small, plastic box he carried as he let the leopard pass by.

Erin returned a grateful grin and a pleasant reply, “Thanks, Jim,” as she slipped past him and his package in the doorway. She gave a warm smile to the box in his hands, through the transparent plastic square in its top, before continuing with Jim, “Last day of the internship. I need to leave a good impression.” The leopard stopped for the exchange, with her body half-turned on her way.

“I wouldn’t worry about that! You leave a good impression wherever you go!” the goat replied enthusiastically. Erin chuckled. Jim gave a shy little grin, straightened his posture, and cleared his throat, “Um, anyway, we’ll miss you,” with a heartbeat of pause, “Oh! Uh—unless you get the job, right? The best intern gets a job? I’m sure it’ll be you!”

She chuckled, shrugged, and confidently replied, “Thank you. I always do my best.” Her eyes, then his, turned to a yellow light that blinked on the box he carried. “Looks like you have to go.”

“Right! Uh—sorry,” Jim looked apologetically at the box. He called after Erin before parting, “I’ll be right back to get you!”

The leopard waved and continued on, passing through a waiting room with an unstaffed reception desk beside a door. A tablet sat on the desk, and she typed in her name, scrolled through a form without needing to read it, ticked a box, signed, dated, and tapped to confirm. She moved to the door and pressed her finger to the button beside it, an amused smile turning to the sign beneath the button: “Do NOT Knock. Use Doorbell.” Erin always appreciated the protocol and consideration behind the sign.

The door opened, and an office-formal, middle-aged wolf greeted her with a nod, “Good afternoon.” He gestured with a point of his muzzle to the desk, “Have you completed the NSS forms?” It was the same question every day—routine, protocol—and she was pleased to

respond in the affirmative every day in turn. Erin followed him within the room, and further, once directed, through an open door into a smaller room of tiled, metallic floors, walls, and ceiling.

It was daunting the very first time she had stepped foot into this room, particularly when the door slid into place and sealed shut behind her with a pneumatic hiss. The room felt sterile, without a single interruption in the tiled pattern of brushed metal plates, even the door fitting invisibly into it, such that she would lose it if she lost her bearing. Her surroundings were illuminated by a white light filtering through the cracks between tiles in the ceiling. Erin knew the technician could see her on a monitor, through a camera, but not from where. Even the loudest noises from outside would be muffled and distant, and it was often silent. She was trapped until the technician let her out, after its work was done. The chamber was claustrophobic.

In time, however, she had decided the chamber was not unlike the elevator she used to reach this floor. Like an elevator, she stood still within the room and waited for it to take her where she needed to go. It was just another part of office life. While the technician outside worked at the consoles and monitors she had passed by on her way in, the systems around her began to hum to life, a soft thrumming from all directions. Knowing that the process would take some time, she drew her phone from her jacket pocket.

Eventually—*ding*—a soft, friendly note rang out from somewhere in the machine. *Ding ding*, it followed, and Erin closed her eyes, preparing for what was to come. *Ding*, came a final chime as the signal to open her eyes, and when she did, without any further fanfare, she found the monochromatic chamber around her far more vast. From wall to wall, it had been fifteen feet on a side, yet then seemed around three football fields long, and she stood squarely within a single tile that her feet had overlapped moments before. Erin, however, did not need to look around her surroundings to confirm this, and she simply put her phone away once more with a smile on her lips and with her eyes lifted to the door.

Moments later, it hissed as it unsealed, and the wolf behind it appeared. The same technician she had smiled to, eye to eye, now towered over her. From her perspective, he

looked almost as tall as the very office building they worked in, but it was no more the case that he had grown than it was that the room had. The desk beside him seemed to her dozens of feet high, and the door in the distance loomed as a great monolith. Of course, they were all the same, and it was Erin who was smaller. Even with how routine this experience was, her brain, like most people's, consistently went through that disorienting twist of perception. It tried to preserve continuity of the self, to tell her that it was the room that changed, that she walked among giants, and it took all the evidence to the contrary for reality to set in.

The leopard had been subsized, a smidge taller than the wolf's middle finger was long, and just small enough to fit width-wise under the ball of his polished dress shoe—though such morbid thoughts, occasionally surfacing, were quickly banished from the young professional's mind. That was unthinkable, but this, what she experienced in the present moment, was perfectly normal. Though she imagined she looked to the wolf like a large insect or non-sapient mouse on the floor, he nodded in greeting to her with the same respect and professionalism that he showed her when he welcomed her into the room.

"Jim's returning shortly, so I'll go ahead and..." the man began to say, trailing off his words as a gentle buzz rang out. Erin had heard the approach of footsteps leading up to that distant door well before she heard the buzzer. With the bass of sneakers' impact on office carpet resonating through the floor, there was no way she could not. Her present size magnified everything. The technician updated her, "That'll be him now. Just a moment."

Erin smiled up to him and nodded her polite gratitude for the courtesy in his resonant voice. The bass tones of standard-sized people's speech were amplified the most to someone of her size, changing the quality of everyone's voice, as did the audible movement of a tongue bigger than she was. She waited, hands folding in front of her waist.

He opened the door, and a cool gust carried in from the waiting room and wafted through her hair. The carpet was vacuumed every week, but the scent of dust on the breeze still made its mark on a nose her scale. An idle hand fixed her bangs as the goat stepped into the room and up to the doorway of the chamber, carrying that little, plastic box.

“All aboard,” Jim announced cheerily, and he gave a bright smile down to Erin as he crouched to set the box at the edge of the chamber. His teeth in that smile were each as large as her head; the new gust of air, scented with goat fur and cheap body spray, swirled past her as he crouched; and the finger, which tapped a button on the box, was thicker than her torso.

She had every physical reason to fear the power in the beings before her, and many in her position would have, but to her, by now, this was normal. With a warm smile up to him, the inches-tall leopard strode on inaudibly clicking heels toward the young man who held the door to the carrier open for her just as he had earlier held the door to the room. “Thank you, Jim. To the hive, please,” she asked as though directing a taxi.

Inside the box of white, frosted walls and ceiling, with viewports of transparent plastic and screen-lined holes for air, she stepped forward. Within were six empty chairs, in columns of three along each wall to the left and right. She chose a seat in the front row and securely buckled herself in. Her eyes passed over the darker spots along the foggy walls, where Jim’s palms and fingertips pressed against the translucent carrier, and she smiled upwards, through the skylight of sorts, to see his friendly face looking down. Erin gave him a thumbs-up.

With his tap of the button, the electronic door slid shut, and Jim lifted her as he stood. This was the way to transport subsized people—protocol—as the fragility of a person her size made carrying one in the hand a tremendous risk. In orientation for her internship, they had stressed this in no uncertain terms. Never was she to walk on the floor or ask a standard-sized person to carry her, since no one could be expected to watch their step at all times or refrain from a simple twitch of coffee-jittered fingers. Either one meant serious injury or death.

Jim had tripped once, she heard. His foot had caught a power cable one of the managers strung across the hall between cubicles, and as he fell forward, the carrier with six subsized employees flung from his hands. It tumbled through the air, end over end, until it struck the ground and rolled further still. Erin could hardly imagine what it must have felt like to be thrown the equivalent of hundreds of feet, but it was by design. The light weight to area of the carrier and of the subs themselves made the fall a slow one, far gentler than if Jim had dragged them down with his own falling body weight, and the seatbelts and airbag safety

systems resulted in no more than a broken collar bone for one of the six inside. The protocol put her at ease. To imagine what would have happened if they were held in his hands did not merit any thought.

Erin and Jim moved through the halls in the post-lunch hour office building. Distant phones rang, and voices murmured, adding to a bass din that all blended together for the small woman. They passed through a door to a wider area, a large office floor with cubicles of shoulder-high partition walls around a central structure that reached from floor to ceiling. It looked like an enormous filing cabinet at first glance, with handles and keyholes, until one noticed the windows with movement within. It was a miniature office building in its own right, colloquially known as the department's "hive."

That was, of course, not its official name. Officially, it was the Subsize Personnel Division Offices of the Department of Underwriting. Nobody knew who coined the short name, many assuming it was some executive comparing the subsize employees to a swarm of insects, but most of them owned it. Like the busy worker bees of a hive, they saw themselves as the lifeblood of the company. Those desk jobs that produced and provided service were almost universally made into subsize positions, staffed in hives such as this within nearly every department of the Littlelake regional headquarters, one of many companies that did the same. The managers sat in the cubicles around the hive, their desks radiating out from the central structure. Their own managers, in turn, enjoyed the four-walled offices at the perimeter of the floor.

"Your destination," Jim chuckled with playful, mock formality, his amusement subtly shaking the carrier and Erin within it. She was used to it, and she gave him a grin and a nod through the sunroof. He gently slid the carrier into place at the side of the hive and opened the door. It locked into a port, a door on the structure itself opening with a green light and a gentle, pinging sound to signal safety.

Unbuckling herself, the leopard stood and took a step forward, before calling up to him with a raised voice through the openings in the box, "Thanks, Jim! I'm just here for the evaluation, so I'll see you soon."

To him, her voice was faint against the backdrop of business all around, but he had no trouble making out her words. “Break a leg, Erin!” the goat grinned down to her. He watched her thumbs-up response, and he watched her turn to leave, before he interrupted, “Uh—hey! Maybe we should, uh, get a drink after—you know, to celebrate your victory?”

Erin looked up through the clear plastic to Jim’s grinning face. It would have been easy for anyone to be intimidated by the young man’s relative size and power—it would have been easy to assume he was leveraging that. The leopard, however, trusted well-meaning Jim. She could see in the lopsided twist of his lips, with every valley of fur in that face magnified for her, how nervous he was to ask her, and she thought it was adorable. “Sure.” A drink wouldn’t hurt, and she could let him down easy. “Gotta run!” she announced, waving up to Jim with a bright smile.

“S—Um, bye!” he tried to contain his excitement as he watched her turn and disappear into the hive, her trailing tail following through the door. The goat stood there for short seconds of reflection, before disengaging the carrier from the hive. He walked his way back to the subsizing office with a spring in his step.

From one office building into another, Erin walked through a lobby with bright lighting and modest, professional décor, all sized for people on her scale. Visually, it would have been easy to forget that it was subsized at all, walking among the furnishings and artificial plants, until one looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows and to the immense cubicles, with their occupants, beyond. Subtler sensations still conveyed her small reality, Erin’s light steps making hardly a sound against the tiled floor, while the air she walked against felt that little bit thicker than normal.

“Erin!” The voice cheerily called out from a border collie’s grinning muzzle, drawing glances from the only other couple in the quiet lobby. Her black and white tail wagged over her khaki pants as she bounded to meet the leopard.

“Jen! How’d your eval go?”

The collie joked, "I don't think I got the job," with a mock-anxious tug on her airy blouse's collar. "Nah, it pretty much sucked," she remarked with a hands-lifted shrug as she joined Erin on her walk, "But it's not like I wasn't expecting it. I mean, it *is* Hank."

"Yeah." Erin gave a laugh. A second passed between them. They shared glances. Her smile faded, and her voice lowered, "Did he try anything again?"

Jen let out a scoffing laugh and smirked as she asked, "You mean like the shoe thing?" It had been only the second week of the internship when Jen told Erin what happened.

Inappropriate though it was, yet certainly not unheard of, for managers to use interns as personal assistants, Hank had taken it too far when he directed the collie to polish his shoes. He had had the inches-tall intern work beneath his desk to do so, her hands smeared with black shoe polish while she dragged a bit of cloth around the faux leather toe section. His feet, broader than she was tall, encircled her and the shoes like a wall, toes flexing worryingly near the young woman. Jen had admitted that she feared for her safety then, and her canine nose reeled at what she experienced on such a scale. She wondered if Hank even knew how foul his feet were, or if that was his point to begin with.

"Like that, yeah," Erin replied with a frown, starting to say, "You know, Jen, you really should—"

"I know what you're gonna say," the collie dismissed, her smirk faltering, "But it's been forever already." She hesitated, before adding, "I mean, it wasn't even as bad as the coffee thing."

More recently, while together reviewing Jen's work at his cubical, Hank "accidentally" splashed his lap with a lukewarm cup of coffee. A scrap of tissue found its way from pinched fingers into the collie's hands before she knew what had happened, and she was asked to do him the favor of wiping it up. His authority, size, and intimidating history compelled her to cooperate. An uneasy climb down from the desk brought her to kneel on the giant's thigh and sop up the damp cloth.

She recalled the smell of coffee as a blessing that offset the powerful scents so near to her boss' body. The pants were musty, and an acrid musk carried to her from between his legs, only growing as he did. While his pants tented beside Jen, Hank continued reviewing her work, speaking as if nothing was out of the ordinary. It was bigger than her, she recalled. She had frozen, paralyzed, staring at it. He finally looked down at her, to it, and back to her, and neither of them said a word. They concluded the meeting, and she went on her way, humiliated. Erin was the only one Jen told.

"Jen, you should have reported him for both," Erin urged her friend, "You still can."

"Fuck it," the collie replied, shrugging and looking away. A moment passed, and she put on a smirk and a laugh to continue more lightly, "I just wanted to get through the internship, and it's over now, so—whatever, right?"

They looked to one another, Erin's concerned frown doing nothing to mitigate Jen's dismissive smirk. "Anyway," Jen went on, "He did try some shit today. Showed me my score—twenty-six out of fifty! Ha!—and that piece of shit told me I could come back after hours for a bonus."

"Oh my god."

"Right? Creep'd probably make me his pet and have me run on a wheel," she joked. "Who's into subs anyway? It's fucked up." Shaking her head, while they arrived at an elevator, she laughed and nudged Erin to say, "You're so lucky you got Fitzroy."

Moments passed while Erin depressed the elevator call button, silent concerns and worries looking from her eyes to Jen's, before she let out a sigh, nodded, and formed a smile again. "You're telling me," the leopard agreed, "She cracks the whip, but that's why we were the most productive group in the whole program."

"Harsh but fair, right?"

"Exactly," Erin agreed with admiration for the manager as they started to ride the subsized elevator. She joked, "You'd hate her."

“Hey now!” Jen laughed, “We can’t all be *summa cum laude*, free-ride-getting, workaholic geniuses! I mean, you’re pretty much a shoe-in for that job,” with a playful jab of her elbow. “Unless,” she considered, shrugging, “Do you think it’s a problem that—”

“Ah!-ah!-ah!” the leopard interjected, waving the thought away, “Ms. Fitzroy’s a professional. All she cares about is who’s best for the job.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure,” she smiled. A moment passed, and her smile grew into a grin, as her volume dipped in the privacy of the elevator, “Besides: I haven’t told anybody, but come on, Jen. The scholarship? The MBA scholarship? I’m accepting. I don’t need the job right now.”

Jen grew a grin of her own, and she laughed, “You bitch! Do you know how many people are working their asses off to keep up with you?”

“And good for them!” Erin beamed, “They’ll be better for it,” and teased, “You could take a lesson from them, yourself.” The elevator announced its arrival.

As the doors opened, another lobby came into view, considerably more populated than the last. Interns waited for their evaluations, while those who had completed theirs milled about, sharing anxieties and experiences. A mouse about Erin’s age met her gaze as soon as she stepped from the elevator. The meek-postured woman broke the folding of her fidgeting hands to lift a low wave to the leopard, beckoning her over.

“I’m gonna say hi to Liz before the evaluation. Catch you after?” Erin smiled to Jen with a hand on her shoulder.

The collie glanced to the mouse, chuckled with a playful grin, and nodded to Erin, “Sure, I’ll hang around.”

“Great. Let’s grab some coffee. Jim’s gonna join us,” Erin replied briefly, before parting with a smirk and a wave to the surprised collie. She crossed the lobby to the mouse. “Hi, Liz,” she gave a bright and friendly greeting, “Early for your evaluation?”

“I— Um...” the mouse started to reply, stammering as she looked up to the taller woman, inches on their scale, fractions of an inch in reality. “I just had it.” A fidgeting hand lifted to fix her glasses in place on her muzzle.

Erin could tell that Liz was even more anxious than the shy mouse usually was. It was obvious to her that she was worried about how she had done in the evaluation. “I’m sure you did great. You’ve been one of the hardest workers here, and, well, have you ever even made a mistake?” she encouraged with a warm laugh, “You have nothing to worry about.”

Liz shook her head, “That’s not—” She interrupted herself, squeezing her hands together in front of her belly and biting her lip. “D-don’t... Don’t go to your evaluation, Erin.”

Surprised, Erin lifted her brow, smile fading with confusion. She had never taken her for the competitive type, and Liz asking her to forfeit was extreme. They looked each other in the eyes for uncertain seconds, before Erin gave a soft laugh and smiled again. “We’re both in the running. You have a good shot at beating me, Liz,” she replied, and it was true. Erin might have been anxious, herself, if she needed this opportunity.

“No— That’s— Erin—” the mouse tripped over her words, intense frustration becoming apparent in her expression. Her mouth hung open, lip quivering, as she seemed to struggle for what to say. At last, gritting her teeth, she started to tear up. “Just— Erin, go home.”

“Liz, what’s gotten into you? I’m not gonna just—”

“Go home!” Liz raised her voice. The room quieted, and others looked on, meeting the eyes of the pair that glanced across the crowd, Erin perplexed and Liz looking horrified.

Before Erin knew it, she had the mouse’s arms wrapped around her, embracing her tightly, her face buried against the taller woman’s neck. Erin was stunned. Her arms, held out, moved with uncertainty to softly pat her colleague’s back. The body against her shuddered with silent sobs, and she felt the wetness of tears in her fur. Never would she have expected quiet Liz to act this way. She guessed that Liz must really need the job.

“What’s the matter?” Erin whispered with worry for her colleague. She started to move the two of them out of the center of the room, at least, to a wall where they could have more

privacy. The mouse's movements were sluggish and reluctant, and she made no answer but more sobbing. The leopard went on to ask, "Why do you need the job this much?" but Liz only replied with a shake of her head, fingers digging into Erin's back. "It's okay... It's okay..."

A minute passed of the leopard murmuring reassurance into the rodent's large ears. She gently rubbed her back, holding her supportively close, as Liz clung tightly to her. Liz's tears started to dry up, and her sobbing had ended. Finally, Erin drew her hands up to the mouse's shoulders, gently grasping her. It was time to go. "I don't want to be late. I have to go now."

The distraught expression that looked up at her, behind fogged glasses and on tear-soaked cheeks, sank Erin's heart into her stomach. "Do you want to join some of us for coffee after?" she offered. That would be nice. She could surprise her, then, with news that the job was in all likelihood Liz's, that Erin would decline it. She thought about spoiling it right then, to save Liz further worry, but many eyes were still on them.

Liz barely responded. Her lip quivered, contorting into an ugly expression that looked as though she were about to begin sobbing once again.

"That's Jen, over there," Erin nodded across the lobby to the collie, who, on seeing them look her way, put on a happy grin to mask the awkwardness of the past few minutes. "She's a friend from school. Go say hi, and I'll catch up, okay?"

Still, there was hardly a response. The mouse didn't want to let go.

"I have to— Liz," she spoke softly, grasping her shoulders more firmly and pushing her away. Finally, the mouse's trembling arms released, and she stumbled back a pace. Wincing through tears and covering her muzzle with a shaking hand, she nodded to Erin. "I'll be back," she assured Liz with a fresh smile, nodding to her, then waving over to Jen, before making her way for a door at the end of the lobby.

At the door, she looked back. She gave a reflexive wince at the heartbreaking sight of Liz still standing there, staring after her, her quivering knees barely keeping her up. The mouse, after a moment's hesitation, mouthed, "I'm sorry..." Erin put on her smile again, nodded with

understanding, waved, and turned to move through the door. It took a deep breath to steady herself after that, the leopard feeling truly terrible for her colleague's emotional anguish.

However, she still had an evaluation to do. Though the prize for peak performance was of no consequence to her, Ms. Fitzroy would be a key reference for her curriculum vitae. It was as important as ever to impress. She was confident that she would, of course, and Erin mentally reoriented herself to these thoughts as she stepped onto the catwalk.

At the ceiling of the expansive office floor, catwalks branched out from the hive, overlooking the cubicles where the standard-sized managers worked. Travel by carrier was effective for longer distances, but Jim could not be available to take every sub everywhere in the department every time they needed. The catwalks kept them safely off the floor while letting them move on their own—provided their destination was a manager's desk. In each cubicle, a spiral staircase, fit for an inches-tall person, stretched from the corner of the desk to the ceiling catwalks.

Erin walked toward one in particular. She smiled across huge, open spaces to wave to the other interns who traveled their own catwalks. Looking down, she saw the heads of managers from above, some nibbling on a late lunch, some working with files, and some evaluating interns of their own. The sounds and smells of the working environment carried up to her, magnified, and though it was easy to become overwhelmed by the sea of giants stretched out beneath the catwalks, it was another aspect of being subsized that she had grown used to. She thought to herself, with some amusement, that what had felt so alarming at first would soon be behind her entirely.

In the distance, she saw the prim bun at the back of Ms. Fitzroy's head, neatly centered between the rodent's large ears. Erin glanced at her phone as she continued on: still minutes early, to her satisfaction. Another minute's walk took her half the breadth of the office floor, to the top of the staircase at her supervisor's desk, and she began her descent.

Staring at managers from the catwalk was improper etiquette, so Erin made herself busy on her phone as she walked around and around the spiral. She felt the brief glance of the seeming giant on her, Fitzroy unceasing in her task at the computer, fingers continuing to strike

the keyboard, its input reflected on a monitor that would seem to dwarf most theater screens. Ignoring the rattling of the staircase and keeping her balance through the seismic keystrokes, the leopard soon neared the base.

Her attention lifted from her phone to see a small plate of celery not far from the exit onto the desk. It struck her as odd, Erin having assumed Ms. Fitzroy would think eating at one's desk to be unprofessional. She had certainly never seen her do so before. However, the more important matter of her evaluation refocused her as she came to the door at the bottom of the stairs, reaching for the small computer console beside it, and there she hesitated.

It was protocol to electronically sign out when leaving the areas of the hive and catwalks. Doing so fostered a sense of safety for the subs and accountability for standard-sized managers. More than protocol, it was required to unlock the door. Now, the console was off—the first time she had ever seen that—and the thin plastic and metal door was ajar. Erin was unsure what to do, if she should delay the evaluation to turn it on and proceed the proper way. She was unsure if Ms. Fitzroy was even aware.

The keystrokes paused, and the woman at the desk looked down at Erin with sharp eyes through her rectangular lenses. Fitzroy reached over halfway between herself and the catwalk to tap once on the desk, sending a jolt through the ground and up the leopard's legs. That answered that question. The mouse's hand continued on to pluck up a stick of celery and carry it skyward, bringing it to thin lips and between the teeth beyond, its crunch filling the air as eyes turned back to her monitor. A second half of the celery hovered, waiting, before those lips.

Erin was certain that Ms. Fitzroy maintained the intimidating image for the benefit of keeping subordinates productive and responsible, but that made it no less daunting in the moment. The leopard pushed open the unlocked door and stepped out onto the desk, putting on a professional smile and ensuring her walk carried none of her sudden anxiety. She moved to where the finger had tapped, between the plate and the manager. Standing at the height of her waist, with more than enough middle-aged mouse framed in that stern, tailored suit looming over her, it took Erin, even with the confidence in her stellar performance, even

without the pressure of competing for the job, brief moments of hesitation before she could begin.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Fitz—”

A crunch silenced her, the enormous jaw closing around the celery. Behind sealed lips, softer, wetter crunches followed. The mouse’s hand lowered back to her keyboard, and she resumed typing as she chewed.

The leopard’s tail frizzed as she stared upwards, watching that sharp, narrow jaw clench and relax in succession around the fibrous vegetable. It became clear to her what the purpose of the snack at Ms. Fitzroy’s desk was, and the casual interruption clearly established where the power in the interaction lie, if Erin’s size had not. That was frustrating and confusing; Erin had always seen her supervisor give respect where it was due, and this seemed anything but.

At a glance down from the monitor, looking right to the leopard, Erin, in response, put her frustration aside and began again. “Ms. Fitzroy, I would like to start by saying how much of a pleasure it has been working with you these last ten weeks,” she started and folded her hands, clasped around her phone, behind her back. The leopard wore a small, polite, and professional smile. “The experience I’ve gained under you has been invaluable, and I...” she continued speaking on, yet trailing with uncertainty, as the manager’s hand lifted from her keyboard again, this time carrying over Erin.

The large palm moved disconcertingly near to the leopard, near enough that she could have reached out and touched the cuff of the woman’s suit. It moved past her as though she was not even there, entirely disregarding her, and Erin was stunned speechless. In all her time with the company, none had reached a hand so close to her, and it was indeed a serious violation of protocol. She stared up at Fitzroy, whose eyes were on the monitor; looked back to the hand, which reached over the plate of celery; and a second later turned back up to the woman, who met her gaze.

In the next moment, she hardly registered the motion behind and in front of her at once, before a searing pain expelled the air from her lungs with a violent cough. A thumb tip the size of her torso mashed her breasts flat, with Erin pinched between it and a fingertip on

her back. Her tiny hands immediately dropped her phone and pressed against the digit, shoving it, slapping it, and clawing against the soft fur, warm skin, and unyielding nail. With wide open muzzle, she tried to scream, but she had no breath to form a single squeak. She kicked her heels against the desk beneath her, scrabbling to push away, but the hand held her firmly in place.

Then, it dragged her upwards, far faster than Jim had ever lifted her in the carrier. With no oxygen in her lungs and her heart racing, dark spots filled the leopard's vision. Her grip slipped, hands falling limp against the thumb, before she drew them back for awkward strikes against the manicured vice. The leopard's motions were wild and uncontrolled, driven by desperation, reflex, and instinct to free herself from the crushing grasp and breathe again. Her tail lashed against the fingers behind her, heels kicking back at thick skin, while her tongue lolled out with futile, wide-mouthed gasps.

A wave of hot, wet air rolled across her and pulled her attention up from the hand. Her fingers dug into it with a panicked grip, as Erin seized and stared directly into the open maw of her supervisor. From the thin, black lips framing the top and bottom of her field of vision to the molars framing the entrance to a gaping gullet, the tunnel was laid out before her like something alien. There was familiarity in each part—Erin had no difficulty identifying the broad muscle, thicker and longer than her, undulating against the base of the maw, or the pools of clear liquid that glistened across its surface—but she could not feel that this was part of a person. This was monstrous.

These observations passed in the blink of an eye, and she realized that she had never stopped moving toward it. Her thrashing resumed with what strength she had while her lungs strained against cracking ribs, denying that there was no hope of freeing herself or averting course. The crushing force carried her, uninterrupted, past the lips and through a wall of sweltering air. She kicked down at the teeth, her heel gliding harmlessly across the enamel and lodging in the mouse's gums.

The thumb slid across her chest and away, grinding her breasts painfully and tearing open her suit jacket as it did. Its absence gave her enough time for a single, desperate breath

of thick air before, in the same motion as the thumb was removed, Erin was shoved face-down into the tongue. Her foot, hooked against the tooth, forced her knee backwards and snapped it as she was mashed into the soft, wet muscle. Hands that had fought against the fingers now fought against the tongue, pushing and sliding along its smooth, slick surface and smearing the pools of saliva in haphazard, sweeping arcs. Erin took a second breath to fill her burning lungs, and she inhaled choking volumes of the viscous fluid.

While she struggled to breathe and buck against the finger forcing down her back, darkness came over her. Heat and humidity doubled within the sealed confines of the maw, replacing the oppressive force of the finger as it released her and slid out, between closed lips. She rolled over, in part by the direction of her kicking and shoving limbs and in part tumbled by the moving tongue beneath her. Choking coughs wracked her body with adrenaline-muffled pain, yet she was compelled to use the precious little air she could take in to scream.

“No! No-o!” she wailed with rasping, sputtering spasms of her lungs, before even these higher order words faltered as she landed hard onto a solid, unyielding surface, striking the back of her head. She reeled as she reached out blindly with grasping hands and her one good leg, recognizing by touch the row of teeth she had collapsed atop. Her hands recoiled from the teeth, pushing then against the fleshy cheek or tongue to either side. “N-uh!” she protested, her voice breaking into excruciating coughs.

Erin had another thought that warranted crying out: to know why. To stop this, however, was her foremost concern. “Pl-eea-se...” Once she was released, she thought, she could then find out why Ms. Fitzroy had done this. “St-op!” She had to get Ms. Fitzroy to listen. “No!” She had to—

A crunch silenced her, the enormous jaw closing around the intern. Behind sealed lips, softer, wetter crunches followed. The mouse's hand lowered back to her keyboard, and she resumed typing as she chewed.

Maeve Fitzroy grimaced, briefly, then settled into a stern frown. Glancing down by her plate of celery, her eyes fell onto the discarded cellphone. She lifted her pointer finger again to her lips and swiped it with the tip of her tongue. Dabbing the phone with her damp digit, she drew it back up to her mouth and kissed it away. With her tongue and lips, she angled the tiny remnant between her foreteeth and bit down, shattering it.

Chewing thoroughly, she rolled the wet mass over her tongue and between her teeth, from one side of her mouth to the other. The din of office chatter, of distant phones ringing, and of footsteps passing by cubicles continued, all unaware of what had happened so near them. A minute passed, and she pushed the tangled scraps of cloth and meat to the back of her throat, before swallowing.

She typed into a spreadsheet displayed on the screen before her, "Intern Evaluations." Names, scores, and notes were arrayed. The last two entries read:

"Elizabeth Fitzroy; 48; Quickly learns new tasks, dedicated worker, slight perfectionist,"

"Erin Prescott; N/A; Failed to appear for evaluation."