

## Empire

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I adjust my tie and check my watch. Again. I'm on schedule. The train is coming, two minutes to go on the platform. I'm right at the front of the queue, locked and loaded.

Nothing will stop me from getting on this very next service.

I've got the interview of my life today. Fresh out of uni: Harold Wickers, Bachelor of Business and Economics, graduating with high distinction and Masters starting next semester, having an interview with *the* Esther Lions of Empire Economics.

It will be a shitty job to start. I'll be an assistant, most likely, and certainly nothing worth putting on a business card. But, at least it's a foot in the door. I'll work my ass off, like I have for the last four years, and advance up the company ladder. I'll be the greatest corporate financial advisor this city has ever seen. I'll be featured in Forbes, on the front page of every finance magazine and weekend newspaper lift-out in the country. You'll see. In my peripheral vision, I see the train lights coming up the tunnel. I do a quick visual check to ensure I've got everything I need. The train aligns with the platform and the rush of air moves my tie. I catch my reflection in the windows. I look respectable in my seven-hundred-dollar suit. It took me weeks to save enough money to buy it on a part-time barista's wage.

The familiar beep of doors opening sounds, and we all shuffle into the carriage. I take a seat on the lower deck among many empty seats. I put my headphones on and play music to pass the time. As the train glides along the line, I practice what I'm going to say to Esther Lions, the head of corporate finance at Empire Economics: *"I'm resilient, hardworking. No, I don't mind working weekends. I'm happy to proofread contracts and work long hours. Whatever it takes to make this company thrive, I'll do it. Economics is my passion. I've read everything. There is nothing I want more than to expand my career in this city."* It all sounds so Hallmark. Being nervous doesn't help. Luckily I have a briefcase full of written references from lecturers and internships and results from uni. Maybe they'll speak if I can't communicate simple English.

I continue scrolling mindlessly through my phone as the train stops again. And that's when I see two of them walking straight in my direction. They wear hoods and baggy pants, and lock eyes with me like hunters.

*Please. Please, not today.*

But sure enough, they approach me quietly, faces unanimated as they ignore the empty seats and sit directly across from me like it's no big deal.

I remain blasé and stay calm. If they know I'm intimidated, it will make me seem weak and susceptible to an attack.

I try to look everywhere except at the two women across from me. I can feel their eyes boring into me. Staring at my neck, looking downwards at my shirt, then my pants and back up again. And what they're thinking makes me feel physically sick.

They lean back casually in the seats, whispering to each other. I adjust myself uncomfortably. I can't move seats, no matter how much I want to. It will only egg them on. I've already stopped catching public transport at night so I don't get attacked.

*Not all women are the same.*

Women say it constantly. And I believe them. Not all women are the same, but I can't afford to take the risk. I know for a fact my mum isn't like this, or my sisters.

They love and respect the men in their lives, but these two assholes sitting across from me ... they're a different breed.

All I can do is pray they get off at the next stop. If they get off on mine, I don't know whether I'll make it out of the tunnel in one piece.

They continue looking at me like a delicacy.

I play on my phone some more. I'm not actually reading anything. I can't focus. My thoughts are becoming irrational. My keys are in my pocket. They could do some serious damage with enough force.

I jumped as fingertips touched my leg.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" one of them asked me huskily.

I pushed further back into my seat so far my back hurt.

*Ignore them.*

"Must be a bit shy," the other one snarled.

The next stop came and a heap of commuters got on, but these assholes stayed.

Every stop brought me closer to my destination and they weren't giving up. I could still see them eyeing me, watching

me, whispering. There were other women in this carriage. They could see what was happening, and they did nothing but sit there and pretend nothing was going on. Between my manic thoughts, I tried to remember what they looked like in case I had to do a police report. Not that that would make a difference anyway. I should report this harassment right now, but they'd have a hard enough time believing me, let alone charging them. It would be my fault because I took the train alone.

The train stopped at Central. And the women finally got up to leave, touching my thigh lightly as I went, "See ya later, handsome."

When they were out of sight, my chest caved in relief and my heartrate slowed. No police reports for me today. I shook off the shitty excess energy and refocused on my notes.

The speaker announced we were arriving at Town Hall station. I got up to wait at the door as it come to a stop. I navigated through the crowds on a mission and found the pavement outside. When I reached the skyscraper with Empire Economics in enormous letters on the side, I stood at its base and smiled. I entered the revolving doors and a flurry of women and the occasional man stood around talking or taking phone calls. I walked through them to reception.

"How can I help you?" the impatient brunette asked from behind the tall marble desk.

"Hi, Harold Wickers. I have an interview with Esther Lions."

She activated her earpiece, "Harold Wickers to see Ms Lions."

She nodded to herself before saying to me, "Level 21. Reception is expecting you."

“Thanks,” I said before walking to the elevator. I got in with a mixture of other people in suits, women mostly. I hated how close the proximity was. Did they have to stand so close to my back? I could feel them breathing down my neck.

I approached the lavish front desk slowly at level 21. Two women, a redhead and blonde, were deep in discussion and didn’t see me approach.

“Yeah, well, if they didn’t want to get raped, maybe they shouldn’t be wearing those jeans. They have no idea how delicious they look. I just can’t help myself,” the blonde laughed.

“I know, right. Like, I flirt with a guy, and I know for a fact he’s into it. Like, he’s giving me all the signs and everything, so I go in for a kiss and an ass grab and he gets all offended. Like, what the fuck is that? I see them all walking around here whispering about this #MeToo shit and I’m thinking, you’re all asking for it ...”

The blonde nudged the redhead and she instantly stopped talking when she saw me. Her personality changed completely.

“Hi!” she said, far too enthusiastically, “did you have an appointment?”

I wanted to confront her about those heinous things she was saying, but I didn’t want to piss them off and jeopardise my chances of getting this job, so I bit my tongue. Hard.

“Harold Wickers. I’m here to see Ms Lions for an interview.”

“Oh, okay. Take a seat.”

I sat on one of the Chesterfield lounges while she pressed a button on the phone and said quietly, “I have a Harold Wickers here to see you, Ms. Lions.”

She paused and her eyes flicked to me before murmuring into the phone, “Oh yes, you’re gonna want to see him. Trust me.”

I had a feeling about what she was implying, but I acted dumb. Don’t screw this up, I continually said to myself.

“Come with me,” the redhead said as she got up from her desk.

I followed her through rows and rows of cubicles and desks. Phones rang constantly, and women had conversations over desk dividers, watching me as I walked past. The redhead opened a double door for me. A foyer was in front of another enormous set of double doors with “Esther Lions CEO” embossed into the wood.

The receptionist knocked quietly.

“Come in,” Esther said.

The redhead opened one last door and allowed me inside. Esther’s office was all city-view windows and easily the size of my entire flat. She had a wall of books on the right, and a casual sitting area on the left. Placed right in the centre, was her hardwood desk and chair that resembled a throne.

She looked up from her notes, taking off her glasses and balancing the end of them on her lips. She admired me from head to toe, a smile on one side of her mouth. I’ll admit I was starstruck. Esther was even more stunning in real life. She had dark skin, silky black hair and wore a suit I could tell cost far more than mine. She stood from her throne to lean over the desk and reach for my hand.

“Esther Lions,” she told me.

I walked quickly to her, still in awe, “Harold Wickers. It’s such an honour to meet you. I’m a huge fan.”

“Well, thank you, darling. I’m glad I could impress.”

Esther didn’t retake her seat. She paced slowly from behind the desk as I sat on the other side.

“So you want to work for my company?”

“Yes, I absolutely do.”

“That’s good to hear. I take my job very seriously. I usually only hire women, but ... your name stood out to me,” she smiled.

“Oh,” I said, my confidence shattering. I remained calm and reached from my briefcase to open it, “well I’ll work just as hard as any woman. I can tell you anything about the stock market or numbers. I just finished my economics degree and I have a number of recommendations from my professors and ...”

“No, stop,” she said, “I believe you when you say you’ve got the recommendations. My secretaries looked into you. You seem like a nice kid. But my question is, can you work? Long and hard?”

“Of course. Whatever is necessary. Long hours, contracts, coffee runs, dry cleaning runs, anything.”

“You want to prove yourself to me?” she asked, walking towards me then.

“Yes.”

“You work out?”

“Um ...” I paused, just going with it, “yes?”

“Good. Oh, and you’re not one of those masculinists, are you? I know you want equal pay, equal rights, yadda, yadda,

but it can be a PR nightmare. That's why I tend to only hire women. Less paperwork."

I swallowed my pride and my beliefs, "That won't be an issue."

"Good. Well, this company is my lifeblood. I haven't got time for laziness or excuses. You can work a few days a week to start. You can help me and anyone else I see fit. I'm not going to lie, it will be crappy to start off with. But prove yourself to me, increase my revenue, get me numbers and I'll reward you."

She came even closer to me then. She pressed her backside against the desk and leant forward, "Are you willing to do whatever it takes, Mr. Wickers?"

Think of your future, I said to myself.

"Yes, I am," I replied bravely.

Esther smiled wide, "Welcome to Empire Economics."