

PREDATORS

By Natalie Estelle Marsan

CHARACTERS

TESS, 20's, American, a novelist who doesn't make enough money to be just a novelist

MR. MACDOUGALL, 40's, Scottish, Chief Operating Officer of Castra Wealth Management, a booming start-up

SETTING

A conference room on the 38th floor of an office building on Billionaires Row, 57th Street, Central Park South, Manhattan

TIME

10:51 AM

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Lights up on TESS, sitting in a conference room on the Castra Wealth Management office floor, which is pristine and jarringly silent. An oblong mahogany table takes up the majority of the space in the room, which is made of glass on three sides. Tess scrolls on her phone, then receives a text from JIM SINCLAIR that reads: “Good luck on your interview. Let me know how it goes. You got this 💪”. MR. MACDOUGALL enters abruptly, Tess’s resume in hand.

TESS

Hi, Mr. MacDougall. I’m Tess. It’s nice to meet you.

Before she can stand up, he drops his business card on the table in front of her, slides it over, and sits down at the head of the table.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Likewise.

TESS

How has your morning been?

MR. MACDOUGALL

Long. This will be relatively quick, yes?

TESS

Oh, sure.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Right. Do you live here?

TESS

In the city? Yes. I’ve been here for about five years. Five years in September.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Okay—

(Looking at her resume)

Why did you leave your last position?

TESS

It was a temp job. Eight-month contract, so...yeah.

MR. MACDOUGALL

What drives you?

TESS

What drives me? I'm a writer, so my creativity. I have a lot of stories to tell.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Are you getting work as a writer?

TESS

Yes, I just signed a book deal.

(Pauses for a response, but doesn't get one)

I'm actually reading the first chapter of my new novel at a bookstore tonight—

MR. MACDOUGALL

Why do you want to work here then?

TESS

Well...my advance doesn't cover everything. Most things, actually. Look, I'm smart. I'm really smart and hard-working and I want work that requires me to use my brain because it's the one muscle I can't ignore. I mean, not literally—the brain isn't a muscle, it's an organ I believe—you get it. I just...want to contribute to something important that's bigger than me.

MR. MACDOUGALL

I don't think what we do is important.

The sudden sound of raised voices can be heard outside the conference room. They startle Tess.

TESS

What? Oh. Um. You don't think what you do is important?

MR. MACDOUGALL

No.

TESS

Huh. I mean, I don't think someone would leave an impressive position at a global, reputable bank to assume the risk of being COO of a start-up if they weren't passionate about what they do. I read that profile of you in the Times.

MR. MACDOUGALL

There may be some passion, but we're not doctors or teachers. Fundamentally...yeah, not that important.

TESS

Do you tell your clients that?

Mr. MacDougall looks up at her.

No, I don't. Who are you?

MR. MACDOUGALL

Tess—

TESS

How would you describe yourself, Tess?

MR. MACDOUGALL

I'm curious. I'm thoughtful. I'm good with people: talking them down when they're worked up, lifting them up when they're down. Reading them.

TESS

Mr. MacDougall looks back down at her resume.

You read people.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Yes. For instance, I've noticed you look down at my resume when you stop listening to what I'm saying and I earn your attention by being confrontational.

TESS

Now he looks at her, really looks at her, for the first time.

You mean aggressive.

MR. MACDOUGALL

No. I mean confrontational.

TESS

Mr. MacDougall turns her resume over and pushes it to the side, giving her his full attention.

The work environment here is fast-paced and pressurized. This business, what we do, is high risk and high reward. We manage billions. The people you see in this office are not here by accident. They are exceptional at what they do, not because of their experience, but because they're animals. They are ruthless and hungry. Their survival depends on it—

MR. MACDOUGALL

Mr. MacDougall is interrupted by the loud voices again as they shout expletives at each other.

They really roar at each other, don't they?

TESS

MR. MACDOUGALL

(Nodding)

We're a pride of lions. We have big personalities. We can be difficult to work with, to communicate with, and we're defensive as hell because there is no room for error here. No room for mediocrity. We are looking for a receptionist who understands that.

TESS

I get it. You don't provoke an obvious predator. But there are other types of predators, hidden in plain sight. Like a Venus Fly Trap.

Beat.

MR. MACDOUGALL

We want someone who is in the pursuit of greatness and gets the work done no matter what.

TESS

I can do that.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Someone who doesn't let emotions dictate their behavior.

TESS

You're saying that money, or money management, is unemotional.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Absolutely.

TESS

Callous, even?

MR. MACDOUGALL

You could say that.

TESS

Bullshit. Money and how much you have of it and where it comes from and where it's going controls everything. The way we grow up, what we learn, what we eat, what we see, what we want. It shapes us as people. I mean, you've dedicated your life to it. You spend, what, 50 to 60 hours a week—sitting in a glass box in the sky, 38 stories above ground—talking about money. Thinking about it, obsessing over it, losing your mind over other people's money just so you can make a ton of money of your own. I looked up your salary. It's public record.

MR. MACDOUGALL

And?

TESS

And I think you have a lot of nerve asking me to work for minimum wage.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Do you even want this job?

TESS

You said you're looking for someone who strives to be exceptional, who *is* exceptional. That's me.

MR. MACDOUGALL

I have no proof of that.

TESS

I'm a writer living in New York City who just signed her first book deal. That should be proof enough.

MR. MACDOUGALL

You might be a shitty writer.

TESS

I'm a great writer.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Fine. How does that make you a good fit here?

TESS

It doesn't.

(Takes a deep breath, then)

I went to medical school. Yeah. After first-year exams, we had to go on this school-sponsored retreat. I think it was their attempt at rejuvenating us before summer research and internships began. We all thought it was a huge joke. I mean, we had to do an activity called Free Time. Yes, that's what it was really called. Three hours to relax and engage in personal activities. None of us had personal lives at that point. We were either in class or studying. The point is, no one knew what to do with themselves. I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do. My mind started racing, and then my palms started sweating and my breathing got really shallow. I had just taken my human anatomy exam, so I knew that my cortisol and adrenaline levels were spiking and blood was rushing to my brain, preparing me to fight or take flight. I kept thinking, "Do something, idiot. Do *something*." My dad used to say "There's no excuse for a negative thought. Write it down and get rid of it." I could do that. So, I started writing and I never stopped. That summer, when I wasn't doing research, I was writing; Essays, poems, short stories, anything. It became my obsession, my guilty pleasure. My only pleasure. Two weeks before second-year class registration began, I dropped out. I walked away from a career that guarantees six figures. I realized that I couldn't be the doctor people deserve because no one can be great—truly great—at something they don't love doing, and I loved writing. I spent the next year working as a waitress in my hometown and writing. I put together a portfolio, researched and applied to grad schools, and by some miracle got into one here in the city.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Most people wouldn't do that.

TESS

No. They wouldn't.

MR. MACDOUGALL

What did your dad say? No use for a negative thought, uh—

TESS

Write it down and get rid of it.

MR. MACDOUGALL

What does he do?

TESS

He was a paralegal.

MR. MACDOUGALL

He must be enjoying retirement.

TESS

He's not, um...he had a brain aneurysm. I had just come home from working a double at the restaurant, and he was complaining to me about a headache. It was 'the worst headache of his life'. I had been on my feet all day. I kept thinking to myself, "You're lying on the couch. Shut up." Nausea, shut up. Stiff neck, shut up. Blurry vision, shut up. Confusion, shut up. Loss of Consciousness, SHUT UP. I missed all the signs. I forgot everything I learned in medical school. You want ruthless? I am the most ruthless, venomous animal to ever—
I gave up everything to be here. I have to succeed. My survival depends on it.

Beat.

MR. MACDOUGALL

This is a part-time position, you understand.

TESS

Yes.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Your schedule would be subject to change on a weekly basis. Do you have that flexibility?

TESS

Yes.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Have you ever managed an executive calendar before?

TESS

Yes.

MR. MACDOUGALL
(Skeptical)

What software did you use?

TESS

I used industry-standard software to complete my tasks.

MR. MACDOUGALL

You're funny.

TESS

Is humor acceptable in this work environment?

MR. MACDOUGALL

Yes, it's a byproduct of the stress.

TESS

You don't seem stressed.

MR. MACDOUGALL

I'm very stressed.

TESS

You hide it well.

MR. MACDOUGALL

This is the 'reading people' thing.

TESS

You asked to keep this meeting short, yet you haven't checked your watch once. You're leaning back in your chair. I think you're enjoying this—enjoying me—much more than you expected.

MR. MACDOUGALL

I have no intention of hiring you.

TESS

If you believe there's someone better for the job, that's fine. You're entitled to your wrong opinion.

MR. MACDOUGALL

The applicant pool is competitive even at your level. You lack basic qualifications. You've never been a receptionist or personal assistant. Your last position was in customer service at Barnes and

Noble. You don't have any formal business education. I doubt you could give me the definition of wealth management. Why should I hire you?

TESS

I do my research, and I get the job done.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Give me an example.

TESS

The name of your company. Castra. What does it mean?

MR. MACDOUGALL

You're asking me? Interesting. Castra means a fort—or, a fortified place created by the military. It's Latin.

TESS

Close. Castra is plural. Castrum would be the singular noun. I don't want to give you a grammar lesson. I want to know why your company is called Castra Wealth Management.

MR. MACDOUGALL

Our CEO Harshan came up with the name. People seemed to like.

TESS

What do you like about it?

MR. MACDOUGALL

It sums up our services. We provide military-level organization and protection of your assets.

TESS

And what does it tell a potential client?

MR. MACDOUGALL

I'm sorry?

TESS

Castra Wealth Management. When they hear the name, what should they believe?

MR. MACDOUGALL

We will protect their assets better than anyone else.

TESS

Therefore...

MR. MACDOUGALL

They should do business with us.

TESS

No. How should the client feel about their money? Not about you.

MR. MACDOUGALL

(Louder)

Alright. Your aggression was cute in the beginning, but now you're wasting time and pissing me off.

TESS

I think you're getting frustrated because you don't have an answer.

MR. MACDOUGALL

(Shouting)

What the fuck is it, then? Huh?

TESS

A 'Castrum' was an entire army camp, filled with hundreds or thousands of soldiers and multiple barracks, surrounded by a wood or stone wall, the first layer of defense—the second being weapons, and the third being the soldiers themselves. Three layers of defense protecting anything of value inside of the camp. When a client hears the name Castra Wealth Management, they should believe that what they value most will be surrounded by the companies' multiple layers of defense. Ultimately, they should believe that their money is safe, and people who believe their money is safe feel *secure*. That feeling of security is what builds trust, and trust builds the client's confidence in your services.

(Lowering her voice)

Imagine hearing that from your reception desk.

Beat. Then, Mr. MacDougall stands up and extends his hand.

MR. MACDOUGALL

You start Monday.

Tess rises. She is significantly taller than him.

TESS

Fifty dollars an hour.

MR. MACDOUGALL

(Looking up at her)

Done.

They shake hands.

TESS

You made the right choice.

MR. MACDOUGALL

That was quite a spin on our name.

TESS

Thank you.

MR. MACDOUGALL

I know you're trying to write books, but have you ever considered sales?

TESS

No, no. I'm a storyteller, through and through.

MR. MACDOUGALL

That pitch would have made some men on this floor sweat.

(Before walking out of the door)

You know, I don't come from money. My father was a janitor. We were—fuck, we were poor, dirt poor. I wanted to be a teacher, but I really wanted money. I came here for school, too. I left Scotland when I was 17. I still haven't been back home. My father died years ago, years before I found success. I did all of this for him, really.

TESS

(Smiling and nodding)

Should I expect my contract via email or—

MR. MACDOUGALL

Head to HR. Down the hall on your left, last desk. Eliana can start your onboarding.

TESS

I will see you on Monday.

Mr. MacDougall exits. Tess lingers at the door before taking Mr. MacDougall's seat at the head of the table, which is too low to the ground for her. As she finishes adjusting it to her height, she gets a text from Jim Sinclair: "Any updates?" She responds: "Negotiated twice the hourly rate, just like you said to. Glad I had a lawyer to prep me for this 😊❤️ I start Monday!" He responds: "My daughter's a chip off the old block. Love you, sweetheart. Congrats." Tess likes the message and leans back in her chair, taking in her new ecosystem.

Blackout. **END OF PLAY.**