

# THE QUARRY

**Alex Jackson**

**Just My Luck**

‘I’m sorry,’ the lady said, not sounding sorry at all, ‘but you’re not what we’re looking for in a candidate.’ The interviewer looked at Shauntelle through false glasses, Hathaway-style eyes taunting her. They must have been a CRISPR job; replicating patterns and colours in eyes with such precision needed genetic engineering. The rest of the interviewer’s body displayed more of the same curves Shauntelle had seen a hundred times. She had barely glanced at Shauntelle’s resume and university scores, only at her slim appearance. Shauntelle certainly was what they were looking for, at least according to the job description.

‘Next candidate, please,’ the lady called out, as Shauntelle opened the booth to leave. Of course a disease prevention laboratory wouldn’t accept someone unmodded, despite her actual ability.

In the lobby, the next candidate stood up, rolling his Jackman shoulders. He was definitely modded, like the other two women waiting for their interviews. They boasted the same curves as the interviewer. The genetic material was probably from the same source. The candidate took his hand from his pocket and patted Shauntelle so hard on her back she lost her

breath. ‘Tough luck,’ he leered, walking through the doorway. Her back stung. Maybe he’d gotten those arms recently and was still adjusting to their strength? No, the leer told her he was definitely a jerk.

‘Look at her clothes!’ Shauntelle heard one woman sneer to the other, who giggled. She channelled her anger into walking faster. As if they knew how hard it was to find business clothes that were made to fit people who didn’t have genetic material taken from celebrities. Shauntelle had to tailor the clothes down to fit her. She’d done a good job of it too. She stepped down the stairs, passed the lobby of the office-lab and stepped into the smog outside.

The skyscraper across the square loomed over her. ‘Jackman style, Ford style, Bergeron style!’ its billboard read. ‘All these arm styles and more! That’s not all: legs, busts, torsos, even facial and eye styles! For a limited time, you can get a CRISPR disease prevention package too! BioKurz Modifications: Realising the YOU that you always wanted to be.’

What a crap tagline, Shauntelle thought, though, the disease prevention would be good. She’d practically memorised that ad from how often it played here; she almost always saw it on the way out from job interviews. She’d learned from her studies that CRISPR immune system treatments for diseases were very effective. Not that she could afford them. Or had the opportunity. She wished at least that her brother had had it. Not now, she thought, she needed to focus on the next job. She walked past the bioluminescent jacaranda and a girl with glittering purple hair.

The door to her home creaked under Shauntelle’s hand as she opened it. Her father was inside, repairing the sink. There was a bucket placed under the leak in the roof. On the table, cards were set out for blackjack. The neighbours must have come over. On the end her father always sat, the first two cards were five and seven. The third card was a Jack. Twenty-two points. Shauntelle hoped they weren’t betting.

‘How’d it go? You’ve been out for a while,’ he said.

‘I went on a walk afterwards. No luck,’ she said. ‘They said I’m “not what they’re looking for.”’

He sighed. ‘Let me guess, all the other candidates had modifications?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it...’

He shook his head, then winced. His hand cramped and he dropped his spanner. ‘That’ll be a yes. Someday it’ll get through their skulls that you’ve got your biology degree too. Probably with better scores than theirs.’

‘Why’d you say that? They’ve got intelligence mods,’ she said.

‘But I doubt any of them worked as hard as you did. Intelligence mods or not, you’ve earned it,’ he replied, cradling his arthritic hand.

Her anger flared. When she went to interviews, they looked at her like she was a bad joke. Among twenty-seven interviewers, those who didn’t immediately tell her to get out made a lame excuse about how she wasn’t suitable for the job.

She scowled, then sighed. ‘What does it matter when they don’t care?’

‘I’m sure you’ll get ‘em next time,’ he said.

‘Isn’t that what you said last time?’

He looked at her. ‘You’re too nit-picky.’

She sighed, opening the door to her room.

Shauntelle felt a headache developing as she arrived at the gate of the Manor at 2:55 pm.

‘State your name and business,’ the intercom at the gate crackled.

Her heart skipped a beat. ‘Shauntelle Penther, here to see Mr Sardon about his offer for advising him in biology.’

‘Of course, come through.’ The gate opened. She walked down the driveway, past the garden maze and the flowerbeds. Private gardens were rare. This was the biggest she’d seen. The manicured hedges and the flowers boasted their life. It was oddly relaxing, walking down the long pathway. She had only ever had a succulent as a gift for her twelfth birthday, a resilient thing, a gift from her brother. She felt a pain in her chest at the thought.

After the interview, she had been preparing for her next application when someone delivered a letter on behalf of this Sardon. A letter, in this age? It was a job offer. Why would

he offer her a job? The job was an advisory role for his business ventures in genetic engineering, CRISPR and biology. The letter requested she meet him the next day.

It was too convenient. It could be a trap, or a prank. She'd had too many of them, promising a job, just to trick her. Maybe it was luck. Could it be her hard work paying off? No, that never happens. She'd done some quick research and found out Sardon was an accomplished entrepreneur, one of the investors behind VitoGreens. That stuff basically got her through University because it was so cheap.

As soon as she arrived at the oak door, it opened. Behind it was a woman dressed in black servant's uniform. It would be prim and proper if it didn't have a little skin showing.

'This way, please.' They walked across a Persian rug and up a staircase to what was presumably a study. The woman knocked. Anxiety punched Shauntelle in the stomach.

'Come in,' was the reply. The room was like stepping back in time—upholstered Victorian chairs, wooden cabinets, and a mixture of stained and clear glass windows. The man to whom the voice belonged was relatively tall, without obvious modifications, though he had flawless skin and a finely-groomed moustache.

'Ah, you must be Miss Penther.' His eyes looked warm, although that could have been a modification too.

'Good afternoon,' she replied, trying to ignore her headache.

'I am Arthur Sardon,' he said, 'and I believe you have met Mika, one of my servants.'

The woman stopped cleaning the bookcase that she had started and curtsied.

'Ah yes,' Sardon said. 'You would be interested: Mika here was part of a CRISPR gene expression experiment my father ordered, to increase her industriousness and mildness. I'd say it's rather effective, wouldn't you, Mika?'

'Of course, sir,' she said, resuming her cleaning. She was only a little shorter than Shauntelle, with full brown hair and unblemished skin. She was slimmer than the usual modifications done on women; she was almost like a doll.

'I suppose there wasn't a control group, and I'm not knowledgeable enough about biology to know the full details.'

Is that even legal? Shauntelle thought. Even if it is...

He continued, 'And that is what brings you here today. I want you to help inform me in my business dealings when they regard biology, which is happening more and more.'

'Oh! I... am very flattered, sir, but why would you choose me over someone who has intelligence modifications?' She bit her tongue to stop herself from saying anything else stupid. Don't bite the hand that feeds you.

He smiled. 'I received word that the Nova and Wellington lab in the city were hiring. They are long-standing friends and business partners of mine, so I asked them for a list of the applicants. Of those I investigated, you had exceptional ability, especially since you had a scholarship on academic credit alone. Of the applicants, you had even higher grades than many with intelligence modifications.

'You can tell that?' she said, a little light-headed. How did he get that much information? That shouldn't be publically available, she thought. Did she really do that well?

'Of course. I must say, I'm disappointed intelligence modifications have proven to be only a small boost thus far. Ultimately, I don't particularly care whether or not you are modified. I suspect...'

'You suspect?'

'I suspect that you'll do well.' He smiled, then turned to gaze out the window.

What does that even mean? she thought. I won't have to be a guinea pig, will I? I won't have to be like... them, will I?

He continued, 'The job, should you choose to take it, will have a good salary and access to research journals so you can keep up to date to keep me informed.'

Those journals were not cheap. It sounded like an acceptable deal, provided the business wasn't shady... Well, provided it wasn't too shady, Shauntelle thought. On the other hand...

She glanced at Mika. Mika smiled back at her, then continued to clean above the filing cabinet.

Starving is much worse, she concluded. Her headache was up there, though. She'd have to do it, wouldn't she?

'As for responsibilities... Miss Penther?' Dizziness overcame her, and she collapsed.

Shauntelle struggled to open her eyes. The ceiling was patterned with stars and she was lying on a very comfortable bed. A doctor was off to her right. Oh God, what happened?

‘I’m telling you, they’re the same hallmarks as all the other cases. Flu symptoms in an HPV virus, with the infection spreading from the back,’ a deep voice said.

At the foot of the bed, she saw the owner of the voice, a policeman, talking with another policeman. The image of her little brother popped into her mind, telling her how he wanted to be a policeman, so he could help people. And so he could have big muscly arms. If he had only been old enough to be a policeman, maybe the leukaemia could’ve been... Not that they’d had enough to apply for the exam anyway.

She groaned. They turned, noticing her. They were built in the same muscular fashion, like toy soldiers fresh from the cast.

‘Ah, you’re awake,’ one said.

‘Where...’

‘You’re in Mr Sardon’s Manor. He called the doctor here instead of having you taken to hospital,’ he said.

Her stomach fell. Why? What was going to happen to the job?

The first deep voice spoke again. ‘It appears you collapsed because of a particular modified strain of HPV, which we believe was deliberately spread. It was probably injected through contact with the back, since we found traces of painkillers like those used by leeches there. While we can’t be sure, we believe it to be a prankster’s doing, since it isn’t that serious or as damaging.’

Human Papilloma Virus? As a prank? Forcibly injected? Who would... Shauntelle checked her skin. Sure enough, there were blemishes and small warty bumps all over her body. What did they mean HPV isn’t that serious?

‘Don’t worry,’ the doctor said, looking a little too proud. ‘It shouldn’t do any lasting damage thanks to my treatment.’ He was synthesising antibodies that would fit her immune system to inject into her. At least, she hoped that was what he was doing.

‘Am I... allowed to stay here?’ she asked. She bit her tongue again. She blamed her stupid questions on her exhaustion.

The policemen looked to the doctor, who shrugged. ‘We don’t know,’ he said.

‘Regardless, the doctor tells us you displayed flu-like symptoms. Numerous other cases have occurred recently with the same strain of HPV modified to use genetic material from influenza.’

Sardon heard the policeman’s voice through the wall, commenting that the victims were from low socioeconomic areas and had little access to vaccines or genetic prevention treatments. He’d found it interesting that they were the ones who needed it the most.

Sardon had meant to test if she would be scared off by Mika in the interview, but this... Was it really a prankster, or was it sabotage?

A week ago, one of his business associates, Jonas, indulged in too much wine and was ranting about how useless the poor were—his favourite hobby.

‘But harsher conditions can end up with more adaptability, no?’ Sardon interrupted.

‘You’re a riot, Arty,’ Jonas snorted, ‘They’re weeds in the rose garden.’

Sardon was annoyed at being referred to so casually. Jonas swallowed another scone.

‘A wager, Arty,’ Jonas said. ‘You said you want an advisor. Since you’re so keen to defend those insects, put your money where your mouth is.’

Sardon tilted his head. ‘What are the terms?’

‘Get an unmodified advisor. If it’s as you say, your profits go up in six months and I give fifty percent on top. But if they don’t, you give me fifty percent.’

Sardon accepted, but he couldn’t remember Jonas making any promises that stopped him from interfering in the bet. He needed to ensure Jonas didn’t in the future, at any rate. Surprisingly, Shauntelle almost recovered within an hour of treatment anyway. She was certainly as tenacious as a weed.

He heard them questioning her about who the culprit might be. She eventually said something about someone forcefully patting her on the back as she left a job interview the previous day. He decided he may need to ask the officers for the name of the perpetrator later, to investigate.

Shauntelle did her best to answer their questions, just dreading the medical bill in the back of her mind.

Eventually, the policeman asked, 'I suppose we should confirm you have not had HPV vaccines?'

'No.' She'd needed to eat that month.

'Health insurance?'

'None.'

The policemen fell silent.

'I'm not sure that standard healthcare will cover this,' the doctor said. 'It's not likely, but can you convince your employer to pay for the treatment?'

Mr Sardon seemed to choose that moment to walk into the room. He stood silently a few metres behind the policemen.

Shauntelle was also silent. After a time, the policemen wished her well, told her he would notify her family, and left.

Sardon wasn't her employer yet. She hadn't accepted the offer before she collapsed. She didn't even know if his offer was still on the table. Still being in the Manor was a good sign. Aside from the fact that he was... a little strange. Still... Her stomach fell. What now? So close.

Just like always. It's only natural, she thought, it's just my luck.