

MERITOCRACY

Written by

J.E. Clarke

INT. CORPORATE WAITING ROOM - DAY

Feminine fingers tremble. NIKKI (31) fumbles with the knot in husband TREVOR's (35) tie. At first, he's patient. Still -

TREVOR
I'm a big boy. Let me try.

NIKKI
We can't let anything get missed.

Nikki reaches for his shirt button. Trevor pushes her off.

TREVOR
It's just a job interview. Don't stress me out!

Nikki steps back, deflates. A balloon pierced by sharp words.

Revealing: the corporate waiting room behind her. A FLATSCREEN looms over expensive, yet bland decor.

A group of MEN slump in chairs. Some focus on music, eyes closed. Others read magazines to kill time. Short, fat, muscled, tall: though each dressed in a suit and tie.

NIKKI
We've been waiting for *hours*. How much longer 'til it's your turn?

Trevor slides up a sleeve: glances at a glowing TIME-IMPLANT in his wrist.

TREVOR
45 minutes. More or less.

NIKKI
But your appointment was for 9:30!

TREVOR
Maybe the last interview ran late?

NIKKI
So what's the excuse now?

TREVOR
They're cleaning up?

Nikki's eyes slip towards two men on a nearby couch.

The first: a BODYBUILDER stuffed in a designer shirt.

The other's pure NERD - skinny with glasses and frizzy hair.

NIKKI

I hope they team *him* with you.

TREVOR

Muscles mean zip in boardrooms. In today's market, the one thing that gives folks an edge is smarts. Don't let that meek appearance fool you, Nik. It's usually the ones you underestimate, who take you out. That guy's probably the stiffest competition in the room.

The nerd picks up a PEOPLE Magazine.

TREVOR

Then again, maybe not.

Nikki blinks at other candidates.

NIKKI

This many competitors - for just one job?

TREVOR

These days, the market's been - rough. Between outsourcing and automation, there's only so many openings to go around.

NIKKI

But why make us wait this long!
Even breakfast's come and gone.

Her stomach grumbles. Trevor blinks, concerned.

TREVOR

I saw a vending machine outside.
Hold my spot.

NIKKI

No! That's too expensive. Don't you dare leave my sight!

Trevor opens his mouth to retort. But: WHIR! A SERVICE BOT interrupts his train of thought.

Deceptively low-tech in looks, it resembles a dinner tray - spliced with a monitor and rubber wheels.

SMOOTHIE SHAKES wobble on its flat surface. It glides to a stop between chairs. A robotic voice echoes from speakers on its side.

SERVICE BOT

Attention, candidates. We apologize for the delay. Please accept a heartfelt apology from our donors - as well as lunch on the house.

Every candidate in the room lunges forward: a hungry crowd desperate for their "share." Trevor grabs TWO glasses.

The bodybuilder grabs his arm, glares.

BODYBUILDER

Dude, don't get greedy. The rule's one each.

TREVOR

The other's for my wife!

The bodybuilder notices Nikki. As well as the hunger in her eyes. He sighs, and lets go. Trevor flashes him a smile.

TREVOR

Thanks... uh, dude. Good luck on the interview.

BODYBUILDER

Um, yeah. You too, guy.

The nerd smirks at the exchange. No-one's watching *him*, so... He tops off *his* glass with someone else's drink. Retreats unnoticed back to the couch.

Trevor hustles back to Nikki with his score.

TREVOR

You pick. Which glass looks tastier to you?

NIKKI

Neither. I'm.. not hungry.

TREVOR

Nonsense! My son's mother needs her strength. Choose a flavor. Blue or pink?

NIKKI

Strawberry?

TREVOR

I think that's cherry. But yeah. Sure.

Trevor's eyes grow wide. He points.

TREVOR

Look - they're calling next round?

Nikki swings towards the RECEPTION DESK. The Service Bot beeps and rolls away.

Playing off the distraction, Trevor pours half his drink in Nikki's glass. He blends it quickly with a straw - until Nikki turns back around.

With dramatic flourish, Trevor hands the cup over.

NIKKI

Uh, the reception desk is empty.
And this looks purple now.

TREVOR

Whoops, my bad. But let's toast!

The two clink/squish plastic smoothie cups.

TREVOR

Here's to well deserved financial
success for the legendary Connor
clan.

He takes a sip. Nikki frowns.

NIKKI

I just pray nothing goes wrong.

Trevor chokes. He puts down his liquid lunch, grabs his wife's shaking hands.

TREVOR

Honey, you know I love you and
Colin: more than anything in this
whole world. It's a man's *duty* to
earn his keep. Whatever it costs is
worth it - as long my family gets
what they need... and deserve.

NIKKI

What your family wants is you: safe
at home.

As robotic as the AI bot, Trevor forces a phony smile.

He scrolls past a PICTURE OF ADORABLE COLIN (8) on his phone.

Toggling a MIRROR APP on his cell, Trevor carefully checks every strand of his well gelled hair.

TREVOR
Honey, don't worry so much. You
know I always come prepared.

Suddenly: the overhead flatscreen flickers. And displays:

INT. CORPORATE BOARD ROOM - CONTINUOUS

A line of designer-clad CEOs stand in shadow. Eerily similar to Greek statues, their sculpted stony faces watch:

Two INTERVIEWEES circle a conference TABLE.

The first: A MIDDLE-AGED MAN - balding, hairy and soft.

His BLOND KEN-LIKE OPPONENT's young. Apparently the gym's this kid's second home.

Both men: disheveled and sweaty. Looks like neither interview's been going well.

NIKKI
Why show us... this? Why make us
nervous - now?

TREVOR
Maybe it's a sneak peak in our
favor: so we know exactly what to
expect?

INTERCUT BETWEEN LOBBY AND CONFERENCE ROOM VIDEO

The two interviewees pace like panthers: each tensed to pounce. The middle aged guy takes the initiative.

Faster than seems possible for his physique, he lunges forward; grabs his opponent's tie.

"Ken-doll"'s dragged across the table on his stomach. The middle aged man dives on top.

The two grapple desperately. Papers, pens and staples fly.

The middle aged man's weight pins his opponent down. Straddling the competition, he clamps meaty hands across the boy's throat.

Then glances towards the watching CEOs. None have moved an inch until...

A FEMALE CEO turns "thumbs down": the universal gesture for -
"finish him off."

The middle aged combatant nods. Grunts and smiles.

The young man gasps and blindly flails his hands across the table. Seeking - *anything* that can be weaponized.

His fingers close on a LETTER OPENER. Which he plunges into his attacker's neck.

The older man grabs his puncture wound; SCREAMS. Blood spurts from his fingers. Stains his no longer presentable shirt.

The young man rolls on top, keeps on stabbing. The middle aged man's stomach. Face. Groin.

In seconds, the fight's over. The middle aged candidate - dead. The CEOS applaud politely from a distance.

INT. CORPORATE WAITING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Everyone in the waiting room gasps. The video cuts off. Far too late, Trevor covers Nikki's eyes.

TREVOR

Don't look!

NIKKI

Now you tell me that?

The Service Bot rolls back into the room. Static "clears" its digital throat.

SERVICE BOT

Room 101 has been refreshed for the next round of interviews. Trevor Connor, please stand up.

Trevor pales, steps forward. Nikki darts to his side.

NIKKI

I've been thinking: you don't *really need* to take this job. We could cut corners other ways!

TREVOR

Darling, be realistic -

NIKKI

Listen to me, Trevor! We could rent out the kitchen as an extra bedroom. Put up a sheet for privacy. And - I don't have to eat every day. Colin's a growing boy. He's the only one who matters now.

Trevor grabs Nikki, whispers in her ear.

TREVOR

Tell Colin I love him. If things don't go well, tell him this, too: Daddy got a job - somewhere else.

NIKKI

You want me to lie to our son?!?

TREVOR

Remember that AI sim we bought Colin for Christmas? We can use photos of me for a model. Pretend I'm calling him on Skype.

Nikki fumbles with that top button on Trevor's shirt again. Revealing: Kevlar Armor underneath.

NIKKI

You *did* remember! Thank God.

TREVOR

Of course. And Conors are always prepared - right?

NIKKI

But who are you interviewing *with*?

The Service Bot's laser scans an anxious room of faces.

SERVICE BOT

Dwayne Rogers, present yourself.

The Bodybuilder steps forward. Trevor gulps. The two men eye each other warily.

TREVOR

This seems awkward. But, good luck?

BODYBUILDER

Nothing personal. May the best dude win.

The bot rolls towards a side door. The two men shake, trail behind its wheels.

BODYBUILDER

(whispers to Trevor)

Lissen: if things don't work out for you, I'll make sure your lady friend gets taken good care of.

TREVOR

Don't you *dare* touch her.

BODYBUILDER

That ain't what I mean. I got a fiancé, too. It's just you look like decent folk. If I win, I'll make sure she gets a cut. Our apartment's a studio - but maybe we could let her share the room.

TREVOR

...we've got an 8 year old son. His name's Colin.

BODYBUILDER

4 people? Damn. That might be - too much.

Trevor stops at the exit. Waves to Nikki with a grin.

TREVOR

Honey, scout's honor. I'll be back.

Nikki jumps up. The door slams in her face. She howls. Collapses back into her chair, stunned.

The frizzy haired nerd darts over: commandeers Trevor's now empty seat. A designer SATCHEL dangles from one skinny arm.

FRIZZY HAired NERD

Don't cry. These things go pretty fast. You saw the video. Your boyfriend -

NIKKI

(snaps)
Husband.

FRIZZY HAired NERD

Whatever. He'll be fine.

Shuffling through magazines, the nerd picks up *Forbes*. Drops it in Nikki's lap.

FRIZZY HAired NERD

Only losers worry about luck, or fate. As long as he puts in the work and has the skill set - he'll survive. Besides, this is just one interview.

NIKKI

What happens in *advanced* rounds?

Nikki stifles a sob behind *Forbes'* glossy cover. The other interviewees hear. Nervous, they turn from the sound.

The nerd digs through his satchel: past BRASS KNUCKLES, RAZORS, RESUMES and KNIVES... to a money stuffed WALLET.

FRIZZY HAired NERD

You look like you need some sugar.

NIKKI

What?!?

FRIZZY HAired NERD

Not that. A candy bar. There's a vending machine in the hallway. And I come prepared. With actual cash.

He bounds for the door. A RED HAired TEEN CANDIDATE looks up as the nerd breezes by, shocked.

RED HAired CANDIDATE

(hisses)

You're hitting on *her*? Now?

The geek flashes the teen a grin.

FRIZZY HAired NERD

Wise up, kid. That's how things work. In dog eat dog markets, you gotta seize opportunities when they come. Demand and supply determines value. That and charging whatever the market bears. If a candy bar loosens her up, then so be it. And if her husband dies - that's *his* fault. Competition makes the world go round. You gotta accept, adapt.. And survive.

Overhead, the flatscreen monitor flickers. And displays:

Trevor and the Bodybuilder eye each other across a freshly cleaned conference table. The CEOs watch quietly.

The two men tense - prepared to pounce. Nikki wails and hides her eyes. Round two's about to start...

FINAL FADE OUT: