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Life Stock: Prologue

Jeanie took a deep breath and fidgeted, looking around the sterile room. The walls and floors were white, with no furniture except a plain wooden desk with a couple of chairs and no appliances or decor. The fluorescent light hummed overhead as she carefully breathed to steady her nerves. "Relax. You got this," she muttered to herself, a determined expression on her face. She opened her purse and produced a pocket mirror to examine herself and ensure her makeup was in order. A quick examination showed everything in place. Her makeup was perfectly intact, bringing her unusual, pale green eyes to life amidst her soft, feminine facial features. She ensured her wavy, strawberry-blond hair was pulled adequately into a high ponytail, her bangs precisely framing her face.

'I basically have the job-- Darren said as much,' she told herself, referring to an old friend who made his way up into a secretive government position. Still, though, she couldn't help but worry if she was qualified for such a job, even if she didn't have most of the details. She had been through five interviews and nearly a year of background and security clearance checks to get to this point. If they didn't want to offer her the job, they likely wouldn't have invited her to a final round where she had to sign a non-disclosure agreement in advance. With a sigh, she straightened her deep gray dress blouse top, adjusted the tight, and ensured her matching gray pencil skirt was adequately straight and lint-free. Once pleased with the results, she replaced her mirror in the bag.

Before long, the door swung open, and a tall man stepped in, closing the door behind him. "Miss Johansson," he stated warmly, offering a smile as he entered.

"Y-- Yes! That's me. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today," she quickly replied, offering a warm smile as the man sat at the plain wooden desk.

As the man sat, he peered carefully at the woman he would interview with piercing gray eyes. He had neatly cut, short black hair with a few streaks of silvery-gray. A few wrinkles

creased his clean-shaven face with classically handsome, squared features. A well-fitted gray suit with a matching tie adorned his tall and fit frame. “Darren speaks highly of you. A good man that I nearly consider a son. Or, perhaps a younger brother,” he laughed, pushing his finger up to adjust his glasses.

“I am grateful for his recommendation. He is absolutely a great man,” Jeanie replied without missing a beat, a broad smile on her face. Her interviewer seemed nice enough, though the hint of dark bags under his eyes told her he might need a better night of rest.

“Indeed,” the man replied. He then placed his elbows on the desk and laced his fingers together, his expression more serious. “You can call me Mr. Black, by the way,” he curtly stated before continuing. “I’ll get to the point. As you know, we have been interviewing you for a few months for a secretive position that more or less suits your credentials. How have you found the interview process?”

Jeanie folded her hands in her lap, not shaking or missing a beat. “I have found the process engaging and also confusing at times. While I wasn’t always sure why I was asked certain questions, I answered everything to the best of my ability.”

“I appreciate your honesty. Some may describe some of the process as esoteric, but it’s designed to judge your tangible and intangible qualities. Can you perhaps tell me one step of the process that confused you?” Mr. Black asked.

Jeanie nodded. *‘You’ve got this!’* She assured herself. “Well, there were some riddles and questions that were odd, but I assume they were meant to judge some of those intangible qualities you mentioned,” she continued. “But, as a specific example, for one interview, the entire two-hour session went through scenarios at a farm. How would I tend to the pigs and cows? How would I react if an animal behaved a certain way, and questions like that. One that stood out was if I thought a cow was capable of experiencing complex, human emotions.”

Mr. Black carefully observed the way Jeanie replied. Her body language, tone, inflection-- all of it was important. “Well, what was your answer? Can cows feel complex human emotions?” He asked with a bemused smile.

“Yes, they can,” Jeanie confidently replied, not missing a beat.

“Oh? Please elaborate.”

Jeanie momentarily paused to gather her thoughts. “Mable is still capable of human emotion despite being a cow. So, the answer was easy.”

Mr. Black noticed her expression briefly strained while speaking. He was well aware of what she said from experience. “I have read your resume thoroughly, Miss Johansson. You have had success as a private investigator, a social worker, and a therapist. I must admit I’m

impressed with some of the articles you've written. You're also a bit of an investigative journalist, aren't you?"

Jeanie mentally realigned herself with the change of topic."Y-- Yes, I suppose you could say that." From her perspective, her resume was somewhat scattershot, regardless of the success she'd found in her professional life.

"I also noticed a few degrees, so you have been busy with schooling. It can't have been easy balancing all your business ventures while pursuing an education."

"Yeah, but none of those are above a bachelor's, so it's not like I can become a lawyer or psychiatrist," she sighed in response. Her cheeks immediately reddened. *'Frick!!!'* She spontaneously blurted out her self-perceived flaws, likely an interview no-no.

Mr. Black wasn't concerned by her slip of the tongue. As an outsider looking in, Jeanie appeared infinitely resilient, with unending confidence. She put one-hundred and fifty percent into everything she did, and she had a varied and impressive resume overall, with feats that made up for any perceived educational deficits. "Miss Johansson." He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap. What do you know of Livestock Syndrome?"

Jeanie's eyes widened, and she shifted away from her interviewer. *'More than most, probably,'* she mused before turning focus to Mr. Black. "You're probably already aware that I am. My older sister, Mable, was infected with it," she quietly replied, maintaining eye contact and a stoic expression.

Mr. Black solemnly nodded, sympathy flashing in his expression. "Because of that, you have also had limited interaction with the government and have surely signed some NDAs before this interview process."

Jeanie's eyes narrowed as she racked her brain, trying to assemble the limited information she had been provided. "Yes, that's right. I also recall a clause in the last round of paperwork stating that I would be allowed to discuss that incident despite the non-disclosure agreements during this step of the interview."

"I understand if it's a tender subject, but may I ask you about Mable and the situation surrounding her case of Livestock Syndrome?" Mr. Black replied without missing a beat.

Jeanie nodded without hesitation. Regardless of how traumatic that tumultuous time had been, she knew now wasn't the time to clam up. Regardless of anything else, she understood she was still being tested. She was technically undergoing a job interview, so his questions all had meaning. "Yes, of course."

Mr. Black pushed his chair back and folded one leg over the other, holding his hands together. “I want your full honesty; this isn’t a trick question. How do you feel about our government’s handling of your sister’s case of Livestock Syndrome?”

Jeanie paused and considered the question. “On one hand, it didn’t seem like the ‘special unit’ of the FBI that handled the case fully understood how to deal with her-- my sister, I mean. There were periods when we were made to wait while someone would confer with their higher-ups and attempt to form some consensus.” She cleared her throat before continuing. “On the other hand, the agents were largely sympathetic and kind. I felt these issues were simply due to Livestock Syndrome being a reasonably new phenomenon with the potential of widespread panic if not handled delicately.” She said that, but panic had already spread. The term ‘Livestock Syndrome’ was known to the public, and it was increasingly difficult to keep the public calm when their family, friends, and loved ones were starting to turn into animals before their eyes.

Mr. Black nodded, his expression stoic. “And, how do you feel about the end result? Did that FBI ‘special unit’ provide satisfactory service to you and your family?”

Jeanie raised an eyebrow. From Mr. Black’s inflection and body language, she felt that his questions were more than a mere test. They were genuine; he sought feedback on how Mable’s case was handled. “The government-sanctioned farm Mable lives on is quite nice. When I have time to visit, I see she is treated well, and she seems more at peace now based on our limited communication.” Jeanie sat back and folded one leg over the other, similarly to Mr. Black. “If you were to hire me, I would be happy to give you a full rundown and extrapolate what processes I would recommend improving,” she said wryly.

Mr. Black let out a small chuckle and smiled. “Let’s move on, then. You wrote an in-depth article detailing your sister’s experience with Livestock Syndrome. You detailed her mental and physical states as she progressed and went into great depth regarding how you provided emotional and mental support to her during the process. Do you remember writing this article?” Jeanie winced and fidgeted slightly. “Yes… I was promptly forced to take the article down. Agents, who seemed to be from somewhere above the FBI, showed up and insisted I keep it unpublished.”

A saddened look appeared on Mr. Black’s face as he adjusted his glasses and sighed. “That was three years ago now… A damn shame. I’m sorry you were forced into such a frustrating situation.”

Jeanie was surprised by the direction of this interview. Mr. Black seemed genuine and warm; his line of questioning sent her mind in many directions. “Thank you. I’m hopeful I can publish it once more soon. It was quite upsetting when my hope was to help others going through the same experience.”

Mr. Black rubbed his chin, lost in deep contemplation, as his eyes turned toward the floor. After twenty seconds, his gray eyes met with Jeanie's again. "That leaves just one more question." He leaned forward and placed his arms on the table, hands firmly clasped. "Are you confident you can fulfill this position? Do you believe you can fully perform the job functions and keep as many secrets as we deem necessary?"

Jeanie's face became a visage of shock. This interview had already been relatively short, and this last question seemingly came from nowhere. How was she supposed to know if she could perform the job? She had only been provided the vaguest hints and generally understood they were looking for a skillset like hers. It only took a moment for her to understand his question; there was one obvious, correct answer. "Of course I can! You won't find anyone who works harder than men. I will live up to and exceed expectations, sir," she promised with a confident grin.

"Oh-ho!" Mr. Black laughed again. "Can you tell me where this confidence comes from?" "A couple of reasons," Jeanie continued. "For one, I am just that kind of girl. I enjoy a good challenge and see opportunities to learn skills or trades as a welcome, exciting challenge. Anything I don't know or can't do can be made up for quickly with my ability to absorb new information like a sponge."

Mr. Black couldn't disagree. As a private investigator, Jeanie has been incredibly successful. As a therapist, she had a sterling record and glowing praises. Despite her resume being dotted with starkly different jobs and lacking any PHD, she mostly exceeded in everything she pursued. Adaptability was a trait he looked for in prospective candidates. "And, the other reason?"

"Simple," Jeanie beamed. "I wouldn't be here right now if I couldn't do the job. I'm only sitting here in this room with you because you're already well aware that I can perform the job functions." She took a slow breath to calm the swelling adrenaline. Despite her confidence, it took every bit of nerve and grit to cease from trembling. "I believe in you. I know you're smart, and I know you work with brilliant people. I have faith in your decision to believe in me."

Mr. Brown tilted his head and looked at Jeanie with a bemused expression. The door opened as if on cue, and a young woman stepped in, placing a couple thick folders on the desk. "Please let me know if you need anything else," she said warmly before leaving.

"Thank you, Bethany," Mr. Brown curtly replied before opening one of the folders. "Review the salary and benefits. Take your time, and then let me know if you accept the job offer," he insisted, handing the interviewee a small packet of stapled papers.

Jeanie's heart raced. *'Is this real? Seriously real?'* She nodded and took the packet from Mr. Black.

“Please take your time. I will return in ten minutes or when you’re done reviewing the packet.” With that, he stood, nodded, and took his leave.

Once the door shut, Jeanie exhaled deeply, her whole body trembling as she broke into a cold sweat. “Ahhh…” She panted, closing her eyes tightly as she clenched and unclenched her hands. Somehow, she repressed her nerves long enough to make it through. *‘Frick yeah. I guess I was awesome somehow!’* She giggled to herself as she began to read through the papers.

Her heart nearly stopped when she saw the salary. This level of income would open endless possibilities. Was she dreaming? She awkwardly stared at the number before taking a slow breath. “Read everything-- don’t get distracted,” she muttered.

It didn’t take long for her to realize just how extraordinary this job was. The health coverage was less of an insurance plan and more of a promise that her employer would comp one hundred percent of her medical costs. Anything from prescriptions to heart surgery to needing expensive medical equipment would cost her nothing.

Beyond that, the vacation time, sick leave, and paid time off were generous. She’d automatically have everything retirement-related set up for her, so she wouldn’t even need to think about a thing decades in the future when she retired.

She couldn’t believe her eyes as she continued down the list. There were options for heavily discounted airfare, free high-quality government housing, gym memberships, and free tuition for certifications and degrees aligned with job functions. Last of all, despite seeming to be a ‘lesser’ perk, she was enamored by the promise of free daily food at the office. Catering happened daily, and they had kitchens stocked with drinks and coffee way better than anything she brewed at home. *‘Well, shit.’* She wasn’t one to cuss in her head or otherwise, but it was hard not to. Her heart raced as a giddy wave of excitement rolled through her. *‘I can do this-- I can definitely do this.’*

When Mr. Black returned, he could barely sit and open his mouth before Jeanie replied enthusiastically, “I accept the job! When can I start on the mountains of onboarding paperwork?” She asked with a wide grin.

Mr. Black blinked and then chuckled, shaking his head. “Right away,” he insisted, opening another folder and producing a large stack of papers. There were more where those came from.

“How are you feeling today, Mable?” A female scientist with long, mousy brown hair and a skinny frame warmly asked as she approached a brown dairy cow in a sunny pasture. She carefully placed a wooden board in front of the cow.

Mable was lost in thought, visions of her past swirling in her head as lamentations assailed her. There were good days and bad; a single day could see her going through a roller coaster of emotions, but she could also go days at a time lost in the illusion of cow-hood. Her human brain-- her sapience and ability to think and feel like a human, remained intact after nearly three years in her bovine form. Her greatest reprieve came in the form of occasionally allowing her cow instincts to put her on auto-pilot, the times when she could graze and live like a cow while her human doubts and worries faded into the background.

She raised her heavy head, still smacking her lips and moving her massive tongue as she blankly looked at Angela, the doctor who had been tending to her.

Angela frowned slightly before smiling again. “It’s okay. I can come back another time,” she offered, moving toward the wooden board.

Mable blinked, snapping back to reality. “MooOOO!” She pleaded.

Angela stepped back, happy to have Mable’s attention. A short moo that started quiet and grew louder near the end essentially meant, *“Stop, wait!”.*

Mable heavily stepped forward, eyeing the board. She then began to rhythmically clop her right hoof upon the wooden surface.

Initially, Angela’s idea was to teach Morse code to those infected with Livestock Syndrome, and Mable proved the test successful. Whether mid or post-transformation, transformees could learn new skills just like any average human. She waited patiently, allowing Mable the time needed to say her piece.

“Today… Sad… Lonely… Bored…” Mable began before uttering a subdued moo. Angela placed a hand on Mable’s shoulder, offering a gentle and sympathetic rub. “Can I do anything for you, sweetheart? Do you need something to calm your nerves?” She had found reasonable success in administering anxiety medication as needed to those infected, though they took measures to prevent addiction. Mable was an excellent patient who rarely requested such drugs.

Mable shook her head. *“My… Room… Television… Computer… When?”* She asked, her tail hanging low.

Angela winced. It had been hard enough fighting for enough budget to maintain the government-sanctioned ‘First Dawn Farm’ in the way she desired; convincing the powers above to grant what was considered expensive ‘luxuries’ to those infected was a difficult task. With the looming threat of overcrowding, there were even talks of giving each transformer a smaller living space, more akin to what typical cows, pigs, horses, etc., might live in. She looked at a few other cows grazing and mooing, feeling sympathy. Each of these bovid beings had loved ones

and friends with whom they would never again share regular human intimacy. The one saving grace for Angela was that the human research and testing performed on the farm were deemed valuable as the nation's understanding of Livestock Syndrome grew.

"Angela?..."

This time, Angela snapped back to reality. "I haven't been able to get those yet. Not in a way you can easily use. I have been working on something on my own time, though; do you want to come see?" She asked hopefully.

While somewhat disheartened, Mable nodded her head. She had nothing to lose and was excited by the prospect of any form of normalcy.

A few minutes later, they arrived at Mable's living quarters. An exceptionally advanced, private *cowshed* furnished to resemble a human room as much as possible. There were ground-level cushions set up like sofas where Mable could lay, along with some paintings and art pieces as requested by Mable to suit her tastes. In a small, closet-sized offshoot at the back left of the living quarters, there were hoof-sized temperature controls on the floor and a simple, one-button lighting control that allowed Mable to cycle through various light settings. At the back right side of the living space was a doorway leading to a private, hay-covered outside area where Mable could defecate in peace before returning inside.

"Stay right here," Angela insisted, taking her leave. The door automatically opened and closed via a retinal scanner, allowing Mable easy access. She returned a couple of minutes later with a large back. "Just one sec…" She opened it and pulled out a radio, setting it near the front-left corner of the room where there was space. She then pulled out some foot-- or *'hoof'* pedals and took a minute to rig them up properly. "Come here, and I'll explain it to you."

Mable curiously stared and nodded, waddling forward as her tail flicked from side to side. Any distractions were welcome. When she reached the corner, she peered down and examined the pedals. Each had an inscription that she could glean the meaning of immediately. *'On/off, volume up, volume down, and-- these three?'AM/FM…'* She thought to herself. Before needing to clop her hoof to communicate, Angela continued.

"These pedals control the radio! As you can probably guess, these are the on/off switch and volume controls." She gestured to the following two, which showed two arrows facing left upon one and two facing right on the other. "These are for seeking channels; you can seek forward and backward. The last switch is the AM/FM toggle! Why don't you give it a try?"

Mable tentatively looked between Angela and the radio. *'Look how much work it takes to let me pretend I'm even slightly human,'* she lamented but quickly forced the thought out. She nodded and began to work the controls.

In a matter of minutes, Maybe had a full grasp of how to use her new radio. She could choose what she wished with relative ease, and there were many channels to pick from. Even if just briefly, her mind drifted away from Jeanie and the others, enthralled by her new luxury. Something as simple as a usable radio went a long way toward making Mable feel less bestial and pitiable. “Moooo!” She let out a content moo, unable to contain herself as her tail happily swished.

“I am so happy you like it!” Angela beamed. “I know it’s not much, but I’ll keep fighting for you and your friends here.”

They went through the motions of saying goodnight before Mable was left alone in her quarters, nothing but the quiet whirring of the air conditioner to keep her company. She placed a hoof forward and began to operate the radio, finding a station that played prog and indie music. Once done, she paused and stared at her new amenity-- or, through it, instead, as regret flooded her. There were so many things she still wanted to do as a human. There was her beloved Joel, whom she’d never marry while wearing a white dress, going out to clubs, dancing, trying on clothes, and eating questionable all-you-can-eat sushi with Jeanie-- all lost to her.

She trudged over and mechanically operated the light switch, dimming it to near darkness before carefully seating herself upon one of the large cushions. With a mix of emotions and quiet music filling the room, she let out a low, mournful moo and closed her eyes, resting her chin forward. Before long, she fell into a troubled slumber full of confusing dreams where she still had opposable thumbs and could laugh and smile with all she loved, only to transform into a cow before their eyes, letting out loud moos as they cast her disgusted looks and abandoned her.

Livestock Syndrome wasn’t easy-- not even remotely so, but what were the options? Be a cow or be dead, and she refused to pick the latter.