

## 2 November 3132

The form had been easy enough to find and fill in. After university and landing a job as a broker, Luc found the Bannson Universal job application form to be almost minimalist by comparison. A few basic details, his past employment history and a quick summary of his skillset, as well as the obligatory references and he was set. Given what Gaspar had mentioned he'd been doing since he got the job, he was almost surprised by how little there was. *I presume they do background checks on the applications.*

He'd been pleasantly surprised when someone from Bannson Universal had called him for an interview; that they were asking if he could come in the same day was a surprise but at the same time he wasn't going to pass up an opportunity. Besides, it wasn't like he had anything else on that day.

What had been even more surprising was the address they gave him. Rather than the head office in the Downtown business district, they directed him to a branch office in an outer industrial suburb. Travelling there in his best suit made him feel somewhat out of place, at odds with the environment around him. The feeling was only made more acute when he arrived at the address, finding that it was little more than a collection of warehouses with an attached office; fortunately, the specific address referred him to there.

If he'd felt out of place before, entering the office only made the feeling even more stark. The place had clearly been made up to look like a professional reception area, but it was about as out of place as he was. What had really grabbed his attention, however, were the other people present, sitting on chairs around the edge of the room, clearly waiting. He'd seen the look before, people who'd come for an interview, each one of them eyeing up the others, assessing them to measure comparative strengths for the job in question.

The difference was the people involved. Luc was about the only man in a suit; even then, amongst those who were in suits, he was the only one who looked like he wore one regularly. The rest of them, the men and even the few women were otherwise rough-looking, muscular, tough, dressed more often in streetwear than anything else, tattoos and more than a few scars on display. *Is this a job interview or a police line-up?* He asked himself. *And I'm sure they're all looking at me.*

To her credit, the receptionist was doing a fantastic job of looking professional and indifferent, acting as if she wasn't in amongst a room full of would-be axe murderers. Right, if she can do it, I can too, he told himself as he approached. "Hi there. My name's Luc, I'm here for a job interview with—"

"Take a seat, we will call your name when we're ready." She replied measured calm, barely even looking at him.

Luc nodded, taking a seat next to a large, muscular man with a shaved head, clad in jeans, a sleeveless top and a vest. He received a brief but angry glare, as if he was being sized up, assessed as a threat before being dismissed as unworthy. All of a sudden, Luc had never felt more alone, more isolated in the world. *What am I doing here? And more to the point, why is Bannson Universal hiring gangers and thugs? No sane person would hire these men for a security job.*

All of a sudden, he began to appreciate how his friend had managed to get a job here; no qualifications, no stable job history, a reputation as a risk-taker and with few connections, he'd be perfect. And at the same time, Luc felt a gnawing feeling of dread, coming with the acceptance that she was in well over his head. *This is insane.*

He stood, walking back towards the reception desk, trying his best not to let his fear show. "Excuse me." He began again to the professionally indifferent receptionist, amazed at her own degree of self-control.

"I've just realised that I have another appointment... can I reschedule my interview for another day?"

Her look told him all he needed to know. *I expected that. Go away, coward.* "Of course. You have our contact number, so please call to arrange another time. Thank you." And that was it, a curt, professional and cold dismissal. Without further word, he turned and left, doing his best not to look back at the assembled crowd.

*Stay calm. Don't provoke them. Don't say a word. They know you're a coward. Accept it and move on. This was a mistake, but you made it out alive.*

As he left, he couldn't help but think of his friend, wondering just what he'd gotten himself into. *God help you. And if this is the future of the Republic, god help all of us.*