

## Chapter 1: It is who you know.

The graffiti laden walls of the building's elevator stare back at me as I ride it to the floor I live on with my mother. They only deepen my sour mood. I had put such high hopes on that interview only for it to fall through at the last minute.

Even what was once nice wood trim on the handrails is similarly marred with carved slurs and gang signs among various other tags.

This hasn't always been a low class apartment building. It was once mid range hotel from some long forgotten chain attached to a decent sized convention center, a hub of various events for the people of this city.

It must have been welcoming and homely before it was purchased by the government. Of course after said hotel chain failed they came in and bought it up for a song. Then used it for the growing homeless and unemployable population. Heh, That's only because sheltered and fed people are less likely to revolt and in turn those that rule keep their heads another day.

How did the United States, which hates anything even remotely 'social' get to the state that they would hand out free housing and meals? Why the same reason why 'I' can't land even the simplest job. The first major invention of the twenty-first century, the biological robot, or Bio-Morph as everyone in the popular media now calls them.

Uplifted animal's with just enough human D.N.A. so they can move around and manipulate objects in a human centric world, with the proper training of course. Yet not enough to be considered 'human' and thus look like enslavement. Well, the United Nations non withstanding, Bunch of nut-jobs saying they are people.

They swept through the economy like a flu sweeps through an office block in winter. When one company purchased them to replace their low end workers, all the surrounding ones followed suit just to compete. Got to love market economies and the race to the bottom they create.

For those replaced by them its just been one long and soul crushing effort to find someone, anyone, who is willing to hire them. Even if its because the place cannot yet afford the large cost of a second hand Bio-Morph.

A sickening lurch and a partially dying ding of a bell announces my arrival to the floor I call home. I don't even reach out to brace myself as it wobbles like its threatening to fall back down to the ground floor as it stops. One of these days it is going to kill someone and yet I am so used to it I use it every day that it will probably be me. I wonder if they would actually fix it then or force everyone to take the stairs, then again those stairs are in a similar run down condition.

While waiting for the carriage to stop swaying I wipe my hands clean from the grime that covers the handrails using the only thing I can, my clothes. They are the best pair of pants; shirt, and shoes that I own. Yet they can only be described as roughly suitable for polite company. Maybe when they were new they would've been suitable for what I used them for.

Now they show wear in several places, the signs of them also being patched to fix holes and tears are visible once you get a good enough look at them too.

We get free food and board here, but clothes? That is something we have to scavenge on our own. It saddens me that my 'best' set of clothes would be someone else's grease rags.

When I finally get a job the first thing I will do is purchase brand new clothes to replace every single one of these stupid hand me downs and scavenged rags. Then I will burn all the old clothes in an open fire.

Possibly while dancing around it naked as I chant nonsense like some modern day pagan. Or well something similarly cathartic like that.

The elevator doors screech open revealing the poorly maintained twenty-third floor foyer. A pitiful space that greets anyone that arrives on this floor or just about any other one besides the lobby actually.

It probably held healthy plants in stylish terracotta pots some time ago. Each one sitting next to the

walls on either side of a large window, a window that gave a view of the parking lot and city beyond.

As I look at it now it just holds a pair of tacky fake plants in plastic planters, half filled with real dirt and trash. Their leaves are covered in dust and flecks of spray paint. Any stylish molding or other decorum have long since been removed by the federal government or stolen for a few dollars of spending cash by the residents.

The carpet, if you can call it that, covering the floor has seen much better days. At least they remove any blood or other fluid stains as they happen. Otherwise, this place would stink. Its better maintained than the walls though, which are covered in graffiti running from highly stylized lettering that nearly borders on art, to the simple gang tag signs. They stopped trying to paint over them on the walls and doors years ago when they would just get covered again within a week. The last time they did it the first tag was up before the rest of the paint even dried.

The placard on the wall that used to have embossed text on it pointing out which room numbers are down which hallway was removed when the building was bought. In its place is a sign that has a removable typeface. Each room listed shows who lives there now. For some reason it is surrounded by a metal case that is bolted onto the wall.

I don't blame them, people here would pawn anything for a few dollars of spending cash.

The hotel room that has been my home for most of my life is down the hallway to the right. To get there I have to navigate a hallway littered with trash for daily pickup and more than a single person passed out drunk on the floor.

At one time it was a possibility for people like me to find work here where we live. Stuff like cleaning the building, delivering mail, cooking food, Etc. That was before the government themselves started to use Bio-Morphs to save those extra dollars just like everyone else. Unlike the corporations who spearheaded their adoption it was pressure from the electorate about 'wasting money' on deadbeats. Kind of funny, if it was not so sad. They are more than willing to spend the money to keep us housed and fed 'just' enough not to starve. Anything more would create dependency and entitlement.

It doesn't take me long to reach the hotel room door with my family name written on a placard that has been haphazardly placed on the face of the sturdy door. 'The Straders'.

For a moment I consider if I should make up some excuse for mother as to why the interview fell threw. No, she knows that my job prospects are slim, she just won't admit it. I guess that makes her an eternal optimist. I'm more pragmatic leaning most of the time.

I just don't want to tell her that its been just another day with a bunch of empty promises. Stuff like 'we will get in touch with you later' or 'We have not made our decision yet but you will be first on our list when we do'.

Bullshit, everyone knows that once you declare yourself a resident of one of these compounds your 'Persona Non Grata'. It doesn't mater if you were a kid when moved in and otherwise had a good education record or if you were just someone down on your luck.

Upon the discloser of this it would take nothing short of a miracle to be hired. I will be damned if I let myself end it the way many others have. To be honest with myself I have had days where it was on my mind, like from today's failure.

What am I considering? It is what we affectionately call 'the shortcut to the ground' because the person in question wanted out of here so badly they opened the window and just walked out.

No, I have to stop thinking about it or I am just going to dwell on the possibility of doing it. I'll do many things, suicide is not one of them.

I also can't stand out here all evening either. So I take out my room key and use it to open the door to the only home I have known for decades.

It opens with a loud aching creak from hinges that have not seen oil in decades. At least the hinges still work well enough to close the door behind me after I enter. Once closed I turn and move

the deadbolt into the door-frame, securely locking it with a satisfying click.

Not that these old doors would offer much protection from anyone who wants what is inside. The peace of mind helps at least make this place feel 'safe' though.

The room its self is small enough for the beds to be visible from the door. Two twin beds stuffed into this single hotel room that was made into our apartment, our home.

Oh and before you start I am 'not' one of those people who would sit in their rooms wallowing in their own lack of self worth. Or how they ended up here in the first place. Though there are days after one to many rejections I can understand why they do it.

No I at least try my hardest to get a job. My mother and I had to move here in the mid 2020's and I will be damned if I stay here long enough to reach her age.

The company my mother was working for decided to restructure while also being the latest in the long line of local companies adopting Bio-Morphs. Just so they could stay in business and compete with their competitors. To be truthful I can't be mad at them for doing so, it was either that or have everyone lose their jobs after the place goes under.

What possibly sealed her fate was that when she was around my age she lost her left arm in a car accident. You know, back when most cars were not computer controlled. Even though she has an adequate prosthesis, the same one she has had since the accident. She is still considered disabled in the eyes of the law.

On a list of people that companies wont hire, the people living in this building are on the top of it. Next are those who are handicapped or have a permanent disability in some shape or form. Mother can be put into both categories, so you can pretty much guess what her chances were of finding other employment. Slim and none, and it seems slim though took the shortcut to the ground. Sure it still is on the books that employers cannot disqualify someone because of a physical or mental disability. No one enforces it anymore since few have the will or the capital to go through a long legal fight that is required to prove wrong doing. It is just an unpleasant side effect of it being a 'employers market'. Too few jobs and too many people needing them allows them to just dismiss applicants like this.

Assuming of course someone in the hiring company did not do something dumb and out right say too the candidate they were not picked for the job because of their disability.

Occasionally there is a case that is paraded around in the media just to give the semblance of rule of law. Every time its just a small business being taken to the cleaners as a way to remove a threat to a larger corporation rather than actually trying to stamp out the practice. I think the term is a 'sacrificial scape goat'.

“How did the interview go? I bet you hit it out of the park.” Mother asks while she is doing her best to clean the carpet with a vacuum my friend Patrick dug out of a dump and repaired. Her effort does make the carpet look better than the stuff outside. It still gives the same atmosphere that this was a former hotel room.

Letting out a frustrated sigh as I cross the distance between the small entrance hallway too one of the two twin sized beds. Without even sighing I lay down on it. Mine is the one closest to the door and both of them together take up most of the floor space. Even then it is still littered with a couple of projects I am working on for a few dollars. Repairing electronics is the only way I can earn a few dollars here and there.

I haven't answered yet and she will expect one even though she knows what it is before I am even able to say it. The only answer I have gotten form the countless interviews in the past several years from just about every company in the metro area.

“Basically same way it goes with every other interview mom. Some half bullshit and yet polite excuse end the interview quickly so they can go onto a candidate who doesn't live in one of these centers.” I speak while pushing my shoes off my feet before stretching out on the bed. They

hit the floor with a dull thud. I hate this mattress. Its nearly flattened springs offer little more than the absolute minimum amount of comfort needed to fall asleep. Yet it still feels good to get off my feet after the long walk home. My plans shift to just laying here the rest of the evening and night.

With a disinterest that only comes with years old routine, she just walks on over and picks up my shoes from the floor with her good hand. "Just keep trying. I know someone will eventually say yes to you. Then you can get out of this place." Followed by using her prosthetic arm to vacuum where they landed. It is simple and robust, not one of those fancy five finger servo driven fingered models, just a two finger gripper. I have only had to repair it once for her. With a single pass with the vacuum she places my shoes onto the tile floor of the bathroom. Exhaustion prevented me from doing that myself, not that she would let that excuse fly.

Not even bothering to sit up I remove my shirt and toss it onto the foot of the bed. "You keep saying that like the answer is going to change for no reason. If it was not illegal to lie about your location of residence on applications now I would have been able to get out of here a long while ago." Removing my shirt I crawl under the thin covers before laying my head down on the single pillow every bed gets.

Mother picks up my shirt and tosses it at the laundry bin. Which I guess she will later stick out in the hall for the laundry Bio-Morph to pick up. "You know as well as I do Jack that this city has many open jobs. Its just that they are hard to get for people like us. Eventually one of them will have hired you. If not tomorrow then, maybe next week, or next month. You know as well as I do Jack they can't discriminate against us based on the location of our residence either." Once finished she stores the vacuum inside the single tiny closet the room has and traverses the space to her twin bed. Sitting down on the corner of the bed she unhooks the straps keeping her prosthetic arm on.

She sets the prosthetic arm on the floor leaning it against the nightstand in the same place she always does every night before going to bed. "Yes there are jobs mother. Mother you know as well as I do that there are hundreds if not thousands applying for every open position a company has. I do admit I should count myself lucky to actually get to the interview stage. Though I have to be realistic, I think it was just to humor me." I don't think she realizes how different the world is right now compared to how it was when she still looked for work. All I get as a response is a sigh while she shuts off the lights in the room via the switch on the nightstand. It is not that late at night, but I do not complain about her shutting off the light. After all she is a lot older than I am and needs more sleep than I do. So I am not surprised when I hear her breathing slow down as she falls asleep a short while later. I might as well try to fall asleep as well rather than just lay here in bed, it might help my mood.

Waking at about nine in the morning I find that the early night has in fact helped banish the melancholy settling in after my failed interview yesterday. Mother though is still asleep. It was the sunlight streaming in through the window that woke me, it has not done so for her. She has always been a selective heavy sleeper. Noise will wake her, but light won't. Being as quiet as I can I get myself up out of bed. Being careful not to wake her up with too much noise I get dressed in some of my normal day clothes. Well, a set that has few holes in them at least. Upon opening the door to the hallway in a manner that won't wake my mother I notice that not only is the trash gone but so are the drunkards. Seems the minimal Bio-Morph cleaning crew worked on our floor overnight. It even looks like the carpet has had a vacuumed clean, which is in its self a rarity here. I can't linger much and try to piece together what they did overnight. The cafeteria has a first come first serve policy, so I quickly head to the elevator and when it arrives I push the lobby button. Being too late to the line would mean I won't get breakfast today. So I hope I make it in time.

Well to tell the truth the whole convention area was not converted. Only some larger meeting rooms were made into dining halls with the smaller ones being converted into kitchens and food storage. The rest of the rooms became either residential overflow, as there are more families here than rooms in the hotel. Or makeshift gyms, which are the only recreation provided by the government free of charge for the residents.

The same dying dinging sound announces my arrival to the lobby. At some time in the past it would have been an inviting place to everyone who enters. All the fancy decorations, the live plants, comfortable seating, and a drink bar for the guests. The public would have a field day if that was kept in. I can see the headlines now, 'Government gives deadbeats free booze!' As it stands right now it is a rather depressing place. Like the rest of the building, all the live plants have been removed and the walls have been painted over with in a beige color. At least I think it is a beige color under all the current graffiti plastered on the walls. Kind of hard to tell in the state they are in. The nice comfortable chairs and couches that littered the room have been replaced by chairs that would fit better in a subway car rather than a lobby. I don't linger in the lobby, if I don't get in line then I don't get a chance to eat till lunch and I rather not go hungry this morning.

Said line for breakfast is already spilling out into the large hallway leading to the converted conference room. I am thankful to any higher power that the people that live here consider it a good idea to get dressed before coming down here to get food. Few people here, and I do mean a small amount people are pleasant to look at so I would dread to see the others without clothes. When the line moves, it moves in silence. Everyone just seems to be in their own little world, not that I blame them. They have their own problems and reasons for being here, their own crushed hopes, and their own dreams of leaving this place. We all seem to have come to an unspoken conclusion not to shatter each others illusions. If they don't harm mine, I won't poke holes in theirs. I am more focused on the smell of food wafting are way out of the kitchen part of the cafeteria. It may be crap but food is food when you're hungry.

Someones hand suddenly but gently grasps my shoulder. Yet I am not scared because I know who it is before I even turn to look at him. "Hey Jack! I take it since you're standing in line right now for breakfast your interviews yesterday fell through?" I must have been too engrossed in my own thoughts to hear him walk up behind me.

"It was just the same old song and dance. They said the same stuff as all the others, in the same way, and in mostly the same tone of voice. Happy and cheerful." Just saying this brings back my bad mood from last night so I don't say anything further for the moment. Patrick stays quiet as well so I guess he realizes the mood I am in.

Every time I return from failed interviews I find my mood in the dumps. Then, after a few days it gets better and then I go out and try again. Thus allowing my cycle of misery to complete. Pondering this I move slightly to the side opening a spot to allow Patrick to stand next to me in the breakfast line. I doubt he got here in time to get breakfast if I don't let him stand next to me. Before Patrick and I realize it our place in line has advanced to inside the cafeteria proper. While the other end of the line has doubled in size, seems I got here just in time. Part of me wonders why I no longer feel sad for those who got here late and are now in the back of the line with no hope of having a breakfast today. The business end of the cafeteria is exactly like the serving set up at our high-school. Stainless steel serving trays behind glass sneeze guards preventing us from choosing our own portions. Three stainless steel rods welded together serves as the shelf for our trays.

Standing behind the glass, in full body fur nets. Are a couple of Bio-Morphs dishing out single servings of whatever food the person in line chooses. One is a house-cat and the other is some kind of canine breed I can't recognize.

"I know what you're going to say Pat, mother said it last night too. Ever since the government mandated that all websites and computer programs be officially registered a few years ago, no one wants to contract out to an independent coder. Mainly due to risks of being caught." I have known Patrick for many years. He, just like me, has lived in this damn place since early childhood when his family's income dried up suddenly like so many others. He arrived with freshly combed dirty blond hair and some alright clothes. When I first saw him I was wearing some slightly too big hand-me-down clothes with some uncombed and slightly long brown hair.

At first our was a friendship was one formed out of convenience. Two white average looking young boys living in a neighborhood made up of primarily non-white residents. Yet as time went on we became close friends. Our friendship stayed strong as the demographics changed, mainly due to more and more people being crushed under the new seismic shift in the economy.

During high-school we both came up with a plan to get out of this hellhole so we can live like we thought normal humans should.

I took an interest in computers. Mainly because I was able to get my hands on many systems thrown in the dumpster due to being 'too old'. It led me into computer programing and some light web design on the side.

I do admit I did make a decent amount of money working as the 'neighborhood' tech. Well for everyone that could afford a computer. Except it all came crashing down right before I graduated.

With the rise of the Bio-Morphs many people found even the modern cheap digital content too expensive. When someone loses their job, it can come down to either watching a movie or having food for the day. In the end people did not want to give up their entertainment. So they did not let a little thing like not having money stop them.

An underground distribution network for said content sprang up to serve these needs. It was crushed almost as soon as it appeared. They should have known from the start that it was going to happen.

The government has been in the pocket of big media since the turn of the century.

Thus was born the authorized network communication act of twenty forty. Coders and their code had to be officially certified as to not allow the unauthorized use of any 'trusted' content.

Certification cost thousands of dollars per coder and up to a thousand dollars per program. If a program was not registered and its author listed in it as being registered, the computer would refuse to run it.

Websites got even harsher treatment. No unregistered website was allowed to stay on-line while the website coders themselves had to annually certify with the act.

If you could not afford the certification costs, or were disqualified. You would be out of a job as fast as the email notifying your boss of your certification status. The act also killed off my only source of income. I do not have the money to register and no one wants to hire someone unregistered.

As for Patrick, he has had a slightly easier time earning money compared to me. While I dug out old computers to fix and sell, he refurbished and fixed anything he could get his hands on. That included everything from motor parts to furniture.

He is so good at this he has become 'the' person you go to for fix anything here in the complex. Mainly because the land lord couldn't give a damn.

Yet as he got older a national chain of stores catering to the same need appeared. The need of repairing what you have instead of replacing it with something new. It didn't matter if you lived in one of these centers or you managed to keep your head afloat. Due to rising energy costs it just

started to make more sense to fix something that broke rather than throw it away.

Then his income slowed down to a near glacial pace as his work dried up. Trapping him here just like me but with somewhat better prospects for the future. He still gets an occasional job here and there, But I have not had any work for years. Just long stretches of failed interviews spaced between short bouts of not caring enough to leave this place.

He doesn't break the silence between us until we pick up our trays while approaching the counter. "You can always help me you know. Occasionally I get an old computer that needs to be fixed. My skills in repairing them can't compete with yours if I am to be honest. Half the time I am poking around in the dark to figure out what's wrong, especially with the old ones. Not to mention I can also keep my ears open for actual job leads while I am out in the city to drop a finished project off or pick one up." I consider his proposition. It is mostly the same one he has given to me several times. In the meantime we point to the food that we want for our breakfast this morning. The two Bio-Morph servers dutifully scoop out our selected portions; plop them onto plates, and then hand them to us to place on our trays. Being up close to them now I realize the canine looking one is actually a gray fox model. Huh, must be a new one then. Foxes are normally in high demand elsewhere. For a moment I think I notice a look of sheer boredom on one of them. I dismiss it right away because everyone knows Bio-Morphs are not smart enough to have emotions. They are just biological robots after all.

So what's on the menu for today's breakfast? A stack of four tasteless but filling pancakes topped with generic syrup. They still refuse to give us butter because it's 'bad to give us frills' for some reason. Next to it we chose two low fat and low taste sausage links to fill out our protein portion for the meal.

Both of us choose the left over two percent milk from local schools. Other options include a juice drink that is more water than juice, or water. As far as Patrick and I can tell, no one chooses the other options more than once. Depending on if you are early enough in line to be able to have a choice for your drink.

To be honest the food is bland, but it is better than going hungry. With the portion size it does fill you enough to keep you from gnawing anything remotely edible until lunch.

Stomach gnawing pain is something I do try to avoid so I am glad I made it in time to get a breakfast.

Food is the last thing on my mind right now. It's Patrick's suggestion that has my interest. "What did you mean by keeping an ear out for some job openings out in the city? No one in the city surrounding the low incoming housing circling this hell hole has ever asked for your repair services before." We grab some recyclable plastic utensils from the bins at the end of the line. Again this is a cost saving measure, but at least one I can agree with. They used to have metal utensils and sometimes they were not properly cleaned before being used again. We look around and then find a small empty rectangular table somewhere in the center of the seating area for the cafeteria. Just like everything else it's simple and utilitarian. Not to mention made out of the cheapest looking pressed particle board laminated with some fake wood patterned plastic coating. There are no chairs sitting around the table. Only plastic stools that I know from experience are more sturdy than they look.

The drone of the conversations going on around us is enough to mask the sound of us placing our trays on the table. Though it is unable to mask the sound of the stools scraping against the floor as we sit down. "If you asked me that a couple of weeks ago Jack I would have agreed with you. Then some poor upper class schmuck had his old pure combustion ninja style bike break down near here." While Patrick speaks I move my pancakes around in the syrup so they will soak it up. This serves two purposes; firstly it makes them soft and edible, secondly it makes them taste of something other than cardboard.

Patrick starts munching on the sausage links. He doesn't even bother to dip them in the imitation maple syrup to give them a better taste. "It turns out that the bike shop he took it too substituted genuine replacement Yamaha spark plugs for used up ones that were made to look new. You know how the old saying goes, 'a fool and his money are soon parted'. Well he was foolish enough not to check the workmanship and the shop basically got away with their little scam. Of course as luck would have it, I had some used Yamaha spark plugs I personally refurbished." I know all about those spark plugs. Grinning like a fool wouldn't shut up about how much cash he was going to get selling them. To local shops or whoever would give him what he thought they were worth.

A loud crash and slightly softer yowl coming from a couple of tables over interrupts our conversation causing Patrick to pause his story.

I have a pretty good guess on what I am going to see even before turning my head to take a glance at the source of the disturbance. A calico patterned house-cat Bio-Morph is hastily gathering up all the trays and dishes that he just dropped.

To the side of the distraught thing are the amused looks and the laughter of a table full of teenage boys. Who just so happened to be watching at the right moment to catch the Bio-Morph's fall, which I suspect is not an accidental one. I do hope those idiots know that if they injure the Bio-Morph they would get in some serious trouble as it is owned by the federal government.

With ears that are flat against his head and with his tail twitching like mad he re-stacks the dropped trays and places the broken plates back into the large container. With the broken cookware cleaned up he places the container onto the stack of trays and picks the whole thing up. He continues on with his duties while glaring at the teenagers.

If I didn't know better the poor thing was considering clawing those kids' eyes out for joking at the expense of his dignity.

It is the most interesting thing about Bio-morphs and the technology used. They are just smart enough to be taught tasks while at the same time not smart enough to be able to talk or have emotions. They are a fantastic feat and a testimony to the technological wonders of the age we live in.

As the cafeteria returns to its normal droll of conversation, Patrick and I return to ours. We also go back to eating this stuff that can barely be classified as food. "Anyway, as I was saying. I just so happened to have the spark plugs he needed at that moment. Not to mention I was feeling sorry for him. Well, if I am honest about it. I was more sorry for that spotless and show room clean bike than the person riding it. I walk up and inform him of who I am and of course and what I do. Then when he calms down I tell him that I can get him some replacements for a fraction of the price he paid at that shop. He's skeptical of course, but then again what choice does he have? Tow trucks won't come anywhere near here without asking for an arm and a leg beforehand." Yea I can't blame them. Many people that live here have turned to robbery as a way to earn cash for luxuries. Like not having to depend on the limited cafeteria food for survival.

Managing to finish my pancakes. It is no small feat considering how they taste. I turn to the sausages and my milk while Patrick starts on his own pancakes. "I would've expected him to be gone by the time you returned with the spark plugs and tools. Though you wouldn't be telling me this story if he left, right?" I point the sausage link and my fork at him while posing my question. Which then I move to my mouth and eat the tasteless meat like product.

Patrick cringes at the taste of the pancakes but forces himself to eat them nonetheless. The thought of having to go hungry can make anything palatable. "Yup. He was waiting right where I left him. Standing and shaking like a leaf, jumping at the noise of anyone approaching near him. If he was not so well off I would be sorry for his predicament. I had to calm him down as I changed the spark plugs. I also explain to him how to do this himself and how the shop ripped him off.



Anger replaced fear once it dawned on him how simple the con was. As I worked on the bike he kept on talking about how he was going to make that shop pay for this. Lucky for him though there was no damage to the engine from the bad spark plugs, with a simple swap out the bike purring like a kitten. After that the guy pays me in CASH! Enough to feed me; my brother, my sister, and my parents for a week. So of course I take what he hands me next, a plastic business card. I nearly drop the damn thing when I see what's on the red tinted translucent card." I always go for two cartons of milk when I eat down here. So I eagerly open one up and drink it down to wash out the horrible taste of the food.

Patrick looks longingly at my two cartons with envy. He was only able to quickly grab one carton. "So who was he and where did he work?" Eh, he hates the food here more than I do. So I just push the second carton over to him. I can live with just having one occasionally.

Smiling at me in thanks he opens the carton before answering. "The guy works at one of the locally based Bio-Morph contractor companies!" Patrick fishes out the mentioned business card out of his pants pocket. He places it face-up on the table before sliding it over to me and I notice that it is indeed a translucent red. Picking it up I look it over, as I do the color seems to change from where my fingers touch into a greenish shade. It only takes a couple of seconds for the color to engulf the whole card making it completely green. Strange but neat if you think about it. "The same one who owns the huge office tower in the center of the city. He's some middle management type but he told me if I, or a friend of mine wanted a job that I should send him over there with that card." I place it back on the table but the color does not change back to its original red.

Patrick ends up finishing his breakfast after I do. Yet I don't leave as I still have a question for him. "Of course this is one of those 'job leads' you mentioned?" I ask while I'm busy cleaning up the table of my breakfast. Placing all the dishes and utensils onto my tray.

He soon follows suit with his own used dishes. "Yup. I figured that you could use the job lead more than I could. I have been so busy as of late I think I am actually starting to make some headway against those national chains. Maybe people prefer a more personal touch. Go ahead, take the card. I'll bet you that by the end of the day you will have a job. Then you and your mother can finally leave this god forsaken place for good." Picking up the card I pocket it for safe keeping. What I don't notice is that the card slightly glows green once its in my pocket.

It doesn't take me long to decide to visit this place. Everything else I had planned today can wait till tomorrow. "Thanks Pat. I am going to head on over there as fast as I can. If I am lucky the guy who gave you that card hasn't changed his mind since giving it to you." Patrick and I make our way out of the cafeteria heading for the lobby.

Which was just in time to see the Bio-Morphs closing the doors for the entrance side of the room. This causes everyone still standing in line for breakfast to groan and protest. Once we reach the lobby I move to give my friend a hug before we have to go our separate ways for the day.

Patrick nods and returns the friendly hug. "I knew that you would be interested in it. Anyway I have to get going. There are a few repairs I have to do today. An old man's generator, and an old lady's dishwasher from some time before the turn of the century. Both are going to take several hours each to repair." We head over to the elevators so Patrick can get his tools from his apartment while I can change into my interview clothes. Once dressed I head back to the lobby and out of the center.

The lot of land in front of the former hotel hasn't been spared in the slightest from the neglect and abuse that the rest of the place has experienced. Graffiti murals cover any bare concrete or brick surface within reach while the parking lot in front

of the place is fenced off with razor wire on top. Inside the fenced off area sits rows of the Bio-Morph housing units for the ones that 'work' here. Which to be fair, are little more than re-purposed cargo containers.

Two rows of three stacked two high sit with the fronts facing out away from the hotel. They have been bolted into place on the inside the sectioned off area closest to the building. So the first thing anyone sees when leaving is the side with all the utility pipes and cords running from the backs of the containers into the ground. From there they must either connect to the same utility pipes that the center uses or are run under the parking lot into the building.

Attached to the front of the residential containers are utilitarian styled gantry's allowing the Bio-Morphs in the top containers the ability reach the ground in a manner that won't result in hurting themselves. A ladder might have been cheaper so I don't know why they did not put that in.

It's obvious these were bought by the government. Just about everyone else seems to opt for option to repaint the re-purposed cargo containers with something a little more pleasant to the eye. Stuff like art deco scenes or a mural matching the theme of the store they will be used in are common. These are rusting with the faded paint of their former life as trans oceanic cargo containers complete with the shipper's logo.

These containers are the other half of the Bio-Morph product, a self contained shelter and home for the artificial organism. They are advertised as a cost saving measure for the customers. I bet they are actually the most profitable part of the transaction considering how cheaply someone can purchase a used shipping container.

Sold as one container per worker and each container provides shelter from; weather, water, and provides a place to sleep for them at night. They are supposed to have a multitude of choices available too.

I don't know what the exact options are for those who order Bio-Morphs to customize the inside. Although from what I can see as I pass by the front they again chose the absolute bare minimum options. It's kind of cathartic to see that the government also spent as little as humanly possible on these creatures.

I can see a cot hanging off the wall of the inside of one of them it has some padding that could be called a bed. I personally wouldn't call it one.

Then again would you give a top of the line memory foam bed to a tiger? Giving a full bed to one of these Bio-Morphs would be a similar exercise in futility.

My view of the rest of the interior of the housing units for the center's Bio-Morphs is blocked by the door attached to the front of it. I don't have the time to stand around and try to get a look inside either, I have a possible job interview to get to.

Being a pretty nice early spring day I don't mind missing the bus and having to walk to the city center. Not that I could have ridden it anyway, I don't have enough cash for the fare. Yes it costs money per ride.

With no income I of course have no money to spend on a ticket. Not that riding the bus is any safer than walking the whole way to the city center.

Just outside the jobless center is some low income housing. Poorly maintained lawns, houses that badly need a new coat of paint or some new siding. The people who live here are about a single paycheck from ending up in the center.

Still, it was a nice and relaxing walk. Once I left the run down and low income neighborhood that is. While there I had to keep an eye out for people waiting in the alleyways along with the occasional gang lounging about in a vacant building.

Knowing how to read the tag signs though makes the journey pretty easy and safe enough. Not what any sane person would consider 'safe' by any normal definition. Of course there is no police presence until the second I enter the higher class housing and storefront areas. They make themselves visible to anyone in the area by patrolling with clockwork regularity.

Their high speed electric patrol cars seem to make regular circuits around city blocks every thirty to forty five minutes on average. At least that is what I have noticed so far in my journey as I have seen the same driver go by a couple of times. Its unnerving and makes me feel unwelcome in the city I grew up in.

No one wants to admit it, but everyone knows they don't care about anyone other than the wealthy citizens. So the only reason you ever see them in the poor areas of the city is to arrest someone.

Because criminals are always poor right? Can't arrest the people with money because god forbid they fight back.

Needless to say I am not much of a fan of the police. They don't give me any trouble as long as I am dressed well enough while walking these high end districts. So I try not to give them any reason for them to stop me in return. People who live in the projects like I do sometimes disappear when in custody of the cops.

No way I can miss the building I am looking for. It is the largest building in the city towering over all the other skyscrapers and office complexes.

Other than size it looks just like every other skyscraper you would see in any other city. Sheer glass paneling starting from the second floor and continuing all the way up to the top floor of the building.

Only the front doors to the lobby shows any sort of personalization and are the only indication of who owns the building. Besides the name of the street sitting in front of it. I never understood the trend of companies getting the city to name the streets leading to their buildings after the company. The whole thing seems too selfish.

Each door has for a handle a simple model of the company logo with a cartoon styled double helix laying on top of it. Cute, well as much as a logo and mascot designed by a committee can be. I open the door and head inside without a second glance at it.

The lobby is your typical high end corporate setting with the fancy new age chairs and tables in the corners. The current style is sleek modern and utilitarian, but made in such a way to make you wonder how they are standing. Even the windows are not spared, they are made of those new self polarizing glass panes. Rather than using blinds to keep unwanted sunlight out like a sane person. I wonder if they stop working when cracked? It seems silly to me for anyone to use such a fragile and disposable thing.

My shoes make squeaking noises on the tile floor as I walk up to the largest object in the lobby, the receptionist's desk. It is just a set of two rectangular glass desk tops placed in an L shape. It too is in the same style as the tables and chairs looking as if it can't stand up on its own and yet it does.

Sitting behind it in an expensive business skirt and blouse is your typical eye candy receptionist.

Big breasts, youthful face, nice hair that is neither too long nor too short. Oh and let's not forget the smooth and blemish free legs visible through the glass surface. Eye candy to a T.

Or she would be if she was not annoyed with the noise my shoes are making on the mirror tile floor. A floor that I am also marking with scuff marks with my old shoes.

She glances at me with a scowl as I walk up to the side of her desk with a 'visitors sign in here' sign.

The sound of claws on marble fill the lobby as I write my name on the paper log book along with the reason for my visit. I don't look back because I know what I am going to see, the Bio-Morph janitor toiling to remove the scuff marks off the floor.

I guess she did not realize I saw her scowl. Because as soon as I stand next to the desk and look at her, she dons that fake smile that all receptionists are trained to have. Upon looking at her in the face she stops working on her computer. "May I help you sir?" The tone of voice is polite but an undertone of annoyance taints it. Like I am somehow beneath her time. She is not putting on a good first impression of the place for me.

Silently nodding yes I take out the business card and place it on the desk in front of her. Its

still the transparent green color it turned earlier. "Yes I am here to see." I read the name on the card. "Joe Snyder for a job he offered me?" She barely even glances down as she picks up a card reader and places it on the table in front of me.

The eye candy secretary points to the card reader. "Please stick the card into the reader." I place the card in the reader and a bright green light activates on the device. I barely notice that one of her eyebrows raises slightly upon the illumination of the indicator. She quickly hides it back under the cheerful mask before motioning for me to take the card.

Removing the card I quickly put it in my pocket. "To get to his office you need to take the elevator to the thirty fifth floor. His office is at the end of the main hallway. You should not be able to miss it." She points off to the side of the lobby where the elevators are located with an over manicured nail.

With a polite nod I head on over to the elevators at a polite pace. All the while my old shoes still squeak against the floor as I walk. Leaving the receptionist's desk I hear her mutter an insult my way. Something about deadbeat trash or something, she speaks too low for me to catch the exact phrase. Reaching the elevator I press the button and it emits the stereotypical 'ding'.

Why is it all the call buttons for elevators ding? Can't they play a jingle? Or how about playing nothing at all?

I idly wait in front of the near mirror finish stainless steel elevator doors. The feeling of someone staring at me creeps into my mind. Glancing back over at the receptionist sitting at her desk, I catch her looking away from me when I glance over. I figured she was staring at me.

Can't help how I look considering that I can't afford anything better. Or well anything at all. Dammit, just because I am poor doesn't make me any less human!

With a ding that reverberates through the lobby the elevator arrives and the doors slide open silently. I quickly make my way into the elevator carriage so I no longer have to endure the vapid receptionist's glare. Once safely inside I press the button for thirty fifth floor followed by slamming the button to close the elevator's door. Her staring still unnerves me as I ride the elevator up to my desired floor. I can't be the only poor person walk in here for a job so that can't be the reason. What else could it be though?

The inside of the elevator is made of immaculate stainless steel. From the walls to the handle bars, even the panel that holds the buttons is stainless steel.

Utilitarian carpet covers the floor instead of tile like in the lobby. Just by the feeling of it though my shoes I can tell it is of better quality than any of the stuff used in the center.

Being a much faster elevator than back home I arrive at the destination floor just about when I finish looking around. Of course it makes yet another ding as the door opens revealing the thirty fifth floor elevator lobby. To tell the truth I don't know why I don't like that dinging sound. I just don't and think they could have used something else.

Stepping out onto the thirty fifth floor lobby reveals it is a much smaller and compact version of the main one. Not surprising since they would want to keep the same style across the different floors.

The same kind of stone tile covers the floor but only in a small area around the elevators. Attached to the opposite wall is a large flat screen monitor of some kind. Its use is pretty obvious upon looking at it, its used to display the floor's directory. Along with this it occasionally switches to short animation focusing on their company logo. Cute, but not in the way a person would think. Art done by a person just for the sake of art has a different feel than art made by and for a corporation. It just feels odd.

Glancing at it shows that the receptionist was right, Snyder's office is at the end of the main hallway to my right. I waste no further time and head in that direction.

Of course the tile causes my shoes to squeak until I exit the elevator lobby. Just like the tile in the main lobby. The carpeting on the rest of the floor seems to be your standard office weave. Short, durable, but not comfortable even through my shoes. Each door I pass on my way to the desired office is only marked with a plaque describing its name and function. Some are offices to other employees, others are marked as labs with notices saying safety gear required. Not a single one has a window. They like their privacy don't they?

With a practiced calm look on my face to hide my nervousness I reach up and knock on Snyder's office door.

By the time Snyder answers the knock I made upon his door to announce my presence I have already straightened my clothes once. Along with my hair as well as checking my breath. I just hope he excuses how I look because I am pretty much broke rather than condemn me because of being broke. "Come in." A young but commanding male voice finally breaks the silence after knocking on his door. No turning back now if I actually want a job here. Pushing down my nervousness about this interview being my one best chance to get out of that damned jobless center I open the door and enter his office. Shutting the door politely after I cross the threshold.

Snyder's office is decorated in the current style for executive offices. Still, its an unusual concept to me since I figured they would want it to be more utilitarian. For fewer distractions since they always claim that their jobs are difficult to do.

Stained oak panels fully cover each wall along with decorative oak moldings frame the outside of each panel. Placed about waist high a uniform railing like molding encircles the room, separating the top from the bottom panels.

The liquor coating on them gives the wood a mirror like shine that reflects the light from the l.e.d. wall lamps. Each of them are made to look like those old gas lamps from the era the decor is imitating.

Upon stepping into the office I notice that the floor is of a high quality wood tile. Just like the tile elsewhere in the building scuff marks appear on the floor from my shoes old rubber soles. I hope this does not count against me.

Sitting in the center of the office laying in between the door and the window on the opposite wall is an ornate oriental rug. Upon which stands a two post oak desk with a green felt top reminding me of a pool table from its color.

The desk is; trimmed, stained, and liquored in the same fashion so it would match the walls so it looks older to me than it possibly is. Each of the two posts serve as cabinets and drawers for the owner. The whole room looks like it belongs in an office a hundred years ago.

Sitting on-top is another l.e.d. lamp built to look like an old oil lamp. What draws my attention is something completely anachronistic to the decor of the room. A brand new holographic display sits on his desk. Its Rectangular base is set on a small swivel device. Visible through its display is a distorted figure of a young man who looks around my age. Both the executive chair he is sitting in and the chairs in front of his desk are similarly ornate, matching the desk for a complete set. They even look like the seats may be covered in genuine leather.

I have heard leather can be comfortable. I just have never seen anything with it because its rare. Rare and expensive to buy.

His nicely pressed slate blue business suit barely wrinkles as he stands to present his hand for me to shake. "Hello there. I was expecting Patrick. Pretty glad to run into him when I did back there." Grasping his hand I hope my firm handshake will give me a good impression in his mind.

Gesturing for me to sit down I take a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk. "Patrick is a friend of mine, but he thought I would benefit more from your offer than he could." Removing the weird business card from my pocket I place it on the felt covering.

Snyder picks up the card carefully with his left hand, making sure to only touch the edges. With his right he removes a similar device to the one I saw in the lobby from his desk. Sticking the card into it and this one also results in a green light activating. Snyder sets the device with the card still inserted to the side. "Name's Joe Snyder. The card is of course the same one I handed to your friend. Due to the amount of fakes we get every day its part of the process to check their validity. We do have a few positions open for outside applicants. Yet I would like to hear about your skills first Mr?" Mr Snyder turns his attention to the holographic monitor on his desk poking and prodding the image. He then grabs a keyboard out from under the desk and places it where he can type on it while I talk with him.

"Jack Strader." Answering his query before going on to explain where I went to school; my experience in hardware, and programing fields. Of course before the authorized computer and network services act was passed making it impossible for me to find work. Snyder's lack of reaction and my un-certified status surprises me. I expected the interview to end right there, but he doesn't even seem phased by it. Why? This causes a red flag to be raised in my mind. Yet I ignore it simply because the interview is going so well. All the while Snyder patiently listens to me speak while using his keyboard to type something. Possibly notes or forms, I can't tell since the display is distorted from behind. Holographic displays have a single drawback compared to the standard monitors. You have to be directly in front of them otherwise everything is a distorted mess. I guess writing text doesn't require good viewing angles.

Wrapping up my explanation Mr. Snyder leans to his right followed by hearing the distinct sound of a fridge opening. "Lacking a formal education in the field and the proper documents won't be a problem. Your informal credentials are exemplary and more than make up for those two deficits. We also seem to have a recent opening in a position I think you may be perfect for too. Would you like something to drink while I fill out some forms to get things moving? I try to keep interviews as informal as possible to help people relax during a stress filled meeting. So, do you want anything to drink? I have; soda, energy drinks, water, and iced coffee. Sometimes I need something to keep myself awake through all the paperwork this job requires." I hear the sound of bottles and cans being jostled about as he rummages through that small fridge.

It is kind of odd to have a potential boss be so casual. Yet, it is also calming to my nerves to hear such a casual question. Thinking for a moment I consider that refusing may send the wrong signal. Besides, I am thirsty so what's the harm in saying yes?. "Soda sounds fine. One of the name brands will be fine. Though I can settle for a non name brand cola too." Mr. Synder nods while I hear the hiss of a couple soda cans being opened.

Righting himself in his chair, Mr Snyder places an open can of a popular name brand soda in front of me as he sips an identical can of his own. Retrieving the one I was offered I take a decent sized sip. Nice and cold like soda should be, but has a slightly bitter after taste to it. I heard they were going to replace the corn syrup with one of those sugar substitutes a few years ago, this one must have been made with it. "We will have to at least get you registered and certified as the law demands. Yet I don't see any problems with footing the bill in that regard. As for your duties, they will basically consist of you acting as internal tech support for the building for most of the day. Occasionally you will be working on programing the interfaces for the Bio-Morph's habitation control systems. They should be similar to the older systems you have worked on in capabilities but of course with the required act compatible hardware installed." I must be thirstier than I thought because I finish the soda before he even finishes his explanation. Yet as I put the empty can onto Mr. Snyder's desk I lick my lips as my mouth seems even drier than before the drink.

He swivels the holographic display around so I can view the screen. One half of the display

sits an image showing the earlier mentioned control system. On the other half is a multiple page standard contract for employment. Surprisingly there is even mention of a salary? So I won't be an hourly employee? Heck yea, talk about luck! "So this means I'm hired then?" Hiding my excitement at the fact that I will have a guaranteed annual income rather than one based on hourly work is an accomplishment in itself. I stop reading at the salary amount and just use my finger to scroll down to the signature part of the contract.

Mr. Snyder smiles. "As long as the routine drug tests come out clean I don't foresee any problems with employing you." With my excitement and eagerness to put my name on the dotted line I barely notice that my hands are shaking. Did he turn on the air conditioning? The room feels a bit colder than it was when I entered. Shivering I swivel the monitor to face Mr. Snyder complete with my name on the dotted line.

He slides the keyboard back in front of his chair. "Good. Sorry about the AC, its stuck at sixty five degrees. What it should be set too is seventy five." I'm out right shivering in the chair while Snyder checks that I filled in the right boxes before adding his own name to the document. "Well all the paperwork seems to be in order. How about I take you on a tour of your work area? Then you can come back tomorrow for your first day of your new career?" Nodding yes to his question he stands and walks around his desk to escort me to the door. Just need to get up so I can go some place warm. My legs don't cooperate and crumple under me upon standing.

Confusion builds as it becomes hard to breath. My limbs start to feel heavy and my head swims. Mr. Snyder though comes clean a second later. "Sorry about doing this. Had to guess your weight for the sedative and I must have over estimated yours by a little. It should have taken affect after reaching the elevator whereupon you would have been escorted to one of our labs. Looks like I will have to do that myself." He drugged me? Why did he do that?! What's going on here?

Pushing him away only results in my hand lightly touching his suit from their lack of strength. My voice fails as quickly as my physical strength does. "While we do hire people from the public. We don't do so with anyone from the housing complexes that you live in. Too much of a security risk to employ them. Thieves and deadbeats all of you." The bastard Snyder grabs me and drags me onto my feet. I can no longer feel them. "We have found a more 'useful' purpose for people like you." He chuckles as my arms go numb. "And it is so easy too! Nobody reads the entire contract. They all stop at the salary with all the zeros in it." Can someone stop the room from spinning? Also, what's that sound? Oh it is my feet dragging on the floor.

"No doubt you're wondering about that card I gave your friend? A Marvelous piece of technology it is. A passive D.N.A. sensor is built into it. When the card turns red the person is incompatible so we just send them away telling them their card is fake. Yet, if it turns green like yours." Mr. Snyder holds the card in his hand in front of my face. I can barely see it as the edges of my vision start to fade. Its still green though, it should be colored red because Snyder is holding it? Right? "Well that means you're a lucky bastard and we do have a 'position' for you." He grins at me. "Oh cheer up, you're the first to be chosen with this. Considering how fast you people breed, you're not going to be the last either." I can barely see as he drags me across the threshold of his office. Darkness consumes my consciousness before the door closes behind us.