

Chapter Eleven: Class Change

With gritted teeth, James restarted the process on the machine in front of him. His D-Class interview was today, which required him to go to the Citizenship Central Office. The atmosphere was one of general unease and fatigue, but that was only to be expected when you walked into a government building, and worse still, they made it as difficult as possible for applicants. Their little tricks were notorious if the E-Classifier rumours were to be believed. If people didn't have their application pack ready, their interview date would be pushed to a later date. The worst part was that you could only use the government approved, on-site machines to complete said application. There were ten terminals on his floor, and all of them were particular about how they worked. Much like the rigs he had used in the slum arcades, James knew acutely that some machines were intentionally broken to create competition. In his peripheral vision, James witnessed fights breaking out left and right. One of the first rookie mistakes was to move your eyes away from the terminal. It would lock you out for *not paying attention*. So, James ignored the shouts from the surrounding terminals, and his eyes remained glued on the prompt in front of him. There was at least another few hours before his interview was to take place, so he at least knew that he had time for another few attempts. The point of frustration was that James had requested that his interview be recorded. The machine mysteriously reset his progress every time he got to that point, and he knew he'd be rewarded with progress if he changed his mind and opt for a non-recorded interview. If he did that, he'd be at the complete mercy of the administrator in charge of his case... which meant he'd need to have a bribe ready. James wasn't too keen on having his newfound fame abused by some asshole administrator.

James' fingers deftly pressed the prompts that appeared, gliding through the initial stages of the application once more. If you moved too fast, they'd suspect automation and would lock you out. You needed to have some human error, but not too much. Counting to himself, the E-Classifier mumbled out the words to show that he was reading the questions. He was at least grateful that he could upload some of his pre-recorded responses rather than recording them now. That process alone would have frustrated him to the point of tears. Many of the attendees in the government building weren't aware of the little tricks to get through the process. Their despairing wails and shouts of bloody murder were the clues. James glided through the first four segments of the application, and the machine was keeping up and not timing out. He encountered the same question regarding recording again and decided that it would be fourth-time lucky. With a press of the button, James tried not to hold his breath and instead prepared himself mentally to go through the ordeal all over again. Much to his surprise, his persistence finally paid off, and he was through to an unknown part of the test. He fought the urge to smile, because his face was still being watched by the machine. It wasn't beyond them to give an applicant false hope, only to rip it away. He was positive that the administrators enjoyed watching the dismay on applicant faces when their hopes are mercilessly crushed. The rest of the process sailed by quickly, with James avoiding a few other common traps and pitfalls. Less than ten minutes later, he was finished, and the machine processed his request. To add insult to injury, James' terminal loudly proclaimed his successful application.

Applicant 871, proceed to Booth 16.

Dozens of hopefuls rushed toward his machine, not aware that the terminal was probably going to act up and malfunction for whoever came next... almost as though they had a quota of rejected candidates to meet. The glares that James received reminded him of the people he encountered when he was repaying his medical debt a few weeks back. There were a lot more confused faces in the E-Classer crowd, their eyes taking in his new clothing and interface. To his surprise, there wasn't resentment on their faces... just a hopeful desperation that they'd get through to the next stage.

With his meeting secured and application sorted, James would normally have kept his head down and walked straight to his assigned area. But something in him had changed. He cleared his throat and intentionally looked at the crowd that were queuing for the terminals. "It took me four attempts because I wanted to have my meeting recorded. You need to keep your cool when doing the application, because it'll restart or give you errors if you look away!" As James spoke to them, he expected that they'd just ignore him and shuffle onwards, but much to his surprise, they were staring at him eagerly... nodding their heads to show they were following. "While you're standing in the queue, you can pre-record answers for sections three and four. Your interface can't be online during the application, otherwise it will cause it to reset! Keep it offline."

After a few more moments, James became conscious of a few other expressions in the crowd. They looked like they recognised him but hadn't yet pinpointed from where. He tried to give them an encouraging smile before taking off towards the next area of the compound. The Citizenship Central Office didn't boast a single colour other than grey, which made it a hard place to navigate. James reactivated his interface and was pleasantly surprised to see how quickly it booted up. Maybe it was because he had jumped so many models, but the one he had was incredibly sleek and efficient. Countless notifications poured through his feed, with much of it being endless noise. His personal messages were a lot more important because only a handful of people had access to them. One of the first was from Nox, which he opened immediately.

James, I've handpicked a group of Brand Ambassadors for you to interview. Hobbs has assured me that all of them are more than capable of doing the job in a discreet and professional manner. They'll meet you after your Citizenship interviews, so let me know who you end up selecting. If there are any issues, message Hobbs and he'll take care of it. Just press your pin.

Glancing up to make sure he didn't walk into anyone; James saw a collection of booths that he assumed was a waiting area. He counted the numbers until he found his booth, which couldn't have been more underwhelming if it tried. 'Booth 16' turned out to be an uncomfortable chair in front of an automated screen, which was adorned with faded vulgarities etched into its surface. A mixture of feedback from disgruntled applicants over the years. Taking his seat, James knew he had quite some time to wait before he would be seen to, but he didn't want to risk wandering off and missing his chance if the administrator came early.

Much to his surprise, a few minutes later, a prompt appeared on the screen, requesting him to confirm his attendance. James tapped the screen, but it didn't register the input. A timer flickered into existence, which only disappeared after James jabbed the screen forcefully with two fingers. The following questions verified his identity, and after an age of hitting the screen, he was ultimately faced with another timer. He wasn't sure if it was because he had

been surrounded by new technology for the last few weeks, but every timer and loading screen now seemed like an eternity for him.

*Applicant 871. Ready for processing. Please wait for an administrator to see you.
Estimated time: 46 minutes.*

Turning to his left, James witnessed a series of other E-Classers with a mixture of emotions on their faces. There was not a single positive expression amongst them, only anxiety and despair. He was about to bury his head back in his messages to see what else he had received when a flicker in front of him caught his attention.

An administrator will see you now. Thank you for your patience.

James barely had time to blink before the screen turned transparent, revealing a nonplussed man in his late fifties. Before James could say anything, the man was already speaking. "Looks like we have a bit of a celebrity with us today." His screen was obscured from James' view, but it was likely his application that was being reviewed. "I can see that you have a request for this meeting to be recorded, but that won't be happening." His snort of derision was a clear sign of how he felt about that request. James opened his mouth to retort, but he was cut off almost immediately.

"Request denied." It was a tone that brooked no argument and James felt his anger bubbling up. The smile on the administrator's face showed James that this little power-trip was probably all the man lived for in his dull existence. Without a single word, James tapped his interface and started recording their conversation. Whatever failsafe they had in place to stop this from happening, was probably aimed at the basic interface models. There wasn't even so much as a hiccup in his new piece of technology sidestepping those safeguards. With that in place, James felt more comfortable challenging the smirking administrator. "On what grounds are you denying my request?"

The amusement on his face didn't even falter as he turned to face James with a humouring smile. "You don't meet the requirements." With that said, he exhaled loudly and gestured vaguely at the screen in front of him. If James had any doubt about him being on a power-trip, the shit-eating grin on his face was all the confirmation that he needed. "Regretfully, your application for C-Class is denied. Now, I've looked at your D-Class application... and I'm afraid it's not looking good."

James gritted his teeth and bit back the anger that was surging up through him. A small part of his brain was telling him to call Elvira and get her to sort this out for him. Whatever traction that idea had in his head, it vanished a second later.

He hated how reliant he had been on others to fight his battles for him. Calming his frustration, James controlled his tone and asked a follow-up question. "What is not looking good about my application?"

Another sigh escaped the civil servant as he leaned forward and squinted at the screens, despite being able to see them clearly a moment ago. "First. You've not completed your mandatory therapy sessions... which alone is grounds for denying your application." James didn't even blink as he retorted. "Her malpractice reports are attached, as is a follow up recommendation by Dryksell Pharmaceuticals. Next?"

The abruptness seemed to catch the civil servant off guard, before he started shaking his head. His demeanour changed and became more heated and targeted. "I'm no therapist, but I'm pretty sure I could diagnose your problems. Notions of grandeur, perhaps? Let's see... you've apparently persuaded someone to falsify a request from Nox Holdings, of all places. That crime itself would be bad enough, but who did you put down as your medical contact? Another S-Class! Sarah Dryksell, no less! What about your legal counsel? Oh, nothing but the best will do you... so Elvira Corbeau? At what point did you think any of this was going to work?"

James just stared at the man in genuine surprise, but he wasn't done. "Most people would settle for having a permanent residence, but no! You apparently own an apartment building! Your employer is my absolute favourite though..." The administrator didn't even bother disguising the contempt in his tone as he tapped at various unseen options on his side of the screen. The atmosphere had gone from uneasy to tense in just a few short moments. James tried to cut in, but the civil servant was on a tirade. "You've been scouted by Quentin Bell to play a VR game? Despite, you know, your social license being revoked over ten years ago? If you're going to write fiction in your application form, at least make it reasonable instead of this... this... wish-fulfilment bullshit."

It finally looked as though the administrator had let up, and James now had an opportunity to retort. "I am employed by Quentin Bell's company. I am sponsored to play Abidden by Nox Holdings. My social licence has been reinstated, which I can show you right now. The deeds and signatures that show me as the Landlord of Apartment Block 516, are all listed in my application forms, which were officially submitted on my behalf by my legal representative, Elvira Corbeau. She is employed as the Legal Counsel for Vendetta Enterprises, which is a subsidiary of Abidden Zoetic Enterprises." James made sure to hit every point as clearly as possible, knowing that he needed his recording to be bulletproof if it was to be used to overturn this situation in the future. "As for my health and mental wellbeing, you'll see that I actually did complete my therapy with Doctor Lancaster who gave me a glowing letter of recommendation. I've received compensation by Dryksell Pharmaceuticals for the malpractice within my VR cessation treatment. I've since been informed that I'm able to return to competitive gaming, which has led to my employment with Quentin Bell."

"Are you done?" The administrator's voice was cold, and his weary face was entirely propped up by his hand. His elbow was nestled against the table in such a way that he was able to rest his head at a titled angle, giving James a sideways expression of both boredom and annoyance. "Even if what you're saying is true. E-Classers don't jump class. You're not a C-Classer, and you won't ever be a C-Classer. To presume you could leapfrog D-Class? You clearly still have some mental issues if that's your state of delusion."

James looked at the man with a mixture of exasperation and surprise. "But... I was C-Class. You can see that in my record." The lack of surprise or any sort of emotion on the administrator's face showed James that he either knew or didn't care about the fact. James couldn't for the life of him understand why this man had it out to get him, when suddenly it clicked. "You're D-Class, aren't you?"

The administrator blinked in surprise and their head lifted off their palm. James saw his opening. "Is it the opinion of the Citizenship Central Office that I'm not suitable for C-Class, or is it the D-Class administrator of Booth 16, that believes I'm not suitable for C-Class?"

James' smile grew wide as the administrator gave him a cold stare. He just needed to play the game. "I don't feel that a D-Classifier is qualified to assess my candidacy for C-Class, and as a former C-Classifier, I would like to formally request that you assign me to non-biased administrator that can assist me." It was like James had literally reached through the screen and slapped the man in the face, insulted his entire family and shit on his desk. The administrator visibly shook in rage at the sheer audacity of this applicant.

With just a single look at the damage he had done to the administrator's sanity, James quickly pinched the pin that Hobbs had given him. He had his recording; he stood his ground and he very much had just ruined this man's day. Now, all James could think about while he sat with a grin on his face, was if the administrator would murder him before backup arrived. But... James couldn't resist adding more fuel to the fire as he stopped the recording and saved the file. He closer to the screen that divided them. "Did I stutter?"