

Prologue

Shivering under a flimsy cardboard box in some dingy warehouse, Eluna could hear them squawking somewhere nearby, tearing open boxes with their sharpened beaks. Their clawed feet clicking on the metal flooring rattled her tired brain as they slowly made their way through the warehouse.

Avians had been chasing her for days, weeks even, she didn't know. Being a goblin shaman, she always knew where they were and when they were coming. But it made no difference because she was in no condition to fight.

She was filthy. Her grey skin and stringy black hair fused with a layer of dirt. She hadn't slept more than an hour or two at a time in days. Food was scarce, as she had no money. She scrounged for rotten scraps in dumpsters and drank dirty water. On top of all that, they outnumbered her by a million to one.

She clutched a small metal shard in her palm. She slowly brought it her neck, but it dropped and clanked on the floor.

A loud shriek deafened her as they descended on her. "You ours."

The box was flipped over and one of the five foot purple birds picked her up with its beak and held her with its short, stocky, nearly laterally immobile arms, which were placed right where its wings attached to its large muscular torso.

"Kill me," she muttered, too exhausted to struggle.

"No. Die. You help. Us. Now!" Another avian replied in the usual avian accent; a horribly butchered rendition of hominid languages.

Her captor flapped its wings and flew across the warehouse and out the large bay doors, her body dangling from its beak.

Chapter 1

Quintanelle Fillion quickly scanned over the job listings at a work station at the New Delta Unemployment Office, like she had been doing every day for the past few weeks.

The office was empty in the late afternoon. The only other job seeker there was some round thing with tentacles called a Brac'tai searching for some kind of work. Quintanelle wasn't about to look over and see, but she could hear it slowly coo as its tentacles flashed over the keyboard.

Quintanelle yawned and continued on. She had moved from Teolos, the crystalline home of the Teolian elves, much to her family's disapproval. Spending her life in civil servitude, like her father, or military service, like her sister, didn't seem at all appealing. Her choice, her only real choice, was to move to New Delta, the technological dystopia made up of nearly sixteen-hundred mile-high towers. Residing within were every abomination and lesser creature that she had been indoctrinated to hate.

She was a newly minted mage, graduated at the top of her class, mentored by a high mage of the Mage Council of Teolos, a very prestigious honor, but nobody wanted her skills. There was no way she was qualified for summoned-item cost accounting, super-computer programming or DNA writing, despite her superior training and pedigree.

Granted, lighting your hands on fire and summoning things out of thin air weren't directly applicable to many vocations. There had to be something, but she didn't see anything. Well... there were jobs, but they were all for stripping, pornography, or legal prostitution, professions she wouldn't enter even if she had a laser pistol pointed at her head. Not only that, being a Teolian Mage meant she was shut out of any New Deltan Government jobs, for which there were many, in order to prevent spying.

She felt a nudge, she looked to over to see the brac'tai looking at her, then the screen and then back at her. It whirred while it gave her a toothless grin, drool dripping down onto the floor. Quintanelle wanted to kick it away, it was slimy and ugly, but that wouldn't be nice. It hadn't actually done anything to her.

"You want me to look," she asked, taking pity on the creature and giving it a break.

Its eye tentacles raised and lowered.

She leaned over and read out loud from the screen.

"Dear brac'tai designated Dave 237: Ashram-Uriah is pleased to offer you a data-entry position... Compensation is the use of a sleeping tank in our Brac'tai dormitory and an unlimited supply of nutrient solution. In addition, you will be allowed a stipend of twenty thousand credits a year for discretionary spending. Congratulations!"

Dave 237 let out a celebratory chirp, logged off, jumped off the chair and slid out the door, leaving a jubilant trail of slime as it left.

How dare that tentacle thing snag a job while she couldn't find anything. Then again, the Brac'tai were famous for working twenty hours straight without a break as long as they were supplied with nutritional fluid.

Quintanelle put her head down on the desk. Time was running out. She had rented a small apartment, but her savings wouldn't last much longer, and once they ran out, she would have to scurry back to Teolos and beg her mentor for a job, her dreams of freedom defeated.

Quintanelle sat up, wiped her tears and starting searching one last time.

Then she saw it, an older listing she might be perfect for. She never bothered to interview because she didn't think she would get it, but now it was time to try; there was nothing else.

Next to the picture of a scruffy looking human male, it said, "Private detective Alfonso Deegan looking for one assistant to help with cases on a full-time basis. Interview between the hours of 09:00 and 17:00, 3/3/10021 through 3/8/10021. Tower K-23, Height 4100, Suite B. First come, first served."

Quintanelle checked the date and time, 3/8 at 16:39. Just enough time to get over there and interview. She summoned on her purple mage robes with blue and green trim, and dashed out the office looking for the nearest tram station to take her there.

It was either that job, or back to Teolos for a life wasted as a boring civil servant.

Chapter 2

Staring at the imposing tower K-23, an oval-shaped tower which took up her entire field of vision, seeming to stretch forever in all directions, Quintanelle wished she could go back to Teolos. Teolos was on the ground. New Delta was not.

The aluminum walkway beneath her feet thumped with the rush of passersby. A gust of wind carried the faint stench of the sludge made up of chemicals, sewage and dead bodies found twelve hundred feet below. Far above her, the dense traffic of aircrafts, riding dragons, Uthirans and avians flying to their destinations whizzed by.

As she gingerly stepped into the east lobby, she could swear she felt the tower move. Even in her own apartment, in Tower B-13, she could feel the structure creak and move, making sleeping difficult sometimes. Some towers were better than others, but since she arrived, she had always been on edge. Fortunately for her earnings prospects, she was gaining her resolve, slowly.

Just inside the door, she summoned a small mirror to check her appearance as various individuals stepped around her to go home. Her silver hair looked fine, her light skin unblemished, emerald eyes clear and robes non-ruffled. She said a small prayer to Illwyn and walked towards the lifts.

A human male in a pressed grey suit stared at her while leaning against the wall next to the bank of lifts, gaze unbroken by the passersby.

Quintanelle hadn't interacted with humans much at all in Teolos. All she really knew was that they had dark skin due to the Southern Deltan Plain's harsh sunlight, worshipped Elohim, couldn't use incantation magic, excelled in technology and took two millennia to build New Delta. Yet something about this human made her uneasy for the first time as he walked over with a smile.

"Emmanuel Jones, Hightower Detective Agency. Nice to meet you." He extended his hand.

"Excuse me?"

Emmanuel retracted his hand. "Pardon me. You are interviewing with Mr. Deegan? If you aren't, I'm sorry and you can be on your way."

Quintanelle stepped backwards. "Yes I am but—"

"An elven mage checking her appearance with a nervous look on her face? There's only one place she could possibly be going right now, especially using this lobby and these lifts."

"So—"

"Anyways, I'm here to offer all applicants of Mr. Deegan's the opportunity to interview with us tomorrow at 09:00."

"But why—"

"We offer a salary, hours and benefits Mr. Deegan just can't match. Plus you'll have the opportunity to work with a large team of experienced individuals who will teach you everything you need to know."

"But I don't—"

Emmanuel pulled out a business card and handed it to her. "See you tomorrow." He started to walk away, but then stopped and turned. "It's 17:04, Mr. Deegan is a stickler for punctuality, so you won't get a chance with him. We aren't so strict, just don't be more than ten minutes late and you'll be fine."

Quintanelle groaned. That man made her late, but with no other job openings, she didn't have much of a choice.

Chapter 3

Very late that evening, Alfonso sat in his office smoking a cigarette behind his desk as a shaman named Ebb sat on the other side, eyes closed, holding a quill above a piece of parchment.

Ebb was a celebrity, being the only known shaman in the city. He had a talk show, a lecture circuit, a charity foundation, and a bestselling series of self-help texts. He also had a mate who demanded that he actually help raise their seven kids. But Ebb was always willing to take time out of his busy schedule to help a good friend hire the best candidate.

Slowly his hand moved to the inkwell and then down to the parchment. With his eyes still closed, he wrote something on the parchment. The message being complete, Ebb opened his eyes and handed the parchment to Alfonso.

Alfonso stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray on the side of his desk. He opened the parchment and read it. "Hire the transplant mage from Teolos, in purple green and blue." Alfonso crumpled the paper in his hand. "I never interviewed a single fucking mage this entire week."

"Ye would have, if Mr. Jones no make her late," Ebb said in the peculiar way goblins spoke every language with. "Ye still have time, she interviewing with Mr. Jones tomorrow. Catch her like Jones did."

Alfonso smoothed the parchment. "But one mage in my life is enough for me." He subconsciously rubbed his gold wedding band.

"Ulux say she best at present, so hire her. Ye adapt."

Alfonso leaned forward. "Does this mage have a name?"

Ebb produced another piece of parchment from the bag at his feet, closed his eyes and wrote on it.

Alfonso took it. "Alright, I'll catch her tomorrow."

Ebb stood up. "Me suggest tonight. She maybe get annoyed if she get diverted twice."

Alfonso thought about it and nodded. "And when I hire her, will you help me test her like you promised you would back when this started?"

"Yes."

They shook hands, and said their goodbyes. Then Alfonso brought a screen out of the desk and went to look her up.

After finding her professional profile in the Teolian Embassy database, he cursed to himself he didn't approach her first, and ran out the door.

Chapter 4

Quintanelle lay in her bed, watching some Teolian drama on the large screen attached to the opposite wall. Right now a mage was confronting his girlfriend because she was sleeping with the high mage he was apprenticing under.

She wasn't paying much attention to it because she was nervous about the interview in nine hours. Emmanuel has been pushy, and it bothered her that he'd be stealing a competitor's applicants, but if Emmanuel was right, then Alfonso wasn't a great guy to work for.

Quintanelle flipped off the screen and turned off the lamp on the nightstand. She snuggled under her covers and tried to clear her mind and get some sleep.

Then the doorbell rang.

Quintanelle sat up and instinctively ignited her left hand, ready to protect herself if necessary. Nobody who rang the doorbell at midnight had good intentions.

Should she call the NDPD? No, the NDPD never responded, or so she was told. Besides, she was a mage. She could defend herself.

She squelched her hand and slowly made her way to the door in her nightgown. The doorbell rang again as she turned on the door console. It showed a scruffy human wearing some kind of pocketed Kevlar vest.

She instantly recognized him from the job ad. Still, showing up at her door at midnight only made Hightower look more appealing.

She pressed the intercom button. "Hello?"

Alfonso pressed the intercom button on his side of the door. "Ms. Fillion, it seems the scummiest bastards in the city prevented you interviewing with me. If you're up to it, you can interview now."

"But it's midnight."

"I know it's midnight. But if you work for Hightower, you'll be extorting the poor within a year and killing babies within two. Besides, and I know this sounds strange," he pulled out the parchment, "a friend of mine with divine connections told me to hire you."

Quintanelle opened the door just a crack, and stretched out her right hand, with the left flaming at the ready. Alfonso handed her the parchment.

She shut the door, turned on the lights, and her heart skipped a beat. This had to be legitimate, because how would Alfonso know what happened if she never made it past the lobby.

Just who was this guy?

"One moment, let me summon something more appropriate to wear."

Alfonso nodded.

Quintanelle ran back to her bedroom and slipped on a casual dress.

Quintanelle opened the door.

She motioned him to the only thing in the living room, a few simple wooden chairs around a simple wooden table. "I don't have the credits for a lot of furniture right now."

"I don't mind." They sat down. "Ms. Fillion, do you know who exactly I am?"

"Should I?"

"Let's just say Emmanuel Jones was siphoning off applicants to screw me, not out of concern for your career. You might think the comments I made earlier were jokes, they weren't. Hightower is actually a very sophisticated extortion racket posing as a legitimate detective agency." He took out cigarettes from his vest with a lighter and portable ashtray.

"May I smoke?"

If she was going to work for him, she'd have to let him.

He lit one and offered one.

“Thank you, but I don’t.”

He puffed and continued. “I investigate organizations like Hightower, one of the thirty-two most dangerous criminal organizations in the city, plus the one that controls them all.”

Quintanelle was about to speak but he stopped her.

“You don’t need to know the specifics now. But all you need to know is that I need someone to work directly for me and help me investigate these organizations full time.”

Quintanelle swallowed.

“I’ve never worked alone, it’s too dangerous, but my help has always been independent contractors who can’t be relied upon to help me at a moment’s notice. I think you’d be a rather good fit working with me, seeing as you just spent four years working directly under High Mage Dhalia Runeshadow, the espionage queen herself, investigating your friends and neighbors for the good of the glorious city of Teolos.”

Quintanelle blushed. “Not exactly...” He was absolutely right in ways he couldn’t even fathom.

“Whatever you did, you can do for me, and rest assured the people you investigate are the worst kind of scum.” He stood up and yawned.

“I need sleep and so do you. So let’s do this. Go interview with Hightower tomorrow and see if you see what I see. Then when you’re done, contact me,” he handed her a metallic business card. “And tell me yes or no.”

“Alright...” She took the card.

Alfonso gently closed the door behind him as he left, leaving Quintanelle wondering whether she had a job.