

## Prologue

Lorag Hearteater rappelled into the empty expanse that existed between the first and second floor blocks in Tower K-23.

Despite K-23 being a highly traveled office tower, the expanse was dark and quiet in the early morning. Water dripped from metal support beams into nothingness. Only the moans and groans of the tower structure could occasionally be heard.

Lorag was an experienced rigger, whose job was to check AB-30's interior support beams to make sure they weren't rusted or cracked. He jumped from beam to beam, looking for tiny cracks and loose bolts with his headlamp.

This job bored the orc most of the time, it was routine and had long since ceased to be exciting by the thousandth time he descended. Sure there were the mutants, but the ones who lived in this tower knew him and ignored him.

Besides, Lorag probably wasn't going to be doing this for much longer. With a few million avians being retrained for legitimate work, their natural flight ability made them ideal for this kind of work. After all, they didn't need expensive rigs like he did.

Then, finally, things got interesting. For the first time in nearly a decade of rigging, Lorag found a dead body.

It was resting face down on a horizontal beam, limbs dangling into the abyss. The body was bloody and mangled, a human female most likely.

Lorag pulled out his two-way radio and called his boss. "I've discovered something I don't think we've ever found here before."

"And what would that be, Lorag?" A gravelly voice replied

"A dead body on a beam."

"I'd have ya chuck it off and forget about it, but since you're right and it's the first time we've actually discovered one, I guess we should find out how it got there. Let me look through the private detective directory for someone stupid enough to investigate a crime in an interior expanse, since nobody with two brain cells would risk their lives doing it."

"What about those detectives who took on the Syndicate and lived? Don't they have an office here?"

"They do have an office here. That just might work. I'll get onto them right away."

"Need me to stay for them?" the orc asked.

"Go home, ya'll get a paid day off, trauma and all that."

They both laughed as Lorag ascended out of the expanse.

## Chapter 1

The evening before, the crowd at the taping of the return episode of 'Revelations With Ebb' was harsh; the packed audience filled the studio with booing the second he walked out on stage.

"You're a fraud!"

"I divorced because of you!"

"Go back to your degenerate kind!"

"Tell us the truth!"

Ebb was chastened by the response, because he deserved it. For years, being the only goblin shaman in town, he could get away with being a self-help guru, selling insights especially formulated for mass consumption. This boiled down to absolving people of personal responsibility for their problems and telling his guests that everything would be alright. This, of course, was not what a shaman's insights actually did. It usually scared people into changing, otherwise, everything wouldn't be alright.

He never once used his divination powers. He never once asked Ulax, the All-Seeing, for true insight. Only his downtrodden goblin brethren got true insight, because keeping the status quo was not a good thing for the poorest, most abused and suffering hominid race.

Ebb could get away with this as long as the general population didn't know better. Then Eluna showed up and showed the world a shaman's true power. The power to change history. In this case, it was helping the Avian Syndicate bring New Delta to its knees.

Now the city knew that a shaman could see beyond themselves, to anything in the present, concrete or abstract, except other shamens, and those covered with a special enchanted cream.

Ebb stood in front of the comforting, pastel-toned set taking his licks for a moment before raising his hand. The audience quieted down, slightly.

"The liar wants to speak!"

"Let's hear the filth!"

"Ye say me lie, me conceal shaman true power. This is true, me lie, me not tell ye reality. So me tell ye truth. Ye sir," he pointed to a middle aged human in the second row. "What ye here for?"

"If you say you're a shaman prove it, you tell me."

Ebb shut his eyes. He saw the man's problem and its true cause. "Ye here because ye have problem in bedroom with mate. Ye want me to say it her fault. That she no try. It ye fault, ye lazy. Ye no try new thing." The man squirmed in his seat. "Ye," He pointed to a human woman in the front row, "tell me."

"I can't find a boyfriend."

"Stop being clingy so much." Ebb pointed to a Deltan elf male in the fourth row. "Nobody like ye because ye asshole!"

He pointed to human woman in the fifth. "Ye spend too much money on useless stuff." He pointed to the man next to her. "Ye son can't no be gay, grow up!" One by one, Ebb went through audience member after member, cutting them down, until the audience was silent, each lost in their own shame. "Now ye want the raw, uncensored truth?"

The audience said nothing, until a young goblin female in the front row raised her hand. "What about me? What me problem?"

“Ye problem be that ye only one in audience that problem no ye own doing.” He took her hand and walked her up on stage. “This girl be special. This girl like me.” A man in the audience was about to stand and heckle, but Ebb lifted up Eluna’s shirt, revealing a nasty scar running through her grey skin from her groin to lower abdomen. “This be Eluna problem. This be symptom of city who no care about reality.”

“But it was your people who threw her out!”

“Yeah, we had nothing to do with her!”

“That be true, that be very true. But why did goblin-kind banish her? Me tell you. Average goblin male age expectancy is thirty. Female, forty. Females will have at least three mates in lifetime, because the other two die. Average goblin male land in Penitentiary at least twice. Unemployment rate for average goblin male thirty-three percent. One in seventy goblin mothers die in childbirth. Goblins die so fast, all females can do is pump out babies all time and hope no die before she do.”

“So what? That’s not our problem!”

“Yes it be your problem!” Ebb screamed. The hecklers slammed down in their seats. “Ye all sit in ye nice apartments, eat ye nice food, sleep in nice warm bed. Yet ye ignore the starving in shadows, the sick in gutters, the dead just beyond ye doors! Ye pretend everything be great, when reality comes, ye blame the downtrodden for their action. Avians killers but avian rage legitimate. Eluna justifiable accomplice, but her pain real. Me wrong for lying? Yes. Me wrong for believing ye spoiled brats who no deserve truth? No. If ye can’t handle truth, but hate for me telling ye what ye want, then ye get nothing from me! Me quit!”

Ebb grabbed Eluna’s hand and stormed out of the studio.

“How ye help suffering now?”

“There be a way. There always be a way.”

## Chapter 2

Quintanelle Fillion woke up late. Her robe didn't summon right the first time. She burnt her breakfast. She missed a tram. Somebody spilled coffee on her on the next tram. And upon entering the newly christened K23 Detective Agency, her boss, Alfonso Deegan, a scruffy human male with chiseled features, ordered her to assist a cigar smoking dwarf named Gruff McGee.

"But I don't know how to use a rig!"

Alfonso put his feet on the reception desk, which he chose to sit at despite an extra office in the back.

"You're still afraid of heights, I get that, this is the best way to overcome them. Now go. I've got over a dozen possible new cases to sort through. There must be one or two which are actually worth our time."

"What about Mordridakon and Trogg?"

"Trogg may be technically full time, but he still has those classes he's contractually obligated to teach for another month. Mordridakon is off being Mordridakon somewhere."

Quintanelle turned to walk out. "Fine."

Alfonso held up a small tablet. "Don't forget your fingerprint scanner."

She groaned, grabbed it and stormed out.

Helping defeat the Avian Syndicate was both the best and the worst thing that could've happened. The good was that their role brought new fame and with it more work than they could handle, most of it having nothing to do with organized crime. There was so much work, Alfonso had to take Trogg the Genius and Mordridakon on as full-time employees in addition to Quintanelle.

The problem was, more work meant twelve to sixteen hour days, every day, and no social life whatsoever in the month since. Up until then, Alfonso had her mostly assisting cases from her desk, running research and comparing records. If she did go out to crime scenes, she just stood there silently and watched. Her stress was about to get worse. Still, considering her first case, she could probably handle it. Maybe.

Quintanelle took the lift down to height 2200, where she met Gruff McGee, who led her down a hallway to the expanse access room. It was tiled and dingy, covered in grease. A harness was attached via cables to a ceiling rig, directly above the expanse portal on the floor.

Gruff pulled it to her, and helped her put it on.

"See this button here, this takes you up, and that one takes you down."

She put on a headlamp.

"Ya ready?"

"Not really."

Gruff pushed her forward into the portal as she closed her eyes and screamed, fearing the end. Then she realized she was still hanging in the room, not going anywhere. Gruff was cracking up.

Quintanelle blushed and lowered herself into the darkness.

It wasn't hard to find the body. It was directly below the access portal about a hundred feet down. Quintanelle felt queasy, so she went right to scanning the fingerprints, which proved easy, since an arm was stuck straight down exposing the victim's hand.

Evita Rosen, age forty-five, a private detective.

Quintanelle shot back up through the access portal. “We need to bring the body up for further inspection.”

“But have ya even identified the body? Ya weren’t down there for very long.” Gruff said as he pulled her over and stood her up.

“Yes, I have.” Quintanelle explained as she unhooked herself.

“Well then, get Deegan’s permission—“ Alfonso walked in carrying cases. “Never mind then.”

Quintanelle frowned. She suspected Alfonso had her rig down on purpose, but she also knew she needed to expose herself to heights in order to conquer her fear of them.

Alfonso asked, “Does the body have a name?” Quintanelle explained. “Let’s haul her up and find out what killed her.”

Gruff set up another rig next to the other one. He attached a sling to second rig. Then Gruff himself descended.

Alfonso opened a case and pulled out a portable autopsy tablet, which had a special camera attached to the back. “You’re going to be doing the autopsy.”

She took it.

Gruff came back up with Evita’s corpse in a sling. He unhooked himself, then placed Evita on the floor.

The body didn’t look like quite so mangled out of the expanse. Just bloody, with large cuts running up and down her now bluish skin.

Gruff moved Evita’s stiff limbs so she laid flat on the ground. Quintanelle tried to look away, but Alfonso physically held her face and eyes open as the corpse was manipulated. Quintanelle didn’t always like Alfonso’s training style, but there was always a reason for his method. In this case, he was training her to get used to non-fresh corpses because Evita was Quintanelle’s first. She’d never get used to them if she didn’t watch.

Alfonso let go.

Quintanelle bent down and ran the scanner over the corpse. A three-dimensional image appeared on the tablet’s screen, followed by analysis.

According to the tablet, Evita died not from the fall onto the beam, although there was bruising from the impact, but from blood loss due to the massive deep cuts on her body. The cuts were most likely caused by sharp nails. Her time of death was around 03:00, so she had been dead about seven hours.

“Very good. Proceed with the investigation,” Alfonso said.

Quintanelle looked around and thought hard. This was definitely a test to see if she was ready to handle evidence and crime scenes. She was tired and cranky, but made a conscious effort to focus her mind.

Evita had clearly fallen onto the beam from the portal. Evita was bleeding when she fell, so there should’ve been blood around the portal edges. Quintanelle stepped over. As she suspected, there was some blood on the rim.

“I can’t believe I missed that,” Gruff said.

Quintanelle pulled out an evidence collector, putting a capsule in the little vacuum. She sucked up some dried blood and put the capsule in the back of an evidence analyzer tablet. The blood was Evita’s.

There was no blood on the floor, so she had to have been cut over the portal, probably lying on the rim. The door had to be locked at night, so how did the killer get in? The door lock looked fine. She stared at Gruff.

“Don’t look at me.” He shrugged. “The lock could’ve been picked, or the killer had their own key. I don’t know.”

“So,” Alfonso said, “what can we conclude about the murderer’s intention?”

“They wanted to dispose of the body where nobody would find it?”

“Correct, but there’s more to it. I don’t expect you to know this, but K-23 is home to a large group of tower mutants... mutants with sharp claws.”

“I didn’t see any mutants in there.”

Gruff pulled a wrench from the wall. “You won’t find them if they don’t want to be found. But there’s a way to summon them.” Gruff slammed the wrench against the rim. “Hey, we need someone to come up here,” Gruff yelled into the void, “someone who speaks Common.”

The void was silent for a moment. A whooshing sound was heard, then clawing. A pale hairless human covered in slime climbed through the portal. The mutant had webbing connecting his arms to his sides to help him glide between beams. He also had sharp nails for extra grip on beams.

The mutant pointed to the corpse. “That?”

“Yes,” Alfonso replied, “that.”

“Fell in night. No one saw. No one kill.” The mutant jumped through the portal and glided away.

“Well that was a giant pile of useless,” Gruff said.

“No,” Alfonso pulled out his screen. “I’m calling Mordridakon. We’re going into the expanse to see if there’s any evidence that dropped to the bottom.” Before he could do it, there was a knock on the door. “Who is it?”

The door opened and a beautiful Deltan elf female walked in the room carrying a shoulder bag.

She pulled a scalpel and a pair of rubber gloves from her bag. She put the gloves on, turned Evita over and knelt down.

Alfonso pointed his pistol in her face. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Gruff squeezed by. “I’m not dealing with this.” He shut the door behind him.

### Chapter 3

“If you don’t let me do my job, you’ll be the next detective who’ll wind up dead.”

Alfonso pulled the gun back. “Who are you, and why are you intruding on my goddamn crime scene?”

“Watch.” She dug her scalpel into Evita’s neck, creating a small hole. She carefully inserted a delicate finger into the incision and pulled out a small microchip. “You know what this is?”

Alfonso bent down. “That’s a Biogenomics sensory recorder.”

The Deltan elf pulled out a small plastic bag, placed it in, and then sealed it. “That’s correct.” The elf stood up and turned to leave. “And that’s all you’re ever going to know.”

As the Deltan elf reached for the knob, Alfonso once again pulled out his pistol and fired one laser blast into the door, mere inches from her head. Quintanelle wanted to back away from the scene, but feared falling into the expanse.

“Mr. Deegan—” The Deltan elf positioned her hand in a position familiar to Quintanelle. As the elf began to turn away, Quintanelle flicked her finger, sending an air pellet shooting through the soft part of the Deltan elf’s shoulder.

The Deltan elf screamed as she fell against the door and slid down. She clutched her shoulder as her top stained with blood. “You bitch!”

“I don’t like doing that,” Quintanelle said, “but I will defend myself.”

“You have no idea what you’re dealing with.”

“Quintanelle,” Alfonso said, “can you pat her down for her ID?”

“It’s in the bag, top left pocket,” the dark elf moaned.

Quintanelle reached in and pulled out an ID card. She handed it to Alfonso. The elf’s name was Icovara Sarayen, a licensed detective working directly for Biogenomics in their security department.

Alfonso knelt down and looked into the dark elf’s eyes. Icovara was sweating and breathing heavily as her shoulder began to throb in pain and blood started to trickle down her arm.

“She can heal you, but the only way I’m going to let her is if you explain to me exactly what’s going on here. Otherwise, I’ll leave you here to bleed to death, like Evita over there.” Alfonso took the shoulder bag.

“I’ll— just make it stop!”

Alfonso looked at Quintanelle. “Heal her.”

Quintanelle said an incantation. Icovara sighed with relief. Alfonso opened the shoulder bag and took out the bag containing the chip.

“What is so important in here that you come into my fucking crime scene and attempt to steal it right in front of me?”

“It’s Biogenomics property, give it back or we’ll sue you into the ground and get it back anyway.”

“Not if it’s on the ground,” Alfonso held it over the portal, “the actual ground.” Icovara’s hand lit on fire. Quintanelle placed her pointer finger on her thumb. “You really want to repeat history don’t you?”

Icovara squelched the flame. “Fine. You want to know what’s in the sensor recorder. So do we. Evita was hired to investigate an unknown group blackmailing Biogenomics for three quarters of a trillion credits over something that’s classified.”

“I have friends who could find out what it is very easily.”

Icovara smirked. “You mean the only two shamen in the city? They’re one step ahead of you. In fact, they’ve also tried to blackmail Biogenomics for fifty million credits in donations to the Ebb Foundation to keep quiet, which we just paid since...”

She held out her hand. “The bag please.”

“Here you go.” Alfonso handed it to her, keeping the sensor.

Icovara pulled out a screen and stylus. She tapped the screen with the stylus a few times and handed it to Alfonso. “Standard non-disclosure agreement plus standard private detective contract.”

“What will you pay for my services?”

“Name your price. Originally my superiors hired Evita because she cost less than you. That was a mistake. Now I’m going to go around them and hire you because I’m not cleaning up after the next dead detective.”

Alfonso handed the screen to Quintanelle who signed it. “Three million.”

“I’ll make it four to keep your attention.” Quintanelle handed it back to Icovara.

Alfonso smiled and juggled the bag. “Now, why is Biogenomics being blackmailed for three quarters of a trillion, and why did they pay Ebb fifty million on top?”

“Bring your two other associates to Biogenomics at 12:00, and once they each sign our confidentiality agreement I’ll tell you, but only if you bring the bag. As for Evita’s body, don’t worry about it. Biogenomics will be picking it up shortly. You’ll be helping to solve her death by helping us.” On that note, Icovara swept out.

“What could possibly be so bad that Biogenomics is going to this length to cover it up?” Quintanelle asked.

“I’m as clueless as you are. All that we can know is, if Ebb also resorted to blackmailing them over this, whatever Biogenomics did, it’s not just evil. It’s comically evil.”