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Warnings We Do Not Heed
Sept 9, 2026
2, 584 Words

Interview

The room seemed designed to make her feel nervous – lights, shadows, angles. The minimalism of it all. Not just for her, mind you, but since she was the only one sitting in the chair, yeah her. Head up, back straight, posture stiff. Uncomfortable. Especially since the chair leaned forward slightly – forcing her to constantly push back so she wouldn't slide off. Tiring.

She looked at the two people sitting across the table from her. Her gaze deliberate so there wouldn't be any flicking from one to the other – which would make her look shifty. First she held the gaze of the woman to her left -- the one with the dark blouse and a tiny stain just above the third button. Then the other – the one with the sharp, hawk-like face. Particularly her nose.

"Why are you here today?" asked Stained Blouse.

"I was told you might be interested in employing me," she replied.

"And who told you that?" Hawk-Nosed asked.

"My Uncle Melvin. Well, he's not a relative type of uncle. Just a friend of my father's from his Army days. Melvin. Melvin Dupree. Mr. Dupree to his friends." She smiled, testing to see if her little joke landed. Neither reacted. Not even a condescending smile to acknowledge her discomfort and willingness to make jokes in tense situations.

"And just what," Hawk-Nose looked her over, "did Mr. Dupree tell you about said employment?"

"He told me the Politan Corporation had an opening for a communications attaché."

"Anything else?"

"That the position involved certain tasks and errands. A messenger-concierge type of thing between Politan, the Natarus government and the United States government."

"I see," Stained Blouse said. "And the nature of those errands? Did Welton..."

"Melvin," she corrected.

"...Dupree say anything about the nature of those...communication tasks?"

"No. Just that you'd appreciate my fluency in the Natarus language. Along with my experience with the Natarus Diplomatic core. Which would make me *tickety-boo* for the position. His words, not mine."

Hawk-Nose and Stained Blouse looked at each other, then back at her. Unblinking and almost in unison, which was unsettling if it weren't also a little impressive. Stained Blouse turned over a piece of paper.

"You were born in Tuvalu, in the west province of Natarus, but moved to the United States when you were sixteen to attend college. Berkley." Pause.

She stared back, letting the pause lengthen. "Is that a question?"

"It is."

"Then yes."

"I see," said Stained Blouse. Then started naming the professors she had in her first two years of college, along with the subjects they taught. "As an underclassman, you attended a diverse array of classes. Nearly three times the average student load. Why?"

"I believed taking a wide diversity of subjects would better help me discover where my interests lay. And, by extension, choose a major in order to discover my life path."

"And so, at the end of those two years, you chose...bagpiping as your major. Bagpiping? Am I reading that right?"

"Yes."

"Then Puppet Science."

"Yes."

"Followed by Artic Studies, Mortuary Sciences, Ecogastronomy, Metalsmithing and, finally, Communications. Seven majors in the remaining two years as an upperclassman."

"Yes."

"And still you were able to attain a bachelor's degree."

"Yes, Summa cum Laude." Oh brother did she sound ridiculous on paper.

Hawk-Nose and Stained Blouse looked at each other in synchronized rhythm again. Without smiling or expression.

"I honestly don't know if I'm impressed...or concerned that you're a big flake and, therefore, unsuitable." Hawk-Nose spat.

"I would echo that sentiment," Stained Blouse agreed. Both looked at her. She looked back, smiling. Holding herself calm.

"Then," Stained Blouse continued, "after graduation, you went to work for the Natarus Diplomatic core."

"Yes. I was assigned as a communications courier specialist, trained by retired Section Chief John Brown."

Stained Blouse looked down at the paper and then back up. "Yes, I'm sure you received plenty of training under John Brown. I also see here, during your time with the core, you worked in fourteen different offices, covering fourteen separate countries,

over a ten year period." Stain Blouse looked up. "You certainly did get around, didn't you? Professionally speaking, of course."

She didn't like how Stained Blouse was intentionally insulting her, implying that she was a companion being passed around rather than a courier. But there was no advantage to arguing back. Not at this point. "I went where they assigned me, as did all new couriers to the service. Not to mention, I held certain...linguistic skills."

"Such as?"

"I could pick up near any language, from any country I was stationed at, in the shortest period of time. Maybe not one hundred percent fluent when it came to reading and writing, depending on the particular regional dialect, but my ability to speak each language was highly functional. Which made me an asset. I also worked hard and received high marks at every post I was assigned to. Including receiving four commendation awards for outstanding meritorious service."

"Of course you did." Stained Blouse gave a micro-smirk before going back to neutral. Not enough for Hawk-Nose to notice, but she did.

"Yes," Hawk-Nose replied. "I do believe you're more than qualified for the position we're offering. At least on paper. So that'll be enough of that for now. Are you interested in continuing?"

"Yes." Jobs had grown sparse in her country. The economy in decline for many years, and the country suffering. Not to mention her father's shop, along with all the other businesses in Telavu, nearly bankrupt. Money was needed. American money if possible.

"Okay then, what I'd like to know...what I'd like to talk about is, when you and Mr. Dupree spoke about coming here," she continued, "it took place outside your father's shop. *BEHIND* his shop, actually. In the alley."

Her unease mounted. How did they know that? How could they? Uncle Melvin wouldn't have given away any details. He wouldn't have seen the point. And no one

had been close enough to see or overhear them. No one she didn't know, that is. So how did they?

She kept her demeanor calm, but sweat began under her heavy blouse and long skirt. She also wondered if they were intentionally making the room warmer. It would track – there were no windows, mirrors or wall devices in the room. Just the single door behind her. Nor radiator, vent or noticeable heating device. So how? She wanted to fan herself but knew to keep her hands resolutely in her lap. Any quick movements might be mis-interpreted.

Hawk-Nose continued. "When you spoke with Mr. Dupree, did you notice anyone else around?"

"No." Still, considering the line of questioning, someone *must've* been there. She searched her memory.

She also realized her legs were getting tired from holding herself back in the slanted chair. And she was becoming thirsty -- her mouth dry to the point she feared her words would come out in a croak. She was about to ask for water, but then remembered something odd.

"There was a man, a very well-dressed man, who passed by the alley when I was leaving." She tried to picture him. "He did it twice, actually -- once walking east-to-west along the street, and again a few minutes later when he returned, west-to-east."

The two across the table looked at her with faces as blank as a fresh sheet of paper.

"He also wore a suit, very dark grey, with a checked waistcoat. And a hat, also dark grey, with a black band around it. He was carrying..."

Stained Blouse interrupted. "Surely others passed by your father's shop while you were in the alley. Cantor St is known to be a busy street in a busy commercial district. Are you telling us no one else was around? Just some random man in a suit."

She began to feel like she wanted to leave. She had no idea what was happening, or who these two really were, or how they knew she'd spoken to Melvin in the alley behind her father's shop two days ago. And her legs were beginning to cramp. But the job was too important. So she took a deep breath to steady herself.

The man, she thought. Must've been the man.

"This man was different from the others who passed," she said, trying to keep the distress and anger out of her voice. "Everyone else was dressed as shopkeepers, or barmaids, or tradesmen. Blue collar types. Most of Telavu *is* blue collar. But the man I remember was dressed much more finely. He was also carrying a newspaper, which very few people do anymore. And the paper was all wrong. It had last week's headlines."

"And you know this how?"

"He passed by close enough that I was able to see part of the headline. It read *"Mayor Fires City Manager...* which was a story from last week's Telavu council meeting when Mayor Glenfield fired the Manager of the City Commerce department for disclosing private information to private parties without the mayor's consent." She searched her other memories. "The man wasn't tall, but not short. He wore a long coat over his suit. His shoes looked new – like they hadn't been broken in and were causing some discomfort. And he had..." She stopped, suddenly very afraid. "He had a..." she continued, "...a gun under his coat." Her breathing wasn't right, feeling like she couldn't get enough air. "He had a black, semi-automatic Berretta under his coat in a holster." She tried to form more words and failed.

"Very good. Very good indeed," said Hawk-Nose. "Most impressive, in fact. You appear to have a head for details too. Good. So let's move this interview to somewhere more comfortable. Would you like to continue?"

"Yes." She had to. Her father's livelihood, her town, her entire life depended on it. But her legs shook as she stood from the chair. In the flurry of the last few minutes, she'd become fatigued trying to hold herself back.

Stained Shirt stood and led the way, followed closely by Hawk-Nose. She followed them down a short hallway to another room. Where they walked in to discover her Uncle Melvin sitting at a desk in the middle of the room. A fresh wave of confusion and fear washed over her.

The lighting in this room was softer. It was an office, not an interview room, with furniture -- a desk, soft chairs, artwork, plants. Even a large bay window where sunlight streamed in, giving a more intimate vibe. The chair they directed her to faced the desk. No slant forward. She also noticed a large pitcher of water on a side table and asked if she couldn't have a glass.

Melvin poured and handed her the glass, rather gently, she thought. When she drank, she fought the urge to gulp in one long draught, satisfying herself with as many dainty sips as she could till her thirst slackened.

"Sorry for all the cloak and dagger stuff," Melvin began. "I know it wasn't pleasant, but there are reasons. And now is when you will have the opportunity to learn why. Would you like to continue?"

"Yes." She was curious. And people were relying on her to succeed.

"Good. To start, let's make introductions. This is Marlene Brock." (Stained Shirt). "And Vivian Fuller." (Hawk-Nose). "They will be your training officers. I am, of course, Uncle Melvin, your father's old friend. That will remain for the time being. No need to know my company name yet. If you pass training, which I'm confident you will, I will become your new station chief. Ms. Brock and Ms. Fuller will remain as your handlers and teammates."

She hadn't completely regained her composure, but was able to smile and acknowledge both what Uncle Melvin said and the information about the other two women.

"Congratulations."

"Can I ask a question?"

"Of course. Now would be the appropriate time."

"Am I to be trained as a communications courier?"

Hawk-Nose (Vivian) cut in. "Officially yes. But that will mostly be a cover. We at Politan apply ourselves to different roles. Some might say, the flip side of the diplomatic core. As it is, you are being invited to join the Politan Corporation, in an entry level training position of course, to handle more...serious tasks related to information gathering. If and when you pass training, you will be assigned a new post requiring travel."

"And your starting annual pay," Stained Blouse (Vivian) interjected, laying a folded piece of paper on the table, "will reflect those particular skills we will be asking you to develop and utilize."

She opened the paper and her mouth fell open. It was a mind boggling sum – more than her father made running his shop for over a decade. Enough to ensure he never had to worry again. "Yes, well...this is a bit unexpected." She took a deep breath, then took a chance. "So you're spies, then."

"Well, yes, and no," Stained Blouse continued. "We prefer the term "agents", but that's no matter. We do surveillance and gather information on individuals and groups run by foreign governments who might wish to harm the citizens or various government agencies associated with Politan."

A gentle rain began to fall. A far-off lightning stroke produced a subdued thunderclap.

"You see, here at Politan, we don't, as a rule, generally peek into what foreign governments are doing. Except to the extent that their agents have been trying to peek into *our* affairs of late. And, so, we find ourselves in a new paradigm, having to employ...newer measures. Does that make sense?"

"I suppose so."

The rain was falling harder. Another thunderclap so loud it shook the window slightly.

"And I am to be one of those 'new' methods." She said it flatly as she could. But she thought she saw Uncle Melvin's shoulders relax slightly.

"Indeed, yes," said Uncle Melvin.

"So what, may I ask, would I be doing exactly?"

"For starters," Hawk-Nose explained, "after your training, you will be returning to the United States to study for a master's degree in communication. And possibly a doctorate, if there is time, at a university of our choosing."

"I see. But that won't be my real job, right. Just my cover."

Uncle Melvin folded his hands on the table and looked directly into her eyes.

"Yes. That is correct. When the time is right, after you and your team have successfully..." and here Uncle Melvin looked from her to Vivian to Marlene and back, suggesting they *would not, under any circumstance*, fail, "when you and your team have been implanted, you, my dear, will court and marry the man of our choosing. And then, with your help, in less than a decade, that man will rise through the political ranks to become the President of the United States. After that, you will ensure, on a regular basis, that the appropriate information flows back to Politan. And in turn, with your help, we will help shape the policies of the most powerful country in the world. Do you understand?"

"I believe so. And if I turn down this offer?"

"Well, my dear. You're a smart girl. What do you think?"

"I'm afraid to speculate."

She didn't have to speculate. She knew. Her father had been covertly teaching her and training her since she was a young girl to be a double-agent for the Natarus government. With the ultimate goal of destroying Politan from within."

"When do I start?" she asked.

The End.