



# Dark Shade of Diplomacy

*Written by Wendi Coffman Porter*

*World Design by Richard W. Porter III*

*“ Sometimes ... diplomacy takes an odd route to its final destination. There are those that would say that if violence is involved, diplomacy has failed. But the reality is, that diplomacy, in of itself, is violent. It is an attempt to force another to change to your way of thinking. Think about the use of the word, force.*

*Force is violent.*

*No matter what type of force we are talking about. ”*

*-Leon Hamilton*

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## **Fordal 21, 26552**

Three weeks passed after the incident in the alley. But Helena still hadn't seen or heard from Mason. Each night, for the first couple of weeks, she went to the Golden Lute, hoping that he'd show to at least hire Delila again, but when he didn't, she grew disheartened. It was his prerogative to walk away, of course. No one knew that better than her. She was the mistress of walking away when things got complicated between her and a partner.

She kept telling herself that she was simply overreacting to this new, annoying, world. But something told her it was more than that. She'd found a new bistro to try tonight. That it was in view of the hostel that Mason had been living in since his wife's murder was merely a coincidence, or so she kept telling herself. But before she could go inside, a young man jogged across the street towards her.

"Pardon me, Doctor Cartwright." He bowed respectfully, and the elf smiled warmly at him.

"Yes?" She didn't recognize this lad, but that wasn't too much of a surprise. He kept his appearance and attire well groomed, which meant whoever he worked for, valued cleanliness.

"My master wishes to speak with you."

She arched an eyebrow. "And your master is?"

"He says to tell you, that he is looking for a mutual friend."

She glared at the boy. "That really doesn't answer my question."

The boy simply smiled at her. His posture was firm and confident, and he kept his gaze locked with hers, which wasn't typical behavior of a page outside of Jane's district. Unless...

"Very well. Lead the way, young man." She nodded to him.

He turned and walked off. He wove through the ward, clearly knowing every inch of it. As he ducked down an alley, the beggar that he stepped over signaled nothing to

her, which meant that the heavy bulk under the blanket wasn't a large beggar, but rather a heavily armored guard.

The teenage boy paused in front of a small door that led into the alley and held his palm out towards it.

She skimmed the alley, then the rooftops. There were far too many guards, which meant that either the king was inside, or they were about to arrest her. Keeping her hands to her sides, she opened the door and stepped into the dimly lit room.

It was a small hovel that likely belonged to some currently displaced loyalist. At a small table with two rickety wooden chairs was a man in plain clothes, with a heavy cloak and a deep cowl. In front of him was a worn bottle of what was most likely some kind of homemade liquor and two clean, but well-worn cups.

"Have a seat, doctor." A clean, well-manicured hand waved towards the empty chair.

She smiled, even though he wasn't looking up at her. "Please, call me Helena." She gave no title to the man, refusing to acknowledge that he was even here.

"Very well. Please sit, Helena."

She sat without saying a word.

"I hear from... I hear you might know of a human woman that calls herself, Delila." He finally looked up and locked eyes with her.

This was the first time she'd been this close to the man. He was handsome, and like all monarchs, his eyes were hard from seeing too much suffering and death.

He waited patiently for her to answer.

When she finally realized that her mind had wandered off, she shook her head slightly. "My apologies. Yes, I may know where to find her. Is there a problem?"

"I am not sure." He shrugged. The bags under his beautiful blue eyes told her he wasn't sleeping well. "Miss Delila was the last person to see inspector Mason. I was hoping she could tell me if something happened that might cause him to..."

Her eyes widened slightly, and she realized that such a subtle facial reaction had told the man across from her far too much. Damn it! It was already happening. Her feelings for the stupid human were causing her to make mistakes.

"I thought so. What happened, Helena?"

She sighed. "Normally, I would tell you to fuck off. My personal life is my own."

The man arched both eyebrows high on his forehead and the man hidden in the corner stepped forward into the light, with a hand on his weapon.

She raised a hand to stop his bodyguard. "However. You wouldn't be here, in a secret hovel, located in a dark alley, with me, of all people, if you didn't care about him. Which means this isn't about recovering an asset, but finding a friend. And that I can respect." She took a deep breath and shook her head. She couldn't believe what she was about to do. "However, if what I say ever leaves this room, you will lose any backing that myself, Joan, or Shadowband Solutions has given, or will give, to the kingdom of Bugrasi." Her eyes narrowed as she locked eyes with the man.

Behind him, the guard fidgeted nervously.

"Do we understand each other?" her voice was menacing; she was playing a dangerous game. She wouldn't survive this if he rejected the offer.

The king smiled warmly and nodded. "I do not take well to threats, but I do understand the sentiment. Yes."

She sighed and looked down at her folded hands resting, neatly in view, on the table. "He and I have been working together for a couple of months now. Which I am sure you already knew."

The man nodded.

She rubbed her hands together as she considered what to say, and how to say it. "I don't hide that I have no qualms about sleeping with, well, let's just say, willing entertainment. And race is rarely an issue in that pastime."

The king of Bugrasi smirked, but quickly allowed it to fade back into his typical stern expression.

"However, Mason recently lost his wife. So, I didn't even flirt with him. I am not a monster." She grimaced, "despite evidence to the contrary."

She looked up from her hands and locked eyes with the man across the table from her.

"When we arrested the young bard. Something changed." She shook her head. "I am not sure if it was my fault or not, but I do know that I didn't stop it right then, like I should have."

"Mason is a grown man. He can take care of himself." The king chuckled.

Her face grew hard as she cocked her head at him. "Have you ever lost someone so close to you that it felt as if someone ripped your heart from your chest? And known full well, that their horrible and painful death, was your fault?"

His eyes widened suddenly, and he bit the inside of his cheek as he considered her question.

"I thought not." She shook her head slowly. "There is no way to describe it." She snorted. "But I guess that's not your concern here." She lifted her shoulders and relaxed them. "He sent Delila on a mission to get some documents from Baron Femilian. The documents were what he expected. The Lord is working with the Shadakan. He is trading Bugrasi citizen into slavery, in exchange for weapons."

The king's eyes narrowed angrily. "Excuse me?"

"Wow, he didn't bring that intelligence to you before disappearing?" She chuckled, but continued anyway. "Delila turned him down that night. He didn't take it well. If I had to guess, he used his anger to fuel his need to punish someone. If he were going to go on a killing spree, he'd need to keep your name out of it. Which means he'd need to do it without your permission."

The man slammed his fist into the table, but Helena didn't even flinch. "You couldn't just sleep with him? I mean seriously woman. You'll sleep with everything else!"

She arched an eyebrow high on her forehead. "First off, you know nothing about me." Her voice was low and dark. "Except what a bunch of half, to no, truth reports have told you. But I will give you this one lone tidbit, but only because I respect your wife's, age and wisdom, not yours." She slammed her own hands down on the table angrily and stood suddenly, leaning over the table to glare directly into his eyes. "I do not get involved with humans. Ever."

The guard behind the king of Bugrasi lifted his rifle towards her.

"Put that away, before I rip your throat out and feed it to him." The anger washed over her, rapidly climbing to the point of rage.

She balled her fists at her side and spun towards the door. It wasn't the stupid human's fault that she'd allowed her emotions to get the better of her.

"And don't worry. I'm sure he is fine. As you said, he can take care of himself. But I will find him and ensure that he returns home. Even if that means that I have to take the fall for whatever he's doing. I owe him that at the very least."

She stormed out and slammed the door behind her.

The young lad leapt out of her way as she marched past.

She didn't make it over four feet before a large surfboard appeared in front of her, and without skipping her stride, she hopped on and zipped off at speeds so fast that the humans couldn't even track her effectively.

As she hopped off the board onto a rooftop halfway across the city, she willed it home. Her clothing shifted to the typical tattered clothing of the beggar's guild, and she



settled onto the cool rooftop. Tugging a book from her bag, she pulled her cloak around her and shifted her vision so that she could read it in dim light as she waited.

On the cover, a large planet, embossed into the leather, barely covering a dark moon. The words, inlaid with a steely looking metal, read, Who Needs Shady Friends.



Diplomacy is the art of letting others have your way. I am sure you have heard that before. I think we all have. Dozens of people have claimed credit for saying it first. Yet, it is simply a fact of nature. It takes little to no effort to come up with that realization on your own, even without hearing it from someone else.

Sometimes, though, diplomacy takes an odd route to its eventual destination. There are those that say, if it involves violence, then diplomacy has failed. But the reality is, diplomacy, in of itself, is violent. By default, it is forcing others to alter their actions or behavior to suit you. Think about that. The word force is violent. No matter what type of force we are talking about.

Occasionally, the violent act of diplomacy requires more than talk. It needs action. And this story is just that, Shade's version of diplomatic negotiations.

“Good morning, Taius!”

The camera zoomed in on Henry Archibald, the male anchor of the late morning news on the Taius Galactic News Network. His dark brown hair was shoulder length with soft curls. His obviously enhanced bright green eyes looked neon in the stage lighting. And he had that kind of tanned skin tone that many Taius women risked skin cancer for, regularly. He wore a light-colored suit with lace fringing, and a dark shirt which was all the rage these days, even if he reminded Helena of formal tea at her grandmothers.

“The death count continues to rise amid last night's power grid failure. The last numbers we received were above four-thousand and climbing by the hour as emergency groups continue to cut their way through the building. Among the dead are the elderly, children and adults with preexisting medical conditions.”

"That's horrible." The camera seemed to hesitate before panning wide to see the woman seated at the anchor desk next to him. "Isn't this the ninth building in three years that has failed closed after a grid failure?"

The camera finally panned to see the co-anchor, Glenda Mordal as well. She had platinum blonde hair and brown eyes, which were narrowed angrily at her co-anchor. Unlike her partner, she dressed in a far more business-like attire. With a tailored maroon coat and lavender blouse.

The man looked down at his pad, swiping to the side quickly as he tried to look up the answer to her question.

"Seriously." She demanded, looking at the camera. "Why have we not heard of an investigation into why these buildings are failing closed during power outages? And, for that matter, why are we not holding the government responsible for the power outages in the first place?"

Henry Archibald snapped his head up to stare at the camera briefly, before turning his attention to his co-host. "Well, the power outages aren't the government's fault. They result from an overtaxed power system due to the population growth."

"That exact grid system was in place four years ago, and was working perfectly, with no failures for forty years prior to the takeover. Yet, when the government enacted a decree that all critical infrastructure, was a matter for national security, and therefore, fell to government hands to manage. They eliminated the commercial system that was in place." She lifted the pad in her hand and waved it at the camera. "A commercial power system that, according to my sources, would have handled growth of Taius for fifty years without needing to build any new plants. The government, seizes their property and their equipment, under the guise of national security, and less than a year later the grid has power failures so catastrophic that the death toll is in the hundreds of thousands!"

Even through the make-up, the male anchor next to her blanched, and looked as if he was going to throw up. "We..." He turned to face the camera, but his eyes didn't quite meet the audience, which likely meant he was looking at someone next to the camera. "We, we of course, are not saying this is the government's fault."

"Why aren't we?" Glenda slammed her palm down on the desk. "Why aren't we holding the government responsible?"

"Well, Yornadal Construction built the buildings in question, and they are a subsidiary of Henderthal Conglomerates." The camera focused on the male anchor as he clearly read whatever someone was typing onto the teleprompter. "Perhaps we should ask them why their buildings fail closed, rather than open, which is the standard for all galactic construction projects larger than ten stories?"

The camera panned back to show them both again, Glenda grinned broadly. Capturing the perfect visual of the cat that caught the canary.

"Interesting." She cooed happily. "Perhaps you're right. Maybe we should ask the board members of Henderthal Conglomerates that very question." She tapped something on the pad in front of her, and a box appeared on the screen between the two anchors. The image of a man with short, dark, curly hair, bushy eyebrows and dark blue eyes appeared. His bushy brow furrowed angrily at whoever was taking the picture.

"Of which, Taius's Planetary President Uther Faldameri is a major shareholder, and until the election, was the Chief Executive Officer. Perhaps we need to be asking him why his company is murdering thousands of Taius citizens. All of which, have a median income of less than the planetary poverty line."

"And on that interesting note." The male anchor interrupted her before she could continue. "It's time for a message from our sponsors, Landry Pet Cemetery. For when flushing that beloved clone, just isn't enough. We'll be back in a few minutes."

The TGNN music began playing as the image shifted to an advertisement. The display automatically muted the audio.

"Seriously. How have they not arrested him yet?" Helena stood suddenly, as pent-up anger welled to the surface.

"He's the sitting president of this back-water rock, that you call home." The unusually large elf next to her turned his piercing green eyes to her and shrugged. Folding his arms across his chest, he added, "he has everyone either in his pocket or terrified that they will mysteriously commit suicide if they go against him."

She marched to the bar and began pouring herself a drink from one of the beautiful crystal decanters.

Pointing to the muted advertisement, Jimmy smirked. "I'll bet you a hundred credits that they arrest her by nightfall for that stunt. Grab me a scotch."

"It won't take that long." Helena shook her head and grabbed another glass to pour the second drink. "They'll place her in custody the second she steps out of the station."

The smirk on the tall, heavily built elf's face faded somewhat. "I gotta give him credit, he's good."

"Good at what? Getting away with it?" She strode back to the couch and sat next to the male elf.



No one knew her quite like Jimmy, he probably even knew her better than she knew herself.

He took the drink she handed to him and flicked his free hand towards the wall that they were using as a display. A still image appeared larger than life. In the foreground was a one-point-five-million credit sports car named the Cougar. Behind it, President Faldameri handed a set of keys to a second man that she didn't immediately recognize.

"Recognize the other guy?"

She shook her head and took a sip of her drink.

"That would be Nathan Yedriss. I assume you know the name?"

She breathed deeply and closed her eyes as she resisted the urge to throw her glass at the wall.

"Director Yedriss is the head of Taius Investigative Service. I took this photo the day after he officially announced that there was not enough substantial evidence to link the President to the Gavardi slave trafficking investigation."

She snorted and shook her head. "Right, so bank records, photos and video recordings, with audio, telling Gavardi which women to target next, wasn't enough evidence?"

Jimmy frowned at her and shook his head slowly. "Apparently not."

"So, that means that we need to get him to shoot a bound and gagged kid on a public stage to get something to stick?" She grumbled, staring down at the drink in her hand.

Jimmy chuckled. "Too obvious, no way we could make that stick. They'd just claim the kid tripped and fell into the bullet."

She glared at him, her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Yeah. I know. Shut up, Jimmy."

She pursed her lips and shook her head slowly. "Nah, you're right. Sadly." She took a deep breath. "It's not like this is new or anything. I can't even count how many times we dealt with the same shit on a different world."

He shrugged and downed his scotch, before standing to refill it. "A hundred, at the very least. And from what I heard, you did it a few more times after leaving my company."

"I didn't leave your company per se. I walked away to save your life." She grumbled. "Besides, this is different. We aren't following orders. We aren't getting paid. This time it's survival. And I refuse to play their game. I am not a criminal."

Jimmy snorted and looked up at her with his head cocked to the side. The diverted attention caused him to accidentally pour too much scotch into his glass. As it poured over the lip and onto his hand, he snapped his attention back to the glass.

"Okay," she bobbed her head back and forth slightly. "I *am* a criminal, but I am not *that* kind of criminal!"

He wiped up the bar with a towel and lifted his glass to take a sip big enough to bring the volume in the glass to a manageable level. Tossing the towel to the bar-back, he met her gaze.

"I know that look. What's the plan?"

She stood and strolled to the bar, straddling a stool. "We deal with them ourselves."

A sly grin played across both faces as they lifted their glasses to clink them together before taking a sip.

"Now *that's* my kind of plan." He chuckled.



The disguised elf looked up from her book as an icon in her Heads-up flashed. Looking over the edge of the rooftop, she saw the woman walking through the alley below. She glanced around furtively, then ducked into a doorway.

Interesting, Helena thought, he didn't change the rendezvous spot. She lost what little respect she had for Norton. Hoping over the edge, she kicked off the wall to the far side of the narrow alley, then back. She did this several more times as she slowed her fall to the alley. As she landed, a tall dark-haired woman with stern features, the new constable armor, strode confidently down the alley towards the same door. She didn't have a sword, or even the new rifles, but she doubted her target would notice.

She strode up to the door and banged on it loudly. "Open up!"

The crash inside told her they had clearly heard her. But she continued banging on the door.

"Open up!" she bellowed. Behind her, several other doors that led into the alley opened as heads poked out to see what the commotion was. Once they saw the Constable in uniform, they ducked back inside quickly, no longer curious.

The door flew open and Norton stood there fully clothed, albeit a tad disheveled. "What is the meaning of this?"

The city constable looked past him to the woman, trying to hide in the corner. Raising an eyebrow, she looked back to him. "Does her father know she is here?"

Norton's eyes narrowed angrily. "Did you burst in on us, just to threaten me?"

"No, in fact." She smirked. "I came to blackmail you."

The lord's majordomo stared at the constable for several long moments before he finally asked, "what do you want?"

"Where is his lordship this evening?"

The man didn't speak up, but the young girl that was not technically of age yet, did. She rushed forward and wrapped her arms around his waist as she peeked out from under his arm.

"Please. I love him. You can't tell daddy. He will have him killed."

"Shasha, no." he wrapped his arm protectively around her.

"Then one of you, tell me where he is." Helena folded her arms across her chest.

"He is at a dinner with Ambassador Sateri." The girl's eyes pleaded with her.

The disguised elf snorted and shook her head. "Figures. You two should get out of town for a while. That is the only warning I will give you." She turned and strode away, down the alley.

A short while later, she wore a black leather outfit that buckled to her snugly. Her shoulder length black hair and blue eyes matched perfectly with the young adult human body. She'd ensured that the form she'd chosen was the same well-endowed Mary, from her time serving as a maid in the Baron's house.

She slid through the wine cellar silently. When she reached the large cellar door, she listened carefully and resisted the urge to complain about human hearing.

Booted feet marched past the door. Waiting a reasonable amount of time, she slipped the latch open and slid into the hallway. To her left, she could hear the kitchen as the staff frantically went about preparing the meal for the guests. She opted to follow the booted footsteps to the right and dodged low when the arm swung around the corner towards her.

She rolled up with a knife in each hand. The two guards smirked at her as one of them circled around to the side, trying to pin her in.

"And here is the petty thief." The one in front of her grinned as he spoke in the local Bugarasian tongue. He dove for her suddenly and she rolled under his arm, slicing him in the side with the knife.

When he dropped to the ground, she hadn't been expecting it. He spun and kicked out his leg, knocking her own out from under her. As he did so, his partner leapt on top of her.

Their sheer strength overpowered her, and they bound her up tightly with ropes.

When the first one tossed her over his shoulder and carried her across the room to a set of stairs that led down, she simply hung there grinning.

Several minutes later, they tossed her into a seated position. As one man tried to tie her ankle to the chair, she kicked him in the jaw. He rolled away as the one behind her laughed and pressed her back into the chair.

"She's feisty." The man behind teased.

She spat at the man on the ground and growled, "You have no idea."

The man she kicked stood and slapped her across the face so hard that her head spun to the side. She could feel the skin redden as she rolled her jaw against the pain.

"Sit still, or we will just kill you." He glared at her.

The man behind her continued to chuckle. "Go tell the boss. I'll take care of her."

A second rope wrapped around her chest as the man tied her torso to the chair back.

Once the second man left, the first one tightened the surrounding ropes.

She grunted slightly.

"What are you doing here?" He walked around in front of her and crouched, resting his elbows on his knees. "You're going to get yourself killed."

"I doubt that." She replied.

He locked eyes with her, and she felt her stomach do several flips in reaction to his stare.

"Wow," she said.

He smirked. "What?"

"You're almost better than me. I mean seriously, how are you doing that?" She cocked her head to the side.

He stood and looked down at her. "It amazes me how you are constantly underestimating us. Me specifically."

She opened her mouth to say something but closed it. She didn't underestimate him; she simply didn't know him well enough to have a well-formed opinion. Yet.

"You realize that's a two-way street, right?" she finally replied.

He folded his arms. "How do you figure?"

"You took those reports about my prison sentence at face value. Even though you are beginning to suspect that maybe they weren't entirely true." She could see it in his eyes, that her argument hit home. "We aren't as different as you might think. And I don't underestimate you. I don't know you."

"And who's fault is that?" Anger seeped into his voice.

She kept her face calm as she replied, "both of ours."

She heard the guard returning, just like he did. She didn't dodge when his fist came down hard across her face. She slumped, pretending to be unconscious. If she hadn't been Shade and stolen far too many artifacts in her life that she'd opted to keep for herself. She would have been out like a light. He definitely hadn't pulled that punch.

"Hey Simbi", she thought to her internal computer.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Did you copy that book to digital yet?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I love you!" she resisted the urge to grin as she heard the two men leave the room.

The image of the page she was on popped up in her HUD and she skimmed forward.



"Look. I get it. You're angry." Jimmy stood in front of her desk, his arms folded across his chest.

They already sealed the office, ensuring that no one could walk in on their conversation, not even Menefelle. The massive wall of plasteel windows behind her

were clear, but on their side only. Showing the massive city of Thanya lit up like diamonds strewn across the black cloth of nightfall.

"And I agree that we've done far worse things in the past, but those things were under orders. This..." he lifted his palm towards a one foot long and eight-inch diameter canister sitting in front of her on the desk. "This is wrong Helena, and you know it."

"How is it any different this time?" Her words came out sounding like a low growl. Over the last week her anger had grown to dangerous levels, and she knew it. But she couldn't stand by any longer and do nothing. She wanted to inflict maximum damage.

Jimmy's nostrils flared slightly as his patience with his ex-commander faltered. "Helena. Snap out of this shit!"

She pushed herself to a standing position, her hands still resting on the desk. She wished she could say that arguing over a mission was a rare event, but it was far too common these days. When she walked off mission so many years ago. It was Jimmy that had to replace her on the team. And now, he was no longer her subordinate, but an equal that both loved and respected her a great deal.

"You want a damn order, fine I am giving you the order," she spat angrily!

"You do this, you're on your own." He said the words slowly and deliberately. In over a hundred years of serving together, he'd never left her to do a mission alone.

She blinked several times as her mind tried to rationalize what he'd just said.

"There are innocent people in there, who are just following orders. They probably feel just as trapped and frustrated as you do." His voice was stern.

She slapped her hand down on the desk. "Bullshit!" she roared. "They work for him, because they hope they will get rich by standing in his shadow. They are lazy individuals who are just taking the easy way out."

"Thank you for proving my point." Jimmy arched an eyebrow and smirked slightly.

Shaking her head, Helena stood and folded her arms across her chest. "What?"

He relaxed his posture, allowing his hands to drop to his sides. With one hand he pointed to the canister. "That's the easy way out."

Fury overwhelmed her at the painfully astute observation. Snatching up the canister, she threw it at him with all the force she could manage.

"GET OUT!" She screamed.



A hand snatched the canister from the air with a heart stopping thud. When the canister remained intact, they both began breathing again. He bent over and gently set the canister on the ground.

"Yes, ma'am." He whispered and strode from the office.

As the door closed behind him, Helena stared at the canister on the floor for several minutes.

Every night since coming home to Taius, she'd gone to her apartment, one floor above her office, and watched the news while drinking something hard enough to numb her mind. And each night as she laid in bed, she asked herself, why am I still here?

Seven years had gone by, and she still didn't have an answer.

"Why am I still here?"

She strode to the massive window. Staring out over the beautiful lights of the Thanya nightlife. She couldn't help but think about how much her home had changed. The once beautiful mecca was now a horrifying city, filled with violence, death and corruption. All of which was far more obvious at night. Despite the overwhelming level of corruption and death, she somehow felt as if this was where she needed to be, and she couldn't put her finger on why.

"For a person who works hard at living in the moment, this seems a bit contemplative for you." A familiar voice behind her interrupted her thoughts.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw the handsome silver eyed elf with long platinum blonde hair. He wore a rather impressive looking tuxedo, cut in the typical Imperial fashion. She rolled her eyes.

Toni smiled warmly at her, but didn't approach. He did however glance at the canister sitting on the floor, before returning his attention to her.

"One of these days I will build a security system that can keep your kind out." She grumbled, returning her attention to the city below.

"And on that day, I will officially request a key. But until then..."

She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. She would never block this dragon from coming to her whenever he liked. And they both knew it.

He stepped up next to her and looked out over the city. "You're on Taius. Interesting choice."

"What are you doing here, Toni?"

He didn't turn to face her as he replied. "I was just informed that Regina Dalmoore was murdered."

Turning to face him, she raised an eyebrow. "And?"

He would have known if she was dead. The two of them talked regularly, although the physical visits, like this, were rare.

He took a deep breath and turned to face her. His eyes stared deep into her soul, he knew what she was about to do. That's why he was here.

"It made me think of you. And when I ..." he paused and looked off to the side, unwilling to admit that he was spying on her thoughts.

"Checked on me, you saw something that worried you." She chuckled and strode to the bar along the wall. "I suppose, I should say, I'm honored that I warranted a tuxedo."

"Don't take your anger out on me." He snapped at her.

She shrugged as she poured herself a drink. "That wasn't what I meant. You left your date, I would assume at some sort of gala, to come see me. My comment was sincere."

"You are always more important than..." his voice trailed off as he looked for a way to finish the sentence that wasn't insulting.

"Your work?" Cocking her head to the side, she took a drink.

He took a deep breath and slowly strode towards her.

"Don't." She held up her palm towards him. "Thank you for caring. And I am sorry I snapped at you. But I am fine. I don't need help."

"Very well." He bowed deeply, breaking eye contact as he did so. Clearly, he was spending too much time at Imperial court functions. He vanished. Simply ceasing to be without a word, or even a popping noise.

"I am here if you need me." She heard his voice in her mind and she smiled weakly.

Taking another drink, she said out loud. "Exactly where I don't need you."

She set the half full drink on the bar and strode past the canister resting on the floor of her office. As she passed out of the office, the security lock-down lifted, and she heard alarms trigger. Lights shifted to red in the hallway, as the sensors in her office alerted security to the presence of a chemical weapon.

Several hours later Shade crouched on a tall plascrete wall. As she plugged a long cable into the camera next to her, she brought up the security network.

The palatial presidential estate spanned over two hundred acres of forested nature preserve. Building on a Taius natural preserve was highly illegal, but apparently if you make the laws, then you're allowed to break them. There were nineteen buildings on the grounds, including a massive one hundred room mansion. The media touted the estate as the most secure facility in the entire Taius Solar System.

Shade triggered her pre-programed worm and allowed it to seep slowly into the network, before pulling the cable.

"Two guards inbound, seventy yards to your ten-o'clock." A male voice whispered into her ear.

"Roger, God." She glanced where he indicated and smiled.

Strolling her direction were two perfect examples of Taius security forces. They were chatting with each other about this week's grav-ball scores, utterly unaware of their surroundings. They passed directly below her as she waited for the worm to securely lodge itself into the network.

Once the light turned green, she pulled the cable and dropped silently off the wall into the neatly manicured forest on the inside of the walls.

"Oh, and, God?"

"Yeah?"

"Welcome back."

"I never left ma'am. I just gave you your space."

Shade smiled and wondered how much of that was true. Had he been watching over her all this time? If so, she had a lot to apologize for.

---

"Wake up, child." A sinister male voice demanded.

Helena closed the book reader in her HuD and groaned. "ugh." She blinked several times looking up at the tall, thin, oddly emaciated looking Shadakan Ambassador.

Looking around at the room, she saw several guards standing in the shadows. One of whom was the undercover inspector.

"Where am I?" She asked.

A man, standing behind the ambassador, made a clicking sound with his mouth. "now, now, Mary. If that is your actual name. We know good and well why you are here." The large Baron stepped up next to the ambassador and smiled happily. "why don't you save us the hassle of beating you to death, and just tell us who you are working for?"

*"Enact protocol four."* She silently told her combat system.

Several lights in her HuD flashed to life, as the nanite factory spat out tens of thousands of microscopic robots into her bloodstream.

The lord pulled a steel gauntlet tight onto his hand and opened and close his fist. Stepping forward, he swung his fist wide and punched her across the face. Her head snapped roughly to the side, and she heard her neck pop.

Pulling her head back, she rolled her head slightly, stretching her neck. Finally! That kink she'd had for months, vanished. She almost wanted to thank him.

"Who do you work for?" The ambassador demanded.

She locked eyes with the baron, but said nothing. In her HuD, the nanties reported they were mimicking the result of blunt force trauma.

The baron grinned at her. "Dorthian sent you, didn't he?"

Her HuD searched the name and came up with another Noble. Count Dorthian Cutwald. He was one of the many dockside nobles who managed the port. But his specialty was export, not import.

"I thought Yentry managed the imports?" She eyed the baron curiously.

He laughed and backhanded her. The strike caused her eyes to tear up, and she spit out a mouthful of blood from where she'd bit her own cheek.

"Yentry is loyal, and not as greedy as Dorthian." The Baron shook his head. "That bastard has been trying to bleed me dry for months. Now he's going for blackmail!" he roared and punched her so hard in the stomach that she lifted into the air and crashed back down, precariously teetering on two legs as she fought to regain her balance.

The baron grabbed a handful of hair and yanked her back onto all four legs of the chair. Twisting her head, he forced her to look up at him. Bringing his head down near her's he growled, "If Dorthian didn't hire you, then who? You will tell me!"

He slammed his forehead into her nose with a loud cracking noise.

Her eyes watered as the cartilage gave way and ruptured hundreds of tiny blood vessels in her nose. Well, at least she didn't need nanites for that one, she thought as blood began pouring down her face.

"Next I will start pulling your fingernails. Then your teeth, and last, if you still won't talk, I will rip your tongue from your head and toss your beaten body into the harbor!"

Her eyes opened wide at the last threat. She could feel her face swelling up, as the nanites did their job. Honestly, it was starting to hurt.

"You're afraid of the harbor monster?" he laughed suddenly and jerked her head backwards as he finally backed off. "Well, well. The pretty petty thief isn't as tough as she pretends to be, after all." He mocked.

The Shadakan stepped forward and smiled at her. It was a rather disturbing sight. "My dear girl, you will tell us everything. Even if I have to make you a slave."

"I am not afraid of your kind." She locked eyes with him, refusing to back down to his threats.

She felt magic wash over her and smirked at him. "Like I said, not afraid of your kind."

"She has wards on her." The ambassador took a step back and pointed to her as he locked his eyes on the Baron. "Find them."

"Gladly." The large man grinned so broadly that she grimaced.

She sighed as he pulled a knife and stepped towards her.

"They paid me to find out how you're getting the weapons. My employer wants to know if you're gouging him on the price."

"That Roshan bastard!" The baron lifted his hand and struck her on the opposite cheekbone with the dagger. The steel pommel slammed into her already swollen cheek and split the skin open as the nanites registered an impact strong enough to rupture the skin.

"Argh." She groaned. Okay, that hurt. It had been a very long time since she'd done this. She forgot how painful it was. She blinked several times as the pain seared her retinas, giving her brief stars. "please tell me that's enough intelligence?" She asked out loud.

"It's enough for me." A guard standing in the shadows, out of her line of vision, replied.

Tilting her head towards each shoulder, she smiled up at the Baron. "Thank you."

He frowned, clearly confused.

The ambassador saw it for what it was and hurried from the room.

"I got fatty and his friends. You get the ambassador." She called.

A single guard bolted through the room, towards the door that the ambassador had escaped through. As he passed behind the baron, he shouted, "I need him alive."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" She snapped at him. Leaping into the air, she flipped forward, bringing the legs of the chair down on the baron's head and shoulders. The wooden chair shattered. But he simply grabbed a hold of her and threw her into the wall as if she were a toy.

The concussive force of momentum meeting wall knocked the ropes loose, and she wriggled free as she shifted from protocol four to full combat mode.

She rolled out of the way as the first crossbow bolt embedded into the wall. Diving onto the closest guard, she embed a dagger into his throat. The two guards that captured her had searched her, but missed the hidden sheaths that held her actual weapons. Snatching up the small hand crossbow, she fired the second arrow into another guard.

As she moved around the edge of the room, the baron watched her calmly. Once the last guard dropped, she stepped into the center of the room and slid her knives back into their hidden sheaths.

"Finally." He leered at her. "you are going to learn what it means to cross us."

"I am sure I am." She agreed.

He dove at her unusually fast, but it was nothing like the vampires she was used to. In fact, he seemed a little slow.

She stepped out of the way, letting him charge harmlessly past her.

He spun and narrowed his eyes, calculating her intently. When he leapt towards her in a feint. She rolled past him and snatched up a section of rope that they used to tie her up.

Waiting for him to try for her again, she dove past him. Using a sleight-of-hand technique, she slipped the rope around his ankle. As she rolled up with the other end of the rope in hand, she smirked.

He glanced down at the rope and laughed. "What do you think you're going to do with that?"



"Me?" She smirked and pulled a handful of tiny red crystals from her bag. "Absolutely nothing." She tilted her forehead to the crystals in her hand that were now floating just above it. "These lil guys, though, that's another story entirely."

Helena gave the tiny red crystals the mental image of the rope going around him over and over as it wound up his legs. A dozen tiny crystals leapt into the air and giggled gleefully.

"Play!" they screamed. Of course, all the human heard was an odd humming noise.

His eyebrows shot up in shock as the tiny things snatched the rope from her hands and yanked it around him so fast that they appeared to be a single red line encircling him.

The race of crystalized entities, that grow on Leon's floating island, come in many colors, shapes and sizes. But as with many species, the size determines age. And one problem with working with children, such as these tiny red crystals, is that they like to play, and they don't like to stop playing.

By the time Mason came back into the room, Helena was leaning in the doorframe, frowning at the spinning baron. He'd passed out a while ago, but the crystals didn't care. They kept him upright as they spun around him, then pulled the string like a child with a top.

"What the hell?" Mason's eyes widened in shock as he turned to glare at her.

"Wheeeee! AGAIN!" They squealed.

He spun and fell, only to have them catch him and begin the process all over again.

"Game's over. That's enough." She called.

"Awwwww." They whined, but stopped and returned to her hand. The roped fell slack as the body of the baron fell to the floor unmoving.

She raised her shoulders, then dropped them casually as she slid the crystals back into her bag.

"What? He's still alive. I think." Laughing, she added, "but I don't envy that headache." Turning to lock eyes with him, her face fell from the grin to a blank stare. "I did what I said I would do. Feel free to blame this on me." Turning on her heel, she strode from the room.

Behind her, she heard the baron groan as he woke up.

“Ms. Cartwright. How nice to meet you face to face. My name is Gedrin Doogan. I have heard a lot about you from Deedra Hammersmith.” A stout, nearly as wide as he was tall, dwarf with a neatly trimmed black beard, and dark eyes, waddled into view and held out a hand to her.

She took his hand and felt a firm grip that belied a lot of confidence.

His eyes twinkled slightly. “Though she never told me you were an elf. Odd thing to neglect.”

Making his way to the chair behind his large wooden desk, he settled in as it lifted, bringing him eye level with her.

“Dee is a wonderful lady who says only what's needed. It's why I adore her so much.” Helena leaned back in the chair, crossing her legs at the knee.

“Indeed. Well, I understand you might need a law firm. And while we at Doogan, Doogan and Don, appreciate you coming to us, there are other lawyers within the firm that might suit your needs better. I personally, am not a corporate or a criminal lawyer. My specialty is civil law.” He steepled his fingers in front of him as he watched her curiously.

“I am aware. That's why I asked for you.” She cocked her head to the side slightly and shrugged a shoulder. “That and Dee said you are the best fit to be my conscience.”

The dwarf laughed and shook his head. “I'm not so sure about that. But I will honor my cousin, which is one of the reasons I allowed this meeting to take place.”

“I am familiar with dwarven customs.”

He smiled. “Of that, I do not doubt. So, how can I help you today?”

“Glenda Mordal.”

A bushy eyebrow shot up on his forehead.

“Either you get her out of jail, or I will.”

His mouth opened slightly, then snapped shut with a soft clatter. He tapped his fingers on his pursed lips for several minutes while he stared at her. Then finally he took a deep breath and his eyes narrowed, ever so slightly.

"You know, when you specifically demanded me, I declined originally." He reached into a drawer to his right and pulled out a pad.

It had a military tough-case on it. Yet the markings told her it wasn't Taius military, but rather a Republic Federated Commonwealth device.

"But when you hacked into the system to override my refusal, I told my specialists to let the meeting request to go through. However, it forced me to do some research into Helena Cartwright and why my cousin would tell you to seek me specifically."

He set the pad on the desk in front of him. "At first, I found nothing, except what Dee sent me. But when I tied Colonel Jymallather Fadmakeel to what I knew, an interesting file popped up. One that I can honestly say, I didn't have clearances to see." He chuckled. "But like you, I have outstanding employees, who are quite good at getting me what I need, when I need it."

Helena arched an eyebrow slightly as she watched the dwarf curiously.

He reached into the drawer again and pulled out another digital device. It clearly wrapped around the wrist and had the marking associated with the dragon council. He set that on the Republic pad, then pulled out a third pad that had the Helandigari Empire Royal Seal on the back.

"After some more research into various databases, I began to see a very fascinating pattern emerging." Finally, he pulled out a fourth device that got a reaction from the elf sitting in the chair.

Helena shifted in the chair and carefully folded her arms across her chest.

The dwarf lifted the pad, so she could seal the familiar seal on the back before setting it on top of the pile.

"Easy, Ms. Cartwright. Please let me clarify something." He rested his hand on the surface of the last pad, and it booted up, which was impossible, unless the owner cleared him for it. "I had to go into my personal vault for this last one. No one has this information except me. The owner of this device and I knew each other well. I was his private attorney, which is why I have access to the files on the device. It contains his last will and testament, which includes a one-thousand-page document. Along with many other legal matters. Which includes the names of the individuals behind his murder."

Her eyes narrowed as she wondered where he was going with this soliloquy.

"It also includes the why."

Helena's face shifted to an utterly blank expression. "And this relates this to Glenda Mordal?"

He chuckled and shook his head.

"Then what's your point, counselor?" Her arms remained crossed as she contemplated killing the dwarf.

"My point is, I showed up for this meeting because, I am already on retainer for you. He paid for your entire lifetime. So long as Doogan, Doogan and Don exist, you are a client."

Helena relaxed her shoulders somewhat.

"However. First, you need to take your hands off your weapons, and we must agree, from here on out, that there are no secrets. I can't do my job if I don't know what's going on. I am not Deedra. We will not be best friends, but I will be your lawyer."

"You have a deal." Helena unfolded her arms and rested her hands on her knee. "Mrs. Mordal?"

He waved his hand to the side. "Done, I assume you are paying for it?"

The elf nodded.

"Very well. However, you are to stay away from her. Let us deal with it. No talking to her, nothing. Understood?"

She nodded again.

"Good. Now I am not the best criminal lawyer, but it's my understanding that you are?"

Helena chuckled. "I have some experience in criminal law, yes."

"Good, when you do finally get arrested. I expect you to write me a brief."

Helena stood, and the dwarf followed her with his eyes.

"And Ms. Cartwright, I expect you to stay away from Mrs. Mordal and her family. If she needs anything, it will come from us and we will then bill you."

She stepped towards the desk and reached out to touch the screen of the pad resting on top of his digital pile. An image appeared of a male and female elf with a toddler between them. The child had an arm behind each parent's neck, and the smile on her face could light up a room. Her beautiful lavender eyes didn't match either parent, nor did her pure white hair. But otherwise, she looked so much like her mother that it caused Helena's chest to tighten painfully.

"They loved her very much." The dwarf whispered.

Closing her eyes, she replied, "she loved them very much too. She still does."

She let go of the pad and strode to the door. "It will be an honor to work with you, Gedrin. But I will only tell you what you need to know, when you need to know it."

She strode through the door without waiting for his response.

Several hours later she was sitting on the couch in her apartment, staring out over the slowly setting sun in the distance.

The door opened, and she heard footsteps. There were only two people with the ability to walk into her home. And one of them always knocked.

"What?" She asked softly.

Jimmy strode up to the bar and waved an arm in a wide arc towards the display.

As it roared to life, she saw the ticker tape at the top of the screen, which read. Breaking News.

"... we have managed to acquire a single image of the crime scene." Henry Archibald's face wrinkled as he grimaced at the bloody image that appeared next to him.

Thankfully, whoever took the image, waited for them to remove the body from the over-sized bed. But the blood-soaked sheets, and the perfectly laser etched message left on the massive headboard, were still a disturbing sight.

*Corruption is a plague that I will cleanse. This is your only warning.*

"In case you are just joining us. This is an image of President Uther Faldameri's bed at the highly secure Thoramin Presidential Compound in the Pardeen National Forest. A facility that was allegedly impossible to break into because of the sophisticated military presence there."

The camera panned to the stand in co-anchor. "Which makes the murder even more disturbing. According to our sources, no one else was harmed during the attack. Even his wife, who was in the bed next to him, saw and heard nothing out of the ordinary."

Helena rolled her eyes. "She wasn't even in the same wing as him."

"I know." Jimmy laughed. "But man, she is playing up the innocent victim something fierce." He handed her a drink as he sat on the couch next to her.

"I still can't believe he's gone." The woman on the screen wept as she tried to talk to the reporter that was interviewing her. "There was so much blood." The woman looked at her hands like she was seeing something disturbing.

Helena laughed. "She'd good. That was a nice touch."

Jimmy lifted his glass towards her. "One down."

They clicked their glasses together, and Helena nodded.

"Nine more to go."

The camera switched off the interview and back to the lead anchor. "We'd like to end this breaking report by informing all of you that wrote in, that we heard your concerns. Thanks to the support of the station, our sponsor's and so many of your viewers. Glenda Mordal will be back with us Monday. The state has dropped all charges. And I am sure she will be happy to tell you all about it on Monday. Until then, thank you for watching..."

The sound cut as Helena muted the display.

"Nothing ever changes." She chuckled.

Jimmy pat her thigh gently. "That's not entirely true. That was a change for you. I've never seen you leave a facility intact like that."

"That's not change, it's progress." She smirked.

They laughed and clinked their glasses together again.

"Like there is a difference."

## The End

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The human Delila, or as her friends called her, Lilia, sat in the Golden Lute at a large table surrounded by easily two dozen people. All listening to her, no shit there I was, story.

"I'm telling you. This guy was enormous! Easily seven feet tall and built like a damn dwarf!"

"No way!" seemed to be the general sentiment from the table as the barmaid laughed and changed out her ale.

The general rule of thumb at the Golden Lute, was that if you could capture the attention of at least half the bar, they considered you entertainment. Which meant that the drinks were free.



"I'm telling you! It was all I could do to stay alive!" She pointed to her black and blue face. "He landed several good blows, but I gave as good as I got!"

Several people nearest her cheered and shoved her. Causing her body to rock back and forth from the accolades.

"Finally, I noticed that there was this pile of rope. I dove under one particularly wild haymaker and snatched it up. With a deft move, I tied a slipknot at one end and dove out of the way again." She paused for a dramatic break while she took a stiff drink. The ale helped the pain, self-inflicted or not, she would milk it at least until morning.

"Why was there rope there?" One particularly annoying patron heckled her.

She felt a hand rest on her shoulder. "Because he planned to tie her up, once he got her subdued, of course." A male voice replied behind her.

Glancing up over her shoulder, she grimaced as the move shot pain through her neck and face. Her skin may be hard as a rock, but her insides were normal. And the beating had been an actual beating. Even if the superficial damage was self-inflicted. No doubt about it, she hurt.

A dark-haired man, with soft green eyes, looked back at her and smiled, but the look didn't quite reach his eyes. He squeezed her shoulder as they briefly locked eyes.

Setting her ale down, she grimaced. "I am not sure, but I suppose that makes sense. Wow, I am glad I got out of there." She shook her head slowly.

The large man named Shane, sitting to her left, poked her shoulder. "Then what?"

"Oh, yeah. I came up holding the end of the rope." She smirked. "And that big dummy looked down at it and said, what are you going to do with that? He charged me again, and I dove under his swing, over and over. He never even noticed that I'd slipped the knot over his ankle."

There was an outburst of oohs and ah's as the various patrons finally saw where she was going with the story.

"Dumb lummo. It wasn't long before I had enough loops to dive backwards. Yanking hard on the rope. I yanked his feet together, and he felled like a giant oak!"

The crowd erupted in cheers! They jostled her back and forth as they congratulated her. She turned slightly to look for the man with green eyes, but didn't see him. As the group dispersed, Shane, who was still sitting next to her, tapped her hand.

Looking to him, she saw him point past her to a table along the wall.

"Thanks." She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek.

He just nodded and winked at her. "Good luck. Try not to fuck it up this time."

She stood and leaned down, putting her face near his ear so he could hear her whisper, even over the crowd that was excitedly talking about her story. "I wouldn't be me if I didn't fuck everything up."

He grabbed a hold of her hand. She paused and locked eyes with the middle-aged human. "Stop trying so hard, it's okay to move forward."

She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek again. "Megan is a lucky woman."

He nodded and let her go.

She stood and made her way through the crowd of people jostling her, as they gave their congratulations, to the table along the wall with one lone man. He watched her calmly as she approached and she could feel her stomach flip. She wasn't sure if she was nervous, or if it was something else.

She stopped in front of the table and the two locked eyes. She stood there for several moments as her mind told her to walk away. But nothing happened.

"I owe you an explanation." She mumbled.

Shaking his head, he frowned. "You don't owe me anything. But if you want to talk." He paused and held his hand out, palm up, towards the chair across the table from him. "I am here to listen."

She sat down and folded her hands on the table in plain view. "I'm not sorry. I have my reasons. But I want you to know that I did it out of respect for you."

He arched an eyebrow. "No, you didn't. You did it to protect yourself."

"If it helps you to think that, fine. I did it for both of us. I..." She breathed deeply as she tried to find the words.

He crossed his legs at the knee and rested his hands in his lap as he continued watching her quietly.

"When we first met." She started again. "You were, beyond distraught."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"I've seen that before. Not willing to kill yourself, but doing everything in your power to make someone else do it." She snorted and looked down at her hands. "Seeing that kind of pain put you on my do not touch list." Looking up, she met his neutral stare. "Yes, I have a line. There is one thing I will not play with. True love."

His neutral stare faltered as he blinked several times. Before his thoughts could go to a dark place, she continued.

"Trust me, I know what people think. I know what the reports say about me. They say exactly what I want them to say. Even before my arrest, I arranged everything. The arrest, the media frenzy, the trial, everything but that damn sentencing. That I had nothing to do with. But everything else was all me. Like you, have spent my entire life carefully controlling everything around me. As it pertains to me, anyway. None of us truly control others. We simply manipulate them and hope." She chuckled quietly.

Mason smirked.

"I am okay with being the bad guy, with a heart of gold. So, to speak." She shrugged. "I play that part well. I have experience with it. But don't get me wrong, I *am* the bad guy. I just have a few, clearly defined, lines that I will not cross." She furrowed her brow and shook her head. "I got off track somewhere. Oh yeah, you." She pointed to him.

Mason snorted and shook his head at her.

"Dear, do you two want drinks?"

Delila looked up at the barmaid and nodded. "Yeah, I don't want to sober up tonight."

"I bet." The older woman reached out and touched her swollen face gently. "That really looks painful."

"I can honestly say, that I am regretting it. I had forgotten how much it hurts to take a beating like this." She glimpsed the man across the table furrow his brow slightly. Breaking his perfectly neutral stare.

The woman walked off to get them drinks.

"Why *did* you take a beating like that?" He finally spoke.

Looking back to him, her own face fell to a neutral expression. "Because you needed intelligence."

"That technique would not have worked had it been the ambassador."

"I know."

He frowned and cocked his head to the side.

"Why do you think I showed up when he was having dinner with the Baron?" She shrugged. "And why do you think I showed up looking exactly like the same woman that stole from him a few weeks before?" She waved her hand between the two of them.

"We have both proven that we can look like whatever we want. Why repeat a compromised identity?"

He smirked. "You were specifically baiting the Baron."

"I've known plenty of vampires in my long career. I met..." her gaze dropped to her hands, and she felt a cat rub up against her leg under the table. Taking a long deep breath, she let it out slowly. She had to talk about it, eventually. She couldn't keep living this way, and she knew it. "I met my..." her voice froze again as her heart refused to finish the sentence.

She saw a hand slide into her view as he placed his hand over hers and squeezed gently.

"I met my husband during an undercover mission, on a planet which was ruled by them." She raised her eyes to look into his.

He'd replaced his neutral expression with one of understanding.

"I know good and well, that breaking a vampire requires a completely different technique." She smirked. "But a human ghoul, they are still mostly human."

They both chuckled.

She reached up and rubbed her jaw. "But man, that jerk can hit. He's obviously been one for a while."

"That was my assessment to the crown as well." He nodded in agreement.

Martha set down their ales as Delila glared at the man across the table, "so can you, I'd like to add."

He grimaced.

Martha put a fist on each hip. "Did you hit Ms. Delila?" She roared loud enough that about half the bar turned to stare at the man.

As the room fell utterly silent, Delila couldn't help but smirk. Taking a sip of her ale, she watched the man across from her squirm uncomfortably.

"I... well..." he began.

The woman swung her tray at his back and walloped him so hard that he rocked out of his chair briefly. "If I ever hear that you raise your hand to her again..." the woman leaned forward and narrowed her eyes dangerously. Her voice dropped low enough that only the three of them could hear her easily. "I will ensure that not even your precious king will find yer body!" she growled.

Delila spewed ale all over the table as she snorted while trying to take a drink.

The woman stood and turned to wink and the elf pretending to be a human, then strode off across the bar.

The people watching protectively, to see if they needed to get involved, turned back to their business.

"That was uncalled for." He glared at her and wiped some ale off his sleeves.

She laughed, silently. Biting back the mild sense of hysteria that tugged at the back of her mind. Trying to get it under control, she added. "Yeah, this probably isn't the best place for this conversation."

"If you'd like, we can go someplace else where I can get you some ice," he pointed to her face. "And maybe some pain meds, or stronger drinks."

"Does that mean we are okay?" She hadn't realized how important it was that they were okay.

"Professionally, we are fine."

She felt as if he stabbed her in the chest and she suddenly grew angry. She needed to walk away right now and never see this man again, and she knew it.

"Personally, however, we are just starting to get to know each other. Finally." He stood and waited to see if she'd follow.

She stood and shook her head slowly as her mind and body began their screaming match with each other again. "I think it's best if I go home."

His face softened slightly, but he nodded. "As you wish. Good night, Delila."

"Good night..." she frowned and lifted her hand to wave it at his body. "Does this version have a name?"

"Whatever you'd like."

She smirked. "Ratheris."

"What is that?" he was genuinely curious.

She smiled weakly. "In my native tongue, it means, forbidden fruit. And that's the last clue for the evening, my lovely spy." She pat him gently on the cheek and waved goodbye to the many patrons as she left the bar.

Martha walked up to the disguised Mason. "You owe me a silver for her drinks."

He laughed and shook his head. "I suppose I do, at that."

*[Faint, stylized signature or watermark text, possibly reading "Dark Shade of Diplomacy"]*