



Dark Shade of Diplomacy

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“ 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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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