



Death in the Shade

Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

“ Throughout our lives, we collect labels which others bestow on us. ... My personal favorite is between evil genius and super villain. But no one earns either of those labels quite the players in this story, even Shade. I stumbled on this story accidentally. She never told it to me. And honestly, I can understand why. But ask yourself, how did I know this story existed? Eh, maybe I'm partial to the term super villain, because I've earned it. ”

-Leon Hamilton

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The tall, elegant, white-haired elf stepped out into the cool spring morning. Pulling the door of the tailor's shop closed behind her, she skimmed the congested city street. Bugrasi was a bustle with the usual morning traffic of people headed to market, their jobs, and who knows what else. It amused her that rush hour seemed to exist even in this backward world of horses and buggy. Even before the influx of old-world refugees.

The man marching straight at her through the crowd was impossible to miss. Remaining in front of the door, she watched him approach. His dark brown eyes furrowed angrily under a bushy brow, and she couldn't help wondering what could make a man like him angry. He was tall and built well enough that people, even in the crowded morning congestion, moved out of the way, when they noticed him.

Keeping her hands in view, she smiled warmly at him as he hopped up onto the sidewalk in front of her.

"Good morning, inspector." She arched an eyebrow as the man stopped in front of her, then began looking around.

"Is there anyplace we can talk privately?"

She cocked her head as she considered his body language. He wasn't mad at her, she suddenly realized. "Well, that's a first."

"What's a first?" He frowned, clearly irritated by her deviation.

Opening the door back up behind her, she waved her arm for him to go in ahead of her. "You're not mad at me. That's a first."

"That remains to be seen." He stepped inside and scanned the area carefully.

"We're closed!" a female voice called from the back of the store.

Looking up, the elf hollered back. "It's me, Ginny."

"I'm done with you, Helena!" the woman teased.

The elf retorted. "Just borrowing the quiet. Assuming you'll shut up, that is."

"Bitch." The woman stepped past a rack of clothing and froze suddenly at the sight of the inspector. Bowing her head respectfully to the man, she added, "My

apologies, your lordship. I will secure the building.” She looked to the elf and switched languages. “The code is the annoying ball’s full name.” Switching back to Bugrasi, she nodded again. “I will be upstairs in my apartment if you need me, sir.”

The man nodded to her. But didn’t say a word.

Helena walked up to the panel to the right of the door and placed her hand on it. The device automatically connected to her internal system, and in her Heads-up, she input the code.

“I’ve seen no one but her use those wards.”

Turning to face the human, she smiled. “How may I help you today, Mason?”

“Did you steal it?” his arms were still at his sides, and she realized he was ready for a fight. She’d almost missed the signs. He really was quite good at hiding his body language.

Lifting her arms to fold them across her chest, she paused and dropped them back to her sides. “I have stolen many things in my career. To which item are we referring today?”

“Four days ago, a thief stole something from the palace. Was that you?” His gaze studied her intently.

“I haven’t been in the palace in months.” She kept her gaze locked with his as she replied. She had no interest in fighting this man. She was genuinely starting to like him.

He frowned. “That’s not what I asked.”

“No, Mason. I have stolen nothing from the crown of Bugrasi.” She shrugged, “At least not this year. Besides, I don’t keep things I steal anymore.”

His shoulders relaxed, and she saw his hand twist as he slipped something back into his belt. This man was far more dangerous than she originally realized.

Had she not been a master of the sleight of hand, she would have missed it. Clearly, he had something that fit in his palm, that he felt could deal with her physically. Considering the influx of both military and paramilitary old-world refugees, she didn’t doubt the possibility. The king and his people had been managing the technological uplift easily. Showing that they had enough intelligence to adapt quickly and enough experience to counterbalance the advanced technology.

She arched an eyebrow and finally folded her arms across her chest. “Would you like to tell me why you are accusing me of stealing?”

“I was not accusing you of anything. I was simply asking.” His jaw muscles bulged.

Her eyes narrowed. "I beg to differ." She pointed to the hand that had palmed the weapon.

He smirked and took a slow, deep breath. "A thief broke into the scribe's vault. And apparently stole something that the king and his people were positive, was unstealable."

"Nothing is unstealable." She answered flatly.

Nodding, he agreed. "You and I know that, but the crown is of a different opinion."

"Ah, I see now. A master thief shows up at their doorstep, and something they believed invulnerable to thieves, is stolen. Hence, I stole it. Since I am the only one capable, in their eyes anyway." She took several deep breaths and waved her hand in front of her face dismissively. "Recidivism and all that. I've had time to reacclimatize, yadda, yadda."

He nodded again, but this time he looked somewhat ashamed. "I told them it wasn't you, but you asked me to keep your name out of my reports. So, I had no ability to prove you are helping the crown, rather than trying to damage it."

Waving her hand at him, she replied. "It's alright. I am often blamed for things I don't actually do. I accept that as the result of my choices in life."

"May I ask a personal question?" He seemed genuinely curious suddenly.

She nodded.

"The list of charges at your trial was rather disturbing. Did you actually commit those crimes?" He tucked his thumbs in his belt, and she mused at the movement. It was a soldier's technique, used to relax with hands near weapons.

"Ironically, no." She shook her head as she remembered the trial. "I've committed many crimes in my lifetime, some of them far worse than they charged me for. But ironically none of those charges, was a crime I actually committed."

"Then why didn't you fight them?"

"I did. My lawyers fought like crazy. But in the end, whoever set me up did their research. They knew exactly how to play the judges and the jury. They managed to get me sentenced into that damned crystal. A sentence, I am positive, they never expected me to survive." She shrugged, "I saw it for what it was. Someone well placed wanted me out of the way."

"Why?" He furrowed his brow, obviously trying to piece things together with nowhere near enough information.

She locked eyes with the man and smirked. "Now that's the million-gold question. I have no idea."

"That's a lie." He nodded his forehead towards her slightly. "I can see it in your eyes."

Arching an eyebrow, she sighed and dropped her hands to her sides. "What would you like me to do, about your missing item, inspector?"

He recognized the shift in the topic for what it was. "I know the item is still in town. But I'd like you to help me find it. And hopefully the person who stole it."

"What makes you think it's still in town?"

He rubbed his chin. "It's just an experienced guess. For example, the rumors began almost immediately. And no one in the palace would say a word, for fear of retribution."

"The thief wants people to know."

He nodded. "Exactly. But the rumor says nothing about a stolen item. They simply claim that something walked out of the palace on its own."

Helena chuckled. "A dramatic flair. Someone is trying to make a name for themselves. But they aren't dumb enough to claim a theft. So, we are dealing with a smart, but likely young thief."

"My thoughts exactly."

She nodded her consent. "Very well, Mason. I will help. But I will need to see the site of the theft."

Taking a step towards the door, he nodded to her. "I am going to go back to the palace. Meet me at the south gate at noon."

She snorted slightly. "They're not going to let me within a mile of the keep."

"You let me deal with that. Be there at Noon." Resting his hand on the handle, he smiled at her.

Bowing deeply in a rather sarcastic move, she snickered. "As you wish, your lordship."

"Stop that, it doesn't suite you."

She tapped the pad next to the door, and the building unsealed.

The man didn't even look back. He marched into the morning congestion and quickly vanished in the crowd.