



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

Death in the Shade

Written by Wendi Coffman-Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

Sanun 14th, 26,552

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.

"He's right." She heard her ex-lover's sister speak up behind her. "You know who did it. Or at least you have some idea of who it was."

Without looking over her shoulder at the woman, she replied. "We all have our secrets, Ginny. I am not sharing mine so easily."

"You have to trust someone sometime." Ginny replied.

Stepping through the doorway, she called over her shoulder. "I trust plenty of people with my secrets. I give away just enough, to keep them trustworthy. Besides, you're not one to be lecturing about secrets."

Stepping into the crowded street, she wove her way to the scribe's office less than a mile away. The immediate area, around his cute little bistro table, was quiet. As she pulled around the lone chair to sit, she saw a young scribe reach a hand towards her to stop her. But as she sat, he paused and simply stared at her in amazement.

Pulling a book from her bag, she skimmed the cover. The leather varied little from the other books, save for the large stain of blood. Running her fingers over the stain, she knew it was human blood. Leon's warped sense of humor often confounded people. The title, carved from pristine white bone, read, Death in the Shade.

Some people enjoy learning new things and actively seek it out. While others avoid learning like the plague. Shade and I, however, we both love to learn new things. And when we could learn those things from each other, it was extraordinary. Many people have labeled me a genius, and I have no interest in arguing with them. But there were days when Shade would just leave me standing, jaw agape, in awe. I learned a lot from that beautiful elf, and not just from her stories. We learned technology from each other as well. Such as the technology used in this story.

The sultry, white-haired elf sat with her feet propped up on the conference table. In her hand she spun a perfectly balanced throwing dagger. With a deft shift, she began rolling it between her fingers.

At the end of the table, a human woman fidgeted uncomfortably in her seat.

"Why are we allowing it to be armed?" The woman grumbled irritably.

She had platinum blonde hair, bound into a bun atop her head. Her light grey eyes were clearly digitally enhanced ocular implants, since that shade of grey didn't exist in humans. But it was common for humans to mimic the more dynamic eye colors of the elder races.

Shade ignored the woman and continued to spin the knife expertly through her fingers. With a deft flip into the air, she shifted hands and began doing the same with her off-hand.

When the door behind the woman slid open, the small group of four humans jumped.

"Sorry to keep everyone waiting." A strong female voice echoed through the room.

The soft lilt to the voice caused Shade to look up. The newcomer wore a knee-length black skirt, heels, and a beautiful red silk blouse with the top three buttons undone. Her long, black hair cascaded down her back loosely. With several curls draped casually over her shoulder. The sight of her caused Shade to smile in interest. Finally, something worth her attention.

"Get out of my seat, Karen." The new elf glowered at the human woman at the end of the table.

The human frowned, but stood and moved down a chair, giving the elf the head of the table.

"Ms. Shade?" The woman looked at the pad in her hand and frowned. "That sounds wrong. What is your preferred honorific?"

"Shade is fine. I need no honors." The knife vanished as she sheathed it, blindingly fast.

"Very well, Shade. I am director Itharia. And this..." The woman in red tossed a digital file to the center of the table, and a holographic interface appeared. "This is Xifarian BioMed. Our number one competitor in the super soldier program."

The human woman next to her twisted in her seat uncomfortably and shook her head, clearly disapproving of the level of detail.

"We are both up for the government contract with the Helandigari Empire. And until the tests last week, they were years behind us in research. What we need you for is to sneak into this location." She swiped her hand through the air and a massive space station appeared floating above the table. "And find out how, and hopefully why, they suddenly leapt past us in less than six months."

"You think you have a leak?" Shade asked, watching the human woman next to the elf.

The elf nodded. "Some of us do, yes. But I however don't think that's the case."

"What else could it be?" the human, named Karen, snapped.

Shade didn't answer, even though she had plenty of examples of what it could be.

"Karen, why don't you and the others wait outside?" The director didn't even look at the human woman, instead she kept her eyes locked with Shade.

"That's not a good idea. She's likely homicidal." Karen argued.

Finally, the director turned to glare at the woman. "Of course, she is, that's why we hired her. Now, get out!"

The four humans stood and slowly trickled out of the office.

As the last of them stepped out, the elf in red stood and strut her way down to Shade. Leaning back against the table, she folded her arms and looked down at the thief.

"You gonna tell me what really going on?" Shade smirked at the woman, refusing to pull her feet down off the table.

A sly smile crept into the corner of her mouth. "In fact, I am. I've been a researcher in the biological field for a long time. And I've seen many things in my career. I know the symptoms of vampiric blood used in super soldier programs."

Shade chuckled. "That never ends well."

"No, it does not, which is why, if I am right, I want you to kill the host. That will be the secondary objective, along with downloading anything you can about their program."

Shade could see where the woman was going. "You want the research on how they are making it work."

Itharia cocked her head slightly as she narrowed her eyes. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Nope. But it does increase's my fee. The grade of vampire also increases my fee. A bunch of researchers and some corporate security is simple enough. However, depending on the grade of the vampire, that may not be so straightforward." She pointed to the station. "Your people said they had a plan to get me in?"

The woman unfolded her arms and rested her hand just above Shade's thigh. "That's the best part. I get to play with your body, while you work."

"Color me intrigued. Do I get to enjoy it too?" Shade winked.

Standing, the director waved for Shade to follow her as she strut towards the door at the far end of the room. "I'm sure we can arrange for that. Trust me, you'll appreciate this technique. We might even tie the technology into your payment."

"Meaning?" As the two stepped out into the hall outside of the conference room. Several Dante BioMed security officers turned to fall in behind them.

"I can guarantee that you'll love this enough, that you'll ask for the designs. So, you can do it for yourself later. I am sure I can arrange for that. If you hold up your end of the deal, that is."

Helena looked up from the book as her internal alarm rang softly. That wasn't an entirely accurate start to the book. Then, none of the books were entirely accurate. They were just Leon's embellished version of the facts. No one remembers every detail when they tell a story. But it was close enough to get him killed, if anyone believed him anyway.

Concentrating on her surfboard, the long device popped into existence next to her, hovering slightly above the ground.

A man, walking by with a handcart filled with sacks of something, startled and his cart fell off balance. As it tumbled into the street, Helena smirked and hopped on her board. With a deft twist of her body, it launched into the air and began skimming just over the heads of the people in the streets. Going any higher would likely draw the attention of the new air guard.

As she zipped through the city at speeds that most of the locals could barely imagine, she ignored the crowds below. She began slowing long before reaching the gate. The castle guards were armed enough to hurt, if they felt she was a threat. At about one-hundred yards from the gate, she hopped off and pat the board affectionately. "Go home. I will call you when I need you."

A man on horseback, that had been walking away from the keep, stared at her like she was insane for talking to the floating board. But when the board vanished, his horse startled and danced in place. Shaking his head, the man mumbled under his breath, "Damn wizards."

"If I *were* a wizard..." She left the thought unfinished.

She avoided magic for a reason. She'd had plenty of chances to learn the art of spell casting, but something in the back of her mind had always stopped her. Helena didn't really have morals per se, but even she had a line that she knew better than to cross. Had she'd learned magic, she would have ended up alongside Robert for eternity. Two ghosts battling it out forever over who got what side of the enchanted skull.

The man rolled his eyes and allowed the horse's nervous energy to carry him past her quickly.

Returning her attention to the gate, she began walking towards the guards. The eastern gate was for staff and residents of the palace only. And she was neither. The guard watching her reached up to check his weapon.

At ten yards from the gate, three of the six guards took several steps forward while three more moved to block the entrance.

Helena stopped in the middle of the street and saw several beggars nearby get up and scurry into the alleys.

"Halt! We cannot allow you within ten yards of palace grounds!" One guard, who appeared to be older than the others, stated firmly.

The elf said nothing.

When she didn't walk away, though, he spoke again. "Walk away, elf. Lady Jane will not be happy if we have to kill her servant."

Cocking her head to the side, Helena resisted the overwhelming urge to put a bullet in the man's forehead.

"This elf is no one's servant, lieutenant. And I would be careful how you speak to her. She would kill you all before you could pull the trigger." The calm male voice spoke loud enough that even the beggars in the alleys could hear him.

As the lieutenant turned to look at the speaker, he immediately bowed his head. "My lord?"

"Mistress Helena is my guest." Mason stepped up next to the lieutenant and waved for her to come to him.

The guard raised his eyes to look at the inspector. "I have my orders, sir. We cannot allow her within ten yards of palace grounds."

"Are you claiming that your orders are higher than mine?"

Helena saw the guard's face pale.

He almost looked as if he were going to pass out. "Of... of course... I am sorry your excellency!" He stammered.

She smirked at the inspector. "Easy there, inspector. He's just doing his job. No need to give the poor kid a heart attack."

A feint grin appeared in the corner of his mouth, then vanished before any of the guards could see it. "His job is to follow orders. And in this case, my orders." Mason replied, his voice dripping with hostility.

The elf shrugged her shoulders at the lieutenant. "I tried."

"Come with me, Doctor Cartwright." He waved his hand for her to follow him inside.

As they moved away from the gate, she chuckled. "You realize I am not the kind of doctor that heals, right?"

"You are a doctor of science, I believe. An engineer, if I'm not mistaken." He didn't look back at her as he strode through the small courtyard.

Arching her eyebrows, it surprised her he knew the difference. But then he'd proven, over and over, that he was far more educated than most.

A group of junior servants come around the corner laughing. When they laid eyes on the inspector, they suddenly stood up straight and spun on their heels to go the opposite direction.

Helena silently followed the man through the palace.

The pattern of fear seemed to continue as they wound their way through a less formal section of the keep. At one point even a small group of knights froze as they came around the corner, then spun and went the other way after bowing deeply to them.

At that point she opened her mouth to say something to Mason, but closed it firmly. She wasn't afraid of him, in fact she was growing to like him, but she knew this political game well. Any familiarity on her part would damage his power base.

They finally entered a large room with several well-built desks, and a vault door that measured ten-foot diameter. Helena paused in the doorway and went to work. She scanned for entrances, exits and clues that would add to the facts she already knew.

Mason continued into the room, striding up to an elderly human knight who was currently berating a gaggle of other humans.

She ignored them as they began arguing about her presence. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a handful of micro drones. Holding her hand out in front of her, she booted them up in her HuD. As the swarm launched in the air, they surrounded her and began scanning. The sight of it scared several maids from the room, despite the elderly knight yelling at them to come back.

"Inspector, please get all non-essential personnel out. They are destroying the crime scene." She called, still ignoring the arguing.

There was a small window high on the wall that fed natural light into the room, but it was twenty feet from the floor. She sent several drones to check it out, anyway. Sure enough, it was unlatched, and the newly oiled hinges were a dead giveaway. She could see through the window an overhang.

She walked over to the wall and placed her back against it as she scanned the room. The two men in the center of the room stared at her quietly, both with opposite expressions.

"There is no way anyone came in that window." The older gentleman snapped.

Helena met Mason's gaze and waved for him to move out of her line of sight.

"Let her work Hendel." Mason walked off to stand near the entrance to the vault.

The knight folded his arms across his chest. "I can't believe you let the damned thief back in here."

"You have had four days to find even a hint of the real criminal and you have nothing. Let the professional work." Mason snapped. "Or I will order you to leave."

The knight growled slightly, but finally moved over to a door that led into the room.

Helena walked up to a desk and skimmed it carefully. Mason had already told her that the history spells hadn't shown them anything. The spells worked. Implying that the thief wasn't blocking the spell, but that they knew how to hide the object itself. Not that it mattered. She didn't have a temporal sensor with her to test it, anyway.

"There is so much damage to this scene." She sighed. "You people really need to learn not to touch things after a crime."

"My people were doing their jobs." The knight retorted.

Looking up at him, she narrowed her eyes. "Is their job to ensure that you never catch this thief?" Pulling a single drawer open at the desk, she smirked. Turning her attention to Mason, she asked. "Has the staff been in here since the theft?"

He looked to the knight, with his eyebrows arched high on his forehead.

"Only my people have been in here."

Placing a single finger on the desk, she asked, "I assume a scribe of some sort sits here?"

The knight nodded.

"Male or female?" She glanced around at the desk and saw several feminine tells.

"Female." He nodded. "She is our only female scribe, in fact."

"I see." She moved to the vault door. Examining it casually, she pointed inside. "May I go in?"

Mason nodded and followed her inside

"He didn't open the safe, she did." Helena whispered.

She skimmed the vault. It contained books, a small amount of money, several ceremonial items and a small desk near the door. On the desk was an inkwell, several sheets of loose paper, few griffon feather quills, and the penknife. A small section of the table had a minute burn mark, in the shape of a pen.

"He stole a pen?" She laughed.

The inspector nodded as he watched her intently.

"Nicely done, kid." She mumbled. Leaning forward with her hands clasped behind her back, she examined the marks on the desk. Next to the darker mark of the pen was a very faint square outline. "I'll be damned." She mused out loud. "He came prepared for wards."

Standing, she held her hand out and the tiny drones all returned and settled quietly into her palm. Sliding them back in her bag, she turned to the inspector.

"I have what I need."

When the two of them stepped out of the vault, they saw the knight standing at the scribe's desk, holding a single, wilted, red rose. His face was red with anger.

Looking over her shoulder at the inspector, she pointed to the large knight. "We should probably go before he blows."

Mason slid past her with a coy wink. "Do you mind waiting outside?"

"I'll do you one better. Meet me at Master Thomas's."

He nodded.

A few minutes later, she settled back into the small bistro table in front of the scribe's office. Popping the book open, she flipped forward, past an annoyingly detailed surgical process. Shaking her head, she marveled at her insane ex-lover's sheer gall. How he'd gotten away with publishing the details like this, she had no idea. But then, his ability to avoid trouble had often left her astonished.

Shade settled into the warm water and frowned up at the technician hovering over her. "Is this really necessary?"

"In our experience, yes ma'am." The woman smiled warmly. "Don't worry, if your claustrophobic, that will go away once we trigger the transference."

Sighing, the elf shook her head and grumbled, "I am not claustrophobic."

Shade didn't have a fear of closed spaces, like the sensory deprivation tank. But her experience had taught her not to trust people who sealed her in containers.

"This button will open the tank from the inside." The woman grinned, seeming to understand the concern. "We built this system for soldiers, who are often on the paranoid side. When one shot his way out in the beginning of the program, we decided that giving the soldiers a way out, that they could control, was a safer option for everyone involved."

Shade chuckled, but nodded. "And now I know why you took my weapons."

"One reason, yes." Without letting Shade ask any further questions, the technician continued talking. "We will hear everything you say through a microphone, and you will hear the doctor through the speakers mounted in the top." She tapped the top of the unit. "In the past we tried communicating directly with the subject in the same room, but we ran into complications."

Shade furrowed her brow deeply. "Hearing things you can't see, might cause combat psychosis."

The woman blinked, but kept her face as neutral as she was able.

"How many of your subjects keep their mental faculties after this?" Shade thought to ask about the death rate earlier, but she'd missed this important statistic.

The technician tapped the button that sealed the lid without another word.

"That many, huh?" Shade sighed. But it was too late now. They'd already implanted the device at the base of her skull, wrapped neatly around her spine. The legal arguments lasted three days, as Shade and the corporate lawyers went round and round over the medical release of liability waiver. By the time she consented, their head of legal had already offered her a job three times.

Herman Jameson couldn't believe how sophisticated her knowledge of Imperial law was. He claimed several times that whoever she was in reality; she had to be a bared lawyer. Shade had teased him by saying that old age and treachery always won out over youth and stamina. He'd grumbled a rather nasty slur about elves and left with her contract and medical liability waiver.

A deep, slightly echoing voice called into the blackness. "Take it easy Shade, we are establishing a connection with the remote unit. It isn't an elf, sorry. But I ensured it has some military grade cyberware for you to experiment with. It's not imperial military, but I did the best I could find. Either way, it will be a step up from what your used to, I am sure."

"Way to play bait the thief, doc. Trying to get me to buy upgrades from you?" Shade teased as she relaxed back into the water.

The elven woman on the other end just laughed. "Five minutes to transference. Okay Shade, you won't feel anything, but it will be disorienting. You need to relax as best as you can. We aren't sure where the unit is. So, if you have trouble, just let us know and we will pull you and try another one."

"You have more than one plant in the facility?"

"Yes, in our experience we have found it's best to have several on sight, just in case."

Shade couldn't help but wonder how many times they'd done this. But she didn't bother asking, she didn't want the answer. The less she knew, the more likely she was to survive. Instead, she focused on the quiet. She relaxed into the darkness and focused on the sound of her own breathing.

As she lay there in the warm water, she realized that it suddenly grew cold. Something cool was touching her bare skin. She popped her eyes open and saw a soft blue ambient light, barely visible, coming from the area near her feet. At their suggestion she'd turned off her Heads-up Display, but as her eyes opened it reappeared. She blinked several times. As her eyes focused on the material laying across her face, she realized it was a transparent plastic. She lifted her hands towards her face, but they struck some kind of ceiling, just above her body. Sliding them up her body instead, she touched the plastic and carefully tore it apart. Luckily, it wasn't armored.

She felt cool air waft over her face, and she fought the slight sensation of panic. There was light. There was a way out, she told herself. Sliding her hands through the hole in the plastic, she felt around the walls of her box with her hands. Sure enough, there was a wall by her head too. She was in some kind of open-ended box. Pushing and wriggling, she finally felt her feet and legs meet air as she crawled feet first from the box. As enough of her mass made it free, gravity kicked in and pulled her to the

floor. The floor was further down than she had expected, and she landed in a crumpled heap with a loud oof.

“You okay?” The muffled sound of the elf’s voice was annoying. But she could see how that wouldn’t be the case if the woman had been standing next to her actual body.

Shade didn’t answer her. The doctor had her vitals. It wasn’t a genuine question, but more of a test to see how she would react to the voice. Instead, she focused her attention on the plastic bag that she was in. There was enough light to see now, and she could clearly tell a morgue bag when she saw one. She’d put enough people in bags like these, though they were usually dead when she did so.

Tearing the bag off from around her head, she fought the rising panic. Once her face was clear again, she took a deep breath of the cold air and scanned the room. She was between two rows of shelves. They contained dozens of rectangular boxes, each with a set of plastic covered feet. From where she sat, there were easily a hundred bodies.

“I thought you said these were living bodies?” She whispered as she quickly pulled herself free of the plastic and stuffed it back in the hole she’d come from.

“They are.” The voice replied, clearly confused by the question. “Why?”

Shade didn’t answer, instead she did a body check. The body was human and, ironically, had a Republic Marine’s officer implant package. She quickly did a combat system inventory. It wasn’t as good as her own, but it would work in a pinch. Jogging, barefoot, up to the end of the row, she leaned around the bodies to scan the room. It appeared to be about twenty yards by twenty yards, with several rows of morgue shelves.

There wasn’t any apparent surveillance, though, why anyone would watch a bunch a dead bodies, she couldn’t imagine. On second thought, however, she’d needed to add cameras to some of her current ship designs. Several of her models had medical centers large enough for morgues. And two of her less commonly built ship designs were full hospital ships, for the more altruistic of her clients, or capitalist, depending on the philosophical bend.

She might even add motion sensors. Just in case the bodies started moving. Dead things moving was bad, no matter how you looked at it. She padded silently through the room, looking for an exit. As she passed the center, something drew her attention, and she took a step back to look down the aisle. On a pedestal in the center of the room was an egg-shaped object, glowing a soft blue color. Here, the light was bright enough to read by.

"Son of a bitch! What do you do, grow legs and walk off on your own?" She snapped. Marching up to the object, she reached for it and thought better of it. "I will come back for you." She grumbled.

"What's wrong?" the voice asked.

"Nothing." Shade lied.

"Then stay focused." The director didn't sound happy.

Sighing, Shade shook her head. "No need to tell me how to do my job."

As she slid past the Orb of Oracanus, to the other end of the row. As she looked left, she finally found the door, just as the light above it went green. Pulling her head back, she heard the door slide open with a soft hiss.

Booted feet turned and began walking her direction.

She crouched low and waited.

As the security guard stepped up to look down the row that she was in, she spun her foot out and knocked him from his feet. With a deft hop, she jumped into the air and brought her fist down hard on his throat. Preventing him from calling for backup.

He began choking but managed to keep his wits about him, reaching for her as he coughed.

Shade rolled away out of his reach, with his stun baton in her hand. She spun it once to get the weight, then snapped it forward in a practiced maneuver, bringing it down, hard, into his groin. As his body naturally doubled at the impact, she twisted it in her hand again and slammed the tip into his temple. His body convulsed, then fell limp. She frowned slightly and twisted the device in her hand until she could see the setting. Lethal.

"What the...?" She immediately regretted the vocalization.

"What's wrong?"

Chuckling, Shade shook her head and set the baton down, and quickly stripped the guard. "Nothing. Just surprised at the settings on this stun baton."

"They are working on, at a minimum, a super soldier program. Standard Operating Procedure is to keep all weapons set at lethal." The director sounded indifferent. "If we're lucky, we can recover a subject without killing them, but it's very rare."

"Let me guess. I am a subject, that falls into that lethal category?" Shade mumbled as she got dressed.

The silence from the doctor answered her question.

“So, mind telling me how you knew about the rose?” Mason’s voice drew her attention up from the book. The look on his face implied only mild curiosity.

She chuckled and closed the book before sliding it into her bag. “Ah, ever the intelligence gatherer. You, Mason, are a fascinating spy. I have to wonder though, this inspector kick, is it true altruism? Repentance? Or is this simply a new position for the spy to gather information for his king?”

“Like you, Helena, nothing about me is altruistic.” He answered, without skipping a beat, or answering the question.

“Indeed.” She stood and gestured across the mostly empty street. As they began walking, she added, “I put myself in the thief’s shoes. So, to speak. There were plenty of clues that led me to believe that we are dealing with a young man trying to establish a name for himself by robbing the palace.” She shrugged, “but he’s otherwise harmless. This isn’t a pro, just a smart young man.”

“Why do you think it’s male?” Mason nodded to a set of guards that, upon seeing him, crossed the street to pass as far away from him as possible.

Taking a deep breath, she paused in front of a smithy and turned to look at the man next to her. The sound of metal on metal rang from the shop behind her. The pattern was smooth and a tad loud. Causing her internal dampeners to kick in. “It was just a theory at first, but the female scribe solidified it.”

“Bringing flowers to a woman isn’t exclusively a male thing.” He teased.

Helena nodded. “I agree completely. I have brought many a flower to a woman, in hopes of an enjoyable evening. But women think differently. This young man wants everyone in town to know that something disappeared from the palace. That kind of bragging almost entirely a male thing. While women do brag, we are far more precise about it. Using it like a weapon to get what we want.” Without looking over her shoulder at the door to the smithy, she added. “Right, Anna?”

“Sounds right to me, but then I don’t know what you’re talking about. Inspector Mason, what may I do for you today?”

The man in front of the elf smiled up past her to the woman in the doorway. “I am just spending the day with the good elf here. She is the one here to see you, not me.”

“Ah, well, then go away. I am busy.” The smith turned her back on the two of them and walked back into the smithy.

Mason chuckled. "Seem like you two are close."

"Probably too close." Helena laughed and followed the woman inside. "I probably should have brought flowers."

"Seriously, Sadie. I am busy." Anna said as she picked the hammer back up.

Her usually short dark hair was shoulder length and lightening to a dark blonde at the roots. She wore it tied back, keeping it out of her face as she worked. The human woman had never really been small, but the constant smithy work, since coming to Bugrasi, was really building up her upper body.

Smiling, the elf moved to where Anna could see her. "It's just info this time. I promise it will be quick." Fishing a pad from her bag, she woke it up and found the image she was looking for. "Third age tech, do you guys have something shaped like this that absorbs wards?"

The green eyes glared up at the elf briefly before she glanced down at the pad. Shrugging, she nodded, "a natherion cube, used incorrectly, leaves a mark that looks like that."

Helena frowned. "Used incorrectly?"

"The properties of the cube will automatically absorb magical energy around it. Even if it's not turned on. Like a capacitor. Looks like whoever used that, didn't turn it on. Instead, they set it next to the object then triggered the ward, which is extremely dangerous, not to mention stupid."

Helena nodded her head as she put all the pieces together. "So, he doesn't know how to use it. He was just relying on its natural absorption of magical energy. I have experience with these." She turned to Mason as she spoke. "They are all designed to absorb the energy slowly, for safety reasons. If he had triggered a stronger ward, it would have easily killed him, regardless of the device."

Anna raised both eyebrows in surprise. "Impressive. That is correct." Then suddenly it seemed to dawn on her who she was talking too. "Even as I say that, though, I'm not surprised that you know how to use an item designed to remove security wards."

"I am not sure if that was a compliment or not." Helena smirked at the smith.

"It was not." The smith replied and slammed her hammer down on the hot metal that she pulled from the coals.

The elf jumped at the sound and took a step back, brushing off the spark that landed on her sleeve. Glancing to Mason, she found him smirking at the two of them.

“Do you know where a local thief could get something like this natherion cube?” She asked Anna.

The woman slammed the hammer down again, without looking up. “Nope.”

“I do.” The man standing near the doorway finally spoke up.

Both women turned to look at the human inspector. “You do?” they asked in unison.

He laughed, but nodded his head.

“Lead the way inspector.” Helena bowed slightly and held her palm up to the doorway.

As the two of them walked out of the smithy, the ringing began again, as the female smith returned her focus to her project.

Even with a carriage, it took them over an hour to make it to the south side of the city. As they strolled into a ward that Helena had never seen, she couldn't help but grin at the furtive glances. Even the casual citizen on the street was leery of the elf and the inspector, but none of them pushed their luck.

As they picked their way carefully down a dark alley, she brought up her internal system and began tracking the locals that were carefully placing themselves at each end.

Mason paused in front of a small door, built into the wall. Above the door a shingle hung, slowly rocking back and forth as the breeze played with it. On the shingle was a spyglass and a Magellan, centered over a pile of treasure. The worn paint cracked in several places, but the image was still unmistakable.

“Let me do the talking in here.” He stated firmly before opening the door with a loud ring of a bell.

She smiled faintly, and nodded her head in understanding, before ducking through the door after him.

The smell of smoke assaulted her nostrils, causing her to cough slightly. She recognized that smell from long ago. It was a dwarven psychedelic which had no affect humans or elves alike. Although it had a rather nasty effect on orc's. But either way, told her a lot about the proprietor of the store.

Mason picked his way carefully through the tables and shelves, piled high with all kinds of salvage, towards the rear of the store.

Helena, however, began wandering through the store, looking over the salvaged pre-age treasures. She paused in front of a table and picked up a small pen-like device. Most of the items on display in the store, she didn't understand since items from her age were extremely rare, but the pieces that she understood, were very telling. The most interesting tell was that whoever the proprietor was, they knew what these items were. Unlike most of the salvage vendors in Bugrasi. It reminded her of some of her favorite, below-the-fog vendors in her time. People that specialized in all the things that either utterly defied the law, or skirted the edge so closely that they left little imagination as to the purpose.

"Careful with that!" A bellowing voice echoed across the room.

Looking towards the voice, the elf saw a rather tall dwarf with a pipe hanging from his lips. He was easily four feet wide and just under five feet tall. And reminded her of a walking wall. Pulling the pipe from his lips, he waved it in Helena's direction.

"Tell your pointy eared, moron of a friend, that she's holding a dangerous weapon." The dwarf growled in the modern dwarven dialect. It was an awful slang version of the original that almost made Helena's ears hurt to hear.

Looking back over his shoulder at the elf, Mason jutted his chin to the device in her hand. "He wants you to be careful with that."

Setting it back down gently, she nodded to the inspector and continued to meander through the tiny shop. She didn't feel the need to argue with either of them. If they wanted to think the laser cutter was a weapon, all the more power to them.

"Mason, Mason, Mason." The dwarf began with a dark tone. "You change sides on me, and now I find you in my shop with an outsider. What, the lizard balls, do you want?" He snapped.

The dwarven curse word made Helena snort quietly, but neither of the males heard her.

As she moved down a row of shelves, the elf could no longer see either of them. As she skimmed the shelves, she only causally listened to the conversation.

"You sold a cube, used to absorb magic, to a young male. I want to know when, and where we can find him." Despite the use of a rather unwavering voice, Mason was going to get nowhere with that demand. Not with a dwarf in this profession.

"I sell a lot of things. None of which are illegal by Bugrasian law." The dwarf replied.

Helena could hear the grin in his voice.

"You can either cooperate with me, Thedar, or I can toss your short ass in prison, and forget that you even exist." Mason's voice grew dark, as the anger seeped into his words.

"Aw, but inspector..." the dwarf teased. "Your people are trying so hard to become civilized, and with all civilization comes due process. Do you really think the ambassador will ignore it if I go missing? My uncle might get upset with your King. And even you, can't escape your King's wrath." His voice dripped with mock sincerity.

Helena paused at a section of the shelving and moved several rolled up bags until she found what she was looking for. Sure enough, there were two intact smugglers bags. They needed new batteries, but they were otherwise extraordinarily pristine. Pulling them loose, she walked to where the human and dwarf were still arguing.

"I don't care. The crown will believe whatever I tell them." Mason glared at the dwarf.

The red-headed dwarf folded his arms across his chest. "Do you honestly think I can't say the same thing?"

Tossing the bags on the counter between the two of them, she smiled sweetly. "I'd like to buy these." She said in the local Bugrasi dialect.

"What," the dwarf jerked his thumb towards her. "This one is the good cop in the routine?"

Mason furrowed his brow at the bags and looked at her.

"Quite the contrary." Helena grinned, continuing to speak in the local Bugrasi language. "He's the one being nice. I would just shave every bit of hair from your body, then deliver your ass, buck naked, to the high king in the middle of Fadamali Court." Her grin broadened as she met the dwarf's shocked gaze. "That's coming up soon, isn't it?" Pointing to the bags, she added, "How much for those?"

"Two gold." The dwarf's voice was deep, and the confident smirk was mysteriously absent as he answered.

Reaching into her bag, she pulled out two of the local gold coins and tossed them on the counter. She doubted the bags were that expensive, but if they wanted the info, they were going to have to pay, regardless. This gave them both the ability to deny it happened.

"What's Fadamali court?" Mason asked.

The elf turned to him, her eyes wide with shock, as she slapped her hands on either cheek. "Oh my! Where did you hear that? You really should stop making up

words like that, you might accidentally say something you don't mean to people who take offense."

Mason frowned at her, but she simply winked at him.

"You should try the Golden Lute." The dwarf grumbled. "It has excellent beer, and in the evening it has some pretty fascinating entertainment. At least recently, anyway."

"Thank you, Mr. ...?"

"Thedar Grassbottom." He nodded to her.

"Grassbottom? Did you have a great grandfather somewhere in your family tree named Forindal?" She smiled warmly at him.

A bushy red-haired eyebrow arched high on his forehead as he nodded.

"Mmm." She mused as she remembered Forindal fondly. "He was brilliant in bed." She winked at the dwarf and snatched up her bags as she turned to saunter out of the tiny shop.

She paused in the alley as she waited for the inspector to follow her.

"What was that?" he said, stepping up next to her.

She grinned at him. "Fun?"

Rolling his eyes, he glanced at a watch on his wrist. "We have a few hours. Want to meet me there?"

"Sounds good to me. Oh, and these are the reason you can't find your pen with search spells." She wriggled the bags in her hand.

Mason reached for them, and she deftly avoided him, stuffing them in her own bag. "I paid for them, they are mine."

"I am not comfortable with you having those." He folded his arms.

Laughing, she walked off down the alley. "See you there at seven."

Several minutes later she sat in the Royal Coffee House with her feet propped up, a cappuccino in one hand and the book in her lap.



Shade marched out the door from the morgue into the main p-way that ran the entire length of the space station. As she looked each direction, she marked the camera positions in her HUD. Glancing down at the pad in her hand, she skimmed the map on the screen.

Laboratory 247a was to her right, forty yards. Turning right, she strode towards the door in question confidently. The key to infiltration of any kind is pretending like you belonged there. As she came around the bend, she saw another guard headed her direction. This guard was more heavily armed and wore body armor, unlike the guard that she'd stolen the uniform from only a few moments prior.

He nodded to her and walked right past without a second thought.

She relaxed her grip on the pad slightly and stepped up to the door on her left. The markings on the door read, 247a in huge letters. She passed her hand in front of the panel and it beeped softly. When the door slid open, she stepped into the sterilization lock and waited as the doors closed behind her.

She stood in the small area between the two doors for several seconds before the computer chimed softly and opened. As she stepped inside, a brightly lit, sterile lab, a female voice spoke to her.

"Welcome security unit two-one-nine. Please be aware, that your recent injury may agitate the subjects in this laboratory. Keep your distance, for your own safety."

Shade opted to not respond, in case the computers had voice print identification, along with the bio-chip readers. Looking down at the cut in the back of her hand, where she'd transferred the guard's biochip, she frowned. She'd used spray skin, but it may not be enough. Especially if the vampiric infusions made the subjects sensitive to the smell of blood.

The front room was mostly just research stations and centrifuges. Most of the stations were still running, even though the lab appeared to be empty. As she moved through the lab to the door at the rear, she stepped into another p-way that led further back. Opening the door to her right, she glanced inside and froze in her tracks. Stacked from floor to ceiling. Stacked along the walls were several rows of three-foot-by-three-foot cages. Each cage filled with an adult human, all watching her intently. She took a deep breath as she skimmed the cages. They seemed calm and oddly quiet as they watched her curiously.

"Wow. That's not disturbing at all." She whispered.

"What?" the director asked.

Walking along the cages, Shade skimmed the notes on each of the doors. Lifting the pad in her hand, she tapped the pad to the digital tag on the door of a slightly younger looking female. Her label read, F2b. A file appeared on the screen with the females, photo, number designation and a series of biological data that made very little sense to the elf.

"I am not a bio-researcher. But it looks like these are hybrids. They are playing with blood dilution through the generations, then crossing them back to the original donor." She cocked her head and grimaced slightly. "Honestly, it's kind of genius."

"I want that research." The director's voice was quiet, as if she didn't want anyone else to overhear her.

Shade snorted and shook her head. "I bet you do."

"Just do your damn job." The woman snapped a little louder.

Clearing the screen, Shade resisted the urge to laugh. "Relax director, I'm just teasing."

"Ugh, you're just like them."

Shade didn't need to see the woman, to know she was rolling her eyes.

As she stepped out of the disturbing little prison, she made her way to a door across the p-way. It read Director James Danson, that was likely the office she was looking for. "Like whom?"

When she stepped inside the office, she smiled. This was perfect. Along the back wall was a floor to ceiling data storage unit. Each lab on the station would have their own backups, then the facility would have a secondary, and possibly even a tertiary backup system somewhere else on the space station. Assuming they followed the traditional design of redundant backups. But the backups in the director's office would have the most recent research.

"My usual subjects."

Shade chuckled, "I'll take that as a compliment." Sitting at the desk, she reached up to the back of her head and pressed. There was a popping sound as a door in the back of her skull opened. It wasn't a large storage compartment, but it was just big enough to house a very special micro data stick.

"Your hacker ready?" she asked as she slid the stick into the digital port on the computer.

"Yes. But once we start this, you will only have ten minutes, tops, before they find the upload and sound the alarm."

Hacking into the highly secured computer system, she wisely left to the pros. Booting up the system, Shade stood and walked from the office. "Understood."

"Do you have the secondary target?"

Walking down the p-way towards the back of the lab, she skimmed the titles on the doors. "Looking for it now."

At the very end of the hall, she paused at a blank section of wall with a door computer. It was the only door so far that was a matter reorganizer. The phase door, as she'd heard them called, was only usable in small scale, because of the sheer amount of power they required to operate. Whatever they locked in here, they clearly wanted it to stay that way.

"Think I found it." She passed her hand in front of the door and several options appeared.

She tapped the button marked, two-way view. The metal cleared, so that she could see through it. Sitting along the back wall on a bed was a broad-shouldered male, with shoulder-length blonde hair, blue eyes and a muscular build that was visible, even in the red jumpsuit that he was currently wearing.

He turned his gaze to her and raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "Come to stare at the animal?"

"Not exactly, no." Her voice was icy as she replied.

The sound of it caused his eyes to narrow as he assessed her threat level.

She lifted the pad in her hand and changed to an empty screen which she could draw on. "Don't worry, I've will ensure that no one can ever stare at the animal again. Or use you for anything at all." She chuckled, her words holding a dark malice that would make just about anyone uncomfortable.

His hands ball into fists in his lap as he watched her cautiously.

Holding up the pad so that he could see it, she saw him read what she'd written. "*Lance, it's Scarlet. I can't speak, there are ears listening.*"

"Are you threatening me?" he laughed. "A lowly little security guard?"

Pursing her lips, she glared at him. Pulling the pad back around, she wiped it clean then wrote another note. Turning it back around, she cocked her head. "*I said they could hear me, not you, dolt.*"

"Oh." He shrugged. "I thought you meant they could hear both of us."

She shook her head. She jotted down another note. "*They want me to kill you. So, we need to get my heart rate up to look like we're fighting.*"

He laughed. "Seriously? You want me to get your heart rate up, dear? I might enjoy that."

She glared at him and flipped him off with her middle finger.

Raising both hands in surrender, he laughed and added, "Fine, how about a good brawl then?"

Nodding, she punched her fist into her hand hard.

"If you really are Scarlet, I might find it hard to do any really damage, but I will try." He shrugged.

Shade smiled warmly at the man and punched the button that turned the metal into air. As the door vanished, she found the tall vampire hovering over her instantly. She hadn't even seen him move.

But instead of attacking her, he wrapped his arms around her and whispered in her ear. "I missed you, love."

She wrapped her arms around him, briefly enjoying the feel of the embrace.

"Hurry, you only have eight minutes." The researcher whispered into her ear.

Shade knew that to make Lance truly fight, she needed to push the envelope. She just hoped he didn't kill her. But even if he did, she was okay with that. Pulling her pistol, she placed it to the side of his head and started to pull the trigger. She knew he could hear the tendons in her fingers, and sure enough, he jerked his head back and she found herself flying down the p-way.

"Ah fuck." She muttered as she triggered the combat systems. Twisting deftly, she managed to land hands first, and rolled to her feet. But before she could turn back towards him, she found his hand around her throat, as he lifted her up into the air with no effort at all.

"I knew it was a trick!" he screamed angrily, throwing her up against the wall.

She slammed into it so hard that the impact knocked the gun free from her hand. She felt a rib break and the damage counter popped into her view. The system came fully online, and she barely ducked under his arm as he punched a hole into the wall. Diving away, she snatched up her gun and ran for the main door of the lab. Overhead, the sirens sounded as the station went into bio-contaminate lock-down.

Her angry, ex-lover charged in after her, appearing directly in her path. Behind him, the door slid open as the first of many security guards charged into the room with a weapon large enough to hurt the antediluvian vampire. That the guard had gotten here so fast, seemed odd, but was a question for another time.

Diving under another swing, Shade came up and fired her pistol into the guard's forehead. He fell like a rock. Diving again, this time towards the dead guard, she dodged yet another angry swing and rolled up with the larger gun.

Lance paused, looking from the gun to her, then back to the gun as he bent his knees slightly, ready to dodge.

She smirked and tossed the bigger gun at him.

The movement caused him to step out of the way, but as the gun drifted past, he reached out and snatched it out of the air.

She pointed to the body, then to him as the door opened again and they both fired into the charging guard. Her small caliber round went through his forehead, but the larger gun blew a bloody hole through his chest that was a foot wide.

"Holy fuck!" She exclaimed. Then grimaced.

"What happened?"

She opened her eyes wide and grabbed a hold of her security uniform, tugging at it emphatically.

"Oh..." he suddenly seemed to understand what she meant. Grabbing a hold of the first guard, he carried him back into the hall out of sight while he changed clothes.

"I was getting my ass handed to be by that thing. But the guards showed up and blew a hole in him so large that I literally wet myself." Shade lied as she jogged to the room with the various test subjects. She ducked inside as the next guard cycled into the room behind her. She opened the cage closest to the door and pointed her gun at the creature. Waving it towards the door, she grinned.

"If you can understand me, have fun." She said to the vampire.

He seemed confused, but the smell of blood was all it took to draw his attention outside. She jogged around the room, opening the rest of the cages. One of the newer vampires pointed to her, then to the door.

She nodded and stepped up to wave her hand in front of the keypad.

As they charged out of the small room of cages, Shade she heard gunfire, then screams, then silence.

"Hey doc, your hacker still in?"

"Yes, why? They haven't noticed him yet."

"Yeah, I am giving them something else to worry about. Have him lock open all the doors."

“Why?”

“Just fucking do it! The more chaos you have, the longer you have to get all the data.”

“Fine. Did you take care of the target?”

Shade laughed as the doors slid open and the screaming creatures poured out into the primary station. She could hear gunfire, but honestly it didn't matter to her if they killed each other. It was just one less thing for her to worry about.

“Trust me, your secondary objective is very much dead.” She laughed as the tall, handsome security guard game back into the main lab and spun dramatically, showing off his new threads.

“Good. Finish the job and come home.”

“Roger that, ma'am.” She waved for him to follow her into the hallway. As they stepped out into the screaming mess, she turned right and head back towards the morgue. The two of them fired at anything that moved. Even his own progeny.

Once inside, she walked him to the center and pointed to the egg.

Arching both eyebrows in surprise, he walked up and picked it up. “Don't worry. I will find someplace safe, away from human hands for this.”

She made a shooining gesture towards the door. Putting her hands together, she mimed an enormous explosion.

Without another word, he nodded. “I will find you, my dear. Until then, stay safe.”

She held up a finger for him to wait a moment. Using the pad, she wrote the name, *Regina Dalmoore*. Then tapped her own chest.

He smiled and nodded. Wrapping a brawny arm around her, he leaned in and gave her a long passionate kiss. As he left, she set about finding the other planted bodies and pulling them together in the center of the room. Whenever there is an infiltration. The last job, on exit, is always destroying the evidence. Once they were all in a pile, she smiled and wondered if this was going to be the end of her, or if Director Itharia Mabelle would uphold her end of the deal. Not that it mattered. She wouldn't know. She triggered the anti-capture software in her internal systems.

“Ready when you are director.” She stated firmly.

The world around her faded to black. Just as she heard the internal cyberware chime, it had begun the self-destruct sequence. The darkness faded as the lid to the sensory deprivation chamber lifted.

"Welcome back Shade." A sexy elf in red leaned her hands down on the edge of the container, giving Shade a very clear view, under the silk shirt, of a lacy black bra, and its soft round contents. "That was impressive. You are definitely worth every bit of your fee. We should work together again sometime."

"That might be fun." Shade pushed back her wet hair and winked at the woman.

The End

Helena stood and slid the book in her bag. A human male sitting across from her looked up from his own book. His grey eyes sparkled slightly as she smiled warmly at her.

"Good book?" He rested his palms over the pages of his own book and casually observed her.

She smiled down at him and nodded. "Good enough."

"We haven't met, my name is Darion." He stood, tucking his own book under his arm, as he held out his hand.

Shaking it, she eyed the man cautiously. "What can I do for you, Darion?"

"Nothing. I was simply being polite." He chuckled and sat back down.

Bowing her head towards him slightly, she replied, "Good evening then."

"Good evening." He smiled, but returned his attention to his own book.

The elf stepped outside the coffeehouse and looked back over her shoulder at the strange man. The odds of him just being polite were highly unlikely, but he would have to be a problem for another night.

A few minutes later, a hooded woman, with dark hair and green eyes, walked into a rather rowdy tavern. She dressed in a well-worn bodice, a heavy wool shirt, and thick wool pants. Her well-worn knee-high leather boots also showed many years of travel.

The smell of ale and mead, mixed with body odor and smoke, washing over her in a heady mix. The smell wasn't as unpleasant as she had originally expected. It almost made her feel at home.

The crowd was loudly chanting a bawdy local tune, along with the young man on the stage. He had an actual six-string guitar, a stool, and the entire crowd's undivided attention. She didn't know the tune, but sang along anyway as she felt the mood take her.

One man, smelling heavily of ale, stood up and took her in his arms as they started dancing merrily across the floor together. They laughed and spun happily as they danced their way to the stage. All around them, several other patrons got up to do the same. By the time they reached the stage, half the bar was dancing merrily to the bards bawdy song.

When the woman suddenly tripped over something at the base of the stage, the two of them tumbled to the ground together, laughing like children.

"Oof." She exhaled loudly as he fell on top of her. Laughing, she flipped him over, straddling his waist, and resting her hands on his chest.

"Now that's where a lovely woman like you belongs!" he teased.

Still laughing, she leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth. He tasted of ale and cheese, and she couldn't help but enjoy it. The action got them a cheer from the rowdy crowd, and even the young man on the stage began laughing and knelt down next to them.

"I'm next!" he taunted.

The woman stood and grabbed him by the front of his jerkin and kissed him fully on the mouth.

The entire tavern erupted in screams and cheers. The crowd pushed forward and began patting them on the back, the men loudly congratulating the bard.

Reaching her hand down to the man still on the floor under her, she pulled him to his feet.

He slapped her on the shoulder lightly and laughed. "Can I buy the beautiful woman a drink?"

"I think I can get behind that." She nodded as she yelled over the crowd.

The man on the stage got back up on his stool and began singing a lewd song about a barmaid and a bard. She followed her dance partner to a table on the edge of the tavern, a little further away from the stage, where he plopped into the chair laughing.

"I haven't had that much fun dancing in a long while." He waved his arm in the air, trying to catch the attention of a barmaid.

Once she noticed him, he dropped his arm into his lap.

"Did you get it?" He asked, still smiling.

Helena winked at him. "Of course I did. But I'd like to say something important."

"What's that?" a coy grin crept into the corners of his mouth.

"The more I work with you, the more impressed I am." She smiled happily.

A barmaid set two mugs down and winked at the dark-haired woman. "Well done, lass. Someone needed to put tha lad in his place."

Helena laughed and nodded.

"Mind iffin I ask yer name?"

The disguised elf winked at the woman. "Delila."

"Well, Glenn, looks like ya landed a good one tonight!" the barmaid elbowed him and strode off through the roaring crowd laughing.

He smirked at her. "I like that name. It suits you. And if that hadn't been a back-handed compliment, I would say thank you."

"Why do you say that?"

He shook his head, still smiling. He reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her into his lap. The singing was so loud that the likelihood anyone would hear his reply was low. But he whispered into her neck, anyway. "You elves assume, just because others live shorter lives, that we can't get good at things." His voice dropped to a more seductive tone, "I am *very* good at many things."

Helena could smell the lust on him, and she raised an eyebrow. "You assume much, Glenn. I simply meant that very few people take the time to master my profession. Most stop short. Doing just enough to get by. No matter what race they are. It takes a level of detail that borders on obsessive to master this art." Staring deep into his warm brown eyes, she could feel that things were taking a dangerous turn between them. Swallowing, she pursed her lips, and added, "that was a lie. This level of expertise goes well beyond obsessive."

Reaching up to place his hand on the back of her neck, he pulled her in for a passionate kiss.

Nearby, several people cheered.

As the kiss deepened, neither of them paid attention to their audience. The elf felt her body react, as the desire for more overwhelmed her senses. Before her own lust could override rational thought, she pulled back away from him. Breaking the contact.

She felt the hand on her neck tighten slightly, as he considered stopping her, then immediately relax.

She chuckled and bobbed her head towards their audience. "I wonder what they'd do if we went further?"

"Likely throw coins at us." He teased.

Near the door, a woman shrieked. And a bell gonged.

The sound drew an immediate reaction from even the drunkest of the crowd, as they leapt up and bolted for any exit they could find.

Glenn arched an eyebrow and cocked his head to the side. "I guess we will have to continue this some other time. The bard, right?"

"Yep." She stood, as he pushed her to her feet.

As he rushed past her into the crowd, she returned to his seat against the wall and picked up his ale. Taking a stiff drink, she watched in admiration as the crowd tried to disperse and avoid the city guard that was pouring in every viable exit.

Glenn, the rather handsome looking street ruffian, was in fact the good inspector. And watching him work his way through the room, with such smooth expertise, was akin to watching poetry. She couldn't help but feel her admiration for him grow into something she felt often for humans, but largely ignored. She refused to even consider a long-term relationship with a human. No matter how much her mind and body tried to argue.

The guards moved through the room subduing the guests of the tavern as best as they could, but some, more sinister, patrons grew desperate and were willing to die rather than get caught.

When one man, who Mason hadn't noticed, drew a dagger and stabbed towards the inspector's back. Helena flicked one of her own daggers towards him. She focused on the blade and willed it to weave expertly through the crowd. It embedded itself to the hilt in the back of the man's neck, severing the spine. The dagger in his own hand fell to the ground, just before his body crumpled on top of it. Luckily, in the commotion, the guards missed her action. She mentally tugged at the dagger, willing it to slide just above the ground, back to her. Leaving no trace of her interference.

It took almost an hour for the guards to empty the bar. Based on her casual math, they only lost four patrons, including her target, who had bled to death. And one guard, who had literally been horrifically unlucky. He lost his balance in the middle of the fray and fallen in the middle of the panicked scuffle at the beginning.

Once the building was empty, save for the guards, Mason and the trussed-up bard. Helena walked up to stand next to the inspector on the stage.

"Hello lad. Fancy meeting you again." She winked at him, but he only spit at her feet.

Mason chuckled. "I think he's a little upset."

"I should think so." She pulled a pen from her pocket and held it up in front of her. "Recognize this?"

The young man's eyes widened in terror as he stared up at the inspector and the disguised elf.

"You planted that one me," he shrieked!

Mason shook his head. "She didn't say she found it on you. And why are you afraid of such a boring looking dwarven pen?"

The kid's head hung low as he avoided looking at either of them.

"Should I ask what you're going to do with him?" She smirked at the inspector.

He carefully took the pen from her and wrapped it in a silk handkerchief, before tucking it safely inside of his tunic. "Nope."

"I'd be happy to offer my legal services." She teased.

Mason glared at her. "He won't need them."

"Young man." She called to the lad.

He looked up at her.

"Don't be afraid to ask for a lawyer. I am fairly sure Helena Cartwright would be happy to represent you."

The bard looked from her to Mason, then back to her. "Thank you?"

She nodded and smacked the annoyed inspector on the shoulder. "Until next time, my friend."