



Pearls in the Shade

Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

“ *The most important thing to remember when dealing with a criminal ... just because they took a contract, doesn't mean they will adhere to it. Read that fine print carefully, or just flat out expect them to walk away with your loot whistling a merry tune as they go. Come to think of it, it reminds me of some politicians I know. Hmmm... I wonder if anyone else has noticed that corollary.* ”

-Leon Hamilton

Pearls in the Shade

Written by Wendi Coffman-Porter

World Development by Richard W. Porter III

Kelun 21st, 26551

Sadie Feelari, a tall, shapely elf, with pure white hair and crystal blue eyes, strode out onto the deck of the Lion's Shade and took a deep breath. She'd pulled the ninety-foot catamaran far out into the Bugrasi harbor. And now the only thing she could smell was cool, clean sea air. A welcome respite from the usual smells of the medieval city with no plumbing or power. Though she didn't knock them too hard. She'd smelled worse in her day. At least they didn't have pollution or chemical spills on top of the sheer uncleanliness. This harbor was still clean enough to accidentally fall in and not need a round of forty different antibiotics.

It was a warm fall day, and she decided that since winter was coming, and she'd missed all of summer already, that it wouldn't hurt to get some sun. She wore a sky-blue string bikini that left very little to the imagination, which was another reason she'd pulled further out away from the ships, docks and prudish population. But even at this distance she realized that nude sunbathing would cause more problems than it was worth. At least with the bikini on she might argue cultural differences, and likely keep herself out of jail. She hadn't tied the ship to the dock, and her sea anchor wasn't exactly on Tausian soil. Or at least that's what she'd argue it if needed.

The elf didn't have a country or even a government, at least not one she claimed. Balkanizing a planet wasn't entirely unheard of in her time. She had taken a history class, or two, in college. Where they discussed it broadly. But she definitely wasn't happy to find herself in one of those history books either.

Shutting her eyes, she breathed deeply for several moments, just enjoying the cool salt air as it caressed her face and lungs. She loved everything about the ocean, especially its finicky nature. But today they were both in wonderful moods. And the elf was going to take advantage of that.

Opening her eyes, she glanced around at the yacht's many overstuffed deck chairs until she found one that put her perfectly in the sun's path across the sky. Settling her sunglasses into place on her face, she smiled and examined the cover of the most recent book. It read, *Pearls in the Shade* by Leon Hamilton. She was genuinely looking forward to reading this story. It had always been one of her favorites to tell, which she

did whenever she got the chance. She did of course leave out pertinent information like names and places, though she doubted Leon would do the same.

Criminals are interesting animals. Some have no ethics at all, and are merely interested in anarchy, but those are the rarest kind. Most criminals prefer some level of structure. They can, and often do, establish their own oligarchy within their organizations. Fostering a level of structure and hierarchy that rivals the strictest of governments. The size and complexity of the hierarchy varies, depending on the size of the organization. Some extent the entire length of the galaxy, while others are a small-time gang within a specific city or district.

But as you will find in every organization, you will have outsiders. Often those outsiders are contractors, hired for various reasons. Most frequently outsiders have skills that the leadership can't find within the organization. Sometimes, though, it is because there is a need for plausible deniability or a scapegoat. The more high risk the job, the more likely that the organization won't want to risk its own people.

Shade enjoyed being the loner that takes the contract type gig. She was almost always the outsider. Hired because no one else in the organization had her particular set of skills. I would be lying though, if I said she hadn't been a scapegoat all too often. But to Shade, that was the best kind of gig. The job that everyone expected her to fail. She thrived on the challenge.

No matter what type of contractor you hire, though, be sure that you read that contract carefully. That is particularly true if you are deliberately hiring a criminal to do that contract work. Just because they took a contract, doesn't mean they will adhere to it. Read that fine print, or just flat out expect them to walk away with your loot, whistling a merry tune as they go. Come to think of it, it reminds me of some politicians I've met. Hm... I wonder if anyone else has noticed that corollary.

A cloaked figure, bundled up snugly against the chill night air, shuffled up to a group of street rats huddled around a large metal can. They had ignited the contents and were using the fire to survive the abnormally cold winter night. The unfamiliar figure hesitated as one individual spun to look them over. After several seconds of scrutiny, the toothless man smiled and waved the new person forward.

"Common, were all freezin. One more body means more warmth." He laughed. His thickly accented street slang was a common sound on the lowest levels of Taius.

"Thank ya," the younger female bowed somewhat and shuffled up to the fire, dragging her left leg slightly. Her obvious injury merely seemed to make her less of a threat to the group.

"No prob! Maybe we can get even warmer later." The man winked deliberately at her.

Disregarding him, she got as close to the metal can as the heat would allow and tried to get some chill out of her bones.

"Whatcha got under there?" Another of the streeties on the far side of the fire jutted her chin towards the young woman under the heavy blanket.

"Who cares?" A third said, moving around to stand behind the newcomer. "This blanket looks terribly nice. It hardly even smells of fish."

The young woman tried to pull the blanket back down from where the third man had lifted it to check the material. The movement didn't help as the man yanked on it ruthlessly.

"I'll take that thank you." Jerking it off of the young woman, he grinned fiercely. His mouth filled with rotted teeth, most often found on Gath junkies.

The cold air engulfed her uncomfortably.

"Please no! My pa gave me that." The girl pleaded, tears welling up in her red face as she reached for the blanket.

"Well now yer givin it to us." The female from across the fire laughed.

"Hey look here! She's got a bag hidden under that blanket!" The first toothless man laughed and snatched the bag draped across her shoulders. "Holy shit! She's got meal bars in here." He said with his arm and his face buried in the large shoulder bag. He pulled up a plastic bag marked Republic Meals Ready to Eat.

"I'm guessing her pa was ex-military." The male with her blanket wrapped around his shoulders strode up and snatched the package.

"No, please! It's all I ha..."

The man with the blanket cut her pleas short as he back fisted her in the face. As he knocked her away from the fire, her right leg buckled under the sudden shift of weight. Whirling, she slammed into the ally wall and slid to the ground, leaving a bloody trail on the wall as she fell.

"Jeeze Johnny, did you have to hit her so hard?" The woman by the fire grumbled.

“Shut up or I’ll hit you that hard!” He spat at her and threw one, sealed meal ready to eat, in her direction.

The injured girl pulled herself into a ball and began whimpering.

Two more street rats jogged up to the fire, laughing.

“Damn Johnny, impressive haul!” One of them exclaimed as he tossed them an MRE.

“Yeah, there is like five more in here.” He held the bag up a tad and the group laughed. “Let’s sell this shit for a kilo of Gath!”

They all cheered raucously and shoved each other spiritedly down the ally as they left the dying fire and the sobbing woman.

When the laughing faded to nothing, the woman curled up on the ground, pushed herself to her feet. Yanking the heavy sweater over her head, she tossed it into the can. The material caught fire. Roaring flames leapt to life, licking at the air eagerly. Beneath the sweater, a skintight black suit flickered faintly as it adjusted to the darker lighting in the ally. Jerking the moth-eaten wool cap from her head allowed several white tresses to tumble loose from their confines, falling softly to her shoulders. With a smirk, she pulled the loose pants off and tossed them into the fire along with the hat. Cleaning herself off, she stood and stretched, working out the kinks from laying on the cold ground.

The tall white-haired elf glanced at her head up display and nodded a little at the counter, gradually counting backwards.

“With five minutes to spare.” She mused silently and pulled a rag from her belt. Scrubbing her face clean, she tossed the makeup removal rag into the fire as well. With a deft leap, she hopped to the wall and kicked off to do the same to the wall on the opposite side of the ally. After several more similar moves, she made her way to the roof and began jogging along the edge. As she did so, she enacted her stealth system, shimmering to a shadowy movement that wouldn’t be clearly discernible by eye or camera.

A sudden splash of water across her stomach caused Sadie to squeal and jerk the book away.

“What the? Dammit Slappy” she yelled!