



Shaded Hoards of Gold

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Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

“ *As I am sure my readers have guessed by now, I am not human. This is not a brag, but a reference point. Shade has many friends, despite what you might think. And few of them have been human. Not because she didn't like humans, but simply, they were never around long enough to get to know her. It takes a long time to make your way past her rough outer shell into the elf inside, which is why most of her friends are scattered among the elder races. This is the story about the eldest of us all.* ”

-Leon Hamilton

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The tall, elegant elf stood gradually, careful not to disturb the occupants. Her long white tresses fell into her face and she brushed them back, tucking them behind her ears. As the lingerie grew along her body, covering it in a dark blue silk shirt, a black leather bodice and pants, she smiled adoringly at the two sleeping humans. Padding to a nearby chair, she slid her boots on silently.

Standing, she stepped up next to the bed and mused at the sleeping red-head and her large, well muscled, husband. The elf had never cared about the human sanctity of marriage. As far as she was concerned, fidelity remained the responsibility of the person married, not hers. But when the couple had surprised her earlier that night by asking if she would join them, she agreed. She'd spent the last few weeks flirting with them both individually. But had never seen them together. They'd told her that the marriage remained a secret, because Margarete's father did not approve.

She couldn't help but wonder if the couple were regularly this open. Or if the elf had been an unusual circumstance. Sadie pat her bodice, and not for the first time, was pleased that she'd kept it. Despite its cursed nature. The artifact and the thief had been the perfect pairing, and they both knew it. She felt a wave of contentment as the artifact responded.

Pulling a perfect white rose from her bag, Sadie set it gently on her, now empty, pillow and picked her way carefully through the discarded clothes strewn across the floor. Slipping out the large patio doors into the cool night air, she concentrated on her surfboard.

There was a soft popping sound as a longboard, made of a strange dark wood, only found off world, popped into existence. An intricate inlaid web of

lines, made with several types of magical and technological metals, covered the board. Mounted on the bottom was an array of crystals that slid along the web, to manage the trajectory and momentum. In the rear, just before the fins, was a fist sized, clear, crystal orb.

Jane and the elf had researched the crystals found on Leon's island for the last few months. They were the same crystals that he had devoted his entire life to researching. But it was the elf that figured out how to talk to them mentally, and it was her that had tumbled one of the clear crystals into the spherical shape. The various texts called the sphere by many names, but Sadie simply called it the Hyper Drive Sphere.

She'd already learned that using the orb within atmosphere was horrifically painful. She'd been lucky it hadn't killed her. But she figured out that if she called it, and she wasn't on it, it used the drive another way, allowing it to appear next to her, causing no atmospheric tearing. Yet, she still hadn't figured out the difference. Merely being mass didn't calculate correctly in the simulators.

Hopping effortlessly over the railing, she landed on the board. It shifted slightly, but held steady. As she leaned away from the balcony, the board floated off without a sound. Drifting silently over the city, she booted up her stealth system and shimmered out of sight. The board was already difficult to see, because of its design, but the city had gotten jumpy ever since Thomas's little stunt when he flew Zerrick back to the island, via a visit to low orbit. Apparently, a dragon suddenly appearing over the city had caused them to tighten the security that looked up. She'd decided it was easier to get around at night, if the city guards weren't trying to shoot her down.

As she drifted over the city, she marveled at the nightlife below her. Some things never changed, no matter the tech level of a world. Every sentient civilization had two distinct realities. The daytime and the nighttime. And the aggression and hostility that existed in the dark shadows after the sun dropped below the horizon, never failed to impress her.

A scream punctuated the thought, drawing her attention to the alley below. The sound, however, cut off suddenly. As she shifted the board towards the

noise, she noticed several rooftop scouts watching the streets below. Each one of them utterly missing the floating board that drifted past over their heads. A scuffle in one of the dark alleys focused her search. Maneuvering the board to get a closer look, she hovered silently over the lookout's head, as they both watched the scene play out.

Five darkly clad individuals were carrying a limp body between them. One of them let go of the girl's arm and threw their hands into the air.

Shifting her elven hearing, she focused in on the group.

"Great, you killed her!" A young male voice growled.

A female voice, which also sounded young, though the local culture probably still considered an adult, added. "So much for getting paid."

"What do we do with the body?"

The first male rubbed his face roughly, which knocked his hood back enough that Sadie was able to see his face. Tugging his hood back into place, he shrugged. "The sewer again, I guess."

"They really need to stop fighting so damn hard." The female snapped irritably.

The group moved off without another word. It took three of them to pull up the heavy iron sewer grate nearby. As they dumped the body through it, they scattered into the shadows.

Chewing on the inside of her cheek, the elf floating overhead pondered what to do next. The young girl was dead. Nothing she could do would change that. Helena Cartwright knew well the price that came with vigilante work. And she didn't wish to revisit that lifestyle.

She leaned off to the side and floated leisurely over the city as she pondered her options. As she approached Lady Jane's brightly lit ward, she paused as an idea occurred to her. Spinning the board, she zipped across the city towards the inspector general's office.

The capital of Bugarad was Bugrasi. And to combat fire, the kings of long ago built the city in walled sections, called wards. They were now distinct sections of

the city, each run by local nobles. Every single ward had its own precinct building, which housed and managed the policing body, known as constables.

But the elf was not looking for just any constabulary. She needed the primary Office of the Inspector General. It was there that she would find the inspector's offices. The Law Ward, where the main law buildings, such as the prison, and the courthouse, was also where she would find the Office of the Inspector General. But the Law Ward remained the hub for all constabularies in the city, and a precinct in of itself, therefore busy, even in the dead of the night.

She turned off her stealth systems as she landed in the street, in front of the enormous building. Several nearby guards rested their hands on their weapons, but did not draw them. As she strode through the doors, a constable stepped out of her path and tipped his hat to her.

“Evening, Counselor.”

Inside the building, a cacophony of sights and sounds assaulted her, as easily over a hundred people argued and complained, while a constable processed them through into the prison. In Bugrasi, anything that warranted more than a single night in jail warranted a trip to the Law Ward, for long-term processing into the actual prison.

Weaving her way through the crowd, she paused briefly in front of a set of constables, who nodded to her as she passed through the door without a word. In this section of the building, there was a sea of desks. Scattered throughout the room, various officers sat, diligently filling out reports.

Marching through the desks, she made her way to the stairwell on the far wall. A maze of smaller offices encompassed the next floor and had far fewer people at this time of night. The halls, lit with lanterns, made the locked offices look dark, save for the few with inspectors in them.

Wandering through the halls, she read each of the doors until she found the one she was looking for. The locked door didn't even slow the elf down. As she stepped inside, she smirked at the cleanliness. Investigative work drew several personality archetypes. But the two that she concerned herself with were the meticulously clean ones, and the messy ones. Both of which were dangerous, for