



Shaded Hoards of Gold

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Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

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-Leon Hamilton

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Sanun 3rd, 26552

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

different reasons. Sliding around behind the desk, Sadie opened the folder sitting there and skimmed the brief.

"Interesting." She mused to herself quietly.

Pulling a blank piece of paper from a neat stack, she used his own pen to jot down a hand written note.

Twenty minutes later Sadie tucked herself into Leon's bed, floating high over the city. Opening the book in her lap, she took a sip of well-aged elven wine. Unlike the other books, Leon made this cover from solid gold. And the intricate carvings depicted a large gold nugget in the rough shape of a dragon, resting on a pile of gold. The title, carved from a single piece of onyx, read, Shaded Hoards of Gold.



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.

This is the first time that Antoni Yathimali and Shade first met. Part of this story, Shade will readily tell you herself, because she still finds the story hilarious. Even if she failed this job on a horrific level. But the hidden details she left out in her telling, Antoni gladly told me afterward. Even though my writing of this book forced him to change his current identity. I can genuinely say that I envy him. Unlike me, he will still be drifting out there someplace when Shade returns. For him, this story is just the beginning.

And if you are reading this, you obnoxious jerk, you still owe me for the last game of delathu. And no, I don't count this book as my payment!

Shade hung by her hands from the balcony railing as the guard patrolled past. The breeze tugged at her gently, as the damp sea air threatened to loosen her grip. Far below, the waves crashed against the cliff face forcefully and she grimaced. They could go back inside any time now, she thought to herself.

The presence of the guard directly overhead caused her to freeze. Holding her breath, she focused her thoughts on the rocks below.

"Humph." The sound was audible, even over the crashing waves below, as they moved away from the railing.

Relaxing slightly, the elf began breathing again. That was close, she'd forgotten how much work breaking and entering was without sensors and her Heads-up Display. She'd shut her internal systems off, meaning that if she encountered a problem, she'd have to survive for at least ten seconds while her systems booted.

When she tested the security last week, with a micro-drone, they'd found it instantly, even with her sophisticated stealth system, based on the republic's military tech. These guards were phenomenal. It made her wonder just what her target was hiding.

There weren't a lot of guards on the site, at least not that she'd seen during her six months of surveillance. But what they lacked in numbers, they more than made up with sheer skill. She rarely spent this much extra time assessing a job, but this guy reminded her of a majordomo she'd known once, during a life that she'd left behind long ago.

Pulling herself up over the railing, she collapsed to the floor of the balcony and just laid there for several seconds as her body complained loudly. Finally, she pushed herself onto her hands and toes, and crab crawled across the smooth plascrete, to the wall near the large glass doorway. With a quick glance into the

house, she pulled back. Looking down at the watch on her wrist, she counted the seconds.

Twenty-three seconds for them to cross the living room and into the hall. She thought to herself. She waited patiently, then abruptly stood and moved to the panel that controlled the glass patio doors. Within three seconds she had the door sliding open. The worm that she injected into the system, crawled towards the mainframe and removed the status change on the door. Reverting it, to show that it never opened. It then began scrubbing the cameras of her presence.

She slipped inside, and dropped low behind the couch, just as the door opened to the front of the house. A guard walked inside casually and skimmed the living area, before turning to head towards the kitchen to her left.

Glancing at her watch, she began counting down in her head. As he stepped down the last step and turned to enter the kitchen, she rushed past to the sizable, overstuffed chair.

From her current position, she saw the coffee table. Laying on the top of the stack of digi-zines, the cover of the most recent Imperious Cosmopolitan had the image of a disturbingly sexy piece of elven man-flesh. On his arm, a spectacular supermodel with long black hair, dark skin, and a smile that melted knees. No matter what the sex or race. They both smiled brightly for the photographers as they paused on the red carpet. Behind them, the logo for the most recent Galactic Wars series premiere. The headline next to the elf read, Billionaire Playboy and his newest conquest, steal the show!

She smirked as she kept counting in her mind. Three, two, one. She stayed low and raced towards the hallway, past the guard who now had his head in the refrigerator.

The back half of the house, she hadn't been able to see in her surveillance. So, she was now technically off book. As she moved down the hallway, she quickly scanned the area. The inside of the house did not match what she expected. Very little technology was in the home, and the antique doors had handles and no digital technology in them at all. It was both disturbing and fascinating at the same time. At the end of the hall, just before her destination, she saw a

doorhandle start to turn. With a deft twist of the handle and roll around the door, she slid into the room closest to her. Leaning against the door, she silently closed it all the way. Keeping her attention on the hallway outside, she heard the guard stroll past. Once he was out of hearing range, she breathed deeply.

Turning her back to the door, she rested against it and scanned the room. In the center of the rather large room, stood a massive round bed that might easily hold ten people. Above the bed, he'd mounted a massive mirror, which caused Shade to snort quietly, as she stifled a laugh.

Pushing off the door, she strolled around the edge of the room looking at the various toys. She stroked her finger down a large swing that sat just above waist level. As it rocked slowly away from her, she found her mind wandering to the man on the cover of the magazine. He was just over six and a half feet tall, with a sun kissed complexion, and a strong masculine face, accented by a firm jaw and piercing lavender eyes. His broad shoulders and muscular build told her a lot about how much the elf focused on himself. He likely worked out for several hours each day.

She paused near an overstuffed chair that faced away from the bed and the various toys scattered throughout the room, towards a stone fireplace. It didn't seem to fit the motif. It was the same quality as everything else in the room, well worn, whereas everything else seemed to be in perfect condition.

Running her gloved fingers over the back of it, she smiled. He sat her often. Next to the chair, a small end table, with an empty glass. Despite him leaving world early this morning, the glass remained untouched. Clearly the house staff didn't come into this room.

She strode to the bar near the chair, and slipped around behind it, to examine his choice in liquor. If it was top shelf liquor his guests wanted, this man had it. Even her personal favorite, Republic Cognac. Smirking, she ran her fingers across the bottle.

Next to it, a near empty bottle of high-quality scotch. He undoubtedly drank it often. Lifting the bottle of scotch, she pulled the stopper to smell the contents.

Behind her, there was a soft click. Had she not been an elf who was already on edge, she would have missed the sound. Taking a deep whiff of the amazing contents of the bottle, she replaced the stopper and moved back to the fireplace. Moving her hand along the seam between the fireplace and the wall, she finally found the latch. As she applied pressure to the lever, she swung the fireplace open. It made no noise at all, and she couldn't help but wonder if he used this while he had guests sleeping in his bed.

Behind the fireplace, a short corridor led to a set of carved stone stairs that led down into the darkness.

"Fascinating." She murmured.

Pulling the fireplace almost closed behind her, she felt her way to the stairs painstakingly as her eyes adjusted.



The next morning, Sadie picked up the book from her nightstand and made her way back into town with a delivery for the king's scribe. As her surfboard settled into the street in front of the scribe's office, he looked up from the book he was reading and grinned brightly like a small child about to get a new toy.

Setting the chair down next to the small round table that was out front of the scribe's office, she chuckled as he rubbed his hands together.

"You did it," he exclaimed gleefully!

Shaking her head, she smirked. "You asked me to."

"Well, yes. But honestly, I didn't think you'd do it." He stood and began examining the chair meticulously.

The elf smiled tenderly. She hadn't realized that he'd become important to her. He was the only link to her mother that she had left. And while she remembered her parents and her homeworld, clearly. She knew that if she ever wanted to return home, she'd need him. But he'd grown to mean more to her than just a collection of his knowledge. She truly adored him. Much like he had adored her mother.

"Hey, you want to do dinner next week sometime?" She asked.

Looking up from the chair, he seemed surprised. "With me?"

"You're the only person here, Thomas."

He stood up tall and placed his hand on the back of the new chair. "In that case. I would love to!"

"Perfect. How about the Feathered Rose in Vinnicia? Say next gallersday?"

His smile broadened to a gleeful grin. "That would be wonderful, my dear. I'll fly us there."

She snorted and shook her head at him. "You're going to start a war."

"I hope so." He sniggered.

She turned to walk away, but paused, looking back over her shoulder. He was still examining the chair. One of his older scribes, however, was leaning in the doorway watching her with a warm smile. He mouthed the words, thank you.

She nodded, then suddenly realized that she could ask him her question, that she doubted Thomas had the answer to.

"Where is the elven ward?"

"West on Weatherstone Way about four miles then south a mile on Claymore." He smiled.

They both jumped slightly as Thomas squealed like a little boy.

Turning back to Thomas, she saw him spinning in place. The chair had opened at the seat and clamped onto his robes right around the grandmaster scribe's posterior. He was spinning in circles, trying to see it and giggling hysterically.

Rolling her eyes, she moved along her way.

About an hour later, she settled into a comfortable chair, at table, in front of a small elven bistro. She'd picked this quaint little place, because it was on the outer edge of the main square, smack in the center of the elven ward. All around her, plants grew from specialized pots, mounted along an intricate pipe system

that encased every building in the ward. The odd technique of hydroponics gave the ward a forested feeling in the center of the massive Bugrasi capital.

A young elf, that was far too thin, with outrageously long ears, set a cup of steaming tea down in front of her. To Sadie, the elf looked silly and malnourished, but compared to the rest of the elves in the ward, she was rather lovely.

"Thank you, Melody." She nodded to the child.

The girl curtsied, "You are welcome, Ms. Feelari. Will there be anything else?"

"No thank you, just keep this full."

She nodded and hurried back inside.

Sadie lifted her boots and rested them on the chair next to her, crossing them at the ankles. Opening the book in her lap, she took a sip from the steaming hot cup. She wasn't a big fan of tea, but when in Elaria, do as the elarians do.



Shade paused at a massive intersection. The ceiling here was easily a hundred feet high, which was utterly insane. The tunnel was mostly round, and natural, not cut, which also confused her. The air had grown moist, and somewhere, in the distance, she could hear the waves as they crashed into the cliff face.

Closing her eyes, she focused her attention on her hearing, trying to tune out the waves. After several minutes of focus, she heard the soft hum of power. Turning left, away from the roaring waves, she jogged down the tunnel. A good mile later, she slowed to a stop in a dimly lit cavern. It was about fifty yards deep and about thirty yards wide. And at the far end, a massive one-hundred-foot diameter vault door loomed mysteriously.

"What the hell are you hiding in there? A fucking ship?" she exclaimed out loud.

When a soft ping answered her, she quickly stepped into the shadows near the edge of the wall.

"Thakfalu, nosh daveengratu." A female voice replied.

Shade didn't need to know the language to know the sound of an access denied. Bolting for the panel to the right of the door as fast as she could, she slid into the wall with a painful thump. But her hands were already working to pull the panel free from the wall. It didn't have standard maintenance access, so she jerked her cutter from her bag and quickly placed it around the device, before activating it.

She wasn't familiar with the design, but systems attached to vaults never ignored failed attempts at entry. She only had so much time before it alerted the facility above. Assuming it hadn't already. The client, that hired Shade to steal the artifact from the elf's private collection, had been positive that he kept it in the main house. Which meant it would not be in the obvious ship hangar.

"Great."

She ripped the panel from the wall and examined the wires.

"The ass hole hired me to steal from Brunace Walynes!" she grumbled. "If there is a Batship in here, I am going to crap myself!"

She pulled two tires free and quickly attached them to another device that she'd fished from her bag. As the counters began running on the tiny screen, she frowned. She was already past the usual nineteen characters. This was a very advanced door. She might be in trouble. She watched as it switched from twenty-nine to thirty characters. Suddenly there was a loud chime that echoed through the cavern.

"Nosh gratu." The female voice chimed. A loud popping noise, followed by the sounds of metal sliding inside the massive door, echoed throughout the cavern. "Heta mal acatu'athali." The computer said.

Shade didn't say the snarky response that came to mind, just in case the system recorded her voice.

The door swung open as she replaced the wires and carefully placed the panel back into the wall. There was no way to hide the fact that she had cut it out, but she'd deal with that problem another day. The system was far too advanced to not have logged the bypass. It no longer mattered if the owner knew someone had broken in, that ship had already set sail.

She tucked her gear back into the bag on her hip as she strolled into the hangar. As she looked up from the bag, her mind and body froze, mid-stride.

"Oh, fuck no!" Her eyes widened in shock as she stared at a cavern that was easily four football fields side by side, and two deep. Piled high, in the center of the massive cavern, was a pile of gold so large that her brain couldn't even grasp the sheer volume of it. In the center of the pile was a large indent, as if something truly enormous had curled up in it.

"Nope." She turned on her heel and took a single step towards the massive door. As her foot hovered just above the ground, an enormous grin crept across her face.

"Don't you dare!" she said out loud, arguing with herself, knowing full well that the argument was irrelevant. She had a mischievous idea that was too hilarious to ignore.

Spinning again, she allowed her foot to hit the ground as she moved towards the pile of gold. Shade was not stupid. She had no intentions of stealing from a dragon. Ever. Suicide wasn't on her list of things to try this millennium. Of course, what she was about to do would be suicide, if the dragon pretending to be an elf, didn't have a sense of humor.

She drug a pile of gold free from the main mass and spelled out the name of the man that hired her. She made each letter ten feet tall, as she took up every inch of the space in the entryway. He would likely have to be in his dragon form to even read it. She quickly lost track of time, as she focused on arranging the coins and bars in the enormous message.

When she took a step back to admire her work, she glanced at her watch. It had been over two hours and there was still no security here to kill her. So, either

the system didn't talk to the house, or she'd bypassed it well enough that it never sent the message. She highly doubted it was the latter, however.

Looking towards the door, she smirked as a second idea occurred to her.

"Your fucking nuts." She muttered to herself and carefully picked her way back to the enormous pile of gold without disturbing her carefully displayed message.

Tugging a small torch from her bag, she picked through the gold until she had a nice stack of gold bars, neatly laid out.

Six hours later, Shade took a step back from her rushed artwork, and wiped the sweat off her brow. She hadn't done metal sculpting since art class, the first time she went to college. She grinned at the product. It wasn't all that great; she needed to practice this more. But the gold was far more malleable than the steel she was used to, which made the end result, not half bad.

She had created a mound with the bars, and perched atop it was an enraged dragon, roaring at the ceiling with its wings extended and its arms grasping at the air in frustration.

"I dub you, Duped." She smirked as she named the piece. "He figures out who did this, and I am so dead." She giggled. "But it was worth it. I am okay with dying from this stunt. It's spectacular!"

Taking several steps back, she dropped to one knee and snapped a photo with her phone. Careful to ensure that there were no identifying markings of the ceiling or walls, but rather, just a picture of the sculpture and the pile of gold. After all, she needed proof when she told the story to people. Because she had every intention of telling this story to everyone, she could find!

Turning towards the door, she skimmed the walls to either side with the headlamp that she'd equipped for the sculpture. To the right of the door was a massive series of shelves. It contained mostly books, but scattered among the books were various pieces of artwork. A skull caught her attention, and she strode up to the shelves, curiously.

Sure enough, the skull had a single emerald embedded into the forehead. And matched the description of the item that her employer was paying her to

steal. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a separate set of gloves and slid them on her hands. This wasn't her first artifact, and it wouldn't be her last. The gloves had been a holdover from a past life. And tailored to handle artifacts, without causing harm to them, or her.

Lifting the skull carefully from the shelf, she saw a subtle spark as the enchantment tried to attack her. The gloves absorbed the energy, exactly as intended. Walking over to the new sculpture, she placed it on the ground gently. Making a small arrow of gold coins that led from the name to the skull, she chuckled.

As she strode from the massive vault, she turned and pushed the door closed. As it sealed, she changed her gloves back to the standard stealth suit and skipped happily down the tunnel towards the ocean and her one-man submarine hiding just below the surface of the waves. The mission happened to be an utter failure. And she'd loved every minute of it. Even if it was most likely going to get her killed.



"Counselor?" The voice drew her up from the book in her lap.

Her enormous grin was apparently contagious, as the man standing in front of her smirked.

"Funny book?" he asked and pointed to the empty chair next to her at the table.

She nodded to the chair. "To me, it's hilarious. Not sure what others might think though."

"May I ask what it's about? I don't recognize the language." He sat down and rested his arms on the table. His brown hair and eyes were warm and comforting, which likely helped him seem unthreatening in his current profession.

She glanced down at the book and considered closing it, but thought better of it. A golden book might draw the wrong attention from the inspector. "It's in my language, and it's a story about a crazy thief that breaks into a dragon's lair."

The man's eyes widened in shock. "That's insane!"

"I agree." She nodded.

He laughed, it was a pleasant sound. The last time the two had spoken, his despair had been overwhelming.

She smiled warmly at him, envying the human ability to let go of the past and move on.

"How may I help you today, Inspector Mason?"

His laugh faded to a coy smile. "I was going to ask you the same thing. What brings you here?"

"The same thing that brings you here, I would assume."

He frowned. "I hope not. I am here to tell the parents of a missing child that their child will not be coming back."

Sadie grimaced. "You found her then?"

He nodded, saying nothing.

"I arrived too late. I apologize." Her voice was quiet as she spoke. Not that it mattered here. Any elf choosing to listen would hear her.

He shook his head. "You are a civilian, you shouldn't get involved at all. If you see a crime, please walk away, and tell a constable. Let us deal with it."

Sadie chuckled.

Movement on the rooftops overhead caught her attention. Silhouetted by the sun, a darkly clad person looked down over the edge and wrote notes about what they were seeing. The literacy rate in Bugrasi never ceased to amaze her. She couldn't make out the face of the person, but she recognized the outfit. Of course, there were only so many ways for a person to dress, if they wished to go unrecognized. But this person was definitely not an elf.

Sighing, she returned her attention to the inspector. "Sadly, they are as stupid as I expected."

"Who?" the man didn't look around despite his curiosity.

Sadie lifted her tea to her lips before responding. "The red brick building behind you and to your right, there is a scout on top, who matches the individuals I saw last night."

He didn't look, which surprised her. He had a far more calculating mind that she had expected from an ex-noble. But then, she didn't really have a high opinion of nobles. Although the Erasian noble, that Slappy had fished from the bottom of the harbor, had been a spectacular specimen, both mentally and physically.

"Well, I need to go do the worst part of this job. Will you be here when I get back?"

She sipped her tea and nodded. "I don't see why not."

"Very well, I hope to talk to you more about this, then." He frowned at her. "Perhaps I can convince you to leave it to the professionals."

"That will be an interesting debate." She chuckled and returned her attention to the book.

In her HuD, she marked the person on the roof with a red icon. And high overhead, at Leon's island, several small drones launched from her ship and raced into sensor range. As she flipped the pages forward to a more interesting section. Simbi, her personal computer began a combat analytics algorithm as the drones scanned the city. Her system would catalog and track all anomalies, within one mile, for her to review when she was ready.

"Welcome back, Ms. Dalmoore." A cheerful human male jogged up to her in the p-way and held a pad out to her. "I was hoping you'd make it back in time to review your schedule."

That was his passive way of telling her she almost missed a meeting with a client. It was annoying, but effective. Snatching the pad from him, she skimmed

her schedule for the next month. She tossed the pad back to him with a practiced spin as she continued marching through the p-way to her waiting shuttle.

He scrambled, trying to catch the pad before it fell to the ground. After several bounces off his hands, he managed to grab it.

The exhaustion from not sleeping in three days was catching up to her. Every time she closed her eyes, she felt a fiery breath on the back of her neck, and it would startle her awake. She remained positive that it was her imagination, but her confidence wavered in the exhaustion's wake. Tonight, she planned to go down to the planet. Walk from her home to her favorite pub and drink herself into oblivion.

Suddenly she stopped in her tracks. The human male following her didn't notice, and ran into her back, causing them both to take several steps to stabilize themselves.

"Let me see that again." She demanded, but didn't wait for him to hand it to her. Snatching it from his hands, she changed off the email that he'd been writing to her schedule again.

Tomorrow was a meeting with the CEO of... Ugh, who cares? She scanned down to five days from now. Sure enough, there was a blocked-out section that spanned three days. Her full, unique design sessions often took two to three days, depending on the client's specific needs. And the name on the appointment, Antoni Yathimali.

"Fuck." She cursed, and her eyes narrowed angrily as she looked up at her personal aide. "When was this scheduled?"

He moved around to her side so he could see the pad. "I'm not sure." He shrugged. "I can go look if you need me to?"

"No. I will do it!" She shoved the pad into his chest and stormed back the direction she'd come.

As she strode angrily through the station, people in front of her quickly jumped out of her way. It reminded her of the times she'd raced through military ships in armor. It would have been comical, had she been capable of humor at that moment.

When her door slid silently closed behind her, she realized her joints ached. The exhaustion was doing damage. She had to sleep tonight, one way or another. She knew from experience that she could go another few days, if she could at least get a quick nap. But whatever was happening even prevented naps.

Falling into her chair, she brought up her computer and tried to focus on the appointment. As she brought up the appointment, the booking date was eighteen months earlier. Her mind tried to tell her that date was significant, but her thoughts remained foggy.

"Computer. Show me the schedule from eighteen months ago." she said out loud.

A soft chime echoed through the room, and a second schedule appeared, hovering in the air over her desk. A section of the schedule was flashing slightly. As she read it, she leaned back in her chair and steepled her fingers in front of her face. Tapping them gently on her lips, she flashed back to the memory of that party.

The guest list had been massive, and for some odd reason included the prince's shipwright. It was the crown prince's engagement party, and Antoni Yathimali was there on the arm of the youngest imperial princess. The same princess that Regina briefly met as the girl raced past her, chasing the royal dog that had her dolly.

That party had lasted well into the next morning, because of a bizarre complication that had sealed the building in the middle of the party. She'd spent the entire night avoiding the elf who was constantly trying to get her alone. She wished she could say that she avoided him because she wasn't interested. But it had been just self-preservation. He was a notorious womanizer, and the imperial princess's date. She didn't want to be drug into that drama, not with the entire royal family, and enough loyalists there to ruin her career, completely.

Based on the date, he'd literally scheduled the appointment the next day.

"Fuck me." She grumbled and wondered what the odds were that the meeting that took him off world, so that she could break into his home, had been a meeting with her.

The door chimed, and she waved her hand towards it, too exhausted to say anything out loud. As it slid open, her aide poked his head in.

"Your shuttle pilot is ready to go. Do you want me to hold him?"

Nodding, she pushed herself up slowly. "Yes. I want to go home."

Her aide frowned, obviously concerned.



"Is the cover of that book...?" Inspector Mason left the question unsaid as he stepped up next to the table and rested his hand on the chair he'd been sitting in earlier.

She sighed and closed the book. Before promptly sliding it into her bag. "Please sit inspector." She lifted her hand to the chair. "And yes. The author was..." her voice trailed off as she looked for an appropriate word to describe Leon. "Let's just say, eclectic."

The man laughed and shrugged. "I suppose we all have our idiosyncrasies."

"Indeed."

"I assume I can't convince you to stay out of this?" he sighed, changing topics.

She smiled warmly at him. "You don't know me very well, inspector. But I assure you, I am not as fragile as you might believe."

In her HUD, she could see that one of the nine red dots was moving.

"After the king assigned me the position as an inspector, I did some looking into you, and where you came from." A coy grin crept into his mouth. "I am not so much worried about your safety, as I am worried about the safety of the citizen of Bugarasi."

Sadie furrowed her brow. "First off, don't believe everything you hear and read." Standing, she walked around to place her hand on his shoulder and lean over slightly. She whispered into his ear. "Even scientific research, is capable of bias, because of the people who write it. After reading something, always seek

the opposite opinion, then use an analytical mind and find the truth somewhere between the two. And second, our target is moving. We need to go.”

Tossing a silver coin on the table, she strolled out of the elven ward and turned left.

The human followed, jogging to catch up. “I counted eight.” He mumbled as he fell in step with her.

“Not bad. There was nine. But that is quite good for a new investigator. I assume you had some military training before becoming an inspector?” She turned down an ally, and he followed without questioning her.

“You might say that. Yes.”

Snorting, she nodded. “Remember that inspector. Not everyone is what they appear to be on the surface. I may have spent time in prison for being a thief, but I had many lifetimes before taking on the mantle of Shade.” She pointed to an emergency fire escape that went up the outside of a nearby building.

“Was that your burglar persona?” He asked as they ascended to the rooftop.

As she climbed over the edge, a man turned towards them, resting his hand on a large dagger sheathed across his chest, as he did so.

“Yes.” She moved her hands a specific pattern.

The man nodded and returned his attention to the street below.

“And apparently you’ve already made your way into the local thieves’ guild.” The man behind her grumbled.

Looking over her shoulder at him, she grinned. “Any good soldier knows to use every tool at their disposal for survival.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but as something seemed to occur to him, he closed it and nodded. “I suppose we do.”

“This way.”

Creasing his brow, he cocked his head in confusion. “How do you know where to go?”

“Because I cheat.” She turned and locked eyes with him briefly. “Always remember that. I will always cheat.”

“Duly noted.”

She picked up the pace and began jogging along the rooftops. When she finally slowed, she dropped low and slipped up to the edge of the building. Down below them was a heavily shaded alley. The positioning of the buildings and various overhangs made it far darker than it should be, even in the daytime.

The human inspector had kept pace with her. She found herself even more impressed with him as he slid up alongside of her, barely breathing hard.

They both glanced over the edge. In the alley below, the hooded teenager was talking with a tall, ominous looking individual. The taller person was heavily cowed in black, from head to toe, they even wore black leather gloves. As the stranger took a piece of paper from the boy, they examined it carefully.

Next to her, the human tapped his ear and raised an eyebrow at her.

Shaking her head, she ordered the drone to focus in on the paper. As it zoomed in, she skimmed the writing. It was a list of names, specifically, elven girl's names, and their ages.

The hand tapped a name and handed the paper back to the boy.

"Aye." He nodded.

The voice that responded was raspy and defiantly male. "Alive this time. The master will not accept failure again."

"Of course." The lad wasn't as confident as he sounded. She could see him fidget with the paper in his hand nervously.

Rolling onto her back, Shade took out a notebook and sketched the words, *I have an idea*. Showing it to the human next to her, she saw him smirk and nod.

They crawled away from the ally to the far side of the rooftop. Continuing to keep low as they did so.

"They will do it again tonight. But this time we will be ready. You go get your people and meet me at the elven ward just after sundown."

He nodded, but frowned. "Please tell me you won't do something silly?"

"I am never silly. Stupid, and often insane, but never silly." She smirked. "When they snatch the girl tonight, let them. And follow without being noticed. Catching the kidnappers will solve nothing, if we don't also catch the people hiring them."

"I am not comfortable with this plan, counselor." The human grimaced.

Placing her hand on his shoulder, she smiled warmly. "Relax, Mason. This is what my government trained me for. Infiltration is something I know better than you could ever imagine."

He stared at her for several moments as he considered her words. His eyes widened in surprise as the realization finally hit home.

She patted his shoulder. She liked this human. His mind was fast. He would be a useful tool.

They made their way back to the elven ward, then separated. Sadie found a quiet place to read near the large tree in the center courtyard, as she waited for nightfall.



Regina had passed out on the shuttle, as the pilot took her from the massive Seasprite space station, down to the far side of the planet and her palatial home. It hadn't been a great nap, but at least it had been some rest. Her mind was still a little foggy, but at least her body didn't hurt as much. The walk from her home to the pub was only about a mile and a half, which she knew from experience that she could manage, even drunk.

As she walked into the warmly lit pub, she smiled. Like many of the places on the largest island on the planet, they used lanterns and enormous fireplaces to light the pub at night. The government didn't expressly forbid technology on land, but the locals cared enough about the ecosystem to adjust their behaviors, anyway.

Several patrons turned and cheered. The owner, behind the bar, shook his head and turned to circle the date on a large green chalkboard.

Regina laughed. This was a local's only pub, and its patrons loved drinking and gambling, in that order. And betting when she would come in was a favorite

pastime. Strolling up to the bar, she took the drink that the bartender held out to her. He was a rugged middle-aged human, with a dark beard, shoulder length dark hair, and warm brown eyes. And much to her chagrin, he was an utterly devoted spouse.

"Did you lose again?" She teased.

Shrugging, he smirked. "Maybe, the night is young."

She frowned, that was an odd response. Turning away from him to examine the bar, she lifted the glass to her lips and froze. There, sitting next to the door, a tall, remarkably handsome elf, watched her intently. As they locked eyes, he raised his glass to her then pointed to the chair across the table from him, before taking a sip.

Glancing down at the drink in her hand, she contemplated whether taking a drink was a good idea. Alcohol, exhaustion and an angry dragon, might be a nasty mix. Lifting the drink, she downed it in one gulp and set the glass on the bar.

A chorus of boo's echoed through the bar, but Regina ignored them. They'd already made their bets. Nothing she could do would stop the scene that was about to play out. But she decided that if today was her day to die, she might as well be drunk.

"I'll need another one of those." She turned her back on the dragon and glared at the grinning bartender.

He poured her another drink without a word, then handed her the bottle.

Picking them both up, she made her way to the table and sat down without a word. There was an infinitesimal chance, he didn't know yet, but somehow, she knew that wasn't true. But rather wishful thinking.

"Mr. Yathimali." She nodded to him respectfully.

He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his cold and calculating, golden eyes.

"Toni, please."

"Fine. Toni. How can I help you? Your appointment, isn't until next week."

She stated firmly as she took another stiff drink.

He smirked, and the grin finally crept into his eyes. "It is indeed Dr. Dalmore."

They stared at each other for several silent minutes before Regina relaxed and leaned back in the wooden chair. "Call me Regina. I suppose I owe you that at least."

"You owe me far more than that, Regina." He retorted.

She breathed in deeply and held it for several seconds before breathing out slowly. She was in trouble. If she didn't focus, the exhaustion would kick in, and she'd end up descending into hysterical laughter. She chuckled but kept it brief.

"Touché." She grimaced. "Fine, is there any way that this ends with me surviving the night?"

The elf opened both eyes wide in shock.

She had thrown him off guard.

"Um..." He started to say, but the sound fell off as he began laughing. As the sound increased in volume, slowly but surely, she literally felt her skin crawl from the power of it.

The sound caused several nearby patrons to jump. The more sober locals quickly paid for their drinks and left. As she continued to scan the building, she noticed that even the bartender had vanished. She bit the inside of her cheek and wished she had a weapon. Not that anything she owned would hurt a dragon, even in his elven form.

She poured herself more cognac and lifted the glass to sip it calmly as she watched the hysterical elf. By the time the sound finally faded, the entire pub was empty, save for the dragon pretending to be an elf, and the elf pretending to be a human.

When he finally wiped the tears from his eyes and looked around, he raised his eyebrows in surprise. Shocked that she remained, still sitting across the table from him.

"My dear Regina. If I kill you, I won't get my exclusive Regina Dalmore original yacht." He teased.

She raised an eyebrow. Now she knew how her own victims felt when she played with them.

Instead of responding, she took another sip. It didn't matter how much she drank now, the dragon's little laughing fit had caused her combat systems to kicked on. Purging any poisons from her system. No amount of alcohol would affect her at this point. Even her exhaustion vanished for the short term, as the adrenal boosters kicked in. It wouldn't last long, however, since she wasn't actually in combat.

"I appear to have scared off your friends." He waved his hand to the empty pub. "For that I am sorry."

"I doubt that." She stared at him intently as her mind calculated various methods to kill the creature. Nothing she envisioned would work, so she opted to just watch him, instead.

He cocked his head to the side and stood. Making his way to the bar, she heard him pour himself another drink. She however kept her back to him. Refusing to let him spook her.

"You know, when I saw you at the party last year..." He paused.

Regina's curiosity got the better of her, and she stood to face him, resting against the table behind her.

He was standing behind the bar sipping his drink.

"Something about you drew me to you." He continued. "I thought it simply your exquisite beauty and unsurpassed confidence. But I see now that wasn't it." He shrugged. "Well, that's not entirely true. They were only part of the reason."

Sighing, she downed her drink and set it on the table behind her. Resting her hands on the table next to her hips, she met his stare. "What do you want, dragon?"

He smirked and lifted his glass in a toast. "That is a tricky question. I think we both want many things."

Her eyes narrowed as he played with her words, but she refused to rise to the bait.

"Okay," he grimaced. "That one, I am sorry for. I want to hire you, of course."

Regina furrowed her brow deeply. "Excuse me?"

"You broke into something that, I was utterly positive, was safe from the likes of you." He strolled back around to the front of the bar and leaned back against it. Keeping the large entry of the pub between them.

She wasn't sure why he kept his distance. He wasn't afraid of her. What else... her thought faded as a coy smile crept into the corners of her mouth.

"I see." Her voice took on a sultry tone.

His eyes narrowed as he noticed the shift. "I simply would like to hire you to ensure that it doesn't happen again. I'd rather not have thieves wandering in and out of my hoard."

Regina stood. She'd decided to push the dragon and see how far she could get. She deliberately swayed her hips seductively as she sauntered up to him, keeping her eyes locked on his. She stepped well within his personal space, but without touching him.

"Is that all you want?" Her voice was deep, as she allowed her own lust to wash over her, knowing that he could smell it.

He kept his eyes locked with hers as he took a sip from his scotch. They both stood there, not touching for several minutes, neither of them willing to back down.

Finally, she saw his nostrils flare almost imperceptibly, and she knew she'd been right. She aroused him.

He sighed, "I'm not going to lie to you. No, it's not. But you, my dear, are in far too much pain for me to even consider anything more."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, but she quickly pushed away the wave of rage. She snorted and stepped away from him. "For a billionaire playboy, you clearly don't understand the healing properties of a good fuck."

"The playboy persona, while entertaining, is simply a method of getting where I need to be, without notice, so that I can do my job. Like you, my dear, I am for more than I lead people to believe." His stern expression softened into a tender smile.

The look annoyed her even further, and she strode across the room to the antique jukebox. "What's your actual job then?" Tapping it, the machine roared to life with one of her favorite songs. She felt him step up behind her, more than she heard him.

"Antiquities." His voice was quiet as he whispered softly into her neck. "May I have this dance?"

The feel of his warm breath on her neck caused her thoughts to fog up again as the desire washed across her mind like a warm blanket. When she turned to face him, he'd replaced the look of pity with a deep desire that she could feel in her bones.

Her mind warned her it was likely just the adrenal booster wearing off.

She placed her hand into his and allowed him to pull her into his sensual embrace. Feeling her body respond to his own desire, she moaned softly.

"Will you take the job?" He asked as he spun her around the room.

She enjoyed the feel of the two of them dancing as one. But eventually she forced her mind to focus enough to respond, "yes. I love a challenge."

"Wonderful!" He smiled happily. "We will arrange it at our meeting next week."

The two of them continued to spin around the room together until the song finally faded. He held her out at arm's length and smiled at her. "And Regina."

"Hmm?"

"That was the most spectacular thing I have ever seen." He chuckled. "You truly are an impressive creature."

She smiled weakly as the exhaustion seeped into her thoughts, blanketing her mind in a fog that she could barely see through. As her knees buckled under her weight, she felt his powerful arms wrap around her.

"Sleep well, beautiful Regina." He whispered in her ear.

The End

Sadie closed the book and slid it into her bag before anyone could notice it. Scanning the area, she found the girl she was looking for; she was currently talking with her father. Standing, she brushed her pants off and strolled up to the two elves.

Switching to the local elven language, she smiled brightly at the father and winked at the young female.

"Pardon me. I was wondering if I might have a word with you?"

The tall, thin elf frowned at her. His long blonde hair cascaded freely down his back and shifted slightly in the gentle breeze. He was easily over six-feet tall, with piercing blue eyes that assessed Sadie cautiously. His daughter was probably the same age as Sadie was when her nanny placed her in the orphanage. Making her the equivalent of a young teenager. Like her father, she had blonde hair and lovely blue eyes.

"I don't know you." He stated firmly and took his daughter's arm.

Smiling, she lifted her palm toward the building behind him. "I come on behalf of the Lady Jane. She wishes to purchase some of your wonderful fruits for her garden." She shrugged. "I know nothing of growing myself. I was hoping you could help me out?"

His shoulders relaxed slightly. Most people in the city knew of the archmage Jane. And it was likely that the elves living here knew that the wizard had an elven servant. Waving for her to follow him inside, he made a shooing gesture to his daughter.

Before the girls could run off, though, Sadie placed her hand on the girl's shoulder. "Why don't you show me your favorite, my dear?"

The girl beamed excitedly and darted past her father into the building.

He simply sighed and followed her inside.

Once inside, Sadie closed the door behind her. Skimming the large produce store, she nodded. It seemed clear. Reaching behind her, she placed a tiny device

on the door. It would carefully control what sounds made it through the energy barrier to the curious ears outside.

Walking up to the girl, she smiled sweetly as the child pointed to a basket of berries.

"These are my favorite. We call them Glenarn Berries and are both sweet and tart." She rubbed her hands together excitedly. "They make the best jams and pies!"

"I bet they do." Sadie chuckled and pat the girl on the shoulder as she found the father at the back of the store. She met his gaze and allowed her face to fall to a neutral expression. "Why don't you fill up a bag for me? I need to talk to your father."

"Okay!" the girl ran off and found the largest bag she could find.

Striding across the room, she dropped her voice to a subvocal range that elves could easily hear. "I apologize for lying to you."

He reached for a sword under the counter.

Raising a palm towards him, she added, "I am sure you know of the missing children?"

His hand closed around the hilt and he drug the sword out of its sheath, with a soft scraping noise, before nodding.

"Your daughter is their target for this evening." She added quietly.

"Maleea, come here." Her father called to the child.

Sadie nodded and pointed to the sword. "You should keep that with you tonight, and also your daughter. I know you don't know me, and you shouldn't trust me, but I was wondering if you have a pair-bond?"

He furrowed his brow in confusion as his daughter ran up to them both, carrying a bag of berries so large that she could barely lift it.

Sadie chuckled at the child, then returned her attention to the father.

"I suppose I should start over. I would like to pretend to be your daughter tonight. But to make that work, there needs to be a reason for this version of me, to stay here with you tonight?" She winked at the elf and saw his eyes soften slightly as he realized what she meant.

"Her mother is no longer with us. I suppose I could, make that look convincing." His smirk implied much, and she chuckled again.

Turning her attention to the child, she took the bag from her and set it on the counter. "I suppose I will take those as well. Your name is Maleea, right?"

The girl nodded happily.

"When you leave tonight. Where were you planning to go?" She crouched down next to the girl, looking up at her.

The girl beamed proudly. "To Safeeria's house. We paint rocks to sell to the tourists."

"I am going to show you an illusion. I want you to show me how you get there. Okay?"

The young elf looked up at her father, who nodded his consent.

A few minutes later, an adorable elven girl skipped out from the grocer's shop and jogged down a nearby ally. She didn't make it more than a block before a black sack dropped over her head and a heavy sap dropped onto the back of her skull. Her body went limp, and the five teenagers scooped her up and carried her between them, out of the elven quarter, deeper into the city.

In her HuD, Sadie watched the group from the drone drifting high overhead, as they carried her through the alleys, carefully dodging the constables and a rather nasty horde of plate clad knights. Keeping her body limp was taking focus, especially since one of them was growing tired and kept dropping her leg.

Under the hood, she rolled her eyes as they dropped her again.

"If you can't do this Nathan, I will find someone who can." A young female voice growled.

There was no response. The elf heard a door open, and the sounds shifted as they took her inside a stone building. The drone lost visual on her, so she shifted it to passive mode. And focused her attention to the sounds and smells around her. The young people carrying her grew nervous as their heart rates increased. They went down several flights of stairs. As they slowed, the echoes spread out,

letting her know that they'd moved into a larger space. Across the room she heard mumbling, and she smirked. That was all she'd been waiting for.

She jerked slightly, and the arms holding her tightened as she slowly fought them.

"No! Who are you? Let me go!" she screamed in the youngest voice she could manage.

The female holding her shoulders growled down at her, "Shut up, kid, or you'll get us all killed!"

Sadie quieted, but continued to struggle.

"Bring her here." A deep raspy voice echoed across the room, and she could feel the magic fed into the words. Her HuD told her it was a compulsion of some sort.

The teenagers carrying her set her down, and the black hood ripped from her head. Luckily, the lights in here were already somewhat dim, so her eyes adapted quickly. The male in front of her stared at her with deep red eyes and Sadie recoiled in horror, covering her face with her arm.

Her HuD displayed the words: Rank III Vampire. Threat Level: minimal.

But she ignored it, playing the part of a terrified young elven girl.

"Calm yourself, child." She felt the compulsion again and dropped her hands to her sides as she stood up straight. Locking her eyes on his, she allowed her face to fall to a blank stare.

"Much better. Now, go over there to my servants. They will prepare you for the ceremony."

Sadie looked to where he pointed and strode to the three human women who were waiting for her.

"Well done, Tina. You have finally earned your silver. Come see me tomorrow and we will discuss the next phase." The male continued talking to her kidnappers.

"Yes, master."

Sadie glanced over to them and saw the group running as fast as they could from the room. She hoped Mason was in place, because hunting those kids down

individually would be tedious. She continued scanning the room as the women undressed her. There were six human guards, the vampire and the three women so far. But something told her that this wasn't all of them. There was no way a rank three was in charge of a setup like this.

The women washed her with sponges and warm water, then placed a sheer silk chemise over her head. As it settled into place, she saw a severely robed person glide gracefully into the room. Her system identified him as a rank five vampire. Threat: moderate. She would need to deal with him first.

His robes were heavy, and almost religious appearing. She wondered if this was some kind of cult. I really need to look into these Shadaka people, she mused silently.

The women led her to the large sacrificial table in the middle of the room. As they laid her down on it, she looked around with a frightened expression. Three more of the religious looking vampires had shown up and were hiding in the shadows. They were all rank one, except for a single rank two, who strode up to the original vampire that had talked to her when she arrived.

The rank five stepped up next to her and smiled down at her. "Easy, my child. I will replace your fear with the joy of knowing our god." Placing his hand on her forehead, she felt a wash of magic that was far more than a simple compulsion.

Her body relaxed, and her calm eyes met the vampires. Her sudden sense of peace seemed to appease him, and he moved to the head of the alter and raised a dagger high overhead.

He muttered to himself in a long sequence that the elf didn't understand. But she was only barely aware of him, as her combat systems kicked in and highlighted the targets in the room with threat indicators.

As the dagger jerked down towards her chest, her hand snapped up and caught his wrist. Not allowing him to understand what was happening, she snatched the knife from his hand with her off-hand and flicked it with an expert snap of her wrist.

It flipped end over end and buried itself to the hilt in the vampire's chest that had first spoken to her. He collapsed to the ground gradually as the world around her slowed. Pulling her feet up over her head, she wrapped her legs around the vampire's neck and jerked him into the altar violently. With a twist of her body, she ended up with a knee in his back as she slammed his head into the altar. There was a loud cracking noise. The head wound wouldn't stop him, but it should stun him for a couple of seconds.

A crossbow bolt streaked towards her and she grinned as she leaned out of the way. Her free hand snatched up and closed on the bolt as she jerked it from the air. Using the momentum, she shoved it deep into the back of the man under her, sliding it with practiced ease between his ribs and into the heart. That should hold him for a bit.

Leaping up into the air, she dodged two more bolts by flipping over them. She followed one with her eyes, and telekinetically adjusted its trajectory to embed it into one of the six guards. He collapsed to the ground, holding the fletching that was sticking out of his throat.

She landed with a soft smack of bare feet on stone and charged the rank two vampire. The body on the ground next to him was unmoving, clearly that sacrificial dagger had been useful.

He drew the sword at his hip, but before it could clear the sheath, she leapt into the air. Using his chest to climb into a backflip, she kicked him in the head, so hard that his head snapped back with an audible crack. And sure enough, as she looked down at him, three bolts buried into his chest.

How wonderful, she thought. The guards were dumb.

She hit the ground again and ducked low as two more bolts flew over her head. With focus, she was able to change the trajectory of one of them. It was just enough to force it into the shoulder of a guard, forcing him to drop his crossbow.

She glanced at the dagger in the vampire's chest, but it was pulsating slowly in a strange black glow. How black glowed, she didn't want to know. But she wasn't touching that again without tools.

Her HuD flashed a warning, and she twisted into the air, throwing herself to the side as she avoided yet another volley of bolts. Running for the pillars closest to her, she dove on top of a guard, jerking the knife at his belt free from its scabbard. She deftly rolled past him, dodging his punch. Just as his buddy next to him pulled the trigger, burying a bolt deep into his chest.

Spinning deftly, she swung her leg under the still standing guard, and plunged the knife in his jaw, up towards his brain as he fell. Rolling away, she faded into the shadows as more bolts bounced harmlessly off the wall where she'd been.

Three minutes later a slew of city constables rushed into the room, weapons drawn, and slid to a stop. One of them slipping on the blood and sliding into his compatriots. They caught him and sighed in relief as they all managed to stay upright.

"By the gods!" The constable in the lead exclaimed, his eyes wide in shock.

As the group spread throughout the room, they found six dead human guards. Three dead human women and four dead vampires. Each of their hearts cut from their chests and blazing cheerfully in the brazier near the large sacrificial alter in the center of the room.

The only entity left alive was a single rank five vampire. She had stripped him naked and trussed him up like a slave. His hands and feet bound behind his back. Tied into its mouth, the hilt of a black dagger pulsated slowly. And buried deep in its heart was the wooden shaft of a crossbow bolt. The Black and red fletching shimmering in the light of the raging fire.

"Inspector?"

A constable stepped up next to the contemplative man, who was staring at the trussed up vampire with mild annoyance. He couldn't help but wonder what kind of demon he'd made a bargain with this time. Looking up at the constable next to him, he frowned at the fear in the man's eyes.

"What do we do?" The man asked.

Mason exhaled, slowly. Stepping up to the trussed-up vampire, he met the creature's angry stare. "You are hereby under arrest for the kidnapping and attempted murderer of at least one Bugrasi citizen." He glanced around at the bloody mess. "Likely more. Take him in for questioning."

Holding up a hand to stop the constables, he pursed his lips together tightly.

"On second thought, call the king's guard for this one. I am not sure any of us should touch that." He pointed to the slowly pulsating dagger.

Another guard stepped up next to the inspector and chuckled as he pointed to the dagger. "Kind of prophetic that."

"That's enough, Yentry." Mason frowned at the older constable.

Gandal Yentry simply found the mess mildly amusing, rather than downright terrifying like the younger guards did.

"Go get the guard."

Saluting the inspector, the man chuckled as he jogged up the stairs and out into the city, to find the king's guard.