



The Shades of Sunset

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Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

“ I will be the first to admit, there are things in this universe that we, mere mortals, should not play with. There are those whose jobs are to go around and collect up these dangerous artifacts. They then lock them away, ensuring that they are safely out of reach.

But occasionally...

even those galactic heroes succumb to temptation. ”

-Leon Hamilton

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Bugrasi, the Capital of Bugrad, is a medieval city, fast approaching a million souls. When you have a city that large, it's not a stretch to imagine dark alleys, back streets, and taverns where the constabulary rarely go.

As the human woman with beautiful blonde curls and crystal blue eyes turned down one of those dark alleys, she couldn't help but grin. She loved the nightlife in any city. And she couldn't help herself, but she was really enjoying the simplicity of being surrounded by murderers and thieves. It was far less complex than her past lives and came with an almost peaceful quality that she could truly appreciate.

Pulling her hood up, she tugged it far over her brow to cover her face from the onlookers on the rooftops above.

A few feet ahead of her, a beggar reached out a hand, but she deftly stepped around him, insuring his calloused and filthy hands never touched even the edge of her cloak. She could hear his whispered curse at her, and she chuckled. The alley was a maze of beggars and street urchins, but she deftly avoided all but one. When the heavily cowled man slammed his shoulder into her, she spun, cursing.

"Watch it! You Sstagi dung!" she spat at the ground, barely missing a nearby beggar who flipped his middle finger up at her. Twisting back around, she continued down the alley, trying to get out before she lost anything important. Like her life.

As she stepped out into the street that had been her end destination, she grinned broadly. Tossing a heavy pouch into the air, she allowed it to land in her hand with a loud clink. It seemed the jerk in the alley was buying her drinks tonight. Striding cheerfully across the street, she pushed the door open to the Golden Lute.

"Delila!" the crowd greeted her with a chorus of cheers.

Laughing, she strolled into the warm pub and waved hi to several friends. She'd been to the pub nightly ever since the arrest of the bard two weeks ago. And in those two weeks, she'd become fairly popular. Mostly due to her stories, and her abilities during the pick pocket games they played regularly. Which she won just enough to avoid suspicion.

There were no brawls here, but there was plenty of drinking, thieving, gambling, sex, and even the occasional murder. All of which was closely managed and controlled by the local guild master.

Thieves' guilds were common even in Lila's time, but they called themselves by different titles, such as gangs or families. This thieves' guild master was a member of the loyalist party. Something she'd found out in the last few weeks. And the people in the Golden Lute were fiercely loyal to their king. Heavens forbid a person spoke ill of Bugarad within these walls. They never made it out alive.

"Hey Shane. How's she doing?" She placed her hand on a large man's back as she stepped up next to him at the bar.

He shook his head slowly. "Not good, I don't think she will survive this one."

"Want me to talk to her?" She frowned.

Shane, the bar's owner, had five daughters, and one more child on the way. But a week ago, out back of the pub, a mugger caught the woman unawares, and while he didn't make it away. She'd had trouble even standing from the pain ever since. But like many Bugrasi citizens, she utterly refused to go to the hospital. The strange refugees and their magic terrified her.

He hung his head and wrapped his fingers around the back of his neck and whispered. "I don't know what I'm gonna do without her."

"Hey sweetie!" The cheerful Martha paused as she passed by Delila and Shane. "Want anything?"

Nodding, the thief smiled at the woman. "Yeah, dinner and an ale. But I am going to run upstairs really quick."

"No problem, luv."

Delila patted the man on the back gently and strode towards the door at the end of the bar. It led to the kitchen and the stairs up into the house above the pub.

As she passed the enormous man named Rolf, who sat at the end of the bar, she bumped her shoulder into him and chuckled.

"Heya sexy. You up for a game of sheet bouncing tonight?" She teased.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "You're cruel, Lila."

"Aw, common' you don't really mean that and you know it." She slid around him, dragging her hand seductively up his arm and shoulder. She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. Whispering softly into his ear. "You want me, and we both know it."

"I'm working. You damn succubus. I notice your never here in the morning when I get off." He didn't even look at her.

"Mm, I'd love to help you get off." She teased.

He made a shooing gesture at her, and she laughed as she skipped into the kitchen.

"Evening all." She called happily to the staff.

Five faces all turned to her and smiled, but only the lead chef responded. "Evening miss Delila. I made that recipe you gave me." He moved to a large cauldron cooking over the massive stove. Dipping a wooden spoon into the mix, he held it out toward her.

She jogged up to him and tasted it. The Thalayan chili warmed her mouth and her mind. It tasted exactly like Menefelle's.

"Oh, that it almost good enough to sleep with." She teased.

The staff laughed, but the chef just glared at her. "Great, now they will be giggling for hours."

"How's it selling?"

He smirked. "This is my fourth pot tonight. Torin even came in for some." He shrugged. "So, I'm counting that as a tremendous success. He hasn't been in to eat dinner with his wife for weeks."

Lila pat him on the shoulder and tuned to jog up the stairs to the home above. Torin was the local guild master, and chef was right. If *he* came in, then the chili was a hit.

She made it about three feet into the house upstairs before the first child adhered itself to her leg. "Delila!" the girl squealed happily.

"Hi there, Melissa. How's mommy?" She tousled the child's hair.

"She's sleeping." An older child answered from a nearby doorway.

When Delila met the girl's stare, she could see the resolve there. It wasn't a good sign.

"The midwife said there is nothing she can do. She probably won't wake up." The child in the doorway was in her early teens, but the youngest was still in diapers. And none of them would handle losing their mother, well.

"Melissa, can you go check on Lily for me?" She glanced down at the child on her leg and smiled warmly.

The child nodded. "Yep!"

Taking the free moment, Delila stepped past the older girl, named Jaina, into the bedroom. She moved up to the woman's side and placed her hand on her forehead she was disturbingly cold.

"Ma'am." Her internal computer chimed up. "*The woman in the bed's blood pressure is dangerously low.*"

"Is the baby alive?" She asked silently.

"Yes, the child seems stable, but the mother is not."

She took a deep breath. Reaching into her bag at her hip, she pulled out an electric blanket. Booting it up, she checked the battery level. It was still at ninety percent. She kicked it to high and wrapped the woman in it.

"That's one of them endless bags?" A voice whispered from the doorway.

Nodding, Delila looked at the girl. "Jaina, I am going to bring a friend to help. But you have to keep everyone out and don't tell anyone. Okay?"

"Is your friend a doctor?" The girl folded her arms and eyed Delila carefully.

Cocking her head slightly, the thief sighed. "Yes."

"Good. If da, asks. I will tell him it was ma's idea." The girl nodded curtly and pointed to the window that led into the alley. She stepped out of the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

Delila triggered her internal comm and called the young monk friend of Jane's. She may be a child, but she was a prodigy, and if anyone could save Leena, it was the kid.

"Neelau."

"Neelau, this is Helena."

"I know who it is. I have caller ID, I am not a neophyte."

Ignoring the teenager's attitude, she continued. "I have a medical emergency. I need you and your genius as soon as possible. I don't think she will last much longer."

"I'm kind of busy. Send me the vitals."

Delila's HUD showed an upload to the person on the other end of the communication.

"Holy shit, Helena! This woman needed to be at the hospital yesterday! Get her here now!"

"I can't." Delila's voice was firm.

"What?"

"Just trust me. I can't move her. I don't even technically have permission to treat her."

There was a long pause. "Fine, I will come to you. But I am not good at being stealthy or anything."

"Yeah, I know. I am opening a window. Fly directly to me and just try not to get shot." Delila moved to the window and opened it. Looking up to the rooftop across the alley, she saw one of the many scouts look down at her curiously.

She signed to him, "One full silver to anyone who finds someplace else to look."

"Not worth my life." The guard signaled back in the local thieves' sign language.