

A sunset scene with a balcony railing and a large, vibrant flower in the foreground. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the scene. The flower is a mix of red and yellow, with green leaves. The background shows a body of water and some trees.

# 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**

# The Shades of Sunset

*Written by Wendi Coffman-Porter  
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**Sanun 30<sup>th</sup>, 26552**

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 Bugarasi 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.

She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Is it worth hers?"

He stared at her for several tense moments, then turned and walked away.

Less than five minutes later, a dark figure silently dove through the window and rolled up into a defensive crouch.

"Thanks, Neelau."

The girl shook her head slowly. "I've never been to this side of the city." She jerked her thumb towards the window. "Did you know these roofs are crawling with people?"

Delila grimaced. That was going to be expensive.

The girl walked up to her briefly and looked her over. "Wow, your disguises are thorough, do you use a spell or something?"

"Or something." The human thief pointed to the woman in the bed. "I put a heating blanket on her, trying to get her temp up. It's not working."

"What happened to her?" Neelau moved up to the woman in the bed and pulled several digital tools from her bag.

Lifting her hands to the same height as her shoulders, she let them fall to her sides limp. "Honestly, I don't know. I wasn't here when it happened, but they said someone attacked her. But that's all I know."

"When did it happen?"

"Six days ago."

Neelau spun her head to glare at Delila. "And you're just now calling me?"

"Look. The doctors and their magic terrify her. I tried several times to convince her to go get help. But she wouldn't listen. She was positive that the midwife she was using would save the baby."

Neelau ignored her as she worked on the woman. After a few minutes, Delila saw the kid's face twist up in confusion.

"What's wrong?"

Shaking her head slowly, she frowned and locked eyes with Delila. "Does this woman have enemies or something?"

The thief snorted, trying not to laugh. "That wouldn't be a surprise or anything, no. This is a..." she waved her hand wide at the surrounding walls. "Let's just say this place has some pretty heavy political opposition."

"Willing to murder her?"

The thief raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"Originally I thought it was an internal injury, based on the symptoms."

Delila nodded, "so did I. Are you saying that's not the case?"

"She's being poisoned. Slow enough that it would kill her and not the baby."

Folding her arms across her chest, Delila asked, "can you save her?"

"She needs dialysis. But if we can't take her to the hospital, I don't see that happening." Neelau rested her hand on the woman's stomach.

"Can't you just heal her?"

"I can, but she's pregnant. The magic will affect the baby."

"Affect the baby how?"

Neelau shrugged. "There is no telling. It could make it magical, or possibly even make it a monk, like me. Technically, it could even make it some kind of super villain. I have no idea, only the universe knows."

The door to the room opened and an older woman stepped in, her brow furrowed deeply as her fists moved to rest on her hips. She looked from Delila to Neelau, then back to the thief.

"Martha?" Delila took a step towards the monk protectively. "She is here at my request."

The elderly woman nodded. "I know, it's the only reason I allowed it." She waved for Delila to move aside.

The thief stepped aside as the older woman strode up to the bedside to stand next to the monk.

"Leena is my daughter. I do not wish to outlive her monk. I give my consent, for you to use magic to save her and the child."

Neelau cocked her head and took a deep breath. "I can't be held responsible for the outcome. The universe will decide what happens next, I have no say."

"I understand." Martha turned to face Delila. "Thank you, dear. I know you risked a lot to do this. I want you to know, I will never forget this."

Delila smirked and winked at the older woman.

"Go downstairs and eat. I will keep an eye on the monk." Martha twisted and slapped Delila on the butt. "Shoo."

Chuckling, the thief headed down into the main pub. As she slumped into her chair, she pulled the bag of coin out and untied it. Reaching two fingers into the pouch, she tugged a sliver of paper free from its confines. Rolling it open, she read the note. Undathil Estate. 7 days. Safe behind self-portrait, office.

She smirked and nodded. Apparently, she had a new job.

Withdrawing a book from her bag, she set it on the table and skimmed the cover. Like the rest, this cover consisted of smooth leather and large embossed letters that read, The Shades of Sunset. The image engraved into the leather was a sultry creature, looking over its shoulder with one hand on its bare ass and the other over its bare breasts. The creature's tail reached across the leather to taper to a fine point under the word Shades. The hooved feet and horned head clearly indicated the demonic nature of the book's content.

She smiled fondly at the image. This was another of Leon's book that she hadn't needed to open to know which story it was.



"I like that cover. What's that one about?" A regular named Maxwell, who was sitting at the table next other, pointed to the book.

She traced her fingers over the engraving of the succubus. "A thief who steals a whole museum."

The man laughed and slapped his hand down on his table. "Now that sounds like my kind of book! Maybe you should give it to our bard. If he ever comes back."

"Maybe." She chuckled and opened the cover to read Leon's foreword.



Sometimes life presents us with challenges. Be they physical, mental, emotional, metaphorical etc... no matter the type of challenge, they are something that causes us to consider deviating from our normal, or chosen, course of action. They can even be something we fight with daily, such as addictions. In Shades case, that fight is the challenge to not steal something when she knows full and well, that she shouldn't. She's not addicted to stealing per se, but occasionally the lure of the item is just too much to pass up, even if she knows better.

That is the case in this story. I know many of you are like me and think that magic is just a crock of shit. That it doesn't really exist. It's just a technology that we haven't figured out yet. And then there are those of you that are screaming at the book in your hands. Telling me that magic is too real, that you've seen it with your own eyes.

If I am being honest, we are both right. 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.

A tall thin human woman, with long blonde hair and deep green eyes, who belonged on the cover of a magazine, rolled over in the enormous bed and smiled warmly at the unconscious man next to her. Sitting up, she stretched and ran her fingers through her hair, meticulously pushing it from her face.

She stood and strolled casually to the large, overstuffed chair in front of the enormous wall of windows. She'd tossed her clothing in the chair the night



before. Reaching up under her left arm, she triggered a hidden compartment that kept her weapons stored in a quantum state. Making them impossible to detect by any level of scanner. As the pistol came free in her hand, she glanced out the window and smiled at the gorgeous deer grazing on the grass at the edge of the forest.

She rummaged through the pile of clothes until she found her bag. Shoving her hand inside, she tugged free a long thin cylindrical device. As she twisted the cylinder onto her pistol, she watched the deer look up and scan the area nervously. Obviously sensing danger. She tightened the silencer and strolled back to the bed. Lifting the weapon, she squeezed the trigger gently, producing a soft popping noise.

A tiny hole appeared in the man's forehead, as a dark pool spread across the pillow under him.

"Too bad, you were a good fuck." She mumbled and untwisted the silencer. "A job's a job."

Replacing the cylinder in her bag and storing her weapon back into the hidden holster, she got dressed. The majestic deer had fled, but the beautiful forest and manicured grounds of the palatial estate still made her smile. It really was lovely here, although how a single man could have enough money to own an entire moon she really couldn't fathom.

It had taken over eight months of work to get this target to trust her enough to bring her to his estate. He was so paranoid that the only manmade item on the entire moon was this single estate. He was a challenging target. But she had to admit, he'd been a fun target. When he wasn't butchering people, that was.

She walked to the door and stepped out into the hall.

A guard walking past smiled warmly at her as he bobbed his head at her respectfully.

"Herman." She smiled and waved to him. "How are you this morning?"

The guard paused. "I am doing well, Ms. Terrlan, how are you?"

"Excellent!" She winked at him and the man laughed. "He'll sleep for at least a few more hours. I rode him pretty hard last night."

The man shook his head, still smirking. "I heard."

Amanda Terrlan blushed slightly. "I suppose I should say sorry for that."

"Please don't. It was nice to hear him happy for once." The man pointed down the hall to her right. "The chef made you breakfast."

"That sounds great!" She waved her hand to him and sauntered down the hall towards the stairs that led up to the main house.

An hour later, she was sitting at an enormous table with a large mug of warm coffee in her hands. The air in the house was chilly, and she wished she'd brought a sweater.

The same security guard, who was Hershall Ucalliar's head bodyguard, strolled into the dining hall.

"Did you want me to warm up a shuttle for you?" He strode to the chair to her left and rested his elbows on the back.

Breathing deeply, she considered leaving, since she really didn't want to be here when they found the body, but her curiosity got the better of her. "You know, he has been promising to show me his museum collection. Any chance I can look at that before I go?"

"Of course, I'd be happy to take you down there." The man's gaze traveled down the front of her deep cut blouse, before snapping back up to her face.

She smirked and stood slowly. Holding her cup out to him, she locked her eyes on his and took a step towards him. "Mind filling that?"

He took the cup by placing his hand over hers.

She chuckled and stepped past him, carefully brushing her shoulder against him. Continuing to the doorway, she heard the man fill her cup then quickly shuffle up behind her. She paused at the door and waited for her escort.

A hand rested on her hip, as the other hand wrapped around her, holding the coffee where she could take it. Her long blonde hair shifted to the side as she felt warm breath on her neck. "I love how loud you are." He whispered.

"I bet you do." She teased and took the cup from him. "The tour?"

A side effect of pretending to be a prostitute, even a high class one, was that most men, and even a few women, ignored the typical social norms. And were comfortable making it very clear what they wanted from her.

"Of course. This way Ms. Terrlan." He bowed at the waist and held an arm out in front of him.

She strut, out in front of him, swaying her hips expertly. So long as his bodyguard had something else to think about, he would ignore his boss. Which meant that this show needed to be a good one.

It took them almost twenty minutes, and a passionate elevator ride down to the museum. As they stepped out into the entryway, she marveled at the massive vault door.

Herman stepped up to the panel to the right of the door and began inputting his biometric signature to unlock the door. Amanda stepped up behind him, pressing her body against his so tightly that he moaned softly. She traced her fingertips down his side and heard a soft buzz from the door panel.

"Error." The system blurted loudly. "Commander Herman Gunderson, you appear in duress. Please enter an override code to access the vault."

He glanced over his shoulder at her and chuckled. "You're making this difficult."

"No," she teased. "I am making it hard."

Shaking his head, he reached up and typed in a code on the pad. "That too."

The door popped open with a loud hiss. An alarm sounded as the lights above the door began flashing green.

"Wow!" Amanda backed away from the guard and the door, her eyes open wide.

She felt an arm wrap around her waist as Herman moved around behind her. He whispered into her ear, "Impressive isn't it?"

She nodded emphatically.

"There are no cameras, or recording of any kind inside." His tone had dropped as his lust took full control of his mind.

She smirked, "really?"

"Mmhm."

Reaching down, she took his hand and drug him through the slowly opening door, giggling. As she pulled him into the massive room, she looked around. There were pedestals and cases as far as she could see, with various artifacts, that all seemed to have one determining factor. Her smile faded somewhat as a large object directly ahead of her drew her attention.

On the far wall was a massive statue of a demonic entity that was easily thirty feet tall. The creature twisted with its left wing and shoulder backwards, as if the creature had just taken some kind of massive round to the chest. The enormous left wings hung in tatters, and the right wing extended out from the body, as the creature tried to keep its balance.

Its fanged face twisted into a roaring snarl, and one of the huge, curled horns appeared shattered at the base. Its clawed right hand reached directly ahead of it, as if grasping at something, and its eyes focused exactly where the hand was reaching. It had a long thick tail, and clawed feet that were dug into the base of the statue, trying in vain to remain standing under whatever onslaught the artist was trying to depict.

As she approached slowly, she realized it wasn't a statue, but an actual demon, locked into some kind of containment field.

"That's his prize possession. He bought it from another collector a few years ago." The guard whispered into her ear, "If you stand here long enough, you can almost swear it moves."

She lost interest in pretending as she stared at the creature in front of her. "You've seen this move?"

She felt him nod into her neck as he kissed the sensitive flesh. "Yes, but it's just an optical illusion."

In one swift movement, she stretched her leg to the side and shoved the man away from her, yanking his sidearm from his holster as she did so. He blinked once, before she pulled the trigger, and he fell to the ground in front of

the statue. Reaching into her bag, she pulled free a bracelet and slapped it on her wrist. Her heads-up display connected to the communicator and brought up a single button. Punching it, she returned her attention to the demon and waited.

"I'm busy." A deep male voice spoke up.

"Sorry about this, but you and I both know how I am loath to say this. I need help."

There was a long pause. "I wasn't even aware those words were in your vocabulary. Okay, you have my attention."

"They are, I just rarely use them in that order."

He chuckled. "I can't feel you, where are you?"

"Yeah, that's one of the... one sec." She reached up into her HUD and swiped. Grabbing her astral coordinates, she plugged them into the dragon communicator. The highly advanced dragon network connected to her through her guest access at the estate.

"Okay, I have the loc. But I wasn't kidding. I am busy. Can this wait?"

She looked over at the dead body next to her and chewed on the inside of her cheek. "How long?"

"Twenty-four hours?"

Bobbing her head back and forth, she considered how long it would take her to clear the facility. "Um, yeah. I can probably manage that."

"What kind of trouble are you in this time?"

She pondered the question. He didn't know her well enough, so she ignored the assumption. "No trouble. I just assumed a dragon artificer might be interested in some artifacts."

"What kinds of artifacts?"

"Um, maybe two-hundred, or so, demonic artifacts from what appears to be multiple dimensions. But then demonic crap is outside my wheelhouse."

There was a long pause. Long enough that Shade checked twice to see if the connection was still live.

"Say that again?" He finally asked.

"Nah, you heard me. You want to know more? Get your ass here. Oh, and you'd better have something big to carry all of this. Because this guy alone is huge!" She pointed to the demonic creature with wings and claws in front of her.

"Guy?"

She smirked, she now had the dragon's undivided attention. "Yeah, a class six hero, it looks like. Fairly sure it's male, but I ain't gonna ask him."

"I will be there in twelve hours."

"I thought you might. See you soon." She teased.

He cut the line without another word, and she chuckled. "Dragons are so sensitive." She shrugged up at the demon. Her skin crawled slightly as she swore she heard it growl faintly.



"His lordship does not tolerate insolence in his servants." The man next to Mary frowned deeply down at her. "When you see him, you will bow your head, and do not make eye contact unless he addresses you directly. Do you understand?"

The young human maid with dark brown hair, brown eyes and breasts bound up tightly in a bodice that was one size too small, bat her eyelashes at him. "Yes, sir."

"If he does talk to you, then and only then, you may look up at him. Stand tall and articulate your words, while keeping your responses short. You are not to appear friendly with the baron."

Mary, the newest maid in the Undathil household, bent her knees quickly as she curtsied, then hurried to match the man's stride. Continuing to listen intently to his lecture, she followed along, carefully learning layout of the mansion.

"The Baroness is on the mainland, thankfully. So, we will teach you how to deal with her when she comes back. Until then, just focus on your duties." His voice drifted slightly, as his attention clearly diverted away from the topic.

He halted, staring ahead of them as a tall, elegant looking young woman stepped through a door into the hallway. She hadn't noticed them yet, but the majordomo of the Undathil household had clearly lost all focus.

The young lady turned towards them and smiled brightly. Her eyes locked with the man next to Mary and didn't even see the new maid. The small brunette resisted the urge to laugh. The man next to her was easily ten years older than the young lady, but even Mary had to admit that the young woman was beautiful. She could easily see how living under the same roof might cause such a cliché.

"Norton." The girl almost giggled, and Mary resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

The man next to her breathed deeply, "My lady. You look breathtaking this morning."

"Thank you." She blushed.

Mary cleared her throat quietly.

"Oh, who is this?" The girl used the excuse to approach them.

The smell of fresh flowers wafted over them as the young lady drew close. The Majordomo breathed in deeply, and Mary curtsied.

"My name is Mary, my lady. I am the new chambermaid."

The girl smiled warmly at her. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mary. I am sure Norton here, is frightening you with my parent's exploits?"

Mary chuckled, but shook her head. "He is only doing his job. Ensuring that I can do mine for many years to come."

"I am sure he is." The girls rested her hand on the man's arm. "But I agree with him, stay away from my mother as much as possible."

Mary frowned. "She does not care for the maids?"

The girl's smile brightened, "not ones as beautiful as you, no."

"Ahh." Mary nodded her head emphatically.

The lady Sasha Undathil, squeezed Norton's arm, and strode past them without another word.

"You did well." He arched a brow down at her. "His lordship will like you."

Mary grinned up at him. "Don't worry, I have no interest in nobles. No matter how much interest they have in me."

"You might last longer than a week, after all." He smiled brightly at her.

The two of them continued the tour through the household. When he finished showing how they kept the linens, he held the door open for her.

"After you."

Mary nudged past him, far closer than was necessary. Brushing the back of her hand across his crotch. Snapping her hand to her mouth, she turned and gasped. "I am sorry, Master Norton!"

Continuing to back out of the room coyly, she bumped into a rather large man and spun, eyes wide with shock. She immediately bowed her head and curtsied deeply. "I am so sorry, my lord!"

She heard laughter, but didn't look up. Instead, she remained cowed.

"What do we have here Norton?" The deep male voice was clearly still chuckling.

There was a brief pause as Norton stepped up next to her. "My lord, this is the new chambermaid, Mary."

"Rise child, let me see your face." The baron stated firmly.

Mary stood tall and met the man's eyes confidently.

He was a large man, who was likely mistaken by many, as overweight, but was clearly wider at the shoulders than at the waist. Which meant that the layer of fat and thick clothing hid a rather healthy man. He was easily six-and-a-half-feet-tall with black hair and dark brown eyes. He groomed his beard into a

goatee, which suited his face nicely. Giving him a rather distinguished appearance.

He smiled when she locked her gaze with his. Clearly her confidence was something he found appealing. "Well done, Norton. This one is rather..." his gaze traveled down to her cleavage and remained there as he finished his thought. "Impressive."

"I think she will fit in well here, my lord." Norton stated flatly.

The Baron turned his attention to his majordomo. "Quite. Perhaps this one will keep you from gawking at my daughter like a lust starved stud dog at a prize bitch."

Mary glanced at the man next to her.

His face showed no signs of recognition at the statement.

When she looked back to the Baron, he was watching her. "And you, my dear, welcome to my home. Avoid my wife and keep this one away from my daughter. If you can do that, then perhaps I will keep you for a while."

She curtsied. There was nothing she could say to that statement that wouldn't cause a trouble one way or another, so she opted to leave it alone.

"I want her here in the mornings. I think I would enjoy waking up to that face." The baron called over his shoulder as he strode off down the hallway.

Mary raised an eyebrow and glanced at the man next to her.

She saw his jaw tighten several times as he stared at the Barons back. Finally, he sighed deeply, "You will be a part of the morning staff. Be here just before sunup tomorrow, and I will show you your duties."

"As you wish master Norton." She bobbed her head at him.

He turned and strode the opposite direction from the baron. "Come, we will get you lunch then you can be on your way today. But don't be late in the morning."

An hour later, a woman in dark leathers and a light-colored cloak settled on the roof of a home near the Undathil estate and pulled a book out from under the cloak. Now she just had to sit and wait for the secrets of the estate to show themselves.

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A loud bell rang through the main house. Luckily the kitchen was near the entry, and Shade stuffed the last of the cheese for her sandwich into the bread and strode to the massive entryway. She tapped the button on the panel to the



right and the door slid open, to reveal a tall, handsome looking elf in a brown jumpsuit.

"Someone ordered Galactic Shipping Service?" He smiled brightly at her.

She mumbled around a mouthful of food. "You're late."

"Yeah, well, the princess was a little more..." he shrugged as he looked for a way to finish the sentence. "Determined that usual."

Rolling her eyes, she stepped back out of the doorway. "Oh, woe is you."

"Shut up." He grumbled. "Wow." He stepped in and looked around at the blood-soaked floor and the bodies stacked up like firewood along the wall behind the couch. "Um, I am not sure what to say to this."

Shade shrugged her shoulders. "I asked nicely if I could have their boss's prized possessions, since he was dead. But they had a problem with that." She chewed on the sandwich with her brow furrowed in thought. "Hmm, but then they could have been mad that I killed their boss. I'm not sure which. Either way..." She held a hand, palm up, towards the bodies.

"Right." The elf took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. "You... This is... There is something seriously wrong with you, Regina."

"Shade, please. And if you say so." She shrugged. "You would know better than most what it's like being a person who spends their entire life hiding who they really are." She marched away from him without looking back over her shoulder. She didn't need to see his face to know that her barb had landed.

He followed her silently for twenty minutes through the house. As they got into the elevator, she finished the last of her sandwich and began dancing to the creepy elevator music. To which he simply rolled his eyes.

When they stepped out of the elevator in front of the still open vault door, he finally spoke. "By the council!"

She followed him unhurriedly as he entered the vault and turned to weave deliberately through the hundreds of display cases. Shade had spent little time in here after she called the dragon. It had taken her over an hour to secure the grounds. There were a few more security guards than she'd originally thought.

She was sore and tired from the ordeal. She'd taken several rounds to various nonvital areas, and while the nanites had stopped the bleeding, mostly. The exhaustion was settling into her bones. But she knew there was no end in sight. They only had so long before Hershal's lieutenants figured out something was wrong and sent backup.

Shade paused at a long black trench coat as Toni continued walking through the exhibits. The black leather appeared amazingly luxurious and far more supple than typical. Walking around the display, she stared at the back of the coat. She knew this piece. It was on her list of items to acquire, if she ever ran across it.

The history books called it by many names, but its maker had named it The Lustful Gaze. Embroidered on the back of the long trench coat, with mithril thread, was the sultry image of a succubus. A tall thin demon, with short horns, sleek wings, large breasts and a thin waist. She had long black hair that cascaded down her back, to end just above her round, perfect ass. The maker did the embroidery at a rather spectacular three-quarter angle, which accentuated her breasts and buttocks. It also allowed her to look over her shoulder with one eye was closed, clearly winking at the viewer, and one finger between her lips, nibbling the tip.

Shade lifted her hand to touch the case, but Toni's voice her caused her to drop her hand to her side.

"Thadalias. We've been looking everywhere for you! Fancy seeing you here, and like this, even." The dragon in a delivery driver's uniform was clearly mocking the demon.

Shade smiled at the coat and actually saw the succubus nod at her. Striding up to the demon and dragon, she locked eyes with the elf. "You know him?"

"Yes. He's one of the reasons I am in this galaxy, actually." Toni sighed deeply and turned to face her. "Can I ask you a question?"

She nodded. "I always encourage questions, but I never agree to answer them."

"Fair enough." He waved his arm wide at the items in the room. "Why did you call me? You're a thief. Why not just steal what you want and leave all this?"

She frowned at the elf. Short of the time in the bar when he had confronted her for breaking into his hoard, she and the dragon had carefully avoided each other. Even when she was at his home, securing his hoard from other thieves like her. He had ensured that they weren't on the same world, at the same time. And she had always scheduled her visits for when she knew he would be busy elsewhere. More than likely, they had different reasons for avoiding each other, but then, she didn't know his reason.

"I am not a thief. I am an artist. There is a difference."

He cocked his head to the side and pursed his lips together. "No, there isn't."

She blinked several times and resisted the urge to punch him in the face. The only one that would hurt was her.

"Why do you care?"

He smirked. "I asked that question first."

Her eyes narrowed as her jaw clenched. "Do you want this shit, or not? I can call someone else if I need to, but they won't be as clean about how they dispose of it. They likely won't even leave a moon."

She got an alert in her HUD that something was touching her mind, and she immediately sealed her psi-shield. After their last encounter, she had gone to an old friend to have a dampener installed. It would at least slow the dragon down and alert her to his presence in her mind. But nothing could really stop him. If a dragon wanted in your mind, they were getting in your mind. There was nothing Shade could do about it.

He frowned, but raised both hands in surrender. "Sorry. I am just trying to understand why you're doing this."

"Did it ever occur to you that I am simply doing this because it's the right thing to do?" She folded her hands across her chest.

He took a step back, clearly aware that she had just shifted from friend to dangerous. "Honestly, no, it didn't. But I think I may have underestimated you. I apologize."

"Can you deal with this or not?" Her jaw clenched tightly. She didn't want to have to call in a favor, but she would if the dragon walked away. She really didn't know enough about dragons and what little she knew, she'd learned from Aneela, Toni's head of security, and apparently his head dragon-knight.

He nodded his head slowly, his hands still held out in front of him. "I will take care of this, but it will take a while. I didn't bring anyone with me."

She rocked her head to the side slightly. "I can help. If you bring the stasis crates down here, I can pack this stuff up."

He shook his head as she reached into the bag at her hip, pulling out a pair of black gloves. "You shouldn't touch..." his voice trailed off as she slid the gloves on and fished a large, wrapped toolkit from her bag. "Wow, I really misjudged you."

"I know." She agreed and walked over to one of the display cases closest to them. She examined the contents, then pulled an orange bag from the toolkit. Looking back over her shoulder, she arched an eyebrow at him. "Are you going to get the stasis crates or not? I am not wasting my storage bags on this shit, if we don't have any way to carry them."

He opened his mouth, then snapped it closed quickly. Shaking his head, he vanished from the room with a soft popping sound.

"Fucking asshole." She muttered and returned to the cursed artifact in front of her. This was very delicate work, that was very unforgiving of mistakes.

Thirty hours later, the two of them stood side by side, looking in at the massive truck filled with sealed crates.

"I can honestly say that the largest haul that I've ever bothered to box up. Usually if there was this much, we just destroyed it." She cocked her head to the side and grimaced, "and twice we just blew the entire planet to be sure."

She caught the elf next to her flair his nostrils slightly. "You realize you won't be able to control that, right?"

"What are you talking about?" She had no intentions of giving up her new artifact, even if he had figured it out.

He turned to glare at her.

Rolling her eyes, she sighed. "Look, it's not hurting anyone. She and I have similar interests."

"You know the only way to take that off is to die, right?" he folded his arms.

Smirking, Shade nodded. "Yep."

The muscles in his jaw bulged as his eyes narrowed.

"In fact, that is the only reason they classify as a cursed item. Because you can't remove it without dying. It's only a class one item, though, it's not an imminent threat to me or anyone else. But it sure will be fun to play with." She stepped around in front of him, not quite touching him but getting close enough that they could feel the heat from each other. "Why, is it affecting you?"

He locked his gaze with her, his face utterly blank. "Demonic items do not work on me."

"Too bad." She smirked. "You really are a rather tasty looking elf. And I'd love to find out just *how* tasty."

He arched an eyebrow, "though I can't say the same about you, clearly."

"Trust me, I thought that long before the coat." She turned to walk off towards the shuttle pad.

A hand reached out and grabbed her wrist.

"We aren't done." He demanded.

She turned to stare down at his hand on her wrist.

He opened his hand and pulled it away. "I still need your help to deliver these. If you don't have anyplace else to be?"

She locked eyes with him and stared intently for several tense moments. In the back of her mind, she knew she should walk away, but she didn't want to. Despite what the dragon thought, she too was immune to the Lustful Gaze artifact's attempt to enforce its will on her.

All items on her acquisition list were not there at random. They were each heavily researched and studied before making it to her list. She took the artifact for its properties to change her clothing with a thought, and its ability to influence others. Not because it had any influence over her. She could feel the coats desire to ravage the elf, but her desire for the elf had surfaced four years

ago when she danced with him at her pub. And was the primary reason she had worked so hard to avoid him.

"Besides, I think I'd enjoy a drive through the countryside with you." He added gently, with a weak smile.

She furrowed her brow. That did it. Now she was curious. "We are driving this stuff someplace?"

"Of course, it's a wheeled vehicle, how else do you think I will get it there?" He teased.

"You have my curiosity piqued. Very well, I will go with you, Mr. Yathimali."

He bowed deeply, without breaking eye contact. With both palms held towards the truck, he smiled. "Please. Call me Toni."



"Mary?" The young lady of the Undathil house, called to the brunette chambermaid that was currently making her bed.

Looking up at the dressing screen, the maid raised both eyebrows curiously. "Yes, my lady?"

"Could you assist me?"

Smiling, Mary shuffled to the screen quickly.

The young lady stood in a thin, almost see-through chemise with a fish-bone bodice in each hand. "I am not sure which to wear."

The maid smirked, I suppose that depends on your desired effect on master Norton. She stepped up and took one of them from the young woman. The young lady of the house was easily seventeen human summers, and likely soon to be eighteen, which was now the age of majority in Bugrad.

The girl's cheeks turned bright red. "Is it that obvious?"

"Honestly, my lady?"

The girl nodded.

"Yes." Mary nodded her head emphatically. "You two are obviously in love with each other." She lied.

Delila, the thief on the rooftops last night, had seen the two of them sneak off under the cover of the night. The young lady was most definitely in love with the majordomo, but he, however, simply enjoyed soiling the young lady of the household. An action that would likely get him killed someday. Considering the notorious temper on both the baron and baroness of the household.

The girl frowned, while Mary fastened the bodice into place and began tightening the laces.

"I do love him." She whispered.

Mary said nothing as she helped the girl finish getting dressed. With a swift curtsy, she finally said something, "I should get back to my duties."

She felt the girl's hand on her arm and looked over her shoulder.

"Do *you* think I am beautiful?"

Mary could see the girl's body language shift as the Lustful Gaze tugged at her desire. She smiled warmly at her and willed the artifact to shut off. "I think you are the most marvelous beauty I have seen in my life, my lady. But I am not worthy of your attention."

Bowing her head deeply, she backed away several steps before turning towards the door. When she stepped outside, she literally ran into the tall, thin, and rather impatient majordomo.

"What took you so long?" He demanded, with a tad too much passion.

She allowed her gaze to travel up his body, that was still pressed up against hers. As she looked into his eyes, she willed the artifact to feed his desires instead.

He took a sudden step back and swallowed. "I mean, is she okay?"

"The lady is fine, she simply wanted to look her best today. Something about wanting to please a man that she has potent feelings for. So, she asked for help to dress."

"Oh." His wrung his hands in front of himself briefly then turned to strut off. "This way."

She followed him silently down the hall until they arrived at an enormous set of double doors at the end.

"This is his lordships room. Remember your manners."

She curtsied in response.

He swung the doors open and marched inside with Mary on his heels.

"Good morning, my lord!" He exclaimed, as he strode across the room to the massive curtain that covered the windows. As he drug them open, Mary moved into the room and poured scalding water from the fireplace into the large bowl in front of the mirror. As the steam rose from the bowl, she set the kettle back on the hook and went about setting up fresh towels.

The large baron threw back the cover and stood, stark-naked, next to the bed.

Mary resisted the urge to chuckle at the man. Moving to the opposite side of the bed, she began pulling the bedpan from between the mattresses. As she tossed the covers over the bed, she ignored the man's chuckle.

He strolled to the water and splashed some on his face before rubbing it roughly with a towel.

She made her way around the bed to make up the far side. Carefully keeping the bed between them.

He watched her with a wide grin for several minutes before finally bobbing his head. "I like this one, Norton. She's feisty."

Mary snatched the towel from the bed and tossed it in the basket she'd set by the door.

Norton strode back to the door and waited for her, eyeing them both carefully.

"While I am pleased that his lordship is fond of me," Mary lifted the basket and rested it on her hip as she turned to face the stark-naked baron. "It does not affect myself, or my duties, in any way. I hope you have a wonderful day, my lord." She curtsied deeply and turned her back on him. Winking at the majordomo, she strode past him out of the room.

She continued about her duties, making the beds and changing the linens. But she didn't see Norton, or really anyone else for that matter. As she made her way to the laundry, a door that she'd been told to avoid, swung open. Leaning in the doorframe stood a rather smug looking majordomo.

"I think there might be a few things in here that need polishing." He leered at her, allowing his gaze to fall to her breasts and remain there for several seconds.

"I believe the lord might grow upset if he catches me in his office." She raised an eyebrow.

Norton shook his head slowly. "He's gone to breakfast with a friend. He will be away for at least two hours."

She smiled and bit her lower lips lightly as she took a step up to him.

His arm snaked around her waist and pulled her tightly to him. Pulling her inside the large office, he shut the door and pressed her body up against it as he kissed her passionately.

Ten minutes later, Mary strode out of the office, putting the last pin in her bun. Wiping the corners of her mouth, she smirked and picked up her basket of laundry that she'd abandoned in the hall.

Norton stepped out of the office after her with a lopsided grin on his face. He locked the door before adjusting his belt back into its proper place.

She blushed and bat her eyelashes briefly as he winked at her, then turned to march down the hallway towards his own office. Norton was so focused on her, he missed the absence of the usual sounds associated with locking the door.

She waited till he was out of sight, before stepping up to the office door. With a gentle push, the door opened silently, and she slipped inside. Once inside, she chuckled and made her way to the large self-portrait behind the desk. Several minutes later, she had the safe open and was skimming several leather-



bound portfolios. She sighed and shook her head. No wonder Mason hired to do this. She tied them all back up and set one aside. Replacing the others exactly as she'd found them, she silently closed the safe and spun the dial.

"Politicians never change." She sighed.

Carefully closing the painting, she gently withdrew the picks that held the ward open. It gently fell back into place and reactivated. The person who placed it there might know that someone bypassed it, if they took the time to examine it. But otherwise, there was no way to tell.

She tucked the papers up under her skirt and carefully made her way out of the office.

Several minutes later she was grabbing lunch on her way out, when Norton came into the kitchen.

"Thank you, Mary. I agree with his lordship. You will make a delightful addition to the household."

When the cook spun to glare at him, throwing her hands into the air, Mary almost laughed. But then the older just woman stormed out without a word.

Stepping up next to him, Mary rubbed her body against him briefly. "It was my pleasure."

He moaned softly. "I will see you in the morning."

She smirked and strutted out of the kitchen into the alley behind the home. "Oh, no, you won't." She mumbled around a mouthful of cheese and bread.

An hour later, Delila stepped into the Golden Lute to a hail of cheers.

"Lilia!" they exclaimed.

"Hey all!" she waved an arm wide in greeting.

She made her way to her favorite table and settled in with her back to the wall.

"Welcome back, dear. Your usual?" Martha smiled warmly at her.

Nodding, the young thief pulled the book from her bag and opened it to the bookmark. "Yes, ma'am."

Martha placed her hand on the girl's shoulder and squeezed gently before walking away.

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The massive eighteen wheeled truck crawled slowly along a trail that was only barely large enough for it. As Shade bounced around in the passenger seat, she wondered what in the hells she was doing. Suddenly the trail widened, and

the trees shifted from conifer to deciduous. The bumps smoothed out somewhat, and the truck picked up speed.

"What just happened?" she looked over at the large, well-built elf driving the Galaxy Shipping Service wheeled truck, and saw him smirk.

He shrugged his shoulders, but refused to look at her.

"Right." She grumbled. "Gonna tell me where we are?"

He glanced at her briefly and cocked his head. "What do you think?"

Leaning back in the large seat, she folded her arms across her chest and frowned.

They drove along a narrow dirt road for well over an hour before Shade threw her arms up in the air. "Seriously?"

He glanced over at her, furrowing his brow. "What?"

"You moved us, who knows where, and we are still driving? What the hell? Why not just take us exactly where we needed to be?"

He didn't look at her when he responded. "Think that through Shade."

She stared out of the window and realized that the treeline at the edge of the road had shifted again. She wondered just how many times he'd moved them to various locations, attempting to mask his trail. "Wow, that adds a whole new level to counter tracking. I am assuming however you are moving us, can be traced?"

He smiled as he nodded his head.

"Good to know, I guess." She shrugged. "How much longer?"

He lifted his hand and pointed out the window. The dirty road shifted to a forest trail again, just as they broke free from the treeline into a large grass field. He slowed the vehicle to a stop, then flipped several switches. The vehicle rocked and shook as it morphed into off-road mode. The engine roared, and the tires slid out, enlarging both their size and their tread, in order to grip the loose terrain.

Across the field, she could see a small cottage, with a thin wisp of smoke trailing up into the sky from the tiny chimney.

"Seriously?" She pointed to the house. "That's where we are going?"

He smirked.

As the vehicle slowed a good fifty yards from the small cottage, she saw the red wooden door swing open and a young human boy, probably no older than ten years, looked their direction and pointed. He turned his head to holler back into the tiny house.

The vehicle came to a stop, and the elf turned to look at her. "That won't work." He lifted his palm up to her. "She will not be happy about you pretending to be human."

Shade raised an eyebrow at him and frowned. "What would you like me to look like?"

"The best option would be your natural state."

She shook her head. "Nice try, but that's not happening."

"Fine, then be an elf at least."

She focused her thoughts on her younger self. Her enchantment shifted her image to a tall, voluptuous elf, with long white hair and deep blue eyes.

She saw the elf's nostrils flair slightly as the visual obviously pleased him.

"This is as close as I get to my natural state. Will this work?"

He took a deep breath and allowed his eyes to travel the entire length of her slowly, before finally meeting her gaze again. "I am sure that will be fine."

"If it helps, this is pretty close."

He blinked several times, as he refocused his thoughts on what she'd said.

"Hmm?"

"This is my body, mostly. I just change some key features to ensure I am not recognized."

He furrowed his brow. "I can honestly say I'd like to know more about that, but I will respect your privacy."

"Um. Thank you?" She furrowed her brow, confused by the sentiment.

He smiled warmly, "we all have our secrets, Shade. And dragons understand that more than most." He lifted his hand like he was going to touch her, but set it back down in his lap gently. "Do you have any tech on you, that you consider important?"

"Yes." She nodded, her eyes wide with concern. "Why?"

"If it's not military hardened, you will want to stay at least ten feet away from them. And probably stay outside."

She narrowed her eyes. She couldn't tell if this was a test, to figure out if she had access to hardened gear. "Why?"

"The Oliver family line is cursed. Technology has a nasty habit of breaking down when it gets near them. If its weaker tech, it gets utterly destroyed. Some tech can handle short exposures, and military grade tech can usually handle proximity to them so long as they don't touch it. Depending on the grade of the tech." He shrugged a shoulder up to his ear and released it.

"Joy." She mumbled.

He reached out and set his hand on her knee. "But no one can handle cursed artifacts like these people. It is literally the purpose of the entire family line."

"Wow, that's one messed up curse." She arched both brows high on her forehead.

He nodded. "Keep that in mind when you're talking to them."

"That friendly, are they?" She snorted and shook her head.

He opened the door to the truck and climbed down.

As she opened her own door, she heard him mumble, "you have no idea."

A woman with a brightly colored knit shawl, and a dark grey dress, stood in the doorway with her arms folded across her well-endowed chest. Her hair was fully grey, and so wild, it looked like birds used it for a nest. It even had items stuck in it, such as pencils, and..., is that a comb? Her bushy grey eyebrows dropped over her eyes as she saw the two elves approach.

"Go away!" the woman waved her hand at them and a massive thornbush appeared in front of them. It was four feet high, three feet wide, and went as far as Shade could see, in each direction.

Shade slid to a halt and started at the bush in shock. Her eyes so wide that she had to blink to keep them from drying out.

Toni however waved his hand and passed through them as if they weren't there.

Her head snapped to where he had walked through, and she furrowed her brow. Looking back and forth, she finally shook her head vehemently. "What the...?"

"Now, Miranda, I am sorry to just show up. But I promise I have a good reason."

The woman threw her hands up in the air and stormed inside the cottage. Toni followed her inside, as the young boy started walking towards the confused Shade.

"You're not a dragon." The boy stated flatly.

Shade blinked at him several times, not sure what to say. "No. I am not."

"You're not that type of elf either." He stated flatly and waved his hand at her. "Oh. Now see, that's pretty!" He bobbed his head at her. "Why do you hide what you look like?"

Her eyes narrowed, and she wondered if the ten-year-old human could somehow see through her enchantment.

"Because people are trying to kill me." She opted for utter honesty, since the two inside couldn't hear her over the raised voices and clattering pots and pans that were being thrown in the house.

"Oh. That is a good reason." He folded his arms. "Why are they trying to kill you?"

"I honestly don't know. Simply because of who I was born as, I think." She shrugged. The kid was annoying, but he seemed harmless enough.

He narrowed his eyes. "That was not entirely truthful."

She arched an eyebrow.

"But I believe I can see why you would be mistrustful of others." He flicked his wrist at her. "Very well, I will let you pretend to be whoever you wish to be." He shrugged, "but you should make them stop trying to kill you."

She chuckled and shook her head. "If only it were that easy."

"It is." He reached out a hand and touched the wall of thorns, and they vanished.

The white-haired elf smiled down at the boy and briefly wished he was right. "What's your name?"

"Lear. What's yours?"

"Teri." She smiled warmly at him. "But he only knows me as Shade or Regina." A small part of her wondered why she was telling this child the truth that she never even told her life-mate.

"It is nice to meet you," he cocked his head slightly. "Your highness." He grinned and his arms fell to his side. "I have read about the Shade."

She raised an eyebrow. "You get news way out here?"

He bobbed his head and waved for her to follow him back to the house. "After a fashion, yes. But I mean, that I have read reports from the council about you." He paused and turned towards her with a grin so large that she could see he was missing a few of his baby teeth. "Did you really break into a dragon hoard and build a statue with his gold?"

Shade chuckled and pointed to the elf standing just inside the cottage, with his back to them. "His hoard, in fact."

The boy burst out laughing. His arm wrapped over his belly and he bent to slap his own knee.

The sound of it caused the yelling inside to cease. She saw a bushy head appear in the doorway. She looked from the boy to the female elf and cocked her head to the side.

"Lear?" The woman stepped past Toni, to just outside her door, and frowned at Shade.

The boy slapped his knee and tried to look up at his grandmother, tears streaming from his face. He pointed to Shade and burst out laughing again.

The woman arched an eyebrow at her and cocked her head.

Looking past the human woman, Shade could see Toni standing behind her with his brow furrowed in confusion. "What did you do?" He mouthed the question, but she just smirked at him.

"She..." the boy gasped. He pointed to her, then to Toni. "He..." the boy fell to the ground laughing and Shade actually started chuckling as she fought back the laughter that was creeping into her mind. The confused looks on the woman and Toni was almost too much for her.

"Damnit Lear, what is the matter with you?" The woman snapped at the boy.

"She's Shade." The boy gasped through his laughter.

The woman frowned at her then turned to glare at Toni. "You brought a thief to my home!" She roared. The sound of it actually shook the ground, causing a wave of earthquakes to roll out away from the tiny cottage.

Shade's eyes opened wide, as the desire to break into hysterical laughter suddenly vanished. She wanted to reach for her weapons, but she knew that would be the last thing she ever did.

The boy pushed himself upright and brushed off his clothes.

"Easy, Miranda." Toni raised both hands, trying to call the archwizard. "She is the one that brought these to us. If she wanted to steal them, she could have easily taken them and walked away."

"Did it ever occur to you she might be using them as bait to find out where you store them?" The woman snapped.

"Yes. That's why I made very sure that she has no idea where she is."

Shade's shoulders slumped, and she took several slow, deep breaths. She finally shook her head and shrugged. No, that's what she would have done too. She couldn't blame him.

She felt a finger tap her hand. Looking down, she found the young boy looking up at her. "Do you have any pictures of it?"

She smirked and dropped to a crouched position next to him. Pulling one of her military pads from her bag, she brought it online and downloaded the video from her internal computer. The camera began moving as she walked around the statue, carefully not showing any details of the hoard itself.

The boy chuckled and pat her on the shoulder. "You Shade, are my new favorite person. Because that is truly awe-inspiring." He pointed to Toni, who was still arguing with his grandmother. "Why didn't he just eat you?"

She snorted and shrugged. Pointing to the statue, she added, "honestly, I'm not sure. I truly expected to die for that."

"Really? Then why did you do it?" He frowned.

She chuckled. "Because I couldn't pass up a prank like that."

The boy cocked his head to the side, staring at her for a long moment. Suddenly he turned and strode to his grandmother, then tapped her in the back, interrupting her.

She spun on him, "what?"

"She's not a thief." He stated flatly.

The woman frowned down at him, then glared at the crouched elf. "Why do you say that?"

"Because she'd not a thief."

The grandmother, that Toni had called Miranda, folded her arms. "Prove it."

He strode back to Shade and pointed to the pad in her hand. The grandmother waved her hand, and the pad jerked from Shade's fingers and floated across to her.

"One minute and six seconds into the video." The boy stated.

Shade stood and walked to where the device hovered in front of the woman. "May I?"

The pad fell into her hands and she backed it up to the 1:06 marker. Sure enough, she had somehow missed the skull. It was in the very corner of the image. Even though she had tried so hard to be sure that it remained out of the video.

The old woman looked from Shade to Toni, then back to the elf again. "Fine, she can stay. But you two will unload the truck, then you will wait outside as my grandson and I go through each and every item. In case we decide not to keep it. Is that understood?"

"I have some experience, I can..."

The woman cut her off. "I do not want two hormonal teenagers in my home rutting around each other like pigs. Period."

Shade blinked several times and looked past the woman to Toni, who blushed slightly.

"As you wish, Mistress Miranda." He slid past the old woman and grabbed Shade. Pushing her in front of him, he shuffled them back to the truck. "Don't say a word."

"Thank you, Mistress Miranda." She called back to them. "And it was nice meeting you Lear."

"You too, Shade," the boy called cheerfully!

"Bitch." He mumbled at her.

They worked most of the day, bringing all the crates to the woman's door.

Now they sat in the grass side by side a good fifty yards away from the house as the sun sank toward the horizon in the distance.

Shade smiled up at the busy sky overhead. "It's amazing how much that sky looks like Taius." She mused.

"How do you know Taius?" He arched an eyebrow and looked at her.

She allowed her gaze to travel to the mountains in the distance and smiled. It was Taius, and she even knew what continent they were on. "It's where I was born."



"Figures." He took a deep breath.

She elbowed him, rocking them both back and forth. "Lustful teenagers, huh?"

He rolled his eyes.

"I know what a couple of lustful teenagers could do to kill some time." She teased.

He turned to glare at her. "Neither of us are teenagers."

"You do realize that you left something out there?"

He reached up and rubbed his face with his hands. "We've already been over this."

She leaned in as his hands came down off his face and kissed him on the lips.

His body betrayed him as his mouth softened, and a hand came up to rest on her hip. Their lips parted and the gently kiss grew passionate. His other hand came up and cupped her head as he slowly lowered them into the tall grass. When he finally broke the kiss and leaned back, he propped himself up on his elbow.

"Who are you?" He asked softly.

Shaking her head, she broke eye contact and looked up at the slowly darkening sky. "No one special, just an orphan like trillions of other kids in the galaxy."

"Did you at least know your parents?"

She turned to lock eyes with him. "Did you?"

"Yes. I still talk to them on the holidays and such. But then my circumstances are a little different. It's complicated." He shrugged his shoulders.

"You're lucky. I miss my parents." She lifted her hands and looked at them. "I can still draw the exact pattern that my father's brains left on the wall when they shot him." She snorted softly. "Even though I stored the memory in a stone long ago. I don't really remember anything else about that day, but I used to know every tiny detail."

"That's awful." He whispered.

She chuckled and returned her attention to his amazing golden eyes, like deep, warm amber. "It's not that bad, trust me. I have far worse memories that I haven't stored, and I likely never will."

Toni leaned in to kiss her gently.

Circling her arms around his neck, she coaxed him to kiss her deeper as the sun finally set below the horizon. The warm sky and cool grass hiding them from reality, as they both gave into their desire to explore the other in intimate detail.

# The End

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Setting the book down on the table, she downed the last of her ale. And glanced up through the room. It was quiet this evening. The usual musical entertainment was still missing. Even a week later. She wondered how long Shane would wait before giving up and replacing the bard.

"Need another, dear?" the Martha stepped up and smiled warmly at her. Despite being older, she could move through a rowdy crowd without losing even a drop of her ales.

"Maybe, but I am going to hit the privy first."

The woman laughed, "Gotta make room for more? No problem, dear."

As Delila made her way out back, several of the regulars waved at her.

"Hey Shane, how's the wife?" She paused and put her elbow on the shoulder of the large bar owner, sitting at the bar.

He chuckled, "She's doin better. Thanks for convincing her to see the doc."

"No problem. Good luck, I hope it's a boy."

"Me too! By the gods, no more girls! I beg you!" he yelled at the ceiling and several patrons laughed.

She stepped out the back door, still laughing.

A hand wrapped around her wrist, jerking her to the side, catching her utterly off-guard.

Her eyes wide in shock, she stared at the dark, male figure, with a deep hood and intense green eyes.

He slammed her up against the wall. Pressing a painfully sharp knife against her throat.

She resisted the natural urge to swallow against the pain.

"You're slowing down, Delila." The man growled in her face. His breath was not an entirely unpleasant mix of mead and fruit.

She smirked, despite the angry stare and the knife at her throat. "What makes you say that?"

"Because you're dead." He sneered.

She applied pressure to the knife in her offhand, and it sliced effortlessly through his leathers, pricking the skin just under his sternum.

"So are you."

The sneer slid into a full toothy grin. "Well played."

Pulling the knife from her throat, he ignored hers and pressed his entire body against her. As he leaned in, he pressed his mouth over hers and the two of them melted into a deep kiss that rapidly grew beyond a simple hello.

As her arms wrapped around his neck, he slid a hand down to her thigh and pulled on her leg. Her body responded without thought as she gave in to his desire.

The door opened next to them and a male voice chuckled.

The sound was enough to draw them back to their surroundings.

Her attacker leaned back slightly, ending the kiss, but keeping her pinned against the wall.

They stared deeply into each other's eyes, neither of them interested in walking away.

"This is a bad idea." Her voice came out far hoarser than she had intended. As her body screamed angrily at the logical part of her mind that told her to walk away before one of them got hurt, if not both of them.

"I know." His voice, however, was cool, almost angry.

When he didn't back away, she slid her hand into the bag at her side and dragged the leather-bound paperwork into the tight space between them.

The muscles in his jaw bulged several times as he looked from her eyes to the leather bundle, then back up to stare into her eyes. His lustful gaze turned angry as his nostrils flared with barely controlled rage.

Releasing her suddenly, he stepped back and snatched the paperwork from her hand. With his other hand, he slammed a jingling bundle into her chest roughly. As he released the small coin bag, it fell into her hand with a soft chink.

Her chest tightened as she opened her mouth to say something to him. It was too late, she suddenly realized. She'd allowed it to go too far.

"You'll fuck anything, but me." Mason growled. "Right, I see where we stand." He sneered and spun on his heel, marching away into the dark alley.

Her mouth remained open as her heart begged for him to come back, but her mind refused to form the words.

"I'm sorry, Lila. I didn't mean to ruin your fun." The large male frowned as he stepped up behind her to watch the man disappear into another alley.

"It's okay, Rolf. It's probably better this way." She smiled at him weakly, then mumbled under her breath. "Though it sure doesn't feel that way."