



Cool Shade of Winter

Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

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-Leon Hamilton

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The gentle sound of water lapping against the dual hulled catamaran, the Lion's Shade, was audible over the sounds of the surrounding harbor. The sleek, simple looking sailing catamaran was deceiving, much like her captain. The slim design hid the most advanced technology found in the entire harbor. And based on what her captain had seen so far, possibly the world.

Inside the main deck, a tall, elegant elf with pure white hair, ice-blue eyes and a figure that left an impression, no matter where she went, stood smiling behind the dimly lit bar. Gently, the elf, known for the moment as Sadie Feelari, lifted a large square bottle from the specially designed shelf. To keep the expensive liquors from shattering on the deck during rough seas, Leon, the ship's designer, had built an intricate railing system that locked the bottles in place, when not in use.

The crystal container in her hand was heavy, and the soft amber liquid in it rolled up and down the sides of the container. Pulling the crystal cork carved in the shape of a smiling lion's head, she took a deep breath in. A soft smile played across her perfect lips as the memories rolled through her mind. Scotch, well expensive scotch anyway, had always been Leon's favorite. She had teased him relentlessly about restricting himself to only one drink, meant he was a snob. She couldn't help but chuckle as she heard his response on the gentle breeze.

"If a snob is a person who only likes the best, then I agree. After all, I like you." His words played in her mind, causing her smile to fade slightly.

Grabbing a glass from under the counter, she poured herself a stiff drink and glanced up at the several monitors on the wall that currently displayed the feeds from her surveillance cameras on Precinct Way. Most of them pointed to a specific restaurant called Giovanni's, while the others showed her the front and alleys surrounding a large smithy, a scribe's office and the building they call the Precinct, at one point in time, it had been a police station. Now, however, the locals called it the wizard's tower. Jane's wizard tower. The young human

wizard that the elf had decided to accompany while she reintegrated into this brave new insanity, that the locals called a world.

Yet another person entered the back of the restaurant carrying several heavily laden bags. According to the facial recognition software, she was running on the ship's computer. This new person brought the headcount to thirty-six Assteri. Making it at least a platoon so far, possibly more. Apparently, Jane's attempt to bring technology to the city of Bugrasi was indeed attracting refugees, who knew what technology was.

Taking a sip from the drink, she shook her head slowly. Every hair on the back of her neck was telling her to sail away, but running from a complication was never her thing. She had always liked a challenge.

Making her way to a nearby bookshelf, she allowed her eyes to glide across the traditional old school bindings. Leon had always loved physical books. Often having digital books printed and leather bound just for his own personal library. The obvious theme caused the slight smile to widen as she exhaled slightly in a weak snort of laughter.

"Why am I not surprised?" Her gaze paused on a book labeled Cool Shade of Winter. They all had the word Shade in the title and the pen name, Leon Hamilton. One of his many aliases. Reaching up, she unlatched the shelf and pulled the book from the environmentally sealed glass case. Or at least it looked like glass and wood, but she knew it wasn't. Nothing on this ship was wood, it just appeared that way because they had both liked antiques.

"Honestly, Leon, I think you'd be in heaven here. I wish you could see it." She murmured.

Moving to a heavily over-stuffed chair, she eased herself down and spun it so that she could monitor the digital counter that overlaid the screen showing the Giovanni's restaurant. Propping her heeled boots up onto the armrest of the nearby couch, she crossed her feet at the ankles and propped the book onto her thighs.

Taking another sip of the peaty scotch, she opened the book to read the foreword.



Sometimes in our lives we look back. During those times, we have several choices available to us. But the most common is to remember fondly or fearfully. Shade however never feared her past, even the terrible memories. She simply used them as a reminder of how to succeed in the future. It was one of her most endearing and annoying traits.

Often, Shade reminded me of the ocean. Unforgiving and yet a loving mistress, to all that dared to venture into her depths. She can feed you, lull you to sleep with her beauty, and just as easily, she can engulf you in her rage. Leaving behind nothing but a bloated corpse. Yet in the end, it turns out that the ocean never even knew you were there. Despite this, there are those of us that love her so much, that the thought of being without her for even one day, steals the breath from our lungs and the life from our hearts.

A single droplet of water fell to the page, causing the beautiful elf to blink several times as she lifted a finger to stop the next tear. In her chest, her heart screamed out in pain. Rage washed over her as she realized all the people in her life that she could never say goodbye to. In every other kind of prison, they allowed some kind of correspondence with the outside world. But Helena Cartwright had that, and so much more, ripped from her by an enemy that she had never really known.

Taking a deep breath, she allowed the anger to fade into the background. Looking back down at the writing on the page, she smiled. She had loved Leon with all her heart, and she hoped he knew that. Her heart begged her to stop reading and walk away, but she refused. Turning the page, she swallowed the pain and buried it deep beneath the layers of anger that were dangerously multiplying. The past was just that, gone. No matter how much she lost, there was no getting her past back.

F ar in the distance, across the blinding blanket of pure white, untouched snow, loomed a dark mountain. Sprinkled here and there were misleading

blankets of stark white on the dark face. To her left, the sun was creeping towards the horizon.

“We will be ready in ten.” A male voice called from behind her.

A tall, white-clad woman with wisps of pure white hair gently playing on the breeze smiled and tried to tuck a curl back under her woolen cap. Turning to look into the forest behind her, she could barely make out the hidden shuttle. Hidden in the canopy of trees, the small shuttle had eight people clad in pure white, currently doing gear checks. Like her, they wore camouflage to fit in with their surroundings, but while her outfit was simply a snowsuit, theirs was a high-tech suit of environmentally sealed armor. Each suit could handle the extreme temperatures of space, so the cool air of the Ferrin Ridge was hardly noticeable. They also each carried several weapons. They bristled with everything from guns, to rifles, to knives, and even explosives. Each suit of Assteri suit of armor also hid an arsenal of micro-missiles and lasers.

The white-haired elf, known to most simply as, Shade. Was a shadow that slid in and out of impossible places, taking with her anything that caught her fancy. And today, Shade watched the compact unit prepare, and mused at the sight of them. Resisting the urge to shake her head in disbelief, she asked herself, why in the world had she agreed to this? It would not end well, and she knew it. She worked alone for a reason.

The male that had spoken, turned, and walked towards her.

“We know you by reputation, but we’ve never worked together.” He began the conversation with what she could already tell was a threat.

Yet she managed not to roll her eyes.

“We expect you to uphold your end of the contract. We do not tolerate failure in the Assteri.”

“Or double crossing, yeah, yeah. Skip the standard issue threats. We both have our agenda’s here. He hired us to work together. That’s what we will do.” She snapped at him and folded her arms across her chest as she leaned back against the tree she’d been using as cover while she surveyed the approach. She intended her movement to look like a dismissive action, yet she was actually placing her hands closer to her own hidden weapons.

The mercenary saw it for what it was, however, and rested his hand on his own pistol resting in the holster at his hip.

They stared at each other for several tense moments.

"We are ready commander." A female voice called from the shuttle.

Shade glanced towards the horizon and nodded. Ignoring the posturing male, she pushed off the tree and strolled past him to the group.

"Okay." The seemingly unarmored elf tossed a small device into the center of the table that the team had set up just inside the large rear hatch of the shuttle.

The team gathered around her closely, while their commander hung back to watch from a distance. Clearly their brief chat had done little to alleviate his concerns.

The tiny holographic projector chimed quietly and projected a highly detailed holographic image of the secret military base at the summit of the looming mountain in the distance.

"The Imperials have far more soldiers at the base than they really need. Based on the design, they also have more soldiers than they can use. A flaw that we will use to our benefit." Reaching into the image, she pulled it apart, forcing it to zoom in on so that they could clearly see the building scattered around the edge of the enormous courtyard. It was easily large enough to land a small spaceship and still have plenty of room to move the troops around.

"This area is the main barracks." She pointed to a building to the left of the courtyard. "This is the hangar where they keep the quad copters. So, you will need to slow them down by taking out the hangar doors. If you don't that little shuttle of yours won't survive long enough to get far." She zoomed in again to show a large machine unit around the back of the hangar building, tucked tightly between it and the outer wall. An area not easily guarded because of the location.

"Hevari, you and yours, will deal with the doors." The male that had threatened her spoke up from where he was watching the group from a slight distance. Most likely because he wanted to monitor Shade as well as the briefing.

"Roger."

"Now this is the good part," Shade chuckled, "they have all these troops." She waved her hand across the Holo image, fingertips down towards the troops in the courtyard. "But only ten can go inside at a time." She pointed to a small door that led into the facility. "They use a tiny airlock system to keep the inner base free from outside contaminants."

She waved her hand in a specific pattern, and the image shifted from an obvious drone footage to a set of highly detailed blueprints.

“So even after the alarms start, only ten soldiers at a time will enter the facility.” She tapped on the airlock. “Even if they use the emergency override, to force both doors open at once, it takes four minutes. They will inevitably try to get a few teams in before overriding the lock. So, you likely have ten minutes, give or take three, before the base fills with troops.”

The smirk on the woman’s face was clearly visible to the metal clad individuals around her.

Several murmurs erupted around her as the mercs expressed their disbelief at the stupidity of the design.

“Keep it down. Let the specialist continue.” The male commander snapped, and the unit went silent immediately.

“We will come in here.” She reached into the hologram and pulled both hands away from each other, expanding the floors so that the entire base was visible from the side. Forty floors expanded, and a blue beacon appeared. “My target, the spearhead, is here.” Another green light flashed into existence. “I will need fifteen minutes to get in, grab it, then get back out to here. The inner rendezvous.” A yellow light appeared.

“I will send one of mine with you for protection.” The male stated firmly and pointed to a smaller female.

“No, you won’t.” Shade stood tall and started to fold her arms, but thought better of it and relaxed them at her sides instead.

“It was not a request.” The male stated flatly.

Shade felt the coolness settle in around her, and she was fairly sure it wasn’t the weather.

“Then I am done here. I have not planned this for three years just to fail because some prick ass mercenary flies in and thinks he knows my job better than I do. Have a nice evening.” She turned to storm off, but two of the mercenaries stepped into her path.

“We have a contract to fulfill.” The male stated, but she could hear the faint hint of confusion.

She really wished she could see their faces. Reading body language in fully sealed armor was always so much more difficult.

“Good for you. I wish you the best of luck in fulfilling that contract, but I am done here.”

Several weapons raised towards her and she heard the energy packs spin up. But Shade simply cocked her head, with a knowing smirk firmly plastered on her face. Leaning back into the table, she rested her hands on the table on either side of her hips.

"I am okay with dying today. Are you? Because if you fire those weapons out here, that" she pointed to the precariously blanketed mountainside. "Will be down on top of us before you can get your engines warmed up and lift off. By the time you dig yourselves out, the army will be on you with every hover tank and quad copter they have. None of you will ever see the light of daybreak again."

"Easy." The man lifted a hand and all but one mercenary lowered their weapons. "She's right, Hevari."

The last weapon lowered reluctantly.

Shade chuckled, they likely considered her insane to be doing this job with only knives strapped all across her body. But unlike them, apparently, she'd done her homework. Guns would not be useful, if they all did their part correctly, that was.

"I simply want to ensure that you can get the item and get back out safely."

"Bull shit." Shade shook her head. "You want to be sure I don't doublecross you."

The entire groups watched her intently as she and the commander stared each other down intently.

"Relax." She laughed, causing several of the mercs to jump uncertainly. "I am being paid to do a job. I will do the job. I will get the spearhead, and I will meet you at the rendezvous. You have my word."

The silence continued for several more uncomfortable moments, while the team had some kind of internal communication that she couldn't hear. She knew they were talking, because of the body language, some of them weren't great at hiding it.

"Fine. You may go alone."

"Well, that was easy, wasn't it?" She suddenly stood and spun back towards the table. Causing several weapons to lift towards her again. Ignoring them, she reactivated the holo and began discussing the next sections of the plan. "That just leaves your target." She tapped a small office and the desk in the room lit up.

"I thought our target was a human?" A younger male voice chimed in, then suddenly grew quiet as several helmets spun towards him.

"Easy kid, don't let them bully you. You are correct. He is a human, but as of six days ago he became a prisoner rather than a researcher. And here is where you will find the passkey to his room. Unless you'd rather blow the door and cause a tier nine lockdown?" She turned to look over her shoulder at the commander behind her. Tier nine meant a bio contaminant warning, permanently locking every single door in the place and making it practically impossible for them to get out.

He shook his head. But the female he called Hevari, asked Shade the question they all had.

"How do you know that?"

"Intelligence is one of my many specialties." She winked at the woman and saw her hand twitch towards her sidearm. Chuckling at the automated response, the elf added, "that and being extremely good with my hips."

"Slut." The merc grumbled.

"You'd better believe it." The gorgeous elf laughed and several mercs shuffled their stance slightly as they clearly became uncomfortable. Laughing harder, Shade suddenly realized that her volume was creeping a tad too high. Rather than trigger the avalanche herself, she clamped down on the sound and shook her head before continuing. "Relax, I am kidding. Well sort of, I have an insider though who feeds me intel."

"Anyone we need to keep alive?" The commander behind her asked.

"Nope. She is as expendable as they all are. Anyone gets in your way, kill them. No exceptions." She shrugged. "Except your target, I suppose." Shade swiped her hand through the holo and it shut off. "Questions?"

The surrounding mercenaries shook their heads and looked to their commander.

"We are good." He agreed.

"Perfect! You guys mind if I use your shitter? I have no real interested in freezing my body parts off, just because I have to pee."

"Are you kidding?" Hevari snapped.

"Nope." Shade did a comical dance with her legs crossed.

“Good grief.” The woman snapped and gestured to the door in the shuttle marked with the universal symbol for toilet.

“Thank you.” Shade waddled to the bathroom and locked herself inside. Outside, she could hear the muffled voices.

“Where the hell did he find this person? She is the most unprofessional bitch I have ever met!”

“Maybe so, but she’s also the best.”

“Yeah, I seriously doubt that.”

Shade came out and stretched before zipping up the rest of her snowsuit. The action had its intended result and every single male in the unit was staring at her, unmoving. Under the snowsuit she wore a tight V-neck t-shirt that left extraordinarily little to the imagination. The stretch had even showed the black lacy bra underneath.

Hevari rolled her head to the side and hit the commander in the shoulder roughly. “Let’s get moving, sir.”

The elf, reading the book, looked up and skimmed the monitors as she took another drink. She couldn’t help wondering if Leon had recorded their pillow talk, because so far the book fit her memories almost exactly. Except, of course, for the part that’d she’d omitted in the original telling. Using the bathroom had been part of her backup plan. Once inside, she pulled the two wires from her bra and connected them. Then she placed them inside the rim of the toilet before taking a piss.

Ships, and even shuttles like this, had explosive sensors, but the Shade had taken that into account. The wires weren’t actually a bomb... yet. The holo chip that she’d conveniently left on the table was in fact the trigger that would mix the chemicals. Once mixed, the compound would only remain stable for approximately thirty seconds before it blew. By the time the alarms went off, it would be too late for them to find and remove it. If the day went the way she expected, they’d get a lovely little present with just enough punch to drop the shuttle out of the sky, permanently.

The stretch after the bathroom had been more than simply flirting with the mercs. It had really been to help the bra settle back into place comfortably. But in her story to Leon, she'd left that part out.

On one monitor, the man they called Giovanni stepped into the ally behind the restaurant and looked around. He was clearly uncomfortable, his heightened senses likely telling him they were being watched. But when he didn't seem to find the tiny surveillance device, Shade chuckled and took another sip of the scotch.

The elf knew the Assteri well. They base much of their technology off of the psionic nature of the race. Which strengthened them in some areas and weakened them in others. In her long career, before being arrested and tossed into the prison stone, Shade ran across them often. Ironically, on both sides of the fence. Leon and Shadowband Solutions had worked together several times, inventing technologies that their systems couldn't detect. And now that she had her tools back, she could make all the surveillance devices she needed to monitor the mercenaries that had set up a secret base across the street from the young human wizard.

He went back inside, and Shade returned to the book in her lap. The next several pages were about the climb up the cliff-face towards the ventilation system. She skipped ahead several pages until she got to something more interesting.



Shade paused on a tiny ledge that only the smaller unarmored burglar could perch on. She watched as the unit of eight heavily clad individuals climbed past her towards the ledge above. She had been sure that they understood at the base of the mountain that their technology was off limits during the climb.

Even their internal psionic based comms. The base high overhead didn't have physical security on this side because of the highly enhanced sensors that covered the mountainside. Actually climbing the mountain, the old-fashioned way, was the only way to approach unnoticed. Because the sensors would just catalog the movement as wildlife. Of which there was plenty.

To most of the high-tech galaxy, a manual climb like this was not only unfeasible, but outright impossible. A serious flaw in thinking that the Shade had every intention of abusing.

Above her, one of the mercs lost their grip and fell. Several of their companions reached for them, but missed.

Shade was sure that this would be the end. No one would willingly fall to their death. But when the jets didn't kick on, she rolled her eyes and leapt off her perch after them. Pulling her arms in close, she dove as quickly as gravity would allow.

Slamming into the armor, Shade immediately spun and triggered her grapple. It shot out and slammed into the cliff face, gripping tightly into the stone. The sudden stop yanked her arm from the socket, but she remained silent as the two of them slammed roughly into the stone.

"What the hell are you doing?" Hevari snapped at her, likely louder than she intended.

"Saving your life." Shade grunted, as she fought the pain. Her internal system began the repairs, but she needed to get the weight off the arm so she could set it. "Would you mind getting off me?"

The female Assteri moved to the rocks and started her climb enough to get a small distance between herself and the unarmored woman.

Shade moved slightly so that she could get her feet under her, then slammed her injured shoulder roughly into a rock outcropping. It reset with a loud pop and a soft exhale of pained breath. Her eyes teared up slightly and she began moving her hand to check for any other damage.

"You never sacrifice the mission for one person!" The merc spat down at her.

"I sacrificed nothing. Besides, there are only 9 of us. To pull this off, we *all* need to do our parts."

"You used tech, endangering everyone to save one person!" The sound was a little loud for comfort.

Shade looked up to see if any of the snow above them was moving.

"Keep your voice down." She glared up at the woman and climbed up quickly to get even with the woman. "Before you get us all killed. I didn't use any tech. That was an air powered device. So shut the fuck up. Oh, and your welcome."

Climbing past the woman deftly, she picked her way up to her grapple and popped it free from the mountain with a push of a button. As she coiled up the rope, she ignored the woman. She needed to make up time, that, and she wanted to get away from the woman as quickly as she could manage, just in case the klutz fell again.

Shade climbed her way quickly up to the vent where the others were already waiting. As she reached the ledge, she saw a single hand held out to her. Taking it, the commander pulled her up over the ledge easily.

Placing a hand on her shoulder as she stood, he whispered, "thank you."

"You're welcome." She nodded and moved towards the grate.

Sadie skimmed the next few pages and chuckled at Leon's utterly fictional rendition of the events that followed the team reaching the vent. The two of them never really talked business per se. They often glossed over details that they knew the other wasn't all that interested in, in order to get to the most exciting parts of the story.

The first part of the plan had gone smoothly, both in reality and in his writing of it. She'd gotten the spearhead and swapped it out for the utterly perfect duplicate that she'd brought with her. She'd placed the drone and the actual Assteri artifact in a separate, smaller, emergency ventilation system that wouldn't open until the base went into lockdown. Then she'd gone to the rendezvous point. Doing exactly what she'd given her word that she would do.

Leon had often teased her about giving her word. Claiming that she was worse than a djinni. The drone had very specific programming. And it would do its own thing as soon as the base went into lockdown mode. The chaos that she had known would happen. But that was only because she was an excellent judge of character. She stopped and began reading again at one of her favorite parts.

"Heh. Howdy Robert." Shade chuckled at the man in the orange jumpsuit.

The team tossed a bag that they'd stored at the rendezvous at his feet. He quickly began getting dressed, equipping the cold weather gear over the jumpsuit.

"Shut up." He snapped at her.

"You two know each other?" The commander asked as his helmeted head looked up past them both down the hallway where several of his team members were heading their way at a run.

Neither elf answered him.

"We have incoming, they have figured out where we are and are applying a perfect pincer. They have heavy weapons and don't seem concerned about using them." Hevari reported, panting.

"So much for your plan." The commander said to Shade as he eyed the blonde-haired elf getting dressed. He was moving too slowly, and they all knew it.

"Let me guess, you are using your comms?" She raised an eyebrow, already knowing the answer to the question.

"They can't hear our comms." One of the other females snapped at her. "I don't care what you think."

"Yes, they can." Robert corrected, as he pulled heavy snow boots on over his bare feet. "Communications is the principal focus of the research here. They cracked the basic Assteri encryption two months ago."

Shade chuckled and shook her head. "By the gods, I love a good fuck up. And they seem to follow you everywhere you go Bobbie."

The man froze midway as he pulled up the snow-pants. His blue eyes locked on hers with a seething hatred so intense that they crackled with power. "Do NOT call me that!"

She snorted and turned to push past several of the heavily armored mercenaries as they quickly checked their ammo counts, preparing to stand and fight.

"Where are you going?" The commander called after her.

"Since you idiots chose not to listen to me, even after I proved to you, I knew what I was doing. I guess we have to move to Plan B."

"There is a Plan B?" The commander had followed her to the door. Watching intently, he cocked his head slightly, as she attached the digital lockpick to the door and quickly popped it open.

"Of course, there is. I am not an unprofessional, as you seem to think." She gestured into the small room. It looked like some kind of training room with ten small desks and a large digiboard on the far wall. "After you."

He stepped in and looked around. "There isn't another door."

"Not yet." She smirked, and the armored head nodded curtly as if he suddenly understood.

"Everyone in!" He ordered.

As the mercs and Robert pushed their way into the room, Shade pulled a thin cable from her bag and quickly measured out an opening large enough for the armored Assteri to fit through.

In the hallway outside, they could hear the gunfire growing closer, as the soldiers guarding the base filled the hallway with bullets. A typical tactic when dealing with stealth units. Which this team most definitely was.

"Wow, you weren't kidding. That's some pretty serious hardware. It will take them months to repair that." Shade attached a device to the cable and punched a button. A bright welding light triggered as the chemicals in the cable ignited the metal and cut a thin line in the wall the size of a large door.

"What the fuck did you do?" Looking over her shoulder at Robert, she saw him quickly find something else to look at.

His gaze settled on the commander. "Can you shut her up?"

"She's our way out." The armored man shrugged.

"You have to be fucking kidding me." He grumbled. "You are clearly not worth what I am paying you."

The gunfire grew dangerously close as the group watched the tiny white fire impatiently. When it finally subsided, and the red-hot metal was the only thing left. One of the armored suits kicked the new door. It fell inward with a loud thud. The tunnel on the other side of the wall was dark and only about six feet in diameter, but the group piled in, regardless.

"Right." Shade called, as she reached down and snatched up the device that had powered the chemical reaction.

The group began running as fast as the tight confines would allow, as the door behind them, that led into the training room, erupted in a hail of bullets.

Staying in the rear, Shade called out several more turns as the group rushed ahead. Behind them, she dropped several small intelligent metallic balls. When they came to an intersection, she would toss several the opposite direction. The small devices began rolling on their own and broadcasting loudly on various circuits. They wouldn't fool the Imperial Marines for long, but they only needed a minor distraction, just enough to break free from the facility. The rest would take care of itself.

As the group blew through the grate at the end of a tertiary vent system, that the new residents of the base most likely knew nothing about. The unit found themselves in a massive cavern.

"What now?" The commander looked down to Shade as several helm lights kicked on, lighting up the floor of the surrounding cavern.

"Now comes the fun part." She strode over to a pile that looked to be rocks. But as she reached down, she pulled back a large digi-tarp to reveal several sets of skis and sleds.

"I wasn't sure if you knew how to ski or not, so I brought both. I will say that the sleds will probably hurt a hell of a lot more than the skis."

"Impressive." The grin was audible in the commander's single word compliment.

"Um. Sir?" The sound of concern was evident in the Assteri's voice.

Robert and Shade turned to look where several head cams were illuminating the slightly shifting walls and ceiling of the cavern.

Shade felt Robert step up next to her to whisper subvocally. "You never fail to impress sis."

"I know, right?" She laughed.

Eight Assteri mercenaries lifted their weapons and gathered together in the center of the cave, their backs together carefully as they prepared for the new threat. The thousands, weaponized drone units, turned their attention to the movement. They were only about ten inches in diameter a piece and affixed to the rock face as they waited for the trigger that would activate their pre-programmed code. Throughout the cavern, thousands of tiny red lights flickered into view. It was a massive red wave that raced across the quarter of a-mile-long cavern, in a rather eerie light show.

Shade handed Robert a set of skis. "Better get ready, all hell is about to break loose."

He took the skis and shook his head at her as the two elves raced towards the exit.

The team of mercenaries watched as they darted past, likely confused.

As they reached the edge of the cliff, they barely had time to set the skis down and trigger the gravity fields, before the soft chime of over two hundred thousand drones climbed to a deafening crescendo.

The cliffs shook from the noise. All around them, the vibration from the drones began shaking the snow loose. As the white powder began sliding past them, they leapt off the cliff with as large a push as they could manage.

Behind them, the tunnel erupted in a massive black cloud, tossing them head over heels out into the air, much further than either of them had expected.

As Shade slammed into the raging avalanche, it took all of her focus, and every single piece of cyberware she had, to keep up with the rapid changes needed to stay on top of the snow, rather than getting buried beneath it. She quickly lost track of Robert and the others, assuming they had even left the cave yet.

The cloud of drones did their jobs, though. Overhead several quad copters, that shouldn't have been in the air, had the mercs done their jobs right, went down as the drones overwhelmed them with sheer numbers. The drones had little weaponry, but two hundred thousand pop guns was a lot to ignore. And when you add the ability to fly into propellers, well, that was enough to knock almost anything out of the air. And anything that crashed into the raging avalanche below, wasn't coming back.

Even the grav-tanks that had somehow appeared below them, ended up tossed like plastic toys in a child's bubble-bath. Any soldiers that may have been on the ground further down at a satellite base were likely to return home in body-bags. Assuming they could find any of them before spring.

Sadie looked up from the book. The screens were empty save for the few beggars that had set up in the alley behind the restaurant. Clearly the local guild also wanted to keep tabs on the newcomers.

She couldn't help but wonder what the locals thought of, what they considered, the pre-age refugees. Even she could see the strain, as the multiple age refugees, strained against the reality of the modern world. The elf had been on many low-tech worlds in her career. Low-tech societies rarely lasted long against the more advanced technology of the outsider. No matter how benevolent the outsiders were, or thought they were, it was never a smooth transition. There was always bloodshed as the cultures clashed, each trying to retain their identity. And in this case, it was looking to be at least five different cultures in Bugrasi alone, all fighting to maintain their identity. It would be beyond bloody in the end. But it wasn't her place to share her experiences. The future was already in progress, there was no way to go back now.

Jane and Zerrick never really liked or understood when Sadie refused to claim Bugrasi as her home. Yet it was true, Bugrasi was a city. It was not a home. Her mind worked differently than theirs, and nothing she could say was going to change that. For her, Taius was home. Even if it was utterly broken and backwards at the moment.

Skipped ahead, Sadie ignored the only slightly embellished avalanche ride across the countryside.

As Shade slid to a stop in front of the hovering shuttle. She couldn't help but chuckle. Clearly the pilot had paid attention to her. Heading her warning, he had prepped the vessel for the possibility of an avalanche. And now the undamaged vehicle was hovering slightly over the packed snow, with the rear door open. In her HUD a green light triggered, letting her know that Plan A had activated with no interference and was arriving at its destination. Grinning, she bent over one of the poles slightly, trying to catch her breath. Skiing was one thing... but whatever that had been was nothing more than sheer survival.

It took a good twenty minutes before the others began showing up. And as the commander landed, using his gravity belt, several tufts of packed snow launched into the air. Next to him, he dropped a squirming body unceremoniously into the snow.

Robert made an oof noise, then cursed into the snow as he tried to push himself upright in the half a mile-high, snowdrift. It was humorous to watch as he kept repeatedly falling through.

"Where is our payment?" The Commander floated over to the lowered gangplank of the ship and settled onto the deck.

Shade watched casually as Robert half swam, half crawled, towards the ship. She knew this was where it was going to get sticky. Reaching into her coat, she pulled a leather wrapped object. Tossing it to him, she rested her hands on her poles, prepping to push off if things went wrong.

He handed it to his female second in command, Hevari. She unfolded the leather and examined the piece. She nodded to him. The hand snatched towards his sidearm faster than the Shade could get out of the way. As she fell towards the now red spattered snow, she heard Robert's voice. "Finally! Now help me up and let's get out of here."

There was what seemed like an eternal pause before she heard Robert add. "That fulfilled the contract. Interested in making a new one? I could more people like you."

Sadie chuckled as she turned the page. Both she and Robert had ended up with some serious medical bills from that day. Unlike the heavily armored Assteri, he hadn't fared as well against her little Life Day present. But again, Helena had left that part of the story out. She wasn't sure he would understand her complicated relationship with her brother. Robert and Helena had no direct blood relation, but it was the family she had chosen after she lost her real family. And whether or not she liked it, she was stuck with the asshole. Apparently even now, after five thousand years. Whoever thought it was a good idea to keep him alive forever, though, was a moron. In prison or not.

Flipping the page, she grinned at the last scene in the story.

Helena Cartwright blinked several times as her eyes tried to cope with the brightness of the surrounding room. Pushing herself upright, she glanced over at the doctor next to her.

"Take it easy, it will take a few for the synaptic stress to fade." The floating metal ball chided her.

"Yeah, yeah. Nothing new." Ignoring the robot, she swung her feet to the floor.

It sighed loudly and darted across the room to analyze some data from the test subject that was still slowly bleeding to death in the snow several thousand miles away.

Not waiting for the okay, she padded across the medical center, before lifting a silk robe off the hook by the door. Sliding it on, she strolled out into the main house and down the hall to her left. As she stepped in front of a high security door, the light turned green on the panel as it slid open silently, with a gentle whoosh of cool air.

A dark-haired man with dark brown eyes, enlarged to absurd levels by the pair of magnification glasses he was wearing, smiled up at her.

"We get it?"

"Yep. And it's rather impressive." Flipping the glasses up so that they were no longer covering his eyes, he gestured to the brightly lit table in front of him.

She walked around and slid a single elbow onto the seated man's shoulder.

They both stared down at the Assteri artifact. A spearhead made of a previously unknown metal alloy, used to kill a god in a single blow. If you believed the legends, anyway. It was the most sought-after secret for worlds over, as it was the key to impregnable hulls or, in this case... the key to the ultimate in armor piercing ammunition.

"This will change warfare as we know it." The man smiled up at her. "And I owe it all to you."

The Shade patted him on the cheek, then bent down to kiss him. "Anything for a good time." She teased and turned to strut off towards the bedroom. "You coming?"

The End



Sadie closed the book and looked up at the monitors. Resting her hand on the cover, she took a sip of the scotch and a slow smile crept across her face. Most of the book had been pure fiction, but enough was real to cause serious problems if certain people put two and two together.

On one screen, a woman came out of the restaurant and looked directly in the camera's direction. But try as she might, she never actually found the tiny device.

Sadie laughed and downed the rest of the scotch before standing and walking over to the control panel that's she'd set up for the surveillance. Moving her hand in a specific pattern over the holo display, the various screens flashed a single green light. The code ran, causing over a dozen micro-drone cameras to slowly enacted their six-hour-long relocation protocol. They would only move a few feet each, but the six-hour time frame would ensure that no one noticed the movement.

"By the gods, I love my work." She laughed and triggered the ship's outer security as she headed to bed, taking the book with her as she went.