



# Deep Shade of a Villain

DEEP SHADE OF A VILLAIN

*Written by Wendi Coffman Porter*

*World Design by Richard W. Porter III*

“...the number one problem with living longer than the younger races, is the children you raised and loved, grow old and die in front of you. The result often makes older races appear harsh or uncaring, when the reality is that they have just learned to harden their feelings against the loss they know will come all too soon. Remember that as you listen to this story unfold before you.”

-Leon Hamilton

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**Fachun 20<sup>th</sup>, 26551**

“Good evening, captain. What can I get you tonight?” A gentle voice cut through the dull roar of conversations and gambling. It belonged to an elegant, yet slightly older human named Mary. One of the many servers at the Rusty Anchor.

This tavern was a unique five story building nestled in the wealthier end of the docks district. The original builder has set it up against the firewall, high on the hill, overlooking the large man-made harbor. It was a spectacular vantage point that allowed the sailors, and captains, that frequented the tavern to see everything happening below.

To take advantage of the amazing view, the owner had built a massive glass window, composed of hundreds of one-foot by one-foot panes of glass. A feat that just didn’t exist in this primitive modern world. It made this tavern not only a one of a kind, but the best location to not only eat, drink and relax, but keep any eye on every single ship in the harbor of the capital city of Bugrasi.

For the white-haired elf in the corner who was used to a high-tech society, the only part of the five-story architecture that was unusual, was the size of the panes. In her time, they had built entire skyscrapers from clear glass like materials. But this was a backward world of dinosaurs, knights, kings and barbarians.

Glass was almost entirely unheard of. Unless you were very close friends with the barbarian tribes that wandered the irradiated sand-wastes. Which made this tavern not only unique, but a beacon for all of those with enough money to buy their way in. Which Sadie had accomplished, despite her circumstances.

“Evening, Mary. I’d like a bottle of wine for myself. And when more people are in tonight, I’d like to buy a round.” Sadie smiled at the shorter human woman and pulled out a chair from one of the smaller tables on the ground floor.

The woman beamed brightly. “Then you found your ship after all?”

Sadie nodded as she set a blue bound leather book face down on the table.

"Congratulations!" The woman seemed genuinely pleased by the news.

"Thank you." As Sadie sat, the woman bounced off towards the bar.

Looking out over the spectacular view of the harbor, she smiled fondly at the hundreds of ships sprinkled across the harbor. In her day, shipping by water was rare, assuming it happened at all. Most ships were leisure vessels, or spaceships. And while many things annoyed her about this alternative version of hell. The return to the sea hadn't been one of them.

Turning her attention inside the massive tavern, she allowed her gaze to pass overhead. Ironically, the fifty-foot tall window wasn't the only unusual thing about the Rusty Anchor. Inside was also a rather impressive feat of engineering, for this backward time anyway. The main ceiling was fifty feet high, with four massive masts used as pillars to support the ceiling. Around the masts, and along the walls, were various balconies. Each balcony was slightly different in design and christened decks. They each had railings, like you would find on a ship, and they varied in size. Some decks even had multiple tables on them. However, the majority only held a single table, large enough for an average ship's officer compliment. All the decks, however, attached to each other via catwalks, rope bridges and the occasional single plank tossed in here and there for drunk entertainment.

Throughout the room, they had strategically scattered several sets of stairs, to make it easier for the wait staff to get to the various levels quickly with heavy loads. The main floor was for general crew or smaller vessels. And the Lion's Shade, captained by the beautiful elf currently going by the name Sadie Feelari, was a small ship in comparison. Sadie was of course not her name, it wasn't even one of her preferred names, but it was the name Robert had stuck her with. Until she could get rid of him, anyway.

The main floor was open seating, unlike the decks overhead. The decks overhead linked the guests with a specific ship or company. Captains could rent the decks by the week. Or longer if they were willing to pay in advance. The decks at the very top of the tavern even had mounted figureheads, signifying that the captain rented them for years or longer.

Sadie was a content to be a lowly floor goer. She enjoyed being among the riffraff, seeing as she was riffraff herself. Leaning her chair back against the wall, she propped her feet up on the table and pulled the blue-bound book into her lap. The waitress set a loaf of bread and a plate of cheese, down next to a slightly dusty bottle of wine, and a perfectly spotless crystal goblet.



With a nod of thanks, Sadie poured the dark red wine into the glass and sniffed it carefully. It was older, she could tell by the bottle. And it smelled sweet and somewhat smoky. Taking a sip, she allowed a contented smile to settle into place.

Turning her attention to the elf behind the bar, she raised her glass in a toast. Unlike her, he was the typical elf found in this fifth age world. All elves were tall, but the more modern versions were also thin, almost emaciated, with high cheekbones and sharply pointed ears that were far too long for their cranium. This elf also had sparkling golden eyes and black hair, though his hair was greying at the temples.

He smiled warmly and nodded to her.

Taking another sip, she turned her attention back to the book. Running her fingers over the scaled leather, she wondered what kind of snake or lizard Leon had found to use as the cover. The scales were slightly iridescent and shone with a faint rainbow in the lantern light. That the scales were blue seemed odd, but taxidermy wasn't really one of her skills. Leon had decorated the cover with a sea motif. Affixing shells to the cover and embossing the leather in a beautiful fishnet pattern. All to enhance the title, Deep Shade of a Villain. Which he had embedded into the cover using what appeared to be scales, or perhaps abalone? As she tilted the book to catch the light, she grinned. No, it was pearl, how à propos.

Opening the cover, she took another sip of the wine as she read the forward.



Age is a determinant variable. And yet we often assign it an indeterminate perception. Are you confused? That was my intent. In this vast universe of ours, one can travel for their entire lifetime and never see the same place twice. No matter what species that individual is. There are common races that live thousands of years, and races that live only a few decades.

Younger races, is the general term used for races that live less than 200 years on average. These younger races are in every corner of the various galaxies. They are also the most prolific, making them the most numerous. They also make up most of my readers. I only bring this up to explain my point about age being an indeterminate perception.

I have traveled extensively in my lifetime. And the most often asked question I encounter centers on Shade and her age, or the length of her prison sentence. My critics like to use the length of her sentence as proof that she never existed. After all, 5000 years is impossible to a younger race's, perceived notion of time, anyway.

Yet, as any older race will tell you, there is a fundamental difference between the younger and older races. Younger races often find it fascinating that a race could live for thousands of years. If you were to ask an elf, for example, what it was like to live for a thousand years or more, the first thing they would tell you is that it is not as wonderful as it may seem.

By now, my dear reader, you are likely bored by all of this prattling on about age. I assure you this applies to the story. You see, the number one problem with living so much longer than the younger races, such as a human, is that friends and loved ones grow old and die. While the elder races, such as elves, continue on, seemingly unchanged. The result often causes the elf, as in our example, to appear harsh or uncaring, when the reality is, that they have simply learned to harden their feelings against the loss they know will come all too soon. Remember that as this story unfolds before you.

“Mr. Gafaldi, I understand the importance of prototypes. And yes sir, I believe the threat to your prototype is credible. However, according to the anonymous threat you received yesterday, you have a week to get the money together. That is more than enough time to get the security measures in place. Trust me, this is my specialty. You will have a team there by morning, they are already in route. We will find the perfect solution for your security needs.”

The tall, elegant elf stepped up the clear wall, and allowed her gaze to drift across the sprawling city lights below, out over the moonlit ocean in the distance, then back to the stocky holographic image of a male dwarf to her left. A soft smile played across her lips as she attempted to calm the panicked dwarf. “I assure you Gendral, Shadowband Solutions will secure your prototype. No one will get their hands on it but you. These threats will be mitigated. We will take care of everything, including forensics, in case you wish to turn over any evidence to the authorities.”

“No!” the dwarf snapped suddenly, and Helena arched a single eyebrow. He shook himself and looked off to the side, clearly avoiding her gaze. “I mean, the

fewer people that know what I am doing, the better. I am sure you understand the need for security.” His voice shivered.

Helena allowed her smile to grow slightly as she bowed her head. “Of course. My people can fully implement whatever plan you wish for this situation. If you will look at the file, I just sent you. We are quite capable. We can handle any kind of problem you might have, for the right fee of course.”

His head cocked to the side slightly as his body seemed to slow its fidgeting. He swiped in the air several times, quickly skimming the catalog of services. He paused suddenly and focused his stare back on to her. “Wait, are you saying...?”

“Relax Gendral,” She raised a hand towards him as if she were going to pat him on the shoulder. “I sent my right-hand dwarf. Jonar will explain everything when he is on site. But trust me, no matter what you need, we will take care of it.”

“Hmm.” The dwarf chewed on the hairs on his bottom lip as he considered the possibilities.

The door to Helena’s office slid open without a sound, and she glanced to the male elf standing there. Once she noticed him, he made a flicking gesture across the digi-pad in his hand. A digital message flashed into her heads up, Ellie on line 2.

“Do you feel more confident now Mr. Gafaldi?” Returning her attention to her client, she beamed happily.

His body language had changed. He was now angry, rather than the panicked rat she’d seen only a few moments ago. “Yes. I am going to make the bastard pay,” he growled!

“Perfect!” She bowed slightly. “Jonar will be there in a few hours. Tell him everything. The more we know, the more we can protect your work and deal with your problem.”

“Understood. Thank you, Ms. Cartwright.”

“Of course.” Waving her hand through the dwarf’s holo, she ended the call and turned to her aide. “What’s going on?”

“Apparently the Taius Vault was broken into last night.” The elf walked up and handed her a coffee.

“What did they get?” She took a sip and opened a file that appeared on her HuD.

"Just one thing, something labeled," he paused, reading the pad. "The Sea Witch."

Helena froze mid sip. But she didn't allow it to phase her for long. "Thank you, Menefelle. Prep my shuttle and activate team Z."

Team Z was her own personal unit that she used for high-profile cases. They were a group of highly overqualified specialists that she'd hired to deal with any possibility. All of them were ex-special forces, from planets and governments all over the galactic arm. One of them was even from a neighboring arm of the galaxy. And Helena absurdly overpaid each one of them.

The elf bowed his head and left the office.

She took several more sips of her coffee before she finally switched to line two.

A holographic image of a male in a grey suit appeared in the room. He noticed her and held up a hand. "Please hold for madam president."

Helena moved back to her desk and sat in the large, overstuffed office chair. Leaning back, she lifted her feet to rest them on her desk, crossing them at the ankles.

It was several minutes before a woman with grey hair, wrinkles and dark green eyes flashed into existence in the middle of her office. Ellena Fairchild Grevalen was the current president of the Republic Federated Commonwealth, who currently controlled over ninety solar systems and one hundred and eleven planets.

The woman's face furrowed deeply as she turned her glare onto the beautiful whit-haired elf. "You promised me, that they couldn't break into the containment unit!"

"No, I told you it couldn't break out of the containment on its own. Security on the outside of the unit was your responsibility, not mine." Helena took a sip of her coffee before shaking her head slowly. Smirking, she added, "remember your people refused to let me do anything else besides build the containment. The theft of the artifact is on you and your people, not me."

"You are a fucking bitch!" The woman snapped irritably and paced back and forth across the office.

"Because I am right?"

"What do we do now?" The woman ignored the question.

"We? No, ma'am. This is all you." Helena chuckled. "And you are screwed."

The elderly human woman turned to her and frowned. "Helena, please? You can't just..."

The elf cut her off, "yes I can. And I will. Your people will not let me do what needs to be done and you know it."

"You let me deal with my people. We both know that there is only one person who can recover it again." The president stood tall and clasped her hands behind her back as she locked eyes with the elf. "I formally request Shadowband Solutions step in and assist with the investigation and recovery of the artifact in question."

Helena smiled and dropped her feet to the floor, standing as she did so. She took several steps around her desk to walk up to the holo of the woman. "Very well madam president, I accept, but only under one condition."

"Yes?" The human looked up at the elf.

"You will put me in charge of the investigation. No arguments. Your people will do exactly as I say."

"Done."

"Good, now go tell them all to stop touching the crime scene. No one is to touch anything at all. Not on the network nor the area around the containment. My people and I will be there in four hours." Shaking her head, clearly irritated, the elf added, "I am sure that your people have already done irreparable damage, but hopefully we will still be able to find something."

The president sighed, but reluctantly nodded. "Fine. I will see you soon."

Helena frowned, "you're on site?"

"Yes."

"Understood." Helena waved her arm through the image and frowned. Having the president of the Republic onsite complicated things. It meant that there was going to be a large military presence, something she would prefer to avoid. She had several enemies tucked neatly in around the current president.



A mug set down on the table in front of Sadie, drawing her attention up from the book.



Five humans stood in a semi-circle around the table, watching her intently. They each wore similar clothing, likely some kind of ship's uniform. The female in the middle carried herself taller than the others and was likely in person in charge. On her left a strong, handsome man, with a square jaw and smoldering grey eyes glared angrily at the elf seated at the table. Of course, Sadie couldn't prove it, but the anger was likely not directed at her, but at the shackles around his wrist. The other three appeared to be subordinates, likely ship's crew.

"I understand you are one of the local magistrates?" The woman in the middle snapped irritably.

An eyebrow arched high on Sadie's forehead as she stared at the woman in shock. "No. Most definitely not. I am, however, a lawyer."

"What is a law yer?" The woman had trouble with the word, and it took all of Sadie's willpower not to roll her eyes.

"A person well versed in the law. How may I help you, captain?"

"I wish to know if I can kill this man in a public forum." The woman pointed to the man next to her.

Sadie blinked several times as she tried to process the insane request. Pulling her feet to the floor, she sat up and set the book on the table, catching a barmaid's attention with the movement. Finally, she shook her head slightly as if to clear it and waved her hand, palm up, towards the empty chairs around her table. "Please captain, why don't you and your crew have a seat and explain what's going on?"

The captain looked annoyed but sat. When her crew didn't immediately follow, she glared up at the man in shackles next to her, "sit!"

He sighed and glanced around the room. Several faces watched them intently, whispering in hushed tones. But when he finally sat, the others followed suit. A clear sign of strict adherence to hierarchy.

"Can I help you captain Sadie?" the barmaid kept her face neutral, choosing not to use her usual bright smile.

"A round for the table?" The elf replied.

"Not for him." The uniformed captain spat.

Sadie narrowed her eyes slightly but said nothing to the angry woman. Instead, she locked eyes with the barmaid and added firmly, "the *entire* table."

The barmaid nodded and hastened away.

"Now, let's start with names. Mine is Sadie, but you may call me councilor. And may I have yours Captain?"

"Thenya, Captain of the Grosh, the Erasian frigate in port."

"Ah, well, welcome to Bugrasi Captain. And this gentleman?" the elf held her palm up to the shackled man.

"His name does not matter. His actions have destined him for death."

Sadie smiled warmly at the man. "All the more reason to know his name, don't you think?"

The captain blinked several times, clearly surprised by the comment.

"Rodger Cavin." The man answered, the anger in his eyes fading somewhat as he watched the elf carefully.

"Ah, nice to meet you, Rodger. May I ask your position on the Grosh?"

Before the captain could retort, the man answered, "quartermaster."

Sadie nodded in understanding. The crew might be more loyal to the man paying them than the woman barking orders. She'd need to tread carefully here.

"May I ask your crime?" Sadie kept her focus on the man.

"Striking a noble." The flare of anger flickered briefly in his eyes again, even as his shoulders slumped slightly.

"Which is punishable by death." The captain's voice had calmed somewhat. Clearly Sadie's comment had taken some wind out of her sails.

Sadie nodded a thanks to the barmaid as she set several ales down in front of the Erasian crew at her table.

"I see." Taking a deep breath, Sadie folded her hands on the book in front of her. "Was this one of your nobles?"

The captain seemed confused by the question. "No, but what difference does that make?"

Sadie nodded her head in understanding. "Well, here in Bugrasi it is not illegal to strike a noble per se. But it is illegal to strike another citizen without proper provocation."

"Nobles are not citizens." The captain argued.

Sadie chuckled. "The Bugrasi king might disagree with you." Turning her attention to the man she asked, "may I ask for a recount of the events?"

He looked slightly confused.

"Tell me what happened." She smiled kindly and cocked her head as she listened to the story with interest.

"We were in a pub lower down on the docks. When this man joined us for cards. We didn't know who he was, we don't normally allow outsiders to gamble with us, but he seemed friendly. We had a good night until he had a bit too much drink and tried to force himself on one of the serving maids."

Sadie nodded and rubbed her chin. "And you felt the need to intervene?"

"In our lands, you do not force yourself on others. We require consent, unless the two are married."

Sadie blinked and took a deep breath, biting back her natural retort to marriage equaling ownership. It was a common practice among certain cultures, even in her time.

"I told him to leave her be. He demanded I make him, so I did." The quartermaster shrugged.

"Sounds like provocation to me." Sadie laughed, and immediately bit it back as all eyes at the table stared at her in shock. "Sorry, please continue."

"That was pretty much the end. He fell, which knocked his cloak open, and we saw his baldric, marking him as a noble. I then came here and turned myself in to my captain."

Sadie blinked several times; she honestly wasn't sure how to respond to the waiting crew. Pouring herself another glass of wine, she took the time to find a response that wouldn't get a man killed for doing the right thing. Taking a long sip, she glanced down at the blue book in front of her and suddenly an idea came to her.

"Okay, let's start with the law." She began, as every person at the table leaned in slightly with interest. "You are of course allowed to enact whatever punishments your law demands on your own ship." She held her palm up to the captain.

Both the woman and the quartermaster nodded in agreement.

"However, this was an event that occurred on Bugrasi soil, which means we must apply Bugrasi laws. The law as it applies here is this, a citizen who rises their fist in self-defense or defense of another is granted clemency."

The furrowed brows of confusion caused her to elaborate.

“Meaning that the magistrate will dismiss the case as warranted violence.”

They still didn’t seem to understand.

Sadie rubbed her chin as she pondered a way to word it in such a manner that they would understand. “The magistrate will say he did the right thing. It doesn’t matter who he hit. Short of punching the kings’ lights out, which even then, the magistrate might still say that he did the right thing, in this case.”

The entire table stared at her as if she’d just grown horns and was drooling blood.

“So, it’s really your decision, captain. But I would like to throw out an idea. Perhaps something you should consider.”

The woman furrowed her brow deeply.

“This may not be a coincidence.”

Thenya cocked her head to the side. Clearly Sadie had piqued her curiosity.

“Consider this. Your crew were playing cards among themselves, when a stranger approached them, hiding the fact that they were noble under a cloak. They could have simply worn commoner clothing, if they were avoiding the title. I assume your king does not allow gambling between nobles and commoners?”

The entire table nodded in agreement.

“Yet, in Bugrasi nobles don’t hide who they are. Nor do they gamble at all without the king’s permission. Nobles here, move among the citizenry freely. Just as you or I might.” She shrugged, “though they may have a guard or two as they do so. You, might wish to consider, good captain, why a Bugrasi noble would hide themselves from you and then willingly break their own king’s law?”

Taking another sip of her wine, Sadie waited while they all seemed to consider the implications.

“For example, the grabbing of a woman against her will,” She continued, “which is against both Bugrasi and Eraisian law. If I were you, that would be a sign to me that something might be amiss. If that’s not enough to call into question the events. Then you might wish to consider why a noble would commit a crime, then demand that you do something about it? Ask yourself, was he demanding that Roger break your own law, on purpose? Did he know what the consequence would be? And if so, what did this person have to gain by killing your quartermaster, publicly?”

Sadie smirked as she watched the captain and the quartermaster exchange a long, knowing gaze. They were both growing angrier by the second she could tell by their posture, but at least now it seemed to be in the right direction, rather than at each other. Taking another sip, she watched as the other crew members squirmed in their seats.

The captain suddenly slammed her hand down on the table with a loud metallic clang. Around her, the younger crew members all jumped. With another swift movement, she stood and strode off through the crowded floor of the tavern.

Resting on the table, next to her mug, was an iron key, exactly like the kind used for the antiquated iron shackles.

Cavrin picked up the key and began unlocking the iron bands around his wrists. "Thank you, Captain Sadie."

The elf shrugged.

"How much is your fee?"

"We will call it a free consultation." She smirked. "After all, I did nothing but explain the laws of the land."

The quartermaster pointed towards the captain that was now sitting alone at her own table. The rest of the crew took the hint and immediately leapt up to disappear into the crowd.

"You and I both know you did far more than that. You made my captain second guess her entire life. And for that, I thank you. She is an amazing captain, and I am honored to serve under her. She is loyal, strong, calculating, and fierce."

"There is no doubt of that last one." Sadie chuckled.

"But she is often clouded by her loyalty to the crown. She can't see past her own rigid adherence to the rules to realize that there are those who would use that loyalty as a weakness." His face softened as he looked down at the shackles in his hands. "I love my captain. And even if you think this was nothing, I will forever be in your debt."

Standing, he bowed to her and turned to walk away.

The white-haired elf shook her head slowly and resisted the urge to laugh, as she pulled the book back into her lap and leaned back in her chair.



Helena heard the jogging footsteps coming up the hallway behind her, but she didn't break stride. A black clad arm, holding a datachip, appeared in her vision as Terrance, her field aide, caught up to her.

"How bad is it?" She asked, taking the chip and slotting it behind her left ear. She skimmed the preliminary forensics report that appeared in the air in front of her.

"It's pretty bad." The human male whispered.

She paused in the hall and swiped through the images. Whoever had broken in wasn't going for stealth. They were trying for maximum damage. They blew a hole in the wall almost large enough to drive a grav-tank through. The carnage was extreme. The intruders had worked hard to get the maximum amount of gore possible.

As she got to the images of the containment unit, she flicked past a series of dead bodies that the intruders stacked at the base of the unit. But something caused her to pause. Flipping back an image, she examined the pile of bodies. Zooming in on one body, she saw a disturbingly familiar pattern of cuts on the man's chest and neck. The attacker had used a weapon that cut through the powered armor as if it were paper. And she knew exactly who had that weapon. In fact, she was the one that had given it to him.

"Son of a bitch!" She made a large sweeping gesture to the left, closing the file. Reaching up, she pulled the stick free and handed it back to her aide. "Pack everything up."

"Ma'am?" He raised an eyebrow.

"We're done here," she growled.

He cocked his head slightly. He clearly didn't agree, but he had no intentions of arguing with the owner and CEO. "Yes, ma'am."

As he walked away from her down the hall, she heard him say into the comm, "Pack it up. We have what we need."

Helena smirked. She'd chosen Terrance as her team lead for a reason. He was almost as smart as her and far more dangerous. She continued her purposeful stride towards the large cluster of guards at the end of the hall.

"Halt!" One guard raised his palm towards her.

She ignored him, but now others were turning her direction and raising weapons. She continued to walk up to the group. She was now close enough that she could hear the lieutenant talking inside his sealed helmet. The benefits of elven hearing.

"But madam president, we have our orders. We cannot allow her in the same room with you."

There was a brief pause. "But..."

His heavily armored shoulders sagged. She didn't envy his position. Damned if you do, damned if you don't. No matter how this went, he would be in hot water with someone.

"Yes, madam president." He pointed to the tall, elegant elf, "go in, but if we see you move towards her even a little, I will blow your head off myself."

Helena smirked and raised an eyebrow. "Will you now? Then I suppose I will have to behave then." She teased.

She didn't need to see through the darkened faceplate to know he was glaring at her with a disturbing amount of hatred. Too many of the guards surrounding the current Republic president had utterly false intel on her.

Glancing to the end of the barrel less than a foot from her chest, she allowed her gaze to travel up it to the soldier holding the weapon. "You will need to move out of my way. Unless of course you want to keep the president of the Republic Federated Commonwealth waiting?"

The weapon lowered hesitantly, but the soldier shuffled aside, giving her barely enough room to pass.

As Helena followed two of the soldiers into the massive office, she smirked. The grey-haired human woman in the middle of the room waved her hand, causing her feeds to flicker off, ensuring that the elf saw nothing important.

The woman wore a dark pant suit. Her long grey hair, piled neatly on top of her head in one of the currently fashionable hairstyles. As she turned to face the six guards and the one lone elf. She folded her arms and narrowed her eyes angrily.

"Did you have anything to do with this?" The human snapped at her. The bags under her eyes clearly marking her as somewhat sleep deprived.

Helena's eyes narrowed as she furrowed her brow. "I am offended that you could even associate a mess like that with me."

The two locked eyes for several tense moments before the human sagged her shoulders slightly and allowed her arms to fall to her sides.

"Yeah, well, I had to ask." She almost seemed ashamed.

"Isn't that funny?" The elf's voice was cold and calculating. Folding her own arms, she instantly regretted the movement as the surrounding weapons lifted towards her head. Ignoring them, she continued, "you have the most powerful job in the surrounding solar systems and yet, even you answer to others."

Clearly uncomfortable meeting the elf's gaze. The elderly woman looked away and snapped, "everyone out!"

The guards tried to herd the elf out, but she refused to move.

"I think she means you, not me."

"Leave her! And get out!" the human screamed, the sound of her voice cracking slightly.

Helena frowned at the sound.

"But ma'a..." the officer complained but was immediately cut off as the pistol raised towards his head. The elderly woman was shaking slightly as the loud whine of the weapon, coming off safety, echoed through the quiet room.

"Get out!" She growled.

The soldier lifted both hands uncertainly, but backed from the room. Leaving the tall, beautiful elf and the elegant elderly human president alone for the first time in several decades.

"You know they are just doing their jobs." Helena jerked her thumb over her shoulder towards the door.

"I don't care anymore." Ellena snapped as she walked over to her desk and punched in a code into the display that only the woman could see.

The elf raised an eyebrow. The woman was cracking, she could see it in her eyes. She shook her head slowly as the room sealed around them.

"We have to get it back." When the president looked back up to meet the elf's gaze, her eyes were tearing up. "Whoever stole it knew exactly what they were stealing. They utterly ignored everything else in the vault."

"You mean the bait?" Helena laughed.

Ellie didn't find it funny, however, and folded her arms as she walked up to the elf, glaring at her angrily. The fear and panic, firmly replaced with anger again. A look that suited the woman far better.

"You and I both know that we can't leave that thing out there loose. Anyone dumb enough to think they can control it, will be the end of us all."

Helena said nothing, carefully keeping her face blank.

"You already know who took it." The human woman narrowed her eyes as she watched the elf carefully.

"I might, but I can't prove it, yet."

"You know, my advisors tell me you aren't trustworthy." She shrugged. "And that if I hire you, that I can expect to lose my position during the next election cycle, at the very least. They even suggested that you might kill me in my sleep."

Nodding her head in agreement. Helena replied, "you should listen to your advisors. Don't trust me, or anyone even remotely like me."

The woman laughed, her face softening ever so slightly. "What? You're going to save my life as a child, just to take my life a few years later? I highly doubt that."

The elf frowned deeply. "That's not playing fair."

"I learned from the best, that there is no such thing as fair. Just because they tell me something, doesn't mean that I always believe them. What did you teach me? Everyone has their own agenda. And the closer the person is, the more we should consider what that agenda might be."

Helena chuckled and shook her head. "You still shouldn't trust me. But I will get it back. Again." Shrugging her shoulders Helena cocked her head to the side slightly. "Seriously though, you need to find a better place to keep the stupid thing."

"Watch that smart mouth, or your president will order that Shadowband Solutions secure it." The woman grinned smugly.

But Helena just smiled. "That's the glorious thing about being a corporate CEO. I will just tell the president to respectfully, fuck off. That damned thing is *your* problem, *your* responsibility. Not mine. And I *will* charge you out the ass for this one."

President Grevalen sighed and nodded, "fine. But don't I get some credit for introducing you to Leon?"

"*You* do, yes. But the Federation does not. *My daughter* is the only reason I am even standing here. But my dear, even my love for you has its limits."

The woman locked eyes with the elf and smiled warmly. "Thank you for always being there for me, when I truly need it."

Helena shook her head emphatically. "Annoying bitch."

"That's madam president." Ellena laughed.

The elf walked to the door, it slid open as she fired a parting shot over her shoulder, "screw you, madam president."



Sadie looked up from the book and smiled fondly. Ellie had been an unplanned complication on a job, long before she became the Republic president. And despite how annoying the kid was, she'd always loved her spunk.

Finishing the glass of wine, she poured another and allowed her gaze to travel over the busy room. The upper decks were full. As the various captain's, and their officers, went over business. She gave a quick glance to the bartender and found him watching her. Raising his brow questioningly, he pointed to the large ship's bell hanging from one mast in the middle of the room.

Sadie nodded.

The crisp sound of the fog-bell produced a hush across the entire room as the entire tavern waited with bated breath to see how many times it rang. A second, then a third ripple of metal on metal rolled across the tavern as hundreds of voices suddenly erupted in a cacophony of cheers. People leapt to their feet, throwing mugs and arms into the air as the entire bar began singing, a slightly modified shanty, about a captain and her first ship.

Taking a deep breath, Sadie tore off a piece of bread and stuffed some cheese into it, before returning her attention to the book in her lap.



"Welcome back, Ms. Cartwright!" an annoyingly high pitched and cheerful voice squealed as Helena got out of her grav-car.

Looking up to the floating drone with dozens of flashing lights, she smiled and nodded. "Hello Joan. Is he home?"



"Of course, he is! And if you could change that, I would be in your debt. He really needs to get out of the house more often than once a year!" the droid's tone had dropped a few octaves.

"You just want to watch your soaps in peace." Helena strode past the spherical robot into the massive metal and glass home perched high on top of the cliff overlooking the three mile, by five mile, long island.

"What's wrong with that?" The floating drone followed her.

"You're a droid?"

"Your point?"

"No point, I guess." Helena shrugged as she realized she was having the same argument, yet again. She made her way to the large open kitchen and started the coffeemaker. As it began pouring her a cup, she connected to the household network and skimmed her emails and messages.

Joan was a fully autonomous experiment, that so far had been oddly successful. Proof positive that if forced to slow down, an AI stayed stable. In Joan's case, the hobby was old fashion two-d trids. Specifically, soap operas. Joan was easily over two hundred years old and still stable, well, stable enough anyway. But when Leon had tried to publish his findings, it hadn't gone well. And after three assassination attempts that were too close for comfort, he'd given up. Now Joan was a unique, albeit irritating, experiment.

A soft chime drew her attention back to the coffee, and she scooped up the cup of black gold. Taking a deep whiff, she smiled fondly and strode deeper into the home.

Several minutes later, she passed through heavily armored doors into an immense laboratory. On the far wall, a piece of broken electronics hung suspended between several cables. The piece was easily eight feet long at its longest dimension. Several mechanical arms were moving around it rapidly as the man standing nearby made slight adjustments to the AR in front of him.

"Well?" she asked as she sipped her coffee.

"Whoever cracked it did a lot of damage. But what bothers me, is that they knew exactly how to blow the containment without damaging the contents."

"Interesting. Any ideas?"

The entire system froze as he turned those deep brown eyes to her and frowned. "You already know where it is."

Keeping her face blank, she said nothing as she sipped her hot coffee.

"Damnit." As his shoulders sagged, the mechanical arms mimicked the movement and drooped. Turning to face the sizeable chunk of containment, he reached up and one of the mechanical arms tapped a section of the device, causing a slight spark as it did so. "Regardless of you trying to steal my thunder, there was an insider. Whoever placed the shaped charge knew exactly where and how to crack it." Turning back towards her, he folded his arms. The six robot arms did the same. It was a fairly comical look.

She looked to the device, then back to Leon. Keeping her face neutral, she knew better than to interrupt his rant.

"I know you didn't sell us out. There is no way for you to come out of that on top. Since you'd lose more than you'd gain, by selling the schematics of your own design. So that leaves someone on Ellie's immediate staff. Because someone gave the thief the precise specs of the unit. And she was the only one, outside of us two, that had the details."

Helena smirked, but still said nothing.

"I am done with the Federation! I don't understand why you even bother trying to work with them! They are all corrupt! Every, last, fucking, one of them!" He ranted and paced back and forth in front of the device. Behind him the arms slid back and forth on their rail mounts, following and mimicking his angry gestures. It reminded her of the mimes in Viniccia, and it took all her willpower not to laugh at him.

"You think this is funny?" he spun on her and put his hands on his hips.

That was all she could take. She spit her coffee across the open area between them, in a fine mist, as she started coughing and laughing at the same time.

"What the...?" He turned and looked over his shoulder. His shoulders relaxed as he realized what was going on. He took a deep breath and shook his head slowly as he detached himself from the interface that controlled the mechanical arms. "It's not funny, Helena."

The beautiful whit-haired elf had set her coffee on a nearby table and was holding her sides as she laughed so hard that it was quickly encroaching hysteria. She tried to nod her head, as she mimed the angry gestures and then slammed her hands into her hips.

"Yeah, yeah." He grumbled and strode off. "It's not funny. Whoever has the item has to know what it is. That's going to be a problem."

She took several deep breaths and tried to get herself under control. Picking up her coffee, she followed him across the lab, out into the hall, then back into his

private office across the way. By the time he turned to lean against his desk, she'd gotten herself back under control, but she was still grinning.

"It's Robert." She said, still grinning stupidly.

"Joy." He took a deep breath and shook his head. "It fits his style though, when he can't hire you that is."

Glaring at him, she shook her head. "He knows there is no way I would willingly give that to him. Hell, he has to know by now that they contacted me to get it back."

Leon rubbed his chin and stared blankly into the nearby fireplace. "He's going too far. I understand that he's family and all that, but you have to draw the line someplace."

"I agree."

Leon could hear the tone in her voice. Looking up he locked those dark brown eyes on her sparkling blue ones. "You have a plan."

Raising one eyebrow she gave a slight nod, "why yes, yes I do."

"Is it a good plan?"

"It's a brilliant plan! But you will not like it."

"Do I ever like your plans?"

She winked at him, "well, some of them you don't mind too much."

He chuckled and shook his head. "Something tells me this will not be one of those times."



Sadie finished the wine in her glass and caught the attention of one of the serving maids. The woman nodded and started heading her direction. Allowing her gaze to drift across the room, she smiled at how full the tavern still was. Even this late in the evening. She allowed one foot to slide off the table as she tapped the chair across from her. The kick forced the chair to slide out into the aisle just as a young adult male was walking past. His shins struck the chair, and he tumbled forward with amazing grace. Rolling up to his feet only a few feet from her.

The elf locked eyes with the young male and pointed to the seat.

"Sit."

"No, thank you, captain." He shook his head.

"That wasn't a request. But this is. Let me buy you a drink and possibly impart some wisdom?"

The human male glanced towards the door in the far distance, then in the direction he'd come. No one really seemed to pay him much attention. He relaxed, but only slightly, before deciding that he didn't seem to have a choice.

As he sat down, Mary stepped up next to her. "Is he bothering you, Captain?"

"Nope, for the moment, he is a guest at my table. Why don't you get him a meal and some drink? Oh, and I need another bottle please." Sadie flashed her a charming smile.

The waitress glared at the young man but nodded her head. "As you wish, Captain."

The young man tried to look casual as he sat across the table from her, but he the act failed to hold up. And he looked more like a wet cat trapped in a cage.

"Relax." She folded her hands across the book in her lap. "I am simply trying to keep you alive through the night, young man."

He laughed and folded his arms. The nervousness vanished as the cocky adolescent male took over. "Yeah? Well, I don't need help in that area. I've survived much worse than you."

Smirking, she nodded her head at him slowly. "I wasn't talking about me."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"You see that crewman there, the one with the greenish-blue scales?" She tilted her head slightly toward the Ashanti crew table on the far wall. Their captain was high overhead with his officers, while the rest of the crew took up the two largest tables in the tavern. They had come in earlier in the day, but Sadie had kept her distance.

The young man however didn't look, instead he kept his attention on her.

"She is a sstagi. Know much about them?"

"Not really, no," he admitted.

"Well, they rarely leave their lands, because they are a tad xenophobic. Generally, the ones that do leave. Well, they are more often than not, criminals. And not just petty thieves like us, but rather, murderers or worse. See, sstagi

have an odd sense of fair play. And whether you wanted to be a part of her game or not, you are now, smack dab in the middle of it."

He furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

The elf waited as Mary sat down an ale in front of him and a plate of food. Switching out the wine bottles, the barmaid turned and left without a word.

Once she was out of easy earshot, Sadie continued. "The purse you took, it's a nice haul, I am sure. Assuming you can survive the night."

"I don't have any purse that does not belong to me." He stated firmly.

"Ah, and clearly you've missed my point, young man. Sstagi have a better sense of smell than even a Bugrasi hunting hound. And you, my friend, have picked up something that any sstagi could track across the great burn. You have basically made yourself prey, for a finely honed killer. Even if you got rid of it right now, you will still reek of having touched it. She will track you no matter what you do with her purse. The purse no longer matters to her, she has found her prey."

The look of sheer panic that flashed across his youthful face told her he finally understood. He hadn't just stolen a noble's honey purse, but he had sentenced himself to death in doing so. He glanced towards the table with the sstagi female and found her piercing green eyes watching them intently.

"Shit." He murmured.

Sadie said nothing as she waited to see how the young man would respond. Was he an intelligent and calculating thief? Or a dead one?

His eyes snapped up to stare into hers. "What do I do now?"

She raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Interesting. Well, you can choose to stay here with me for the night if you like. They will return to their ship just before dawn. I believe they plan to be out with the tide, if they follow past trend, but then I wasn't really paying attention, when they came in."

"They won't do anything in here?"

"In front of a Bugrasi lawyer, most likely not." She shrugged; she wasn't 100% sure. Sstagi were generally law-abiding, but they were also rarely outside their own lands. So, in truth, there was no telling what would happen. Even after traveling aboard the Antiries like she had, she had never really pinned down the captain and his sstagi crew. The other crew, well, they were pirates, and easy to calculate.

"Well, so much for my date." He picked up his mug and took a long drink.



"Indeed. Now be quiet while I finish my book." She turned her attention to the pages in her lap and flipped forward toward the end.

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Helena's comm chimed in her ear and she glanced up at the name of the caller. It read, Ass Hole.

"Hello Robert." She said as she allowed the link to establish. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, hello there, Sadie. How is my sweet sister doing today?" He used the name that the headmaster at the orphanage had given her when she arrived. Mostly just to annoy her, much like her use of the name Robert.

"I have a job for you."

"Of course, you do." Taking her morning cup of coffee, she strolled out onto the massive balcony that looked out over the ocean far below the island.

"Mind securing the link?"

Reaching up into the air, she typed in a command and flicked her wrist. An encryption algorithm ran. At the other end of the call a pop-up triggered, requiring him to input his own key. After several seconds, the light next to the image of him flashed red several times before turning solid green. Showing that the link was secure.

"Thank you." The tall, thin male with black hair and blue eyes nodded to her. "So, I need you to get something from the Hall of Light Archives."

Helena rolled her eyes and leaned on the railing, taking a sip of coffee. Out of the corner of her vision, she caught Leon coming out of the house with a coffee and a pad in his hand. He didn't come her way. Instead, he flopped into one of the large, overstuffed lounge chairs and went over the data on the pad.

"Robert, be serious."

"I am. I need something from the archives."

"I am sure you need many things from the archives." She agreed.

He chuckled. "Touché. But in this case, I need something they took in there about eight weeks ago."

A file appeared in her HuD, and she opened it, quickly flipping through the images. There was a large gravity lift with what appeared to be an absurdly large aquarium precariously balanced on top of it. A heavily armed team of security and scientists were gradually pushing the tank into the lift that led down to into the bowels of the Halls of Light. The most secure museum vault in the entire galaxy.

The Hall of Light Archives was where artifacts went to be forgotten. It was also where Helena had told Ellie to store the sea witch after she stole it back from Hammerfell the first time. But clearly, that hadn't happened.

"Fish? You want me to break into the one place no one can break into, in order to steal you some pets?"

"Snails actually, and no. They aren't pets. Well, at least they aren't my pets."

"No, Robert. This is insane. Why don't you just send Gregor for your new pets?"

Robert furrowed his brow, glaring at her. "You and I both know that while Gregor is perfectly plausible for some types of jobs, he lacks the finesse for this."

"Yeah, I we can agree that he lacks something at least." Shaking her head, she looked down at her cup. "Though I don't think finesse would have been the word, I would have used."

She heard Robert chuckle. "Seriously, Sadie. I need these to stop the reset."

Looking up to the image of the half elf in her HuD, she locked eyes with him. "No."

He shook his head slowly, "unwise choice." His image vanished. In its place was a rather clear image of Leon, resting in his chair over a hundred feet away. Perfectly overlaid across his face was a neon green crosshair.

Leon's island was a masterpiece of modern technology. It had a rather spectacular diffusion shield around it to prevent any outside cameras, satellites, or scopes from getting a clear image of the island or anything on it. The only way anyone could get an image that clear was if the two of them weren't the only ones on the island.

"Feeling a little more cooperative?" Robert's voice was smug.

"What do you want them for?"

"I told you. For our plan." His image reappeared.

"Our plan?" She took a sip of coffee and raised an eyebrow at him.

"It was originally your idea." He smirked.

Her jaw clenched slightly, "perhaps, but this warped version of it you have going on, has nothing to do with me."

"On the contrary, it has everything to do with you. You've been at my side every step of the way. Whether you meant to be, or not."

In the back of her mind, she knew he was right. She had been a part of this plan from the beginning, but as it got further and further off the rails, she'd tried to distance herself. Albeit perhaps not as far as she should have.

"When do you need it done?"

The male on the line began laughing. It was a rather disturbing sound, simply more proof that his mind was cracking under the strain. "I can't believe that after all these years you've finally made yourself so ridiculously vulnerable. You realize that I now own you! Right?"

"Don't push me, Robert."

The horrific sound of his cackling spiked and didn't seem to die down as quickly as he enjoyed his moment. Sadie simply continued sipping her coffee and waited until he grew bored with laughing at her.

"Or you'll do what sis? Get your lover's brains splattered all over his pretty little balcony?"

"You and I both know you won't do that." Her voice was icy.

"And why wouldn't I do that?"

"Because then there would be nothing to stop me from ending this insanity of ours, permanently."

The line went silent. His image in her HUD flickered somewhat. It was easily over a minute before he finally responded.

His humor completely gone. "You have time. I am not stupid, the Archive is not something anyone just walks in to. Let alone walk out with an artifact. You need time to plan. Though I would appreciate it if you didn't take too long. I'd rather they not have too much time to study the target. We can't have them figuring out what they actually have."

"Fine, I will let you know when I am ready, and where you can pick them up when I'm done."

"Perfect. See you then, sis."

The comm dropped and her head sagged a little as she contemplated her next moves.

"Breakfast is ready!" Joan called from the doorway into the house.

She and Leon reached the door at about the same time, but neither of them said anything as they stepped inside.

"How long have they been on the island?" She asked as she sat at the counter.

"About a year now actually, I was kind of wondering when he would finally use them."

"Joy, that means he's been planning this for a while now."

"Apparently."

"Who are we talking about?" Joan chimed in brightly.

Helena looked down at the smiley faced pancakes and resisted the urge to chuckle. "Robert."

"Oh." Her cheery disposition plummeted to a much darker place, and when she spoke again, the sound almost made the elf's skin crawl. "Am I allowed to kill them yet?"

"No Joan, leave them be." Leon chuckled as the droid floated off, streaming explicatives at him.

"I think he's actually trying to kill me permanently this time." Helena grumbled as she stuffed a fork full of pancakes into her mouth.

"Maybe, maybe not."

"What do you mean?"

"I was going over all of this on the digiboard, when I couldn't sleep, last night. I don't think he's trying to kill you. I think he's trying to put you on ice for a while."

She rolled her eyes and took a sip of coffee.

"Seriously, follow me with this. We both know Robert, you more so than me. If he wanted you dead, why go through this elaborate plan? He'd just shove a nuke in your office and take out you and Shadowband Solutions all in one blow."

Shrugging, she nodded her head. "Yeah, that is more his speed."

"So instead, he sends you after something he needs. You'll get the item. He'll make sure your arrested on the way out. He then gets you out of the way for a

bit, and the item from the less secure planetary security lockup. That allows him to move on to the next phase, unhampered by you."

"It's not like I will stay locked up."

"Probably not. But let's say he can keep you inside long enough to enact the ultimate stage of his plan. Which it's sounding like he is very close to doing. He then becomes emperor like he wants. He pardons his long-time friend. You are grateful, and the two of you rule the galaxy together." Leon made a grand sweeping gesture with both arms.

"You know you're nuts, right?" She raised an eyebrow at him and shook her head.

"Not me, him. I think it's the most moronic plan I've ever heard of. Which is why I think it's exactly what he's planning."

She stared down at her plate of partially eaten pancakes. The sheer idea of it was lunacy. It felt more like something out of a comic book, or children's cartoon involving a lighthouse and some pesky kids with a dog. But the more she considered Leon's theory, and compared it to Robert and hers', sordid history. The more she believed it was a possibility.

Could it really be as simple as him trying to trick her back into the fold? After all, it wasn't until after she met Leon that she had realized how insane Robert's plan had really become. I mean, he was never really sane, even when they were kids. But in the last two-hundred years, he'd grown increasingly paranoid and frantic about stopping the grand reset. And while he had her convinced in the beginning that his conspiracy theory was real, she quickly grew to realize that he was in fact creating the reset, not preventing it.

If it were that simple though, that meant as soon as he had her locked up, there would be a plan to remove Leon from the picture. And likely blame it on someone else so that she would have an outlet for her rage.

"You realize that if you are correct. Part of his plan will be to kill you?"

"Yep." Leon's smirk grew to a full shit-eating grin.

"Which means," she turned and beamed a bright smile at the man next to her.

"That we have him exactly where we wanted him." He nodded, laughing.

"By the gods, I love it when a plan comes together!" She chuckled.

"Yep, now for phase two."



Several hours later...

A figure, barely visible, slid silently across the floor of a large dimly lit bedroom. As they loomed over the large oversized four-poster bed, they gazed down at the sleeping woman. Her elderly face looked peaceful in the moonlight.

As the figure reached for the woman, a flash of steel glinted in the dim light, stopping just short of embedding itself in the shadowy figure's throat.

"Well done, Ellie." Shade smiled down at the woman.

"What are you doing here? You're going to get us both killed."

"Relax, your security is none the wiser." The barely visible elf shrugged. "I keep telling you to hire your own security team from outside the government."

The woman rolled her eyes and lowered the knife back into the sheath under her pillow. "What do you want Shade?"

"I came to tell you I have a plan. Oh, and that you have an insider."

"I have hundreds of insiders. Is this about the sea witch?"

"Of course, why else would I bother?"

"Shade, I am tired, and I have a meeting early in the morning. Get to the point?"

"Robert stole the witch. Which means he has an insider on your staff that had access to the plans."

"Okay. Does that mean he is getting ready to start his coo soon?"

"I believe so, yes. However..."

The president finally pushed herself upright in bed. "However?"

"I have a plan to stop him once and for all."

"Do you think he will fall for it?"

"Of course, he will, it is his plan after all."

Ellie smirked, "I'm listening..."

"To pull this off, you will need to make a huge scene about arresting me. And you can't pull any strings, it has to be legit."

The woman sighed and shook her head. "That won't be too hard. Most of the political world will be ecstatic to capture the notorious Shade. Though I will

admit that there will be a few of us, myself included, who will be unwilling to sell you upriver like that." She folded her hands neatly in her lap and kept her gaze locked onto the elf.

"I know, but for this to work, Robert and I both have to go down. And we need to go down hard! Don't worry, I don't plan on rotting in a cage for long." Shade smirked, but she knew her expressions weren't visible by the human in the dark.

The in the bed stared at her hands briefly before responding, "I don't like this. But I understand. And as president of the Republic Federated Commonwealth and the president of Taius System, I agree to your terms. I sure hope you know what you're doing. Once this starts, I won't be able to stop it."

"That's what I am counting on." Shade leaned down and kissed the elderly woman on the forehead. "Thanks, kiddo. I promise, I will be fine. And together we will finally bring Robert and his insane house of cards down around him."

## The End

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Sadie looked up from her book to find the young thief playing cards with himself. She chuckled, then glanced around the room.

"Good book?" he asked.

"It was interesting enough." She nodded. The Sstagi was still watching them intently. Whether or not Sadie liked it, she'd made an enemy, and she knew it.

"They've been staring at us the whole time. I swear I have two holes in the back of my shirt."

"She does appear to be upset. Predators are rarely happy about losing their prey." Sighing, the elf closed the book and set it on the table as she pulled her feet down to the floor.

"How can you tell that it's female?"

"Practice." Pointing to the cards, she smiled. "Deal me in?"

"Sure thing, but I cheat."

Sadie chuckled and nodded as he tossed a card in her direction, then set a second card in front of himself.

"Is there any other way to play?"

He smirked, "I suppose not."

At the next table, a rather drunk looking human opened his eyes wide and grinned a disturbingly toothless grin.

"Mind if I join ya?" he slurred and stumbled to their table.

The elf and the young human male locked eyes, both smirking at the other.

"Of course!" They said together.

"The more the merrier!" She added, pointing to the chair that the man was currently trying to untangle himself from. She added, "pull up a chair, if you can."

The two of them resisted the urge to laugh as the man half fell and half sat into the chair. Already several other sailors in various stages of drunkenness were looking their way with interest.

It may not be the night she'd planned, but it was going to be a decent night, regardless.