



In the Shade of a Gala

Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

“Have you ever had one of those moments that you look back on and say to yourself. Wow, I really couldn't have messed that up more, even if I tried? This dear reader was my moment. The one moment in my life that I honestly wish I could take back and redo.

Not only did I make an utter fool of myself, but I was an utter jackass to a woman, who I would come to realize that fateful night, that I had fallen head over heels in love with.

”
-Leon Hamilton

In the Shade of a Gala

Written by Wendi Coffman-Porter

World Development by Richard W. Porter III

Rune 7th, 26,552

“Sadie, I have a question.”

The tall elf leaned over the railing of the command deck, looking down at the wizard on the main deck below. Resting her elbows on the railing, she smiled fondly at the feel of the wind in her hair.

At least now, the recently designed airship was moving at reasonable speeds. She’d designed it to work with contra-gravity technology. But knowing the suspicious nature of the various governments and races that at present inhabited Taius, Sadie had opted to keep it somewhat simple. She designed sails that laid back and operate as wings or rotated upwards, to look like typical ship sails, if they were traveling leisurely. In no case, though, were the sails capable of being used for propulsion.

The first design had caused a rather violent response from the local sea life, including Slappy. So, after spending some time in the dry dock on Leon’s island, she had adjusted the design significantly, shifting it into something that didn’t affect the wildlife.

Now, it would only take a week or two to get to her destination rather than a minimum of three months. The devastation in the wake of the wastelander’s missed shot, had thrown the entire planet into a minor apocalyptic event. The sky had symptoms much like a nuclear winter. And the ocean developed eddies and currents where none had been before. There were even reports of a whirlpool in one of the critical traffic lanes between the hemispheres. Even the quick trip from mainland to Bugrasi capital had become treacherous. Let alone sailing across the world like they were doing now.

“What’s up, Jane?”

“Have you been told about project uplift?”

Sadie kept her face blank as she stared at the brilliantly dangerous woman standing on her deck. It took every ounce of willpower she had not to burst out laughing. But angering the wizard might be downright final if she weren’t careful. “Where’d you hear about that?”

"Joan mentioned it. At first, I ignored it, but now that I am thinking about it, that doesn't sound like a good thing."

A sly smirk spread across the elf's face. Her eyes twinkled faintly, as they often did when she thought something funny.

"I suppose that depends on your perspective." Shrugging, she added. "It's a program where they take primitive races and cultures, then insert upgrades and education modules. In effect, uplifting them to a more civilized status."

The wizard's face remained peculiarly neutral, but her eyes darkened. "I guess that might have its place. But who decides what constitutes primitive?"

Sadie took a deep breath, still resisting the urge to laugh. "The more advanced a society. For example, the society which can uplift in the first place."

Shutting her eyes, Jane took several deep breaths. "I am not sure I approve."

"You're the one that gave them permission to do it." Sadie shrugged.

The woman frowned, knowing that the elf was right. She had given them permission to educate the people in her district. "I guess."

"I mean seriously." Waving her palm towards the wizard, Sadie stood and turned to walk back to the control console. "Who cares if they kidnap the king and uplift him. It's not like he important in the grand scheme of the planet or anything."

"What?" The single word came out of the wizard so low that the elf almost missed it over the wind.

But that single crack of thunder in an otherwise clear sky? That wasn't hard to miss.

Glancing over her shoulder, Sadie laughed at the now empty deck where the wizard had been standing only a second before. Her gaze drifted to the wastelander, whose mouth was somewhat agape.

"Far too easy." Sadie chuckled and went back to check their course. The course seemed to hold, despite the occasional storm. Power output was stable, and everything seemed to work like it should. The maiden voyage of the Starlight was a success. She had only needed to adjust the sails when they skirted the edge of one of the massive storms over the center of the ocean where the old one slept.

Wandering her way into the bar down on the main deck, she poured herself a drink and moved to the sealed bookshelf. Tasting the cognac, she began tracing the spines of the books with her fingertips.

"This one looks interesting." She murmured to no one.

Reaching up with a single finger, she pulled a book from the shelf and twisted it so she could examine the cover. Trailing her fingertips over the image of two champagne glasses, she imagined hearing them clinking together amidst the murmur of a large crowd.

The words in the center of the cover read, *In the Shade of a Gala*. Sadie had been too many galas in her long life, but she didn't need to open the book to appreciate which gala this one was. She chuckled as she remembered how close to death Leon had come that night.

"Hmm. What did you do this time, love?" Settling into the overstuffed leather couch, she opened the cover and took a drink as she read the forward.

Have you ever had one of those moments that you look back on and say to yourself, wow, I couldn't have messed that up more, even if I tried? This dear reader was that moment for me. The one moment in my life that I sincerely wish I had the ability to redo. Not only did I make an utter fool of myself, but I was an utter jackass to a woman, who I would come to realize that fateful night, that I had fallen for.

We are all a collection of our experiences. And if any of those experiences were different, we may not be who we are today. There are occasional moments that pain us to remember, not because of what someone else did to us, but because of what we did to ourselves. It is those moments that seem to linger with us, even when the scars of what others have done have faded. They are also the most powerful lessons that we will have in our lives. And when we think back on those moments, it's astounding how much one fateful moment can shape our entire lives to come.

Helena Cartwright strode into the large ballroom, and a warm smile crept across her face. Her long black gown hugged her curvy features so firmly that it needed a long slit up her thigh just to walk. The gown left her shoulders and neck bare. Accentuating the large diamond necklace that sparkled in the dim light of the large ballroom. As she adjusted it somewhat to disperse the weight better, the discomfort from its weight abated somewhat.

She wore full length, black sleeves with a diamond bracelet at each wrist. Her pure white hair, piled high atop her head, was held in place with diamond encrusted pins and a large diamond comb.

A tall, well-built man with soft brown eyes and a short military style haircut, smiled warmly as he stepped up next to her. He wore a short white coat, with long coattails and held a small silver tray, which he held out to her. On it rested a single crystal champagne flute with a golden bubbling liquid.

Bowing a little, he said, "you look amazing tonight ma'am."

"Don't I?" She teased. "Thank you, John." Reaching out a gloved hand, she retrieved the drink.

Placing it to her dark red lips, she took a sip. Par usual, it was sparkling juice, made to look like the champagne that was being distributed throughout the party. She never drank at events that had this many people, something she'd learned a long time ago. Usually, she tipped a bartender to feed her nonalcoholic drinks, but tonight the staff were Shadowband Solutions security personnel, except for a few museum staff members that were in key places to manage the facility. And of course, the few military personnel that were present to guard the various government officials.

"The usual culprits tonight." The man next to her interrupted her thoughts. "General Thalín is here, and he's the only unusual piece on the table." The waiter was speaking in a sub-vocal range. Knowing very well that even without the communication circuit, she heard him.

Helena was on the security circuit for the party, but she was part of a separate sub-channel, used for emergencies only.

"And the exhibit?"

"The exhibit is ready for guests. The curator went down to check it twenty minutes ago. It impressed her. She wanted us to pass along, her thanks. Your donation to the museum will attract guests from all across the Tharward arm." He replied in a normal hushed tone.

"Perfect. Then I suppose I should go see what the general wants."

Striding into the party, she took another sip of her drink and plastered a wide smile on her face. As she wove her way through the crowd, she began waving hello to various guests that attempted to catch her attention. Occasionally, she stopped to chat, as the various guests attempted to draw her into their conversations. With deft practice, she maneuvered the conversations away from her, then slipped away.