

The background of the entire page is a dark, warm-toned image featuring two champagne flutes. The glasses are filled with a golden liquid, likely champagne, and are clinking together. The background is filled with soft, out-of-focus light spots (bokeh) in shades of orange and yellow, creating a festive and elegant atmosphere. The text is overlaid on this background.

# 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

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**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.

When she approached the tall human male with predominantly white hair, she smiled happily at him. He was handsome, even in his advanced age. But in their century of knowing each other, he had made it abundantly clear that he was not interested.

"You truly should go into politics, my dear." He met her gaze evenly.

With her heels, the two of them were at eye level to each other.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out gently, she replied, "and just like the other hundreds of times you've said that. Politics and I are not a good fit for one another."

"I disagree. But that is neither here nor there." Looking her up and down deliberately, his stern face melted into a smile. "You look stunning tonight, but then I am not sure I have ever seen you any other way."

Smirking, she shook her head. "But it's never enough, is it?"

"You, my dear, are far too dangerous for an old soldier like myself to be playing with." He chuckled.

"I assume you didn't come tonight just to admire what you've chosen not to have." She intended the jibe to be humorous, but as his smile faded into a pained expression, she sighed.

It had apparently hit home a little harder than she intended. The man had lost his wife eight years ago and had been a confirmed widow ever since. Evidently it was still too soon to make jokes.

His jaw clenched as he responded, "no. I didn't. Can we talk in private?"

"Of course, sir." She raised her glass and bobbed it towards a doorway behind him. "That leads out into the hallway, I am sure we can find someplace secure there."

As if on cue, a man in a short white coat with long tails melted out of the crowd next to her and held out an empty tray.

Placing the glass on the tray, she listened to him whisper.

"Third door on the right is being cleared now."

Without acknowledging him, she followed the general through the doorway into a hallway with several armed men in black uniforms. The patch on their arm plainly read Shadowband Solutions.

The security closest to the door nodded to them as they passed. Their job was to keep the guests in the ballroom rather than wandering the museum unattended.

"Third door on the right." Helena said.

The two of them made their way to the door without talking. As they approached, the door swung open and three black clad Shadowband security personnel strode out past them. The last one was younger and instinctively snapped a salute to the general.

Greggory Thalin however took it in stride. He smirked at the young man, refusing to return the salute.

"At ease, young man. You don't work for me anymore."

The boyish face paled somewhat, and he snapped his hand back to his side and rushed past them, avoiding Helena's gaze.

The elderly general bowed with a single arm crossed in front of him, palm up. "After you, ma'am."

"Your manners are unnerving." She grumbled as she passed.

They both stepped into the large office that also seemed to double as someone's private library.

"This reminds me of my wife's office."

"She was a researcher, right?" Helena looked through the office for some place comfortable to sit, but opted to lean against the desk instead. The gown wasn't conducive to sitting.

"Historian, yes."

Tapping the cover of the book next to her with a finger, she smiled. The title read, *The Sordid History of Polaris*. "That fits. It looks like this person is the same."

"So, I need a favor."

Neatly folding her gloved hands in front of her, she frowned at him. "You, or them?"

"I'm not even sure where I end, and they begin anymore." He sighed.

"That is one of the many dangers of being a politician, sir."

He shivered somewhat. "Please don't call me that. It's like having your grandmother, sir you."

"You consider me like your grandmother? Wow, no wonder you kept turning me down." Helena grimaced.

"It's important."

The elf didn't budge. "It's always important. What's your point?"



"Damn it Helena, we need Shade. We've tried and tried, we can't even find them, let alone stop them."

"No. I am fed up with this shit. I am tired of you people coming to me with every minor problem, that you can't solve yourselves. You're worse than children." The tone in her voice fell as a hint of anger swirled in her eyes.

He kept a respectful distance, but he stepped in front of her, locking eyes with the angry elf. "You owe me."

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head. "Damn it Greg! Fine, who am I finding for you?"

"We don't aren't sure, that's the problem. But someone is gathering up artifacts, and based on the list, it will not end well for any of us. We think they are building an army."

Wrinkling her brow, she shrugged. "So what? People build armies all the time."

"Not with pre-age artifacts they don't."

The elf took a deep breath. That was different. "Ahh."

"We have reason to believe they are targeting the Polaris gates."

"Okay, then why do we care? The Polaris gates aren't even in Republic space. Let the Imperials deal with it."

"We are. We've already passed what little intelligence we have to them. And according to our sources, they are increasing their presence there. What we need from you, is the who and why. Who is stealing the pre-age artifacts and what they are planning to do with them?"

"Fine, send me what you have." Her eyes narrowed perilously. "And as always, if any of your people leak that I am working with you..." She left the rest of the threat unsaid.

Making her way back into the party, Helena tried to ignore the interruption. But it wasn't working. She knew better than to take the job, but she also knew in the back of her mind that she couldn't ignore it any longer. She had to do something. She just wasn't sure what anymore.

"Good evening, Ms. Cartwright."

A hand on the small of her back drew Helena's attention to the woman behind her. Lifting a fresh glass of champagne from the tray held out to her, the elf smiled to the server, before turning her attention to the woman. General Thorin had already ruined the party. There was no way this woman would make it any worse.



"Mrs. Gladrial. I am so glad you were able to make it." She lied with a warm smile that sparkled deep in her eyes. A benefit of centuries of practicing lies, she had honed the art to perfection.

"Leave it to you, to throw the party of the year, my dear. Par usual." The woman's smile was fake, but Helena ignored it.

This human woman had been in an imaginary competition with Helena for almost a decade now. And the elf felt sorry for her. She was the epitome of arm candy for Taius's leading exporter of ship steel. Helena often wondered if the woman had anything else to do, besides compete with every woman she knew, over parties, clothing and property.

Smiling kindly, Helena raised her glass to the woman. "I could never outdo your gala for the Feathered Friends Foundation last month. That was genuinely spectacular."

The woman blushed somewhat, and Helena resisted the urge to chuckle.

"How sweet of you to say. But the planetary president didn't come to my event." The woman pouted as she used her glass to gesture at the tall, handsome elf across the room.

Leaning in, so that the woman was able to hear her. She whispered, "trust me, if you were single, Mason would have been there. Personally, I think you're lucky. The man is a horrifying leech."

Darleen Gladrial choked on her champagne as Helena whispered in her ear.

Patting her gently on the back, the elf smirked.

The coughing turned to laughter, drawing the attention of several nearby guests. When she realized she was making a scene, she quieted. Beaming the first genuine smile of the evening. She replied, "thank you for that, my dear. You just made my night."

"I'm glad." Helena smirked. That little piece of gossip would warp into a doozy of a lie by evening's end, but at least she wouldn't have to deal with constant rounds of social sabotage all night, by the jealous woman.

The wonderfully dressed human wandered away into the crowd, still beaming happily.

Breathing deeply, Helena scanned the crowd for signs of important donors that she'd yet to talk to.

President Mason Manchester, the third, caught her attention and they momentarily locked eyes.

Damn, she thought. She wasn't in the mood to spend the evening fending off unashamedly overt attempts to bed her tonight.

As he made his way through the crowd towards her, a deep male voice spoke up behind her.

"So, what sucker did you get to sneak you into *this* party?" The voice was cool and tinged with a hint of anger.

Sipping of her drink, she turned deliberately toward the man behind her.

"Mr. Vetiste." She stated flatly.

"Was he as easy as I was?"

Grinning, Helena reached up and patted his cheek with her gloved hand. "My dear sweet Leon. No one equals you."

The last pat was almost a slap. And he closed his eyes against the force of it.

"You were, after all, an astonishingly simple mark."

His eyes narrowed to angry slits. "I should report you to the hostess. Or at the very least, security."

"If you see fit, then please do. I believe that man there is security." Pointing over Leon's shoulder, she smirked as he turned to see the approaching planetary president.

Without another word, she spun on her toes and melted into the crowd, avoiding both men.

Making her way to the bar, she sighed noisily.

"Everything okay, ma'am?" He asked. Like all the wait staff at the party, this man was Shadowband Solutions' security. Though his weapon was under the bar, rather than hidden in his coat.

"It's fine, Jason." She lied. "Give me a proper drink this time."

"Ma'am?" He arched a single eyebrow, then promptly dropped it back to his neutral smile. They were all highly trained for public access. And he knew better than to let anyone see his surprise.

"Just do it."

As the drink set down in front of her, she lifted it and took a deep breath. The smell of the cognac calmed her somewhat, and she turned to scan the crowd again.

She hadn't expected to see Leon. It had been more than a year, and they both had gone their separate directions without a word, or even an attempt to communicate with each other. It was no surprise that he put two and two together. Even if he didn't have

proof of her activities on Hammerfell Isle. He might become a problem if he opted to make life difficult for her. In her heads up, she marked his name in the roster of guests with an orange hue, but before she was able to send it to her security staff, a man in a black uniform stepped up next to her.

"We have a problem." He subvocalized.

Without turning towards him, she took a big drink from her glass.

"Perfect." Her voice was flat.

Tonight was going stunningly, and she wasn't even an hour in. At the four-hour mark, the museum below would open to the party members for a tour of the new exhibit that Shadowband Solutions had donated.

"It's the exhibit."

Shutting her eyes, Helena took a deep breath. "Of course, it is."

Downing the rest of the cognac, she set the empty glass on the bar and gestured for her head of security to proceed her from the room.



The sound of pacing drew Sadie up from her book. Zerrick was striding back and forth across the common area.

The second he realized that she'd looked up, his eyes lit up, and he stopped pacing to face her. "Can we go by the isles?"

"That's in the opposite direction." She stated emphatically, folding her arms across her chest as she glared at the shirtless man.

"But I really need to take her something." He pouted.

"I will not go three hundred miles out of my way, into the storm, just because you want to get laid. You're her bitch, not me."

When he began pacing nervously again, Sadie rolled her eyes.

"Good grief, just go yourself." She pointed to the braces on his wrists.

"It would take me forever in this thing." He grimaced, referring to the pre-age mech he'd found in a museum some place. Her two new teammates' propensity to *borrow* or *salvage* things was the number one reason Sadie enjoyed hanging out with them. They called themselves treasure hunters, but the reality was, they were just thieves that stole

from history. Shade had often referred to herself, as a treasure hunter. It was all semantics.

"That's because you're trying to fly using its space thrusters." Shrugging, she waved for him to follow her out to the main deck. "Deploy it."

The armor folded out from its stored quantum state at his wrists and began building the fourteen-foot tall mech around the large human barbarian.

"There should be a button in there that says maintenance." She taped the clear metallic front.

Inside the cockpit, Zerrick nodded.

"Push that, then get out."

A few moments later, Zerrick was climbing out of the now open mech.

"Alright, go make me something to eat while I see if this thing has atmospheric flight modules." She climbed inside and began going through diagnostics. "I should spend more time researching this thing," she mumbled to herself.

Zerrick had gotten the armor long before she came into the picture. He would be in real trouble if it's owners ever came looking for it. That she even allowed her friend to continue to use the pre-age antique without knowing more about it was absurd. Her head snapped up, and she stared into the sky for a moment.

"Crap!" she bitched. "When did that happen?" Lifting her hand, she started to slam her fist into the panel, then thought better of it. She didn't know enough about the system to know how it would react.

In her mind, a male voice chimed in, "should I upgrade his designation?"

"Simbi, you need to stop listening to my thoughts." She grumbled at the computer system.

"It's my job to monitor your stability and alert you to possible subversion or anomalies."

Grinning, Sadie didn't look up as she popped a panel free inside the system, and began plugging in her diagnostic system. "Then log it as possible subversion."

"I am not sure acknowledging Zerrick as a friend, constitutes a possible subversion." The system complained.

"Yeah, well, potato, French fries, it's all the same to me." Frowning at the tool, she grumbled. "How does this stupid thing not have atmospheric propulsion?"

"I doubt they ever intended this unit anywhere but on the ground or in space. After all, we seldom use weapons systems as vehicles." The ship's computer offered. "Perhaps it's merely a power to thrust ratio?"

Climbing out of the mech, Sadie grinned. "Bingo! Well done, Simbi."

"Thank you, ma'am?"

She jogged down into engineering compartment, Sadie snatched up a large bag and half drug, half carried it upstairs.

Twenty hours later, Sadie took a step back and grinned at the system. It looked no different, but that was the point. If you messed with unknown technology too much, it might have catastrophic results. She poked the sleeping waste-lander, whose hammock was out on the deck near her and the mech.

"Done." She yawned.

"Hmm?" Opening his eyes, he blinked several times.

"Your suit. I'm done. You need to test it. Off the ship, please. You damage my ship and I will kill you." Yawning again, she pointed inside. "I am going to go take a nap. Spend some time running flight tests and let me know if I need to make any adjustments." Wandering down below, Sadie made it to the captain's cabin and fell in the enormous bed.

When she came out onto the deck several hours later, she found it utterly quiet. Checking her HuD, she realized that she and Fluffy were the only living things aboard.

"Well," she said to the large lizard, curled up on the deck, sound asleep. "Looks like we have the ship to ourselves for a while." Picking the book back up, she poured herself a drink and moved up to the bridge. Sitting in the captain's chair, she leaned back, setting her feet on the nearby console. She opened the book and found a good place to pick up the story.



"Please tell me you're kidding?" Helena stopped in her tracks and stared at the elf's back.

The two elves had been marching through a long hallway that led to a staff lift. Behind her, the staff was noisily flowing back and forth between the kitchen and the

main ballroom, as they brought hors d'oeuvres and champagne to the guests. of Taius Historical Museum.

"I wish I was." He paused and turned to meet her gaze.

Pursing her lips and closing her eyes, she fought the urge to pull the man's sidearm and shoot someone. She didn't care who at this point.

"So, you are telling me that the Taius Historical Museum, enhanced with Shadowband security forces, was not only breeched. But that the entire centerpiece of the exhibit, that we have over thirteen-hundred people in there, waiting to see, was stolen?" She pointed over her shoulder with a gloved finger.

Jimmy's green eyes were hard as he met hers. He was calm despite being the man in charge of security for the entire facility this evening.

But the stakes were high, and he was right, being upset would help no one.

Snorting, Helena shook her head. "How strangely appropriate."

Jimmy smirked, causing Helena's nostrils to flare.

"It's not funny." She grumbled.

Raising his shoulders, he replied, "I respectfully disagree. I mean, you set up a juicy target, what did you expect?"

Marching past him towards the lift in the distance, she grumbled, "I expected at least twenty-four hours to let the security get back to normal before they stole the damn thing. Not have it..."

A resounding crash of shattering crystal echoed down the hallway, interrupting her mid-sentence.

Twisting towards Jimmy, Helena snatched his sidearm from its holster and dropped low on to one knee. The movement was smooth and practiced, as they both drew in on the doorway at the far end of the hallway.

The two cybered elves were faster than the rest of the waitstaff. As they locked in on the intruder, the world slowed for them, making it appear as if the staff were drawing their weapons sluggishly.

Just inside the doorway, a surprised Leon raised his hands deliberately. Keeping them in unobstructed view.

"Hold." Helena's voice bellowed down the hallway.

The servers stopped moving, and one of them began whispering into a communication device on his wrist.

Glancing up at Jimmy, she frowned. "Get whatever intel you can, I will be right there."

Nodding, he turned and headed for the lift.

As he strode past her to the lift, she slid the pistol back into his holster with practiced precision.

"Genna," Helena called to the waitress closest to the intruder. "Bring him here."

The woman waved her gun, showing that she wanted Leon to walk in front of her.

The rest of the staff went about their jobs, while the man that lost his tray, cleaned up the mess.

As Leon approached, he kept his hands high in the air so they were visible over his shoulders.

"I don't have time for another round of insults. What do you want?" Her eyes narrowed, and she realized she needed to be careful not to take her anger out on the man.

"Well, that's a pretty long list. But perhaps I should start with, I am sorry." He smiled softly and furrowed his brow.

Rolling her eyes, she turned her attention to the woman behind him. "I got this. He's harmless."

"Ouch." Leon replied.

As the woman turned to walk away, Helena turned her glare to him. "Don't make me regret letting you live."

"Understood." He grimaced, "wait, what? They would have shot me?"

Whirling on her heel, the elf stormed off down the hall away from him.

She heard him jog to catch up.

"One attack on my motives wasn't enough? What else do you want, Mr. Vetiste?" In her HuD, she called the lift and input her security code.

He shifted, putting himself between her and the lift doors. Beaming fiercely, he said, "in fact I have been trying to get in to meet the real Helena Cartwright for over four years now."

Glaring at him, she chose not to reply.

He grimaced. "Imagine my surprise when you turned out to be her."



"Couldn't bother to pick up a pad and look at the news? Way to do your research." Folding her arms, she found herself relieved when the lift doors opened. Marching past him, she waved for him to follow her.

"Yeah, well... A comedy of errors, so to speak." He shrugged but stood up straight. "I don't have a good excuse for that. But you have to admit that you being here, might seem a tad suspicious, under the circumstances."

Arching a single eyebrow, she smirked and nodded her head. "I suppose. If I hadn't bothered to look at the news and see who was hosting the event."

"Ouch, touché. But the reason I've been wanting to meet with you is because I have a business proposal."

Helena didn't look at him when the door opened. As she strode from the lift, a tall elf handed her a pad.

"It's not good." Menefelle shook his head gently, with a casual glance towards the human male following her.

Flicking through the data, she sighed. "I don't have time for business right now, Leon." Mumbling she added, "Assuming I still have a business after tonight."

"They knew precisely what they were looking for, and it looks like they had inside help." Jimmy said as the two elves reached where he and several other soldiers stood around a large display case.

The case had a single hole cut in the clear plasteel. It was just large enough to pull the gravball sized chunk of greenish-grey cube through.

The device, known as a pre-age artifact, was a data storage device from a much larger system that the researchers believed was a mainframe. They hypothesized the mainframe had once been used to run a massive network of Polaris gates. They were even postulating, that there might have been thousands of the gates that spanned the entire universe. Even though there were only three remaining.

"The cameras have nothing." Menefelle sighed.

"Yeah, we didn't see a hack, because there wasn't one. They had the codes to loop the system." Jimmy pointed to a nearby camera.

"Outstanding! And by the time we find the outsiders, they will have sold the damn thing already."

"Not to mention having to cancel the party." Jimmy said, adding salt to the wound, but Helena just sighed.

"Um. I can help!" Leon called from where the security had stopped him back by the lift.

All three elves turned to face the human in the tuxedo.

Waving her hand for the guards to leave him alone, she watched as he approached. "Ironically, it's the same reason I have been trying to meet with you."

As he reached into his jacket pocket, he froze, as every security personnel in the room lifted a weapon and pointed it in his direction.

The three elves, however, just watched him, unconcerned.

"Uh..." he muttered hesitantly.

"Relax." Helena lifted a hand, and the guns lowered, but now all eyes were on him.

"Wow, they are touchy." He pulled a small circular device from his pocket and twisted it into a different shape.

"I prefer the term, loyal."

Glancing up at her, before returning his attention back to the device, he mumbled, "I bet you do."

Helena looked to the elf on her left and shrugged.

Jimmy just shook his head in response.

"So, what is this thing?" She asked.

"It is a time frequency modulator for your forensic sensor suite." He replied, still adjusting it. "May I?"

He pointed to the piece of technology set up on a tripod in the middle of the room. It was about six feet from the display case.

"Yes." She said, her head cocked to the head as she watched him intently.

Shuffling to the device, he popped open the mod casing and plugged his device into it. "Now, what was the time?" he began mumbling as he opened the interface panel and began sifting through the data on the screen. "Just set a filter. And add the mod..." he continued to mumble to himself as he made adjustments.

Forensic Sensor units were one of the many products of Shadowband Solutions sold on a mostly open market. If you were able to prove you needed one, Shadowband Security sold it to you. So, it wasn't a stretch to think that Leon Vetiste, one of the wealthiest men in Taius, might have one. That he'd been trying to contact her about a module for it. That seemed odd. But then, many people were always trying to sell her things. Most of them never made it through her staff to her.

"There we go." Looking up at the elves, he nodded to Jimmy. "Please don't let your people shoot when I turn this on. You might damage something important." Touching his chest, he grimaced, "like me."

Flipping a switch, he started a new forensic scan of the area.

Energy filled the room, but instead of a scan of the area, the new module also displayed what it saw.

A woman, that looked completely real, stepped right through Helena. Causing the elf to jump to the side and take several steps back.

Around them, the security tightened their grip on their weapons. But it wasn't because the woman was there, it was because of who she was.

"Son of a bitch!" Jimmy blurted. With a jerk of his hand, the room emptied as eleven of the fifteen soldiers ran from the room at full speed. Headed towards the door at the far end, away from where she and Leon had entered.

Menefelle shook his head. "Yeah. That is going to get ugly, fast."

"No shit." Helena sighed. "Go stall the party."

Bobbing his head, the elf strode to the lift.

Helena and Leon watched, as the eerily real, woman used a tool to slice a perfect hole through the plasteel. With a gloved hand she reached in, pulled the device out and slid it into a bag, designed to mask electronic signatures. Smuggler's bags weren't purchasable on the regular market. And only true professionals knew where to find them on the dark web.

"I assume you all know her?" Leon stepped up next to Helena and pointed to the woman, who was now walking away. Glancing up to the camera nearby, she winked.

"Yes, we do." She turned her attention to the man and smiled. "I have to say Leon, that is impressive tech."

He smirked. "Essentially, I have you to thank for it."

"Okay? Why is that?"

The woman walked out of the scan range and the system shut itself down.

"It's one-hundred percent based on your tech. I ordered one of those a few years back." He waved his hand, palm up, toward the forensic unit. "For a friend of mine. But that was a similar problem. The thief was good and had cleaned their tracks very well."

Helena kept her face neutral as his story headed in an uncomfortable direction.

"So, I designed a module to see if I might access time residuals." Cocking his head to the side, he raised his shoulders slightly and frowned. "The burglar had scrubbed that too."

"A mage?"

He shrugged. "Either that, or someone with access to pre-age or extra-galactic tech."

"Did you ever figure out who it was?"

"No." Cocking his head, he smiled, "But it gave me a great idea."

Smirking, she nodded and waved for him to follow her to the lift. "You want to co-design the next level in forensic sensors."

"And make a fortune. Yep!" He laughed as they both got into the lift to head back to the party.



A thumping noise drew Sadie's attention up from the book. In the doorway, a massive eyeball, close to two feet across, blinked at her.

Arching an eyebrow, she resisted the urge to pull out her compute device and snap a photo. "Now here's a statement I never thought I would say." She laughed as she spoke to no one in particular. "But I do believe there is a dinosaur at my door." Shutting the book, she stood.

The eye in the door rocked as the creature shuffled weight back and forth on its front feet.

"Poor thing." She strolled up to the creature and placed her hand on its cheek just below the eye. "He left you all alone. I bet you're hungry." She mumbled to it, knowing that unlike Slappy, this tag along was not intelligent. At least not enough for her to talk to it. Stepping back, she smiled and waved for it to come inside.

A faint blue glow began around the creature's ankle and the eye shrunk to where she saw more of its head. Then it was the size of a large hunting hound.

Shaking her head, Sadie sighed. That Zerrick and Jane had thought it was a good idea to put a pre-age war artifact on a dinosaur, was astounding. It would not end well for anyone, in particular the dinosaur. The creature came bounding inside and bounced joyfully in wide circles around her.

Luckily, it didn't seem to control the artifact at least. It basically shifted when the animal wanted to do something and couldn't because of size. Well, that and when it grew angry, which was an unpleasant sight.

"Yeah, yeah, let's go get you some food." Shaking her head, she picked her way through the ship to the galley. She had to admit, she was hungry too. "I'm not the best cook, but something tells me you don't care. You eat rocks, dirt, poop, or whatever else you put in your mouth."

As she began rummaging around in the kitchen, she noticed that the now dog sized lizard had curled up on the floor next to her and gone back to sleep. Carefully stepping over it, she went about making herself and him a sandwich.

"Hmm, I wonder if there is anything you shouldn't eat?" She pondered as she began filling bread with whatever she found. "Meh, who cares. I doubt anything that I have, will kill you outright."

Reaching down next to the curled-up lizard, she set a plate piled high with bread, meats, cheeses and vegetables. She'd opted to skip any sauces. Though she did briefly consider seeing if it would eat spicy peppers. Grabbing her own sandwich, she moved to a stool at the counter and watched as the creature sniffed the plate cautiously.

"Tell me again how I ended up caring for the dinosaur?" She complained around a mouth full of food. "I'm not all that fond of pets. Humans are bad enough. None of you ever live long enough to get to know." She continued bitching as she watched the creature push the food around on the plate.

Taking another bite, she blinked several times in shock. The creature placed its teeth around the edge of the plate and began dragging it out from under the food. As it came free, he bounced gleefully and plopped to the floor, chewing on the plate. There was a loud crunching noise as the plate shattered in his mouth. Chewing up the bigger pieces swiftly, he began sniffing the ground, looking for each tiny shard.

"Um, okay?" She mumbled and began chewing again. "Guess I won't need to wash that one then."

Meticulously, the lizard licked every shard of plate up off the floor before returning its attention back to the food. Sniffing, it pulled out the meat first, swallowing it without chewing. It then began tenderly tugging out the vegetables one at a time and chewing them.

By this time, Sadie had finished her sandwich and was leaning her elbows on the counter watching the strange creature. "You are the weirdest eater I have ever seen."

Fluffy looked up at her and blinked.

Shaking her head, she stood and walked to the sink, stepping over the large, dog sized, lizard. Waving the dish under the sonic scrubber, she replaced it in the cabinet and latched the door.

As she turned to leave the kitchen, she saw him gobble up the last of the food on and lick the floor clean. Pausing in the doorway, she placed her hands on her hips and glared at him.

“Seriously?”

He bounced several times and blinked at while licking his lips.

“Well, did you like it at least?”

When he continued to stare at her, blinking, she threw her hands into the air and shook her head. Storming off to the main deck of the ship, she heard the bouncing pitter patter of the lizard behind her. It was disturbing how dog like this creature was, when he wasn't the size of an elephant, anyway.

All of a sudden, she paused, and her gaze fell to the darkening sky outside. She wondered if elephants were still around. She shuddered as she considered the other mutated creatures she'd seen to date. A mutated elephant was something she didn't want to consider just now.

Picking up the book from the table, she saw the lizard leap into her spot on the couch. It spun into a seated position, watching her with its tail curled up over its toes cleverly. Chuckling, she reached for a nearby blanket and sat next to him. “Fine, we can cuddle. But you can't tell anyone.”

As she made herself comfortable, the creature spun in a tight circle several times and laid up against her leg, draping his long tail over his nose and along his body. He typically slept on the deck, and she wondered if he was cold. The species came from the radiated wastes. Which, as far as she had seen, was more like a desert.

Wrapping the blanket over her legs, she tucked the corner around the creature that Zerrick called Fluffy. At First, she thought it was an ironic name, since it was a lizard. But after learning more about the waste-lander, it was utterly possible that he meant it literally.

The creature next to her wiggled a little, pulling his corner of the blanket down snugly with its tail, before falling asleep.

Shaking her head, Sadie opened the book in her lap and found a good place to continue.

Helena waved goodbye as she climbed into her grav-car. The party had been an astounding hit, thanks to Leon. Jimmy had caught the thief before she even left the building. They replaced the device and repaired the display case, with the museum staff and guests being none the wiser.

As her driver closed the door, she heard a familiar voice.

"Helena?"

A human female, in a black suit, looked inside the door and arched her eyebrows questioningly.

"Yeah, it's fine Margie."

The woman nodded and pulled the door back open.

Leon approached the car, then leaned in the doorway. "One last question."

"Alright." She smiled warmly.

They had spent most of the rest of the party mingling on their own. She had ensured that Menefelle cleared her schedule for the entire next day, so that the two engineers might discuss the new design.

"Was any of it real?" His face was neutral, preparing himself for the answer.

Blinking several times, Helena opened her mouth to answer, then thought better of it. "Get in."

Sliding across the wide seat, she silently made room for the man to get into the car with her.

As the door closed on them both, she called to the driver. "Home."

The trip was quiet as they both watched out their own windows. Neither one of them willing to break the silence.

As the car settled into the garage, Helena didn't wait for the door to open for her. Instead, she climbed from the vehicle and strode towards the door in the distance.

As she stepped inside the massive penthouse apartment, she didn't stop. Striding with purpose, across the vaulted living room, to the bar on the far wall, she poured herself a stiff drink. Once she had a drink in hand, she turned to watch as the man stepped into her home.



He paused just inside the doorway and scanned the large, vaulted room. It had a large sectional couch that effortlessly fit twenty people. A well-stocked bar, and one entire wall that was twenty feet high, made entirely of clear plasteel. The sparkling lights of the city below, twinkling brightly.

"Wow, you genuinely love the ocean!" he exclaimed as his gaze traveled around the nautically themed decorations. He pointed to an anchor on the wall. "What is that?"

"Its name is the Death's Fate and is from one of my older museum exhibits. It was a boat anchor from a famous pirate ship, called the Antiries. They claim it was cursed with the souls of the crew. But after extensive tests, it seems to just be an old wives' tale." She took a sip from her drink and watched as he continued to explore the room.

"Is this a painting of the ship?"

"Yes. That was a commission from the King of Nather in ten, two-forty-one. He wanted a way to show his captains what to watch out for. Though, no captain on the sea needed warning to avoid that ship. She was beyond infamous." The elf chuckled.

"Wow, this is very impressive. At least you didn't lie about that." His back was to her as he spoke.

She bit the inside of her cheek and wondered what she was doing. Humans often had trouble separating business from pleasure, and this man was still angry about Hammerfell Island. She was playing with fire.

"Wow, what's this?" He rested his hand on the deck of the large model of her catamaran. "The Shade?" He chuckled.

"Yep. That's my retirement goal." Lifting her glass towards the ship, she took a sip. "My goal is to help the republic capture the Shade, then spend my retirement building that ship by hand and sailing her across the ocean."

He stared at her for several moments, his hand still resting on the model.

Helena kept her gaze on him nonchalantly as she waited for him to say what he wanted.

"You never answered me."

"You're correct, I did not." She downed the rest of her drink and set it on the bar before heading towards the kitchen. "I'm hungry, you want a sandwich?"

"Sure."

Sticking her head in the stasis cupboards, she continued to ignore the question.

"Do you have a preference?" She held up several types of meat.

He pointed to one.

"Right, ham and cheese it is."

She made the food. As she set the plate in front of him, he still hadn't spoken.

Sighing, she took a bite. "I haven't answered because I am not sure what to say."

Arching an eyebrow, he took a bite of the food. "Wow, this is good."

"Thank you. It's one of the few things in the kitchen that I do well."

Leering he asked, "what are the other things?"

"If you're lucky, maybe I will show you." She winked at him.

He laughed.

They ate in quiet for several minutes, both lost in their own thoughts.

As she put away the dishes, she wiped her hands on a towel and turned back to him. She was still in the long Black evening gown. She began pulling the pins from her hair, letting the soft white curls fall down around her shoulders.

"Too much of it was true." She turned to face him, her face painstakingly neutral. "It's true that I needed you to get into the party. But I am a professional. Feelings can't get between myself and a job. But they did anyway."

A small part of her screamed in irritation. She was telling this stranger far too much. Particularly since eliminating him was not an option at this point.

He stood there watching her silently, his face unreadable.

A small part of her wondered if that was why she liked this man, because he was a challenge.

Helena made her way back to the bar and poured herself another drink. This one though, she made lighter.

When she turned, she found him far too close to her. He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss.

Her body melted as his lips met hers. Even now, more than a year later, this man still made her weak at the knees. Not a common reaction for her.

As his deft fingers unfastened her dress, Helena smiled. It looked like she was going to get her man tonight after all.



Sadie paused and skimmed the page. Snickering, she flipped forward several pages before reading another paragraph. "Wow, Leon. You're not a half bad smut writer, for a guy."

At the sound of her voice, a head popped up next to her. The blanket draped across it, like some kind of silly pet cloak. And the elf couldn't help but chuckle again.

"Go back to sleep."

Flipping several more pages, Sadie skipped past the raging evening of lust that had spanned an entire chapter. "Wow! Okay, here we go."



Helena looked at the pad, her nostrils flaring. "She was good. I will give her credit."

Jimmy shifted uncomfortably from where he stood, leaning with one elbow on the bar.

"Relax, it wasn't your fault. She played you. Hell, she played both of us." Tossing the pad on the bar, it slid until it stopped by his elbow.

He however left it laying there.

"What do you suggest we do?" She met his hard gaze.

"Kill her. And toss the body into one of the suns."

Helena grimaced, that was a tad extreme considering the situation.

"Jimmy, she's your life mate." Her voice was low and gentle. Stepping toward him until she was in range to reach out and touch his hand, she added, "I understand this hurts, but you need to think this through."

"Is she, though?" He asked, his eyes raised from the pad to meet Helena's. The pain darkened his beautiful emerald eyes into a dangerous shade of dark green.

It was an adage, that love, and hate were the opposite ends of the same emotion. And she wasn't about to argue the truth of it. But when one switched to the other, the results were often extreme.

She opened her mouth to say something but fell short. She wasn't sure what to say. In the interrogation's transcript, Tessiana had admitted to setting them up from the

beginning. She knew Helena had the device. She just needed to get inside and bide her time until the opportunity came to steal it.

"Ask yourself, how much of that was her trying to protect you?" Helena sighed.

She hadn't watched the actual video of the interrogation yet. She'd likely need to talk to the woman herself, to get the truth. And if she was lucky, she might get who the woman was working for. But right now, she needed to pull her best friend off the ledge he was standing on. Metaphorically, of course.

"Why the fuck should I care?" he spat. Jerking his hand away, he stormed across the room and out onto the balcony.

"Crap." Helena cursed herself for not locking the balcony door. Following him out into the chilly morning air, she stepped up next to him and leaned her elbows onto the railing.

"Damnit, Helena." She heard his voice break.

Her chest tightened at the sound.

Putting her arm around him, she laid her head on his shoulder.

"I will never be sure. For the rest of my life, I have no way of knowing if she was my life mate or not."

Helena wasn't sure what to say. Elves only mated for life once. During that mating, the souls of the two entwine forever with the fabric of the universe. When the bond shreds in two, the elf never entirely recovers. It haunts them until the day they die, and no amount of elven memory storage stones can stop it.

"That's not the real problem." She breathed.

He remained quiet for several minutes as they both stared out at the gradually lightening sky in the distance.

In her HUD a green icon appeared in the living room, and after a brief pause, it headed deliberately to the kitchen.

Jimmy saw it too and pushed himself upright. "I will let you get back to your guest."

"You're more important."

Jimmy smirked and shook his head. "I've made my decision regarding Tess. And I'm not blind, this one is different. I've seen the way you look at him."

Rolling her eyes, she glared at the elf. "Purely entertainment. He differs from my typical toy, your right, but it's still just fun." Looking deep into his still dark eyes, she frowned. "Are you going to be okay?"

"No." He raised a hand, palm up towards her. "If you are any inkling of how this will go."

Taking a deep breath, she ignored the wave of anger at the comparison. "The difference is you have a choice."

"Maybe so." He shrugged. "I will send you the report when it's done."

"Very well. I leave it to you, Jimmy, but we need who she was working for."

He frowned and looked off to the side as he recalled something. "General Thorin?"

She nodded.

"That bastard. There was no way he was there for the unveiling of the exhibit." Shaking his head, the elf frowned at her. "Fine, I will get what we need."

"Jimmy," she sighed and looked out over the ocean in the distance. "You have no idea the pain that comes from losing half your soul. Please, choose wisely."

"You're right, I don't. But let me ask you something."

Helena turned back towards him.

"You had no doubts, right?"

With a soft snort, she shook her head.

"That's what I thought. I think I always suspected something was wrong. I just didn't care. Well, we will both know soon enough."

Sighing as he strode off, she shivered and followed him inside.

The tall male elf made his way across the apartment without acknowledging her guest. When he disappeared through the door into the garage, she turned her attention to the half-naked man in her kitchen.

"Already moved on, have ya?" Leon teased.

Strolling up to her, he handed a steaming cup of coffee.

"On that note." She smiled at him warmly as she took the cup. "I am not looking for anything serious."

Nodding, he smiled and took a sip of his coffee. "That makes two of us."

"Perfect. How about we head downstairs, get something to eat, then lock ourselves in my lab and knock out a new design?"

Chuckling, he shook his head. "How about instead, I make breakfast here and we hash it out now? Unlike you, I am an exceptional chef." Allowing his eyes to travel up

and down her silk clad body leisurely. He added, "then if we detour, we won't break anything important."

Laughing, she nodded. "I can get into a plan like that."

## The End



Sadie closed the cover of the book and smiled affectionately. The sudden sound of lightning however drew two heads toward the main deck. Around her, the ship's lights turned red, and an alarm sounded, almost deafening her.

"Proximity Alert!" Simbi called in her internal comms.

On the couch, the small lizard snorted and tucked his head back under the blanket. Shuffling around to ensure that the blankets covered him completely, before he fell back asleep.

Raising an eyebrow at him, Sadie strode to the ladder that led up to the bridge, as the various doors on the ship sealed to prevent internal damage.

The sound of the lightning grew, and the elf realized it wasn't single strikes, but a constant sound, more like an electrical storm.

"Warning!" an outer speaker screeched over the sound of the ship wide alarm. "Intruder Alert!" Looking out over the deck, Sadie saw a large ball of lightning arching in every direction as it floated towards the center of the deck. Arcs of lighting leapt out from the wildly electrified woman at its center and struck several sections of the sails, masts, and railings on the deck. But the damage was minimal, and the repair system reported negligible.

Rolling her eyes, she reached over and punched in a code into the captain's console. The red lights and sirens cut off.

"Log the intruder as Jane."

"Understood." The computer acknowledged. "I have logged the Arch-wizard Jane's return to the ship."

Sauntering out to the balcony that looked out over the deck, Sadie leaned on her elbows and waited for the storm around the woman to die out.

After several steps, the lightning faded to a howling wind. And by the time she made her way across the deck to where she stopped and looked up at the captain, the howl had died down to a loud whisper.

"Welcome back." Sadie smirked.

"Yeah. I'm still not sure why I came back."

"Because your just as curious as we are. What *did* Robert hide in Venecia?" Sadie resisted the urge to chuckle. "Want me to make you some coffee?"

"No, Robert can do it." An ethereal vision of a tall half-elf appeared before her and bowed somewhat before striding into the ship towards the coffee maker behind the bar.

"Did you have a pleasant visit with your knightly toy?"

Rolling her eyes, Jane glared at her and strode into the ship.

Laughing, Sadie followed. "Come on, admit it was a little funny?"

"No." Jane answered softly.

Grimacing, the elf smirked. "How long are you going to stay mad?"

"I am not mad at you. I am mad at myself for letting you manipulate me."

Sadie pulled both lips into her mouth and bit down on them, trying hard not to laugh.

Rolling her eyes again, Jane stepped up to the bar and took the hazelnut latte from the ethereal male elf.

"It's not like I actually lied, per se." Sadie looked to the ghostly Robert and smirked. "Could I get a drink too?"

He glared at her, then vanished from view.

"Guess not." She laughed as she walked around to where the elf had been standing and poured herself a nightcap. "Are you saying that you don't like what they are doing?"

"No, I guess it's fine." The wizard sounded somewhat defeated.

"Your young. To be honest, you are harder to manipulate than most five-hundred-year-olds. In some ways anyway." Shrugging, the elf took a sip of her drink. "You still care. Until you give that up, you will always be manipulatable. It's just a fact of life."

"I am not callous enough to think that caring is a fault." Jane glared at her.

"That's precisely my point. No one your age is. And I never said it was a fault. I said it makes you susceptible to manipulation." Shaking her head, she took another drink,



letting her words settle in place before she added, "It only means you need to calculate for being manipulated. Simple as that."

The wizard pondered the idea for a moment before turning and heading to her quarters silently.

Laugh quietly, Sadie downed the rest of her drink and snapped her fingers.

A hooded head popped up out of the blanket on the couch.

"You behave. I am going to bed." Smirking at the creature, she walked over and covered him back up before patting him affectionately. "Try not to destroy my ship."