



# Kindred Shades of Blood

*Written by Wendi Coffman Porter*

*World Design by Richard W. Porter III*

“ Family. Have you ever had a member of your family, that somehow warps the word for you? When you think of them and say the word family, your skin crawls? Far too often, we associate with and possibly even love someone that we would never even consider being near. If it weren't for the fact that they were, family. It's funny though, if we have no family, as with Shade, we often invent them. ”

-Leon Hamilton

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## **Rune 12th, 26,552**

Sadie stepped out onto the deck of her ship and breathed deeply. She could hear the soft hum of the engines and the grav-plates that were holding the ship in place, a few feet into the water. The newly designed Lion's Shade looked nothing like her predecessor. Nor did it match any of the other vessels in the Viniccia harbor. She was now a single hulled air ship. But she didn't float on the water at all, but above it. However, as they had approached the harbor, they slowed to a crawl, and lowered themselves into the water enough that the other vessels and captains wouldn't feel the need to consider them a threat. The crew aboard the ship would draw enough attention just being themselves. There was no need to make it worse by hovering in the air above the other vessels.

Viniccia hadn't changed. Which was both awe-inspiring, curious, and welcome. She bustled with easily over two-hundred vessels and their crew. For Sadie, it was a welcome sight. In her day, sailing vessels were almost an endangered species. Owned exclusively by sport sailors and wealthy eccentrics.

In this post-apocalyptic world, there were a much higher number of sea-going vessels than she had seen in her time. Yet, the sheer cacophony, that was Viniccia, was somehow still soothing. Vendors barked offers at docked vessels. Advertisement billboards were still in their usual locations. Blasting ads from their massive screens and speakers. Each announcing this week's sales. Even the sound of the various crew members arguing with anyone that would argue back was comforting.

In her time, the port rarely had ships in the water, but the air above it crammed vehicles into every empty space they could find. Air cars, smaller atmospheric ships and shuttles all parked in the sky overhead, and it sounded exactly as it did now. The only difference was the missing platforms drifting slowly between the parked vessels.

They had spent most of the morning and early afternoon exploring the city. And strangely, nothing was different, except for the people themselves. The stores, restaurants, landmarks, street names and culture were exactly the same. The stores still sold the same items they sold five thousand years earlier. How? She had no idea, but she was beginning to suspect it had something to do with the canal sludge. Even the

smell of Viniccia was still there. It had never really been a horrific smell or anything, though it certainly wasn't the smell of fresh clean air and water.

But compared to the horrific pollution of her home city of Horin or the more modern ports filled with sewage, she couldn't complain. At least wasn't the smell of fecal matter and disease. No matter what, love it or hate it, Viniccia was a sense of normalcy that she hadn't really expected.

The trio had ended their time in the city after creating a rather disturbing scene at the Lover Way bridge. The crowd that had gathered to watch the wastelander commune with the sludge grew rather hysterical when golden canal sludge dumped three boxes onto the bridge. The local magistrate had to shoo them off and requested that Sadie get her friends and the boxes out of town as quickly as she could.

It really hadn't gone the way she expected. But based on the reactions of the locals, it hadn't gone the way anyone expected. Apparently Zerrick's odd propensity to speak to things that others wouldn't even consider talking to, won the day? Using the word won, was likely not appropriate, though. The apparently intelligent canal sludge liked him, like most things did, and gave them three highly irradiated boxes.

Shaking her head, Sadie sighed.

"No matter where we go, I can't seem to stay under the radar." She grumbled. "At least not if those two are anywhere near me, that is." She reached up to scratch the lizard on the jaw.

A slit appeared in the stone-like skin, as an eyeball rotated to peer at her through the cracked eyelids.

"Yeah, I know, you're not the right one to be bitching at." Shrugging, she pat the creature roughly. "At least it didn't take me three years to find it."

Strolling across the deck, towards the door into the ship. She passed into the darker common room ambled up to the bar. Pouring herself a drink, she mused quietly to herself. The two young humans were below decks working on their new projects. The wastelander was using something he called, wasteland soap, to wash the radiation off the boxes in the contamination shower in engineering. And the wizard was doing some kind of research with the sludge samples in the alchemy lab. The sludge samples were from scrapings that they'd gotten off the boxes and radiation bags that Sadie had used to get the boxes to the ship safely.

Drink in hand, Sadie stepped up to the bookshelf and perused the titles.

"Kindred Shades of Blood, well, that looks interesting." Pulling the book free, she made her way back out to the main deck and lowered herself into one of the overstuffed lounge chairs. Taking a sip of the drink, she opened the book and read the foreword.

Family. Have you ever had a member of your *family*, that somehow warps the word for you? When you think of them and say the word *family*, your skin crawls? Far too often, we associate with and possibly even love someone that we would never even consider being near. If it weren't for the fact that they were, *family*. It's funny though, if we have no *family*, as with Shade, we often invent them.

In Shade's case, her *family* was a morally stunted confidence man, that most of my readers already know, simply as, Robert. His full name, though, was Robert Fetharous vonMeerin. Unbeknownst to Robert, he resulted from a rather powerful Senator and his elven victim. To keep the elf quiet about the abuse, the senator kept her supplied with whatever she wanted. A small house in the country, groceries, cars, etc... But when the senator found out that she had a child from his repeated abuse. Well, things took a wrong turn, and the elven woman turned up dead. Committing suicide by shooting herself in the back of the head, while on her knees.

The shooter, however, apparently missed Robert. The police found him, curled up with the family dog, sound asleep under the porch. He was far too young to understand what happened, or even remember his mother. Child protective services took him and tried to find an elven orphanage that would take him. But elves are finicky. And none of them would even consider taking a half-breed.

But as Robert would soon learn, humans didn't understand how to handle a child that took two hundred years to reach maturity. They passed him from orphanage to orphanage. And with each hand off, he grew more and more detached from reality. Until one day found himself in the inner city of Horin halfway across the planet from where he began his journey in life. It was there that he met the first person who was even remotely like him. Sadie Feelari, or as we know her, Shade.

Shade stepped into the raging nightclub. She had already adjusted her dampeners to prevent the noise from deafening her, but as the wave of sound crashed over her, she felt herself take a step back. Quickly she adjusted the dampeners to maximum and shook her head. This level of noise was seriously detrimental to anyone without internal dampeners. Even her advanced cyberware wasn't quiet enough.

Scanning the crowd, she frowned slightly. She hated places like this, but they were part of the job, no matter who or where she was.

A person tapped her on the shoulder, and she glanced over her shoulder to the bouncer standing directly behind her. The large orcish male pointed to a balcony high overhead. On the fourth floor, another bouncer was looking down at them. When they finally locked gazes, he waved his hand up towards himself.

"Stairs?" She yelled over her shoulder.

The arm shifted to point along the back wall.

"Outstanding," she grumbled. "Straight through the chaos."

The song shifted, and the party-goers began bouncing to a different rhythm. Pushing her way through along the left wall, she made her way to one of the four bars on this floor. As she passed by a pair, fucking up against the wall to the rhythm of the music, she rolled her eyes. As an elf, sex was simply an entertainment, but when you were so high that didn't know what was going on, it was just a waste of time.

"What can I get ya?" A human bartender smiled at her.

"What's the best stuff you have down here?" She hollered back at him.

"Nothing." He shrugged. "Most of these people don't care what I serve them."

Pointing to the balconies above them, she arched her eyebrows. "Do they have better up there?"

Nodding, he rescued a glass from the counter just before a barely aware patron stumbled into the bar.

"Thanks, I'll try my luck up there."

Turning towards the stairs in the distance, she pushed her way carefully through the crowd. Ignoring the repeated offers of drinks, drugs and sex, she skillfully avoided the more aggressive patrons. Four times, however, she wasn't able to avoid the stealthier ones. In each case, she deftly diverted the needles, filled with who knows what, back into the person carrying them. One individual even fell to the ground below the bouncing crowd.

By the time she reached the stairs, the large troll standing there ignored her as she passed. His massive hand, however, snaked past her suddenly, to close on the face of the person who'd been following her. Pausing, she turned to look over her shoulder. A human male, with a drink in one hand and a needle in the other had an enormous hand currently closed over his face. The troll glanced up at her and she shook her head, frowning.

With a practiced swing of his arm, the ten-foot-tall humanoid threw the human high over the crowd. As he came down in the center of the mosh-pit, Shade grimaced. That would hurt. Assuming he survived the throw, that is. The unmoving body slid along the top of the crowd for a short time, before he slowly melted down into it.

Shaking her head, the elf began the trek up the empty stairs to the next level.

At the top, another orcish bouncer nodded to her and pointed ahead. About thirty yards away, another set of stairs led up to the third floor.

Shade smiled kindly and nodded, veering off towards the nearest bar. This floor was just as loud as below, but littered with tables rather than an open floor filled with intoxicated people. Other than the tables, though, the clientele appeared little better than below. Drugs, paraphernalia, money, and oddly, weapons covered every table nearby. One person waved a bag at her gleefully as they passed, headed for the stairs down to the floor level.

Stepping up to the bar, Shade watched the bartender slip something into the drink just before setting it on the bar top in front of a man.

The bartender turned his attention to the white-haired elf and smiled brightly. "Can I get you something?"

"Does the quality get better the higher the floor?" She returned the smile, ensuring he didn't become suspicious.

"Yes. Top shelf will be on the top floor." He nodded.

Without a word, she turned away from the bar and headed for the stairs. Winding her way up the floors, she watched the surroundings curiously. It really wasn't much different from any other den of criminals she'd been in. The higher up the more money, and the higher the quality of the deals.

As she slid up to the bar on the fourth floor, she glanced around at her surroundings. It was quiet up here. The music was now just a background noise. The plush surroundings reminded her of a top-class hotel. Across the Marble floors covered in plush rugs. They scattered hard-wood and leather furniture with gold fittings in abundance.

"Good evening, ma'am. What can I get you?" A rather handsome looking elven bartender dried off his hands and tossed the towel over his shoulder.

"Cognac please." She smiled warmly at him and saw him wink in response.

She monitored him as he pulled down a sniffer and an expensive bottle of cognac. As he poured it, she sighed.



Turning her head, she scanned the floor. There were still deals going down here, but they were clearly for a much higher clientele. The drugs were in smaller amounts and only samples of what was likely drugs being sold by the ton. Each table had a built-in sound dampener, which made the floor fairly quiet, despite the number of people here talking.

"Here you go." A drink settled into her view and she picked up the glass and took a long whiff.

Turning back to the bartender, she smiled warmly. "Very nice."

"Yeah, the boss only allows the best up here." He grinned proudly.

Nodding her head, she set the glass back on the counter in front of the elf. "Now get me a fresh glass, and the Fedali twenty-nine." She pointed to the bottle to the left of the one the man had poured for her. "And don't even consider spiking it again."

He glanced over his shoulder to the bottle she suggested. When he turned back to meet her gaze, her eyes narrowed dangerously. Pursing his lips, he took a slow, deep breath and nodded. "Of course, ma'am."

"Impressive." A male voice spoke up as a second, rather handsome elf slid onto the stool next to her.

Turning, Shade smirked at the well-built half-elf. He'd clearly gotten almost all of his mother's traits. If you didn't know his lineage, there was no way to tell him apart from a full elf. He, however, clearly didn't recognize her. But that wasn't surprising. Each new life, Shade made sure that the changes to her persona were physical and digital. Using gene therapy, surgery and hacking of the various databases, she not only altered her name and history, but she changed her genetic identity as well. A little trick she picked up, a long time ago, from a close friend. In the modern age, it was almost impossible to change who you were, without a considerable amount of work, and heavily greased palms.

"Thank you, but it's not all that hard to be observant." She leaned one elbow on the counter and watched the elf next to her.

His deep blue eyes were calm, lacking the usual swirl of emotional shifts common in elves. Most people likely thought it was because he was in tight control of his emotions. But his dark blue eyes appeared to be the one thing that he'd inherited from his father. She smiled, he'd grown up to be a rather imposing figure, an impressive feat, considering the cards stacked against him.

Shrugging, he held up two fingers to the bartender. "You are the one that calls themselves the Shade, right?"

"Just Shade, but yes." Her smirk spread a little. "And you are?"

"My name is Bob."

Shade blinked several times. "What? Did you say Bob?"

Those dark blue eyes turned to him and narrowed slightly. "You have a problem with my name?"

Shade froze, mostly because it was taking every ounce of willpower she had not to fall off the stool laughing.

"My name is Bob. Simple as that. If you don't like it, you can fuck off."

Clearing her throat slightly, she smirked. "Alright *Bob*." Her jaw clenched slightly as she locked it against the laugh.

"The boss will be ready to talk to you in a moment. She is finishing up with the last person she hired for the job."

As if to punctuate the conversation, Shade heard a single, large caliber gunshot ring out through the quiet of the fourth floor. Heads around them turned towards the noise. All except for the three elves at the bar.

"Does she often hire more than one person for a job?" Shade used the distraction to get away from the elf's name.

Shrugging, he took a stiff drink from the glass in front of him. "Never at the same time. But it's not uncommon for her to need more than one to get a job done."

"I see." Shade nodded and sniffed the drink carefully, allowing her internal sensors to check the drink before taking a sip. The flash in her HUD revealed that the drink was unaltered.

"She'll be ready for you in a second." The half-elf, named Robert, but who was now calling himself Bob, stared into his glass without looking up. "I will say one thing Ms. Shade."

She arched an eyebrow at him curiously as she took another sip of her drink.

"I'm tired of finding new contractors for her. Don't fuck this up."

Shade slid from the stool and slapped him roughly on the back. "Relax, Bob. Life is way to fun to take this shit so seriously!" She laughed and made her way toward the gunfire.

She arrived at a large round table surrounded by a leather booth. Around it several large human and orcish bouncers in black suits glared at her. One of them was stuffing the bloody body of a human male into a large black garbage bag.



"Soda water gets blood stains out of carpet." Shade laughed as she pointed to where the body had been laying. She was easily out of arm's reach of the nearest guard and as he took a step towards her, she shifted her weight and took a stiff drink from the glass.

The woman in a long red dress, with a still slightly smoking pistol resting on the table in front of her, watched Shade quietly.

As the orc reached for her, the elf stepped forward, up under his arm, squeezing the thin glass sniffer as she did so. It shattered, leaving a sharp-edged stem, which she then slammed into the orc's jugular, and yanked it upward to enlarge the hole. Continuing the pirouette past him, she dropped into the leather seat and smiled brightly as she set the base of the now bloody stem on the table gently.

"I understand you have some business that needs an outsider to your organization?" She grinned broadly at the human woman.

As a second orc approached, the woman at the far side of the table raised her hand with one finger up. "Easy Noath, I'd like to hear her out."

"Ah, Noath?" Shade pointed to her broken glass. "Could I get another cognac?"

The orc's nostrils flared angrily, but the human woman laughed.

"Yes, why don't you have Bob bring us both drinks, Noath."

Tempted to add something else to the order, Shade reminded herself of the trek she needed to get out of the place. Pressing her luck too far, wasn't a wise choice, considering the number of bouncers between herself and the exit.

The orc that she'd slid past finally fell to the ground, and no one moved to help him. Shade arched an eyebrow in surprise, but cocked her head in a quick half shrug. This woman clearly didn't tolerate failure. Good to know.

"So, you are the Shade." The woman gestured to where the orc fell. "Not exactly what I expected from a thief."

Shade smirked and locked eyes on the woman. "It's just Shade. And I could say the same. You aren't what I expected of a crime boss."

"Why's that? Because I am a woman?" The human laughed.

Shade pursed her lips slightly and shook her head. "No, because you are human." She lifted her hand, palm up, to Robert as he set a drink down in front of her. "Surrounded by non-humans who will easily outlive you."

He slid into the bench seat across the table from Shade, his face utterly devoid of any emotion or interest in the conversation. Setting a drink in front of the human woman, he met Shade's gaze, watching her quietly.

"I see." The woman smirked and lifted the drink. "So, you think humans should fear other races?"

"Of course not." The beautiful white-haired elf turned her attention to the human. She doubted anything she could say to this woman would change her behavior, but she pushed anyway. "But I wonder at the wisdom of surrounding yourself with species that you will never truly understand."

"Oh, so now humans are too simple minded to understand other races?"

Shade laughed loudly and took a drink from her glass.

"You are new to Taius Ms. Shade." The woman continued. "I am going to give you some friendly advice. Don't shit where you eat. Meaning, don't piss off the people who decide whether you live or die."

"The only person who decides if I live or die, is me." Smirking, Shade locked eyes with the woman. "But I understand your point. I have no interest in murdering an entire nightclub filled with bystanders tonight. So, what did you need from me, Mrs. Kellerman?"

She used the woman's actual identity. Well aware that according to the local governments, Mrs. Andrea Kellerman, and her husband, the renown lawyer, Marshall Kellerman, died in a car accident eleven years ago. In a rather spectacular assassination. An assassination that the lovely Mrs. Kellerman organized.

The woman arched both eyebrows in surprise. "Impressive. You do your research."

"And you do not." Shade smirked, she'd been on Taius for over fifty years now, longer than this human had been alive. "The job?"

"Indeed." The human watched her carefully for several tense moments. As she flicked her wrist in Shade's direction, Robert slid a datachip across to her. "Everything you need is in there."

"I doubt that." Placing the chip in a pad, that she pulled from the satchel at her side, Shade skimmed the brief.

"I am looking for an item. It's nothing all that special, just a book."

Shade ignored the woman's lies and examined the intel. According to the data, the book was a pre-age artifact. And currently being stored at the Arrudan Facility in Horin. Taius public records marked the facility as medical research for the under-

privileged citizens living below the smog. It was a program implemented on underdeveloped worlds to appease the local planetary government and entice them into joining the Republic as a state. A standard Republic tactic, because it was successful time and time again.

"It's in the Arrudan Facility. Interesting."

"It's just a bunch of doctors and nurses." The woman waved the back of her hand towards the elf.

Glaring at the woman, she shook her head slightly. "Do you honestly think anyone buys that crap?"

Andrea Kellerman's eyes shot up in surprise. She was clearly not used to being called on her lies. "What?"

"If you want a contractor to be successful, then stop lying to them. It's unprofessional. Typical behavior of a child." Shade snapped.

Around her, the orcish guards simply resisted the urge to smirk. One of them even turned her back to prevent the human from seeing her smile.

The woman however snatched up her gun and pointed it towards the elf. "How dare you speak to me in that manner!"

"Put that away before you get hurt." Shade ignored the gun and looked over the pad. "They built that on top of the old Fermalyn Palace." Eyeing Robert, she shifted to the elven language. "I assume the historical society prevented them from making too many changes to the core structure?"

Robert nodded.

"Perfect." Returning her attention to the woman, she pointed to the gun in her hand. Switching back to the local language, she added, "the last time you fired that, there was a very subtle click. Often missed the heat of the moment."

The woman wrinkled her brow, confused.

"You pull that trigger again and you'll blow your own hand off. It's jammed." Pushing herself upright, Shade winked at the nearest orc.

He smirked and stepped out of her way.

"I'll let you know when I have the book." She called over her shoulder as she strode off.

Sadie lifted her gaze from the book in her lap and grinned. A subtle breeze drifted across her cheek, playing with her soft white curls. It was amazing how much she welcomed the smaller things in life, now. Ever since her time in the stone, she appreciated the feel and taste of actual drinks, food, and even the breeze. At some point, she'd need to find a beach and enjoy the surf. Leon's island was great, but it hadn't touched the ocean in thousands of years, it didn't have a beach, or surf. A small part of her considered building a hut on some tiny island and learning to fish. But the thought vanished as easily as it came. Boredom would set in by the end of a week.

Around her, the sounds of the busy docks shifted to screams. In the distance, a soft siren began echoing along the pier. Now that was a new sound. She wasn't a resident of Vinicia or anything, but she also wasn't a stranger. And she'd never heard that sound before. It was not the typical screeching of emergency alarms, but more of a deep warning. Of course, the sounds of screaming people along the docks was a warning in of itself.

Sitting up, Sadie glanced over to the ship next to them. Crew members were racing up the gangplank so fast that they were fighting each other. One man fell from the gangplank and screamed all the way until he hit the water.

An odd reaction for a professional sailor. As she skimmed the vessels in the distance, it seemed a common theme. One ship further down, had crew, and the local vendors, all standing on the deck of the ship, looking in her direction.

"Crap," she mumbled. "What now?" Scanning the deck, she saw nothing out of the ordinary. A sleeping giant lizard, a fully clothed elf, and a book. Nothing that wasn't here an hour ago. The barbarian and the wizard hadn't come up from below yet.

Letting out a deep sigh of exasperation, the elf placed her feet on the floor. But before she could stand, movement at the side of the ship caught her attention.

A dripping golden sphere, that looked somewhat like a large round eye, lifted over the edge of the deck. It glowed faintly, as a subtle cloud of golden gas wafted off of it.

The sensation of panic settle into her bones as she stared at the entity.

The golden stalk holding up the spherical object dripped several times into the water below with a loud hiss. As the ball started leaning forward over the deck, the elf leapt up.

"NO!" she yelled! Holding both palms towards the entity.

The ball stopped moving.

"Back up! Don't touch my ship!" the sound came out higher pitch than she had intended. Breathing deeply to calm down, she added, "please."

The sphere backup slightly, keeping its mass over the water, rather than the deck. As it blinked several times, the sensation of panic faded somewhat.

"ZERRICK!" The elf screamed as loudly as she could manage. Somewhere in her head there was a faint chuckle. Switching to the ship's communications circuit, she said it again. "Zerrick! I need you on deck immediately!"

As she stared at the creature, she couldn't help but feel utterly useless. Nothing she had could stop this thing if it decided to hurt her ship.

"What's wrong?" The male voice called across the ship's comm channel.

"You have a guest. Please get up here quick! I don't want it touching my ship!" She replied.

Next to her, a large Fluffy lifted its head and sniffed the air. But when he licked his lips, the eyeball snapped to look directly at the massive lizard. The lizard snorted a wash of hot air, but laid its head back down on the deck.

"Seriously?" the elf grumbled at the dinosaur next to her. "Please don't make it mad. We will get you some radiation to eat later." She stepped up next to Fluffy and pat him gently. "I'm sure I can find some spare uranium or something." She laughed at her own joke, but a small part of her wondered if the lizard would actually eat uranium.

"What's going... Oh." Zerrick slid out onto the deck, clothed in only a loincloth, and carrying one of his space-steel spears. He stood up straight and set the butt of the spear on the deck with a loud metallic thud. Grinning up at the dripping sludge that was holding itself into the shape of an eyeball, he asked, "what's up?"

The eyeball blinked several times. The mostly naked barbarian cocked his head as he appeared to listen to it.

"What's going... oh." Jane strode out onto the deck casually. Arching one eyebrow, she smirked at the elf. "I didn't know it could leave the canals."

"Neither did I." Sadie twitched. She was still trying to deal with the fact that the Viniccia canal sludge was alive at all. Let alone making a house call to her ship.

A ghostly figure appeared next to the wizard and handed her a steaming cup of coffee.

Nodding to him she said, "thank you Bob."

"Of course, ma'am." He smirked over the wizard's head at Sadie.

She just shook her head somewhat and rolled her eyes.

"What does it want, Zerrick?" Jane asked loud enough to catch the barbarian's attention.

He nodded to the sludge creature and glanced over his shoulder to Jane. "You, actually."

"Me? What does it want from me?"

He shrugged, "no idea. Something about a bunch of stuff it wants to give you." He scrunched up his face as he tried to make sense of the creature's meaning. "I think they are making her sick?"

Another series of screams echoed across the docks, just before a loud crash.

"She said she put them at the end of the pier." He grinned broadly. Taking several long strides on the deck, he leapt high into the air like a disturbing comic book hero.

Sadie sighed, she shouldn't have shown him how to use the pre-age mecha like that. Even when not deployed, he had access to the frame system, enhancing his strength and jumping capabilities to absurd levels. Even for a waste-lander.

There was a massive crashing noise that sounded nothing like the other noise. This time it sounded more like a grav-car wrapping around a pole.

The two women still on the deck locked eyes and shook their heads.

"Adds a whole new meaning to, look before you leap." Sadie quipped.

Lifting both shoulders slightly, the wizard mused, "or just the original meaning."

"Touche." The elf agreed.

"We'd better go see if he's still alive." The wizard ceased to exist on the deck of the ship.

Tossing the book into the chair, Sadie frowned. "I guess I will walk then. You know, like a normal person." Glancing over at the lizard, she smiled warmly. "You coming, Fluffy?"

The lizard didn't even open his eyes as he huffed a large blast of warm air at her.

"Guess not." She pat him on the forehead, between his enormous closed eyes. "Don't worry, big guy. He still loves you."

Striding down the plank to the pier, Sadie glanced to the dockmaster's office in the distance and saw the old elf watching her. He looked mildly amused, rather than annoyed, which was a good sign at least.

"Did he hurt anyone?" She asked in elven.

Even at the one-hundred-yard distance, the elf heard her and shook his head. "Just himself. I am surprised he's still alive, honestly. That's impressive armor he's got."

"You have no idea." She grumbled.

By the time she made it to the massive pile of artifacts at the end of the pier, she could see the golden hue rolling off them, as the radiation pooled in a disturbing golden cloud. Keeping a safe distance from the clouds, she stepped up next to Jane and the miniature hoard.

"Wow, I know what some of those are." She exclaimed.

Next to her, Jane wrote some glowing numbers in the air and tapped them. She then slid them into the formula that hovered around her. "Hmm?"

If Sadie hadn't already grown numb to the sight, she would walk away. But the wizard writing in the air, was so commonplace, that she merely found herself, trying to read the math.

"Oh, nice." She mused. "That will be useful in for more than just this."

Jane glanced over her shoulder to see what Sadie was talking about. "Oh, yes, probably. I can't send these to my grandfather without cleaning them first."

"That makes sense." The elf pointed to a sword laying atop the pile of items. "They call that the cursed sword of Fanee'la." Shrugging, she added. "It's not actually cursed, though. But it is dangerous."

Zerrick stepped up next to her, rubbing his shoulder. "That hurt."

"Honestly, you're lucky to be alive. That is a vorpal blade, it would have gone right through your armor."

Wrinkling his nose, he shook his head. "I shifted my landing right before crashing into that." He pointed to a nearby grav-sled covered in shattered crates and boxes. It looked to be a shipment of steel nails and armor pieces.

"We are going to have to pay for that, Zerrick." She sighed.

"I know." He pointed to the dockmaster, who was still sitting about thirty yards away in front of his office. "I told him to send me the bill."

Sadie resisted the urge to slap the man in the back of the head and settled for folding her arms across her chest.

"I think this will do it." Jane said, drawing their attention.



With a gigantic wave of both arms, in a semi-circle, over her head, a fifteen-foot-tall doorway between two places shimmered into existence. A large troll, dressed in jeans and a button up silk shirt, walked into the room on the other side and folded his arms.

"Mistress Jane. To what do we owe this visit?"

"Hello, Rajin. We have some items to add to the vault."

The troll stepped through the gate and scanned the area. "This is Viniccia." His shoulders sagged somewhat as he saw the pile of cursed artifacts. His eyes narrowed as they shifted to look at Zerrick. "This is your fault, I assume?"

He placed his hand on his bare chest, "how is this my fault?"

The troll ignored him, returning his attention to the wizard. "Very well, mistress. But I am not touching any of this. Let me go get your grandfather and the storage tools."

"And that is my cue to leave. This is your problem, not mine." Sadie laughed.

Jane turned her attention to the glowing pile of items and began the new ritual to clean them of the residual radiation.

Sadie nodded respectfully to the ancient eleven dockmaster, before returning to her ship.

Once on the deck, she refilled her drink and settled back into the chair with her book. They would be at that for hours. Moving cursed items was a dangerous endeavor. Even for those with experience.



Shade walked along the empty canal, humming quietly to herself. She hadn't been here since she was a kid. And even with how much Horin has changed, the canal system was exactly the same. All storm drains in the city emptied into the canal, which meant that if it wasn't clean, it would get cleaned soon enough. The monsoons alone could create a wall of water large enough to destroy anything in its path. And there was rarely any kind of warning. At one moment it would be dry, and at another there would be a fifty-foot wall of water. Which meant it was the perfect place to hide things you didn't want found.

There had been storm warnings all day, which meant that there could be a flash flood at any second, but that also meant that no one was paying attention to the elf that was cheerfully striding along the canal. In her HuD, a warning flash alerted her to the incoming water. Overhead, an alarm sounded.

"That's new." She mused.

Moving over near the wall, she began frantically looking for a way out. As the wall of water roared into view, she felt a slight increase in adrenalin. She was playing with her life, and she knew it. As it roared closer, she took a deep breath and slowed her heart rate. Just before it reached her, she raised her hands to cover her face in terror and took a step backwards into the wall. As she passed through the plasteel wall, she chuckled and allowed her hands to fall to her sides.

A red light flashed in her HuD, alerting her to the armed hostile behind her.

Dropping low, she spun, dragging her heel in a large arc.

Her leg connected with the person behind her, but they simply fell backwards and rolled back up into a standing position, still pointing the large pistol in her direction.

"Explain to me why I shouldn't blow your head off and shove you out into the wash?" The deep, angry voice of the male half-elf made Shade smirk.

"Now, now, Robert. That would be excessive, don't you think?" She remained crouched, with one hand on the ground. It had been a long time. There was no telling how he would react to her leaving him behind all those years ago.

The muscles in his jaw tightened as his eyes narrowed. "That is not my name."

"I beg to differ." She tilted her jaw to the side slightly.

They stared at each other for several tense moments.

"How did you know about this place?" He finally demanded. She could see his finger tighten on the trigger.

The world slowed as she leapt to the side. With a deft kick off the wall to her right, she dove forward and landed feet first on the elf's chest. Snatching the gun from his hands, she kicked off and rolled past him in the tunnel.

He didn't stay down for long. Rolling up to his side, he tugged a knife free from its sheath on his calf and snapped into a crouched position, facing her.

Dropping the clip from the weapon, she kicked it towards him.

He deftly parried it, knocking the clip behind him, and ironically through the force shield keeping the water at bay.

She popped the single round free of the chamber and tossed the gun behind herself, just as he dove at her.

Frowning, she dodged the slash. The two traded places again, and she grimaced at having her back to the water that roared by outside.

"Easy, Robbie." She used her pet name for him, trying to calm him down.

The sound of the name, however, seemed to enrage him further. And he screamed as he lunged forward.

Her automated reactions kicked in and she fell backwards. Using his own momentum, she kicked upwards, tossing him past her. Her mind registered the movement in mid-action, and she grabbed for his arms. One hand connected, grabbing a hold of his wrist.

The panicked look on his face tugged at her, and she grimaced as she snatched the second hand to his wrist, just as his body passed through the barrier.

The water jerked them both towards the force shield.

And Robert screamed in pain.

With a deft twist, she got her feet under her and yanked back on him with all her might. She jerked him free of the water and he fell on top of her. He was soaking wet from the waist down and Shade couldn't help herself. She started laughing and allowed her arms to fall to her sides.

Her laugh fell to a chuckle as a sharp sensation pressed against her throat.

"Who are you?" the furious elf on top of her growled.

Pushing up on the hand holding the knife, so that it wasn't applying as much pressure. She replied, "You already know the answer to that."

His narrowed eyes widened slightly.

They stared at each other for several moments before Shade said something.

"Not that I mind a sexy guy laying on top of me or anything, but do you mind getting off me?"

He crinkled his brow in confusion, but rolled off her anyway.

Sitting up, she snaked her hand out faster than he could register the movement. She slapped him in the back of the head, before rolling up to stand. "And next time, if you think I am a threat, don't talk. Just pull the fucking trigger."

The slap jarred his head forward, and he fell into a seated position. "Sadie." He grumbled and rubbed the back of his head.

"Well done, lil' brother. What are you doing here, anyway?" She didn't wait for him to answer as she strode deeper into the tunnel, away from the roaring water.

She made it to the sealed door at the end of the tunnel and punched in the code that they'd set when they were kids. The door popped open with a soft hiss. The lights in the large room flickered to life, and jaw fell agape slightly as her eyes widened in shock.

"Protecting you." He muttered behind her.

All around her, from where they hung on the walls, dozens of pictures of a young Sadie Feelari and Robert vonMeerin stared back at her. The sparkle lights they'd put up all those years ago were still active and twinkled cheerfully. The enormous bed that they used to lie in together, and dream about the future, looked well lived in. On one wall, a new desk, with a rather sophisticated computer system, seemed to be running a search algorithm. It was the only thing in the room that hadn't booted up on entry.

Tilting her head to look over her shoulder at the half-elf behind her, she frowned. "Are you still using this?"

He refused to meet her gaze.

Robert had made several more modern additions to the hideout. A food printer, a shower system, and even a toilet that he'd hooked up to the facility above. Stepping between Robert and the computer, she intercepted him and skimmed the screen. She tapped the antiquated keyboard and brought up the search parameters. The screen flashed, bringing up several pictures of her and the name Sadie Feelari. Turning deliberately, she stared at the elf who was watching his own feet intently.

Returning her attention to the search, she found several images lined up with various percentage numbers under them. The image in the upper left corner was of a Republic Marine colonel, with the words deceased written across the image. Beneath it, the software labeled the image as an eighty percent match. "Well, I am guessing you don't need this anymore." She typed in a command to the waiting prompt.

Confirm Deletion. The screen flashed at her.

Tapping a key, she glanced back at the male behind her.

The system began deleting the file.

"Care to explain?" She asked, folding her arms across her chest.

Robert allowed his eyes to meet hers finally. "I started that a few years back." He pointed at the ceiling. "I found nothing in the Taius databanks, but when the Imperials moved in, I decided it wouldn't hurt to look through their files." Shrugging, he added,

"It's a ghost process, tapped directly into their fiber, so it's slow. Honestly, I forgot it was running."

"I see." Taking a deep breath, she exhaled slowly and looked around at the shrine to their childhood. "Robert..."

His eyes were welling up, and she grimaced. She'd gotten away from Taius, and he hadn't. For the first time, she felt somewhat guilty.

"Well," she exclaimed loudly, causing him to jump slightly. "You should change. I have work to do. I'll be back in twenty."

Halting at the door that led deeper into the facility, she glanced over her shoulder at the half drowned elf. "And Robert?"

He kicked off his shoes and looked up at her.

"I missed you too." She lied and smiled fondly at him.

He smiled, then rolled his eyes as he undid his pants.



A loud crash, and sudden red alert caused Sadie to bolt to her feet, a pistol in each hand.

"Hull integrity at ninety-nine percent." Simbi alerted her.

Scanning the area for attackers, she dropped to a crouched position. "What the fuck happened?"

Next to her the lizard was looking around, tasting the air.

"Damage originated from within the vessel." Simbi replied.

Sadie stood and checked for the shipboard life signs. "Location?"

Zerrick was back in engineering in the radiation shower again, and Jane was in the alchemy lab. They both appeared to be fine.

"Alchemy lab." The computer answered.

Sliding her weapons back under her arms, they vanished. Sadie stormed into the ship and found both Jane and Zerrick coming up from below. The wizard however had a sheepish look on her face.

As she met the angry elf's glare, she grimaced. "Sorry about that."

"What happened?" Zerrick looked around excitedly. He spun his spear slowly, anticipating a fight.

"We got some sludge off the boxes that Zerrick had." The woman shrugged. "And I was testing the crystals and..." her voice faded.

"Trajectory calculated." Simbi stated so everyone could hear him.

The elf grumbled, "did it hit anyone?"

"Damage was minimal captain. It struck the sail of an inbound vessel, but the crew seems unaware that anything is amiss."

Zerrick laughed. "Where did it go?"

"Based on my scans, it should be in high orbit. It will probably settle at L1, between us and the Theris moon. Or the Dragons Eye, as the locals call it."

"Wow." All three of them said simultaneously.

Sadie shook her head and looked at the wizard. "Um, how about we wait to get back to the island or, even better, the R&D facility before we continue that research?"

Zerrick laughed. "Yeah, do that under high pressure, that sounds like a genius idea!"

Jane frowned, clearly concerned.

Sadie glared at him.

"What?" He shrugged. "It's a dumb idea!"

"I built the facility there to withstand that kind of research. It has far more armor than my ship. And it doesn't have a bunch of innocent bystanders for her to kill!" She snapped at the barbarian.

Grimacing, Jane looked out the windows onto the deck. "Not a big fan of killing anyone. I think that's might be a better idea."

Sadie's face softened.

"How much did you use, anyway?"

Shrugging, Jane shook her head. "Not much, I only have a few drops."

"Yikes!" The elf rubbed her arms. "That stuff is crazy."

"Yeah, but I learned something interesting by accident."

"Besides the fact that it launched the crystals across the planet and out into orbit?"

Jane chuckled, "yep."

Sadie blinked at her several times. "I am not sure I want to hear this."

"We can feed it." Jane smirked slyly. "And it grows."

Arching a single eyebrow high on her forehead, Sadie cocked her head a little as she considered the implications.

"Is it going to get mad at us for taking some of it, without permission?" Zerrick asked.

Shrugging, both females looked to him.

"How would we know?" Jane asked.

"Want me to go ask it?"

Sadie crinkled her nose at the idea. "Please don't. We've caused enough trouble for one day."

"She's right." Jane agreed. "Besides, I don't think it's alive per se."

"So, like skin cells?" Sadie asked.

The human wizard nodded.

"If it grows when you feed it, then it's alive." Zerrick folded his arms around this spear.

Sadie looked at the barbarian. "Sort of. Yes. But not the way you think."

"I don't understand." He shook his head.

Ignoring him, Sadie looked to the wizard, "which means we can use it as a fuel source, so long as we feed it."

"Yep, that was my thought as well." Jane agreed.

"Wait, what?" Zerrick tried to get the attention of the two females.

Jane cocked her head, smirking. "I need to do more research with it, though."

"No kidding." Sadie rubbed her hands together excitedly. "We might get off the planet after all!"

"Wait, we can't keep it as power, if it's alive!" Zerrick tried to get the girls to pay attention to him by raising his voice.

Patting the barbarian on his shoulder, the elf winked at Jane. "Relax big guy. It's not alive."

"But you just said if you fed it, it grows. That means it's alive."



Jane finally looked at him. "Trust us, it's okay, Zerrick. It's alive, but not intelligent."

"My head hurts." The man grumbled.

Patting him on the shoulder again, Sadie smirked. "Go relax. We are going to dinner soon, anyway. Then tomorrow, after we get Leon's laptop, we will head home. Then you can find something to smash to make yourself feel better."

Strolling back out on the deck, Sadie patted the lizard affectionately and pulled the book out from under his tail.

She flopped back into the chair, she flipped forward several pages.



Shade took a step back suddenly, flattening herself up against the wall as she waited for the patrol to pass. The Republic hadn't been able to make many changes to the facility, but unlike the Taius military that inhabited the facility several hundred years ago. They had patrols in the lower sections of the emergency tunnels. The soldiers marched past, down the hallway until they were finally out of sight.

She relaxed and took her finger off the trigger. In her HUD, she triggered the tiny drone that was waiting at the camera. She glanced around the corner and nodded, before sliding silently into the hallway. There was a slight interruption as she slid past the device unnoticed. The tiny drone raced ahead to the next unit. As she approached the doorway that led into the primary facility, she heard voices.

"They think it's just wildlife again, but they want me to check it out, anyway." A female voice said.

Shit, Shade thought. Reaching up, she snatched the micro-drone from the wall overhead and jogged back the way she'd come. Sliding around the corner, her foot slammed into something that hadn't been there only moments before. She tripped roughly, tucking up into a ball she rolled as quietly as she could manage. But it wasn't quiet enough.

"What was that?" The female voice sounded somewhat panicked. A typical techie, she thought.

Shade heard armored footsteps on the plascrete as a soldier headed her direction.

Glancing to where she had tripped, she saw an enormous book, easily three feet long, and over six inches thick, resting against the wall. It looked exactly like the drawings of the book in the dossier.

Warning bells went off in her mind. She spun and jogged further away from the facility, leaving the book behind.

As she rounded a corner that was no longer on the Republic soldiers' patrol route. She noticed the book again. This time, though, she reacted fast enough to pick up her feet, hopping over the book effortlessly.

"Nice try." She whispered to the book.

Crouching down next to it, she assessed it carefully, without touching it. Cautiously, she examined it for traps, but it was just a massive book leaning against the wall.

Frowning deeply, she grumbled, "they didn't tell me you were an artifact. That might have been useful info."

She pulled a unique pair of black leather gloves from her bag and changed the gloves out. Tucking the technological gloves, designed to disguise her presence, into her belt, she reached down to pick up the book. It was amazingly heavy. The cover seemed to be leather covered wood. The corners and spine had an unusual-looking metal alloy trim. The metal gave the book some serious heft. It also made it painful to trip over, she mused.

"Sheesh, you're beefy, aren't you?" She exhaled as she lifted it in both hands.

Flipping it over, she looked for any kind of writing, but there was nothing on the outside.

A sudden wave washed over her, and she felt the need to open the book. The desire to know what language the author used was overwhelming.

Chuckling, she shook her head. "Nice try jack ass. I am not that easy to manipulate." She yanked a black cloth bag from the bag on her hip and slipped the book inside. Drawing the strings tight, she tied them to activate the magical seal. "You picked the wrong sucker, my friend. But thanks for making my job easier by coming to me." Tossing the end of the bag over her shoulder, it fell against her back, causing her to exhale rapidly. "Oof."

When she came back into the sealed hideout, she was humming quietly to herself again. Tossing the black bag on the table, she startled the sleeping half-elf.

He awoke with a pistol in hand.

"Jumpy much?" She laughed.

He glanced from her to the bag on the table and frowned. "Did you get it?"

"Yep."

He seemed surprised. Glancing at a watch on his wrist, he frowned. "We have at least another three hours before the waters are low enough to leave."

"Fabulous!" She sauntered to the bed and hopped into the air. She landed on her back next to him.

Launching him into the air somewhat.

"Then I am going to take a nap."

He rolled his eyes at her and climbed out of the bed to stroll to the table.

"Leave it alone, Robert." Her tone was deep, warning him. "It needs to stay in that bag. Don't let your curiosity get you killed."

"Why?" He asked, allowing his hand to fall to his side.

"Because it's an artifact of power. And I am not entirely sure what it is yet. So, leave it alone."

She saw something in his eyes, and she frowned. He was going to ignore her, and she knew it. He'd never been one to heed warnings, even as a kid. Watching him curiously, she wondered if it were any of her business now. They were both adults, and it wasn't her job to take care of him anymore.

"Fine, I will make something to eat then." He shrugged and strode across the room to the food printer. "Want anything?"

"Nah, I'm good." She sighed, he'd made his choice. It no longer mattered what she said. "Just, be careful." She added quietly as she rolled onto her side, her arms crossed over her body as she took a brief field nap.



Alarms rang through the ship again as Sadie looked up. This time, though, she saw the crystal as it burst from her ship and raced across the top of the water. It barely missed two ships as they passed each other at the mouth of the harbor. Whacking the book into her forehead, she inhaled deeply.

"Son of a bitch." She muttered.

"That wasn't me!" She heard Jane call from just inside the door into the common area.

Standing up, she walked inside to find Jane looking up at her from the couch. She had one of the Shade novels in her lap and looked comfortable nested into the pillows and blankets.

The elf turned off the hull breach alarm in her HuD. The repair counter showed the estimated time to full repairs as six minutes.

Near the stairs, a set of eyes peeked up over the deck.

When he realized both women were glowering at him, he crept up further. Grimacing, he raised an eyebrow. "Um, sorry about that."

"What the hell, Zerrick?" Sadie snapped.

He came up onto the main deck. "Well, apparently when you put red ones next to a blue, well..." he pointed toward the flying crystal that was likely already entering orbit.

"Right." Sadie sighed.

Behind her, though, she heard Jane chuckle.

Exhaling, the elf drooped her shoulders slightly. Chewing on her lip slightly, she opted to walk around the bar to pour herself a stiff drink before saying anything.

The two younger humans watched her quietly. The larger one fidgeting slightly.

She felt the warmth pass through her body as she took a large gulp of the imperial vodka,

"Okay," she started.

Jane settled her hands on top of the book in her lap and raised an eyebrow curiously.

"Do you think we can agree, just this once, to wait on researching the crystals until we get back to the island?" Sadie's gaze fell to the large male.

She and the wizard had already to this consensus, but clearly Zerrick hadn't realized that it applied to him as well.

"I didn't put the sludge near it." He muttered and looked down at his hands.

Sadie smiled gently. "I understand that." Pouring herself another drink, she took a sip. "I am not asking that we stop researching the Vinician sludge. I'm asking that we stop messing with the crystals in any way, while aboard the ship. Don't touch them, don't talk to them. Hell, lock them up and ignore that they even exist! At least until we get back to the island." She tried to keep her voice calm as she talked to the man.

Behind him, the wizard was hiding her grin behind a cup of coffee. The tall half-elf ghost next to her, however, grinned broadly and folded his arms across his chest as she calmly chastised the waste-lander.

"I agree, they are very interesting, but there are over ten thousand people in this harbor. So far, we have been lucky, and no one has sunken a ship or killed someone, but that luck won't hold out forever. Please, both of you. Stop. Just for another couple days?" It reminded her of why working with humans was always so entertaining and all at once, annoying.

"But I, didn't know they would do that." He mumbled.

Nodding, Sadie agreed. "That's precisely my point. We don't know enough to be playing with them at all. Tomorrow we will get Leon's laptop. Then we can get go over his notes and see if we can continue his research, safely." Taking another large gulp of the Helandigari Imperial Vodka, she felt her mind and body relax. "Just a couple more days. I promise. Then you can do whatever you want with the crystals."

"Fine." His shoulders sagged, and he walked out on deck to stand next to the large lizard.

Sadie met the wizard's gaze.

The woman shrugged at her, "I had already stopped."

"I know." The elf agreed.

Making her way back out to the book, she skipped ahead. The sun was already setting on the horizon, and they would need to head to dinner soon. Settling into the chair, she ignored the moping waste-lander who was looking over the side of the ship for his ocean-going friend. She didn't have the heart to tell him that Slappy had evacuated the harbor a long time ago.

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Shade rolled over and found the half-elf intently reading the enormous book. He didn't even notice when she walked up and pushed the book closed.

Blinking several times, his solid black eyes shifted back to the normal white eyeballs with their usual light blue irises.

Sighing deeply, she knew it was too late. Whatever the book was planning to do to her, it had done to Robert.

"I can see why she wants it." He mused as he stood and slid the book back into the black bag.

Nodding casually, Shade said nothing.

Handing the bag to her, he stood tall. Much like he had the first time they'd met in the bar a few days ago. She could already tell that the Robert, that was searching in vain for his best friend, was gone. In his place was this alternate version of Robert.

She took the bag and smiled. "Well, lets go give it to her, shall we?"

"Sounds good to me." He agreed. Swiftly moving through the room, he shut off the electronics, including the computer. "Don't need that anymore." He chuckled.

"Welcome back, sis." His smile was warm, almost adoring.

"Mmhmm." She nodded and started towards hidden exit that led into the canal.

Several hours later, the two met outside the nightclub. Robert led her to a lift in the back that avoided the major part of the nightclub.

"I hate dealing with the riffraff." He rolled his eyes.

Smirking, she glanced at him. "We used to *be* the riffraff."

"True enough, but neither of us stayed riffraff." He smirked at her. "You, for example, have become a rather spectacular thief."

"And you, are a rather spectacular, suck up." She replied.

He pat her on the back and laughed. "That is one of my many skills, yes."

The doors opened to the lift, and he strode out onto the floor.

Shade remained behind in the doorway to the lift, as she watched him cross the floor carefully. On the ground floor, he had made several subtle gestures to the bouncers as he took her to the lift. And now as he strode to the large booth where the human woman, in the red gown, sat, he made several more gestures.

Shade glanced to the woman briefly.

"Did you find my..." Her voice cut off as her brains splattered across the wall behind her.

All across the floor gunfire leapt into existence as the orcish bouncers eliminated about half of the guests and the human bouncers. Down below, screams rang out as more gunfire ripped through the crowd.

Robert turned the weapon toward Shade and grinned.

Leaning into the doorframe of the elevator, she watched him casually.

"I'll take my book now, Sadie."

A large orc stepped up next to her and held out his hand.

She handed the bag over to him. But remained leaning into the doorway, her arms folded across her chest, hands carefully near her own weapons. Her shoulder pressed against the lift doors, forcing them to remain open with her presence.

"Why don't you come sit down?" His grin turned into a dangerous leer.

Shaking her head, Shade replied, "I am fine where I am."

"It wasn't a request." He sneered.

"And like I said, I am fine where I am."

An orc stepped towards her. Snapping her attention on him, her eyes narrowed dangerously.

He froze in his tracks and took a step backwards.

"Relax, sis. I have no intentions of killing you..." He paused for dramatic effect. "Yet."

The orc with the bag dumped its contents on the table. As the heavy Republic dictionary fell out onto the table, Robert pulled the trigger on the pistol.

The weapon clicked harmlessly.

"You only had the chambered round." She chuckled and held up his clip. "And before you do anything stupid. If you kill me, you will never find where I hid it."

Robert held up his hand, stopping the orcs that were approaching her in their tracks.

"Well played, sis." He chuckled. "How about I buy you a drink?"

"That sounds lovely. But only on one condition."

He raised an eyebrow curiously.

"I want to know what it is, and why you both wanted it so badly."

His smile grew to a beaming grin. "Deal."

## The End



Sadie closed the book and looked inside to where the wizard sat reading her book.

Behind the bar, an ethereal half-elf held up a bottle of cognac, grinning questioningly.

She nodded.

He walked out to her carrying a fresh glass.

"Thank you." She smiled weakly.

Pointing to the book in her lap he asked, "those any good?"

"You haven't read any of them?" She sipped the drink slowly, watching him.

Shaking his head, she shrugged. "I tried, but they have a lot of blank pages. I am guessing they contain stuff that the prison sentence is blocking."

"I suppose that's possible. You're in several of them." She flipped the book over so he could see the cover.

"I bet I am a principal character in that one." He chuckled.

She nodded and smiled. "I'd tell you, but you won't remember. Suffices to say it's about the day that I lost my little brother."

He frowned. "What do you mean?" he looked around. "Last I checked, I am still here." Looking down at his ghostly hand, he grimaced. "Well, sort of."

"Bob is, yes." She agreed. "But this is the day that Robert truly died. Replaced by whatever you are now." At first, she'd been angry at the book. But she knew the twisted path that had led them both to prison, and this very moment had been her fault. Not the artifact's, it had simply followed its design.

"Yeah, I don't understand." He shook his head.

He seemed genuinely confused, and Sadie sighed.

"Thanks for the drink."

"You're welcome." He faded into wisps of ethereal energy, and drifted on the breeze back inside, to where the wizard sat reading her book.