



# Many Shades of Helagg

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*World Design by Richard W. Porter III*

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*and I do mean never...simple.*

”

-Leon Hamilton

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## **Fachun 13<sup>th</sup>, 26551**

A loud ping rang throughout the upper decks of the sizable catamaran, audible even despite the wind in the sails and the water rushing past the dual hulls.

"Sadie!" The abnormally large male wastelander, named Zerrick, hollered down into the main deck. He had been on the bridge for the last few hours learning how the sensor gear worked.

"Yeah, yeah, I heard it. I am not deaf." The tall, elegant, white-haired elf stepped out of the main cabin area onto the deck and looked up at him. Her long hair pulled back into a bun to keep the wind from tangling it up. The usually fashionable elf was more casually dressed than usual, in a tight t-shirt, jeans and her favorite pair of desert camo boots.

The boots had been one more thing she'd found hidden on her new ship. Yet another clear indication that her long dead lover hadn't moved on after she was sentenced to five thousand years in prison. Instead, he'd scoured the world and surrounding solar systems, looking for every emergency drop-cash he knew about. She honestly wondered if he left any of her stashes. Though, now that she thought of it, none of her drops were designed for five-hundred years. Let alone five thousand. Odds were that they were all gone, no matter how she looked at it.

"That was the sonar. So, look to the larger screen on the right with the two-color image. What does it look like?"

"Um..."

She waited while he tried to interpret the image. Sonar was a tricky tool, but damn useful once someone mastered it. It was a two-week trip back to Bugrasi. Which meant she had plenty of time to help Zerrick get good enough at the new tool to be useful in the future.

"It's definitely manufactured, it's not natural." He called to her as she walked back into the main cabin and finished pouring herself a drink.

"Okay?" The called back to him.

"A ship!" he called excitedly. "It's a sunken ship! I can see the break in the spiny belly thing."

"Keel." She grumbled, rolling her eyes. Laying a hand gently on the leather-bound book on the bar, she smiled weakly as she traced the embossed title with her fingertips.

The Many Shades of Helagg.

Without skimming the pages, she already knew what this story was about. She'd been seriously drunk when she'd told him about that trip. But then, she'd been drunk for several weeks after that event. It wasn't surprising that he used it to get the story out of her. It wasn't a story she wanted anyone to know, ever. But he'd claimed some crap about closure helping her to deal with whatever happened. It had been a mistake, and she knew it. Even as she told him the parts of the story, she was comfortable sharing. One of the many downsides of alcohol, she supposed.

The next day he begged her to let him write it down. She'd refused. Clearly her incarceration had somehow removed his need to keep his promise. A slight smirk crept into the corner on her mouth as she realized that she'd never actually demanded his word on the matter.

"Holy crap!"

A large reptilian tail dropped over the upper deck into the doorway of the main cabin. Clearly the rock lizard was on the bridge again, checking to see what its master was doing.

Pushing the tail aside, Sadie stepped past, carrying her drink and the book. Making her way up the stairs to the bridge, she saws the abnormally large human male tapping the sonar screen.

"Look, I can even read the name on front!" He exclaimed excitedly.

"It's called a prow, and yes. The resolution is not bad on that unit." She smiled warmly and moved to look around him to see the entire panel. The radar to the left of the sonar image showed three blips on the screen. Where the image he was pointing to showed a clearly sunken vessel resting on a ledge far below them.

The ship was moving too fast moment to get any good visuals in actual time. So, they were simply collecting images that matched a certain parameter, such as non-natural.



The odd waste-lander barbarian, who was wearing military style pants and boots from her age, and a loincloth tied over the top of them as a belt, beamed at her proudly. Despite his stone age upbringing, he was oddly adept at picking up her more advanced technology. Even though he still crept her out slightly, with his faintly glowing eyes and clearly tribal roots. He was an entertaining traveling companion, to say the least.

Patting him on his bare shoulder. She marveled, and not for the first time, at how tough this human was. Even his skin was harder than it should be, more like his rock-lizard companion than any normal human.

"You've got the hang of it." Pointing past him to the two blips at the outer edges of the radar, she added, "what about those though?"

"What?" He shifted his attention, and she heard him cuss under his breath. "Damnit!" He leapt from the upper deck, caught the main spar on the sail and landed on the deck gently. The first time he'd leapt from the top deck to the main deck, he rocked the ship so hard that the wizard almost fell. She threatened to make him swim the five-hundred miles home, which he briefly considered. Ever since then, he and the lizard were doing better about rocking the ship too much.

"Trajectory?" He called from the large, mounted camera on the prow of the ship.

"Come two-one-two." She replied. Settling into the chair at the console, she set her drink in the cup holder and rested the book in her lap.

She could hear him talking to the lizard, as he took several pictures of the ship in the distance. All he could see at this distance was the mast, but that was all they needed. These locals could derive basic size and colors from just the masts of a vessel. She didn't feel the need to tell Zerrick that they could also launch drones and get more data if they required it. Since the photos were for the Bugrasi King, she knew they would already be more than his stone age government was used to.

Opening the main cover of the book, she began reading the forward.



Humans, elves, dwarves, orcs... really all the traditional bipedal humanoids that are found across the Tharward arm of the galaxy, have one similarity. We all have many faces. Before you get upset, please realize that I am not saying that everyone is a two-faced liar. I simply mean that we all, every one of us, have different behaviors depending on the audience.

We act differently in front of our parents than we do in front of our friends. We behave differently in front of complete strangers, then we would in front of government authorities. Those behaviors will change even further when you consider digital mediums.

For example, we text differently than we talk. Or in in virtual spaces, for example, we say and do things we might never even consider doing in person. This is a normal facet of culture. Many people will tell you that honestly is easier to remember than multiple personalities. And they are right, to some degree. But no matter how honest you are, you still will have micro shifts in your behaviors, based on the audience.

Here's the rub, though. Throughout our lives, we develop these intricate behaviors to the point we often lose track of who we really are. Everyone loses themselves in their lives. Most can never find the authentic versions of themselves again. Instead, they live their lives going through the various pretend people, never know who the real one is.

Then you will occasionally come across some people who embrace the falseness of it. Shade was one of those people. I wish I could tell you she was better than the rest of us, because she always knew who she was, but that would be a disservice to you and her.

Shade never knew who she was from moment to moment, always keeping her personal reality utterly fluid. But she embraced that fact and never claimed to be any one person in particular.

She was an authentic example of chaos incarnate, but not a purely destructive chaos, more like the beautiful chaos of a Dolluk painting or dark matter. There are many that believed she was simply a thief and a murderer, but that was never the case. She was never... and I mean **never**... simple.



"What about the other one?" Zerrick called up to her, drawing her attention from the book.

Glancing at the radar, her eyes narrowed slightly. The second blip had moved in closer and seemed to follow them. Looking over her shoulder towards the massive three hulled vessel to their starboard, she saw the various lookouts scattered through the masts alerting the ship's captain to the trailer.

The Sstagi, or dragonkin, captain of the Antiries, looked her direction and waved his arms in a unique pattern. His blue scales sparkled in the sunlight and she smirked.

"I don't care what you do with it, captain. We will slow to ten knots and continue course. Catch up when you see fit." She stated clearly, knowing that the dragonkin could hear her, even though there was over fifty yards of ocean between their vessels. Their hearing was far superior to anything she'd ever known.

The massive vessel immediately veered away from them as their gunports swung open, plainly stating their intentions.

"Come to one-one-six!" She called out loudly to the wastelander below. Reaching to the console, she flipped a switch and pulled the microphone to her mouth. "This is the captain. We will reduce speed while our escort deals with some side business. Bridge out."

Closing the book and setting it on the console, the elf hopped lightly to the deck below and moved to reduce the sail. Leon designed the ship to be manageable by one person from the main bridge. Even the sail mechanics were fully electronic, but she still enjoyed doing it the old-fashioned way. Not to mention that it was what the locals expected to see her doing, so operating as if it were just a normal ship, was the most optimal OpSec.

The ship slowed dramatically as the sail reduced its surface area. Overhead the massive falcon, yet another reappearing dinosaur, like Zerrick's rock lizard, widened its lazy circle.

Shaking her head, she made her way back to the chair at the sensor panel and picked her book back up. Propping her feet up on the console, she opened it and picked up where she'd left off.



Shade walked through the dilapidated streets of Guthera Limone with her laden pack strapped over one shoulder. The surrounding streets were filled with the poorest of the poor, many of them clearly starving. Too weak to even look up at her as she walked past. Further down the street, someone had parked a four-door vehicle with wheels, at an angle in the middle of the street. Next to it, a two-wheeled cart with an ox attached to it was over-turned.

Two tall, dark-skinned humans were screaming at each other, with their arms flailing threateningly. Both of them carried automatic weapons, but neither of them was paying much attention to them. Likely unwilling to waste the bullets on something so trivial as a navigational accident.

When the white-haired elf took a large step forward as a young man ran, full tilt, into her from behind. Simply twisting away from him, she allowed the energy to bleed off naturally. He yanked her bag from her hand and continued down the street, as fast as his feet could carry him. He darted to the left down a dark alley, and Shade smirked as she adjusted her jacket back into place over her weapons.

Approaching the two men, she found the brightly colored cart owner still yelling, but the man next to the vehicle was ignoring him. The two of them locked eyes, and he jutted his chin toward the stolen backpack.

"Do we need to get that back?"

Shaking her head, she smiled warmly and placed her hand on the shoulder of the angry cart owner.

"Easy, my friend." She cooed gently, and the man calmed somewhat. "My apologies if my friend has caused you or your animal harm. Please, take this and be well." She handed him a compact bundle that she pulled from a smaller shoulder bag that tightly bound to her, ensuring that it didn't vanish the way the over-laden backpack had.

The cart owner looked down at the bundle and nodded his head. "He needs to watch where he flies that monster!"

Waving his arm angrily at the tall man next to the vehicle, he turned and moved away.

The calm man, resting his arms on his harnessed weapon, smiled at her and shook his head. "You're too generous. What was in the bag, anyway?"

"Food."

He laughed and opened the passenger door for her. "That's what he would have sold the contents for, anyway."

"I'm aware, which is why I packed a full bag with easily six months' worth of dehydrated food, enough for a family of ten."

He closed the door behind her and laughed all the way around to the driver's seat. "Welcome back Ms. Shade."

"Thanks, Bandambi. Where to?"

"Home first, my wife made me promise."

"Sounds good to me." She smiled and pat the man on the arm.



Pong!

The sound of the radar finding a new target drew her attention from the book. Glancing up at it, she saw three new objects in a tight formation entering the preset range.

"Simbi," She called to the computer system. The computer had been utterly silent since they had come aboard. At first it had spent several days adjusting and updating the systems. But after Sadie had finally completed the upgrades, it had remained silent in front of the other passengers, which suited her just fine.

It answered in her Heads-up. "Yes ma'am?"

"Launch drone three."

"Roger."

There was a soft ta tong sound as the drone launched and shot off underwater towards the new vessels.

"What was that?" Zerrick called up to her.

"Come to nine eight degrees and tell me what you see." Switching the sonar panel to the drone sensors, she waited briefly for the image to switch.

"A four-masted ship of some kind. Not coming towards us, I don't think." He replied and began taking photos.

Sadie smirked; they were good. They were staying at the very edge of the radar. She doubted that the radar specifically had anything to do with it, though. She'd set the range to just past the horizon. Anything more and they couldn't



take clear photos because of the curvature of the planet. Which meant anything outside of the range wasn't really relevant.

Especially since none of the ships she'd seen or heard about so far, had any reliable form of radar. Which meant that they too only worked by why they could see on the horizon. This sailing group had experience in masking their actual size and numbers with the horizon.

The wastelander was right about one thing though; they weren't interested in the Lion's Shade. They seemed intent on the Antiries, though, and were on an intercept course. In the distance she heard cannon fire begin as the first of likely several broadsides filled the air. The Antiries had found new prey, and she chuckled.

Tapping a virtual button, she launched the drone into the air. The image on the screen cleared and she could see four ships. The fourth ship was almost invisible from a distance, since it tucked neatly in the center of the other three larger ships. Even with her high-resolution camera, the image was blurry, which meant they were masking it in some manner.

"Activate stealth and begin evasive maneuvers." She told the computer currently piloting the drone. The camera angle shifted slightly as the drone moved around in the sky at irregular intervals.

"What's going on?" A female voice called up to her from the main deck.

"The Antiries found a prize. They are off collecting it."

"Oh." Jane seemed to pout slightly, and Sadie resisted the urge to chuckle.

"I mean, you could go join them... but I am sure they have it under control."

Waving the back of her hand toward the fighting, the woman walked back into the comfort of the main cabin and its many overstuffed chairs and couches.

"Orders?" The text request drew her attention.

"Just monitor them. They are the Antiries's problem, not ours."

Back in the book, Sadie skimmed over a disturbingly detailed visit with Bandambi's tribe. Far more than she'd ever told Leon. In fact, now that she thought about it, she'd never told him of Bandambi at all. She'd always referred to him as simply a tribal guide that she occasionally used while in central Helagg. She was always careful to protect Bandambi's family from her normal life. Ensuring the two never crossed, save for this one instance.

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Shade and Bandambi laid on the grassy hill, looking down over the massive compound in the distance. The walls were over fifty feet high and highly electrified, as much for the wildlife as it was for the occasional tribal attacks that happened every so often.

As she skimmed the grounds, she paused and zoomed the binoculars on a line of slaves, their feet and necks bound by what appeared to be steel shackles. The most disturbing feature of these slaves was that none of them were over fourteen years of age.

A high-powered spray of water gushed over the slaves. The pressure was so high that several of the smaller children fell over. A man in military fatigues swung a whip toward the fallen children, forcing them to struggle to their feet, despite the water.

"How long did you say this was going on?" Shade's voice was calm and collected, despite the scene playing out below them.

The voice next to her was also cool and neutral, despite the scene. "It's not unusual for the warlords to steal children, but about six months ago, the pace picked up here. He's been collecting them from all throughout Helagg."

"Hmm. Why are you collecting kids, Handal?" She mused out loud, even though the warlord wasn't here to answer the question. Chuckling, she added, "interesting, look at that. You call his name, and he appears. What a funny little djinni he is."

The man stretched out next to her didn't laugh. None of these were his children. Shade had made sure that he was capable of defending his village from the warlord. But unlike her, he was a reasonable person, and reasonable people didn't joke about captured and tortured children. No matter whose children they were.

"Okay, I will go in after it the evening shift change. I will meet you back here at four thirty. Got that?"

He turned to furrow his brow at her. "That is longer than usual."

Nodding her agreement, she rolled over onto her back and stared up at the slow-moving clouds overhead. What she wouldn't give for a monsoon storm

right about now. "Yeah, they need more detailed intel this time. Which means I need in the vault."

"That is in the beast's belly." He stated flatly, clearly disapproving.

"Yes."

"Why do you risk your life for this? Warlords come and go in Helagg. This one will go soon enough."

Shade continued to watch the clouds pass by overhead and didn't answer him. She had her reasons, and she knew that even if she told him her usual bullshit line that a job was a job, the tribal elder would never truly understand. He might even point out the obvious tautology.

The two of them lay there quietly for several hours as the sun sank slowly over the savannah. In the distance a lion roared, and she thought of Leon.

She felt a touch on her shoulder and looked over at the man next to her. He pointed with a long finger towards the compound. Rolling back onto her belly, she brought up the glasses. It wasn't time for turnover yet, but there was clearly something going on in the courtyard. People were running in almost every direction. Her eyes narrowed as she scanned the people dragging out line after line of young slaves. They easily had a hundred young slaves cleaned and stripped, all standing in rows of ten, in the cool evening air.

A thought suddenly dawned on her, and she cursed. "Shit." Turning the binoculars up towards the stars, she saw what she hoped wouldn't be there. Far up, there was a bright flash as a vessel entered the planet's outer atmosphere.

"I have to go in now. I will be back in one hour. Be ready to run."

"What's going on?" He frowned at her, obviously concerned.

"Nothing. Stay here. No matter what, STAY HERE!" she demanded. "Give me your word!"

He nodded emphatically and said, "you have my word Shade."

"Good, I will be back." Tossing him her binoculars, she rolled over the edge of the cliff and began sliding down to the base. Once on the lower savannah, she took off at a run towards the massive compound several miles away.



The sudden lack of cannon fire drew Sadie's attention up from the book that she was regretting reading. The memories of that night were already weighing on her, and the details were dangerously close to 100% so far. The only way he could have gotten the story this accurate was if he'd gone and found Bandambi, who would have told him the entire story for the simple joy of telling it. As was the way of his people.

Glancing at the radar and the drone footage, she could see the ships still slowly creeping up on the massive Antiries.

"Switch to the Antiries." She said to the computer. The camera shifted, focusing on captain Destonovan. They were focused on their prize and didn't seem to see the approaching vessels. Taking a deep breath and letting out slowly, she glanced down at the book, then up to the drone feed. "ETA?"

A timer appeared in her HUD, showing a countdown of just under three hours.

Turning her attention back to the book, she skipped ahead several pages.



Shade slipped a wafer like device from the top of the stack in her left hand and stuck it to the back of the barrel that she was currently hiding behind. As soon as the nearest guard looked the opposite way, she slipped past into a currently empty hallway. She'd placed over a hundred of the tiny wafers so far as she made her way into the base. But she was running out of time, and she knew it.

Moving silently through the compound, she stayed to the shadows and when needed, slipped in behind a patrol of guards to walk through the various doorways. Most of the vast army stationed here were collecting in the main courtyard. They seemed to set up defensible hard points and gun nests in case their inbound guests opted to be unfriendly. Which was all too often the case, at least in Shades experience.

She slid in directly behind one of the few remaining guards on the vault floor, which was five floors below ground level. They painted this section of the underground base pure white. Mostly for the security watching the cameras. It made it easier for them to notice when things were out of place.

Yet, if a thief had the right tools, such as a perfectly white suit with photosensitive reflectors designed to blend into the background. The white made it even easier to get past the security with minimal traces. So, when she shadowed the security officer so tightly that you almost couldn't tell them apart, no one even noticed her, which was the point.

He swiped his badge and passed through the last security door into the inner sanctum. Just before the door closed, she triggered a switch in her heads-up. And somewhere outside of the base, a small turret drone received the signal and began firing at the guards on the walls. She had programmed it to shoot two or three times, then move and repeat.

As the door sealed, her hand snapped up and closed around the man's mouth and nose. The shock of it caused him to breathe in as his mind and body tried to alert someone. But the chemicals acted quickly, and he grew limp in her arms. Lowering him to the ground, she pat him on the cheek and thought, *nighty night*.

She already knew the facility well. The phonetic sensors would key in on any voice not registered with the system. Smirking, she continued in to where she knew the massive vault door was located. As she rounded the corner, she found the vault door ajar.

Her white gloved hand reached forward and gently shifted the door just enough so that she could see inside. It was empty, which didn't fit. Warlord Gethri Doravin Handal was a meticulous man. It was his annoying attention to detail that made her admire him somewhat. And what always made him easy to manipulate and steal from, like she'd been doing for years now.

Cautiously, she slipped into the vault and scanned the large room more carefully. It was indeed empty and unlocked. Glancing at the table in the center of the room, she found several flimsies and written journals scattered about. Again, unusual, it was almost as if someone with the same intent as her had already ransacked the vault. Yet they returned anything to its proper place, leaving a rather obvious trail. She did one more scan of the room, looking for other hidden people like herself, and still found nothing.

Back on the table, she noticed a familiar recording device. Its chronometer showed that someone had played it within the last twenty minutes. Tapping it, she told it to display the holo-recording.

An image of a balding caninoid appeared above the device and looked at her. She felt a cool chill run down her spine as she recognized the creature. It had a



deep scar over its left eye, and its other eye was a piercing dark green. It furrowed its brow in anger.

“I will not tolerate failure again, monkey.” It spat, baring his sharp white teeth as it spoke. “Our agreement was one-hundred innocent souls for the weaponry. Not fifty, not five, not ninety-five. One hundred. I will be there in two of your hours, you’d better have all of my souls or I will eat yours instead.”

Shade felt her stomach lurch as she suddenly realized the hole that Handal had dug himself. Emerald Scar, as the caninoid called himself, did not deal. He took. No matter what the human warlord thought, this would not go as he planned. And they caught Shade smack in the middle of it. She didn’t have the firepower to deal with Scar again.

Looking over the rest of the papers, she quickly realized what had happened. The notebooks were translation keys. Which meant that Handal didn’t speak caninoid, yet he was still dumb enough to make a deal with them. Gritting her teeth angrily, she hastened to the shelves where he kept his many contracts and began pulling down the newer ones.

She’d been coming about every eight months to check in on him and log his dealings. The planetary government had been monitoring him for almost a decade now, trying to find the source of his arms deals.

The next part of the job was rote practice. Scanning the documents went quickly as she pulled tools especially designed by Leon Vetiste, in conjunction with Shadowband Solutions. Taking a copy of the Emerald Scar message was slightly trickier, since their race was far more volatile with their code. But ironically, it wasn’t impossible if you knew what you were doing. Caninoids were arrogant, and positive that humans were nothing more than dumb cattle. Occasionally they kept some of their cows around for a while, but in the end, they were all food.

She’d been in the vault longer than she intended, and she could hear movement outside. The guard was coming around. Moving quickly, she returned everything exactly where it had been and moved back out to the doorway where the guard was swiping his badge to exit the inner sanctum so he could call for help. He made it approximately two feet outside the door before deciding, against his will, to take another nap.

Making her way up to the main floor, she paused in one of the many empty barracks and changed into a local uniform. Several minutes later she came out looking like a complete native. Dark skin, hair, eyes and all. As an elf, she was

already taller than a typical human, so she didn't even appear all that short, when compared to the others.

The main gate was already open and the caninoid ship was clearly visible outside the walls. Thankfully though, he appeared to be up to his old antics. Shade pursed her lips; Scar loved his drama. He would drag this out for the sheer fear factor, which might be the distraction she needed.

No one even questioned her when she moved out to join the group that was standing with their warlord. Slipping away from the group was amazingly simple. Since the entire facility had its attention and their weapons trained on the caninoid ship.

Racing at a breakneck speed back to the rendezvous point, she slid to a stop as Bandambi greeted her with the barrel of a gun. Smiling with approval, she tossed a compact bundle of memory sticks towards him with one hand. With the other, she tossed a long red, candle looking, device.

"I need you to get those to the Great Tree as soon as possible." She pointed to the red stick. "When you get there, break that in half. It will trigger a special signal. A flier will come in and pick the package up." She pointed with emphasis to the memory sticks. "They have to get that package, or thousands will die."

The weapon lowered and Bandambi narrowed his eyes dangerously. She'd only ever seen him angry once, it hadn't been pretty. "Where are you going?"

"Back in."

"No." He stated firmly.

Shade smiled, showing bright white teeth behind her now dark lips. "Yes."

He shook his head emphatically. "No. I forbid it."

"Bandambi, I love you and your family very much. And I respect your right to rule them, but I am not yours to rule over. I do as I see fit. And right now, I am needed in there. I will not stand by and allow that monster to eat the children of Helagg. At least not without a fight."

"Then I will come fight with you." He took a step forward.

Faster than lightning, she drew her own weapons, pointing them both directly at him.

"You will take the package to the Great Tree and give it to the people there. Right now, that is all that matters. Please don't make me break my promise to your wife."

He ignored the guns and instead looked deep into her eyes. They stared at each other for several minutes, before he finally turned and took several long strides away from her. As he broke into a full run, she smiled and took a deep breath. The bushmen of Helagg were the fastest runners in the entire world. He could run for days and not be winded. She hoped he made it in time.

If she couldn't delay Scar, more than just one-hundred children and a few thousand misguided soldiers would die. All of Helagg would burn. Including Bandambi and his family.



Sadie looked up from the book in her lap, her nostrils flaring angrily. Slamming the book closed, she tossed it across the console and stood. It skidded across the panels and bounced up and over the edge to fall on the deck on the far side.

"I... I told you that in confidence! You fucking prick!" Her fists balled at her side, but before she could do something destructive, she hopped over the railing and landed softly on the deck below.

The sudden movement in the doorway caused the wizard Jane to look up from her own book and nod a greeting.

"I am going to make food, want anything?" Sadie's voice remained cool and neutral, despite her current agitation level.

"I can have Bob cook something." Jane smiled kindly.

At the mention of his name, an ethereal ghost appeared in the center of the room and looked from the wizard to the elf. "What would you like?"

"To drop your ass off in the great divide and leave you there forever." Sadie snapped, far too much vehemence had come through with her response.

Robert raised a single eyebrow at her. "Okay... and for you, ma'am?"

"Go away, Robert." Sadie looked to the wizard, knowing good and well that she had no say over what the woman's ethereal prisoner did or didn't do.

Jane shrugged and nodded her head towards the skull resting on the coffee table in the middle of the room. The ethereal ghost whisked away into the skull without a word, which was unlike him. But Sadie didn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

"You okay?" Jane asked.

"Not really, no. But I will be. Do you want anything?" Sadie paused at the top of the stairs that led down to the next deck where the kitchen was located.

"No, thank you. I am good."

Several vegetables later, a finely diced rainbow of death was strewn across the counter. There was no reason to the order. She was simply chopping everything she could find, as fast as she could manage.

In her mind's eye, all she could see was blood. It was everywhere. She began chopping faster as the sounds of rapid gunfire engulfed her in the cacophony. Finally, the smell of death rolled over her as she heard the scream of another child as bullets ripped through her naked body. Around the corner, a massive caninoid stepped into view, with an odd look on his face.

Her hand snaked up with blinding speed and released the knife. Just as she opened her fingers, she realized why the look on his face seemed so odd. The knife embedded itself deep into the door frame next to Zerrick's head.

He turned his head to look at it and laughed. The sound utterly broke the flashback, and the last of it faded away.

"Seems like an odd place to store kitchen knives, but it's your ship." He shrugged and took a step into the small kitchen. Setting the leather-bound book on the counter, he pat it gently. "That was slowly trying to make its way into the ocean. I thought it might upset you if you lost it."

Sadie glanced down at the book, then back up to the barbarian. In a weird way, he reminded her of Bandambi. It was probably why she liked him.

"Thank you."

"Yep." Looking down at the slaughter of random vegetables, he grinned broadly. "Whatcha cooking? I am starving!"

Sadie felt the last of the anger fade from her body as she cocked her head at the wastelander. "You're always hungry."

"True, but now I'm starving. There is a difference." He retorted.

Pointing to the knife in the doorway behind him, she replied, "I can guarantee, you have never been starving in your life. Trust me, I know what starving looks like."

Grabbing the knife from the doorway, he spun it several times in his hand before the handle suddenly halted, and he handed it towards her. "We've had tough times in the tribes, like anyone. Perhaps more so than most."

Sadie took the knife and began considering what she could cook with the finely diced vegetables.

Several plates and a full barbarian later, Sadie made her way back up to the bridge, the book and a full glass of strong clear liquid in hand.

Glancing over the drone footage, she realized the Antiries had finally noticed the new ships. They maneuvered to begin yet another loud sea battle, but the Lion's Shade was further away now. Which hopefully meant they would be easily out of range of the ruckus. If the ship in the center was a wizard's vessel, like she suspected, it might be a problem, but hopefully they didn't care about the smaller catamaran.

Settling back into her chair, she saw Zerrick on the upper deck using binoculars to watch the impending battle. Strapped to his chest was his massive, Gothic looking gauss rifle. Overhead the clouds were gathering unnaturally fast, and she shook her head with a low chuckle. So long as Jane didn't join in the fray, it would be fine.

Opening the book, she found where she'd left off.



"It's opening!" One soldier in the rear of Handal's personal unit pointed towards the small shuttle.

Now small might be a misnomer if you don't know what a caninoid is. Imagine a fifteen-foot-tall werewolf, with short hair, a disturbingly thin body and a taste for sentience. Now I don't mean a taste for human flesh, I mean they will eat anything with intelligence. The more intelligent the creature, the more of a delicacy it was to this vicious species.

The rumor in the galaxy was that it was the caninoids that hunted the dragons to extinction. But that only really applies if you're ignorant enough to think that dragons are extinct. Caninoids are always hungry, and no matter what or how much they eat, they always look as if they are starving to death. Don't let their looks fool you, however. They are as strong as one-hundred humans and nastier than an old-one. And they will NEVER enter a fair deal.



A tall creature with black skin and grey and black hair, growing only in irregular patches across its body, stepped from the shuttle. Its ears stood tall and thin, like an Anubis soldier from the old pyramid drawings.

Around Shade, several people peed themselves and two of the younger soldiers bolted. The number one rule in dealing with caninoids, never, ever, run. A second, slightly smaller and far more healthy-looking creature stepped from the ship and leapt into the air after the closest fleeing soldier. The man screamed, but the caninoid cut the sound short as it tore the man in half.

A third slid out deftly, after realizing that there was food to be had. It bolted after the remaining soldier, knocking him up into the air before pouncing on him with a happy roar.

"Sath faldel madere." Emerald Scar took several large strides towards Warlord Handal.

Shade saw the warlord looking over a book in his hand. Scar would not have the patience to deal with him trying to translate. She swiftly shoved her way to the front, standing just behind and to the left of the warlord.

"The dominant master Emerald Scar says thank you for feeding his pups so early in the negotiations." She bowed her head to the massive creature in a clear sign of submission. But only because she didn't want him to pay attention to her. If he noticed her scent, then none of this would matter any longer.

"Wha... What?" Handal stammered and turned to look at her. "You understand him?"

She simply nodded, still refusing to look up. Her disguise was good, but it wouldn't hold up to intense scrutiny.

"Tell him I am honored to have his presence at my humble abode."

"Fagtelush matn gatere. Gloth'dal mere."

Shade's skin crawled at the graphic imagery, but she remained quiet.

"What did he say?"

"He says that he understands the..." She tried to rephrase the caninoids words so that they were less offensive. "Moron. And that you should not attempt flattery." It had been a severe oversimplification of what they said, but she refused to repeat the actual words.

"Fine." Handal seemed to grow a spine and stood tall. "Then let's go inside. I will show you the offering."

The tall, clearly aging caninoid strode into the base and scanned the area as the human behind him jogged to catch up.

"These are the slaves I promised." Handal waved his arm over the children like a man proud of his accomplishment. As if capturing children was difficult somehow.

Shades clenched her jaw but said nothing. She needed more time.

The massive creature moved towards the children and began sniffing them. Unlike the soldiers in the massive courtyard, the children simply flinched. She couldn't help but smile at their bravery.

A large black clawed hand snatched up one of the younger children. With the other, he broke the chain on the child and stuffed the entire girl in his mouth. There was a sickening crunch as he chewed the child several times, then swallowed. It took every ounce of control for Shade to resist pulling her weapons. Next to her, one soldier threw up. One of the other children cried and a taller male boy next to her stepped protectively in front of her.

The rest of the facility fell utterly silent, mostly from shock, but the smell of fear was powerful enough that even Shade could smell it.

Scar was getting exactly what he wanted. She could see him happily breathing the smell in like a bear with a dripping beehive.

"Shaaa." He cooed happily.

"Don't translate that." Handal mumbled next to her. Then added even more quietly, "Oh, and when this is over, I am going to gut you like a fish."

She said nothing. Right now, Handal wasn't her biggest concern.

She saw the creature raise its hands and take another deep breath. Apparently, Scar wasn't interested in playing his games anymore.

"You realize that none of us are surviving this, right? Especially not you." She whispered to the warlord next to her.

"I'm glad that's what you think." Handal grinned. "Because that means that's what he thinks too."

Shade snapped her head to the warlord and locked eyes with him as her mind raced. Oh shit! He thought he could kill the caninoid alpha and seize the power of his pack. That was his plan all along.

The man smiled brightly at her and raised his hand. The sound of hundreds of weapon emplacements roared to life, deafening everything in a one-mile

radius. Large caliber armor-piercing rounds tore through the air and anything they hit, except of course for the caninoid alpha. Outside, two creatures roared angrily and leapt over the fifty-foot walls with ease.

Handal had underestimated the creature he was dealing with, while the weapons would eventually do damage. If they didn't know what they were shooting for, there was no way these weapons were going to kill Emerald Scar.

Shade leapt away from the arm that grabbed for her. Diving into a deft roll, she came up and bolted for the guard overseeing the children. He was so focused on the screaming alpha that he didn't see her coming.

With minimal effort, she wrestled his weapon from him and ended his confusion. Snatching the keys, she tossed them to one of the older children and began scanning for some way to get them out of the main courtyard. No matter what happened, she had to narrow the attack vectors and restrict space. Caninoids were extremely deadly, but if you confine them to hallways or corridors, they were easier to manage.

"Lookout!" one of the younger children yelled to her and pointed towards the now angry Scar.

"THAT SMELL!" He screamed so loud that the walls shook from the power of it.

"Joy." She grumbled under her breath and dodged away from the wild swing in her direction. Checking the clip in the weapon, she realized that it too had armor-piercing rounds.

She couldn't kill him with them, but she could ruin his day. Leaping away again, she brought up the weapon and fired at a bald section of skin just above his groin. The rounds impacted the scar tissue there, and he roared in pain. Several rounds tore into the ground near her, and she looked to her right to find Handal and several others firing at her. Skillfully, she snapped the weapon in their direction, and dropped the soldier to his right with a bullet to the forehead. Leaping away, a large section of wall crashed into the ground where she had crouched only seconds before.

Scanning the area again, she saw several of the children pointing to a doorway and waving for her to follow.

Several more soldiers began firing on her, and she realized the jig was up. But before she could return fire, a massive brown caninoid slammed into the ground on top of them and snatched one of them up to eat. With their attention diverted for now, Shade ran and slid past the creature to fire into another group that was

now shooting at the children of all things. As the last of the children fled through the door, Shade drew the soldiers' fire.

"Kill the female!" Scar roared in the local human tongue and pointed at her.

Literally every single entity in the facility turned to look at the disguised elf.

She felt her shoulders sag as the magic rolled out away from him. The compulsion worked, and the terrified human minds happily chose another target.

"You have to be kidding me!" She dove into the door as the building above her exploded into a hail of bullets. She felt several stings in her back as pieces tore through her armor. She felt hands pulling on her arms. Easily a half a dozen kids began pulling her from the rubble, further into the building. The bullets had paused briefly as they tried to decide if she was dead or not.

Shade hurt all over and her lungs were threatening to give out completely. She was only barely aware of them dragging her down a nearby stairwell. Her internal cyberware triggered the repair nanites. As they rushed into her bloodstream, she fought to remain conscious, but the world around her grew dark, anyway.

"Ms. Shade?" A young male voice broke into the darkness as a tough hand slapped her cheek roughly. "You need to wake up!"

Opening her eyes, she saw a familiar face. It was a boy that she'd used several times to run messages. He was from a village almost one-hundred miles to the south.

"Pakapo?" She blinked several times and sat up. Several of the older children nearby had weapons and were grouping the younger children up between them as they prepared to move.

"Yes ma'am." He nodded, clearly relieved.

"Where are we?" She had never bothered with this building.

"The entrance to the mine."

Furrowing her brow, she pulled her feet under her and stood. Her body complained, but she ignored it. She did not know how much of the blood on her hands was her own, but she opted not to think about it for now.

One child handed her a weapon.

Checking the ammo, she chambered a round before looking around. "There is a mine?"

"Yes, an old one. It is where he hides us and makes us work."

"Work? Doing what?" She could hear the battle getting closer. Now that she wasn't the primary focus, they would turn on each other again, but it wouldn't last long as the human soldiers realized that their weaponry couldn't hurt the furious creature.

"We make weapons and ammunition for them." An older female pointed towards the sound of fighting above them.

"Son of a bitch." She snapped, but the children just watched her, clearly confused. "No wonder I could never find the source." She pushed the thought from her mind as she realized that the last five years' worth of work had been useless. Handal had played her, and she couldn't help but admire him a little more for it.

Her mind raced as the first of many bullets ricocheted down the stairwell behind them.

"Go!"

The children took off at a run. Following, she moved alongside Paka. "How many kids are in here?"

He shrugged, "many."

There were several planetary programs that tried to find the more remote areas of the planet and teach the children there, but the bushmen of Helagg avoided the sky-walkers when they could. Census's were rarely accurate, and regular education was fleeting. It had taken her years to work her way into the various villages. And they still didn't trust her completely, except for Bandambi and his family.

"Do you have any place that you can hide deep and defend?" She made a gesture with her hands, trying to show them hiding behind walls.

His eyes widened as he seemed to understand what she meant. "Yes."

"Take us there."

The boy made a barking sound that eerily mimicked a hyena. The children suddenly veered and darted down a separate corridor to the right. Behind them, Shade could hear booted feet chasing them through the halls.

"Keep going, I will catch up." She called to him and slowed down.

The boy listened to her and darted down the corridor after the others.



As the soldiers came into view, she dropped to one knee and began firing. Bullets filled the hallway, going both directions. Several of them dropped before she felt a sharp sting tear through her shoulder. Rolling backwards, she leapt to the side corridor and fired several more times.

Two more soldiers dropped and the next one to take their place slipped in the blood on the floor and fell backwards. She used the confusion to take off running after the children.

A light in the upper right corner of her HUD flashed into existence, and her internal comms immediately added themselves to the new channel. The highly encrypted channel needed a key, but her system entered it without asking. She sighed slightly relieved, Bandambi had made it to the Great Tree.

"Status?" A male voice asked calmly. She could hear gunfire over the link.

"I am underground with the children. Sending loc now..." She rounded a corner and slid to a stop. The tunnel ended into a massive cavern. Several hundreds of guns lifted towards her. Raising her hands slowly, she scanned a sea of over a thousand filthy faces.

The floor was easily out of sight as she stood on a ledge. Makeshift walkways lined the walls and interlinked with dozens of other catwalks, creating an intricate maze. Wherever she looked, children of every race and creed, that she could imagine, stared back at her curiously.

"By the gods..." she mumbled as her heart sank into her stomach.

Another shouted noise drew her attention, and the weapons lowered.

Shade shook herself and remembered why she was here. Jogging over to where Paka was standing near a much older boy. She asked, "is there another way out?"

The entire group shook their heads as they watched her intently. They had built what appeared to be barricades of crates and boxes, and behind the line of armed children, were stacks and stacks of ammunition. They had clearly planned to fight, but those boxes would not stop armor-piercing rounds.

"Commander, we have a problem." She called to the man who had asked for her sitrep.

"Go ahead."

"I found where he's getting the weapons and ammo."

"That's not really a concern at the moment." He called back over the scream of pain from one of the younger caninoids.

"I respectfully disagree, sir. I can't explain this. You need to see it." She used her ocular implant to take a snapshot of what she could currently see and sent it over the link. It was easily over a minute, as she waited for a response. In the meantime, she began scanning the cavern for structural integrity. It had some, but it likely wouldn't be enough.

"Is there any way to get everyone out if the cavern collapses?"

The older boy was from the southern tip of Helagg. He knew war. She could tell by the look on his face as he shook his head slowly. Southern Helagg broke out in war at least every few years as the locals fought over who should represent them on the planetary council. Death was all too common there.

Gunfire began next to her as the children didn't wait to see who was coming in behind her. From her current vantage point Shade could see over the edge now, down at the bottom of the cavern. There were hundreds of bodies piled in a disturbing mound of rotting flesh. All around it was what appeared to be a pool of fecal matter. That would explain the smell, she thought.

How these children were still alive with rotting bodies and fecal matter, piled up at the base of the cave, she didn't know. The top of the pile had easily dozens of fresh adult bodies, and she wondered how long ago the kids had decided to take their freedom back.

"Understood. Can you hold your location?" The voice on the comm finally answered.

"Negative." She replied, knowing good and well what came next in the fight above. There was no way she could keep these kids alive if they stayed in here.

"Roger. Activate plan Bravo." The man stated firmly.

"Negative." She refused the direct order, knowing good and well what that meant for her future relationship with the government.

"Shade." The man sighed across the comms. "Don't do this. Trust me, I know what this will do to you if you take this route."

"I am not killing them, John." She looked out at the thousands of terrified faces observing her.

"It's better than watching them die around you slowly. I promise." He replied quietly.

As if he'd planned it, several boxes shattered as a hail of large caliber bullets tore them to pieces. Behind the boxes several children exploded in a hail of blood, muscle and bone, splattering across the ammunition behind them.

The rest of the children opened fire in response, but Shade suddenly realized what her commander had meant. And he was right. No matter what, these kids were going to die.

Grabbing ahold of Pakapo, she rolled and threw him into the wall near the corridor as she depressed the button on her watch.

Far overhead, hundreds of explosions ignited, as the discriminately scattered wafers she'd placed throughout the compound, received the signal to explode all at once. The walls of the cavern shook violently. It wasn't long before the first bits of dirt and rocks dislodged, raining down over the cavern and its inhabitants. Secondary explosions began as the fuel and gunpowder stored above ignited.

"Everyone out!" She yelled as loudly as she could manage over the tumbling walls.

She watched in awe as the children leapt into action. Snatching up weapons, they began running towards the corridor that led out of the massive cavern.

Pakapo leapt up and led the way for the children alongside Shade. As they shoved the dead bodies out of the way, Shade shot two more soldiers and forced her way through. They fought their way back up to the main courtyard, as the surrounding walls shook.

As she and Paka broke free of the last of the rubble, they found themselves surrounded by fire.

A Republic marine in fully sealed power armor strode through the fire towards them.

Paka spun, raising his weapon towards the armor, but as he pulled the trigger the weapon simply clicked. He was out of ammo.

Resting her hand on his shoulder, she squeezed reassuringly. "Easy, their big guy. That's the good guy."

The helmet nodded to her, "Well done agent Shade. We have Scar occupied for the moment, let's get the survivors out of here." He pointed to a single clear path through the flames towards the main doors. "Head to the gate, then go left. We have people there to help you."

Paka looked up at her, and she nodded with a reassuring smile. "Run. I'll be okay."

The boy didn't need to be told a second time. He took off at a run. After him, several more children followed. Running as fast as they could manage.

"How many?" The man next to her waved for her to follow him to better cover.

"No idea." She replied honestly.

Across the compound, she could see several marines engaging the large angry alpha caninoid and one remaining pup.

It didn't take long for them to notice the fresh smell on the wind. They both turned towards the now steady stream of fleeing children. If they ate the children, they would heal rapidly, which she couldn't allow.

Leaping over the barrier, Shade pulled her pistols and took a deep breath, focusing her mind on the same spot that she'd hit Scar two-hundred and five years ago, when she'd robbed him of his ability to reproduce along with depriving him of his depth perception. The scar on his pelvis was clearly still sensitive. If she was lucky, she could use that to distract him.

She fired both weapons at once, then charged the creature screaming. Caninoids were fast, strong, and incredibly lethal, but this one also had one hell of a temper.

Her rounds pierced the scar tissue and embedded themselves into what was left of his most sensitive internal organ.

He screamed in pain so loudly that the young pup next to him looked up at him with blood-frenzied rage. Caninoids couldn't tolerate weakness. And they would cannibalize each other if she could make them both cry in pain. With several skilled leaps, she dove past the smaller one and fired both weapons again. This time she held the triggers down tightly, allowing a full five rounds to slam into the younger male, just above and to the left of the pelvis.

Like the alpha, the male screamed in pain as the fourth bullet finally did enough damage to tear through the flesh into the sensitive organ. She landed hard on her injured shoulder but refused to make a noise as she rolled up, back onto her feet and continued running.

The two remaining caninoids turned on each other and began fighting for leadership. It wouldn't last long, but it should be long enough.

Diving behind a large section of the destroyed wall, she switched to a different circuit that she knew the Republic navy was listening to.

"Angel, this is Shade, Call for fire. Immediate suppression, two zero meters due east from my location."

"Roger Shade, this is Angel 2. Cannot Observe, repeat. Cannot Observe."

"Roger Angel 2. Fire when ready."

"Shot Over."

"Shot Out!" Shade called across the local military circuit. All around the compound, planetary marines dove for cover. Their armor would likely protect them from any serious damage, so long as they had some kind of cover.

"Splash Out." The interplanetary fighter screamed overhead so fast that it created an explosive boom as it shattered the sound barrier.

The sound caused the fighting caninoids to pause and look up.

Shade pulled herself into as small a ball as she could manage just before the round slammed into the ground between the two creatures. Her cover protected her a little from the explosion, but not enough. She felt herself launched into the air as the concussion rolled over her. Remaining tucked up, she kept her arms over her face protectively until the heat wave passed. She would be severely burned, she could feel it, but for now, she had other things to focus on. Opening her legs and arms, she noticed the incoming wall, just in time to change her position.

With grace, that reminded everyone watching, of her spectacular elven heritage, she angled herself to roll along the wall in such a way to bleed off some energy. Eventually gravity would kick back in, but for now, she had to deal with one energy source at a time.

The roll turned into a run as she ran along the wall, adjusting her trajectory towards the ground. But before she could adjust it enough, she came across another major break in the wall. Leaping into the air, she dove towards the ground and rolled several times before she fell flat on her back and slid across the dirt for several more feet.

"Ow." She whispered and allowed her arms and legs to fall to the ground next to her. "Rounds Complete, over." Her voice broke slightly as she tried to complete the sequence over the open comm.

"Rounds Complete, out!" the commander finished for her. "Enemy routed!"

A cheer erupted over the compound as the few remaining soldiers and the Republic marines cheered. In the distance, the retreating caninoid shuttle lifted into the air and began its erratic exit, a series of interplanetary fighters hot on its tail.

"Roger. Escorting our guests out of friendly airspace. Well done Shade, Angel 2 out."



Throughout the facility, the cheering changed slightly as the various soldiers that had been loyal to the warlord Handal began laying down their weapons and raising their hands to surrender to the marines.

The commander and several others came out from behind cover to look where Shade had fallen. There stood a lone marine looking around.

"Um, sir?" The sergeant called across the comm.

"Yeah?"

"There is nothing here."

John Tagredy looked up to where the sun was rising in the east and smiled.

Easily a mile away in the distance, two figures walked across the savannah towards the sunset, away from the smoke and fire. One of them limped slightly and leaned to the side roughly as the taller of the two elbowed her.

"See, I told you. Warlords come and go." Bandambi teased.

## The End

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Sadie closed the book and smiled slightly. She still wanted to kill Leon for writing the entire thing down like that, but he was right. Somehow it felt like she had closure now. She wondered how many people believed the story. If all the books were like this, she wondered just how much time Leon had put into research. Had he done anything else after she left?

"Good book?" Zerrick leaned his elbows on the console and grinned at her.

"Not really, no." She lied.

"Right." Jerking his thumb over his shoulder to where they'd left the Antiries, he grinned broadly, showing all his slightly sharpened teeth. "They had a wizard."

Sadie raised an eyebrow. "Had?"

He chuckled and pat the gauss rifle strapped to his bare chest. "Yep, had."