



Pearls in the Shade

Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

“ *The most important thing to remember when dealing with a criminal ... just because they took a contract, doesn't mean they will adhere to it. Read that fine print carefully, or just flat out expect them to walk away with your loot whistling a merry tune as they go. Come to think of it, it reminds me of some politicians I know. Hmmm... I wonder if anyone else has noticed that corollary.* ”

-Leon Hamilton

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Kelun 21st, 26551

Sadie Feelari, a tall, shapely elf, with pure white hair and crystal blue eyes, strode out onto the deck of the Lion's Shade and took a deep breath. She'd pulled the ninety-foot catamaran far out into the Bugarasi harbor. And now the only thing she could smell was cool, clean sea air. A welcome respite from the usual smells of the medieval city with no plumbing or power. Though she didn't knock them too hard. She'd smelled worse in her day. At least they didn't have pollution or chemical spills on top of the sheer uncleanliness. This harbor was still clean enough to accidentally fall in and not need a round of forty different antibiotics.

It was a warm fall day, and she decided that since winter was coming, and she'd missed all of summer already, that it wouldn't hurt to get some sun. She wore a sky-blue string bikini that left very little to the imagination, which was another reason she'd pulled further out away from the ships, docks and prudish population. But even at this distance she realized that nude sunbathing would cause more problems than it was worth. At least with the bikini on she might argue cultural differences, and likely keep herself out of jail. She hadn't tied the ship to the dock, and her sea anchor wasn't exactly on Tausian soil. Or at least that's what she'd argue it if needed.

The elf didn't have a country or even a government, at least not one she claimed. Balkanizing a planet wasn't entirely unheard of in her time. She had taken a history class, or two, in college. Where they discussed it broadly. But she definitely wasn't happy to find herself in one of those history books either.

Shutting her eyes, she breathed deeply for several moments, just enjoying the cool salt air as it caressed her face and lungs. She loved everything about the ocean, especially its finicky nature. But today they were both in wonderful moods. And the elf was going to take advantage of that.

Opening her eyes, she glanced around at the yacht's many overstuffed deck chairs until she found one that put her perfectly in the sun's path across the sky. Settling her sunglasses into place on her face, she smiled and examined the cover of the most recent book. It read, *Pearls in the Shade* by Leon Hamilton. She was genuinely looking forward to reading this story. It had always been one of her favorites to tell, which she

did whenever she got the chance. She did of course leave out pertinent information like names and places, though she doubted Leon would do the same.



Criminals are interesting animals. Some have no ethics at all, and are merely interested in anarchy, but those are the rarest kind. Most criminals prefer some level of structure. They can, and often do, establish their own oligarchy within their organizations. Fostering a level of structure and hierarchy that rivals the strictest of governments. The size and complexity of the hierarchy varies, depending on the size of the organization. Some extent the entire length of the galaxy, while others are a small-time gang within a specific city or district.

But as you will find in every organization, you will have outsiders. Often those outsiders are contractors, hired for various reasons. Most frequently outsiders have skills that the leadership can't find within the organization. Sometimes, though, it is because there is a need for plausible deniability or a scapegoat. The more high risk the job, the more likely that the organization won't want to risk its own people.

Shade enjoyed being the loner that takes the contract type gig. She was almost always the outsider. Hired because no one else in the organization had her particular set of skills. I would be lying though, if I said she hadn't been a scapegoat all too often. But to Shade, that was the best kind of gig. The job that everyone expected her to fail. She thrived on the challenge.

No matter what type of contractor you hire, though, be sure that you read that contract carefully. That is particularly true if you are deliberately hiring a criminal to do that contract work. Just because they took a contract, doesn't mean they will adhere to it. Read that fine print, or just flat out expect them to walk away with your loot, whistling a merry tune as they go. Come to think of it, it reminds me of some politicians I've met. Hm... I wonder if anyone else has noticed that corollary.

A cloaked figure, bundled up snugly against the chill night air, shuffled up to a group of street rats huddled around a large metal can. They had ignited the contents and were using the fire to survive the abnormally cold winter night. The unfamiliar figure hesitated as one individual spun to look them over. After several seconds of scrutiny, the toothless man smiled and waved the new person forward.

"Common, were all freezin. One more body means more warmth." He laughed. His thickly accented street slang was a common sound on the lowest levels of Taius.

"Thank ya," the younger female bowed somewhat and shuffled up to the fire, dragging her left leg slightly. Her obvious injury merely seemed to make her less of a threat to the group.

"No prob! Maybe we can get even warmer later." The man winked deliberately at her.

Disregarding him, she got as close to the metal can as the heat would allow and tried to get some chill out of her bones.

"Whatcha got under there?" Another of the streeties on the far side of the fire jutted her chin towards the young woman under the heavy blanket.

"Who cares?" A third said, moving around to stand behind the newcomer. "This blanket looks terribly nice. It hardly even smells of fish."

The young woman tried to pull the blanket back down from where the third man had lifted it to check the material. The movement didn't help as the man yanked on it ruthlessly.

"I'll take that thank you." Jerking it off of the young woman, he grinned fiercely. His mouth filled with rotted teeth, most often found on Gath junkies.

The cold air engulfed her uncomfortably.

"Please no! My pa gave me that." The girl pleaded, tears welling up in her red face as she reached for the blanket.

"Well now yer givin it to us." The female from across the fire laughed.

"Hey look here! She's got a bag hidden under that blanket!" The first toothless man laughed and snatched the bag draped across her shoulders. "Holy shit! She's got meal bars in here." He said with his arm and his face buried in the large shoulder bag. He pulled up a plastic bag marked Republic Meals Ready to Eat.

"I'm guessing her pa was ex-military." The male with her blanket wrapped around his shoulders strode up and snatched the package.

"No, please! It's all I ha..."

The man with the blanket cut her pleas short as he back fisted her in the face. As he knocked her away from the fire, her right leg buckled under the sudden shift of weight. Whirling, she slammed into the ally wall and slid to the ground, leaving a bloody trail on the wall as she fell.

"Jeeze Johnny, did you have to hit her so hard?" The woman by the fire grumbled.

"Shut up or I'll hit you that hard!" He spat at her and threw one, sealed meal ready to eat, in her direction.

The injured girl pulled herself into a ball and began whimpering.

Two more street rats jogged up to the fire, laughing.

"Damn Johnny, impressive haul!" One of them exclaimed as he tossed them an MRE.

"Yeah, there is like five more in here." He held the bag up a tad and the group laughed. "Let's sell this shit for a kilo of Gath!"

They all cheered raucously and shoved each other spiritedly down the ally as they left the dying fire and the sobbing woman.

When the laughing faded to nothing, the woman curled up on the ground, pushed herself to her feet. Yanking the heavy sweater over her head, she tossed it into the can. The material caught fire. Roaring flames leapt to life, licking at the air eagerly. Beneath the sweater, a skintight black suit flickered faintly as it adjusted to the darker lighting in the ally. Jerking the moth-eaten wool cap from her head allowed several white tresses to tumble loose from their confines, falling softly to her shoulders. With a smirk, she pulled the loose pants off and tossed them into the fire along with the hat. Cleaning herself off, she stood and stretched, working out the kinks from laying on the cold ground.

The tall white-haired elf glanced at her head up display and nodded a little at the counter, gradually counting backwards.

"With five minutes to spare." She mused silently and pulled a rag from her belt. Scrubbing her face clean, she tossed the makeup removal rag into the fire as well. With a deft leap, she hopped to the wall and kicked off to do the same to the wall on the opposite side of the ally. After several more similar moves, she made her way to the roof and began jogging along the edge. As she did so, she enacted her stealth system, shimmering to a shadowy movement that wouldn't be clearly discernible by eye or camera.



A sudden splash of water across her stomach caused Sadie to squeal and jerk the book away.

"What the? Dammit Slappy" she yelled!

Glancing up overhead, she found a huge tentacle hovering over her, dripping water across the deck, the chairs, and even the ship's half-naked captain. Wrapped in the end of the tentacle was a large, rusted device.

Leaping to the side, Sadie rolled out of the chair just in time to avoid having the rusted device dropped on top of her. It hit the padded cushion and bounced off to land with a heavy thud next to her. There was no way she was moving that thing without help or her power armor.

Opening her mouth, she started to yell at the recoiling tentacle, but merely sighed instead. Not like the creature would understand her. They'd been working together on developing a sign language that they would both understand, but the work had been slow. The annoying animal was continuously calling her a disabled podling. Which, from her perspective, was likely true. The cephalopod was exceedingly intelligent, but it was still an animal.

There was a gentle pat on the railing as the creature made a gesture, then tapped the railing before making the gesture again. Standing up, Sadie brushed the water off the pages of the book and moved over to the edge of the deck to look down into the water. An eye, easily a foot across, was staring up out of the water. As she appeared in its view, it locked onto her and tapped the railing again before making the gesture.

Exhaling, Sadie nodded. And not for the first time in the last few weeks, she felt an overwhelming desire to throw the Bugrasian dock-master into the water. Of course, it wasn't his fault that she'd rewarded the creature for bringing her old-world tech from the bottom of the ocean.

"Fine." Sadie strode off towards the kitchen.

Striding back out a couple of minutes later, she had a towel draped over the arm with the book and in the other hand, a banana. Tossing the book and the towel on the chair she'd been sitting in, she stepped up to the edge.

As the tentacle reached for the banana, she jerked it away. "No. You get banana when you put the treasure there!" She shouted, pointing to a spot near the center aft of the ship. Catamarans, like this one, were pleasure yachts. Ships built for people that loved to go swimming or diving. The builders often design a section of deck, precisely to take heavy and possibly damaging equipment and gear, in and out of the water. Whereas the regular deck was not. It was also closer to the water and rubberized to help with traction and deck protection.

The eyeball blinked up at her and reached for the banana again.

Sadie was very deft at avoiding the tentacle, but she needed to be careful. Without Zerrick, this might get dangerous, fast. The exceedingly mutated, and irradiated, giant

squid was capable of cracking her ship in half, with minimal effort. And what it might do to her, if it grew angry, was far worse.

“No.” The elf pointed to the rusted device on the deck and made an odd gesture with an arm. When nothing happened, she moved it with her foot.

It took a second for Slappy to understand her, but a tentacle ultimately snaked up onto the deck and wrapped around the device.

Going back to the edge, so that the creature could see her, Sadie waved for it to follow her to the aft of the ship. Placing the banana down on the rubberized deck, she moved away. Slappy then gently set the rusted device precisely, one-foot, to the right of the banana. Snatching the yellow fruit up with blinding speed, she slipped silently back into the water to vanish into the depths. She was likely looking for more loot to bring back.

Why the dock master had thought it was a good idea to feed her banana's no one understood. But the creature had developed a freakish addiction to them. Which strangely had become useful. After all, it was Slappy that had found the old-world space depot hidden more than a quarter of a mile down on the ocean floor in Hugar. Far deeper than any of these primitives could get to. It convinced Sadie and the team of tomb raiders, which included Zerrick and the arch-wizard Jane, to explore the bottom of the bay. Where they eventually found the Imperial Storage Depot. A veritable treasure trove of materials, money, and equipment, that Sadie wasn't likely to find again.

Drying off her deck chair, Sadie grimaced at the now damp book. A small part of her mind told her she should go inside to keep reading. But, looking up at the warm sun, she shook her head. Winter was coming, assuming the various planetary cataclysms hadn't adjusted the weather patterns too much. This was going to be one of the last days of warm weather left. Sinking herself into the deck chair again, she scanned the water, looking for the cephalopod, and found nothing. The waters were calm.

Peeking towards the docks in the distance, she saw a small crowd. She focused her cybernetic eyes to zoom in on the dock, and chuckled, shaking her head. Evidently, she hadn't gotten far enough out, and the local boys had noticed her. They seemed to share a spyglass between them as they tried to get a peek at the skimpily clad elf.

Even with all the changes to the technologies and cultures, young boys apparently were the same. She thought to herself as she opened the book back up to the damp pages. Concerned about risking the now fragile paper, she turned forward several pages until they were dry.

Shade gradually lowered the body to the floor. Patting the guard on the helm, she smirked and lifted the key card from his belt. Flipping her fingers from her forehead towards him in a mocking salute, she slid noiselessly down the hallway towards the lift at the end. As she approached the next intersection, she saw the light in her HUD gradually fade from red to green. She slipped rapidly past the hallway as the micro-drone looped the footage. Providing her precisely 30 seconds to get out of the camera's view. Before it then scrambled off towards its next target. Micro drones were Shade's favorite devices. Far more loyal than any meat-based hacker who could get easily distracted. But then Shade seldom enjoyed working with other living things. Live things were flawed, and predictably lethal, either to themselves or to her.

Requesting the lift, she waited the few seconds for her drones to arrive. She grinned as they climbed into the panel via the maintenance link. It was just under a minute before the doors slid open. Stepping in, she swiftly found the emergency panel in the ceiling and popped it loose. In her HUD a countdown was ticking away, but she ignored it. With a practiced swing, she pulled herself through the panel to the top of the lift. The countdown was getting precariously close to zero as she slid the panel back into place.

The lift abruptly started moving, catching her somewhat off guard as she snatched one cable just in time to prevent the lift from disappearing out from under her. Inside the lift, compensators prevented the passengers from noticing the gravities created by the speed at which the lift traveled. But the top however did not. She felt gravity fall away as the lift fell. Utilizing her sudden weightlessness, she immediately attached her harness to the emergency rings so the lift couldn't get away from her. Snatching a cable on her harness, she pulled herself towards the panel on the edge of the unit. If she didn't get to the panel before the lift came to a stop, this was going to be a very short gig.

Yanking the box open, she found the maintenance port and shoved the cable into it. Her body fell with a loud thump as the maintenance plates on the top of the lift kicked on. *Crap*, she thought. She remained still as she listened on the security channel. She had ghosted herself into the channel when she first entered the building, as a safety precaution. When nothing happened, she sighed and rested her forehead onto the cool metal.

"Ow," she whispered.

The lift slowed. Pushing herself upright, she quickly checked her HUD to see what floor they were stopping at. It read -24. A sly smirk crept across her face as she looked around. Sure enough, there was an emergency ladder-well, even this far down into the facility. Grabbing the cable free, she closed the box calmly and detached her safety lines. Below her, inside the lift, she could hear talking.

"I still can't believe they made us stay this late." A familiar sounding male voice sounded beyond angry.

"Oh common, you can't be unhappy about those results!" A young sounding female voice replied. The eagerness in her voice apparent even without seeing her face.

"They would have been the exact same results tomorrow." The man snapped.

Shade suddenly realized why the voice sounded familiar. His name was Fernando Althois, the lead researcher on the Verodase Bio-med Rock-Claw bioware project. And the whole reason she was here. She'd spent the last few months getting close to him and learning everything about him. They even had a date this evening, but apparently, he had stood her up. A humorous turn of events since she'd planned to be the one to stand him up tonight.

She placed one foot between the ladder and the wall and hooked it on a rung. With her hand she stabilized herself and pressed the rest of her body against the wall of the lift shaft, just as the lift began to move. It slid past her without touching her, but only by a few millimeters. She swore she could feel the energy coming off it as she closed her eyes and tried to hold her breath.

Once the lift passed. She took a deep breath, slowing her heart rate, and swung around onto the ladder. The sign of a professional thief was knowing how and when to adapt. No plan, no matter how much you do your research, ever turned out precisely as intended. For Shade, stealing was an art. Adapting, when a brush stroke didn't turn out just right, was a part of the art form. Sometimes it was the sudden deviations that made the final product that much better.

Shifting to the emergency panel in the shaft, she placed her gloved hand on the device and held it there for several seconds as the tiny devices that were invisible to the naked eye climbed from the back of her hand into the panel. In her HUD, several drones alerted her they were entering the system.

With several deft gestures in her HUD, she gave each of them a code sequence, setting them on their jobs. A new timer appeared, but it took several minutes before it started the count down. Once the numbers started moving, she popped the panel open and rapidly attached two cables that ran to a device on her belt. It took less than seven seconds to get the lift doors open. She'd allowed for fifteen, so she would need to adjust her timing.

A light in her HuD turned green. Camera one was looping. Striding into the hallway, she immediately pulled her cables free and closed the panel. The lift door swished closed with a soft hiss. Using the elevator call button, she turned and glided speedily and silently down the hall.

Making her way through the maze of offices and labs, she watched the various lights in her HuD shifted from red to green, then back to red. Permitting her to pass by the dozens of sensor systems entirely undetected. Fortunately for her, this wasn't a Shadowband Solutions customer and the security, while extremely advanced, was no match for a true professional. But then what Shade considered a true professional, only comprised about twelve people in this entire arm of the galaxy.

When a secondary flash lit up on the left side of her HuD, she resisted the urge to chuckle. Activating a Shadowband Solutions proprietary thought to voice software, she answered the incoming call.

"I am mad at you." The software mimicked her voice effortlessly.

"I'm really sorry. They forced us to stay late in the lab to finish some tests." She could see the man's face in her display. He was pacing back and forth wherever he was. "The assholes on the board don't care if we have lives."

She smirked and prodded his anger a little. "Of course, they don't. You work for a corp. Therefore, you are owned. Your entire life belongs to them."

She could hear something shattering in the background. But the man slowed and looked right at the interface. "Please give me another chance?"

"I'm not sure. I went to meet some friends when you didn't show." The image of her on the call frowned intensely.

"How about this, I will make dinner." Tilting his head to the side, he smiled eagerly. "If you decide to join me, I will be at home waiting. But if you don't come, I will understand."

"I will think about it." The image of her pouted.

Just as she arrived at the door to the lab she was looking for. Another flash appeared in her HuD, alerting her to yet another incoming call. Rolling her eyes at the caller ID, she shook her head. "I have another call. I will most likely see you later tonight."

The researcher grinned joyfully and nodded. "Thank you, Kelly."

She cut the call and opened the new one as the door slid open and she stepped inside.

"Seriously?" She snapped at the man that appeared.

The handsome half elven male in the feed raised an eyebrow at her. "Do you have it?"

"Robert, you have the patience of a four-year-old."

"Stop bitching and answer me."

Disregarding him, she walked up to the device suspended in the center of the room. It was full cybernetic spine, with thousands of tiny wire clusters extending off it. Yet the spine looked strange, as if they made it out of stone rather than metal. An odd aesthetic choice considering that a cybernetic spine wasn't a visible implant.

"What is this thing again?" She asked.

"Non of your concern. Just get it and bring it to me."

She stood up straight and turned her attention to the image of the man in her HuD. "Try that again? You know better than to talk to me like that."

"Look, Sadie, just get the damn thing. Don't fuck with it. It's not what it appears to be."

"So, you're saying that it's not cyberware?" She folded her arms and smirked at him.

"No. I am saying that it's not just cyberware."

"I see." She smirked, "You seem kind of desperate there, Robert."

"Don't you dare!" he snapped.

"Don't I dare what? Destroy it? Leave it here? Or do you not want me to sell it to another bidder?"

"Bitch! What do you want?" His voice dropped an octave, and Shade had him by the balls. An enjoyable feeling, considering their history. Now, should she rip them off, or leave them only slightly bruised?

"Triple."

"Double."

"Done." She chuckled and looked down at the panel. The main console had several cables leading off to the side of the room. They seemed to be makeshift cables, which didn't look right. Tracing the cables, she found a case on the far wall. Resting within the transparent container was a metallic ring with cables coming off it. Resting in the center of the ring was a full-sized Kraken pearl. It was clearly a foot in diameter. "Um, Robbie?"

"Don't call me that. What?"

"What are they researching here?"

"I have no idea. If I had to guess, they are most likely trying to reverse engineer it. After all, they stole it from Keena Tech a few weeks ago."

She nodded her head. "Okay, I gotta work. See you soon."

"Right. See you at the house." He cut the comm and Shade shook her head.

"Yeah, this is not reverse engineering." She mumbled as an idea occurred to her. Searching the room rapidly, she found what she was looking for. Turning towards the computer console, she instantly brought up the interface and injected her intrusion software into the system. Several seconds later, the system logged in and brought up the most recent file.

Project Magenta (Rock-Claw Infusion Test)

Energy infusion successful.

KP2 99.9% compatible with RCBS1.

Effects: Unknown

Energy Output: Unknown

Side Effects: Unknown

Recommendation: Cease all testing involving project magenta. Any further testing with KP2 may affect our ability to continue the reverse engineering project. We need to figure out how to reproduce it before we continue testing the infusion properties. Signifying that Project Green is not, I repeat, NOT compatible with project Magenta!

Shade smirked and saved the file, before giving the command to disconnect the experiments from their containment. The lights in the lab switched to red as the system began its shutdown sequence. With practiced ease, she followed the peripheral link to the primary system and popped it open. Pausing until the soft whirr of the fans stopped, she pulled the drive system and slid it into a specialized sleeve she pulled from a small bag on her belt.



A loud triple smack on the deck of the ship drew Sadie's attention up from her book. Turning her gaze to the rear of the ship, she saw several tentacles waving hysterically. Narrowing her eyes, she tried to make sense of the movement.

"Find. Help. Find. Not dead."

"What the...?" Sadie set the book on the table next to her and stood up.

Laying on the rubberized aft section of the catamaran was a humanoid body. It was obviously male, based on the size alone. She jogged towards the squid and its new find. Turning that man onto his back. The smells that assaulted her nostrils were horrific. He smelled of decay and fecal matter, even after being in the ocean. He wore a shackled ball and chain firmly locked onto his left ankle, but was otherwise naked. Plainly, someone had thrown the man overboard. And as was Slappy's habit, she'd tossed the man on to the deck of the Lion's Shade.

"Good grief, Slappy. You supposed to only bring me the people that fall of *my* ship." She grumbled, knowing full and well that the cephalopod didn't understand her. She needed to have Zerrick explain that to her later. Sadie's hand signs couldn't handle anything that complex.

Placing her hand on the man's neck, she looked for a pulse. It was there, but growing weak. Scowling, she began CPR. After the third round of compressions and breathing into his lungs, the man convulsed, and began vomiting up sea water. Twisting him up onto his side, she shook her head and smacked him hard on the back several times.

She was going to have to give herself a round of antibiotics after this. "Ugh," she grunted, and drink an entire bottle of vodka. To sterilize her mouth.

"Easy." She whispered as the man began looking around, searching for a weapon. Dodging back away from him, she remained crouched, ready to leap to either side if he became violent.

The tentacles sunk gently into the water, but the elf could see the faint glow of the mutated creature still near the surface. They were both likely waiting to see how the human reacted.

Placing her hands where he could see them, she waited. After several panicked scans around him, the man fell onto his back and relaxed, staring up at the sky. Gradually his breathing grew less ragged, and at last he rolled his head in her direction. Both eyebrows rose gently as he looked her over, surprised by her dress, either that or her presence, there was no telling with these people. As his attention turned to the ship, his brows furrowed.

"Can you understand me?" She asked in the local Bugrasi tongue.

Sitting up, he looked down at his ankles, then to the iron ball attached to the bundle of chain resting on the deck.

"Fan mas thaenali?" He pointed to it, then looked at her, his brow furrowed even deeper.

"Dog truck car bumper." She replied mockingly and rolled her eyes. He would understand nothing she said. And it was going to take her phonic detector a while before it caught up.

Glancing around at the harbor, she scanned the ships that were in port. A small part of her wondered how many skeletons they shackled to iron balls, then fed to the floor of the harbor. That same part of her welled with anger, then subsided as she took a deep breath. Local politics was not her concern.

"What ship?" She waved her open palm in the general direction of the larger masted vessels throughout the harbor. Looking back to the man, she wondered if he'd understand her intent.

He skimmed the ships until he found one that seemed familiar. Lifting a finger, he pointed to it. It bore a black flag with a blood red curved dagger on it. She seemed to remember getting a letter of mark from Hugar recently. It had several flags in the paperwork, one of which matched. But she was not about to start a fight in the Bugrasi port.

"Go figure." She strode off into the ship. Slipping her hand into the bag resting on the bar, she pulled out a leather bundle with a zipper. As she turned to walk back out onto the deck, she found the man standing there, the iron ball in his hands, and his jaw somewhat agape as he stared at her.

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head, ignoring the look. As she approached, he backed away uncertainty. His foot found the edge of the deck and he stumbled. From behind him, Slappy reached up and shoved him hard, forcing him to take several enormous steps towards her, in order to stay upright. Sadie caught him and helped him balance before crouching down swiftly. With a deft twist of the lock-picks, the shackles fell open.

Behind him, in the water, several tentacles were waving and twisting as the cephalopod asked her, "what wrong two-legger?"

"I have no idea." Sadie shrugged.

One tentacle twisted into the specific shape that Sadie knew was a banana, as the others slipped silently into the water.

"Yeah. I agree this one warrants a banana. Though let's not make it a habit of bringing me dying things?" Standing, Sadie pointed to the ball in the man's hand, then pointing to the water.

He didn't even see her, however. Instead, he had turned to look over his shoulder at the movement, and was staring in shock at the tentacle.

Groaning, she strode into the ship and grabbed a banana from the stasis box behind the bar. Strolling back to stand next to the man, she tossed the yellow fruit at the tentacle.

Snatching it from the air, Slappy drug the fruit soundlessly into the water.

Trying to regain the man's attention, Sadie slapped her hand down on the iron ball. The noise drew his attention. Pointing at it again, she then pointed to the water. Normally, she would recycle metals, but this hunk of badly made iron wasn't worth wasting the power on.

He seemed confused but did as she bid and tossed the ball, with one hand, into the water. The chain followed with a rather severe racket.

Scowling, Sadie shook her head, then looked to the large human. He was a little taller than her, which was saying a lot. But he was almost twice as wide. Clearly, he had done manual labor his entire life. Either that, or somewhere on Taius, weight gyms were still a thing. She very much doubted the latter.

Even in the elf's time, slavery was a thing. Both above board indentured slavery, and the more sinister, black-market slavery. And Sadie knew that a healthy and well-built slave was worth a lot. It seemed odd that some slaver captain would throw him overboard. Even if the man was a troublemaker, a slaver would just sell him immediately. Why kill him? No matter what the answer was, it wasn't going to bode well for her.

Regardless, she couldn't take the smell anymore. Motioning with a finger for him to follow, she moved into the ship towards the guest bathroom down below. He followed behind, but slower than she would have liked. He kept stopping to gawk at the insides of her exceedingly advanced vessel. Ultimately they made it to the head, and she opened the door. Pointing for him to go in, she watched his shoulders sag a little.

His head drooped as he maneuvered into the small room and turned to sit on the lid of the toilet, his hand folded neatly in his lap.

"Ew." She shook her head and gestured for him to stand up. "Ugh, you are disgusting." She pointed to the shower. "Primitive, back water, Neanderthals." She grumbled under her breath. Stretching past him to the shower, she turned on the water. He leapt backwards from it, tripping over the toilet and crashing to the floor, knocking her on top of him as he fell. Rolling up and away from him, she came up angry. Her fists balled at her side as she fought the urge to slit his throat and throw him back into the water.

"Easy Helena." She whispered to herself. "It's all magic to them."

Stepping into the water, she showed him it wouldn't hurt. She then took a bar of soap and rubbed in on her skin. "See, it's okay."

He cocked his head as he watched her oddly.

Handing the soap out to him, she waited for him to take it. He stared at her in disbelief for several moments before taking it. Sniffing it, he turned his attention back to her, his gaze traveling down her now wet body, then back up to her breasts.

"Well, at least you're not a eunuch." She grumbled. Pointing to the water, she slid past him outside and gave him a slight shove.

Carefully he approached the water, testing it first with his foot, then his hands. Once he realized it was warm, he stepped all the way into the water and began rubbing the soap on his skin.

She eyed him curiously.

He seemed to understand what the soap was for, at least. He focused on exceptionally dirty areas, scrubbing himself hard.

Once he was no longer paying attention to her, Sadie left the bathroom and wandered off to find him a pair of pants at the very least.

"Simbi, do you have his measurements?" She asked the ship's computer.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Print me something that will fit but keep it simple."

"How about a pair of drawstring pajama pants?"

"That might be simple enough."

"Printing."

Sadie went to medical and had the automated system run a quick scan to ensure she hadn't picked up anything from her new guest.

"You're clean, ma'am." The female medical computer chimed cheerfully at her.

"Mmhmm." It wasn't a response as much as it was a noise. Heading to her own cabin, Shade promptly showered and changed into a new bathing suit. This time, though, she took one of the summer scarves and tied it around her hips. She wasn't willing to change entirely, but she also didn't want to create an incident that would require her to kill the man she'd just saved. Slappy may not be happy if she killed her, 'two-legger find'.

Snatching the pants from the printer, she moved to the bathroom and set them on the sink. She could hear the water still going as the man continued to scrub himself. Strolling back up to the main deck, she poured herself a drink and returned to her chair and her book.



Shade slipped the drive into the pouch on her belt and turned her attention to the Rock Claw bioware. Robert was far too desperate for this thing, she mused. She was always suspicious when he was unwilling to give her information. They understood each other very well. If he wasn't telling her something, it was because he realized she'd want it for herself.

Retrieving yet another bag from her belt, she meticulously slid the odd-looking cyber-spine into the bag, careful not to damage the thousands of micro filaments. They were the nerves replacements, and just as important as the spine itself. A coy smile remained in place as her mind raced with the possibilities. She had a contract with Robert, but he'd been in such a hurry to get her started on the mission that he'd neglected to talk to her himself. Giving her a loophole that would cost him dearly. Or at the very least, was going to cost him the bioware.

Sealing the bag, she checked the integrity of the seal. When it switched to green, signaling a stable seal, she nodded. Slipping the bag into the large pouch on her belt, she smirked and turned her attention to the pearl. In her HuD, the security circuit came to life abruptly.

"Intruder Alert! I repeat, intruder alert! All officers report!" A somewhat panicked male voice called across the comm.

She chuckled and popped the door open to the containment. The pearl hummed softly as it sat there in its charged ring. Gazing intently at the object, she willed it to float upwards. Once it was clear of the powered ring, she relaxed her focus, allowing the pearl to fall into her hand.

Kraken pearls were fascinating objects, not just because of their origin, but also for their properties, and the sheer visual effect of the black iridescent outer coating. They were heavy, but not as heavy as their size would suggest they should be. And they were so hard that nothing found, to date, could crack them. At least, not that she was aware of, anyway. Rolling it across her palm, she flipped her hand over, then back to let the object rest in her palm again.

"I always loved the feel of these things." She mused silently to herself. Tugging a particularly unique white Cadmury Rose from her bag, she tossed it into the container and strode off towards the door. She didn't always leave a calling card. But whenever she was exceptionally proud of the job, and she knew the victim would not report it, she enjoyed bragging. And there was no way that Verodase was going to admit that the Shade had stolen the Rock-Claw from them. Particularly since they'd stolen it themselves.



Glancing up from the book, she saw a clean and handsome man standing in the doorway into the ship. The dark blue silk pants looked rather sexy on him, and Shade felt her body respond to the sight.

He was watching her curiously, his eyes a mixture of smoldering lust and confusion.

"You look like you fell better." She rested her hands on the book.

"Heta masseril fash nothu?" He asked.

Sadie looked up into the corner of her HuD. A percentage number gradually climbed to seventy percent.

"What's your name?" She pointed to her chest "Helena." She then pointed to him and raised her eyebrows inquisitively.

"Jonau." He nodded his head and leaned his shoulder into the doorframe.

The movement made her smile. He wasn't afraid, just confused. He absolutely did not act like a slave, which might explain why they tried to kill him.

"Feta fash nothu kadere?" He pointed to the deck of the ship.

In her HuD, the percent flashed to 100%. Simbi spoke to her over the private comm. "I have a lock. He asked what the name of the ship was. One moment, uploading the language."

"The Lion's Shade." She replied in the man's language.

The man's eyebrow shot up in surprise when she answered him. "You are a wizard."

"No."

"I must courteously disagree. Lady Sadie."

Shaking her head, the elf frowned. "I am also not a lady. Please don't insult me so. If you must give me a title, then captain will suffice."

A single eyebrow rose, and a sly smirk played across his now clean-shaven face. Evidently, he'd found a razor. She might need to monitor him, since he probably considered himself armed.

"You consider nobility an insult?"

"In fact, I do, yes. I have worked hard to earn everything I have. Nothing was given to me, purely because of my lineage." She stood, setting the book aside. "Would you like a drink?" She held up her crystal glass, showing him it was empty.

She strode past him boldly, almost daring him to try something. But he only moved out of the way and bowed somewhat as she passed.

"I think I might, yes. But I have not eaten in several days and I don't think it is wise." Shaking his head, he moved up to the bar and slid onto a stool as she began pouring herself a drink. "An empty stomach, alcohol, and such an exquisite example of female flesh would be a dangerous mix. For me that is."

She smirked and reached into the storage bin. Dragging out a bag of pretzels, she poured several into a bowl and set it in front of him. "That will help a little. I can make lunch if you like. Unless you have someplace else to be that is?"

He smirked at her and shook his head. "No, I think I prefer it here for the moment. If you don't mind my company, that is."

"You are more than welcome Jonau. I'll be right back." Making her way to the galley, she heard him get up and begin walking around.

"Are you sure you aren't a noble?" He called down to her.

"I am positive. Why do you ask?"

He was silent for several minutes before she saw him step into the galley with one of the Shade books in hand. "I've never seen a non-noble with so many books. Two or three, yes, but an entire library and aboard a ship no less?"

"This ship is my home." She shrugged. "And they were a gift from a friend. I am not typically a big reader, unless it's for work."

"Ahh." He said, but the look on his face belied his confusion.

"You, however, *are* a noble." She smirked as she cut the large sandwich in half and placing one half of it on a plate, then slid it in front of him. It was a ham and turkey club. Cooking wasn't Shades thing. But she made a mean sandwich. "Eat that slowly, if your malnourished, it might make you sick."

"What is this word, malnourished?"

"If your body has gone too long without food, eating can cause damage. We call this, being malnourished." She took a bite of her half of the sandwich.

He stared at his plate carefully. She saw the doubt in his eyes. She wondered if his captors had been poisoning him, and that was why he hadn't eaten. But it only pointed toward him not being a slave, but rather, a prisoner. Slavers didn't starve their cargo; it reduced their worth.

"You were onboard a Shadaka ship?" She asked gently.

He nodded, looking up at her.

Continuing to eat her half of the sandwich, Sadie smiled and shrugged. "I understand little about them, but lady Jane says they aren't the nicest people."

"You work for this lady, Jane?" His stomach growled furiously, causing him to give in and pick up the sandwich.

"I work *with* her, yes." Applying the emphasis on the word with, Sadie shrugged. "I am a contract for hire."

"Ahh, so you work for many people." He said around a mouthful of sandwich. "My, this is delicious!"

"Yeah, I don't cook well, but I love a good sandwich."

The two of them ate silently for several minutes while he scarfed down more food than his body could probably handle. He'd be throwing it up later. As he slowed, he returned his attention to her.

"May I ask you a personal question?"

"Yes. But I may not answer it." She put the dishes away and strolled back up to the main deck.

"Fair enough." He agreed.

"Why did you save me? What do you hope to gain from this?"

Sadie snorted and shook her head as she resisted the urge to laugh outright. "I saved you because I could." Picking up her glass of Cognac, she strode back out toward the deck and looked towards the gradually sinking sun.

"I get it. It's hard to understand why someone would risk angering a massive ship like that beast." She lifted her glass towards the three masted Shadakin ship in the distance. "Unless they planned to get something out of it."

Sipping her drink, she turned back to the man. "Rest assured, I don't consider that ship, or the people aboard, a threat. To me, they are nothing more than a nuisance cluttering up my horizon. My friend dumped you on my deck because she wanted me

to help you. I'm far more worried about upsetting her than them." She waved the glass towards the aft of the vessel, then back towards the large slaver vessel in the distance before taking another sip.

Wrinkling his brow, the man said nothing as he tried in vain to wrap his exhausted mind around her answer.

"You've had a rough day. Almost dying and whatnot. Why don't you go inside and get some sleep? I give my word that you are in no danger, so long as you are aboard this vessel. We will talk more when you wake." She smiled seductively, "Perhaps we can even get to know each other better. Then you can ask me whatever questions you like. But for now, you need rest."

He stared at her for several minutes before ultimately yawning and sagging his shoulders. She could see the exhaustion seeping into his mind and bones. She only hoped he laid down some place, rather than falling where he was. Because if he did, she was leaving him there. He was far too heavy for her to move without her suit. And waking up to the sight of a metal humanoid carrying him into the bowels of the vessel undoubtedly would not make him feel safe.

As he shuffled off into the main living area, Sadie returned her attention to her book and her comfortable deck chair.



Shade sat on the edge of a wall, high over the city, the wind screaming around her, whipping at the few loose tresses of pure white hair. One foot dangled over the edge as the other was used to support the pad in her hand.

Far below her, the Taius planetary police ran their typical patterns when responding to a 911 call. Several cars used searchlights and scanners to chase various individuals with internal idents that matched the suspect. But this time there were ten identical chips that matched the ident used to break into the Verodase Biomedical facility.

Streeties, or street rats, hardly ever got a legal ident, since it allowed the government to track them and see everything they did. Having a double ident would have allowed the rats to go free after only a cursory check. But since they only had the one ident that Shade had laced into the MRE's, well, they were screwed. And now there were ten street rats running frantically through the back ally's and streets trying to escape the patrols that understood precisely where they were.

The best part was that all ten of them matched the ident of the burglar that had broken into the exceedingly secure bio-med facility.

The cops weren't stupid, well most of them weren't, anyway. They likely understood something was wrong, but regulations would require them to bring them all in and try to sort it out at the station. And that would give her plenty of time to drive away, without attracting undue attention.

She chuckled as several more small-arms fired at the police. Her little street rats were likely so high on whatever street drug they'd found, that they did not realize what they were doing.

Looking down at the vehicles far below, she shook her head as she saw one police vehicle fire an electrified net into a crowd.

"I love my job." She laughed and returned her attention to the pad.

The logo at the top of the pad spun deliberately just above the words Keena Bio-Tech. Not only had Verodase stolen the cyber-spine, but they hadn't even scrubbed the data files yet. As she began reading the manufacturing statistics, she raised an eyebrow. If these stats were correct, it was no wonder that this Rock-Claw bioware was the hottest item on the planet. Keena Bio-tech had stolen a genetic sample of a dinosaur from yet another corp. Most likely Quadrimine Bio-Med, which focused on historical genomes, diseases, and virus's in order to develop modern treatments for things plaguing the population.

They had then taken the dinosaur DNA and combined it with modern genomes into a piece of bioware. Constructing a cyber-spine that was bordering on the realm of superhero like.

Tapping her comm unit, she placed a call. When the other end picked up, there was no video.

"What?" a gravelly voice snapped at her.

"Hey, I got something I want you to look at. I need to find out if this is real or not."

"Mmhmm, what did you steal this time?"

"Seriously? On an unencrypted line?"

"Look you called me, remember?"

"Meet me?"

"Fine, Starsky's."

"Oh, yes, please, I am genuinely craving pizza right now! See you soon."

The line cut and Shade leaned back into the cold steel gargoyle and stared off into the lights overhead. She'd learned long ago not to call them stars, because there were no stars in the Taius sky. It was only traffic, satellites and space stations scattered throughout the solar system. Allowing her gaze to travel off towards the galactic lanes, she smiled as she watched the streaking lights tear across the sky, making the most fascinating kind of Borealis effect.

It took the police over an hour to round up the last of the rogue idents. Once the sky below her calmed somewhat, she swiped through her HuD, switching to the police bands.

"We got the last one. Returning to base."

"Roger that, we will inform the Verodase security so they can come and try to identify them."

"None of these have been sober enough to break into a bio corp."

"Not our concern. It's a corporate problem now."

"Roger that ETA nine minutes."

Grinning, Shade closed the link as she stood. Turning to a shadowy shape, hidden behind several large steel gargoyles, she pulled back the large electronic cover she used to stealth the air bike. Folding the material into a tight bundle, she slid it into a saddlebag at the rear of the bike.

Several minutes later, she and the bike drifted into a dark ally towards a solid plascrete wall. As she approached, a ping triggered in her HuD. The wall slid open just wide enough for her and the bike to squeeze through.

As she slid to a stop in the secret garage, she hopped off and strode towards several nasty looking figures with guns. The tallest of the creatures was only four feet high. Her dark grey skin and large grey ears twitched towards Shade as the weapons powered down. If the elf had the wrong ping response, there would have been nothing left of her body or her bike for the police to find. But then that was the specialty of the Grendu Corporation. An extremely black-market group of goblins that Shade used so often to move stolen cyber and bioware, that they knew each other by name.

"Heya Kelly." She called to the tallest goblin.

"Go in Shade, he's waiting." The female goblin nodded her bulbous head in the elf's direction.

"Thanks." As she walked past, one of them held up their hand to her. They exchanged a series of fist bumps in an intricate pattern. To the outside it was just

friends saying hi, but to the goblins and Shade, it was a series of codes that they could use to pass hidden information. This time, they each said that all was calm on their side.

Striding inside, the horrific smells of Starsky's pizza washed over her. It was a small goblin eatery that, if she was lucky, wouldn't give her severe food poisoning. There were always manufacturers warning labels on any box. Reminding non-goblins of the dangers of goblin food.

"Ohhhhhh." Elongating the sound, she danced enthusiastically across the room and snatched up a piece of the foul-smelling pie. "Thank you!"

An uncharacteristically tall goblin shook his head from where he sat at his desk.

"You know you're mad, right?" He wagged a long bony finger at her. "One of these days that addiction you have to goblin pizza is going to kill you."

"Mm, but what a way to go!" She cooed gleefully around a mouthful.

"Crazy elf." He hopped out of his chair and made his way to a normal sized medical bed. He walked up the steps to the platform. They installed the platform so the doc could reach his larger med chair. Most of his patients weren't goblin after all. "Whad'ya have for me?"

"I think you'll like this." She pulled the cyberware out of from her bag and set it on the surgical steel tray.

The goblin rubbed his hands together and grinned, showing several rows of needle-sharp teeth. "Ahh, I do love new toys!" Meticulously, he withdrew the device from its sealed bag, and laid it tenderly on the metal table. Utilizing a large magnifying arm that hung from the ceiling, he scrutinized it. "What an interesting material. Can you grab me that scanner?"

Shade stuffed the last bit of her pizza in her mouth and strolled over to the doc's desk. Snatching the scanner that he'd pointed to, she strode back to him and handed it over.

"What are you, my pretty?" He mused as he turned on the scanner.

"They were doing some relatively intense research on it. They had this hooked up to it." She reached into her bag and pulled out the pearl.

"This almost looks like..." his voice broke off as Shade tossed the pearl onto the tray with the cyber-spine. "Shade, No!"

The pearl rolled across the tray as her mind quickly realized what he had said. As the pearl came to a stop against the stony material of the spine a flash of light, followed by a rather painful concussion, knocked them both away from the table. Shade hit the ground and rolled skillfully into a crouched position, weapons out on instinct.

Doors burst open all around the room as goblins flooded in, weapons drawn. Several turrets dropped out of the ceiling and instantaneously locked on the lone non-goblin.

"Crap." Shade froze in place. Any wrong move now, and decades of work would instantly be undone. Presuming, it wasn't already too late.

"Ow." A voice called from where the doc was laying. A younger female goblin ran up to him.

"Da, are you okay?"

"I think so." He grumbled as he sat up. As if the tension in the room needed any help to get worse, the doc began laughing. It was a quiet sound at first, but as it climbed in volume Shade could sense the others grow more concerned. The hairs on the back of her neck rose, trying to convince her to run, but she ignored them.

"Everyone out!" He screeched over his own laughter. "I can't believe they fucking did it!" He exclaimed; his face was lit up with elated disbelief. Shuffling back up to the deck next to the med bed. He waved for her to come join him. Eyeing the unmoving goblins around them, he frowned.

"Are you deaf?" He roared. "I said, out!"

Several goblins spat at her angrily. They could get good money for pretty elf parts. But no one argued as they eventually all filed out. Even the turrets pulled sluggishly back up into the ceiling.

"You, my dear, have just created a pre-age artifact. Congratulations." He pointed to the spine on the tray.

Shade stood and walked to see what he was pointing at. "What do you mean I created a pre-age artifact? That's impossible, this isn't the pre-age."

"Luck, my dear. You just happened to have all the right tools, at the right time, and were the right place. Honestly, you continue to impress me every time we meet, my dear."

On the tray, the spine, which had looked like stone before the explosion. Matched the same material as the now missing, kraken pearl.

"You see, they used Rock Claw Lizard DNA to make the cyberware. Something that corps have been trying to do for over a thousand years. Yet somehow, this time, they pulled it off. And you, my dear, well, you merged the kraken pearl with the Rock Claw. Something that used to happen in nature, when these creatures still existed, anyway." He shrugged his small shoulders. "It didn't happen often, they think. But when it did, it made a Greater Rock Claw, a creature that could go toe to toe with a dragon and survive. Almost certainly not win, but they also wouldn't loose."

Shade chuckled and shook her head. "Yeah, can't truly blame that on me. All I did was toss it on the tray. How was I to know you couldn't touch them together?"

The goblin doctor grinned and held his palm up, gesturing to the spine. "That is precisely my point, my dear Shade. The rest of us could have touched them together all day long and nothing would have happened. It took someone like you to do it." He pointed at her chest.

Creasing her brow, she cocked her head at the goblin in confusion.

"It required magic to bond the two."

The sudden realization hit her. She'd inadvertently created an alchemical reaction. Something that was only possible when done by someone capable of magic. And while Shade wasn't a wizard, she was an elf. And all elves were inherently magical creatures. Even if they didn't cast spells.

A sly grin crept across the goblin's face, and Shade couldn't help but feel as if it were contagious.

They both grinned at the same thought.

"An artifact you say?" She tried not to giggle. "An artifact cyberware, you say?"

"Yep." He chuckled.

"Is it safe?"

"Only one way to find out."

"Oh, hell yeah!" She hopped up into the chair and laughed at the goblin. "Make me a superhero Gordie!"

The End

Sadie closed the book with a soft thud and laughed. She'd forgotten the conversation with her favorite street doc. It was still funny, even after all these years. Standing, she stretched, feeling the artifact spine twist comfortably in her back. Even after all these years, she still had that same spine, and she never once regretted putting it in.

Strolling into the ship, she saw the half naked human sleeping soundly on the large sectional couch. He looked so peaceful. She couldn't help but wonder how long it had been since he'd had a good night's rest. Pushing the book away on the shelf, she smiled

at him. Silently maneuvering to one of the storage containers mounted on the bulkhead, she pulled a large fluffy blanket out. Covering him cautiously, she monitored him to ensure that he didn't wake up thinking she was attacking him.

In the morning she would need to talk to him about what happened and who he was, but for now, he was merely an exceptionally sexy man sleeping on her couch.

Picking her way quietly down below, she set the ship to security mode. If anyone or anything moved even a hair on her ship, she'd know about it. It was going to be a long night.