



Shadeless Shadows

Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

“...fabulous story of Helena Cartwright and Shadowband Solutions didn't start as glamorous as the media would have us believe. In fact, it's not a tale that any of us really expected. Shade liked her privacy, but no matter how hard she bit, there are a few of us, that accepted the scars to get through the extremely hazardous outer shell to find something utterly different inside. I only say that because I will be dead by the time she gets out. By the gods, I hope.”

-Leon Hamilton

Shadeless Shadows

Written by Wendi Coffman-Porter

World Development by Richard W. Porter III

Thorn 10th, 26,552

“Ma’am?”

Warm blue eyes smiled up at the young brunette woman in a dark green apron.

Sadie had dressed in form fitting black jeans, a dark blue silk blouse and a rather snug black leather bodice. She wore thigh-high black leather boots that rested on the coffee table in front of her, crossed neatly at the ankles. The long white curls draped down across her chest, a stark contrast to the dark colors she’d chosen for today.

It was cold outside, and her long, heavy winter coat draped over the back of the chair behind her, acting as extra padding.

The young human woman smiled brightly back at her and held out a red ceramic cup piled high with white foam. Her clothing was clean, along with her face and hands. Which meant one of two things. Either the uplift program, that Anna and Joan had implemented, worked. Or she was another of victims of the stasis anomaly from what Jane called the fourth-age.

“Your cappuccino.” The girl smiled, before she adjusted her apron, and picked her way carefully through the crowd, back to the bar.

The smell wafted up to Sadie, and she felt herself smile. This was a coffeehouse. The whole thing smelled of coffee, but something about a well-made cappuccino that always lifted her spirits. Though the sense of normalcy that might also affect her mood.

The newly dubbed Royal Coffee House had self-contained power, which made it the center of normalcy for more than just the elf. There was a booming population of old-world refugees, all flocking to Bugrasi. As the word spread through this backwards world, that there was a place with power, plumbing, and refugees who understood what that meant. Bugrasi had become a new beacon of hope for all those that felt overwhelmed with the apocalyptic existence around them. It wouldn’t end well, but Sadie had decided that it wasn’t her concern. Instead, she opted to keep her experiences to herself.

For the locals, the coffeehouse had become a kind of tourist attraction. Locals regularly gathered up their courage to peek through the large windows at the magical miracle inside.

For Sadie, though, her mood was most likely because of the lack of a nattering metal ball. She could only handle Joan for so long before she wanted to throw the stupid thing into the recycler. Why Leon had the brilliant idea to will his home to Helena, she had no idea.

Even with the constant throughput of people in the public coffeehouse, it was still less annoying than a floating island with a floating metal ball that talked, sang, and otherwise annoyed the elf constantly.

She smiled at the heavily embossed black cover of the book in her hands. It had a platinum corporate logo embedded into the material. She traced her fingers across the logo of Shadowband Solutions. Intricately embossed in the thick leather, above the logo, was the words, Shadeless Shadows. Opening the cover, she lifted her cappuccino to sip it carefully as she read Leon's foreword.

Many of my readers will know that Shade, at one point in time, went by the alias of Helena Cartwright. In fact, it was Helena that I first met so many years ago. And it is Helena that I still adore to this day. It was also Helena Cartwright they arrested and sentenced to five-thousand years in prison. In the most spectacular media frenzy in modern history.

Tens of thousands of solar systems sat on the edge of their seats, as the court, and the media vilified, the most infamous burglar of our time. More than seven hundred and twenty trillion people watched the trial in amazement. As the prosecution laid out impossibly detailed evidence for all. They focused on a minuscule portion of Shade's magnificent career. Detailing crimes that spread the gambit, from treason, to mass murder, and everything in between. None of these details will you ever find in these stories. And her guilt or innocence to those crimes is of no matter anymore. The damage to her life, freedom and loved ones has already been done.

Many of the media followers were fans, some of them ex-clients, and others enemies. But no matter what category they fell into, they couldn't help but be captivated by Helena Cartwright. The most infamous villain in known space and yet the owner of the most advanced security corporation in the Tharward arm of the galaxy. As they proclaimed her sentence, no one can forget how the infamous Shade smirked and winked into the camera.

But the fabulous story of Helena Cartwright and Shadowband Solutions didn't start as glamorous as the media would have us believe. In fact, it's not a tale that any of us really expected. Shade liked her privacy, but no matter how hard she bit, there are a few of us, that

accepted the scars to get through the extremely hazardous outer shell to find something utterly different inside.

I only say that because I will be dead by the time she gets out. By the gods, I hope.

When the yellow dot entered the coffeehouse, Sadie's HUD alerted her. But whoever it was didn't approach, so she kept reading. Now, however, the yellow dot, signifying a potential threat, was slowly moving towards her. When she looked up from the book, she smiled.

Colonel Wilhelm Peterson had dark hair that was greying slightly at the temples, and the most amazing green eyes. Eyes which watched her casually. His well kept local attire, effectively hid a large, well-built body beneath. A body she'd been interested in seeing more of for a while now. Ever since they'd met the first time, several months ago.

"Sorry to bother you." He pointed to the book in her lap. "Good book?"

Contemplating how to answer, she opted for a half truth. She'd already lied to this man once. If she continued the trend, she was likely to lose any future opportunities.

Lifting it so he could look at the cover, she smirked. "I simply wondered what all the fuss was about."

Both eyebrows arched slightly as he scanned the title, then looked back to meet her gaze.

They stared at each other for more than a minute, before he relaxed slightly. "I'm sorry about that."

Smiling, Sadie shrugged. "I've read a few of these now." Her gaze traveled to the wall in the distance, not really seeing anything specific, as she recalled the books. Taking a deep breath, she turned back to lock eyes again. As she replied, she opted to tell him the truth. "They are romanticized stories, written by a man who clearly had a personal agenda."

He nodded in agreement.

"I can imagine how people might read these and draw the wrong conclusions." Shrugging, she added, "even possibly to the point of hero worship."

He coughed as his snort of laughter caught him mid drink.

Grinning, Sadie gestured to the seat across from her. "Care to join me, Colonel?"

Sitting down, he shook his head as he finished coughing. "Jamie does worship her. It's..."

"Disturbing?" She finished for him.

Wilhelm cringed, but nodded his agreement.

"I agree. Though I have to admit. It's also kind of endearing." As flattering as it was to meet one of her fans, it often came with its own share of problems.

Meeting Wilhelm's young corporal two months ago, hadn't been the first time she met a fan, by any stretch of the imagination. In several of her other persona's, it was downright common.

Even as Shade, it had gotten extremely commonplace at the end. The hearing lasted eight months. And during the media fiasco, there were thousands that lined up outside the media and the security forces, begging for autographs. Even several of the officers and inmates during the few months that she was in a maximum-security prison, had gotten various things signed.

At one point, her fans even mobbed the prison, trying to free her. The injuries to the officers and rioters had been severe and included several deaths on both sides. They forced her to make a media announcement after that, asking her fans to let the authorities do their jobs. She even bragged that they weren't holding her against her will. Showing the camera, and the surprised reporter, that the shackles were now on the reporter and not Shade.

Yet, considering the sheer time difference from when they imprisoned her, it was a surprise. It was almost an ego boost to know that her memory had lived long past what the court, and her obvious enemies, had intended. At least it would have been a boost. But not being to escape the stone had been an extremely humbling experience.

Clearly, though, her face had shifted slightly as she considered it, because now Colonel Peterson was watching her with a coy smile.

Crap, she thought.

"You can call me Wil, by the way." He took a sip of his coffee, but it looked more like he used it to hide his grin.

Taking a deep breath, she grinned. "Okay, Wil. To what do I owe this visit? I am sure you didn't come here to play bait the elf."

As she called him out, his grin broadened.

"Old habits." He chuckled.

"I am intimately aware of those habits." She nodded in agreement.

"I am sure you are. But no. I actually came to find out if the beautiful elf was doing anything for dinner?" Crossing his legs at the knees, he watched her intently as she considered the offer.

Her eyes narrowed slightly as she wondered if he was just trying to gather intelligence.