



Shadeless Shadows

Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

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-Leon Hamilton

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"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.

As if on cue, he answered her thoughts. "You know, I've been thinking about Jamie's, Shade. Even if she did suddenly appear five thousand years later, she would have served her sentence. Five-thousand-years is a long time. No matter what species you are. I think that would earn them a clean slate, don't you?"

Sadie kept her face neutral as she pursed her lips and nodded somewhat. "I suppose."

Taking a sip of her own coffee, she used the time to allow her eyes to travel the length of him, before finally meeting his gaze again. She normally avoided military personnel as entertainment, especially special operations types, like the colonel, but perhaps he was right. Five-thousand years was a long time.

"I think dinner would be a lovely idea."

Smiling, he stood. "My place?"

He pointed toward the intact skyscraper nearby. It was the only building in Bugrasi that was taller than five floors. And utterly out of place. Through the large windows, the lit sign at the top of the building that read, Laveeri Towers was visible. The skyscraper had literally become the beacon of technology. Standing out like a lighthouse amidst the medieval backdrop of the surrounding city.

"Penthouse suit number nine, twentieth floor. Will seven o'clock work?"

"Sounds perfect." She leered at him.

She watched him blush slightly at the inflection in her voice. But he moved on without acknowledging it. "See you then."

Watching him leave, she chuckled quietly. Once he was out of sight, she returned her attention to the book.

Helena Cartwright stepped off the shuttle onto the Taius space station and scanned the terminal. It was empty, which wasn't a genuine surprise. The trip to Taius system hadn't taken long, but the trip through the solar system itself had taken over a month. She'd never seen this much traffic in Taius system. So much for the theory that it was a backwater planet.

The Republic fleet presence alone told her there was something bigger going on than appeared on the surface. The only way the Republic would commit this many forces to a solar system off the main traffic lanes, was if there was some kind of problem.

Taking a deep breath, she strode to the door at the far end of the room. To the left of the door was a clear plasteel window, behind it a rather bored looking teenager was playing some kind of game on his personal compute device.

"Welcome to Taius." He got out without rolling his eyes. Setting the device down, he added, "are you here for business or pleasure?"

"Business." Keeping her face neutral, she watched him tap something in the air, using his Alternate Reality system.

"Import documents and Ident?" He asked, as he seemed to notice something on his fingers. Examining it carefully, he utterly ignored her as she watched him for a moment. A small slot had appeared in the wall next to the window. Pulling a chip from her pocket, she slotted it into the opening.

"Fine, enjoy your stay. And don't forget to check out the wonderful sightseeing possibilities on Taius." Flicking his fingers towards her, he yawned.

Her HuD acknowledged receipt of the advertisement but refused to open it. Instead, the firewall immediately moved the file to the recycling bin, carefully deleting every digital byte.

Without saying a word to the young man, Helena strode through the now open door into the cacophony of the primary station. The sheer sight of the dilapidated station was such a shock that she froze mid-stride. There were people everywhere. It looked like something she had seen below the fog level of Horin.

Sitting on the deck directly to her left, a male dwarf, reeking of alcohol, and fecal matter, looked up and grinned at her. His toothless mouth was only slightly more gruesome than the patchy beard that matted to his face.

A grav-taxi floated past with a loud hum, carrying luggage and a rather stoic looking man in a business suit.

"Heya sexy! Wanna give a darf a gud time?" The dwarf chuckled next to her.

As she scanned the crowded space station, a heavy blanket of rage fell over her. It had never seemed possible that Taius might get worse.

Raising a hand towards one of the incoming grav-vehicles, she noticed the now standing dwarf reaching for her bag. Afraid to touch him, Helena opted instead to draw a knife and hold it to the small dwarf's throat.

"Please continue. I'd really love an excuse." She growled deeply in the local dwarven street slang.

Bushy eyebrows shot up in shock. He deliberately pulled both hands into view.

"I assume you need a ride?" A female voice behind her chuckled as it spoke.

"Yes. Thank you." Helena turned her back on the stout male, her knife already gone as quickly as it had appeared.

Stepping up on the car, she sank into a well-worn seat. She felt the compensator's kick in.

"Where to?"

"The lift."

The human female turned in her seat to meet Helena's gaze. "You're going down to the cesspit? Wow, you're brave."

The elf said nothing as she leaned back in the chair and watched the station fly past her. She'd picked this station because it was over Thanya. A beautiful city with magnificent corporate arcology's, parks and homes that had always made her wonder, when she was young, about how the wealthy really lived. But that had been over three-hundred years ago. A lot could change in that amount of time.

When Regina had won the Darkwater Security Solution corporation in a game of dathalu, she originally refused. But the owner complained for almost an hour about how the company was in the ass end of space. He practically begged her to take it off his hands. Finally, she agreed to look it over. That the headquarters was on Taius had been comical. But the more she thought about it, the more she considered accepting the transfer of ownership after all. Perhaps it was time to go home.

Now, however, as the vehicle slowed near the space lift, she shook her head. Perhaps it hadn't been such a good idea. But Regina Dalmoore was dead. Killed in a horrific accident at her shipyard. Her body literally crushed by a malfunctioning grav-lifter. There was no going back now.

The murder investigation was still going on when the elf, Helena Cartwright, picked up her commission. She did hope they found the murder. At least, the man she'd pinned it on, anyway.

"You going down?" A Republic soldier, who appeared to be manning the lift, called to her.

Glancing at the five other soldiers spread around the entrance to the lift, she frowned, but nodded anyway.

The marines' equipment was better than she remembered, and the weapons were a newer version of the front-line assault rifles she had seen last time she was here. Apparently, they now had a less-lethal setting. Which meant the marines were doing more policing than actual fighting.

"Com'on then, we don't have all day."

Stepping into the large lift, Helena remained standing, rather than sitting, in the filthy rows of seats. The lift had given her anonymity, which was why she'd opted to take this route. A

shuttle to the surface would have required her to log her identity and her intent. Which was not something she wanted to make public just yet. She wanted to watch Darkwater in action before telling them she was the new owner.

Looking out of the large plasteel windows, the elf watched as her home-world grew. It was darker than she remembered it, but as they broke through the atmosphere, she realized it wasn't the planet; it had been the atmospheric haze. Her nose wrinkled as a part of her heart sank. Gone were the lush green forests, and the once dark blue water was now a kind of brown color near the land masses.

As they continued to fall towards Thanya, she saw the brownish grey of the polluted fog that used to only be in cities like Horin. Above the fog, the city was still bright, with heavy traffic and wealthy people who no longer cared about the people below them, out of sight.

"This your first time to Thanya?" A male voice said next to her.

Glancing at him, she noticed the man that had flown past on the grav-cart. He wore an expensive, crisp, clean suit. Apparently, he too was avoiding notice as he descended into the city.

"In a long while, yes."

He was quiet for a moment, and she couldn't help but wonder what the man wanted.

"You're an elf!" The sound of surprise caused her to turn towards him slightly.

"Your point?"

Raising his palm towards her, he raised both eyebrows. "Sorry, I was just surprised. You don't look like an elf. Are you a half-breed or something?"

Folding her arms across her chest, Helena narrowed her eyes, staring at the man without saying a word.

It took him a good minute before he got the hint and finally moved away from her.

Watching back over the scene below, Helena wondered what she'd gotten herself into.



The sound of giggling drew Sadie's attention up from the book. Across the large seating area, four teenage humans quickly looked away. The male at the end of the group leaned across one girl and tapped a pad. The red-haired girl holding the pad looked down at the screen and nodded.

"That has to be her." He whispered. They were all wearing jeans and t-shirts, with their jackets piled up on the couch to the left of where they were sitting. They were clearly not locals. They were far too comfortable with the technology in front of them.

"It has to be one of those sad copycat wannabes." The dark-haired girl on the opposite end said a little more loudly. Which quickly earned her several hushing noises.

"Shh. She'll hear us." The red head replied.

"If she is her, she can hear us anyway." The blond human met Sadie's gaze and smiled apologetically.

Sadie raised her hand and bent her finger, calling the blond to her.

The girl stood up, even though her friends all clawed at her.

"Don't you dare!" the male squeaked hysterically.

But the child ignored them and wove her way through the couches and padded chairs until she stood only a few feet from Sadie.

The elf smirked. The girl was brave; she had to give her credit for that. "What's your name?"

"Michelle." The girl bobbed her head respectfully.

"You're not from Bugrasi?"

The girl laughed and shook her head. "No. This place is insane. We are from..." her voice trailed off as she contemplated how to answer the unasked question. "Well, I guess technically we are from the Rutherford Hotel."

"I see." Nodding deeply, Sadie now understood. "From the stasis incident."

The girl cocked her head to the side as she grimaced. "Not exactly. We weren't in stasis per se, but a kind of time loop." Shaking her head she tried to find the right words, finally she gave up, shrugging. "I didn't really understand the math when Mrs. Ceribelle explained it."

"Ah." Sadie pointed towards the girl's friends, who were all leaning forward trying in desperation to hear the entire conversation. "Is there something I can help you with?"

The girl blushed slightly and folded her hands in front of her as she fidgeted slightly. "We were kinda wondering if you were her?"

Sadie folded her hands on the book and arched a single eyebrow. "And who would that be?"

"The Shadow."

One girl had leaned forward so far that she slipped and fell from the chair. Her friends hurriedly pulled her back up, and they returned their attention to the elf and the blond human.

Shaking her head, Sadie turned her attention to the other children. "You might as well come here, before you hurt yourselves."

They leapt up so fast they literally ran into an elderly woman carrying a hot cup of coffee. Catching her before she fell, the male apologized and got the woman several napkins to clean her shirt with.

The woman shooed them away with threats of beatings about the head and shoulders.

Sadie watched with a furrowed frown. They reminded her of her daughters' friends. They had been just as focused the first time they met the musical superstar Terrance the Silver. He had been an utter asshole, but the kids didn't care. They adored him anyway.

As they fell into line in front of her, the elf pointed to the pad.

The red-headed child grinned happily and flipped the pad around. On the screen was the frozen image of a white-haired elf in skintight black leathers. In each hand she held a pistol out to her sides. Apparently in the scene that the boy had frozen, the pistols were being fired. The bullets were clearly visible in front of the bright orange explosions.

So many things about the scene made Sadie want to break every single bone in Leon's hands. In the background a massive green eye set in a snarling, black, caninoid head.

"What's the name of this show?" Sadie kept her voice relaxed as she returned her attention to the children.

"The Shadow Conspiracy!" the boy said excitedly.

Now that he was closer, Sadie noticed he was younger than the girls and had similar features to the brunette. Likely a younger sibling.

"It ran right up till the war started." The blond nodded. "Until the actress vanished mysteriously."

"They say that the elves took her to the enclave to protect her from the war." The red head agreed.

"Nineteen years of awesomeness!" the boy exclaimed, waving his hands excitedly.

"I'm sure." Sadie nodded and smiled at the boy. "What makes you think it's me?"

"Elves don't have white hair and blue eyes. Not for real, anyway." The brunette stated flatly. She clearly didn't agree with her little brother.

"According to the stories, they were supposed to release her from the tower last year." The blond held her head high as she spoke. "And if we can believe the rumors, you appeared right outside the police station nine months ago. Just after we came here."

The girl locked her gaze on Sadie, causing the elf to smirk slightly. This child really had one hell of a strong will. She reminded her so much of Ella.

"Shade."

All four children frowned, clearly confused.

"Her actual name was Shade, not Shadow." Lifting the book so they could read the title of it she added. "But with titles like these, I can imagine how time might warp it into Shadow."

The boy lifted a small personal computer device and snapped a picture of the book. After tapping the device several times, he held the device aloft so the others could see.

Their brows arched high with surprise as they seemed to understand.

Sadie smirked. Leon had written the books in Republic Standard; they had likely needed a phonic detector to translate it.

The blond narrowed her eyes slightly as she returned her attention to Sadie.

"Are you her then?"

Sadie sighed. She really wasn't sure how to answer the question. No matter how hard she ignored it, this would not go away. The more advanced the society got, the more they were going to have access to the materials written about her in the previous ages.

"These stories are based on me, yes."

The boy leapt into the air and squealed; the girls however continued watching her, waiting for her to finish.

"However. These are fictional stories. They aren't real."

The boy looked like someone had popped his favorite balloon with a pin.

"While they based some stories on actual events," She pointed to the pad. "Such as Scar there. They are not historical documents or anything. And you need to keep that in mind."

All three girls smiled and nodded their heads. "I am not sure any of us think you ride a pegasus or play chess with the suns." The red head laughed.

"Did you actually kill Emerald Scar?" The boy opened his eyes wide in awe.

"Along with the help of several other amazing soldiers, yes."

They all smiled happily, clearly in awe of the elf.

"Is that your actual hair color?" The brunette asked, now utterly accepting the fantasy.

"It is the color I was born with, yes."

"Wow." They all said at once.

"Can we have your autograph?" The girl handed her the pad.

Chuckling, Sadie took it and signed with her finger the single word, Shade. Beneath it, she sketched a quick Rose and used it as an artistic flourish.

Handing the pad back, she smirked as the kids ran from the coffee shop squealing happily. She only hoped they didn't run into anyone else on their way back home. Looking down at the book, she sighed and shook her head.

"What did you do to me, you adorable idiot?" She grumbled as she flipped forward a few pages. She needed to skip the details if she wanted to make it to her date tonight.



Helena looked up from her pad, as yet another group of street-worn individuals sauntered into the lobby of the Darkwater Security Solutions building. They each wore sidearms, and the large troll in the rear was carrying a rather large Republic heavy assault rifle. Attached to the side of it was a rather makeshift looking device. Obviously designed to bypass the biometric safety.

Stolen Republic weaponry. She mused to herself. What could go wrong with that?

The corporate security not only allowed them through the checkpoint, but they gave the large troll a high-five, as the man at the head of the group slipped one guard a cred stick.

A tall, disturbingly thin elf stepped out of the elevator. Stepping to the side out of their way, he glared at them as they passed. He carried a large duffle on his shoulder and ensured that he faced them the entire time.

"Yo, yo, yo, Mene!" the leader laughed and flipped him off with a typical street gesture. "Have a nice life bitch!"

The elf took a deep breath and stood up straighter as he watched the lift doors close. Once he was sure they wouldn't be at his back, he began walking towards the lobby. As he passed the security checkpoint, the woman at the guest reception waved her hand to catch his attention.

Helena could tell that he considered ignoring her, but he strode up to the desk, anyway.

They spoke quietly for several moments, with the woman pointing in her direction.

"Not my problem anymore!" The elf said loudly and turned to storm across the lobby towards the large exit doors.

When he halted suddenly, Helena couldn't help but smirk. Veering towards her, his brows furrowed slightly.

The most common species of elf has far more subtle expressions than elves like her. But it was always her experience that one elf knew another. Unlike humans, which often mistook her for a half elf. And she had apparently drawn the attention of this elf. Even in his current state, her presence seemed to nag at him.

As he approached, she leaned back in the chair and crossed her legs at the knees.

The shift in posture seemed to give the elf a moment of pause, and he slowed his stride. Lifting his chin slightly, he eyed her cautiously with his dark, angry stare.

"May I help you?" His voice was cool and calculating. He had no Republic accent, which either meant he was a local, or he was a linguist.

Grinning, Helena locked eyes with him and replied, "I am not sure. I am here to see..." She knew the man's name, but she lifted her pad to give the illusion of ignorance. "A Mr. Randolph?"

"Did you have an appointment?" The male's eyes narrowed even further at the use of the CEO's name.

"No, but I can assure you. He will want to speak with me." She allowed her smile to slip into a knowing smirk.

The male's brow furrowed slightly. He was quick. He knew something was amiss. Instead of brushing her off, like everyone else had, he looked to her pad then back into her eyes. "May I ask, why?"

The sly smirk grew into a full-fledged grin. "Of course." She lifted a hand, palm up, towards the inner building. "I am the new owner of Darkwater Security Solutions."

The elf straightened somewhat as he eyed her carefully. Helena saw the gears moving behind those cool, calculating eyes.

"Is that so?" A hint of a smirk appeared in the corners of his mouth, but his eyes were still dark. A clear indicator that the elf was dangerously angry. "May I see the paperwork?"

Folding her hands on top of the pad, her grin faded. "Why don't we start with who you are first?"

Nodding, the elf lifted his hand towards the door in the distance. "May I buy you a coffee, Ms....?"

"Cartwright." Standing, Helena nodded and followed the man from the building.

They crossed the street in silence. The coffee house was a rundown on the outside, but after passing by the bouncer at the front door, she found the inside to be clean and well kept. Considering the surroundings outside, she could understand the need for a bouncer at the door.

"What would you like, Ms. Cartwright?" The male elf asked her.

"Cappuccino please." She nodded and looked around.

Despite the exterior, and the riffraff in the streets. The coffeehouse was busy, well lit, and maintained on the inside. Most of the clientele were well-dressed people in typical corporate attire. Had it been a couple hundred years ago, this would be exactly what she expected to find inside of an establishment in Thanya.

Finding an empty table, she wove her way to the far wall while the elf behind her ordered drinks.

Sitting where she could clearly see the door, she waited for him to join her.

When he approached with their drinks, he set them down on the table and gave her a slight bow.

"Greetings Ms. Cartwright. I would like to apologize for my earlier behavior. It is not in my nature to behave in such a way to strangers." Placing a hand on his chest, he nodded his head to her. "My name is Menefelle Thernali Hadere. I am, well, I was, until today, Mr. Randolph's aide."

A slight smirk crept into the corner of Helena's mouth. "It's nice to meet you Menefelle." Gesturing with her palm up to the chair, Helena continued. "My name is Helena Cartwright. And as I said, I am the new owner of Darkwater... that's an awful name, by the way. I mean seriously. Do you people know what that word means?" She shuddered slightly.

The sudden deviation from the topic caused the elf across the table from her to laugh. "It wasn't my decision."

"I'm sure." Bringing the pad to life, Helena swiped to the left and brought up the legal document. Then slid the pad towards him with a deft flick of her wrist.

Picking it up, he quickly skimmed the document. He was good. She could tell that he was absorbing it with both experience and cleverly hidden cyberware.

"Hmm." Looking up, he locked eyes with hers. His eyes had lightened, the anger was being replaced with something, resolution maybe? "This puts me in an awkward position."

"Are you sure?" Helena smirked; she already liked this elf.

The first day she arrived on world, she had gone to a lawyer and transferred the title of the building, and the corporation into her name. Which meant that the company, and all of its assets, including the people, had belonged to her for the last four days.

She then spent the next three days watching the Darkwater office. She kept detailed notes as she assessed the staff and the clientele. Each morning she showed up just as they opened the main doors to the public, and she returned to her hotel each night, to do more research, both from legitimate sources, and on the dark web. She already knew exactly what was happening there. She just hadn't decided how she wanted to handle it, yet.

"Because I checked. You, Mr. Hadere, are the only employee of Dark... ugh. I can't say that out loud. You are the only employee on my staff, that is a free citizen. Except for Mr. Randolph, of course."

Menefelle chuckled. "While that is true, and I applaud you for doing your research. It does not change the fact that I resigned today."

"Ah, but in your contract." She pulled the pad to her and brought up his contract. "Here we are. Your contract was with Mr. Thedalias. And according to what I am reading here, requires the consent of both parties to cancel."

A sly smirk crept onto his face as he saw where she was going.

"And since I am now the owner, this contract reverts to me. And I can choose to decline your resignation." Smiling warmly, she took a sip of her cappuccino and arched both eyebrows in surprise. "My, this is good!" Returning her attention to the elf, she locked eyes with him. "Do you want me to accept your decision to leave Mr. Hadere?"

His attention drifted down to the cup in front of him as he considered it.

"I can honestly say that I'd rather not deal with this mess alone." She added, "but I will respect your decision to walk away. I commend your dedication, however, remaining as long as you have. Especially considering this level of corruption." She set her hand on the pad and frowned.

His gaze lifted to meet hers again. His eyes were almost so dark that they were black. She wondered what color they were when he was happy. Hopefully, she'd get to see it someday.

"I would like to revisit this conversation tonight. Perhaps over a business dinner?" He stood, both palms flat on the table. "For now, though, why don't I take you to see Mr. Randolph?"

"Sounds perfect on both accounts." Helena stood and adjusted the hidden shoulder harness that carried her matching pistols.

She'd purchased the shoulder holster long ago, in a neighboring galaxy, long before Shade came into existence. And more than any other piece of equipment she owned, she was never

without it. The maker designed it to mask any pistols, no matter the size or design. Meaning that she was, in effect, always armed, no matter how good the sensors or the legality of carrying weapons.



The sound of metal approaching drew Sadie's attention up from the book. She loved the coffeehouse, but apparently today she was more popular than usual. A man in full platemail, with a whitewashed leather belt, stepped up to her.

Over the last few months in the capital of Bugrasi, she'd learned several key tells about the nobility. A person with a white belt was a knight, and if they wore a purple ribbon on it, they were a member of the royal order of the king's knights. And sure enough, this rather handsome young human, wore a pristine purple ribbon on his rather clean white belt. The pristine condition was, in itself, a tell that he was new to the order.

Stopping in front of her, he held out a cup. "For the beautiful councilor."

Arching an eyebrow on her forehead, she took the cup and inhaled the robust aroma of the fresh cappuccino.

"To what do I owe this honor, good knight?" She bypassed the annoying pleasantries and waved the cup towards the seat across from her, before taking a sip.

"I believe the honor is, in fact, mine."

The overabundance of flattery was commonplace among the nobility of Bugrasi court. In fact, Robert had been studying court etiquette in the capital for over a decade, and still found himself without an answer, a regular basis. Which often resulted in an ethereal, handwritten book being chucked into a wall. Scattering papers in every direction.

Sitting down, the man smiled and leaned back in the chair, allowing his sword to clatter against the wooden legs of the chair loudly. No doubt an attempt at either intimidation or bragging. A wasted gesture, either way. Since she found swords to be a waste of metal. Only an utter moron brought a sword to a gunfight.

"Indeed." She'd play the game for now.

He glanced down at the book and furrowed his brow when he realized he couldn't read the language. "I do however have to admit that I am curious."

"Indeed." She repeated herself flatly. Not taking the bait.

"Are the stories true, I wonder?"

Sadie hid her smirk behind her cup and continued to watch him quietly as she sipped her fresh cappuccino.

When she didn't respond, he seemed taken aback. Glancing around to see if anyone noticed, he shifted in the chair, obviously uncomfortable. For a man used to being utterly in charge, this was not going how he'd planned. Obviously.

"Um. How is the dwarven coffee?"

Sadie lowered the cup, allowing him to see her smirk. "This is not dwarven coffee."

Furrowing his brow deeply, his head cocked to the side. "It's not?"

"No. In fact, I believe to compare them, might offended a dwarf enough to cause them to challenge a human knight." Raising her chin slightly, she recognized she might be having too much fun at the noble's expense.

In her HUD, three yellow icons entered the building and spread out. Two of them went to order coffee, while the third moved to a table in the corner to her left. They were all three wearing local attire, but they carried sidearms and assault rifles, slung in the open. The weapons and faces matched the members of Wilhelm's team. Glancing at the young corporal in the corner, the two locked eyes briefly.

A message appeared on her display.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, thank you. I am fine." She replied to the text mentally.

"Understood, we are here if you need us." Jamie nodded.

Sadie's expression remained neutral as she returned her attention to the knight. The young corporal was her own personal stalker. It wasn't a surprise that he was here. Though she was curious what had taken him so long.

"I see." The knight's voice had dropped slightly, and the elf wondered if she'd gone too far.

"To which story are you implying, sir?" She smiled kindly.

Curving his brows high, he seemed surprised. "There is more than one story about you?"

Sadie resisted the urge to laugh. She wasn't sure if he was just ignorant or if he was honestly trying to insult her. For his sake, she hoped it wasn't the latter.

"I am an elf good sir. I have lived a long life. There are thousands of stories about my adventures. But to which are you referring?"

"That you are the wizard Jane's, servant."

Sadie had been taking a sip of her coffee and coughed as the fiery liquid threatened to force its way into her lungs.

As the knight leaned forward to assist, she raised a hand with her palm towards him.

Cough, "I see." Cough, cough.

"Is it true?" he asked.

Shaking her head slowly, she swallowed. Next to her, a plastic bottle came into view. Glancing up at Colonel Peterson's second in command, Sadie smiled her thanks.

The woman nodded, then glared at the knight before moving back to the counter to wait for their drinks.

Taking a quick drink of water, Sadie returned her attention to the knight across from her. "I suppose from a certain perspective it might look that way."

"Are you not in her employ?"

"Why do you ask good knight?" Sadie opted to ignore the question completely.

He squirmed again, but only marginally. He was clearly not used to being handled. "I am just fascinated by the wizard and wanted to learn more about her."

"Indeed." Sadie's face fell to her standard neutral gaze, which often made humans uncomfortable.

"Is she really as powerful as they say?"

"Depends on who *they* are."

"Excuse me?"

"You said as *they* say. Who do you define as they?"

The man furrowed his brow. Evidently word games were not his forte. She couldn't help but wonder who had set the young man on this path, and what they expected him to gain from it.

"They." He waved his arm randomly. "The people."

Taking a deep breath, Sadie let it out slowly. "The capital of Bugrasi alone, has three-hundred-thousand people in it, or so I am told. Are you expecting me to have talked to three-hundred-thousand people about their opinions of the wizard? If so, you have a far greater impression of me than is possible."

The man scowled. He appeared to develop a headache.

"But if you are asking me to spy on mistress Jane and feed you intelligence, then you will need to pay me far more than a cup of coffee."

That the man seemed to understand. He relaxed slightly. "And if I were to ask something like that, which I am, of course, not doing. What might that payment look like?"

Shrugging, Sadie lifted the cappuccino and took a sip before responding. "I might consider passing along information for, no less than fifteen million Republic Bonds."

The man looked utterly confused. Behind him, Sadie saw the three soldiers furrow their own brows, obviously not understanding what she said. Nosey little operators, she mused silently.

"I do not know what this Republic Bond is."

Her grin broadened, and she nodded. "Then my good sir, you can't afford me, can you?"

"I can offer you Bugrasi Trade gold." He stated firmly.

Chuckling, Sadie shook her head. "I can make Bugrasi Trade gold on my ship, with the push of a magical button. Gold is a worthless crafting material, not a basis for trade." Setting the cup aside, she glared at the knight. "I am done with this discussion, human. You are wasting my time."

The knight frowned as his hand slid towards his sword.

A soft whine echoed throughout the coffee house. A dozen or more customers leapt to their feet and ran from the building. Behind the counter, the employees ducked down out of sight. Putting the thick bar between themselves and the now standing, fourth-age soldiers.

The knight glanced around at the empty building. The only individuals remaining were three human soldiers, the elf and himself.

Assault rifles were not common in Bugrasi. But over the last few months they had seeped into the royal guard, along with being standard equipment for the wizard Jane's, personal security forces. Only an idiot, or someone who wasn't native to the capital, would be unaware of what the weapons were.

Clearly the knight was neither. Raising both hands into view, the knight nodded.

"I suppose, we can be done. For now, half-breed." His voice dripped with the familiar insult.

Chuckling, Sadie nodded. "Touché, sire. I deserved that. Now, please find yourself safely out of the Royal Coffee House. I am sure, none of us wish to damage her majesties favorite home away from home."

Taking a deep breath, the knight relaxed and nodded his understanding. "Indeed. Please have a wonderful day, Ms. Feelari."

"And to you, good knight."

She didn't wait for him to leave before she began ignoring him. Flipping forward a couple of pages, she skipped past the carnage that had followed her and Menefelle storming into the facility.

Helena stood in the middle of the large circular office. More than a dozen bloody corpses littered the floor. The entire room was coated with blood and bits of flesh. A sight that would normally turn the stomach of anyone, except the furious white-haired elf. In her hands, two pistols were slowly dimming from white to orange, as the barrels cooled in the chill air of the office. Turning to look over her shoulder, she saw Menefelle standing there unmoving. Both eyebrows arched high on his forehead.

"Excessive perhaps, but I will not argue its effectiveness." A coy smirk played in the corners of his mouth.

Helena shook her head. The elf had been testing her.

Looking around at the walls, she saw one of the semi-conscious naked women watching her quietly, her eyes sunken in her head. Her hands shackled to the wall high over her head. Her arms coated in dried blood, suggesting that she'd been there a while. She half hung, half crouched against the wall, utterly unaware of the carnage surrounding her.

When the shooting began, the woman didn't even flinch, but then Helena wasn't sure she could. They had clearly beaten her severely. One leg was bent in a disturbing shape and her black and blue body showed severe signs of malnutrition and blood loss. Even as her eyes watched the elf, they didn't seem to be aware of what they were seeing.

Raising her gun, Helena shot the woman between the eyes. As the head drooped forward, the elf allowed her gaze to continue around the room. There were over a dozen humans of various sizes, colors, and sex similarly strung up as some kind of decoration. All of them were so far gone that there was nothing left to recover. When Helena and Menefelle had entered the room, the CEO and his gangster guests were in the process of beating and raping them. The gangsters had all been too high to fight back, but the rage had overwhelmed her, and instigated the extreme slaughter.

Finally, her attention arrived at the man in the center of the room. He was currently bent backwards over his desk, hands covering his face, crying. Even in his drug addled state, he had tried to plead for his life. With a deft snap kick to the face, she had dropped him while she dealt with the gang rats. As she walked up to the desk, careful not to slip in the blood, she glared down at him. Her own blue eyes so dark that they were almost black. She now understood why Menefelle had been so upset when they met.

"Stand up." She hissed.

When he didn't move, she demanded it again.

"Stand up!" She roared.

Rolling to the side, the man fell off the desk and tried in vain to push himself upright. But the most he could muster was looking up at her from his knees. Blood poured from his nose as he pleaded for forgiveness.

"Please don't kill me. I am sorry. Whoever you are, I am sorry." He begged. "Take any of them. They are yours, just please..."

With a deft snap, her hand came up and squeezed the trigger. His brains splattered all over the floor, as the body fell backwards, collapsing into a rapidly growing pool of blood.

Drawing her attention back to the desk, Helena stepped around to where she could see the dozens of open files spread all over the massive surface. "So much for security." She grumbled.

"He hated having to put in passwords." Menefelle replied, still not moving from his spot. "He figured if he never closed the file, then he didn't have to unlock it later."

Looking up at the elf, she frowned. "Are you kidding?"

"I wish I were."

"Wow." Shaking her head, she looked down at the mess on the desk. "I got nothing."

"Well. I suppose I should make a call and see if we can get this mess cleaned up."

Looking down at the file closest to her, Helena's frown deepened. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea. I will see if I can clean this up." Pulling the nearby chair to her, she sat and began going through the open files, trying to make a triage list. This was going to take months just to get straight, let alone cleaned up.

Several frustrating hours later, Helena hung her head in her hands and slowly allowed them to wrap around the back of her neck as she tried to stretch out the stress. The company was so severely corrupt she wasn't sure she could pull it out of the never ending black hole.

The door to the office slid open with a soft hiss.

"Whoa." A deep male voice exclaimed. As it continued, she could hear the humor, "wow, you weren't kidding Menefelle. I gotta meet the chick that did this!"

"Colonel Jymallather Fadmakeel. Meet Ms. Helena Cartwright."

"Reti..." His voice fell away as Helena sighed and looked up from the desk.

The tall muscular male elf, in black military fatigues, locked his gaze with hers, and they both stared at each other for a good minute without saying a word.

Standing slowly, Helena changed to a highly encrypted elven language.

"Jimmy?" Picking her way carefully through the sticky mess, she stopped within arm's reach of him.

"Well, I'll be damned." Shaking his head slowly, his shocked expression faded to a warm smile. "You have no idea how good it is to see you alive."

Helena chuckled, "Colonel?"

"Retired." He nodded.

"Then you went back to college, like I suggested." A pained smile crept across her face as she stared at him.

"Yeah, well," he shrugged, refusing to look away from her. "Shit went bad on an op a few years back and command didn't give me a choice. After my team lost their colonel, someone had to replace them."

"I see." Leaning forward, she wrapped her arms around the broad male shoulders and whispered into his neck. "I missed you."

"And I you, ma'am." He replied.

They stood there hugging each other for several minutes.

"While it is clear, that you two know each other. I would like to point out, that we still have a mess to clean up?" Menefelle brought their attention to the surrounding office.

It was starting to stink even more than it had before the slaughter. Standing up straight and taking a step away from the retired colonel, she looked down at her clothes.

"Uh, yeah. While you take care of this, is there any place sanitary that I can get cleaned up? I mean, this place is so bad, I am almost afraid to even consider staying here."

Menefelle smiled. "You can stay in my quarters, ma'am. It is secure."

"And what about you?"

"Don't worry about me, ma'am. It's going to be awhile before I have time to take a break." He held his palm up towards the mess of her office. "This is just the beginning. Jimmy and I have a lot of work to do. It's best if the new owner stays out of it."

"He's right. You should keep your hands clean." Looking around at the bloody mess, Jimmy wrinkled his nose. "Metaphorically, I suppose."

Chuckling, Helena nodded her consent. "I suppose you're right. Does that mean you'll take the job?"

Arching a single eyebrow Jimmy asked, "What job?"

"As Shadowband Solutions' new Security chief?"

The two of them locked eyes for a moment before he grinned. "Work for you? It would be an honor, ma'am."

Hugging him again, she whispered quietly. "Thank you."

"Always Ma'am." He replied.

Sadie placed her hand over the book and smiled faintly. She recalled that moment, he hadn't called her ma'am.

She felt sorrow well up in her mind, and she shoved it deep back down inside its dark hole where it belonged. Taking several deep breaths, she knew good and well that focusing on who and what she had lost was a waste of time. It annoyed her that Leon even told this story, let alone knew about it. She spent hundreds of years working extremely hard to bury things so that even she couldn't find them. But clearly that hadn't mattered to Leon.

"So much for privacy." She grumbled.

She could hear his response, knowing that it was simply a memory of the endless arguments they'd gotten into over the topic. "Right to privacy is a fallacy. It's something we tell ourselves in the dark, to keep the monsters at bay."

Looking at the chrono in her HuD, she skipped ahead toward the end of the book.

Helena sat in her now clean office. The walls behind her were clear, allowing her to see the sparkling lights of the city. Printing out a flimsy, she pulled it in front of her and skimmed it carefully, ensuring that it had all the intel that he would need.

The door to the office opened with a soft hiss and she looked up to smile at her old friend.

"Jimmy."

"Ma'am." He made his way to the bar and poured himself a drink. "The building is finally clear."

Glancing down at the desk, she frowned. It had taken them over a month to clear out the old guard, and some of them had still managed to remain hidden in the cracks.

"Well, that took longer than I expected. I'm glad its over." Standing, she strolled to the bar and poured her own drink. It was nice to legally buy cognac, but she had to admit that it somehow lost that special something that made it her favorite beverage. A figment of her imagination, she was sure, but it was true none the less.

"What's next?"

Holding her drink out towards the sparkling city, she smiled. "The world, of course."

He chuckled, "Of course."

"Can I ask you a question, Jimmy?"

"Always." He moved to the chair in front of her desk and sat down, sipping his drink.

"Menefelle?"

"Teams." His one-word response to her one-word question spoke volumes.

"What does he know about me?"

"Nothing you haven't told him, as far as I can tell. I checked; the Helena Cartwright alias is really fucking solid."

"Anyone else know?" She strolled back to the large window, looking out over the city.

"Nope. Your secrets safe, so far."

Turning, she strolled to a scale model of a balsa-wood catamaran and set her hand on the deck just above the ship's name, The Shade. "Perfect."

The two of them remained quiet for several moments, as they sipped their drinks, lost in their own thoughts.

"There is a flimsy on the desk."

Leaning forward, he slid the flimsy into his hand and scanned it.

"The usual bonus, when it's done." She took a sip of cognac.

"Got it. I'll take care of it this weekend." The man stood, setting his empty glass on the desk, and strode from the room with purpose.

The End

Sadie closed the back cover of the book and looked up. The coffee house was abuzz with people meeting and chatting after a long day. For a moment, she forgot she was in the medieval hell of Bugrasi. Next to her a microphone was being set up, as a man with a guitar tuned his instrument. It was certainly time to go.

Standing, she saw a group of young, adult males' eye her intently. One of them smiled and nodded to her respectfully. Unlike the others, he took a deep breath and drew the courage to walk up to her.

"Pardon me, ma'am?" He asked quietly. Trying not to draw attention.

"Yes?"

"You are far more beautiful than the actress that portrays you. And I had the honor of meeting her once at a book signing."

Sadie smiled warmly. "Thank you. I think."

"Would you mind autographing this?" He grimaced slightly as he held out a brightly colored comic book.

On the cover was a rather large autograph, made with a silver marker. It read the Shadow. "You realize my name isn't the Shadow, right?"

He nodded. "My little sister was here earlier."

"Ahh." Sadie sighed, "Of course she was."

Pulling a white marker from her bag, she signed the word Shade in small letters, then drew a small white rose under it.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Sure thing." She nodded.

A to-go cup appeared in her vision.

Following the arm with her eyes, she found the young corporal smiling kindly at her. "I knew it wouldn't take long before people put two and two together, like I did." He moved the cup, trying to draw her attention to it. "You and the colonel might think I am crazy, but you were beyond famous in my day. And with everything that's happened, they need a hero that gives them a sense of hope. Hell, we all need it." Wiggling the cup again, he added, "it's a cappuccino by the way."

Taking the cup, she took a sip of the hot liquid. It had never occurred to her that someone might consider her a hero. That wasn't really a word that people associated with her. But this unknown world was far harsher and unforgiving. These people didn't have the false sense of safety that technology usually brought with it. In reality, this world was far more suited to Shade. Perhaps the young man was right, maybe now was her time to shine.

The elf suddenly burst out laughing, spewing coffee in a fine mist in front of her. Shaking her head, she looked to the startled corporal. "Yeah, kid. I am no one's hero. The sooner you accept that, the happier we will all be. This place is fucked up," She waved her hand towards the city outside the front door of the coffeehouse. "For all of us! You can either move forward or die. It's your choice. Don't wait for some fantasy superhero to save you. Because you'll be waiting forever."

As she strolled to the door, she knew every eye in the place was watching her leave. Most likely because of the scene she had just made. Least she could hope.

Looking up at the twenty-three-story condominium in the distance, she continued to chuckle as she made her way to her date. She couldn't wait to share the story with Wil over wine, and if she was lucky, breakfast.