



Shades of War

Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

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No matter where you find life, you will find others that have died to support that life. The largest trees in the forest killed hundreds of weaker trees to survive. Such is the way of life. Yet every once in a while, we as advanced beings, make the choice to preserve weaker life when we can. And THAT is what makes us superior.

-Leon Hamilton

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Sadie Feelari, a tall, elegant elf, stood with her hands clasped behind her back facing the floor to ceiling window. Staring out over the city lights far below. The lights twinkled, creating a beautiful sea of movement sprawled out before her. It ended at the dark shores of the ocean in the distance. Her long hair hung down her back unbound, wrapping her in a cloak of pure white. Smiling, she sighed.

"Add the minor moon, waning, just over the horizon." She stated, her voice carrying in the large office.

A soft blue moon appeared just over the horizon and her smile widened.

"Perfect. Save and add to favorites." She called as she turned away from the enormous wall. There was a soft chime as the image flickered, then settled into place as a moving background image.

The desk was also perfect, an almost exact duplicate of the desk that had been in her office on the top floor of the Shadowband Solutions Arcology needle. The plush black carpets, dark blueish-grey walls and chrome trim were throughout the office, and the facility. Except, of course, in the apartments of her current partners.

The look gave the office a dark, but powerful feel. There were two overstuffed, black, leather chairs in front of her desk, but she knew good and well that this office would never see guests. This was the new Shadowband Solutions R&D facility. Situated a quarter of a mile below the surface of the ocean. In a potentially hostile country. So, secrecy was the name of the game this time. Unlike the Shadowband solutions of old which stood tall and proud no matter where the offices were. Either planet side or on the various proprietary space-stations, found in the four dozen solar systems that were home to the mega-corp.

Waving her hand from left to right across the room, a dozen holographic whiteboards appeared. Six of them had the designs and math for the new ship design. That she hadn't finished yet. She still need to fly the Lion's Shade as a test before she could complete the math. No amount of simulations were a suitable replacement for

experience. She was ready to sail, but Jane was still working on her current project. A disturbing duplicate of the Polaris rings, but on a much smaller scale.

Reversing the wave of her hand, the boards vanished. Collecting up the book resting on the desk, she left the office.

As she wound her way through the massive facility, she smiled. It had once been an Imperial Storage Depot, and secret base for spying on the Republic owned world of Taius. But when the three of them had found it at the bottom of the ocean, it was more of a sealed tomb of historical artifacts than anything else. Most which, she had recycled to build her new Shadowband Solutions R&D facility. A facility that had built in security through obscurity, for now. The descendants of the secret Imperial base, that were on land, far above them, had no ability to handle the water pressure at this depth. Thusly ensuring that the base would remain hidden until their technology sufficiently advanced to handle exploring the bottom of the ocean.

Using the recycled materials, and a Ruby Aide Society printer that they had found in the attached Ruby Storage Depot. Sadie had built a place that felt more familiar to her. She'd been sure to include whatever the team would need for research, though she doubted that either of her teammates would even use it. The facility had a full alchemy lab, a full gun range, and four different engineering labs. The last of which, was a large empty room, for the wizard to fill as she saw fit.

The other three engineering labs were for her and Zerrick. One had several tables and mounts designed to work with large, heavy pieces of armor and mecha. Another was the engine and ship-part manufacturing lab. While the third was for weapons design. She had already stocked with several racks of Republic and Imperial weapons that they found stored in the facility, before they took it over.

Along with the R&D, she'd made the three of them full sized apartments. Being sure to put plenty of self-maintained plants in Zerrick's apartment so that he would feel more at home. Janes apartment, however, Sadie had moved the woman's magical yurt into. Most technology didn't work around the wizard, anyway. So building her a high-tech apartment was a waste of resources. Giving her a space to keep her portable wizard's tower seemed practical. She didn't expect the woman to stay anyway once the gate was up and working.

Walking out into the massive lobby, she grinned. The building didn't have a front door per se, so the lobby was more of a common area. It had a full bar, a large table for the team to dine or collaborate. A half of a dozen sectional couches and about a dozen single overstuffed chairs. She had also filled the room with plants and at one end, there was an enormous greenhouse. Sadie had prepped it for whatever her two companions

wanted to grow. She had even been careful to build it large enough to handle the banana trees for Slappy.

The large shirtless waste-lander stood in the middle of the room with a large bucket next to him. In it were a dozen large space-steal spears. He was tossing them at a wall where he had drawn several pictures of abnormally large cockroaches and other heavily mutated creatures.

As the steel spear embedded into the wall a good foot, Sadie cringed. She'd need to reinforce that wall if that was going to be the man's new pastime.

"Still nothing?" She asked the irritated barbarian.

His people didn't like being indoors, let alone on the bottom of the ocean. They liked wide open spaces. And she couldn't help but wonder if he was dealing with claustrophobia, or just cabin fever. They'd been down here almost two months now. And even she was ready to get back up top and get moving.

The Lion's Shade was deep sea anchored above them, and they had been going back and forth to the ship as she printed the parts here, then took them up to the ship to install. But it wasn't the same.

As she watched him toss another spear into the wall, she couldn't help wondering what kept him here with her and the wizard. The only thing that came up with was that somewhere, before Sadie had come into the picture, the waste-lander had bonded with Jane. Either physically or just emotionally and now considered her family. Neither of them seemed to be sexually interested in the other, but they were close, nonetheless.

"Nope." He grumbled. "I haven't even seen her for two weeks." He added, sighing. For a large barbarian type, he had an unsettling lack of temper. It was one of the many things, regarding this man, that concerned Sadie.

She'd known a lot of soldiers in her long lifetime. A few of them had been like the waste-lander. Utterly calm, all the time, no matter what. But when they blew... well, the body count was always disturbing, even for her.

"I'm pretty sure she is still working on the ring."

He shrugged and turned to face her. He was shirtless again, but at least now he usually wore pants and shoes. His overly muscled chest rippled in the light and she couldn't help but smirk. In her day, the only way to get a body like that was with drugs. But there was no drug like that in this world, which meant he was just a mutant. Like most of his tribe.

"Can you even find a door to the thing?" He asked, his shoulder sagging.

Her smirk widened as she realized he was growing annoyed. "No, but then she is an arch-wizard. She's going to do what she is going to do."

"But how are we supposed to use it? Or get anything through it if there is no door?" He folded his arms across his chest. "Wasn't that the whole point of this place?"

Sadie found a comfortable chair and half fell, half sat into it. Propping her feet up on a nearby low table, she resisted the urge to laugh at the man. "Relax, Zerrick. I am sure it's just a security thing." She shrugged, she had no idea what the woman was doing, but then she wasn't an arch-wizard. Honestly, she believed the woman might pull this off, but she was having trouble fathoming it.

"You want security, let's move the whole thing to the tribe. They will secure it."

Sadie snorted quietly; she couldn't help herself. "I am not even going to start with the long list of things that are wrong with that idea."

He spun, snatching up a spear, and threw it a little too hard at the wall. It buried itself a good three feet into the plascrete wall, and Sadie felt a slight sense of panic.

"I am very glad I adjusted your designs and had the manufacturing bots reinforce that wall." A metallic sounding voice floated up behind her, as a mechanical arm reached into view with a glass of Cognac. "Would you like lunch as well?"

"Yes T4, thank you. And seriously, thank you." She pointed to the wall that just sprouted another spear.

"You are quite welcome. And as for the wall, that was for me as much as it was for you. He's been getting more and more agitated over the last few weeks." The bot's voice dropped several decibels as it attempted to whisper.

She nodded and looked down to the book in her lap. The cover was dark grey leather with scorch marks across it. It looked like something Sadie might find in a burned-out house, which she knew was the point.

The gold inlaid title read, *Shades of War*. She couldn't help but wonder how he wrote this one. She'd been rather tight-lipped about that event in her life, but Leon knew the other person who had been there. If he got the woman to talk, after they incarcerated Shade, he might have been able to piece together more of the story. If he wrote it true to the actual events, though... well, she certainly would not be the heroine. Flipping the cover open in her lap, she read the forward.



Survival. For any culture, society, race... nay, for any living thing, the key is survival. And for any living thing to survive, it must compete. Compete for resources. Even trees in the forest compete for sunlight and water. The living thing that sits on the wayside and does not fight for resources, has only one path available to it, death.

Among your typical advanced species, such as those that develop technology. The competition for resources can inevitably destroy those very resources. That too is a part of the competition, after all, if I can't have them, then neither shall you. And that competition can scale up to encompass entire solar systems or scale down to a single room that you had to share with your sibling. If you have siblings, I am sure in your life you've broken or hidden a toy, just so they didn't have it either.

A familiar argument against competition is that we, as advanced beings, can choose not to compete. And that argument is correct, you can choose to do nothing, to sit on the wayside and watch as other fight to get the best resources and survive. But we already know the path that choice brings. Death. For some, though, a brief life filled with peace and poverty is acceptable. And I commend them for that choice, I know I couldn't do it. But those are few, and far in between.

For the rest of us, life equals conflict. No matter where you find life, you will find others that have died to support it. The largest trees in the forest killed hundreds of weaker trees to survive. Such is the way. Yet occasionally, we as advanced beings make the choice to preserve a weaker life when we can. And THAT makes us superior.

A small fire leapt into existence on the tip of the elven finger, as she lit the end of a long, thin cigarette. Inhaling a deep breath in, she filled her lungs with the smoke and smiled. Blowing the smoke out gradually, her deep blue eyes looked skyward and followed the fire streaking by overhead. Sagging her shoulders, the woman glanced around at the burnt out husk of what had once been an elementary school. Pulling the cigarette from her mouth, she jogged along a blacked pole that balanced up against some rubble. She heard the missile now, and she knew the impact was imminent. The sound wave hit her first, as she dove headfirst and rolled behind the remaining section of the school's stairwell. As the dirt, dust and chunks of building rolled past her, she couldn't help but chuckle.

Taking another drag from her cigarette, she stood and tapped a button on her HUD. An older map overlaid her current GPS view, and she skimmed the bombed out wreckage around her.

The sounds of gunfire broke out again, and Shade's smile widened. Hopping back up onto the log, she danced cheerfully down the burnt telephone pole and hopped casually to the street. Turning towards the gunfire, she began strolling along. Further overhead two more missiles streaked through the sky, but she ignored them as the slowing sounds of gunfire continued ahead of her.

Pop, pop.

Pop.

Brrapp.

Pop, pop.

As explosions sounded in the distance, Shade stepped up to the corner of a partially standing brick building and pulled a small device from her pocket. Reaching up, she placed the device on the wall over her head and tapped an icon in her HUD. The small device came alive and crawled around the corner.

Pop, pop, pop.

Brraaapp.

Pop.

Brrraapp.

Scanning the firefight in her Heads Up, she leaned back against the wall and took several deep drags on her cig. Soldiers in uniform became highlighted as the device snapped through several frequencies to find even the ones hiding behind rubble.

Both units wore the same uniform, despite the obvious intent to kill each other. The ones hiding behind a severely damaged compound wall however had different digital IDs in her HUD. Marking them as royal guard and not the loyalists following General Geoffrey Hammerfell, who was wreaking havoc on what remained of the surrounding city in his attempt to conclude his military coup.

Twisting her chin toward each shoulder, Shade stretched her neck as she prepared to step around the corner. Pushing up off the wall, she rolled her shoulders and took one deep drag off the cig before flicking it off into the rubble nearby. Reaching across her body with both hands, she drew two large pistols from under her black trench coat and stepped around the wall.

With several long strides, she cleared the corner towards the backs of the soldiers nearest to her. Raising the weapons, she squeezed the triggers in smooth, rapid motions. The bullets streaked out from her, locking onto their targets with deadly precision. Each round exploding a skull in a spray of grey and red goo. One soldier

spun completely towards her, only to get a bullet directly between the eyes before he pulled his own trigger.

The soldiers that were hiding behind the remaining plascrete wall that encircled the heavily bombed out royal palace, called out, "who are you?"

Shade switched ammo in her pistols with a thought to her internal computer system. As she waited for the click that registered the change she replied loudly, "your savior of course!"

One head popped up over the wall to see her still striding towards them with intent.

The click triggered in her weapons, letting her know that the change was complete. Squeezing the triggers again, several bullets leapt free from the automatic pistols and flew towards the highlighted targets. They blew their way through the walls with ease as the anti-vehicular rounds shredded everything in their path. As the dust settled, one lone soldier that had been looking up over the wall stared at the tall white-haired elf as she stepped up to him.

"I surrender?" He raised both hands hesitantly.

"Aw. Isn't that sweet." She smiled warmly at him.

He relaxed slightly.

"To bad I don't care." Her pistols clicked again as they switched back to antipersonnel rounds.

The look of shock crossed his face briefly, just before she raised the gun and blew his brains all over the ground behind him.

Shade looked up at the wreckage of the compound and shook her head. "Joy." She grumbled. Taking a deep breath, she strolled across the grounds towards the inner rubble.

Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a larger drone with four propellers. Activating its boot sequence, she set it on a section of wall and ducked through a doorway.

"Good grief." She grumbled as he surveyed the wreckage, "the odds of me finding anything is here is absurdly low."

Choosing her way cautiously through the wreckage of the building, she brought up the overlay again and skimmed the basic layout. What she was looking for, thankfully hadn't been underground, but on the third floor.

"You couldn't wait another week to bomb the palace into smithereens, you prick?" She grumbled to no one in particular.

There was a soft chime in her heads up as the drone finally came online and lifted into the air.

"Search query?" It asked in a robotic tone. It was a smart unit, but not an artificially Intelligent one. She'd already learned her lesson and had no intentions of repeating that fiasco.

"Square or rectangular, sealed, and hopefully still powered." She said out loud. Though there was no need for speaking at all. Since her internal computer was piloting the drone.

A beam of light passed over the rubble, in a precise pattern, as Shade continued to climb toward the southeast corner of the building. Several times the rubble under her gave way, and she slipped back down, barely avoiding injury.

"I ever get my hands on Hammerfell and I am going to strangle him until his eyeballs pop out." She growled as she rode yet another avalanche of rubble to the bottom of the wreckage. "Damnit!"

Inhaling deeply, she began examining the area around her for another way up. As she scanned the wreckage, she noticed a door. Unlike all the other doors, this one was still upright, and apparently still in its door frame.

Considering the sheer number of bombs the royal compound had obviously absorbed, it seemed highly unlikely that there was a lone intact door. Tugging several pieces of rubble free, Shade made her way to the door. The bombing had been going on for a week now, so the odds of anything being alive were minimal, but she wasn't about to risk it. Withdrawing a pistol, she knocked on the door. When nothing happened, she tested the handle. It came open, but only barely. Yanking it back to clear the rubble, she found a single face looking up at her with wide brown eyes.

The girl had dried blood all over her face and clothes, but she seemed unharmed otherwise. Shade wasn't great with telling the age of human children, but this kid didn't look over six years old, if that. She pointed the weapon at the child as she skimmed the obvious bomb shelter. As far as bomb shelters went, this one was nice. It had a couple of chairs, a table, a cupboard and a large blood-soaked bed on the back wall. The table nearest the door had a lantern, a radio, and a dozen or more wrappings from meal rations. On the bed were two well-dressed bodies, also covered in blood.

Shades finger tightened on the trigger as the girl watched her, unmoving. She should put the child out of her misery, and she knew it.

Lowering her weapon, the elf shook her head slowly. "Get out of here kid." Gesturing over her shoulder with her head, Shade looked back up the wreckage of the royal palace and frowned.

A lack of movement drew her attention back to the child that was still watching her intently.

"Look, kid. Get out of here or I'll just shoot you like your parents." She waved her pistol towards the obvious dead couple on the bed.

But the child didn't move, she didn't even seem afraid.

"Do you even understand me?"

The child nodded.

"Are you stupid or something?"

The girl narrowed her eyes, clearly annoyed by the question.

"What's your name?" When the girl spoke, her voice was a weak. Like it had been a while since she said anything.

Shade's nostrils flared slightly as an eyebrow arched high on her forehead.

The child however still didn't move, maintaining her intense stare.

Holstering her weapon, Shade ignored the child and looked back up over the wreckage. A light flashed in her HUD, drawing her attention to the drone panel. It currently had a sealed and powered box highlighted high at the top of the rubble. It looked like her last avalanche had caused it to be uncovered enough that the sensors might finally pick it up clearly.

"Finally!" Now she just needed the contents, then she'd get the hell out of this war zone.

Three more missiles streaked by overhead as she leapt to a section of wall that she knew was stable. Aiming for her target, she planned her route and began hopping, and carefully balancing her way to the safe. Precariously balancing next to the box, she frowned as she looked it over. It was face down. She'd have to flip it over somehow.

"Of course." She grumbled and looked around, looking for something she to use as a lever. Pulling a two-by-four free of one of the bombed-out sections of wall, she turned to the safe and began planning the fall trajectory. As she looked the building over, she saw out of the corner of her vision, the stupid kid still watching her. No matter how this went, the kid was going to get crushed.

"Seriously kid, you need to get the fuck out of here." She shook her head.

"What is your name?" The child called up to her. Her voice, clearly working fine now.

Shade rolled her eyes and saw another missile streak by overhead. It was lower than the past few had been, which didn't bode well. It meant that the fighting was headed her way.

"If I tell you, will you get the hell out of here?"

The child didn't move.

"Fine, my name is Shade. Now get the fuck out of there or you're going to get crushed." The elf decided she no longer cared about the annoying kid and placed the board under the corner of the safe. Finding a section of rock to use as a fulcrum, she positioned it and jerked down on the board, which didn't budge. The safe was heavier than she expected. She adjusted her balance to get more of her mass on top of the board. With a quick jump, she applied most of her weight to the board and saw the safe lift enough that the rubble slid under it.

As the avalanche began, she felt herself losing her balance. Glancing out over the rubble, she tried to pick a safe route down. Her heart skipped a beat as she realized that the kid still hadn't moved.

"Fuck." She bitched, as she triggered her internal combat systems. The surrounding rubble slowed somewhat, as she leapt up over the safe and landed on a broken section of what appeared to be a desk. Using it as a surfboard, she leaned forward, trying to speed it up. As the makeshift board crashed into a section of wall, she pulled her knees to her chest and flipped forward, using gravity to pull her towards the ground. She landed next to the child, scooping her up she leapt forward through a broken doorway and twisted hard to put the small section of the doorway that was still standing between her and the avalanche of rubble.

Luckily the frame held as the safe and a mountain of rubble came crashing down around them Shade held her breath and wrapped her armored trench coat around the child. When the sound finally died down, she blinked and coughed, waving the dust away from in front of her face. She suddenly wanted to strangle the kid in her arms. Instead, she sighed. She wasn't about to kill a kid that she'd risked her life to save. Dumping the child roughly on the ground, she turned and began scanning the area for the safe.

The child made an oof sound as it hit the dirt and pushed itself upright.

Sure enough, the safe was only a few feet away, the door mostly clear, and facing the sky overhead. Well, at least something had gone right. Shade thought to herself, smiling. Picking her way carefully across the rubble to the metal box, she began pulling tools from her bag. As she crouched down next to it, she heard a voice next to her.

"That's my daddies safe."

Shade didn't even look towards the child. In the distance gunfire erupted, slowly growing closer.

"What's your point your highness?" Arranging the audio pickup on the safe, she began cracking it quickly. Time was running out.

"My name is Princess Ellena Fairchild Grevallin." The girl stated proudly, her chin held high.

"Mmhmm. Shh." Shade tried to ignore the child, focusing instead on the safe.

"Twenty-four, nine-teen, thirty-one, ninety-nine." The girl added in a softer voice.

Shade blinked at her several times as she looked at the twenty-four mark that her hand had stopped on. Arching an eyebrow, she tried the kid's code. When the safe popped open, she snorted.

"Um, thanks?" Wrinkling her brow, she frowned at the girl. "But you really shouldn't give out safe codes like that to strangers."

The girls shrugged and raised her palm to the rubble of what had once been her home. "I don't think it matters anymore."

Shade smirked and reached into the safe. Withdrawing several leather-bound stacks of papers with royal seals embalmed on them, she shoved them into her bag. She then rummaged through the rest of the loose papers, gold bars and money until she found a hard cylindrical device. Pulling it up into the slowly dimming daylight, her smirk grew into a full smile. "Bingo." She mumbled. Dropping the imperial seal into her bag as well, she glanced at the kid.

"Way to think small, kiddo." She cocked her head and winked. "But either way, thanks. See ya."

Carefully choosing her path through the rubble, she made her way to the street and looked towards the gunfire in the distance. She was sure now that she heard vehicles and possibly even a grav-tank. That would be the general's troops. Turning the opposite direction, she strolled down the road.

"Shade is a verb, not a name." The child spoke up behind her.

Stopping her in tracks, Shade spun and glared down at the kid. "No, giving shade to something is a verb. I am simply Shade. Which makes it a noun, and since it is a name, it's a proper noun. All of which is irrelevant. You need to get the fuck away from me. I am not a damn royal nanny." She spun and continued on her way.

Shade rolled her eyes as she heard the kid continue to follow her. They wound their way through the bombed-out buildings and torn-up streets, quietly. Behind them, the sun continued to sink below the horizon, lengthening the shadows as it went.

Gunfire erupted behind them as the troops encountered resistance. But once the tank fired, the shootout would end suddenly. This happened several times as they wound their way through the city. Shade knew they weren't following her, but instead, were clearing the streets. Likely in a standard sweep and clear pattern. Meaning that she needed to get to her ship before they did, because no matter how well she hid it, the grav-tank and its more advanced sensors would not miss it.

Yelling in front of her caused Shade to suddenly dropped low and scanned her surroundings for cover. Sliding into a building that was mostly standing, she moved to where she could see the next intersection through one of the empty windows. The blackened walls and floor looked more like fire damage than bombs, since there was still a ceiling overhead. And while it didn't smell that great, it gave cover in the waning sunlight.

The center of the intersection had a compact unit of about six soldiers standing over a rather large group of civilians on their knees. Of the two dozen civilians, there were only three or four adults. The rest were kids from about four-years old up to the low teens.

A small head peeked up next to her and the child looked to see what she was looking at.

"Are we going to help them?" She whispered.

"No."

"Why not?" The girl looked into Shade's eyes intently.

Looking away, the elf leaned back against the wall under the window, and sat, waiting for what she knew would come next. Tugging a cigarette out of her pack, she lit it and took a deep drag. "Because they are all dead."

"No, they aren't, I can see them." The girl pointed out the window, but Shade ignored her.

"Trust me, kid."

The sound of automatic gunfire ripped through the air, bouncing off the few remaining buildings, and echoing painfully into the burnt-out building where a young princess stared in shock. Tears welled up in her eyes as she sunk slowly to her knees, her hands over her face. Shade simply stared at the blacked wall silently as she continued to smoke her cigarette slowly. The sound continued, along with the screams of several young children, for several seconds. When the last of the echoes faded, the only sound left was the soft sobs of the girl next to her.

The sound of a ceramic plate on the glass end table next to her brought Sadie's attention up from the book. Taking a deep breath, she frowned. The story was annoyingly accurate so far.

"Your lunch, ma'am." The T4 unit said next to her. It backed up slightly and hovered there. Its holographic face looked from the book in her lap, then back up to her face. "May I ask a question?"

"Sure." Closing the book, she set it next to the plate and took a French-fried potato wedge.

"There is writing on that, and my scans suggest that the material is a tree-based paper product." One of his eight hands pointed to the book on the table.

Biting into the fry, she watched him, waiting for the actual question.

"But I am not entirely sure what the object is. What is it called?"

Grinning, Sadie looked around and saw that the waste-lander had apparently wandered off. Several small droids were repairing the walls and trying to wash off the cave painting style artwork.

"It's called a book. Apparently, it is how they originally stored information."

His holographic face frowned. "But my scanners indicate the book is from your time. It is not a historical artifact."

Snatching another fry, she contemplated how to reply. "Well, I suppose that depends on how you look at it. You and I are technically historical artifacts, as are the items we had in our day. Since our civilization rose and fell, we are, history. But to answer your question, even though you technically didn't pose one. My partner wrote this book, and he published each book as both digital and substantial, like this, for collectors who liked to have physical libraries."

"I see. I have several books in my storage. I suppose they would also be historical artifacts." The droid stated flatly, as he clearly seemed to consider the concept. "Thank you for the education."

"Anytime T4."

The droid turned and floated off back towards the Ruby Aide Society side of the facility.

Watching him go, Sadie turned her attention to the food and smiled. He'd brought her a hamburger with all the fixings. Her stomach growled as she stared at it. The book would wait, assuming she finished it at all.

As she ate, she found her mind attempting to recall the day she fought off the memory, but eventually she heard the sounds of gunfire around her. Shutting her eyes, she focused on the feel of the hamburger in her hands, and the taste of it in her mouth. Breathing deeply, she realized that the sounds of gunfire had shifted to a different make of weapons. And now she could also hear the familiar voices of long dead people calling to her.

Opening her eyes, she ignored them and took another bite of hamburger.

"Hey Sadie," The unfamiliar sound of Zerrick's voice snapped her attention, and her weapons, in his direction. He paused and looked down at the weapons, then up at her face. "Wow, that was fast. Cool! I need a break; I am going for a walk."

The utterly absurd comment snapped her completely out of her flashback, and she furrowed both brows deeply and cocked her head to the side slightly. "Um, Zerrick. We are under a quarter mile of water."

"And?"

Blinking several times, she realized she didn't have a retort that would really apply to the insane wastelander. Shrugging, she holstered her weapons as she finally replied, "give Slappy a high five for me."

"Will do." He strode from the room towards the airlock.

Eyeing the hamburger in her lap, she sighed. "Damn."

She cleaned it up by dumping the ingredients back on the plate and using the napkin to wipe up the red and white sauces. She'd need to change now.

She stood and walked off through the facility to her quarters.

After a long hot shower, and a change of clothes, she wandered barefoot out into her large living room. There, sitting on the dining room table, was the book. T4 likely thought it was being helpful by bringing it back to her.

Ambling across the room towards the large glass doors that lead out to the balcony. Sadie smiled. The blue moon had set, but the night sky had a slight orange tint to it as the larger orange moon, often called the tiger's eye, sat high overhead. The doors slid open slightly and a heavy breeze blew past. It was cool to the point of almost being cold.

It wasn't uncommon for underground, or off world facilities to mimic the surface of a planet. She knew she was able to switch the view to a beach scene with the waves

lapping towards her if she wanted, and she would even be able to smell the water and feel the ocean spray. She however opted for something more comforting. There were plenty of beaches above them.

Leaning out over the railing, she looked down over the massive complex below her. Her new partners didn't have the experience to fully comprehend the idea of a corporate arcology. At one point in time, Helena Cartwright, her name from before her arrest, had over three million people living in the Shadowband Solutions arcology on Taius alone. Despite being indentured, Helena always treated her corporate citizen well. The facility contained everything they would ever need to keep them healthy and happy.

Her largest expense was entertainment. She ensured they had everything and anything any of her people might want. Everything from amusement parks to brothels. Happy workers were better workers, and she did everything in her power to keep them happy. Security was the next largest expense, because if her people didn't feel safe, then their work would suffer.

Ironically, though, the next most expensive part of the arcology was the criminal syndicates. She had three operating within her facility, and all three reported directly to her. Though only the topmost majordomos knew that minor fact. Mostly they were petty thieves and hackers, but the higher-ranking members also did odd jobs for her criminal alias known as Shade. And she paid them well for it. Mostly, though, the syndicates existed to give her people the chance to rebel while inflicting minimal or no actual damage to the arcology. It gave them a sense of power. Like she used to tell Ella, if you don't give your people access to the front door, they will just sneak out the window.

Pushing away from the banister, she looked back into the book and focused on it. It lifted off the table and began floating towards her. She met the book at the large sliding glass doors and allowed it to settle into her hands. Tracing her fingertips across the golden inlaid words, she frowned.

"You knew too much my love." She whispered to the book.

She settled into a large lounge chair on the cool balcony and pulled a nearby blanket over her lap. No matter what time of year it was, this high up was always cool. So, she had always kept blankets draped on the chairs. Opening the book, she took a deep breath and flipped through the pages until she found herself closer to the end. She didn't care to remember the rest of the walk, thought the city, since it hadn't really gotten and better as they continued.

The trek through the rubble of the burnt-out city had seemed endless. The clusters of soldiers increased the closer she got to her ship. And while a group of soldiers wasn't really a problem for Shade, she now had an annoying tag along. Which meant that she needed to go around them, rather than through them. She had briefly considered knocking the kid unconscious and just leaving it, but no matter how hard she considered it, nothing ever seemed to come of it.

It was likely because a small part of her wondered if there would be some kind of reward for finding the young princess alive. But mostly she found the child baffling. The kid was extraordinarily stealthy and remarkably good at staying out of sight. Ever since the first shooting, she'd been smart enough to look away, just like the elf, when they came across similar groups. And she hadn't said a word. Not even one peep. She almost wondered if there was something wrong with her.

Evidently Shade had gotten caught up in her thoughts without realizing it. As she stepped around a corner, she literally ran into a soldier. The world slowed suddenly as her combat implants kicked on. A knife appeared in her hands as she spun him and buried it to the hilt in the man's throat, aiming downward into the chest cavity. There was a soft gurgling sound as she pulled the limp body back around the corner. She drug him a few feet until she managed to push him up through a broken window. The body fell with a soft thud inside the building. Crouching there for a brief second, she switched to the local comms circuit in her HUD.

She hadn't been listening on the military circuit, basically because she didn't want to hear what they were talking about, but now she had no choice. If he was a scout for a nearby unit, they would notice quickly that he was missing. Removing a pistol from its holster, she slid the scope off the rail and pointed it around the corner. A mirror wouldn't work in the dark, but her scopes all had night vision built in and tied directly to her HUD. In a small display in the upper left, she saw a full company slowly marching towards them. Behind the two-hundred soldiers was a large floating grav-tank. Its massive cannon slowly rotating back and forth as it scanned the area.

"Fuck." She mumbled.

Slipping the scope back on her weapon, she pursed her lips as she considered her options. A light tug on her coat drew her attention to the slightly shivering child next to her. The child that she'd briefly forgotten about.

A small arm pointed to their left as those large brown eyes stared up at her blankly.

Examining where the child signaled, she saw another platoon with a second grav-tank headed their way from the opposite direction.

"You have to be kidding me." Shade growled. Pulling the map overlay onto her HUD, she checked her current location against the map. She was less than two-hundred yards from the ship. But if these two tanks met at the intersection between them, they had two ways to turn. The likelihood of them turning the same direction was low, considering the sweep patterns they were running. Which meant she was too late. They would find the ship before she got to it.

Her fingers tightened around the knife in her hand. The kid had hampered her, slowing her down. Had she just shot the damn kid when she had the chance, she'd be gone already.

Spinning on the girl, her cold blue eyes met the soft brown ones that were still watching her intently. She felt her anger seep from her bones as she realized it wasn't the kid's fault. It had been her choice. Just like it was her choice now. Squatting down, she met the child at eye level.

"Do you trust me?" She whispered.

A single eyebrow rose on the dirty little face, and the girl shook her head slowly.

Shade chuckled and tousled the girl's dirty hair. "Smart kid. Alright, Plan B then." A small part of her admired the child's honesty as she reached up into her HUD and brought up a new panel. Tapping a red button, she watched as a percentage number counted upward. In her ship, several combat drones booted up and prepared for launch. She heard the footsteps behind them before the kid did. Snatching the girl with one arm, she leapt in the air. Grabbing the railing with the other, she swung herself upwards and quickly dove through a shattered window. As she rolled up to her feet, arms cradling the child. She noticed the girl staring up at her, with eyes wide and both hands clasped over her own mouth.

Snorting silently, Shade set the girl down and put one finger over her mouth.

Nodding, Ella crouched down and waited as the elf made her way to the window.

In her HUD, several dots turned green. Shade triggered the attack program. She designed the drones to use as a distraction as she lifted off. She didn't build them to take a beating, like they were about to, but shit happens. She just hoped they had enough ammunition.

Past the units below, she saw several fighters shimmer into view as the holo's triggered around the small drones. They raced towards the tanks and began firing. Each

drone carried a rather nasty republic round that packed a punch that was easily ten times its size. Shade however had made some modifications to the stolen design, and now the round looked like a missile that was in fact ten times the size of the actual round. So instead of being the highly compact incendiary round it was, it looked like a space-fighter missile. Honestly, she was fairly sure her modification was the only reason she was getting away with using them, without incurring the full wrath of the Republic Navy.

The world around the small building erupted in flames as the first rounds targeted the most dangerous machines and lit them up with a half a dozen minor explosions.

As the fighters screamed by overhead, Shade grimaced. Man, those speakers were loud. She felt the blast, and she paused briefly to admire her handy work. It didn't last long, though. Waving for the girl to follow her, she hopped out the window and began jogging up the fire escape to the roof. With a brief glance over the edge, she did a quick calculation and planned her next move. The distraction had worked. The tank closest to her crashed to the ground, and soldiers were pouring out of the smoking wreckage.

The soldiers were grouping up and running towards cover as they prepped for the next pass of the drones. In her HUD, she could see the green dots circling back around. She only had one point two minutes. Looking around, she saw the young girl climbing over the ledge onto the roof. For the first time since she'd met the kid, she seemed flustered.

"You trust me now?"

The frightened eyes stared at her as she nodded her head emphatically.

Jogging towards the child, she snatched her up under one arm and turned to run back towards the edge of the building at full speed. Yelling loudly, "never trust me, kid. It will get you killed." She leapt off the roof.

When the kid didn't scream, she shook her head in mild surprise. A pair of large black wings deployed from the back of the heavy trench-coat, and caught the air, jerking them upwards. The pair floated silently over the soldiers below just as the drones shrieked past overhead with a deafening roar.

Below, several more explosions triggered as the incendiary rounds slammed into their targets. The second volley had apparently cracked the containment on the grav-tanks power-plant. Allowing the highly volatile materials within to interact with the fire that was already inside the tank. The result was an explosion so large that it engulfed a good fifty-yard radius in all directions.

The fiery blast of air washed over the elf and child, ripping them apart violently. Shade lost her grip, and finally heard the girl scream as she fell. Reaching up, she jerked

the emergency release on the glider and folded her arms to her body as she dove after the girl.

Her arms wrapped around the child at about ten feet from the ground as her emergency contingency triggered. The short-range teleport bled off some energy, but not enough. As they crashed into the metal deck-plating inside of her ship, Shade had the wind knocked painfully from her lungs. Crumpling into an ungraceful heap, her body fell open as the last of the kinetic momentum bled off, and she tried in vain to fill her lungs with air.

In her HUD several red lights flashed medical warnings on the right, while the green lights continued their attacks. As one of the green lights vanished, she felt her mind override the pain with logic. She didn't have time to just lay here, no matter how much she hurt.

Rolling to her side, she pushed the small body off her. It fell limp to the deck and Shade rolled her eyes. If she'd done all that work to save the kid, only to have it die now, she was going to murder someone. She placed her hand on the girl's neck and felt a strong pulse. It was alive, just unconscious.

"Not bad, kid." She nodded in approval and quickly scooped the kid up to place it in one of the grav-chairs. Fastening the child into the chair and tightening the harness, she switched the chair to 1-g medical override, then jogged to the cockpit.

Overhead, the drones streaked by and spun to dive back towards the soldiers and the now three operational tanks. Several explosions rocked the building around her ship, knocking pieces loose to rattle harmlessly off the hull.

Flicking several switches, Shade reached up to wipe something off her forehead. Glancing down at her hand, she noticed the dark red blood and frowned. Ignoring it, she continued her launch sequence. As everything finally flashed to green, she fastened herself into her chair and brought two intelligent systems online.

"Weapons systems online." A female voice called happily into the cockpit. "What am I killing today ma'am?"

"Everything."

"Understood."

"Defense systems online." A male voice added to the conversation. "Ma'am I believe we are currently under attack."

"You think?"

"Occasionally, yes." He replied sarcastically.

Pressing the throttle forward slowly, she heard the screeching sounds of the building restraining the ship.

"Fuck." She snapped. Stretching to the right, she flipped a switch from red to green. "Ready in three, two, one."

The ship began firing space grade weapon systems into the building as she rotated the stick, slowly spinning the vessel. Around her, for a good hundred yards, she had leveled the buildings into dust and fine rubble with the space lasers. As the ship finally broke loose of its hiding place, several drones screeched back towards her. Settling in around her, they formed a spherical pattern and began acting as point defense systems. They began firing, shooting any larger caliber rounds out of the sky as she slowly increased in altitude. When she was finally clear of the city, she rotated the nose upward and accelerated rapidly as the drones remounted themselves into their harnesses on the outer hull.

As she broke free into low orbit, the first wave of dizziness struck. In her HUD, warning lights flashed violently, alerting her to dangerous levels of blood loss. Turning off the weapon and defense systems, she fought hard against the blurred vision. Focusing everything she had, she flipped the last switch and waited as the emergency pilot came online.

"Ma'am I am detecting a medical emergency. Requesting permission to return to base for assistance."

"Permission granted..." She tried to get the words out as the world around her went black.

She woke up to a rapidly moving ceiling and several faces looking down at her. The male elf closest to her smiled down at her warmly.

"Don't worry ma'am, it's minor. You'll be fine. Rest." His calm voice allowed her to relax slightly. As she closed her eyes, a human female replied.

"Why would you tell her that? This is not minor."

Menefelle chuckled, "relax. For her, this is minor. Trust me. She has survived far, far worse."

Grasping her hand towards the elf, she felt him take it. Forcing her eyes back open, she locked her gaze with his. "The kid?"

"She is fine. They took her for a bath and some ice cream."

A wash of relief passed over her. And she knew at that very moment that she was doomed. She cared for the damn thing.

Great, now I'm stuck with it, she thought as her vision turned black.

The End

Closing the book, Sadie rested her hands on the back cover and smiled gently. Breathing deeply, she allowed her mind to travel back in time, searching for a specific moment. As her elven memories slid to a stop, she opened her eyes and could see herself sitting in the same spot as a ten-year-old Ella walked out onto the balcony. She marched to the railing and leaned her elbows on the banister.

She was wearing jeans, a button up silk blouse and a loose-fitting sweater rolled up at the cuffs, so it fit her. It was dusk, and the sun had just settled below the horizon in the distance. But the sky was still bright enough to see the city laid out below them clearly.

"How was school?" Helena Cartwright, the CEO of Shadowband Solutions, asked the girl.

The child said nothing for several long moments, which caused the white-haired elf to raise a single eyebrow in curiosity. Ever since returning to the arcology that fateful day, the kid hadn't shut up. She was always asking questions and absorbing everything around her like a sponge. And in all that time, the day they met had never once come up. That had been a little over three years ago.

The girl turned, leaning her back and elbows on the banister as she locked those deep brown eyes onto Shades sparkling blue ones.

"Why?"

Helena took a deep breath in, letting it out slowly. She was pretty sure she knew what the girl meant, but she would not let her off that easily.

"Why what?" She picked up a glass of light brown liquid and took a sip of her favorite cognac.

The girl glanced to the side as she considered the question.

"Why did you let them die?"

The elf's mouth opened slightly as her chest tightened. Even through the memory vision, other memories threatened to surge forward, but she pushed them deep down and out of the way and focused on the moment in front of her.

Taking another deep breath, she looked down at the drink, then stood. She doubted Ella would like her response, and with the last four years of combat training, she didn't want to be sitting in case the kid lost her temper.

"Operational risk management." She replied dryly as she took another sip and moved to stand near the child at the railing.

"Bull shit." The girl snapped.

Helena chuckled, "no. Fact." Turning towards the girl, she leaned one elbow on the railing and looked deep into her eyes. "Let's say I killed the soldiers. What would come next?"

"You let them go." The girl rose an eyebrow. These lessons in 'what comes next', had become commonplace, as Shade attempted to force the princess to learn how to critically think her way through problems.

Helena nodded. "Okay, they run, they get what? Three hundred yards, maybe? They catch them again, and they get shot anyway. They are dead."

The girl glared at her angrily, but Shade knew it was because the elf was right. Looking out over the city, Ella bit the inside of her cheek. "They could have come with us." Her voice was soft, which meant she already knew the answer.

"Could they?" Shade asked.

The girl was quiet for several minutes and the elf could see tears welling up in her eyes. "No." She finally stated firmly. "We would not have made it very far before we were all caught. We'd be dead along with them."

The elf nodded her head slowly. Honestly, she had expected this conversation a long time ago. She probably should have forced it, but she allowed the kid to get there on her own.

A single tear fell down the tightly clenched jaw, as the girl coped with the reality of moment that had happened so long ago.

Helena reached up to place a hand on her adopted daughter's back. "Life is filled with painful lessons. For people like us, too many of those lessons are written in someone else's blood. We have to learn to balance death with life." She tried to be comforting, but she knew there was nothing she could say that would be able to rationalize the random slaughter, like General Hammerfell had been responsible for

during his attempt to take the Imperial throne of Dathea, a small country in the western hemisphere of Taius.

The coup had inevitably failed. But only because Shade had recovered the royal seal, several legal documents, and oddly the heir. The Republic Federated Commonwealth had allowed her to maintain custody of the child until they were able to return her to the throne. Until then, the seneschal ran the country as regent. He worked side by side with Helena and the Republic to fight their way through the planetary court system so they might place the child back on the throne.

The memory faded as the girl turned to her and began crying in her arms.

Sadie blinked several times and realized that she had stood up, like in her memory, and was standing near the railing. A weak smile crept into her face as she stood there for several minutes reflecting on the events that followed.

The girl had finally taken back her throne at sixteen, only to turn around in the next year and sign the treaty with the Republic Federated Commonwealth, along with the others on the Taius governing council. Which included two-hundred and thirty-four other government heads of state. Adding Taius System to the Republic. A move which inevitably made Representative Ellena Fairchild Grevalen the youngest republic councilwoman in history to hold a seat.

Fifteen years later, she became the youngest president of Taius, and thirty years after that, they swore her in as the president of the Republic Federated Commonwealth. The first ever, Taius representative, to claim the presidency.

After turning sixteen, though, Helena Cartwright only saw the child twice more. Whenever she needed something from Shadowband Solutions, which was often. Helena would send Jonar Dorithan to do the business, only agreeing to have brief chats via text or recorded calls when necessary.

When they arrested Shade several decades later, Ella hadn't even come to the trial. She sighed as she realized there had been another person in her life that she hadn't been able to say goodbye to.

Making her way back into her apartment, she poured herself a drink. Setting the book onto the empty bookshelf in her secure quarters, she smiled weakly. That was where that story needed to stay. Out of the reach of others.