



Three Shades of Summer

Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

“ *Shade is and was, a real person. She will eventually be released again on this world and this universe, and while I may not be there to see it. I can only image the havoc she will wreak in her wake. I do embellish her stories a little, artistic liberty after all, but I will tell you this, in every single story there is the honest truth hidden among the pages.* ”

-Leon Hamilton

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Fauchun 18th, 26551

Legal councilwoman Sadie Feelari, aka the CEO Helena Cartwright, aka the master burglar known as Shade, nodded her thanks to the barmaid as she set down the warm mead in front of her. It smelled of warm honey and an expertly arranged palate of spices. It was the number two reason, the beautiful white-haired elf frequented this establishment.

Par usual, she had come a little earlier than the typical clientele, so that she could have the small table under the stairs to herself. In reality, the table had a horrible view of the room, let alone the door, but it was quiet. And no matter how unruly the bar got; the stairs gave a certain level of protection from the rowdy crowd.

The Honeyed Rat was rather large, and poorly situated pub, in a little-known area of the capital city of Bugrasi. If you didn't know it was here, it was difficult to find and almost rarely had non-local guests. Yet, despite its hole-in-the-wall location, the Honeyed Rat packed in the customers, wall to wall, every single evening.

Like most places in the capital city of Bugrasi, the Honeyed Rat had no power, plumbing or air circulation. Its patrons did not know of germs, which meant that it and they reeked to high heaven of body odors, rotten food and sex. Yet despite the horrendous smell and semi-lethal food, Sadie liked it here. There was no place in this new, apocalyptic version of Taius, that she felt at home per se, but at least this place was something she understood.

It didn't hurt that the mead was spectacular, and the ability to garner city wide knowledge was unsurpassed. Even the various guild halls sprinkled throughout the city used the Honeyed Rat to gather local intelligence. This was mostly because of the clientele which comprised the staff of the wealthy. Be they merchant houses or noble houses, the clientele here knew all the dirty little secrets of the world. Making this hole in the wall pub, literally the pulse of the free world.

So, despite its tendency to need repairs by morning, and its odor, the Honeyed Rat was Sadie's favorite place in this unknown world. At least so far, anyway. She'd only been out of prison for just over a month, which meant that she knew little to nothing of the world and its inhabitants. What little she knew; she was learning here. Taking a sip

of the amazing, mulled honey wine, or mead as the humans called it these days, she caught the attention of her favorite server.

The cleanest of the five barmaids in the tavern winked at her and nodded.

“Whatcha need luv?” The smile clearly hoped for something more than something as simple as a candle.

“Could I get a lantern or candle?” The elf set a leather-bound book on the table. The title embossed on the cover was Three Shades of Summer.

The serving woman pouted but scurried off to find something for her best paying patron.

When Sadie had first come to the Honeyed Rat, she and the owner had a falling out. Because of her clothing, and her propensity to be clean, she could understand the mistaken identity, but after convincing him she was no noble, he had allowed her to stay. They banned nobles from the tavern because of past events, in which a prominent noble died during one of the many brawls. It was probably for the best, since the patrons felt far more relaxed and able to blow off steam after a hard day serving their pampered employers.

Of course it took telling him she was, in fact, an ex-convict, that was simply trying to find a safe place to drink where they wouldn't judge her for her past, or enticed into recidivism. That, and the silver she'd paid for the entire bar to have drinks on her for an hour, had done the trick. After several bar brawls where she held her own, they decided she was indeed one of them. Or at the very least, that she wasn't a threat. Now she came here at least three or four times a week to enjoy a drink, good gossip, and some untethered company.

A candle with a small silver mirror behind the tiny flame appeared on the table, and the elf smiled warmly up at the woman.

“Thank you, Angel.” Shade called Angelica by the nickname that she'd given her on their first night together.

The woman winked knowingly and shuffled off to deal with a shouting patron from across the bar.

Taking a deep breath and another sip of mead, Shade pulled back the leather cover to read the foreword written by her deceased partner.



Reality is a finicky thing, mostly because it is 100% dictated by the observer. I am often chastised about these stories that I share with my many readers. The claims are such things as “you shouldn’t embellish your stories beyond believability.” Or, “Your utterly fictitious character of Shade is ridiculous, make her more relate-able for your readers.” Yet my books sell in the tens of billions every time. Shade’s renown existed long before I began these stories. The entire Tharward arm of the galaxy watched her trial with bated breath. So, even if I embellish a little, my readers seem perfectly happy with that. Hence, I will let the numbers speak for themselves.

Now, for you, my beloved readers. Here is the truth... Shade is, and was, a proper elf. They will eventually release her again into this galaxy, and while I may not be there to see it. I can only image the havoc she will wreak in her wake.

I embellish her stories a little, artistic liberty and all, but I will tell you this, in every story there is truth hidden within the pages. Each story I have written to date was an actual event that was not only told to me by the Shade herself, but corroborated by research and interviews of the people who called her friend, and even the occasional enemy. She never told me the entire story, and I never asked her to. But these are the stories of her life. I bring them to you because I don’t want her forgotten. She did not receive a proportionate punishment for her transgressions on the world. And I, for one, will love her always, no matter what happens.

A final note to my readers, this will be my final chronicle of Shade. I felt it only fitting that I end at the beginning. That first fateful day that I saw the exquisite creature, known as Shade.

A warm breeze drifted over the soft crystal blue surf. The surf was licking softly at the pillars of the small dock. The sound was tranquil, except for the occasional break in the water’s surface tension, as easily a dozen sea creatures fought for the food being casually tossed into the water.

Sploosh. The frenzy began, as the ten to twelve reef sharks fought each other for the uncooked ground beef. As the food vanished, the creatures slowed and lazily circled under the dock, waiting for another. The tall graceful elven creature with pure white hair and golden, sun-kissed skin only barely covered, in a jet black bikini, tore another piece of meat from the ball in her hand and tossed it in the water. She’d been doing this every morning for a week now. She loved the frenzy of it. The hysterical grab for food at any cost always made her smile.

Some called her sadistic, but the reality of it was that she was simply a fan of nature. Nature always won out, no matter how advanced the species became. If you caressed the strings on the harp of life well enough, you could trigger the natural beast inside of anything.

Tossing the last piece into the water, she strolled past her small bungalow towards the beach at the other end of the dock. Once there, she rinsed her hands in the surf and turned towards the closest beach-front bar. She couldn't help but wonder if this was the type of place she would go, if she ever took an actual vacation.

Skimming the crowd carefully as she approached, the relaxed nature of the lounging resort guests amazed her. Easily eighty plus people, in various states of dress, lounged on chairs and blankets across the pure white sands in front of her. Several children splash in the water near their parents, playing various games, and pelting each other with floats of various types. One young boy was running through the sunning patrons with a massive water-gun that was easily as long as he was tall.

He noticed the beautiful white-haired elf and b-lined straight for her. She smirked and paused as she waited for him to approach. He didn't slow as he began pulling the trigger to douse her. With a deft spin that belied the grace of a dancer, she sidestepped the stream of water and closed with the young man. Her hand swung out blindingly fast and snatched the barrel of the gun. Lifting it up and out of his grasp, she spun it with expertise that hinted at far more than a simple prankster and doused the boy point blank in the face. He sputtered and reeled backwards so hard that he tripped and landed roughly on his ass in the sand.

The resounding applause from the fifty or more patrons that the boy had been terrorizing all morning was almost deafening.

The charming elf chuckled and swung open the cartridge that held the water, allowing it to drain completely. Kneeling down in front of him, she smiled kindly.

"I told you Bernard, you won't catch me by surprise. But nice try. Next time don't run directly at me, try coming in from the side." Tousling his hair, she set the weapon in his lap and stood to continue towards the bar.

"Good morning, Miss Helena." The heavily accented bartender smiled so brightly that she could see all of his teeth. "Your usual?"

"Yes, please Gadanu." She replied and turned to lean against the bar and continue examining the crowd. So far, she hadn't found what she was looking for, but she had a better feeling about today.

"That was impressive." A deep masculine voice spoke up at the end of the bar.

She turned to see a man in jeans, a button-up shirt, tie, and a sport-coat. Next to him was a small suitcase. He was clearly new to the resort. His dark hair was shoulder length, and those dark brown eyes watched her casually with interest. Yet there wasn't the usual hint of lust, and his eyes didn't travel. They remained locked on hers. He raised his glass to her but didn't move from his seat.

A slow smile crept across her face. He was clearly a brainiac, but wealthy. The luggage alone told her everything she needed to know. It was a brand name that only made heavily hardened luggage. Rosfell Luggage Inc often touted that their luggage was impregnable by the typical damage and hacker interference. Traveler's commonly used them for intergalactic travel. To top it off the tell, Rosfell was utterly out of the price range of anyone who made less than seven figures. Bingo, she thought.

The sound of a glass being set on the wooden bar top drew her attention. She spun and artfully scooped up her drink as she sauntered down to the overly dressed gentleman.

"You just arrive?"

The knowing smirk on his face almost made her laugh. Her usual routine would not work here, she could already tell. She slid into the seat next to him and glanced down at his plate of food. Steamed, Fallerfish, and vegetables. Not really what she expected to see him eating. He struck her as more of a hamburger and fries' kind of guy.

"Steamed fish doesn't fit." She gestured with her drink before taking a long drink of it.

His nose crinkled slightly as he picked at the food with his fork. "Yeah, it's not bad, but I am not really a fish person."

Shade smirked, "I know a great hamburger joint in town. Totally hole in the wall kind of place with the best and greasiest burgers I've ever had." Leaning into him, she bumped her shoulder into his. "How about you let me buy you lunch?"

He looked up from his food and met her piercing blue eyes. Finally, his gaze traveled down her body and back up to settle on her face again. As he did, she could almost feel the burn in that gaze. He was definitely interested. But would he take the bait?

"I'd rather not." He stated firmly.

"Ouch." She shook her head. "If you're sure?" She shrugged and downed her drink. "Have a good day, Mr.?"

He locked eyes with her and said nothing.

Shade smirked and nodded her head in understanding. Turning, she jogged off down the beach away from her bungalow.

Every morning since she'd arrived she'd gone, gotten orange juice and then gone jogging in the beautiful surf. It was her alone time. Once she got away from the throngs of people at the resort, the stretch of beach went on for miles with little to no people at all.

Hammerfell island was one of the many islands in the Dragonspine Island Chain. Named so, because the larger islands were visible from low orbit, and wound in a long s pattern that looked kind of like a dragon had fallen asleep on the ocean floor. Assuming you are the type of person who believed in dragons, anyway.

This wasn't one of the large islands, in fact it was small enough that a single person owned the entire thing, which he then turned into a resort. In of itself, owning the entire island wasn't all that unique, at least not among the smaller islands. But this island was owned by a General Geoffrey Hammerfell. Once, just under five decades ago, the general had been a powerful dictator that had claimed the country of Dathea. But when ousted, by the rightful ruler, with the assistance of the planetary council, he retired to his own private island and opened a resort that quickly grew famous throughout the solar system and the surrounding systems.

To jog the entire Hammerfell island would take all day, Helena only ran about five miles each morning. About two and a half out, then back. She used the time to empty her mind, focusing instead on the sounds and smells of the ocean and the sand beneath her feet.

She loved the ocean, there was just something about it. No matter how bad things got, the ocean was always there. Treating her exactly the same as it did anyone else, no matter their race, sex or creed. The ocean didn't care. And the ocean would be here long after her life ceased to exist. It was the perfect example of the true nature of reality.

No matter who or what you were, you were nothing in the grand scheme of the universe. Even planets and suns came and went in the blink of a cosmic eye. The life of an intelligent biped, such as herself, was nothing more than a grain of sand beneath her feet as she ran.

As she made her way back to her rented bungalow, to swim, then shower off the sweat, she was so focused that she didn't seem to notice the man sitting in the chair on her patio. She dove into the water. As she broke the surface, she pushed her hair back out of her face and looked up at him.

"You realize there are reef sharks in there, right?"

Looking down at her was the dark-haired man from the beachfront bar. Yet now he was only wearing the button-up shirt and jeans. He had undone the top two buttons, and she could see some wisps of dark brown hair on his chest.

“Your point?” A shark swam slowly across in front of her, and she reached out a hand to run her fingertips along its dorsal fin.

“Wow. Okay, I take back my earlier statement. That’s impressive!” he exclaimed and shook his head slowly in disbelief.

“Not really, we have an understanding. They know my smell, I have already informed them in language that they can clearly understand, that I am not food.”

Their eyes locked as she continued to tread water. They stared at each other for several moments before she finally broke the silence. “What are you doing here? This is a private dock.”

“I came to take you up on your offer. Assuming you don’t mind me dropping my stuff off in your bungalow, so I don’t have to lug it all over town.” Jerking his thumb towards her door, he smirked.

She laughed and rolled her eyes. “What makes you think that offer still stands?”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Unlock room two-oh-seven!” she called out loudly and a soft chime came from the panel next to her door.

“Vetiste by the way.”

“What?” One shark got too close, and she quickly rapped it in the gills, causing it to dart away and keep its distance.

“My name, it’s Leon Vetiste. Mind if I change out of these disgusting travel clothes?” Pinching his shirt, he pulled it away from his chest and scrunched up his face as if he’d just smelled something rancid.

Waving the back of her hand towards him, she turned and swam away from the dock.



Back in the Honeyed Rat, the sudden shouting drew Sadie’s attention away from her book.

“How dare you speak of my lord in that manner!” the clearly inebriated man spat at another man, in what appeared to be a chain-mail shirt, that was a few sizes too big for him.

“It’s not my fault that your lord is a moron!” the second, somewhat younger man spat back.

“Them’s fightin words!” the first man leapt up from where they sat at a large, heavy wooden table. The stool he was sitting on spilled backwards and tripped him, causing him to tumble backward with it.

“Not in here they are not!” A deep voice bellowed loudly from the bar to Sadie’s right. “Everyones got tha right to their opinion in here. If yer gonna fight, take it outside!”

The elf shook her head and took a deep breath. An action she immediately regretted. Resting her hand on the book in front of her, she took a long draft from her mead and held the cup up so that the bartender could see that it was empty.

Many horrible things had happened to this elf in her long lifetime. But spending five elven lifetimes in prison had taken the booby prize. There was no proper way to describe waking up in the stone ages, especially when you’re used to intergalactic travel and printed food. As if it could have gotten worse, Sadie’s planet hadn’t bombed itself into the stone ages just the once. Of course not! It hadn’t even done it twice. No! These nut jobs did it four damn times! Talk about post holocaust.

Shaking her head sadly, she looked up and nodded her thanks to the massive half orcish, half human owner of the Honeyed Rat.

He narrowed his eyes and set a clean mug of mead down in front of her so roughly that some of it sloshed over the rim to spill down onto the table.

She simply smirked, refusing to take his bait. He’d been looking for a fight with her for days, and she wasn’t entirely sure why. But she wasn’t willing to risk her favorite mead over some imagined slight. Instead, she took a sip of her now sticky mug and returned to her book. Skipping forward several pages until she found what she was looking for. The dinner that happened two days later.



“You know, for a guest of the resort, you know an awful lot about the island.”

Leon tossed his napkin in the center of his plate and leaned back in his chair. The plate wasn't even there long enough for her to finish chewing before she answered.

“I've been here for over a week now.” She shrugged as she placed another piece of amazingly moist chicken in her mouth. “I love to explore, no matter where I am. And this place is so cute. There are so many tiny little gems hidden all throughout the island.”

“I bet there are.” He took a sip of amber scotch and watched her as she finished eating.

“I never really asked why you were here? You don't really seem like the vacation type. You strike me as a work-a-holic.” She teased. They'd talked about a lot in the last two days exploring the island together, but none of it had been substantive.

Leon laughed, it was a deep sound that never failed to make her smile, even if she didn't mean to.

“You pegged me nicely with that one.” Nodding his agreement, he pointed to the large open window behind them, where they could both hear the gentle sounds of the surf. “Would you like to go for a walk?”

Helena wiped her mouth with her napkin as something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye. Using the suggestion to turn and look out the window, she scanned the crowd waiting outside to get in. Sure enough, there were two men staring directly at her. One of them narrowed their eyes and pointed to her, then bent his forefinger, demonstrating that they wanted her to come to them.

“Sounds like a perfect end to a perfect day.” She turned and smiled at the handsome man sitting across the table from her. “Aw look, they even have a trail that leads off the balcony down to the beach.” Without asking, she stood and turned towards the open doors that led out to the patio. Quickly removing her high-heeled sandals, she padded barefoot down the narrow path through the bushes until her toes found the wide-open sand.

Behind her, Leon chuckled. “I love how literal you are.”

She giggled and spun several times in the sand, allowing her skirt to lift in the evening breeze as she did so. Sure enough, the two men were moving around the side of the restaurant into the more heavily covered underbrush. The one that had pointed to her, pointed to the bigger man to continue while he pointed to the west, where the main path led down to the beach.

“Damn, I forgot my purse. Will you hold my shoes? I will be right back.”

Leon smiled at her and held his hand out. "Of course. Or I could just run and get it for you?"

Helena's smile grew, and she dropped her sandals in his hand. "You are far too gentlemanly. I don't understand how you are still single."

He laughed, and she jogged back up towards the restaurant. He watched her go briefly before turning to walk towards the wanning surf.

Shade ducked into the brush as soon as he was no longer watching her. Even with the sounds of the loud music and ridiculous crowd waiting for open seating to begin at the most exclusive restaurant on the island. It wasn't hard for her to find the larger of the two men. Mostly because of the cussing and the sound of him trying to force his way through a dense bush that should have prevented this kind of trespass.

When the trashing suddenly stopped, no one even seemed to notice. Shade checked the man's pocket and found a cell phone and wallet, before pulling one of the broken bushes over the top of him and making her way back to the restaurant.

The maitre d' was happy to return her purse to her and apologized profusely for the inconvenience. To which she told him was her fault, not theirs, and left a rather large tip.

On her way back to the beach, she conveniently dumped the wallet in the recycler at the busboy station.

"Looks like you found it." Leon's smile caused her own grin to return. She turned eastward and began walking down the beach. Her date followed her without a word.

"There is nothing quite like moonlight over the water." She kicked her toes through the retreating surf.

"I agree that there is something to the moonlight here. It is often showing us things that we miss in the light of the day."

Helena turned to see him watching her from further up the beach, trying not to get his own shoes wet.

"Walk down here with me." She teased.

"These are my favorite shoes. No thanks."

"Then take them off silly!" She charged him and reached for his feet.

She chased him around in the sand before he began laughing and finally gave up.

"Fine, but I will take my own shoes off, thank you!"

Ignoring him, she tackled him to the sand. They both laughed loudly and rolled on top of each other several times before she ended up on top.

Their eyes locked briefly before she rolled off him and glanced in the direction they'd come. She could see the man following her more clearly now. Shit, she thought, this just got more complicated.

"Take your shoes off, I am going to go grab us drinks." She pointed to a small beach-front bar that they'd passed. "I'll be right back."

Several minutes, and one less trailer later, she returned with two drinks. One scotch on the rocks and one fruity smelling concoction.

He held up both hands, each holding a pair of shoes. She traded him her shoes for his scotch and the two of them continued down the beach, this time ankle deep in the surf.

"I have a party that I have to attend tomorrow. Would you be interested in accompanying me?"

Helena chuckled, "have to? That's a new one. I've never heard anyone make a party, sound like a tortuous event."

"Yeah, well, I'm not big on large groups of people dancing, drinking and gossiping with each other. It's a giant waste of time and space."

She snorted slightly and coughed up the drink that she'd tried in vain to swallow. Once her sinuses were clear again, she shook her head.

"Okay, maybe I can see slight glimmers of why you're not married." She teased him and glanced down at her drink. Thankfully, the bartender hadn't spiked it, because alcohol in the sinuses would have been painful.

"Meh." Was his only response, not really a word, but more of a sound of derision. "You might at least make the company tolerable."

Those clear blue eyes locked on him and frowned as she froze in place. "Did you just say that I was tolerable?"

"Yes." He took several more steps before he realized that she'd stopped. Turning, he cocked his head slightly, but his face remained neutral, showing that he had no intentions of changing his statement.

Helena couldn't decide if she wanted to slap him or kick him in the groin.

"Hmm. I can see that you might have taken that as a slight, but trust me, it was not. I've rarely found a woman tolerable to just be around before. For sex, yes, but just to chat and socialize with, no."

Rolling her eyes, Helena strode past him. Making a B-Line for another beach front bar, she shoes to ignore him.

Behind her, she heard the man make a “hmm” sound before following.

Setting her half full glass on the bar, she strode back down towards the water without even looking back. She was used to being treated as an object. It was a hazard of her work. But this time it bothered her more than usual. Part of her knew better than to push her luck, she needed that invite.

“You never answered me.” The quiet sound of his voice drew her out of her thoughts. Despite her walking off, he was still walking alongside her in the surf.

For the first time in her life, she wasn't sure how to respond. Several snarky thoughts came to mind, but in the realm of reality, that place outside of her own head, she said nothing. Silence engulfed them as they made their way down the beach to her bungalow. Around them, drunk guests yelling, sang, danced and laughed, but between them, the wall of silence reigned supreme.

She stopped at the end of her dock and turned to face him finally. “What time?”

“It starts at six.”

“I will meet you there at six thirty.” Turning on her heel, she marched away from him down the dock.

CRASH!

Sadie looked up from her book and smirked. The first throw of a stool crashed into the stone fireplace and shattered. The owner had designed them that way to limit their use as clubs on other patrons. The door to the pub opened and she could see that it was dark outside. Which explained why it was already wall to wall people.

One of the younger barmaids swung by and deftly replaced her empty mead with a full one.

“Thaya?”

The young human female paused.

“Any pools?”

“Of course not, thar be no bettin in Bugrasi.” The woman winked.

“Put me down for my usual plus a half.”

"Of course, luv." The barmaid laughed and danced off through the crowded room. She couldn't be over fifteen years old, but she worked the crowd like a pro that had been at it for decades.

Her attention fell to the book resting open on the table as she pondered the implications. Leon had written the Shade Chronicles from her perspective, carefully masking his own thoughts and actions. She'd eventually told him about the men on the beach, but how did he know why she'd been so silent on the walk back to her bungalow? Was she that easy to figure out? She knew that wasn't true. Taking a long drink from her mead, she returned her attention to the book. Skipping ahead to the part where she entered the party.

There is a particular adage that says white and black go with anything, but when you mix them together and add diamonds, well, that can stop a crowded room in their tracks.

"Doctor Helena Cartwright!" The herald shouted to the room as the most spectacular vision of loveliness, in the room, stepped up to the top of the stairs.

She reached a diamond encrusted wrist to the stair-rail and extended one foot to step down onto the stairs. As she did, a hush fell across the sea of people in the massive hall below. The exquisite white-haired vision in a floor-length black gown descended the staircase alone. Around her neck was a fortune that many small countries would murder a small army for, let alone the smaller fortunes on her wrists and ears. Her pure white hair was piled on her head like a queen, with perfect little ringlet curls framing her face like a priceless oil painting.

All eyes were on her as she approached the floor. She carried herself in such a manner as to let everyone in the room know that she was well aware of how stunning she looked.

A lone figure stepped from the crowd in a perfectly tailored tuxedo and extended a hand to her just as her foot touched the main floor. His dark hair and smoldering dark eyes met hers just before he bowed deeply.

"You look exquisite." A genuine smile of admiration played across his face and she squeezed his hand gently.

"So do you." Around them the sea of people had begun moving, but neither of them seemed to notice.

Still holding her hand, he led her off to the side of the stairs and allowed his gaze to travel the entire length of her. The gown was floor length, but there was a delicate slit that went from the floor up to her right thigh to just below the carefully hidden knife. His gaze paused for a telling time on her tall heels, before traveling back up to meet her gaze. When he opened his mouth to say something and nothing came, a sly grin crept onto her face.

"Cat got your tongue?"

"No, but I believe you might have." His voice was huskier than usual, but at least that witty mind was back in play.

Waving her hand, palm up toward the crowd, she drew his attention away from her. "This is what you call a party?"

Allowing her to distract him, he let go of her hand and turned to face the same direction before shrugging.

"I can see why you aren't fond of them. They don't really suite your personality. I, however, love any occasion to play 'tongue tie the man', with an exquisite gown."

Glancing sidelong at her, he smirked. "It's not the gown that's going to tongue tie every man here. It's the woman in it."

She chuckled and slid her arm through his and squeezed it gently. "Not all of them, I can assure you. But why don't you introduce me around?"



Nearby, raised voices drew the elf's attention away from her book yet again. She looked up just in time to see one of the weak stools crash down on the head of a patron who was just standing up. The man crumpled to the floor with bits and pieces of stool littering the surrounding ground.

"Tha's it!" Thaya stormed up and took the standing man by the ear. He immediately bent down to her as she twisted it painfully. "Yer outa ere!" She drug the man behind her to the door and kicked it open. With an expertly timed shove, spin and kick, she booted the man out into the dimly lit alley. He stumbled forward several steps, then slammed into the far wall. Sliding down it face first, he fell into an ungraceful heap.

"Now you!" She yelled at two confused looking younger males on either side of the unconscious man in the pub. "Pick his arse up and toss em out too!" She pointed to the man on the floor between them.

They looked at each other with slightly fearful expressions.

Thaya walked up to them and put her arms around their shoulder, drawing them close to her as she did so. "NOW!" she screamed.

Both boys leapt to their feet and literally turned and slammed into each other with a loud thud. One of them rubbed their chin while the other rubbed his forehead. But as Thaya placed her fists on her hips, they reached down and snatched up the man on the floor. Between them they carried him out and dumped the second man on top of the first, who was pushing himself upright. They turned back to the bar, then looked at each other as they tried to decide if she would allow them back in.

"Get in ere and shut tha door!" Thaya snapped.

The poor lads jumped and did as they were bid.

Moving around behind them, Thaya grabbed their asses roughly. Which caused them to startle.

"Well done, now go sit. I'll bring ya dinner and an ale on the house." She whispered to them both and pointed back to where they had been sitting.

Sadie chuckled and shook her head. Taking a long drink, she turned her attention back to the book.

The night drug on as Leon and Helena wound slowly through the crowd. Every so often someone would call him over and ask him to introduce her.

"So, I heard the herald refer to you as a doctor." The hostess of the party smiled sweetly at Helena. Next to her, a tall, darker skinned man with a greying goatee wore enough medals and ribbons to make Helena wonder what was keeping him upright. The general was eyeing her like a delicious piece of meat that he couldn't wait to devour, but his wife simply ignored him.

"Yes, ma'am." Helena nodded respectfully.

"Doctor of what? Medicine?" The male asked, clearly uninterested in the answer as he looked out over the crowd for anything to divert his attention.

"Engineering."

Leon's head snapped to her suddenly, as if she'd grown tentacles. "You're an engineer?"

Helena smiled warmly at the woman asking the questions, deftly ignoring her date.

"That sounds fascinating. Do you have a specific field of interest?" The woman recognized Helena's attempt to remove of the men from the conversation and proffered her arm. "How about we ladies go get a drink and leave the men to chat?"

"I'd love that."

They wandered away from the utterly confused Leon, who watched after them as if some bully had just taken away his favorite toy.

The general tried to engage him in conversation, but eventually gave up and walked off in a huff.

"Honestly, my passion is nautical engineering, but my degree is in security science. I specialize in developing and testing security equipment for banks and various private corporations."

"That sounds so exciting!" the woman exclaimed and held her hand out to the bartender for another drink. "Would you like something?"

"No thank you, I am okay." Helena turned and saw Leon watching her intently. He seemed confused, as if learning that she had a doctorate in engineering had somehow broken his reality.

"So, you are like one of those hacker types? What are they called, black hats?"

Turning her attention back to the hostess, Helena shook her head. "No, ma'am. I specialize in hard things, like building new sensors, bank vaults, etcetera. My company develops unique security solutions for anyone who can afford us." Shrugging, she added, "occasionally we are even used to *recover* stolen items."

"Oh, well, I suppose that seems interesting too." Apparently not being a hacker had seriously dropped Helena several rungs down the ladder of interesting people.

Resisting the urge to laugh, she turned her attention to the man approaching the two of them.

"Pardon me," he was a rather handsome looking blond, with a perfect smile, a perfect build and a perfect tuxedo, save for the utterly awful, bejeweled bowtie. Bowing to the hostess next to her he added, "may I interrupt madam Hammerfell?"

"Yes, please do. I am bored with her." The woman waved the back of her hand in their direction and turned to saunter away through the crowd.

Helena smiled slightly, but raised an eyebrow at the woman's dismissal.

"May I have this dance, Miss Cartwright?" His honeyed voice tried to mask the purposeful slight. He reached for her hand, clearly not interested in waiting on her permission.

Helena had no interest in this perfect little man, who was more interested in himself than anyone else in the room. She took his hand and twisted it up behind his back with an expertly applied hold that she knew very well, was exceedingly painful. The man spun away from her, and found himself up on his tiptoes, trying in vain to reduce the pain level. She stepped up close behind him and whispered in his ear.

"That is Doctor Cartwright. And no, you may not. Not now, not ever. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes." He squeaked.

"Yes, what?" she growled slightly.

"Yes, doctor?"

"I meant ma'am, but that will work." She released him and shoved slightly, forcing him to take several enormous steps away from her. He stumbled into Leon's chest. Her date caught the man deftly and helped him to stand up properly. As the blond stranger massaged his hand, Helena saw Leon whisper something into the man's ear that even she couldn't hear. His face paled distinctively, and he quickly scurried off into the crowd.

Before Helena could ask what Leon had told the gentleman, he held out his hand and asked loudly, "may I have this dance Doctor Helena?"

Placing her hand in his, she smiled happily. Lifting their hands up high, he led her to the nearby empty dance floor. With a smooth yank, he pulled her to him. Their bodies met for the first time, and every nerve came alive. Their eyes locked on to each other as the music started. Her smile widened as the tango began.

Two bodies glided across the floor as one, as if they'd been dancing together for decades. The song seemed to last forever, as the two utterly forgot that anyone else was in the room. As the music rose to the final crescendo, he dipped her so low that the few loose curls touched the floor. Pulling her back up with a snap, the music and movement finished at the precise same time. Their bodies poised perfectly extended and pressed together tightly. Not even a single beam of light could be seen between them.

The thundering applause roared around them, almost drowning out the sound of her own heart beating in unison with his. Yet neither of them moved, unwilling to let the dance end. When the music finally changed, it shattered the spell, as the other guests began dancing around them.

"I..." A warning flashed in her heads up display, stopping her before she could say something that she would have regretted later.

Taking one large step back from him, she turned to walk off the dance floor. Her mind raced as the timer in her HUD reminded her of the timetable that was already dangerously off. Before Leon could stop her, she slipped away into the crowd.

Making her way upstairs, she found a quiet spot behind a plant and slid her hand up one of her thighs, attempting to adjust her nylons. As she did so, chemicals triggered and adhered to her fingertips. She then slipped her hand inside her bra to adjust herself. This time, though, she withdrew the key that she'd borrowed from the general during their private encounter much earlier in the evening.

Luckily the man was a hound dog, and she was far from the only woman he'd felt up at the party. There would be no way to tie the missing key to her.

In her heads up display, the counter flipped green, and she walked back out where several people, including the upstairs guards, could see her. Taking up a position at the long balcony, she skimmed the crowd. She hadn't intended to be looking for anything specific, but she looked for Leon, anyway. When she found him, he was talking to a rather beautiful blond woman, in a blood red dress that left almost nothing to the imagination.

Too obvious, my dear, she thought to herself as she smirked. A crash rang out across the room as someone backed into a server. The tray crashed to the ground with the almost painful sound of shattering crystal.

Helena, now acting as Shade, grimaced, shaking her head. That was a lot of money that would likely come out of someone's pay. But it was the distraction she was looking for. She moved towards the guard closest to her near the railing. He turned to see her coming and smiled kindly.

"May I help you?"

"I was wondering if there was a restroom up here?" She gave him a pitiful frown and leaned in close. "I am shy."

The man's last name was Dorn, according to his name tag, and she ran a quick identity check on him.

He frowned slightly and shook his head. "I am sorry ma'am, but I can't allow you to use any facilities on this floor."

Bingo, she thought as she saw the quick synopsis of the man's little sister. "You have to know someone who can't use the public facilities with strangers." She pleaded, allowing her eyes to well up with tears.

He sighed and nodded. "Yes, I suppose I do. But if anyone finds out, I will lose my job, if I am lucky."

"I have no interest in sharing my problems with strangers. It was hard enough to tell you."

He smiled warmly and looked past her to the hallway. "All the way down on the right."

"Thank you, Mr. Dorn."

"Gerard. And you're welcome, Doctor."

She smirked; he'd been paying attention. Either that or he too had a Heads Up Display. More than likely it was both.

Using the continuing distraction below, Shade slipped down the hall that the man had shown her and slid quietly into the last door on the right, locking it behind her. Pulling her shoes off, she waited as the counter in her HUD continued to count down. Moving to the window, she slid it open and tied up her dress with the special garter wrapped around her left thigh.

Finally, the counter flipped to green again, and she quickly slipped out the window and began climbing the outer wall. She went up two floors and over one row of windows, just as she heard the click and the window popped open. Sliding into the dark office, she heard the guard pass by the outer door.

Padding silently across the room, she walked up to a massive oil painting of the general and his three dogs. Using the stolen key in a hidden lock behind it, she could swing the painting out without triggering the alarm.

Behind it was exactly what she'd expected. A standard old-world style safe, with no electronics anywhere. She smirked, the general believed in the adage that if you wanted no one to figure out how to open a door, give it a door handle. Or with a safe, if you want no one to know how to open it, make it an antique. An extremely flawed tactic, since any good safecracker always learned on the historical version of a safe first, and worked up to the more modern electronic safes.

She pulled an odd-looking wire from the neckline of her gown. At one end was a flat piece, and at the other was a compressed earpiece that was already expanding. Attaching the flat end to the safe, she slid the other into her ear. It took less than eight seconds for her to pop the safe open. But it was two seconds longer than she had expected.

The one-foot thick door swung open. The first thing she saw was a dozen stacks of cash, which were highly illegal in some parts of the world, and several bars of gold. A

reasonable precaution for an ex-dictator, she mused. Stuffed into a small shelf on the right of the safe were several stacks of papers with a leather thong around them each. Again, proof that the general wasn't a fan of keeping things in digital form. Then finally, all the way at the back, sat a jewel encrusted one-foot by two-foot statue of a mermaid. It stared back at her coyly, hiding its mouth behind its hands.

A thin smile crept across her face as she felt the urge to brag to no one in particular. Shade had been right; the general had stolen the Queen of the Deep artifact from the Empress's Maritime Museum in Dathea. And now she was going to steal it back.

Pulling a thin sheet of silk from the lining of her dress, she quickly pulled the mermaid out of the large safe and began wrapping it up. Just for good measure, she grabbed one stack of leather-bound papers and tossed it in with the statue. After tying everything up neatly, she began closing the safe and painting. She pressed the key deep into the dirt of a potted plant in the office's corner and gently brushed the dirt back into place. They would find it eventually, long after she left.

Shade was in and out of the room in less than two minutes, before the guard paced back in front of the office door. With smooth precision, she moved up to the roof of the massive mansion and placed the black bound bundle at the base of one of the many sensor towers. The smuggler's bag would protect and hide its contents from weather, or any sensor sweeps. They examined the towers every six months. And the last check had been last week. She would have plenty of time to come back and get the items after everything calmed down.

Less than five minutes had passed when the elegantly dressed elf flush the bathroom toilet.



Internal combat systems triggered as Sadie's hand snapped up from the book in front of her, catching the incoming knife just as it entered her small cubby under the stairs. Based on the trajectory, it would have missed her, but her internal systems would not allow her to ignore it. She scanned the area and saw a small dirty blond head duck below the crowd. Weapons were commonplace in the new world chaos. But using them in a public place like Bugrasi hadn't really changed and was highly illegal. But where there were laws, there were always lawbreakers.

As if on cue, a man stood suddenly and flipped the table in front of him. Cards and mugs flipped into the air in slow motion as her combat systems kicked on fully, speeding her up enough that the world seemed to slow down around her.

Continuing to scan the crowd for the owner of the knife, she spotted a young man heading for the door. He wore tattered clothing, but he didn't have the typical markers of the local beggars' guild. His gaze darted towards her as he made the last mad dash for the door. The look of terror on his face told her all she needed to know. Someone had hired the lad to test her reflexes.

Before he could reach his hand out for the door, a heavy wooden mug bounced roughly off his skull.

His body jerked to the side slamming him into the wall, sliding to the ground bleeding profusely from a rather nasty looking wound in his scalp. The odds of him surviving the new few minutes were almost null.

The sound climbed almost instantly from a dull roar to a full crescendo as the entire pub erupted in chaos. Horis, the pub owner and bartender, hopped over the bar and began grabbing various humans that got too close to his bar and tossing them into the air. More often than not, the individuals landed squarely back in the center of the fray.

Sadie glanced at the chronometer in her HUD and grinned, 12:30 almost on the second. She resisted the urge to laugh, but she couldn't hide the wide grin that came from winning yet another betting pool. Horis would be furious.

Someone shoved one of the many patrons into the stairs. As he spun towards her, her hand snaked out with deadly accuracy and with a subtle twist of her wrist, she continued his spin past her, where he then crumpled to the floor unconscious. The elf deftly placed the dagger that the boy had thrown at her under the unconscious man and returned her attention back to her book, as the cacophonous brawl continued around her.

Flipping a few pages past where she'd stopped, she found the scene she was looking for.

The alluring elf and the enamored engineer stepped out into the heavily manicured garden together.

"You're a better dancer than I expected." The glint in her eye belied her humor at the idea that the work-a-holic engineer could dance at all.

"I have an excellent instructor named Joan, back home." He shrugged and pointed to the left, where there were fewer people milling about.

She nodded and the two of them strolled deeper into the garden. The further away they got from the main patio, the various statues and water fountains seemed to drop the ambient temperature slightly. The cold was likely why it was almost completely empty, save for a few guards.

“I must thank her someday.”

Leon took her hand and pulled her to him, as the two of them did a gentle ballroom step around the small clearing. Despite the lack of music, the two of them grew lost in each other’s gaze and movement. As they slowed to a stop, they continued to stare deep into each other’s eyes.

A subtle movement at the edge of her vision, that the nearby guards missed, caused Helena to lean forward suddenly and kiss the man roughly. Forcing him to take a step backwards to absorb the energy. Just past them, a statue shattered into a hail of marble and dust, but neither of them seemed to notice.

Sexually enticing targets was Shades specialty. It was simply a tool in her arsenal that she’d used most of her life, and she was extremely good at it. But this time was different somehow. Her entire body reacted instantly, welling up inside of her so fast that her thoughts grew clouded. Somewhere in the back of her mind she heard the alarms screaming from nearby speaker systems, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t focus on them. A hand on her shoulder drew her attention to the present, clearing her mind. The surrounding compound had erupted in utter chaos.

“Pardon me Doctors, we need to get you inside, we have an active shooter situation.” One of the security guards was respectfully trying to herd them back inside the massive mansion.

Around them, searchlights were sweeping across the grounds, and she could hear dogs being released in the distance. Over the sounds of the alarms in the compound itself, she could also hear the sounds of police sirens in the distance.



The table rocked as a man slammed into it, knocking over the candle that Sadie was using to read by. With a sweep of her leg and a quick shove on the man’s head, she knocked the man to the floor on top of the man from earlier. The second man rolled away and lifted both hands towards her in apology.

“Sorry, miss Sadie.” He was clearly sober mostly and quickly got to his feet and pushed his way back into the brawl.

She shook her head and set the candle back upright.

The police, along with the Hammerfell security, carefully searched each of the eight hundred plus guests. The police interviewed the guests over several hours. Before finally releasing the group, just as the sun peeked over the horizon.

Leon drove her back to the bungalow and walked to the door with her.

“Well, that was an interesting evening.” His understatement caused her to chuckle.

“It sure wasn’t what I expected.” She bit the inside of her cheek, then finally added. “It doesn’t have to be over.” Reaching behind her, she opened the door to the quaint little one room bungalow with a massive oversized-king bed.

Leaning in, he kissed her on the cheek. “Meet me for breakfast?”

She smirked and nodded. “Of course. I will see you soon.”

He turned and walked away towards his waiting car.

She showered and changed into her usual morning bikini, but this time she added a long scarf that she tied at the hip as a skirt. Just as she was prepping to get hamburger for her new friends, there came a knock on the door.

Shade opened it to find two rather large men in cheap suits. The slightly smaller man had a rather nasty looking scar on his left cheek, and his hands folded neatly in front of him.

“Ah, there you are, Fish. I suspected you were around here someplace.” She cocked her head slightly, watching the two carefully.

“Yes. Well, the boss would like to speak to you. It seems you stole something from him, and he would like it back.” The smaller man spoke, waving his hands slightly, then returning them to the folded position.

“Yeah.” Shade pursed her lips. She knew Robert would find her, eventually. “But I would like to go on record as saying that I stole nothing from him. I stole it *for* him, then never delivered. There is a difference.”

“Yeah, well, he don’t think so.”

She chuckled. “Yeah, fine, I owe him. We’ve been friends for too long, I can’t avoid him forever. I’ll go see him. You have my word.”

"Yeah, see, that ain't gonna be good enough." The man nicknamed Fish gestured to the slightly larger man behind him, who pulled handcuffs from his pocket. "You're gonna come with us right now."

She looked from the cuffs to the man with the scared face. "You're kidding, right? Do you really want to do this right now Fish?"

"I have my orders." He replied firmly.

Shaking her head slowly, her eyes narrowed. "You really need to learn when to say no."

Her hand snapped out and slammed into his windpipe. While he gagged, she spun and snatched the cuffs from the larger man. With a well-practiced maneuver, she cuffed the two men together and slid between them. From behind, she leapt up and wrapped her legs around the larger man's neck.

Meanwhile, his hand came up towards her with the gun that he'd pulled from his jacket.

Leaning forward, she snatched it from his hand and punched him in the face with it. Blood exploded from his nose as she suddenly jerked backwards with all her weight, keeping her legs wrapped around his neck as she did so.

She jerked him backwards, yanking him off balance. As he tumbled backwards. She quickly placed her hands on the dock and twisted her body to her left, flipping the man to the side towards the water. Releasing her legs, she kipped back up into a standing position. Spinning one last time, she planted her foot into his chest with a roundhouse and knocked him backwards into the water with a loud splash.

The awaiting frenzy began almost instantly as the scent of fresh blood drove the waiting sharks into a full-blown feeding insanity. Kicking the gun into the water after them, Shade smirked and closed the door to her room. As she began walking down the dock, the water turned bright red and spread underneath the dock.

As the regal elf stepped up to the bar next to the man in shorts, a t-shirt and sandals, Gadanu was already setting down her morning orange juice.

"Good morning, Ms. Helena." He smiled brightly, then turned to walk away further down the bar.

Leon beamed a smile at her. "Good morning."

"Good morning." She took a sip of her juice and for the first time wondered what would happen next.

"You get everything you needed last night?"

Shade turned and stared at the engineer next to her briefly, before returning to her juice. "Not everything. No."

He chuckled, "Well, if you like islands, I know another island where you might find what we are both looking for."

"Oh really?" She smirked.

"You should check it out sometime, I'd love to have you." He slid a card across the bar-top towards her before standing up and picking up the suitcase next to him and walking away.

Lifting the blank card, she flipped it over to find nothing on it except two numbers separated by a comma. Grinning broadly, she brought up GPS in her Heads Up Display and input the two numbers. GPS showed nothing there, which only made her smile grow. This was going to be fun.

The End

Sadie closed the book and laughed. Leon had clearly written that for his more romantic fans. It was definitely an act of romantic fiction, designed to entice an audience into believing there was far more between the elf and her ex-lover than there actually had been.

Looking up over the rapidly thinning brawl, she smirked. The tavern owner generally split the bill for the damage done each night at the Honeyed Rat, between the last remaining people. After they cleared the bar of the fighting. Which meant that once the brawl started, people left as quickly as they could. It worked two-fold, one to stop the brawl before it did too much damage, and two, it helped the owner pay for the damages.

Sadie stood and blew out the candle on the table. The candle had less than an inch left anyway, but she saved what she could. She downed the last of her mead and picked her way carefully through the unconscious bodies until she found the young boy that had thrown the knife at her. She knelt and placed her hand on his neck, looking for a pulse. She wasn't all that surprised when she found none.

"Did you have to hit him so hard?" She looked over her shoulder at the half-orc still standing by the bar.

“He got better than he deserved!” the man spat and straightened his arm out in front of him as a younger patron tried to rush past him, towards the door. The effect jerked the young human off his feet at the throat. As he landed on his ass, he coughed, trying to catch his breath.

“No one's leavin till they pay for this mess!” He bellowed loudly, which meant anyone left in the pub was paying out the ass for the damage. Even if they had nothing to do with it.

Sadie stood and stepped towards the door.

“Where do ya think yer goin?” He yelled at her.

Without looking back, she waived the back of her hand over her shoulder at him. “Take it out of my winnings.” She stepped out and closed the door behind her.

Inside she heard the half orc bellow angrily, “you fucking bitch!”