

THE ELF AND HUNTRESS

# **The Elf & Huntress**

**J. L. Lawson**

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**Man's great misfortune is that he has no organ, no kind of eyelid or brake, to mask or block a thought, or all thought, when he wants to.**

**---Ambroise-Paul-Toussaint-Jules Valéry**

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### Playing Favorites

*"A punishment to some, to some a gift, and to many a favor."*  
---Lucius Annaeus Seneca

“No I am *not* the *Assistant* Manager of the lab...” her nostrils flared with the riposte. She had to take a deep breath and remember that it really didn't matter what this person, or anyone else for that matter, thought about her, her position, *or* the lab. She had a charter from the Executive Director to achieve specific goals---this cover was just that: a well constructed mask. In a gentler tone, “...I am just a struggling lass from the highlands, however if you would wait here, I'm certain I can arrange for you to interview one of the management. Now I really would like to get in out of this rain!”

“Thanks Doll, that'd be super!” the agent grinned in triumph. “And if we could be allowed to bring along our cameras?...”

Tera was careful not to roll her eyes, but maintained her grip on civility as tightly as her umbrella. “I will see what I can do. If you will wait here?” And she finally made the foyer of her own facility. “Inger,” she needn't have raised her voice; the Chief of Security for the labs was always at the doors in the morning. “Please find Clara or Jack and give them heads up that they have an eager journalist waiting out front...” Shaking out her rain gear and shedding her sodden coat, she held them, dripping, out to the genial guard.

“Yes Ma'am. Und guten tag!” Inger was still trying to get used to the position, she reminded herself as she breezed passed the screening machines and the rest of the formidable security measures keeping plain folks at bay.

“Ms. Elphinstone, the progress reports from the night shift are on your desk and I made sure the department heads are aware of the

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meeting change.” Her lieutenants were nothing if not organized, she thought and flung her coat and shoulder bag onto the layout table next to her desk.

“Thanks Vince, now if the espresso machine is working..”

He winced and disappeared, closing her doors behind him. Talking to herself was just a way of organizing her thoughts she justified and opened her mouth to emphasize, “The Boss does it; must be useful...” reassuring herself. “Now,” she reached for the reports, hoping the milestones that were supposed to have been reached last night--- “are we ahead or trailing?”

Vince glided to the desk, set down the demitasse and let himself out again. She reached for the cup; took a sip...

Her vision began swimming and the scene before her blurred. “Crap!” she struggled up against the restraints. “Another damn memory!” She tossed her head back and forth to get her hair out of her mouth and hopefully dislodge the probes and wires decorating her scalp; her arms and legs strapped so tightly to the bed/table their usefulness was passed futility. The caked and clotted bloody streaks up and down her arms and legs were testament that she had been out of the restraints at least long enough to gain *them*. “I hope that was entertaining enough for you!” she blasted, though her voice was raw and thin. “Whoop, whoop! Another exciting memory of reading reports! You guys are sooo not getting anywhere!”

Her minor rebellion in the face of her dire predicament was all she really had to keep her sanity over the last... how long *had* she been tucked away in this Naudi hell-hole? The dim and bare closet of a room with its blank walls and ceiling, and that smell! “What is this stench!” she repeated for the hundredth time at least. She had a suspicion that it was her own loss of hygiene... And again she tried to shake her head clear of the fog descending...

The night closed in on her where she crouched in the shadows of the alley. Her mind always drifted back to those morbid recollections when she wasn't careful. The chill of the moist fog on her hands and face brought her out of her private hell. She glanced

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across the street for any sign that her marks had arrived without her noticing. Nothing. Just the erratic pulse of the abused neon sign over the tattoo shop window answered her scan. 'Won't be long..' she muttered under her breath.

She stood and retreated deeper into the shadows. Circling the building without a sound through the narrow alleys was all that suggested she was haunting the shop across the street. The sounds of splishing steps grew louder as she emerged at her other secret peeping spot. The figures of a couple, both the same height, but one stumbling and reeling next to the other, solidified from out of the gloom. 'That's my Jack and Jill; tardy as usual..' As they passed her station she crept out behind them before they could reach the flickering neon light. Silent as death, she slipped 'a package' into the coat pocket of the reeling fellow; the girl none the wiser for the movement. Tera was out of sight again in an instant into the vacant doorway of a neighboring shop. The tattoo parlor door opened and the tinkling of the little bell over it as it shut was dampened by the roiling mists at once.

Tera stepped out of the shadow and walked casually back up the way the couple had come. "Four, three, two, one..." There was a flash of light that lit up the narrow lane for several moments. At once it became darker than it had been but for only a split second. She lifted her wrist to her face. "Ready for pick-up..." she uttered matter-of-factly and continued on up the shadowy lane toward the brighter lights and festive shouts and music of the boulevard.

She threw back her overcoat and put on her best 'let's get this party on!' face as she joined a band of revelers just coming out of one of the hundred bars and honky-tonks lining the strip. Her tight red dress glowed as bright as the thousand lanterns swaying overhead to mark the third night of celebration over the people's recent liberation from their overlords. Her matching red heels clicked on the cobblestones behind the little knot of revelers. She moved like a drunken debutant until she reached the Underground. Slipping down the stairs she pulled the coat up tighter again and slumped onto a

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bench to wait for the train.

'One more errand and I'm shut of this little backwater planet...' she sighed and glanced down at her shoes. 'And something more comfortable...' The approaching screech of grinding metal heralded the train. She rose, intuitively glanced back and forth across the platform; no movement. She positioned herself near the boarding steps still semi-covered by the pillars. The cars stopped with a whistle and whoosh, the doors snapped open. She waited until the last second and leapt as they slammed shut and the train took off for the next stop.

There were only a handful of passengers. The rest of the district's residents were all back up on the strip carousing and drinking their brains out. 'Save two notable exceptions...' she reminded herself with a grim smile. She made a little cough and brought her wrist to her face again, "Fourteen minutes till second package drop." Her voice was low and her eyes took in the entire contents of the carriage. Still nothing. Through the windows, low lit side tunnels and the under-lit passing trains smeared by. A mechanical gong announced the next stop and she hunkered down in the seat, looking for all the world like a bag lady or other of the teeming homeless vagabonds that were ubiquitous of late.

An elderly lady and her nurse stepped into the car. Tera scrutinized the pair, ensuring they were who they appeared to be. Satisfied, she relaxed a bit and reran her next 'drop-off' in her mind. Another gong and she was up at the door as it opened, and was across the platform like a phantom, no one the wiser for her passage.

Again she emerged from her overcoat like a butterfly from a chrysalis and allowed as much attention to herself as could be offered by this new avenue of celebrants and their raucous singing, laughter and shrieks of ridiculousness. Two blocks later she pushed through the polished glass revolving doors into the elegant foyer of a grand building. Smiling coquettishly at the poor saps who drew the short straws for nightwatchman duties she bounced up the broad stairs drawing both their attentions absolutely. 'Never under-estimate

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the power of moving mammaries!' she grinned back at them when she reached the mezzanine and ducked into the ladies room.

The door had only just shut and she was transformed again. The seductive costume of the early night replaced by the dark matte skintight suit of a shadow. She leapt onto the sink counter and was inside the ventilation shaft without a sound. "Countdown to drop on my mark," she whispered to her invisible comrades. "Mark."

She moved like a cat through the winding shafts with the surety of one who had been there before. Suddenly stopping over a vented juncture, she rose up through the hatch and climbed the service ladder to the maintenance door above her. A moment to trick the lock and she opened the door enough to look down the empty upper floor hall.

She slipped a plastic wedge into the lock and let the door close, her ear pressed to its surface. The clomp of leather shoes barely rose in tempo as she listened. Again she held her breath, waited as the steps passed her door. She moved silently out into the hall, slipped another 'something' into the pocket of the suited gentleman just passing and was hidden in the alcove opposite her door in a blink.

The gentleman turned the corner at the end of the hallway and she opened the door behind her in the alcove. Crossing the suite, she burned the locked latch of the window with a pencil laser and pushed it open. The muted din of the streets below instantly pervaded the stillness of the vacant rooms. She crept out onto the ledge and began the short climb up the wall, moving like a spider over the glass and steel. At the roof, she picked up the backpack left for her there and pulled out her last disguise.

A roar erupted in the floors beneath her as she smiled mischievously and jumped from the roof.

The dank night air rushed over her face. She blinked back the gathering moisture in her eyes and glided toward the rows of piers at the harbor. Spotting the one vessel she knew was waiting just for her, she made a barrel-roll to drop some velocity and pushed herself into a spread eagle that fully dampened her descent. Dropping softly onto

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the upper deck of the ship. Two assistants helped her out of the flying gear.

“It's good to have you back Boss;” said the slightly shorter of the two.

“Mistress is waiting. If you take my meaning, ma'am,” intimated the other.

The first one held open the hatch leading to the bridge of the vessel, “We're cleared for lift off, at your discretion Boss...”

Tera marched onto the bridge and sat in the captain's chair. “Let's blow this backwater little satellite! Mama's got an appointment with her majesty and she doesn't want to be late.”

She turned to the pilot, “Our two 'guests' situated securely? Sadly, I over estimated the charge for the third... Que lastima...”

“Yes ma'am,” came the curt response as the ship shuddered and rose. “Anticipated docking in forty minutes...”

Tera touched a panel on the arm of the chair, “The Elf, here. Special delivery expected inside the hour. Please have my bounty waiting, we shan't be docked longer than necessary. Her Eminence is expecting me and I won't keep the Matriarch waiting!”

The blurred points of light through the main viewer crystalized into a familiar pattern of stars, then just as suddenly they blinked out as the little scout ship went into wrinkle drive. “Good. Alert me in twenty. I'm going to have a bath.” With that she left the bridge and sauntered across her quarters dropping bits of her clothes in trail behind her. “Shower.” She said with not a little anticipation in her voice. The hot spray of water and steam filled the bright chamber and she was enfolded. “Aah...”

Tera Elphinstone. Born Earth. Recruited Lascor Special Operations after first contact. Indentured Contract Operative for three years and four months following her extensive training period with the Selective Services Administration. Answerable only to the Matriarch. Anticipated release from indenture: three days, seven hours and... “Twelve minutes. Can't come too soon...” she repeated

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to herself as she towed off and pulled her court robes from the drawer. "Dressing like a geisha is one of the things I'll be missing about this gig!" She writhed and wriggled into the costume and did a turn in front of the mirror, making a practice flourish. The translucent, billowing folds of the robes swelled then snapped around her figure like saran wrap in the blink of an eye.

"Perfection;" a voice uttered mechanically through the speakers as the Elf gazed, satisfied at the display.

"Yes. It should be; I've only done it a thousand times..." the Elf responded. "Inform the Matriarch the Naud's last remaining 'errant children' from Tabila are on their way to the 're-education' facilities." She smiled "Via channels, naturally. A girl's allowed a kickback from time to time. These two were *very* naughty boys and girls. The one I left in pieces was positively... evil. I'll have his price in rhodium if you please."

"Understood," retorted the voice and the speaker went silent.

Under her breath, "Damn snooping, department staff..." she muttered at the pervasive monitoring busybodies who intruded at the most inopportune moments.

The Elf was on her last assignment. "Where shall I visit first?" she mused half aloud to herself. Crossing to the view port in her quarters she gazed out at the smears of light that were the passing stars. "*Not* a Naudi outpost or haven, that's a given!" she stamped and turned to return to bridge. 'Had enough of that lot on behalf of our latest well-paying clients...' It was always best to appear at command when dealing with these quasi-directors. 'Directors,' she sniffed at the title. As if the witless automatons directed anything in reality. A pinging chime announced her return to the Bridge.

"Bring us out of wrinkle, and hail the Directorate of Naudi Diaspora Re-assimilation;" she commanded.

The screen filled with the well-groomed face of a man she didn't recognize--and no wonder, the Directorate had a higher turnover than a brothel of lepers. "Docking permission requested and

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bounty disbursement expected, as notified...” her com officer announced to the blank face of the director.

“Dock ten.” The face mouthed mechanically and added, “Disbursement delayed...”

The Elf leaned forward menacingly from the captain's chair toward the screen. Through clenched teeth she repeated evenly: “If this delay is greater than a nano-second, this facility will be missing its charter the next second later...”

The screen blipped with static for a moment and the smiling face of a woman replaced that of the droll little man's visage. “Miscommunication. 'Delay' is a misnomer. A simple exchange is all, we take custody of the packages and you have your bounty. No delay, I assure you. The Matriarch need not be involved in the slightest...”

“Satisfactory,” the Elf replied smoothly and cut the link. “Skip protocols and put us at dock ten. Now.”

“Yes Captain,” the smirking voice of her pilot answered. This was more like it!

There was a bumping and a sudden stillness. “Oops, we may have crumpled their umbilicals as we transited, Captain...” her pilot pointed out without remorse.

The Elf was at the docking hatch in a flash. Her two 'packages,' the 'emigrees' who had at last been returned, flanked her, blindfolded and bound. She pushed them through to the platform ahead of her. The waiting 'reception committee' took custody and a tallish woman stepped forward extending a small shimmering cube in her hand as she did so. “Your bounty Captain. And may I add...”

“Not interested,” the Elf spat as she turned, grabbed the offered reward and shut the hatch on the emissary before she could finish her short speech. “Bounce!” the Elf said without hesitation.

The little scout ship blinked from the dock and was in wrinkle toward Lascor inside three seconds. “We'll arrive at Court in eighteen hours and thirty-three minutes Ma'am;” the voice of her navigator



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announced over the speakers.

“I'll be in my quarters. Please knock three times...” That was ship's code for disabling the snoop monitors' signal.

A moment, and there came: “Captain, free to be yourself ma'am. All department signals jammed.”

“I'll be in my quarters.” the Elf strode up through the short corridor removing her official robes as she went. “I need a nap...”

There is a back story to this little escapade.

The Elf; Tera Inghean Elphinstone, was the second child of a very happy couple residing on their ancestral highlands in the village of Fortingall. The Elphinstones were a modest folk but not provincial by any stretch. Their children, as they themselves before them, were shuffled off to the Universities on the continent as soon as admissions were secured. Tera and her older sister were natural scholars and graduated with highest honors in less than the prescribed four years. Fortunate, that. Their parents died in a rail accident a few months later.

Her sister, Mara, accepted a research/teaching position at the Max Plank Institute; Tera went into the corporate world with a definite attitude. The Drummond Group made her an offer she couldn't refuse and in seven years after the first months of her employ, she became one of a handful of Directors overseeing the most vast and influential engine for change on the planet.

Then company operations took a turn for the interplanetary and Tera's future went with it.

It seemed innocuous enough. Just a little assignment to inventory the Seranath Trade Guild holdings outside the Nourii systems before formal negotiations for merger would be drafted by the Drummond Group attorneys. A precious few people from Earth had ever heard of the Naud, let alone the Lascorii. The latter was intentional.

History Lesson One---the Lascorii:

Setting: Central band of star systems in Nourii traded space

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