



A Shady Gamble

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Written by Wendi Coffman Porter

World Design by Richard W. Porter III

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-Leon Hamilton

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The elegant elf, going by the alias Sadie Feelari, which was her first alias, padded barefoot out into the large open kitchen with a wide yawn. Her long white hair brushed freely across her bare back. The house had more guests than it had in the entire time Leon was alive. Which meant that she'd taken to being at least partially dressed when she got up in the mornings. But a bra and sleep shorts covered little.

"Good morning, Ma'am!" A loud, cheerful voice screeched at her from the other side of the counter.

With a blindingly swift movement, Sadie snatched up a kitchen knife and sent it flying at the entity that dared to speak to her before her coffee.

The knife thunked, with deadly precision, into the cutting board in front of the metallic sphere. As it continued to vibrate from the impact, the board lowered cautiously. The holographic face of Leon's personal doctor, maid and cook, glanced over it at the elf.

"Would you like me to make breakfast?" She jerked the board back up, only just blocking a second knife. "I'll take that as a no." The floating droid grumbled and drifted off.

Pouring herself a cup of hot coffee, Sadie inhaled the unique aroma of her long dead partner's homemade roast. She leaned back on the counter to face the woman behind her. She had short dark hair, and was wearing leather pants, and a thick long sleeved cotton shirt.

"She's just trying to be helpful." Anna said after she was sure that Sadie had gotten several sips.

"No, she's not."

Reaching past the elf, Anna filled her own empty cup with the delicious black liquid. She'd already been to the forge this morning, if the soot and sweat were any indication.

"What do you mean?"

"She's a bitch." Sadie replied coolly. "She does it on purpose. She's been doing that every morning for hundreds of years. She thinks it's funny." Sadie shrugged. "So, I humor her."

"Ah." The ex-government agent shook her head and rolled her eyes as she moved a good ten feet away and rested against the counter, much like the elf.

The two women stood sipping their coffee for several minutes, each lost in their own thoughts.

"How the oraculem coming?" Sadie was the first to break the silence.

Shaking her head, the agent answered, "not well. It's harder to mix than I expected. I almost blew myself up yesterday."

"You're still here. What are you whining about?" Sadie teased.

"You're a bitch, you know that. Right?"

Sadie smiled brightly at the woman, her eye sparkling. "Why thank you for noticing. I try."

"I bet you do." Placing her empty cup on the counter, the human woman turned to storm of back into the basement smithy.

"Want to do dinner tonight?" Sadie called after the woman.

"Yeah, I guess. If I can make any headway at all today." She waved her hand over her shoulder as she disappeared through the doors that lead to the highly secured stairwell.

Fascinated by the secret order of Althenian smiths, Leon had spent a sizeable chunk of his life researching their methods. According to the history texts, they worked a kind of magical based alchemy into their metalwork. With their secret techniques, they created the most advanced artifacts and metals in the known galaxy.

In an astounding failure, that almost killed him, Leon attempted to recreate one of their masterpieces. He hired Shade to steal several very illegal books, which he then used to build a strangely archaic smithy in the bowels of his floating island home. But on mixing the metals, like the books showed, he created a catalyst that produced an explosion so devastating that it knocked the island off its axis. It took almost five months for Shade and Joan to get the island repaired and floating back on course.

And now, that five thousand plus years later, that that same forge was being used by one of the actual members of the Althenian order. Sadie chuckled, good thing he was dead already. Anna would have killed him already from sheer annoyance.

"Right." Sadie sighed and turned to fill her cup.

As she made her way to the balcony outside, she noticed a book sitting on the table next to a vase filled with white roses. The cover was white leather with a blue embossed title that read, *A Shady Gamble*. Chuckling, she picked up the book and made her way to one of the lounge chairs. Evidently Joan wanted her to read this one, and since the ship design was on hold until Anna finished the oraculem wiring, she had spare time.



For years now, my fans have been begging me to tell them the origin story of the master thief Shade. I've shied away from the story for fear that it might give away too many of her secrets. And even lead my readers to the truth about who she was. But it doesn't look like, she will return to us anytime soon, here it goes.

Oh, fair warning. If you are expecting some explosive fireball of an intro, you will be profoundly disappointed. The origin of Shade starts out peculiarly mundane, with a friendly game of dathalu none the less. There will be no bang, or apocalyptic event, but more precisely, a whisper. A portent of things to come. For true legends never start out legendary. Or do they?

"I raise you one million." A heavily jeweled hand with a cigar between the fingers tapped a button on the table. A single platinum chip printed and spit out onto the green felt in front of him. The large man locked eyes with the woman across the table from him and tossed the chip onto the pile between them.

"Too rich for my blood." The tall, thin man to his left shook his head. Brilliant green eyes belied his lack of interest in the game. Placing his cards face down on the table, he leaned back into his chair, smirking as he folded his arms.

"Stop cheating, Glen." The blond-haired woman to his left didn't look at him as she kept her gaze locked with the large man across the table from her.

He raised both hands, palms up, and shrugged, "what? I folded."

"Exactly. Now stop signaling Jani." Regina snapped and printed out two platinum pieces. "I'll take your bet and raise you another mill."

The large man, with several rings on each hand, that said more about who he was, rather than his fashion sense, glared at the smaller man. "If I find out you're cheating, I will break you in half and feed you to the sharks."

Glen Horthman grimaced and nodded his understanding. "Of course, your grace." Standing up from the table, he took a step back. "On that note, I am going to go get something to eat. Anyone else?"

Next to Regina, Janicia Amanda Tellerman, a tall thin super-model, who was most recently on the cover of the Imperious Gala Times, smiled eagerly and folded her cards face down on the table. "I think I will come with you, Glen. My hand is awful anyway."

"Wise choice." The large duke chuckled.

"I thought so." The model smirked and followed Glen from the room.

"Have I told you how much I love this ship?" The duke grinned at her, showing a row of perfect white teeth that seemed to sparkle in his darker complexion.

The light-skinned blond woman with deep blue eyes nodded. "Every time you come to play dathalu with me."

"Willing to bet it?"

"Nope."

"Fine, then I call." Laying the cards down dramatically, his grin widened as he burst into a full-throated laugh. "Kalune!"

Regina grinned and nodded leisurely. "You win again your grace." She didn't look down at her hand as she folded the cards neatly and slid her own hand to the bottom of the deck. Picking up the rest of the cards around the table, she shuffled them.

"You are having an off week, my dear." He chuckled.

"Apparently." Agreeing, she dealt the usual six cards to the four seats at the table.

As they waited for the other two to return, from wherever they'd wandered off to, she got up to pour herself a drink from the bar behind her.

"Get me a scotch, would you love?" He asked.

Without turning, she nodded.

"Now that it's just the two of us, I have a problem I hope you can help me with."

She raised an eyebrow in curiosity as she leaned far over the table, so he could see down her deep cut blouse. Setting his drink in front of him, she smirked. She placed a knee on the seat of her chair and leaned against the back, sipping her drink as she waited for him to continue.

Adjusting himself awkwardly in his seat, he looked up at her and smiled. "You are a local and you seem to have some very useful connections." He waved his glass toward the imported Republic cognac in her own hand. A drink that was highly illegal in Imperial space, because of taxation laws.

She observed him cautiously. This man wasn't an honest noble, but that also made him potentially dangerous.

"I need to hire someone with a specific skill set." He said just before taking a sip of his imported scotch.

"What kind of skill set are we talking about?"

"The five-finger discount kind."

She snorted as she took a sip, and promptly coughed, attempting to stop the drink from going down the wrong pipe.

"That seems a little below your paygrade, your grace." She coughed.

"Thomas." He smiled. "While we are alone." He clarified.

Nodding, she cocked her head as she waited. There was no way this man wanted something as simple as a shoplifted trinket. She wondered if he even realized what the phrase five-finger discount actually meant.

"I need something stolen."

Pursing her lips, she arched a single eyebrow deliberately.

"It's nothing serious, just a set of family jewels that I would like to relocate into my possession." Shrugging, he gulped the last of the drink and set the crystal glass across the table in front of her with a loud thud.

"Ahh." Regina took a sip of her drink as she considered the request.

His grace, Duke Thomas Gerald Sanderison had been coming to Jostten Nine to play dathalu with her for over a decade now. And while he'd never been shy about his illegal dealings in front of her. This was the first time he'd ever tried to bring her into his web of illicit activities.

"Now see, that is a wholly unique set of skills."

"Really?" He gave her an innocent bat of the eyes, but she knew him better than that. You don't play dathalu with a man for ten years and not learn his every tell.

"If you want my help, you need to try that again. Without the bullshit." Draping an elbow over the back of her chair causally, she locked eyes with him. The ball was in his court, and she was curious what his next play would be.

"Fair enough. I need someone capable of stealing *the* royal jewels." There was emphasis on the word, *the*.

Arching both eyebrows high on her forehead, she kept her gaze locked on his own dark eyes. Behind her, two individuals sauntered into the room smelling of sex. Both players at the table used the distraction to turn and look at them at the same time.

"Finally! Get me another drink, Glen."

"Sure thing, your grace." The man replied cheerfully.

Regina rolled her eyes and slid down into her chair, holding her empty glass up over her head. "Since your up, me too?"

The model came in and leaned down to kiss the larger man on the cheek.

He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into his lap.

She giggled and wrapped her arms around his neck. They kissed each other intensely for several minutes.

Glancing up, Regina saw Glen step up next to her. His green eyes were dark and foreboding as he glared at the two of them. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and she cleared her throat softly.

He startled and instantly plastered that perfect smile back into place. Setting the drink down in front of her, he winked then moved back to his seat.

Wanting to look anywhere but across the table, she glanced across the room to an unfinished scale model of a sleek ocean-going catamaran. Its mast was in place, but the sails and rigging were still laying on the table next to it. Allowing her gaze to fall to the paint canister and brush, sitting next to it, an idea popped into her head.

"Your grace." She stated loudly, to be sure that the man heard her over the giggling of his most recent fiancé. "There might be someone that could do that after all."

Glancing over the woman seated in his lap, he grinned. "Well, that's the best news I've heard all week."

He pushed the woman off him, and his grin grew as he rubbed his hands together with excitement.

"The deal is to you, Jani." Regina smiled kindly at the model. She almost felt sorry for her, but they were all playing their own little games, and the super-model wasn't exactly an innocent bystander.

"Okay." Tossing several silver chips into the now empty pot, the woman picked up her cards and smiled. "I raise one hundred thousand." She printed and tossed a gold chip onto the pile.

"You must tell me about this person." Thomas said eagerly as he tossed in his own ante, then a gold 100,000 credit chip.

"I must tell you nothing. That's not how this works." The blond female lay her cards face down in front of her and folded her arms across her chest.

"Well, will you tell me something?" he pleaded as he tossed several more gold coins on the pile.

"Not until you tell me how you plan to set this up. I am assuming you don't expect them to break into the royal palace?"

The man laughed and shook his head, even as the other two looked up from their cards in surprise. "No, in fact, it's coming directly to us." Pointing to the woman next to him, he grinned broadly, showing those perfect white teeth again. "For our wedding, of course."

Regina sighed and shook her head. He was better than she gave him credit for. She couldn't help but wonder if the wedding was literally just a set up to steal the empress's royal jewels.

Glen tossed in a matching bet and all eyes at the table looked to Regina.

"That narrows the list a little." Keeping her face neutral, she picked up her cards and printed three platinum coins. She flipped them onto the pile and locked eyes with the large man. "I call."

Laughing, the duke met the bet with his own platinum coins before setting his cards down one at a time, in a dramatic flair. "Kalune!"

The other two folded their cards and threw them face down in the pile in a huff.

Keeping her eyes locked on his royal grace, Regina kept her face utterly blank as she laid her cards down face up. "Imperial Kalune."

To either side of her, the man and woman grinned, but resisted the urge to laugh like they wanted to. The large dark-skinned human, however, began laughing so hard that he had to place his hands across his stomach to prevent himself from falling out of the chair.

A sly grin spread across the blond woman's face. This was promising to be the most entertaining game of dathalu she'd had in over a century.



The sound of a crash from inside the house drew Sadie's attention up from the book in her hand. Rolling off the chair, she crouched low and moved to where she could see into the large sunken living room.

A large floating metallic ball darted across the room at high speed. Extending a thin metallic arm, it snatched up a knife and chucked it expertly at the large wooden table in the middle of the room.

The table, however, leapt into the air in a bizarre display that left Sadie feeling lost in some horrible nightmare. Opening a rather disturbing mouth, rowed with huge razor-sharp teeth, it swallowed the knife completely. Landing, it turned towards the floating ball and charged her.

"Freeze!" Sadie bellowed as the door to the balcony slid open silently.

Both entities stopped. Joan, the metallic ball, simply hovered there, still staring at the table.

The table, however, twisted slightly in mid-air as it turned to look at the elf. The movement didn't situate it for a proper landing, and it fell out of the air like some sort of absurd cartoon character. As it crashed into a large glass table, the table shattered, spewing glass everywhere.

The metallic ball lost some altitude as Joan drooped.

"Table, how many times have I told you not to come into the house?"

"Sixteen." It answered, looking from Sadie to the floating ball. "But I really need to eat that thing before it harms someone!"

"I am not a thing!" Joan shrieked loudly.

The elf grimaced as pain shot through her ears, causing her internal cyberware to dampen her hearing.

"And the only one doing damage here is you!" the screech continued as the AI grew into hysterics.

Walking up behind the floating sphere, Sadie reached up and placed her hand firmly on the outer casing. The casing scanned her DNA, and the ball fell out of the air into her waiting hands. Turning to face the table, she saw it bounce happily.

"Feed it to me!" It exclaimed gleefully. "I will ensure it never bothers you again!"

Narrowing her eyes, Sadie glared at the sentient artifact. "The only thing bothering me right now is you." Waving her hand palm up around the destroyed living room, she continued. "You are destroying my house! I will not tell you again. GET OUT!" Tucking the ball under her arm, she extended her finger and pointed to the front door.

A section of wall slid open and a sweaty woman with short dark hair and a rather nasty looking hammer stepped into the living room, ready to do battle.

"But..." The table began.

"No!" Sadie snapped. The thing had been useful, but it was shockingly arrogant and beyond annoying. If she could figure out how to kill it, she would. At this moment, anyway. "Get out!"

The dark-haired human stepped up next to her, looking from the ball in her hands to the table, she raised the hammer and took a menacing step towards the wooden creature. Yelling loudly, she threatened the wooden artifact, "if you've hurt Joan, I will pummel you into toothpicks and sell you to the goblins!"

One end of the table sagged between its legs, and Sadie couldn't help but remember the cartoon movies she'd seen when her daughter was little.

"Easy Anna, Joan is fine." Sadie said to the human.

The table turned, shook itself like an annoyed cat, then pranced out of the house without another word.

Looking around the livingroom Anna shook her head. "What the hell happened?"

"It wants to eat her." Sadie sighed and walked to the nearby kitchen counter. Lifting the ball carefully, she set it gently on a folded towel so that it wouldn't roll off.

"Why the fuck...?"

"AI." Sadie replied without turning, knowing good and well that the woman wouldn't need more than the single word.

"Oh. Um, well..."

"Yeah." Sadie agreed.

"Joan is stable. Sort of." Anna didn't sound too convinced by her own words.

Sadie chuckled and made her way into the kitchen. The stasis unit held one of the many household interfaces. Activating the repair system, she watched as dozens of smaller robots leapt to life and began cleaning up the house. It would only take a couple of minutes to repair the damage completely.

"We have a few minutes. Want something to eat?" Sadie asked as she poured another coffee.

"Can you even cook?" Anna asked, moving to a stool on the living room side of the counter.

"Nope. But I make a decent sandwich." Sadie shrugged.

"Sounds good to me."

As Sadie gathered ingredients, Anna looked the dormant metal ball next to her.

"Do you do this a lot?"

"Nope. She gets horribly vindictive about being taken offline." Sadie didn't look up as she answered.

"I know the feeling." She growled the reply more than said it, and the elf grimaced.

"Sorry about that by the way." Sadie tried to apologize for knocking the woman unconscious several months ago.

"No, you're not."

Snorting, the elf shrugged. "You're right. I'm not sorry. You needed help. Neither of us can deny that."

The woman was silent for several minutes as the elf finished making the meatball subs. Sliding a plate in front of the agent, she drew the woman's attention back to the present.

"That's one of the crappy things about being human." Sadie smiled softly as the agent looked up at her. "As an elf, we can choose to store our memories out of sight. They are still there, but they are easier to keep away from us."

Staring down to her own sandwich, Sadie's mind flashed to when she pulled her weapons on Zerrick. The trigger was a dangerous memory that had tried to sneak its way to the surface. Elven memory storage wasn't a perfect technique, sometimes memories could feed off each other, bringing something forward that was similar to another memory, but it was rare.

"Does that make the memories harder to remember?" Anna asked around a mouthful of food.

"It can, yes. We forget a lot, but then we live a long time. If we remembered everything all the time, we'd go insane."

"Hmm."

Sadie smirked, "what?"

"I wonder if that's why human wizards that pass a certain age seem more unstable."

"Likely one reason," she shrugged. She hadn't really known too many arch-wizards that were old. Least not human ones.

Sadie rested her hand on the metallic sphere and began its boot sequence. As she took several more bites of her sandwich, the two women sat in silence, watching the ball.

When it suddenly leapt into the air, they both jumped slightly and found weapons in their hands.

Sadie set the butcher-knife in her plate and pulled Anna's empty plate on top of hers. Stepping over to the sink, she washed the dishes by hand as Joan continued to process what happened.

"Where is that walking tree?" A dark, angry voice crawled across the room and the elf shook her head slowly.

No one said anything, however, as the ball zipped around the room. "Where..? What the...? Damnit! You fucking white-haired bitch!"

Joan zipped into the kitchen and hovered behind Sadie, uncomfortably close. She remained still as her hand tightened on the knife. Joan was looking for any reason to turn this into an actual fight. She suddenly wondered if the android had ever really dealt with the death of her maker and best friend.

Especially since he had left her behind for the one person who the droid only barely tolerated. It had to have been hard on Joan, to have Leon choose Helena over her.

"Easy Joan." Anna finally said something.

"Why?"

Sadie felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

"She was just trying to keep the peace. Besides, you missed it. Sadie ripped it a new one! It slinked out with its proverbial tail tucked between its legs." Anna laughed.

She felt the droid float away slightly, and she relaxed her grip.

"No," Sadie spoke up, adding her two cents to the ex-agent's depiction of the events. "You ripped it a new one. I was too angry to say anything useful."

Anna chuckled and Sadie could see her out of the corner of her vision. She waved for the droid to follow her, "Common, lets watch TV."

"Ohhhhhhh." Joan elongated the sound and zipped to the living room, floating just over her spot on the couch. "Soaps!" she exclaimed gleefully.

Chuckling, Sadie made her way out to the balcony quickly. The doors closed just as the theme music for their most recent soap-operas began. She hated soaps. Anywhere was better than Leon's living room at that moment. Even prison.

Flopping casually back into her chair, she picked the book up from the floor where it had fallen, and found her favorite part.

Shade stepped into the massive ballroom, aboard his majesty's ship, Empress's Finesse. It lent new meaning to the phrase, luxury liner. The ship alone was a full-sized dreadnought they had heavily refitted to be a home away from home for the immediate royal family. Which today, included the Empress Franchesca Matilde Ashkenazi and her three youngest daughters.

As was common in many ballrooms, it had a massive staircase that could hold twenty soldiers' side by side, in full armor. The main entry was onto the landing at the halfway point in the staircase. The main stairs led down to the ballroom floor, which could easily house a full sized grav-ball game. Up from the landing, the stairs split and led up the walls to a large balcony that wrapped around the entire room.

Positioned throughout the ballroom were enough guards to handle just about any circumstance. Most were in royal guard uniforms, with sidearms and combat rifles. While still others walked around as guests and wait staff, armed only with sidearms.

On a dais on the far end of the room there was a single throne. Upon it sat an elegantly dressed woman wearing a crown that sparkled, even from this distance. Her long dark hair piled expertly atop her head, adorned with even more sparkles. She wore a gown that was likely worth as much as the ship itself.

"Grandmaster Shipwright Regina Satheeri Dalmoore." A man in a royal guard uniform yelled loudly to the individuals within hearing distance.

Regina raised an eyebrow at the man. She was mildly surprising that he knew her middle name. But then, on second thought, it wasn't that remarkable, considering the multitude of royal guests. It would require an in-depth security check to get an invitation to a party that included the Empress. Even if she was a body double.

She noticed the woman on the dais look in her direction after the mention of her name, and Regina couldn't help but hope that it was because of someone behind her.

Regina wore a floor length blue gown that matched her deep blue eyes perfectly. And while it was worth well over a million credits and looked utterly fabulous on her. She couldn't help but feel outclassed by the billion-dollar gowns around her as she reached the ballroom floor.

A woman nearby nodded her bejeweled head towards the blonde shipwright.

Regina sighed. That headdress alone could buy four of her top-of-the-line ships.

A tall, thin man, in a rather handsome tuxedo, stepped up to her and bowed. "It elates his grace that you were able to join us, Ms. Dalmoore. He asked me to check on the progress of his newest commission?"

Regina smiled and took a drink from a tray as it passed. "The keel is down, and we are putting the ribs in place now. It should be ready by the time he returns from his honeymoon."

"Wonderful." The man clasped his hands together and smiled that flawless smile that he'd been perfecting most of his life.

Regina felt sorry for him, he was clearly far too attached to this bride. Leaning in, she asked quietly, "how are you doing Glen?"

His smile softened slightly, and he took a step closer to her. "A little overwhelmed, but it's not like weddings are new around here. I think he has found the perfect mate this time though." His practiced response was so well rehearsed that it almost sounded sincere.

She resisted the urge to chuckle and instead took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. She patted his arm. "Hang in there. It will be over soon enough."

They were both aware that she wasn't talking about the wedding.

"You should pay your respects to her imperial majesty." He locked eyes with her. "She has on the most amazing gown, and if I am not mistaken, she is wearing the Lendari Tears. It is an exquisite combo."

Regina lifted an eyebrow in surprise. "Really?"

His standard smile shifted to a sly smirk as he reached out to take her hand and kiss it gently. "I must mingle. Enjoy the wedding."

"I may just do that after all." She chuckled.

Shade had learned a lot over the last month about the Emperor's Starburst, the traditional royal jewels of the Imperial family. The empress of the Helandigari Empire wore the Emperor's Starburst during important formal state events. That she'd chosen not to wear them tonight was likely a slight intended for the Duke.

But then, he had made the royal family show up for over ten weddings in the last thirteen years. That he was marrying outside the usual list of accepted royal partners might upset the family. And marrying a supermodel that was over eighty years his younger probably didn't help matters.

Thomas had shared everything he had on the target. The history, detailed photos, measurements, facts, and even, a who's who, of royal family members who had either worn them or been able to touch them in private. A list which he hadn't been on, Regina noticed.

But something was still missing. No matter how thorough the intelligence was, it was still missing the why. It had clearly defined who made it, what it was from, and precise locations where the jewels were kept, both in the palace, and on the Empresses Finesse. But why Duke Thomas Sanderison would want the royal jewels was mysteriously absent. Which meant he was hiding something.

Either way, Regina had decided that it was the perfect chance to see if she still had the gift. It had been a few decades since she'd done anything this, well, this insane. But there was a certain thrill to placing her head in the lion's mouth, just to steal its platinum fillings.

Maneuvering carefully through the crowd, she visited with the several dozen people she knew, and even a few that she didn't, but would like to. After all, people with money bought things. Things like private yachts. It never hurt to expand her network.

"Really, you made the Kings Grace?" A rather wealthy CEO of Keenadine Biomedical raised both eyebrows in surprise.

"Let me guess, you assumed I was a man?" She smirked as the man blushed.

His wife laughed and pat him on the forearm. "We should take that as a yes."

Regina chuckled, "Yes. I am the sole owner of Seasprite Engineering. All the ships we build, I design, even the special orders. I then send the designs to the manufacturing facility who builds them to spec, with oversight by my staff. I then personally inspect every ship before and while we bring the engines online."

A soft chime echoed throughout the room. Almost every head in the room turned towards the large doors at the far end of the ballroom.

Regina, however, glanced towards the dais and saw it empty. Damn, she thought.

"I need to use the restroom before the nuptials. We can talk more about it later, if you are interested."

The woman next to the CEO smiled at Regina. "I don't care if *he* is interested. I want one of my own! I will find you after the wedding."

"Sounds great." Regina smiled. "A few good stiff drinks, dancing, and business. My favorite kind of evening."

The man rolled his eyes, but the woman laughed. "Sounds perfect."

Regina looked around and saw an exit that clearly marked, restroom.



Sadie looked up from the book and smiled. She hadn't lied to the woman, that was still her favorite kind of evening.

The door to her right slid open, and she saw Joan float out onto the balcony. Gliding past the elf, she moved to the railing and stared out into the sky.

In the distance several large, winged creatures were lazily circling. There had always been at least one griffon's nest on the underneath side of the island for as long as Sadie could remember. They were harmless, so long as you left them alone, that is.

Sadie watched the droid for several minutes, her hands resting on the book casually.

"You miss him." She finally said to the Artificially Intelligent machine.

"Yes." Joan turned towards her slowly.

The elf could see the holographic brows furrowed deeply as she met Sadie's gaze. "Do you?"

"You know the answer to that question." Sadie stood and took a deep breath, refusing the droid's attempt at manipulation.

"You've never said it."

"Stop it, Joan. I am not Leon."

"Stop what?"

Taking several angry steps towards the droid, Sadie's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I am not Leon. I do not need a ball of programming and wires to take care of me."

The droid backed away, keeping out of arm's reach.

"The only reason I didn't destroy you a long time ago is because I promised Leon." Folding her arms across her chest, she put her hands near her hidden weapons. "And for me, that promise still stands. I have no intentions of killing you unless you give me a reason to." Her voice dropped slightly as she added, "Fucking with my head is a reason. Are you giving me a reason, Joan?"

The droid arched a single holographic eyebrow and rotated slightly to the side. Which was her attempt at mimicking a contemplative look. "No. I am not. Though I would like to say one thing."

"Go ahead."

"I made a similar promise the first day you set foot on this island."

Sadie smirked and nodded. "I am aware."

They stared at each other for several tense moments until Joan finally turned her attention back to the creatures in the distance.

Sadie leaned out over the banister, resting her elbows on the cool steel.

"What a pair we make." Joan mused.

The elf exhaled quickly. It was almost a chuckle, but not quite.

"Two entities mourning the loss of a loved one and hating the other one for having what the other would give literally anything for."

Placing one hand on the railing, Sadie straightened the arm as she twisted to look at the floating metallic ball. A smile played across her lips and she reached up to pat the droid on the back roughly. "That son of a bitch owes me a million Republic credits." She finally laughed and went back to leaning on her elbows, looking out over the horizon.

"Why's that?" Joan turned toward her slightly.

"I told him you were in love with him." Sadie shrugged. "He kept telling me I was imagining things."

"I am an android, I can't love."

Sadie snorted, "sure. Now who's not dealing with their feelings?"

"Bitch." The ball growled.

"Yep." Sadie agreed.

The two of them stood side by side for several minutes as they stared out into nothing.

When the ball turned and floated off without a word, Sadie frowned. She needed to find Leon. If nothing else, she needed to bring him back to Joan so that the AI could say goodbye. They could both use the closure.

Making her way back to the book, she opted to delve into the memories she'd made long before she even knew that Leon Vetiste, or his pen name Leon Hamilton, existed.



Regina sat on the groom's side all the way at the back of the room. Not quite in the last row. Glancing up at her HUD, she frowned. At this rate, her drone was going to finish its slow-moving pre-coded sequence before the wedding even started.

The large formal courtroom was utterly full of guests, all of them rapidly growing irritated. Around her, people were speculating about the delay, and the volume was slowly creeping up to a deafening roar. On the dais at the front of the room, the Empress had left a good ten minutes ago and not returned, which didn't bode well. The ceremony was already forty-five minutes behind schedule. And it was looking like it would not happen at all.

"Well..." The man next to her started to say, but then seemed to lose his train of thought as the man next to him laughed.

People got up and milled about. As they grouped up with others further away, the gossip spread.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Regina could sense the hostility of the guests climb as the confused and somewhat humored crowd grew angry.

"I spent three months flying all the way out here just to have it canceled. I will kill him." A woman behind Regina growled softly to the man next to her.

"Easy dear, the phonic detectors pick up words like that on this ship."

"I don't give a rat's ass, who hears me!" The woman spat.

The man began trying to calm the woman down, but Regina stood and scanned the room, no longer paying attention to them. Making her way to a nearby guard, she nodded to him then moved a few feet away so he wouldn't be uncomfortable with her proximity. Putting her back to the wall, she began scanning the crowd, watching for the warning signs of something more severe than angry gossip.

Eventually, a man in a tuxedo with the large purple sash, marking him as a staff member of the royal household, stepped up onto the dais. His presence drew hushed noises from the crowd as people slowly turned to the front of the room.

"Dear guests and family. We would like to apologize for the inconvenience, but there has been a medical emergency. At this time we, need to postpone the wedding. But her imperial Majesty would like to extend her gratitude for your attendance. She will allow the after party to continue, and she has arranged gifts from her to each one of you. When you are ready to leave, please alert our staff and we will return your wedding gift to you, along with her imperial majesty's gift." The man opened his arms wide as he bowed deeply.

Regina couldn't help but chuckle, along with several other people, at the last part of the announcement.

"Please enjoy the party with her Majesties compliments!" He finished with a flourish and promptly left the dais.

Throughout the room, several people on the bride's side howled complaints at the retreating servant. While others, mostly on the groom's side, laughed. The gossip roared back to life as theories of heart attacks and death spread like wildfire through the room.

The doors at the end of the long red carpet opened into the ballroom and music drifted into the courtroom, blending with the gossip in a deafening cacophony.

The human female, standing quietly with her back to the wall, grimaced slightly as her audio dampeners kicked on, protecting her disguised elven ears. Her heads up alerted her to the soldier approaching her from the right. It was the same soldier that she had nodded to, before putting herself in a more defensible position. But she remained relaxed and pretended not to notice him.

He stepped into her obvious line of view and paused, waiting for her to acknowledge him.

Smiling at him, she waved him into her personal space. If he were here to arrest her, he wouldn't be so polite, which meant that they didn't realize anything was missing yet. The likelihood of them noticing anything, before leaving Jostten Nine, was very low. Especially since the empress hadn't been wearing the jewels in question.

"Good evening Ms. Dalmoore." The guard nodded curtly. "Your presence has been requested."

Regina smirked, with the sheer numbers of royal personages at the wedding there was no telling who would *request* her presence. One more reason for Regina to prefer Republic space to Imperial space.

"May I ask who is requesting my presence?"

The man shook his head.

"Well, I'd rather not get caught up in a family quarrel, so if it's Thomas, I respectfully decline." She used the royal duke's first name as a slight. But the soldier didn't move a muscle. He didn't even change his expression.

Nodding her head slowly, Regina realized she knew who it was. "It's not his grace, is it?"

Still nothing, as the man kept his gaze locked on hers.

"Do I have a choice?"

He finally smiled faintly and shook his head.

"Right." Taking a deep breath, Regina shifted her weight and pushed off the wall. "Which way?"

With a practiced flourish, the man raised his palm to the left.

She started walking towards the small crowd of guards in the distance. They were guarding one of the four hatches that led deeper into the ship. Her mind tried to warn her of the approaching danger, but she locked the panic deep down and shoved it out of sight.

By the time the guards parted to let her pass, her heart rate was calm. Her mind locked tight against the psionic inspection, which would happen before meeting the woman. Once inside the p-way, a second soldier stepped in front of her and began escorting her through the ship. As they passed by an intersection, Regina could hear Jani and Thomas arguing.

"You are a monster!" The girl screamed.

"You knew that before you agreed to this arrangement, my dear!" He bellowed back.

"Did you have to kill him?" Jani screamed, the sadness obvious in her voice.

The voices faded out of hearing range and Regina held her face perfectly neutral. She was going to miss Glen. She liked when he came with the duke to play cards. He never had a shortage of snarky responses to her, no matter how charming she had been.

Finally, the p-way shifted to brighter colors and a carpeted deck. Regina couldn't help but roll her eyes at the sight. This was a warship. Why would anyone... she stopped herself mid thought, as she realized she didn't really have room to talk. Almost all her designs were decadent like this. She however didn't design war ships, just luxury yachts.

A hatch opened, and the guards led her into a large living space. The guard in front of her suddenly stopped as a massive dog darted in front of his legs. On its tail a young girl, in a rather pretty dress, charged after him laughing.

"Give it back!" She squealed.

The guard cleared his throat and a woman with long black hair, blue eyes and a lovely floor-length gown looked up from where she sat on the couch, brushing the hair of a girl in her young teens.

"Ah, thank you, gentlemen. That will be all."

"Ma'am?" The man behind her sounded as if he were about to have a heart attack.

Glaring at the guard, the woman frowned. "What's she going to do? Start an international incident? I think not." Waving the brush at him, she made a shooing gesture.

Regina opted to remain still as the guards looked from her to the Empress. There was nothing she could say that would make this situation any better.

"Ma'am, we have standing orders." The man in the rear spoke again, he was clearly the ranking officer.

"Ms. Dalmoore. Do you intend me or my children harm at this time?"

"No, your majesty." Regina replied, still not willing to bow like most imperial citizens would do by now.

"There, she is fine. Besides, I have business with the lady. Now get out and let me have a few minutes in peace." The last sentence came out slightly lower in intonation than the rest, which seemed odd.

Imperial royals were always perfectly calm and collected, no matter what was happening around them. Their intense training from birth allowed for nothing else.

The guard behind her touched her arm, and she turned to glance at him.

"She's had a rough few weeks. Please don't make it worse." The words were sub-vocalized. No human could have heard him, which meant they were aware that she wasn't human.

Smiling brightly, Regina winked at him, then turned her attention to the woman. "Business, you say? Well, your imperial majesty, you now have my undivided attention." She took a step forward out of the custody of the soldiers, then paused and curtsied deeply; her head bowed to stare at the ground as she waited for the woman to tell her to rise.

"Rise and come here, Regina." The woman chuckled. "I love that gown by the way."

Regina took several steps towards the couches across from the woman. pushing a toy out of the way, she smirked as the young princess leapt onto the large dog that she could easily use as a mount. The dog bolted away, wagging its tail happily.

Pointing to the now empty seat behind Regina with the brush, the woman nodded.

"Sit. I'd like to talk to you about a commission."

Arching an eyebrow, Regina sat on the edge of the couch and crossed her knees causally. Relaxing her hands on her knees, she kept them in plain sight. Opting to keep the soldiers on the other side of the hatches as calm as possible.

"Color me intrigued."

The teen sitting on the ground chuckled.

Regina winked at her.

"My eldest son has his twentieth birthday coming up in nine months. I'd like you to build my present to him."

Regina kept her face neutral; this was about to get sticky. Torn between her Republic roots and her current identity as an imperial citizen, she needed to choose her words carefully. "While I thank you for your interest in Seasprite Designs. I am afraid I am booked solid for the next three years. I couldn't possibly meet that deadline."

The entire room froze as all three children turned to stare at Regina in shock.

In her own mind, Regina asked, what the fuck was that? Great, there goes this persona.

Empress Franchesca Matilde Ashkenazi smiled warmly and nodded. Reaching around the girl in front of her, she handed the child the hairbrush. "Take your sisters in to the nanny and get ready for bed."

"Aww..." The two younger girls frowned, but the teenager stood, curtsied deeply to her mother, and shooed the children out. The large dog however stayed and moved to lie in front of his owner. Watching the stranger intently.

Once they were out of the room and the hatch sealed behind them. The Empress leaned back in her chair and draped her elbow over the arm. It was not her typical elegant poise, and Regina couldn't help but smirk at the woman's power play.

"I've seen your list. All of your customers would understand being bumped by the crown prince." Her voice was cool and collected, despite having to negotiate.

"I am sure they would," Regina agreed, unmoved by the argument.

When she didn't add to the statement, the woman's grin broadened somewhat. "So, you will do it then."

"No. I will not." In her Heads-up-Display, she saw several yellow dots switch to red, as the guards outside the room took their weapons off safety and grouped up at the hatches that led into the room. "If you wish to commission a vessel from me, then you will wait in line. Like everyone else." Regina added firmly. Still not moving from her relaxed position facing the woman.

The woman stared at her for several tense minutes, as she no doubt considered her options.

"I admire you." The woman finally said, her voice still calm and collected.

"And I you your majesty."

"Call me, Francesca. When we are alone, that is." Standing, the woman moved to a bar positioned near the wall on her left. "Would you like a drink?"

"I'd love one." But still Regina didn't move. The guards were still at the hatch, ready to burst through. Any movement on her part might trigger their entrance and she knew it.

"Cognac, right?"

"Of course not, your majesty. Republic cognac is illegal in Imperial space."

The woman turned and walked back towards her guest, handing her a crystal glass with a thick golden liquid.

Regina took it and sniffed the contents; it was Republic Cognac. Smirking, she took a sip.

"I assume that will work instead, then?" The woman smiled warmly as she stood in front of the chair that she'd been sitting in only moments ago.

Regina wanted badly to stand. Sitting in the woman's presence was a serious offense to the crown, but she knew better. Any movement at all might trigger a body cavity search that she really didn't want right now. Assuming they left her alive at all.

"How about this instead?" The woman sat as an idea seemed to come to her. "I will put myself in line, just like any other customer." She smirked at the idea of being just like anyone else.

Regina shook her head slowly. She was about to be played and they both knew it.

"And you will accept an anonymous gift from a benefactor which allows you to build a second shipyard, or even a third. However many it takes to ensure that my son's birthday present is completed in time."

Regina replied, "we both get what we want, without losing face."

"Indeed. You put the royal family in their place, and I get my ship. Most will miss the intricacies of the deal. But to the political elite, we both preserve our power base." She rose an eyebrow. "You realize that this play of yours may lose you some business among the loyalists?"

Chuckling, Regina took a sip of the highly illegal cognac, then shrugged. "That may be, but no offense to you, or the crown, that is a tiny percentage of the population. At least among those that can afford my work, anyway." She paused for effect, "For every loyalist customer I loose, I will gain at least fifty new clients."

The woman frowned slightly, and Regina knew she'd cracked that perfect facade.

"Well played." The woman took a deep breath, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "You are not what I expected, Ms. Dalmoore."

"I'm glad to hear it." Regina nodded, a sly smirk firmly in place. "You are, however, exactly what I expected your majesty."

The woman's nostrils flared ever so slightly. For most onlookers, nothing happened between the two women, except a cool business negotiation. But to Regina, who had spent her entire life mastering the ability to read people, she knew good and well that her shots had landed with deadly accuracy. It was time to leave before the woman retaliated with something far less subtle.

"I think we have a deal. My people will send your people the details." Standing slowly, she curtsied deeply to the woman. She paused for the dismissal, but when it didn't come, she stood on her own and walked to the hatch. It slid open silently, and she found herself face to face with at least five rather angry royal guards.

"Regina." The woman in the room called.

Turning, she saw the woman still sitting, casually sipping her drink.

"It requires my permission to leave this room alive."

Regina couldn't stop the smirk as it played across her lips. Reaching up to scratch her nose, she tried to mask it. She'd gone too far. Well, at least now she knew the woman's limits.

"My apologies, your imperial majesty." She took two steps back into the room and stood with her hands clasped in front of her peacefully.

The woman named Francesca strolled casually over to her and waved her hand to the hatch.

Regina didn't hear it close, but she also no longer heard the guards on in the hall.

The black-haired woman stepped well inside Regina's personal space. Her lighter blue eyes stared deep into the disguised elf's deeper blue ones.

Regina contemplated taking a step back, but refused to give ground to the woman.

"I really do love this gown." She began dragging her fingertips along Regina's side.

It was then that Regina suddenly realized what was happening. Shit, she thought. She really had gone too far. Her mind raced as she tried to untangle herself without offending the woman.

Snatching the woman's wrist, stopping her hand from continuing just before it reached her breast. She mused to herself, that probably wasn't it. She cringed slightly.

Francesca's brow raised slightly in surprise. "I thought an elf wouldn't be so finicky." She cooed, her voice husky.

"They aren't." Regina pursed her lips. She would not insult the woman by pretending to be human. "But there are certain exceptions. For one, we are not suicidal."

The empress's brow furrowed slightly, and the woman took a small step back, giving Regina her space.

Letting go of the woman's wrist, Regina started to fold her arms, then thought better of it. Instead, she dropped them to her side and waited.

"Very well then, Ms. Dalmoore. You are free to leave our presence."

Regina heard the Imperial soldiers behind her again. And she never thought she would be this thankful to hear that sound.

"Thank you, your majesty."

The woman simply nodded as she watched Regina get escorted away from her private quarters.

They led Regina through the ship to an outer lock, where one of the ship's many shuttles waited to take her back to her own vessel. So much for the party, she thought.

As she approached the lock, a royal seneschal waited for her with a package under one arm. It was a one-foot, by one-foot, by six-inch box wrapped in white and blue paper, and decorated with a bright blue bow covered in glitter.

As he handed it to her, she smiled warmly.

"Thank you, I suppose."

"You are quiet welcome. And I have been told to inform you that her majesty will be at your facility tomorrow to place her order. I believe she is expecting a tour." The man smiled kindly, though she knew he would smile like that even if he were stabbing her repeatedly.

"Thank you again. I assume her nephew will join her?"

Looking at the pad in his hand, the man read the list and finally nodded. "It seems he will, yes."

"Figured." She replied quietly. Tucking the gift under her arm, she stepped through the lock into the waiting shuttle.

The next day, Regina led the tour through the facility. She even showcased the ship that was currently being built for the newlyweds. It took several hours, but eventually she left the Empress and her sea of staff, with one of the Seasprite sales staff.

Regina led Thomas to her office so that they might discuss changes to his ship. As she strolled into her office, she made a B-Line to the bar and poured them both a drink without asking.

Taking the glass, he met her gaze. The dark bags under eyes showed that he had gotten little sleep.

"Rough night?" She asked.

"Screw you." He snapped at her.

She chuckled and shook her head. "I assume you don't want to talk about it or anything."

His eyes narrowed dangerously at her teasing, and she raised both hands in surrender.

"Sorry."

"No, you're not. Do you have the goods?"

Waving her glass toward the table behind him, she nodded. She had tucked the small jewelry box safely in a larger box that held one of the many models she often sold to people who liked sailboats, but just didn't have time for the hobby.

He set the glass down and tore open the box. Digging through the ship parts, she heard the weak balsa snap several times, and she tried not to cringe.

Yanking the jewelry box free, he looked it over carefully.

"The jewels had better be in here." He growled at her.

Shrugging, Regina pointed to the box. "That's how they gave it to me. I don't know what's inside. Remember, I just brokered the deal." She lied.

Unlike him, she'd spent over three-hundred years eliminating her tells. Even to the point of giving herself fake tells when she played games like dathalu.

"Fine." He shook the box slightly, and she cringed. "But if the jewels aren't in here, I will hunt you and this Shade person to the edge of the galaxy."

Regina's eyes narrowed slightly at the threat. A small part of her wondered if he actually thought that the necklace was what he was looking for.

"I can assure you. The necklace is in there." She nodded.

"Fine." He set the jewelry box back into the box with the model and closed it. Downing the last of the scotch in one gulp, he put the box under his arm and moved to the hatch. "Your payment." He flipped her a platinum cred chip.

Catching it, she nodded her head in thanks.

"Good luck, Thomas." She smirked as he stormed out of her office.

Turning back to her desk, she pulled out the bottom drawer and smiled down at the jewelry box sitting there. "Now to find a safe place to hide you." Seeing the partially completed model of the sea-going catamaran, she grinned broadly. "Perfect."

The End



Sadie closed the book and looked up into the sky. She couldn't help but wonder where the model of her catamaran was now. Had someone found the jewelry box?

The jewels had been right where she said they were, and when they found Thomas wearing them, well... he hadn't lived long enough to explain how he'd gotten them.

The duplicated box had been an exact copy of the original, but the computer inside was utterly devoid of life. She had intended to return it to the imperial crown eventually, after it stopped being funny. But it never ceased to make her laugh when she looked at the model of the sailing vessel known as The Shade.

A small part of her wondered if her joke had somehow caused the downfall of the Empire.

"Nah." She laughed as she stood. "I wonder if anyone in the royal family ever read this?" She mused out loud, then laughed again as she went inside. Clearly, she still found it funny, several thousand years later.