



# Silhouettes in the Shade

*Written by Wendi Coffman Porter  
World Design by Richard W. Porter III*

“ There is an old adage, that professionals don't make big mistakes, they make little ones. And while that is true, even in the case of a professional like Shade. The true mark of greatness is when, that professional, plans for the mistakes they know will eventually happen. There is of course no way to know what the mistake will be, so the plan needs to be broad, and more flexible than typical. And all too often, utterly final. ”

-Leon Hamilton

# Silhouettes in the Shade

*Written by Wendi Coffman-Porter*

*World Design by Richard W. Porter III*

## **Rune 23rd, 26552 (Starting of spring)**

Sadie halted on the corner of Foundry and Keller and scanned the surroundings. She'd locked herself in her lab for over a week, doing research. She needed a break. A stiff breeze kicked up and blew her silky white hair into her face. Brushing back, she finally saw what she was looking for. Bugrasi was a decent sized city for this fourth-age apocalypse. It's lack of running water or power, originally annoyed her to the point of rage. But she was growing accustomed to it. The last trip to Viniccia taught her to suck it up and try new things. So that was the goal today. To explore a new section of the city that she had never considered before.

Down thirty yards, and across the street, there was a cute-looking restaurant, with outdoor seating. The covered patio had several flowering vines that wove intricately through the strategically placed trellises, which separated the patio from the sidewalk. It looked perfect. Overhead, thunder rolled leisurely across the city. The storm was still miles away, but she could already feel the barometer dropping as the rain threatened.

Swiftly crossing the street, she made her way down the raised sidewalk to the woman standing at the entrance. She wore a simple work dress, with an off-white apron. Her hair was a beautiful deep shade of red, which matched nicely with her lighter complexion and emerald green eyes. It was the first red-head that Sadie had seen in Bugrasi.

"Good morning, ma'am." The woman smiled sweetly at her.

The elf returned the smile and nodded her head. "Good morning. Do you have room for me on the patio?"

"I think we can fit you in." The woman chuckled and waved her open palm towards empty patio tables. "Pick anyplace you like. Though I recommend in the center near the door. It'll remain dry, even when the storm hits."

"Thank you." Picking a table near one of the large open double doors, the elf pulled a book from her bag and set it down on the table.

The woman set a warm loaf of bread on the table. The steam rising off it smelled amazing. "Would you like some tea, or perhaps some wine? We have several good elven vintages."

"Do you have anything harder?"

The woman beamed brightly, her emerald green eyes twinkling. "We have several. But I highly recommend our Tepani Cognac."

"That sounds wonderful. I will take that, and whatever the special is today."

The woman nodded. "Rendali, our chef, anticipated the weather. So, our special is bouillabaisse."

"Perfect." Sadie smiled brightly. She might not regret this after all.

Bowing slightly, the woman hurried off into the restaurant.

Overhead, the sky flashed. It was several seconds before the thunder chased the flash across the city. As the first large drops of water fell, the elf smiled. She loved the smell that came with the first drops of rain. It always made her think of Jostten Nine. There was something magical about that place. But it was likely just the purity of it. A purity which was missing on most of the worlds that Sadie had been to in her long lifetime.

Tearing a piece of bread from the loaf, she inhaled the warm fragrance. It smelled amazing. And she wondered what kinds of spices they had mixed into the bread to give it the amazing aroma. As she took a bite, her body sagged in the chair. It tasted like it smelled, amazing! She had a new favorite restaurant, and she didn't care how the rest of the food tasted.

Chewing the bread happily, she skimmed the cover of the book resting on the table. Like the other Shade novels. The book had a thick leather binding with heavy tooling. The image appeared to be a digi-board of some kind. On it, several images hung that showed various types of weapons and pieces of jewelry. Smack in the center of the other images was a silhouette of a humanoid, from the waist up. Carefully tacked into the leather was a red silk thread which tied each of the images to the single silhouette in the center. The title was pure gold and mounted tightly to the wooden cover under the leather. It read: *Silhouettes in the Shade*.

As she folded the cover open, the sky flashed overhead, followed almost immediately by a torrential downpour.

There is an adage that professionals don't make big mistakes, they make little ones. And while that is true, even with a professional like Shade. The true mark of greatness is when that professional plans for the mistakes they know will eventually happen. There is of course no way to know what the mistake will be, so the plan needs to be broad, and more flexible than typical. And all too often, utterly final.

When one of those minor mistakes led to Imperial Investigative Officers showing up on Shade's doorstep with badges in hand. She already had a plan. A game, if you will. A bloody game of shadows and misdirection. Using the bright spotlight of the law, she traced her little singing canary. And eliminate two annoying birds, with one well-placed two-ton boulder. Well, bomb actually.

"Ms. Dalmoore?"

The blonde-haired human looked up to her beautiful dark-haired aide. It was the third secretary in the last two years, but this one seemed to her job with some level on competency.

"You have..." the woman hesitated, she clearly wasn't sure how to finish the sentence. "Guests."

Arching an eyebrow, Regina pursed her lips. Her aide knew better than to just let anyone without an appointment. Which meant there was something wrong. Leaning back in her chair, the CEO of Seasprite Engineering folded her arms across her chest. "Show them in, I suppose."

To most, folding her arms was just a sign of annoyance. But for the elf pretending to be human, it was a sign that she felt the need to be near her weapons. Her specially designed shoulder holster was a stealth rig. Specifically designed to hide weapons from any form of scan, including visual. It did so by tucking the weapons into quantum space, making them not actually on this plane of existence.

A woman in a well-tailored dark grey pant-suit stepped into her office. She had brown hair and eyes, and a confident air that told Regina all she needed to know. Government.

Behind her, an orcish male with dark brown skin, and piercing green eyes stepped into the office. He wore a spectacular black, tailored suit with a green power tie that matched his eyes perfectly. He was clearly the one in charge. Based on the value of the suit alone.

"Welcome to Seasprite Engineering. How can I help the Helandigari Empire today?" Regina beamed brightly, but didn't move her arms.

The human female narrowed her eyes angrily, but the male smirked.

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Ms. Dalmoore." The orc reached inside his coat and pulled out a badge. Imperial Investigate Service. "We want to ask you a few questions about an associate of yours."

Regina smiled and finally waved a hand, palm up, towards the chairs facing her desk. "I am, as always, a loyal citizen of the Empire. Have a seat, I will answer anything I can."

The woman seemed to hesitate, but when her lead passed her to sit down, she sighed and followed suit.

"Thank you." His voice was deep, which was often the case with the species.

Regina smiled warmly and wondered how seriously he took his job. He was handsome, with those deep green eyes and genuine smile. His broad shoulders and square jaw belied a strong build underneath that perfectly tailored suit, which was more common in the orcish species than it was typical of humans or elves. A few nights with him might be entertaining, especially if she could get a few drinks in him.

"We are looking for a person who goes by the alias Shade." He watched her intently as he said the name.

Regina knew this game well. She gave him the tell he was looking for. Her breathing shifted slightly, and she blinked several times at the mention of the name. To pretend that she didn't know the name was ridiculous. Even in her brief career, Shade was gaining some rather serious notoriety. And to pretend that there was no link between herself and the thief, she'd been brokering work for, was folly.

"I see." She finally said and leaned back in the chair. It rocked slightly as she pursed her lips.

"You will tell us everything you know about them!" The female agent leaned forward in her chair, attempting to be aggressive.

The orc next to her simply watched them both, casually.

A coy smirk played across Regina's lips. The traditional good cop, bad cop routine, how quaint.

"Are you insinuating that I have anything to do with this Shade person?"

The woman stood suddenly and slammed her hands down on the desk. "We know you and the Shade work together! We know everything!"

Regina resisted the urge to laugh at the woman and instead kept her gaze cool and calculating. She replied, refusing to respond to her threats. "Then I suppose I should contact my lawyer."

"Ms. Dalmoore, if you are a good Imperial citizen, as you say, then I am sure we can discuss this without lawyers." The orc, smirked.

Regina laughed boisterously.

The sound seemed to infuriate the woman into reaching for her weapon, but the Orc placed his hand on her arm.

"Does that ever work?" Regina locked eyes with the orc. "I mean seriously. Do any of the people you investigate, actually fall for that line?"

Smirking, he replied, "you'd be surprised."

"Sadly, I doubt I would." Regina shook her head. "Am I under arrest?"

"No." He replied, cutting the off the woman next to him.

"What?" The woman shrieked. "Arrest her! She is an accomplice!" The demand came out more of a roar than actual words.

"Glenda, wait outside." The orc ordered gently.

The woman slammed her fists into the desk and opened her mouth to say something, but the glare from her team lead prevented her. Spinning on her heel, the investigator stormed from the room.

As the door slid closed behind her, Regina returned her attention to the orc.

"She takes the bad cop routine a little too seriously."

He chuckled. "She's dedicated to the part. That is for certain."



They both laughed.

"My name is Xander, by the way." He crossed his legs at the knee and rested his hands casually in his lap.

"Nice to meet you, Xander. But I am still not talking without a lawyer present."

She watched him breathe in deeply through his nose and she smirked. Orcs had an incredible sense of smell. And no matter how much control she had over her own body, pheromones were almost impossible to mask. She knew he could smell her interest.

"I understand." He nodded. "How about you just listen to my offer then? You can then discuss it later with your lawyer."

"I think I can manage that."

Chuckling, he shook his head at her. "I am not interested in you, but you are my link to this Shade. And therefore, a link to my actual purpose here. Shade stole something that the crown considers..." he let his voice trail off as he tried to finish the sentence. "Important."

"Indeed?"

"I am charged with returning this item." His eyes narrowed slightly as he left the threat unsaid. "And I will recover the item and put the people responsible for stealing it behind bars for life." Reaching into his pocket again, he pulled out a digital business card. Leaning forward, he set it on the desk.

"You can either be a friend who helps me recover it, or the criminal who helped steal it. The choice is yours." Standing, he straightened his jacket and winked at her, suggesting far more than casual interest. "I, for one, hope you chose the friend route. Call me?"

Regina licked her top lip lightly and grinned at him. "I can guarantee it."



"I still can't believe how bloody the mess was." A hushed male voice spoke, nearby. His words alone were enough to draw the elf's attention up from the book.

The rain had slowed, and two constables were walking past the restaurant. Their waxed leather cloaks drawn tightly about them, holding out the water.

Across the street, a woman in a rather heavy wool cloak with gold and silver trim raced through the rain. In her arms, she carried a wrapped bundle. Her posture alone caused Sadie to be suspicious, and as she concentrated on the bundle, she noticed it was some kind of extremely well made, taupe gown, covered in what appeared to be blood.

Blinking several times, she stared as the woman raced through an open door. Above the door hung a sign that read Middleman Laundry.

"They arrested her husband last night. But I have never seen a man that upset before." The second guard shook his head under the cloak.

"Crime of passion, I guess." The first guard sighed.

Sadie pursed her lips and furrowed her brow deeply. This was not an affluent quarter. A woman with that much obvious money, coming here to wash a gown, was unusual. Inside the launderer, she could see the woman waving her arms at the proprietor of the laundry. Whatever the problem was, she was clearly unhappy. Shifting her elven hearing to hear through the rain, she focused on the two.

"I don't care how much it costs! You will get this out, or I will have you and your entire family arrested for theft! And not a word to anyone. My husband finds out I got pig's blood on his favorite gown and he will divorce me!" The woman demanded.

"As you wish, m'lady." The man's voice behind the counter was respectful, but stern.

Sadie could tell just by his intonation that the threat irritated him.

"I will be back tomorrow, it had better be clean!" the woman snapped and stormed from the building. As she pulled her hood up to exit into the rain, the elf got a good look at her.

Bugrasi is not a small city by any classification. So, when Sadie realized she recognized the woman, she frowned. Taking a sip from her cognac, Sadie watched the woman run off in the rain. Turning her attention to the glass in her hand, she raised both eyebrows in shock. It was unbelievably good. Far better than Republic cognac. Glancing in through the doors behind her, she caught the serving woman's attention.

As the woman hurried out to the elf, she beamed brightly.

"This is amazing!" Sadie exclaimed.

Clapping her hands together happily, the woman nodded in agreement.



"May I ask your name?"

She paused, furrowing her brow. Placing her hand on her chest she replied, "Margarete."

"Margarete, what a beautiful name."

The woman blushed and curtsied.

"Are you married?" Sadie felt herself get drug off track by the lovely woman.

Cocking her head warily, the woman pointed to the glass. "Did you have a question about the cognac?"

Glancing down at the drink then back up to the woman, the elf chuckled. "I did. Can I buy this by the bottle, or better yet, the case? For my ship?"

"Ahh," the woman seemed relieved. "You're a captain. I understand now. The bottle, most likely. I am not sure about the later. I will need to ask the owner. He won't be in until this evening, when we get busy."

"Very well." Sadie looked down at the empty bowl of soup and frowned. She didn't remember eating any of it. "Great, now you're eating my food as well as my coffee." She mumbled to the ghost cat that had been following her ever since Vinicia. She still hadn't seen it yet, but Joan had. For whatever reason, it was following her and making a pest of itself.

"Pardon?" the woman looked concerned. "Was the soup not to your satisfaction?"

Looking up at her, Sadie shook her head. "No, it was so good, that I'd like a second bowl. If that's okay?"

"Of course, Captain."

The elf looked across the street. "Would you mind watching my book while I run across to speak to the launderer?"

"Your table will be untouched, captain." The waitress agreed.

Beaming a bright smile in thank you. Sadie stood and swiftly made her way through the rain, to the far side of the street. High overhead a clap of thunder rolled across the city, setting a rather foreboding mood.

Looking up at the clouds, just before she entered, the elf chuckled. "Nice touch." She mumbled.

Inside the laundry, the smells of chemicals and flowers were potent, but not unpleasant.

She didn't really need a launderer. There was a washer and dryer on the ship, and her outerwear resulted from an artifact that she picked up during her lifetime as Regina Dalmoore. It changed shape at her desire, meaning that a change of clothes could literally be instant. A thief's wet dream, or so Leon said when he first saw it in use.

"Good day, ma'am. How may I assist?" A deep male voice proceeded the large male that stepped out from between several racks of hanging clothes.

Smiling warmly, the elf nodded her head respectfully to the man.

He was clean shaven yet rugged. He wore a shirt with no sleeves that showed off muscular arms. And his long blonde hair was bound tightly at the nape of his neck, to keep it out of the vats. Clearly this was a man used to intense labor.

She sighed softly and thought to herself, I really need to get laid soon. As her eyes traveled back up to the man's face, she realized that she'd been leering a tad too much.

The grin on his face, however, showed that he didn't mind.

Smirking, she replied, "my apologies. I am a ship's captain. I've been at sea a while."

He chuckled.

"May I ask your name? Mine is Captain Sadie Feelari."

"Francis." His smile faded slightly as his eyes narrowed cautiously.

"Thank you, Francis. It's an odd habit I have. I like to know who I am dealing with." She shrugged. It was true that she preferred to know names, but the reason was a lie. It was easier to manipulate a person when you used their names. "My vessel is small, which makes us a target for the larger ships." She grimaced and shook her head. "Luckily, I have a rather competent wizard on board, along with a good crew. But this last voyage we were attacked." She looked off to the side as she pretended to recall the attack. "Some of my crew were injured. And I got blood all over my favorite silk shirt."

The man's eyes narrowed slightly.

She knew she needed to be careful if she wanted information from this man. She stood tall as she beamed proudly. "But my wizard sunk that ship like a rock! It was glorious!"

The man tried not to, but her boast caused him to smirk.

"I was just wondering, If I brought my shirt in, how long would it take to get it clean? If you can clean it at all that is." She pouted. "It's a silk shirt from the isles. I really don't want to go back to buy another. That's my entire commission from my last haul." She grimaced and mumbled under her breath. "After paying that damn wizard's fee, that is."

He finally chuckled and relaxed his expression.

"I am sure we can get it clean, but it would likely be a week." He waved his arm to the racks of clothing. "We are very busy. And blood needs to soak in a special solution to eliminate it." Smiling warmly, he added. "But at least it's just a silk shirt. That is much easier than, say, embroidery."

Sadie arched an eyebrow curiously. That was oddly specific. Had he seen through her story?

"Well, that's lucky. I am eating lunch across the street."

He nodded as if he already knew.

"I will go get it afterward. My wizard is doing some kind of research. So, it will be several weeks before I can set sail again." She turned to step towards the door.

"I hope to see you again, captain Feelari." The man smirked at her. "Perhaps over dinner sometime?"

She paused in the doorway and twisted to look back at him. She flashed him a genuine smile and winked. "I am sure we can arrange that."

"What did you say was the name of your ship captain?" he grinned broadly. He was playing her game rather well, but the question suggested that he knew who she was.

He intrigued her. This was turning out to be far more interesting than she had originally expected.

"I didn't. I will see you tomorrow Francis." Waving her hand over her shoulder, she stepped out into the rain.

"I am sure I will." He mumbled as he watched her leave.

Sadie made her way back to her book and sat down.

A bowl of soup settled on the table in front of her and Margarete winked down at her. "You'd better eat that before your friend does."

"Thank you." The elf chuckled and began eating the soup as she opened the book.

---

“Look, Regina. I am your legal counsel, but we both know that you don’t need my advice. I am not the criminal lawyer, you are.” The female dwarf folded her arms across her chest. She was clearly angry as she glowered at the elf, pretending to be a human.

Deedra Hammersmith was a business lawyer, but Regina hadn’t hidden the new persona of Shade from her friend. Regina had gone to the dwarf’s house several parsecs away, to have dinner with her and her family, when she told Deedra about Shade. The dwarf had been so angry that she chased Shade around the kitchen with a butcher knife for a good ten minutes. All the while uttering a string of dwarven slurs that had actually made the elf blush.

The two of them had met several lives earlier. Long before the current persona of Regina Dalmoore. Mercedes Forsyth was a partner at the Devon, Forsyth & Mercury law firm, when she took on a young dwarven legal aide named Deedra Diamonhammer, who was working her way through law school. The two became fast friends, despite Deedra’s dislike of the elf’s work with crime families. When Regina created Seasprite Engineering, it was Deedra that she went to for help. There was no one better in Imperial space, for business law, than the angry dwarf in front of her.

“You have a problem, you know that, right?”

“It’s not a problem.” Regina chuckled and propped her feet up on her desk as she interlaced her fingers behind her head.

Her long red-braid rocked back and forth as the dwarf shook her head. “Can you go even one lifetime without breaking the law? I swear, you will go out of your way, to do something so long as it’s illegal!”

“I can, in fact.” Regina smirked. “I spent an entire lifetime as a barista. I never even pocketed loose change.”

“I hate you.” The dwarf growled.

Regina laughed. “No you don’t, and you know it.”

A tiny hand appeared in the holo, followed by an adorable red-haired dwarf covered in freckles. “Hi auntie Regina!”

Deedra glared at the child and pushed her from the image. "Get out of my office!" She grumbled.

"Bye auntie Regina!" The girl squealed and laughed from across the room as her mother threw a book at her.

"Hi and bye Keelie." The blonde human called happily. Glaring at the dwarf, she teased, "your such an abusive mother!"

"Bitch! I should just hang up on you right now."

Laughing, Regina shook her head. "You should, but you won't and we both know it. You charge an arm and a leg for these calls, and you love money too much to hang up on anyone. Even me."

The dwarfs nostrils flared as the elf pegged her a little too closely.

"Relax, Deedra. I have this under control. You're right. I know what to do. But I had to call my lawyer to make it look good."

The dwarf rolled her eyes. "As your legal counsel, I am going to advise you to turn yourself, in and give them back whatever it was, that you stole."

Regina opened her mouth to say something, but the dwarf snapped her hand up, palm towards the human, to stop her. "Don't you dare tell me!" she shrieked a little louder than she intended.

"Aw, common, you want to know. I've known you too long. Besides, you'll laugh your ass off when I tell you what it was."

The dwarf shook her head. "You are not bringing me into your webs of corruption, again."

Regina sat upright, bringing her feet to the floor with a loud thud. "Nice try, Dee. You're a fucking lawyer. Circumventing the law is your profession and you know it."

"I manipulate it, I don't circumvent it." The argument was softer than it should've been, as Regina's argument hit home.

"Bull shit, makes great fertilizer, but that doesn't stop it from being shit that comes out the ass of a bull." Regina retorted.

Sighing, the dwarf stood and paced behind her chair. The holo followed her perfectly, making it look like she was pacing in the middle of Regina's private office, aboard her personal yacht.

The ex-special forces engineer built the office on her yacht to be utterly secure. Even from the prying eyes of the imperial agents that had her under twenty-four-hour surveillance.

"Fine, Mercedes, what's your plan?" Clasp ing her hands behind her back, she looked to the elf.

Smirking, Regina stood and walked to where the holo stood, and crouched down to meet the dwarf eye to eye. "I am going to give them exactly what they want."

"They want this new persona of yours. What did you call it? Shade?"

Regina nodded. "Yep."

The dwarf allowed her gaze to stare off into nothing as her mind raced. "Oh shit." She murmured.

"There ya go." Regina wished the small dwarf were here to pat her on the shoulder.

Sighing, the small female's dark-green eyes locked on to Regina's blue ones. "What poor sucker is going down this time?"

"My new secretary." Regina's own jaw clenched, even through her smile.

She had traced the leak to her new aide. Apparently, the woman was snooping through Regina's files and found the backup of the blueprint that she'd used to make the fake jewelry box. She was sure that the woman wasn't a government plant, but just a nosey goody two-shoes. Ethics were one thing, even Regina had ethics, even if they were malleable at times. But this woman was the worst kind of person, honest. People who were utterly honest, all the time, were dangerous.

"Alright." The dwarf nodded. "But you know how this works. You'd better make it airtight."

Chuckling, Regina stood. "Trust me, it will take care of both of my minor problems."

"Both?"

Nodding, Regina positioned herself to sit on the corner of her desk. "Yep, the nosey little snitch and the box."

"What box?" The dwarf slammed her hands on her large ears. "Nevermind that! Shit!" the woman balled her fists at her side and stomped a foot angrily. "I told you not to tell me!"



Regina folded her arms and watched the dwarf quietly with a coy smirk firmly in place on her face.

"Seriously, why would someone care this much about a...?" She stopped mid-thought as something seemed to occur to her. Shuffling to her desk, she picked up a pad. "Holy shit! Mercedes! What the hell?"

The smirk grew to a wide shit-eating grin, but the elf said nothing.

"But they said they got the jewels back. The only thing missing was a jewelry box." The dwarf's eyes met hers. "What the hell is so special about the box?"

There it was, the dwarf's curious nature settling in, overriding her training to stay out of it.

"You sure you want to know?"

She furrowed her bushy brow at the elf. "It's kind of too late now. I already know too much. I might as well know all of it."

"It's a pre-age artifact." Regina left out the most important part. She liked her friend too much to endanger her life with the truth.

Shrugging, the dwarf shook her head in confusion. "Why not just give it back?"

"Because it's funnier this way."

The dwarf froze and narrowed her eyes at the woman. "Seriously?"

"Yep."

"Fine, don't tell me." Folding her arms, she glared at Regina. "How do you plan to destroy a pre-age artifact?"

"I don't." Regina observed the dwarf curiously.

Confused, the smaller woman asked, "But I thought you said you were getting rid of both of them?"

"I am. You can't destroy this thing, not without some kind of catastrophic event, anyway. So, I will do the next best thing. Put it so far out of reach that they spend the next century trying to figure out how to get it back."

The dwarf nodded as the understanding kicked in. "Putting the spotlight someplace else and giving you plenty of time to walk away while they aren't looking."

"Welcome to the dark side, my friend." Regina chuckled.

"Yeah, well, the plan isn't too bad. Just make sure you are with the agents when the secretary is killed. Preferably in a public display." The dwarf waved the back of her hand at the elf.

Shaking her head, Regina laughed. "Nice touch. I will do that."

"As your friend, I can only say, be careful. As your lawyer, I say, turn yourself in you psycho! And get help!" The dwarf snapped as she held her hand over the disconnect button.

Smiling, Regina nodded. "I love you too, Deedra. Give Max and the kids a kiss for me."

"Yeah, yeah. They'd prefer it if you came and did that yourself."

Regina's smile shifted to a more sinister expression. "I thought you said I had to stop sleeping with your husband?"

Rolling her eyes, the dwarf slammed her hand down on the button, and her holographic image disappeared. Replaced by the words, Call Disconnected.



The rain slowed to a stop as a distant roll of thunder crept across the sky. Looking up, Sadie breathed in the fresh air and smiled happily.

"How was the bouillabaisse?" a male voice next to her drew her attention from the sky.

A well-groomed elderly man, with grey hair and a warm smile, stood in the doorway. His local attire was well-made, and well-kept. And the handsome Van Dyke style beard, peppered with the occasional red hair, contrasted nicely with the long grey braid resting across his shoulder.

"It was wonderful! Thank you very much. Might I venture to guess that you are the owner?"

The man nodded. "My name is Giuseppe, it is a pleasure to meet the famous Captain Feelari."

Sadie grimaced and resisted the urge to glance across the street to the launderer. "I am not famous." She lied.

The man simply smirked at her.

"But I was wondering if I could buy some cognac for my ship?"

He folded his arms, "Yes, my daughter told me of your request. I ship this in from our homeland of Tep. But I am expecting a shipment in the next month." He looked up at the sky. "Assuming that the Great Event didn't sink my brother's vessel."

The elf grimaced slightly. Zerrick's accident had affected more people than he could imagine.

"I can spare three bottles." He locked his eyes on the elf's. "However, I have a favor to ask, in return."

Sadie smiled and leaned her elbows on the table.

"If you, and your flying ship, go towards Tep in the near future. I would ask that you pick up a couple more cases?"

The elf chuckled. "Word travels quickly."

"Of a flying ship, yes it does."

She exhaled loudly and frowned. "Very well, it's done. Do I need a letter of introduction to purchase it?"

A coy smirk crept into the corner of his mouth. "You have experience in import and export of high quality items."

"I do."

He nodded happily. "Yes. Come back tomorrow and I will have everything you need."

"Very well." Glancing across the street to the launderer, an idea occurred to her.

Pointing to the empty bowl, she stood. "How much do I owe you?"

"We will settle it tomorrow."

"Thank you, master Giuseppe." She bowed slightly. "Until tomorrow then."

Tucking the book up under her arm, she strode out into the damp street with purpose.

An hour later, she strode up to a man in uniform. He had a sword on one hip and a rather nasty looking assault rifle slung across his chest, at the ready. The rifle was one of Anna's third-age designs. The third-age used eldritch for power, which Sadie knew very little about.

"Good day, counselor." The guard nodded to her respectfully. "Can I help you?"

"I am here to see a prisoner."

The young human male arched an eyebrow curiously. "I wasn't aware any of the prisoners in this wing had requested counsel."

Cocking her head at the man, she smiled sweetly. "Would I lie to you, young man?"

Sighing, he shook his head and swung his arm wide for her to pass.

"Thank you...?"

"Derek." The young man smirked at her.

She didn't touch the man like she would normally do, but she did wink. "Thank you, Derek." She took a step, then suddenly stopped. "Um, the gentleman that they brought in for murdering his wife. What cell is he in?"

The soldier smirked knowingly. "You'll have to be more specific."

"There's more than one?" She wrinkled her brow.

"There are five currently, to be precise."

"Interesting." Sadie turned and walked down the hallway.

As she approached the first intersection, she listened. There was sobbing to her left, and she nodded. That was her man. Turning down the narrow hallway to the left, she passed by several cells on either side of her. Most of the current occupants simply watched her walk by calmly. When she reached the door with the sobbing, she found a man in well-made finery. He was filthy. Covered, head to foot, in dried blood and dirt. It was a pitiful sight.

Behind her, a man made a low whistle. "Well, what do we have here? A pretty little whore, come to visit her master?"

The elf turned to stare deep into the man's eyes. His stature was tall and confident, and his structure belied a man used to manual work. But based on the wing that he was currently in, he was most likely a knight. Or a noble with an oddly physical hobby. He had dark, curly hair that was greasy and filled with filth. Clearly this man had been in here a while. She contemplated saying something, but opted to ignore him. He was looking for a fight, or anything that got him some sort of recognition.

Turning back to the sobbing man, she watched him for a good minute, while she considered how to approach him. He was sitting on the wall-mounted

rack. His face in his hands, he was clearly sobbing, but there wasn't any moisture left for tears.

Reaching forward, she unlocked the cell door with an effortless twist of the picks hidden in her sleeve. To a casual onlooker, it was smooth enough that they likely thought she had a key.

The sound of the door caused the man to look up, his face red and swollen. He rubbed his nose on his sleeve and she cringed slightly. Moving over to the small table with a metal pitcher and cup, she tipped the pitcher towards her with her finger. It was still full of water. He clearly hadn't touched it. Lifting it silently, she poured some water into the cup and handed it towards him.

He shook his head and waved her off.

She opened her mouth to introduce herself and suddenly thought better of it. "You should drink. You are drying yourself out with this." She waved her hand up and down at him.

"I don't care." The sound came out stuttered as his body fought for air.

Sadie looked into the cup and swirled the water slowly. "I understand you admitted to killing your wife?"

"It was my fault, yes." He sobbed again.

The elf resisted rolling her eyes. "Care to explain what happened?"

"No." He shook his head vehemently.

She set the cup down next to her. "You don't want to tell me, because you didn't actually kill your wife." Her words were flat and cold.

His eyes snapped up to hers. The brief flash of anger faded into despair as quickly as it came. "I deserve to die for what I did."

"Perhaps." Sadie shrugged. "But does her true murder deserve to get away with the crime?"

The sobbing faded as the man continued to stare at his feet.

Sadie waited silently for his anger to replace the sorrow, as she manipulated him into the next stage of grief.

As his head slowly raised, she smirked. The seething hatred was firmly in place, fueling him. Now for the next phase.

"Do you really plan to let her murderer get away with it? And possibly even murder someone else? I think your wonderful wife deserves better than that, don't you?"

"Who are you?" the man's voice was cold and calculating.

She smirked, good, there was a brain in there some place.

"A good samaritan." She lied.

He pursed his lips and glared at her. "I highly doubt that."

"Perhaps not." She handed him the cup of water. "But if you want to stop the woman that murdered your wife, you don't have a lot of options. Do you?"

He took the cup and downed the entire thing in one gulp. "How do you know it was a woman?"

"Why don't you tell me what happened." Her eyes narrowed. "All of it."

Several hours later Sadie settled into the chair at the law offices of Doogan, Doogan and Donn. It was technically a satellite office, since the enchantments on the primary office prevented them from moving it to a less irradiated region.

"You want this delivered tonight?" the young page seemed confused. It was fairly late, after all.

"Yes. I need to speak to him in the morning about a case. Everything is in there. And I want to be sure he will be there. So, wait for an answer." The idea of using a page was utterly foreign to Sadie, but it had its benefits. No matter what, she could ensure that the right person read her message and that they responded immediately. Something which was that was less controllable in digital space. Even texts, the recipient could read and choose not to respond.

The lad nodded and spun on his heel to jog from her office.

Leaning back in her overstuffed leather office chair, the elf pulled the book from her bag and flipped it open.

---

"Ma'am?" The tentative voice spoke up from the doorway.

Regina looked over at the door and quickly swiped her hand through the digi-board to put it to sleep. "Yes?"

"Special Investigator Xander Rockwall is here, as you requested." The dark-haired woman looked from Regina to the holo as it closed.



Striding back to her desk, Regina rested her fingertips on the desk. "Show him in."

As the woman drew her head back into the outer office, Regina heard her tell the orc outside that he could go in.

Lifting her finger from the digital display on her desk, she saw the subtle flash of a new light appear in her HUD. It flashed red briefly, as the daemon began running, then it flashed green as it settled into place to wait for the action that would trigger its next sequence.

"Good morning, Ms. Dalmoore." The orc smiled brightly, flashing bright white teeth, which stood out in his darker complexion. His lower canines were slightly more pronounced, which was common for the species. Some of his kind occasionally filed them down, but Regina liked it when they were natural.

Looking past him, Regina arched her eyebrows in surprise when the door closed, leaving them both alone.

"Regina." She beamed a smile at him. Apparently, he decided he didn't need his hot-headed junior.

Nodding, he agreed. "Very well, Regina." He rested his hand on the back of a chair. "May I?"

"Please, have a seat." She waited till he sat before she sat down in her own chair.

Once they were both seated, she rested her elbows on the arms of her office chair and steepled her fingertips in front of her face. "I asked you here to tell you that my lawyer has recommended that I take you up on your offer. Though I will honestly admit, those weren't the words she used, precisely."

The orc laughed. "I bet."

"However, while I agree to tell you everything I know. It's likely not what you are hoping for."

His eyelids drooped slightly as he cocked his head. "What do you mean by that?"

"I have brokered jobs for Shade, but I don't know who they are, per se." She opened her palms wide towards the ceiling.

Pursing his lips, he frowned. "I see. Dead drops and such?"

Regina nodded. "Shade is highly enigmatic. And from what I understand, extremely dangerous." Standing, Regina walked over to the bar in her office and

poured herself a drink. She took a sip, before turning to lean back against the bar. "Understand, while I love the thrill of working with a dangerous criminal, I am not suicidal. Did you want anything? An iced tea perhaps?"

The large orc smirked and crossed his legs at the knee casually as he kept his eyes locked on hers. "That would be great. Thank you."

Regina walked around the back of the bar and made him a tea, before walking it back over to him.

As he took it, she leaned back against the desk, directly in front of him. "I am not sure how much help I can be. But I am all yours."

She both loved and hated working with species that had a heightened sense of smell. Every little emotion, no matter how well hidden, was detectable through pheromones. But in this case, her attraction to the orc was working for her benefit. It was hard to focus when you could smell desire in another, no matter how conditioned the mind was. It would give her just enough of an edge to influence a mind trained to notice the attempt at manipulation.

"Indeed." He remained relaxed as he watched her, the smirk still firmly in place. "So, are you willing to, perhaps, help us set up a drop for the Shade?"

Regina took a sip of her drink and cocked her head to the side as she considered the offer. "That's genius. If they fall for it, that is."

"We have our ways." He winked at her, and she grinned coyly.

"I am all yours. What would you like me to do... I mean for you?" She tossed the game out the window and opted for an outright flirtation.

He coughed as his drink threatened to go down his windpipe.

Pushing up from her desk, she strode past him, so close that her leg brushed against his arm. Grabbing a hand towel from the bar, she strode back to him and tossed it into his lap. "I am assuming you want me to drop off some kind of job offer?"

"Yes. I will set everything up and use an undercover agent to deliver a job to you through your usual channels." He wiped off his lap and his tie with the towel. "Then we will stay nearby by when you take it to the drop. It is important to us, that you stay safe, just in case Shade gets suspicious."

"How sweet." She smirked at him. "Though I doubt your partner cares about whether I'm in danger."

A light in her HuD flashed red as the daemon triggered and began its subroutine.

Ignoring it, she continued talking, "but I might be able to cut out a few steps. If you're interested in trusting me, that is."

She saw a glint of suspicion in his face that vanished as quickly as it came. This orc was good. She suddenly realized that she wanted to play dathalu with him. He might actually be a decent challenge.

"I am listening."

Waving her drink towards a briefcase resting on her desk. "There is, one hundred-thousand Imperial Bonds, in that briefcase. It's the final payment on a minor job where they hired Shade to steal..." Pursing her lips tightly, she grimaced, then finally shrugged. "The job doesn't matter. I am due to pick up the stolen item and drop off the payment tonight."

The sly smirk crept back into the corners of his mouth as he watched her with, what almost appeared to be, admiration. "Impressive. I assume you wouldn't be interested in telling me your client's name and what the item was?"

"No, I would not." She chuckled, shaking her head.

Arching an eyebrow, he nodded. "Fair enough, I suppose. But you realize that I have no intentions of letting you finish the transaction?"

"Think that all the way through Xander." She took a sip, leading him to the epiphany.

His eyes lit up as he suddenly understood what she was insinuating. "Ah. You may have a point. Ms. Dalmoore."

Smirking, she leaned forward slightly. "Regina, please."

He pushed himself up out of the chair, putting them both well within the standard personal distance. Looking down into her eyes, he smiled warmly. "We will monitor you closely, tonight, Ms. Dalmoore. Good luck."

Remaining seated on her desk, she raised her glass to him then took a sip.

As he strode from the office, she glanced up at the counter in the upper left of her HuD. It calculated just under four hours to complete its pre-programmed sequence. Just enough time to ensure that her little canary was in the right place at the right time.



The next morning, the beautiful white-haired elf made her way to her new favorite restaurant. She wasn't even sure they were open for breakfast, which was one reason she arranged for him to meet her just before noon. As she strode across the street, she saw the young red-headed woman opening the restaurant doors to the beautiful cool morning air.

"Good morning, Margaret!" Sadie called cheerfully as she crossed the empty street.

Turning, the woman grinned happily. "Good morning, Captain Feelari."

"Just Sadie, is fine. I am not a fan of titles. I am expecting a guest this morning."

The woman nodded, "Wonderful Ms. Sadie. My father will be here a little later, but I will prepare your table." She pointed to the book tucked under the elf's arm. "Better lighting today, to read by."

Nodding, Sadie chuckled and moved over towards the patio tables. Pulling the chairs down herself and setting them around the table, she heard a male voice chuckle.

"Taking a new job as a waitress, counselor?"

Grinning up at the man, she shook her head. He had sandy blonde hair, hazel eyes and a beard peppered with grey hairs. A long black trench coat that was heavily waxed to handle rain or snow, and a well-tailored outfit that the locals often called a suit.

"No, but it doesn't hurt to be helpful when you can." Lifting her palm towards the seat next to her that was facing the street, she added, "Have a seat. The food here is amazing."

"I thought you stuck to lady Jane's quarter?" he mused.

Sighing, the elf cocked her head. "I admit, as a pre-age refugee, I prefer plumbing and power. But I decided that ignoring the beauty and wonder that Bugrasi offers, was just snobbish of me."

The human male laughed, obviously agreeing with her, but he said nothing.

"What would you like, Ms. Sadie?" the woman stepped up to the table and quickly wiped it down with a clean rag.

Sadie frowned. "You know, I honestly don't know what you have. Do you have coffee?"

The woman nodded, "We have coffee that we import from Tep. It's very good, would you like it with steamed milk?"

"That sounds wonderful!" The elf said happily.

"For me as well." The man next to her smiled warmly at the woman.

"Of course, inspector." The woman bobbed her head in a slight bow and hurried off.

Sadie turned her full attention to the man next to her. Setting the book on the table, she settled into her chair comfortably and leaned back to relax.

"Alright counselor, I am here. Want to tell me why?" he folded his arms across his chest, and she smirked in response.

"Easy, Gerald. I simply wanted to talk to you about Count Mason Hadeller."

The man's eye narrowed slightly as he watched the elf suspiciously. "Yes, I heard you went to talk to him yesterday, and now suddenly he is claiming that he didn't kill his wife, which is the opposite of the sworn affidavit that I have on file."

She smiled warmly at the man, but he was unimpressed. "I simply went to ask him what happened."

Two coffee's set on the table and the elf lifted her own cup to take a sip. "Mm, that is wonderful Margarete. Thank you."

"You are welcome, ma'am." The woman didn't stick around to see if the two wanted anything else. She clearly wanted nothing to do with the upset Inspector General.

"You should try it, Gerald."

"And you are stalling." The man snapped. "Why do you suddenly care about us lowly humans? Shouldn't you be off taking over another country or moving mountains with Lady Jane or something?"

She opted to ignore the attack. She knew that the tension was climbing in Bugrad, but there was nothing she could do about closing the floodgates. Not that she'd been the one to open them.

Sighing, Sadie set her cup down. "I am not claiming that Mason is an innocent man. But I *am* saying, that he did not murder his wife."

"Prove it."

"Isn't that your job, not mine? Traditionally investigators should investigate a crime, not just randomly believe an obviously distraught man, without even attempting to gather some kind of evidence." Her voice was cool as she called him out.

Her smile gone as the calculating lawyer kicked in. "For example, where is the murder weapon?"

"I don't need one, he admitted to killing her." His voice was deep, obviously angry.

Sadie nodded, "thank you for proving my point. You don't even have a murder weapon."

His brow creased as he tried to understand what she meant.

"If a man admits to murdering someone, immediately and without interrogation, they are usually holding the murder weapon. Yet, there was no murderer weapon on the scene at all." She took a sip of her coffee to punctuate her devastating epiphany.

She saw his gaze travel to the side as he clearly began going over the case in his mind.

Across the street, a woman in a heavy cloak rushed past them and into the laundry.

"I love restaurants like this." She mused out loud. "They are wonderful places to people watch."

The sudden topic change drew the contemplative man back to the unusual elf.

She pointed with her coffee cup to the laundry across the street. "That woman, for example. She was also here yesterday."

Inside the laundry, the raised voices were audible, even to the human seated next to her.

"She had a rather spectacular gown, covered in pig's blood. A funny thing, if you ask me. I mean, who butchers a pig in a ball gown? The silly things humans do, often confuse me. You are an odd race."

The man next to her squinted slightly as he tried to see the woman. Her hood had fallen back as she vehemently argued with the large sleeveless man in the laundry.

"Why does she look familiar?" he mumbled, more to himself than to the elf.



"Justice Geller's wife." Sadie chuckled. "She said something about trying to surprise him by learning to cook? Or some such nonsense. I don't remember clearly. I was reading and only noticed her because she was so upset." Sadie lied.

"Justice Geller doesn't have livestock." The man stated flatly.

Setting her empty cup down, the elf furrowed her brow. "Really? That's strange. She could have purchased one from the market. She has a bandage on her left hand. If she didn't cut it butchering a pig, what else could it have been?"

The man next to her stood. "I am sorry, counselor Feelari. I will need to take my leave now. Perhaps we can discuss your client at my office later?"

"As you wish, inspector." Sadie kept her face blank as she watched the human step out into the street and look both directions.

Raising his hand, he gestured to three groups of constables, who immediately changed their routes to head straight for him. He marched across the street to the launderer. Two of the constables followed him inside, while the four others took up guard positions.

Inside, she could still barely see the tall owner of the laundry over the other humans. He glanced her direction and gave her a feint nod.

Lifting the inspector's untouched coffee, she raised it towards him in a toast, then took a sip. Turning her attention to the book in front of her, she opened it up, as a bowl of fresh mash, filled with oats, fresh fruit and browned sugar settled on the table in front of her.

"On the house." Margarete winked at her and wandered back inside before Sadie could thank her.

---

"You realize this is highly illegal?" The human woman next to her snapped. For an investigator, the woman was annoyingly nervous. She'd been glaring at Regina for over an hour now, which wasn't really all that bothersome. But each time the woman had rested her hand near her sidearm, the blonde owner of Seasprite Engineering grew irritable.

"I think we have established that Johnson. Stand down and shut up." The orc growled at her. He was clearly losing patience with his partner.

On the other side of Regina, a young female police officer, with corporal stripes, rolled her eyes. The investigator Glenda Johnson was genuinely annoying everyone on the boat.

"We shouldn't be here!" the woman growled angrily as she slammed her hand down on the railing of the small boat.

Regina smirked and strolled back to a bench seat in front of the small wheelhouse. The police boat, only designed to carry approximately fifteen people, currently had fifteen officers, two Imperial Investigators and herself. Which made it a tad crowded. She sat next to the sergeant in charge of the boat and smiled at him.

He did not return the smile, however. The officers had made it abundantly clear that they were unhappy working with a known accomplice. But they all understood the game, and no one had argued with the agent in charge of the investigation.

Glancing to either side, she saw three more boats each, all of them packed with heavily armed and armored planetary police. The show of force was a compliment, to be sure. But only because the agents and the officers had no idea what they were dealing with. The actual Shade was not a simple burglar or thief, but rather, a highly trained wet-work specialist, who found stealing a fun pastime. The reality was, if they'd been dealing with Shade, and not a simple secretary, they hadn't brought enough hardware.

"I see a boat." The lookout on top of the wheelhouse whispered quietly, and the boat fell silent.

Glenda gripped the railing tightly. "We shouldn't be doing this!" She hissed.

"Shh!" several people around the boat shushed the woman. The sound ended up being louder than the woman's original outburst and the man next to her cringed slightly, as they all watched to see if the small speedboat noticed. The person driving the boat heard nothing over the sound of the outboard motor, and the officers seemed to give a collective sigh of relief.

Glenda had a point, though. Jostten nine was a heavily protected Imperial preserve. And being on the water after sunset was a serious crime. Even if you were using the outboard gas motors. The sound disruptive to the wildlife that only surfaced at night. On the planet's surface, the only legal technology was gas powered motors. There was something about the frequency of modern technology that severely disrupted the planetary ecosystem. Imperial ship's engines were so lethal to the sensitive ecosystem that they needed to leave

atmosphere when the wildlife came to the surface at night. Either that or stay in the sunlight by following the planet's rotation. Most research, or pleasure sailing, required historical sailboats that had no technology in them at all. Not even basic comms and navigation systems. But they restricted even historical vessels from sailing at night, because they were unable to signal for help in an emergency.

"They are slowing down." The man with the night vision binoculars called quietly to the man below him. "Um, sarge?"

He looked up at the young man. "What's up?"

"It's a woman." The young male officer seemed surprised, and Regina stopped herself from rolling her eyes.

"And?" the man next to her however didn't.

"Nothing I guess."

"She is tying up to the boat." The kid announced.

Sighing, the sergeant added, "Gellerman, only tell us if she's doing something, we can't see for ourselves."

"Yes, sarge."

The seven boats quietly watched the woman in the distance as she moved around the deck of the large dual hulled sailboat that was resting at sea anchor, further out in the harbor. When she bypassed the briefcase sitting on the table, to extend something over the side of the vessel, she heard inspector Johnson whisper to the orc next to her.

"What is she doing?"

He didn't answer as he pulled a pair of his own binoculars from a bag on the deck next to him. As he lifted them to his eyes, Regina saw his back tighten under the black BDU's. Casually looking from his back to the other officers that were lining up at the railing, she remained seated. Even the sergeant next to her stood and pushed his way to the prow, trying to get a better view.

In her HuD, Regina shifted to a secondary view that overlaid the backs of the officers on the deck in front of her. In the new display, she could clearly see her secretary look around suspiciously as she began pulling on the line. She was wearing dark colors and even wore a black knit cap covering her long dark hair. Honestly, she looked every inch the part of a burglar and Regina almost chuckled. The woman was making this far too easy. As the cable went taught, the woman leaned back and began pulling with all her might.

“Hold!” The orc’s voice was low, as he spoke into the command channel that each of the police sergeants was on. “We need to see what she’s pulling up.”

The crowd of police officers at the prow all seemed to lean forward slightly in anticipation.

The woman in black continued fighting with the line until it finally popped free from whatever it caught on. Stumbling backwards, she quickly got her feet under her and glanced around frantically. Clearly, afraid someone would catch her. She began quickly hauling up the rope. As a metallic jewelry box, broke the surface of the water, Regina smirked.

“Now!” the Orc called across the comm. Massive flood lights flashed into existence as all seven police boats activated their emergency lights.

“This is the Jostten Nine Planetary Police! You are under arrest! Pull the...”

In her HuD. Regina mentally triggered the drone that she was watching the woman through. Just as her secretary's head came up in shock to stare blinking at the police floodlights, her head exploded in a red spray. Less than a second later, the sound of the round breaking the sound barrier tore past them. The result was the woman dropping the box back into the water, as her body fell to the deck in a heap.

“Shots fired!” the man above her yelled.

As the officers spun to ascertain where the shot had come from, the boat that the orc was still watching exploded in a massive ball of fire that lit up the sky for miles. Regina, along with almost everyone else on the boat, dove to the deck as the heatwave washed over them. The shock wave fast on its heels. The small boat rocked violently as the shock wave hit, knocking the prow to the side slightly. The last place any vessel wanted to be when the wave, that followed, slammed into the small vessel.

The craft launched into the air, spilling the occupants out into the water violently. Regina pushed off the deck, twisting expertly, and hit the icy water, hands first, in a rather graceful dive. She swam as fast as she could manage straight down. As the boat slammed back into the water, it smashed into several pieces. The prow barely missed her, sliding past hard enough to slam into her leg painfully. Her HuD registered the damage and kicked on several combat systems. Ignoring the pain, she kept swimming down away from the wreckage. As the next series of waves slammed into the wreckage, it began twisting into in a deadly weapon that would likely kill anything it hit.

When she finally paused to give her leg a rest, while the combat repair systems worked, she turned and looked up. A large section of the ship was slowly floating past her towards the ocean floor far below. As she watched it pass, she saw the young man that had been their lookout. His body was limp, his safety line still attached to the rail, dragging him to the floor with the wreckage. Swimming towards him, she jerked his knife free from the sheath on his leg and cut the line. She then wrapped her arm around his neck and began swimming towards the faintly glowing surface.

As she broke the surface, she could hear the last of the fire, as the larger catamaran finally sank far enough to put out the last of the fire. She doubted the man she was dragging was still alive, but a small voice in the back of her mind chanted the mantra. No man left behind. A circular flotation device landed next to her. Without thinking, she pulled it to her and slid it over the man's head, tugging his arms through it quickly. She jerked on the line twice and dove back into the water, as they jerked the man away from her, toward one of the three remaining boats.

Looking around for other survivors, she made out a still warm shape just below the surface near her and swam to whoever it was. Drawing near the female agent dressed in black BDU's, she swam up under her and drug her back up to the surface.

Pulling the woman on to her back to ensure that her face stayed above the water, she hollered, "I have another one!"

Two hours later, they finally forced her out of the water. As the strong orcish hand pulled her up over the edge of the boat, he grinned at her.

"Well done, Regina." He whispered. "Anyone else is too far gone for us to help now." He added louder.

An officer wrapped a heated blanket around her, and pat her fondly on the shoulders.

There were nine boats on the water now, all running silent with only minimal lighting. They had divers in the water, but Xander was right, there was nothing left to find. Any bodies left had been drug down to the ocean floor more than a mile down, well out of their reach.

"Thank you, Ms. Dalmoore." The sergeant that had been sitting next to her on the bench smiled as he handed her a warm cup of coffee. "You stayed in the water a lot longer than any of my people could. You save a lot of lives tonight."

She took the cup as her body tried in vain to control the shivering. She'd likely overdone it, but she couldn't help herself. No matter how much she'd argued with herself about blowing her cover, she couldn't let them go without giving them everything she had.

The orc moved around to her side and wrapped an arm around her, stroking her gently, he tried to help her warm up.

"I'll be okay." She mumbled, before taking a sip of the warm liquid. "How many did we lose?"

"Nine-teen total." The Sergeant answered softly. "But only three are still missing. So that's something to be happy about, considering."

Looking up, Regina frowned. "Considering what?"

"Over ninety of us hit the water. The survival rate for that, especially at night, is typically less than forty percent." The sergeant clasped her on the shoulder. "Your fast thinking, and unparalleled swimming, saved over thirty people. All by yourself. That's pretty amazing, Ms. Dalmoore. I take back what I said about you earlier."

She chuckled. "Something tells me I don't want to know what you said earlier."

"Probably not." He laughed and walked off across the hospital ship, towards the obvious man in charge, who was barking orders for the vessels to pack it up and head back in to port.

Looking up at the orc next to her, she frowned. "What the hell happened?"

He shrugged. "I think they set us up."

"How?" Regina allowed her tone to drop as she let the anger from the last two hours of rescue diving to seep into her voice.

He looked off into the distance as the ship started moving under their feet.

"This Shade is better than I gave them credit for." He sighed, but looked down at her and smiled tenderly. "However, that lovely little fuck up, draws my investigation to a close. Possibly even my career." He shrugged and shook his head. "Glenda is already writing the report that highlights everything she feels I did wrong. But I doubt she realizes that neither of our careers will survive this failure. So, how about dinner and dancing tomorrow night? If you're up for it, that is?"

Regina chuckled and met his gaze. "That sounds like fun, though I might skip dancing. My leg is killing me."



"Alright, dinner then." He smirked, "And maybe breakfast?"

"Mm." Was her only reply.

## The End

Sadie closed the book and looked up at the beautiful blue sky. The air was warming as the first buds of spring were signaling their readiness to open on the trees. It was promising to be a beautiful day.

A young boy ran across the street, headed straight for her. A carriage driver yelled at the lad, only to have the boy deftly dodge the whip that cracked in his direction. As he slid to a stop at her table, she saw Margarete head her direction to shoo the boy off.

"Mistress Feelari?" The boy gasped.

Sadie lifted her hand, stopping the red-headed woman in her tracks. "Yes."

The boy gulped and nodded. Fishing inside of the bag at his hip, he pulled up a neatly folded piece of paper. And handed it to her. Before she could tip the lad, though, he took off at a run.

Turning the paper over, she found a red wax seal. Popping it free, she opened the letter.

*Dear Counselor, Feelari,*

*I am sorry that I am writing this letter instead of speaking to you in person, but I am not entirely sure I could say everything that needs to be said, face to face. First, I want to say thank you. I was so caught up in my grief, because of my own transgressions, that I never even considered the justice that my loving wife deserved. I know it's hard to believe, but I loved my wife dearly. In my stupidity, I allowed my ego to lead me down a dark and dangerous path that, in the end, cost me more than I ever thought possible. I hurt the one woman I loved by bedding another. Then I allowed that stupid transgression to grow into something so sinister that it inevitably took my beloved's life.*

*I have denounced my lands and my title as penitence. And I have dedicated my life to ensure that the people who met an untimely end, such as my wife, are given the justice they deserve. I also wish to ensure that no one else hangs for a crime that they did not commit. Even if they are stupid enough to admit to doing it. You have affected my life more than you can ever imagine. You are a kind soul, may the gods keep you safe.*

*With utmost respect,*

*Inspector Mason Hadeller*

