

Sylvia Day

NATIONAL
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR

NOW THE
HUNTRESS
IS THE PREY...

SNARING THE
HUNTRESS

Snaring the Huntress

by
Sylvia Day

Smashwords Edition

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Snaring the Huntress
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Dedication

*To Renee Luke and Annette McCleave, my friends and cps. Your support means everything.
Thank you.*

* * * * *

Author Note

Dear Reader,

This story was written many years ago. In other words, it's not up to the same standards as my present-day writing. When the rights reverted to me, I considered editing *Snaring the Huntress* again, but I'm a different writer now and would likely write a different story, which would destroy this one.

So I present *Snaring the Huntress* to you in the exact same form in which it was first published. I hope you enjoy it!

—Sylvia

* * * * *

CHAPTER 1

As she had every night for the last week, Star woke up without an orgasm.

Running her hands through her sweat-dampened hair, she growled in frustration. There was something fundamentally wrong with having a totally hot sex dream that didn't end with her getting off.

"Dreaming of him again?"

The soft feminine voice echoed through the metal confines of Star's ship.

Tossing aside her coverlet, she hopped out of bed, too worked-up to go back to sleep. "Yes, damn it. The bastard. If I didn't want to fuck him so bad, I'd kick his ass."

"You do realize you are speaking of a figment of your imagination?"

"Yeah, I know, Two-Thousand. I'm losing it from lack of sleep." Naked, she padded barefoot down the hallway until she reached the bridge. "The craziest part is I still have no idea what he looks like. He's just this yummy deep voice in the darkness. I swear that voice makes me so hot." And his hands--those warm, tender hands. They knew just where to touch her, stroke her, caress her.

She shivered.

"Why do you wake up?"

"Because he leaves!" Star complained. "Right before we fuck, he leaves."

Dropping into the captain's chair, she checked out the navigational readings. "How are we doing time wise?"

"Excellent. You will be on top of your fugitive soon."

"Good. I could really blow off some steam right about now."

"Will you kill him when you capture him?"

Star sighed at the question, and turned her gaze away from the cockpit window and its view of the galaxy beyond. "Probably."

"You answered with very little hesitation."

Shrugging, Star kicked her feet upward to rest on the console. She'd purchased the newest model Starwing with the bonus earned from her last capture. "Why feed him rations all the way back to Primus when they'll just kill him when we get there? I'm a hunter of criminals, not a restaurant. Besides, he'll be a handful. I don't want to deal with him."

"While I agree that is practical, do you not worry that perhaps the Supreme Court Justices passed sentence too quickly?"

"You know," Star grumbled, "for a computer, you do a lot of hypothetical thinking."

"All correctional CPUs are programmed to second-guess decisions. It helps keep judges on their toes."

"Yeah, yeah. You know the rules, Two-Thousand, and so did he. Jacians can't be on the loose when their heat is on them. They can't control their sexual urges, and if they're not locked up with their pre-assigneds, they'll rape or go irreversibly crazy. It's just that simple."

"For you, maybe." If her computer could have sighed, it would have. "What if he was not attracted to his pre-assigned partner?"

Leaning forward, Star snatched up her nail file and began to shorten her claws. The damn things grew like weeds. "When a Jacian is in heat, even a deck plate is attractive."

"Regardless, how would you like being locked in a room with someone you would not want to have sexual intercourse with?"

Star rolled her eyes and shot a quick glance at the console readout. They were five clicks

away from Rashier 6. Intel had reported that the Jacian had last been seen there. If his med file was correct, he'd be entering his heat now, which effectively trapped him on the planet. His body couldn't do anything for the next week besides fuck. "You're missing the point. He's so desperate for it right now, he'd want to have sex with you."

"Funny, Star."

"Actually, it's not. Poor bastard. At this moment, his brain is so sexually focused that piloting a ship is impossible, and using mass transport would get him arrested."

I almost know how he feels, she thought grimly, her blood still thrumming from her earlier dream.

Except she wasn't breaking Interstellar Council Law, and he was. Some of her cases were a little tougher than others, like this one. She really did feel sorry for the guy, but she was a judge and her job was to follow the letter of the law. Black and white. Right or wrong. There wasn't any place for her to give leeway because she sympathized with him having shitty genetics. And she was the only judge who was of the Hunter species. Her ability to hand down fair verdicts was heavily scrutinized, and left her no room for error. While another judge might have been able to appeal for a reduced sentence, she could not. That was why she was so surprised the Jacian government had asked her to personally handle this capture. It was almost like they wanted their rogue ambassador dead.

"Maybe his pre-assigned had qualms."

"Whatever, Two-Thousand. Now you're being ridiculous. You know his pre-assigned was hot for it." Jacians were a telepathic species renowned for their exotic beauty. Pale green skin mottled with softer and darker shades of green. Thick, silky hair in various colors. Eyes in a rainbow of jeweled tones. And their inexhaustible sexual appetite, which they augmented by reading their partner's fantasies and then making them come true. All traits that made them highly sought after as mates.

"Have you been with one? Sexually?"

"Nope." Star stood and stretched, lifting her arms over her head and pushing out the bony spines that coursed the length of her back before retracting them again. "I like sex as much as anyone, maybe more than most, but days on end with the same guy would kill me. Even if you are fucking most of the time, there has to be some time when you're not. You gotta sleep and eat, right? And once men start opening their mouths, it gets tedious fast."

"You are kidding."

Laughing, Star checked the programmed coordinates, and started the mental preparations for the hunt. She liked to be ready for anything. It's why she was the best. Because of her skill, she was counting on this being an easy capture. The Jacian was holed up somewhere, either with a woman or going mad with need for one. He didn't stand a chance.

"Of course I'm kidding, Two-Thousand. I love men. Everything about them. That's what sucks about this assignment. Jacians don't usually go rogue. In fact, this is the first case I've heard of in my lifetime. A shame to have to waste a prime Jacian male like this, but he had a trial and was duly sentenced. Wanted dead or alive. Those are our orders."

"I am curious as to whether you agree with the popular opinion about their beauty."

"I don't know, I've never seen one." Star opened the weapons bunker and withdrew her favorite blade. She didn't need it. Physically, she was equipped with the claws and teeth to kill anything. But using a knife or blaster kept her prey alive. "I've always been too busy collecting the judicial credits I need to make it to the Supreme Court bench."

"I have pictures of him," Two-Thousand coaxed.

"No, thanks." Moving back down the hallway to her quarters, Star caught up the silvery blond tresses that flowed down her back, and tied them in a knot at her nape. It was time to get ready for the hunt. "Jacians are pretty distinctive. I just have to find the one with the raging hard-on."

"But they have varying hair and eye colors."

"I'll keep my eyes trained below the waist. No problem."

"How about a first name?"

"Ambassador Teron is good enough." She sighed. Softness was a luxury she couldn't afford. "You're a computer, you don't understand."

"What do I not understand?"

"It makes it harder to terminate prey if they actually become individuals."

"Ouch."

"Yeah," Star muttered. "That's what he'll be saying when I catch up with him."

* * * * *

They'd sent the Huntress after him.

If he weren't in so much pain, Roark would be flattered. As it was, he was merely relieved his plan had worked so well. Of course, this meant the Supreme Court wanted him terminated. The Interstellar Council never sent a Hunter after anything they didn't want dead. But if everything worked out as he hoped, it would all be worth it. Death was a small price to pay for the realization of his true desire. A desire *he* chose, not one that was forced on him by genetics.

Roark leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes, a wracking shudder coursing the length of his long frame. At this point, he rather wished for death. He'd begun the heat cycle yesterday, and his veins burned with the unrelieved hormones in his blood. Every muscle was straining, his breathing was labored, and sweat poured from his skin. If he'd started fucking at the onset, he'd be languorous and playful now. But he wanted what he wanted, and he would get her. He was not a man who took well to being denied.

But damn it! He wished she'd hurry.

He'd chosen lodging just outside of town, and did the best he could to hide, while not hiding too well. She was a Huntress. If she tracked him too easily it would arouse her suspicions. But now he wished he'd just stayed out in the open, so she would have found him already. He needed relief, a few hours straight of it, so he could think clearly and handle her properly.

He heard the door latch disengage, and sighed with relief.

Finally, after years of waiting and lusting, Star had arrived.

* * * * *

Star entered the darkened cottage with a deliberately noisy step, tossing off her cloak with a shrug of her shoulders. If there was a woman inside being kept against her will, Star wanted her to know that help was at hand. But as she sniffed the air, she relaxed. There hadn't been any sex going on in this rental in awhile. Her prey, however, smelled delicious. A dark, spicy scent filled the room, and she breathed it in, finding it both arousing and familiar.

Shaking off the distraction, Star forced her attention back to the task at hand. The innkeeper assured her that a Jacian male had checked in yesterday, and according to the security vid, he hadn't left. So where was he?

He'd kept the lights out, but that was more to his disadvantage than hers. She was a Huntress. Her people could see in the dark, smell from great distance, and move with amazing rapidity. In fact, they were known so much for their physical attributes that most other species had forgotten how smart they were. A fatal mistake in most cases.

Star blinked, putting into place the thin optical membrane that made night vision possible, affording her an unhindered view of the room. A bed, still made, took up the center, with two small tables on either side of it. To the right, a door led to the bathroom. To the left was a desk, beside which stood a cooling and heating unit. From the smell of it, the ambassador hadn't eaten since he'd arrived.

Great, he was horny *and* hungry.

She snorted derisively. What a shitty case. But then she always ended up with the most undesirable assignments. She was the first of the Hunter species to attain the bench, and because of that she had to work twice as hard, and hand down twice as many verdicts, just to get the same respect and the same number of judicial credits. Two of her classmates had already moved up to the Supreme Court, despite having far less experience than she. They'd both failed and had been retired quickly.

Sure, Hunters could track and kill anything, but they could also be gentle, fair, and wise-- basically, they had brains to back up their brawn. And it was her life's goal to show that fact to the universe. Her species was depending on her to prove the Council wrong.

"I hope you didn't dim the lights for me," she murmured, the hilt of her small dagger gripped firmly, but not tightly.

"I certainly didn't do it for me," came the low, velvety voice she knew from her dreams. It swirled around her, originating from nowhere and yet permeating everywhere. "I would much rather see you. You do hunt naked, like the rest of your species, don't you?"

Star paused mid-step, her pulse quickening at the sound of that deep growl of sensual promise. She shook off the tingle that coursed over her skin. "Who are you?" she breathed, every nerve ending flaring to life. "*Where* are you?"

The room was empty.

"That depends. I'm either your prey or your lover. You have to decide which."

She checked the bathroom. Nothing. "I don't know you."

"Don't you, Star? I've held you in my arms, caressed you, licked every inch of your skin. You have a scar on your left hip. A battle wound. I like to kiss it. Suckle it, like your nipples..."

"Shut up." Her spines shot out, a sign of arousal and fear. She was the predator here, but she didn't feel that way. "Get out of my head."

"Can I get in somewhere else?" he purred. "I'm rather desperate at the moment. You took longer than I expected."

For a moment, she swore she could feel the heat of him behind her. She tilted her head back, and looked up at the ceiling a moment too late. The Jacian dropped down from a harness, and caught her up. He ran to the wall, and pinned her hard against it. The blade in her hand skittered away, but still she moved to grab him, finding instead that her spines had sunk into the wall and held her securely.

"Oh shit," she groaned, as he cupped one breast in a familiar grasp. If she stayed aroused, she'd be stuck for awhile. "I'm so screwed."

"Not yet," he breathed, his tongue flicking across her nipple. "But you're about to be."

CHAPTER 2

Roark opened his mouth and surrounded the peak of Star's perfect breast. He was almost dizzy from the smell of her, the feel of her, the taste of her skin. Dreams could not accurately convey all of this. She could only see herself through her own eyes, not through the eyes of a man who lusted for her, so their shared dreams could not give him this pleasure. Nothing in the universe could give him this pleasure.

His tongue stroked softly, abrading the tight nipple. He shuddered, the burning in his veins nearly excruciating. He knew he had to arouse her swiftly. The first fuck would be quick, he'd waited too long, but he had to make it good for her or she'd arrest him as soon as he was finished.

"So that's what you look like," she said, her voice breathless. "You're gorgeous. But I'm still going to kick your ass when you're done."

He wanted to look his fill of her, but couldn't risk turning the lights on now. One glance at her lush beauty, and he'd be fucking himself to orgasm and leaving her behind.

But later, once the edge was off, he intended to see her in all her glory. All that silver blonde hair and pale skin. And those big blue eyes, lighter in shade than his sapphire ones. She looked like a celestial angel--until those razor-sharp claws came out and she bared those pointy canines.

"You know who I am." He flooded her mind with images of them together, echoes of the passion they'd shared in her dreams. His hand drifted between her legs, finding the soft, smooth skin and the slickness of her desire. She gave a soft cry, a sound he loved and had heard so many times. It was enough. Lifting one of her lithe, long legs, he spread her open. Then he stepped between her thighs, and took his cock in hand.

"Wow." Star's hands touched his stomach, and then brushed across his cock. "At least it was worth waiting for."

"Sorry," he said, sounding anything but. "You had to be primed before you got here, or I'd be in the brig now instead of in you."

He rubbed the head of his shaft against her, coating himself with her cream. Pausing a moment as his frame shook violently, Roark waited for the heat wave to pass before pressing into her.

"You better not leave this time." She was panting and shifting restlessly against him, her legs locked around his waist as if to trap him to her. "Or I'll kill you for sure."

In answer, he rolled his hips and surged into her.

"Oh hell," she gasped. "I don't even know your name." And then she came. Hard rippling spasms gripped his cock, stealing his breath and stilling his heart.

"Damn," he growled, his thighs shaking with his need. "You're so small...tight as a fist." He worked his cock into her with powerful thrusts, grunting with every deep plunge.

Definitely worth dying for.

His head fell back and he howled his release, two days of misery shooting out of him and flooding into her. Clutching her suspended body tightly, he stroked himself with her cunt until he was drained.

For now. The next heat wave would hit within moments.

He rested his damp forehead against Star's, fighting for control, their labored breaths mingling. "Hi," he managed. "I'm Roark."

"Hi, Roark. Nice to finally fuck you."

* * * * *

Star shook her head. This was *sooooo* wrong. A judge was not supposed to have sex with the criminals. "This doesn't change anything, you know."

"Yeah, I know." He turned his head and began to lick the sweat that misted her skin.

Deep inside her, he throbbed, his erection unabated. It felt so good, it took every bit of control she had not to grind herself onto that massive cock.

He was beautiful, the ambassador. *Roark*. She couldn't see colors with her night vision, but she could see everything else. The spots that mottled his silky skin made a wondrous pattern. His hair was dark and straight, hanging almost to his hips. His mouth, with its sculpted lips, was a work of art, and she moaned as he turned his head and pressed it to hers.

"Just give me a week, Star." He licked her lips. "Then I'll go with you without a fight."

"You *can't* fight me," she said dryly, her hands brushing across the tops of his broad shoulders. He was very big. Tall, and well-muscled. Very yummy, but still... "I'd tear you apart."

"But then you'd miss having all you want of this." He pumped his cock through their cream.

She shivered. "You're a cunt tease, you know that? A fucking week I've been squirming over you!"

Roark laughed, and it was a warm sound, so vibrant and full of life. His hand cupped her nape and he nuzzled his nose against hers. "It wasn't easy for me either, you know. I've waited almost two years to come into my heat."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"It was the only way I could reach you. The time during our heat is when a Jacian's telepathic powers are strongest. I could not have dreamed with you at any other time, and without dreams we would not be together. You are too focused on your work. If it were possible, I would have had you sooner, and without risk to my life, but this was the only way."

She took a few moments to absorb what he'd said. What the hell was she going to do? Whatever detachment she'd felt when she walked in the door was gone. Her prey wasn't some nameless, faceless body. He was a man. A man who had been loving her nightly for a week. A man who, even in the grip of a tormenting heat, had taken the time to please her as well.

"I can't go through my heat without you, Star." He slid his hands down her arms and then laced his fingers with hers. "You'll have to kill me if you won't stay. I'll go mad trapped like a wild animal in your brig." He thrust as deep as he could go. "I'd rather die if I can't have you."

You'll have to kill me. How the hell was she supposed to do that now? He was *inside* her.

"Why?" To risk all this...for her...she didn't even know him.

He reached up and touched her hair. "May I?" Star nodded, and he pulled the tresses free of their knot. "I've spent a great deal of time in the courts on Primus. This," he shifted her hair through his fingers, "caught my eye. I followed you. I watched you work, I saw the compassion you strive so hard to hide. I like your toughness as well as your softness, and I love that the advancement of your species is so important to you. As an ambassador, I can relate to and respect that."

"I've never seen you," she scoffed.

"I wear a black cloak and hood."

Her eyes widened.

"Ah...I see you've noticed me. I have to cover myself. My appearance is...distracting."

Star snorted. "That's an understatement." Frowning, she asked, "Do all Jacians look like you?"

"We share the same level of similarity as any other species." Roark lifted her hair to his nose, and took a deep breath.

"So, no," she answered, startled by her reaction to his tenderness. "You're exceptionally hot. Women fall at your feet and beg you to fuck them."

His mouth curved in a smile that made her heart leap. "Would you have done that? No? Well then, my looks offer no advantage I would be interested in. Hence the robe."

Slipping his hands around her shoulders, Roark pressed his body fully to hers. She felt the tremor that moved him, felt the sudden swelling of his cock inside her. Her breasts grew heavy, her blood heating and slowing with her arousal. He smelled divine--a potent allure for her heightened senses. His skin was soft and sleek over beautifully defined muscles. Her hands touched his back, slid down his spine, kneaded his flesh.

"Kiss me, Star," he begged softly in the deep, dark voice that moved her. "Like you did in our dreams."

She shouldn't. But his mouth waited just inches from hers, the mouth that had pressed kisses to every inch of her skin. Licking her lips, she tilted her head and gave him what he wanted, her tongue sliding along his, drinking in his taste. He groaned and then began to move, his cock slipping from her inch by inch and then gliding back inside, the thick head stroking every tender spot.

"Oh man," she breathed, shuddering just like he did, the feel of his deep, steady plunges making her writhe in his embrace. His long, silky hair swayed all around him, caressing her legs where she held on for dear life. She'd wanted this for a week, and yet the hunger he fed was far older than that.

"Is it good for you?" he purred, knowing damn well it was. He bent his knees and shifted his angle, massaging her so deeply her eyes watered. "How's this?" He pulled out to the very tip of his cock, and then rolled his hips, screwing back inside.

Her plaintive moan was all the answer she could manage.

His skin grew hot to the touch, his muscles trembling beneath her hands. He was holding back for her. Again. "Go ahead, Roark." Star licked the shell of his ear, then bit the lobe. His cock jerked. "Take what you need."

"Star..."

"I want it," she whispered.

As if her words freed him from invisible restraints, his entire body hardened, then like a coil held too tightly, he sprang into action. He withdrew his cock and then slammed his hips to hers, the wall behind her protesting with a creak. Again he slipped out, again he thrust, his rhythm increasing with every lunge until he was pounding into her, giving her the long, deep plunges she'd begged for in their dreams.

Pinned as she was, she could only take what he gave her. She struggled for leverage, for control, but found none. Roark bit her shoulder and then growled, "Want to come?"

"Yes! Damn you."

He ground his pelvis against her clit and watched her orgasm, his gaze so hot it burned her skin. She rippled around him, milking him, clenching tight to hold him deep. She curled her body around his while he cried out and spurted his pleasure inside her. The feel of his power reduced to such desperation was amazing. That he'd wanted to share this only with her was more so.

As he finished, he held her tightly, but his grip was tempered with unmistakable tenderness. Her body was dense with muscle and unbreakable bones, but Roark made her feel cherished and delicate. Far beyond the sex, this heated after-embrace was achingly intimate--his sweat mixed

with hers, his tongue licking at the bite mark, her hands tangled in his hair.

She could never terminate him.

So now...what to do with him?

"If we--" She cleared her dry throat. "If I agree that we stay here fucking for a week, do I have to hang off the wall the whole time? What happens when I have to pee?"

Laughing, Roark drew his head back and kissed the tip of her nose. "That's something I didn't know about you, your sense of humor. I like it." He stepped back, his heavy cock slipping wetly from her. Star pouted at the loss, and he groaned, but there was no help for it. She'd never retract her spines if he didn't let her calm down a bit.

"Lights," he called out, and she blinked to see him in the new brightness.

"Oh jeez." She swiped her fingers over her mouth to check for drool. In full color, he took her breath away. Inky black tresses set off eyes the color of sapphires--a deep, dark translucent blue.

Then she registered how those eyes looked at her, and she swallowed hard.

He walked a slow semi-circle, his body moving with a fluid, powerful grace. Every muscle was clearly delineated, bunching and flexing as he strode with quiet command and made his thorough perusal. He reached out, his fingers brushing the sides of her breasts, tickling her waist, dipping between her legs where his seed leaked from her. "You are so lovely," he breathed. The smile he gave her was wistful. "Thank you for this week, Star. It'll be worth it." He brushed his lips across hers. "Remember that."

...when I'm gone.

The words were unspoken, but she heard them just the same.

Consumed by a sudden sadness, her spines retracted, and she slid easily to the floor.

A week.

She lowered her head. Only a week to find a way out of this mess without killing Roark or ruining her career. Star hoped that would be enough time.

CHAPTER 3

"Did you pick this place because of that harness?" Star asked, lying flat on her back and staring up at the apparatus above the bed.

"Yes. A guy has to be creative when fucking a woman who gets prickly when aroused."

His smile curved against her shoulder. Roark had the oddest way of sleeping. He wrapped himself around her with their limbs tangled together. At the moment, his hand cupped her breast and his leg was slung over hers. After years of serving on the bench, a position which required frequent travel and killed any chance for a relationship, it was an intimacy that soothed her loneliness.

"Also it was the best way to get the 'drop on you.'"

"You know," she grumbled, "that tactic wouldn't have worked if I'd had any sleep the week before."

"You haven't had any sleep this week either," he said smugly. "Partly because of that harness, and its endless possibilities. Who knew the stern Huntress judge had a liking for such erotic play?" He caught her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "You're just full of surprises."

So was he. Roark was a multi-faceted individual--one moment teasing and playful, the next abrupt and arrogant. He was still getting used to her disagreeing with him over simple things, like what vid station to watch or which restaurant to order food from. It was clear he'd never held a long-term relationship, but then he'd just turned thirty and he was exceptionally handsome. She wasn't surprised.

The comm link beeped next to her.

"Yes?"

"The clerk for Justice Yamada has been comm'ing you," Two-Thousand said.

"He's been doing that all week." Star gave a slight shrug, or as much of one as she could manage with Roark's head on her.

"He has tried several times today, and his last message was very clear--'Check in, or lose the robe.'"

So that was it then. Their time was up.

Star sighed, her hand stroking through the silky strands of Roark's hair. "Make the pre-flight arrangements. We'll be on board within the hour. Star out."

Roark kissed the tip of her breast and then rolled out of bed. He stretched, his beautiful skin moving sinuously over the muscle beneath. She watched him, as she had been all week, memorizing every line of his body, every smile, every heated glance.

"I'm not going to your ship, Star," he said in that deep voice she adored.

"What?" Sitting up, she gaped at him. "You promised!"

His mouth was taut with determination, his sapphire gaze intent. "Terminate me here."

"*What?* Are you insane?"

"It's best this way, and you know it."

After leaping from the bed, she began to pace. "I thought all-you-can-take sex was supposed to prevent madness. Isn't that right? Did I not fuck you enough?" She threw up her hands and then pointed a finger at him. "Just so you know, sometimes I was really sore, but did you hear me complain? No! I put out all week. You shouldn't be crazy."

Roark came to her and pulled her into his embrace. "I love it when you start with the humor. Especially when you do it because the situation is too uncomfortable, or you're facing questions

you don't want to answer. It's one of your little quirks."

She buried her face in his chest, her own so tight she found it hard to breathe. "Don't ask me to do this, Roark. Not after this last week."

He tilted her chin up to look at him. "Did it mean something to you, Star?" His gaze searched her face. "Do *I* mean something to you?"

"Well, you're pretty to look at. And you're built in all the right places, and that thing you do with your tongue is awe--"

Roark lowered his head and took her mouth, one hand cupping her breast while the other moved away from her advancing spines. His touch was like fire, it always had been. Everything inside her came alive when he held her.

"Yes," she whispered when he broke the kiss. "It meant something."

"Then do this for me." He cupped her cheek. "If it has to happen, I would rather it be you."

She shook her head. "You haven't done anything wrong. No one got hurt, you passed through the cycle. Perhaps I can argue on your behalf."

"I fled my pre-assigned," he pointed out gently. "If I get away with it, others will try. It's a good system, Star. It's protected a large number of individuals. As the former Jacian Ambassador to the Interstellar Council, I know how important it is that the Jacian people retain their reputation."

"Yes, I know all that!" she snapped, pushing away and running her hands through her tangled hair. "But how would you feel if I asked *you* to kill *me*?"

Turning to confront him, she was startled to see her blade in his hand. Roark held it out to her, his bearing as proud and noble as always.

"No." Star shook her head, her eyes wide with horror.

"Your appointment is at risk."

Her hands clenched into fists. "I hate you."

He flinched, but kept his hand outstretched.

As she stalked toward him, her eyes narrowed and she swiped away the tears coursing down her cheeks. She drew her arm back when she reached him, and punched him in the shoulder. He took the blow easily. "You teased me for a week." *Punch* "You requested me to come here." *Punch* "You fucked me to exhaustion." *Punch* "And *now*, after I *like* you, you want me to *kill* you? Go fuck yourself!"

Roark caught her next blow as it came toward him, and held her hand. "I didn't request you, Star. I *hoped* you would be the one to come after me, but I didn't ensure it. With the sentence for rogues being death, I thought I had a pretty good chance of the Justices sending you, but I didn't ask for you. There was no way I could have without revealing my plan to run."

Crying silently, she stared up at him. "Your government requested me in particular. They insisted on it."

His frown and pursed lips told her that he was as clueless as she was. He released her fist and brushed the tears from her cheeks. "I think you better find out what Yamada wants."

Nodding, Star moved to the comm link on the nightstand and linked to Two-Thousand.

"Patch me through to the clerk." It took only a moment for the clerk's disapproving features to fill the screen.

"You should at least attempt to make yourself presentable before reporting in, Judge Star."

"You seemed like you were in a hurry," she pointed out, smoothing her hair with trembling hands.

"Your input was desired, but the Chief Justices moved forward without it when you could

not be reached. Now they wish to know if you've terminated the Jacian ambassador yet."

Star lifted her chin. "Not yet."

"Excellent, they will be relieved."

She froze, and felt the answering tension in Roark. "What?"

"The Jacians have requested a reduced sentence based on the ambassador's prominence and the fact that he did not injure anyone during his heat. The Interstellar Council has agreed that terminating a political figure with the popularity of Ambassador Teron would incite trouble they don't want. The Jacians pointed out that they agreed to the pre-assigns in a show of goodwill, and they are not obligated to follow the dictate."

"Can they do that?" she asked.

"Certainly. They would lose membership in the Council if they resisted the pre-assigns, but it seems they are willing to do this. In light of these machinations, the Chief Justices have ordered the ambassador to five years guarded incarceration."

"No." Star shook her head adamantly, her stomach knotted. "I'd rather kill him than send him to a penal colony."

"I haven't finished," the clerk said in a chastising tone. "The ambassador is to be placed on house arrest, and since you obviously deal well with him..." He paused. "You did partner him through his heat, did you not?"

"Yes."

Roark's arms came around her waist in a gentle embrace that offered needed comfort. He looked over her shoulder at the comm link.

The clerk smiled. "Greetings, Ambassador."

"Greetings."

"So, Judge Star," the clerk continued. "You are assigned to five years house arrest guard duty in addition to your regular bench assignments."

Star's eyes widened. As her knees went weak with relief, she was grateful for Roark's steady embrace. "Five years."

"That's a lot of judicial credits, right?" Roark asked.

"Yes, it is, Ambassador. Upon your return, Judge Star, you are to meet with the Chief Justices to discuss your advancement. Congratulations. We'll have a drink when you get back." He smiled again. "See you then. Out."

The screen went blank.

"Oh, man..." she breathed, turning in Roark's embrace. "Oh wow." Her eyes narrowed. "But you're still a selfish bastard."

He laughed that warm laugh that made her shiver, and kissed her nose. "I know. I'll make it up to you, Chief Justice Star."

"Damn, that sounds good, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does." He released a deep breath and his mouth curved in a wry smile. "I guess I wasn't as good at hiding my attraction to you as I thought."

"Yeah, it's pretty obvious someone knew you had the hots for me." Star brushed the silky skeins of Roark's hair over his broad shoulders. "And they set us up."

"My personal assistant, I bet. I'll have to reward him when I see him next."

"What's my reward for seeing you through your sex-a-thon? That was insane, you know." She shook her head. "Insane."

"For the next five years I'll be your sex slave. You can do whatever you want with me. *If* you can handle being with me that long."

"Slave. Yeah, right." She snorted. "You're too arrogant for that. And too used to getting your own way. You argue about what vid shows to watch!"

"But you like me," he pointed out softly, pulling her closer. "And maybe, if I'm really good and really lucky, I can make you more than like me."

Star stared up into those beautiful blue eyes, and smiled. "Wanna start being really good right now?"

Stepping backward, she tugged him toward the bed. Her spines flared outward, and his gaze heated at the sight.

His smile was wicked. "Looks like I just got lucky."

###

SYLVIA DAY

Sylvia Day is the national bestselling, award-winning author of a dozen novels written across multiple sub-genres, under multiple pen names--*three!* A wife and mother of two, she is a former Russian linguist for the U.S. Army Military Intelligence. Sylvia's work has been called "wonderful and passionate" by WNBC.com and "wickedly entertaining" by *Booklist*. Her stories have been translated into Russian, Japanese, Portuguese, German, Czech, and Thai. She's been honored with the *Romantic Times* Reviewers' Choice Award, the EPPIE award, the National Readers' Choice Award, the Readers' Crown, and multiple finalist nominations for Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA Award of Excellence.

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In The Flesh

(Fantasy / Futuristic Romance)

Kensington Publishing Corp.
ISBN-13: 978-1420100907

* * * * *

An Infamous Beauty. A Daring Warrior. . .

For five years, Sapphire has been the King of Sari's most treasured concubine. Independent at last, she refuses to put herself in anyone's control again. But now another's meddling has led her into the path of proud, arrogant Wulfric, Crown Prince of the rival kingdom of D'Ashier...a man who is dangerous to her in every way.

And A Seduction That Could Destroy Them Both

The daughter of Wulfric's fiercest opponent, Sapphire is a prized warrior in her own right and highly skilled in the sensual arts—in short, Wulfric's perfect match. A lasting union is unthinkable, but the bargain they strike—to spend one night together, and then part—proves impossible in the face of a desire powerful enough to bring two countries to the brink of war, and two hearts to the point of surrender...

* * * * *

PROLOGUE

D'Ashier, the Borderlands

“Is he dead, Your Highness?”

Closing the bio-scanner, Wulfric, Crown Prince of D'Ashier, rose from his low crouch and stared down at the corpse at his feet. Desert sand swirled around the body, eager to bury it.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

He lifted his gaze and scanned the berms around them. “At the next check-in, make the report. No need to call this in early and risk the signal being detected.”

They were too close to Sari to chance discovery. The Sarian king was always on the lookout for any provocation to go to war, hence the border patrols that never ceased.

Once every two months Wulf accompanied a platoon of D'Ashier soldiers on their rounds. His presence wasn't required, but for him it was a necessary task. A good ruler lived the trials experienced by his people. He saw the world through their eyes, from their level, not from so

high above that he lost touch with their needs.

“Was he coming or going, Your Highness?”

He glanced at the young lieutenant next to him. “I can’t determine. It’s so hot today I can’t even tell how long he’s been dead.” The bio-suit Wulf wore protected him from both dehydration and the scorching sun, but he could see the heat waves shimmering above the sand.

After the recent Confrontations, the border had been closed abruptly, which left many families divided. The unfortunate result of this was the death of many citizens who tried to cross to their loved ones. Wulf attempted to reopen treaty negotiations with Sari on a regular basis, but the Sarian king always refused. Despite all the years that had passed, Sari still held a grudge.

Two centuries ago, D’Ashier had been a large, prosperous mining colony of Sari. After years of disagreements and injustices claimed on both sides, a bloody revolution had freed the small territory from its homeland, creating a permanent animosity between the two countries. The people of D’Ashier had crowned the popular and well-loved governor as monarch. Over the years, Wulf’s ancestors had expanded and strengthened the fledgling nation until it rivaled all others.

But the royal family of Sari still looked disdainfully upon D’Ashier such as a frustrated parent would an upstart child. Sari remained steadfast in its decision to ignore D’Ashier’s power and sovereignty. The talgorite mines of D’Ashier were the largest producer of the coveted power source in the known universe, well worth every battle and war waged in an effort to reclaim them.

“Something is off.” Wulf lifted his field-sight lenses to scan the sky.

He and the lieutenant stood on a mound several kilometers away from the border. His *skipsbåt* hovered nearby, waiting. D’Ashier guardsmen kept watch all around them. There were a dozen of them altogether, the requisite number of every patrol. From this vantage, he could see a good distance and should feel relatively secure, yet the hair at his nape stood on end. He’d learned long ago to trust his instincts.

Surveying the situation anew, he said, “There’s something posed and artificial about this, and there are too many unanswered questions. This man couldn’t have traveled so far without transportation. Where is his skip? Where are his provisions? Why hasn’t the sand buried him?”

As his headset crackled to life, he lowered the lenses.

“There is no sign of anything of note, Your Highness. We’ve searched the surrounding two kilometers.”

“Any more unusual readings, Captain?”

“Nothing.”

He shot a glance at the young lieutenant who stood expectantly beside him. Wulf’s patrols were always officer heavy, usually with many newly commissioned. The general had made that request years ago in an effort to demonstrate to his subordinates how the weight of command should be carried. It was a mantle Wulf had worn without strain since birth. “Let’s go.”

They moved swiftly to their abandoned skips, using the economic movements that were innate to inhabitants of a desert planet. Just as they prepared to mount the slender bikes, the ground rumbled ominously. The source was easily recognized, and Wulf cursed his failure to foresee the trap. Loosening the restraint of the glaive-hilt holster attached to his thigh, he yelled out a warning. Leaping onto his skip, he engaged the power and tugged hard on the controls, flying away just before the small enemy borer emerged from the sand.

“I can’t get a distress call out!” cried the panicked lieutenant. The rest of the patrol assembled into the V-shaped group formation, and sped farther into D’Ashier territory.

“They’re blocking it.” Wulf’s tone was grim. “Damn it, they must have been boring their way through the sand for days.”

“Why didn’t they show up on the scanners? We were directly over them.”

“The power was off. Without that signature, they were effectively invisible.”

Wulf was highly conscious of the powerful hum of the borer behind them. The warning blip that had sparked their investigation must have been made as the transport entered D’Ashier from Sari, before the engines had been turned off. The corpse was merely the lure that ensured the anomaly wasn’t dismissed as a malfunction.

“How the hell could they stay under without environmental controls?”

“With desperation,” the captain muttered, flying upward as a warning shot from the borer spewed sand into a cloud before him. *“That’s not a Sarian borer. They’re mercenaries.”*

Studying the upcoming landscape through his navigational scanner, Wulf said, “We can’t outrun them. Break up over the rise. Circle the rock outcropping.”

Clearing the embankment, the patrol separated into two lines. Another shot from the borer hit its mark, sending a skip spinning briefly before it exploded and killed the soldier who rode it. The rest of the men bent lower as they sped toward the multitowered rock formation that rose as monoliths from the desert floor.

Wulf cursed when a well-aimed shot from the borer crumbled a tower of red rock. Blood-colored dust billowed as a horrifying cracking sound rent the air. Glancing down at his console, he saw transport-sized debris break loose, crashing down upon the other half of his patrol. From the loss of readout, he knew only a few survived.

Rounding the corner, he saw an opening that could give them a fighting chance.

“Dismount,” he ordered, weaving his skip between the monoliths. “Draw them out in the open.”

In the center of the rock outcropping was a circular patch of sand. They set down, alighted, and fanned out, forming an outward-facing circle. Drawing their glaives, they engaged the powerful blades and waited, the tension palpable.

Phaser fire shook the ground beneath them, but they were safe inside. The gaps and crevices between the various obtrusions were large enough for a skip to enter, but not the borer, which was much bigger. If the attackers wanted to kill them, they’d have to come in on foot and fight hand to hand.

The waiting was endless. Sweat coursed down Wulf’s temple. The rest of his skin stayed dry only by benefit of the *dammr*-suit, which regulated his body temperature.

“We just want the prince.” The words echoed around them. “Give him to us, and the rest of you can live.”

Wulf felt the anger that spread through his ranks.

“You’ll have to kill us first!” the captain challenged.

“I was hoping you would say that,” came the laughing reply, then blaster fire lit the air and was deflected by the quick movement of a glaive, the powerful laser blade more than a match for the inelegant handgun.

Almost before he could blink, Wulf found his men surrounded. As he thrust and parried with almost innate reflex, he knew there had to have been more than one borer. All these men could not have fit inside one of the small transports. He also knew there was no chance for victory, not when they were four to one.

The urge to surrender for the lives of his men was strong. Despite the risk his ransom would present to D’Ashier, Wulf was about to yield when his headset crackled.

“No, Your Highness.” The captain shot him a sidelong glance. “They will kill us regardless. Let us at least die with honor.”

And so he fought on, his chest tight with regret and frustrated anger. Every one of his soldiers gave their all, despite knowing the inevitability of the outcome. They kicked at those who got close enough, cut down those who stumbled in their path, and kept as near as possible to Wulf in a vain effort to spare him.

One by one they fell, the air thick with the smell of burnt flesh. Bodies, both soldiers and mercs, littered the sandy floor. But all too soon, he stood alone against the many.

In the end, Crown Prince Wulfric of D’Ashier went down with the knowledge that he could not have done any more than he had.

For him, that was enough.

* * * * *

Sari, the Royal Palace

Sapphire lounged in the small private atrium that was attached to her quarters and absently studied the design of the Sarian palace on her compu-pad. Birds called out from their hanging cages, singing in chorus with the splashing water in the fountain. Sunlight poured onto the large plant fronds that lined the walls and shielded her in shade, the scorching rays diffused by the low emissive skylights above.

The other *mätresses*, royal concubines like her, were gossiping in the *seraglio*, but she didn’t want to socialize today. In fact, over the last few years she’d found herself growing more dissatisfied with her life in the palace. She was an active woman with a variety of interests. The indolent life of a concubine, while highly respected and esteemed, was not suited to her temperament.

Despite this, Sapphire remained grateful that the King of Sari had chosen her from among the many women graduating from the Sensual Arts School in the capital city of Sari. Her graduation had come soon after the end of the D’Ashier Confrontations, a drawn-out war with a neighboring nation that had drained Sari’s resources. For a time, concubines became an unaffordable luxury, and many graduates had been forced to auction their contracts to the highest bidder. The king’s interest saved her from a similar fate, and created her high social status. All she’d had to relinquish was her name. She was now known as Sapphire, the royal stone of Sari. The appellation was an undeniable declaration of the king’s possession, and the driving force of her fame.

But she possessed her king more surely than he would ever possess her. His love for her was obsessive, his desire insatiable. He demanded her presence at all public events. Since their first night together, he had never taken another woman to his bed. Not even the queen.

This last result pained Sapphire greatly. It was obvious the Queen of Sari loved her husband. Sapphire had no personal experience with that powerful emotion, but she imagined the pain would be devastating—loving a man who in turn loved another. She hated to be the cause of such misery.

Over the last few years she had taken every opportunity to speak highly of her queen. She pointed out Her Majesty’s beauty, poise, and ease with command, but her praise fell on deaf ears. Her best efforts to help the other woman all met with failure.

Setting aside the compu-pad with a sigh, Sapphire rose to her feet and began to stroll along

the tiled path.

“I hate to see you so bored,” came a lilting voice from the doorway.

Sapphire turned her head and her gaze met eyes of soft, pale green. Dressed in flowing pink robes, the blonde woman who’d spoken was a welcome sight. “Mom!”

“Hi, sweetheart.” Sasha Erikson opened her arms and Sapphire rushed into them, curling with pleasure into the maternal embrace. “I’ve missed you. Tell me what you’ve been up to.”

“A great deal of nothing, sad to say.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Her mother kissed her forehead. “More and more, I think I did you a disservice by not seeing where your true calling lay.”

Sasha had loved the life of a concubine and urged Sapphire into pursuing the career. Retired now and a tenured professor at the Sensual Arts School, Sasha was widely appreciated for her beauty and the adoration of her idolized husband. Sapphire’s success was largely attributed to the tutelage of her mother and she was grateful for that advantage. However, she’d realized too late that she was far more suited to her father’s military occupation than her mother’s sensual one.

“You know better than that.” Sapphire’s tone was softly chastising. Linking arms, she pulled her mother into the atrium. “I wouldn’t have pursued this career if I hadn’t wanted it. My expectations were off. That is no one’s fault but my own.”

“What did you expect?”

“Too much, apparently. I can tell you what I *didn’t* expect. I never expected the confrontations or the sale of my contract to the king. I didn’t expect that the political marriage between our monarchs was in fact a love match for one of them. I never would have accepted His Majesty’s offer if I’d known.” She wrinkled her nose. “I was naïve.”

“You? Naïve?” Sasha squeezed her hand. “Sweetheart, you are one of the most pragmatic women I know.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew what I’d hoped for then. I wanted to find what you and father have. You have a great love story—the handsome, heroic general who falls in love with and marries his beautiful concubine. You said when you first saw him it was as if your blood caught fire. That’s so romantic, Mom.” She sighed dramatically and her mother laughed. “See? You think I’m silly. Girlish fantasies and daydreams.”

Her mother shook her head. “The majority of people don’t find love in the course of their employment. But I don’t think you’re silly.”

Sapphire arched a dubious brow.

“Oh, okay,” Sasha conceded. “Maybe a little silly.”

Grinning, Sapphire rang for a *mästare* to bring wine. Then she sat on the tiled lip of the fountain and settled in to experience much-needed excitement through the words of her mother.

* * * * *

In just a few moments, her husband would leave the exotic haven of their private rooms for the bed of his concubine.

Desperate to reach him before he left, Brenna, Queen of Sari, spoke bluntly. “You have to make love to me, Gunther, if you want me to conceive. I cannot do it alone.”

As the king began to pace in front of her, his frustration was clear. He was such a beautiful man, tall with golden hair and skin. In all of her life, she had never met a man who could equal him. With every breath she took, she loved him more than the last.

“The precedence is clear and unbreakable. I cannot be artificially inseminated,” she

reminded ruthlessly. “All royal heirs must be conceived naturally.”

Running a hand through his hair, Gunther shot her a scathing glance. He strode past where she sat on the velvet-draped divan. “I know the rules!”

His reluctance to bed her cut deep. As she thought of his concubine, her nails dug into her palms. Sapphire was the *karimai*—most prized of all the *mätresses*.

The concubine’s quarters remained full with women of every description, but for five years now the other *mätresses* had been sexually pleased by the *mästares* who protected and served them. Only Sapphire shared the bed of the king—a place that should be Brenna’s, and would be again. Soon.

“Send her away,” Brenna suggested, as she had a hundred times. It always sparked an argument, but she refused to stop trying. She would get rid of her rival. Somehow. “Sari must have an heir.”

He growled and paced faster. “I weary of your harping.”

“We have been married for years! The people grow restless. They begin to doubt our fertility.”

“You lie. No one would dare speak of such things.”

She leaped to her feet. “They think it. They whisper it.”

Coming to a halt, Gunther’s gaze darted around as if he was trapped. No doubt he felt as if he was.

“Gunther?”

“Do it, then.”

Her breath caught.

“Tomorrow, Brenna. Before I change my mind.”

“Yes, of course.”

Gunther stared at her for a long moment. Then he shook his head and made his egress.

To go to her. *To Sapphire.*

Brenna fought back the bile that rose in her throat. She had only hours left to wait until the *mätress* would be gone.

Then the king would be hers again.

* * * * *

As Sapphire made love to the King of Sari, her mind was firmly on her job. She barely registered the opulence of her surroundings, heeding them only in passing recognition of their enhancement of her duties. Simulated candlelight and smoky incense drifted lazily through the room. White stone arches draped in blue velvet circled the divan where she pleased the king. Beyond was a shallow bathing pool; the tinkling melody of water pouring from the fountains was masked by the rhythmic sounds of sex.

She concentrated instead on the king’s body signals—the rapidness of his breathing, the impatient upward drives of his hips, and the glazed look in his blue eyes. Using the powerful muscles of her thighs, Sapphire raised and lowered herself with practiced grace above him, conscious of her appearance because she knew the king liked to watch her. She was rewarded by the masculine satisfaction that curved his lips.

Soon he was gripping the pillows around him, hoarse cries torn from his throat as she serviced him. The all-powerful King of Sari groaned, sweat breaking out over his handsome features.

Sapphire arched her back as the king's orgasm pulsed within her. Her job done to his satisfaction, she closed her eyes and reached her own climax. Her moan of release echoed through her bedchamber along with the king's.

Replete, she sank into the king's embrace with a sigh. He was a tall man with a sinewy strength she admired. The monarch was golden from the top of his blond head down to his manicured toes, and he was kind to her.

Once she'd dreamed of falling in love with her king, but in the end it was impossible. The King of Sari placed his pleasure paramount to hers. He knew nothing about her and made no effort to learn. After five years, she was still served food she didn't enjoy. They listened to music he liked and the clothes provided for her were made in colors and materials he chose with no care for her preferences.

Once a concubine accepted a labor contract, she was bound to her chosen protector until he decided to release her. Sapphire wondered if the king would ever allow her to go. How long would she be asked to remain his concubine? His interest showed no signs of waning.

She wanted to find someone who cared for her as she truly was—inside and out. She wanted to make love to a man because she was giving herself to him with her heart, a gift of herself for the man she loved.

That would never happen if the king never released her.

Nuzzling against his neck, Sapphire gave a throaty laugh as the evidence of his renewing desire swelled inside her. Her eyes met his.

"Give me a moment, my king." Her voice dropped to a throaty purr. "And I will pleasure you again."

He gripped her face between his hands, his gaze fierce. "No matter what happens in the future, you must promise me that you'll always remember you are my *karisette*. You have been from the moment I first saw you."

The intensity of his tone startled her, as did his words. *Karisette*—"true love."

"My king—"

"Promise me!"

She caressed his chest soothingly, turning her voice into a gentle croon. "Of course. I promise."

He rolled her beneath him and took her again.

* * * * *

Restless and edgy, Brenna paced the length of the throne room. Whenever she felt powerless, she found this location—the seat of her power—to be soothing. It had been dark when she first came here. Now the massive chamber brightened as the sun rose, spilling light through the domed skylights above.

"Your Majesty."

She turned her head and saw the prostrated messenger by the door. "Rise."

He stood swiftly, straightening the blue and gold vest that proclaimed his position as a member of the royal staff. "I have a message for the king."

"You may tell me," she said, needing the distraction. "His Majesty is occupied."

"A family near the border reported a disturbance they likened to blaster fire. A unit was dispatched to investigate and in the ensuing fight a mercenary was captured." He paused. "It is Tarin Gordmere."

Brenna's brows rose. Gordmere was a well-known irritant to Gunther. He had no qualms about raiding certain sectors, often costing the royal coffers a great deal of income. If she were to present the mercenary to the king, it would put him in a good mood, which could only be conducive to softening his feelings toward her, if only a little. "Where is he now?"

"At the Southern detention facility."

"Excellent." She gifted the messenger with a bright smile. "I will see that the king hears of this. You are dismissed."

"There is more, Your Majesty."

"What is it?" Her tone was curt, an audible sign of her thinning patience.

"Gordmere's lieutenant approached the jail soon after the incarceration and offered an exchange."

"He has nothing we want," she scoffed.

"He claims he has Crown Prince Wulfric of D'Ashier."

She stopped midstep. "Impossible."

"The captain assures you that he would not bring this information to the palace without proof. The mercenary carried a signet ring bearing the royal shield of D'Ashier."

Stunned, Brenna attempted to reason out the implications of this new development.

Gordmere. Prince Wulfric.

How delicious, if the tale was true. Certainly if she presented Gunther with the prince, he would admire her daring. She would prove to him that she was fit to be his queen and worthy of Sari. He would see what he'd been blind to all these years—that she was perfect for him.

"Guardian," she called out.

"Yes, Your Majesty?" responded the masculine voice of the palace computer.

"Inform my guards to prepare for my departure." She strode past the servant, needing to change and depart before her husband was made aware of the day's events. "I leave within the half hour."

* * * * *

Sari, the Borderlands

Adjusting the train of her velvet robes, Brenna disembarked the antigrav-craft. As she took in her surroundings, her nose wrinkled. The vast cave they'd been directed to made her skin crawl, and the smell of uncleansed air was offensive.

"Where is he?" She was eager to finish the distasteful business ahead.

The large sandy-haired man who waited at the end of the ramp bowed at the waist, a grave insult since he should have dropped to his knees and prostrated himself. "This way, Your Majesty."

Brenna could order her guards to force Tor Smithson down and would have if the mercenary didn't have something she wanted. But he did, so she followed, surrounded by her guardsmen. They traversed a long hallway, then turned a corner.

The sight that met her made her gag.

Covering her mouth, it took a few moments to find breath enough to speak. "If he's dead," she choked out, "you get nothing!"

"He's not dead." Smithson shrugged. "I just had a little fun with him."

A little fun.

Her stomach roiled violently. The man was mad. What she saw before her was near carnage. The stone walls around them were spattered with so much blood she couldn't believe it belonged to one person.

Hiding her nausea beneath chilly hauteur, Brenna moved forward. The man they said was the Crown Prince of D'Ashier hung unconscious before her, his wrists shackled and chained to opposite walls. The entire weight of his body was supported by those metal bonds. His powerful arms and broad shoulders were stretched to the tearing point, his hands a dark purple from supporting his large frame.

Reaching him, she used both hands to lift his slumped head and gasped. Aside from her husband, she had never seen features so finely crafted. Each line and plane had been etched by a master hand to create perfection.

Sadly, his face was the only part of him not covered in blood, or cut or burned or whipped. The rest of him—a warrior's well-honed body—was gravely, perhaps mortally injured.

She listened closely for sounds of life, and caught his breathing—shallow and erratic. The sounds of a man dying.

"Take him down." She stepped out of the way.

Smithson growled. "Give me Gordmere first."

"No." Brenna raked his massive frame with a look of pure disgust. She'd never in her life met so vile a creature. "Once the prince is safely in my transport, I will release Gordmere."

The exchange was completed within moments, a perfectly healthy Gordmere exchanged for a man who had only hours left to live. The antigrav-craft lifted off and navigated carefully out of the cavern.

"Send out a call for troops," she ordered. "I want that place destroyed."

The distance to the palace was quickly traversed, but the prince's condition seemed to worsen considerably over the journey. Afraid to move him further, Brenna left him in the craft when they landed. She wanted to present a live captive, regardless of whether he died shortly after or not. Running against the clock, Brenna hurried from the transport bay in search of her husband. The fastest route was through the *seraglio*, so that was the path she chose.

Rounding a corner, she skidded to a halt at the sight of the king. She was about to speak when she realized he wasn't alone. He was with *her*. Sapphire.

As Brenna registered the intimacy of his pose, her eyes widened. Gunther stood in the doorway of the concubine's room with her cheek cupped in his hand. Bent over her possessively, his lips clung to the *mätress*'s with obvious affection. When he lifted his head, the torment on his handsome features was clearly visible.

He loved her.

Brenna collapsed against the cool plaster wall, shocked by comprehension. She could not win his heart, because it was no longer his to give. He was taken.

Something inside her cracked, then broke completely.

Sending the concubine away would not be enough. As long as Sapphire drew breath, she would be a threat.

Straightening and moving away before she was seen, Brenna reminded herself that she was queen and had unlimited resources. She could, and would, deal with this threat once and for all.

Everything she needed with right at her fingertips.

* * * * *

Sapphire entered the queen's receiving chamber, admiring as always the beauty of natural light flooding the room from the doomed skylights above. As the palace computer slid the door closed behind her, she prostrated herself just inside the threshold, her forehead touching the cool tile floor. "Your Majesty, I am here as you ordered."

The queen's regal voice echoed across the vaulted ceiling and down the long, narrow chamber. "You may rise, king's *mätress*. Come and sit at my feet."

Moving as she was bade, Sapphire walked the massive length of the throne room toward the beautiful Queen Brenna. Golden, like her husband, the queen was the day to Sapphire's night. Tall and blessed with a willowy gracefulness, the queen stood a head higher than Sapphire and possessed none of her generous voluptuousness. However, it was not the blonde's figure that had discouraged the king's passion but her frigidity. As Sapphire approached the monarch, she swore she felt a radiating chill even through the queen's warm velvet robes.

Once she reached the end of the room, Sapphire took a seat on the bottom step of the royal dais and waited.

"We both understand our respective positions well, *mätress*, so I will be brief. Sari needs an heir. I have discussed this with the king and he agrees."

Sapphire took the news without a blink.

The queen watched her closely. "The thought of the king in my bed does not affect you adversely."

It was statement, not a question.

Inclining her head in acknowledgment, Sapphire said, "Of course not, my queen. The king is yours. I have never thought otherwise."

Brenna leaned back in her throne with a grim smile. "I see you are not as taken with the king as he is with you."

Sapphire said nothing, which in turn said everything. She had never professed to love the king. He was a good man, a handsome and kind man, but he was not her *karisem*. She could never love a man who saw her only as a possession and not as an individual with thoughts and feelings of her own.

"That is fortunate for you, *mätress*, considering what I have to say. The king does not feel he can share my bed if you remain in the palace." Bitterness was evident in the regal voice.

Her heart going out to her queen, Sapphire lowered her eyes to hide her pity.

"You are to be retired with the honor due you as the king's *karimai*," Her Majesty said. "As his most favored, you will be moved immediately to a home on the outskirts of the capital. You will be provided with fourteen *mästares* who will serve you until you die. Your every wish will be granted, *mätress*, for your exemplary service to the king."

Sapphire sat for a moment in shock. *Retired*. More than freedom, more than she had ever allowed herself to hope for. She was being pensioned off, after only one contract.

Usually when a *mätress* was released, she was free to find another protector, her value now greatly enhanced for having shared the bed of the king. Her wages became ever more exorbitant, her worth increasing with every protector until she acquired the funds to support her indolent lifestyle. But such was not to be Sapphire's fate. The king valued her and loved her so much he was willing to retire her.

Retirement. The word swirled in Sapphire's brain with a heady delight. It was what she had worked for, the reason her parents had encouraged her to become a concubine. Not only was the position well respected, it was also one of the few careers where hard work guaranteed a luxurious existence for life. In addition to her pension, she was also being gifted with fourteen

mästares — handsome, virile men who would dedicate their lives to serving her.

“I’m grateful, my queen.” Her words were heartfelt.

Brenna waved her hand in dismissal. “Go. Your belongings are being packed as we speak. The king has left the palace and will not be saying farewell. I’m certain you are clever enough to discern why.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Now she understood the king’s driving urgency of the night before and his passionate declaration. He’d known it would be their last time together.

Sapphire backed out of the room in a bow. The doors slid open with a hiss as she approached, then closed again when she departed.

Unbelievably, freedom was hers.

* * * * *

Brenna waited until the doors sealed shut behind the retreating *mätress*. The fact that the concubine could so easily disregard the king’s love solidified the queen’s already firm resolve.

“Guardian,” she called out to the empty chamber.

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Has my gift been delivered to the new home of the *mätress* Sapphire?”

“Of course, my queen. With the utmost discretion.”

Her mouth curved in a feral smile. “Excellent.”

CHAPTER 1

Sapphire alighted from the royal antigrav-craft, her palms damp with anticipation. The home given to her by the King of Sari was, in fact, a small palace. Bright white with multicolored windows, it was set in the golden hills of sand like a sparkling jewel.

As five of her new *māstares* unloaded her belongings, she approached her front door. The hot breeze that coursed over her skin was a welcome and pleasant sensation. She'd spent the last five years inside the palace, her skin tanned by artificial means, her lungs filled with purified air. On excursions with the king, she had always entered the cooled antigrav-craft through equally cooled landing bays.

Taking her first deep breath of natural air in years, Sapphire smiled at the slightly gritty sensation left in her mouth. She enjoyed the heat of Sari and relished the fine sheen of sweat on her skin that evaporated instantly in the dry desert environment.

Placing her palm on the recognition pad, she waited a split-second as the system recognized her prints. The door slid open and "*Welcome, Mistress*" rang out in the melodious feminine voice of the house computer.

Sapphire entered her new home and was immediately assaulted with chilled, cleansed air.

"Guardian."

"*Yes, Mistress?*"

"Purify the air, but cool it only in the bedchambers."

"*As you wish.*"

Absorbing her new surroundings with wide eyes, she found the balance of her *māstares* lining either side of her long entrance hallway. The resemblance the men bore to the king was noted with a smile. Tall, blond, and possessing sinewy lines of muscle, they were all remarkably handsome.

Sapphire walked through the gauntlet, then paused at the end with a frown. "There are only thirteen of you."

The *māstare* nearest to her dropped to his knees. "Mistress, my name is Dalen."

Resting her hand on his head, she slipped her fingers through his silky hair. "I'm pleased to meet you, Dalen."

He stood, and smiled with boyish charm. "The other *māstare* is still in the healing chamber, Mistress."

Her frown deepened. The healing chamber took only moments to heal slight injuries.

"*Still?*"

"He was gravely injured when he arrived. He's been in the chamber for half an hour now. While he should be healed shortly, he'll need some rest before he can assume his duties. But the rest of us stand ready. We'll more than make up for his absence."

"I've no doubt you will all please me. But I'm concerned about the injured one. How was he so badly hurt? And why was he sent to me in such a state?"

"I'll take you to him, Mistress. I have no answers to your questions. You'll have to ask him when he emerges."

Offering his arm, Dalen escorted her through her palace. Sapphire took in the size and beauty of her surroundings with astonished pleasure. There could be no greater testament of her worth to the king than this show of largesse.

They crossed the large receiving room with its massive divan and traveled down an arched hallway to the center atrium. The sight of a large bubbling bath surrounded by lush greenery

filled her with joy. The rest of her life would begin in this home, and her blood quickened at the thought of the freedom she would enjoy here.

Dalen stopped before a door nestled along the rear wing of the courtyard and waved his hand over the lock pad. The door slid open, and she stepped inside. In the center of the small room stood the cylindrical glass healing chamber. She took one look at the unconscious man inside and her instinctive response to him was so powerful, she ordered Dalen to leave her. When the door slid shut behind the retreating *mästare*, Sapphire walked closer to the chamber.

The injured man took her breath away. Tall, dark, and devastated with whip marks that were slowly healing before her eyes, he still boasted raw potent masculinity. He was nothing like the king or her *mästares*. He was nothing like any man she'd ever seen.

Rich, gleaming black hair blew gently around his nape as the swirling air pressure inside kept him upright. His skin was deeply tanned and stretched over powerfully defined muscles. She'd never seen a man with so many ripples of power beneath his skin; not even her warrior father displayed such strength.

His facial features were strong and bold, like the rest of his body. High cheekbones and an aquiline nose gave him an aristocratic cast; the powerful jaw and sensual lips made him dangerous. He was simply magnificent. She wondered what color his eyes were. Brown maybe, like her own? Or perhaps blue, like the king's?

Sapphire circled the chamber slowly, wincing at the myriad of wounds that striped and gouged his flesh. The man had been tortured most grievously. The length of time he'd already spent in the chamber told her he must have been near death when they brought him to her. Who would have selected such a man for her? He was as different from the other *mästares* as she was from the queen. Even unconscious, this man radiated mastery. He was no *mästare*.

Returning to the front of the chamber, she continued her heated perusal, her nipples puckering as desire quickened her blood. His broad and powerful chest was almost healed now. A thin strip of hair led her eyes down the ripples of his abdomen to his cock and testicles below. Her mouth went dry as she noted the carefully trimmed curls at the base of his shaft and his heavy sac that was completely denuded of hair. She stepped closer to the chamber until her hands and breasts were pressed against the warm glass, her eyes riveted to his groin. Even flaccid, his penis was impressive. She wondered how it would look when aroused.

As if it could read her mind, his cock suddenly twitched and began to swell. Rising slowly, it took on commendable size. Becoming aroused by the sight, Sapphire rubbed her breasts against the glass, then stilled as the stunning phallus grew in response to her wantonness. Startled, her gaze flew upward and was arrested by dazzling green eyes. Emerald bright, they raked her body hungrily, able to see her completely through the sheerness of her gown. Her skin tingled and grew warm as the man studied her with breathtaking boldness.

Nakedness imparted no vulnerability to the man's undeniably arrogant bearing. She was so hot for him she was on fire, this stranger with the battered body and beautiful face. For the first time in her life, Sapphire felt the pull of true desire, heady and overwhelming.

"Who are you?" she whispered, even though she knew he couldn't hear her through the glass. He reached out a hand, pressing opposite hers against the barrier that separated them. Sweat misted her skin at the thought of touching him. She wanted to curl her fingers and lace his long fingers with hers. She longed to caress his bronzed skin and see if it was as smooth as it looked.

He was almost healed. Soon, he would exit the chamber. Prolonged, intense healing was exhausting. He would most likely collapse at her feet. With a sigh of regret, Sapphire stepped

back and was startled when he lunged toward the glass as if to catch her. *Don't go*, he mouthed. The stark plea in his eyes made her chest tight.

“Guardian.” Her voice was a hoarse whisper. “Who is this man in the healing chamber?”

“He is Crown Prince Wulfric of D’Ashier.””

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