



*The Knife's Edge*

by Stephanie Draven

## THE KNIFE'S EDGE

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## *Prologue*

“Why is she still alive?” Junik asked, pushing his way into my chambers quite uninvited, yet with every expectation of being welcome.

Nobles were all the same that way. Bandyng about their status and eager to sign death warrants, but rarely appreciating the skill, patience and fortitude it took to actually end someone's life.

“It is no simple thing to kill a queen,” I said. Especially not a desirable one. “Even without guards and poison tasters, she still wears the medallion. It protects her better than any army.”

The lord slithered into a chair, his mouth a nasty circle of contempt. “She must take the damned thing off sometime.”

You must understand that the medallion was a sacred relic of our nation. The lord's way of speaking about it was sacrilege, and made me peevish. I might be a killer, but I was a patriot, after all. “She wears it to sleep and even to bathe.”

A momentary image of my sovereign disrobing and stepping into a pool of warm water assaulted my senses. Her legs slick and glistening, her delicate hands working the soap between her thighs. Oh, to see such a thing with my own eyes...

It occurred to me that I had forgotten my manners. “Would you care for refreshments?”

The lord narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “No.”

His mistrust was typical. I'd endured it my whole life, as all bastards must, but it still insulted me. Nonetheless, I took out two goblets and opened my best vintage. “Not even some wine?”

“I said no.” Junik stacked coins on the table in precisely even little piles. “I've only come to get her papers. Do you have them?”

I felt the sharpness of the moment keenly—the dance on the knife's edge that preceded all life and death decisions. I loved that feeling, and the certain rush of power that came with it. I tossed him a carefully wrapped pouch of papers. "Here. Copies of the queen's recent correspondence. I'll kill her when she removes the medallion and no sooner."

"She must remove it when she takes a lover," Lord Junik suggested, tearing open the pouch. I watched his piggy fingers thumb through the sheaf of letters. "If it's true that the medallion knows and remembers everything it touches—even a slattern like Nestra wouldn't allow it to witness her fornications."

"The queen doesn't take lovers," I said, for I believed it to be true, no matter how much I wished otherwise.

Junik snorted. "She's notorious for it! It's the reason her husband left her."

"So her enemies say." I poured my wine and left Lord Junik's goblet empty as requested.

"You have some reputation with women, Dardanus," Junik snorted. "Seduce her yourself. Women are weak—easily wooed with flowers, poetry and song."

The drink in my cup seemed very dark indeed. "I doubt Queen Nestra would lower herself to lay with her bastard advisor."

Junik laughed. "Are you so base-born that you can't *rise* to the occasion? We can always find someone else up to the task."

"I didn't say I *couldn't* seduce her." The lord's mockery caused my temper to rise, any regrets extinguished. But Junik didn't seem to be paying attention. He was sweating and his eyes were glassy. "Are you feeling unwell, my lord?" I asked with great satisfaction.

He put his hand on his stomach. "Indigestion."

I coolly appraised the man's state. "It's poison, actually."

The lord's eyes flew wide. He reached for his empty goblet. "But I didn't drink—"

"It was the first scroll in the pouch I handed you," I said. "Contact poison."

Junik tried to get up, and couldn't. "You lie!"

"Often," I confessed. "Especially to those who have no faith in me anyway. But not today. The poison is fast acting; I'm not entirely without mercy. The pain will be over shortly."

Junik's cheeks puffed with the strain of his labored breathing. "You want the medallion for yourself, you want to rule, is that it, you vile Pretender?"

Ah, so he'd said it.

"*Pretender*, am I?" I asked, bringing my face close to his. "My blood is better than yours. Were it not for the accident of my birth, you'd have called me your king."

Lord Junik's eyes were closing, his breath rasping away. "I should have never trusted you."

I eyed the man's empty wine goblet and murmured, "My lord, you never did."

## Chapter One

“You’re late,” the queen said. She was sitting at her desk, reading a scroll, and she didn’t even bother to look at me when she spoke. I resented the imperious attitude she always took with me. But for now it must be borne gracefully. While she wore the medallion around that lovely, fragile neck, she was inviolate.

“My apologies, Your Majesty,” I said, as the sway of my cloak came to rest behind my hurried steps. Having complained I was late, she now made me wait. She used this technique to put me in my place when she felt under assault—as she must feel now, threatened by enemies on every side.

“Lord Junik was found dead in a brothel this morning,” she finally said.

I didn’t bother to feign surprise or dissemble; the truth occasionally served as well as a lie in games of betrayal. “I know. On his person we found copies of your personal correspondence. He was disloyal, as I warned you.”

She was genuinely wounded. I tasted the sweetness of her struggle, so unsure of what to believe. The burden of rule, I imagined, was heavy without a husband or a son to protect her. I might have pitied her, were I the kind of man to feel pity. But the medallion around her neck flickered in the light of the oil lamp, winking at me like a flirtatious maid.

She sighed. “I trusted Lord Junik with my life.”

But nothing else, I was sure. He hadn’t set eyes on the breasts that rose and fell beneath her bodice. He hadn’t captured those lush lips. But I would. I decided it then and there. Whether she be willing or not, I told myself, I would have one kiss...

“Trust is usually a mistake, Your Majesty,” I said.

She traced the medallion, as if drawing upon its wisdom. "Because I am a woman, they say that I'm unfit to rule."

I nodded. "That is what they say."

"And what do you say, Dardanus?"

I showcased my practiced servility. "You have royal blood. Your right to rule is divinely ordained." Of course, I had royal blood too, and I hated her for forgetting it. "I think that if you don't draw up a list of the disloyal and execute them, we'll never know peace in this realm."

"No," she said, her breath catching. "Proscription lead to insurrection, and when we put down one rebellion, their sons will start another, determined to avenge their fathers."

She was quite right. "Then, Your Majesty, you kill the sons too."

She recoiled. "If I do, the gods will condemn my soul."

"Preserving the soul is a luxury few rulers can afford," I said, more to myself than to her. "Small people must be loved but rulers must be respected. Killing is a necessity of rule."

Besides, killing came naturally to me; it was an art form. I had a methodical approach that made me well-suited to such tasks, not to mention a lifetime of resentment to draw upon.

Nestra clutched her medallion and the sparks of its magic flickered over her fingers. I noted the ice-blue gown she wore, pinned at each shoulder with an unassuming silver brooch and the way she held herself stiffly, her hair confined with sapphire hairpins. I doubted she ever let her hair loose—ever let herself loose. To kill her, I would have to change that. I would have to arouse her. I would have to bring her to the point that she was willing, nay, eager, to remove that medallion from her neck and cast herself into my arms. "Your Majesty, if you worry about the sin in killing, give the sin to the medallion and let it hold it for you."

She eyed me suspiciously. "What do you know of my medallion?"

I wasn't surprised at her reaction. As a bastard, people usually expected the worst of me and I rarely bothered to disappoint. "My father never acknowledged me, but remember that he too was of this royal house. He told me of the medallion's powers. The rest I've learned from what I observe of you."

She had the slightly offended look of a woman who was secretly flattered. "You observe me?"

"Often. Carefully. *Eagerly*," I admitted. "Which is why I know that when you feel uneasy you hold the medallion to give you strength, as you're doing now."

Nestra dropped her hand self-consciously. No words passed between us for several moments and I knew not to push. Given enough curiosity and time, a woman could usually be made to come to me. Of course, Nestra was no ordinary woman, no whore or commoner. She was the queen.

“Draw up your list of rebels, Sir Dardanus, and offer proof of their treasons.”

With a list of inconvenient obstacles already in mind, I bowed at the waist, glancing up just in time to catch her frank appraisal of me. She liked my looks and I watched her flush.

So then she *could* flush, like any tavern wench, like any gutter slut. I should have averted my gaze, but I met her eyes and let the heat settle between us.

## Chapter Two

I didn't have to wait long. The next day, I escorted her back from religious services. She was sullen. As soon as she found her chair, she dismissed me without a glance but as I made my way to the door, she stopped me. "What else have you observed of me?"

I feigned confusion. "Your Majesty?"

"You said yesterday you observe me. What have you observed?"

I held my breath. *One. Two. Three.* I reached a count of ten before shaking my head. "It would be impertinent of me to answer the question."

"I give you leave."

"Why give me leave to speak impertinently?" I asked.

"Because you might have something useful to say."

"What I've observed is mostly of a personal nature—I doubt very useful to you."

Nestra sighed wearily. "Don't make me command it."

I bowed my head, in mock surrender. "You're brittle."

"*Brittle?*" It wasn't what she wanted to hear, I knew, but it had the advantage of being true.

"Yes, brittle. You hold yourself apart from the world. It's the burden of the medallion, and the evidence of it is in everything you do. You maintain a leader's hard exterior, but with a fragile edge, as if too much pressure could shatter you."

Her eyes hardened. "You're saying I'm *weak*."

"No," I said hurriedly, fearing I'd miscalculated. "I'm saying that bronze is stronger than glass—it bends."

"You speak in riddles, Sir Dardanus."

"Only because I'm afraid for my life. Telling a queen such things is hazardous."

"I gave you leave," she insisted. "It'd be dishonorable to punish you now."

"Very well." I'd lured her far enough out onto this plank. It was time to push. "I observe that you're always, *always* alone. Even in a room of people, you are alone. Why haven't you remarried? Have you never found a man to arouse your passions?"

Her knees stiffened as if she couldn't decide to stand or stay seated. "That's impertinent."

"I told you it would be," I said. "Every day, someone wants a decision from you. Every day you hold the fate of the realm in your hands. You're being crushed under the weight."

"I'm sure I'll bear up *somehow*." Her mouth tightened with disapproval. "I've heard enough. Thank you." She pretended to work, fumbling for the wax and spilling it.

I'd knocked her off balance, and knew I must now keep her that way. "Is there still a woman beneath your medallion? Or only a queen?"

She gave me a warning look. "Sir Dardanus—"

I bowed over her words. "Maybe you hate touch. Maybe you hate companionship, or maybe you simply hate men. Who could blame you, after your husband? But when you think no one is watching, you stare into the fire, as if you thought it the only source of heat—as if the medallion were turning you into metal as cold and hard as it is."

"You have a flair for the dramatic," she hissed. "Truly you presume too much. That's enough."

I bowed my head. Yes, that would be enough, because she couldn't now let that be the end of it. "Just so you know, Dardanus, I'm not made of metal, though I wish I were. I don't loathe touch—but the medallion won't allow it."

The carved rune stones seemed to sparkle then, like the eyes of a jealous lover. "Well, Your Majesty, do *you* rule the medallion, or does it rule *you*?"

"What difference does it make?"

These words startled me into silence.

Now I was the one on the plank, and she pointed a quill pen at me. "And while you ponder whether I hate men, my enemies claim I love them too much. Are those are the only extremes a woman has to choose from? Frigid or slattern?"

"Of course not, Your Majesty."

"Don't humor me."

She was still angry.

"I'd do more than humor you if you'd allow," I said. I'd seduce her now and make an end to her, or resign myself to my fate as her baseborn errand boy for life. It was now, or never. "While you wear that medallion I am subordinate to you, but I'm not in the habit of being passive with a woman I desire."

I liked the way she tried to fight the reddening of her cheeks. I'd crossed a line now. What I'd said was unforgivable. She'd have to arrest me, banish me, or bed me. That was the knife's edge and my blood ran hot.

"How dare you speak that way to me?" she asked.

"From what I know of you, I imagine you *want* me to speak to you that way."

This time she did stand, her fists clenched as she took three paces towards me, then three paces away. "You don't know anything about me. You see only a few stones from a mosaic."

I made no reply. I guessed she'd been bottling up a tirade for months, perhaps years, and my silence forced her to go on. "My husband married me for my throne and I might have given it to him if he had any notion of how to rule. But I couldn't rely on him for the simplest task. All he wanted was to drink, gamble and hunt. He complained about every privation. He whined about every slight. Even when he found some girl to mother him, he hadn't the strength to simply leave me, but instead, spread lies about my fidelity!"

"He was a dishonorable man," I said quietly.

"He was weak," she said, her lips curling with contempt. "I don't hate men, I hate weakness. I'm a queen. Lions mate with lions, not with mice."

I allowed the torrent of her emotions to spill out and settle. Taking it in, I wondered how I could have ever thought poetry or flowers would woo her. She thought too much of herself for that. I thought too much of her for that. I loved the fierceness in her eyes, the color of her cheeks, and the way her hands clenched.

"Sir Dardanus, what do you hope to gain by bringing out all this miserable self-reflection?"

"*You*," I said.

To my surprise, I was telling the truth.

To my fury, she laughed.

"You're goading me," she said. "And I'm so pathetically eager to feel something, anything, that I'm indulging you. So what do you really want? Marriage? Gold?"

I kept my temper in spite of her derision. "As a bastard, I have no title; we could never be wed. Besides, I have easier ways of getting gold."

"Then, what do you want?"

I looked her directly in the eye. "I told you."

"Lions mate with lions," she repeated imperiously, taking a challenging step towards me.

Her manner stirred something inside me, the presence of which I'd not been aware of before. I should have gone to one knee at this display from my sovereign. I should have begged her forgiveness, but I couldn't. I met her eyes and said, "Lions *do* mate with lions. Try me if you doubt it."

Then she slapped me.

She slapped me so hard it sent my face to the side. This was all taking a dangerous and unexpected turn. She'd dared to strike me, and it tapped a well of anger I couldn't control. But before I could return the blow, her mouth was on mine. Her lips pressed with blistering heat and bruising intensity.

I hadn't expected it to be this easy, nor had I expected the kiss to contain the emotion that swirled bittersweet over my tongue—desperation. I'd required her to make this first move, but now that she had, I tipped her backwards onto her desk. She cried in surprise, flailing one arm back and knocking over an inkwell, but I was relentless, shoving her down. The heat of her beneath me was like some kind of primal fire that ignited my desire. I felt my cock swell. Need drew tight between my legs. I would ravish her right here, right now, heedless of all.

Then I felt the chill of the medallion upon my skin. Its mystic tendrils clawed into me for every memory of my first kill. It wrenched from me my resentment at having been born on the wrong side of the sheets, my youthful anger at the mockery of my peers, and the desolation of the day I decided to be the black soul everyone thought I was. The medallion searched my intentions and left me raw. Its violating power was astonishing.

I felt scraped, raped and hollow.

I was holding her down, but the medallion had me in its teeth. Panicking, I released her, breaking the kiss. We stared at one another as if over the abyss. My chest rose and fell in rhythm with hers, the medallion's ancient protective magic twisting between us.

*How could I have forgotten the medallion?*

Even now, I wondered if the wide-eyed look on her face revealed comprehension of her peril and my treason. "I'm sorry," I said absurdly, daring to breathe.

She lay disheveled and in shock. "The error was mine."

"I should leave," I said.

She didn't answer, so I strode towards the door, expecting her order for my arrest or dismissal. Neither came, and I did not wait for them.

## Chapter Three

I assumed she'd have me followed. I wasn't about to give her the satisfaction of betraying my supporters, so I claimed illness to excuse my absence from court. I contemplated escape, but in the end, if the medallion knew the truth about me, there would be nowhere to run or hide.

Perhaps the medallion hadn't seen my intentions clearly—I hadn't even seen my own intentions clearly in that kiss. There had been some manner of personal validation in her quick surrender. Some echo of my hunger. Still, how could I have been so careless? How could I have become so entranced, forgetting years of careful planning?

The knock I'd been dreading came late one evening. "Open up by order of the queen!"

I answered the door with grim resignation and was surprised to find her there, in the flesh. "Sir Dardanus, I'd like to speak to you for a moment," she said, stepping into my chambers and leaving her guards outside. "You've absented yourself from court when I most need your advice...it's no wonder after the way I behaved."

"Your Majesty, it was my behavior that was abominable." I was again telling the truth. It was becoming a nasty habit. But I had just realized that she hadn't come to arrest me, and I needed to press my advantage. "However, you compound my disgrace by having me entertain you in my private quarters; it's improper."

That I place the blame on her was now vital. That the assassination be successful, twice as urgent.

"You encourage impropriety," she accused. "Don't deprive the realm of your services because I had a single unguarded moment."

I realized, to my complete delight, that I was being given a second opportunity to seduce her. "If a single unguarded moment is all you allow yourself it's no wonder it happened. Have you taken no lovers?" I asked.

She glared at me, incredulous.

I had to shame her now. From lifelong experience, I knew shame to be a powerful tool. "You've entered my private chambers against my wishes. Surely I deserve an answer."

She hissed her reply. "You know the lies my enemies tell. How could I risk making those lies truth by taking lovers?"

"So you'll live your life untouched?"

"I have my medallion," she said, clutching it like a ward.

I took strides towards her. She took a step back and I was glad because I didn't want to get any closer to the medallion than I had to. "Does your medallion satisfy your night longings? I've always wondered. Does it tease the pulsing ache from between your legs? Does it lick the fevered sweat from the back of your neck after you've come?"

The redness spread from her cheeks to the tips of her ears. I saw the edges of her resolve begin to fracture. She should turn and walk out. But she wouldn't. It shouldn't have been this easy to seduce a queen, but I understood now that the trap she had fallen into was not of my making.

It was a web of isolation she'd woven herself. I was just conveniently on hand to devour her.

"What are you suggesting?" she asked.

"One night with me, understanding my life is forfeit should I speak of it to anyone."

She wet her lips, then shook her head. "That's no way for a subject to speak to his sovereign."

I towered over her. "Take the medallion off, and we'll see who is sovereign and who kneels."

Her eyes narrowed to slits and I regretted my implication. Perhaps I'd been too bold. But it was too late to back down now, so I gazed openly at her in challenge.

Then her eyes dropped.

It was a simple, soft gesture, but in my ears it sounded like the shattering of a window-pane. The completeness of my victory made my mouth dry. It took me a moment to remember what drove this seduction beyond genuine desire. "There's the abandoned servant's room behind the kitchen. It has two

entrances. Come through the dining hall without your guards, and leave your medallion behind. I'll be waiting."

"*Don't*," the queen said.

"I'll expect you after midnight."

She started for the door. "I won't come."

I was quite sure of myself now and grinned, a rakish tilt to my lips. "Oh, but you will."

## Chapter Four

I drew the blade across the palm of my hand, toying with the dagger I'd use to end her life. Then I secreted it beneath my pillow. When the time came, I'd use it to make a quick end to the queen. She didn't deserve to suffer.

But I wondered if she would really come to me. She was right; to take a lover would make true everything her detractors said about her. It'd make her promiscuous. She'd be foolish to come without the medallion that protected her. She'd be foolish to come to me at all. If she came to me, trusting a bastard, then she deserved to lose her life. Foolishness could never be rewarded, or so I'd always believed.

She arrived in the dark hours of the morning, her eyes dreamlike as she opened the door and slipped inside. I stood to greet her. "Your Majesty."

"Call me Nestra." She stood trembling in the dim candlelight. The medallion wasn't with her; she was mantled in anticipation, perhaps arousal. Even now, I missed the taste of her vulnerable kisses and the predatory impulses of a lifetime built up in my blood.

Then I realized she was crying.

I reached out to cup her cheek. "Why tears?"

"I'm ashamed."

"I asked you to come here. There's no shame in doing what you're asked," I told her.

"To the contrary," she said. "A man generally abandons a woman in the morning for doing exactly what he asked her to do the night before." When I frowned, she pressed her cheek against my hand. "Dardanus, if a woman withholds her favor she's bitter. If she gives it freely she's a wanton. And shamefully, in spite of knowing all that, I'm still here with you."

The truth of it irritated me. “No one will find out you took a bastard to your bed, if that’s what worries you.”

“I’m not ashamed of *you*. I’m ashamed of myself. Not because I need to touch and be touched, but because I need to be matched, to be *ruled* even, if only for a night. I need to let you do anything you want with me. I need to trust you.”

Something tightened in me, then snapped.

I didn’t have to pretend desire. That a woman of her power should wish to cede some of it to me, entrust me with it, even for one stolen night, was dizzying and dangerous. It changed things, somehow. “My lady, you should not be here. You should leave.”

She winced at my rebuke. “And now you have contempt for me.”

I felt her ache. “No. I’ve only just realized how little contempt for you I have. I fear for you to stay in this room. You’ve little idea what you’re doing here or what I’m about.”

“I don’t want to go now,” she said. “The hardest part is over. I’ve come to you. I don’t know if I can do it again.”

I realized I was angry, though whether it was at her or at myself I couldn’t tell. “Leave.”

“I don’t want to go. Let me stay. Let me be with you,” she whispered. “Please?”

It was that last single word, spoken so quietly I wasn’t sure I’d heard, that ruined me. I was no longer self-possessed. She was a queen yet she was pleading with me. I was so damned angry. I wanted to break things. Shake things. Break her too. I grabbed her and pushed her back against the door, trapping her between its rigid surface and my body. There was no question of who was kissing whom this time. I didn’t insult her with the fumbling of adolescence—my hand went directly between her legs, pressing the fabric there with rough, possessive fingers. The unexpected violation caused her to struggle, but I would not be stopped now.

When I heard her moan, I dragged her to the bed, knocked her down and climbed atop her. When she tried to wind her fingers through my hair, I grabbed her arms and held them over her head. It was only when I worked her legs apart that she gave more than token resistance. She whimpered and strained. “You’re not glass,” I told her. “You’re not even metal. Bend for me. *Bend*.”

Her thighs parted, trembling white skin revealed. I could have her. Right there. Right now. I could plunder and violate. But somehow, it wasn’t in me.

“Say it,” I growled.

Her breath caught. “Say what?”

She’d slapped me before. Now I returned the favor. I struck her with a flat palm and she cried out. “Say it!” I yelled, willing her to read my mind. She wouldn’t. She

couldn't. Even I didn't know what I wanted to hear. And that made my rage justified. Her eyes sought mine frantically.

Then, somehow, she knew.

She lowered her lashes and serenity passed over her features. She actually smiled as she whispered a single, blessed word. "Yes."

I had her consent. For all of it. For anything.

Years of hatred boiled up to the surface of my skin and evaporated into thin air. Our fingers twined high on the bed, knocking the pillow to the side. Then we both felt the cold metal of the knife's edge.

Moments before our breathing had filled the room like the rush of water over rock, but now everything was silent. We lay entangled, again on the brink of that abyss, both of us staring at my dagger. I reached for the blade. Her strength was no match for mine, and I could make the end come swiftly. I wrapped my fingers around the hilt, but she didn't struggle or cry out. Instead, she looked at me with the kind of trust that I thought only existed in myth.

"Write your name on my skin with your blade," she whispered, then closed her eyes.

Only a stupid woman wouldn't have apprehended the danger, and the queen wasn't stupid. Some part of her surely knew, but she chose—she *chose*—to trust in me even if it were her very last living act.

This was a defiant, insistent, faith that humbled me to my core. It broke me. It made of me a different man in an instant, and I felt an emotion welling up in me that I had never felt before.

I realized then that she'd given herself to me completely—holding nothing in reserve. I was a bastard without title, a schemer and ne'er-do-well, a murderer and a seducer of women—and yet trusted so profoundly that my hand shook to behold it.

I'd thought her unworthy of her throne, an obstacle in my way. But in abject surrender, Nestra held the only quality that meant a damn for a leader to possess: she inspired a man to rather die than betray her.

My decision was not difficult. I drew the dagger down and cut the bindings of her gown, opening it. Then I traced each letter of my name over her bare stomach in tiny, harmless, white lines. With that done, I threw the dagger across the room into a forgotten corner and entered her savagely.

I should have met some resistance as I buried myself inside her, but she was a scabbard that sheathed me whole. She received me, stroke for stroke. Her insides were a molten core that tempered me, reforged me like a blade thrown into the fire.

I kissed her hard, bruising my own lips as well as hers, but she did not pull away. "I'm yours," she whispered as her sweat-soaked belly slid beneath mine and she cradled me between her knees.

*Mine.*

I felt her tongue at my throat, tracing a path to my ear, and felt the softest of kisses there. The scent of her was raw arousal, and when she climaxed, the sounds she made were untamed. I could not get enough of her.

I could not get enough.

## *Epilogue*

We weren't finished until the dawn had nearly come; it was only exhaustion that stopped us. I held her tightly within the protective confines of my arms and felt oddly at peace for a man who was about to die.

In touching her skin, I felt the faint traces of the medallion's echoes reaching for me. I'd never known myself at all, but the medallion had known me true. I hadn't deserved the throne or even the woman upon it. Yet, by some lucky accident, I'd come close enough to taste them both.

I loved her, and the irony was not lost on me. The medallion had known everything, but allowed her to trust me anyway. And why not? The medallion had known it'd be my undoing. Its magic had protected her after all, better than any army.

I watched her face as she slept, a small smile upon her lips. I'd never seen her smile before. Perhaps she loved me too. Or perhaps she'd known what she was doing, conquering me with an act of surrender. But there was no bitterness left in me. She deserved the victory.

I'd set out to seduce and take a life, and succeeded, even if the life would be my own. In the morning I'd give her a new list of traitors.

My name would be at the top.

## *Letter from the Author*

I've always wanted to write an anti-hero and this was my chance! I like to imagine that Nestra will forgive Dardanus, because he's now a changed man. Trust can do that to a person. And even if she doesn't forgive him, I know that he has found his happy ending.

Because this short story is an otherworld fantasy with romantic elements—it's a little different than the books I write for Harlequin's Silhouette Nocturne line. Even so, I hope you enjoyed it, and that you will forgive any errors in the manuscript. It's a work in progress, and was released as a free excerpt for my readers.

I hope you'll visit [www.stephaniedraven.com](http://www.stephaniedraven.com) because I always have some kind of contest going, giving away free books or gift certificates. More importantly, I love to hear what my readers think, so stop by and tell me what's on your mind!