



THE RAVEN

2005 CAPA Winner
of Best Fantasy
Erotic Romance

THE KING'S CHOICE

MANDY M ROTH

King's Choice:
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by
Mandy M. Roth

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Dedication:

To old friends who have come and gone. To new friends I have yet to meet.

Chapter One

King Jakov of Braluse sat at his throne and waited as his head advisor, Andrija, led the females into the great hall one by one. The act of selecting a queen wasn't one he relished. His harem would continue to see to his needs, as they always had. He had no use for a woman to sit by his side and rule the Kingdom of Braluse with him. He'd done so on his own for centuries. However, the prophecy called for the choosing of a queen by the night of the sixth red moon of his reign. Disobeying and angering the gods was not something Jakov wanted to do. Red moons occurred once every one hundred years and if he didn't select a queen by the rise of this one, he would never have an heir.

That was not acceptable.

His people, the Avistaurus' of Braluse—part human, part shifter, were immortal. The entire planet of Hafoca was inhabited with various forms of bird-like shifters. All the tribes were able to shift into a bird of prey. In addition to shifting into a bird of prey, they could also shift into some other animal. That, of course, was dependent upon the tribe. The Avistaurus' shifter forms were that of an eagle and a bull. His child would share in these traits if it was male, as all males did.

The females on Hafoca were only immortal once they began to take a male's semen internally on a regular basis. It was not a kind way of life, but necessary to the survival of their breed and tribe.

Each virgin made her way past Jakov. Their faces were veiled with only their eyes showing, giving them an air of mystery. Gold chains adorned their near-naked bodies. Each was beautiful, toned, free from signs of aging but none made his cock stir and his chest burn. It was too much to hope that the woman he was forced to select would actually appeal to his carnal sexual nature. No. He would be lucky to find one he even wanted to bother sinking his cock into long enough to impregnate her with his child. Thankfully, he would be able to roll off the wench and allow his harem to see to giving him adequate relief.

Andrija cast him a wary look and motioned for the virgin nearest him to leave the room. The girls' eyes were wide with fear as they hurried from the room. He wasn't sure why he was so feared. He thought himself a fair ruler. Merciful. Strong. Fearless. The people seemed to have a different opinion of him.

"King Jakov, many women have passed by you on this day, yet you have seen none," Andrija said.

Rolling his eyes, Jakov shrugged. "I have seen them all, Andrija."

"Then why have you not selected one?"

Jakov rose slowly. "None have called to me, brother. None have made me cease to think about all but them. We live long lives and I do not wish to be tethered to a woman I am indifferent too. If at all possible, I would rather not have to tolerate my wife."

Andrija arched a dark brow. "Do my ears deceive me or could it be that the great, powerful King Jakov wishes to be in love with his wife?"

Not wanting to subject himself to his brother's obvious amusement, Jakov laughed off the idea. "Brother, I merely wish to be able to sink my cock into the woman that will lie next to me for eternity and it remain hard long enough to give my seed to her."

"I see." The look on Andrija's face told him that his attempt at justifying the innate need to be drawn to the one he must choose was not going over with him.

It wasn't as though Jakov wanted to have these feelings. No. He wanted to be like so many other kings before him. He wanted to pick a wife that was prime stock to assure his sons would be both handsome and healthy.

"Would sampling the women help?" Andrija asked, his dark brown gaze locked firmly on Jakov.

The thought of bedding several virgins in one sitting did sound interesting. Shifting his robe slightly, Jakov felt the stirrings of arousal deep within. He wasn't worked up enough for his cock to harden but it at least seemed to be interested in the prospect of taking the virginity of many. That was one of his favorite things to do. "Perhaps. Send the next one in. I shall have her wait here for the others then I shall allow her the pleasure of servicing me."

"Very well, my king."

* * * *

Dijana pulled at the chains around her waist. The priests had informed her that they were for adornment only, but she suspected it was more for a show of submission. It was appalling, the way the virgins of nobility were gathered to come before the king. As Sacerdos of the Sabian

Antistitas she was in danger by simply existing. Standing in close proximity to the king or his people was ludicrous. If she dared to use her powers as high priestess, they would know. Her people, the other priestesses from Sabian, needed her to continue to guide them.

How the beast of a king could pluck a woman for the taking from a gathering of strangers was beyond her. Unless the fates were aligned with him, he would never find a woman true to his heart. If he even had one.

Dijana had tried desperately to escape capture but failed. Her own mother had been the one to inform the high guards where she was hiding. The woman lived and breathed loyalty to the king and all that he stood for. Dijana found the man to be an intolerable monster and she had yet to even lay eyes on him.

Thankfully, her sister had managed to escape capture. It was hard enough being here. The idea of her sister being subjected to this sickened Dijana. She'd spent the last week surrounded by women who wanted nothing more than to have the "great king" choose them. It was disgusting the lack of self-respect these woman had. The way they went on and on about pleasing the king and giving him a child had left her on the edge of madness. She was no man's whore. Her body was her own, not a tool to provide a man she could not stand with a child.

Hoping to be able to one day forget this fiasco, Dijana had done her best to follow the lead of the others in respect to obeying the priests. Not one who normally obeyed anyone or anything, it had not gone over so well. By the time the priests were done scraping the hair from her legs, sex and underarms, she'd wanted nothing more than to geld this "great king" of theirs. As if that weren't enough, the priests had taken to twisting her long hair into tight ringlets and painting her face to the point she looked like a whore for the taking.

When they'd pierced both her nipples, she'd sworn to exact revenge upon them. The other women around her had looked at her in complete dismay. They couldn't fathom why someone would not want to be the next queen of Braluse. Dijana couldn't understand why any women would want the job or the man that came with it.

Dijana certainly wanted to meet the king but not for a chance to be his queen. No, she wanted to gouge his very eyes from his overinflated head for turning her into some sort of sex object. She'd grown up with a brothel in her village. It wasn't as though she hadn't seen the types of women that frequented those places. They wore similar amounts of heavy black eye makeup and tiny outfits. In truth, they actually wore more material than she currently had on.

Now, wearing gold chains and only a thin scrap of white material to cover her sex, she stood with her arms crossed, daring anyone to tell her to move. If need be, she would fight to the death before allowing the beast to touch her. She was no man's whore. Not even the king's.

The door to the waiting chamber opened and the remaining women flocked to greet the king's advisor. Dijana's lips curled into a sneer at the sight of it all. They were pathetic, each vying for a better position in hopes they would be presented next. Rumors circulated the villages that the king was an extremely handsome man. How this was possible was a mystery to her. In her opinion he was a tyrant and no doubt an ugly one at that.

The advisor was a handsome man though—tall, tan, and muscular. All that a woman would want in a mate. It was a good thing she wasn't looking for one. Dijana had decided long ago she would live her life for herself and no one else.

Andrija, as she'd heard the others refer to him, pushed through the group of women and came to a stop before her. Grabbing hold of her chin, he shook his head. "Why did you remove your veil?"

Dijana batted his hand away from her and stared defiantly into his face. "Because I wish to have no part in this exercise of barbarism. And I have no reason to be ashamed of the way I look. I care not what the man thinks of me. This is all a farce. Take one of the mindless ones who seem so content on dedicating their lives to a man they've never met."

The advisor's chest puffed out and he pulled her to him. "You think our king to be a barbarian?"

Rolling her eyes, Dijana gave him a droll look. "I'm not a woman to mince words. I said what I meant and will shout it from the hills of Braluse if need be."

If she didn't know better, she could have sworn that Andrija's dark eyes lit with amusement. "Come, it is your turn."

She dug her heels into the floor, but it provided little in the way of traction. He pulled her with no effort at all. "No, stop," she said, trying to take her arm back from his firm grasp. "Take one of the others. They'll go willingly."

Andrija yanked her through the door to the king's chamber. Kicking out she managed to catch him in the back of his knee. Wanting to celebrate her small victory, she smiled wide. He stumbled forward, taking her with him, cutting her solo celebration short. They slammed into the

ground hard. Andrija took the brunt of the impact leaving her lying on top of his muscular body. He growled as he rolled her over quickly.

Dijana's eyes widened as the large man pinned her to the floor. He glared down at her with deep brown eyes and pressed his powerful body against her.

"You will respect your king." The look on his face was not kind and the tone of his voice was harsh. Still, she didn't fear him.

"He is not *my* king," Dijana spat back at him.

Andrija tightened his grip on her and she cried out beneath him. "Take your hands off me you... you... servant to the bastard that claims to care for his people."

"How dare you speak of the king in that manner? He cares greatly for Braluse and its people."

Dijana snorted. "Do they put something in the food here? That must be it because no one in their right state of mind would claim that beast cares a thing for anyone but himself."

In an instant, Andrija had her pressed even tighter to the ground. "You will not—"

Dijana thrust her head up, catching his face with her forehead. Clearly taking him by surprise, she couldn't help but smile as he rolled a bit to the side. She rammed her knee up fast. It made contact with his most valued parts. He hissed. She went to do it again but only managed to catch his upper thigh. The muscular trunk sent pain radiating through her knee. "Get off me, you oaf!"

"You." He tried to gain control of her. "Will be still or I will—"

Narrowing her eyes, Dijana stared up at him. "Or you will what? Punish me? See to it that I'm locked in a cell for life? Or have me executed? Hmm, I'll take any of those options rather than be forced to be here."

That stopped him in his tracks. "You would prefer death to the opportunity being presented to you?"

"Well, it's not every day I go around besting head advisors." The need to taunt him was great.

"Besting advisors?" he asked, shock lacing his voice. "You are hardly in a position to claim victory, woman."

"Hmm, yet I'm not the one flinching every time I move slightly now. Am I?" Dijana jerked her leg fast as though she was about to strike out again and Andrija flinched, making her

grin from ear to ear. "I'll consider that ample proof you were indeed bested. I certainly hope you're not the king's last line of protection. Wait, I take that back. Who do I need to see to assure you're the one protecting his overly pampered backside?"

"Woman, you are dangerously close to being taught a lesson you will not like." He raked his gaze over her. A tiny grin began on his handsome face. "Hmm, perhaps you would enjoy it. I know I would."

"Pffft, you won't be participating in any sort of punishment involving anything lower than your navel for some time. And if you should try, I'll tear it from your body."

His eyes widened. "You dare to threaten me? Men twice your size have died for less than that."

Dijana wasn't about to give an inch. "That doesn't surprise me. Most men I know are pigs and cowards. Try taking on more women and you'll drop the act."

"Act? What act?" he questioned.

"The one that tries to convince people you're not only powerful but dangerous as well."

Andrija's mouth dropped open.

She smiled wide.

A loud clapping noise came to her attention and she glanced sideways to see the source of it. There, only a few feet from her, stood the most magnificent looking man she'd ever seen. His long black hair was in one braid that hung over his shoulder. The sides of his head were shaved, as was the custom of most men in Braluse. He wore a long red robe that was open in the front and a wrap that was tied in a knot around his waist. His tawny, rippled chest seemed to glisten and his small gold hoop earrings on his nipples and ears added to the mystique.

Looking down at her with the same dark eyes as Andrija, he smiled. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

She balked. "Not really."

"Care to tell me what you are doing down there?"

Dijana pushed hard on Andrija's chest until he finally moved off her. She rolled to her side and took a deep breath in. "Ah, I was doing my best not to be squashed by the king's henchman."

The red robed man laughed. "King's henchman? Oh, I like that."

"Wonderful, now point me in the direction of the exit and I will be eternally grateful. Let me gut the oaf beside me and I'll consider offering my soul to you."

"Why you little—" Andrija made a move for her.

Dijana twisted quickly and thrust her leg out. The instant she came into contact with his cheek and sent his head flying back, she smiled wide. "You were saying?"

Laughter erupted from the red robed man as he took a step toward her. Andrija got to his feet and put his hand out to her as he gave her a piercing stare. She snarled and snapped her jaws at his hand. He yanked his hand back quickly and began to curse in their ancient tongue. She merely smiled at him as she got to her feet. "The feeling is mutual, beast."

"What is your name, young one?" the red robed man asked.

"Dijana of Sabian, daughter of Pelersa." She dusted her backside off and rolled her eyes when her chains rattled. "Or, you could just call me painted whore for the day. This is ridiculous. What kind of a man thinks that having women wrapped in chains and barely dressed is attractive? I wish to cover myself. This is humiliating. No, beyond humiliating. I am a living, breathing person, not an object to be adorned with enough gold to feed the poor for years to come. Allow me to wear something or strip down and join me. I don't like being the only one in the room with nothing more than the king's gold on."

The red robed man closed the distance between them and touched her cheek lightly. A spark jolted through her as his skin brushed past hers. She gasped.

"You are not pleased with how your body looks?" he asked.

Looking up at him, she wondered how tall he truly was. She wasn't exactly short for a woman, yet this man seemed to tower over even her. The muscles in his neck worked and her inner thighs tightened. "I never once said that I wasn't pleased with myself. It should be my choice whom I allow to view me in this state, not that I would ever purposely wear an outfit this preposterous. And the veil... pffftttt... why should I cover my face? Is he covering his? I think not. And really, he has me wearing almost nothing at all. What is the point of covering my face? I can see the purpose only if he puts a hood over his wife's face while he takes her." Shrugging, Dijana nodded. "I could see her begging for the veil. If he looks as horrible as he is rumored to be, it may be necessary."

He licked his lower lip, clearly amused by her words. "I take it you do not care for the king."

"Gee, was it that obvious?"

The man chuckled. "Would you like to share why you do not like the king?"

"Why should I care for a man who has not cared for me or my people? It's his continued tardiness that has left outside armies raiding and pillaging my village and that of those near me."

The man looked taken aback by her revelation. "This cannot be true. If it were then you would not be standing before me now."

Not wanting to be annoyed by both men in the room, Dijana took a deep calming breath. "And what leads you to that assumption?"

"You are a fine specimen. The first a warrior would want to take for his own, to use, to sate his needs."

Her breathing grew shallow as he spoke. Something about him called to her on a level she didn't want to explore. Doing her best to hold herself together, she put a hand on her hip and tipped her head to the side. "Did I ever once claim the outsiders haven't tried the very things you've stated?"

His face turned to stone. "Tell me exactly which armies have come and describe the men who have... who—" He looked as though he wanted to kill something. "Dared to touch you."

Dijana grinned. "I can take you to the men who tried to touch me."

The red robed man's brows drew together. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, the men who dared to think they could lay a hand on me are buried just outside of my village."

Relief washed over his face, making him appear slightly less agitated. "It is good to know one of the guards in your village came to your aid and prevented them from taking you."

Tipping her head back, Dijana burst into laughter. "Oh, you are just like every other man I know. The first thing you assume is that a big strong man came to my aid. The guards who are stationed in my village spend their days and nights at the whorehouse. If one approaches you, it's not to help. It is so that he may bury his serpent in you as well only to later claim you offered yourself to him."

A tic began on the red robed man's hard jaw. "Then how did you escape the others?"

For a gorgeous man, you're rather narrow-minded.

"Not all women sit around all day waiting for the king to call them before him in hopes they'll be his queen. Some of us actually need to protect ourselves and those that we love."

Thinking of her sister brought unshed tears to the surface. Dijana blinked them away, hoping no one noticed them. Looking up, she found Andrija staring at her with warm eyes.

"Perhaps you should speak with the king on these matters. Sabian is on the border and word does not always travel back to us on matters such as this." He cast a wary glance at the red robed man.

"Oh, I want to have a word with him but I do not wish to do so wearing this. This is not who I am. I am no man's painted whore. I've spent my life preventing others from turning me into this very thing. Why the king, sworn to protect, would purposely do this to me is a question I wish answered personally."

"Speak with him. It matters not what you wear. He will want to hear all you have to say. And he will want to thank the men who have aided you. While it makes sense that you would present yourself as powerful, it is not necessary within these walls. You are safe here."

"You dare think me untruthful in regards to protecting myself and that of my sisterhood?" she questioned, outraged.

"It is most honorable you should want to present yourself in a manner but it cannot be true," Andrija said.

Dijana let a slow, deadly smile move over her face as she took a tiny step toward Andrija. "This is your last warning. Beyond this, I cannot be held responsible for what comes of you."

Andrija laughed, the sound mocking, a challenge. One she would not only rise to but win. He shook his head and glanced toward the red robed man who nodded slightly, appearing amused.

Outraged, Dijana lifted her hand and pointed it toward Andrija. She let her magic flow through her veins and directed it toward him. She whispered in the tongue of the ancients—a chant, drawing upon her power.

Instantly, Andrija lifted off the ground and was thrust backwards. Falling, he hit the floor with a thud. She watched as he struggled to get up. "If you were one of the invading army's men, I would use this opportunity to crush your airway or take your heart from your chest. Be very happy you're not one. Also, I do not sense you would take a woman against her will. That cannot be said for all in the room presently." Dijana let her magik drop and Andrija got to his feet quickly.

He gave her a rather stunned look and glanced behind her toward the red robed man. "We were told the Sabian Antistitas perished years ago."

Dijana stood tall and nodded. "For the most part that's true. All priestesses who were old enough to practice were slaughtered. Those of us who were too young to be part of it yet were kept hidden away."

The red robed man drew in a sharp breath. "Tell me who the Sacerdos is."

Turning toward him, Dijana bit her lower lip, not willing to reveal herself to him just yet. "Why? So you can offer our high priestess over to a king that cares nothing for her or her people? We work, healing the sick of the land and fighting the evil that walks among us. We have had to teach ourselves how to do it all. There's been no one to follow, no one to instruct us. No warriors to stand by our side and keep harm from coming to us. We do this in secrecy, afraid that if the outsiders' armies don't kill us, the king and his men will. You are most welcome to turn me over to him. I will not reveal the rest of my sisterhood, nor will I give him the Sacerdos' name. And dependent upon my mood, I may or may not allow him to live. I will eagerly sacrifice myself for the greater good."

The man looked over to Andrija and arched a dark eyebrow. "This changes everything."

"Yes, it does."

Dijana let her gaze run down the length of the red robed man while his attention was on Andrija. She wanted to touch him, run her hands over his chiseled body to see if it was as well-crafted as it appeared to be. He had the body of a warrior and that was what she had always dreamed of bedding, not some whiny king who sat on a throne all day deciding the fates of others.

Glancing up, she found the man staring at her with a smug expression upon his face. "Do you like what you see?"

She stood straight, refusing to let him get the better of her in her moment of weakness. "As a matter of fact, I do. If I wasn't in such a hurry to get away from this palace, I would entertain the idea of letting you bed me."

"Letting me bed you?" He glanced at Andrija again. "You brought a priestess here who is not even a virgin?"

"I-I..." Andrija stammered.

"I never said I wasn't a virgin. I simply said I'd think about letting you bed me. There is a big difference. No man has slid his serpent into my body before. I'm a virgin by choice. No man has piqued my interest enough to allow him entrance to me. Standing next to the two of you is testing my limits. Andrija may be a pain in the backside but he's not bad on the eyes. It's all I can do to stop thinking about the both of you driving your hard serpents into me at the same time. Maybe it's the outfit or lack thereof. Perhaps if you dressed me I wouldn't feel the need to think such thoughts."

The red robed man grabbed hold of her arms and shook her hard. Shockwaves of tingling sensations moved throughout her, caressing her, slinking over the apex of her thighs. "Let me never hear you speak of wanting any man but I to enter you!"

She tried to break his hold on her, but he was too strong. The feral look in his eyes left her wanting to both leap on him and run. "You have no claim on me. I belong to no man."

"That is where you are wrong." Bending down, he put his face dangerously close to hers. The need to press her lips to his was great. She held back. "I claim you, Dijana of Sabian."

"No, you are destined to the claim only the high—"

The red robed man put his hand up, silencing Andrija instantly.

Her mouth dropped open. "You don't have the power to claim me, only the king can do that."

"And who, exactly, do you think I am?"

She gulped. "No, you can't be... you're not... no."

A wolfish grin spread over his face. "I can and I am, King Jakov, and as king I can and did claim you as my mate."

Her eyes nearly popped out of her head. This couldn't be happening. She wasn't supposed to be selected to be the queen. She had no desire to be married and thought better of Marocioton beast's dung than she did of the king. Considering the two-headed beasts were known to excrete remains bigger than a horse that wasn't saying much.

"No, I refuse your claim. Take one of the others. They're all dying to let you bed them until they carry your child. Take one of them. They'll listen to your every order and bend at your every whim. I am not like that. I am a handful—ask my mother. She was so desperate to rid herself of me that she told the guards where I was hiding. She actually went to them and pulled

them to me, squawking the entire time about destiny, fate. Oh, I believe I was chosen all right. Chosen to slit your throat."

He raked his hot gaze over her. "You wish death upon me and I wish me upon you. I believe part of you wished to come to me. Somewhere in there you wanted to know what I looked like, if I am what they claim I am and if I can truly give you the world by merely sinking deep within your silken depths. That is why you came to me. Is it not?"

Heat flared through her and slick cream originated from her core. "Pfft. Trust me, they had to drag me here. I should have used my power and destroyed them as I have done to so many others. I foolishly thought I could merely blend in and leave, not once risking my people's secret. I never dreamed you would select me over one of the endless women willing to give up all they have ever hoped and dreamed of for the honor of being had by you. Please. No, you do not want me and I certainly do not want you."

"I take what I want, Dijana, and I am taking you."

Instantly, Dijana brought her magik up, ready to strike out against him. "Remove your hands from me before they melt away before your very eyes. You should feel special. The last man who refused to release me found his flesh pulling back from his body as I glared at him. I have not lived as long as I have untouched by man to allow the one I despise the most to have me. No part of your pampered backside wishes to spend its life with me. No. I am nothing more than a challenge—a woman who dares to defy you when no man would think to. That is all I am to you. If it is a challenge you seek, it is a challenge you shall receive. I would face execution rather than allow you to touch me another second."

It was a horrible lie. The feel of his strong hands on her made her want to lie down and allow him to touch her, take her, claim her fully, but he was the king. The heartless barbarian she'd spent her life despising.

Arching a dark brow, he pulled her closer to him. His warm breath skated over her as he leaned down to meet her eye to eye. "If you feel the need to harm me, to punish me for all you believe I have done to wrong you and your people then I will not stop you."

Do it! Rid Braluse of him.

As Dijana's mind encouraged her to cause him pain, her body refused to listen. She glared at him, wishing seven types of death upon him. None came to be. The longer she stood there, staring at him, soaking him in, feeling the slight buzz of his essence moving around her, the

harder it became to envision any sort of death for him. Suddenly, the very thought of hurting him made her stomach turn. Looking away, she did her best not to look pathetic. "I want nothing to do with you."

Brushing his hand lightly over her cheek, the king left her eyes fluttering and her breathing ragged. Jakov kissed her cheek lightly. The moment his warm lips touched her sensitive skin, shivers of delight tore through her body. The need to turn into the kiss, make her lips the target was great. Somehow, she held true and didn't give in.

"Am I to believe that you do not wish me to fuck you?" Jakov asked softly.

Fuck? It was such a crude way to refer to the practice of copulating that she'd only ever heard the warriors saying it to the brothel whores. Images of Jakov's sweat-covered body riding hers flooded her mind. She knew what sex was. She and her sister had sneaked enough peeks through the cracks in the brothel windows to know what a man and woman did.

Prior to arriving at the palace, the idea of a man sinking his serpent into her and doing what she'd seen done so many times before had turned her stomach. Now, as she stood before Jakov that faded away.

Chapter Two

Jakov watched as the golden-haired beauty before him bit her lower lip. Her tongue darted out and left a tempting line of wetness over her rose-colored lips. The urge to taste of her flesh was too great to resist. He swept his lips over hers gently, savoring the sweet perfection and moaning softly before clamping down and claiming them with force. The feel was glorious.

She was so different from the other virgins brought before him, so outspoken, so strong willed, so incredibly beautiful that he could scarcely breathe when he'd seen Andrija dragging her in behind him. Her pierced pink nipples swayed as the chains around her waist jingled, creating a vision so erotic that none would ever compare to it. He knew he had to have her. No small sample would do.

The revelation that Sabian Antistitas lived should have stopped the burning hunger to claim her and make her his for all eternity. It didn't. It had been said long ago he was to wed the Sacerdos, the high priestess of the Sabian Antistitas. News had spread throughout the lands. It was so many moons ago he could scarcely remember, let alone keep track. At the time, the thought of bedding females period was intoxicating. The harem had been passed down to him and he'd had it stocked with new additions. It had been his first step into manhood.

Seeking pleasure from so many willing mouths, cunts and asses was so easy. At a mere click of his fingers he had them there, touching him, sucking him, fucking him. All of it had been so overwhelming that the very thought of having only one woman had been something he laughed off. Forgetting about the Sabian Antistitas, Jakov had left them with a group of guards overseeing them and had not looked back.

Then, twenty years ago when news of an attack on Sabian brought with it tales the entire race of Sabian Antistitas were annihilated, wiped out in but three short hours, Jakov had felt grief for the first time in his life. He'd wept for the life of a woman he did not know, had never met and was not even sure existed. He'd led the battle against the army who had invaded them.

One by one, Jakov had cut through the enemy, each swipe of his sword dedicated to the one chosen to be his wife. The one he'd laughed at the idea of settling down with. The one who he fully believed dead. But now, as his mouth drank of Dijana's honey filled lips he felt that fire again. He'd thought it dead along with his hopes of a future.

Jakov had been positive he would never find a wife since the day the news of the attack reached him. After the battle when the enemy had been defeated and Jakov's hands bloodied, he thought the feelings he'd been experiencing would simply vanish. For the most part, they did. He'd buried them deep, not letting them out. But the minute Dijana lifted her hand in the air and sent Andrija into the air with nothing more than a flick of her wrist, hope had surged through him.

At that moment, her golden hair had laid in waves over her back, dusting the top of her luscious, perfect ass and had called to him on a primitive level. The ceremony drums had beat madly in his head. Jakov truly believed Dijana to be the one he'd lost so long ago. When he asked of the Sacerdos, he'd assumed she'd shout out that she was the high priestess, confirming why it was he wanted to see her lavished in his riches, cared for, under him with lust-filled eyes and swollen with his child.

When she didn't confess to being the Sacerdos, Jakov's insides had clenched tight. By law he was to try to find the Sacerdos, see if she lived and claim her. It mattered not if he cared for her, only that she was who she was. After seeing Dijana, Jakov cared not for the law, the old stories and prophecies. He cared only for her.

Her tongue ran over her lush bottom lip as he wrapped his arms around her slender frame. When her soft breasts pressed against his chest, his cock sprang to life and demanded to be freed. In no position to argue, he reached down and moved his wrap to the side, allowing his shaft to bob freely.

Dijana broke away from the kiss and glared down at his cock. Her jaw dropped and her face reddened. "Your serpent is monstrous! It will never fit within me. See," she said looking up at him. "This is why you should select someone else to be your queen. I neither like you, nor can physically accept you."

Jakov grabbed hold of the chain around Dijana's waist and pushed the thin veil of material that covered her pussy out of the way. She'd been shaved clean, just as he liked his women to be. "My serpent? Hmm, I like the sound of that. I'm assuming since your dislike of me is great that my serpent is poisonous in your mind. Would you like to suck out the toxins? Free me of my evil? Use your body, that of healer, to filter it out?"

"No," she whispered, her breathing irregular, her breasts heaving forward, testing his will.

"I am sure it will fit in you, wife."

"I'm not your wife," she cried out, attempting to back away from him.

He held her tight and looked at Andrija for assistance. Andrija nodded and moved in to aid him in subduing Dijana. She would take his "serpent" as she liked to refer to it, he would see to that. She'd been attracted to him when she believed that he was not the king and he knew she'd desire him again—very soon. No woman had ever resisted him.

Dijana fought against Andrija's hold on her, causing her breasts to bounce uncontrollably. Jakov seized hold of one and brought his mouth to it, taking her nipple and running his tongue over it. Sucking. Pulling. Nibbling on her soft flesh. It went hard under the touch of his tongue and he moaned at how truly delectable she was. At the rate he was going, he'd end up spending more time fucking his own wife than his harem.

Ridiculous notion.

A man needed to bury his cock in a variety of pussies or risk it falling off. At least that's what he liked to tell himself.

"Guards!"

The door to the chamber opened and several men entered. They never questioned what he was about to do to the woman before him or why she was there. They simply formed a line and waited for instructions. Jakov waved his hand over Dijana's head, sealing her power with his own. Now, as her husband he could do so and successfully hold her power down for periods.

"Take her and chain her in my sleeping chambers. I wish to fuck my new bride this fine day."

They looked at one another, shocked. He nodded to them. "Yes, indeed. I have claimed a mate. The official announcement will come later, but according to our ways, she is my wife now and I shall take what is rightfully mine—her."

Without question, they grabbed the outraged Dijana and dragged her toward the door. She kicked and screamed as she went, visibly trying to draw on her power. Two guards were repelled away from her by an unseen force and he couldn't help but laugh. She was so spirited, so strong-willed and so not the one he was to have taken. How she had managed to pull forth any type of power, let alone enough to knock two men over, was a mystery he fully intended on solving.

The sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach caught his attention. He'd been disgusted by the idea that he had to select a wife. Long ago he'd resigned himself to the fact his true mate was dead, murdered along with all the other priestesses by the outsiders' armies. He'd given up hope of ever actually loving the one he'd be tied to for all eternity. Sure, Dijana was a priestess but she wasn't the Sacerdos, the high priestess. Why did he still desire her so?

You do not just desire her. You are consumed by her.

"I'll never submit to you... you... monster! You will not take my virginity! Do you hear me? It's a gift that you don't deserve. You stood there pretending to be a decent man but you're just what I suspected you were—an animal."

As the door closed, Andrija turned to face him. "Brother, you cannot force yourself upon her. If she is unwilling then you should allow her to leave. So many others desire nothing more than to please you. She is not the Sacerdos. Let us find her. You will be able to take your true mate and end the charade that we have been forced to put you through."

Jakov was stunned by Andrija's bluntness. Rarely, if ever, did Andrija question his decisions. There was something about the way he'd said it all—a challenge perhaps? His brother had never thought to issue one before, why now? It hit him then. "Andrija, you have feelings for her."

When Andrija didn't immediately deny this charge, Jakov saw red. A jealous rage swept through him. He wanted to hit something, anything, preferably his brother. "You are not to be in her presence. Am I clear?"

"Why? Are you afraid I will let her go? That I will not make her live like an animal? That I will not do to her what so many other men have tried? Are you truly that concerned I may free her?"

"No, brother, I am afraid you will never let her go." He turned and stormed out of the room, needing fresh air to clear his mind. Dijana had been such a shock to his system that he could no longer think as a king should. And it was clear that his advisor was in no condition to advise on the situation.

Chapter Three

Dijana tugged on the chains that held her wrists and ankles. She could move only a tiny bit and wasn't strong enough to break them. Something had slammed down hard on her, forcing her power into a painful state of submissiveness. It needed to be free. She needed to be free. As weak as she was, she'd never be able to break the restraints and handle all of the guards. She had more guards surrounding her than the pyramid of Thoesia, Hafaco's greatest high priest's home. Apparently, the king thought she was a flight risk. He was correct.

The guards stared at her with her legs spread and breasts in the air, but didn't say a word. She couldn't recall a time in her life when she'd been more humiliated. Once she'd caught her own hair on fire while trying to mix a remedy for stomach ailments, but that didn't even compare.

The mortification of being chained to the king's bed created an endless flow of unshed tears. They welled in her eyes, waiting for an opportune moment to be free. The door to the room opened and her breath caught in her throat. Jakov would surely claim her as a husband did a wife. Biting her lower lip to keep from crying, Dijana tried to see past the wall of guards before her.

"Leave us," a husky voice said.

The guards looked at one another and then turned to go. Andrija moved past them and stared down at her. His brows met and he shook his head. "I am sorry. I did not know he would behave this way."

The dam broke loose and her tears fell down her cheeks. "He's an animal. How can you stand to serve him?"

"I do not *serve* him. He is my brother."

The resemblance was undeniable. How she had missed it before was unknown to her. Andrija's hair was as black as Jakov's and he too wore it in a long braid. He did not dress in the fancy red robes that Jakov did, but rather, just a dark green wrap around his waist. A gold snake piece of jewelry fastened his wrap closed and a matching snake band wrapped around his upper arm. He was so modest in comparison to the king and she found that oddly comforting.

Andrija took another step toward her and reached his hand out. She thought at first he was about to free her but when he touched her breast, she knew otherwise.

"You seek to pierce me with your serpent as well? I've done nothing to you. Just let me leave... please."

"Shhh," he hushed, sitting on the bed next to her. He caressed her breast gently and rubbed his finger over the ring in her nipple. "Do you wish for me to remove these?"

What she wanted was for him to set her free. That didn't seem too likely to happen. The fact he seemed concerned with her well-being could play to her advantage. She batted her eyelashes and wiggled beneath his touch. If she had to use sex to free herself, then she would. And, the satisfaction of knowing Jakov wouldn't be the one taking her virginity made it all worth it.

He tweaked her nipple again and his nostrils flared. Her body responded to his touch. Shivers of delight spread like wildfire through her body and she jerked on her chains. "Ahh, Andrija...please..."

"Please what? Please let you go?" he asked with something close to sadness in his dark eyes.

Dijana spoke without thought. "No, please touch me again."

Andrija dropped his head and took her nipple into his mouth. His tongue darted in and out of the gold ring, flickering over her erect nipple, causing her to pant under his touch. She tried to reach out to free his hair from his braid, but could not. The chains confined her. Andrija slipped his other hand between her legs and cupped her shaved mound. She cried out as he rubbed a sensitive spot between her folds. "Ahh, what...?"

He lifted his mouth from her breast. "You are so wet and your clit is so responsive. How is this so? It is swollen already and I have but barely laid my hands on you. You are a rare find, Dijana, rare indeed."

He rubbed faster and she dug her heels into the bed, trying to hold off something big that threatened to consume her. Andrija slid a finger into her channel slightly and she bucked under his touch. Never before had anything crossed that threshold and now all she could think about was having more put inside her. She contracted around him, her vaginal muscles fighting against the intrusion, as the rest of her basked in the glory of it.

Andrija withdrew his finger quickly and stood, leaving her body in a state of arousal. "I must go. Jakov has forbidden me from being in your presence for this very reason. He sensed that I am drawn to you and he will not share you."

"He shares his other women?"

"Yes. His harem is often offered to the service guards who have performed well in battle. Jakov often watches as the women perform various acts of sex on the men. Often, the women will drop down and pleasure him while the other guards are fucking in the same room. I have not, as of yet, participated in one of his group sessions but I must admit, they do look intriguing—especially now that he has something I desire."

Dijana gulped. "I am to be offered to the guards?"

Andrija shook his head and glanced quickly toward the door. "Someone approaches. I shall steal in to see you as soon as I can."

Tears ran down her cheeks. "Take me with you, please."

"I cannot. At least not yet," Andrija said, reaching into his wrap and pulling out a small cloth. He unfolded it quickly and leaned down to her. He pressed a tiny morsel of something close to her lips.

"What is it?" she asked, unsure if he was trying to poison her or not.

"Niloticaou."

Her eyes widened. The fruit of niloticaou was illegal to possess. As healers, they were often raided by the guards for stashes of it, and if they found it, death was often the punishment. It was said to hinder a woman's ability to conceive, at least for short periods of time, allowing women to be as free with their sexuality as they wished without the worry of creating a child. The women of Hafoca were not permitted to be free with their sexuality, not unless a man said it was okay to do so. "No, you could be killed for having that."

He smiled. "It is from the king's personal stock. He feeds it to his harem so that he does not impregnate anyone of a lower caste and so that the guards he allows to fuck them do not create bastard children." He looked toward the door. "I must go now. If you eat it, no one will be able to get you with child right away."

The idea of being forever tied to the king because she held his child within her womb terrified her but the thought of him allowing his guards to pleasure themselves with her body and

creating a life scared her even more. She lifted her head and took the morsel from Andrija's hand. Its bitter taste was hard to accept and for a moment, she feared she'd vomit.

"I must go," Andrija said, backing quickly into the shadows.

Chapter Four

Jakov pushed on the door to his chamber and did his best to remain calm. His earlier run in with Andrija had left him with the urge to kill something, anything. He'd never felt such raw hate, such jealousy before. Being over five-hundred years old and immortal, he'd slept with hundreds upon hundreds of women. One of his greatest pleasures was to stroke his cock or fuck a harem girl from behind while he watched the other women being mounted by several men. But now, the thought of any other man touching Dijana drove him mad.

Is she truly my chosen one? My mate?

He stepped into the room and found Dijana spread eagle on his bed. Large gold chains attached to shackles on her wrists and ankles. The scrap of material that had covered her sex was gone, leaving him a view of her pussy spread open. His cock jerked and ached to be buried in her. Instantly, he was hit with guilt for having had her chained to his bed. She was so strong willed that she would not let him have her any other way.

The rise of the red moon was a week away and if he did not create an heir prior to that time, he would never have one. That meant something to him. He wanted a child—a son who was of noble blood and who would one day rule his kingdom. If he was lucky enough to fill Dijana's womb with his child, then she would forever be responsive to his seed, allowing for the possibility of more children. And, just maybe, she'd be happy too.

Seeing his blonde goddess of a wife spread out, her bronzed skin glistening and her pussy opened to him was too much. Jakov ripped the robe from his body and unfastened his wrap quickly. He needed to be buried in her. To make her his. Always. Forever. She'd come to love him, he hoped.

Love? Why do I care if she loves me?

Dijana stared up at him, her blue eyes wide. "Don't do this, please."

"You are my wife and if I want to place my cock within you, I will."

The muscles in her neck moved as her gaze ran down the length of him. She licked her lips and he knew then that regardless of how much she pretended to dislike him, she desired him.

"You want me." He took a deep breath in. The shifter side of him kicked in and the bull wanted to surface, wanted to claim her for its own. "I can smell your desire for me."

She shook her head, but the cream running down from her parted nether lips said yes. He climbed onto the bed and bent down to draw in her scent. This was his mate, his wife and the smell of her cream drove him wild. The urge to fuck her was great. He wanted nothing more than to plant his seed in her and watch it grow.

Jakov placed his head between her parted thighs and ran his tongue out and over her pussy. His insides tightened and his chest felt heavy. Having never experienced desire in its purest form, he was out of control and on the edge of shifting. Taking her in bull form could tear her in two if she was not prepared for it and he'd never forgive himself if harm came to her.

Inserting his tongue into her dark passageway, he slid it in and out, fucking her with his mouth. She jerked against the chains as tiny moans escaped her lips. Cream continued to flow from her body and when he glanced up and met her gaze, he saw that she was in a state of full lust as well.

"More," she whispered. "I want more."

Jakov nibbled gently at her swollen clit and smiled into her pussy as she screamed out in ecstasy. She came with such a jolt that he feared she'd hurt herself, still being tied to the bed. He wanted to release her, but he had no choice but to mount her and take her, over and over again until his seed took and his heir came to be. No. She had to remain chained. The future of Braluse was at stake. He would take her and make it as wonderful for her as he could.

Jakov pushed his face into her more, letting her cream cover his chin as he stimulated her clit. She pulled on the chains and came again, this time so hard that he felt her vaginal muscles contracting near his face. She was a wild one and he would be the one who tamed her—or would that be the other way around?

Leaning up, he grinned as he watched her face flush. "You enjoyed that. Did you not?"

"Mmmhmm," she murmured.

"Do you wish for me to enter you now?"

Her head snapped up. "Your serpent's too big. It'll break me in half!"

He chuckled and was shocked to hear that. As king, he wasn't known for laughing. Somehow, this fiery goddess before him had brought laughter into his life. "I know you will like it once I am in you. All women do."

Clicking his fingers, he summoned the guards to step forth. "Bring me three harem women, now."

"Yes, my king."

Dijana jerked hard on her chains. "Let me up. I've no desire to watch you bed other women... you, you king!"

The harshness in her voice took him by surprise. For a woman who claimed to hate him, she sounded incredibly jealous to him. He smiled, knowing this could play in his favor. He would fuck the other women before her. Show her that women did indeed enjoy the feel of his cock and then she just might be jealous enough to demand he show her the same pleasures.

"You shall watch and see how they beg for my cock then you will do the same."

Dijana glared at him. "Touch them and I assure you that I will never remain here with you. I'll get away as soon as I can and you'll never find me. For now that I have seen you and you have drunk of my nectar, I will have the power to keep you away."

His eyebrows went up. Could it be that she would not forgive him if he placed his cock within another woman? Would she really defy him and leave at first chance? It could not be so. Hafoca women, regardless of what tribe they were from, understood that their men were insatiable and that they required many women to satisfy their needs. Even with her Sabian upbringing, she should have understood that he would spend many, many nights away from their bed, seeking comfort with other women.

The door opened. The harem girls entered quickly, each naked and covered in Geranium oil and nothing else. The sweet rose-like smell filled the room as they came to him. Hands touched him everywhere, all at once. He tipped his head back to let them please him.

"You disgust me, you... you... *bestia*!" Dijana shouted.

Being called a beast by Dijana in their native tongue stung more than he would have guessed. Even though the harem girls were well versed in his likes, they no longer seemed to satisfy him. One dropped to her knees and took him in her mouth. The feel of her hot lips pressed around his cock did little for him as he watched Dijana's blue eyes grow cold. He had misjudged her. She would not be jealous enough to give in to him. She would forever hate him.

Jakov pushed the harem girl off his cock and stepped toward the bed. The harem girls attempted to follow him. Their sole mission in life was to please him so he could not fault them for trying. However, the risk of isolating Dijana was too great. She was the first woman in over five hundred years that had stirred feelings of desire and love in him. He could not lose her now.

"Leave us!" he shouted.

"But, my king, we have not made you come yet. We have not drunk of your sweet come or rubbed our bodies with our joined cream."

He twisted and gave the one who'd dared to question his order a menacing look. "I said leave."

"No," Dijana said. "Really, have them stay and let me go. I can't stand to look at you, let alone the thought of you touching me now."

"You did not seem to mind me touching you a moment ago."

She laughed and sounded oddly scary. "That's because my body had been left in a state of yearning. I needed someone to ease my pain—end the suffering that had been caused by *his* touch. You just happened upon me. Consider it your lucky day, King."

Jakov's body itched to shift into the bull as rage ran through his veins. "Who dared to touch you?"

Dijana's eyes widened. She shook her head and pulled on her restraints. "No one...I didn't mean that. It slipped out. I was angry."

She was trying too hard to convince him that it was a mistake for him to believe her. Someone had touched her in a way that had made her yearn for release and when he found out whom, he'd kill them. "Tell me who dared to lay his hands on you. Was it one of my guards? I shall put him to death you know."

She glared at him. "I said it was no one. Why does it matter anyway? You let a woman take your serpent into her mouth right before your so-called wife. Would you like to watch another man take me into his mouth, run his tongue along my sex?"

"No." His nostrils flared. "I would rip him in two."

Dijana laughed wickedly. "Not if I had ordered you to be chained like an animal to the bed."

Jakov climbed onto the bed and crawled over her. His cock should have been dormant in his state of anger. Instead, it was fully erect. He moved between her thighs and positioned the head of himself near her entrance.

"Get off me," she huffed.

Her sex oozed cream and her hips swayed under him of their own accord. "Tell me that you do not want me to bury my cock in you and I shall think about leaving you."

Dijana opened her mouth to protest and he used that opportunity to plant his lips over hers. A bitter taste greeted him at first. It was oddly familiar, but he couldn't place it. As quick as it came, it left to be replaced by her sweetly warm and extremely kissable mouth. He kissed her hard and heavy until he was left no choice but to come up for air.

The head of his cock slipped slightly into her opening. Her eyes were heavy with desire and it was she who initiated the next kiss. Biting his lower lip gently, she made him growl in delight. He drove into her and moaned as he felt her maidenhood tear away. She was his. He'd been the only man who'd claimed her.

Dijana cried out below him as he slammed his cock into her. Her body was so much smaller than his was that he was afraid he'd crush her or harm her since she was still chained to the bed. He continued to slide in and out of her as he reached for her wrist. Undoing the lock on her shackle, he freed one of her hands. Instantly, she had it wrapped around his body, clinging to him as he rode her.

Jakov worked her other arm free and she held him as he took pleasure in the tight, hot vat of her pussy. "You feel so good, my queen."

"Ahhh, there, right there... yes. Yes, harder, harder—"

The beasts within him roared to the surface, each fighting for supremacy. The eagle wanted to take her and fly with her as he continued to fuck her and the bull just wanted to ride her until he could ride her no more. A sharp pinching sensation hit his back and he knew that his wings had sprouted. The tingling in his lower region signified the bull had won out over that area.

Dijana gasped as Jakov's serpent seemed to grow alarmingly fast within her already stretched sex. He hit her cervix each time he pounded into her and when she looked up to see dark brown wings spanning several feet in both directions, she knew that he'd shifted, at least partially. It was clear to her that he now took her as a mix of all that he was—man, bull, eagle. Her husband.

Running her fingers up his arms, she stroked his wings as he continued to thrust his bullish lower half into her. His chocolate eyes stared down at her as she continued to caress his feathers. He was so handsome, even in his state of partial shift. She kissed along his chiseled jaw as he caused wave after wave of pleasure to crash through her.

She wanted to wrap her legs around his waist and to hold him tight as they coupled, but the chains on her ankles prevented that. "Yes, yes," she panted as an orgasm hit her.

Jakov's body tightened, his wings expanded and he slammed into her body so hard that the pleasure quickly merged with pain. His shaft jerked deep within her as he shot forth thick, hot streams of his seed, drenching her womb and bringing about another orgasm.

He held tight to her as the last of him seeped deep within her body. Finally, he kissed her lightly on the lips. Smacking them together, he looked puzzled for a moment. "You taste of the fruit of niloticaou." An angry expression quickly replaced the light one he'd worn upon his orgasm.

"Who dared to give you the fruit of niloticaou? Who dared to interfere with my right to bed my wife and produce an heir?" When she didn't respond, he reached down and yanked on her left nipple ring hard. She screamed and feared that he'd rip it from her body. "Tell me!"

Her eyes filled with tears and she clasped her hands over his, hoping to prevent him from tearing the ring directly from her body. "Please, Jakov, don't do this...please."

He pulled his hand away from her breast and she breathed a slight sigh of relief when her nipple ring didn't go with him. When he looked down at her with eyes of mixed red and brown, she was no longer relieved. She was terrified.

Dijana watched as the dark fur covering his legs and pelvis receded. His wings drew in as he glared down at her. A slow smile spread across his face as he reached down to free her ankles. She didn't move when she felt the shackles break away from her body. She was too terrified of what he'd do.

Jakov grabbed her waist quickly and flipped her over onto to her stomach, knocking the wind from her as he went. She clawed at the bed in a pathetic attempt at fleeing him. He was too strong, too powerful and he was spreading her backside apart.

He thrust his finger into her anus and she screamed. Jakov called to the guards and she tried to get away from him, but he held her tight. Before she knew it, guards surrounded her and hot liquid was being poured all over her flesh. Jakov continued to work his finger in and out of her anus as the others poured the rose-scented oil all over her.

"You need to be punished for not only allowing another man to touch you, but for accepting the fruit of niloticaou."

Punished? Did he mean to execute her? Panic welled up inside her. "No, please, my king."

"I am more than your king," he said, pressing something large into her dark passage. "I am Jakov, your husband. You will learn to obey me."

White lights flickered behind her eyelids as he thrust the length of his turgid shaft into her ass. The hot, scented oil running all over her body made her skin tingle as a fullness like none she'd ever experienced took hold of her. Jakov reached around and began toying with her clit, causing her hips to jerk and his cock to dig deeper within her. An intense orgasm tore through her body quickly.

"Too much, ahh, King, err, Jakov," she panted as an orgasm hit her, making her legs tingle and her sex contract.

Jakov drove his cock deep into her ass and held it there, allowing his seed to fill her dark passage. He slapped her butt cheek hard and then ran his hand over it, as he finished ejaculating into her. The pain mixed with pleasure was beyond her wildest dreams. Ways of disobeying him again flooded her mind, as she looked forward to seeing what he'd do to punish her next.

He withdrew his shaft slowly, causing their mixed juices to run down the backs of her legs. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her up and hugged her tight against his chest. "Never disobey me again, young one."

Dijana moved her arm up and over her shoulder so that she could reach behind his head and hold him close to her. "Let no other woman touch you and I shall let no other man touch me."

He stiffened. "You are my wife. You have no right to tell me what I can and cannot do. Learn your place, woman."

She didn't back down. "I know my place and my worth. If you didn't know it as well, you wouldn't have claimed me to be your queen. I suggest that if you don't want to find me taking another man's cock, as you like to call it, into my body then you will honor my request. Should you choose to seek comforts from outside sources, so shall I."

Jakov slapped her ass cheek again and the stinging sensation vibrated throughout. He quickly rubbed the spot he'd struck as he pushed on her back with his other hand, guiding her down onto the bed. Shifting her legs a bit, she ended up lying on her stomach with Jakov lying

directly on her back. It didn't take long before she felt the head of his insatiable cock easing its way through her clenched butt cheeks again.

Still covered in their mixed sex juices, Dijana was wet and well lubricated. His cock slipped back into her ass easily and now that she knew what to expect, she rocked her hips under him and enjoyed the ride. The bed provided clitoral stimulation and soon wave after wave of gut wrenching orgasms hit her.

"Do you... know your place...yet woman?" Jakov asked between thrusts.

Dijana smiled as pleasure raced through her. "Yes, but do you know yours?"

Chapter Five

The warm bath water was soothing to her oversexed body. Going from a virgin into the hands of a king who couldn't seem to get enough was tiring. Over the last several nights, Jakov had taken her every way imaginable and she loved every minute of it—of him. He was tender at the oddest moments, especially when he believed that the guards were not looking. He'd even taken to sneaking pianious, flowers native to their planet, in places he'd known she'd be. At first, she hadn't realized he was the one doing it, until he came to her with an armful in their bedchamber and made love to her all night—so gently, so sweetly that she'd wept. Now, on the night of the red moon, Jakov had to plant his seed in her or he would never have an heir.

It was funny how she didn't want to have a thing to do with him only one short week ago, but now, all she wanted to do was have his children and spend eternity by his side.

The only reason she could guess that she'd not become pregnant yet with his child was that the fruit of niloticaous was still in her system. She'd spent the greater part of the day inhaling herbs and inserting healing remedies into her vagina in hopes that these would counteract the fruit.

Dijana slid her head under the water and let the over-sized bathing pool consume her.

The door to the bathing chamber opened and she was surprised to see Andrija standing there when she surfaced. His hungry gaze swept over her and she blushed. Covering her breasts with her arms, she smiled up at him. "I didn't think you'd come back."

He licked his lower lip and reached down to adjust his cock. "I couldn't stay away if I tried and I did try."

"We can't pursue this," she said. "Jakov will kill you."

Andrija moved to the side of the pool and leaned down to stroke her wet cheek. "Tell me that you feel nothing when I touch you and I shall go away."

It was on the tip of her tongue to lie and tell him what he asked to hear, but she couldn't. She most certainly did feel something when he touched her. It wasn't as intense as the way Jakov made her feel, but it was there all the same. Still, she wouldn't allow Andrija to be harmed because of her.

"Go now," she pleaded.

He didn't move. Instead, he undid his wrap and cast it aside, leaving him naked before her. His erect cock bobbed close to her head and she wanted to taste it, to know the wonders it possessed. Could he make her feel as Jakov had? Suddenly, her body craved him, his touch. This was wrong. She'd fallen in love with her husband and would not betray him, no matter how tempting the offer was. Jakov owned her heart now, and she'd not risk losing that—losing him.

"Andrija! What are you doing here?"

Startled, they both looked up to find Jakov glaring at them. His dark eyes burned with the fire of a shifter. "You are the one who has touched her."

Andrija laughed slightly and Dijana wanted to shake him for his brashness. "Yes, brother. I am the one who has touched her. I am also the one who shared the fruit of niloticaous with her. You do not deserve her. You whore around with your harem and think of women as dispensable objects. It has always been so easy for you—the firstborn. If you wished it to be so—it was. You cannot wish her to love you if she does not. I heard about the harem girls that you had sucking on you as you forced her to watch. You have no idea what love is. You know only how to fill your own desires."

"Andrija, you have crossed a dangerous line, my brother. I cannot be held responsible for my actions."

Andrija snorted. "You never are."

Jakov glared down at her. "You have allowed him to fuck you?"

Dijana shook her head.

He nodded slightly. "Do you wish to fuck him?"

She didn't answer. He looked at Andrija and his face went slack. "It appears that you are correct. I cannot force her to love me. It would appear that she chooses you."

"No!" Dijana shouted, catching both of their attention. "Don't speak for me, Jakov. I can't tolerate the idea of you with other women. I understand that it's the way of our people, but it is not my way. I want you for only me, and if I cannot have all of you, then I want none. But know that I do love you, more than I've ever loved anything in my life." The last part came out hushed but he heard it all the same.

He took a step toward her with a smile on his face. "You, Dijana, my wife, my love, can have all of me. No other will satisfy me now that I've tasted of your flesh."

"No," Andrija said quickly. "I invoke the Rite of Abserespicre."

Dijana looked to Jakov to see what this meant. She wasn't extremely well versed on the laws of Braluse and from the look on Jakov's face, she wouldn't like this one.

"The Rite of Abserespicre has not been invoked for over two thousand years."

Dijana attempted to climb out of the bathing pool but Jakov's look made her rethink that decision. She sank back into the water and watched as he stormed over to his brother. "Revoke it! Now!"

Andrija shook his head and put his hands in the air. "I cannot. Once it's been invoked it cannot be changed."

"What's the Right of Abserespicre?" Dijana asked, unsure she wanted to know the answer.

"It is my right as head advisor to the king to request permission to inspect his claim—to sample it for assurance that it is worthy of the king and free from imperfections."

Jakov growled and lunged for Andrija. "You will not sample my wife."

"As your head advisor, I can and I will. If you deny me, then you forfeit your rights to her. The rite was placed into effect by the gods to assure the king's happiness, safety, and the continuance of a strong line of leaders. To ignore it is to spit in the gods' faces, dear brother."

"Andrija, please... I can't bed another man. My husband's assured me that he's mine and mine alone. I'll be his alone as well," she said.

Jakov moved away from Andrija and ran his hand over his jaw. "Our marriage will be cursed by the gods if we disobey their very laws." He sounded so disheartened, so unlike himself.

"No," Dijana protested. "They'll not curse us, Jakov. I cannot sleep with him, the fruit of niloticaous may be out of my system and tonight is the night of the red moon." Moving quickly toward Jakov, she shook her head as tears slid down her face. "I am the Sacerdos, Jakov. I am the high priestess and I assure you that if the fruit is diluted enough that I can, if you release your hold on my powers, assure us a child."

Jakov looked at her, his jaw dropped and his eyes widened. "Gods," he gasped, "I was right. You have taken my heart as no other could. You are what I wake for." He lifted his arms in the air. "My hands, they burn to simply touch you each time I look upon you and my chest grows tight whenever you are not in my presence. I worry constantly that you will leave me. I care not

if you slit my throat for hating me, so long as it is you who delivers the killing blow. I want it to be your eyes I see when I leave this world, Dijana."

She reached for him. "Jakov, I could never harm you. Even when I stood toe to toe with you, telling you how I would, I couldn't. No part existed within me that would allow me to harm you. I have opened my heart to you and you have taken it into your large hands and held it close. Do not break what you hold by allowing this madness to occur. Let it be you and only you within my body from now until eternity. Let it be your seed that creates a life within me. And let it be our child born nine cycles from this point. No other. Please. I wish to be only with you for all of our life and I want a family with you. We have only tonight to make that work."

"I am sorry, Dijana," Andrija said, looking pained. "It was out of anger that I invoked the rite. Never would I have done this had I known you truly loved him. I will go before the gods and beg for their forgiveness. I do not wish to take you against your will. Perhaps they will not punish you. I will tell them to punish only me."

Jakov pulled his robe off and undid his wrap. "They will punish all of us and you know this." Casting Andrija a look of disgust, he stepped into the bathing pool. Putting his hand out, he motioned for Dijana to come to him. "Come, my love. Andrija shall not place his seed in your womb. Will you, Andrija?"

"No. I just told her that I will not take her at all."

Jakov's jaw was tight and his movements jerky at best. "This will be fixed, now. My wife wishes for my seed to grow within her, as do I. To see her happy I will do and bear witness to anything. Even the sight of my brother taking my wife."

"No," Dijana whispered. "I will not lie. There was an attraction between Andrija and myself but I know that it is only because I am the Sacerdos. My mother was right to tell the guards where it was I hid. She knew. She's always told me that my mate was a great man, one she saw nothing but the purest form of leadership, compassion and power in. She has been so honored to be chosen by the gods to give birth to not one Sabian Antistitas but two that she dedicated her life, and still does, to your cause, your kingdom."

"Two?" Jakov asked.

She nodded. "I have a sister. I was afraid to reveal her to you. Since I had not revealed myself as the Sacerdos, I feared you would seek out the pleasure of her body, assuming it was

she who was the high priestess." Dijana looked away quickly. "I love my sister with all that I am but I could not bear the idea of you—"

Jakov's face softened. "Dijana, do you know so little of our ways that you would not understand what you are to me?"

"I am your wife. But by our laws, by your laws actually, you could take any other woman you wish to have. The fact that you have not has made the love I fought so hard to hide from you blossom that much faster."

Jakov offered her a soft smile. "I knew in my heart the moment I saw you that you were to be mine. My mate. The mother of my children and the only woman I would ever love. I turned my back on the prophecy, on the Sacerdos and focused only on you. Even when I foolishly sought to make you jealous by using the harem girls, I found I could not physically use them. Only you can bring my cock to life. It is a serpent that's only den resides in you. Your confession of being high priestess only serves to confirm what my cock and my heart already know. You are my true mate and I love you dearly."

She let out a long breath, soaking in all that Jakov had just revealed. "You love me?"

"Woman, I am on the verge of releasing my hold on your power and you ask a question so absurd that it makes me worry that you hurt yourself with your own gifts."

"What?"

He chuckled. "Of course, I love you, Dijana." He smiled. "Now, let us add a child to our union."

"But what of Andrija? I wish to only have children with you."

"Andrija, ensure my wife that your seed will not enter her womb. And then join us to finish the rite that was invoked."

"No, I will not come inside your womb, Dijana," he said. "Perhaps together, we can call upon the gods and harness their power to create the heir that is so desperately needed."

Dijana moved toward her husband, unsure of what was to come. Andrija entered the bathing pool next and she stiffened. "Jakov, please."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her forehead. "You are my only love and I shall not chance angering the gods and losing you."

"I am sorry, brother. I was angry and jealous when I called upon the rite," Andrija said as he moved behind her.

Jakov positioned himself on the seating ledge and pulled her onto his lap. She cried out when she felt the instantaneous spearing of his hot serpent. "Jakov ... oh," she panted, fitting her channel all the way over him.

"Yes, Dijana, take all of my cock. Move for me."

She did and the feeling of his massive girth and length in her coupled with the sloshing of the water on her clit made her scream in ecstasy. Hands moved onto her shoulders and she knew that they weren't Jakov's. He still had hold of her waist, directing her thrust as she rode him.

Something nudged at her anus and she came to a grinding halt on Jakov. He brought his lips to hers and kissed her feverishly. Their tongues danced around one another, sometimes pushing, sometimes pulling--all the time pleasuring. A sharp pain followed by an overwhelming sense of fullness hit her as Andrija shoved his cock into her ass.

Impaled now, with one in her pussy and one in her ass, Dijana could barely move. The feeling was too much, yet not enough. Jakov sensed her desire and leaned back, allowing her clit to rub against his tight abdominal muscles and giving Andrija better access to her ass.

She moved in quick thrusts, mostly because of Andrija's weight pushing on her, and moaned as pleasure consumed her. "I... am... so full... on fire... ahhh... yes, more."

Jakov thrust his hips upwards as Andrija increased his thrusts. An orgasm tore through her just as she felt like she'd be ripped in two. The orgasm helped to relax her and not a moment too soon. Jakov and Andrija began to chant in their ancient tongue and she knew that they'd channeled the gods' powers as all royal men could.

They fucked her fiercely and came simultaneously. Her eyes rolled back into her head as she felt their seed spilling into both lower holes of her body. Being of healer blood, Dijana felt the instant that her womb began to respond to Jakov's seed. "We are so ... close," she said, still riding the wave of their come. "So, close. I'm responsive. The power you've harnessed is working."

Jakov's jaw tightened as he looked past her. "Brother, you shall stay with us on this evening to aid in bringing the power I need to give Dijana my child."

"No, Jakov. I would have to continue to fuck her."

"I know. The only reason I am permitting this union is because I love Dijana and I wish for us to have a family together. There will never be another time after this night."

Chapter Six

They bathed quickly and Jakov lifted his wife from the water carefully, knowing that her body was not used to this type of activity. He hated sharing her with anyone, but she was right. He'd felt it too—the power they'd harnessed was working. By the time the red moon rose, Dijana would be with his child, he was sure of it.

He motioned for Andrija to lay on the pillows near the edge of the bathing pool, and he did. Next, he placed Dijana on top of Andrija, face down. Pulling on her slim waist, he moved her down so that her mouth was aligned with his brother's dick. "Take him in your mouth and bring him to climax. I will enter your pussy and continue to spill my seed within you."

She nodded and grabbed hold of Andrija's cock. At first, seeing her suck on his brother stabbed at his gut, but when he thought of the bigger picture, he let the anger go. It was good that it was only Andrija that he had to share her with. Another may not have fared as well as his blood had.

Andrija moaned and clawed at the ground as Dijana continued to suck on him. Jakov moved behind her and pulled her hips up slightly. He thrust his finger into her tight pussy and wasn't pleased with her lack of moisture. Bending down, he placed his mouth over her hot channel and thrust his tongue into her. She cried out, her mouth still on Andrija's cock and bucked against him. Cream ran down his chin as he continued to eat her out. Her swollen clit was ripe for the picking, so he tweaked it with his fingers as he continued to tongue fuck her.

Tasting how truly creamy she now was, he sat up and grabbed the length of his shaft. Sliding it into her slowly, he savored the feel of her sheath gripping him, fisting him to the point that he wanted to come, shift, and then come again. Andrija must have felt the same overwhelming need to shift because he watched his brother's leg cover in the fur of the bull. Dijana gasped as she tried to take Andrija's cock deep in her throat as it swelled to twice its normal size.

"I beg this of you, my gods," Jakov whispered as he felt a partial shift overtake him as well. The urge to claim her was great, and he parted the lips of her sex and rammed his massive cock into her pussy. She screamed and that only made him thrust harder. He needed to be wild. Fuck her. Come in her. Claim her.

The feel of her painfully tight channel gripping him was too much. He came with a burst that actually knocked Dijana forward. A muffled cry escaped her as she deep throatted Andrija, causing him to come too.

The room smelled of sex, lust, and the promise of more to come. Jakov waited until every last drop of his seed had spilled into Dijana before he pulled out of her slowly. His lower portion returned to normal, as did Andrija's.

"Did we hurt you?" he asked, afraid now that they may have damaged her or caused her harm in any way.

She rolled over and looked up at him, her eyes filled with tears. His heart shattered into a million pieces and unshed tears filled his eyes as well. "Dijana, my heart, my love...I never met to harm you, please forgive me."

She shook her head slowly. He fell back and away from her, disgusted with his lack of control. How he had come to love a woman more than life itself in only one short week was something he could not understand, but he did love her—immensely.

Andrija sat up and put his hand on Dijana's shoulder. "Why do you weep?"

"Because I'm happy, you fools."

That caught Jakov's attention. "Dijana?"

She ran her hand over her stomach and smiled up at him. A half laugh, half sob escaped his throat. "We have done it? You are with child?"

Dijana shook her head no and that puzzled him.

"But, you—"

"No, not with a child, my husband, with two children... the healer powers within me can sense two tiny lives being formed within my womb. We shall have a pair."

"Twins," he murmured in disbelief. "We are to have twins?"

"Yes," she said laughing.

"Twins... two?"

"Brother, leave the poor thing alone. She answered you already. I am to be an uncle to two of the finest children in all of Braluse." Andrija said it with love, but there was a sadness in his voice that only Jakov, his brother of all these centuries could detect.

"Come, let us celebrate." He nodded toward Andrija. "I wish to have a word with you. My love, stay here a moment and rest. I do not wish for anything to happen to the most important person in my life—you."

* * * *

Jakov pulled Andrija aside in the long corridor. "Tell me what troubles you."

"I know how much Dijana means to you and you had to share her with me. Never before have you loved and the first time in over five hundred years that you do, I come along and force you to let me sample her."

Jakov embraced his brother and held him tight. "I will admit that I was angry to start with, but I believe it was our combined powers that allowed us to channel the gods, thus letting my seed take within her."

Andrija let out a nervous laugh. "Maybe we did it a little too well."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because now instead of one child making your new wife's belly swell, there are two waiting to enlarge her."

Jakov tipped his head back and laughed with his brother. "I shall love her even if she was to swell with a thousand babies. I shall love her forever."

"So shall I, in a small way."

"As you should, brother, as you should."

Epilogue

Jakov watched his wife as she tried to stand. Her stomach was enormous, yet he had not told her that, and she had lost sight of her feet some time ago. It mattered little to him. In fact, he found the sight of her swollen with his children wildly erotic and had tried to take her at every opportunity he could. This late in the pregnancy now, he did not bed her as much. The other healers had warned against it, saying the babies may come too early. He loved her too much to risk her health or that of his children.

Dijana cast him a sideways look. "I'm sorry I can't please you on this night, my love. If you want to seek comfort in the arms of another, I'll understand, just this once, mind you."

"Dijana," he said with a scowl. "I disbanded the harem months ago and even if they were here, I would want no one but you. I am fine waiting to sink my cock back into your silken depths. It will be like the first time all over again. I hope to plant more little ones within you."

"Jakov! Don't even tease. Everything on my body is swollen and I can barely move."

"I know, and it is beautiful." He smiled and was happy that he was out of her reach. "Just think, we have hundreds and hundreds of years to create new lives."

She rolled her eyes at him and then grabbed her stomach, letting out a cry. Jakov rushed to her side. "Dijana, shall I call for the midwives and the healers?"

"Y-e-s!"

* * * *

"Sit down," Andrija said, as he watched Jakov pace the corridor yet again. "They have said that all is going well."

"I know," Jakov answered, running his hand through his hair. The fact that his brother's hair was free from its normal braid tipped Andrija off instantly that Jakov was beside himself with worry. "I cannot lose her, brother. I simply cannot. I would cease to exist."

"I understand, but you are doing her no good running yourself down."

A guard hurried down the hall toward them and Andrija leapt up to head him off. Jakov had enough to deal with as it was. "What is it?"

The guard stopped to catch his breath and glanced back toward the palace entrance. "Drago of Sabian is here. He brings news of raids occurring. Many have lost their lives and now the general that you sent is missing and—"

"Silence!" Andrija shouted.

Jakov moved forward but Andrija put his hand up. "I will see to this, brother. Your concerns are here now, with Dijana and the babies."

The door to the chamber opened and two healers exited, carrying tiny bundles in their arms. Andrija's breath caught in his throat until he heard both babies cry. Jakov shouted in joy and made the babies wail more. The healers cast him angry looks and took the babies to be cleansed. Another healer walked out of the room and nodded to them. "The queen is well and wishes to see her king now."

Jakov swung out to pat Andrija on the shoulder and caught him off guard, sending him crashing to the ground.

"Andrija, I am sorry. I was—"

Andrija put his hand in the air and laughed. "I am fine. Go see your wife. I shall depart with a legion of men to Sabian in the morning."

Jakov stopped in the doorway. "Take care of them, brother. Not only is Sabian home to our people, it is where Dijana is from. Her family still resides there as do the other Antistitas. Keep them safe. I shall not tell her about this until you have more news. Promise to return to us, you are an uncle now and needed to advise me on the art of fatherhood."

Andrija laughed. "Oh, advise on a subject that I know nothing about? I think not, my king. You are on your own."

The End

About The Author

Mandy M. Roth grew up fascinated by creatures that go bump in the night. From the very beginning, she showed signs of creativity—writing, painting, telling scary stories that left her little brother afraid to come out from under his bed. Combining her creativity with her passion for the paranormal has left her banging on the keyboard into the wee hours of the night. Her books have won numerous awards, including an RT nomination for Best Paranormal Erotic.

Mandy lives on the shores of Lake Erie with her husband, their three boys and a boxer pup named Hercules. When Mandy is not writing, she's doing cover art for various places with a super double secret brush name. She also co-hosts a live talk radio show, Raven Radio, which was recently mentioned in Romantic Times Magazine and has given several marketing workshops for authors. She has a Bachelor of Science and is currently working on her Master's Degree in Marketing.

To learn more about Mandy, please visit www.mandyroth.com or send an email to mandy@mandyroth.com.

For latest news about Mandy's newest releases subscribe to her announcement list in Yahoo! groups. http://groups.yahoo.com/subscribe/Mandy_M_Roth

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King's Choice II:
The Advisor's Apprentice

By
Mandy M. Roth

Chapter One

Andrija of Braluse made his way through the village of Sabian shocked by the state of it. Once rumored to be a paradise, tucked partially in the forests of the Kingdom of Braluse, Sabian now seemed more like a post war zone. No longer did it boast beauties as far as the eye could see, or wealth. It looked shaken to its very core. The smell of smoke still rode the air from the fires they'd been told were set.

Andrija spent much of his time visiting other regions of Hafoca and even other planets altogether. In his five hundred years of life, he'd seen many advances come about. Although Hafocaians preferred to live the ways of the old, they were keenly aware of technology and the evils it could bring. They kept just enough to assure their planet was protected from others and that was all. They, unlike many planets, had the advantage of natural born weapons—of supernaturals.

During Andrija's travels to other planets, he'd come across one called Earth. The planet's rich history had been of interest to him since it was rumored that many of the Hafocaians had resided there long ago, helping to build what Earth knew as its Greeks and Romans. From his understanding the Hafoca even had a hand in establishing Native American and Aztec races. It made sense. Much of their language overlapped as did some of their customs, not to mention appearances. It was a shame to know that the Native Americans, Aztecs, and almost all Earthlings for that matter had been wiped out. The Earthlings' greed and desire to possess technologies greater than they could control had been their downfall. It would not be Hafoca's. Regardless of how much each of the kingdoms on Hafoca fought, they agreed on one thing, they would not become like Earth—a veritable wasteland. They valued nature too much to allow such a thing to happen. Or so he had thought prior to arriving in the village.

Hafoca males possessed something most Earthlings did not. They possessed magik. It was sacred and bestowed upon all males at birth. With this great gift came immortality and the ability to shift forms. Only a few females were born being able to wield magik and up until Andrija met his sister-in-law, he thought them to be a myth. Something the females of the world cooked up to make them feel more special than they were.

It was a fact of life for the Hafoca that their women were kept based on their beauty and health. Assuring the lines continued was the most important thing of all. Other planets tended to look down upon them for such behavior but in truth, they weren't the only ones who practiced selective mating. They were just one of the few who confessed to it at all.

The Sabian village of today looked much the way Earth had in the aftermath of their global war. It hardened his heart knowing that his queen, Dijana, hailed from the tiny village. Though Andrija had never personally visited the village before, he knew from others that Sabian had been spectacular. It was anything but now.

He sighed.

Poor Dijana.

She had only just given birth to his nephews and was resting at the castle with his brother, King Jakov. As head advisor and brother to the king, Andrija had volunteered to journey to Sabian when the reports of an attack occurred. Never did he expect to see the destruction before him now. Drago, head guard of the seventh legion, continued to mumble under his breath about the state of affairs in Sabian. Drago had been stationed in Sabian for close to nine cycles and was the primary reason news of the attacks made it to the palace. He'd shifted forms, into that of an eagle, and exhausted himself by flying all that distance in the blistering heat to alert the king to Sabian's need. Andrija, Drago, and armed guards had left at first light and had ridden on horseback for nearly four straight days.

All were amazed at Drago's stamina. Their people, the Avistaurus of Braluse, were part human, part shifter and were immortal—at least the males were and the females were, as well, once mating was complete. Hafoca was inhabited with various forms of bird-like shifters. Each tribe was able to shift into a bird of prey and some other form of animal. The Avistaurus' shifted forms were that of an eagle and a bull. Since Drago wasn't a full-blooded Avistaurus, he shouldn't have been able to hold his shifted form as long as he had.

Several villagers rushed out to greet Drago, spewing forth tales of the attack and of the losses they had suffered. They were irate with the King's armies for letting them down and Andrija couldn't say he blamed them. Their lives had been threatened and many had lost all they had. It often took days, sometimes weeks for news to travel from the edges of Braluse to the palace. Jakov would never intentionally leave them at the mercy of invading troops.

Andrija glanced back at Drago and found him shaking his head as he soaked in even more destruction. The man wore the normal hair style of the men of Braluse. The sides of his head were shaved and a long, chestnut brown braid hung over one shoulder. Drago's silver eyes unnerved many but Andrija had never been bothered by them. He was aware of the fact that Drago's mother wasn't a full-blooded Hafoca. She had been the result of an Earthling, or human, as so many of their kind liked to be called, and a Hafoca male mating. By rights this and this alone should have prevented Drago from being able to serve as a royal guard. Andrija had grown up with the man, befriending him when they were but children and stood his ground, demanding Jakov allow Drago to serve. Jakov had caved easily enough because he, too, valued Drago's friendship. Andrija did more than simply value Drago's friendship. He trusted Drago fully. Not many men outside of Andrija's family could claim that right.

A group of men in long black robes moved forward from the crowd. They immediately went to Drago. "They came for our women. News spread of the Queen being the Sacerdos of the Sabian Antistitas and they thought to steal the rest of the priestesses from us. They managed to take many of them. The others scattered and have not returned to us as of yet."

It was as Andrija expected. The lure of possessing females whose power was virtually limitless was too great for outsiders to pass on. It was something the men of Braluse had had problems with long ago. At one point in Hafoca history, the lands were littered with priestesses. Many men of the old times believed the women to be too great a threat—being on equal footing with them wasn't an option. Large mass hunts happened, systematically wiping them out. It was part of the reason the priestesses were first thought to be extinct. Dijana's arrival had proven otherwise. Now, every power hungry warlord in the surrounding areas was no doubt eager to get his hands one of the Sabian Antistitas. A greater healer they would never know and the additional magik to their clans would make them virtually unstoppable.

An older man, who must have chosen to age instead of keeping his immortality, bowed his head. "Several of the priestesses did not survive the initial attacks. They are laid to rest in our burial grounds."

Andrija's gut clenched. He fought the urge to be sick. Such a loss. "What of the queen's sister? What of Tiegan? Is she laid to rest, as well?"

The elderly man stared up at him with wide unforgiving eyes. "We know not what has become of her. She was taken into the forest some four days past by men from Conias. We were unable to track her scent. They have managed to mask her from us. The enemy still lurks within the forest and our strongest men joined the royal guards, leaving the rest of us to try to defend our homeland without their aid." There was no accusation in his voice but there should have been.

Andrija heard the same story through Braluse, how virile men had joined the guards rather than choosing to stay and protect their villages. Yes, the guards were many but they were spread thinly throughout the lands. He cast a wary glance at Drago, wondering just how few men he'd been able to station in Sabian. From the look upon his friend's face, the number was low. Very low.

Drago was dismounting and handing the reins to the elderly man before Andrija could comment. "Come. We shall search for Tiegan's trail. If there is one to be found, we shall uncover it."

Without hesitation, Andrija did the same, dismounting and racing into the forest in search of not only Dijana's sister, but any surviving priestesses, as well, though the queen's sister would take precedent. It was a sad truth. The survival of their race meant that only the strongest could prevail. The line of magik that Tiegan came from was powerful. So much so that it had to be protected at all costs.

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Pike's Peak

by Mandy M Roth

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To learn more about Mandy M Roth and her books, visit www.mandyroth.com

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Silk

by Michelle M. Pillow

Quinlan St. James gasped as coffee spilled down her dark designer pantsuit. Blinking as the hot liquid cooled, she turned to glare after the hoverboarders who trailed by, laughing rudely at her. Their boards glided noiselessly over the uneven sidewalks of Pierson Park, carrying the spike-haired lads to their next unfortunate victim.

She clutched her newspaper under her arm as she leaned over to pick up the cup and throw it in the trash. Quinlan didn't mind the kids, not really. They were just being young and obnoxious. She should have been watching for them, but her mind was clouded with other things. Brushing the brown droplets off her suit with the back of her hand, she sighed. The suit was stained, but it wasn't like she needed to be anywhere that it would matter.

Giving up on the cleaning, Quinlan headed straight back to the quaint little sidewalk coffee vendor. The man behind the counter wiped his hands on his twenty-first century green apron and automatically handed her another cup. She made a move to reach for her card, but he smiled and waved her away. Quinlan nodded at him and walked over to her customary bench beneath the shade of a tall oak tree.

She took a small sip before setting the cup down. Coffee was better in the old district. They still ground it by hand and brewed it in refurbished coffee machines. Flipping to the science section of the New Pierson City Times, her face fell as she saw her father's cheery expression staring at her. Quietly, she scanned the feature article on him.

This weekend, ten years after his unexplained death, Dr. William St. James, renowned genetic engineer, will be inducted into the Scientific Achievement Hall of Fame. Dr. St. James spent the last two decades of his life fighting the war against genetic diseases ... work that is the foundation of modern genetic study....

Quinlan narrowed her gray-green eyes, refusing to cry about things she could not change. She looked silently up at the bright blue sky. Clouds peeked down from behind the tree limbs and the dark skyscrapers of the oldest section of the city. Nearby, the motor of a 1950 Chevy Fastback revved as it gave tourist rides around the historical section of the park.

Quinlan frowned. The newspaper wasn't telling her anything she didn't already know. Sighing, she turned back to the article anyway.

The official induction will be held at the St. James Estate in East Bend this Friday. It is the first time since Dr. St. James' death that the home will be opened to guests. Dr. St. James' daughter, Quinlan St. James, owns the estate, a renovated castle from England.... Miss St. James is often described in the media as a reclusive billionaire. An invitation only cocktail party will follow the official induction, where some of the scientist's papers will be on display for the first time, along with some of his earlier inventions. All items are being donated to the Genetic Science Museum.

Even now caterers and decorators invaded her home. It was the whole reason she'd come into the city. The giant photograph the museum had sent over of her father had been staring down at her for days, bringing up a myriad of emotions she didn't want to feel.

Quinlan's eyes skimmed the rest of the article before carefully folding it up. It didn't even come close to describing the full truth of her father's work—the strange late night visitors they'd had while she was growing up, the coded messages he received at all hours. She didn't care. Let the public have their fairy tale version.

Grabbing her coffee, she stood and walked over to the trashcan. William St. James' face stared up at her from the paper she held, smiling in a crooked way she still remembered. She didn't smile back. Hesitating slightly, she threw the article away.

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