



# Reluctant Goddess

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## Chapter One

*A Barren Planetoid, 3157 C.E.*

*Appollonia Amarosiana, Princess Designate of Korsawor, brushed her long, curly blonde locks with vigor. On Korsawor, her home planet, in the palace where she'd spent her formative years, ladies-in-waiting competed for the honor of brushing her hair. Now, marooned on a godforsaken globe of stone in some obscure corner of the universe, she had to fend for herself in matters large and small. And she didn't like it one little bit.*

*After a last swipe with her brush, Appollonia abandoned her coiffure. Nothing on this barren planetoid even approached adequacy. Not the food nor the drink, not the sights nor the sounds. Worst of all, when it came to her royal sexual hunger, she felt condemned to eternal frustration. On Korsawor, knights and warriors—from the leading champions to the greenest aspirants—all competed for her favor. She'd had her pick.*

*Back home, resorting to a sex toy had been one option among many. She'd had the finest implements at her beck and call—vibrators and dildos from every corner of the known solar system. Back then she could use a toy once and discard it. For that matter, she'd been able to use two or three toys in a single session and then just toss them into the trash. Replacements would appear like magic.*

*When she remembered the home she'd so foolishly left, a tear welled up in the corner of her eye. She swiped it away with an angry snuffle. If she started to weep, she'd probably never stop. She had to adjust to the disappointing reality around her. Now instead of having a multitude of toys, all she had was a solitary hunk of cheap plastic and a single faltering battery. After a long day spent in futile search for her lover and now facing a bleak night, Appollonia surrendered to the call of horniness. She stretched out in her cold, lonely bed and held her vibrator up to the weak light from a bedside lamp. "Do your magic. Transport me from this misery, even if for just a moment."*

*Desperate to come, she twisted the base 'til the desired buzz whimpered forth. With a sigh, she drew up her plain night garment, opened her legs, placed the vibrator where it was most needed, and arched her hips to open herself up. She sighed as she felt the first stirring of excitement caress her moist pink folds.*

*It was all his fault. XXXX, who'd promised her the world. "Follow me, my lady, and the glories of the universe will be yours." Dazzled by this soldier of fortune, so different from all the men she'd known in the royal court, she'd sneaked away from Korsawor. After a rocket ride of ecstasy, he'd dumped her on this barren hunk of rock. Oh, he'd pledged fervently to return, to deliver on all his promises. Which was how long ago? After the failure of all means of communication, she'd begun to lose track of time. Now she couldn't send out appeals for rescue. And she'd lost total contact with XXXX.*

*All that was hers these days was the worn-out vibrator, the few rags left of her imperial wardrobe, and many cans of chicken noodle soup from a bygone era. Thank the Benevolent Goddess, she had discovered a can opener in the ancient pantry.*

*The vibrator shuddered, choked, sighed, and died. What was this? Appollonia's royal*

*pussy clenched in frustration. No, no! It couldn't be. Nothing. The vibrator now lay in her hand, an inert hunk of plastic. Shit. She needed to come, and this vibrator wasn't about to help her meet that fundamental goal. Not without more batteries.*

*Gritting her teeth, the princess tossed the worthless gadget across the room and sincerely wished that XXXX would miraculously return and enter their quarters at that precise moment. She'd love to hit him over the head with the proof of her overwhelming frustration.*

*But XXXX remained as elusive that day as any appeasement for her mammoth frustration....*

*Marin County, California, 2006 C.E.*

Frustration dogged K.C. Berrigan's heels. Heck, *Frustration* had become her middle name these days. Reading over the last bit of her current work in progress, cranked out three days before, she bit her lip. Talk about writer's block. More like granite boulders damming up her creative juices. Here she was, poised to write the follow-up to her first bestseller and thus carve her name onto the marquee of Successful Authors—except she couldn't get her futuristic time-traveling heroine into the same century as her hero. Princess Appollonia, her so-called heroine, had been stationary so long she was beginning to grow moss. And the still unnamed alpha hero behaved more like an omega.

Maybe K.C., who adored anagrams, would change the name Korsawor to Strufnoirat, an anagram of frustration. And Korsawor could become the hero's name. Did Korsawor *sound* like a hero's name? The whole thing depressed K.C. so badly, she couldn't get out of bed. Not even having stashed her favorite chocolate nuts beyond arm's length moved her.

The phone rang. With a sigh and an unerotic groan, she put down the manuscript, dragged herself out from under her covers and raced to pick up the receiver ... well, stumbled. Hopefully, she was going to hear good enough news to justify getting out of bed.

Not. Shit. Some bozo selling another phone service. Didn't they have laws against that? K.C. slammed the phone down, stretched, yawned, and looked at the clock. Eleven. Missed breakfast. No wonder she felt starved and weak.

She went to the kitchen and grabbed a loaf of some lovely cinnamon raisin challah bread, eggs, milk, vanilla, and a touch of sherry—what the hell, it was getting on to lunch time. It was a French toast morning, and she was going to make herself her very best recipe—one she usually saved for company. If she was up to making French toast for herself, she couldn't be as totally catatonic as she'd been feeling since writer's block had descended—was it only three days ago? Or three weeks? Three months?

K.C.'s tummy rumbled, as well it should. She'd make herself four good slices of the delectable toast. And fry up some bacon for a protein boost. She got everything going, then put her special blend hazelnut coffee on to brew—full octane this morning, to rev up her creative engine. Soon, the kitchen smelled amazing and K.C.'s spirits, if not her block, began to lift. She sliced fresh strawberries from a neighborhood fruit stand—the first of this spring. Maybe she'd plant some strawberries in the garden that had come with the cottage ... the great cottage in beautiful Marin that she'd lose if she went bankrupt.

K.C. sipped coffee as she put the finishing touches on her breakfast. She artistically arranged the French toast, bacon, and berries on her prettiest plate. After sprinkling powdered sugar on the toast, she poured on pure maple syrup direct from Vermont. Then she carried everything over to the table, put her plate on a blue and yellow quilted place mat, and sat down. Though she'd resolved to stop reading when she ate alone, today wasn't the day to begin. So she

grabbed a magazine and began her feast.

By the time she took her last bite, K.C. was starting to feel better about the world and her life. The phone rang again. Determined to preserve her growing optimism, she picked up.

"Magda here," a heavily accented voice said. A large and in-charge Hungarian, Magda Marki was one of K.C.'s favorite people. Stylish and well-groomed, with a manner the French would label *formidable*, Magda could have been anywhere from forty and seventy. Few people had the *cojones* to ask for the exact particulars.

"Good morning, Magda."

The other woman made a clucking sound with her tongue. "'Tis afternoon, Karlotta Carolina." Her friend insisted on calling K.C. by her full name. Magda and K.C.'s sister, Cassandra, were the only people permitted that liberty.

K.C. looked at her clock and nodded. "You're right as always, Magda. How are you? It's good to hear your voice."

"All you would need to do to hear my voice is pick up the telephone. I have not heard from you in a very long time and have grown concerned," Magda scolded in her careful English.

"Sorry." K.C. sincerely meant her apology.

"I thank you for that, but I cannot spend too much more time before I tell you the purpose of my call. Karlotta Carolina, you must come down to my shop immediately."

K.C.'s heart sank. Much as she loved Magda and her herb shop, there was no way she could unchain herself from her computer long enough to go into San Francisco.

"That is *exactly* why you should come," Magda insisted. "Whatever you must accomplish or rearrange in order to come here, do so. I demand this, in the name of friendship." She grew still for a moment then added the killer words, "Have I ever before given you incorrect advice?"

K.C. could hear the agitation, almost excitement, in her friend's voice. Magda usually kept all emotion out of her voice—which made this appeal all the more powerful. "Can you tell me what this is about?"

"Tsk. This is not a matter suitable for the telephone," she hissed. "Your immediate presence is demanded."

K.C. raised her eyebrows. Everything Magda had ever done or said since they'd met in the Rubenesque dress department at Starr's of San Francisco had been right on the money. She owed Magda for all her support and help in the past.

A thought struck K.C.. Maybe, hard as it would be to believe, her self-reliant friend required some help only K.C. could provide? She knew she should absolutely park her butt in her chair and work on her book. But she couldn't ignore Magda's summons. Okay. She would justify a temporary separation from her computer because it was Magda asking. "I'll shower and dress. Be there as fast as possible."

It sounded like Magda exhaled a breath she'd been holding. "I promise, you will never regret this." The word *promise* triggered K.C. to remember the last she'd written of Appollonia Amarosiana and XXXX's traitorous promises. She shook that thought away. K.C. was about to hang up when she heard Magda add a last thought. "Oh, Karlotta Carolina, wear something spectacular. No velour track suit today."

K.C. stared at the phone after she hung up. She had to wonder why her friend wanted her to dress up for an ordinary trip to the city. K.C. remembered a previous invitation to Magda's shop—when Magda had tried to fix K.C. up with her cousin, Zoltan. She shivered, thinking back to that disaster. That one time Magda had steered her wrong. Well, she couldn't hold that lapse in judgment against her friend forever. She'd take her at her word.

Intrigued, energized, and just the slightest bit wary, she put on a gorgeous red silk dress that swirled around her substantial butt, dammit, *shapely* legs like a soft cloud. Her one pair of black designer heels actually looked quite reasonable with the dress. K.C. carefully applied makeup and put her long blond hair into a good imitation of a French braid. By the time she felt satisfied with her looks, it was nearly two. She flew to her ancient car and drove across the Golden Gate Bridge, into the city.

\* \* \* \*

Hungarian Rhapsody, Magda's shop, in the North Beach section, was a Mecca for herbalists, cooks, and anyone who valued buying the freshest herbs and spices from an expert.

When K.C. opened the door of the shop, setting off a series of bell chimes, an aroma of fine herbs mingled with mysterious spices assailed her—the signature scent of the place. K.C. had to resist an impulse to open the jars and sacks to give them the sniff test. Her friend, so proprietary as to the handling of her goods, would have a fit.

Magda, who was just finishing up with some customers, asked her assistant to wrap up their order, then turned to K.C. “At last you have arrived.” She looked her up and down, told her to turn around. “You are looking fine, though perhaps a bit more blush and a darker lipstick would be better with that dress.” Magda frowned.

“You’re looking good, too,” K.C. said, relieved to have passed inspection with what was from Magda a minimum of suggested corrections. She, on the other hand, admired the other woman’s flowing multi-colored silk caftan and smart new haircut and had no hints to offer. “Is that more red I’m seeing in your hair?”

Magda winked. “Some new henna that just came in. I couldn’t resist trying it out. Do you approve?” She moved her head around so K.C. could see her hair from various angles.

K.C. nodded. She especially liked how Magda’s hair picked up highlights when she turned her head.

Magda accepted the compliment and grinned mysteriously. “Your work is going well?”

K.C., who hated putting negative vibes into the atmosphere, shrugged.

Magda shook her head. “You are probably wondering why I have torn you away from the possibility of your work and insisted that you come here today.”

“I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

Magda reached out her beautifully manicured hand in which she held a small wooden box. “This will help you with your writer’s blocked,” Magda whispered. “Take it.”

“My writer’s block?” K.C. asked, subtly correcting the error in English as Magda had once requested her to. But how did Magda know about her writer’s block? K.C. couldn’t remember telling her about it. On the other hand, Magda had a way of knowing things... “What is this, Magda?” A thought crossed K.C.’s mind. Her friend hadn’t begun dabbling in drugs or...? K.C. put her question into words and instantly regretted the impulse.

Magda’s eyes flashed with the spark of her Gypsy ancestors. “Karlotta Carolina Berrigan, you know better than to suspect such things!”

“Of course. Today seems to be my day to apologize to you.”

Magda waved her hands dismissively. “I cannot blame you for being careful, even where you need not be. But no, I am not offering you *drugs*.”

“It’s just that writer’s block is such a difficult condition to deal with. I’m beginning to feel like I’m going to need magic or a blast of dynamite.”

Magda tapped a meticulously red-lacquered talon on the box. “What I have here is better than dynamite—a magical plant.”

K.C. raised an eyebrow. "What miracle resides in that plain, brown box?"

Magda's smile lit up her coffee brown eyes. "Merely a powder made from the root of the otvingadoria plant. With no taste and little fragrance, no harmful effects and only benefits to you, this powder will solve your problems. You will be inspired to write a magnificent *chef d'oeuvre*, a masterpiece."

K.C. desperately wanted to believe that something legal could relieve her writer's block. And she wanted to stay in her friend's good graces. She took the proffered box. "Should I open it now?"

Magda gasped. "No, no, Karlotta Carolina. The powder of the otvingadoria is very fragile, very volatile. Once exposed to the air, it will lose its potency and must be consumed immediately. And I advise that you not consume it until you are back home, near your computer, ready to create."

"Alright." K.C. would, with difficulty, resist looking inside.

"You must take it home and use it immediately—and consume all the powder in a drink at one time. Then, later, you will tell me the results."

"Can you tell me a little about this plant? What did you call it?" Used as she was to her friend being cryptic, K.C. needed more information.

"The otvingadoria."

K.C. tried to repeat the name, which took two or three tries. "The otvingadoria. Is that a Hungarian name? I've never heard of it."

Magda smiled enigmatically. "No, this is the universal name of the plant. *Salvia otvingadoria* to the scholars. Simply otvingadoria to the rest of us. But I must admit I am not surprised to learn of your ignorance. The otvingadoria is one of the rarest plants on Earth. It blooms only once every seven years for but one night. To capture its potency, an herbalist must wait until the proper moment for harvest or the efficacy is doomed."

"Just once every seven years? Must be very expensive. I don't know how I can afford it." Actually, she was sure she couldn't.

Magda scowled and sniffed dismissively. "We do not speak of such things. I am pledged that the otvingadoria powder will go only to worthy recipients. And Karlotta Carolina, you are most worthy."

K.C. blushed. "I'm honored, Magda, and don't know what to say."

"Just follow my instructions for using the powder. Later, you will tell me I was right."

K.C. inwardly chuckled at Magda's confident prediction. "Of course. Magda, where does the otvingadoria grow?" She once again tripped over the name of the plant.

"I forget sometimes how much information a writer craves." Magda pursed her lips. "This plant grows only in the high mountainous desert areas. The powder I am giving you came from a plant growing in Sedona in Arizona."

"Oh, so that's why you went there recently."

Magda bowed her head slightly. "Yes. I am pleased now to have witnessed the blooming of the otvingadoria. This was the first time I ever had this privilege. And now to have a small amount in my shop. You are receiving the first powder I have distilled from the plant. There are only three full doses."

"Thank you, Magda." She bowed her head, though she considered going into a full curtsy.

Magda waved off her thanks. "Go home, Karlotta Carolina. Put on some more makeup, as I suggested. Then take the powder according to the directions. And voilà! You will proceed to

write that story of yours—which I will have the first chance to read.”

“Of course. I’ll give you a copy of the very first draft, as soon as I complete it. Now I’m on my way. But just one more question. Magda, why did you insist that I dress up to come down here if you were going to send me right back home?”

Magda looked smug. “I wanted to see how you look all dolled up. What you’re wearing is perfect. Stay dressed just as you are when you take the powder. Don’t forget the makeup, though.”

“Why?”

“Trust me.”

Feeling a bit like Alice about to fall down the rabbit hole, a sensation she often had when she was with Magda, K.C. agreed. She took the box and made the trip back to Marin.

By the time K.C. got home, it was after four. Another day shot to hell as far as her writing went. She’d gotten her heroine, Princess Appollonia, trapped in the thirty-second century. And then she’d lost the thread of what to do with her. According to Magda, the powder she held in her hand was going to solve all that. Though Magda had never yet been incorrect about any of her herb lore, K.C. couldn’t quite suspend her disbelief on this one. Though she wanted to. If only it could be so easy to get past her writer’s block ....

She also wanted to get out of her dress, heels, and hose and into her usual sweats. But she’d promised Magda to stay in the same outfit and apply more makeup before trying the powder. Magda had instructed her to brew some tea to dissolve the powder in. Not tea from a bag, but loose tea. She might as well do it now, then change.

K.C. opened her ceramic tea canister, took a generous spoonful of the custom rose hips and cinnamon brew Magda had given her for her birthday, and prepared her drink. When the tea had properly steeped, she poured all the powder in, watched it dissolve, and drank it down. Then she waited to feel something huge, like a big block rising up and hurtling away from her into outer space. Nothing. For a moment, she imagined herself turning into the female equivalent of Mr. Hyde. She looked at her hands to see if she was sprouting claws, then giggled at the thought. Her fingers and palms remained unchanged. Her nails remained short and unpolished with a hanging cuticle that needed attention. She watched the clock tick by ten minutes. Still nothing. K.C. didn’t know what Magda had expected to happen., but obviously this time her herbal expertise and steering mechanism had malfunctioned. Perhaps there had been something off about the process of harvesting the otvingadoria, or maybe K.C. hadn’t followed the directions precisely? Disappointed and unsure how she’d break the bad news of the failure to Magda, K.C. went to her bedroom to change into her sweats.

No magic. And no more excuses to justify time away from her computer. Too bad about the ineffective herb. She really could have used the magic today.



## Chapter Two

Narim, Niarofilca, 3157 C.E.

Deep in the Kingdom of Niarofilca, the people of the Narim District gathered in the sacred ritual arena and looked anxiously at the night sky. Adriac Mendushar, Lord Pom'diflor, alternated between watching the crowd and the sky. Though everyone's future depended on the impending arrival of the Goddess, Adriac's would be most immediately impacted. He might thus have been the most anxious of the citizens holding vigil, but he would neither admit to any anxiety nor allow such emotion to color his thoughts. Along with becoming the designated consort of the Goddess, he'd taken on a leadership role. He had to be strong, set an example for the others by never showing any weakness or hesitation in meeting his fate. Above all, he had to conduct himself exactly like the legendary heroes their society most revered.

The people of Narim were now a mere three days from the crowning ritual of their cyclical renewal rites. The essential performance of these rites would guarantee the continuation of their society for the next seven years. But the key to their salvation, the Goddess designated for this cycle, still had not arrived. Where was the golden deity they all awaited, the one who would mate with Adriac to safeguard Niarofilca's coming fertility and freedom from the ravages of nature gone wild? Without her, the rain might cease to fall. Or else torrents would flood their lands. Cold days would grow frigid, hot ones boiling. Adriac ran a hand through his long black hair. He felt his muscles, newly large and hard as a result of the ordeals he'd gone through to become the Goddess's consort, ripple.

The competition to be named consort had been fierce, and he'd bested all comers. Granted, he was taller and broader of shoulder than the other competitors. He'd heard it whispered that his piercing amber eyes unhinged the men he'd fought against almost as effectively as they melted female hearts. And he supposed that having the longest, thickest cock of all, as proven in the arousal trials, hadn't hurt his prospects.

If he had a regret, it was the loss of his lifelong friendship with Jondiac Blancanishar. Though Adriac and Jondiac had made a solemn pact before the start of the ordeals that no matter what the outcome their friendship would continue, the reality proved that pledge false. Jondiac appeared to resent Adriac's victory, acting as if his friend had achieved his triumph by foul means. Adriac, in turn, resented his former friend's accusatory air. But, most of all, he missed his friend. But he could not allow such thoughts to obstruct his progress on the path to glory.

Muttering an oath at the continuing absence of the Goddess, Adriac resolved to take action. Much as he personally disliked Deel'hui Melindar, Chief Priestess of the Goddess' temple, Adriac tore himself away from the crowd to consult with her. He pushed his way through the streets filled with people primed for the festival. Though he first searched for Deel'hui in the temple where he'd have expected her to be performing the necessary rites to hasten the Goddess' arrival, he found the sacred worship sanctuary completely empty. Adriac was about to abandon this site and look elsewhere when he heard a low buzz from one of the rooms separated by a wall from the central altar.

He went through a doorway and found himself closer to the source of the noise. In moments, he located Deel'hui, sitting in her office, entering data in her computer while she

spoke into a headset. She motioned him to sit down and be quiet.

Ignoring her, Adriac looked around the sparsely furnished office. Deel'hui kept few artifacts of her position or her private life around her. A golden bowl filled with lush red roses provided the only soft touch in a room of hard angles and gray machines. Somehow, he felt this cold, bleak work space suited Deel'hui Melindar far better than the sumptuous temple or any luxurious feminine refuge.

After she completed her conversation, Deel'hui fastened cold gray eyes on him. He took a chair. "What have you come for, Adriac?" Usually cryptic, she seemed even more than usual to be guarding a deep, dark secret—very dark.

Whatever reason he provided, he was sure she'd do her best—in typical Deel'hui mode—to trivialize. But his concerns weren't trivial. The people were raggedly close to exploding with worry and fear. As the Goddess' consort, he had to take responsibility for responding to their questions. Which meant he had to get answers.

"Why has the Goddess not yet appeared among us? The people's fears escalate by the hour."

Deel'hui appeared unperturbed. She threw her head back and the thick coils into which she'd wound her dark hair gleamed in the reflected light from the room's lamps. Deel'hui's charcoal eyes glittered with an unholy malice. "The people. Pah. Superstitious, ragtag rabble."

Adriac winced. "You are talking of the populace you're pledged to serve as Chief Priestess of the Goddess..."

She waved an aristocratic hand dismissively. "Don't remind me."

Among Deel'hui's many other questionable talents, evasion was one of the most developed. She once again managed to dodge the crucial question. Adriac could well imagine she'd done much of that lately and he began to wonder what she might be hiding. But he wasn't going to let her get away without some sort of solid response. "Where is the Goddess? And when will she arrive here?"

Deel'hui smirked. "Are you asking from personal concern? As you prepare for your role as her 'sacred consort'?" Her mouth twisted into a sneer as she said the last words.

Adriac refused to let her bate him. "I am voicing the concern of the people. No Goddess has ever arrived so late, this close to the date of the Fertility Rite. We need to know if something is wrong so, if need be, we can try to prepare an alternate way. Or, if all is as it should be, when will she arrive?"

Deel'hui rose to her full height, revealing her skeletal body draped in the robe of her office, and came around her desk to Adriac. He stood up from his chair and prepared to back away from her. But Deel'hui pounced too fast. In moments, she had her hot hands on his chest. "If you are concerned about fulfilling your role as consort, I am more than prepared to help you rehearse. To show you all the ways to please the Goddess ...." She broke off and roughly grabbed Adriac to her.

Before he could pull away from her, she'd hammered his mouth with her stiff, cold lips, ramming her tongue against his teeth.

Adriac broke away and barely managed to resist wiping his hand across his mouth to remove all trace of her. She tasted like she'd been feasting on putrid fish and sewer waste. "I have no concern about fulfilling my role in holy copulation and bringing the Goddess to her sacred climaxes."

Deel'hui lowered her lashes for a moment. "I'm glad to hear of your confidence in this crucial sphere." Her eyes smoldered, and Adriac could feel her misguided desire for him reach

out in her effort to ensnare him. She'd hinted before that her position as Chief Priestess gave her access to carnal secrets that would set his senses afire. He sniffed. As if any way Deel'hui Melindar touched him could move him an iota.

Deel'hui Melindar had started pursuing him when they registered in the same young children's learning class. Since the moment Adriac had outgrown his little boy's dislike of girls, he'd shared the affections of many. Some he liked, some he fancied he loved. But he could never bring himself to respond to Deel'hui with any reaction other than a cringe of distaste. As she'd never lacked for boyfriends, it had seemed to Adriac that she should have been more than content with the conquests which easily came her way. But she'd always kept her eye set on Adriac, no matter how many ways he tried to discourage her. Sometimes Adriac wondered if Deel'hui could even distinguish any more what motivated her to chase him—love or hatred?

Being Chief Priestess of the temple, Deel'hui should have honored Adriac as the Goddess's chosen consort. This was her obligation, despite her fierce campaign to prevent him from winning the competition for the title. And, after he'd won, she'd moved heaven and earth to have the title declared invalid. For once, she'd failed in her initiatives, and she was stuck with having to fulfill the dictates of her office.

Now, shocking as it was to contemplate, Adriac realized Deel'hui wouldn't hesitate to suborn him. She knew as well as anyone else that he was pledged to total celibacy until he met the Goddess in the arena for their holy copulation. Yet, she appeared to show no hesitation in attempting to undermine his vows.

"When will the Goddess be here?" Adriac asked again through gritted teeth.

Deel'hui backed off and shrugged. "All the portents say her arrival is imminent. Perhaps she has dropped down from the heavens while you have tarried in my office?"

Realizing he wouldn't get any more information and that perhaps Deel'hui had just spoken a truth, Adriac turned on his heel and strode out the door. He raced back to the central square where the people were still waiting, the place where all previous Goddesses had touched down among them which now remained ominously bare.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as K.C. opened the door to her bedroom she stepped down into a wind tunnel that had her whirling through space like a ball of dandelion fluff caught up in a tornado. As she plunged into a whirlwind of color, lights, and roaring noise, she frantically struggled to get her bearings. While the world hurtled insanely by, her red silk dress billowed around her legs, and she at first tried to hold it down in a vain attempt at modesty. Then as realization dawned, she flung her arms and legs about in a mad effort to stop her crazy free fall. Blood curdling screams—hers, she suddenly realized—filled the air. Colors she couldn't identify flashed in intense spurts of energy, and her writer's brain tried to find names for them all the while she grappled with the realization that she was in deep danger. Prayers to every deity she'd ever heard of did nothing to bring her to a safe haven. The sound of her own shrieks and howls of creatures unknown ricocheted endlessly across the space rushing by her.

When the madness appeared to subside to a background noise, she caught her breath. "That powder has some kick after all," she said out loud though there was no one around to hear. The sound of own voice provided a modicum of assurance—something she could recognize amidst all the strangeness. She figured at this point, talking to herself was the least of her problems. "Or was there just a massive earthquake?" Then K.C. kind of lost track of things.

Next thing she knew, her free fall came to an abrupt end and she thudded down, hard, onto a solid surface, landing ass first—and everything went black. When she came to, with no

idea how much time had passed, she first thought she'd arrived in Wonderland—or a psycho ward. Or someone was playing an amazingly elaborate joke on her. Could Magda have gone to all this trouble just to play a trick? Would she have? Why?

From the massive plush chair in which she now found herself ensconced, K.C. watched in amazement as countless young men and women danced frenetically around her. The men, every one tall, buff, and clad only in a purple loincloth edged in gold, towered over the slim but curvaceous women, who wore the same cloths plus what looked like bikini bras. The dancers frequently interrupted their whirling and stomping to bow to her. Bow to her? Everyone was chanting what sounded like a weird incantation, while they watched her with imploring eyes.

K.C. quickly rose to her feet, maybe too quickly, for she nearly fainted. She sat down hard again. Whatever was in the so-called *Salvia otvingadoria* Magda had given her seemed to have the same effect as bad drug trips she'd read about. But before she had time to think much more about Magda, the most amazing looking of the men approached K.C. and bowed, gazing at her with soul-gripping adoration. The rational part of her mind stridently demanded that she deal with the unknown dangers she was facing immediately instead of gaping at him, but an even stronger instinct kicked in at the sight of the man before her. He loomed before her like the epitome of every hero she'd ever created or dreamed of. Seeing him made her believe in love at first sight. Certainly lust.

She tried not to stare, but he was staggeringly well endowed—his shimmery purple loincloth left very little to the imagination. He had black hair to his shoulders and smoldering, golden amber eyes. To her astonishment, he bowed deeply again, then arose, grasped her by the elbows, and proceeded to bark some words in a harsh language she didn't recognize. Talk about an alpha hero for her books—except way better than any product of her imagination. An inadvertent stab of jealousy grabbed hold of her. Forget her heroines. She wanted this guy for herself.

*Inappropriate thought.* She needed to deal with her bizarre situation before she let herself fantasize about Mr. Eye Candy. Too bad she hadn't paid more attention to studying foreign languages in school. Hoping he'd understand at least a bit, she responded slowly in talking-to-foreigners English. He gestured her to wait one moment—he'd be right back. What choice did she have? She watched, mentally feasting on the view of the way his buns rippled as he walked away from her. How could she find the words to describe him?

"Do you speak English?" she asked when he returned. Though she tried not to stare, she couldn't tear her gaze away for long. His face—the amazing eyes that seemed to read to the bottom of her soul, a nose, chin, and lips chiseled by a master sculptor and graced with life.

He barked something else. K.C. reluctantly figured anyone who looked that good probably had a negative I.Q. But then he snapped his fingers, and a woman brought over two pairs of the tiniest earphones she'd ever seen. Bowing, the man stepped forward and held out one set to K.C. He put on the other pair.

Gorgeous Guy, which was what K.C. had labeled him, then dazzled her with a smile that would have convinced her to follow him anywhere... and do things far more outrageous than putting on a pair of tiny purple headphones. When she had them in place, Gorgeous Guy smiled again, and K.C.'s heart triple-flipped. Of course, with so many beautiful women surrounding them, she had no illusions that he'd have any interest in her. Still, it was nice to have his attention for the moment or for the length of the hallucination—whatever the hell was happening to her.

Gorgeous Guy motioned to his mouth with his index finger. As soon as he seemed sure

he had her attention, he said, “Welcome to our humble city, Goddess,” in his own language—and K.C. simultaneously heard the words through her ear phones in meticulous British English. She laughed at his joke—it had to be a joke, right?—but part of her had to admit she appreciated being called ‘Goddess’—definitely a new experience, one she regretted would be short-lived.

“Where am I? Who are you?” she asked, curious to see what kind of answer he’d come up with. “And why do you call me Goddess?”

“So many questions.” He flashed his perfect smile, and her heart melted. He had the most perfect teeth she’d ever seen. Must be caps. “You are in the Narim District of the land of Niarofilca, as I am sure you must realize. And you are surely familiar with our C.E.E.P., Computer Enhanced Ear Phones. These permit people to converse no matter what their language of origin and their range of knowledge.”

“The land of Niarofilca—Narim District?” Geography had never been K.C.’s strong suit, but she’d thought she knew the names of most of the countries. Well, many of them. She sneaked a look around her. Maybe she’d landed in one of those Third World countries that had undergone a recent name change? Except she didn’t expect any of those places to have the kind of technology this place seemed to.

K.C. fingered the head phones. Though she would’ve considered it impossible for any ear phones to accomplish what these seemed to, she realized she and Gorgeous Guy seemed to be communicating despite their language differences. She sure wished she’d had a gadget like this when she had struggled through French in high school .... But she couldn’t allow herself to get distracted. She had to figure out what the hell was going on, starting with where the hell she’d landed and who this guy was—which she asked again.

“Pardon my lapse.” He bowed his head slightly. “I am Adriac Mendushar, Lord Pom’diflor. Adriac to my friends.”

“Adriac? May I call you that?” She repeated the only name he’d said that she could pronounce.

He bowed more deeply. “As your chosen consort, I’d be greatly honored to have you call me Adriac, my Lady. And how shall I address you?”

How should he .... “Adriac, what’s with this Goddess business? Is it a joke you play on newcomers or some ploy to increase the tourist trade?” She thought a moment, realized the import of his other comment. But before she could ask, he began to answer her question.

“You have arrived in the manner our previous Goddesses have—just, I might add, barely in time to prepare for our Fertility Rite. In fact, we greatly feared you would not arrive at all. With all due respect, you’ve come to us with very little time to spare.” He inclined his head again.

Adriac kept a straight face as he said all this. Maybe she needed to play along with the joke ‘til her head cleared? Had he really said he was her chosen consort, or was that just her wish impulse kicking into high gear? Chosen by whom? She would have chosen him in a heartbeat, but she sure as hell didn’t remember doing so. And that was something she wouldn’t have forgotten. Especially because the second word he used to describe himself was *consort*. Last she’d heard that word meant the two of them would have sex together and everyone would know about it, didn’t it? Whoa, this was so far beyond any other fantasy she’d ever had... What *had* Magda slipped her?

And then understanding dawned. K.C. realized the whole scene was part of Magda’s plot. K.C.’s eyebrows shot to her hairline and she burst out laughing. She loved Magda’s sense of humor, even when she pulled weird stunts like this, but the Goddess and her consort bit was a tad

over the top. K.C. didn't exactly understand how this would help banish her writer's block, but she'd have to give Magda credit for going to a lot of trouble to create an elaborate Hollywood-worthy scene.

"Right. I'm your dear Goddess, and you're my consort." K.C. shrugged as she feigned nonchalance. "Okay, we've had our laugh. What's the punch line?"

"Punch line?" Adriac repeated. A small furrow formed between his perfect brows. "You would like to drink some punch? This is a mixed beverage of juices and sometimes liquor served at parties. But our dear Goddess, you do not have to wait in a line for anything. We will bring you any drink you desire. And any food you desire. We want to make sure we feed you well, especially because it appears you have lost some body mass in your travels."

Lost body mass? This really snagged her attention. For the first time ever, she wished she had a full-length mirror. After quickly running her hands up down her body, she felt reasonably sure she hadn't lost any weight since the last time she'd checked. Every ounce seemed to be exactly where it had been then. So now she knew she was having an auditory hallucination. No one had ever accused her of having lost body mass—or offered to help her make it up. Where was a recording device when she most needed one?

"The Fertility Rite and the other ceremonies will take place in a mere three days," Adriac said. "We want you to be prepared. You are less substantial than the Goddesses who have come our way before. As you surely know, we revere and honor your kind for your large, soft proportions."

That was too much, but Adriac had said his piece without a glimmer of smile or a hint of sarcasm. What an actor. K.C. would wait him out. Surely there'd be a crack in that perfect façade, and he'd give himself away with a laugh or a smirk. "What's this about a Fertility Rite?" She wondered how far he would go for the joke.

His eyes fastened on hers. "The holy copulation ceremony is the high point of the Fertility Rite."

Yeah. She'd consider copulation with him a high point in several areas, like her life.

"As I have mentioned," he continued, "I have the honor of being the designated lover consort for you, our Goddess?"

Designated lover consort? That was about as explicit an explanation as anyone could need.

"You and me, huh, Adriac?" She aimed an elbow at his luscious abs.

He neatly backed away to avoid the jab and bowed yet again. "I have won the competition to be your mate—the dream of my life. You are beautiful, oh my Goddess. But the images of our previous Goddesses showed them to be most substantial, far larger than you. No offense intended, but you are by far the tiniest ever."

K.C. laughed heartily. The last time she'd bothered to weigh herself, she'd tipped the scales at a cool 228, which all the charts she'd ever seen deemed a bit high for her 5'4" frame. Hell, more than a bit high even though she was large-boned.

But, she didn't have much more time to spend with the fun and games. For one thing, she felt her muse beckoning. Maybe something in her current wild adventure had begun to crack at her writer's block? She could just see Adriac as the model of the perfect hero for the Princess Appollonia, one who could definitely get her moving out of her rut. Arranging her face into her most serious don't mess with me pose, K.C. said, "Ha ha. Joke over. Tell me how to get home, or better yet, what you've done with my home." She folded her arms in front of her and, though her heart was thumping wildly at the thought of sex with him, glared.

Adriac grew quite pale, his eyes darkened. "My Goddess, what have I done to offend you?"

She chuckled, wanting to show him he could cut the act and get real. "Adriac, you're great. Honest. I promise I'll put in a good word about you with Magda. But I really can't spend much more time here ...."

He gripped his head with his hands. "Please. Say the word, and I will undo any unfortunate action and unsay any careless word. Is it because I say you're smaller than the other Goddesses? Please know that I am still ecstatic at the thought of being your lover."

He fell to his knees and looked so sincere, that if K.C. hadn't had years of learning how the world really operated, she'd have been taken in. It bothered her that she couldn't figure out what was going on, but she wasn't going to waste time trying to unravel his game. "Impressive," she said, amazed that the others were still keeping up their circle dance and chants. If anything, they seemed to have grown even more frenzied. "You'd have me almost believing you. Everything except the part about your having sex with me, especially when you say that I look like I need to gain weight."

His eyes grew wide and he looked as if he'd swallowed a large oyster, shell and all. "Forgive me, my lady, for being so forward. Of course, if you do not accept my humble services, our leader will appoint a more suitable consort for you. Or you may choose your own. I was given this honor in your absence because I have won the most competitions for your favors in the last Feats of Strength, Endurance, and Sexual Prowess. But my Goddess can choose another, bestow this greatest of honors on the one deemed most worthy."

A glint of sadness, and then his expression grew somber. "Jondiac Blancanishar, who finished second, stands prepared to take my place in service to you."

K.C. had trouble keeping a straight face as this male centerfold pretended she could have her choice of studs. Before she could respond, he added, "We are happy beyond measure that you have arrived at last on the eve of the Fertility Rite for this seven-year cycle. As to your loss of body mass, even though your mating time is soon, perhaps you will be able to eat proper foods to help you start to restore your abundance ..."

This was the final straw. K.C. erupted in laughter. Magda had gone too far, coaching Adriac or, whatever his name was, to say what he'd just said.

"Okay, the joke's over. I'll tell Magda you've done your bit."

"Magda? Who or what is Magda?" he asked. "You have said this name before, so Magda must be of great significance."

K.C. experienced a brief flare of annoyance. Delicious as Adriac was, enough was enough. "Damn straight she is, as if you didn't know." As he still looked clueless, K.C. decided to throw him a bone. Maybe he'd been hired by someone else and didn't know Magda had orchestrated the whole deal.

"Magda's the one who set this whole thing up. Hungarian woman with a weird sense of humor, but a great all around girl. But that's not important now. Adriac, get me home so I can write. You can tell Magda, or I will, my writer's block is now officially history."

"I do not know any such woman." He stroked his perfect chin with long fingers. "As for when you can return to your home, to my understanding it will be only after you have completed the Fertility Rite ... with your chosen consort."

Though she could have visually feasted on the eye candy in front of her indefinitely, she was serious about being done playing.

"Look Adriac, if I were a Goddess looking for a consort, you'd be at the top of my A-list."

But I'm not a Goddess, and I'm tired of this game. Is there someone else I can talk to, some woman in charge here?"

A look of distaste briefly contorted his features. "Of course. I will bring Deel'hui Melindar, Chief Priestess of your temple. She is the mistress of all rituals, reputedly the knower of all sacred knowledge."

"Right." K.C. hoped this Deel'hui Melindar would be able to give her some real information before she lost what was left of her patience.

\* \* \* \*

Adriac strode to the temple of the Goddess to summon Deel'hui. Nothing less than the Goddess' need could have induced him to deal with Deel'hui again so soon after his previous contact.

Since the moment Adriac had laid eyes on the Goddess, he'd been ecstatic. Though he hated to admit it, over the past moon cycle, he'd had moments of what felt close to regret that he'd have to sacrifice his life at the conclusion of the Fertility Rite. But finally meeting the woman—the Goddess—he'd make love to as his last act in life brought some degree of comfort.

Like all young boys and men in Niarofilca, he'd grown up hoping some day to be worthy of being the designated consort of a Goddess, the highest form of hero for his people. He'd be recorded and lauded forever in the history books, and his family would be blessed with elevated status in his name. Once he'd been chosen as a candidate for this honor, he'd had to best a cohort of almost one hundred young men for the top spot.

He again found her in her office. She looked up for a moment before resuming her work. "What is it, Lord Pom'diflor? This is a most inopportune interruption." Her eyes flashed angrily.

He bit back his own angry response. After all, shouldn't Deel'hui, the Chief Priestess, be among those greeting the Goddess? Shouldn't she, instead of Adriac, have been the one to express concerns about the Goddess's lack of body mass? "The Goddess has at last arrived and is asking many questions I believe only you can answer."

A small ripple of a frown rippled across Deel'hui's alabaster forehead. "What do you mean the Goddess has arrived?"

The question and a look of near panic in Deel'hui's eyes threw Adriac off balance. "Just what I said, she's at last arrived. The people are mad with joy. But she seems a bit bemused after her voyage."

Deel'hui muttered something under her breath. Adriac thought he heard her say, "It can't be." But such a response would have been incongruous.

Deel'hui appeared to pull herself together. "Bemused you say? What kind of questions is she asking?"

Adriac breathed a sigh of relief. Deel'hui appeared back to herself which, at the moment, was needed. "Very fundamental ones—of a kind I can't begin to answer with any authority."

"Why not? Why must you intrude on me in the midst of my vital work at this important time?" As she'd never stopped typing, Adriac didn't feel he was especially intruding.

"Chief Priestess Deel'hui, it's important. Come with me to answer her questions, or I fear some complications for the Fertility Rite."

"This incarnation of the Goddess is the least satisfactory one ever. Look how late she arrived. And now she has questions. Goddesses are not supposed to ask questions. Their role is to shroud themselves in their eternal mystery. Her worshippers are supposed to be the ones with questions—and most should remain unanswered. I hope her inadequacy doesn't corrupt our rituals." Deel'hui typed some more.



Adriac bristled at this. "I find her more than adequate—quite splendid, actually."

Deel'hui shrugged. "That's right. As her chosen, you have to defend her at every opportunity. As her Chief Priestess, I must supervise her preparations for the Fertility Rite and worship her. But that doesn't mean I have to like her. Or even approve of her."

"But you do have to obey her summons."

Muttering under her breath, Deel'hui typed a last word, shut down her computer, and finally arose to follow Adriac to the Goddess.

\* \* \* \*

K.C. had to wait longer than she'd expected for Adriac's return. Almost long enough to feel nervous that maybe she'd been abandoned. Or to wonder if one hallucination had ended and another would soon replace it. One thing she knew, nothing looked familiar. She appeared to be in a huge arena made of white marble. A purple sky had replaced the normal blue, or occasionally gray, one she'd come to take for granted. Some sort of vegetation appeared to cover the ground, but it sure wasn't anything like grass—unless grass came in pink and orange.

Finally Adriac returned, and K.C.'s heartbeat ramped up at the sight of him. Beside Adriac stood a tall, slim woman swathed in purple gauze, with long black hair in tight perfect coils and a crown of gold. Must be Deel'hui Melindar. Clearly the Chief Priestess did not dress like her scantily clad handmaidens. This woman, whose loveliness paralleled Adriac's gorgeousness, kept frowning like someone was dosing her with cod liver oil. The moment she caught sight of K.C., Deel'hui seemed nearly to collapse in a deep curtsy that left her looking like she'd melted into the middle of yards of purple.

K.C. was glad to see a gleam that indicated Deel'hui also wore headphones for communication. The two of them should be able to get to the bottom of the colossal practical joke gone awry that she'd landed in. Of course, Deel'hui, being the Chief Priestess of the Goddess' temple, would be able to distinguish the true Goddess from a fraud in a matter of moments, or, in this situation, a case of mistaken identity, though Deel'hui *had* gone into curtsy mode the moment she laid eyes on her. K.C. waited impatiently for Deel'hui to rise. The other woman seemed interminably frozen in her humble pose, her heavily lashed eyes looking downward.

"Why doesn't she stand up?" K.C. finally hissed to Adriac.

"She is waiting for your permission to rise, dear Goddess," Adriac answered in hushed tones.

K.C.'s patience was definitely wearing thin. "For Pete's sake, get up," she snapped.

The other woman rose gracefully.

"Deel'hui, I need to return to my home. Now. Today. Delightful as this is, please tell me how to end this delusion and get home."

A rapid display of emotions crossed Deel'hui's face. K.C. recognized contempt, hatred, disgust, and a smattering of confusion. In fact, Deel'hui appeared almost as confused as K.C. felt. "Dear Goddess, where is your home? This is a great mystery to us, much as it is a mystery that you have arrived this very day, just in time to begin the ritual preparations for our sacred Fertility Rite."

That stopped K.C. in her tracks. How was she going to explain where her home was—especially when she didn't know where she was? But a greater problem filled the air around her. Even after getting a good look at K.C. and exchanging words with her, Deel'hui, who looked intelligent and alert, still confused her with the Goddess the populace apparently had been expecting.

Maybe K.C. would have to explain more—convincingly prove once and for all that she wasn't a Goddess?

## Chapter Three

After a great deal of conferring between Adriac and Deel'hui, to the backdrop of the dancers and the chanters—and at this point K.C. was more than ready for them to shut up and sit down—the two of them summoned her.

Adriac looked her deep in the eyes and parts of her melted. The incessant background noise faded in importance. With this man on her side, for no rational reason she could articulate, she felt optimistic. Maybe that was a component of being horny and delusional.

“Your questions are unprecedented,” he said softly, “so you’ll please forgive our hesitation in responding.” Hearing his voice brought a surge of warmth to the pit of her belly. “We have decided to summon Nyrtel, the wise woman. Surely she will be able to answer your questions.”

Tight-lipped, Deel'hui barked what sounded like orders into a chip of shiny purple metal she removed from her garment. She and Adriac exchanged rapid bursts of conversation while K.C., who couldn't follow the conversation even with her ear phones, stood around and felt superfluous. A short time later, a small white-haired woman hidden in a voluminous white robe with purple trim rode over to them in what looked like a jazzed-up golf cart that floated a foot above the ground. She curtsied to both Deel'hui and K.C. before inquiring as to the reason for the command performance.

“First of all, where am I? What year is it?” K.C., having accepted the fact that her current location wasn't any more recognizable than the era, asked. Yes, there were straws for her to cling to, people who looked like people and objects that had some correspondence to what she was familiar with. But the strangeness far outweighed any sense of familiarity.

“This is the Narim District in the land of Niarofilca,” Nyrtel intoned in a surprisingly deep voice, repeating the names Adriac had told her earlier. “We are in the year of the Powers thirty-one fifty-seven. With all humble respect, why do you ask for this information, Goddess? Surely you know all.”

Surely not. The Powers? Who or what did that name refer to? K.C., whose mind always tended to look for anagrams everywhere, quickly realized she was in some variation of her familiar California. Narim? That could certainly be Marin. But the year thirty-one fifty-seven? There was no way to anagram that. Assuming that the culture she'd landed in was using the same calendar she was used to, and that was a huge assumption, she'd landed far into the future from where she'd woken up that morning. And then her mind began to work again. Thirty-one fifty-seven—the year Princess Appollonia was supposed to inhabit. Magda, the *Salvia otvingadonia*, and writer's block had struck again. Only being on this uncharted voyage was way more than K.C. had ever anticipated doing for her art.

“Nyrtel,” K.C. said, trying to hold on to some semblance of a cool and rational façade, “I am from a different time.” She wasn't even sure if she was addressing the woman properly, showing an appropriate degree of respect.

The older woman seemed to take this news in her stride. “Of course you are. Every Goddess comes to us from a different time.”

Great. She'd landed in a society where Rubenesque time-traveling Goddesses were

standard fare. "But there must be some mistake here. I am definitely not a Goddess. I am an ordinary woman, and I must return to my own time and place, now." For once the head phone apparatus didn't appear to provide a simultaneous translation of her words. Judging by the blank expressions greeting her, she might as well have saved her breath. K.C. resisted the impulse to childishly stamp her foot. She suspected throwing a tantrum would do little to get her out of this delusion. What would work?

Though she'd like to get a whole lot closer to Adriac before she left, K.C. decided she couldn't prolong her sojourn in this strange place for too much longer. After all, she had obligations at home, people whose lives she was involved in, like her sister, Cassandra. Not to mention her manuscript and looming deadline. She shivered. She'd heard tales of people stuck in their hallucinations. Usually they ended up locked away in nasty institutions for very long periods.

Nyrtel bowed her head. "You are far more modest than most of our previous Goddesses." She shrugged. "But you are clearly a Goddess, all the same." She appeared to ponder for a moment. "Perhaps the voyage through space has deranged your memory as well as costing you some body mass?"

"But my memory and all my thinking processes are perfect. And, trust me on this one, I haven't lost any body mass since I was in junior high." K.C., who was finding it more and more difficult to hold on to her cool, heard her voice rise unattractively on the last word. Her getting so flustered and bothered should convince all present that she was no flaming Goddess.

The old woman made a rumbling sound that resembled rusty laughter. "You remind me of a Goddess who arrived here, oh, when was it? Perhaps ten cycles ago. Seventy years. When I was just a maiden myself." She shook her head nostalgically. "Like you, she kept modestly refusing her title. But, in the end, she played out her part, and we entered into one of our most prolific cycles."

Shit. Some other poor slob had been trapped in this scene years before? Evidently, she'd ended up holding up her end of the bargain. As precedents for the liberation of a reluctant Goddess, this episode went against K.C.'s faltering case. Damn. This was *her* delusion. Why was she making it so difficult to leave it behind?

"Whatever. Let's cut to the bottom line here. When can I go home?" Surely they didn't intend to keep her here forever, a prisoner. Or did they? A slight sense of panic began to override her other emotions, which were, admittedly, in turmoil. She had to keep reminding herself she was in charge of everything that happened in this hallucination—except, evidently, when it would come to an end.

"Only after completion of the holy copulation in the Fertility Rite will it be possible for you to depart." Nyrtel pronounced the words slowly and carefully. The completion of the holy copulation? What K.C. understood was that only after she experienced some form of sex with the incredible hunk would she be able to head back to reality. As delusions went, this one had definite appeal.

"Wait a minute. I can't get my mind fully around what you're saying here." K.C. struggled to keep her voice steady. At least they intended to let her go, or so this woman said. But, how could she be sure if she could really *trust* Nyrtel's word. After all, just because she looked like a prototype crone/wise woman, everyone's great grandmother, didn't mean she wasn't lying through her dentures. K.C. figured she had nothing to lose by pushing for more. "Why is there no way for me to leave earlier? Did you ever think that by my being here, I'm blocking the real Goddess from taking her rightful place? Like a pretender to the throne?"

"You are no pretender, my dear. The signs are clear. You are the one we have been awaiting. We never gave up hope. And here you are."

K.C. bit her lip. This was *her* fantasy, and though she was, after all, merely arguing with a figment of her own imagination, she appeared to be losing. For the first time ever, she wondered if she had a split personality—and if the other inhabitants of her splintered mind were about to overpower her. "You're just not listening, Nyrtel. Look, I've got to go. Perhaps there's someone else I can talk to, an official of some sort?" K.C. sensed Deel'hui bristling behind her, and she shivered, goosebumps of nervousness popping up on her arms. Deel'hui looked more than capable of summoning a fleet of police or soldiers or whoever or whatever was in charge of law enforcement in this world.

Nyrtel drew her thin white brows together. Her eyes grew ominously dark, and her voice became low and quavery. "If you attempt to return to your time and place before the completion of the Fertility Rite, the consequences will be dire—for you and for us." Her pleasant manner seemed to evaporate as she pointed a surprisingly steady, accusatory finger at K.C.

"Consequences?" She shook her head. "Please, don't tell me any more, unless what you say can help me."

Nyrtel leaned closer to her. "Ah, but now that you have started asking such questions, you must listen. You must know. You see, if anything impedes our ritual from taking place as it is ordained, our world will burst into flame and disintegrate into a large ball of dried powder."

"Sounds pretty drastic for a delayed ritual." The wheels in K.C.'s mind whirled. "How soon will this catastrophe happen?" Maybe several centuries later?

"Immediately. At the end of the allotted time. And you, Goddess, you will disappear along with all the poor mortals at your mercy." Nyrtel's mouth tightened into a grim line.

K.C., unconvinced, laughed. The stricken looks of her three companions indicated the inappropriateness of this response. According to Nyrtel, K.C. had her choice of destroying a world and herself or sticking around and making love with Adriac. Put that way, it didn't sound like a tough decision. So she'd hang out in her delusion a bit longer, imagine herself and Adriac doing the horizontal happy dance and, coincidentally, save a world. "But I will be able to return to my place and time, safe and sane, after the Fertility Rite?"

The older woman smiled and bowed. "Exactly as you wish."

"And you say this Fertility Rite is in three days?" K.C. wasn't sure what that time length signified in delusional terms, but it didn't sound onerously long.

"Yes." Adriac's eyes gleamed in a way that told K.C. he also was looking forward to their time together. "The time is fleeting. My Goddess, do you agree to have me as your consort?"

"Oh, yeah." K.C. had just been through a long, dry spell as far as any social life—let alone love life—went. Adriac would more than fill the bill to get her going—and coming—again. With a pang she realized she wanted much more of Adriac in her life than would be possible in the real world. Too bad dreams like him didn't come true in real life for women like her.

"My Goddess, now that you have accepted your chosen consort, you must willingly participate in the designated preliminary steps. Do you agree to come with me to prepare for the sacred mysteries?" Deel'hui's expression of contempt contrasted with the invitation in her words.

Deel'hui Melindar reminded K.C. of every bitchy homecoming queen and cheerleader type who'd grown up to be a trophy wife. But it looked like cooperating with Deel'hui was part

of a package deal she had to accept. K.C. agreed.

Adriac grinned at her. Then, after bowing his head, he stepped away and held up his hand for the crowd of dancers and chanters to stop. Once blessed silence reigned, he announced K.C.'s plan to the crowd, including the fact that he was accepted as this Goddess' consort lover. The people raised their arms and voices in an unmistakable cheer. K.C. hadn't been this popular since she'd brought a triple chocolate brownie birthday cake to share in the fourth grade.

A girl could get used to this sort of acclaim. But before K.C. could bask too much in her glory, Deel'hui approached her again and curtsied. "Goddess, the time is fleeting. You must come with me now so we can prepare you for the Fertility Rite."

K.C. was in no rush to go anywhere with Deel'hui. "Shouldn't I get to know Adriac better first?"

Adriac looked at her with such longing in his eyes she could have sworn he wanted the same thing.

Deel'hui's mouth twisted with hardness and arrogance. "For the Fertility Rite to succeed, we must respect and follow all our customs. This means that now, you and Adriac are to have no further contact until you come together before the entire population of Narim for the holy copulation."

K.C. raised her eyebrow. "Having the two people know each other before they *copulate* strikes me as the best guarantee of success."

"Yes, for ordinary people." Deel'hui's mouth twisted with contempt. "But you are a *Goddess*," she spat out.

K.C. had never before so wished to be ordinary.

Before K.C. could say another word, Deel'hui clapped her hands and four women carrying a flower bedecked sedan chair glided over. After Deel'hui clapped her hands again, the women put down the sedan chair, curtsied to K.C., and surrounded her. Next, to K.C.'s shock, they picked her up and plunked her inside, where she sat surrounded by flower petals in every shade of several rainbows she'd never seen before.

"Wait," she called out, to no effect. Of course, K.C. realized, these women didn't understand English. As Goddess she should be able to command that Adriac accompany her, but, from what the women were doing, the pleasure of his company didn't appear to be an option. In a few moments, the four women easily picked up the sedan chair with K.C. and prepared to carry her off.

Nyrtel signaled for them to wait a moment. Great. K.C. might have been the Goddess, but even the old woman had more authority. K.C. took advantage of the delay to drink Adriac in with her eyes.

"There is one more thing you must know before the ritual takes place." Nyrtel's eyes seemed to grow even darker, glowing like embers from the deep wrinkles of her face.

Deel'hui shook her head. "I don't think it's necessary to trouble the Goddess with any more information now. Clearly, she has enough to do to prepare properly for the Fertility Rite."

"I disagree." Nyrtel looked determined to say her piece.

Deel'hui shrugged. "Very well. But be quick about it, old woman. I will have my hands full getting this one ready in the short time left to me." *Good one*, K.C. thought. Deel'hui managed to offend two people with one utterance.

"It is written and foreordained that the chosen consort of the Goddess will be sacrificed to the great god Xiatace at the conclusion of the sacred mating."

"What?" K.C. thought she understood Nyrtel's words, but she couldn't believe the

meaning she constructed from them. If what she'd gleaned could possibly be true, these people were monsters .... Visions of ancient barbarities raced through her mind. "What do you mean *sacrificed*?" Her voice squeaked. For once, she wished her writer's imagination weren't so vivid.

Nyrtel looked at her with what appeared to be pity and regret before her eyes took on a veil of blankness. "The death will be quick and merciful, as it is ordained. And Adriac Mendushar, Lord Pom'diflor, will be acclaimed with great honors forever."

The truth hit K.C. in a rush of horror. She pushed open the door, jumped out of the sedan chair, and put up her fists when the women escorts attempted to grab hold of her. "A quick, merciful death? Excuse me. You can forget that bullshit. Nobody's going to murder Adriac after he and I ...." She swallowed hard. "You people are crazy, bonkers, insane!" She turned to Adriac, who looked aghast. "You can't have agreed to this."

"I have fully embraced our tradition," he said solemnly.

*Oh, yeah? Well we'll see about that. Obviously the poor deluded guy had been brainwashed .... Time to act now and think later.* She wanted to clutch Adriac to her bosom and keep him safe. "Listen to me, consort. I'm opting out. And I advise you to come with me. As in, let's split this joint now." This delusion had taken a sharp turn into nightmare territory, and she was calling a halt.

Adriac stayed frozen.

In seconds, Deel'hui's four women, looking fierce and focused, surrounded K.C. and formed a barricade between her and Adriac. For a moment, K.C., fueled by adrenaline, figured she and he could take these women on and make an escape. Deel'hui looked disgusted.

Adriac shook his head, and she thought he looked conflicted and confused. What in the heck was there to be confused about? Why wasn't he as horrified as she was? More? "Dear Goddess. You know I have chosen this fate, an honor every boy dreams of growing up and winning. In fact, I have trained and worked hard to earn this distinction for myself and my family. Years of study, competitions ...." Adriac's eyes gleamed with a fervent light as, sounding like a wind-up robot, he spouted all this crap.

Talk about landing in the land of the sickos, even if they were all products of her mind. Even as a joke, the whole set-up was nausea inducing. "I'm so against everything you've just said." She'd feel this way even if the guy weren't as gorgeous and terrific as Adriac. The idea of sacrificing any person went totally against the grain. "Surely there has to be an alternative?" Her voice sounded desperate and weak, hardly that of a Goddess.

"There is none." Deel'hui's voice dripped icicles but was nowhere near as cold as the look in her eyes.

Nyrtel snorted. "True love. True love can save the consort. Otherwise, he must perish."

Great. K.C. would put in an order for true love. Even as a romance writer, she realized what a tall order that was. Though looking at Adriac, K.C. could easily believe she might some day love him .... But in three days, when they were to be apart for the whole time? When they would then have to come together and have sex in front of thousands?

Who would judge whether whatever feeling existed between her and Adriac at that moment could qualify as life-saving true love?

Deel'hui pursed her lips and a moue of disgust distorted her face. "Don't listen to that old hag," she hissed. "With her fairy tales about 'true love'. The kind of nonsense no one past the age of ten could possibly believe. You must believe me. With you, Adriac is doomed. Without you, he is also doomed—along with the rest of us."

*Nice woman.* "I believe in true love," K.C. claimed, feeling a bit like when she had

clapped her hands to save Tinkerbell. She couldn't write her books if she didn't believe wholeheartedly in true love. Meeting Adriac had brought the potential of true love to life. If only they could have the gift of time ....

Deel'hui looked her over with withering disdain. "You would."

And this woman was supposed to be Chief Priestess of her cult? K.C. returned her own withering gaze. "True love is considered divine, which is perhaps why you, as a *mere mortal*, are skeptical about its existence."

Deel'hui looked as if she wanted to lob a volley right back, preferably at K.C.'s head, but managed to restrain herself. K.C. didn't doubt she'd manage to twist the knife later, in some less public forum. "True love, as you well know, is not among the divine precepts in our holy books." The priestess's voice chilled the air like a blast from the Arctic.

"Oh, I can believe that." Especially if Deel'hui had a hand in writing those holy books. The more time she spent in Deel'hui's company, the more K.C. believed the other woman considered herself not just the Chief Priestess, but the true Goddess here. Knowing she was Goddess under false pretenses, K.C. considered herself on thin ice arguing the point. For now, at least, everyone with the exception of herself, appeared to accept her as the Goddess, and that's how she would have to play it. "But inauthentic priests and priestesses have been known to alter holy books to suit their own needs, or to make errors in the interpretation of the texts."

"Our temple books are as handed down by the ancestors, as have been the sacred interpretations." Deel'hui sounded smug.

"There is still room for human error. However, I will engage in no further debate on this matter with you, *Chief Priestess*." Deel'hui opened her mouth to react to K.C.'s sarcasm, then closed it when K.C. continued. "But I want all of you to hear this divine proclamation. I no longer agree to this, this *monstrosity*. This *travesty* of nature and love that demands the sacrifice of Adriac." K.C. folded her arms in front of her and dug her heels in. After all, they couldn't force her ....

Adriac scowled. Before he could speak, Deel'hui opened her mouth. "Too late. Your previous agreement cannot be rescinded—especially after it was announced to the assembly of the people."

"I don't care ...." K.C. started arguing when she felt her feet leave the ground. Damn, Deel'hui's priestesses were strong. This time, they weren't handling her with the care they'd shown earlier. They began to force her inside the sedan chair, but she resisted—effectively, at least for the first moments. After a decidedly mundane shove, she found herself imprisoned in the chair.

From her mid-air perch, K.C. gazed at Adriac, begging him to intervene. The look in his eyes, the way he stood reaching out to her, melted her heart. If only she could have her arms around this man. Just from looking at him, her panties grew moist with desire. It wouldn't be hard to love him. She just didn't know if she could fall in love fast enough to meet the required timetable.

"Do not fret," he assured her. "I have agreed wholeheartedly to this. Ah Goddess, I have been groomed for just this time since I was a young boy—to give up my life for the good of my people and the honor of my family. 'Tis a privilege granted to few, desired by many."

K.C. wished she could feel his hands touching her. Though the women had succeeded in pushing her into the sedan chair's interior, they hadn't closed off the window opening. "I'll never agree to any harm coming to you." K.C. wanted only to keep him safe, but she was already being transported to an unidentified location.



“Until three days from now, my Goddess.” Adriac’s voice already sounded far in the distance.

“We will find a way to be together and for you to live,” she called back to him. She had to make this happen. Too bad she’d already revealed so much about her true feelings to Deel’hui. K.C. instinctively understood that the less Deel’hui knew about her, the better off she—and Adriac—would be. K.C. might not know what Deel’hui was really up to, but she instinctively understood the woman’s glamorous exterior hid a deep, dark, nasty interior.

The full impact of her new understanding hit K.C. with the force of an eight-point on the Richter Scale earthquake. What was happening to her was real. Adriac, his impending doom, and her role as Goddess were not figments of her imagination or a personal hallucination. Somehow, she’d gotten caught up in an aberration of the space-time continuum.

Her feelings of tenderness and concern for Adriac were realer than anything she’d ever before experienced. Holy shit. She had to get her mind functioning with clarity to find a way out for both of them.

One of Deel’hui’s women poked her head in the window to check on K.C.

“Where are you taking me?” K.C. demanded.

“To the Royal Palace of Dark Chocolate.” The woman wasted no time in retreating.

A palace of dark chocolate? Of all the times for one of her lifelong fantasies to come true. If timing was everything, hers had definitely taken a major detour in the wrong direction.

\* \* \* \*

Adriac watched the sedan chair bearing the Goddess until it disappeared from view. The sun was starting to go down on the day when the Goddess had arrived among them, bringing with her assurance of their people’s continued survival. The future resided in her hands, in her luscious loins and in their sacred union.

Now that the Goddess was among them, the time had come for Adriac to retire to the Consort Preparation Hut. There, he was supposed to live apart from mundane society, meditate, and focus his energy on preparation for his momentous participation in his people’s most significant ceremony. His fists clenched. Watching the sedan chair bear the Goddess away for three days, he came to realize there was no way on the Powers’ Purple Planet he could confine himself away from her for such a long time.

Yes, he’d agreed to it all. But that was before he saw her, his beautiful Goddess and saw the future through her eyes. Suddenly, the fate he’d embraced seemed an empty glory. He needed to have more to give meaning to his last days on this planet than the promise of one brief holy copulation three days hence. Now, driven by a force and energy he little understood, he knew he would have to alter tradition to be with her far earlier than their official rendezvous. Only this would give meaning to the end of his life.

Ultimately, of course, Adriac was an honorable man. With his entire heart and soul, he intended to go through with all the rituals as was ordained. He’d merely adjust the customs in this one small way. There were, after all, precedents for individual adjustments to the established order.

He’d memorized the complex history of the holy copulation and Fertility Rite as part of his exhaustive preparation. To get to his exalted position as consort, he’d won all the competitions, both physical and intellectual, and he’d had to undergo several weeks of intense instruction. So he felt completely confident that he understood the ways of tradition sufficiently to know what could be changed.

His program now mandated meditative contemplation and exercises to increase

endurance. The key was for him to pleasure the Goddess so she reached her peak orgasm before he released his essence into her. These commitments he'd undertaken with a glad heart. He'd said his farewells to his family and friends, completed all that remained incomplete, and prepared himself fully to embrace his fate. What difference could it possibly make if he spent some portion of his last days with the Goddess who brought such joy to his body and his soul? A niggling of unease took residence in his heart, but he managed to stifle it.

Envisioning ways to be with the Goddess before the official time, Adriac walked through the forest, down a stone path, to his place of seclusion. The trees were thick with leaves, flowers, and fruit, potent symbols of the abundance his union with the Goddess would help ensure for the future. The air felt heavy with promise, fragrant with hope. Adriac opened the door of the hut and set about gathering the food for his humble meal—flesh and grain, just enough to satisfy his hunger—mustn't overdo—a modest serving of wine. He set it all before him on the simple table and began to partake.

He remembered the almost business-like air of the divine attendant who'd instructed him in the fine art of leading the Goddess to her climax. Of course, Adriac had had his fair share of leading other women, none of the previous ones divine, to their happy culmination. He was no stranger to the joy of erotic climax, both for himself and his partner. He'd actually been a bit disappointed to find the divine attendant had very little new to teach him, a point he carefully avoided revealing to her.

One aspect of the lessons Adriac hadn't expected was the necessity to *perform* no matter what his personal reaction to the Goddess would be. There were whispers of previous times when the consort found the Goddess so little to his taste that he had to be provided with herbs to raise his male organ from the dead .... Such rituals always resulted in less than ideal outcomes.

Adriac had never previously encountered difficulties in this area. And now that he'd met the Goddess, he knew there was nothing to fear. His cock stood ready, willing, and able to please the Goddess even now, when they were so profoundly separated. But what if he'd been forced to have sex with one such as Deel'hui Melindar? He shivered, and his erection instantly disappeared.

In their previous encounters, Deel'hui had made no secret of her hunger for Adriac, and, raised by his family to be gentle in his manner, Adriac had tried his best to deflect her unwanted attentions without hurting her feelings. Unfortunately, Deel'hui had not taken kindly to his ultimate refusal, and had been his sworn enemy for years. How odd that, despite her evident enmity, her desire for him still shone through glaringly. Well, he wouldn't have to worry about her for too much longer.

All his life he, like all the young males of Niarofilca, had believed he could have no higher or more wonderful fate than being chosen as the Goddess consort for the essential Fertility Rite. When he had first laid eyes on the Goddess, his heart had swelled even more than his penis. What glory to know love in this woman's arms, to plant his seed in her, as his next to last mortal act. Just the thought of her was enough to banish Deel'hui from his mind's eye and to render his manhood aching hard and ready.

Adriac carefully chewed a piece of the crusty bread that was now part of his nightly fare. His instructions for his time of preparation included a strong proscription against masturbation or any other form of relief for sexual tension. All sexual energy was to be conserved until the fateful meeting.

Adriac had managed, barely, to comply with the proscription before meeting the Goddess. After all, he'd reminded himself when he felt a wave of longing and his cock had risen

in protest against neglect, he wouldn't have to wait too long for the ultimate climax. But now that he'd met the Goddess, suddenly three days of building sexual tension felt like a year. Or maybe a century. Like he'd explode from denied desire long before the appointed time of their mating.

He took a swallow of wine. He wasn't supposed to overindulge in spirits during this time either, but perhaps drinking a bit more wine than was his custom would blunt the edge of his desire until he could be with her? He'd heard such effects reported by other men, though he'd never experienced the like himself.

His cock twitched, and Adriac suddenly knew he'd have to drink a prodigious amount of wine, enough to render him unconscious, to blunt the effect that meeting the Goddess had had on his nether regions. He lightly touched the headphones he was still wearing, his link to oral communication with her when they were together. Now when they were separated by so great a distance, the headphones had no function except as a souvenir. Was she thinking of him at this moment, just as he thought of her? It seemed they'd had a live, electric connection from the instant their eyes first met.

Adriac's balls tightened, and he gave in to the reality that his erection would not just go away without some particular attention. He would go to her tonight in his dreams. He wanted to bury his face in her ample bosom, to be surrounded with her scent and her essence. He would caress her every where, run his hands through her blonde hair.

Would the hair on her sacred woman's mound mirror that on her head? Adriac's shaft went rock hard at the thought of her divine triangle and his imminent contact with her feminine mystery. How would her large blue eyes register his presence, his touch? How could he bear to postpone learning the answers to these questions? His hard-on demanded immediate attention before he could focus elsewhere and figure out a plan. Bowing to the inevitable, Adriac put down his wine goblet and slid his chair out from under the table.

His engorged dick strained against the cloth covering his groin. With a quick flick of his wrist, he flung aside the garment, freeing himself. He was far more accustomed to having his hand pleasure a companion, to having a lovely female's hand stroking and playing with his organ. But now there was only one female whose hand he wanted on him, and her image rose before him, enticing him to new levels of arousal. If only she could actually be with him at this very time.

He touched himself tentatively once or twice. And then he fully grasped his shaft and began a rhythmic stroking. Up and down, just the way he'd done it years before. Though not the warm, wet pleasure of being inside a woman, the friction his hand provided produced sufficient sensations to meet his immediate need. How would her hand on him feel? He imagined her touch, the dance of her fingers on all the parts of his manhood.

Up and down, again and again. He stroked and rubbed his balls, alive with sensitivity, and pretended she was there with him. His cock grew harder, straining in search of the divine feminine warmth and wetness he so desired. Adriac groaned. Never before had he so much desired a woman or so intensely felt the pain of separation.

He raced his fingers along his length faster, harder, and his glans grew quite engorged. He shuddered as a drop of pre-cum appeared, presaging his final release. Now Adriac, with the image of the Goddess before him, really got into it, thrusting his hips up, rotating them, to vary the contact between his organ and his hand. He could feel the pulsing of his dick as intense pleasure rode up and down his spine, and he wished only that she were here with him to share this.

His climax sneaked up just when he visualized the Goddess fully surrendered to him, straddled across his lap in this chair, the two of them rocking together so they moved the chair across the floor as her breasts dug deep into his chest.

Another moment and he'd burst, exploding them both into another world. With a cry, he came, his cum spurting forth.

Alone in what should have been afterglow, Adriac feverishly began to lay his plans. Before this first night was out, he would be in her arms and know his Goddess intimately. By the time they met for their public ritual, they would be lovers familiar with each other's bodies. Surely this would presage only the best possible outcome for their ritual of the Fertility Rite?

## Chapter Four

K.C.'s feet did not touch terra firma again 'til she and her escorts entered the outer portals of the Royal Palace of Dark Chocolate. She'd often fantasized about being carried in a sedan chair, but now that she was actually in one, the reality fell far short of her fantasy. For one thing, comfort was in extremely short supply.

The sedan bumped along like a ride on a grumpy camel, and the actual seat, though poshly swathed with the most delicate silks in rainbow beautiful colors, nearly sent her into claustrophobic shock. But worst of all, her head was swimming with fear and confusion. She had no idea what was going to happen next, which effectively put the death knell to any possible enjoyment. She didn't trust Deel'hui as far as she could throw her. Never mind all the bullshit about K.C. being a Goddess, she was now the woman's prisoner. To K.C.'s way of thinking, Deel'hui Melindar appeared more than capable of perfidy, and she probably wouldn't hesitate to commit Deicide—whatever the female version of killing a deity was. Goddessicide?

As to Adriac. Knowing that the handsome man who'd been so amazingly attentive was sentenced to death because of her sucked beyond words. She suffered from enough of a complex already when any great-looking hunk paid attention. After all, she still remembered the malicious whispers from high school and college peers. *Why would he go out with her?* One particularly rude classmate had labeled K.C. and a movie star handsome date 'Beauty and the Beast'.

Here she was, a stranger in a strange land, hell, in a strange time, in an extremely weird situation with clear signals of catastrophe looming. She had to keep her senses at high alert to get them both out of the deep pit they'd landed in. And she hoped like hell Adriac was thinking along those same lines—only far more clearheadedly. After all, he was familiar with the bizarre land of Niarofilca and its strange customs.

Once inside the courtyard, the ride got even bumpier. Jolted unbearably, K.C. stuck her head out the window and looked around. Deel'hui and the women bearing her chair were wading through a pool of what smelled like rose and lavender water. Hmm. Not the usual moat she'd read about. Beyond, what looked like a solid gold edifice gleamed in the late afternoon sunshine. For a moment, K.C. was disappointed. But then she realized she'd been foolish to expect a whole building to be made of chocolate.

Once they emerged from the pool, the women carried the chair to the open entrance of the palace. Just outside, they plopped the chair on the ground and let K.C. out. Dizzy after the weird ride, K.C. took an undignified stumble as she exited.

Deel'hui, her lips permanently frozen in a grim line, dismissed the other women. K.C., determined to assume a cloak of divine dignity, assumed her full height. Deel'hui looked less than impressed. No surprise there. While she tried to gather her wits, K.C. asked about the castle.

"As we could not build the palace of chocolate—far too impractical, we chose the most appropriate material to house this valued resource." She sounded like a tour guide. "There you have it. Gold studded with diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and other stones."

If K.C. hadn't had the evidence before her eyes, she wouldn't have believed Deel'hui. But if the walls weren't pure gold and precious gems, they were great imitations. Mostly, though, she was impressed that this society so valued chocolate as to enshrine it in such a palace.

The two women quickly crossed sumptuous mosaic designs made of yet more precious stones. Lush plants and flowers scented the air, and birds sang sweetly. When they came to the actual doors to the palace, Deel'hui pressed a button—and they slid open.

K.C.'s breath caught when she glimpsed the interior.

"Chocolate is but one of the treats we have here," Deel'hui continued. "This palace is also known as the Castle of One Thousand Pleasures. It is where Goddesses come to prepare for the mysteries of the Fertility Rite. We have rare foods here, reserved solely for the delight of our Goddess. In our society, the Goddess, a symbol of sacred abundance, is set apart from ordinary women. We worship the Divine Feminine for her great breasts, her huge thighs and belly and hips. As soon as you arrived in our midst, we knew you were our Goddess because of your ample proportions." Deel'hui inclined her head.

Despite the complimentary nature of her words, K.C. sensed a subtext of insult—or maybe that was just her habitual sensitivity. She still didn't understand how she'd landed in this illusory setting, but she let down her guard for the moment to enjoy the enjoyable.

Unfortunately, this pleasurable exaltation was at odds with the horrible, bloodthirsty plans for Adriac. If she did nothing else, she would help him avert the fate he'd so misguidedly embraced.

"What am I going to be doing here—and for how long?" K.C. asked.

Deel'hui looked her up and down. "We want to be sure you're ready for your holy copulation in three days with the chosen consort. That does not give us much time. Usually our Goddess arrives early enough to give us at least five days. So we'll have to work extra hard to prepare you."

"What exactly does that mean—to prepare me?" Was she being prepped, like Adriac, for some sort of horrendous sacrifice? Only in her situation, it would never be voluntary.

"We need to increase your mass, bathe you, pamper you, clothe you," Deel'hui droned on as if she were reciting a really boring laundry list. "And see to your sensuous preparation."

"What about Adriac? What will he be doing all this time while I'm being bathed and pampered—and sensuously prepared?"

Deel'hui just looked at her. "My Goddess, must I put this in words?"

K.C. felt a shiver up her spine at the way Deel'hui's voice sounded. "Yes. I need it spelled out."

Deel'hui bowed. "Adriac is preparing to participate in the sacred ritual and holy copulation with you—and then, after that initial sacrifice, for his ultimate gift to the people, his final sacrifice. Actually, I should be more precise. He's prepared for his death already. Now, he is getting ready to bring you to your divine release before he submits his life to the great god Xiatace."

Hearing this blunt summation—and she hadn't missed Deel'hui's characterization of their lovemaking as a sacrifice for Adriac—put an end to K.C.'s sense of fun. "This is not acceptable. If Adriac is going to die as a result of making love to me, the answer is no. I won't do it." She folded her arms in front of her and clamped her lips shut.

Deel'hui shook her head. "It is too late, dear Goddess, to change things. You know that. Adriac's fate is sealed."

K.C. furrowed her brow, willing her brain to kick into gear. She also tried not to get rattled by how pleased Deel'hui looked about Adriac's doom. "What do you mean, Deel'hui? How can he have to die whether he makes love to me or not?"

"Once he has sex with you, after he spills his seed in your *sacred* womb, he will be put to death by our warriors."

"After the guy comes in me, he'll be pushing up daisies?" K.C. waved her hand dismissively though her heart was pounding painfully. "No. I want him to wear a condom for the rite. I demand this."

"A condom?" Deel'hui looked puzzled.

Great. What a time for the interpretation program to fail. "A condom or something to contain his .... So he won't spill his seed in me. End of situation."

"No, no," Deel'hui protested. "He *must* spill his seed to safeguard our society for another quarter. If he does not spill his seed in your sacred womb, we all will die."

This didn't make any sense. But then, nothing had since she'd stepped into Hungarian Rhapsody—was it days or hours ago? "I don't understand. Adriac is toast no matter what happens? There has to be some way out."

Deel'hui shook her head. "There isn't."

"But what if there's no sex? What if he can't get it up?" K.C. would deal with feelings of rejection at another time.

"That will not happen. Adriac is a guaranteed performer. Certainly this is true after his training. But," now Deel'hui looked sly, "Adriac was a sure thing even before."

K.C.'s eyes flew open. Shit. Sounded like Deel'hui had inside information. As in, maybe she and Adriac had been lovers in the past. Maybe the recent past. Waves of jealousy pounded K.C.'s heart, and, she suspected, turned her aura bright green. "But what would happen if for some extraordinary reason Adriac, uh, couldn't perform?" She could feel her face redden.

"If within the designated time Adriac fails to rise to the occasion," she looked pointedly at K.C., "if *you* have failed to stimulate a manly response from him, the soldiers will take him away. He will be executed for failure to serve the state. His family and descendants will live in disgrace. And the second-place candidate will take his place."

"You mean I'll have to make it with someone other than Adriac? Someone I haven't met?"

Deel'hui bowed her head. "Yes. But, be assured. It would be most unusual for such a thing to happen."

"Shit, Deel'hui. What kind of way is this to run a world?"

Deel'hui moved her shoulders in what looked like a shrug. "This is our way. As it always has been, as it always will be."

"That's not true. I lived in this world, uh, this place, before. And we never had any such barbaric customs."

Deel'hui bared her teeth. "You are a Goddess from above. Everyone knows the divines live by different rules than us mere mortals."

K.C. snorted. Like there was anything *mere* about Deel'hui. "Adriac has agreed to all the conditions?" She couldn't believe that vibrant man would go along with such a wanton waste of life.

"Yes. He's fulfilling his sacred duty." Deel'hui's face bore a blank expression, as if she spoke of trivial matters. "He sought his fate and embraces it fully. But Goddess, you know all this. You are merely testing me with your questions."

K.C. was tired of trying to hold on to her temper. "This is not a game or a test. I'm calling a halt to this insanity this minute. Let me out of here. Now."

"Must I remind you of the sacred texts? Remember, dear Goddess. If you abandon us, we all, including Adriac, will perish. Once the designated time for the ritual passes, our world will dry up and blow away like the fluff of the lion weed. Is it not far better that just one person die

instead of our whole world? Adriac understands his role.”

K.C. shivered as an image of Adriac’s death flashed before her. What of her own future after the ritual? Unlike Adriac, K.C. was not about to be a willing sacrifice.

As if she could read her mind, Deel’hui said, “Of course, dear Goddess, you will depart safely from this plane the moment you and Adriac have consummated your union in the Fertility Rite. As has always happened in the past.”

“Oh, yeah? Some of those soldiers are going to escort me out of the country? A safe conduct to the border of Nevada or whatever it’s called now?”

“Heavens. You seem our most ill-informed Goddess.”

As if. “Tell me what will happen to me after the ritual.”

“You will arise to your home in the sky, just as you descended to us today.” The way she said it, K.C. figured she was mentally adding, *any idiot knows that*.

Yeah, except Deel’hui was talking about the Goddess. K.C. wasn’t any damn goddess. Her gut told her Deel’hui knew this, too, which brought up the question of why Deel’hui pretended to believe K.C. was the real deal. If she tried to arise to anywhere in the sky, she’d quickly end up on her gluteus maximus. But, if she could pull off that rising to the home in the sky trick, she’d be out of this palace right now, in the blink of an eye.

Deel’hui looked at her from under lowered lashes. “Please know that even for one of your divine stature, there is no way out of the palace or our protective custody ‘til the hour of holy copulation with the appointed consort. So you must give up these wayward thoughts.” Shit. Deel’hui had just read her mind. In addition to their interpretation function, the ear phones must transmit other messages. K.C. could never get her mind to shut down and relax, but she’d have to try, or Deel’hui would read her like a road map.

In the meantime, for the next seventy-two hours or so, she’d evidently have to let herself be plied with luxury and chocolate. All the while, she’d keep alert for a means of escape. K.C. made a vow that both she and Adriac would survive the coming ordeal. When she left, she’d take him with her.

Deel’hui continued prattling on in tour guide mode. K.C. had a quarter of her mind on receiving facts, the rest on how she and Adriac would get out of their dilemma. So far, neither inspiration nor logic were making an appearance.

Despite the very real danger and the bizarre nature of the situation, K.C.’s senses drank in her surroundings. The castle could have been lifted whole from one of K.C.’s daydreams. She’d always considered herself a connoisseur of chocolate, margaritas, cheesecake, pizza, and other fine foods and drinks. But her tastes, smells, and sights of the delights Deel’hui called forth—to help her build up her body mass—left K.C. thinking life as she’d known it before had been amateur night in the boonies—not the usual description for the world-class San Francisco Bay Area restaurants.

A serving woman brought the two women an artistically arranged candy platter made of solid gold. Chocolate globes, some studded with nuts, some smooth, some topped with small jewel bright bits of what looked like fruit, some dark, some light, gleamed invitingly. K.C. swallowed hard. The aroma of rich chocolate momentarily overrode the other perfumes in the air.

“Go ahead, dear Goddess. Indulge.” Deel’hui’s voice made K.C. think of every snake that hissed an invitation to any Eve.

“There is so much here chocolate here. Have a piece with me.” She reached for one.

Deel’hui shook her head. “This is special food, for Goddesses only. I would be



committing the most fundamental of transgressions if I partook of your food—even by invitation.”

Strange society. Eating chocolate was a transgression, but sacrificing a perfectly lovely man was considered honorable.

This thought took K.C.’s appetite away. Nothing before had ever turned her off chocolate. With a shudder of new understanding, K.C. recognized what Adriac was coming to mean to her.

Several other thoughts assailed her. What if Deel’hui had somehow drugged or poisoned the chocolate? K.C. shrugged off the latter idea as too paranoid, but she wouldn’t put it past Deel’hui to drug the candy. What if Deel’hui had refused to eat the chocolate because she knew it was drugged? Who could ever imagine what kind of drugs they might have in this society?

“The chocolates contain no foreign elements, dear Goddess.”

Again, that damn mind reading. If only she could train her brain to stay in *neutral*.

“I would encourage you to eat. If you do not, I am afraid we will be forced to find less pleasant ways to feed you.”

That snapped K.C. out of her stupor. “What are you threatening me with?”

“Not a threat, dear Goddess. Just the prescribed ritual. If you are not capable or willing to eat the food we provide, we will need to insert a medical food distributor to keep you nourished.”

Visions of I.V.’s jammed into people’s veins flashed through K.C.’s mind. Though she imagined this advanced society must have evolved past that kind of treatment, any medical procedure involving sharp instruments terrified her—especially an unknown procedure at the hands of Deel’hui, who must have a sadistic streak a mile wide.

Reluctantly, K.C. agreed to ingest chocolate. The moment she bit into her first morsel, a light show exploded in her mind. She finally understood the meaning of oral orgasm. Her mouth went into spasms of delight, and she felt as if her whole body had been transported into outer space via a chocolate cloud. She wanted to lie down and pass the next several hours contemplating the perfection of the taste filling her, but Deel’hui had other agendas. “This is just the start,” she said ominously. “The least of our creations.”

K.C. would have sworn nothing else could ever taste quite as amazing as the chocolate. She was wrong. Her next course consisted of cheesecake crunchy and sweet from some kind of almond-pecan-hazelnut and thick veins of chocolate swirled through the rich filling, all under mounds of fresh whipped cream. A strawberry margarita had her head swimming. She stopped and pushed the drink away halfway through, realizing how quickly she was losing focus in a food and alcohol haze.

“Don’t forget, all these foods provide essential nutrients.” Deel’hui hovered over her like a crazed home ec. teacher.

K.C. briefly wondered what essential nutrients there were in a strawberry margarita. “Deel’hui, as delicious as all this is, I can’t eat or drink any more. Surely you don’t intend to feed me for seventy-two hours straight?”

Deel’hui eyed her a bit skeptically. “Dear Goddess, we were hoping you’d eat more. You still look a bit ... reduced.”

If only she could have heard these words in a different context .... “I promise, I’ll eat and drink more later. What else will we be doing?”

“Perhaps it is a good time now for you to have your first bath.” Deel’hui gestured to someone outside K.C.’s vision.

“First bath?”

“You will take three each day until you meet with Adriac in the arena. The first is the cleansing bath.”

K.C. was about to protest that she was quite clean, thank you very much, when two of Deel’hui’s maidens linked arms with her, escorted her to a turquoise and silver mosaic pool and began to strip off her clothes. “Watch the dress.” K.C. was not happy about being separated from her precious red silk. Not to mention how weird it was having two women undress her. She hadn’t been undressed by a woman since nursery school ... and that had been her mother.

And there she was, stark naked in a large room with a pool and three other women who were dressed. Deel’hui brought her what looked like a white silk full body shawl with purple and gold trim. “Here, my Goddess, you can wear this when you are not in the pool.” She slipped it over K.C.’s shoulders, and K.C. gratefully held it close. It wasn’t like she was modest or anything, but still ....

“Allow me to lead you into the pool,” Deel’hui said.

The water was clear, warm, and gurgling. K.C. could distinguish lavender, roses, a touch of citrus and vanilla, and some musky scent. The moment K.C. stepped into the water, she felt every cell of her body relax, and she could sense herself slip into an aura of calm and well-being. She wanted to surrender to a sensation of good health and contentment, but she forced herself to hold on to her fears. Not easy. She closed her eyes and felt a sense of ecstasy. Fine sponges and cakes of soap were at hand for her to cleanse herself, which she did. And then she lingered. Deel’hui sent the two women to take K.C. out of the pool too soon.

After K.C. had been dried off in a huge heated towel so fine it felt like butterfly wings, Deel’hui handed her a golden cup of hot chocolate. K.C. sipped, and her insides floated toward the most languid climax of her life. She’d never known it was possible to have a relaxed orgasm—but her whole body quivered in an aftermath that said it was.

“Now it is time for you to prepare for the first level of pleasure with your consort,” Deel’hui commanded.

K.C. shook her head. “I hate to break it to you, Deel’hui, but I’m hardly a vestal virgin.”

“I know that,” Deel’hui said in a voice that sounded suspiciously close to a snap.

“Nonetheless, it is crucial that you arrive at a complete climax the first time you and your consort are together. We have learned ways to ensure this.”

Guaranteed orgasm, eh? Certainly if the sex didn’t do it, the chocolate would. K.C.’s curiosity kicked into high gear as she wondered what would happen next. She didn’t have long to wonder. One of Deel’hui’s henchwomen approached, carrying a gleaming tray. When she caught her first glimpse of the objects on the tray, K.C.’s heart lurched. What looked like two pistols, one gold, one silver, shone brightly. This was it. Now that she was clean and fed, they were going to shoot her. Deicide was evidently one of this society’s customs. Her rational mind insisted that Deel’hui and company had to keep her alive ‘til after the Fertility Rite. But staying rational did not come easy. Determined not to cave despite her imminent death, still wondering if escape could be possible, K.C. gasped when Deel’hui grabbed one of the objects and aimed it point blank at her heart.

And then K.C. nearly passed out from relief, when she recognized the object in Deel’hui’s hand—a thirty-second century *vibrator*—evidently made of solid gold, with diamonds and rubies embedded at strategic spots along the barrel. K.C. burst out laughing. “Is that what I think it is?”

Deel’hui scowled. Nodding toward the vibrator, she said, “This is part of our sacred ritual. Under our careful instruction, you will use this pleasure stimulator to prepare yourself for

Adriac.”

K.C. smirked. “Deel’hui, first off, I don’t need anyone instructing me on how to use a vibrator. Trust me, I’m a pro.”

“Though you are a Goddess, it is more than clear you have a great deal to learn ....” Deel’hui said, with less and less respect in her voice. She flicked her wrist and turned a dial at the bottom of the vibrator.

In this world a vibrator could be adjusted to play different music—a big improvement over the usual hum or buzz. Deel’hui gave the golden vibrator to one of her women, who handed it to K.C. and bowed. Then she signaled that K.C. should follow her over to a chaise lounge upholstered in gold silk. K.C. stretched out and looked up to see what would happen next. The woman parted K.C.’s robe and pointed to her mound with the vibrator. K.C. promptly closed her robe, clamped her legs shut, sat upright, and glared at the servant.

“Deel’hui, where the hell are you?” K.C. bellowed.

“What is it, my Goddess?” Deel’hui stepped out from a nearby shadow.

“Thanks for the goodies and the bath. I’d like to get dressed and leave the palace now, enjoy the sunshine.”

“That is not possible,” Deel’hui clucked disapprovingly. “The next thing on your schedule is the sacred empowering of your clitoris with the stimulator. I can assign one of my acolytes or perform this myself.”

K.C.’s face grew hot, which meant it was beet red. “I have no interest in using a vibrator at this time. If I did want to do so, it would be in privacy.”

Deel’hui raised a brow. “This process is obligatory, now, or you will throw the schedule off even more than it already is.”

“Don’t Goddesses have any rights in this society? Deel’hui, there’s no way I’m using any vibrator—and no one’s using one on me. Non-negotiable.”

A nasty little smirk curled the edges of Deel’hui’s mouth. “You have no choice.” She clapped her hands and three servants appeared bearing what looked like meters and wires tipped with suction cups. “We are required to monitor your orgasmic output when you use the vibrator. This is to ensure the responsiveness of your sacred clitoris.”

K.C. had to remind herself again that she wasn’t hallucinating, that she’d decided all that happened was ‘real’. “That’s insane,” she muttered before she could shut her mouth and think.

“Nothing is going exactly as planned, but we have to accommodate our divines. Though ‘tis unclear why heaven chose you ....” Deel’hui wasn’t even pretending to be friendly or warm. “We will measure what needs to be known. Your orgasmic output must be recorded, and the charts will be displayed for all to see the day of your holy copulation.”

“I won’t.”

“Oh, Goddess, you will. Furthermore, we transmit the records to a group of scientists who will monitor your progress. If they feel you are not sufficiently orgasmic at each step of the process, we will have to alter our program to aid you to raise the level of your performance.”

Nausea, negating the earlier pleasure of eating the fine foods, threatened. “I can’t do this.”

“All you have to do is lie back and relax. We’ll do all the rest.” Deel’hui’s evil grin was at odds with her words.

K.C. groaned as the irony of the cliché gripped her.

“Who shall be the holder of the stimulator? A servant, me, or yourself? You see, Goddess, you do have choices.”

How the hell had she landed in this nightmare? Before K.C. could protest again, she had suction cups attached—thank goodness, not painfully—at four points around her mound and two points between her breasts. She felt like a giant lab rat.

Deel’hui held the stimulator like a gun pointed to K.C.’s head. “Who shall operate this?”

Wishing it were a gun and she could shoot her way out of the room, K.C. took it from Deel’hui and ordered the women to leave the room.

“We will be watching and monitoring,” Deel’hui threatened. “If you do anything counter to our process, dear Goddess, we will be forced to take harsher methods.”

K.C. had never felt less sensual. But the thought of the harsher methods she had no doubt Deel’hui would resort to terrified her. In the spirit of choosing her battles, she figured she had to keep herself safe until she could act to save Adriac and herself.

Hands shaking, she picked up the gold vibrator. Knowing she had to do something, she examined it, admiring the workmanship and the fine jewels decorating the nine-inch barrel. If only Adriac could be with her. The two of them would figure out a way to use the implement as a weapon to free them instead of to dig her deeper into her current trap.

Thinking of Adriac turned her on, and the vibrator was at hand. None of this would have sufficed to make her turn the vibrator on were it not for Deel’hui’s threats. Reassured that no one else was in the room with her—and blanking out the detail that a group of scientists were monitoring her every move and sound—she turned on the vibrator. Instantly the room filled with the music of strumming harps, twittering birds, and gurgling waterfalls. After a slight twist of the dial, smooth saxophones filled the air with gentle jazz.

The vibrator chilled her fingers. Adriac, pulsing with energy and life, would warm her. She touched the cool gold. And then, stifling a tear, she parted her legs and ran the length of the gold rod up and down her moist slit. Despite her misery, her lower belly muscles contracted at the merest contact of the implement. Wanting the whole experience to end as fast as possible, she nudged the speed up a tad. Like a detached observer from somewhere outside her body, she could note the smooth pulses stimulating her. For the first time ever, she felt betrayed by her body and the responses that had previously given her such pleasure.

K.C. had never been partial to rubies before, but, she observed, the touch of this jewel on her clit nearly sent her through the enormously high ceiling of the room. Ever afterwards, she would despise rubies.

Though she hated the pleasurable sensations racing through her and she felt only contempt for herself for giving Deel’hui and the scientists that they wanted, K.C. found herself crashing to a premature orgasm.

Biting down on her lip to keep from crying out, she vowed that she would get through this situation. She’d return to her home and take Adriac with her.

“Goddess, you must now repeat the experience with the silver stimulator.” A disembodied voice boomed at her through her headphones which she, alas, had found she could not remove.

Shuddering with distaste, K.C. put down the gold stimulator and picked up the turquoise studded silver implement. Now she couldn’t keep back the tears, which ran down her face all the time she plied the second vibrator. This time, she climbed to her orgasm harder, deeper, and higher. And there she was—gasping out Adriac’s name as she quivered to her very intense climax.

Devastated that she’d given so much to her enemies, K.C. flung away both vibrators and pulled the wires off. Ready to face whatever punishment Deel’hui and the others would mete out,

K.C. felt worse than ever when they assured her they'd gotten sufficient data—and she should rest up for what was coming next.

## Chapter Five

Adriac knew the Goddess was undergoing her secret ritual preparations at the Royal Palace of Dark Chocolate. He cursed. Along with being equipped with the kingdom's most complete inventory of pleasure provisions, the Palace was also a completely secure fortress. Gases of toxic isotopes, capable of paralyzing a man in under thirty seconds, rose from the moat when defenses were activated. These gases could penetrate any known protective gear. If an intruder got over the moat, the second tier of defense, piercing metal spears tipped with poison would rain down on him. The Goddess would be safe from an invading army there. Several. But Adriac wasn't an army, merely a lover. And he would breach those defenses to be with the Goddess, his lady. After all, what force in the universe was greater than love?

He smiled wryly to himself. Love. He'd managed to get through his thirty-four years without ever succumbing to that romantic notion. But after far too short a time with her, his Goddess had captivated him so that he finally believed in the power of that emotion.

Adriac activated the hut's minimal computer system. Though he was supposed to leave tech gadgets behind for his preparation time, the Powers didn't want him totally cut off from communication. After all, what if he needed some assistance? What if he, Powers forbid, fell ill or had some accident?

First off, Adriac typed the words 'Royal Palace of Dark Chocolate' and 'defenses'. In moments, a detailed description, including graphic illustrations of the effects the defenses would produce on hapless victims, filled the screen. Adriac cursed again. Though he'd agreed to sacrifice himself after the ritual, he had no intention of meeting this fate before the designated time, especially not before he had his holy copulation with the Goddess.

His mind raced to identify possible ways of gaining entrance to the Palace—chemicals to neutralize the toxic isotopes—armor that could withstand the toxins and the spears. Both sounded like excellent strategies. Unfortunately, as far as he knew, not one of these solutions had yet been concocted or invented, and time was fleeting.

In hopes that he'd overlooked something, he read over the data once more. And then his gaze snagged on the nugget of data he'd been praying to find. In tiny print at the bottom of the page: All systems designed by Cragdoniac Ophinadar.

Cragdoniac Ophinadar. Adriac's mind strayed to his old school friend and he allowed himself a small smile. A good friend, though they hadn't seen each other since graduation day—Cragdoniac. And then Adriac remembered what they'd both agreed the last time they met. His friend owed him a favor. Adriac had acted as go-between when the almost pathologically shy Cragdoniac was dying to ask pretty Hig'dora Donaddar to their school graduation dance. As it turned out, Hig'dora had as big a crush on Cragdoniac as he had on her, so go-between duties had proven easy. After Adriac had conveyed Hig'dora's acceptance, Cragdoniac promised he'd forever be in Adriac's debt. Whatever his friend ever wanted would be his. But would Cragdoniac remember a youthful promise after so many years? Adriac couldn't permit even a whiff of doubt to color his thoughts now.

Adriac summoned up Cragdoniac's contact information. When the requisite numbers popped onto his screen, Adriac initiated the communication link.

“Hello,” a familiar voice said within moments.

“Is this Cragdoniac Ophinadar?”

“Speaking. Who’s that?”

“Adriac Mendushar from...”

The other man began to laugh. “Is that really you, my old friend? The man who’s set to take part in the sacred mating ritual with the Goddess?”

“The very one.”

“Listen, old man. Even though it’s been so many years, I’m glad you called to say goodbye.” His voice sounded sober. “I don’t know if you knew. Hig’dora and I are joined and bonded. And we both owe it all to you. We’ve never forgotten what you did for us.”

Adriac exhaled with relief. His friend remembered him with gratitude. “I’m not exactly calling to bid you farewell. Not yet.” Adriac then proceeded to tell his friend the exact purpose of the call.

\* \* \* \*

K.C. must have dozed. Next thing she knew, Deel’hui and two women, different from her previous henchwomen, were rousing K.C. to take another bath and eat more food. K.C. sleepily protested she just wanted to rest, but Deel’hui said she’d have lots of time for that later.

“Before you get into this pool, we must ensure that your body is smooth—free from excess hair and any blemishes.”

For K.C., who ran, not walked, away from waxes and other painful rituals, this prospect was on a par with root canal. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Goddesses don’t deal well with pain.”

“No pain,” Deel’hui assured her. Like she had any great faith in anything Deel’hui might say. But the woman insisted. She also demonstrated on herself that the process would really be pain free. All K.C. had to do was run a slightly rough white towel over her body, and she’d have a perfect bikini line and smooth legs.

Though she still didn’t trust Deel’hui, K.C. did trust her senses. She reached out for the towel. If that sucker raised one flicker of pain reaction, K.C. would claim Goddess privileges and refuse to proceed. With her teeth clenched, she began to run it along her legs. After all, she wasn’t about to apply anything to her bikini area ‘til she knew how it would feel on a less sensitive spot. To her amazement, better than not hurting, the towel actually felt great. Warm, soothing, like a relaxation massage.

K.C. reluctantly put aside the towel and proceeded to the bath. This time the pool was filled with rose petals and gold dust. K.C. found the warm water so soothing and refreshing, she happily sank in up to her chin. Beforehand, the serving women had lit what looked like several hundred candles surrounding the pool. The flames cast dancing shadows on the golden walls. The only incongruous note in the luxurious setting was the aroma of ... pepperoni pizza. Though K.C. loved pepperoni pizza, somehow it just didn’t seem to go with the whole ambience.

The bigger question was, how did Deel’hui and the others know of K.C.’s penchant for pepperoni pizza? “Through the headphones,” Deel’hui responded icily to K.C.’s unasked question.

Groovy, K.C. thought, shivering in the warm water. She couldn’t let herself forget her mind was an open book.

To which Deel’hui responded, “We have our ways.”

K.C. had tried, several times, to remove the ear phones.

“You can’t,” Deel’hui said. “Not until we release the force holding them to you.”

Shit. That would mean Deel’hui knew about her plans to abduct Adriac through time.

Deel'hui nodded curtly. K.C. willed her mind to shut up, which of course got her thoughts chattering a million miles an hour. If only the water would calm her down ....

When K.C., her body glowing from the warmth and shiny with gold, came out of the pool, she waved away the two women with towels and wiped herself dry. Next she put on the proffered robe, made from some infinitely soft feathers and silk.

She sat down to a perfect pizza—with the right amount of Parmesan and pepper flakes—and Chianti. As possible last meals went, this one was right on target. And then dessert, in keeping with the Italian theme, was a meltingly scrumptious tiramisu, espresso, and dark Italian chocolate with hazelnuts.

When she'd had her last bite, Deel'hui's women walked K.C. over to a huge bed where two gorgeous young men lay entwined in each other's arms, locked in a fervent kiss. "What's this?" K.C. asked.

"These are Cwadiac and Gl'endziac. They will service your body according to your dreams."

K.C.'s eyebrows shot to her hairline. "You mean I'm supposed to have sex with both of them?"

Deel'hui sniffed. "Of course not. The only man you will mate with is Adriac, your chosen consort. These men will give you what you call a sensuous massage."

Oh yeah, K.C. thought. Though neither man hit her in the gut quite like Adriac, both were handsome, one blond, the other with chestnut hair. She saw each had great hands. Heck, a massage from them was probably better than sex would be, especially if the two of them were into each other more than they'd be into her.

"They really are amazingly well made bots, aren't they?" Deel'hui commented.

"Bots?" K.C.'s mind parsed the word. "You mean they're not really men?"

Deel'hui smiled. "Some say they're even better than the real thing, not nearly as problematic."

For just a moment, K.C. felt a shiver of sympathy for Deel'hui. Was it possible that this beautiful, powerful woman had man woes the same as more ordinary women?

But K.C. couldn't afford to let such complex feelings distract her now. To buy time, K.C. figured she wouldn't protest the massage. Heck, she'd always found getting a massage a great way to think. After Deel'hui left the room, K.C. stretched out on her belly and gave herself up to the experience of having two strong men touch every inch of her body. They used some light lotion on her, which smelled of roses and lavender and spices as well as some scent she totally couldn't identify but loved. Heck, she loved the prospect of smelling this good when she and Adriac finally came together.

Both men murmured softly in their language to each other and to her as they kneaded out her knots and bumps. Both men worked together in perfect synchronism, as if they were two people with one mind—and four talented hands. Starting at her shoulders and back, they firmly stroked every inch—making her feel relaxed and beautiful.

K.C. must have drifted off at some point. Next thing she knew, they were turning her over. Now aware that her mound and her breasts lay completely exposed to their view, she experienced half a second of self-consciousness. After the earlier invasion of her privacy with the vibrators, K.C. felt acutely sensitive to having unwanted observers. But both men continued in the same soothing yet invigorating manner—the two of them apparently completely focused on bringing her body to full, enthusiastic awareness.

Used as she was to massages back in her usual life, K.C. expected these two talented men



to follow the same rules, mainly to avoid touching her breasts or her pussy. They evidently followed a different rule book. One began a gentle massage of her breasts. Her protest died on her lips when the second man began to manipulate her labia. "Stop!" she ordered. Though she doubted that either man understood English, they evidently understood her intention. Both stood frozen, their hands over her intimate parts.

"Don't be tiresome, Goddess." Deel'hui's voice crackled in K.C.'s headphone. "You can continue on as you are, after which the men will report their findings. Or we can hook you up to the meters and the observers. One way or another, your reactions will be added to our data."

K.C. began to understand the image of a golden prison. "I have not agreed to have these men invade my personal space in this way."

"This time, alas, we will need to use more invasive and numerous probes. Decide now. Time is wasting."

Shit, shit, shit. "No probes," K.C., consummately squeamish, muttered.

"So much better. You will permit the men to proceed."

K.C., craven coward supreme, agreed.

The men, seeming untouched by the little drama that had just gone on, continued as they had been. K.C. felt a momentary embarrassment at how wet she got at the masseur's skilled touch, but nothing seemed to faze him. She hated everything about this so-called massage, including how good it made her feel.

K.C. closed her eyes as a flood of sheer sensation swept through her. The pussy man stroked her up and down, his fingers playfully teasing her clit and folds with differing degrees of pressure. When she arched up to feel him more strongly, he eased off. The tease left her stimulated, breathing hard. It was like he knew her. When she could feel herself begin to tighten into the upward spiral of a climax, he'd back off. She stayed on an edge that would have driven her mad if it hadn't felt so good.

She almost sighed with regret—and relief—when both men moved on to touch her less private but equally sensitive parts. They'd probably ruined her for any future massages. Maybe she'd have to hire two massage therapists to work on her from now on—though she'd happily give up any professional jobs to have Adriac's hands on her.

By the time the massage ended, she'd drifted to sleep. Or at least she must have, because she had no recollection of the two bots leaving her. When she awoke—was it minutes or hours later?—K.C. found herself in a huge bed. White silk sheets and a coverlet of fine, lacy crochet. Flowers—roses, lavender, and lilacs, all her favorites—scented the air with fragrance.

K.C. felt almost drugged from all the pleasure she'd experienced in the past few hours, but her overwhelming feeling was guilt. How could she allow herself to indulge so when Adriac was an imminent danger?

She should have tried harder to resist. Hell, she hadn't put up much of a fight at all. When it came to the vibrator, the food, the baths, and the massage, she'd been like putty in Deel'hui's hands. And then she realized that Deel'hui could read her mind through the ear phones. K.C. could just picture Deel'hui holed up in some cranny, reviewing all her thoughts like images on a private movie screen. *Fuck you, Deel'hui.*

What if Deel'hui had lied to her? What if she could remove the headphones so at least Deel'hui wouldn't be able to read her mind? K.C.'s fingers closed on the thin plastic that connected the two ear pieces and pulled. It didn't budge. Shit. Now the vision of the Chief Priestess laughing at her sprang before K.C., who felt more of a prisoner than before.

If she did manage to get out of this place, where would she go? She had no clue where

Adriac was or how to contact him. How did people communicate in this society? Was there an equivalent to telephones or e-mail? And could she possibly expect any of the populace to help her escape? Hell, they were all counting on her and Adriac to save their butts. She had the distinct impression anyone who found her would just hand her back to Deel'hui and the Goddess Police.

And shit, Deel'hui probably knew everything K.C. had just thought. Unless Deel'hui was on a break from reading her mind. In which case she'd check her screen and get updated shortly.

\* \* \* \*

What Adriac was about to do would break every rule he knew and probably some he didn't, but he couldn't stay away from his Goddess. Not one more moment. Fortunately, Cragdoniac Ophinadar had come through with the exact information he needed to survive storming the Palace. Sort of.

"But there's really no safe way to enter," Cragdoniac had warned. "Not unless the defenses are disabled. Which they won't be when you try to enter. Are you sure there's no other way for you to carry out your plan?"

Adriac assured him there wasn't. Deel'hui would be the only one who could order the defenses disabled, and there was no way she'd accommodate him like that.

All the way to the Palace, Adriac reviewed his plans to gain entry. But once he actually arrived at the Palace and experienced the impact of the defenses, Adriac understood the reasons for Cragdoniac's hesitation. Were it not for the Goddess, he'd also hesitate. Maybe even turn back. Though the toxic gases of the Palace's first line of defense were invisible and odorless, the air around the moat shimmered with an eerie, green glow. Via an ultra-speed messenger, Cragdoniac had sent him a mask currently in development, the first protective gear that could offer even partial protection.

"It's not yet perfected," Cragdoniac had warned.

"Do you think it's good enough to do the job?"

"Clinical trials have given some grounds for optimism," Adriac grinned. His friend Cragdoniac had certainly mastered the art of talking like a scientist.

"I'll take my chances," Adriac said. Now, donning the helmet, he hoped his friend's optimism would prove justified. Muttering a prayer and a promise to the Goddess, Adriac plunged forward.

For one moment, he nearly panicked as the gases whooshed and flowed about him. He passed through and, to his pleased surprise, found he was still upright. He'd have to tell Cragdoniac that the helmet, in fact, worked. With an exhale of relief, Adriac proceeded. The gases hadn't challenged him nearly as much as would the piercing metal spears tipped with poison that would rain down on him as he raced toward his goal.

"Timing," Cragdoniac had told him. "You see, there is a thirty-second gap between the deployment of the gas and the onslaught by the spears."

"Thirty seconds? That's not a lot of time."

"No. But that's your only chance. You need to make it from the far bank of the moat to the Palace entrance in under thirty seconds. Then you'll be safe."

*He'd practically have to fly.* A vision of the Goddess rose before his eyes. For her, he could do anything.

With another brief prayer on his lips and Cragdoniac's protective gear on his head, Adriac made the great leap.

\* \* \* \*

K.C. bent her knees and drew her legs close to her in her usual 'I need comfort' position, practically rolled into a fetal position. And then she heard a noise, and any little hairs still remaining on her stood on end. Someone was in her room with her.

She turned into a mass of goose bumps. After all, aside from Deel' hui and her henchwomen, K.C. was really, really alone here. Anybody, for any purpose, even inflicting major damage on her, could sneak in. Though her mind told her that, as Goddess, she was probably safe, this understanding didn't stop the adrenaline from pumping extra hard. Who would want to hurt her now, before she performed in the essential rite expected of her?

Rational thoughts or not, she was about to scream when her eyes made out the form of the man who'd been filling her fantasies. Her heart began to pump double time. Was it possible or was she hallucinating? It couldn't be. It was. Adriac, here with her. She heaved a sigh of relief before her mind began to whirl with questions. How could he be here? And then the romance of the moment took hold. Adriac was here with her, in her private chamber. After all the stimulation she'd gotten, she was more than ready to have her man with her. The man who'd come to dominate her thoughts and dreams.

He came closer and put a finger to his mouth. In two strides he was at her bedside. Her senses reeling, she didn't know what to do first. But she had total faith her instincts would kick in and guide her.

Though he longed to bury himself in her embrace, Adriac knew the first thing he had to do, after silencing her, was to disable the mind-reading function of her ear phones, or Deel' hui and an escort of armed guards would be upon them in moments. As it was, he knew he and K.C. wouldn't have long together before Deel' hui came to investigate. But he meant to seize every moment.

Forcing himself to be calm and rational, he touched her ear phones and manipulated the appropriate switches. He prayed Deel' hui hadn't read enough of the Goddess' thoughts to realize he was there, or they'd have no time alone together.

Then he let his gaze feast on the Goddess before him, clad in white silk, nestled in her bed. Adriac felt his body tighten and harden. No longer could he resist or deny the call of passion. He fell to his knees, then rose to embrace her, worshipping her with his entire being. He took her in his arms and captured her lips in the kiss he'd longed for since the moment they met.

"Forgive me, Goddess, I couldn't stay away from you any longer," he murmured.

Were those tears he saw in her eyes? Tears of joy, of pain, of anger? The tears of any woman unhinged him, but especially those of a Goddess. His Goddess. With his thumb, as gently as he could, he wiped them away.

"Oh Adriac. I've been so worried about you," she whispered. Her eyes grew wide with fear. "I strongly suspect you shouldn't be here." Her smile contrasted with the tears pooled in her eyes. "But I'm ecstatic you have come to me." She held him to her like she'd never let go, so Adriac surrendered himself to the joy her words unleashed in him.

He was softly stroking her lovely blonde hair when he realized something strange. "You know, dear Goddess, I don't even know your name. How is this mortal to address you?"

She bit her lip. "Oh, Adriac. I'm really not your Goddess."

"But of course you are. You arrived just as the others always have, as it's been foretold since the beginning of our era. Just as we all expected you to."

She shook her head. "I don't know what happened to the one who was supposed to come." Her laugh sounded almost harsh. "But, I'm not anyone's Goddess." She looked so earnest and sad in the blackness of the room.

He didn't understand this continuing modesty, but he would not argue with her. She must have some reason he couldn't fathom for her denial. Perhaps at some time in the short future before them, he'd understand. "You will always be a Goddess to me. If you would do me the great favor of telling me how to address you ...."

She smiled, and his heart quivered. "Of course. I'm K.C."

"K.C.?" he asked, surprised at this name. But then, usually the name by which to speak to the Goddess remained shrouded in great mystery, revealed to a select few. "'Tis such a simple name. Surely you have another?"

A smile played at the corners of her lips. "Okay. If you must know, K.C. stands for Karlotta Carolina. But nobody calls me that except for Magda."

"Karlotta Carolina? Magda?" He stumbled over these unfamiliar names. "Perhaps I will call you K.C., too. Though, if you want me to address you as Karlotta Carolina, like this Magda .... This is a woman's name? I remember you said it when we first spoke."

"Yes, Magda is definitely a woman. And I'd love it if you'd call me K.C."

"K." He parted her lips with his tongue for he could not wait one more moment. She tasted of flowers and starlight, with an undercurrent of a spice he had to taste more of her to identify. She trembled in his arms, and he felt her surrender to him in a way that appeared entirely mortal.

"C." The most beautiful name he'd ever heard or said. He tasted her soft, full lips, forcing himself to remain gentle so he didn't cause her any pain.

"No one's ever said my name exactly like that," K.C. said, her breath warm against his ear. Her words swirled around him like a divine mist. His lower stomach clenched, and his cock hardened into a full erection.

He pressed her to him, and she felt so soft, yielding her generous body in invitation. "My Goddess, my K.C., I want you. I couldn't wait even one more night for us to be together, let alone three." He lowered his face to her breasts.

She held him to her. "It's like you read my mind or my dreams. Not just through the damn headphones."

"It's my dream, too." Using all his restraint, he tenderly pushed aside the white silk of her garment and looked to see if she protested. She gazed at him with such longing in her eyes, he knew she wanted him to go on. He kissed her breasts, licked one nipple while he stroked the other with his fingers. She moaned, and her nipples grew instantly hard. Though he could tarry the entire night exactly where he was, his demanding erection impelled him to raise the stakes. Her arousal fed his, and he wanted only to enter her, to satisfy the hunger she'd inspired from the moment he laid eyes on her. But this was a Goddess, his Goddess. He had to approach her with the utmost respect for her divine person.

And he wanted to show her with all he was how much he cared for her, how her pleasure mattered more than his. His mind now ranged over all the techniques his instructor had shared, all the ways he'd pleased other women in his past.

He wanted to kiss her, taste her, lick her everywhere. He wanted to be completely imprinted with her image, her essence, to permeate himself with his Goddess.

*Breathe*, K.C. reminded herself. *You have to breathe, or you'll die*. With Adriac so close to her, regular breathing became a challenge. Having him beside her, she could all too easily forget everything else the two of them faced. A life in another century? A ritual mere nights away that would end with the sacrifice of her lover? Nothing but his presence seemed real or worthy of notice.

They were alone together, to do with and for each other whatever they wanted. Not with a cast of thousands watching, as would happen in a few short nights. Just the two of them, maybe for the only time ever. Better than any dream, than anything she'd ever read or written. For now, she would close her mind to the phantom watchers.

After all the sensual pleasure of the previous hours, she'd never expected to be so turned on so quickly. But Adriac beat everything and everyone else in that department—even a palace of chocolate.

With his lips on one breast and his long, artistic fingers fondling the other, K.C. felt a stab of longing. She wanted to be more beautiful for him, as perfect as he was. But from the look in his eyes, the tenderness and longing in his every touch, she could bring herself to believe she *was* perfect, everything he had ever wanted.

"You are so beautiful," he moaned. "My Goddess, my K.C., I must feast my eyes on you."

K.C., who usually preferred to avoid nudity, now flung aside her delicate garment. Adriac looked at her and, his eyes big with wonder, gasped. From the expression on his face, she knew only pleasure and delight motivated his response, and she wanted to weep.

But she wasn't about to let him be the only one who looked. "And you, Adriac. Let me see you."

He inclined his head slightly and stood up. K.C. hated that they were separated for even a moment. But when he threw aside the cloth that had covered his amazing cock, the pay-off was well worth it. Large, firm, and full—all for her. K.C.'s pussy clenched and creamed at the sight of him. A penis worthy of a goddess indeed. She wriggled her hips to move closer to him.

"Oh, Adriac," she sighed. Didn't it mean she was shallow to fall in love with a guy because he was gorgeous? But it wasn't just his looks. His coming out here, tonight, braving she knew not what dangers to be with her, tipped the balance. "Turn around. Let me look at all of you."

As expected, buns of steel. Hard, tight, smooth all over. She wanted to love him in every way possible, to get to know every part of his body in the short time they would have together. She wouldn't let her sadness at that thought impinge on even a moment.

He held his arms out, and she beckoned him to her.

With a growl, he leapt onto the bed and clasped her to him. She fastened her arms around his broad shoulders and held on for all she was worth. Now she felt his pulsing erection nudge her mound, and no clothes separated them. Nothing kept them apart. She wanted him inside her for the ride of her life.

"I will kiss you everywhere," he announced in a husky whisper, and all K.C.'s nerve endings arose and whimpered.

His lips traced a hot path down from her forehead to her waiting lips. In moments, she opened her mouth to his, meeting his tongue, thrust for hungry thrust. She wanted to pause, taste him, identify the elements of his scent and flavor—spice, sweetness, a hint of forest. She could have been lost in the kiss forever, but he broke the contact so his mouth could meander down, down to her very core.

Next his lips touched her everywhere, and electric sparks sizzled, heating the air around them with purple fire. He nibbled her breasts, tongued the sensitive spot between them. His sex impossibly grew even harder, and hers nearly melted as she prepared to welcome him into her. She wanted him to end the sweet torture of their being apart, but she also wanted him to continue nuzzling her everywhere he touched. Greedy. Yeah, she was totally greedy for him.

She arched her hips up to him and felt his glans nudge against the skin of her feminine triangle. But she wanted him in her, now. He ran a finger along her slippery labia, and K.C. shrieked, nearly hitting the ceiling. She'd have sworn she'd burn his finger up with her consuming heat.

"Delicious," Adriac murmured, his eyes half covered by long-lashed lids.

*Delicious* was an understatement. He rubbed his finger along her folds, and K.C. had to bite her lips to keep from screaming. Then he touched her clit, and K.C. felt the stirring of an orgasm start to gather force. Better, oh infinitely better than the ruby. Shit, she usually had a tough time coming with a new man. But with one touch, he practically had her there, despite all her earlier climaxes.

From the ecstatic sounds Adriac was making, K.C. could tell he was getting as intensely involved as she was. Thank goddess, he evidently wasn't a man to stop at one quick clit caress. Using his thumb to great effect, he played with the sensitive little nub, and pleasure radiated out from sensation central to engulf her. K.C. thrashed back and forth, any vestige of resistance to letting herself go dissipating in the wonder of their intimacy. Not having to move much at all, she tightened her legs around Adriac's talented hand and savored each wiggle. Once he inserted one finger into her, K.C. was nearly done for. As much as the sensation, the thought of him touching her there, stroking her most intimate spots, nearly shot her into ecstasy.

Another finger soon joined the first, then a third. All the while, he played with her clit and pressed his erection against her leg. Interspersed with butterfly kisses and deeper ones, with the way he said her name.

K.C. felt herself begin to clench and climb toward culmination. "Yes, oh yes, Adriac," she whispered as she rose and fell into a climax that left her shuddering.

After he slowly and tenderly withdrew his fingers from her, Adriac put them in his mouth, one by one, and sucked her juices off. Then he put his fingers in her mouth, and she inhaled them. She wanted to suck his fingers, his cock, to have him inside her in every way possible, now more than ever. But he evidently had other ideas. "Before I come into you, I must taste you, my K.C."

Was there a limit to how many times a person could come in one day? K.C. suspected she was about to have the delightful chance to test any previous world records.

Adriac opened her legs and slid down between them. When he nibbled on her belly, K.C. began to quiver. And then he stroked the hair around her feminine core and began to lick her labia. Even though she'd just come, K.C. felt again aroused. His tongue slowly traced the shape of her folds before making a pass over her clit.

K.C. had never before experienced so much pleasure at one time. If a person could go insane from a surfeit of pleasure, she was well on her way. Uncaring of this possible consequence, ever greedy for more, she put her hands on either side of his head and humped her hungry nether lips up to his eager mouth. She tightened her legs around him, holding him exactly where she wanted him—forever.

Adriac made luscious sounds, lapping her up like a gourmand cat with the finest cream. And cream she had for him. She felt herself gush her response onto his lips. "Oh, Adriac," K.C. moaned. If this was standard treatment for goddesses, she wanted to be one.

With his strong hands, he was massaging her sides. His hands slid down from the right next to her breasts to the indentation for her waist over the large curves of her hips.

So many sensations at one time—she didn't know where to focus—except on him, the man who was bringing such ecstasy to her.

He was whispering words she could never understand into her intimate places, and the vibrations of his words echoed through her. Her clit stood proud and firm from the attention and stimulation, throbbing like a bell in full clamor.

Now he put his hands under the cheeks of her ass, holding her tighter to him. She wound her leg around him and put her foot on the crease of his butt and, wanting to give him pleasure, slid her heel up and down. He waggled his head from side to side, burrowing deeper into her.

Her foot played over the opening in his crease, and he wiggled his ass to encourage her. Now he thrust his tongue into her, alternating between this most sensitive opening and her hungry clit.

Encouraged by Adriac's sounds, the scent of him, and, most of all, the heft of him between her legs, K.C. felt herself begin to come once more. Damn, all her life she'd been told she was not orgasmic. Huh. No one would ever be able to accuse her of that again. Not after today.

"I'm going to come again," she sang out, proud, happy, and over the moon with pleasure. dripping with sensation. And to think, she still hadn't experienced having Adriac's cock in her. That new erotic intimacy lay just before them. Pulsing and throbbing at the prospect of opening herself up to take her man in, K.C. gave it up to the massive climax that rocked her from the toes up.

Adriac did not let up on her clit and her pussy 'til she'd moaned her last moan and shuddered into a teeth-rattling climax.

Surely, she'd just hit a limit. She'd need to—what was the word?—*regroup* or re-something before she could make love again.

Nearly wiped out by the force of her orgasm, K.C. felt more than content to lie in Adriac's arms for a few minutes, just to be with him in a rosy afterglow.

Except the man had a hard-on that could break concrete. And, goddess or not, she owed him. Not to mention her fervent desire, stronger by the moment, to have him in her. Actually, feeling his erection pressed against her lower belly, K.C. surprised herself by how ready she was. "I want you in me," she whispered to him.

"Oh, my Goddess. My K.C., I want to be in you," he whispered back. He positioned himself at the opening between her legs, still totally slick from his tongue and her climax. She held her breath, waiting to feel him deep inside her.

Suddenly a very bright light shone, nearly blinding K.C. What the—?

## Chapter Six

“What a very pretty picture the two of you make there.”

Once K.C.’s sense of sight began to function again, she realized the strident voice breaking their idyll was none other than Deel’hui Melindar’s. “What a *pity* the two of you will have to wait ‘til the night of the fertility ritual before Adriac inserts his manhood into the Goddess.” K.C. had never before realized how much sarcasm could pour from one woman’s venomous mouth.

But Deel’hui wasn’t the only unwelcome intruder. Moments after Deel’hui’s arrival, a band of ten steel-helmeted warriors, high tech weapons drawn and aimed at them, stormed in behind her.

Adriac shielded K.C. with his body. “This is my doing, mine alone. The Goddess had nothing to do with it.”

Though K.C.’s heart melted at his effort to protect her, no way was she going to let Adriac claim full responsibility. “Thank you, Adriac, but I will not let you take all the blame. I wanted you here and summoned you with all my powers of telepathy.”

Deel’hui’s mouth twisted into a bitter smile. “Prettier and prettier. Goddess, we mere mortals know the rules for you deities are not the same as those for us.” Though she bowed slightly, K.C. could see the other woman did not intend any true deferment or humility with this gesture. “Nonetheless, our tradition requires you to honor our ways when you come among us.

“As to Adriac, he is of our people. He knows the gravity of his transgression against our rules and ways by his improper, illegal entry.” Deel’hui’s face looked pinched and puckered, like she’d just swallowed a lemon.

“I wanted him here,” K.C. repeated. Damn. As a Goddess, shouldn’t she have some rights and command some respect? Especially in a conversation with the woman who was supposed to be the Chief Priestess in charge of worshipping her?

Deel’hui again slightly nodded her head. “With all due respect, *Goddess*,” she spat out, “what you are saying proves you do not know the details of our society.”

K.C. frowned. “Of course I do. I’m a Goddess, after all.” She might as well press whatever advantage she could.

Deel’hui waved her hands dismissively. “I am beginning to wonder if we made a mistake when we dismissed your earlier denials of this identity.”

K.C.’s eyes flew open. *Now* Deel’hui was going to start to believe her? Actually, K.C. had thought Deel’hui knew the truth from the first moment. Why Deel’hui kept this secret ‘til now still eluded K.C.. Before she had a chance to respond, Deel’hui barked orders to everyone, including her and Adriac. “I’ve had enough. Both of you, get out of that bed and get dressed.”

Talk about being dissed. K.C. caught the expression in Deel’hui’s eyes and knew the jig was up as far as Deel’hui even pretending she was the Goddess. She just wasn’t totally sure what would happen next to her or Adriac.

“I will not allow you to speak so disrespectfully to the Goddess,” Adriac growled.

“You, Adriac Mendushar. Get dressed or the guard will haul you off as you are.”

Uncomfortable as K.C. felt, she now took a perverse pleasure in her and Adriac staying



exactly as they were. Naked as jay birds and entwined in the sheets.

“Excuse me, Deel’hui. I am the Goddess here. If I want to stay naked, I’m going to. And by the way, who the hell invited you into my private chamber?” Not easy to carry off this speech in a dignified way when she was naked and still glowing from her orgasm, but well within the capability of any goddess.

Deel’hui snorted. “We heard strange sounds emanating from this chamber and feared you were in some sort of distress, which more than justifies my entry with the guard.”

“Well, I’m not in any distress. Or at least I wasn’t until you and your gorillas arrived. Speaking as a Goddess, I want you to leave. As in now. As in, don’t let the door slam your backside on your way out.”

Adriac still shielded her with his body. Amazingly, through all the tumult, he remained erect. Now, magnificent as her climaxes had been, K.C. really regretted how they’d been interrupted before he came into her. She feared they’d never come together in the way her body was crying out for.

Deel’hui actually bared her teeth. “Dear *Goddess*,” she said, the evil in her eyes belying her words, “in light of Adriac’s fatal transgression, I must disregard your command. I will repeat. Adriac Mendushar, arise and dress. I will shield the Goddess from improper regards until she can be properly dressed.”

“Or what?” K.C. asked, feeling a kind of courage she’d never known herself capable of.

“Or these men will forcibly separate you. I will be hard-pressed to preserve your dignity, *Goddess*.” Deel’hui pointed to her snarling entourage.

Adriac lifted his head. “I’m not removing myself from my Goddess. I suggest you and your guards leave. Now.”

“There are ten of them. Only one of you,” K.C. reminded Adriac in a whisper.

He kissed K.C., which seemed to be enough to fry the last of Deel’hui’s nerve endings.

“Adriac Mendushar, Lord Pom’diflor, in the name of the true Goddess and all decency, I pronounce you under arrest. Guards, seize him !” Deel’hui barked out.

The soldiers didn’t hesitate. In moments, three of them grabbed Adriac and pulled him from K.C. He kicked and punched, knocking at least two of them out of the game. But three others immediately replaced the downed soldiers. One aimed his gun at Adriac, and K.C. wanted to jump between them. But the two guards on her were more than sufficient to keep her down.

“Don’t shoot him!” Deel’hui cried before a trigger-happy soldier could do any damage.

Within moments, it was all over. Adriac, still naked, was covered in chains, head to foot, so weighted down, he could barely stand upright. A cloth covered his eyes, preventing them from sharing a last look.

“Adriac,” she called out. “I love you.”

“And I love you, my Goddess, my K.C.” These were the last words she heard as the guards gagged him and dragged him off—to what?

K.C. had the distinct feeling it would do no good for her to beg Deel’hui for much of anything. Rather, she had to show her tough side, though she was quaking with agony inside. Summoning up every scrap of dignity she could, she rose. “You, Deel’hui, who are supposed to be my Chief Priestess. I hereby excommunicate you.”

Deel’hui actually laughed. “I’ve known all along you are a fraud, though I don’t know who you are or why you’ve come. Actually, that matters very little. But, by your arrival, you’ve forced me to postpone my plans. So for now I will have to continue to pretend you are indeed our awaited Goddess. Though it violates every principle I hold dear, I will continue to groom you for

the fertility rite. But I know exactly who you are not. And if you push me too hard, I will publicly confess to learning you are an impostor and leave you to the harsh justice of the crowds.”

Then she crossed the chamber and walked out, slamming the door behind her.

*Damn*, K.C. thought. What the hell was Deel’hui talking about? Why had she gone along with the fraud ‘til now? K.C. strongly suspected she wouldn’t like the answers to these questions.

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The soldiers dragged Adriac, kicking and screaming, to a vehicle. From their muttered remarks, he knew they’d transport him to the final destination for tonight. Thrown into a chamber, slammed into a chair and bound tightly, he heard the door slide shut. Were they leaving him alone? Where in the world were they going to take him? A transgression against the Goddess was considered treason, punishable by death. But, by the hair of the gods, he was already slated for that. And after all his training, they needed him to satisfactorily complete the fertility ritual.

Adriac tried his chains. Maybe, if he could loosen them just enough, he’d be able to escape when the vehicle landed. He squirmed and thought he felt a slight loosening.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Two strong hands clamped down on his shoulders.

Obviously a rhetorical question, since he still had a gag in his mouth. Nonetheless, he tried to respond, which came out in a series of harsh, unintelligible noises. Maybe the guard would be curious and remove the gag?

He did not. “Worst crime I’ve ever seen in all my years. Here you are, the hero to a generation of young boys. And instead of filling your duties with honor, you sneak into the Goddess’ sanctuary and besmirch the sacredness of the rite, foul all our traditions. Why, I can’t think of any punishment bad enough to fit your crime.” Sounded like the guard spat. “Too bad they have to keep you intact ‘til the ritual.”

Well, he hadn’t gotten much useful information from that tirade, other than to know he wasn’t alone. Adriac speculated as to his destination. Probably they’d take him to the Mid-Level Dungeon of Rehabilitation in Cazlatra Island. Far enough distance away that he couldn’t return to the Goddess easily, especially across the icy waters surrounding the island, yet close enough to deliver him for the ritual on time.

So he wouldn’t spend his last days in splendid isolation, preparing for his mating with the Goddess and his ultimate sacrifice. Still, he could be grateful the powers that be couldn’t punish him too severely, yet. After all, as the hostile guard pointed out, they had to keep him in reasonable shape for the ritual.

Adriac could curse himself for his blindness, but most of all for leaving his Goddess, his K.C., exposed both to the eyes of the guards and, most discouragingly, to whatever cruelty Deel’hui had up her priestly sleeves. Fueled by frustration and anger, he again tried the chains to see if there was some overlooked possibility to maneuver. Still none. His mind spun. There had to be some way out of his imprisonment, some way for him to be assured that Deel’hui didn’t take her evil and wrath out on K.C.

He had to think. Maybe he’d be able to come up with a way to bribe one of the guards. Or maybe common knowledge, which declared Mid-Level and the other dungeons impossible to break out of, would turn out to be wrong. After all, he’d breached the Palace’s ‘impossible’ defenses.

He was determined to be with K.C., his Goddess, the woman he loved, again before their final meeting and ultimate parting. But how?

\* \* \* \*

K.C. hadn't cried herself to sleep since forever ago. She considered herself far too grown up, with too much life behind her, to go in for such adolescent angst. But the sight of Adriac being hauled off in chains stayed in front of her eyes, whether open or closed, and she felt like she could weep a river.

Now, as she lay solitary in the bed where they'd been together such a short time before, K.C.'s head wouldn't stop spinning. What in the world had happened to Adriac? Even worse, what would the guards do to the man she loved? She shivered at the thought of him being tortured or harmed in any way. What made it all worse was knowing whatever happened to him was her fault. If he'd only stayed put, in his isolated hut, he would still be okay—and she'd be anticipating their meeting.

Her heart clenched at the memory of the two of them together, and she silently thanked him for taking the risk he had. She felt her womb muscles contract. He'd made her come twice, ensuring her total pleasure before he'd even take a turn. She'd only taken from him, not given him anything but her ecstasy. K.C. shivered. She was always a giver, for pity's sake, not a taker. It felt so wrong for her to receive without giving anything to the other person, and especially in this situation, when Adriac had practically brought her to her knees with intense sensation. She wanted him, for about a hundred million reasons including the fact that he hadn't climaxed with her. The ecstasy had been strictly a one-way street.

K.C. wrung her hands. The worst was not knowing where he was, how they could possibly be in contact. Of course, Deel'hui would know everything. K.C. realized Deel'hui would not only withhold the desired information from her, but that sadistic bitch was probably getting off on every moment of her agony. Their agony.

Deel'hui had admitted she knew K.C. wasn't a Goddess. So why hadn't she thrown K.C. out of the Palace? Deel'hui hinted that it suited her purposes to have the pretense continue—for now. What purposes? What did Deel'hui have in her devious mind? More questions to make K.C.'s head spin.

Yeah, K.C. knew she was spending too much time in her head. She had to stop thinking so much and start acting like one of her heroines, or, even better, like one of her heroes, and come up with a way out of the dire situation she and Adriac were in. Right now, she feared Adriac was imprisoned in what were probably horrendous conditions. Her prison, at the Palace, was hardly horrendous. Actually luxurious. But it remained a prison, now more than ever.

Okay. She'd just named the situation. So what was her way out? What would a real hero do now? With a jolt, K.C. remembered Adriac had disabled the mind-reading function of her ear phones. In all the confusion, Deel'hui had not enabled the function again. That meant K.C. had a bit of mind freedom—for now.

\* \* \* \*

Once they landed at their destination, Adriac intended to try again for whatever opportunity he could find to escape. But the moment the transport touched down on the ground, the door of his compartment opened and he heard footsteps. He counted at least eight soldiers stepping up to surround him. He was hoisted up and a spear head jammed into his gut.

"Get up, Mendushar," a voice commanded. When he hesitated, the spear dug into him.

"I'm getting up," he protested.

"We don't have all day."

With an escort of men, he presumed they were armed, around him, he walked the short distance to his new temporary home. He heard a door open and was prodded to move ahead.

Once inside, he tried to pick up on sounds or any other sensations to help him get his bearings. The silence, other than the regular beat of soldiers marching him to his cell, seemed total.

They stopped and Adriac heard metal sliding. If he remembered correctly, this 'rehabilitation facility' included metal doors that slid into hollowed out rock.

At least once he got inside his cell, a guard relieved Adriac of the gag, the chains, and the blindfold. Not that there was a whole hell of a lot to see—a hard bunk, a chemical toilet. Several openings in the walls.

"Your food will be piped in to you at the designated meal times. Consider yourself lucky to have luxury accommodations—including the sensors, which will help us make sure you follow the proper ritual preparations." On that cheery note, the last guard left.

Adriac rubbed his face to soothe the places where the blindfold and gag had bitten into his skin, then moved around to restore his circulation. The cell was small, with barely room for him to take more than ten paces from end to end. He ran his hands over the walls and door, feeling for any opening he could exploit. And found none. A pile of rough clothes lay in a corner of the cell. Adriac put them on.

As far as he could tell, there was no way out of his cell let alone off the island. Not if he wanted to live. And, by now, he surprised himself by realizing how committed he'd become to living. First, he wanted to be with K.C. again. Funny how he'd never before in his life known the power of love. He smiled grimly at the memory of K.C. calling out her love to him—and his admitting his feelings to her. The guards had mocked both of them, but Adriac didn't care. K.C.'s love made him stronger than them. He could soar higher, swim faster, all because K.C. loved him. Not as the Goddess' consort or the hero of his people. She loved Adriac Mendushar, the man. She didn't want him to be a sacrifice. All she wanted was for them to be together and have a future.

But he couldn't break through the wall of rock and the steel door. And he hadn't yet found a guard who might even listen to his offers of bribes. Hell, other than the sensors which would track his every move, Adriac had no idea how he could communicate with anyone who could do anything for him. Unfortunately, the people at the other end of the sensors were not about to help him in any way he wanted.

Knowing the way of his people, evidently he'd be released only in time to bathe and prepare for the Fertility Ritual. He had to think. He had to have some ace to play to get him out of here and back to K.C. so together they could avert his fate.

\* \* \* \*

For the first time in her life, K.C. had no desire for food. Thinking of Adriac, missing him, worrying about him, took her appetite from her—which did not at all impress Deel'hui. "You absolutely must eat," she commanded.

"I can't, Deel'hui. Looking at you makes me nauseous and I lose my appetite." K.C. folded her arms in front of her and looked determined.

Deel'hui narrowed her eyes and brandished an I.V. needle. "You will take nourishment, one way or another. You will not be insufficient for the ritual. Not when you are in my charge."

Was Deel'hui bluffing? K.C. cursed her inability to fire up her bullshit detector. "Surely you wouldn't subject a goddess to the indignity of an I.V., especially such a short time before the Fertility Ritual?"

Deel'hui grinned with malice. "As Chief Priestess of the Goddess temple, it is my duty to ensure the Goddess appears at the appointed time, no matter how bizarre or inappropriate her behavior. I am empowered to use whatever means necessary. *Whatever means.*" The way

Deel'hui's eyes gleamed, K.C. had no problem believing the other woman wouldn't hesitate to hook her up with an I.V. Hell, she'd probably use a dull, rusty needle and relish every iota of pain she caused. Sadistic, bloodthirsty...

Deel'hui took a step closer and held up the needle, which indeed looked dull enough to cause major damage, though at least there was no visible rust. "What is it to be? The I.V. or this sumptuous dinner? Lobster with melted butter, fresh corn on the cob dripping more butter, baked potatoes oozing sour cream and chives. Blueberry muffins. And for dessert ...."

As if a seafood feast could distract her from the horrendous situation she'd landed in. But giving Deel'hui *carte blanche* to come after her with a needle was too scary. After all, who could know what substance the so-called Chief Priestess would pump into her under the guise of 'nourishment'? K.C. wouldn't put anything past Deel'hui.

"I'll take the dinner." Though K.C. realized the Palace cooks could just as well drug her food as a sac of fluid, K.C. felt she had a better chance of detecting something off with her sense of taste than in an I.V.

Deel'hui smirked in triumph. "I rather thought you would." She turned to order the servants to prepare the meal and serve it.

K.C. wanted to smack Deel'hui across her smug, self-satisfied face. Yeah, Deel'hui looked completely confident she held all the right cards. But Deel'hui was not going to win this war. Somehow, K.C. and Adriac would triumph in the end. They'd be together, and Adriac would live.

Unfortunately, K.C. didn't know how they'd accomplish this. But she had no doubt they would.

"Sit down and enjoy your meal," Deel'hui chirped. More like croaked. Deel'hui was not a chirper. But she grinned like the proverbial 'hostess with the mostest', as if K.C. were the most honored and treasured guest.

*Fuck you.* K.C. gritted her teeth and sat down in silence to the feast Deel'hui had described earlier. Delicious as every bit was, she felt like she was swallowing lead.

\* \* \* \*

There had to be a way. Adriac couldn't give up on finding a way to escape from his prison cell. If he could just convince his guards to take him elsewhere for a short time, he'd find a way to evade them. Then he realized they had a stake in keeping him healthy for the ritual. Surely there had to be some sort of clinic or hospital in the prison to care for the sick or injured?

Adriac paced back and forth in his tiny space. The clinic or hospital. How to get there? He'd always been so healthy, he'd never particularly paid attention to how people got medical treatment. What could he complain about that would get him to a doctor? He could fall and break a bone, but that sort of injury might render him unfit to perform the ritual with the Goddess at the appointed time.

His blood ran cold at the thought of any other man with her. There would be a designated substitute should Adriac be unable to perform, Jondiac Blancanishar. The Powers would hate to substitute for Adriac almost as much as he would hate having another man with K.C., so they'd try to fix him in time. But a broken bone would be too risky all around.

Pain somewhere in the body would do it. Where did people get pains that sent them to doctors? Head, back, stomach?

Adriac touched his stomach and suddenly decided he had a wicked discomfort there. He remembered a friend once complaining about an ache and about nausea. He threw himself down on his bunk, clutched his stomach and began to groan loudly. When that got no attention from

anyone monitoring his sensors, he began to roll and thrash around.

“What distresses you, Prisoner Mendushar?” a disembodied masculine voice asked.

Adriac groaned. “It’s my stomach,” he gasped. “Must have eaten something that’s making me sick. Or maybe I have some sort of infection.”

He heard a crackling over the speakers. “Our sensors do not detect any physical problems that would cause you distress.”

*Shit. He hadn’t reckoned with the full extent of the sensors’ power.*

“Does Prisoner Mendushar request an assessment to determine psychological causes of his psychosomatic episode?”

Adriac paused. He wouldn’t appreciate having his mind probed, but this might be the opportunity he needed to be freed from the cell. “Yes.”

“Very well. We will deliver a mind probe sensor through the delivery chute next to your meal chute. As soon as it arrives, put it on. We will deliver a diagnosis and options for treatment to you shortly.”

*Double shit. They weren’t about to take him anywhere.*

In moments, a headphone-shaped sensor plunked down the chute to him. Adriac curled his lip in disgust. No way he’d put that contraption on his head. Bad enough they knew as much about him as they already did. He was not about to hand his captors any more data about him on a silver platter.

Which left him back at square one. How in the name of all he treasured was he going to get out of this cell before the appointed time of the fertility ritual?

\* \* \* \*

“Tonight you will be able to choose your bedtime stimulator toy,” Deel’hui announced after standing over K.C. to make sure she polished off every bite of her lobster dinner.

All she wanted in the world was to be left alone, which K.C. told Deel’hui in no uncertain terms.

“With all due respect, Goddess, this is one request we can no longer grant you.”

K.C. frowned at her. “What do you mean, I can’t be alone?”

Deel’hui’s smile grew positively smarmy. “We have had only too pointed evidence of the danger you are in. Despite the excellent defenses of the Palace, an intruder was able to enter and accost you in your private quarters. I shudder to think what would have happened if we had not intervened.”

K.C. shuddered, too, but in memory of her moments with Adriac, in anticipation of what was about to happen between them. “Not an intruder, Deel’hui,” she hissed. “It was Adriac, my designated consort. Not just any intruder.”

“All the worse,” Deel’hui sniffed like some moralistic church lady. “If even as exalted a figure as the designated consort is going to breach our traditions, society as we know it is in peril.”

“Bullshit.”

Deel’hui raised an eyebrow but didn’t bother to respond. “Before I take you to the storehouse where we keep our Goddess toys, you must finish your meal. For dessert you have your choice of any flavor of ice cream with any type of cake or pie or both.”

“Don’t want any.”

Deel’hui didn’t bother to say anything, just brandished the I.V. needle. K.C. thought glumly of how pie à la mode would taste via an I.V. needle. As Deel’hui and one of the other serving women sat with K.C. through the whole meal, she couldn’t even just fake eating.

"I'm waiting for your order. You may have as many flavors of the desserts as you want. After all, you are still well below the mass we want you to be."

K.C.'s head spun. Should she bother trying to come up with something difficult to find? Though, so far, nothing had been beyond Deel'hui's reach. Her mind stumbled on something.

"I want carrot cake with cream cheese frosting," K.C. said.

Deel'hui nodded. "Done. And what else?"

"Lemon meringue pie."

She nodded approvingly. "Very good. As to the ice cream?"

"I want to have some of the pumpkin pecan crunch ice cream that I left in my freezer at home before I departed to come here." K.C. constrained herself not to smile. For Deel'hui to comply with this request, she'd have to open some pathway of communication to K.C.'s home and time.

Deel'hui's face betrayed no hint of challenge. "Very good." She nodded to the serving women, all but one of whom left. They returned in moments with massive servings of carrot cake and lemon meringue pie. And a huge dish that looked very much like it contained the pumpkin pecan crunch ice cream from her freezer. K.C. looked at Deel'hui in amazement and fear.

"I'm sorry," Deel'hui said blandly. "We weren't able to locate the exact same ice cream as you have in your freezer. We hope this substitute will be acceptable."

Of course the substitute was far superior to what K.C. had at home, which was damn good. But she wasn't about to admit that to Deel'hui. "It'll do," she mumbled.

"Well, please enjoy your dessert. And then we shall go to the sex toy warehouse. We want you to have a very special night."

K.C. swiped away a tear. Here she was in this palace of hedonistic pleasures, and she'd never felt more imprisoned in her life. Nothing and no one could ever bring her pleasure while she was separated from Adriac.

\* \* \* \*

Adriac thought and meditated, just as he was supposed to be doing in the days leading up to the Fertility Ritual. Only his thoughts now were not focused on his preparation for his task as designated consort. Instead, all he could think of was how to be reunited with K.C., his Goddess. How to rescue her from the sadistic clutches of Deel'hui Melindar.

He felt like his mind spinning in circles, wearing out a patch of ground like a stream eroding solid rock.

And then, when he was exhausted from looking at his situation from myriad different angles, a thought arose. What, he asked himself, was the fundamental cause of his current situation? He was here because of becoming the Goddess's designated consort for the upcoming Fertility Ritual for the good of his people.

He wasn't supposed to fall in love with the Goddess, but fall he did. And so did she. So much so, that they needed to be together for more than the short time of the holy copulation. Neither could wait for the time of the ritual. And now that he knew the glory of loving, he found the notion of his imminent death—the ultimate separation—unbearable.

Despite his bleak surroundings and isolation, at the thought of K.C., Adriac smiled. He'd never before felt this way about any other woman. Imagine, him falling for the Goddess. Even more amazing, she appeared to love him as much as he loved her.

Which wasn't helping him solve his dilemma.

He was the Goddess' designated consort for his people's Fertility Ritual. Why? Because he'd bested a field of competitors for the honor. Because he'd outfought them, outsmarted them,

and outsexed them. Outperformed them in the sexual competitions. Because he'd shown himself to be hotter and more potent than all the others combined.

His masculine power as a lover made him stand out from the crowd and marked him as the most desirable in the field.

But what if he lost his ability to make love to the Goddess?

Adriac's sex pulsed and rose at the thought of her, her image floating before him. He remembered how he'd pleased her, how she'd wanted to return the favor, to have him in her, when the guards had burst in on them, and his balls clenched.

Fat chance he'd ever lose the ability to make love to her. Wouldn't happen as long as he remained among the living. He could easily imagine that, with his dying breath, his last act as a man would be to brandish his erection for his woman.

But how could he use this knowledge to help free him from the prison?

And then it came to him. On the theory that a man required to build his reserves up prior to meeting the need for an especially potent performance, he'd been ordered to refrain from any sort of sexual activity in the days leading up to the Ritual.

But what if he made his guards believe he was going to indulge in self-stimulation and gratification non-stop, night and day, 'til they freed him? They'd believe he'd be on the path to depleting himself. Knowing how loath the Powers were to substitute another consort for him this late in the game, he figured it was worth a try.

With the image of the Goddess before his eyes, Adriac reached a hand into his crotch, took hold of his burgeoning erection, and began to stroke.



## Chapter Seven

“Now come this way to our garden of delights.” Deel’hui sounded like a used car salesman trying to move lemons.

How could anywhere she went with Deel’hui qualify as a garden of delights?

Ever since the fiasco, K.C. always had at least two companions with her. Her only comfort was realizing not even Deel’hui would pull twenty-four hour guard duty. Maybe K.C. had a shot of slipping away from other less diligent guards. Of course not having a clue as to where to go if she did manage to escape clipped her wings almost as effectively as the presence of the guards.

The room Deel’hui led her to wasn’t large by Palace standards. The approximate size of a small ballroom in a fancy hotel of her own era, the toy room gleamed with glass cases filled with a huge assortment of implements. This was the kind of place K.C. would have given a week’s supply of chocolate chip cookies to find and explore back in her own life. Now, it meant less than nothing to her.

The first section contained beautifully displayed whips and floggers. K.C.’s fingers itched. Nothing she’d like better right now than to have a whip in hand and Deel’hui within reach. K.C.’s inner predator roared.

“I’m sorry, dear Goddess. The whips and floggers are not available to you at this time.” Deel’hui smirked again.

“Why not?” K.C. grumped. “Considering I’m the goddess here, I’m awfully restricted in doing what I want.”

“We have concerns because the whips might cause inadvertent scarring or marking which would have no time to heal before the Fertility Ritual. You are to be without blemish or mark, one of the reasons for the many baths and cosmetic treatments that form the core of your preparation.”

K.C. glared at Deel’hui. It wasn’t like she intended to use a whip on herself.

“Alas, because you are alone, the handcuffs and other implements for binding are also on the rejected list.” Deel’hui moved briskly past all the cabinets housing the forbidden toys.

At any other time, K.C. would have loved to look and touch. Now she reserved the word ‘love’ to talk about being with Adriac.

At the far side of the room, Deel’hui gestured to another large section of implements. “Here are the cases with contents available to you. You may look through them, see which interest you. In addition to various gadgets, we have a wide variety of creams and gels. Why don’t you take a look?”

Though she’d have liked to touch many different toys, having to ask to have the various glass cases unlocked inhibited K.C. Several cases included dildos, in a variety of materials and colors. One that caught her eye looked like glass and, when viewed from different angles, sparked off rainbows. She didn’t imagine it could actually *be* glass—cringed at the thought—but she admired the crystalline colors its facets gave off. One looked like solid lace in a peach color. And there was one that looked like good old-fashioned rubber in a spectrum of stripes. Though she’d experimented with a dildo once, she preferred the buzz and action of vibrators.

But suddenly having to choose a toy under the scrutiny of her guards felt like an unacceptable breach of her privacy. “Deel’hui, I’d prefer not to choose any toys. I just want to go to my chambers and sleep.”

Deel’hui frowned. “According to the divine preparatory schedule, you must choose at least one toy to take with you tonight.”

“Why?” K.C.’s tone expressed her exasperation.

“Because that’s what the program says. Tonight you must play with a toy of your choice, stimulate yourself in the way that will please you. The observers will take careful note so we can inform your designated consort of exactly what will bring you the desired satisfaction.”

K.C. winced. She didn’t know what was ickier, having people watch her get off with a toy or the notion of them reporting back to Adriac by way of Deel’hui. Aside from the fact that Adriac had no difficulty knowing exactly what she wanted, she wanted anything they shared to be just between the two of them. Cripes, with how everything was set up here, even if Deel’hui weren’t guarding her, K.C.’s ‘observers’ would probably report back to the Chief Priestess.

Hell, nothing would please K.C. tonight except .... “Deel’hui, I’m so not in the mood for any of this. How about giving me a break here?”

Deel’hui drew herself up to her full height and her eyes shot daggers. “Not in the mood? Goddess, quite frankly, your mood hardly matters an iota. Despite your feelings, we have an agenda to follow. And follow it we will.”

“You can’t force me to choose a toy,” K.C. pointed out in a harsh whisper.

“No, I can’t. But I can choose a toy for you,” Deel’hui threatened. “You can believe me on this, Goddess. Not only am I prepared to choose a toy for you, I’m also prepared to choose the people who will use it on you if you’re unwilling to use it on yourself.”

Talk about disgusting. Remembering Deel’hui’s glee at the prospect of hooking her up to an I.V., K.C. shuddered at the thought of what kind of toy she’d select. The sadistic priestess would probably subject her to a hot pepper douche.

“When the real Goddess comes along,” K.C. started. She was about to promise Deel’hui she’d recommend the real Goddess sack her when she caught herself. K.C. figured whatever small leverage she had with Deel’hui came from the other woman having to pretend to go along with the K.C. as Goddess shtick.

“Our time here is limited. Choose or I will.”

Though she didn’t have enough time or energy to really look, K.C. chose—a very lifelike-looking vibrator of some plastic she imagined would feel a lot like the skin on an erect penis. Next she opted for some thick cream with a peppermint logo, one of the few pictures she could identify on the arrayed jars. Usually being able to see and choose from such a display of goodies would give K.C. a buzz, but not now. Not when her mind was taken up with her worry about Adriac.

But at least she knew he was still alive .... And they would be together for the rite. A slender thread to hold on to for hope, but all she had. For the moment.

\* \* \* \*

Adriac had to believe K.C. was all right. He knew Deel’hui wouldn’t hesitate to hurt her if she could get away with it. But, for now, K.C. was in too public a position for Deel’hui to risk flagrantly harming her. Whatever nastiness Deel’hui had in mind would be far too subtle to get her in trouble. After all, he knew Deel’hui would never lose sight of her public persona and the honors and privileges that went with being Chief Priestess of the Goddess’ temple. But Adriac hated to think what plots Deel’hui might have in mind for the future. His gut told him her

ambitions would not be satisfied until she rose much higher than her current position.

Well, he wasn't going to let Deel'hui triumph. Of course, being slated to die right after he and K.C. made love in the arena didn't give him much room to maneuver. But he would figure out a way to stop her—even if he'd have to leave the plan to someone else to carry out afterwards .... No, he wasn't going to think that way. He would perform the rite, live to make a future with his beloved, and vanquish Deel'hui.

But right now, he had to get back to the matter at hand—the matter in his hand—his cock. He needed to convince the Powers that he was in danger of depleting his vital essence. Thoughts of Deel'hui had a withering effect on his erection, so he banished her from his mind's eye and focused on K.C. He imagined her here with him in this cell. Instantly, the air around him grew warm and charged with electricity.

K.C. with her beautiful smile, her soft, generous body so open to him. His aching hard-on pulsed, and he stroked harder. His hand was a poor substitute for the place where he'd most wanted his erection tonight, deep inside her. But at least she'd come twice for him before the Guard dragged him away. And he knew there'd be one more climax for both of them, this time with the two of them intimately entwined in holy copulation.

No, there'd be many more times, not only one.

He moved his hand up and down his dick, feeling the satisfying surge of his response to the stimulus of his flying fingers. He rubbed and stroked, paying special attention to the sensitive skin of the ridge 'neath the head. The friction was accomplishing what he'd wanted, bringing him to his goal. Adriac's balls tightened, and he gave them an extra squeeze. His cock surged, and he knew he'd explode in moments.

No reason to hold back. With a groan on his lips and K.C. in his heart, Adriac came. He thought he heard a gasp from somewhere—not him—probably his unseen audience. Good, let them get an eyeful. There was plenty more where that came from.

Thinking about K.C., imagining her here in the cell with him, Adriac didn't require much recovery time at all. He'd hardly gone back to a soft state when he willed himself to get hard again. The faster he could convince his jailers he was going to deplete himself, the faster he'd be out of the cell and en route to getting out of this place.

His cock half hard, Adriac visualized K.C.'s sensuous mouth, her full red lips parting to welcome him. He could see her little pink tongue dart out from between her lips to lick them, to get them shiny with her warm moisture. His penis responded with a satisfying vigor, and he stroked harder.

Now he wanted moisture. He wanted to feel K.C.'s wet tongue and her lips caress his cock, make it glisten with her wetness. Totally dedicated to K.C., he put his fingers into his mouth and sucked each one. If only he could have them in her luscious mouth. He ran his tongue over his fingers and pretended K.C. was running her tongue over every inch of his erection, taking his balls into her hot mouth and sucking on them.

When his fingers were thoroughly wet, he returned them to his waiting cock and began to slide them up and down. At first slowly, so he could savor the feel of the moisture seeping into his hot skin. She ran her tongue over his shaft, tickling him with divine pleasure. He rasped his nails around the tip and lower, and told himself the slight sting came from her teeth, teasing him with soft, delicious nibbles.

Now she blew her hot breath across his straining glans, and Adriac squirmed to get into her mouth harder, tighter, closer. He wanted to be so far into her that they truly merged into one.

Sooner than he would have imagined, he felt himself begin to tighten for that final ascent.

A drop of precum pearled the head of his cock, and he spread it over himself, imagining her licking it off and swallowing it.

It was too much. With a gasp and a groan, he exploded into a second come. Giving into temptation, he aimed his cock at the sensors' lens. Let them get a real eyeful.

\* \* \* \*

Tonight's pre-bed bath was a relatively simple affair, as ritual preparation baths went. The attendants showed K.C. to a bathtub, a huge one, but still a bathtub. Sleek, probably marble, with fourteen-karat gold spigots. When K.C. came over, a serving woman was just filling the tub with hot water.

"What kind of fragrance would you prefer, dear Goddess, for the bubbles and the moisturizing oils?" Deel'hui, her eyes lowered modestly, asked. She sounded so deferential anyone listening might think she really respected 'the Goddess'.

"Musk de Adriac," K.C. said.

Deel'hui flinched as if K.C. had poured ice water over her head. "We have a wide selection of fragrances including many musks, but not the one you mention."

"I bet," K.C. muttered.

"Perhaps if the Goddess does not prefer to choose a scent herself, I can help her out and choose one for her?" Deel'hui's teeth glinted in the soft light of the room.

"What would you choose for me, *dear Chief Priestess*? Let me see if I can guess. Uh, you wouldn't consider skunk spray as the fragrance of choice for me, would you?"

"Of course not," Deel'hui huffed. "Such a choice would be inappropriate and ... *disrespectful*."

K.C. raised an eyebrow. Skunk would be her first choice of scent for Deel'hui. On second thought, even skunks deserved better representation. "I took mint cream along with the vibrator. Supposing I'm going to make use of both tonight, I'd better go with mint. Don't want to have a clash in fragrances."

Deel'hui inclined her head. "A wise choice." She ordered the serving women in her own language, and they took off. In moments, they'd returned with two ceramic pitchers, which they emptied into the filling tub. Soon tangy mint fragrance scented the air and tantalized K.C. She remembered Magda had told her how many varieties of mint there were. K.C. couldn't remember the exact number now, but she'd be sure to ask Magda the next time she talked to her. If she ever again talked to Magda, she thought with a pang.

Great. Homesick and heartsick about Adriac. If this was how a Goddess was supposed to feel, K.C. considered divinity overrated.

"The tub includes several hundred jets you can activate at will," Deel'hui rattled off. "You can select the temperatures and speeds of the water jets, varying them or having them all be the same. Some Goddesses especially enjoy directing the various water jets at their sacred mounds. This is also wonderful cleansing and preparation for the holy copulation."

So much for the tub being of the plain, old-fashioned kind. All K.C. wanted directed at her sacred mound was Adriac. Was there any way she could use this bath to help her get back to him? She knew from past experience that a hot bath would relax her, make her drowsy. Those magic jets of water would probably only enhance the effect. So, it behooved her to stay on her guard and keep her wits about her while she bathed. Not let herself relax. At the same time, she had to be able to convince Deel'hui and the other guards and witnesses that she was fully giving herself up to the bath's effects.

"You may disrobe now. Your humble servants are here to assist you." Two young women

who kept their eyes modestly turned downward stepped forward.

"You know I prefer to undress and get into the bath alone," K.C. reminded Deel'hui.

The Chief Priestess frowned. "It is our way to provide assistance to our Goddess in all these tasks. By refusing, you keep disrupting our traditions to a dangerous extent."

"That's me. I live dangerously. Which includes taking off my clothes and getting into the tub myself. If you were serious about wanting to give me what I want, you all would get out of this chamber and let me take a bath in divine privacy."

Deel'hui's eyes flashed. "That is impossible. For any number of reasons which I'm sure you understand. We will refrain from touching you, but we will not, repeat not, leave you alone. Not at any time from now until the Fertility Ritual has been successfully completed. Which is why," she added with a smirk, "I haven't re-enabled the mind-reading function of your ear phones. Think whatever you'd like. You won't be alone to act on your perversities."

So Deel'hui remained one step ahead of her. All the more reason for K.C. to wish the next few days away though she knew what fate awaited Adriac right afterward. But the truth had grown in her. There was no way she'd let him go to the sacrifice. There had to be something she could say or do to change his fate.

"The tub awaits you." Deel'hui bowed with a flourish.

"Turn around, all of you," she commanded the serving women. None of them made a move to comply until Deel'hui nodded. "You too," K.C. told Deel'hui. "All of you. Turn around."

Deel'hui shook her head. "Having seen how misplaced my trust in you was previously, I can no longer have you out of my eyesight from now until my sacred duty to you is complete."

"You mean you're going to eyeball me every minute 'til the ritual?"

"Either I or one of my most trusted priestesses." Deel'hui folded her arms over her chest and thrust out her chin.

"I won't get into this tub until you turn around." K.C. could outstubborn anyone.

Deel'hui lifted an eyebrow. "If you do not climb into the tub by the time I count to ten, my women will pick you up and put you in."

Where had Deel'hui found so many women with large muscles? So K.C. lost that battle, but she wasn't going to give up on the war. Woodenly, she got undressed under the scrutiny of her guards and climbed into the tub. She had to admit, the water temperature was perfect—just like they knew her exact preference.

"Our aura reading capacity is a most powerful tool," Deel'hui crooned.

*Shit.* Deel'hui's being able to read her aura and, at will, her mind, was a hundred times more intrusive than all the crap they were doing about her body. K.C. remembered reading about meditation, the challenge to make her mind blank. For someone like her, whose mind was always going a hundred miles an hour, slowing the process down was next to impossible. But damn, she was tired of giving Deel'hui so many weapons to use against her. Could meditation also blank out an aura?

Deel'hui grinned at her as if in challenge. K.C. was going to do it. She was going to clear her mind and aura and think nothing. Yeah. Where better to do so than in a tub full of perfect water that smelled like her best friend's herb garden? K.C. pictured a big fat bee, droning lazily, and a black-and-orange butterfly drifting from plant to plant under a hot noon sun.

She could practically fall asleep in the garden that smelled so sweet and felt so peaceful. With her toes, K.C. explored to find the water jets. She wanted to feel hot water sluice down her body, warming her even more in her cozy bath. The jets were amazing. With just a little pressure

from her toes, she could vary the speed and temperature of each one. She felt kind of like a symphony conductor, only she was directing water jets instead of musicians.

Good thing to occupy her mind, which still hadn't gone completely blank. Yeah, she'd think about water jets and how great they felt. Nothing else in her mind but thoughts of racing through the bubbles, which seemed to stay large and fragrant no matter how much she splashed around. She wouldn't let herself think about how much she desired Adriac to be here with her. How fantastic it would be to share a bath with him. Have him wash her back, her pussy ....

Too much thinking, which, she was sure, intruded out into her aura and showed on her face. She'd never been a poker player. She sighed. Her toes found the water jet perfectly aligned to stream to her clitoris. She nearly jumped out of the tub when the first splash of water hit her spot on. Dang, but it felt good. She squirmed in the tub and a small tidal wave of water splashed out along the sides. In moments, the water and bubble level were exactly returned to where they'd been when she first got in the tub. Seriously impressive shit that.

K.C. hated that Deel'hui knew how good her clit felt with the water hitting it. On the other hand, if her mind was on her clit, K.C. wouldn't be thinking much of importance for Deel'hui to glean. K.C. put her hands alongside her hips to brace herself and opened her legs. Several water jets now pulsed over her pussy. With another small toe flicker, she was able to get the speed variable, but she was still surprised when the different bursts opened her up.

The water jet teased her. First the water pulsed harder. Just when K.C. felt herself begin to come, the water eased up, keeping her on the edge. Her whole pussy felt caressed, with water coating her labia and flying up inside her. Now fully concentrated on her pleasure, as she'd intended, K.C. slid her thighs back and forth across the bottom of the tub. Her own rhythm, as much as the water jets, was turning her on.

And then the jet concentrated on her clit began to flow more steadily, building, building. This time, when she started to come, the water fed her sensations and took her even higher. When she let herself slip into her climax, K.C.'s mind went totally blank. But not blank enough for her to emit the sounds of a full-fledged orgasm.

Those she would reserve for Adriac only.

Did she imagine it or did Deel'hui actually say, 'We'll see about that.'?

\* \* \* \*

After Adriac came for the fourth time, his cock started to feel a tad sore. But he wasn't about to give up. After a very short recovery period, he shifted position and once again took himself in hand.

Within moments, he heard footsteps outside his cell. Without much delay, the metal door began to slide back from the stone wall, and four men wearing the purple and black of the imperial guard burst in.

"In the name of the people of Niarofilca, unhand that cock!" a soldier barked. He lunged at Adriac. An older soldier caught him and pulled him back.

"What do you think you're doing?" the most senior-looking barked.

As Adriac's hand still gripped his penis, he considered any answer he might come up with superfluous. "I don't recall inviting you *gentlemen* into my private quarters."

"You are committing treason," the same senior officer intoned. "Mendrinar, read him the code."

Mendrinar unscrolled a document and read. "According to the most fundamental tenets of the people of Niarofilca, district of Narim, legal code number three hundred thirty-two point seventeen, subsection A two hundred point eight, it is the sacred duty of the designated consort

who will plant his seed in the divine Goddess during our solemn Fertility Ritual to conserve his consecrated semen. This means that for the period of the ritual preparation, the consort will dedicate himself completely to the conservation of his essential fluids. Not a drop is to be shed until he meets with the divine Goddess in holy copulation as stipulated in the annals of the law. For the good and welfare of the people, any transgression of these most essential laws is to be punished.”

“With what?” Adriac asked. Funny how he’d never paid attention to the end of this section of the legal code.

“What do you mean, with what?” the senior guard asked.

“What’s going to be the punishment for the divine consort who disobeys?” He still had his hand around his half-erect dick, along with the eyes of the fourth guardsman, who’d yet to say anything. What else could they do to him? Cripes, he was scheduled to be sacrificed in two nights. Meanwhile, he was being held far away from K.C. with no clear understanding of what was happening to her.

“Oh, you have no idea what else we can come up with,” the fourth guard broke his silence to say. He never stopped looking at Adriac’s cock.

“You can’t stop me from touching my body any way I intend to,” Adriac challenged.

The oldest guard said, “You have a poor memory if you have already forgotten how quickly and easily we can restrain you in full-body chains. That’s exactly what we’ll do if you can’t keep your hands off your penis.”

Adriac wouldn’t let them see him wince at the memory of the chains he’d been dragged to his cell wearing.

“We have lots of ways to keep you from spilling your seed in an inappropriate fashion,” the fourth guard, still addressing Adriac’s groin, said.

“The only way I’ll stop is if you free me from this prison. I need to know K.C., uh, the Goddess, fares well. And I will believe only the evidence of my own senses as to her welfare. Furthermore, to perform my designated function to the best of my ability, I need to have the freedom to live my last days as I choose. Otherwise, I now realize I will be less than fully able to complete the sacrifice my people’s good demands.”

“We are but humble guardsmen,” the senior officer said. “Our authority extends only to the most basic of duties, such as making sure you do not transgress our people’s rules.”

*Humble officers, my ass.* Adriac knew the guard here was a representative of the elite of their class, the *crème de la crème*. “If you aren’t in a position to grant me my freedom, then take me to whoever is.”

“Very well,” the senior officer said. “Though I will tell you that you probably won’t like what you hear and might end up in worse shape after you confer than you are now. Our hands really are tied here.”

Adriac, with thoughts of escape looming, said, “I’ll take my chances.” He reinserted his cock inside his garment and, always alert for a gap that would allow him to escape, prepared to follow the guards to a person of greater authority.

\* \* \* \*

When she was thoroughly clean and had come several times, K.C. started to climb out of the tub. Two women were instantly at her side, ready to assist her. “I really can do this myself,” she huffed.

“We want to be sure no accident or harm befalls you,” Deel’hui said self-righteously. The two serving women continued to clutch K.C.’s arms though she used her best elbow action to bat

them away. *Dang, they were strong.*

Two other women came over with large, very soft and fluffy-looking towels that radiated warmth. One started drying K.C. off from the back, the other from the front. She totally hated the lack of privacy.

"Now you will have a small snack before you retire for the night," Deel'hui said when K.C. was dry. Yet another serving woman brought over a black silk garment. K.C. took it from her and pulled it over her head before the servants could help her.

"I'm not hungry or thirsty." Not after all she'd consumed already. And, especially, not after the way Adriac had been pulled away from her. Maybe a hunger strike was called for.

"Just, as they say in your culture, a nightcap. To help rush you to pleasant dreams," Deel'hui crooned.

"More like nightmares if they're coming from anything associated with you."

Deel'hui waved her hand dismissively. "You must have your night time snack. Dear Goddess, don't be tedious. I really do not want to have to put you to bed with an I.V. stuck in your arm."

That made two of them. K.C. shivered at the prospect. So all right. She'd take a few sips, a few nibbles. Enough to get Deel'hui off her back. Hell, the woman had to sleep some time. Maybe K.C. would get the next few hours away from her relentless scrutiny.

"I'm not in the habit of night time snacks," K.C. started.

"I'm getting the I.V."

Cripes, the woman was needle happy. "So I won't take much for the snack."

Deel'hui smiled big. Didn't she ever hear of people being gracious in victory? K.C.'s two faithful companions led her to a table set for one with magnificent gold dishes and utensils. A single red rose edged in gold decorated a golden vase. K.C. sat.

Two more serving women brought in a tray and pitcher. Deel'hui herself poured a drink from the pitcher into the glass at K.C.'s setting.

"What's this?" K.C. asked.

"A strawberry margarita, exactly as you like it," Deel'hui said.

K.C. doubted that. Exactly as she liked it would have been back at La Palomita, her favorite Mexican restaurant. A margarita of any kind was not exactly K.C.'s idea of a bedtime drink, though she had to admit it beat warm milk any night of the week.

"And to eat?"

"Strawberry cheesecake."

Yeah, she couldn't fault them on their knowledge of her favorites, at least as far as food and drink. She'd never have considered indulging in strawberry cheesecake with a strawberry margarita, especially before going to bed. Well, it wasn't like she was going to sleep anyway. Not with her worries about Adriac.

Under Deel'hui's vigilant glare, K.C. took a dutiful sip of her margarita. The first taste was luscious, as good as the bartender at La Palomita got it on his best nights. But then K.C. became aware of some weird aftertaste. Actually pretty subtle. At first, she wasn't even sure she tasted something that didn't belong. But after three sips, she was. This time, Deel'hui hadn't managed to hide her tracks. K.C. pushed the margarita aside.

"What's wrong?" Deel'hui asked. "Why aren't you finishing your drink?"

"It doesn't taste right," K.C. said.

Deel'hui's brows came together. "Of course it tastes right. It's perfect, exactly what you prefer."



K.C. bit back any number of appropriate responses. Damn, the woman pressed her buttons, large and small. Like Deel'hui was the world expert on K.C. Berrigan and what she wanted. "It's off, but that's all right. I don't want any more."

Deel'hui wagged a needle in front of K.C. "All right. I'll drink it. But I'll taste the cheesecake first, see if it's any better." K.C. put her fork into the rich filling of the crust. The cheesecake was a rich yellow color, with an abundance of large red strawberries garnishing the top and along the sides, and several dollops of whipped cream. None of it skimpy. K.C. put her fork into the filling and took a small piece. Looked good. Smelled luscious. She tasted cream cheese and sour cream in the sweetened mixture. In combination with the sweet, ripe berries, her palate said 'yes'. And then, that funny aftertaste again. Same as the margarita. What the hell?

"Whoever made these used some sort of ingredient that messed them up."

"That's ridiculous," Deel'hui stated. "You're just imagining things."

K.C. shook her head. "I know what I know. I know margaritas and cheesecake. These two work well until the aftertaste, which tells me something is wrong."

Deel'hui pursed her lips. "Regardless of your fancies, *dear Goddess*, you will finish your snack. And then retire for the night." She once again held up the I.V., and K.C. got the message. Loud and clear. She forced herself to down the rest of the margarita and cheesecake. Hell, an episode like tonight's might be enough to put her off both her favorite drink and a dessert she'd always loved. Though she hoped not.

After her so-called snack, K.C. was indeed ready to call it a night—anything to get away from Deel'hui, who surely couldn't intend to sleep with her. When she'd completed her toilette and gotten into bed, Deel'hui came over to say good night. Jeez, just what K.C. needed to guarantee a nightmare. It looked like two women, one on either side, would be guarding K.C. for the night. Evidently Deel'hui would get a few hours of shut-eye while K.C. slept—or, as she was sure would happen, tossed and turned.

When K.C. was in her bed, Deel'hui said, "You mustn't forget these toys, which are for tonight." She brandished the vibrator and cream K.C. had selected earlier and then forgotten about.

"I won't need them tonight," K.C. said.

"Oh, I think you will," Deel'hui answered before gliding out for the night.

*What the hell did she mean by that?*

## Chapter Eight

As soon as K.C.'s head hit the pillow, her thoughts raced to Adriac. Now she envied Deel'hui her ability to read minds and wished she had some means, any means, to communicate telepathically with the man she loved.

The moment Adriac entered her mind, K.C. felt her pussy begin to tingle and cream. As in she felt so hot, she'd die if she didn't come. She needed a man between her legs, or she'd explode and expire right on the spot. There'd be nothing left of her.

Desperate, she clamped her hand between her legs and, her clit throbbing painfully, she began to ride herself. She thrashed back and forth, unable to achieve any of the satisfaction she so craved.

And then her fevered brain remembered the vibrator and cream waiting on the table next to her bed. Driven, she turned on to her side and, like a drowning woman going down for the third time, grabbed the jar and the hunk of plastic as if they were guaranteed life preservers.

With trembling hand, she pried off the lid of the jar and flung it aside. She plunged her fingers into the cream and opened her legs to cool her hot pussy with it when the lights around her bed came alive.

Cwadriac and Gl'endziac, the massage dudes from before, now stood on either side of the bed. She so didn't want them there, but, when she opened her mouth to tell them to leave, nothing came out but an ineffectual squeak. "Let us help you with that," Cwadriac said. He sat down on the edge of the bed, briskly and efficiently transferred the cream from her fingers to his own, and then began smearing it over her clit, massaging it into her labia and up into her intimate core.

She wanted to swat his hand away, but couldn't move, couldn't get herself to do anything but savor the touch of the cream and his fingers on her screaming pussy.

*No*, she wanted to yell. *Get away from me!* She wanted to push him away, banish him from the room. But it seemed like the only part of her that remained alive and functional was her damp hot mound.

The two women sat frozen on either side of the bed. No one moved except Cwardiac and Gl'endziac. The latter had picked up the vibrator Deel'hui had insisted on leaving by K.C.'s bedside. With a quick flick of his wrist, he turned it on. The quiet musical hum of the toy filled K.C. with dread at the same time her treacherous sex kicked into high gear. If she didn't have a cock in her in a moment, she'd fling herself on anything or anyone she could get her legs around—even, goddess help her, Cwadriac or Gl'endziac. Her last rational thought was the most profound regret of her life that Adriac wasn't there with her to get her through this insane frenzy.

In moments, Gl'endziac had the vibrator exactly where K.C. so badly needed it, sliding along her moist, hot folds, then jammed into her. She'd expected to feel instant relief when she was filled, but to her horror she found the large, solid vibrator wasn't enough. She needed to move, faster, harder, in search of an orgasm that would end her torment.

Cwadriac kept massaging her pussy with the mint cream, and K.C. wasn't sure if he was helping matters or making them worse. All she knew was that she craved the contact with his talented fingers, and she pressed herself uninhibitedly against them. Meanwhile, Gl'endziac

danced the vibrator in and out of her, accommodating her as she arched her hips to maximize the contact.

Cwadriac's massage expanded to include her ass, with his fingers playing in and around her hole. Whatever the two men did seemed only to raise the level of K.C.'s arousal. She was totally on fire while the two of them stood by dispassionately and, unengaged, serviced her galloping needs. She wanted to shriek and holler of her driving, hammering frenzy, but she despite all her efforts to express what was happening to her, she remained mute.

When her first climax began to gather up inside her, K.C. dared to believe she would be delivered from the fury of sensation that gripped her. She shuddered forcefully at her release.

But the first climax did nothing to relieve her tension for long. Nor did the second or third. All night long, she continued to buck and claw until exhaustion finally overtook her and ended the drama.

\* \* \* \*

The guard to whose office his escort brought Adriac reeked authority. Decked out in the dress version of the uniform the other men wore, this officer also wore the medals and ribbons that bespoke high office.

"General Omniac Muradingar," he said by way of introduction. "I understand you have some concerns that have led you to transgress our code," he stated in a voice devoid of emotion.

Adriac was not about to give up more information than he had to. "I have some concerns, yes."

The general nodded to the men who surrounded Adriac. "If you will excuse us ...."

One guard said, "He's never to be left with fewer than three of us at a time."

The general fastened him with a withering look. "I accept full responsibility for the prisoner. You can leave him here with me."

The other man was about to respond then seemed to think better of it. "Very good, sir."

"The prisoner will be here with me and the videotronic expert. I am convinced the two of us will be able to help our prisoner understand the error of his ways."

"Very good, sir."

The escort guards left the general's office, and now Adriac could see the other man in the room with them, the one the general identified as the videotronic expert. Adriac saw the 'expert' was a man of about his age. Tall, dark-haired—he looked more muscular and fit than the men who usually went in for that line of work. More like he should have been one of the guards, too. Maybe he was one, undercover for some reason. Adriac instantly tensed. But then he realized that, given the long, difficult training for anyone to become a videotronic expert, the other man was probably not also a guard. Or else he would probably botch up whatever videotronic task he was there to complete.

"Tell me your concerns, Mendushar," General Muradingar commanded Adriac.

Adriac had no illusions that the general's question was sincere, and he had no intention of answering truly. On the other hand, he had to answer something. "I am concerned," he said, "because I am being locked away in this insalubrious setting until the Fertility Ritual, hardly the optimal way for me to prepare to pleasure the Goddess then."

The general's mouth twisted in what appeared to be disgust. "And you thought jacking off like a randy adolescent would be the best way to get yourself in top shape for that event?"

"I considered it the only way to get the attention of anyone with authority, to reconsider this prison sentence."

"Food, shelter, solitude. Protection from anyone intruding on your last moments of

privacy.”

“Aside from the sensors and spies monitoring me twenty-four hours a day.”

The general inclined his head slightly. “Granted. But still, Mendushar. Consider what you have. Lots of men would willingly give up freedom of movement for these advantages.” The general looked at him questioningly.

Adriac shook his head. “Total separation from the Goddess negates all else.”

“Standard ritual preparation. You knew that when you signed on. The Goddess is always sequestered in the Palace of Dark Chocolate until the appointed day. I understand the period of preparation is considerably reduced this cycle.”

Adriac began to feel his way to a plan. “Perhaps it’s time to change the traditional approach. For the ritual to be really meaningful, perhaps the consort and the Goddess should have more time together before they meet in the arena.”

“Whatever for?” The general snorted and shook his head. “This year’s been different in too many ways. She’s gotten to you then, has she?”

“What do you mean?”

The general snorted and shook his head. “Listen, young fool. The Divines like to play their games, don’t you know? Makes their immortality more interesting. Sounds like for this one, it’s not enough to fuck with you in the Fertility Ritual and save the people. She’s trying to add spice to the process, playing a game with you.”

Adriac couldn’t let himself believe K.C. had been any less than completely sincere and truthful with him. But the general didn’t stop talking, and he couldn’t shut his ears. “She’s using you, like a plaything. What does she care about you? To her, you’re merely a plaything, one of many. So she uses her charm to make you adore her, then, when you’re completely her captive, tosses you aside.”

A sick feeling took root in his gut. He didn’t want to believe this man, but the general had such an air of authority, as if he knew all the secrets of the world. “Why would she do such a thing? Given that I’m slated to die immediately after the ritual.”

“Because your adoration, whether for a moment or a day, feeds her like no other elixir or food.” The general made a dismissive gesture with his hands. “I’ve seen it before, but never as bad as your case. And considering how you came through the trials, highest score of any competitor in recorded history, I thought you’d be a model for posterity of how to complete the process right. Right, hell, brilliantly. Instead, you’re flubbing worse than the lowest wash-out.”

Adriac felt anger flash in his heart. He wouldn’t stand still and hear K.C. maligned. “I do adore the Goddess, you’re right about that.” He clenched his fists. “You’re wrong about everything else.”

“Yeah, wise guy? Is that what you think?” The general’s lips curled in disgust.

“It’s what I know.” Adriac jutted his chin out in pride and desperately hung on to the truth he was so sure of.

“Well, I can show you that, when it comes to the Divines, you don’t know anything.”

Adriac doubted that. “What are you going to show me? Nothing that’ll change my mind.” He folded his arms in front of him.

The general sat back in his chair and laughed. “Nothing I like better than a challenge—and setting a wiseass straight.” He looked over at the videotronic expert. “Got the connections ready to go, Allorishar?”

The expert nodded. “The system is set to proceed.”

“Sit here next to me, Mendushar.” He indicated a chair. Adriac warily sat down.

"The picture is being transmitted simultaneously with the live action occurring over the videodirectpath system," Allorishar said, his voice flat and neutral.

What pictures, Adriac wondered? What were they going to make him look at?

In a moment, he knew. There was K.C., his K.C., with two giants of men servicing her. Adriac saw her, writhing beneath their attentions, silently begging them for more. One appeared to be wielding his hand and some cream over her sacred mound and into her buttocks. The other had a vibrator that he moved all over her folds, deep into her—the place where his own hands had been just a short time before. But not his cock, which now, despite his exhaustion, twitched.

Muttering an oath, Adriac flew from his seat, his hands like claws to tear down the offending screen where the abomination flickered. By the Goddess' hair, he couldn't bear looking at K.C. like this. Even worse, having the other men here in the room with him, all of them watching his K.C. in the throes of some misbegotten ecstasy.

Before he could destroy the screen and wipe the image away from his eyes, two strong hands clamped down on him and a whip crackled from across the room. "Don't be an idiot, or I'll be forced to put you back in irons, or worse," General Murandigar hissed.

Adriac growled. Let them put him back in chains. Nothing could be worse than being forced to sit in this spot and watch the woman he loved share such deeply sexual moments with two men. After what they'd experienced together, after their words and promises, how could she so quickly submit to the embraces of these two men? Yet K.C. did nothing to protest. She mutely participated in their attentions and appeared to urge the men on.

He felt two more pairs of arms encircle him, pick him up, and deposit him back in the chair he'd just jumped out of. Though he struggled and managed to make contact with one of the bastards sufficiently to feel a bone crunch and hear curses hurled, in moments he was tied to the chair. When the videotronic expert turned up the lights, Adriac saw the general and one of the other guards standing over him, panting for air.

"Will you listen now, idiot?" the general asked when he'd caught his breath.

Adriac glared at the videotronic expert, who he thought looked back at him with a modicum of sympathy in his eyes—an ally of sorts. "You're lying, all of you, with those filthy images," he spat out.

"You think what you just saw is not actually happening now, as we speak?" the general asked.

Adriac narrowed his eyes. "I know there are all sorts of ways false images can be constructed and conveyed—especially by a videotronic expert. I am furious that you would so dishonor the Goddess."

"Bardriac Allorishar, speak clearly now," the general commanded.

"Yes, sir," the expert responded.

The general cleared his throat. "On your professional and personal honor to the eleventh degree, do you verify the images you are revealing are true and accurate to the best of your knowledge?"

He hesitated for a beat.

"Need I repeat my question?" General Murandigar, his voice only slightly elevated, asked.

"No, sir." Allorishar looked at Adriac with what appeared to be regret. "I do so verify the images."

"To the eleventh degree?"

"Yes, to the eleventh degree." Though his voice still sounded neutral, Adriac felt certain

the expert didn't want any part in how he was tearing him apart.

"What we have seen is happening at the moment it is transmitted to us via your equipment?" the general went on relentlessly.

"Yes, sir." Allorishar looked like he wanted to be anywhere but where he was at that precise moment.

No matter how bad he felt, though, he couldn't feel as gut-wrenching sick as Adriac. What the hell was going on with K.C.? If those two goons were attacking her, why didn't she protest—never mind try to fend them off?

"It's all part of the divine games," the general droned on. "As in, for goddesses like this one, mortal men exist simply for fun and games. When you're not around to service her, she moves on to the next guy. Or in her case, two guys."

"I don't believe it," Adriac muttered through clenched teeth. Everything in his body was frozen, half dead already.

The general shrugged. "You would deny the evidence of your own eyes—evidence attested to by one of our leading videotronic experts?"

Adriac wanted to talk to the expert alone, but realized there'd be no way in hell that the general would let that happen. Sick as it made him to contemplate, he figured maybe he should force himself to look some more at the video. Maybe he'd see something that would help him to understand what was going on. Why K.C. would go almost literally from his arms to those two bozos.

"Run it some more," Adriac muttered.

"You're sure?" The general looked only slightly smug and self-satisfied.

The expert, wincing, silently appeared to voice the same question.

No, Adriac wasn't at all sure. But he had to know. Nothing was worse than the gaps in solid information his imagination was filling with horrors.

The moment the video started up again, Adriac thought he'd retch. Bad as the previous images had been, he wasn't prepared to see K.C. thrashing and arching into a climax at the hands of the two men he'd hate forever. After the way he'd made her come, twice, he'd expected K.C. to restrict such interactions to him and no other. But what he viewed was unmistakably a climax, involving her entire being. And, far from protesting that Adriac wasn't the one producing this reaction and two other men were, all K.C. did was mewl in tiny whimpers and shudder.

"Shut it off!" he demanded.

The expert didn't wait for an order from the general before closing down.

"You see the truth of what I was saying?" the general asked again. "What more proof could you possibly need to believe that mortal men are mere toys for the divine who come among us?"

Adriac wasn't ready to concede, but he was too heartsick with grief and loss to continue fighting. With a shudder he remembered his reason for scheming to leave his cell was to seize any opportunity for escape. Now, after seeing just how the Goddess comported herself as soon as he was out of her sight—after having seen him dragged off from her presence in chains—he realized the futility of his plan—and, most of all, what an idiot he'd been.

Even the guards seemed to realize he'd lost something essential and were far less vigilant on the return trip to his cell than before. He could make a break for it—for what? So he could try to take a turn servicing the Goddess? Hell, that would be the way he'd spend his last hours before his sacrifice.

When he lay down on his bunk later and tried to get to sleep, he felt more bereft than at

any other moment of his misbegotten life. After all the honors he'd accrued, his last days would be marred by his being the biggest moron in the universe. He could just hear all the gods and goddesses above and below laughing at him.

He was wondering if he'd ever fall asleep that night when a beam of green light streamed in under the metal door that sealed him off. *Great. Another intrusion.* Well, the Powers had done enough damage for one day, hell, for one lifetime. He resolved to ignore the light and turned away.

But he couldn't seem to evade the beam. Oh hell, he might as well take a look and see what new way his prison guards had found to torture him. Not that anything could ever beat the visions of K.C. in her most intimate moments with those two large, hulking studs. To think, he'd allowed himself to use the word 'love' to describe his feelings for her. The first time he'd ever used that word, though other girls and women had begged him to say it to them. And K.C. had said the word 'love' back to him, convinced him that she, a Goddess, loved him, that what lay between them was not just the obligatory pleasure of the holy copulation at the Fertility Ritual.

Adriac got off his bunk and hunkered down to the floor to take a closer look at the light. At first, all he could perceive was that a solid beam of green flashed across the floor, but he couldn't figure out why it was there. It didn't seem possible that random rays of light would be shot off under prison doors.

As he looked at the light, it appeared to move, almost as if trying to convey some sort of message. And then he realized the light pooled over a small area of the floor where he saw what appeared to be words. What kind of prank was this? He began to read: *Though the images were real, do not believe all you saw. There are ways to stage anything.*

Humph. A message he would have given his teeth to get when K.C.'s likeness lay fresh in his mind. Could this communication be a trap—for what purpose? Before he could puzzle this out, Adriac read the initials at the bottom of the note. B.A. Had to be Bardriac Allorishar, the videotronic expert.

Maybe there was an explanation for K.C.'s apparent betrayal. Or not. Though he wanted to harden himself against any spark of hope, he couldn't completely shut out the possibility that B.A. knew what he was talking about. But what good would any of that do now?

\* \* \* \*

The next two nights passed in exact repetition of what had happened after Adriac was captured when he came to K.C. On the last morning, K.C. woke up with what felt like the worst hangover of her life. A hangover she'd have had to guzzle whiskey all night to earn, but all she'd had was one strawberry margarita. Everything else was a blur. Her muscles felt sore and achy in places where she hadn't realized she had muscles. Worst of all, she felt discouraged and hopeless.

When she hit bottom, she'd have a memory flash of how Adriac had come to her. His eyes had burned with intensity when he looked at her, as if she really were the most beautiful Goddess in the universe. And when he touched her, her body sprang alive as it never had before. They'd had such a short time together. Her two climaxes with him shook her. Thoughts of those orgasms warmed her even now, when she felt so exhausted—sexually and in every other way, like she was coming down with a weird flu.

Though K.C.'s sense of time was totally disoriented, she understood that several days had elapsed. This was the day of the ritual, the time she'd both dreaded and longed for. Soon, she didn't know exactly when, she'd finally be with Adriac again. Then she could get answers to all the questions that so puzzled her.

Of course, she and Adriac wouldn't be alone. She'd be sharing his presence with a crowd of thousands. Worst of all, during these lost days, she hadn't figured out a way to save him. No glimmer of a plot. And suddenly his sacrifice was smack in their faces. They were running out of time, and all she knew was that she adored him—which wouldn't mean squat when it came to rescuing him.

The moment she climbed out of her bed, two guard women sprang up. "Chief Priestess Deel'hui and the cooks are busy preparing your breakfast for this special day," one chirped. "You will need to eat a hearty meal to prepare for your role. May I help you on with your dressing gown to go to the dining room?"

K.C. hadn't expected there'd ever be a time in her life when the thought of food would turn her off so completely, but that's what this experience had done for her. Still, she knew better than to turn the food down. She'd managed not to get stuck with an I.V. up 'til now, and she planned to keep avoiding it. With the women on either side, K.C. went to the eating area.

Deel'hui and two more women were busily preparing a meal. The last person K.C. wanted to see this morning, especially when she felt so shaky and weird, was Deel'hui. But the sight of her bustling around the kitchen, acting like the perfect chef and hostess, wasn't all that turned K.C.'s stomach upside down. A familiar aroma tickled her nose, making her feel like she was back in her own kitchen, only far better.

On the table where she was to breakfast sat a golden platter of K.C.'s favorite French toast—the way she made it, but looking perfect, like a glossy photo out of a best-selling cookbook. Three slices of bread dripped pale yellow butter and fragrant maple syrup. Powdered sugar outlined the generous contours of the French toast, and fat red strawberries garnished the plate. The smell of the fresh brewed coffee in a thick creamy mug would have roused K.C. from the dead. This breakfast, her personal dream of perfection, was the scariest sight of all she'd seen.

She looked around her and went to the table. "How did you know?" she asked Deel'hui. Of course K.C. had heard the mind and aura reading explanation before. But she continued to be stunned by how much Deel'hui knew about her.

The other woman waved her hand dismissively. "I've told you," she said, grinning like a model at an expensive car show room. "Your memories are clear, oh Goddess." Of course. Evidently K.C. broadcast everything she thought and felt so loudly and clearly she might as well have been on twenty-four hour/seven-day TV like the guy in a nightmarish movie she'd once seen.

Thinking she understood exactly how a condemned prisoner eating her last meal—one she'd chosen from soup to nuts—felt, K.C. sat down and tried to scare up even a modicum of appetite. Deel'hui's threat of forced feeding lurked just below the polite facade.

"Eat hearty. It's a very big day," Deel'hui said, bustling. The spider said to the fly.

K.C. mechanically ate the food before her. Yeah, it was delicious, like the most amazing chef had personally prepared it for her. But it all tasted like sawdust.

"You don't have to sit here and watch me eat," K.C. said. Maybe if Deel'hui left, she'd feel some shard of appetite. Thinking of Adriac and wondering what he might feel this morning, K.C. realized even Deel'hui's absence wouldn't do much to lift her mood. Only Adriac's return could do that.

Chew, swallow. Chew, swallow. Don't choke. Take a sip of coffee. Hot. K.C. worked her way through the breakfast, trying to ignore Deel'hui's constant gaze. "So what's on the agenda for today?" K.C. asked.



“After you finish eating, you will have another cleansing,” Deel’hui said.

Geesh. These people must have thought she was incredibly filthy or something. “Another bath?”

“Yes. The last one before your Fertility Mating with your consort.” Deel’hui’s eyes grew almost misty.

K.C.’s heartbeat accelerated. She would be reunited with Adriac in just a short time. “So soon?” The approach of their ritual meant the time of his sacrifice was also getting close. And so far, no plan to save him.

“Even as we speak, the crowds are gathering.”

That prospect nearly sufficed to put K.C. further off her breakfast. Under Deel’hui’s eagle-eyed glare, she finished every last morsel.

Deel’hui nodded almost approvingly. Shit. She really thought she’d won, didn’t she? Though as far as K.C. could see, maybe she really *had* won already. Looked like everything was going her way.

“Now it’s on to your bath.”

K.C. went with two different women and Deel’hui to the chamber for the baths. To her amazement, she was first told to submerge herself in what looked like a pool of chocolate, warm enough to raise bubbles. “What the hell? You’re going to have me bathe in chocolate now?”

“It is not chocolate.”

“What is it?”

“Sacred mud, my Goddess, brought here especially for this august occasion.”

Great. She was supposed to roll around in some mud prior to meeting with Adriac in front of a cast of thousands? “Uh, Deel’hui, I don’t think so. I don’t do mud. And you are not going to threaten me with an I.V. on this one.”

Deel’hui glared. “You must take this bath. It is essential. For softening.”

K.C. rolled her eyes. “I’m already soft.”

“Not like this,” Deel’hui insisted. She dipped her pristine white hand into the mud and scooped some up, holding a fistful under K.C.’s nose. The stuff smelled like the inside of cave. Sexy. Not. More like dank and mineral.

“You are not getting me to climb into that,” K.C. said. “I’ll take another bath, one of the nice ones, but not in that.”

Though Deel’hui didn’t call K.C. an idiot, that opinion flashed in her eyes. She rolled some of the mud between her finger. “This mud is carefully harvested once a year for just this purpose. The women of our society are on long waiting lists to get just enough mud for their faces. Only you, *Goddess*, can bathe in it.” Deel’hui practically spat out the last words.

Yeah, okay. So she’d heard about mud baths. She had to pick her battles here. She’d get into the mud, bob up and down a few times, then climb out. “I certainly hope I’ll be bathing in something else before I get together with Adriac.”

Deel’hui tsked. “Of course, Goddess. This is not the final step of your preparation.”

Once inside the pool, K.C. found the mud a pleasant surprise. It felt smooth and comforting, almost healing. Her earlier flu-like aches and pains seemed to disappear. The two women who’d escorted her to the bath next showered K.C. with warm water from hoses they held over her head and then moved across her body. The water pulsed from the nozzles, making short work of washing away the mud. K.C. touched her arms. As advertised, she felt totally smooth, if not as clean as she planned to be.

Next K.C. went into a tub of creamy milk—cool and soothing, so calming she wanted to

linger there. But time was fleeting. Her next stop brought her to a pool of clear water scented with flowers and a cinnamon musk. Here K.C. thoroughly cleansed herself, washed her hair and scrubbed every inch of her body.

When she exited the pool, she was surprised, not happily so, to see that the massage guys from before, Cwadiac and Gl'endziac were back. Seeing them stirred her mind, a whiff of nasty memory and something disagreeable. But she couldn't identify what about them nagged at her.

"Tell them to go away," K.C. told Deel'hui.

"Nonsense. They have already participated in many phases of your preparation. You have no reason to dismiss them from this one."

Just her gut telling to get away from them. With her dismissal of them on her lips, she tried to resist them, but she really didn't know why she felt so put off by them. They dried her off, then rubbed her body with flower petals and a thick cream with no fragrance. Though they upset her, she couldn't deny how good their hands felt.

Deel'hui watched the proceedings. When K.C. was totally moisturized and smooth, she nodded and said, "Now you are ready to dress for the ritual, my Goddess."

Two more women from what was apparently an abundant supply of attendants now entered the bathing area. They held up for K.C. a length of white silk with a thin band of purple and a thick band of gold finishing the edges.

"This is the official divine fabric, reserved for our Goddess to wear only for the Fertility Ritual."

It looked nice, but not that special to K.C.

"Oh, it's very special," Deel'hui said. "We must import it from Venus, where the most talented weavers have a colony."

When it came to curiosity, cats had nothing on K.C. How could she possibly resist touching anything that allegedly came from Venus? Assuming Deel'hui meant the planet, and not a different city.

"Of course the planet," Deel'hui said. "Surely you know this, Goddess. We understand you and the other gods and goddesses wear many garments made of fabrics from Venus."

K.C. made a non-committal remark.

The two serving women and Deel'hui draped the Venusian cloth toga style over K.C., and fastened it around her waist with gold links. The cloth did feel fine against her skin. She evidently wasn't going to wear any garments under the toga, which suited her. The silk draped over her in the most flattering way, and she really did love the feel of it. Much finer even than her favorite red silk dress, the one she'd been wearing when this whole adventure began. Where was that dress? Would she ever see it again?

After styling her hair, the women crowned K.C. with a wreath of purple and white flowers that fit over the top of her purple headphones.

"What no makeup?" K.C. asked, remembering how carefully she'd applied all her cosmetics for her trip to Magda's shop—surely a lifetime ago.

"You will go for the ritual as you are," Deel'hui said.

"What about shoes?"

"No, you will be barefoot. The sedan chair bearers will carry you to the arena. Your feet will never have to touch the ground."

Fun and games were over. She had to kick her brain into high gear if she seriously intended to get herself—and Adriac—to safety—and home. And she did. She wouldn't return home without him.

It would be nice if she could take the toga along, too.

## Chapter Nine

General Murandigar himself accompanied Adriac's escort that final day.

"It is now time for you to meet with the Goddess for the sacred Fertility Ritual." The general looked as if he were conferring the highest of possible honors on Adriac.

Moving like an automaton, Adriac got up from his bunk and crossed to the opening. He laughed dryly. Freedom from the cell at last. He'd been so proud previously that his last act before the sacrifice would be making love to the Goddess and saving his people. But after three days of hell, he fully acknowledged the truth. His sole function was to service her, no better than the bots. His lovemaking had no more meaning for her than any other service a mere mortal, a bot, or even a sexual aid could provide. Brush her hair. Serve her a drink. Hell, cut her toenails. Make her writhe and come. Hear her treacherous words of love. Adriac would die facing the ugly truth—he was only one of many indistinguishable servants. Did all of them delude themselves as he had that they were special to the Goddess? That she *loved* them?

He'd have sex with her and then he'd die. No better than a worker bee in a hive.

"First you will have the sacred bath and grooming," the general pointed out.

Adriac nodded mutely. Every man in Niarofilca knew the ritual preparation procedure down to the last detail. Of course Adriac had abrogated the usual preparation. Few of the Goddess's consorts spent the days prior to the ritual in an isolated prison cell.

But even his flagrant flouting of the traditional separation of the Goddess and consort did not suffice to alter the final steps of the preparation. So Adriac would go through with the bath, the shaving and hair trimming and the sacred decorating. He would have the red circles of those consecrated to Hamlak, the Master of the Dark Sacrifice, painted on him prior to his union with the Goddess.

Even at the thought of her, of their coming together, his traitorous dick rose. After the evidence of how she'd moved on from him to the next, he'd have thought he could easily keep himself in check. But just the thought of her stirred his desires and aroused him. He'd had no fears previously of achieving complete erection before the cheering crowds in the arena. After all, that was his sacred duty. Now he sadly conceded to himself it wasn't just duty and honor getting his cock hard.

The general left, but the four guards stayed in tight formation around him as he entered the anointed bath chamber. Heat radiated from the pool of water, which Adriac knew would be perfumed with aphrodisiac scents both to permeate his skin, to arouse him and, afterwards, the Goddess. He nearly wept at his image of her taking in his scent, tasting him with her lying tongue.

He made quick work of the ritual disrobe and descent into the pool. The warm waters swirled around him, and he dipped himself down to immerse his entire body. Though he was in no mood to appreciate the intense sensuousness of the waters, he couldn't completely ignore them.

If only the Goddess had stayed true to him. K.C. He couldn't believe how quickly and easily she'd replaced him. How foolish he'd been to trust there was something real between them.

His thoughts strayed to Bardriac Allorishar, the videotronic expert who'd tried to give him a secret message of hope. Unfortunately, Adriac had had no further contact with the man, and, from the skimpy message, could glean no additional reason to doubt the evidence of his senses.

When he met up with K.C. again—the Goddess, he mustn't lose sight now of her true title—he'd hold himself as aloof and cool as possible. He'd fuck her instead of making love with her. All he owed anyone at this late point in the proceedings was the fulfillment of his duty, which he'd do, to the letter.

Except, such half-cocked compliance would do little good for his people. The complete fulfillment of the commands was the reason he'd first entered into the competitions that landed him where he was now—that and his wish to bring honor to himself and his loved ones.

Adriac's head whirled with his confusion and anguish.

Well, before nightfall of this day, his agony would be past and he'd have entered the next world.

Lost in thought, Adriac didn't hear his guard summon him until they'd grown quite loud and impatient.

"Time now for your painting," the senior guard said.

Adriac climbed out of the pool and reached for the towels piled on a table. "I'm to dry you off," the same guard said, getting a towel.

"Don't touch me," Adriac growled. The guard backed off.

Adriac proceeded to dry himself, then looked around for his garments.

"You are to be painted before you dress for the Fertility Ritual," another guard told him.

Adriac attached the towel around his waist and walked away from the guard. He hated being under the intense scrutiny of all four men.

Within moments, General Murandigar returned to the pool room with a little man wearing the long braid favored by members of the artists' collective. The man carried the little black metal cans of paint and the large leather folder of brushes that also characterized artists.

"This is Gadlon Yardiac, the artist engaged to create your body markings for the ritual."

Adriac inclined his head. The other man bowed deeply. "It is an honor for my work to become part of the Fertility Ritual for our people."

Adriac remembered when he'd also felt honored. He inclined his head. "I await your directions."

Yardiac studied Adriac. "The commission is for me to paint seventeen circles, large and small, on your body, with an additional one on your face. This will bring us to our sacred number of eighteen. The paint I am using, a shade of red called Crimsiac, is specially formulated to dry almost as soon as the brush touches your body. Which is why," the painter cackled, "I have to be perfectly accurate as I paint."

"I am sure you will do a superb job. I have every confidence in you," Adriac said, wishing he cared.

"No complaints ever before." The painter cackled again.

Adriac rose and threw his towel aside. One of the guards swallowed hard. "Get them out of here," Adriac ordered the general. "It's going to be hard enough for me to stand still to get the circles painted. I do not need to have him or anyone else gawking." Adriac nodded in the direction of the guard, who now averted his eyes as they should have done all along.

"The guard remains. He watches you intently to prevent any escape attempt." General Murandigar shook his head. "We are taking no chances with losing you."

Adriac's lips curled in contempt. Like he was really going to bust out of the prison buck naked, with a painter running after him brandishing a brush dipped in red. "I'm not going anywhere."

The general appeared to consider this. "Are you telling me you are now prepared to fill your role with total honor and dignity?"

Honor? Dignity? Did either exist any longer? Adriac, too heartsick to debate the point, nodded.

"You must say the words, Mendushar," the general demanded.

As if any of it mattered. Adriac just wanted to get the inevitable over with. "Very well." He held his left hand across his forehead in the classic pose for taking oaths. "I, Adriac Mendushar, Lord Pom'diflor, do solemnly swear to uphold the duties of my honored position as Consort to the Goddess for the holy copulation in completion of the Fertility Ritual."

The general looked as if he believed Adriac's words. "Very well. I alone will remain here while you are painted." He nodded to the guards in dismissal. "But, Mendushar, know they will not be far from the door. One wrong move on your part and you'll be dragged to the arena in chains—hardly the image of the hero on his glorious path to the Ultimate Sacrifice."

Nothing was working out the way Adriac had dreamed. But, his own disappointment aside, he didn't want to bring shame down on the House of Pom'diflor. So, though his heart raged, he would cooperate. Be the model prisoner, the model consort, the model sacrifice.

Gadlon Yardiac was completely focused on his work, which, he'd quickly let them know, required absolute silence. Adriac watched in fascination as the other man painted the first of his series of circles on his upper thigh. The brush flew over skin and hair, tickling his leg slightly, but Adriac was able to remain as rock still as Yardiac's art demanded. Despite himself, Adriac grew fascinated with the intricate designs Yardiac deftly painted. He wondered what K.C. would think when she saw these adornments. He snorted to himself. Would she even notice anything but his staff erect in her honor?

In a surprisingly short time, the painting was complete. Adriac found himself sincere in his compliments to Yardiac for his masterful creation. The other man actually blushed. "Thank you, Lord Pom'diflor. I am proud my humble work is part of the divine ritual."

"What next?" Adriac asked the general when the painter had left. In moments, the escort was back. Now it wasn't only the one guard who stared at him in fascination. What the hell? The entire populace would be looking in just a short time. And K.C. Let whoever wanted to stare. He was beyond caring.

"Time to get dressed." Two men came in carrying a length of white silk with a thin band of purple and a thick band of gold finishing the edges. Adriac stiffened. He knew wardrobe servants would be bearing the same type of cloth, though much finer, to K.C. For their last time together, they would be dressed for a short time in similar fashion. Then, once the ritual began, they would shed their garments. And fate would be served.

His penis rose, tenting up his toga. Soon, soon, he would be with K.C. And soon after that, everything he knew and felt and was would be over.

\* \* \* \*

The sedan chair ride to the arena was much smoother than the one taking K.C. to the Palace had been. Or maybe she was getting used to being schlepped around in a sedan chair—which she'd better get unused to real quickly. Sedan chairs were few and far between in Northern California, her home in the twenty-first century. Home. She thought of it with a pang. She was homesick. She wanted more than anything else to return there. She'd had more than

enough of being a Goddess.

No, much as she missed home, she didn't want to return there more than everything else. Not more than saving Adriac and, somehow, taking him with her. But her brain must have gone into hibernation the moment she arrived here, because she didn't have a clue as to how to go about accomplishing that. And the moment of truth was upon them.

It was a magnificent day. A huge purple sun dominated the lavender sky, sending forth rays of warmth. There must have been thousands of toga wearing people, men and women, maybe even children, filling the seats of the huge arena. K.C. didn't see a single open spot anywhere. She and Adriac were evidently the headline event in Niarofilca that day. She'd always wanted to be a star .... But not like this.

The women carrying the sedan chair brought her out to the middle of the arena and put her down. Deel'hui herself parted the silk curtains and held a hand out for K.C. to grasp. Feeling far less graceful than she'd imagined a Goddess would, K.C. spurned Deel'hui's hand and gracelessly got to her bare feet unaided. The peach and pink stalks of what appeared to be some sort of ground vegetation, a kind of grass, tickled the bottoms of her feet.

Even with her headphones on, K.C. felt nearly deafened by the non-stop cheering. The crowd was putting out so much sound, K.C. felt like she could practically see waves of energy floating over their heads.

But where was Adriac? She looked around until she finally spotted him, off to a side, waiting for her at the edge of a raised dais in the center of throngs of cheering people. As soon as their eyes met, he began to come to the center of the arena with an escort of guards. But something was wrong. The look she'd seen in his eyes had little to do with adoration she'd grown accustomed to, but, only briefly, once, to seeing there.

The moment Adriac saw K.C., he knew he wouldn't succeed in keeping his heart hardened to her. All that remained hard was his cock. Damn everything, he wanted her. He wanted to be able to turn off his love for her, but, now that she was there before him, he knew he was lost. No way he could ever stop loving her.

\* \* \* \*

Adriac, wearing a toga that looked like hers, only less delicate and probably not from cloth of Venus, looked even more gorgeous to her than he had when last they'd met. She couldn't let anything happen to this man, even if she couldn't manage to take him home with her. Beauty and a noble soul like his could not be sacrificed.

The moment she approached him, Adriac broke visual contact and bowed. She held out her hand and raised his chin, so he could look her straight in her eyes.

When she once again saw the adoration in his eyes, K.C.'s knees nearly buckled. Knowing he could read her mind through the headphones, she'd enabled this function during the ride here. She wasn't taking any chances on him not understanding what she felt. Now she struggled to put order to her rioting thoughts and feelings, to express all her fears for him—for them. She saw him flinch at the violence of her thoughts.

He took her in his arms, and she felt his incredible hard-on—it made her solid gold vibrator feel like a discount store blue-light special. Now grateful for all the bathing and smoothing, she thrust her already moist pussy against him, and then part of her brain kicked in. "Do we have to stay here, be in front of all these people?" she asked, easing up a bit.

"This is our way," he murmured, his voice soft and husky.

She was so tired of hearing *that* particular expression and vowed to expunge it from her vocabulary from that day forward.

“Come my Goddess.” He took her by the hand and led her over to a white silk-covered chaise in the middle of the dais. The crowd now grew hushed. Their subdued sound was a slight improvement over the previous noise. If she couldn’t get rid of the onlookers, at least the lower decibel level would be less obtrusive.

In any competition judging sensitive, powerful hands, Adriac’s would easily have beaten the combined talents of those magical massage bots, Cwadiac and Gl’endziac. He lay her down and stretched out next to her face to face, gazing at her, his amber eyes sparkling. Suddenly it was like a cocoon spread over the two of them, shielding them from whatever and whoever surrounded them. Grateful, K.C. drew Adriac close for a kiss.

“My Goddess,” he whispered.

“K.C.,” she murmured back. “My name is K.C. You’ve called me so before.”

“K.C.,” he repeated, his voice sounding far away, before he closed in on her for that kiss she’d waited forever for.

Before she could give herself up to a full embrace, K.C. had to ask Adriac why he’d looked so cold when their eyes first met.

“It’s not for me to tell you now,” he murmured.

Part of K.C. wanted to coast on the good feeling between them and not press for an explanation. The fact that he’d admitted there was something to tell confirmed her instincts. “If not now, when?” she asked with a sad reference to the increasingly inevitable time of the sacrifice.

He laughed dryly. “After...after I left you, I was held in prison.”

She gasped, though she’d imagined he’d suffered. After all, a man didn’t get dragged off in chains to attend a tea party. But hearing the truth gave weight and reality to her suspicions. K.C. stroked the side of his face. “I’m so sorry.”

His eyes got a far-away look. “While I was there, I saw video of you with two men ... bots”

K.C. narrowed her eyes. “Me with two bots?” The only two men she’d been with had been for the massage, but that had been days ago ... Though in truth, the past few days, and especially the nights, were unclear. “There was a massage several days ago. But other than that, I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

“The images were very clear. You caught up in a passionate climax ... Well, I understand it is the way of deities to take their pleasure with mortals and other playthings like these bots.”

This had to stop right now. “Adriac, I truly don’t know what you’re talking about. Though to be honest, I suspect Deel’hui has been drugging me. The nights and days since I saw you have passed like a blur.”

“Drugged so you were unaware of what happened? Is this possible? Strange, but the videotronic expert warned me the images might not be all they seemed.”

The crowd roared, evidently demanding more than conversation from the spotlighted couple.

“Look, Adriac, whatever. I hope we have time to talk this out. But the most important thing is, I’m not a Goddess. Really, really. You must believe me. I’m just as mortal as you or anyone else here.”

He smiled. “You still insist on this?”

“It’s the truth. But tell me, Adriac, can you love a mere mortal like me? One who’s not a Goddess?”

In response his lips seared hers, and as his tongue darted into her eager mouth to caress



and explore, the earth shook. Damn, she thought, if he's making the earth move with just a kiss, what's going to happen when ...?

"Hold me tight," he said or thought, she couldn't be sure. Like she was going to let go of him as they went on their wild ride. She heard a loud clapping, and thought how crass these people were, expressing their judgments of two people loving each other. Adriac was nibbling at her lips and tongue, making little noises that didn't need to be translated through the headphones.

K.C.'s feminine core pulsed with need and desire. Adriac, though rock hard, was taking his sweet time. Did he know that his kiss transported her to a place of shadow and light, colors and sparks? Was he in that same place with her? K.C. pressed her breasts against him, sure she was poking him hard with nipples that cried out for his hands. He got the message. With one quick tear, her toga was gone. His hands now as frantic as her need, he cupped her breasts, then with a cry lowered his mouth onto her nipple and suckled. K.C. felt him down to her toes and for a moment wished she could have two of him to pleasure her everywhere.

Hell, two of him would probably kill her. As it was, he had them both hurtling through space, playing among the stars and planets.

She wanted skin now, to touch him and feel him against her. She put her hand under his toga, gratified to hear his moan when she made first contact with his huge, pulsing erection. He pressed himself to her, and she ran her fingers over the amazing thick, broad length of him, playing for just a moment with his firm tight balls.

K.C. shoved away Adriac's toga and lay her face against his firm chest. The man was burning up. Her lips on his nipples did nothing to lower his temperature. Adriac writhed against her, wedging his cock into her lower belly.

K.C. wanted him there, she wanted him in her. For nothing and no one in the universe could she stop her legs from opening for him. Her labia were heavy with her dampness. Adriac pressed his thumb against her clit, and K.C. nearly jumped off the chaise.

"I want to love you, K.C.," he said.

K.C., so happy he was using her name instead of calling her Goddess, moaned with pleasure. She rubbed her hot slit against his hand, and she heard him gasp. In one second, he had his cock where his hand had been.

"You want this?" he asked.

She bit his shoulder in response.

He turned them both now so she was under him. Around them, the winds rushed by, colors flashed, sounds she couldn't recognize burst into shapes. All K.C. knew was that Adriac had his cock at the opening of her pussy, and her insides were writhing in ecstasy.

He entered her with infinite slowness, raising countless buds of pleasure everywhere he touched her. K.C. had never before felt so exquisitely the advance of a man coming into her. The newness of being with him had her feeling like a virgin—only a million times better.

And then he was fully in her, and they were in complete body contact, total skin to total skin. K.C. wrapped her legs around his waist, and kept her arms firmly around his neck. The dizzying flying continued, heightening her excitement—and tightening their hold. K.C. could have swooned with the sensuousness of being with him, but she didn't want to miss a moment.

Buried deep inside her, locked in a kiss that had her breathless, Adriac lay perfectly still. And then he began to move, slowly, arching his slim hips, and K.C. let loose a volley of sounds she didn't know she was capable of making—somewhere between a cat's purr and a mountain lion's howl.

She thrust her hips upward to meet him and grasp the glory of the feelings he was waking

up in her. Her whole feminine essence sang and moaned, fully alive for the first time ever. K.C. did not want this magical bond ever to come to an end. She and Adriac soon fell into an exquisite, erotic rhythm, each stroke taking them higher and higher into the storm they were producing between them.

K.C.'s orgasm started in her toes and moved up her legs, past her knees, turning her thighs to jelly. Her nipples tightened almost to the point of pain, and she could swear every hair on her head was standing on end. She began to ululate with the sound of her ecstasy. After a precipitous climb, she reached the top of her mountain and flew off, coming and coming and coming. "I love you," she moaned. And then he called out her name, "K.C.," the sound stretched on and on. "I love you."

Adriac clutched K.C. to him for dear life as the world around them shook and streaks of black thunder rent the sky. A massive wind swirled around the crowd, forcing people to huddle together. Never before had such strange phenomena greeted the holy copulation during the Fertility Rite, and Adriac shuddered to think what these omens might portend for his people. But no matter what lay ahead, he would protect K.C. to his last breath—which was supposed to come pretty soon, though the current weather situation appeared to preclude any imminent sacrifice. He'd take every moment he could possibly get to be with K.C. and count himself fortunate, no matter how brief the time.

But suddenly Deel'hui loomed before them. "The power of the ritual is unleashed. But now to bring consummation, we must hasten the consort to the altar of sacrifice."

"No!" K.C. cried. Her heart hammered ferociously as she held on to Adriac so tightly he could swear no mere mortals could pry them apart.

From the corner of his eye, Adriac spied as a soldier approached them. So few moments left. He refused to waste the remaining time and would spend his last breath telling K.C. how much he adored her.

Just as the soldiers prepared to seize him a great tremor shook them all. And then a massive figure of a female descended from the blackening sky. Was it his imagination, or did Deel'hui appear on the verge of fainting?

The crowd released a large collective gasp. Adriac could see them all asking the same question—Who could this be?

The woman, fury sparking from her huge dark eyes as coils of thick black hair swirled around her head in the strengthening wind, planted herself on the dais near him and K.C. Both frightened nearly out of their wits, the two of them clutched each other and still lay entwined as one.

Arms planted firmly at her sides and legs spread in a stance of power, the woman announced. "I am the Goddess arrived for your ritual."

"Now she shows up," K.C. moaned.

Adriac looked from the Goddess to K.C. Yes, the newly arrived female had the air and bearing of a true Goddess. But why had she so delayed in coming to them?

Before he could express any of his half-formed thoughts to K.C., the wind took hold of them and spun them around in a series of whirls and pirouettes. No matter how hard he tried to hold on to her, K.C. slipped from his grasp. Futilely, he reached out to the place in the sky where he saw her slip between low-flying clouds. Damnation, but he couldn't have lost her now. Fate wouldn't be so cruel. With his heart, soul, and gut he hoped she would still be somewhere near him when their mad spin finally stopped. But when all grew still again, before he'd even regained his breath, Adriac found himself completely alone in the middle of the arena. His K.C.

was gone as mysteriously as she'd arrived among them.

Despite the crowd around him, never before in his life had he felt so alone. Before he could stop himself he opened his mouth wide and howled out his agony.

## Chapter Ten

In a whoosh of wind, with a bone-threatening thud, K.C. landed on something hard. And then, total blackness engulfed her.

When she came to, K.C. found herself lying on her bed, her red silk dress crumpled about her. She groped around, found herself alone in her bed—and she felt more bereft than ever before. She sat up abruptly, but her head ached so badly that she lay back against her pillows and ran her hand over her brow.

What the hell had happened? She looked around her dimly lit room and saw the box Magda had given her—when? Had it just been today? Yesterday? Had she been out of it for longer than a day? Her bedside clock had stopped at 5:32. A.M. or P.M.? She had no idea. Memory slowly began to return. The box Magda had given her contained something weird for her writer's block. Otvingadoria.

K.C. snorted. The otvingadoria had produced a hell of a dream. Yeah, she'd have to tell Magda as soon as she could get herself over to her phone. K.C. sure knew what to write now. Heck, she felt like she'd been to the thirty-second century and could describe it firsthand.

Her groin ached pleasurably. The dream had felt amazingly true, down to the stud who'd made the most amazing love of her life to her. Adriac. She tingled with pleasure thinking of him and sighed. Damn, she had a great imagination. Or that otvingadoria was powerful stuff. Maybe she'd advise Magda to bottle it. Make a fortune.

None of which eased her sense of deprivation. K.C. knew now she had the key to writing her book, but she'd upped the ante on what she required to be content. After her time with Adriac, what man could ever measure up? She'd be alone and loveless forever, unless she could figure out a way to get back to the thirty-second century again. But was the otvingadoria that reliable? She wouldn't want to time travel somewhere else, even if the travel took place only inside her head.

\* \* \* \*

"You!" the Goddess commanded, aiming a magnificently beringed and taloned finger to point at Deel'hui, whose escape route had been blocked by the crowd.

Pale and shaky, Deel'hui drew herself to her full height and appeared to pull herself together. She curtsied gracefully to the Goddess. "My Lady," she said, "I am most gratified you are here among us at last. It is clear that during the delay in your arrival, an imposter came forth and attempted to usurp your rightful place."

The Goddess bared her teeth and growled, causing more disturbance in the square. "The only imposter who concerns me here is you, Deel'hui Melindar, false and treacherous priestess. Before you die a most dishonorable, slow death, you will confess to all assembled here. Tell these, the people you purport to serve, why you imprisoned and diverted me from a timely arrival to complete the necessary holy copulation for the Fertility Ritual."

At these words, the soldiers surrounding Deel'hui grabbed hold of the priestess. The crowd, grown ugly, demanded horrendous punishments. But Adriac would have willingly foregone the justice of any such punishment if Deel'hui would only tell him what had become of K.C. Who was she and where had she gone?

“You will confess before all here now,” the Goddess commanded in a voice that would brook no disagreement. “Reveal all the ignominy, the duplicity that motivated you to subvert your people’s most central ritual—and my worship.”

Deel’hui’s face hardened into a cold, hard sneer. “My Lady, do with me as you will. But I choose the path of silence.”

“Insolent traitor, what illusion do you harbor under even now? To think you have a choice. You will talk. Immediately.” Streams of electricity burst forth from the Goddess’ fingertips and surrounded Deel’hui with cold fire. Icicles formed in the priestess’s hair, on her nose, her chin, her breasts. Adriac, like the rest of the onlookers, shivered as they watched Deel’hui freeze over. Her lips shuddered and her teeth chattered as she contracted into herself in an apparent effort to hold on to warmth.

“Goddess, have mercy. Forgive me,” Deel’hui begged, her once-haughty voice now the feeble plea of an ancient crone.

“Not until you tell everyone exactly what you have done. And why.”

When the Goddess aimed a second round of ice fire at her, Deel’hui held up her trembling arms. “I’ll talk.”

The Goddess kept silent, waiting, like the crowd, to hear what Deel’hui would say.

“I confess. I purposely befuddled and confounded your summons to our Fertility Ritual so your voyage would carry you far a field.”

“Go on,” the Goddess hissed. “Why did you so divert me and subvert our traditions?”

Though Deel’hui hung her head in an imitation of humility, Adriac saw the mutinous glitter in her eye. He only hoped the Goddess would see through her insincerity—and that the Goddess would soon tell him where and how to search for K.C.

And then the realization struck him. The Goddess was here. The real Goddess. K.C. had been speaking true in her denials. Heavens, he was the Goddess’ designated consort for the Fertility Ritual—and now, just in the nick of time, she was here. Glory, entry into the history books as a legend to be forever admired spread before him. Now was his chance to be a hero forever to his people.

But all he could think of was K.C., his beautiful, adorable K.C. All he wanted was to be with her, however they could be together, whatever he needed to do to make that happen. He would gladly repudiate his elevated status, the honors awaiting him and his, if only he could join K.C. and make love with her. He would never need any other honor and would be more than ready to cede any admiration due him to his runner-up.

The Goddess appeared to be studying his face during the many silences in Deel’hui’s so-called confession. Adriac could have sworn the Goddess could truly read his mind and heart, understood what he was feeling. Despite his pain at K.C.’s absence, his heart swelled. Wherever and whenever K.C. might be, surely the Goddess would reunite them. He hoped with every ounce of his being.

\* \* \* \*

K.C. had never felt at such loose ends before in her life. Cripes, she had everything she’d wanted. And more. After the great adventure of her herb-induced hallucination, she was back in the home she loved, safe on terra firma—whatever the true nature of that adventure had been. And she realized with a pang, she might never fully understand what had happened.

In the past, work had always been her salvation. She couldn’t think of a single time in her life when she hadn’t been able to work through any trauma or angst by sitting down and writing. Ironical that her first ever writer’s block had led her on the strange journey she’d just come

through. She didn't know what to call the mix of fantasy and fear she'd landed in—and come out of.

Could there ever be a more perfect hero than Adriac? A hero for her heroine—and for her. At the thought of what she'd known in his arms—and what she'd lost by coming back to reality—K.C. felt herself tear up. Oh, hell, she couldn't let herself go and get all weepy now. Tears were so not her style. And it was impossible to see the computer screen through tear-filled eyes.

She stared at her screen through the veil of her tears and forced her fingers to move. She wished she could conjure up Adriac's face, use the image to fill the blank screen. Yeah, right. She was a writer, not an artist. So maybe she'd just type his name several hundred times across the screen, the way she used to scribble boys' names in her notebooks in high school. Or she'd just let her fingers type whatever thoughts came up. Better to write nonsense, any gibberish and then go back and try to make something of it than to keep facing the blank screen.

Adriac was everything she ever wanted. So she was lucky to have had her time with him, even if only in her mind. It wasn't like K.C. Berrigan to just hang around, mooning over a man, even the Mr. Perfect she'd spent too little time with. She had to go back to the way she'd been before, when creating perfect men and writing them for her heroines more than satisfied her yearnings. Or so she'd always told herself. She wouldn't deny that having sack time with a hunk rang her chimes, but hey, that's what they had vibrators and batteries to replace, right?

She shivered at the memory of the vibrators that had surfaced in her fantasy. K.C. smiled to herself. Her great imagination was one of her favorite qualities about herself. After all, she was a writer of romances—which meant she should be getting down to business—and writing.

Despite how she ached for the fantasy she'd come up with to be true, she wasn't one to indulge herself in daydreams. With a sigh of regret and a determined swipe at her tears, K.C. began to move her fingers across the keyboard.

\* \* \* \*

Once Deel'hui began really confessing, it seemed she'd never shut up. Her voice loud in the rapt silence of the crowd, Deel'hui spun out her tale of greed and duplicity.

"I've always wanted Adriac Mendushar," she spat out, turning to glare at him. Adriac wanted nothing more than to avoid her eyes, to reject her again. "When he began to compete to be your consort, dear Goddess, I knew he would win. After all, he's always stood head and shoulders above his competition in all."

The Goddess turned to him, swept him with her eyes, grinned and nodded. "My designated consort." When she turned back to Deel'hui, she was no longer smiling. "You sought to interfere with the most fundamental rite of my worship and your society. The width and breadth of your sin and treachery have no equal in the annals of the Goddesses."

Deel'hui lowered her eyes. "Yes, my Lady."

"Go on."

"Even before he'd actually won the crown, I had my plan in place."

The Goddess's dark brows drew together. "And your confederates in this were ...?"

Deel'hui shook her head slowly. "No confederates. I thought of the plot and executed its details all by myself." Damned if she didn't look a tad proud.

"At least you didn't corrupt any others," the Goddess muttered in a bellowing voice. "But now I, the Goddess Xapantarina, have arrived. And all will be set back to proper order."

Deel'hui began to look smug. The Goddess, who lacked no mass and proudly wore masses of white hair that contrasted strongly with her cocoa brown skin, whipped out several

more bursts of her icy electric sparks. The smirk on Deel'hui's face froze. Clearly from the sounds of approval that began to emanate around her, the Chief Priestess was not a crowd favorite.

Xapantarina continued, "The corruption you have brought to this society is evil enough. But tell me, why didn't you find another means to communicate your desires to me? Instead of diverting my retinue and befuddling us, why didn't you simply confess your feelings?"

Deel'hui appeared to manipulate her facial expression to show surprise, but succeeded only in contorting her face into a frozen grimace. "Would you have let me have Adriac?" she practically whispered.

The Goddess bared her teeth. "I didn't say anything like that," she snapped. "But had you told me of your feelings and inclinations, I might have searched for a different fate than the one you will meet today."

Deel'hui hung her head.

"Continue with your story," the Goddess ordered. "Was it just your desire for this man that motivated you to come up with your satanic plan?"

"No," Deel'hui answered through gritted teeth.

"Don't force me to ice you again. Speak."

"I thought that, in your absence, I would be elevated to be the Temporary Goddess—especially for the holy copulation part of the Fertility Rite."

Now the Goddess laughed, a harsh sound that people held their ears to block out. "To think, how is it possible a priestess could wander so far astray from the path? Do you not realize the difference between mortals like you and the divine class?"

Deel'hui looked sick.

"I grow tired of restraining my wrath, Deel'hui Melindar. But I want to know one more thing. I want to tell the other deities the extent of your perfidy so no other mortal can ever again commit such mischief. Specifically, how did you keep me from landing here at the designated or any other times 'til now?"

Deel'hui shrugged. "I embedded a repelling spell in your navigational coordinates and in our soil. Any time your vehicle would begin to approach our atmosphere, the repelling spell diverted you."

"And sent us off to many boring orbits. Did you realize that would happen?"

Deel'hui shrugged again. "I wasn't sure where you'd be diverted to."

The Goddess raised a perfect eyebrow. "I'd still be in inglorious exile but for a fortuitous departure. Someone exited your society and made a sufficient hole in the atmosphere to allow me in. At last."

K.C., Adriac thought. "*She's talking about K.C.'s departure.*" His heart began to ache all over again.

"Now is the time for the ritual," the Goddess said. "We don't have much of a window of opportunity. But before I take on my consort, I want to make one thing clear."

A cordon of soldiers surrounded Adriac and began to escort him to the Goddess. He opened his mouth to protest, to throw himself on the Goddess's mercy and refuse. Because in addition to not wanting to make love to the magnificent Goddess, he wanted to stay alive so he could find K.C., tell her all, and be with her.

As they forced Adriac forward to her, the Goddess added, "I am committed to stopping the foolish and horrible custom still being practiced here—that of the sacrifice of the Goddess' lover."

Adriac's head snapped backward when the Goddess' intention penetrated his emotional fog. He no longer faced certain death once his consort duties were behind him. Of course that still didn't let him off the hook as far as going through the complete Fertility Rite with the Goddess. Lord knew that, if she insisted he service her and he refused, she might still order his sacrifice. But now he felt so much surer than before that he and K.C. would be together again. If only ....

When Adriac stood before the Goddess, she turned and said to the shackled Deel'hui, "Well at least you have good taste."

Deel'hui snorted.

"It's too bad, Deel'hui Melindar, that you have perverted and corrupted the gifts I bestowed upon you."

Deel'hui appeared to shrink before the crowd and her accuser.

"Deel'hui Melindar, is it accurate that you have mocked and vilified the most awesome gift we gods and goddess have bestowed on you mortals—true love?"

The priestess's face contorted in a spasm of what looked like pain.

"Well, is it?" the Goddess thundered.

Deel'hui weakly nodded her head.

"Speak up, priestess."

"Yes, my Lady."

The Goddess shook her head. "Do you know how I finally came to land here? I will tell you. It was because the woman who left had the power of true love moving her to the place of her desire."

Adriac now knew exactly where K.C. had gone. Back to her time. His heart thrilled at hearing that she felt 'true love', at the Goddess's recognition of his and K.C.'s special bond. Loving her, he had to be glad that she'd gone to the place she longed for. But he could no longer fool himself. She was now irreparably beyond his reach. He'd never see her again, touch her again, be able to share words and acts of love with her. What did it matter that he no longer would be sacrificed if he faced his long life to come without K.C.?

"I am the one who loves this woman who departed from us," Adriac told the Goddess and all assembled. "And I've been most blessed that she loves me."

"If you and she love each other, why are you supposed to be my consort for the Fertility Rite?" the Goddess asked.

"When I fell in love with K.C., I thought she was you," Adriac said.

"And now that you know she's not a Goddess and I am, what do you feel?" The Goddess examined his face with an almost unbearable scrutiny.

Adriac bowed his head for a moment, then looked the Goddess straight in the eye. "With all due respect, my Lady, she is my true love and always will be."

Without skipping a beat, the Goddess clapped her hands. "Well clearly this man is not to be my consort on this day. So who is going to be my consort? Hurry, hurry. Time is fleeting."

With a shout of hurrah, Jondiac Blancanishar burst out of the crowd. "I was second in the competition, my Lady." When his eyes and Adriac's locked now, Adriac knew the wound to their friendship was healed.

"Step forward, man. And prepare yourself for the holy copulation." The crowd began to buzz with excitement.

The Goddess turned back to Adriac. "As for you, young man, what are you doing here? Why are you not with the lady you love?"



“She has gone back to her time and place,” Adriac started.

“Why didn’t you return there with her?”

Why indeed? “We became parted, and I could not hold her with me. Or follow her.”

“You do want to be with her?”

Adriac didn’t hesitate. “With all my heart and soul.”

“Well, then that’s where you shall go. Immediately.”

Adriac couldn’t believe his ears. “You can make this possible?”

She looked at him as if she wondered why he’d ask a question with such an obvious response. “Of course *I* can make it possible. But in your case, all you need is true love to take you where you need to be. Put your faith there, and you will be right by your lady love faster than a head shake.”

Adriac bowed deeply. “My Lady. Words fail me at this time.”

The Goddess held up her hand. “Don’t thank me yet.”

Head raised, Adriac studied the Goddess to see what complication she had planned.

“You will send me to K.C.?”

“Yes. But you’re not getting away from us that easily. You see, I’ve decided that wherever you go, you’re going to take Deel’hui Melindar with you.”

“Deel’hui Melindar?”

“I don’t want to go anywhere with him!” the priestess shouted.

“You, hush!” the Goddess thundered.

“But why are you going to punish K.C. and me in this manner?”

“Punish?” Deel’hui shrilled.

“I’ve told you once to hush, haven’t I?” the Goddess glared at the disgraced priestess. “I can find a way to silence you permanently if you can’t find a way to keep quiet on your own.”

Deel’hui started to say something, then must have thought better of it. She looked downward in a good imitation of humbleness.

“Do not regard this as a punishment for you,” the Goddess told Adriac. “But rather as an opportunity for Deel’hui Melindar to meditate on the errors of her ways. And a final gift to give your people as you leave them. You see, I shall not allow Deel’hui Melindar to stay here in the Narim district of Niarofilca. Not after the way she abused her position and perverted the Goddess worship here.”

Deel’hui made a noise that sounded like the start of a protest, but the Goddess quickly squelched her. “If I must chastise you once more, Deel’hui Melindar, I shall silence you for all time. As of now, you will merely be contained until such time as you can convince your guardians that you have reformed and want to atone for the errors of your ways.”

“My guardians?” Deel’hui croaked.

The Goddess indicated Adriac. “Adriac Mendushar and his lady.”

Deel’hui put her head in her hands but refrained from saying another word.

Though Adriac didn’t especially relish having the responsibility for Deel’hui’s custody or rehabilitation, he was so brimming with gratitude to the Goddess that he bowed his head in acquiescence.

“But you have said Deel’hui Melindar would be contained.”

“And so she shall.”

The Goddess snapped her fingers, and, in moments, Deel’hui Melindar shrank before them. By the time a puff of smoke dissipated in the air, a one-foot square cube of a clear substance surrounded Deel’hui, who appeared frozen with her mouth open. The Goddess placed

the cube on the ground near Adriac.

“Soundproof on the outside, though she can hear inside her prison unless you disable her sound apparatus,” the Goddess murmured with a smile. She leaned over and tapped the cube with a talon, which brought a frown to Deel’hui’s shocked face. “Unbreakable.”

“How will I know when she’s reformed?”

“I will maintain a telepathic communication with my former priestess.” The Goddess smiled cryptically. “If she’s to be freed from her prison, I shall find a way to contact you. And if you have any reason to think you see change, you can broadcast the thought and I shall be in touch.”

Deel’hui’s open mouth appeared frozen in a scream.

“There’s also a screen you can press a button to lower, covering all facets of the cube. To hide Deel’hui Melindar away from sight, should this become necessary or desirable. As now.”

Deel’hui appeared to open her eyes and mouth wider for an even bigger scream. The Goddess depressed a button, and a black screen obscured all facets of the cube. Despite an impulse toward sympathy for the priestess, Adriac’s lips twitched in the start of a smile.

Nyrtel, the wise woman, stepped forward from the crowd and curtsied deeply to the Goddess. “My Lady. The time is fleeting. In the absence of your priestess, I must humbly request that you and the consort begin the holy copulation phase of the Fertility Rite.”

“Right you are, Nyrtel. But first things first.” She handed Adriac the cube. “You must leave us now so the Ritual can take place.”

Before Adriac had a chance to say another word, he felt the world he knew open and swallow him up. Through the blackness and the winds that buffeted him, Adriac struggled to hang on to the cube the Goddess had entrusted to him. And then he lost all conscious thought.

\* \* \* \*

Though she considered herself a pretty gifted writer, K.C. had to struggle to get Adriac down in black and white, on her screen. Talk about the perfect hero. Wide and deep as her vocabulary was, words failed her. She almost felt like she’d have to create new words, heck, a whole new vocabulary, to describe Adriac to her readers. To her frustration she realized that even doing all this, she’d probably still come up short.

Remembering the Palace of Dark Chocolate, K.C. reached for a piece of her own special favorite. Funny, after all the indulgences she’d experienced, she’d have expected to become jaded about the rather ordinary pleasures of everyday life. But she found herself savoring the taste of the chocolate, same as she always had before. If anything, now she could appreciate the usual texture of her life in a way she hadn’t previously.

If only Adriac were here with her. If only Adriac were real. She might now be able to appreciate chocolate and other food, but how could she ever even consider being with another man? The Palace might not have spoiled her for subsequent pleasures, but, after Adriac, it seemed impossible to imagine there could be anyone else.

Despite her firm intention to guard herself from daydreaming and to work her butt off, K.C. slipped into a daydream. Funny, not only could she picture Adriac, but she could also hear him.

“My God..., um, K.C.,” she heard a voice call out. Uh oh, now she was having auditory components to her hallucinations. Well, she didn’t want to get over that, even if it meant nasty things about the state of her mental health...

And then he stood before her, gloriously naked, with a strange-looking object in his hands. He put the thing down. K.C. shrieked. Adriac rushed over to her.

“K.C., what is wrong?” he asked.

She touched him. He felt amazingly real. “What are you doing here? I dreamed you, didn’t I? Who are you?”

He took her hand in his. “I am Adriac Mendushar, Lord Pom’diflor.” With that, he drew her into a breathtaking clench, and K.C.’s knees turned to water. His lips on her tasted exactly as she remembered Adriac’s, only better. As the erection proudly poking at her—it was all Adriac. She moaned and wanted nothing more than to take him into her. But she had to know first .... Was any of this real?

“How?” she asked.

“K.C.,” he said, enunciating her name firmly, “you transported us back to your time.”

“Me?” How could she possibly have such power?

He stroked the side of her face, brushing her hair back from her face. “You transported us both. First yourself, then me.”

“How?”

His gaze drank her in, and she felt herself drowning. “The power of love. You see, I have fallen in love with you. And you said you love me, those very words. When I spilled my seed in you from the fullness of my love, the portals of time opened.”

Holy orgasm!

It all sounded reasonable. Well, as reasonable as a fantasy of time travel and finding the perfect hero could. “But, but, what about your ... *dying*? The sacrifice. Deel’hui said your doom was set, whether we made love or not. The moment of climax would lead directly to your sacrifice. When I fell away from you right afterward, I imagined the worst.”

Looking smug, he turned away from her for a moment, raised what looked like a cube of acrylic, and pushed a button that cleared away a black covering. Embedded inside the cube, her mouth frozen in a wide O of shock and unhappy surprise, sat what looked like a very miniature version of Deel’hui Melindar.

“What ...?” K.C. asked. “Is that who I think it is?”

He raised an eyebrow and nodded. “Deel’hui Melindar. In the flesh—and plastic.”

“But why? Why is she here? And,” she asked touching her head, “how come I understand what you’re saying? No more headphones.”

He deposited the cube on K.C.’s bedside table, kissed her, and pulled her down on his lap. “So many questions. First the easy one. When we travel to a new time or place, we automatically absorb the language.”

“Beats studying verb conjugations. Simple.” She snapped her fingers. “But why is Deel’hui here in that condition? Is it really her?”

“It’s really her.”

Talk about reducing. “Why?”

“To make a long story simple. Deel’hui came up with a conspiracy to make it impossible for the real Goddess to arrive among us.”

K.C. gasped. “She did? Why?”

“It seems Deel’hui aspired higher than being the Chief Priestess. She wanted to be the Goddess herself. She figured she would step forward and claim to be the Goddess when the people became sufficiently panicked. Oh, yes, and she also wanted me in holy copulation.”

K.C. scowled at the thought of Deel’hui’s perfidy and bit back a stab of jealousy. “What happened to the real Goddess?”

“She was diverted. Don’t worry, she’s fine. And Deel’hui’s plot brought us together. So

we should be grateful.”

“No wonder Deel’hui always seemed pissed.”

“Uh, yes.”

“But why is she in that cube? And, most importantly, can she get out?”

“That cube is her home until she can convince the Goddess she has completely atoned for her transgressions and reformed. None of which will be easy. So this small cube may be her permanent home. You see, the real Goddess caught wind of Deel’hui’s plot and didn’t take kindly to her pretensions.”

“I see. But Adriac, how come you’re okay? As in not sacrificed?”

“The Goddess has done away with this custom. Starting now.” He raised his eyebrows. “You see, Deel’hui Melindar never believed love could conquer the ancient curse that forced us to have these sacrifices. But the Goddess does. And our love has shown her to be right.”

K.C. didn’t waste time regretting Deel’hui’s blindness or evil-doing. To ensure the blindness continued, she covered Deel’hui’s cube with a plain white sheet. “That’s not necessary.” Adriac demonstrated the button-activated black-out feature. Though the two of them couldn’t actually hear Deel’hui’s words, the expression on her face as the screen descended communicated a clear message. Atonement and reform would evidently be a long time coming.

All K.C. could do was pinch herself in an effort to see if she was still lost in her dream. The pinch, which would soon give rise to a bruise, helped convince her that what was happening was real. “Adriac, I have somehow trapped you in my time. With me. If you want, I’ll call Magda, see if we can find a way to get you back to your own time again.”

Adriac grinned at her and nodded to his full-blown hard-on. “Do you think I look trapped?” he asked and grabbed her into an enthusiastic embrace.

Now K.C. was the one wearing too many clothes. In a second, she had her dress off. This time she’d make love with him in her bed, her home, and her time. They wouldn’t be hurtling through space and time, but they also wouldn’t have hordes of onlookers and a death threat over them. K.C. found the trade-off more than satisfying—as she did Adriac. Again and again and again.

Though Adriac had wanted with all his heart to go to K.C., he’d wondered if he would find her world as strange as she’d found his.

But the introduction to that world was in K.C.’s bedroom, with her by his side. He couldn’t have imagined a more perfect welcome.

Now that they could really be alone together, with no threats of spies or an unwanted audience, he could make love with her the way he’d wanted to from the moment he first saw her—slowly, with lots of time to explore and get to know every bit of her.

He watched appreciatively, his penis growing hard to bursting point, as she removed her garments and tossed them aside. She might not have been the Goddess in name, but in every sense of the word, she was a goddess to him—his goddess.

Her softness and warmth beckoned to him like a guide star. He pressed her to him, savoring the feel of her skin in contact with his. Before anything else, he had to kiss her. He cupped her chin in his hand and tilted her face up to give him easy access. Much as he longed to gaze at her beautiful eyes, drown in them, he couldn’t wait another moment for their lips to join.

He licked her lips lightly, tasting her sweetness and feeling her breath. With a groan, he plunged his tongue into her mouth. He drew her tighter to him, and she caressed the back of his neck as she invited him to deepen his kiss.

Her bed was large and soft. When the two of them tumbled down to it, Adriac knew he

could stay where he was forever. Their kiss continued, now the two of them mouth to mouth, then one or the other running teeth and tongue over the face of the beloved. Dragging his hands down K.C.'s sides 'til he got to her luscious behind, Adriac got down on his knees and buried his head in her belly. She smelled and tasted like the finest exotic spice, and he knew he would never get enough of her, never tire of her.

All his senses kicked into a higher gear than he'd ever known before, and excitement coursed through him like current through a wire. He began to kiss and nibble, tonguing her navel and wanting to burrow ever deeper into her. K.C. held on tightly to his head. Her touch melted him at the same time it turned him rock hard. She trembled against him. He shivered at the sheer effort of not devouring her.

Now Adriac couldn't resist K.C.'s intimate femininity. With his hands in the crease of her generous ass, he began to lick his way to her core. The taste of K.C. surrounded him, her scent overwhelming his senses and sharpening his hunger. With a soft groan, K.C. opened her legs to him, giving him the full access he craved to her hot, moist pussy lips. He began to nibble his way around the perimeter, alternating little love bites with thrusts of his tongue.

"Oh, Adriac," she whispered.

Goddess, she tasted incredible. Adriac inhaled deeply of her musky scent. She was like a rare flower, her petals leading him to the mysterious core opening only for him.

Quivering with need, Adriac, took a moment to feast his eyes on her beauty, the glistening plumpness of her pink folds. She lay, her legs spread wide for him. He still couldn't believe no one threatened him. That he could do everything he longed to with this woman. When he began to suck and lick her, to dip his fingers into her, his hungry cock pulsed with anticipation. He wanted to dive into her, but he held back. He was determined to pleasure her first, to bring her to a screeching climax before he plunged into her.

K.C. arched her hips up to meet his tongue, fingers, and teeth, and purred low in her throat. Adriac curled his tongue, creating a vee with the tip that he used to play with her clit, driving K.C. wild. And then he lifted away from her for a moment and blew gently on her pink, swollen labia and her clit.

"Adriac," she whimpered. "I want to taste you in me."

His cock practically stood up and begged. The thought of her taking him into her mouth ... Well, he nearly came. Enjoying the luxury of knowing there would be a time in the future for him to experience her mouth on him so intimately, for now he would forego this pleasure. Postpone it. All of which he longed to communicate with his lady.

K.C. writhed, showing him in many ways that she wanted his tongue, his teeth, his hands, his cock, all of him. Adriac resumed nibbling on her with the gusto of a starving man at an all-you-can-eat buffet. K.C. thanked him with her groans and thrusts. As she moved against his mouth, she thrashed back and forth on the bed. She tightened her legs around him, and he knew without a doubt she was going to come.

And come she did. With a series of sighs and moans, crying out his name, his woman let the world for all time know exactly where and how she was.

Then, when she'd becalmed for a moment, she lay shuddering deliciously. She held her arms out to him. "Oh, baby, I want you."

"I'm yours," he said, now nearly frantic. He'd been rock hard before, but now he was high and tight with a thrumming urgency to be deep inside her.

With the taste of her on his lips, Adriac kissed K.C. She took his cock in hand and began to rub, running her long fingers along his shaft in teasing little circles and driving him crazy. He

moaned at the pleasure of her touch. So many places he wanted to kiss and touch, but his cock demanded to be in her now.

He wanted her on him, over him, engulfing him. Adriac rolled onto his back and K.C., wiggling her bottom and setting off sparks, straddled him. He felt her hot, wet pussy on his belly and he swerved his hips to move her where he most wanted her.

Laughing, she bent down and kissed him, first on the lips, then the chin, before suckling his nipples with her teeth. Adriac knew he'd die soon if he didn't get into her. He groaned. And then, at last, she lifted her hips and positioned her pussy at the tip of his engorged penis. He grabbed her ass and held on for all he was worth. She was so wet, she slid right down his shaft.

Adriac moaned. He felt huge, hard and ready to explode. Pumping his hips, he began to dance inside K.C., but he wanted, needed to slow things down. He wanted to savor being inside her, make it last for both of them. Once again, he needed to move *s-l-o-w-l-y*. Oh, yes. He could swear he was feeling new sensations, discovering new places inside his lover unlike any he'd ever experienced with the many who'd come before. K.C. was so amazingly tight and hot and smooth over the ridges and veins of his granite-hard cock.

K.C. sat upright on Adriac, and he savored her solidity. Now he was deep inside her, so intimately bonded he couldn't tell where he ended and she began. But he wanted to kiss her, to mingle his tongue and teeth and breath with her so they connected on every possible level.

Willing himself to be gentle, Adriac drew K.C. down to him. As she nestled against him, he could feel the firm points of her nipples press into him, her breasts flatten against his chest. He thrust his tongue into her mouth and savored a deep kiss as he grew harder yet.

Now he couldn't help it any longer. He could no longer be slow. With a growl he sped up his thrusts, his hips moving up and down as his cock drove faster and faster into K.C.'s core. From deep inside him a climax built 'til he shook with his need to release into her.

"Oh goddess, K.C.," he called out. And then he began to climax, humping out his orgasm to the beat of the blood coursing through him. K.C. followed moments later, calling his name out in rhythm with her own release. And then, like two castaways shipwrecked on their own private island in deepest space, they clung together.

\* \* \* \*

After K.C. and Adriac came up for air, she finally phoned Magda. "The otvingadoria worked," she said, watching her man explore his new world.

"Of course it did," Magda said. "I want to hear everything. When can we meet?"

"Soon," K.C. thought, realizing she'd have to get Adriac some wardrobe and some lessons in his new culture...some time. But first, she had a book to write—and lots of love to make.

## Epilogue

“Like this?” Adriac turned his face a half inch to the right.

“Perfect.” The photographer crooned. She turned to K.C. “Where’d you find this guy? He’s perfect.”

K.C. and Magda grinned. With Adriac as K.C.’s writing partner and the model for her covers, each of her books soared to the top of the fiction best-seller lists and remained there for a satisfying number of weeks. For this photo shoot, the photographer agreed to come out to their love nest in Marin. Ah, the perks of being a best-seller.

“That’s our secret,” K.C. said, nodding to Magda. “Though you could read my books for some hints.”

The photographer laughed. “Good joke. I do read your books. They all take place far in the future.”

K.C. caught Adriac’s eye and winked.

“Or perhaps you might want to come by my shop. K.C. and Adriac are among my most faithful customers.”

“What kind of shop is it?” the photographer asked.

“Hungarian Rhapsody. Custom herbs and spices for every need ....” Magda began.

“You won’t be disappointed,” K.C. said.

The photographer looked intrigued. K.C., not for the first time, wondered exactly how many people Magda sent on journeys like her own.

Just then a slight movement in the corner of the room drew K.C. away from the others. Deel’hui Melindar’s face, still deep inside her cube, registered the usual negative emotions that permanently contorted her features. Now that K.C. was living her dreams, and better, she felt some compassion for the ex-priestess. As she did daily, K.C. peered in to see if she could find a hint of reform on Deel’hui’s face. She couldn’t.

Adriac came up behind K.C. and hugged her. “You see any change?”

K.C. shook her head.

Adriac shrugged and took her hand in his. Together they pressed the button on the acrylic cube still housing Deel’hui Melindar and closed the screen. And then, arm in arm, they walked away to rejoin the photographer and Magda still deep in conversation.

The End