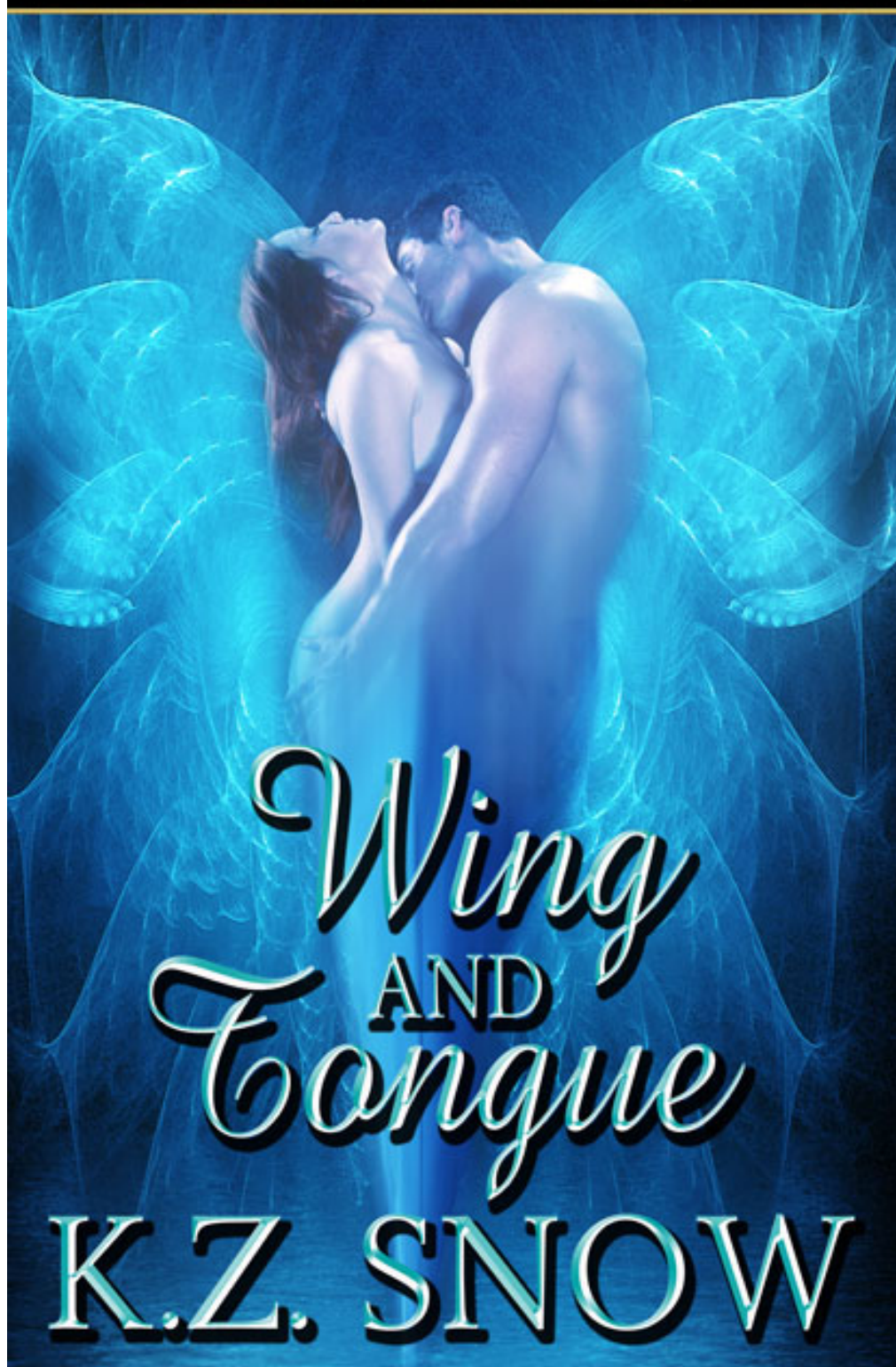


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Wing and Tongue

ISBN 9781419912337

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Wing and Tongue Copyright © 2007 K.Z. Snow

Edited by Carole Genz.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication September 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

WING AND TONGUE

K.Z. Snow

Chapter One

Trew closed his eyes as he felt an insistent pressure rapidly build in his loins. Whose mouth was his cock in? It was Yarlee's, he thought dimly, but he wasn't sure. All those moist and mobile cocoons hidden behind all those red lips felt pretty much the same...although a couple of the Redames seemed to have trouble keeping their teeth out of the way.

He'd simply walked into the prostitutes' dimly lit lodge, turned into the first stall that housed a whore with an available mouth and pulled his cock out of his breeches. All he had to do was swipe it against the woman's lips to let her know what he wanted. Her lips immediately opened and drew in his rod...and the luscious sucking began uncoiling his need.

Hands gripping one of the beams of the low ceiling, Trew pushed his stiff cock faster, harder, deeper into the woman's accommodating mouth and felt its head bump against the back of her throat. She didn't react. His breath pumped from his lungs as he both felt and envisioned the band of her lips tighten snugly around the distended skin of his organ.

Without attempting restraint, he gave way to the convulsive shuddering of his hips. Relief came quickly. The juice gusted out of his cock and down Yarlee's throat. Trew let out several conclusive, panting breaths and withdrew his shrinking member. Yarlee didn't seem to notice. She continued to slide up and down on some recumbent man's rod. Trew didn't recognize him—it was too dark in the stall—but he was likely another member of one of the Higher Orders.

Gently gripping Yarlee's bare shoulder, Trew murmured, "Thank you." The woman's only response was a slight hitch of the mouth that could have been a smile. Obviously concentrating on her current task, she didn't even bother to look at him.

Sighing, Trew left the shabby, bare-bones bedroom. Whispered words, laughter, moans swirled around him. He hadn't noticed the sounds earlier, when he was bent on depositing his seed. Somewhere behind him a female voice cried out sharply – whether in pain or ecstasy, Trew could not tell – but it cut through the quieter din of sexual service and caught his attention. The scream dwindled into a series of breathless whimpers before spiraling toward shrillness again.

A mixture of concern and curiosity caused Trew to follow the noise to its source. Detouring down one of the parallel passages, he soon found it. The cries were coming from one of the Redames. Of course. No women were allowed in the lodge unless they worked there. Naked, the whore was draped over a broad leather sling that hung from one of the ceiling beams. An exceptionally tall man, grasping her by the hips, repeatedly rammed his cock into her anus, slowly withdrew it, rammed it in again. Trew could hear the slap of his belly against her rump. The woman whinnied every time the man asked her, “Can you feel that? Huh? Can you feel that?”

Stemming from neither pain *nor* ecstasy, her reaction to the plunge of her client's cock was obviously a cued response, something he wanted and expected to hear.

The Redames' purpose was, after all, to please.

Somehow, *all* the sounds and sights and smells in the lodge underscored Trew's restlessness. He'd found temporary relief, yes, but not satisfaction. That had been the case for almost a year now.

Pondering this unsettling fact, he turned away from the stall and headed down the narrow passage toward the lodge's arched doorway. Walking out into the sun-washed air of late afternoon felt like a liberation. Turning toward the east, Trew struck out for the Callers Cliff.

Why did the prostitutes of Galdesh not thrill him anymore?

Available every day and night throughout the year – and conscientious, if not inspired, in the performance of their duties – the scarlet women were certainly an asset to the kingdom. And they were particularly attentive to the needs of men in the Higher

Orders. There were times, like today, when Trew abandoned all preliminaries, when he bypassed conversation and foreplay and simply exposed his needy cock to one of the servicing women. No Redame ever hesitated or questioned or complained.

And it wasn't that his drive had lessened. Trew was only twenty-four. Yet, as he grew older, each of his interludes with the Redames seemed lacking. Continually changing partners hadn't helped. Experimentation hadn't helped. To compensate for these missing essentials, whatever they were, Trew had thrown himself into his work with such focus and dedication that he'd finally been awarded Exalted Dragon Caller status—a significant achievement for any man under twenty-eight years.

Trew approached the lodge that housed his brotherhood, the Order of the Wing and Tongue. Two mammoth *irsii* trees flanked its portal. Just the sight of the building, planted like a burly sentry at the base of the Callers Cliff, filled him with pride. He paused before its sturdy double doors and caressed their black walnut handles. The friction and skin oils from countless Dragon Callers' hands had smoothed and darkened the wood to onyx silkiness. Trew pulled the doors open, relishing their heavy resistance and the responsive bulge of his arm and chest muscles.

The rest of his brothers were already there. Although their day's work was finished, the Master of the Order had called a special meeting.

Trew lifted a hand in greeting. "I'm sorry I'm late. I had some business to attend to."

"Yes, getting your balls lightened," Tlenima said with a grin. "Good thing too. With that sac weighing you down, you wouldn't have been able to work very efficiently."

The other men laughed as Trew took his place at the table. Xentis, the Master of the Order, smiled and clapped him on the back once he was seated.

"Well," Xentis said, flattening his broad hands on the table, "are we ready to begin?"

Nodding, the brothers watched him in respectful silence.

Xentis motioned toward Belkyr. "Take your place, sir."

Belkyr rose and positioned himself where he could face the eight other men. Like a star cradled by the horns of the moon, he stood within the arc of the crescent-shaped oak table and addressed his fellows, all members of the Order of the Wing and Tongue.

"I have chosen a woman," he announced.

A soft, collective rustling came from the table. Trew alone didn't move. He merely gaped at Belkyr.

This was the *last* Caller he would have thought would choose a woman. What was going on?

"Nobody is aware of your selection, the woman included?" It was Xentis who spoke first. That was his prerogative as Master of the Order.

"Nobody is aware," Belkyr assured him.

"Are you certain you haven't communicated your desire in any way? Through word, look, gesture?"

"I haven't betrayed my feelings or intentions," Belkyr asserted.

The other men could now speak. They could voice their reactions and ask questions. Surilen, second only to Xentis in age and experience, went first. "So you have conclusively rejected your other options?" he asked. The question was posed with obvious concern. Marriage, for a member of *any* Higher Order, was not to be entered into capriciously.

Belkyr stood with head and shoulders high. "I have."

Of course, as Trew was well aware, his brothers had a distinct shortage of "other options". They could either embrace celibacy or make regular visits to the Redames, which most did with great gusto...Belkyr especially.

Trew's suspicion sharpened.

"The Redames no longer satisfy you?" Alkan asked in disbelief. He was nineteen and lusty, so it was no surprise the professional prostitutes of Galdesh fulfilled his every need.

Above Belkyr's black beard, a tincture of red appeared. "I don't see how that's any of your business."

"Don't be coy," Xentis chided. "It's a valid question. We all know you spend as much time at the Redames Lodge as you do here. Perhaps more time. I believe Alkan is simply wondering why you're suddenly immune to the persuasions of the scarlet ladies."

Belkyr cleared his throat and stared over his brothers' heads. "I'm becoming more advanced in years. I feel...I feel the companionship of a helpmate would...suit me."

Xentis thoughtfully stroked his beard. "I cannot dispute your reasoning, Belkyr. Such a decision does seem in keeping with your age. It does not, however, seem in keeping with your nature. Therefore, I impose a Day of Thought. You must be certain you've chosen the right path *and* the right woman. You are, after all, a Dragon Caller. The defense of the Kingdom of Galdesh rests partly in your hands. Your brothers' performance of their duties," Xentis indicated the men arrayed on either side of him, "rests partly in your hands. We cannot risk having a person with an unsettled life or addled mind in *any* of our Higher Orders."

"I'm aware of that." Belkyr appeared to fidget, doing a small shuffle from one foot to the other. "But the woman I've chosen is exceptional."

He added this, Trew thought, as though she could make up for any of his own potential shortcomings.

"What makes you think she's exceptional?" Surilen asked.

Trew narrowed his eyes and studied Belkyr. He didn't fully trust this brother, who was rich in egotism, impoverished in talent and notoriously self-indulgent. And like any individual with such a combination of qualities, he was prone to envy and resentment. All these facts seemed to justify Trew's wariness of his motives.

"I cannot discuss her personal qualities," Belkyr answered, "without divulging her identity."

Tapping his fingertips together, Xentis nodded. "Very wise of you to recognize that. Since you have no established relationship with this woman, her identity cannot yet be publicly revealed." His hands stilled, and he skewered Belkyr with a look. "And for the same reason, you know she must pass the Two Trials, do you not? And you know what they are?"

Some of the other men at the table tried to suppress smirks. Belkyr tried to ignore them. Still standing with legs apart and hands clasped behind his back, he again fixed his gaze above his brothers' heads. "Yes. One is a trial of basic construction skills. She must fashion Calling Wings or a Calling Tongue."

"To prove what?" Xentis asked, testing him.

"To prove she understands the nature of my work, appreciates its significance and is capable of assisting me when need be."

"And the other trial, which in your case must precede this one?"

Trew could almost feel his brothers' attention gather and funnel toward Belkyr. They all knew, of course, what the Two Trials were...and what they were all about. Xentis was simply testing Belkyr, gauging his level of preparedness.

Belkyr seemed to be making a concerted effort to keep his face impassive and his body immobile. "She must have sequential intimate encounters with three Dragon Callers, one of whom will be me."

Xentis pressed on. "The purpose of this sexual trial is?"

"Twofold," Belkyr said without missing a beat. He'd obviously learned his lessons well. "First, to test the woman's natural allure."

"Correct. Should she be off-putting in any way, she cannot become your bride. We certainly know how crucial it is that you work in complete concord with your brothers. To maintain this harmony, they must find her likable. And we certainly know how shrewd and discriminating the Farfields dragons are." Xentis looked around the table. The other men murmured in agreement. He turned his eyes back to Belkyr. "So I assume you understand the reasoning behind the 'allure' criterion."

"I do. It isn't enough that the woman appeals to *me*. My brother Callers must hold her in high regard. And our draconic allies —"

"*Potential* allies," Xentis corrected with a frown. "Never take the dragons' allegiance for granted."

"Excuse me for not thinking before I spoke," Belkyr said with humility, whether genuine or feigned. "I meant to say, I know my Chosen One must meet the dragons' standards. If she doesn't, they won't respect her."

"More important," Xentis told him, "they will no longer respect *you*, because you chose her as a lifelong mate. Hence, your usefulness as a Caller will come to an abrupt and sorry end. Now what is the other purpose of this trial?"

"To determine the depth of our mutual attraction and compatibility."

"I cannot overemphasize the importance of this," Xentis said, although his voice had softened and did not convey the intended emphasis. Perhaps he was being deferential to Belkyr's large and tender ego. "Your suitability for each other and hers for our brotherhood are paramount concerns...which is why that suitability must be determined before the woman's construction skills are even put to the test." The Master curled a hand over Belkyr's shoulder, likely as much to secure his attention as to offer comfort. "You must understand, Belkyr, that should she favor one of the other two men over you, she cannot become your bride. Indeed, the balance of power then shifts. She can either walk away from the proposed marriage and resume her life, or she can petition to wed the Caller she fancies. Of course, she will not be apprised of the latter right until the trysts are concluded and she makes her preference known. This will eliminate the possibility of some shallow, faithless opportunist marrying into our Order just for status and income."

Belkyr lowered his head. Did he actually feel embarrassment? Anxiety? At that moment, Trew almost felt sympathy for him.

Xentis further explained the sexual trial, since two other brothers must necessarily be involved in it. "The encounters will take place at the Cave Garden. When the woman

arrives there—if she chooses to come, for she’s certainly not bound to—she will of course not know which of the three Dragon Callers has chosen her. This will allow us to determine where her natural predilections lie.” He pushed back from the table and rose. “Now let us proceed with the selection.”

Pulling his gold-threaded black sash from around his waist, Xentis walked to the other side of the table and past the spot where Belkyr stood. “Come join me,” he said, beckoning the other seven Callers with his hand. Once they’d gathered near him, he instructed Belkyr to sit at the table.

“Do you trust me?” the Master of the Order asked his artisans.

The men’s chorused affirmative came without hesitation.

“Then this is how I shall conduct the selection.” Xentis held up his sash, its gold threads glimmering in the torchlight. “Once I secure this around my eyes, making certain I cannot see, you men will form a circle around me and begin moving contrary to the sundial. I shall make a complete turn in the opposite direction. When I say ‘stop’, you must stop and stay where you are. I will step forward until my outstretched hand meets one of your bodies. That man will remove himself from the circle. The process will be repeated with the remaining six men.” Xentis regarded them as he lifted the sash. “Do you understand?”

The Callers all indicated they did. Trew scanned the group. Each brother, himself included, was now Belkyr’s potential rival. All of them had stunning physiques—a necessity for dragon calling, since deft manipulation of the handcrafted wings and tongues required both agility and strength. So it wouldn’t be their bodies that would distinguish the men, it would be other physical attributes in addition to their personalities and characters...and how they *used* their bodies as lovers.

Alkan was young and energetic, likely an enthusiastic sex partner but just as likely lacking in endurance and finesse. He wouldn’t be a scintillating conversationalist, either. Maldon was quiet and introverted and had a scholarly bent. He’d been considering and even attempting to practice celibacy so probably wouldn’t pose much

of a threat. Quamir was all-around attractive. He had fair hair and sparkling blue eyes and a temperate, generous nature. Tlenima possessed an infectious sense of humor, complemented by a captivating smile. Kdar was another comely Caller, with perfect manners to match his perfect looks. Chivalrous enough to be a knight, he was a favorite among the Redames...who weren't used to an overabundance of gentility in the men they serviced. And finally there was the mature and eminently capable Surilen, who also held Exalted status.

Then there was Belkyr himself. The would-be husband was darkly handsome and exuded an intense, self-possessed, commanding masculinity. He surely had an excellent chance of winning over his chosen woman...especially if she liked his rather unorthodox approach to sex.

Trew wouldn't let himself even consider the possibility of his own involvement in this trial. He didn't want to be forced into playing suitor.

Once Xentis had secured the sash around his eyes and assured the brothers of his virtual blindness, the seven Callers walked to the right around their Master. He made a slow, tight pivot to the left. In a short time he called out, "Stop." The men halted, and Xentis moved forward with arms extended.

His hands connected with Kdar's chest.

Trew glanced at Belkyr, sitting tense and alone at the table. Dismay seeped into his expression.

Kdar stepped out of the circle.

"Start again when the brother I touched has removed himself," Xentis ordered.

The rotation resumed. This time, after all the men had stopped, Xentis walked forward—toward Maldon, it seemed—but then teetered a little, probably from mild dizziness and disorientation. When he reached out, his hand grazed Trew's shoulder.

Blinking in shock, Trew tried to slide to the left, allowing Xentis' hand to connect firmly with Maldon. But it was too late. He felt the Master's fingers dig into his shoulder.

Trew felt queasy. His stomach suddenly seemed like a living thing, squirming beneath his rib cage.

Damn it all.

Lowering his eyes for a moment, Trew wondered if could devise some strategy to get out of this. Perhaps he could claim to have a genital affliction. But no, the ruse could too easily be debunked. If any deception on his part were discovered, he would be stripped of his Exalted status and possibly even expelled from the Order. Besides, he had an aversion to lying.

Reluctantly, Trew joined Kdar outside the circle.

Xentis removed his blindfold and asked Belkyr to join them. He addressed all the members of the Order, and he did so quite sternly. "Remember—and I say this more as a grave warning than a casual reminder—you are honor-bound not to discuss this matter. Not amongst yourselves and not with anybody else. You are also enjoined not to discover or attempt to discover the identity of the woman chosen by Belkyr or to influence her in any way. If you violate these rules or your conduct is otherwise found wanting, you shall be indefinitely suspended from the Order of the Wing and Tongue and no longer enjoy the title of Dragon Caller or the benefits attendant thereto."

"But," Kdar pointed out, "Trew and I will need to know something about this woman if we're each to play her suitor."

"That's right," Xentis admitted. "You will both know exactly what Belkyr knows—no more, no less. This must be a level battlefield, so to speak. The woman must *not* be able to determine which man has chosen her."

"But..." Obviously confused and troubled, Belkyr shook his head. "How can anybody be sure that none of us has said something he should not have said? Especially during our...our time alone with her?"

Xentis smiled mysteriously and patted Belkyr on the shoulder. "Fear not, my son." He imparted no further reassurance. Rather, he did just the opposite. "Now you must find an isolated place and begin your Day of Thought. And prepare yourself for other

contingencies. Your Chosen One may not want to go through with this. At all. She may have no interest in marrying a Dragon Caller or anybody else, for that matter. Or, even if she does wish to marry, she may find none of *you* acceptable.”

Uttering a curse, Belkyr stalked out of the lodge. Xentis let him go. Trew watched the heavy doors swing shut behind the departing man. Had he been allowed to, he would have followed Belkyr. He would have grabbed his brother by the arms and stared into his eyes and demanded to know *why* he sought to wed this particular woman – whoever she was.

Because, Trew was certain, some ulterior motive lay hidden behind Belkyr’s sudden desire for domesticity.

Chapter Two

Sitting beneath an *irsii* tree, Elrisa again felt the scratching of unsatisfied desire. Need slithered along her skin and burrowed into her pores. She was growing tired of pleasuring herself. If only she'd been born into the gentry, a woman of title and privilege, or had distinguished herself enough through her work to be Mistress of the Weavers and Spinners Guild...

Ladies could choose consorts, personal studs. In fact, they could choose as many as they wanted. Mistresses of guilds or women of similarly high social standing could visit the Hardsirs Lodge as often as they pleased, just as their male counterparts could visit the Redames. But women of little or no status had either to rely on their own devices for sexual gratification or had to wait for a Provider to wander along.

Granted, Galdesh had no shortage of Providers, whose duty it was to quiet the beast of desire in "ordinary" females. Most single women, and many less happily married ones, knew which Providers walked what routes—whether through meadow or forest or through the north, south, east or west ends of the village. Elrisa had even heard rumors of women taking on Providers as clandestine lovers, sometimes paying them quite handsomely. This was forbidden, of course—the men were prohibited from engaging in favoritism—but human nature being what it was, a certain amount of lawlessness was to be expected.

Coupling was regulated in Galdesh. For generations, the kingdom's rulers had upheld a ban on "reckless and indiscriminate" indulgence of lust. Such behavior, they claimed, threatened the common good in many significant ways. It undermined positive character traits. It led to unplanned pregnancies and murderous jealousies. Even marriage, often arranged, was more a matter of procedure than passion.

No citizen, Elrisa included, had *too* many problems with this system, aside from its built-in class distinctions. All adults were given options and outlets.

Like the Providers.

Elrisa slid a glance toward the Weavers Glade. It was some distance away, and clumps of trees as well as other lush vegetation mostly screened her from her coworkers. She should be rejoining them soon, but...

She was by far the best weaver in the guild. If she chose to extend her break from work, no one would reprimand her. Being the best at anything always had distinct advantages.

It wasn't long before a fair-haired man of approximately Elrisa's age came strolling from the direction of the Potters Glen. She'd seen him before but had never used him. His attire was minimal—a thin, tawny-colored hide that bared half his chest and most of his legs—and his trim, largely exposed body had adequate appeal. Elrisa didn't find his face particularly arresting, but that didn't matter. He had long fingers.

Hiking up her linen shift to mid-thigh, Elrisa languidly bent and parted her legs. She felt her nipples contract and push against the fabric lying against them. These were some of the signals, immediately recognizable to Providers, through which women indicated they wanted servicing.

As the young man drew closer, his steps faltered almost imperceptibly. Elrisa knew he'd glimpsed her. He casually detoured from the path and sank to his knees just in front of her parted legs.

"Need?" he asked quietly...as Providers always did, to verify their attention wouldn't be unwelcome.

The answer was certainly obvious—Elrisa knew her exposed folds must be glistening with moisture—but she underscored her unspoken affirmative by sliding her hands along the insides of her thighs. She silently cursed herself for not having worn a dress with a bodice that could be unlaced. Having the man suck energetically at a nipple while his fingers played lower on her body would have felt exquisite.

She breathed open-mouthed as he moved closer to her.

“Hard or soft?” he asked. “Fast or slow?”

Elrisa was so overwhelmed by her appetite she could barely see. “Hard. Fast.”

Without so much as a smile, the Provider raised his left hand to her chest and lowered the right to her hips. Elrisa closed her eyes and rested her head against the trunk of the tree. Simultaneously, she felt one breast and then the other being gripped and kneaded, the nipples alternately pinched, while two fingers slid assertively into her oozing vagina and a thumb teased her bud. The man exercised no finesse, just force...as if he were commanding her to come. It was what Elrisa wanted. She didn't take more than six or eight ragged breaths before her body arched forward. As her vagina clenched around the man's masterful fingers, she seemed to bounce along the jagged peaks of an excruciatingly sudden, ripping orgasm.

The encounter ended as abruptly as it had begun. Elrisa's breasts burned. She felt lightheaded. Closing her legs, she lowered them to the ground.

“Need?” she asked, her voice brittle.

If a Provider became aroused, which was often the case, it was up to the sated woman to bring him relief. This was supposed to be done with the hand, but Elrisa knew that was yet another rule frequently broken or bent. Many women sucked or fucked the men into climax. And even the most law-abiding Providers wanted at the very least to ejaculate onto a woman's mouth, bare breasts or gushing pussy.

This man surprised Elrisa by answering, “No need. I was taken care of a short time ago.”

She was glad. These encounters weren't nearly exciting enough to make her want to prolong one.

The man rose to his feet. After giving Elrisa a small bow, he moved off toward the path. She saw him pull a flacon from a holster strapped to his belt. A piece of cloth hung beside it. Although the sight was a common one, Elrisa suddenly found it demeaning and depressing. She looked away.

The Provider would drizzle scented water from the flask over his fingers, then wipe them on the cloth. He had to prepare himself for his next case of “need”. If he didn’t carry the flacon, he would have to go to the nearest brook to wash.

Almost dejectedly, Elrisa sighed. A feeling of emptiness quickly displaced her physical satiety. Although Providers were adept at quelling acute sexual hunger, they delivered no deep, abiding fulfillment. They weren’t supposed to. They simply had too many women to serve and thus had to keep their ministrations as impersonal as possible. No exchange of names, no conversation, no kissing or extended foreplay or fucking, no, no, no... Even though the Redames’ sexual repertoire was virtually unlimited, Elrisa wondered if the men *they* serviced ever felt dissatisfied.

She breathed a laugh. Of course not. Men were...men.

Elrisa was about to rise and go back to work when another male, between boy and man, came bounding up to her. Clearly he wasn’t a Provider. He was a messenger.

“Are you Elrisa the weaver, granddaughter of Algiwyn?”

Alarmed, she sat up on her haunches. “Yes. Why?” She immediately thought something had happened to her grandmother.

“I have a missive for you, sent by the Order of the Wing and Tongue.” He pulled a roll of parchment from his belt.

Elrisa gawped at him. “*What?*” Sweet Mother, why would the Dragon Callers be contacting *her*? Without asking permission, she yanked the missive out of the messenger’s hands.

Wide-eyed and trembling, Elrisa unrolled the document. She perused the decorated parchment, then simply stared at it. There was no mistaking its elaborate insignia. The document was definitely issued by the Order of the Wing and Tongue. She glanced up at the messenger, back down at the parchment, back up at the messenger.

The content was almost beyond belief.

"Would you like me to recite it to you?" the young man asked. He reached for the sheet.

Elrisa pulled it away from him. "That won't be necessary. I can read quite well, thank you." Of course, it was a natural assumption on his part that she *couldn't* read. Not many Galdeshians outside the Higher Orders were literate, and this was especially true of Galdeshian women. But with the help of her grandparents, Elrisa had learned this invaluable skill when she was still a child. "May I respond through you?" she asked the bewildered boy.

The question apparently left him even more perplexed. "But...you're to take three Days of Thought, during which time a female Advisor will come to you and—"

"Excuse me for interrupting, but I need neither three Days of Thought *nor* an Advisor." All these fussy procedures could be so exasperating! Why did the rulers of this kingdom believe its citizens needed every aspect of their lives forced into a predetermined pattern, like so many dance steps? "Please answer my question," Elrisa said, growing impatient. "May I respond through you or not?"

The messenger glanced uneasily at the parchment. "I...I suppose you could, but the response would be considered informal, not official. At some point it would need to be put in writing, then sworn to and sealed."

Uttering a groan of frustration, Elrisa rolled her head back and clamped her hands over it. *Damn the legalism!* "All right, here's what we'll do. You take back my 'informal' answer and tell this," she glanced at the document to find a name, "tell Master Xentis to send over whomever he needs to in order to make my reply official. Will you do that?"

The messenger jerked out three nods. "Yes, I will."

Elrisa smiled up at the young man and touched his hand. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to complicate matters for you." She fished in one of the pockets of her shift, pulled out a dew pearl and handed it to him. "Thank you."

His eyes rounded as he stared at the glittering drop in his palm.

"Don't worry," Elrisa assured him, "I didn't steal it. I made it. I use them in my trade."

The young man turned his astonished gaze to Elrisa's upturned face. "So *you're* the Web Weaver who still practices some of the old arts!" His face collapsed in thought. "But you're...not old."

Heartily, Elrisa laughed. "Not too. I've had quite an extraordinary upbringing, though."

Tightly gripping his rare reward, the messenger turned to leave. After several steps, he abruptly turned to Elrisa once more. "I almost forgot. What *is* your answer?"

Her fingers ran covetously over the gilded Wing and Tongue emblem. "Yes. My answer is yes."

Once the young man departed, Elrisa allowed herself some moments of solitude. Soon she must return to her work—and the questions of her coworkers, which she must deftly sidestep.

In the distance, she could see the partially concealed faces of her fellow spinners and weavers occasionally turn in her direction. Their curiosity was natural. Few tradespeople received documents delivered by special messenger.

She could hardly believe it herself. Chosen by a brother in the Order of the Wing and Tongue! *Chosen by a Dragon Caller!* Elrisa dropped her head against the *irsii's* trunk and expelled a single, incredulous laugh. So, her dreams were finally within her reach.

Most other women would have wondered why they were chosen and what the would-be husband looked like, how adroitly he made love. They would have wondered about the trials that awaited them and whether or not they would pass those tests. But these issues were of little concern to Elrisa, particularly those related to the man who wanted her. Sex, romance, marriage—such silliness mattered not, except as a means to an end. And Elrisa knew she had just been handed the means to her most deeply desired end.

All her life, she had wanted to be the first female Dragon Caller, the first “sister” in the Order of the Wing and Tongue. She knew she had the talent. She knew she had the drive and determination and diplomacy. She knew she had everything the High Art of Dragon Calling required...except a door that stood open to her.

But now she had that too. Bouncing to her feet, Elrisa let out a *whoop* of glee. She hugged the *irsii* tree beneath which she’d been sitting, its sleek bark caressing her cheek. She looked up at its glimmering, spear-shaped leaves of multi-hued green—some pointing straight to the heavens, some nearly horizontal with a sweet little droop at the end, some hanging toward the ground and swaying gracefully, like seaweed in a slow current. Elrisa loved the *irsii* tree. Dragon Callers used its bark and leaves in their wing and tongue construction.

They used many other materials as well. Not only had Elrisa learned about their art from her grandfather, she had often climbed to the Callers Cliff, found a hiding place and watched the brotherhood transform common stuff into dragon song. She saw how they tanned and stretched and oiled animal hides until they became the finest leather, both tough and nearly translucent. She saw how and where they applied abalone shell, mother-of-pearl, butterfly wings, iris petals, fish scales, eel skins, feathers, moss, even toadstool caps. She saw the different shapes of the frames they built, how the tongues were hinged and where the reeds were placed. She saw how the Exalted Callers—the best in the Order—wore and worked the wings, lifted and fluttered the tongues. She couldn’t recall any of the men’s faces, though. She’d always focused on the products of their craftsmanship.

But only from a distance had Elrisa seen the grandest sight of all—the swooping arrival of a Farfields dragon, answering the eerie calls of these artful men. A dragon’s magnificent appearance in the sky invariably brought her to tears. How she *ached* to summon one!

No, she didn’t care if she had to marry and bed with a troll. She *would* become a Dragon Caller. Romance and sexual compatibility be damned.

“Elrisa! Come repair these threads!”

It was Mimell’s voice that broke her reverie. Whether or not she could be seen, Elrisa waved in acknowledgment. Her own trade suddenly seemed so petty – weaving webs to capture faeries as well as the exotic, insectlike creatures that sometimes wandered over from the Farfields.

She cast a final, yearning glance at the Callers Cliff. It was shrouded in mist today. There was nothing to be seen.

* * * * *

“Do you fully realize what these trials entail?”

“Yes, Grandmother, I do.” Elrisa rose from her stool to put more wood on the fire. The large hearth glowed. Light licked the fieldstones. Heat lapped at Elrisa’s face. She resumed her seat.

Algiwyn, her grandmother, had so penetrating a gaze that Elrisa could feel it without looking at the woman. “Now that you’ve accepted this proposal in writing and decided to forego your three Days of Thought –”

“I know what comes next.”

“And, you realize, ‘next’ starts tomorrow.”

Elrisa stared into the fire, trying to envision her future. “I can’t wait to get on with it.” She glanced at her grandmother to gauge the old woman’s reaction. “I’ve planned for years just how I would craft my first wings and tongue. I’ll incorporate my web-weaving expertise to give them more flexibility and resilience. The wings will have more resonance, too, and the tongues will seem to shoot sparks. No Farfields dragon will be able to resist their call.”

Algiwyn, perhaps a bit grudgingly, smiled in response. “I can’t deny I’m excited for you. But wing and tongue construction is not what I was referring to. Be advised, young lady, that Dragon Callers are notoriously...adventurous lovers. And you must accommodate three of them. In one day.”

Elrisa's smile was more teasing than her grandmother's. "You forget I have a bit of experience with Dragon Callers."

The old woman dismissively flapped a hand and blew air through her lips. "Oh that. Excuse my bluntness, dear, but you didn't know your toe from your tit back then. And you were lucky enough to have had a Caller who wasn't some rampaging boar. So don't use *that* incident as a measure of your experience."

Giggling, Elrisa didn't bother correcting her grandmother. She did indeed know her toe from her tit when she was eighteen, and the man she'd been with had made both feel quite good. "Still, I imagine you accommodated that many men and more when you were a Redame. And your exertions seem to have taken little toll on you."

Seaming her lips in exaggerated disapproval, Algiwyn muttered, "Impertinent child."

Elrisa laughed and hugged her. "I just hope this man finds me as pleasing as your clients once found you." She grew more serious. "I'm not beautiful, Grandmother. I may not be ugly, but I'm certainly not a beauty. There are countless other women in Galdesh more buxom and fetching than I."

"Ah, but you *are* beautiful. To me. And, better yet, to a certain Dragon Caller. I pray you're naturally drawn to that man and find *him* beautiful."

"It doesn't matter how he strikes me," Elrisa said. "What's far more important is that I determine which of the three men chose me. I needn't be naturally drawn to him. I must only *appear* to be drawn to him."

Looking troubled, Algiwyn grabbed her hands. "I don't often say this to you, but I'm saying it now. *Listen to me.*"

She rarely spoke with such emphasis. Elrisa immediately paid keen attention.

"You may have other opportunities to become a Dragon Caller. But you may *not* have other opportunities to reclaim your chance for happiness once you've cast it aside. And there are other important considerations, as well."

"Like what?" Elrisa asked, feeling rebuked.

Softening, Algiwyn petted her granddaughter's hair. "Do you know why Galdeshian society is the way it is? How and why it became this way?"

Elrisa was baffled by the transition, but she answered the question anyway. "No, not really."

Algiwyn leaned forward. "*To garner the respect of the Farfields dragons.*" She sat back again. "In the time of my grandmother's grandmother, King Relzidor ruled over a Galdesh ravished by attacking armies. Ours is a much-coveted land, Elrisa, but also quite vulnerable. Relzidor knew that for the kingdom to survive, it desperately needed some matchless advantage over its enemies."

Her grandmother's history lesson piqued Elrisa's interest. "So it was this king who first thought of enlisting the aid of the dragons?"

"Yes. His council studied their temperament, their social system. It was very dangerous work. Many knights lost their lives. But in time, a fairly clear picture emerged of our winged neighbors. Relzidor wanted the dragons to find Galdeshians an admirable people worth defending, so he instituted sweeping changes in our manner of living."

Elrisa began to sense a moral buried somewhere in this narrative. She listened carefully, waiting for its revelation.

"The Farfields dragons," Algiwyn went on, "have a very orderly society with different strata, although a certain degree of flexibility is in place. They despise lack of discipline, greedy self-indulgence, senseless violence and deception. They particularly despise betrayal of trust. On the other hand, they revere the opposites of those traits. Therefore, they place the *highest* premium on fidelity. Dragons mate for life, you know, and they bond with a depth of love and regard most humans can barely fathom. Both males *and* females will defend their spouses to the death."

The moral lurked beneath the surface of her last several sentences, Elrisa knew, but she didn't acknowledge it. Instead she said, "Now generations later, the dragons finally trust us." *And I believe I'm worthy of their trust.*

Algiwyn raised a cautionary finger. "They only conditionally trust us. They know how fickle and self-serving humans can be. That's why any member of any dragon-related order must reflect those values the Farfields creatures most esteem. Dragon Callers, Readers, Riders, Healers – it is primarily through them that our whole kingdom is judged."

Elrisa lowered her eyes. "I understand."

"Do you? Do you *really*?" With one curled finger, Algiwyn forced Elrisa to face her. "You will never know true joy and fulfillment, and never receive the full respect of the dragons, if you make yourself deaf to the voice of your heart. Don't let the insistent clamoring of ambition drown out that voice. You can become the most exalted of Exalted Dragon Callers yet find yourself mired in a misery of deception if you wed a man you do not love. So, tomorrow when you have your trysts and afterward when you must state your preference, be true. *Be true.*"

Mutely, Elrisa nodded. She'd always thought being a Dragon Caller was synonymous with her happiness. Now after hearing her wise grandmother's words and the fervor that infused them, she wasn't sure.

And she didn't know *where* tomorrow would lead.

* * * * *

As sunset spread a princely cloak of rich color over the landscape, Xentis spoke privately with Kdar and Trew.

"Here is what Belkyr knows of the woman. Her name is Elrisa. She is a Web Weaver who lives with her grandmother."

"That's *all* he knows?" Kdar asked with some skepticism.

“So he swore to me,” Xentis said. “He’s seen her about, apparently when he’s gone to the Weavers Glade to harvest the *irsii*. He was immediately taken by her and made what he called ‘discreet inquiries’. Why are you frowning, Trew?”

The Caller immediately tried to smooth his face. “Oh I wasn’t aware that I was. It doesn’t mean anything. I was just thinking about this...marriage process.” Actually, he’d been thinking about a good deal more than that.

“Why? Are you considering going through it yourself?” Kdar asked with a chuckle.

Trew gave a limp smile but said nothing. A tangle of thoughts clutched at him. Some were related to why he was dissatisfied with the Redames. But these were too vague and too distant from the matter at hand, so he pushed them aside.

Elrisa. The name sounded familiar. Trew thought he may have heard of her but could not remember when or where or in what context. *Web Weaver*. Maybe that was the context. He’d been to the Weavers Glade several times but had been focused on the women’s products, not their names or faces. Still, that reference to the Web Weaver trade held some answer to a question that had been nagging him.

Could Elrisa be the one whose talent was so lauded?

Trew upbraided himself for caring at all. What difference did such things make? He just wanted to fulfill his onerous obligation as quickly and indifferently as possible.

Chapter Three

Feeling spellbound, Elrisa wandered around the Cave Garden. It temporarily took her mind off the men who would soon be arriving. Crossing her arms over her chest, she vaguely wished she'd worn more substantial clothing. Enchanting as this place was, its coolness gave her a slight chill.

Elrisa did think her garment was lovely, though. A simple, nearly diaphanous dress of light, leafy layers, it subtly mimicked the *irsii* tree. Its color, a soft wash of swirling chartreuse shades, seemed a good complement to her dark red hair. She'd decided against cosmetic enhancement. Any man who wanted her must want her unadorned, not camouflaged with paint like a Redame.

The Cave Garden was a special place reserved for special occasions. No Galdeshian could come here without official permission. Now Elrisa saw why. Glistening, multicolored spears hung from the ceiling. Glistening, multicolored teeth shot up from the floor. Gleaming rocks were embedded in the walls. And all this magnificence was Nature's doing. A clear pond into which a small waterfall trickled was in a corner of the cavern and looked very inviting.

Whoever was caretaker of the Cave Garden had made sure any guests would be richly accommodated. A luxurious, thick pile of pelts had been placed on a smooth part of the floor. A portion of them lay against a rounded outcropping, so a visitor could sit with his back against the rock and be comfortable. Beeswax candles and wall torches imparted a soft, wavering light that coaxed still more glimmer from the cave's natural sculptures. The caretaker, or somebody, had also slid bouquets into crevices and hung the walls with ivy and evergreen garlands, so the harsh beauty of this unique place was softened by the delicate beauty of flowers and plants. Their fragrance mingled headily with the scents of earth and water.

As tension began overtaking her again, Elrisa turned to the furry pelts and considered sinking onto them...

"Welcome, my dearest weaver."

She whirled around at the sound of the deep voice and nearly lost her footing on the cave's slick floor.

The man who'd addressed her stood with his hands on his hips. He wore a long cloak of black wool, fastened at the right shoulder with an elaborate bronze medallion, tight suede breeches that, Elrisa suspected, reached just below his knees, high boots of fine, black leather into which the breeches were tucked. A distinctly suggestive smile, visible within his dark facial hair, was mirrored in his equally dark eyes. Although of medium stature, he was brawny as a bear and had an intensely masculine face, like a weatherworn crag.

What was he carrying over his shoulder?

Elrisa shivered slightly and mustered a smile. "Good day, kind sir." The man didn't appear particularly kind...but he *was* intriguing.

As he strode up to her, he tossed his burden onto the floor. It looked like a jumble of horse tack. "I am Belkyr," he said, dropping his voice even lower. His gaze, too, slid lower, fixing on her body. "I've been eagerly awaiting this day."

As Elrisa had intended, the particulars of her form were nearly visible beneath her filmy dress...nearly, but not quite. The effect wasn't lost on Belkyr. He seemed to be trying to burn the fabric off her body with his smoldering eyes.

"Let us see how much we please each other." He curled one arm around her waist and drew her to him. "Have you ever been possessed by a man?"

Elrisa's breath came out in spasms. "No." She knew her answer wasn't fully truthful. There'd been one time, three years ago, when she'd *felt* possessed...

"Would you like to be?" Belkyr's free hand slid roughly across her right breast, his thumb aggressively moving back and forth against her already taut nipple. Gasping,

Elrisa felt it tighten further. He clutched her loose hair and forced her head back. Elrisa closed her eyes, her breath fluttering anxiously from her mouth. She hadn't answered his second question, and he didn't seem to care.

"You respond to me already," Belkylr murmured, obviously pleased. As if to verify her responsiveness, he firmly pinched the nipple he'd been rubbing.

Elrisa let out a thin mewl and arched her back. Her breasts grazed his chest, partially visible beneath his cloak. He seemed not to be wearing a shirt or vest beneath it. Belkylr's free hand now moved from one breast to another, clutching and rubbing each. Moisture collected between Elrisa's thighs.

"Do you want me to kiss you?" Belkylr asked, his mouth close to her ear. His hot breath felt humid against her skin, a strangely pleasing contrast to the abrasiveness of his whiskers.

Elrisa exhaled a "Yes". She hadn't been with many men who weren't Providers and certainly never with one so commanding.

"Not yet," he said. "Later. If you *earn* my kiss." And suddenly, Belkylr flung her to the floor.

Reclining, braced on her elbows, Elrisa stared up at him. She didn't know what she'd expected from today's encounters, but this type of treatment was certainly the last thing she would have imagined. "How am I to earn it?" she whispered, as much out of curiosity as a desire to please.

"First, by removing your clothing."

After flinging aside his cloak, Belkylr bent over and reached for something from the pile that lay on the ground. Half his body was in a pool of shadow, so Elrisa couldn't see what it was he lifted. She could tell, though, that his cock had already begun to harden beneath his breeches. A distinct hump had formed in the thin suede at his crotch.

Trembling slightly, she stripped off her dress and carefully put it aside, aware that the cool cave air combined with Belkylr's touch had made her nipples high and tight.

"Fondle yourself," he instructed in a coarse voice, stepping toward her. One hand was behind his back. Belkyr's broad chest, luxuriously blanketed with dark hair and studded with drops of sweat, expanded and contracted noticeably. "Fondle your breasts, your belly, your cunt. But don't bring yourself to climax." His jet-black eyes glimmered in the flickering light. "That's for *me* to do."

Elrisa felt a twinge of self-consciousness. She'd never before pleased herself in front of a man. But Belkyr's hungry scrutiny and obvious arousal infected her with a kind of wanton abandon. She kept her gaze boldly fixed on his as her hands slid up to her breasts. Caressing them, pushing them forward, she showed him how ripe and soft they were. Elrisa dropped her head back as her excitement mounted. She circled and flicked her high, hard nipples with her fingertips. A thrilling tingle shot through her nerves.

Kneeling, she slowly ran her hands down her torso, around her belly to her buttocks, back to the insides of her thighs. Her fingers parted her pussy lips and glided along either side of her sensitive, wet bead. But if she touched it, Elrisa feared, she would shudder into orgasm. A sharp desire was already overtaking her and making restraint almost impossible. Her hands began to move more crudely, less daintily. They again swept over her breasts then back down to her wet cunt. She heard herself panting, felt the little spearheads of gathering arousal...

And then felt a fiery sting to her breasts. Elrisa's eyes sprang open. Belkyr held a willow switch in one upraised hand.

"I told you not to not to make yourself come," he growled. He whipped her again, the switch cutting across her nipples.

Elrisa let out a thin, wavering cry. Blades of pleasure-pain darted toward her cunt. She felt a gush of fresh moisture.

Belkyr stepped up to her. He twisted her nipples, still blazing from the bite of the lash. "Get on your hands and knees. *Now.*"

Elrisa did so. Belkyr immediately delivered a sharp slap to her ass, so hard it rocked her body and made her breasts sway. Quivering, she heard him rummage through the pile of straps he'd dropped to the floor. Then he straddled her. Before Elrisa knew what was happening, he forced a thick bit of twisted leather into her mouth.

Tears gathered in her eyes. Reins were obviously attached to the bit, because her head was urged backward and up.

Still holding them, Belkyr leaned toward her ear. "Have you ever been fucked in the ass?" he whispered.

Elrisa shook her head.

"I hope you're willing, because you have a very, very sweet, silky, tight ass and I have a very, very hot, hard cock that wants to shoot in it."

She felt Belkyr move backward. His thick erection slid between her cheeks...but the head was pointed up, not forward. Still holding the reins, he pumped furiously until Elrisa felt plops of warm cum on the small of her back and heard Belkyr's coarse panting. When he was spent, he stood and leaned over her shoulder once more.

"We'll save the real thing for our wedding night," he crooned. "It takes time. I don't want to hurt my Chosen One."

Belkyr lowered himself onto her back. He didn't put his entire weight on her but he did squirm in irregular circles, obviously stimulating his balls. Elrisa felt the willow switch slither between her legs. Had it been handled with care, she knew it could have stimulated her. She *wanted* it to stimulate her, for she'd yet to have her orgasm. But Belkyr seemed far more concerned with his own pleasure than hers.

Finally, mercifully, the gong that signaled the end of their time together sent its throaty tone throughout the cave. Where it was and how or by whom it was rung, Elrisa had no idea. She also had no idea how much time each man was allotted.

Belkyr removed the bit from her mouth. Lifting her upper body, Elrisa sank back on her haunches and closed her eyes, barely aware of the rustling sounds that meant Belkyr was preparing to depart.

She felt his hand on the side of her hair. "We will meet again soon, my weaver."

Saying nothing, she realized the kiss she'd earned had never been bestowed.

As soon as he was gone, Elrisa waded through the cave's pristine pool to cleanse herself. She wondered what surprises the next man would bring...and felt renewed respect for her grandmother's toughness.

"Warmest greetings, Elrisa." The man who stood before her was much taller and more slender than Belkyr. He was perfection—fair hair, clear green eyes, straight nose, strong chin and jawline. He must have invested a good amount of time in shaving the whiskers off his face, for it was smooth as marble. "I am Kdar." Dipping into a courtly bow, he gently lifted Elrisa's hand and even more gently kissed the backs of her fingers.

She was charmed. Only knights and lords behaved this way. Feeling demure, she swept an arm toward the pile of pelts. "Welcome. Please join me."

Lightly cupping Elrisa's arm, Kdar guided her over to their seating area.

"I greatly admire the work of Web Weavers," he said, seeming to mean it.

They talked a bit about their work—Elrisa had to caution herself against being *too* inquisitive—and other more mundane matters. Kdar was impeccably polite. Although he never failed to answer one of her questions, he also never revealed too much.

Kdar lifted one of the leafy panels of Elrisa's dress and admired it. Inching closer to the man, she thanked him...and turned her face to his in doing so. He must have understood. Lifting her chin with a fingertip, he touched his lips to hers.

Elrisa curled one arm around his back and flattened her other hand against his chest. The pressure of his lips increased, but not by much. It drove her mad. Was he intentionally teasing her or was he, by nature, a man of restraint?

"Would you like me to remove my dress?" she asked, wanting to ignite him.

"Yes," Kdar breathed. "Very much."

“But we won’t be on equal ground if you remain clothed.” She languidly slipped out of her garment. Smiling into Kdar’s eyes, she lay on her back, presenting her body to him.

“You’re very enticing,” he murmured. Without hurrying, he removed his tunic, belt and boots.

Elrisa’s breasts rose and fell with her excited breathing as she watched Kdar bare his body. Her nipples hardened and her cunt moistened in response to his nakedness. He had long, sweeping muscles that made him look very limber, a long, semi-erect cock that made him look very virile. Elrisa wanted to be entangled in his limbs while she felt that cock slide into her like a ramrod.

Kdar stretched out beside her and lightly trailed one hand from her face to her hips, moving around but not over her breasts. Squirming, Elrisa parted her thighs. Kdar’s hand palmed her pussy but did not dip into it.

“I want to bring you pleasure,” he said.

“Please do.” She desperately needed a release.

Kdar knelt over Elrisa, his thighs on either side of her body, his cock head doing a tantalizing little dance on her belly. His hands moved up to her neck and he began to massage her.

It was very sensual—the man’s long, strong fingers flexing and gliding over her flesh, kneading her muscles. He even massaged her breasts. Elrisa closed her eyes as a delicious lassitude poured through her.

Strangely enough, these ministrations made her excitement ebb. Traces of it remained—stirred occasionally by Kdar’s hands when they worked their magic on the swell of her breasts or the muscles of her inner thighs—but, for the most part, Elrisa just wanted to fall asleep. Did he realize this?

Maybe he planned on lulling her senses before shocking them with a flash-fire of unexpected lust. Elrisa smiled at the thought. She would suddenly feel his firm body crushed against her, slicking her breasts with sweat. As she wildly rubbed her nipples

against his chest, he would fork his fingers into her hair and press his hungry mouth to her lips as if he wanted to devour her. They'd roll and tumble on the pelts, clutching and caressing each other's body. Then he'd force her legs apart and, sucking the flames from her nipples, would thrust his rigid cock into her cunt and pump it until –

The gong sounded. Elrisa's eyelids fluttered open. She saw Kdar get to his feet and start dressing. He smiled down at her.

"I love touching you," he said. "I wish our time together wasn't limited." He handed Elrisa her dress.

"I wish that as well." Dazed, she took the dress from his hand and slipped it on. Her pussy was uncomfortably drenched...but in her own fluids, not his. Neither of them had transmitted a fever to the other.

Kdar helped her up and gave her a kiss that mirrored his first one. "Thank you, dear lady." After briefly cupping her cheek, he left the cave.

Elrisa needed some fresh air. Beautiful as the Cave Garden was, she'd been in it for over four hours—four *frustrating* hours. She hoped she could glean at least one decent orgasm from this confusing ordeal.

Assuming somebody was hidden somewhere to monitor the goings-on, she announced, "I'm stepping out for a bit. I won't go far and I won't speak with anybody. I'll return in time to meet the third visitor."

Exiting the cave, Elrisa wandered into a small grove adjacent to it. It was filled with various fruit trees, many of which were in bloom. She sank to the ground, inhaled deeply and impulsively peeled off her dress.

What a day! She lowered her head and let out a forlorn chuckle. *First ridden like a donkey then stroked like a kitten. What will come next?*

Elrisa didn't want a master and didn't need a slave. She both wanted and needed an equal. But could she have an equal as well as keep her dream alive? She might just have to settle for someone who didn't quite meet her standards.

Like Belkyr. So far, he seemed the one most likely to have chosen her. She sensed it based on things he had said. Belkyr had dropped clues. Kdar had not.

Elrisa wondered if she could bond with someone such as him. She reminded herself that if she became involved in dragon calling, even as an assistant, she would be able to serve as a credible wife to any man. Her grandmother, after all, had borne up under the onslaught of countless insensitive clients, year after draining year, so she herself should be able to tolerate Belkyr. And if she couldn't get him to moderate his approach to sexual interplay, she could insist he visit the Redames and let her be.

Sighing, Elrisa grabbed her dress but didn't bother putting it on. Perhaps the next Caller's lovemaking would be effective. At this point, even a man with a pox-pitted face and bland approach would do...as long as he brought her satisfaction. Surely *one* of the three would be at least as good as a common Provider.

Elrisa glanced at the dress hanging from her hand and giggled. She could always throw it over his head.

Upon reentering the cave, she paused briefly to let her eyes adjust to the dimness.

"Hello. Are you Elrisa?"

Startled, she jumped. Then the question registered, prompting her to laugh. At this point, she had a devil-may-care attitude. "No, I'm Princess Trelkiny. I've always wanted to make love to a Dragon Caller, so I had that silly little strumpet of a weaver dragged off and thrown into a dungeon."

Elrisa walked in the direction of the voice. It was a very appealing voice, rich and subdued with an underlying roughness. As she approached the small pool, she saw a man sitting at its edge, his lower legs dangling in the water. His head was lowered and he appeared to be smiling sheepishly.

"Stupid question," he muttered, then looked up. "I'm sorry. I can only see your silhouette. You're backlit." He was about to rise from the edge of the pool.

"Please, don't bother," Elrisa said...and got her first good look at him.

She nearly tripped on a rise in the floor. Her heart hammered at the base of her throat. She recognized the man. What's more, they'd already been intimate. His name was Trew—how could she forget a name like that?—and they'd spent four glorious hours together making passionate love.

Chapter Four

Unsure of the steadiness of her legs, all Elrisa could do at the moment was stand there and gape at him. It didn't help that he was clad only in a skimpy loincloth.

They'd met nearly three years ago. Elrisa had asked her grandmother what it was like being a Redame. Since she'd just turned eighteen, she assumed the question was no longer inappropriate. So Algiwyn, who believed in embracing all life's experiences, accompanied her granddaughter to the Redames Lodge and let Elrisa volunteer her "services" for an evening—just one evening, to satisfy her curiosity about the life of a professional prostitute.

Apparently, hers wasn't a very representative experience. Elrisa remembered coming away from the lodge feeling moonstruck. She thought her client, Trew, was a god. But that dazzling impression gradually faded. As time went on, she ascribed her feelings to glossy, youthful delusion. An eighteen-year-old female was still quite naïve and impressionable.

But Trew couldn't be the Caller who'd chosen her. He *couldn't* be. Had he been smitten by her three years ago—which was highly unlikely, given both her lack of sophistication and his stated aversion to marriage—Elrisa would have been chosen by him long before now.

In any case, she'd feel awkward mentioning that episode. What would be the point? And she certainly couldn't let his unexpected appearance influence her behavior today. Since she didn't know for certain which of the Callers had chosen her, she must try to please them all, equally. She didn't want to risk doing anything that might jeopardize the realization of her dream.

Elrisa doubted he'd recognize her. On her one trip to the Redames Lodge, she'd painted her face, hadn't used her real name, and was prohibited from mentioning she was an impostor.

"My name is Trew, by the way. Are you reluctant to join me?" He lifted one leg out of the pool. Bending it, he rested his linked hands on his knee. A cup of shadow had formed beneath the short awning formed by his loincloth, and Elrisa knew what lay within it.

"No," Elrisa quickly answered. "I was just...admiring you."

"Flattery isn't necessary."

"I wasn't trying to flatter you. I was making a confession."

Indeed she was. Trew was as breathtaking as he'd been three years earlier. His thick, lustrous hair, somewhat darker than hers, had short curls that caressed the tops of his shoulders. His body, somewhere between Belkyr's and Kdar's in height, was lithe and muscular and graced by flawless skin. But it was Trew's stunning face that put Elrisa's heart in her throat. It seemed less youthful now, more mature and angular, and all the more compelling because of that maturity. He had neither a full beard, like Belkyr, nor a clean face, like Kdar. Instead, dark stubble peppered his upper lip and chin and part of his jawline, as if he removed his whiskers only every few days or so and didn't bother shaving them right down to the skin. It gave him a very fetching, rakish look.

As she gazed at Trew, Elrisa had a vivid recollection of the feel of his lips on her skin. He had a softly sculpted mouth...and he knew how to use it. He also had a delectable cock that fit into all her secret places like a hand in a tailored glove. His eyes, a warm grayish-blue, had a way of not just looking at a woman but washing over her.

Motivated more with every passing moment, Elrisa walked over to the pool.

Trew couldn't help gawking at her. She was completely nude. His gaze slid uncontrollably down Elrisa's somewhat petite but athletic body. Her wealth of hair—

tousled from the day's activities, no doubt—partially concealed nicely rounded and very delectable-looking breasts, which bounced slightly as she walked. Occasionally a succulent nipple peeked out, high and rosy as a swollen bud...but obviously far more responsive.

Tossing aside some piece of fabric she was carrying, she sat beside him.

"That was quite an entrancing entrance you made," Trew said. His throat felt constricted. "Right now I'm not feeling very much like a gentleman."

Her eyes glimmered. "Good. I'm not feeling very much like a lady." Luring him with a smile, Elrisa slipped into the pool. "Are you reluctant to join me?" she asked in an arch tone. One glistening arm rose from the water. One slender hand tugged at his loincloth.

"Not at all," Trew breathed.

The short length of fine suede fell away from his hips. Already aroused, his engorged cock jutted over the water. As he was about to slide into the pool, Elrisa stopped him.

"Wait," she said, her voice dusky than before, "there's something I need to do."

Her head rose up between Trew's legs. Languorously, she ran her tongue along the underside of his shaft, pressing and flicking the thick vein. When she reached his cock head, she gave it a quick lick and firm suck, then disappeared beneath the water.

Well, this is one lady who knows what she wants. The thought was accompanied by admiration and gratitude. Perhaps this interlude would be a welcome change from his visits to the Redames. Nerves singing and blood simmering, Trew dropped into the pool.

He immediately felt a pair of slender hands crawl up his legs from ankles to crotch, firmly rubbing his muscles all the way. After delivering simultaneous squeezes to his balls and cock, Elrisa surfaced. She looked quite satisfied with herself.

"It's about time," Trew said, grasping her shoulders and looking into her eyes. They were a deep, soft brown. An adorable, sparse scattering of freckles cascaded down either side of her nose and across her high cheekbones.

"Didn't you like that?" Beneath the water, Elrisa's hands continued their exploration, fondling his chest muscles, his nipples.

"I like everything that's gone on since you appeared...but I want to play too."

Eager to advance their intimacy, Trew grasped either side of Elrisa's face and touched his lips to hers—once, twice, thrice—each time letting his lips linger a bit longer, move more eloquently. Elrisa's breathing convulsed. Her soft, moist lips returned his kisses with an ardor he hadn't experienced in a long time, an ardor that fueled his own. Maybe the Redames hadn't been lying to him when they said they liked the feel of his mouth, looked forward to his kisses.

Trew carefully eased their intertwined bodies to the small waterfall, barely lifting his mouth from Elrisa's. The way she responded to him, vibrating like a finely crafted harp to every whisper of a touch, seemed to snatch at some buried memory. Or was it just a fond wish? Trew didn't know. Lost to the consuming heat of their kiss, he couldn't seem to distinguish memory from fantasy.

Beneath the gentle spill of water, their lips alternately crushed and glided together. Their probing, demanding tongues became even sleeker. Breathing heavily, nearly blinded by desire, Trew lifted Elrisa onto a low ledge beneath the falls so the water would cascade over her breasts. Ravenously, he sucked at her erect nipples while his hands grasped at the slippery orbs beneath them.

"Are you going to fuck me, Trew?" Cradling his head, Elrisa pressed her yielding flesh against his greedy mouth. Her lips skimmed across his wet hair, across his forehead and temples. "Are you going to fuck me?"

He couldn't help but chuckle softly. "This must be Stupid Question Day in Galdesh." Lifting his head, Trew gazed into her eyes. He didn't think about what he would say next. He simply opened his mouth and let the words come out. "No, I'm not

just going to fuck you. I'm going to make love to you." He no longer felt he was performing some distasteful duty.

Elrisa's forehead dipped in the center, as if she found the statement perplexing. Her hands rose to Trew's face. Tenderly, as she studied him, her fingers trailed over his features. Trew's eyelids drifted shut. When her fingertips came to rest on his mouth, he pushed his lips against them.

"You're so beautiful," she whispered.

Trew felt himself smile. When was the last time a woman had so carefully explored his face and pronounced him beautiful? He had a vague recollection of it happening before, but he couldn't remember when.

Looking at her again, savoring the sight of her, he slid his hands down Elrisa's wet body.

She quivered beneath his touch. Trew never lifted his palms. He simply let them glide across her skin. His fingers moved continuously, sinuously. Elrisa felt them slowly sink into her breasts and massage them as his thumbs slowly circled her nipples. He flicked at them with his nails. His tongue darted at one, then the other, back and forth, delivering quick, teasing licks. Moaning and weakening, Elrisa gripped the ledge to keep from sliding off. Trew's hands swept down her rib cage, thumbs inscribing parallel lines of pressure against her abdominal muscles, her stomach...and finally the soft, inverted delta of her pubic hair.

Trew raised his bent arms away from his body, pushing Elrisa's thighs farther apart. His thumbs, still poised at the topmost demarcation of her labia, continued their delicate circular massage.

Elrisa wanted to feel his mouth on her cunt. Remembering how his lips and tongue had once transported her, she wanted desperately to feel them again. But Trew was taking his time.

She remembered that about him, as well—how, at the Redames Lodge, he hadn't rushed them into consummation, how he'd tantalized and readied her with ever-increasing doses of pleasure. Elrisa wasn't a virgin then but felt like one. As soon as Trew touched her, it seemed like the first time her body had *ever* been touched, the first time her senses had been fully awakened. The experience was so new and intoxicating she'd lost track of her climaxes...or maybe had had an unbroken string of them. It was impossible to tell. Trew had simply kept coaxing her body to respond, fully and wildly, to his mouth, his hands, his tireless, plunging cock.

Trying to keep the past from melding with the present, Elrisa let herself sink into their current encounter. It required no effort. Still exerting a gentle pressure, Trew's thumbs moved down the inner folds of her pussy lips. The middle finger of one hand traced the opening of her vagina. A thrilling, cool tingle spread like a web of frost through Elrisa's limbs. She heard herself making sounds like a small animal calling for its mother. Trew's finger dipped deeper into her moist canal, stroking, pushing, probing.

Her clit was beginning to throb, her womb to ache with need. Trew's thumb teasingly brushed the sides of her sensitive nub, and Elrisa had a fleeting, fanciful thought—that it was like one of her dew pearls, and this man who coveted it would handle it like a rare, fragile treasure.

"What did the other men do to you?" Trew asked. The question was breathless, almost urgent.

"Would it excite you to know?"

"Yes. Very much." Trew bent over. With restrained fervor, his mouth replaced his hand.

Elrisa had difficulty finding her voice. "Belkyr...whipped me."

"Where?"

"Across my breasts."

Trew groaned and pulled her clit between his lips. His tongue did a delicate dance over and around it. Elrisa cried out as a lightning strike of desire forked throughout her body. Trew's excitement put an almost unbearable edge on her own arousal.

"Then he...he put a bit in my mouth...and rode me, and —"

Trew's tongue slipped into her gushing vagina and moved as if it were a creature with a will of its own. He hungrily lapped at her moisture. Elrisa squirmed against his sumptuous mouth. She began fondling her water-slicked breasts, pulling at her exquisitely sensitive nipples as Trew's lips and tongue returned to her swollen clit.

He finally lifted his head. In a fractured voice he said, "My cock is so hard it's torturing me. Please let me fill you."

Elrisa felt both enervated and energized. His beseeching tone and look propelled her to the brink of orgasm. "Yes, do it. Quickly."

Without a moment's delay, Trew swept her off the ledge and onto his stiff, eager organ.

She cried out as he fully sank himself inside her — a cry of biting, blissful excitement that seemed to charge Trew with even more masculine power. Buoyed by the water and the tense strength of his arms, Elrisa had no trouble riding his thick rod. Rejoicing in the feel of it, she gripped his stony column with muscles she didn't use often enough, then kissed him with a passion she hadn't felt in three years. Within moments, grasping his neck and shoulders even more tightly, her whole body stalled...then violently convulsed as an orgasm tore through her. She felt her vagina clutching Trew's nearly bursting cock, possessively pulsing against it. Claiming it.

And only then, when she was securely locked in the throes of her climax, did he let himself go. The intense throbbing of his cock, accompanied by a guttural groan, sent more bolts of pleasure through Elrisa's body. Nearly senseless, she felt as if she were surrendering her very essence to him.

"I don't want to let you go," she whispered against Trew's ear. How strange, she thought dimly, that she felt proud to be so thoroughly taken.

His lips pressed against her throat. "Good," he seemed to say.

Trew swept her limp body up into his arms and, walking though the shallow pool, skimmed her across the surface, slowly swaying this way and that to make the water purl over her skin. Smiling, Elrisa stretched out her arms and legs to relish the experience. She noticed the satisfaction in Trew's face.

"You seem to be enjoying this as much as I am," she said with bemused chuckle.

"I love the way your breasts look when they break the surface, with those silvery veils of water spilling down from the peaks." He leaned over to lick and suck and nibble.

Elrisa felt the first stir of renewed arousal. She curled forward and nuzzled the gully between his neck and shoulder. "Let's lie on those furs. I want to look at you and feel you. I want to talk with you and know you."

They couldn't seem to take their eyes and hands off each other, even as they climbed out of the pool and walked to the thick bed. As soon as they lay down, Trew pulled one of the pelts over their wet bodies. They rolled onto their sides to face each other.

"Did you like what Belkyr did to you?" Trew asked, stroking the side of Elrisa's face.

She gave a small, lazy shrug. "Not particularly."

"Did you *dislike* what Belkyr did to you?"

"Not particularly."

"Do you think he noticed? Or cared?"

Elrisa smiled. "Not particularly."

She leaned forward to kiss him. When she drew back, she traced the outline of his lips with one finger.

"You never did get to tell me what happened between you and Kdar." Trew wondered why it mattered to him. Asking about Belkyr was something he did simply to hone his own excitement. But now...now some other feeling motivated him, some feeling only distantly related to sexual desire.

Yet, even that desire had taken on a different cast. While he made love to Elrisa, his arousal had been like a deep, thickening tension that infected every fiber of his body. As the cum pounded out of him, exquisite pleasure and relief poured through him. And it was nothing like the mechanical release he found through the Redames.

Except for that one time, years ago...

That time, as today, a lilting sweetness overlaid his surging storm of release, like the piping of a flute over the pounding of a drum.

Curiously, Elrisa studied his face. "Nothing much at all happened. He treated my body like...a fine piece of statuary."

"That's because it is." Trew loved the enveloping warmth of her eyes. Once again he had the nagging sense that there was something familiar about the way Elrisa looked at him, touched him. She made him feel – "Were you drawn to Kdar?" he asked rather abruptly, interrupting his own thoughts. They were taking a disturbing turn.

"Yes, I found him attractive. He's quite handsome and very genteel."

They stared into each other's eyes.

"That he is," Trew murmured.

"Are *you* drawn to him?"

The blunt question gave Trew a start. He let out a self-conscious chuckle as blood heated his face. But because he espoused honesty, he gave Elrisa an honest answer. "I guess I am, somewhat. Not the way I'm drawn to women, but –"

"Have the two of you ever been intimate?" she broke in.

Now it was Trew who gave *her* a curious look. "Does that prospect excite you?"

Elrisa answered with a mysterious smile—the only response Trew thought he would get from her. Then she said, “Yes, it does excite me. Primarily because *you’d* be involved.” As if to prevent them from delving deeper into this subject—which, Trew realized, would have been pointless—Elrisa lapsed into playfulness. “You know, dear man, I may have to suck your cock quite vigorously before you leave.”

Trew felt it twitch in response to this possibility. “I may have to nip and nuzzle your pussy quite tenderly before I leave.”

Elrisa feigned surprise. “Again?”

“Are you tired of it?”

Her tongue skated daintily over Trew’s mouth. “What do *you* think?”

He pulled her tongue between his lips, sucked it, released it. “I’m starting to think we can’t get enough of each other. What else might you have to do?”

“I may have to ride you like the stallion you are. I want to watch your firm body buck beneath me.”

“Well, I may have to set you on all fours and fuck you like the temptress-bitch *you* are.”

Folding up, Elrisa squealed in delighted laughter. Trew captured her in his arms and eased her on top of him. Their mouths came together for a prolonged, savoring kiss.

“What things in life are most important to you?” she asked, growing more thoughtful.

Trew eased Elrisa’s hair back from her face, then traced the short line of her nose. “My family and friends. My work. Loyalty, fairness. Truth.”

“What about love?”

Trew’s heart skipped. “I’m afraid I don’t have any experience with that. Not the romantic kind, anyway.”

Completely somber now, Elrisa whispered, “You are extraordinary.”

Another skip, and a fluttering in his belly. "You probably say that to all the Callers." Trew attempted to lighten the moment with a grin.

Elrisa remained serious. "No. Only to you. I think I may have even said it to you three years ago...when we were first together."

Trew's smile fell. He suddenly felt disoriented. "At the Redames Lodge," he whispered. "*You* were the one who —"

"Who was eighteen and only there for one night," Elrisa said, "just to satisfy my curiosity. My grandmother used to be a Redame, so she arranged it. And you were the only 'client' I had."

Aghast, Trew held her face and gazed into her eyes. *You were the one who moved me* so was what he'd intended to say. "I wondered why I never saw you there again. When I finally asked, they said you'd been dismissed." His fingers slid down her cheeks. "Elrisa, you have no idea how you —"

The gong sounded.

"*Shit!*" Trew hissed.

Elrisa closed her eyes. Despair weighted her face. "You must go. Tarrying could get you in trouble."

Still dumbstruck, Trew had neither the time nor the wits to say anything further. *You have no idea how you affected me...how you continue to affect me.* Yes, he remembered. He'd been remembering, on and off, ever since that night. He'd been remembering the whole time he was with Elrisa today. Quaking, Trew hastily grabbed his loincloth, threw his cloak over his shoulders and slipped into his boots.

The only parting words he could muster were, "I'll no doubt see you soon." Everything else he wanted to say would've been improper, not allowed.

On his way back to the lodge, Trew was shaken both by recollections and realizations. He now understood the reason for his restiveness...and understood that Elrisa offered everything that would cure it. What he craved was a loving, passionate

bond with someone he could trust and respect and cherish, someone who would make him feel...

Adored.

She made me feel adored.

As Trew climbed up the rise to the Callers Lodge, he spied Belkyr approaching its doors. Trew charged up to him, jerked him around and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. "Now I know why you want to wed Elrisa."

"She's a sweet little sparrow, is she not?"

"Don't play games with me. No woman will ever persuade you to become a doting husband." Trew jabbed a finger at Belkyr's face. "Listen, you overbearing jackass. You're not worthy of Elrisa. The only reason you made a bid for her affection is to advance your position in this Order. It *eats* at you that you haven't achieved Exalted Caller status. So your plan is to join forces with a gifted Web Weaver and put *her* talent to work for you."

"What of it?" Belkyr said sullenly. "I have a right to better myself."

"Through your own efforts, not at the expense of someone else's happiness!" Trew shoved him away in disgust. "You're a boor and a slacker, Belkyr. You don't deserve a place in *any* of the Higher Orders."

"I don't give one apple of horseshit what you think of me," the dark man hissed, his face reddening. "You've been a bur on my balls since you entered this brotherhood. I swear, if you did or said anything to turn that woman away from me, I'll see to it *you* are expelled from the Wing and Tongue." He took a step away from Trew and haughtily straightened his shirt. "And afterward, I'll pound your pretty face to a pulp." Belkyr spat on the ground before Trew's feet and entered the lodge.

"You are not going to marry her," Trew announced, even if Belkyr could no longer hear him. "*I am.*"

Chapter Five

A pale, willowy man appeared from behind a jagged wall of rock. He wore a white linen robe. As this wraithlike creature glided up to her, Elrisa's immediate reaction was one of confusion. She still couldn't think clearly.

Then she made the connection between the man and his peculiar clothing. The neckline, cuffs and hem of the robe had been embroidered with a specific decoration. Elrisa recognized the design as well as the silken threads, dyed with indigo, that were used to make it.

He was only the second of his kind she'd ever seen. There likely weren't many such men, but all were in service at the castle. He was a eunuch.

"My name is Fren," he said with a fluid bow. "I'm to escort you to Master Xentis."

"Were you...here the whole time?"

Fren inclined his head, indicating an affirmative. He offered neither explanation nor apology.

Elrisa stared at him a moment longer. "I knew there had to be somebody." She donned her green cloak. "Let's go, then."

As she and Fren exited the cave, her apprehension mounted. Belkyr was the Caller who had chosen her. Elrisa was virtually certain of it. Neither Kdar nor Trew had said the things he had.

She was just as certain of something else but forced *that* certainty aside.

"Fren has some distinct impressions, based on what he witnessed in the Cave Garden."

"Has he?" Elrisa kept looking around the large hall with its exposed timbers and finely wrought sconces. Although preoccupied, she still felt a thrill. This was where the Order of the Wing and Tongue met! The brotherhood's lodge was like sacred ground to her, second only to the Callers Cliff in mystique.

Afraid of seeming discourteous, Elrisa quickly turned her attention back to Master Xentis, who faced her across a sturdy, sickle-shaped table.

"Of course," the Master said, "Fren's impressions will only carry weight if you confirm them." Linking his hands together, he leaned forward. "Did you fancy any of the Callers, Elrisa? Or did you fancy none of them?"

Swallowing hard, she looked down. Conflicting thoughts and feelings boiled within her. *Was Belkyr the right one? More important, what did "right" mean?*

She immediately saw Trew's face. A swell of mingled tenderness and longing accompanied the vision. *No, I can't be swayed by this. He certainly isn't the one who chose me.*

Then her imagination conjured up another persuasive image—an image of herself standing on the Callers Cliff, her arms bearing the delicious weight of her hand-fashioned wings. She gazed into the golden blue distance beyond the green hills, where the Farfields lay, then proudly lifted the wings and began to beat them against the air...

"Will you need a Day of Thought," Xentis asked, "before you give me your answer?"

Elrisa's heart seemed to beat in response to both the image and the question. Then her mind shut down, her mouth opened, and a word came out—or should have come out but didn't quite. Her throat felt clotted. Clearing it, Elrisa tried again and this time tore through the words. "I don't need a Day of Thought. I know the man I want." Inexplicably, an urge to giggle overcame her. She felt like a lunatic but couldn't seem to control herself. "I choose Belkyr. He's the one I fancy." Catching her breath and swiping at her eyes, Elrisa was appalled to realize she'd not only been giggling but crying.

She thought she might be losing her mind.

Xentis frowned at her. His shaggy brows dipped together. "Belkyr? Are you certain?"

"Why wouldn't I be certain?" Elrisa snapped. "And why do you doubt me?"

Still looking befuddled, the Master lightly shook his head. "It's just that Fren was..."

"Fren was what?"

Xentis waved away the question. "Never mind." Lifting his head, he assumed his previous air of composure. "So you prefer Belkyr over the others. Beyond any shadow of a doubt."

Elrisa blinked, nodded. She felt ill and wanted to flee. The spacious lodge suddenly seemed suffocating. The Master's attention suddenly seemed crushing. She swore she could feel the eunuch's gaze boring into her back and scouring her soul...

And Elrisa knew it was from herself she wanted to flee. From herself and the mountainous lie she'd just told, because it was a betrayal of everything she held dear—her grandmother's regard, her own integrity and the man she not just favored but truly loved.

"Now I can reveal," Xentis said, his voice strangely flat, "that it was Belkyr who chose you."

Elrisa's chin quivered. "How fortunate for me."

"Here," Xentis said, sliding a sheet of parchment in front of her, "you must mark this document to make your declaration official."

"Official, unofficial, what does it matter?" Elrisa cried, her voice strained. "I've stated my preference. Why must I constantly have documents thrust at me?" How she despised all these formalities! And she despised them especially now. When she glanced down at the table, she saw shackles instead of a thin rectangle of sheepskin.

"I regret, miss, that I cannot amend the law of the land for you." Xentis dipped a quill pen into a jar of ink and handed it to Elrisa.

Snatching it from his fingers, she inscribed a sloppy rendition of her sigil on the bottom of the page. She turned to Fren, still standing like a statue near the door. "Please show me where I'm to go now." Looking back at Xentis, she asked, "May I leave?"

Xentis didn't answer. Instead, he lifted his head to address the eunuch. "Fren, please escort this lady to the chamber behind the hall. I'll ring the bell to summon the three Callers." Raising his eyebrows, he shook his head and sighed.

The eunuch quietly backed out of the chamber, pulling the door closed as he went. Elrisa heard the peeling of the bell that hung in the lodge's tower.

"Fren, wait!"

Pausing, he looked up at her. His eyes were the most startling blue she'd ever seen, very much like glacial ice. She hadn't really noticed them before now.

"Please, come sit with me a moment. If you don't mind." She desperately needed to redirect her thoughts.

"I don't mind," Fren said in his lulling voice. He glided toward the bench where Elrisa sat and sank onto it.

"Fren, if I ask you a question, will you give me a truthful answer?"

"I will."

"Were you responsible for regulating the time I spent with each of those men? Were you the one who sounded the gong?"

"I was."

Elrisa didn't quite know how to phrase the next question without impugning his integrity. She glanced at the eunuch. His face remained impassive. "Is it possible you might have...given more time to some and less to others?"

He blinked twice. A hint of guilt seemed to creep into his face. "It's possible."

"That's what I thought." She didn't want to press the issue and make him say something incriminating. "Fren, what made you decide to become..." She was too ashamed of her question to finish it.

"To become what I am?"

Blushing furiously, Elrisa nodded. "Excuse me for prying. I don't want to offend you."

"You haven't. It's just that no one's asked me that before." There was a trace of wonderment in his voice. Uncertainly, he glanced at her. "It's a story I've never recounted and never particularly wanted to recount."

Elrisa's face fell. She grabbed one of his hands. It felt impossibly smooth and cool. "Oh, Fren, I'm so sorry. If these memories are unpleasant for you —"

"No, it's all right," he said with a wan smile. His crystalline gaze drifted off. "I was a young man at the time — well, as much a boy as a man — and my mother served as one of Princess Trilkeny's attendants."

"So you were raised in the castle?" Elrisa asked, fascinated.

"Yes. I was something of a pampered child. But my mother's position was threatened when my father was killed in a battle against the Urlkinians."

"Why would that endanger her position?"

Fren chuckled softly. "I can see you're not familiar with political intrigue."

Laughing lightly, she shook her head. "Not at all, thank goodness."

"Well," Fren went on, "my father was falling out of favor at Court. He'd run afoul of some lord. To this day I don't know the details and haven't bothered to inquire. In any case, whatever besmirches a husband besmirches his wife. When my father was no longer around to defend his name and garner support, my mother became something of an outcast."

"How awful for her!"

Fren nodded. "The prospect of being uprooted was difficult for my mother to face. It was difficult for both of us. We knew no other way of life. Being established at Court tends to coddle a person. So we both had a sense of entitlement, even rather high-toned ambitions." Fren gave Elrisa a brief, guarded glance, perhaps tintured with embarrassment. "So, to secure our place, I offered my—" Abruptly, he stopped speaking.

Elrisa stared at him. *He offered his manhood.* "How old were you?" she whispered.

"Seventeen. It should have been done before I was twelve, but..." Fren shrugged. His eyes, directed at nothing near or visible, took on a dull glaze.

Elrisa's forehead hurt from being furrowed in horror and pity. "Have you ever regretted your decision?"

The question seemed to snatch Fren back into the chamber and into the present. "Rarely," he said, obviously trying to brighten his tone. "Eunuchs are treated extremely well. Almost revered, in fact. I have many luxuries, many privileges."

"But you said 'rarely'," Elrisa pointed out. "That must mean there were times when you *did* regret it."

Fren turned his eyes down. The fingers of his primly folded hands began to bend and straighten. The question clearly made him uncomfortable. "Yes." He gave her an unusually sharp look. "Like today."

Because, Elrisa assumed, he had to watch three men exercising their sexuality. But she didn't divulge her assumption. Doing so would have been cruel.

"Before I...changed," Fren said, "there was a young woman I loved. She lived in a neighboring kingdom and visited the castle several times a year with her father." He smiled wistfully at these recollections. "We reveled in each other's company...and, eventually, shared great passion."

Transfixed, tears rising in her eyes, Elrisa could only stare at the eunuch. "How could you give that up?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

Fren turned on the bench to face her. "How could *you*?"

Blinking at him, Elrisa felt a spin of vertigo.

Fren curled a hand around her wrist. "Today, as I watched and listened to you and Trew, I knew I was witnessing two people falling in love. And that's precisely what I told Master Xentis. It reminded me of the time I'd spent with Darnala. And I thought, well, at least *this* couple will be able to enjoy their love and find lifelong happiness through it. Ambition won't come between them." His gaze didn't move from Elrisa's face. "Yes, I gave Trew more time than the others. I wish I could have given him more. Now tell me, why did you lie?"

* * * * *

"The woman, Elrisa, has stated her preference." The Master's somber gaze swept over the three Callers who stood before him.

Trew felt he was about to jump out of his skin. He wasn't sure he liked being in love. When he had to leave Elrisa, he realized he didn't *want* to leave. His spirit had felt heavy since they parted. His cock remained restless. His thoughts were chaotic, suffused with anxiety.

He'd never felt this way before...and it confounded him.

"I commend all of you on your conduct," Xentis said. "One of the king's eunuchs was secreted in the Cave Garden. He heard no inappropriate utterances, either by you or the woman. So I must assume what she told me sprang from genuine, natural feeling, uninfluenced by any source save her own heart."

Trew could hear Belkyr's breathing. He, too, must be edgy. When Trew realized why, his scorn for Belkyr freshened. This brother cared only about his own advancement. Elrisa was nothing more to him than another tool.

Xentis stepped forward. He extended a hand toward Belkyr. "My congratulations, sir. You have prevailed."

* * * * *

Fren's searching, perceptive gaze would not release her. Elrisa's breath hitched. She struggled to hold back tears.

"Well? Why *did* you? And I know you did. Master Xentis likely believes so too."

"I can't tell you that," Elrisa forced out.

"Then tell me this. *Is* it Trew whom you want?"

The effort to suppress sobs made Elrisa's throat feel like a knot of fire. "More than I can stand," she gasped...then lost her tenuous control. She gulped air as tears streamed down her cheeks. Concealing her face with her hands, she struggled to calm herself.

Just as Elrisa began to regain some composure, Fren shattered it. "Have you no idea how it will *torment* you to be married to one member of the Wing and Tongue while you yearn for another?"

Bolting up from the bench, unbearably pained by his questions, Elrisa railed, "But at least...at least I'll be married to a Dragon Caller!"

Fren's fine, pale eyebrows drew together. "Why is that important to you?"

"*It just is.*"

"Then...why didn't you simply state your preference for Trew? He's an *Exalted* Dragon Caller. You could have petitioned to marry *him*, the man you genuinely care for, and had your trophy husband as well."

"I'm not in the least bit interested in having a 'trophy husband'!" Elrisa cried. The phrase stung her. She didn't know whether to take umbrage at the insult or give in to her hurt. Then something else Fren had said eclipsed the rest of his utterance. Elrisa froze where she stood. "Petitioned? What do you mean?"

"Had you not felt drawn to the man who chose you," Fren explained, "you could have petitioned to marry the man you *did* fancy. Master Xentis would have told you this as soon as you'd stated your preference for anyone other than Belkyr."

Elrisa's jaw hung open. "But I thought —"

"That you must either choose Belkyr or end up with no one?" Fren shook his head. "That's not the case. However, a Chosen One is not made aware of this option unless she voices her desire for one of the *other* two men. It's done that way to ensure that her statement of preference is an honest one and she isn't simply trying to marry into one of the Higher Orders." Fren's gaze became even icier. "You just threw away the love of your life, miss."

It was as if Fren had slapped her. But rather than be paralyzed by this shock, Elrisa forcefully galvanized it into determination. "Then it's up to me to reclaim him."

* * * * *

Trew gaped at Xentis and Belkyr. "No!" he shouted.

The Master stepped back and eyed him with consternation. "What's gotten into you?"

"This can't be!" Trew was incredulous. His gaze roamed wildly over the other men. "I don't believe it!"

Kdar grabbed his shoulders. "Trew, she's made her choice. You have to accept it."

Smirking, Belkyr crossed his arms over his chest. "That's right."

"No, I *don't* have to accept it." Trew backed away from the three men but continued to glare at them. "This filthy deceiver," he spoke to Xentis but pointed at Belkyr, "doesn't want Elrisa. He wants her *skills*. She is nothing more to him than a means to an end. Can't you see that? Belkyr will never rise through his own talent, so he's hoping to rise through hers!"

Xentis looked down, then up again. "It doesn't matter what we see, Trew. It only matters what *she* sees."

Trew studied the older man's face. "You *know*," he whispered.

"It doesn't matter what I know," Xentis said, echoing his earlier statement. He sounded dismayed. "Trew, I have no choice but to take Elrisa at her word and act accordingly. I can't explain her decision. Only *she* can."

"And I shall."

The men all looked toward the lodge's doors. Elrisa had managed to slip in without being seen or heard. She stood just inside the portal and regarded the brothers.

"It seems my choice is being met with some...skepticism."

Trew's chest pumped with ebbing fury and mounting passion as he stared at Elrisa. He wanted her so much he was tempted to fly over to where she stood and fall at her feet. But she'd lied to Xentis! That ugly realization confused and sickened and angered him all at once.

"Disbelief," Trew corrected in a tight voice. "Your decision was met with disbelief. And I think you know why."

"Tell me." Elrisa watched him intently but didn't move. She no longer seemed to notice the other men.

"Because you weren't truthful. It isn't Belkyr you favor. It's me. And I defy you to swear I'm wrong."

Infinitesimally, her eyelids fluttered. Her posture no longer seemed quite so rigid.

"How *dare* you?" Belkyr roared. He began to descend on Trew like a thunderhead. When Kdar stepped in front of him, Belkyr spun around and instead strode up to Elrisa. He put an arm around her waist, locking her against him.

She wasn't that easily captured. Stepping forward, she slid out of his embrace.

"Tell him!" Belkyr shouted at Elrisa, his florid face looming over the back of her head. "Tell that madman you've made up your mind!"

Elrisa gazed into Trew's eyes. "I've made up my mind," she said softly.

Trew began to smile.

Belkyr now sent his booming voice at Xentis. "Did she mark the Declaration of Acceptance?"

"She did."

Elrisa walked up to the table. She lifted the sheepskin parchment that still lay there. Her hands stilled. Turning her gaze from the parchment to Xentis and back again, she said with bafflement, "Belkyr's name isn't on this document. There's a blank space where it should be."

Belkyr looked outraged. "*What?* Why is that?"

Xentis was unruffled. "Fren, the royal eunuch who witnessed your encounters, was absolutely certain Elrisa would choose Trew." Xentis looked back and forth between them. "He's convinced they're quite smitten with each other."

"A *eunuch*?" Belkyr blustered. "Why would you trust the impressions of some freakish gelding?"

"Because he's an impeccably scrupulous and discreet individual of high intelligence and sound instincts." Xentis sounded irked. "That's why."

"But what does *he* know of passionate love between a man and woman?"

"A great deal," Elrisa murmured.

"And what do *you* know of it, Belkyr?" Xentis asked, his voice quiet and steady.

"Obviously enough to make this woman want me!" Belkyr hurried to the table. As he passed Trew, who hadn't moved, he shot his fellow Caller a poisonous glare. Grabbing the parchment out of Elrisa's hand, he scanned it. "If you have so much faith in your castrated cohort's opinion," he snidely asked Xentis, "why didn't you insert Trew's name?"

"As much as I trust Fren's judgment, I could not in all good conscience write in *any* man's name until I first spoke with Elrisa."

"And speak with her you did!" Belkyr cried, waving the parchment. He swatted it with the back of his hand. "So why did you *still* not enter my name?"

"I felt Elrisa wasn't being honest with me *or* herself and needed more time to ponder her decision." Xentis turned to her. "It does appear you've reconsidered."

"Yes. With Fren's help." She cast Trew a fond look.

It further melted his heart. "But why were you not honest from the start?" Trew asked, almost imploringly. He wanted to comprehend her motives. He *needed* to.

Elrisa slowly walked up to him and took his face in her hands. "Please forgive me," she whispered, then kissed his eyes. "I had a...dream for myself. Perhaps a silly dream, perhaps not. I'll tell you about it when we're alone together. I believed that to fulfill this dream, I had to marry a Dragon Caller. At the Cave Garden I deduced it was Belkyr who had chosen me. So I pretended to choose *him*. I thought if I didn't, I'd be sent back to the Weavers Glade and forgotten."

"And now?" Trew asked.

"Now I realize *you* are my dream." Elrisa touched his face. "It matters not if you're a Dragon Caller or a dung hauler." She turned and faced Xentis. "I beg you, Master, write this man's name into that document. It belongs there. No other one does."

Belkyr was on the verge of lunging forward to intervene, but Xentis put up his hand. "If you wish to be a member of *any* Higher Order," he warned, "I advise you to relinquish your claim on this woman and leave now. And do not even *consider* venting your wrath on your brother, or you'll no longer be disdainful of the eunuchs, you'll be envious of them."

Fuming, Belkyr hesitated a moment. Then he strode across the room to the lodge doors and banged through them into the night.

Xentis bent over the table, lifted his pen and wrote. His attempt to hold a somber expression wasn't entirely successful. A smile began to break through as he handed the parchment to Trew. "The next step is yours, sir."

Trew lifted one of Elrisa's hands and kissed it. "I love you. I'm flattered and grateful you chose me, even if it took you a while, and I'd be honored if you became my wife...as long as you're sure you won't change your —"

Jubilant, Elrisa threw her arms around his neck. "Never. Never, never, never!" She raised her mouth to his ear. "I adore you, Trew."

He held her tighter. "I know."

Chapter Six

"The Cave Garden?" Elrisa idly caught one of the drifting feathers from the fat goose her grandmother was plucking. "But why must I go *there*?"

Squinting against the sun, Algiwyn glanced up at her. "I can't tell you that, dear."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know."

"Well, why didn't the messenger come directly to *me*, at the Glade?"

"He did, but you were working." Algiwyn thrust more feathers into the sack that sat beside her. "You know we're not to be interrupted while performing our duties." Swiping one hand against the other, she rested them briefly on the bird cradled in her lap. She turned up her head, eyes once again defying the sun's brightness. "Were I to make a guess, though, I would say your husband-to-be is exercising his right to spend time with you."

"Trew wants me there?" Elrisa's pulse sprinted. Galdeshian law required that one full moon-cycle must elapse between a couple's betrothal and their wedding. During that period, they could only see each other once. The meeting could be for any reason whatsoever, but it was most commonly used for one of two things—either to have sex or to part ways.

Algiwyn smiled. "I don't know for certain, dear, but logic dictates that is the reason." She resumed plucking. "I suggest you not dawdle any longer."

Elrisa was tempted to run into their cottage and find something more flattering to wear. She decided against it. She couldn't keep Trew waiting. Besides, a betrothed couple should be able to see beneath appearances and value what they saw.

After thanking her grandmother, she dashed off like a deer.

How could I have forgotten about this? she wondered, running along the narrow paths that snaked out from the village and undulated, in nearly every direction, over hills. *It was the wings. Of course it was the wings.*

Elrisa had been thoroughly preoccupied with the Calling Wings she'd been constructing. She would have to present them on her wedding day and demonstrate them before a very intimidating group of guests. If the result of her labors was deemed inferior, indicating she had neither an interest in nor understanding of Dragon Calling, she would not be allowed to marry a member of the Wing and Tongue order. And the possibility of *not* binding hands with Trew filled her with the most gnawing dread she'd ever felt in her life.

After leaping and skipping through a field of large rocks and clambering over a boulder, Elrisa finally saw the mound that housed the Cave Garden. Her thoughts took a new direction. Did Trew want to make love? *Please, let it be so.* The hope infected her like a rapidly rising fever. In her mind's eye, Elrisa saw his face, his lean, muscle-platted body. How she yearned to feel both against her bare skin! Just kissing him again would be a blessing—feeling those sensuous lips pressing against hers, feeling the first soft thrust of his tongue...

Would their coupling be an urgent assault or a leisurely torment? Elrisa felt slipperiness at the apex of her thighs. Both prospects made her insides twist with desire. Her hunger for Trew, she realized, had become voracious over the past fortnight. But what about his hunger for her? Elrisa knew he hadn't been to the Redames Lodge. Algiwyn was well connected there, and she'd been told of Trew's absence.

And Elrisa hadn't had the least wisp of a wish to be touched by a Provider.

Near the entrance to the Cave Garden, she paused to catch her breath and straighten her hair and clothing. Her pussy was flooded now, and there was little she could do about that except hope she would soon be putting the lubrication to good use.

Elrisa sprinted the short distance to the entrance and wheeled inside the rocky mouth of the cave. Its cool dimness was warmed by torchlight and candlelight, its

earthy scent sweetened by more bouquets of flowers. In the near distance, the little waterfall at pool's edge plashed invitingly.

Then she heard Trew's voice say, "I've missed you so much."

Elrisa wanted to lift herself into the air and fly to him. Recalling her near-spills on this slick, uneven floor, she cautioned herself to step carefully. This would be a bad time to get injured.

Trew was sitting on the bed of pelts, leaning back against the wall. Again, he had one leg bent, one arm lying across his knee. The other leg was extended, the other hand resting at the juncture of his hip and thigh. There were no breeches beneath the full-sleeved, blousy shirt he had on, but it was long enough to drape over his groin. His smile was both affectionate and unbearably seductive.

Elrisa's joyful gaze caressed him. "I've missed you too," she whispered, content to stand there for a moment and enjoy the view. She realized she could look at Trew for hours and not tire of it.

She also realized how horny she was and started pulling her shift over her head.

"No, don't," Trew said. "You'll arouse me."

Frowning in bewilderment, Elrisa let the garment fall back into place. "But don't you want—"

"Not yet. Not until I give you your wedding present."

"Wedding present?" Elrisa stepped over to the furry bed and sank to her knees in front of him. "Is that why you wanted me here?"

"Yes, in part." Trew leaned forward as if he were about to touch her, but he pulled back at the last moment. "*Damn*, I want to hold you."

"Then do it. I'm nearly out of my mind, craving you."

"I have to give you your gift, first."

Looking around, Elrisa turned up her hands. "But where is it?" she asked with a bewildered laugh.

That's when the wedding present stepped from behind a nearby wall of rock.

"Kdar!"

Smiling shyly, he inclined his head in greeting.

Trew rose and went to stand beside him. They both looked as if they were in front of Master Xentis, awaiting instructions.

Elrisa's astonished gaze darted back and forth between them. She didn't know what this was all about, but she did know she was in the presence of two extremely desirable men. Seeing them standing side by side took her breath away.

"It's up to you whether you use us or not," Trew said. "It's also up to you *how* to use us."

Elrisa felt a fresh flow of moisture between her legs. "I don't like to 'use' people." She meant it, but her body seemed to have no such scruples.

Kdar glanced at Trew then said, "We're quite willing. Believe me."

Trew smiled. "Let me put it this way. We're here for your pleasure. How would you like to enjoy us?"

Elrisa could not ignore the sudden, wild spike in her arousal. These men *excited* her. She remembered the exchange she and Trew had had the last time they were here together—how they'd both admitted to finding Kdar attractive. She also knew that the men of any brotherhood were very close and genuinely loved one another. In fact, Algiwyn had told her stories about two or three or even four from the same order coming to the Redames Lodge just so they could share a woman...without *any* self-conscious restraints.

Seating herself more comfortably, Elrisa decided that acceptance of this gift would be far more gracious, and interesting, than clinging to false modesty. "Before *I* enjoy you," she said, "I would like to see you enjoy each other. Have you ever done that before?"

"No," Trew said. "The most we've done is bathe together with the rest of the brotherhood."

Kdar turned slightly and briefly slid a hand into Trew's thick hair. "Seems you were right," he murmured.

Trew faced his brother and smiled.

Taking their time, they began undressing each other. Each undid the hooks that ran down the front of the other's long shirt. Kdar stopped at Trew's stomach. He glided his splayed hands up inside the open garment, languidly caressing Trew's lean torso. His hands moved to Trew's back to explore its landscape, then slid around again and inched up to Trew's chest. Kdar's long fingers moved like quicksilver over the tight mounds, swirling through the fine dark hair. The heels of his hands dug into Trew's chest muscles before moving a bit lower. Kdar raked his fingers across Trew's beaded nipples, then his thumbs began circling and pushing at them. He lowered his head and began to suck.

Trew rolled his head back and closed his eyes. His lips parted. Elrisa could see his chest rising and falling more rapidly, shallowly. His hands forked into Kdar's golden hair, then fell to his neck and scrabbled at the loose collar of the shirt, feverishly trying to pull it off his shoulders. Both their shirts were falling lower, revealing two gorgeous bodies locked in a heightening passion Elrisa could read in their urgent movements, in the glaze of sweat of their firm flesh.

The sheer erotic force of their manhood was staggering. She wished she could be some parchment-thin creature, pressed between them. She wanted to feel the men as they were feeling each other—the taut resistance and fluid glide of muscle against cabled muscle, the rasp of stubble against stubble and against smooth skin...and, soon, the sinfully erotic swordplay of two sizable iron-hard cocks.

Their transfixing interplay inflamed Elrisa. She had to struggle to keep from touching herself. Yet even without the benefit of touch, she kept feeling pre-orgasmic

ripples running from her core to her limbs. The sensations grew more persuasive with every move the men made.

Trew and Kdar forced the shirts off each other's body. Elrisa's breath caught. The men were magnificent in their grappling embrace, their glistening bodies locked together and moving so, so sensually. Both cocks looked ripe and luscious as they gradually thickened, gradually rose out of their insouciant droop and nudged each other.

Maybe Trew and Kdar felt this contact, proof positive of their ardor. Maybe each felt the other's hot, swelling erection against his own. Because their hands rose, almost simultaneously, and grasped each other's face. Their lips came together in a crushing kiss. Kdar caught Trew's lower lip between his teeth. Their mouths again joined, lips sliding and flexing, tongues lancing and clashing. Trew's hands fell to Kdar's ass. Gripping the tight globes, he ground Kdar's hips against his own. And still they kissed, all the while clutching at each other's shifting, taut muscles and the fine damp flesh that overlaid them. Harsh breathing drifted through the air on the backs of deep-throated groans.

Panting, the men finally broke their kiss. Their bodies came apart, although they still held each other's upper arms. Their rigid cocks bobbed between them. Kdar murmured something. Trew's response was a breathless chuckle followed by a small thrust of his hips. His rod knocked and slid against Kdar's, then jammed the hard plank of the other man's stomach.

Kdar braced his hands on Trew's shoulders, as if keeping him at bay. "I mean it," he gasped. "I can't hold on."

Droplets of fluid winked at the tips of both men's cocks.

"Then don't." Trew dropped to his knees.

He gripped Kdar's impressive, nearly upright shaft and began firmly pumping it. His other hand bobbed and massaged the man's low, heavy balls. Trew's own erection stuck aggressively out from his body, a stone pillar wedged between his long, hard

thighs. Kdar began moaning...until moan piled upon moan like breakers on a beach. When his hips jerked, Trew gently angled down the man's tense cock. Soon the cream spurted out of it, landing on Trew's chest. Some caught in the dark hair. Some dripped sluggishly down one nipple.

Trew suddenly grabbed his own cock and just as suddenly released it. Kdar extended a hand to help his brother up.

"Thank you," Kdar said. "Now it's your turn."

"And mine." Elrisa pulled off her shift. "Both of you, come over here."

"Gladly." Trew, obviously in pain, lurched toward the bed area. When he got to it, he collapsed onto his back. Although stress etched his face, he managed to give Elrisa an impish smile. "Now what was that you once said about riding me like a stallion?"

She needed no further inducement. Blades of desire seemed to fill her very womb. Climbing atop Trew, she slid easily onto his solid, purpling cock. The feel of it made her quiver from the inside out.

"I need that badly," he breathed, curling forward to kiss her. "I need the wet fire inside your body."

That fire raged when he cradled Elrisa's face in his hands and claimed her mouth. His lips, quivering slightly, felt very warm and somewhat swollen. The fervid kiss seemed to create a vortex between them, drawing them deeper and deeper into their consuming passion.

Elrisa raised and lowered herself on Trew's demanding cock. She felt strong arms encircle her. She felt deft hands fondling her breasts, teasing her tight nipples by snapping and pulling and rolling them. Kdar must be behind her, straddling Trew's thighs.

As soon as Trew lay back down and saw his brother stimulating the breasts of his betrothed, his body shuddered and his hips bucked. Elrisa felt as if she were spinning faster in the vortex—uncontrollably faster. Trew's thrusting cock, Kdar's masterful hands, her own pent-up need all came perfectly together to send an orgasm surging

through her just as Trew's strained and throbbing root sent spoonful after spoonful of thick cum into her vagina.

Spent, Elrisa began to sag. Kdar's arms gently released her so she could fall upon the body of her lover. The heady musk of sexual arousal seemed to saturate the air and become an element equal to earth, water and fire.

Elrisa nearly slid off Trew, so slicked with perspiration were his chest and her breasts. She hung her head over his shoulder and limply kissed his ear, his damp hair, his warm neck.

"I guess you liked your present," Trew murmured.

"Words can't express how much I liked it," Elrisa said. "I believe you liked it too."

"Yes, I did."

"Which made me like it even more." The fact that Trew never equivocated was one of the many things Elrisa cherished about him.

"I hope you know how much I love you," he said.

"I'm starting to know. I hope I never stop knowing."

After kissing Trew, Elrisa raised her head to look for Kdar. He was sitting close to where Trew lay, his back against the rock wall, his long legs stretched out beside his brother's recumbent form.

"Thank you," Elrisa said.

A smile played at one corner of Kdar's mouth. "I should be the one thanking you and Trew. I'm not even getting married, but *I* certainly enjoyed the wedding gift."

They all began tittering.

Kdar's hand lazily moved to the top of Trew's head and gave it a brisk, friendly rub. "I'm also thankful you're not Belkyr."

Trew turned his head to the side to regard his brother. "Oh? Why is that?"

"He'd likely have ridden me to Urlkinia by now."

Elrisa slipped off Trew as they all erupted into gales of laughter.

Chapter Seven

Never in her life had Elrisa felt such joy or such pride. As she gazed over the verdant hills that rolled beyond the Callers Cliff to the distant edge of the Farfields, they almost seemed to gather up and creep toward her. *Perhaps, she thought, they want to be at our wedding too.*

Smiling, she turned to the inexpressibly beautiful man who stood a few respectful steps behind her. Sunlight gleamed on his hair, sparkled in his eyes. He wore the Dragon Callers formal tunic—a rather full, gathered garment of rich forest-green with deep brown trim. It fell just below the knee and was cinched at the waist with a wide leather belt, the bronze buckle of which bore the Wing and Tongue emblem. The front was open to the belt buckle, affording a tantalizing glimpse of his chest.

Just looking at him made Elrisa ache. “I’d be more confident of success if I didn’t love you so much,” she said to him. Her smile faded. “I don’t want to fail, Trew. I don’t want to destroy our marriage before we’re even married.” Stepping up to him, Elrisa wistfully touched the gold cord that hung around his neck. It would be used to bind their wrists together at the end of the wedding ceremony...if indeed there was a ceremony.

Stepping forward, Trew took her in his arms. “You will succeed *because* we love each other. And this cord *will* later bind us.” His look became teasing. “Maybe you will even become a Caller someday.”

Elrisa felt herself blush. She’d confessed her secret dream to him after Kdar had left the Cave Garden, as she’d promised to do, but Trew hadn’t scoffed or taken offense. He knew she was committed to him, he said. He felt it in his soul. And if Belkyr were expelled from the Order, which could very well happen, a promising apprentice would be chosen to take his place.

"Becoming a Caller would mean nothing to me," Elrisa said, "if I couldn't be your wife and partner. Truth be told, I couldn't bear it."

Trew lowered his head, and Elrisa felt the bone-melting press of his lips. How could this man make even a tender kiss so passionately expressive? She felt one of his hands slide into her hair, another caress her breasts. The half-liquid, half-solid dew pearls that made up her wedding dress undulated beneath the pressure of Trew's fingers. Elrisa felt a responsive tingle and tightening in her nipples. Overwhelmed by desire, she intensified the kiss for a moment—they hadn't made love in a fortnight, which was the required period of abstinence before a wedding—but the slurry of moisture between her legs made it prudent for her to pull away from him.

"You're making me weak," she said on a thin breath.

"Can't have *that*," Trew whispered against her ear, making her even weaker. "Not until later, anyway."

"Oh, Trew, I hope there *is* a 'later'."

His smile bore not a shred of doubt. "There will be. Your talent and our love will buoy those wings."

Elrisa nodded. She had to believe. "All right. I'm ready." For added inspiration, she glanced at the shimmering veil made for her by the Superior Spinners and Weavers—a sisterhood of older women who had, for all intents and purposes, retired from their trade. It had been carefully draped over a large boulder. Elrisa could only don the veil after she'd completed and passed her second trial.

The wedding party had already assembled at the rear of the Callers Cliff. Algiwyn was there, of course, and Trew's father and stepmother. All the members of the Wing and Tongue were present, in addition to all Masters of Galdesh's Higher Orders and whatever weavers and spinners Elrisa had chosen to invite.

Trew faced the attendees and raised a hand. They advanced half the distance to the edge of the cliff. Xentis alone approached the engaged couple.

Smiling paternally, he kissed Elrisa on both cheeks. “Blessings on you and your intended. May this final trial see you blissfully wed.”

With those words, he and Trew lifted the scalloped wings Elrisa had constructed and helped fit them to her arms and torso. They were only half the size of normal Dragon Caller wings, but Trew had told her they were the most cleverly built and artistic pair he’d seen in a long time.

Once the wings were secure, the two men stepped back. Elrisa could virtually feel the crowd’s anticipatory silence press at her back. Taking a deep breath, she tentatively raised, lowered and rotated her arms to accustom herself to the wings’ weight and balance. Then she fixed her eyes beyond the hills.

With a gradual buildup of force and speed, Elrisa rhythmically pumped the wings against the balmy air. They were surprisingly powerful—enough to raise her onto the balls of her feet. The web she’d for years been designing in her mind was now part of the wings’ surface structure, and it added just the flexion and nuances of sound she’d hoped for. The throbbing *whump-whump-whump* was overlain by a lovely, wavering contralto hum. Shaved crystals and dragonfly wings, acting as prisms, both caught and reflected the sunlight, spangling the air with dancing colors.

When Elrisa heard the wedding guests cheer, she finally allowed herself to smile. Surely their reaction augured well. She was about to lower her arms and await Xentis’ decision when the crowd fell silent. Had she unknowingly done something wrong? Slowing her movements, Elrisa noticed that the wings’ alluring sound continued to echo from the hills...

Only it couldn’t be an echo. Echoes became ever softer, not louder. As Elrisa dropped her arms and stared toward the horizon, her heartbeat began to accelerate.

But it can’t be...

The swooping, yawing form of a Farfields dragon grew larger and larger in the sky as it headed for one of the promontories that jutted up on both sides of the cliff. *Of course, these must be where they land.* Her breath caught in her throat. Behind her, she

heard Xentis excitedly call Dalnach forward. He was the Master of the Dragon Readers brotherhood, the Order of Deep Speaking. Spellbound and unblinking, Elrisa followed the dragon's progress to its perch.

"It's an elder female," she heard Trew whisper. He stood beside her once more. Elrisa glanced at him. His face glowed with pleasure. "I've never seen her before."

Blotting out the sun for a moment, the dragon gracefully alit on the promontory. Currents of air stirred by its wings buffeted Elrisa. Tears rose in her eyes as she stared at the creature.

"You answered my call," she whispered in awe.

Regarding her, the dragon cocked its head this way and that...then extended its neck. Elrisa could see herself and Trew reflected in its amber eyes, could feel the warm breath issuing from its nostrils.

Dalnach approached the female. He stretched out one hand, palm down. After sniffing it, the dragon lowered her head, touched her snout to the ground and closed her eyes.

"She trusts him," Trew whispered. "She's acquiescing."

Dalnach lightly placed his fingers behind the dragon's right eye.

Dragon Readers had the unique and extraordinary skill of being able to communicate, wordlessly, with these sublime creatures. Elrisa brimmed with questions but was afraid to speak. She didn't want to frighten their unexpected guest or interrupt its exchange with Dalnach. But within moments, most of her questions were answered.

Turning to Elrisa and Trew, Dalnach smiled quite broadly. "Well, dear woman, it appears you snagged the attention of this lady's clan. They deduced the wing sound was coming from a Galdeshian Caller, but it was unfamiliar to them." He dipped forward and squeezed Elrisa's arm. "They apparently found it quite irresistible." Winking, Dalnach straightened. "They're also wondering why the call was made. I explained. Because the dragons greatly esteem Trew, as well as male-female bonding, they're curious about the 'mate' he's chosen."

Elrisa felt Trew's arm curl around her waist and give her a quick hug. She continued to watch the dragon...who, it appeared, continued to watch them. Then the female nudged Dalnach's back.

He chuckled delightedly as he hopped but managed to keep his balance. "She's getting impatient."

"Why?" Elrisa asked.

"Because she wants to meet you. And Trew, whose reputation she's familiar with."

Elrisa's heart skipped. "But how..."

"Just do as I did. The two of you together hold out your hands, palms down."

Elrisa took off the wings then she and Trew stepped toward the dragon's lowered head and did as they were told. The sides of their hands touched. Elrisa felt gooseflesh break out over her body. As soon as the dragon sniffed them, her tongue slowly snaked out and twined around their wrists, forcing them together. Just as Elrisa thought the tongue's heat would sear her skin, the dragon withdrew it.

She glanced at Trew. He stared raptly at their reddened wrists, his hand still overlapping hers. His fingers curled over it and gripped it.

The dragon swayed her supple neck to the right. Her nose dipped beneath Elrisa's veil, lifted it and, with what seemed like a celebratory toss of the head—although Elrisa knew she might well have imagined this—released the veil into the air. It grazed Elrisa's shoulders as it fluttered back to earth.

Raising her head to the heavens, the dragon made the most hauntingly soulful sound Elrisa had even heard. The grande dame then launched herself from the promontory and soared toward her home.

Cheering and applauding, the wedding guests encircled Elrisa and Trew.

Xentis was beaming. "Saying you passed this trial seems superfluous," he told Elrisa. "In fact," he put one arm around her, the other around Trew, "a wedding

ceremony almost seems superfluous. There could be no more authoritative sanction of your union than what was just given."

"Still, I want us to have our ceremony," Trew said. "So I can declare my love for this woman and pledge my troth to her before the world."

"And so I can tell this man," Elrisa said, turning to him, "that he *is* adored...by a woman, not just the Farfields dragons."

About the Author

K.Z. Snow (formerly writing as Kate Snow) is the daughter of Milwaukee tavernkeepers and learned her first words off a Wurlitzer jukebox. Nine years of higher education, resulting in two and a half English degrees and a stint as a teacher, did not dampen her enthusiasm for beer, Green Bay Packers football, classic R&B, and various forms of political incorrectness.

She's been many things in her life, including a varsity debater, a Catholic, a hippie, a Girl Scout, a junker, a fag hag, a gardener, an editor, a saxophone/bassoon/tambourine player (not all at once), a damned good dancer, and a companion to most species of domesticated animals, including men.

One thing she has never been is a Republican. One thing she will always be is a writer.

She now lives in rural Wisconsin, not far from the birthplace of surrealism, a.k.a. "The Dells". Her imagination and her hips continue to grow unchecked.

K.Z. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by K.Z. Snow

Cemetery Dancer

Cheer Givers & Mischief Makers

Plagued

Also see the author's title at Cerridwen Press (www.CerridwenPress.com):

Pirate King



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com