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K.Z. SNOW

Cauldron of Keridwen

Ace of Cups



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Cauldron of Keridwen

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# *CAULDRON OF KERIDWEN*

**K.Z. Snow**

## *Dedication*

To my talented fellow authors at Cerridwen Press.

## *Ace of Cups*

Ruled by the bonding element of water, the tarot's cups are probably the most emotionally charged suit in the deck. The Ace of Cups, like all the ace cards, represents a distillation of the suit's characteristics.

The upright, overflowing goblet is indicative of love—past, present and future, in all manifestations—and the qualities necessary to keep it abundant. A subject who receives this card is likely a sympathetic or even empathetic person with a warm and open heart. She may even be on the brink of a romantic relationship, marked by deep intimacy and lasting commitment. To fully realize this positive emotional potential, she should heed her inner voice. Intuition will lead the way to fulfillment. Vivid dreams may accompany the process since it's inextricably bound to the psychic powers of the subconscious mind.

Some tarot experts view the Ace of Cups as a variation of the Christian Holy Grail or the pagan Cauldron of Ceridwen—hence, the title of this story. In Welsh legend, Ceridwen (there are many variations in spelling) is the mother of the great enchanter Taliesin. Depicted both as the goddess of poetic inspiration and a kind of witch with considerable supernatural abilities, Ceridwen was not only an adroit shape-shifter but also had a wondrous cauldron in which she brewed a wisdom-bestowing potion.

So welcome to my magical valley, the Cauldron of Keridwen in the Kingdom of Galdesh, where water, dreams, second sight and even shape-shifting contribute to a humble empath's discovery of abiding love.

## **Chapter One**

It was a splendid way for any woman to spend a midsummer day—lazing naked on a soft, shaded carpet of grass beside a softly burbling, crystal clear stream, one naked man to the right of her and another to the left, both with slow hands and slowly swelling cocks. Content for the moment, Hilendra let herself enjoy her position.

She felt more or less fortunate to have met Elswin, a Dragon Healer with a special talent for herbalism. It was lucky he regularly called on her. She was glad—at least now, because she'd been uneasy at first—that Elswin soon brought along his friend Purnab, an Armorer. If it hadn't been for these men, Hilendra could very well have lived out her days without male sexual companionship in this valley called the Cauldron of Keridwen.

For generations, the Cauldron was where the “Strange People” of Galdesh lived—those who had supernatural gifts or were practitioners of the occult arts. Viewed with a certain degree of suspicion, they were generally avoided...although the kingdom's citizenry was not averse to calling on them in times of need. The prostitutes came looking for love potions, knowing the right spouse would free them from their servitude at the Redames Lodge. Anxious wives wanted to find out if their husbands were being unfaithful...and if so, with whom. Bitter men occasionally sought vengeful curses that would lay low their enemies. People of both sexes and all ages wanted their fortunes revealed, their illnesses cured, their broken hearts mended. Yet still, in public, the Strange People were treated like invisible entities and those Galdeshian citizens who visited the Cauldron did so quite furtively.

Only two groups of outsiders seemed unashamed of their interaction with the valley's residents. Travelers and refugees, ignorant of the Cauldron's reputation, occasionally made their way there. In return for food and shelter, they helped with

daily and seasonal chores. The masters of Galdesh's Higher Orders also had no qualms about calling on the Strange People. But of course their business with the outcasts was always for the good of the kingdom.

Hilendra found it ironic that alchemists, whom she and her neighbors viewed as frauds, were generally accepted. They had even found favor at the castle. In fact it was said the king quite coddled them.

She didn't understand it—not the misplaced trust or the misplaced distrust. Still, Hilendra knew she had to accept her situation. There seemed to be no escaping it. That would require a sweeping alteration in attitude, from royalty to gentry and on down the social strata, and such a change would certainly not come soon...if it came at all.

Elswin, the man on her right, made a cryptic statement that jarred Hilendra out of her reverie. "I'm going to get you wet," he said, "to make you wetter."

Curiously, Hilendra glanced at him. Rising from the bank, he grabbed the longneck gourd he'd brought today and dipped its hollowed-out base into the stream. The sight of Elswin's body did not arouse her—he was quite thin and pale, with little muscle definition—but the anticipation of what he would do next made her tense with excitement. Once more reclining beside her, he slowly trickled the stream's icy water over her chest.

Hilendra gasped. A frisson shot through her nerves as her nipples tightened almost painfully.

"Ah, *that's* what I was after," Elswin said in a gruffer voice.

Eagerly running his hands over both slick, plump breasts, then squeezing them, Elswin lowered his mouth to the right one. Hilendra instinctively shifted toward him. The shocking thrill of his lips closing over her taut and ready nipple brought on a gush of moisture. It was as if, she thought vaguely, the nearby stream now flowed through her body.

All the while, Purnab's fingers teased Hilendra by massaging the insides of her thighs, working ever closer to her pussy. Then one hand moved up to her left breast

and vied with Elswin's hand to knead it and pull at the already high nipple. Breathing heavily, Hilendra writhed beneath their touches. Her legs fell farther apart. Purnab's left hand, still at the apex of her thighs, closed over her mound. Hilendra felt the heel of his hand push against her pussy lips as his thumb slipped between them and found her swollen bud.

She thought she would perish, the sensations were so unbearably thrilling. Elswin's mouth, still closed firmly around her right nipple, sucked with a hard, regular rhythm. Purnab rotated his lower hand so two fingers could slide into her dripping vagina while his thumb continued to stimulate her clitoris.

"You must want us very much by now," Purnab said.

Hilendra answered with a breathless "Yes".

Purnab quickly moved between her thighs. Sitting back on his heels, he grabbed Hilendra by the hips and forcefully pulled her toward him. Her eyelids fluttered, drifted shut. Purnab entered her.

"I want to feel that," she heard Elswin say as he lifted his head from her burning breast.

Suddenly three fingers tried to push into her vagina as well, moving against its walls, moving against Purnab's meat. Hilendra lifted her hips toward the invaders, welcoming them. She began panting as fingers and cock moved inside her, as Elswin's knuckles occasionally bumped and rubbed against her bud. She thrust her hips toward her ministrants, again and again, until the beast of orgasm caught her up and carried her to near oblivion. Only vaguely did she notice Purnab's climax. Not only did Elswin's fingers shield it from her, but Purnab had a rather small cock.

When Hilendra's rigid body began to relax, she heard Elswin say, "Now you must take care of *me*." Heavily, she opened her eyes.

Purnab hardly had enough time to withdraw his shrinking member before Elswin pushed him out of the way, took his friend's place and rammed his own stiff cock into Hilendra's body. His was longer than Purnab's but rather more thin than thick. She

tried to derive some pleasure from it, but to no avail. Her climax had sensitized her nerve endings and Elswin's rod felt more like a weapon than a magical wand. Hilendra was grateful that his climax came quickly.

The two men abruptly abandoned her. Trailing short, breathless bursts of laughter, they waded into the stream. Hilendra turned onto her side, propped her head on her hand and watched them.

A shadow passed over her mood. Yes, the men sated her physical hunger. But Hilendra desired neither of them. Truth be told, she didn't much like either of them either. Once again she wondered why Elswin had bothered seducing her and why, the second time they'd met for sex, he'd brought Purnab. Like other Galdeshian men in the Higher Orders, they could just as easily visit the Redames Lodge and find satisfaction through professional prostitutes who would do anything to please them. In fact they could *more* easily find satisfaction there, since the brothel was on the outskirts of the village and the Cauldron of Keridwen was a good distance beyond that. Only roaming herdsmen were farther from the seat of the kingdom.

Hilendra couldn't help but worry that these two men somehow knew of her special gift. She'd tried to keep that gift a closely guarded secret because she didn't want to be used for it. Yet, she *did* feel used by Elswin and Purnab, who clearly had no interest in her as a person and a woman...or as anything other than a sheath for their fleshy poles.

But *how* could they have found out?

As far as they knew, as far as any Galdeshian knew, Hilendra was a quiet, unassuming empath with some farseeing ability. It had taken her a while to realize that her somewhat erratic talent had an extra dimension. And it was this special something that made her leery of the men's interest.

So *had* they somehow deduced that the more intimate she became with somebody – emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and physically – the more she could invigorate that person as well as cure an illness or heal an injury?



Hilendra had discovered this unique effect of her closeness at the age of nineteen. She, still a virgin and rather lonely, had had a brief affaire with a handsome, older resident of the Cauldron who happened to be lame. Within a single moon cycle, not only was his limp gone, but he could move with greater strength, speed and agility than he'd possessed since childhood. To make certain she was responsible for this transformation, Hilendra had visited an old woman named Bronwil who lived as a hermit far from both the village and the Cauldron. Bronwil was a conjurer and spellcaster both feared and shunned by most Galdeshians. But Hilendra rather liked her.

While holding Hilendra's hand and studying the steam that drifted from a pot hung in her fireplace—in which, Bronwil claimed, she could see and communicate with beings she called the "Others"—the witch had proclaimed, "Yes, it was you who rejuvenated him. But hold this knowledge close and make this power your slave...lest *you* become enslaved."

Hilendra immediately understood. It was obvious that willful men who possessed or sought power would like to have her at their disposal. She could be spirited away to the castle and held there as the king's or prince's concubine. She could be passed among the knights of the realm or the members of Galdesh's Higher Orders like a whore.

All these prospects sickened her.

Shifting to a cross-legged sit, Hilendra resumed studying the men who splashed about in the stream. They could not possibly know. But why, *why* did they continually seek out her company? Maybe it wasn't such a mystery. Maybe consorting with one of the Strange People simply titillated them. Such liaisons weren't forbidden, but they were frowned upon.

Hilendra recalled how she and Elswin first met. She'd been summoned to the Healers Mount to help identify an ailment suffered by one of the Farfields dragons. Within the past few moon cycles, Galdesh's draconic allies had been plagued by a spate of mysterious illnesses that left the Healers increasingly baffled. Elswin was there of

course since he was a member of the Healers' brotherhood, the Order of the Gentle Hand. His eyes *did* look unnaturally large and bright when he and Hilendra were introduced, as if he was thrilled to meet her, and he'd kissed her quite warmly on both cheeks.

Just before Hilendra departed from the Mount that day, Elswin had approached her. Surreptitiously grazing her nipples with his palms, he'd said, "Do you mind if I visit you in the Cauldron?"

Stymied by the question and embarrassed by how unmistakably her body had responded to Elswin's brazen touch, she'd merely shaken her head and dashed off. Two days later, he appeared in the valley, eager to seduce her. Three days after that, he came back...with Purnab the Armorer. She'd never before enjoyed such intense and varied stimulation, so many luscious orgasms.

The memory stirred Hilendra. She stood and shook out her tangled blonde hair, shaking her breasts as well. They soon caught Elswin's attention. As soon as his lustful gaze alit on her body, she felt her nipples rise and stiffen.

"Come join us, you wicked little temptress," he called out. "I'll soon be ready for you again."

*Ah, Mother Bronwil, Hilendra thought, stepping toward the stream, how I wish I had your wise counsel right now.*

As she eased into the cold, purling water, words came into her mind, skipping through it like a rock along the surface of a pond. *Take heed. Take heed. Take heed.*

*Of what?* Hilendra wondered, mildly startled...but it soon didn't matter. Both men's hands began scrabbling at her body, again seeking out her breasts, her slit.

The men ducked beneath the surface of the waist-deep stream. Hilendra felt her legs being forced apart. She teetered a bit on the slippery pebbles that formed the floor of the streambed before assuming a spread-legged stance. Fingers snaked along the insides of her lower lips. A flattened hand slid up her buttocks. Soon Elswin and Purnab broke the surface.

What Hilendra saw when they rose into the sun-bright air nearly made her lose her balance. Stunned, she swiveled to glance at Purnab, who stood behind her, then turned forward again to regard Elswin. As the water they'd displaced trickled over their faces, another face appeared...on *both* men. Hilendra gaped at Elswin, trying to make out the features that faintly rippled and wavered within the thin glaze of wetness.

It was a man's face, of that she was fairly certain, and it seemed a handsome one with a trace of melancholy. She didn't recognize the face but it nevertheless tugged at her. Even Elswin's ginger hair was affected by the illusion. The hair on the ghostly head appeared darker, fuller, longer.

Brows furrowed, Elswin took a step back. "What's wrong? You look as if you no longer recognize me."

Purnab's arms curled around Hilendra from behind, his hands cupping her breasts, his fingers jabbing at her nipples and pushing into the soft flesh that surrounded them.

Mounting desire clashed with confusion, leaving Hilendra dazed. She continued to stare at Elswin. Gradually, as the sun's warmth dried his skin, the features that belonged to the stranger began to dissipate like smoke. "I...I think it's the water's chill. It was a shock."

Her explanation seemed to suffice. Elswin gave her a lascivious smirk. "Then I shall warm you." Shoving Purnab's hands out of the way, he pulled Hilendra against him and rubbed his chest against her breasts.

His cock poked at her belly, but she barely noticed. That phantom face shimmering on the veil of water continued to shimmer in her mind. Troubled by its persistence, Hilendra tried to push it away and concentrate on her body's demands.

"Come back to the bank," Purnab urged his friend. "I have a new kind of fun in mind." He yanked at Elswin's arm. "Come, we'll enjoy this."

Breaking his embrace with obvious reluctance, Elswin clutched and rubbed Hilendra's butt as he steered her back to the grassy slope at the water's edge. She was still so preoccupied she couldn't even wonder what "new fun" Purnab had planned.

Once they stepped onto land, Elswin swept her up into his arms and whirled her around. Laughing, he announced, "My arms feel like oaks, Purnab! This woman seems no heavier than a leaf!"

"It's a wondrous thing, is it not?" Purnab answered with a crafty smile.

Their statements jerked Hilendra out of her daze. The men were beginning to notice their new strength. *But, she tried assuring herself, they cannot possibly believe I am responsible for it. These are very ordinary men with little imagination, little belief in things beyond the mundane. Surely they'll conclude it's their own arousal that fills them with such vitality.*

"Lay her on the ground," Purnab instructed.

Elswin ended his celebration. Lowering his head, he licked and sucked at Hilendra's nipples while a satisfied chuckle rumbled in his throat. A tingling heat flared in her breasts. Her concerns, quickly crumbling to ash, were consumed by it.

"Come on, lay her down!" Purnab snapped.

Elswin lowered Hilendra to the grass. "Are you ready yet, my dear?" he cooed against her ear.

"You must stimulate me more," she whispered, her excitement mounting. Through her peripheral vision, Hilendra saw Purnab reach for something.

"My pleasure," Elswin murmured. Immediately his mouth and hands seemed to be all over her body, nibbling at her throat, roughly fondling and biting at her breasts, tweaking the tender, swollen bead between her legs that he made slick by spreading her own moisture over it. Soon her breasts and nipples and cunt felt ready to burst.

"Yes," Hilendra gasped, "now."

Purnab lifted and bent her legs. Invitingly, they fell to either side. But neither man mounted her. Instead Purnab crouched between her thighs. Hilendra glimpsed the dipper gourd in his hand just before he parted her labia and slowly slid the gourd's long neck into her vagina.

She mewled at first, fearing it might hurt her. But it was surprisingly smooth and Purnab's manipulation was quite deft. His free hand moved to his own cock and began pumping it.

"See that?" he breathlessly said to Elswin. "Look at how her cunt grips it." He carefully slid the gourd neck in and out of Hilendra's body, turning it slightly one way and then the other. "Look how it glistens now with her fluid."

Hilendra twisted on the grass as her body responded to the hard, sleek tube that filled her. Neither worry nor embarrassment could apparently stave off her impending climax.

"It's driving me mad," Elswin growled. He seemed to make a circle with thumb and forefinger around the gourd neck, just at the point where it entered Hilendra's body. She felt the circle pressing against her opening. "Do you like that?" he asked her. "Do you like being fucked by something other than a cock?"

Hilendra closed her eyes and didn't answer. The men's voices and movements had become a distraction. Her hands moved to her breasts.

"Of course she likes it," Purnab said, his voice thick with lust. "She's caressing herself."

He abruptly pulled out the gourd neck and replaced it with his cock. After only a few thrusts, Purnab shuddered and spent himself. Hilendra nearly screamed in frustration. Her own orgasm was creeping up on her, trying to grip and shake her. But within the space of a breath, Purnab seemed to topple sideways over her right shin and foot and another cock was inside her. Now it was Elswin who pumped, and quite furiously. Hilendra rotated her hips against him.

Everything was connecting now, her body being tugged toward a throbbing release. Swaying on the brink of it, Hilendra squeezed her nipples. She let out a wavering cry and surrendered, falling into the maw of the beast. It shook her and shook her, the relief crashing through her nerves and muscles. She let her mind go blank until she was released, until a delicious weakness overcame her.

Throwing an arm over her face, Hilendra suddenly wanted the men to leave. She wasn't tired of the physical attention—her hungry, responsive body seemed never to stop craving fevered touches and turgid cocks—but she *was* tired of the men themselves. Elswin and Purnab never really conversed with her and rarely called her by name. Always impatiently focused on the end result of sex, they didn't bother kissing her, probably because they thought it a waste of time, and didn't bother pleasuring her pussy with their mouths, probably because their mouths couldn't appreciate it the way their rods could. They clearly had no affection for her and Hilendra had none for them. She didn't even find them attractive. Purnab was as flabby as Elswin was skinny. The Armorer's disheveled black hair and scarred, bloated face were as unappealing as the Dragon Healer's stringy, red hair and blotchy skin. One had a dense, single eyebrow. The other had eyebrows and lashes so pale they were nearly invisible.

No, Hilendra didn't like looking at them. She didn't even like touching them. She only liked having them touch her, which they did with greedy abandon.

*Well, let us use each other then,* she thought wearily...and once again wished a Provider would wander through the valley every couple of days. But no, that wasn't going to happen. Even Providers—the men who walked through villages and countryside, efficiently delivering sexual gratification to unmarried women—wouldn't come to the Cauldron of Keridwen.

The other face that had temporarily blotted out Elswin's and Purnab's suddenly wavered before her mind's eye.

Shaken by the image, Hilendra sat up. She could no longer stay here with these men. "I should like to return to my cottage now and sleep," she announced, reaching for her shift.

Elswin caught her arm. "But we're not through with you yet, shameless wench." One hand rose toward her naked breasts.

Glaring at him, Hilendra simultaneously jerked her arm free and blocked his groping hand. "You need to understand this, sir...and please forgive my bluntness. If *I*

am through, *you* are through.” She slipped on her shift and straightened it. “I’m not a Redame, you know. If you want a woman to be at your disposal indefinitely, regardless of her preference, I suggest you visit the lodge at the edge of the village.”

The roseate patches on Elswin’s skin spread together, obliterating his pallor. He seemed on the verge of striking her.

“Brother!” Purnab barked. In a calmer voice, he said, “We don’t want the young miss to withdraw her welcome. You know how much we enjoy her favors.”

A cloud passed overhead, briefly darkening the landscape around them.

“Besides,” Purnab added, “it may rain soon.”

And rain it did...but not drops of water. A multicolored shower of flower petals fell from the sky—white and yellow, pink and red, purple and blue. Petals from every flower that grew in Galdesh and possibly more. Hilendra and the men looked up in astonishment. The cloud had moved on. Sunlight once again poured over them.

Shielding his eyes and pointing toward the western rim of the valley, Purnab said with wonder, “That was a dragon, not a cloud. I think I caught a glimpse of its silhouette against the sky.” Rising to his feet, he continued to stare into the distance.

Elswin joined him. “Don’t talk like an idiot. When a Farfields dragon is summoned, it flies directly to the Callers Cliff. If one is sick or injured, it flies directly to the Healers Mount. This valley does not lie along their path to either place.”

“But I could have sworn—”

Elswin chuffed and shook his head. “I think your senses have left you along with your seed. Not only is it highly unlikely a dragon would fly over the Cauldron, it’s *beyond* unlikely a dragon would fly about carrying a cartload of flowers.”

Still dumbstruck, Hilendra merely listened to their exchange. She fingered some of the velvety petals that lay in her lap. *But how, why—*

“Then explain these.” Purnab irritably scooped up some of the fallen petals and tossed them at his friend. Too light to go far, they drifted back to the grass.

“I suspect some guild or order was working with them, up there.” Raising an arm, Elswin pointed beyond the rim of the valley to the southwest, where the village lay. “The Dragon Callers often use petals in their wing and tongue construction. Perfumers and clothiers use them. Flower parts can even serve the same purpose as parchment, once they’re mashed into fiber and flattened and dried. A strong gust could have lifted whole baskets full of petals and scattered them to the four winds.”

Purnab brushed off the ones that remained on his hair and shoulders. “Perhaps you’re right,” he muttered, then began dressing.

“You’re leaving?” Elswin asked.

“Yes, I’m leaving. This woman wishes us to go. And I don’t—” Purnab’s gaze shifted uneasily toward Hilendra.

“You don’t what?” Elswin asked, his voice sharp with disapproval.

Purnab fastened his belt around his tunic. “I don’t like what just happened. It made my flesh creep. And I particularly don’t like that it happened here, over the Cauldron.”

Finally Hilendra got to her feet. “You may want to follow your friend’s lead,” she advised Elswin, trying to put a hint of foreboding in her tone. It meant nothing though. She simply saw this as an opportunity to be rid of the stubborn man.

Elswin hesitated for a moment then sullenly snatched his clothing off the ground. “I’ll be back,” he said to Hilendra. Once dressed, he grabbed the gourd off the ground and shoved it in his belt. “I still have many surprises in store for you.”

And the bewildering phrase that had earlier bobbed into her mind suddenly returned — *Take heed.*



## Chapter Two

As Hilendra made her way back to her modest cottage, she stopped briefly to greet and chat with two newcomers to the valley, a father and son who had stopped there temporarily before continuing their journey to the Kingdom of Mobarria, far to the south. Such travelers were a fairly common sight in the Cauldron. Devoid of Galdeshian prejudice and grateful for the food, shelter and acceptance they received, travelers were more than willing to work in return for the residents' hospitality.

Continuing on, Hilendra heard a familiar four-note whistle and looked in the direction of the sound. Pidor, the former lover whose limp she had inadvertently cured, walked toward her. How fluidly he now moved! His long strides seemed a perfect complement to his long, black hair, which was a perfect complement to his dark-as-pitch eyes. Every time Hilendra saw him like this – a striking and vigorous thirty-year-old man, moving confidently through meadow or settlement, his gleaming hair flowing behind him – she felt profoundly grateful for her secret gift.

They were now the best of friends. Since their pleasant but rather tepid affair, Pidor had discovered his preference for intimacy with men.

He smiled and waved. Hilendra returned the greeting. *Such a dear, lovely man*, she thought. Invariably, when they were together, she wished she were also a lovely man.

They embraced warmly when they reached each other.

Pidor stood back and regarded her. "You were with your herb gatherer and metal pounder again, were you not?" The tenor of his smile had changed. It carried both a gentle tease and a gentle reproof.

Hilendra answered the question with gentle defiance. "What of it? By the way, Elswin is a Dragon Healer and Purnab is a Royal Armorer."

“Ah, well, I know what *that* means. You can gild a pig, but it’s still a pig.” After he nipped her chin with thumb and forefinger, Pidor’s expression grew more serious. “Don’t convince yourself that being in the Higher Orders somehow redeems those two.”

Lowering her head, Hilendra chuckled silently. *Gilded pigs...* “I’m not convincing myself of anything.” She looked into his eyes. “Truly, Pidor. But if I wish to amuse myself with them, I shall do so. It harms no one.”

“No one?” Cupping Hilendra’s arm, he led her to a crude, wooden bench beneath a chestnut tree. “Tell me truthfully, do you enjoy the company of these men? Do you care about them and do they care about you? Do you talk with them, confide in them, share your dreams and fears and frustrations with them? Do you laugh, cry, rage?”

They sat side by side on the bench.

“No,” Hilendra said, her voice flat. “We play. That’s what we do. We play.”

Solemn now, Pidor continued to gaze at her. “I hope for your sake it isn’t a dangerous game.”

She was tempted to ask, *Why would it be?* But Hilendra worried that Pidor, who excelled at divination and sometimes lapsed into strange trances, would feel compelled to come up with a reason. And she didn’t want a reason. Pushing Elswin and Purnab out of her life would be the same as sentencing herself to celibacy.

Thinking of the mysterious male face that had earlier appeared to her, Hilendra wondered if she should mention it. Pidor could possibly shed some light on this event. Then again he might read too much into it and confuse her all the more. She decided to wait.

Angling toward her, Pidor took up both her hands in both of his. “You’re a lovely woman, Hillie. You deserve better than what those two men have to offer you.”

She gave him a wry smile. “You forget, my friend—I’m a lovely, *shunned* woman. Besides, you’re biased.”

"I won't deny that. But, damn it, at least visit one of the common witches, or even Bronwil, to get help in finding—"

"No." To underscore this refusal, Hilendra withdrew her hands from his. "I've told you before—I refuse to bring love into my life through spellcasting and binding. If a man doesn't come to me of his own free will, I'll just continue to..." She couldn't formulate a graceful conclusion to the statement.

"Play with your gilded pigs?" Pidor supplied with a smirk.

Hilendra blushed. "If I must."

Sighing, Pidor leaned against the chestnut's trunk. Its leaves shifted delicately in the breeze, dappling his long, white tunic with sunshine and shadow. "All right. You don't want my help. You don't want the wise women's help. So let me ask you this. Have you tried training your *own* sight on your life?"

He meant of course her second sight. "You know I'm more of an empath than a seer, Pidor. My clear-vision is sporadic and beyond my control. I can't muster it at will, through concentration." With a shiver, Hilendra again thought of the misty face that had appeared on Purnab and Elswin, a face that had spontaneously presented itself. She'd done nothing whatsoever to call it up.

Could it be her second sight was getting keener? But why...and why now?

"I think, Hillie, you're *afraid* to muster it." Pidor leaned forward, lifted one of her hands and kissed it. "Come into my cottage with me. Please. Let me try something that could give you direction."

Groaning, she rolled her head back. "Oh, Pidor..."

"Please." He underlined his imploring tone with a squeeze of her hand.

Hilendra responded with a grudging smile. How could she ignore the concern of her dearest friend? There would be no harm in indulging him. "All right. As long as you don't draw this out, whatever it is you have in mind. I'm a bit tired and out of

sorts." Still smiling and holding his hand, she rose from the bench. "So don't tax my concentration."

Pidor rose too and beamed at her. "I'll be quick about it. I promise."

They ducked into his small, simple cottage, just two doors away from Hilendra's. It was very much like her own cottage and, for that matter, very much like most other dwellings in the valley. Pidor led her to a square table and invited her to sit on one of the two short benches flanking it. After removing the bowl and pitcher of water from the center of the table, he lit a candle that also sat there. Moving to the foot of his bed, he lifted something from a wood chest with leather hinges and a simple iron lock.

As he returned to the table and sat across from her, Hilendra immediately recognized what he was holding—his pack of tarot cards. She'd always thought they were quite lovely and fanciful with their colorfully painted images and touches of gilt, but their mystical quality was lost on her. Anybody with an imagination could make up stories based on such evocative pictures.

"I'll do a simple layout," Pidor said, shuffling the cards without looking at them, "although a more complex one would provide deeper and broader insight."

"The simple one will do, thank you." Hilendra already felt impatient. She suspected Pidor would, however unintentionally, interpret the cards in keeping with his own view of what was best for her. And she already knew his attitudes on *that* subject.

He handed her the pack, face down. "Here, shuffle these again without looking. Hold the deck between your hands and ask a question. Make sure it's something important to you. Then return the cards to me."

Hilendra felt a twisting chill in her belly as soon as she took the pack. Somewhat awkwardly, she rearranged the rather large cards before pressing the stack between her palms. The candle flame flickered. Licking her lips, she cast Pidor an uncertain glance.

"Go ahead," he said gently, "they won't leap out of your hands and fly at your face." He gave Hilendra an encouraging and slightly amused smile.

She drew a breath. "What role will the men closest to me play in my future?"

“Good question.” Pidor took the deck back from Hilendra and carefully turned over the five topmost cards, placing them in the shape of a cross. One hand curled over his mouth, he studied them. “Strange. Interesting.”

“Aren’t they always?” Hilendra said dryly.

He ignored her sarcasm. “All chalices. Emotion, intuition and illusion rule here.” Pidor tapped the card in the center, which had seven small cups aligned at the top, and looked up at his companion. “This is you in your current situation as it relates to your question. You’re teetering on the brink of self-delusion, Hillie. You need to tap into your inner resources to reflect on your choices. Some could have grave consequences. Others, or at least one, could shine with brilliant promise. But you must hone your inner vision to perceive the latter.”

Hilendra’s gaze scanned the cards. In addition to the seven, there was a six, an ace and a queen and king. The last two would appear upside down to Pidor.

“And as I consider this six, which represents past influences,” Pidor said, “I see harmonious relationships—”

“That’s almost always the case in the Cauldron,” Hilendra broke in.

“Yes I know, but there’s likely some connection between one of those past relationships and the potential indicated in the seven card.” He looked at her, his face compressed in thought. “One you’re not aware of.”

Hilendra shrugged. It surely couldn’t be Pidor—could it?—who held such promise of future fulfillment.

“Close as we are, I doubt it’s me,” he said with a smile. “It must be someone else you encountered, either in the village or here in the Cauldron.” Sighing, he touched the queen and king, rocking his thumb and middle finger from one to the other. “These are both reversed. The queen represents the reason for your question, your current conundrum. You haven’t been focused enough, Hillie, on your supernatural gifts. You haven’t used them to your advantage. In fact, if you continue to be lax, you’ll not only

overlook personal opportunities, you could very well place yourself and others in grave danger.”

His words made Hilendra’s heart skip. She thought of her healing gift, her concerns over Elswin and Purnab taking advantage of it. But how could that imperil her? Or others? Frowning, she stared at the cards as Pidor turned his attention to the king.

“This is very troubling,” he said. “It’s the possible outcome, and it seems to be governed by a man or men who cannot be trusted. Duplicity defines them. They have no moral core. There’s even a potential for violence.” Pidor gave her a pointed glance as he tapped the queen card. “And it’s this little lady who could be opening the door for them.”

As much as she tried to minimize the significance of Pidor’s reading, Hilendra couldn’t ignore a growing tension in her nerves. Respect for her friend made it impossible to discount everything he said. She began to feel very uncomfortable indeed.

Pidor must have read her reaction in her face. “*Possible* outcome,” he quietly repeated then pointed at the overflowing chalice on the ace card. “But here’s the good news.”

“It’s about time,” Hilendra murmured.

Laughing, Pidor flattened his fingers on the final card and caressed it as if showing his appreciation. “There could be great love in your future, Hillie. But you must push all your self-constructed obstacles aside and be open to it.” He lifted his fingers from the card and curled them over Hilendra’s hand. His expression sobered. “Open the eyes of your heart. And take heed of what you see.”

His advice jolted her. *Take heed...*

As Pidor rose from the bench, Hilendra grabbed his wrist. Her mind spun. A question suddenly spilled out, words tumbling over words. “Pidor, what does it mean when a stranger’s face takes shape on the face of someone you know? I mean, just appears, without any conjuring?”

He lifted his eyebrows as he gazed down at her. "It means, dearest, that somebody is trying to get your attention."

"For what reason?"

Pidor grinned. "The only way to find that out is by *giving* the desired attention...fully and willingly."

\* \* \* \* \*

After finishing her dinner of a hearty soup made from chicken, vegetables and herbs, Hilendra covered the iron pot that hung from a tripod. On its lid, she crisscrossed the large dipping spoon and the knife she'd used to cut up the chicken, securing both utensils within the links of the tripod's chain to keep them from falling to the dirt floor. Tomorrow morning, she would wash them.

Her cooking fire would soon be out. Hilendra watched its thin banner of smoke curl up through the vent-hole in the center of the cottage's roof. As much as she hated to see a fire die, she didn't need one tonight. The air was warm and humid.

She realized how tired she was. The meeting with Elswin and Purnab had resulted in some vigorous sexual activity and her conversation and consultation with Pidor had given rise to a spate of nagging thoughts. Until dusk, she'd helped tend to the Cauldron's communal gardens and livestock. Now, with dinner made and eaten, Hilendra wanted nothing more than to sleep.

She donned her nightdress and lay on the straw bed covered with a goose-down mattress. The wool blankets were unnecessary tonight. Reclining on her right side, she gazed into the shallow pan of clean water she always kept beside the door. According to ancient wisdom this was a welcoming gesture—both for animals, which the Strange People deeply respected, and for spirit beings. In fact it was said the latter sometimes showed themselves there.

The parade of cups on Pidor's tarot cards marched through her mind.

Was it a spirit man who was trying to contact her? Hilendra began to remember the hazy details of his face, but she pushed the image away. She didn't want her mind tricking her into believing she actually saw that face in the water. Rolling onto her back, she briefly covered her eyes.

"I don't want to see you if you're not really here," she whispered.

When she looked into the pan again, she saw only the reflected light from her sputtering fire. After she'd stared at it for a while, her head sank onto the pillow and her heavy eyelids lowered.

The dream started with a distant thrumming sound that grew ever closer. *An owl*, Hilendra thought drowsily, imagining the large bird sailing through the darkness of the valley. Owls were a common sight in the Cauldron of Keridwen. But the beating of its wings stopped and a faint, brittle voice sounded.

"My son, my son...oh, my son," it said with sadness.

Awakening, Hilendra struggled to open her eyes. She finally did, or thought she did, and saw Bronwil's face, dry and creased as old leather, hovering over the vent-hole in the roof.

"My son," she breathed one last time...and her face faded into the black sky.

Just as Hilendra began sinking back into the depths of sleep, she saw a slight movement beside her mattress. Her first, quite fanciful thought was that some image had arisen from the pan of water and now loomed over her. She tried fixing her sight on it.

On *him*.

The man was tall. His lean, unclothed body seemed to waver into and out of the realm of flesh and bone. As Hilendra stared, hoping to identify him, she felt as if she were straining to see through heavy fog. She *must* be dreaming. Her gaze swept from



his head to the floor and back again, but not all parts of his form were visible at once. She focused on his face. The longer she looked the more detail it assumed.

Straight, dark brows overscored the most bewitching eyes Hilendra had ever seen. Green as the lushest midsummer grass, they seemed spangled with the daintiest crystals of snow. The man's strong nose looked chiseled. His high cheekbones appeared more carefully carved. Infused with a pale rose blush, his clean-lined lips gave the impression of being both soft and severe. Short whiskers, like a sweep of fine, dark sand, accented his upper lip, chin and jaw. His lustrous hair, just a shade lighter, fell in soft waves to his shoulders.

It was the same face she'd seen earlier, on Elswin and Purnab. And it was inexpressibly stunning. That must be why it had been lodged so deeply in her mind and she was dreaming about it now.

Despite the man's lack of substance, the force of his masculinity was so intense it coaxed a reaction from the core of Hilendra's womanhood. She felt a string of weak contractions between her legs, like the heralds of orgasm.

"Come, sit beside me," she heard herself say.

The figure did so. Beneath him, the straw barely rustled.

"I want to know you," she whispered.

Rather than speak, he leaned over her. Hilendra felt an irresistible pull. She instinctively tried to grasp him, hold him. But just as her hands and body began to feel some solidity—the smooth mounds of his chest, the plane of his stomach, the hard hillocks of his shoulders or the slope of his thighs—he seemed to dissolve beneath her touch. It was maddening...especially when she felt what must have been his hard cock nuzzle against her belly.

If only *all* her most pleasant dreams could be this enticing.

Although there was no breeze stirring the muggy air, her nightdress lightly billowed upward. Hilendra felt her legs gently nudged open, felt a whisper of fingers along her inner thighs. They feathered toward her pussy, already moistening from

excitement, and slipped between its folds. Like a delicate, yet dense column of air, the semi-solid fingers moved over and around her damp and swollen bud. Moaning, she writhed within the soft embrace of the mattress, wishing desperately it was *his* embrace, wishing she could see and feel and smell this mysterious, determined dream lover who already made her quake with passion. His fingers were both inside and outside her body now, moving like quicksilver, stimulating her so adroitly she had no choice but to surrender. Her breath caught...and caught again. An orgasm bit into her and kept biting, the strong, rhythmic pulsations delivering the sharpest pleasure she'd ever felt. Her whole body seemed to fold around it as if to prevent that exquisite feeling from escaping.

But gradually it did escape, leaving Hilendra limp and perspiring. She gasped for air as the throbbing dwindled. Her sense of the bed, the room, even of her own body began to dwindle away as a delicious lethargy overtook her. More dream images swirled through her head, all slipping in and out of each other—Elswin and Purnab, Bronwil and owls, floating tarot cards that seemed to bear the watery likeness of her dream lover.

Oh, how she wished he would return!

Heavily, Hilendra's eyelids opened. *No, not yet!* She was reluctant to face the emptiness of her cottage.

Strangely, it didn't *feel* empty. Her skin seemed to prickle with things unseen, some presence she couldn't quite discern. Her eyes shifted and focused as they adjusted to the darkness.

Then, with a thin cry, she jumped in surprise.

He was there...or *still* there. Hilendra didn't know which. Tentatively, she reached for the man's handsome face. His lips seemed to graze her hand.

"Who are you?" she asked, certain she was not asleep. In fact she'd never felt so tensely alert.

Hilendra heard him say something—*Saaldon*, she thought—but it was little more than an exhalation.

“Where are you from?”

Turning away from her, he raised an arm and pointed beyond the cottage. Hilendra looked at his strong back. An odd, lovely pattern of looping lines and intersecting angles tapered down the left side, from shoulder blade to waist. She couldn’t make out either the color of the design or its significance.

She sat up. “I don’t understand,” she said, her voice tight with frustration. “Why are you here? What do you want from me?”

He faced her once more. *To help us.*

“I will. I’ll do whatever I can. But...help whom? I don’t know what you mean by ‘us!’”

*Us*, he repeated more emphatically. *You. The kingdom. Its allies. And us.* He leaned toward her.

For the first time in the course of this strange visit, Hilendra fully felt *Saaldon*...or at least part of him. The cushion of his lips, full and warm, pressed against her mouth. Immediately she felt as if she were melting into him. She returned the kiss with an ardor that overtook her so naturally, so completely, it seemed she’d never before had a lover. Her whole being strained toward this commanding dream man who so ignited her. But she still couldn’t hold him. Her hands moved frenetically, trying to feel his face, his thick hair, trying to clutch the muscles that banded his back. Still, it was only his sumptuous lips she could feel, sealing them together.

The word *Us* echoed dimly in her mind.

*Saaldon*’s lips flexed one last time and the kiss was broken.

Rising from the bed of straw, he took two steps backward toward the tripod then let out a low cry.

Hilendra empathetically felt pain flame across her right thigh. "Oh dear Mother," she whispered in shock, wincing as Saaldon winced.

She instantly pictured the pot hanging from the tripod and the knife stuck within a link in the chain, its sharp tip protruding... He'd been injured!

"I'm so sorry! Please let me help you!" Hilendra tried moving toward the stricken man but her limbs still felt weighted.

It soon didn't matter what she did. Because the vision named Saaldon disappeared like a phantom into the night.

"Bronwil?" she said without knowing why.

Again the deep and distant throb of beating wings drifted through her doorway.

Again the crone's wistful voice came from above. "Claim your happiness, my son. Drink, drink from the cup."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hilendra, wake up."

Her eyelids sprang open. The cottage was suffused with a murky half-light. Without seeing clearly, Hilendra reached for the man who sat on her bed. His arm was hard beneath her hand. *Solid flesh*. She tried pulling him toward her.

Chuckling, the man disengaged her fingers. "That's not why I'm here, my sweet...which should be obvious by now."

Hilendra stretched her eyelids and pushed the hair back from her face. Wakefulness began to clear her mind. "Pidor!" Awkwardly, she sat up. "Is it morning?"

"Nearly. Dawn is just breaking." He pulled her nightdress down over her bare legs.

*Last night...* Hilendra put a hand to her forehead. At the moment, she couldn't seem to focus on her friend. She felt wildly needy, as if the slightest touch from a man would bring her to climax. The apex of her thighs was drenched.

"You must go," she said distractedly. "I have to...take care of something." Would that dream return? *Was* it a dream? Now distanced from the experience, she could make no sense of it.

"You're aroused," Pidor murmured through a slight smile.

Hilendra's gaze flew to his face. She felt her cheeks burn.

"I couldn't help but notice as soon as I walked in," he said gently. "You must have had a very vivid dream." He laid a hand on her rib cage. "Would you like me to help you?"

"But you're not...you don't..."

"It isn't as if I'm unfamiliar with your body, you know. And I've always quite liked your very luscious breasts." His hand slid higher and lightly massaged the right one, his thumb playing over the nipple. "Pull off your nightdress. I think I can ease your discomfort."

Hilendra did so, almost frantically. Even his dispassionate touch made her pussy ooze and throb. Her breasts felt heavy, her nipples excruciatingly taut. Pidor might not want or be able to fuck her, but he could still bring her some relief. "I'm so embarrassed," she muttered.

He put a finger to her lips. "Shh. It isn't as if you're the first human being who's ever been in this state. I would've given anything for a hot, moist mouth when that visiting dowser, Selnak, heated my blood. I could barely keep my legs under me when we worked together."

Pidor lowered his head and began slowly sucking on Hilendra's right nipple as he fondled her left breast. Weakly, she dropped her head against the wall. *A hot, moist mouth.* Yes, it would do. Not as well as a hot, hard cock, but it would do. She fingered her slick cunt as lightning branched between it and her breasts. She envisioned the gorgeous man who called himself Saaldon, imagining it was *his* sensuous mouth that pleased her. His form no sooner took shape in Hilendra's mind than an orgasm shot

through her, tensing her limbs and curling her toes. Pidor, certainly familiar with her body's responses, pulled away.

"See?" he said, fondly patting her thigh, "I'm not *totally* useless to you."

Breathlessly, Hilendra laughed. "You've never been useless to me. Not to any degree." Relaxed now, she sat forward. "And since you're so useful, would you mind handing me that blue dress?"

Rising from her bed, Pidor went to the peg-rack. "Taking advantage already, eh?" He tossed Hilendra the light-blue garment with its tucked-in waist and lace-up bodice.

As she put it on, she wondered why she'd chosen it. This was her best dress, its meticulous tailoring far more flattering to her figure than the loose shifts and tunics she usually wore.

"That looks lovely on you," Pidor said.

"Thank you." Hilendra walked to the table at the other side of the room, where her comb and wash basin sat. She could feel Pidor's curious gaze at her back. "Please turn around," she said, not wanting to clean herself while he stared. She heard the straw of her bed crackle beneath his weight.

"Do you have some special meeting today?" Pidor asked.

After she finished washing and combing her hair, Hilendra pulled a sprig of lavender from an earthenware vessel and rubbed it between her breasts. "None that I'm aware of."

"Then why –"

Hilendra turned to face him. "I don't know," she said with genuine wonder.

Pidor smiled. "You will. Soon you'll know."

They looked at each other a few heartbeats longer. "By the way," Hilendra said, "you never did tell me why you woke me."

"Just come outside and you'll see."

It wasn't much brighter when they left the cottage. The sun still hadn't lifted itself above the rim of the Cauldron. In the near distance, cattle lowed and roosters crowed. A barely perceptible breeze wafted through the valley, carrying the mingled, rich fragrance of dewy grass, countless flowers and animal dung. Hilendra inhaled deeply, relishing the scents.

"Well, I don't see anything out of the ordinary," she said.

"You're not looking in the right place." Pidor turned her around and tilted her face upward. "There. On your roof."

Hilendra's mouth fell open. Nestled within the thatch were scores of flower petals, glistening with dew. "It can't be." She turned to her friend. "Are there any on other roofs?"

"No, only yours." Pidor put a hand on her arm. "Hillie, what *did* you dream last night?"

Approaching hoofbeats aborted their conversation. The horse and rider pulled up beside Hilendra's cottage. It was a messenger—they all wore the same uniform—and it was one she recognized. He often rode into the valley to bring one of its residents to the village or castle or to announce the impending arrival of some dignitary.

He politely tipped his feathered cap. "Miss, I'm to bring you to the Callers Cliff."

Frowning in bewilderment, Hilendra glanced at Pidor. He shrugged, apparently as befuddled as she. Hilendra rarely went to the Cliff, where the Farfields dragons arrived after they were summoned by the Dragon Callers. And they were usually only summoned when an attack on the kingdom was expected, for they were Galdesh's first line of defense.

"Are you sure you don't mean the Healers Mount? You know I'm an empath and that's where I normally go."

"I know, miss, but this time that's not where you're wanted."

Hilendra felt a surge of alarm. “Were dragons summoned? Are we soon to be at war?”

“I only know a Farfields dragon flew to the Callers Cliff and that’s where I’m to take you.” The messenger extended a hand to help her climb into the saddle.

Pidor waved in farewell as Hilendra seated herself behind the messenger. This was a worrisome turn. If a dragon had been summoned, a battle could be imminent. If a dragon arrived on its own, without being summoned, it could be so ill that it was disoriented. Neither possibility boded well.

As the horse galloped toward one of the four paths that led out of the valley, Hilendra pondered this unusual situation. She’d been very concerned about whatever affliction had gripped the dragons’ community within the recent past. Two of the creatures had apparently died from it. And many of the others, regardless of age or sex, seemed continually to fall ill and recover, only to fall ill again. Thinking of their suffering made her heart ache. Although the Farfields dragons could be ferocious warriors, they were fundamentally rational, sensitive, peaceable creatures, capable of deep loyalty.

Galdesh relied heavily on the dragons’ help in time of war. Securing their trust and aid was a process, Hilendra had heard, that had claimed many Galdeshian lives and spanned more than a generation. Maintaining their trust was an ongoing effort and one that rested largely within the hands of the dragon-related orders—the Callers, who summoned them, the Readers, who communicated with them, the Riders, who guided them on military missions and the Healers, who tended to their illnesses and injuries. Without these powerful and irreplaceable allies, the kingdom could have fallen many times over to attacking armies.

If sickness continued to decimate the dragons’ ranks, Galdesh was essentially doomed.

Rising gradually out of the valley, horse and riders made haste toward the Callers Cliff, somewhat northwest from the Cauldron of Keridwen. Hilendra was grateful they



didn't have to travel through the village, which lay largely to the south. Village residents were generally more small-minded than members of the Higher Orders. They tended to gawk and point and mutter behind their hands whenever one of the Strange People passed through. Although Hilendra didn't particularly care what they thought of her, she found their behavior irritating and didn't want to subject herself to it any more than was necessary.

The promontories that surrounded the Callers Cliff loomed ahead of them, dark serrations in the azure backdrop of summer sky. It was on these the dragons usually perched when they were summoned. Hilendra tried to discern if a draconic silhouette crowned one of the peaks, but she saw none. Her curiosity sharpened.

The messenger followed a broader, more rutted path that circled around the base of the Cliff and wound past the impressive lodge that housed the Dragon Callers brotherhood, the Order of the Wing and Tongue. The path, which zigzagged back and forth up the slope, was well-worn. The Callers required many materials for their wing and tongue construction and wagons had to haul these materials to the broad, flat top of the Cliff.

After one more turn, Hilendra could see the scattering of huts in which the Callers stored their materials and often worked.

And then she saw the dragon.

Of medium size, it sat on the grassy plateau that led to the edge of the Cliff. The creature seemed calm and alert. It appeared to be watching a group of men who stood nearby.

The messenger directed his horse to this gathering, for these were obviously the people who'd summoned Hilendra. She immediately recognized Dalnach, the Master of the Dragon Readers brotherhood, and Orlik, the Master of the Healers. Judging by his garment, the third master must be Xentis, who headed the Callers. She also saw the unmistakable form of Elswin. A few other men were also present, but none was familiar to Hilendra. They all turned to regard her as soon as the messenger's horse approached.

Her arrival didn't catch only the men's attention. Raising its head and tensing, the dragon fixed its scintillating emerald eyes on Hilendra. She smiled. *Yes, I'm here to help you*, she thought, admiring the creature's harsh and brutal beauty. She was by no means a Dragon Reader, so the best she could do was send the creatures strong, directed, sincere thoughts and hope they somehow understood.

Hilendra had never seen a Farfields dragon quite like this one. Its build was somewhat different from the others' – more slender and graceful, she thought – and its coloration was definitely out of the ordinary. The creature's luminous wings and neck fins, which nearly matched the color of its eyes, were threaded with and outlined in a brilliant blue. Its thick, pentagonal scales and vertical backplates, glimmering with a mother-of-pearl luster, were also thus outlined. The dragon's crown was almost whimsical – not just two backswept horns, but a cluster of pairs, all of different heights. Hilendra had been under the impression that only the dragons' Dame, or queen, had characteristics that departed from the clan's. Their usual color combination was near-black and garnet, with faint amber highlights.

*I'll be there in a moment*, Hilendra thought, still watching the strange creature as she dismounted.

Suddenly the dragon lifted its head skyward. Fully extending its neck, it "sang" for a moment. Then, fluidly swaying its neck, it turned its head toward the northwest and breathed out a multicolored torrent of fire.

The messenger's horse reared, nearly throwing him. A few of the men jumped in surprise. Hilendra only stared at the creature, wondering what had prompted its eccentric behavior. Slowly lowering its head, the dragon assumed its previous attitude but kept its eyes trained on the humans it had startled.

One of them approached her. "So you are Hilendra, from the Cauldron."

"Yes."

He gave her a small, courtly bow. "Permit me to welcome you to the Dragon Callers Cliff. I am Xentis, Master of the Order of the Wing and Tongue." He gestured toward the other men. "Please join us. We'll explain why you were brought here."

"Thank you." Hilendra immediately trusted this man. He was older, as most masters were, and she sensed he placed a high premium on honor and duty.

Dalnach and Orlik, with whom she'd worked before, stepped forward to greet her. The Master of the Dragon Readers was a man of warmth and expansive good humor. The Master of the Healers was more reserved but deeply compassionate. True to their natures, Dalnach smiled broadly, held her by both arms and kissed her on both cheeks, while Orlik merely lifted her fingers and gave them a delicate squeeze.

"Tell me what this is all about," Hilendra said to them. She glimpsed Elswin out of the corner of her eye. He was staring at her. She knew her garment's open-fronted bodice hugged her breasts snugly and their cleavage was visible through its laces.

"The creature wasn't summoned," Xentis began. "He arrived, quite unexpectedly, just after daybreak."

"He," Hilendra repeated.

"Yes," Orlik said. "We've determined it's a male."

"And you're certain he's from the Farfields?" Hilendra asked. Her gaze slid toward the dragon, still sitting on the grass, still watching them. Occasionally his barbed tail flicked, indicating a certain degree of impatience.

"Indeed he is," Orlik answered. "He once appeared at the Healers Mount in the company of an older male. We assumed he was serving as an escort for the infirm dragon."

Smiling, Dalnach turned to regard the visitor. "Handsome fellow, isn't he? We can't seem to account for why his appearance differs from that of others in the Farfields community, but the most likely explanation is that he's a crossbreed."

“Did you ask him?” Hilendra thought it a logical question. As a Dragon Reader, Dalnach could converse mentally with the Farfields creatures. It was a limited mode of communication but one that was more or less effective.

Dalnach leaned toward Hilendra. “He doesn’t seem willing to divulge much of anything. That’s been our problem so far. He’s an obstinate bastard.”

She smiled and again snuck a glance at the dragon. “Well, what *has* he told you?”

“Only that he’s from the Farfields and he wished for you to be present.”

Hilendra’s eyes widened in surprise. “Me? Why me? I’ve never seen this creature before.”

“From what I was able to gather,” Dalnach said, “you’re respected in the Farfields community.” He lowered his voice. “I also get the impression he prefers dealing with a woman.” Dalnach winked.

“In any case,” Orlik added, “once you determine what’s wrong with him, we’re prepared to step in.”

He meant of course the Healers would take over. It was a logical assumption there *was* something wrong with the dragon. He wouldn’t request the presence of an empath if he were in good health.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Hilendra said. “Did he tell you his name?”

Shrugging, Dalnach shook his head.

Hilendra took a deep breath and walked over to the creature. She was aware of Elswin’s gaze following her, undressing her. Shifting in Elswin’s direction, the dragon’s eyes narrowed. Hilendra’s steps faltered as she thought of that unprovoked burst of flame. What if illness had made the dragon delirious and volatile? He could easily reduce her to ash with no warning.

But when his eyes again moved in her direction, his whole demeanor seemed to soften. Before Hilendra even had a chance to extend her hand, palm down, for the

dragon to sniff, he lowered his head and touched his snout to the ground. He'd acquiesced before he'd even determined if he could trust her!

"Thank you," she murmured. "I feel humbled and honored."

The dragon briefly closed his eyes. Hilendra felt a prolonged, warm breath issue from his nostrils and caress her feet.

Very gently, she rested a hand on the knobby skin just behind his nose. An empath needed to have an emotional bond or physical contact with any creature, human or animal, in order to determine the source of its suffering.

A searing pain shot across Hilendra's right thigh then lapsed into a throbbing, burning ache. The dragon had been injured and the wound was not healing by itself.

"We'll help you," she murmured...and something astonishing happened.

The dragon answered. She heard the words only in her mind, the way Dragon Readers heard them, but such a thing had never happened to her before. She'd certainly had no training in this type of communication.

*I shall help you, he said. You shall help me. We shall help us. Falsehood surrounds all.*

It sounded like a riddle. Hilendra didn't know how to respond. Her mind frothed with questions she couldn't seem to articulate. Something else nagged at her too, but she was too stunned to pinpoint the thought.

*You like flowers?*

Hilendra gaped at the creature. "Yes," she said inaudibly.

*That's why I brought you some and brought you more.*

Her heart was stuttering now and her voice had completely abandoned her.

*You wish for love.*

Tears rose in Hilendra's eyes. She felt faint. Something was going on. Something she didn't understand.

*That's why I'll bring you more.*

The dragon raised his head and seemed to stare directly into Hilendra's eyes.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

He gently nudged the laces of her bodice with his snout, pushing against the swell of her breasts as he did so. Heat flared in Hilendra’s face—the heat of arousal and of shame over that arousal. She considered turning and walking away but she felt frozen in place. Without showing his fearsome teeth, the dragon slowly and almost surreptitiously slipped his vivid red tongue out of his mouth. It curled upward, slid between the laces of her bodice and languorously licked the narrow gully between her closely pressed breasts. As the tongue withdrew, it lightly darted against one nipple then the next.

Hilendra gasped. She immediately felt drenched in her own wetness...and humiliation. Dear Mother, how could her body betray her like this? Responding to the inexplicable caresses of a dragon!

*No need to feel...* The voice in Hilendra’s head began to weaken and break apart.  
*Mandrac... He who –*

“Well, what brings him here?”

*Do not trust... Are captors.*

Startled, Hilendra spun around. The three masters had walked up behind her. Too engrossed in her interaction with the dragon, she had neither heard nor sensed their approach. It was Xentis who’d addressed her.

“He, uh...he’s injured. On his right leg. You’ll have to look for a dislodged scale. Beneath it, there’s probably a gash of some sort, but I don’t know what caused it. I do know it needs immediate attention.”

The three men hurried over to the dragon’s right hind leg. As they poked and probed, the dragon flinched slightly. Hilendra felt a pang. Impulsively, she stroked his head. His eyes closed.

Orlik beckoned Elswin with a wave. Hilendra’s lover came forward, carrying two small pails in one hand and a wooden chest in the crook of his other arm. He briefly stopped beside Hilendra – somehow, she knew he would – and leaned toward her ear.

In a harsh and hurried voice, he said, "That dress is driving me to distraction. I want to rip it off with my very teeth and watch your succulent tits fall out of it. I want to fuck you until neither one of us can stand while I bite you and make you scream."

The dragon's head suddenly jerked up. Startled, Elswin stumbled backward. Menacingly, the dragon bared its sharp, deadly teeth. The Healer's eyes widened in shock as he backed farther away and then scurried around the creature's bulk to its hindquarters.

Hilendra wanted to know what caused this reaction—pain, or a particular aversion to Elswin—but before she could ask the dragon, Dalnach and Xentis walked up to her.

"Can the Healers help him?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, they're tending to the wound right now," Xentis said. "It is indeed a gash beneath one of his scales. Elswin and Orlik cleansed it. Now they're packing it with some concoction intended to draw out the poison and help it heal."

Hilendra felt a wash of relief. "I so hope it works. At least he doesn't have the illness that's beset some of the others in the Farfields community."

Dalnach touched her arm. "Could you determine anything else about this creature? Was he more forthcoming with you than he was with me?"

"We're all very curious about him," Xentis explained. "If there's some alteration taking place in the Farfields clan, such as the type that would occur through crossbreeding, we Galdeshians need to know about it. The introduction of a new dragon strain with different characteristics could have an enormous impact on our dealings with these animals."

Hilendra nodded. "I understand." She considered what had happened between the dragon and her. Their exchange had been oddly intimate and she felt loath to discuss it...for the time being anyway. She'd certainly found out nothing relating to the masters' concerns. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I don't know any more than you. He does seem to have a rather...well-developed personality though."

Laughing, Dalnach clapped his hands together. "You noticed it too, eh?" He fondly looked at the dragon. "Fascinating creatures, they are. Willful, brave, intelligent, perceptive. I wish we could communicate with them less clumsily. So much of the nuance is lost..."

Xentis gave him an encouraging slap on the back. "You do quite well, sir, quite well indeed. I believe all our dragon-related orders have much to be proud of."

"I hope so," Dalnach murmured.



### Chapter Three

After being treated and once its human attendants had backed away, the dragon flew off toward the Farfields. Hilendra immediately asked the messenger to return her to the valley. She didn't want to be around Elswin, who seemed to be waiting for an opportunity to approach her again.

Besides, she needed to pay someone a visit.

After grabbing a cape and then filling a sack with vegetables from the Cauldron's large garden, Hilendra climbed onto her docile mule, Flora, and struck out to the northeast. There was still a good deal of daylight left—enough to travel to Bronwil's cottage, visit for a while and make the trip back.

Hilendra enjoyed the approach to the wise woman's dwelling. The seldom-used path that led to her yard was overshadowed by the intertwined crowns of ancient oak and *irsii* trees. Following it was like traveling through a verdant tunnel to another realm. Birds and squirrels, hare and deer were abundant, as if they felt protected here. And they likely *were* protected. It was said that Bronwil had cast a large magical circle around her cottage—one that provided a refuge for friends and a defense against foes.

Built into the side of a hill, Bronwil's cottage had a roof that was sodded, not thatched. A goat grazed contentedly on its gentle slope. The sun-drenched yard was a tangled riot of flowers. Countless butterflies, bees and hummingbirds darted among them. Ivy clung to the walls of the cottage and roses climbed around its door.

*No, more a portal,* Hilendra thought as she slid off Flora's sleek back. There was no need to tie up the mule. The animal, which always seemed pleased to be here, would not trot off.

Ducking beneath the arch of roses, Hilendra rang a small bell that hung beside the door. It immediately glided open.

As her eyes adjusted to the relative gloom, she saw Bronwil's hunched form seated before the large fieldstone hearth.

Without turning, the old woman said, "I've been expecting you."

Frowning slightly, Hilendra placed the sack of vegetables on a scarred, crooked table. It was customary to bring Bronwil a gift when her help was sought.

"Then you must be willing to answer my questions." Hilendra approached the hearth and sat on a low stool that was an arm's length away from Bronwil's handsome, twig chair.

The mistress of the cottage still didn't look at her. "Some questions are better left to answer themselves."

It would be futile, Hilendra knew, to ask what that meant. She decided to pose some questions anyway and see what she could come up with. "Mother Bronwil, do you have any sons?"

A private smile seemed to disrupt the pattern of creases in the old woman's face. "I have never borne children." She lifted a long stick that rested against the side of her chair and poked at the fire. Sparks wafted up the chimney. "The wrong hands occasionally stir *your* fire," she murmured.

Hilendra felt her face gather into a frown. How to proceed? She still didn't know what to make of last night's dream...or vision, or visitation. She didn't even know what it was, but she couldn't stop thinking about it. And then today, at the Callers Cliff—

"But I *have* borne dragons."

Nearly tumbling off the stool, Hilendra gaped at the old woman. "What?" she whispered.

Neither repeating nor explaining her assertion, Bronwil remained still as a stone. For some moments, she didn't even blink. Finally she turned to her guest. Her pale blue eyes, usually rheumy, glimmered brightly in the firelight. Both her face and voice were more animated. "As you open one door, close the other. Much depends on it. A brilliant

vista lies beyond one, a bleak vista beyond the other. Open...then close." She fixed her gaze on Hilendra for a few heartbeats longer. When she faced the fire once more, she seemed to seal herself in silence.

*What does it all mean?* Hilendra's head had begun to ache. Sensing it was time to leave, she rose from the stool. "Thank you for your time," she murmured and stepped quietly toward the door.

"Hephestia and I are much obliged for the food. We greatly enjoy the fruits of the valley. The Cauldron is a place of bounty. Many kinds of bounty."

Startled, Hilendra turned. She wasn't used to Bronwil expressing gratitude. It touched her. "You're quite welcome," she said. "Who's Hephestia?"

Although she could barely make out Bronwil's shrunken form within the spacious chair, she did see the old woman's arm rise like a growing vine. Her forefinger pointed at the beamed and daubed ceiling.

The response bewildered Hilendra...until she remembered the goat on the roof. Smiling, she said, "Ah, yes, I saw her when I rode up. She's quite lovely." Securing her cape and still smiling, she imagined the nanny and the mule chatting amiably while their human companions visited indoors.

"Like magpies," Bronwil chirped in confirmation.

Shaking her head, Hilendra expelled a single, silent laugh. When she was with the old wise one, her thoughts were never entirely her own. She walked to the door, paused and called over her shoulder, "Good day."

Just as Hilendra was about to step outside, Bronwil made a final, cryptic statement.

"You are loved, well and truly."

Hilendra whirled around.

Half turned in her chair, Bronwil held a pottery pitcher high in one hand, a goblet in the other. Slowly, she began pouring water from the pitcher into the goblet. She poured and poured until the goblet was full—Hilendra could even see the glimmering

surface of the liquid lazily kissing the cup's rim—but she didn't stop pouring. It wasn't until the water, a fire-gold veil, began spilling over the edge of the goblet that Bronwil tilted the pitcher upright.

The old woman sighed contentedly and took a long drink from the cup. "Do not reject the gift," she said.

Dumbfounded, Hilendra stared at her a moment longer. No further utterances were forthcoming. Those were, apparently, the wise woman's parting words.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pidor was clearly agitated. He strode alongside Hilendra as she led her mule to one of the Cauldron's livestock pens. "He's been skulking around since shortly after you left. I don't know where he is now, but I hope he went back to the village."

"He'd better not be waiting for me in my cottage."

*Damn that Elswin.* Hilendra extended the curse to herself. What had prompted her to wear so revealing a dress today? She hadn't expected to meet anyone special, hadn't even expected to leave the valley. Then, indignantly, she retracted the self-reproach. *I should be able to wear whatever I please without some man assuming it's for his pleasure alone.*

"He wasn't in your cottage the last time I looked," Pidor said. "I've been trying to keep an eye on him *and* it."

Her friend's agitation began to infect Hilendra. "This is so *maddening!* Why is he turning into such a nuisance?"

Pidor seamed his lips together and gave her a disgusted glance. It said, *Oh, spare me, you know damned well why he's turning into such a nuisance.*

"Don't say it," she muttered.

"I think it's time you insist that pair find another playmate. I'm telling you, Hillie, those men are pigs. I know you've been enjoying their...well, their attentions, but they're the type who'll start taking liberties you're not willing to give. Even my tarot cards suggested as much. That reversed king card was especially troubling."

They stopped in front of her cottage, which was circled by myrtle and hollyhocks. Cards or no cards, Pidor's suggestion was likely a sound one. Hilendra thought of yesterday, when Elswin had virtually demanded she stay at the stream with them, and this morning, when he'd slavered over her like a hungry wolf. The men's desire for her was provocative—she couldn't deny how her body tingled at the thought of the two of them looking at her as if they wanted to devour her—but that desire now seemed to be taking a suffocating turn.

And then there was the other man, the one who kept appearing to her but had yet to take on any real substance, had yet to fully identify himself or explain his presence in her life. Hilendra was haunted by his image. Did he have something to do with Bronwil's strange utterances?

"You may be right, Pidor," she said to her friend.

"I know I am. *You* know I am."

Smiling wanly, Hilendra touched his face. "I do believe I need to move on." Bronwil's voice echoed in her mind. *As you open one door, close the other.* "But move on to what, I don't know."

\* \* \* \* \*

Saaldon immediately went to the Dame's lair after returning from the Callers Cliff. She hadn't approved of his flight there, but neither had she prohibited him from going. As the Dame well knew, his visit to the Cliff could prove of critical importance...both to the Farfields dragons and the Kingdom of Galdesh.

The Dame sat regally within her ring of fire, staring at the lair's entrance. Around her, the cave walls glittered with collected jewels and precious metals. The dragons did love treasure.

Unblinking, the Dame followed Saaldon's measured steps in her direction. She'd surely been expecting him.

“That was a foolish risk,” she said in Dragon-thought. Then her sternness melted away. “But a brave one. We’re very proud of you. Have your suspicions been confirmed?”

He remained at a deferential distance from her circle of flame. “More or less. I’m not finished with this though. There’s no telling how far the web extends. Or how soon the spider will pounce.”

The Dame’s brilliant amber gaze slid past his flank. “But your leg—it must be properly and fully healed before you continue. We may have to call upon the old wise woman to do it.”

He shifted uncomfortably. Her mention of the wound drew his attention to it, how the burning had increased. “That would be futile,” he said, suppressing a grimace.

“How so?”

“Because the old woman will *not* heal it.”

The Dame obviously found his answer bewildering. “But why? She’s your—”

“She believes it’s to be taken care of in another way.” Saaldon kept his gaze steadily on the Dame’s. Her high status aside, he would allow no room for argument. “And it’s a way I wish to pursue. I request that I may take my leave of you now.”

“To pursue this ‘way’?”

“Yes.”

She considered his request for a moment. “Well, a healing *is* necessary and your courage *has* earned you considerable privileges.” The Dame briefly lowered her head, indicating she was granting his request.

“Thank you.” He backed away from her toward the lair’s entrance.

Just as he was about to depart, the Dame called out to him. “This unbending determination I see in you, might it have something to do with...your desire to experience the Euphoria?”

The question took him aback. “What makes you ask me that?”

“I have been around a very long time,” she said. The statement was gentle, swaddled in compassionate understanding. “I can read the yearning in you. In both of you. So your quest...*does* it have something to do with such a desire?”

“No,” he said, not even bothering to wonder how she would react to his admission. “It has *everything* to do with such a desire.”

Saaldon entered the Cauldron just after dark, far enough from its gardens and orchards, its pens and stables, workshops and cottages to ensure he would not be seen. As if signaling his arrival, the large Aeolian harp perched on the rim of the valley sent out a few eerie, wavering tones.

Last night’s visit here had been different. He’d arrived much later, when the valley’s residents were likely sound asleep. Now, however, many could still be awake. Even his swiftness and stealth would not prevent the residents from seeing or hearing a dragon descend into their midst.

As soon as he alit on the ground, he dropped his wings to his sides and remained as still as possible. Concentrating on the look and feel, the very essence, of his human form, he soon felt the odd, tickling contractions that signaled significant changes in his body. Both his internal and external structures were reconfiguring themselves. As the change neared its end, he shook his head and arms...as he always did. The movement was probably unnecessary, but it helped Saaldon feel that he was casting off all vestiges of his draconic self.

Finding Hilendra would not be difficult. Saaldon was quite familiar with this valley, including the location of the empath’s dwelling. Without any thought, simply following the steps that were laid in his memory, he made his hobbling way through the tall grasses and wildflowers to a rough path, then to a fork in the path and on to the left. His right leg continuously shrieked in protest, for his wound had grown steadily worse since this morning. But the scattering of modest buildings in the near distance, some with candlelight still glowing within, helped buoy his footsteps.

With the Dame's approval and Mother Bronwil's help, Saaldon had already made nine visits to the Cauldron, ten including last night's. He did it for the human companionship. He did it to have an opportunity to work with his hands and body, feel his muscles clench and strain through hard, honest labor. Always, though, he was anonymous—a lone traveler who tarried for several days and nights, perhaps a bit longer, before moving on. Bronwil's magic assured his anonymity. Every time Saaldon arrived at the Cauldron, he did so with a different face. And every time he departed, he did so without having forged any bonds. Except for Hilendra... Still, such a thing was prohibited, along with revelation of his true identity.

He was beginning to think, however, that Bronwil's magic had a secondary purpose—to ensure he'd meet Hilendra and to prepare them both for his involvement in this crisis.

His draconic leader hadn't objected to that involvement. When he'd told the Dame of his suspicions and offered to probe further into the matter, she'd granted him more latitude in his dealings with Galdeshians. She knew full well that something had to be done.

The closer Saaldon got to Hilendra, the less fiery pain his injury caused him. He knew this wouldn't be the case if she hadn't been drawn to him. But she *had* been drawn to him, had opened herself to him—Saaldon smiled, he was so sure of it—and once he convinced her of certain things, well, *anything* seemed possible. Although she didn't yet realize it, her trust had validated his love. So maybe, as Bronwil had hinted in her occult way, this mission would yield an even happier result. Maybe his love would some day be returned with more than trust.

Saaldon smiled. *Love and trust*. Like an alchemist's brew, this could prove a magically transformative mix. It had already allowed him to present himself to Hilendra in his fully fleshed-out, natural form.

And didn't his jouncing cock, gradually swelling with anticipation, remind him how wonderful that form could be?



\* \* \* \* \*

Another night. What would it bring? Again Hilendra felt weary to the bone. Elswin, thank all that was good, hadn't appeared. Perhaps Pidor's vigilance had made the Healer uneasy enough to abandon his pursuit. Perhaps the Cauldron itself had made him uneasy. Hilendra knew neither he nor Purnab liked it here and only came for her favors.

Legs stretched over the edge of the straw bedding, she sat with her hands loosely folded and gazed vacantly into the pan of water. Nothing. Not so much as a ripple. Only her thoughts were reflected back at her from the still surface. How was the dragon doing? What was their peculiar encounter all about? And what had Bronwil been trying to tell her? Did it have some relation to Pidor's advice? Did everything that had been happening lately have some relation to everything else?

*But my pan isn't overflowing like Bronwil's goblet.*

Quietly, Hilendra uttered a forlorn chuckle. Her thoughts, ever more jumbled and as slippery as seaweed, were turning into mash. She lifted her legs onto the bedding and lay on her left side, facing the wall. The low flames of her cooking fire cast a dim, dancing light around the room. In the dark distance, a whippoorwill called—

And then there was a weight beside her, a heavy arm folding over her ribs, predatory fingers caging her right breast. Mumbling incoherently, she tried to turn over. The fingers squeezed and dug into her flesh.

"Be quiet. Just let me have you." A whisper, coarse and urgent.

Familiar scents assaulted her nostrils—juniper, rue, leopard's bane, monkshood. She smelled soil on the clawing fingers.

Thrashing with greater purpose, she said, "No. Get out of here," and tried prying the fingers from her body.

"Not until I get what I want."

"I demand you lea—" Just as her voice began to rise, a hand clamped over her mouth.

"I said *shut up*, bitch!" It sounded like the half growl, half hiss of an enraged animal. Wrestling with her, Elswin tied a filthy length of cloth over her mouth then forced her onto her back.

Straddling her hips, he fiercely ripped open her nightdress from neck to belly. Hilendra heard a ragged, lecherous sigh as her body was bared. Then Elswin pinned her arms down, above shoulder height, and lowered himself toward her face. "I told you earlier," he crooned, his voice chillingly unctuous, "all I want to do is bite your ripe tits until you scream and then fuck you until you scream more." His knee drove against the soft but dry swell of her labia. "Not wet for me *this* time, eh, you little tart? It matters not. I can still ram into you...like a sword into sand."

Hilendra bucked against Elswin, trying to throw him off. It only seemed to inflame him all the more. She tried to scream behind the gag. He slowly licked her cheek, as if to taunt her with his control, and she felt nausea ball in her stomach. Just as his head began to creep toward her vulnerable breasts—

He flew off her. Elswin's body seemed to buckle and shoot backward into the room. Free again, Hilendra sat up and scrambled to pull the cloth from her mouth. She trained her eyes on the room's interior.

Somebody else was there, fighting with her attacker. His form was shadowy in the dying light and moving with limber speed. Had Pidor come to help her?

She saw and heard the tripod topple over as flesh connected brutally with flesh and grunts punctured the air. Hilendra's astonished gaze tried to follow the action. The other man finally slammed Elswin against a wall and held him there with a hand locked around his throat.

Hilendra thought she saw the dominant man's hand rise and level a forefinger at Elswin's face. The voice that sounded was *not* Pidor's. "You and your equally foul friend are never, *ever* to come near this woman again. Do you understand?"

Elswin's labored breathing prevented him from answering at first. When he did, he was defiant. "So you're this randy mare's new stud, eh? Must be, since most men don't

walk around at night with their naked bollocks swinging between their legs. Well, let me tell you some –”

He didn't get a chance to dispense his words of wisdom, because a fist sharply connected with his face. As Elswin swayed and crumpled, the other man shoved him toward the door.

That's when Hilendra saw the intricate, colored design that wound down the left side of his back. "Saaldon?" she whispered, knowing this was no dream.

He glanced over his shoulder and gave her a twitch of a smile. "Yes." Then he pitched Elswin outside and into the dirt.

Trying to pull her torn nightdress closed, Hilendra rose from the bed and stood beside the man in the doorway. Silently, they watched as Elswin got to his feet. Only when he seemed capable of walking under his own power did Saaldon speak again. His voice was low and level.

"I suggest you leave this valley as quickly as possible and never return."

Elswin, his battered face twisted in hate, raised a fist in his enemy's direction. "You'll pay. I swear you'll pay."

"I already have. And it isn't going to happen again. Now be on your way...before I forfeit *all* restraint." He calmly turned back to the cottage.

Hilendra was about to follow when Elswin's arm shot up. Quaking, he pointed at Saaldon's back. "By the gods, you're –"

Saaldon spun around.

Whatever look Elswin saw on his enemy's face or in his eyes made him take a few stumbling steps backward. He turned and began awkwardly jogging down the path.

Somewhat shyly, Hilendra looked up at her rescuer. He was indeed the mysterious man she'd been seeing over the past two days. He was indeed stark naked. And he was indeed the most gorgeous creature she'd ever laid eyes on.

"I...I don't know what's going on," she said, "but I'm very grateful to you. Please come inside." So she *hadn't* been dreaming!

Saaldon glanced down at her. His expression was quite different now. With all his ferocity flown, he looked almost demure. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"It should've been obvious since last night that I don't mind."

Turning his eyes down, Saaldon nodded. A smile teased his handsome mouth. "You must be quite bewildered. I'm sorry for that."

They no sooner entered the cottage than he grabbed a wool blanket from the pile near the bed and wrapped it around his waist. But not before Hilendra spied the cut on his right thigh. It seemed to be healing, but not particularly well. How strange that the dragon at the Cliff today had so similar an injury. Her pulse quickened as they sat on the mattress. She couldn't keep from staring at him. "You *did* hurt yourself last night."

"A bit." He wouldn't look at her.

"Is it still paining you?"

"Somewhat."

Surely Saaldon was willing to be more forthright with her about his injury. Why else would he be here? She had to help him overcome his reticence. She needed answers.

"I experienced a...strange coincidence today," Hilendra said, trying to keep a matter-of-fact tone.

Saaldon surprised her by answering, "I know. You met a dragon at the Callers Cliff who had the same kind of injury as I."

Her gaze swept down Saaldon's form—from the sheen of his rich, tousled hair and his regal profile to the firm humps of muscle beneath his fine skin—as if she could detect some trace of "otherness" in that perfect body. But there was no hint of anything, save a vigorous and very human masculinity that made her head swim. She smelled his

clean sweat. It became more difficult by the moment for Hilendra to regulate her breathing.

“What made Elswin gape at you?” Her voice was airy, with little sound to fortify the words.

“He likely saw the mark on my back.” Finally Saaldon turned to regard her. “The same one you saw last night.”

“How did you get it? And what does it mean?”

“I got it by having my flesh ripped open by a dragon’s talon. Voluntarily. Once my fever had passed and the wound closed, the mark appeared. Mother Bronwil oversaw the process.” Saaldon’s gaze was fixed on hers quite steadily now. Although Hilendra couldn’t see the color of his irises, she knew it was a startling green. “It’s the mark of the Mandrac.” He tried to smile. “Do you find it disturbing?”

Hilendra could only shake her head in wonderment. She’d heard of such creatures, Mandracs—men who could turn into dragons and then back into men again—but neither she nor anybody she knew had ever encountered one.

Then she remembered Bronwil’s words. *I’ve never borne children. I’ve borne dragons.*

“So it was *you* today at the Cliff. It was *you* who brought me all those flowers,” Hilendra said with wonder. He’d seemed to be trying to suggest this at the Cliff today, but she hadn’t made the connection. Then she asked, “But why...why did you become a Mandrac voluntarily?” She’d long believed this sort of transformation happened against one’s will, through enchantment.

Looking at his lap, Saaldon deeply inhaled and exhaled. “Five years ago, an invading army swept through my homeland. They left devastation in their wake. Slaughter was random and widespread. I lost my entire family.” He paused, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I and some others managed to escape, though, through a warren of caves and tunnels in the hills. Then I struck out on my own. Just wandered about the countryside, half out of my mind with rage and despair.” He cleared his throat and glanced at Hilendra. “Bronwil found me.”

“And she convinced you to—”

“No. No, she merely took me in, fed me, nursed me back to some semblance of physical and mental health. Like a very caring grandmother would do. It was only after she told me about her first love that the notion of becoming a Mandrac seized me. I couldn't seem to let go of it.”

“Bronwil had a lover?” Hilendra asked then realized how stupid it was of her to be surprised. The woman hadn't been old forever.

“Yes, one,” Saaldon said. “A very, very long time ago when she had just come into womanhood. He was a Mandrac too and one still spoken of with great affection in the Farfields community. She adored him with every fiber of her being. But shortly after they fell in love, he was killed. She never took another man after that. To this day she mourns.”

“But why...why were *you* so intent on becoming one?” Hilendra was so enthralled by Saaldon's story she'd forgotten all the other questions she had for him.

He turned his face to the cottage's open door for a moment and stared into the night. “I lost all faith in humankind after what happened. I knew the Farfields dragons were noble creatures. So I felt their company would be far preferable to that of my fellow men. Besides,” Saaldon turned his gaze back to his loosely interlinked fingers, which flexed and twisted slightly in his lap, “I wanted revenge. And what better way to wreak vengeance on one's enemies than by becoming their worst nightmare?” He slid Hilendra a wan smile. “As much as Bronwil sympathized with my feelings, I believe she knew, from her own experience with her lover, that my vision was lacking. A Mandrac leads a lonely life. It took me a while to realize this. I had goals, yes, but they didn't include *everything* I would need to be happy.”

Impulsively, Hilendra glided a hand down the side of his face. Her heart and soul seemed to strain toward him. Closing his eyes, Saaldon covered her hand with his.

“Did you find what you were after?” she whispered. “And what Bronwil wanted you to find?”

"I'm finding it now." He tenderly slid her hand to his mouth and kissed the palm.

Her whole core seemed to quiver in response. She had a sudden, vivid recollection of last night's kiss, the passionate movement of his plush lips, the soft friction of his stubble against her skin. The frustration of not being able to hold him had been a kind of dementia.

But here he was again, whole and solid, inviting her touch.

"Why were you not as substantial yesterday as you are today?" she asked, beguiled by the difference in him.

"You had to accept me first. You had to show interest in me and prove you trusted me."

"And I do trust you. But why are you here?" Hilendra asked quietly, turning toward him. Her hand fell away from her rent nightdress. "Why have you been showering me with flower petals and appearing to me? We've never met, never even seen each other before."

"Those questions require a number of answers. Do you mind if I get a drink of water?"

"No, of course not. Go ahead."

Still clutching the blanket around his midsection, Saaldon went to the table across the room and lifted a dipper full of water from an oak bucket. Some of the water sloshed onto the table. Hilendra had a sudden, startling memory of Bronwil's goblet. But a more arresting image soon displaced it.

A few stray curls of dark auburn hair crept onto his back as he tilted his head to drink. His arms were long and corded. Smooth, interlocking planes of muscle shifted delicately from his broad shoulders to his narrow hips. The intricate mark of the Mandrac not just complemented but drew attention to the fetching contours of his back. Her desire spiraled as she stared at Saaldon.

*Incomparable*, she thought. His presence again began to seem like a dream.

As he walked back to her, Hilendra said, "You can drop the blanket if you'd like. There's nothing to be ashamed of. Your body is beautiful." She mustered a smile. "And it isn't the season for a woolen wrap."

After a brief hesitation, Saaldon pulled the blanket off and tossed it onto the pile of other bedding. "It *was* beginning to itch," he said as he rejoined her.

Hilendra's breath had suddenly grown so shallow she had to remind herself to draw in air more slowly and deeply. She tried not to look at or even think about the long, thick column that hung between his lean legs. Saaldon sat down and leaned against the wall, one leg bent and the other extended. He seemed more comfortable now...but Hilendra was not.

"I'm making you uneasy," he said gently. "You're obviously not aware of the fact we've already met. We've talked and laughed together, many times."

Her head snapped in his direction. "That's not possible. I would surely have remembered you." In how many more ways could he stun her?

"But you couldn't remember *me*, the me you see before you, if I didn't look like this when we spoke in the past." Eyes glimmering, Saaldon leaned forward and took her hand. "Being a Mandrac is not easy. I never fully became accustomed to it. In my heart and soul and mind, I'm still a man. I found I couldn't entirely abandon human company and still be content. So with our Dame's permission and Bronwil's help, I've visited the Cauldron quite a number of times. But this," curling his fingers toward himself, Saaldon swept his hands down the length of his body, "had been altered. A Mandrac cannot appear among people in his own form. Except under very special circumstances."

Hilendra thought for a moment. "So all those travelers over the years... A number of them were actually *you*?"

Saaldon nodded. "But always in a different guise."

Hilendra's gaze scoured his face, trying to detect shreds of familiarity. And maybe there *were* some. In that subdued but engaging smile, bracketed by shallow dimples. In



those expressive eyes, so full of inquiry and insight and the pure force of individual spirit. In the way he spoke, carried himself, displayed his emotions... No disguise could conceal a person's most telling characteristics, because they had nothing to do with physical appearance. And, Hilendra suspected, Bronwil was well aware of that fact. However she may have changed Saaldon, she would never want to deny her "son" his essential identity and personality.

"You and I, Hilendra, have worked together and supped together and sung songs together. We've harvested honeycombs at the apiary and crops from the garden. We've made repairs to this very cottage. I've even curried Flora with you. You've brought water to me when I was thirsty and I've done the same for you. Remember how I've told you about other places and taught you some of the things astrologers know? And you taught me—" Saaldon suddenly cut off his flow of words.

Without realizing it, Hilendra had moved closer to him. Their hands were still clasped together. She began to remember those visitors to the valley whom she'd instinctively liked and trusted and had the most contact with. "Don't censor yourself now," she said, coaxing Saaldon into complete frankness.

He no longer seemed like a stranger.

"Now I'm the one who's uncomfortable," he murmured, turning down his eyes. "Perhaps I should've gone about this in a different way."

"No," Hilendra said quite definitely. "Whatever your reason for being here, you've gone about it in just the right way. Now tell me what you were going to say."

He looked at her again and licked his lips before speaking. "You taught me how to laugh again and trust again. And...how to love again."

This simple, softly spoken confession caught her up like a whirlwind.

"I'm sorry for being presumptuous," Saaldon murmured. "I do have something important to tell you. After I've done that, I'll go."

"You've already told me the most important thing you could have. Everything else is secondary." Hilendra slid closer to him. "Please stay with me."

## **Chapter Four**

Through instinct, Hilendra knew her attraction to Saaldon had very little in common with the feelings Elswin and Purnab stirred in her. She wanted him in ways she'd never wanted any other man. Facing him, she slid even closer. Saaldon didn't move. This night, he seemed content to let her come to him. Maybe he needed proof that she shared his desire.

Almost holding her breath, Hilendra lightly flattened her hand on his breastbone. The contractions of his heart throbbed faintly against her palm. His warmth radiated against her skin. Slowly, her fingers spread outward. The night's heat and his scuffle with Elswin had misted Saaldon's chest with sweat. It dampened the dark, silken hair that threaded across the tough mounds of muscle.

Yes, he was real. Solidly, alluringly real.

Hilendra glided her hand down. Fingers curling, she gently raked one of his nipples, then the other. She heard Saaldon's breath quicken. With heavy-lidded eyes, she glanced at his face...and read arousal there. It was obvious that passivity did not come naturally to this man. He was used to taking action. Her touch made him strain against the control he'd imposed on himself.

Letting her torn nightdress fall from her shoulders, Hilendra let Saaldon's smoldering gaze wash over her. She could feel its heat vie with the steaminess of the air. Both commanding and responding to his focused attention, her nipples tightened and rose higher. As she dipped toward Saaldon's entrancing face, she lifted his right hand and put it over her left breast.

Their mouths touched just as the flesh of her breast seemed to meld with his long, flexing fingers. They teased each other with their lips – pushing, withdrawing, making quick, seductive swipes. Saaldon's tongue darted at her mouth. Hilendra gave its tip a

brief, firm suck. She gently drew his lower lip between her teeth and tugged at it. Balling her long hair in his left hand, Saaldon suddenly crushed his mouth against hers.

The kiss was an erotic frenzy of softness and moisture. Moans crept from their throats and mingled. Saaldon circled and rubbed her taut nipple with the ball of his thumb then dug his nail against it. Uttering a thin cry, Hilendra pushed her breast into his hand, begging for more of his impassioned touch.

She put her hands on either side of Saaldon's face, relishing its stark, artistic contours. And, soon, his hands were cradling *her* face. Their fingertips slid in and out of each other's mouths as the kiss went on, exploring the sleek linings, meeting their thrusting tongues. It seemed they wanted to feel every part of each other at once, wanted to absorb each other.

Rising up over her, Saaldon pushed Hilendra onto her back. She caught a maddening glimpse of his erect cock, standing like a lance at a steep angle from his body. But he apparently wasn't ready to use it yet. Instead he sat between her legs and eased them over his shoulders.

Breathing heavily, Saaldon drew one splayed hand over her rib cage and belly, around the swell of her hips. Hilendra's chest too rose and fell more wildly as he caressed her. Everything about this scene excited her nearly into madness—the sight of this magnificent man, his naked body, so lithe, so tightly banded with gracefully gliding muscles, the tall, proud shaft that seemed to be at her beck and call, for her pleasure alone and the vulnerability of her own sex, spread wide and wet before his eyes.

Saaldon's gaze suddenly locked onto hers. "I don't know how to show you how beautiful you are to me," he said, sounding almost helpless.

Hilendra's breath caught. She felt the same way.

Massaging the soft cheeks of her bottom with one hand, Saaldon slid the other over the springy cushion of her delta. He rotated his exploring hand. His thumb slid down the inside of one lip, then the inside of the other as a finger swirled delicately around the moist rim of her canal.

A weak tremolo of pleasure came from Hilendra's throat. The small towers of her nipples tingled and heightened. Saaldon's finger slipped farther inside her, circling and probing. Another finger joined the first. As Hilendra began to squirm, he lowered his head.

His succulent mouth closed over both labia and gave them a firm suck. Nestled between them, her swollen bead also felt the tug. His tongue crept out and slid languidly from the opening of her vagina, still being probed by his fingers, up between her pussy lips. The tip skated deftly along either side of her clit, without touching it, then circled, again without touching it. Hilendra arched her back to the tease as her hands gripped and twisted the down-filled mattress. A pinpoint pain of arousal burned in her clit...and still Saaldon's lips and tongue skirted around it.

"I can't stand it," she gasped. "You're torturing me."

Immediately his tongue began to flutter rapidly over the slippery bud as his fingers moved to a similar rhythm inside her flooded canal.

Hilendra couldn't bear up under this assault. She wanted to feel Saaldon's thick rod pumping inside her. She wanted to feel his thick juice shooting from it, filling her.

"Fuck me!" she cried out, demanding it, ordering the crush of his hard body against her soft, aching breasts, the thrust of his hard cock into her slick, aching vagina.

Simultaneously Saaldon was both in her and on her, the long, dense column of his cock thrusting into Hilendra's eager body as his strong, lean form pressed against it. His hips moved slowly at first, luring her along, the root of his cock nudging against her clit as the hard shaft stroked her inner walls. He kissed and fondled her breasts, laved and sucked the sensitized peaks. When she arched her neck, his sumptuous lips went there as well, stamping and trailing kisses along her throat.

Hilendra's hands clawed at the shifting muscles of Saaldon's back, the silken tumble of his hair, the smooth, tensing globes of his ass. He pushed harder and deeper into her, his rhythm never faltering. She matched it without thinking.

Within moments, it seemed as if moths were fluttering beneath her skin, through her nerves and muscles. Saaldon's hot breath, gusting against her skin, spurred the sensations on. They began to concentrate and intensify.

As Hilendra gripped Saaldon's face to kiss him, a convulsive orgasm burst through her. Even throughout her delicious paralysis of pleasure, he kept kissing her, moaning deeply against her mouth until his own hips bucked and shuddered. His groans became coarser, more fragmented. As soon as Hilendra felt the throbbing of his cock, she clutched the organ with her vaginal muscles as if laying claim to it, sealing it inside her. Saaldon's release went on and on, as if the seed milk he pumped into her had been hoarded far too long, as if he'd been saving it for her. A fanciful thought, Hilendra knew...then realized it wasn't just this part of him she wanted. It was Saaldon himself, the whole man. She *wanted* to feel she was special to him, because she never wanted to let him go.

Gradually though, nature had her way. Saaldon had no choice but to withdraw. As he did, laughter started burbling out of him. He rolled onto his back and flung an arm over his eyes. The laughter continued.

Hilendra turned her head to face him. She couldn't seem to suppress her own smile, then her own laughter. Saaldon shifted onto his side and soon their bodies and their joy were intertwined.

*This is what I've been seeking, he thought, more than anything else. Her smile, her laughter verifies that. She didn't look surprised or confused or, worse yet, oblivious. She didn't take offense. She felt it too.*

"I'm at a disadvantage," Hilendra murmured.

"How so?" Saaldon pushed the damp, golden strands of hair from her face. Was it adoration he saw there or simply the afterglow of sexual fulfillment? He tried to keep from jumping to conclusions.

Her brown eyes moved, studying his face. "You know me so much better than I know you. So...I don't seem entitled to the feelings I have for you."

Saaldon's heart leapt at her words. "But you *do* know me. You're just in the process of remembering how well." He leaned forward and lightly kissed her. It amazed him how responsive she was to his kisses. "And feelings are never a matter of entitlement. Not any more than breathing is."

Hilendra laid a hand on the side of his face. Again Saaldon felt cherished by her. "Why couldn't I feel you this way last night?" she asked. "Except when you kissed me?"

"There are a couple of explanations." Saaldon stroked her arm, enjoying the silky warmth of her skin. He'd yearned for her for so long. Almost as long as he'd gone without touching another human being in any lingering way. "I told you a Mandrac can only appear in his natural form—to people, that is—under very special circumstances. My reasons for seeing you hadn't yet been fully validated when I first appeared. That's why I was insubstantial. It was your acceptance of my presence and your...well, your desire for me that lent me enough substance to be able to kiss you. *And* get that gash on my leg."

His statement seemed to draw a blush from Hilendra. "I'm surprised you were allowed to visit me at all," she said. "Or did you do it without permission?"

"I *would* have done it without permission, had I not gotten it. But our Dame is very reasonable. And very caring."

Hilendra sat up but continued to look at him. "*Why* would you have done it without permission?"

Saaldon now trailed his appreciative fingers along her legs. He began to notice that his own leg no longer hurt. "Because you have to be warned about something and I care too much for you not to deliver that warning."

He too rose to a sitting position. He glanced at his right thigh then tentatively ran his fingers over it. The wound, which had earlier felt as if it were packed with hot shards of flint, seemed completely healed.

It confirmed everything Mother Bronwil had told him. It also confirmed everything Saaldon most hoped for...and feared.

Hilendra watched him with a small, worried frown, her affection clearly tintured now with apprehension. "What is the warning?" she whispered.

"First tell me your sincere feelings about the so-called Healer and his friend, the Armorer." Saaldon's voice softened as he took Hilendra's hands. "And don't be embarrassed that I've brought them up. I'm passing no judgment. If anybody understands need, I do. Believe me."

Despite his reassurances, she nevertheless did feel embarrassed. It was obvious. Her gaze flickered to and from his face. "I'm not particularly fond of them." She sounded a single, dour laugh. "Especially Elswin, needless to say."

"So can I safely assume you no longer trust them?"

"I never fully did, to tell you the truth." Hilendra looked down for a moment. "But given the...shallowness of our relationship, trust never seemed an issue. Until today." When she looked up again, there was something like defiance in her face.

Saaldon knew it wasn't directed against him. "Did you know they aren't native Galdeshians?"

The question caused her brows to dip again. "Uh, yes. I recall hearing that they were captured by enemy soldiers after the fall of the Kingdom of Canar. When they finally managed to escape, they were given sanctuary here, in large part because of their skills. They haven't been here very long. But...how would *you* know they're not Galdeshians?"

"I know more than just that," Saaldon murmured, preoccupied with how best to phrase what he had to say. He didn't want Hilendra to think his motives were strictly personal, that he was trying to drive a wedge between her and these men so he could have her to himself. "They're not from Canar, dear one. That is, or was, *my* homeland. Elswin and Purnab are Brodagians."

Her eyes widened in shock. “How did you come by this knowledge?” she asked breathlessly.

Saaldon knew that, to maintain his credibility, he had to outline everything for Hilendra as factually as possible, without melodramatic embellishment or personal commentary. It was also a point of honor to him that he be truthful. “In my dragon form, I accompanied a weakened elder to the Healers Mount one day,” he explained. “The elder didn’t recognize Elswin—you know how wary dragons can be—and so asked Dalnach about him. When I was later told what the elder had been told, I immediately knew Elswin was lying. I informed the rest of the clan and they began to investigate. In the meantime, members of the Farfields community began falling ill.”

Hilendra looked dumbfounded. Apparently she’d begun putting together the pieces of Saaldon’s story. “Are you suggesting there’s some connection between Elswin serving as a Healer and the dragons’ rash of illnesses?”

“I’m not just suggesting it. I verified it.”

“But how?”

“Through the cut I got when I was here last night.” Saaldon ran his hand over his thigh, almost wishing the wound hadn’t healed so he could show Hilendra what he meant. “I flew to the Callers Cliff this morning, knowing the Healers would be summoned. I went *there* because I wanted as many masters to be present as possible—Xentis of the Wing and Tongue, Dalnach of the Readers, in addition to Orlik and his people. Hilendra, Elswin packed something into the wound that made it worsen...rapidly. Healers have treated the dragons before for such injuries, which are fairly common. Yet, no dragon ever experienced the aftereffects that I did.”

Clearly shocked, she leaned over his lap and began running her hands over his right thigh. Saaldon was stirred by her touch, especially when he felt her nipples graze his skin. Blood surged into his cock. He gritted his teeth and tried to concentrate on the subject they’d been discussing, hoping it would reverse his burgeoning erection. This



was not the time to be distracted by sexual arousal. But it was everything he could do to keep from running a hand over her bare back and long hair as she bent over him.

"It's gone now," Hilendra said, turning her face up to look at him. She didn't seem terribly surprised.

"Yes," Saaldon said. "I know."

Hilendra paused, looking troubled, as she sat back on her haunches. "Did you come here just because —"

Saaldon immediately grabbed her arms and stared fiercely into her eyes. "No. You must believe that. Your ability to heal is only one reason for my being here. And a fairly insignificant one, at that. Bronwil could have achieved the same results." He gave her an impish smile and tenderly stroked her hair. "Not in the same way of course."

Returning his smile, Hilendra seemed to relax. "I'm just grateful you're all right now. But what does all this mean?"

"That's the frightening part. It means Elswin has been trying to poison the Farfields dragons. It also likely means Purnab has been compromising the strength of Galdeshian armor, since he helps construct it. These men, Hilendra, are Brodagian agents. They infiltrated Galdesh's Higher Orders for the express purpose of undermining the kingdom's defenses."

She put her hands to her face and stared at him, open-mouthed. "Incapacitated allies. Defective armor. Galdesh wouldn't stand a chance of warding off an enemy attack under those circumstances."

"Precisely," Saaldon said. "And what kingdom has the biggest appetite for war?"

"Brodagia." Hilendra's expression hadn't changed. Her eyes remained large and bright in the cottage's gloom. "Dear Mother. And you're *sure* that's where Elswin and Purnab are from?"

"Yes. There's no doubt. The dragons just confirmed it within the past few days."

"Then they must inform King Alagis!" Hilendra cried.

“No. Not the king. Not just yet.” Saaldon kept his voice calm, hoping to soothe Hilendra. Although she didn’t seem prone to hysteria, she did have an understandable sense of urgency. That, however, was enough to lead to indiscretion. Saying too much too soon to too many people was risky. If Elswin and Purnab were in fact innocent, any punishment would be unjust. If they were guilty and caught wind of these suspicions, they would flee.

“The masters of the Higher Orders should be told first,” Saaldon said, “so they can methodically investigate our claim. Of course they must keep Elswin and Purnab locked up while they do so, but they must also treat the men humanely. That means no torture or starvation. Certainly no hurried executions. The dragons are very firm on this point. You know how strong their sense of fairness is.”

Hilendra nodded. “Yes, I understand. And I fully agree.” Her look became more guarded. “But why are you telling *me* all this?”

Saaldon held her hands. “First because I trust you enough to convey a message. Tomorrow morning, please go to the Wing and Tongue lodge and tell Master Xentis a dragon will shortly be arriving at the Callers Cliff to deliver a warning of critical importance to the kingdom. Tell him to have all the masters of the dragon-related orders there—no members, just the masters—and to summon them with the utmost secrecy. And emphasize that no one from the castle is to be present. Will you do that?”

Despite the uncertainty in Hilendra’s expression, Saaldon still detected an overriding faith in him and an inner strength, which further justified his love for her. “Yes,” she said, “I’ll do that. I’ll do anything I can to help.” Swaying toward him, she touched her lips to his with such sweet, tender ardor it made his limbs feel weak. Dear Mother, how he longed to have her as a mate!

“Hilendra,” he said quietly, trying to control the emotion in his voice, “you must also help yourself. I beg you. Stay far away from Elswin and Purnab. I’m afraid they don’t just pose a threat to the kingdom, they pose a threat to you as well.”

Saaldon could immediately see her body tense. Had she harbored the same qualms about them?

“In what way?” she asked, obviously trying to conceal her alarm.

“I’ll wager they know of your...special gift.”

Drawing her lips between her teeth, Hilendra looked down at her lap. She nervously rubbed the fingers of one hand with the fingers of the other. “What makes you think so?”

She *did* suspect it. Saaldon was sure. She just needed someone to confirm her suspicions. “Common sense,” he said. “Elswin and Purnab are hardly men of quality. Their only standard is their own pleasure.” He squinted at her. “Why are you smiling?”

Hilendra dismissively waved a hand. “Oh, I was just thinking of how my friend Pidor describes them. He calls them ‘gilded pigs’.”

In spite of his concerns, Saaldon grinned. “That’s very apt. They’re the perfect clients for prostitutes. Why do they travel all the way to the ‘dreaded’ Cauldron to share you when each could easily have his own, very accommodating sex partner at the Redames Lodge?”

“I’ve wondered the same thing,” Hilendra confessed. “But what I can’t figure out is *how* they could know about my gift.” She gave Saaldon a shrewd glance. “They surely didn’t find out about it from Bronwil, as you likely did.”

Saaldon felt his face heat up. Did she view that as a betrayal? He reminded himself that Hilendra knew nothing of Bronwil’s instincts regarding the two of them. He let her tagged-on comment pass. “I don’t know how they found out,” he said. “Maybe one of them overheard a conversation. Maybe a Brodagian seer figured it out. Maybe they simply deduced it, based on how they feel after they’re with you. But the point is, Brodagia’s warlords would view you as a very desirable commodity.”

Her alarm returned, tenfold. She grasped Saaldon’s arms. “Of course! I’ve been worrying that *our* leaders would find out about me and use me. But this...this is far worse.” Hilendra dropped her hands from his arms. She seemed embarrassed by her

outburst. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to leap at you. No purpose is served by overreacting. I'll just have to be more vigilant, that's all, and completely avoid those men. They should be in custody soon."

Smiling affectionately, Saaldon cupped the side of her face and lightly ran his thumb over her lips. "You can be quite determined when you want to be."

"Well, we residents of the Cauldron must learn to look after ourselves. It's a fact of our lives."

As they gazed at each other, Saaldon reluctantly said, "I have to leave before dawn. But I'll come back soon, if you want me to."

"It isn't nearly dawn yet," Hilendra whispered.

Now it was *she* who lay *him* down. Saaldon closed his eyes as her hands lovingly explored his body, starting with his face. *Yes, lovingly*, he thought as she kissed him. He held her face against his, relishing the feel of her hair trapped between his fingers, of her lips and tongue moving with such tender furor against his.

He felt her hot mouth and eager hands travel down his neck to his shoulders. How he loved being in his body right now...and he realized how much he'd missed the pleasure he could find through it. Hilendra's touch made his chest feel as broad and hard as a shield. Her fingers seemed to delight in the tough resistance of his muscles, the swirling eddies of his body hair, the smoothness of his skin. As she enjoyed him, she whispered something, over and over. Saaldon could feel the movement of her lips and the breeze of her breath against his flesh.

The lower Hilendra moved on his body, the more his respiration and pulse quickened. Blood was surging into his cock. He felt the spasms that lifted it into proud rigidity – a maddening but delectable torment.

Apparently Hilendra couldn't ignore its fullness any more than he could. Her slender fingers curled around the tall shaft quite commandingly. Her moist, silky mouth slid over its head. Like the shocking flash of dragon fire, a searing pleasure shot from his groin through the whole internal map of his body.

She firmly stroked as she sucked, ever harder and deeper, her fingertips occasionally caressing his weighted balls then pressing and rubbing just in front of them and just behind them. Saaldon tried to be still, but his entire body seemed to strain toward Hilendra's mouth and throat. She wasn't at all daunted by the hard rod of his manhood. Eagerly she took it in, farther and farther, not just persuading but commanding him to sacrifice his essence to her.

Saaldon tensed, shuddered...and let nature and this woman have their way. He gave himself over to the fierce pulsations that released his juice into Hilendra's mouth and down her throat. Even as he spent himself, her tongue curled around and lapped at his cock, urging it to feed her more.

Panting and perspiring, Saaldon finally let his gloriously human, male body sink into the down and straw beneath him. And he knew with absolute certainty he never again wanted to relinquish this ecstasy. Or the brave, lovely woman who delivered it.

Yes, he'd experienced the Euphoria. And he intended to keep experiencing it.

## Chapter Five

Just as Hilendra was leading her favorite horse, Copper, from the Cauldron's stable, Pidor strode up to her. "Another trip?" he asked, petting the neck of the roan gelding.

"Yes." She adjusted the saddle. "An important one. That's why I'm not taking Flora. She isn't very fleet-footed."

Pidor regarded her. "You know, as modestly as you're dressed today, you look radiant."

"Thank you." Her friend knew something. Hilendra could feel it. She could also read it in his sly smile. "You were up very early this morning, weren't you?"

Pidor lifted his eyebrows. "Indeed I was. And I beheld the most astonishing sight."

"What? Flower petals on my roof?" Hilendra asked archly. With a pang both lustful and loving, she thought of Saaldon.

"Actually," Pidor said, "I may have seen the *bringer* of the petals—a quite striking and, I might add, well-endowed man, jogging naked past my cottage toward the edge of the valley. Most astonishing of all, I thought I saw the symbol of the Mandrac on his back, glimmering like mother-of-pearl in the moonlight."

For the moment, Hilendra couldn't speak. Vivid images of her lover ran through her mind. Already she missed Saaldon, yearned for him. Her memories of their recent time together, even the still-surfacing recollections of their past time together, seemed to be feeding her very spirit nectar and ambrosia.

She thought she'd burst if she couldn't tell somebody.

Hilendra gripped her friend's arm with her free hand. "I feel so blessed, Pidor. So very, very blessed." Her voice was rushed and breathy, but she couldn't control her ebullience. "He *is* a Mandrac and so incomparably beautiful...even in his soul. He's

been to the Cauldron many times. But he's always come in disguise. We've been together so often, he and I. And I never knew his true identity until last night. Your tarot cards did not lie, Pidor! The opportunity for my happiness was right under my nose. All I had to do was open, *truly* open my eyes."

She giggled at the thought of it—all those middle-aged or plain or even grizzled and homely men she'd assumed were travelers. All those men with unappealing bodies and faces whom she'd nevertheless found likable because of their characters. But their traits were part and parcel of one man. The selflessness, wisdom, sense of humor, kindness, resolve—they all belonged to Saaldon.

Shaking her head in renewed wonder, Hilendra gazed intently into her friend's dark eyes. "I love him, Pidor. I've been slowly falling in love with him for years and haven't even known it."

His smile softened. "I can see that." In a fatherly way, he carefully brushed aside the strands of hair that had blown across her face.

Hilendra impulsively leaned forward and gave him an affectionate kiss on the cheek. "There's so much more I want to share with you, sweetness, but I do have a very important errand to run. I have to go to the Callers Cliff again." She climbed onto the horse and settled into the saddle.

Looking quite pleased, Pidor gazed up at her. "See what can happen when you make yourself see clearly and become receptive to what you see?" He ambled to the gate and opened it. "You can find princes instead of pigs."

Happily, Hilendra nodded. Snapping the reins, she waved to her confidant as she guided Copper toward the northwest.

\* \* \* \* \*

The heavy iron knocker on the door of the Dragon Callers lodge was expertly wrought in the shape of a dragon's wing. Hilendra lifted and banged it twice. The door

soon glided open and a fair-haired man, very tall and handsome, stood looking down at her.

“May I help you?” he asked in a honeyed voice.

“Are you a member of the Order of the Wing and Tongue?”

“Yes.” He smiled and gave a slight bow. “I am Kdar, an Exalted Caller.”

Hilendra was grateful most of the men in Galdesh’s dragon-related orders were exceedingly courteous. Although the Riders could be a bit intimidating, even *they* knew when and how to tame their wildness. She also wondered, yet again, why so many members of the dragon brotherhoods were uncommonly attractive. Quite a few Cauldron women longed to bind some of these men through enchantment—Hilendra often heard them whispering about it—but any such activity would have grave consequences. Men in the Higher Orders were protected by government decree against any supernatural manipulation.

“Sir,” she said, “I am Hilendra from the Cauldron of Keridwen. I’ve come to deliver a message to Master Xentis. It’s of crucial importance.”

Kdar’s brows rose. “Please come into the antechamber and wait.” He held the door open to admit her then executed a fluid turn and strode back through the main hall.

Hilendra peeked inside. The lodge was a spacious, magnificent building, handsomely appointed. She glimpsed a group of men clustered around what she recognized as a hand-fashioned Calling Tongue. Examining it, they flexed the strange piece and ran their hands over its surface. One of the men bore a striking resemblance to Saaldon. Although he, of course, *wasn’t* Saaldon, the sight of the man made Hilendra’s breath catch.

Once again she silently rehearsed what she was going to say.

Soon Master Xentis, who had emerged from a rear room, trundled toward her. As he approached the antechamber, he donned a welcoming smile.

More shyly, Hilendra returned it.



“How lovely to see you again,” Xentis said, delicately lifting her hand and kissing it. “Kdar tells me you have a rather urgent message.”

“Yes.” Hilendra tried to make her voice authoritative. “Sir, you’re to summon all the masters of the dragon-related orders to the Callers Cliff. As soon as possible. The group must include Master Torban of the Armorers. Make certain no members come, just masters, and do not alert anyone at the castle. At least one Farfields creature will be arriving sometime today to deliver a warning. It’s of vital importance to the entire kingdom.”

Xentis listened with a frown of deepening concern. “How do you know this?”

“I was told.”

“By whom?”

Hilendra swallowed. She wasn’t sure how much she could or should say. But she did have to convince Xentis of her credibility. “By a Farfields dragon who visited me last night in the Cauldron.”

Almost imperceptibly, Xentis nodded. “Might it have been the fellow who arrived here yesterday?”

The question startled her. “Actually, yes. He didn’t raise the issue at that time because...the dragons needed to verify something first.”

“And do you trust him?” Xentis asked.

Hilendra’s answer was immediate and emphatic. “Implicitly.”

Xentis lightly laid a hand on her back. “Then, miss, I shall do what you’ve instructed me to do.”

“Good.”

As Hilendra turned to leave, the master called out to her.

“You should become a Dragon Reader,” he said. “That order would benefit greatly from your talent. You seem quite adept at communicating with the creatures and they seem to trust you.”

Hilendra gave him a modest smile. “Thank you. It’s very kind of you to say that.” *But, she thought, not all the Farfields dragons are in love with me.* Her smile broadened as she walked out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

By far the most exhilarating aspect of assuming draconic form was the ability to fly. Saaldon never tired of it. On the ground, he always felt somewhat imbalanced and awkward—a lumbering bundle of thick scales and knotted muscles dominated by a serpentine neck and tail—but in the air, every part of his body came together in a precise, intricate melody of movement. Even the Dame had complimented him on his grace in flight.

So, despite the grave nature of his mission, he joyfully let those monstrous muscles control his hollow bones and membranous wings as he soared toward the Callers Cliff. He delighted in the rushing caress of air against the exposed flesh of his underside and across his side fins. He even felt something like reverence for this wondrous element, because it both supported and surrendered to his weight. The air, Saaldon realized, had been his only lover for quite a while.

But now he had Hilendra.

Out of pure ecstasy, he ascended then dove in an exhilarating spiral. The sunlight drew dazzling flashes of color from his wings and scales. Nothing would keep him away from her now. Nothing...and no one.

Making a wide half-circle, he began his gliding descent to the Callers Cliff.

\* \* \* \* \*

It all seemed to happen so quickly.

Hilendra was nearing the Cauldron when a wagon drawn by two horses appeared on the road in front of her. It was at a standstill, fully blocking her way, and she had to pull Copper to a halt so abruptly she nearly slid off his back. Frowning, she studied the

wagon and noticed the driver seemed to be slumped over in his seat. Dismounting, she hurried over to him.

It happened so quickly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Again Saaldon landed on the Cliff's grassy plateau rather than one of the promontories that surrounded it. Folding in his wings, he surveyed the small group of men who were waiting for him. Yes, the right ones and only the right ones were there – the masters of Galdesh's dragon-related orders. Glancing at him, they murmured among themselves for a moment before Dalnach, the Reader, came forward.

Even in his draconic form, Saaldon could understand human speech. These men didn't know that, of course, because they didn't know he was a Mandrac. So he let Dalnach engage him in thought communication.

*Welcome, the master said. Will other dragons be joining us?*

*No, Saaldon answered. I am the sole messenger.*

*And you come with your Dame's approval?*

Yes. They were still wary, Saaldon knew, because of his strange appearance. Maybe they thought him something of a renegade.

He extended his right foreclaw, in which he clutched his authorization. It was a roll of birch bark that bore the Dame's unique mark. Dropping it to the ground, he waited for the masters to study it.

They gathered around Dalnach as he unrolled the bark. Xentis, the Caller, pronounced, "It's authentic. Proceed." He and the other masters retreated by several respectful steps.

*What is it you have to tell us?* the Reader asked in thought.

Saaldon issued his warning.

Alarm and concern etched Dalnach's face. "Dear Mother," he said aloud then quickly turned to his companions. "All of you, come here. I shall have our visitor repeat his message to me so I'm certain I have it right. If I do, we must take immediate action."

\* \* \* \* \*

As soon as Hilendra climbed up onto the wagon's seat, the lethargic-looking driver suddenly came to life and sprang on her. He was a large, burly man who looked familiar. She'd seen him around the Cauldron, doing odd jobs but generally keeping to himself. He would regularly disappear for a day or two then reappear.

But why was he doing this? Before she could even scream, much less ask him anything, he stuffed a wad of cloth in her mouth. She flailed and kicked at the man, trying to gouge his eyes or thrust a knee into his groin, but his strength and agility were overpowering.

Confirming this, he growled, "Fighting will get you nothing except a good, sound trouncing."

Hilendra didn't doubt it. She stilled her frantic movements and tried to think of another tack. Flipping her over and pinning her to the wagon's seat, the driver swiftly bound her wrists behind her back and then bound her ankles. Jumping to the ground, he pulled her off the seat and threw her over his shoulder like a sack of barley.

"You'll like this," he said, sliding her onto the hay in the wagon's back. "It should keep you more or less content on our long journey." He gave her an ugly, lascivious leer. "I'd be more than happy to keep you content myself, but I have to drive."

Hilendra watched with large and terrified eyes as his hand slid beneath the hay. When it emerged, it was clutching a strange, belt-like contraption—a circle of leather with a buckle. But attached to and hanging from it was a leather thong strung with a series of brass balls, all of different sizes, set at varying intervals.

Still wearing his lewd smirk, the driver dangled the belt over Hilendra's face. "Meet your traveling companion. I shall very much enjoy making sure the two of you are properly settled in."

He roughly pulled up Hilendra's shift, lifted her hips and slid the belt around her waist. After buckling it in front, he shoved a filthy, meaty hand between her thighs, forcing them apart. He paused briefly, glancing at her and sneering, then grabbed the leather thong that lay beneath her and pulled it forward and up.

Hilendra gasped. The driver jammed his knuckles between her pussy lips as he yanked the thong into position between the cheeks of her ass. She felt the upper section of brass balls lodge there. Cackling, the driver curled the rest of the thong forward. As Hilendra writhed beneath his hands, he positioned the largest of the balls at the entrance to her vagina and slipped the rest of the string up between her labia. The brass spheres were smaller here and closely spaced, although they had enough play to slide around a bit...and the driver made certain that her clit could not escape contact with them. He then secured the end of the thong to the front of the belt.

The driver leaned over her face. "Ahh," he breathed, "now that's a good girl. You'll enjoy *this* ride, eh?" He tugged on the thong with one hand and roughly fondled her breasts with the other.

Hilendra could do nothing but whimper behind her gag.

"Sorry I can't do more for you, miss, but we must be on our way." After pulling her shift down to cover her legs, the driver stepped back and latched up the wagon's gate.

Withering from both shame and fear, Hilendra understood what this strange bondage was all about. With the string of brass balls wedged so snugly between her thighs, the slightest movement on her part would be unbearably stimulating. Already her folds were wet and her limbs weak. More vigorous movement, like kicking at the wagon's gate, could easily trigger an orgasm.

Hilendra knew she was as much a captive of her own body as she was of this menacing man.

And she still had no idea where he was taking her. Or why.

She felt a fluttering in her crotch as the wagon lurched forward and her “traveling companion” did its job.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dalnach’s voice was rushed and edged with anger as he conveyed Saaldon’s message. “It appears there’s a conspiracy afoot in our kingdom and the actors are members of our own Higher Orders.”

“What?” two of the masters cried out as they all huddled around him.

“Elswin of the Healers and Purnab of the Armorers are not refugees from Canar. They are Brodagian operatives.”

“Oh dear Mother,” Orlik murmured, looking aghast. “One of my own men.”

“And one of mine,” Torban added, glancing at him.

“What have they been up to?” Xentis asked. He looked at the draconic messenger. Saaldon steadily returned his gaze. “Do the dragons know?”

“Yes. Those men have been attempting to weaken our defense system. Purnab has been tampering with the armor. Elswin has been feeding the dragons noxious potions instead of curatives and treating their wounds with harmful poultices.” Dalnach pointed at the dragon still seated behind him. “This fine creature was almost crippled yesterday—could have lost his leg or even his life in fact—because *your* so-called ‘Healer’, Orlik, polluted his wound and made it fester!”

The Master of the Order of the Gentle Hand stepped back, eyes wide and hand splayed on his chest. “But I had no idea what—”

Saaldon lifted his head and, with a roar, spewed a cloud of steam into the sky. *Idiots!* He sent Dalnach a forceful thought—that it was not appropriate for them to be resentful of or cast blame on one another. They needed to act quickly and in concert. Time was wasting.

Dalnach lowered his head. "I'm sorry for my outburst," he murmured, apparently to Saaldon as well as his fellows.

"But the dragon seems fine now," Xentis noted. "He alit here quite nimbly, with no sign of impairment."

"That's because," Dalnach explained, "he had access to another form of healing. He refuses to go into any detail about it. In any case, he was very adamant in insisting that we find and detain Elswin and Purnab. The sooner the better. But we're not to apprise the Court of this matter until we've conducted our own investigation and found these men guilty of malfeasance."

Thoughtfully, Xentis nodded. "That *is* in keeping with the Farfields ethic. We must adhere to it if we're to maintain the dragons' respect."

Saaldon, showing his agreement, lowered and lifted his head two times.

"Can that creature understand us when we speak?" Torban asked. The Armorers didn't have much contact with dragons, except to construct the breastplates that protected their underbellies during battle. And it was usually the Healers who took the measurements for these, since the dragons were used to their touch.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he could," Dalnach said, regarding Saaldon. "His breed, whatever it is, seems to be uncommonly intelligent and used to dealing with people."

Saaldon nudged his back. *Get going!*

"We need to act now," Dalnach told the others. "This fellow is tiring of our talk."

"Then I suggest," Xentis said, "that you, Orlik and Torban, speed back to your lodges and gather up two or three of your most trustworthy men. Find Elswin and Purnab without delay and take them to separate, secure places. Make certain they carry no weapons. Treat them civilly but with great caution. Never leave them unguarded, not even for a moment. You two masters must begin questioning them while other members of your brotherhoods examine the materials they've worked with and the products they've produced. As soon as there are any conclusive findings, contact the

rest of us and we'll determine how to proceed." He asked a final question of Dalnach. "Is the Farfields community safe and generally well now?"

The Reader once more laid his hand on Saaldon's head. "Yes," he told the others. "You'll notice the dragons have recently been avoiding the Healers Mount, so they haven't fallen prey to Elswin's mephitic concoctions. Aside from the two tragic losses they suffered, they're doing well. The ones who were ill are rapidly recovering." Sadly, he shook his head. "It makes me feel like pure, fresh dung to think we were responsible for their hardship."

Saaldon immediately assured him Galdesh wasn't responsible. Brodagia was.

Just as Orlik and Torban jogged over to their steeds and galloped off, another horseman appeared on the Callers Cliff. Saaldon squinted at him. He recognized the man, had seen him before. But where?

The stranger nearly leapt from his horse and ran straight to Saaldon. "I know you can understand me," he said breathlessly.

The remaining masters, obviously shocked by this intrusion, grabbed the man's arms. He tried shaking them off. "Leave me be!" he cried. "I need to tell this creature something!" Wild-eyed, he turned back to Saaldon. "I'm Pidor, Hilendra's friend from the Cauldron. Her horse returned without her. I rode the path she would have taken from here, but she's nowhere to be found. Those gilded pigs are behind this. I'm certain of it."

*Gilded pigs.* Saaldon recognized the phrase. Indeed this *was* Hilendra's friend. Then Saaldon realized he himself had worked and conversed with Pidor during his visits to the valley.

Stretching his neck, the Mandrac let out a sky-rending shriek and bounded with fully beating wings from the Cliff.

\* \* \* \* \*



The wagon suddenly came to a halt. Hilendra knew they couldn't yet have reached another town. Judging by the position of the sun, they'd been traveling almost due north. It would likely take over a half-day's worth of trundling along to get anywhere. She wondered if their destination might be some obscure dwelling or outpost.

The driver leaned over the wagon's gate and, with that same stupid grin, looked down at her. "Are you hungry? Thirsty? I have to get you there in good shape, you know."

*Where?* her mind screamed. She nodded in answer to his question, just to get the gag out of her mouth.

The driver pulled out the wad of cloth and dropped a bunch of grapes and a hunk of bread beside Hilendra's face, apparently expecting her to nibble at the food without being able to use her hands. Not that it mattered. She had no appetite. But having that gag removed was a great relief.

Hilendra stretched her jaw but otherwise tried to remain as still as possible. That damned thong! She didn't want her kidnapper seeing any signs that she was responding to it. "Where are you taking me," she asked, "and why?"

The driver bit into an apple and regarded her. "Let's just say your journey has been planned for a while, but it wasn't supposed to happen quite so soon."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. My bosses weren't going to spirit you off to...their homeland until they concluded their business in Galdesh. But when it was discovered you had a new lover, that Mandrac, they decided it would be prudent to take you away as soon as possible." He spat out an apple seed. "Nobody wants to deal with an angry dragon."

Brodagia! That must be where he was taking her. And Elswin was obviously behind it. Indeed Pidor's cards had not lied, even when their message was dark and foreboding. Her foolish shortsightedness had kept her from seeing the danger her erstwhile lovers had posed, to the kingdom as well as herself. "So these bosses of yours, is it because of them you were in the valley?"

He chuckled. "Why else would a normal man consort with outcasts? I was there to keep an eye on you. My bosses seem to think you're valuable for some reason." He tossed the apple core aside. "At least I managed to get out of that damned valley pretty regularly," he mumbled as an afterthought. "So I was able to get to the village and keep myself entertained."

Hilendra had stopped listening to him. Her mind reran something he'd said. *Nobody wants to deal with an angry dragon.*

Watching her with a taunting smile, the driver pulled the thong back and forth and gave it a few tugs. Hilendra tried to concentrate on how odious this man was. It helped control her body's responses to his vicious tease.

"Nobody wants to deal with an angry dragon," she murmured. She forced her thoughts to become focused and clear. Panic, anxiety and the maddening interplay of brass balls would no longer muddy her mind.

The driver's smile fell. He immediately withdrew his hand. Glancing at the sky, he quickly latched the wagon's gate and hurried to his seat.

\* \* \* \* \*

Saaldon glided and dove over every path that led from the Cauldron of Keridwen. With keen eyes, he scanned the meadows and hillsides. He crisscrossed the valley itself, ignoring the people below who stared and pointed at him.

Pidor was right. Hilendra was nowhere to be seen.

Just as Saaldon considered trumpeting a call to the Farfields community, knowing the dragons would not hesitate to come to his aid, he heard Hilendra's voice. It was as if she were whispering inside his head. The utterances were broken, but enough words came through to give him clues.

He heard his name then the words *help me* and *wagon*. At least she wasn't lying somewhere, hurt and unconscious. She was alert...but obviously in trouble. Saaldon soared to the south and circled the village. As he looked down, his rescue attempt

appeared doomed. There were scores of carts and wagons in and around the village and there would likely be just as many in the surrounding countryside. Hilendra could be secreted away in any but the empty ones.

*Where?* he kept wondering. *Where should I be looking?*

As he headed toward the Cauldron once more, his question seemed to be answered.

## Chapter Six

*I must be on the High Road*, Hilendra thought. It was the only link between towns and kingdoms. Although she hadn't seen much beyond her valley and the nearby village—in fact she wasn't even sure of the full extent of Galdesh—she'd of course heard of the High Road. If she was being taken to Brodagia, which was almost certainly the case, the driver would not be steering his cumbersome conveyance through rock-strewn moors and fields of grain. And he wouldn't want to encounter any fences or fieldstone walls. The plan was certainly to get her to Brodagia as quickly as possible.

The sky briefly darkened...and suddenly Hilendra's travel plans were altered.

The wagon pulled up short, its team fidgeting and whinnying. Jostled, Hilendra ignored the tormenting thong between her legs and struggled to sit upright. Her face broke into a grin.

Like a message from the gods delivered in a blaze of sapphires and emeralds, her lover in dragon form landed on the road in front of the wagon. He craned his neck to peer into its back. His eyes narrowed in obvious displeasure when he saw how Hilendra was tied up. Fully extending one wing to keep the horses from bolting, he lifted a foreclaw and, with meticulous care, severed the ropes that bound her then opened the wagon's gate. Hilendra quickly undid the belt beneath her shift and cast it aside.

"You're so beautiful, so magnificent," she told him, still smiling.

He responded through thought. *I'm sorry this happened to you. Believe me, they will all pay. Please come to the front of the wagon so I can communicate with the driver.*

Hilendra did so. The driver, his eyes wide as flatbreads, was quaking. Hilendra gazed up at him as she absorbed Saaldon's messages.

“You must heed what I say,” she told the man. “I am speaking for this dragon. Do not make any threatening moves or they will be met with fire.”

The driver nodded in a convulsive way.

“First remove your cloak and place it on the seat.”

He clumsily did as he was told.

“Now throw your dagger to the ground as well as any other weapons you might have concealed in the wagon.”

Fumbling at his belt, the driver finally managed to extricate his dagger and toss it aside. He hesitated a moment, his eyes shifting from side-to-side, then reached behind the seat and pulled a broadsword from the pile of hay directly behind it.

“Throw it away,” Hilendra said sternly, “unless you relish the prospect of being reduced to a cinder.”

Saaldon underscored the threat by releasing a puff of steam from his nostrils. The driver yelped, jerked backward and immediately pitched the sword into the surrounding meadow.

“Once you’ve returned to your homeland,” Hilendra went on, “you’re to inform your warlords that their plot against Galdesh has been uncovered. The Brodagian operatives are now in custody.”

“All right, yes, I’ll do that,” the man said breathlessly, obviously relieved he *would* be returning to his homeland.

“Your leaders should also know the Farfields dragons are, to say the least, displeased. Brodagia would be well-advised to adopt more...pacific policies, lest the kingdom cease to exist.”

The driver’s anxious gaze shot between Hilendra and her draconic rescuer. “Is that all? May I go now?”

Hilendra glanced at Saaldon. "The dragon says you are very fortunate you didn't abuse me. If you had, you would no longer be sitting there." She smiled. "Not in that form anyway."

"I only did as I was told," the man hastened to say. "No more, no less. I don't take liberties, especially with women." His mouth twitched into a nervous smile. "I have a wife, you see. She's more fearsome than any dragon."

Hilendra found his statements rather disingenuous but she let them pass. "Then go now and be with her. And never again set foot in the Kingdom of Galdesh. You will most assuredly regret it if you do."

Before the driver could answer, Saaldon caught him up in one of his large rear feet, holding the man just firmly enough to keep him secure but not tight enough to harm him. The driver screamed in shock and began frantically waving his arms and legs.

"Calm yourself!" Hilendra called out to him. "This dragon means only to expedite your journey home. You will not be harmed. He is an honorable creature." On impulse, she climbed onto the wagon's seat and delivered a sharp slap to the man's dirty face. "But you're not. The next time you do what you are told to do," she hissed, "make sure it is honorable. And make sure your hands do not stray while you perform your duty." She slapped him once more for good measure then got out of Saaldon's way.

Hilendra fought to hold the team of horses in place as her lover leapt upward and soared off to the north, the pathetic Brodagian trapped within his talons. She suddenly realized he would be flying into enemy territory with no protection—no breastplate to shield his vulnerable underbelly, no other dragons to serve as reinforcements—so she sent him an urgent thought. *Be very careful as you near Brodagia. I want you to return safely to me. I love you.* Once Saaldon's powerful form disappeared over the horizon, she led the team of horses to a nearby tree and hitched them there, then wandered a short distance away and sat amid the grasses and wildflowers.

Leaning back on her braced arms, Hilendra closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun. What would become of the two of them, she wondered. Her heart already

brimmed with love for the heroic Mandrac. But was it even possible for them to be together? Hilendra realized she knew nothing of his position within the Farfields community or about what, if any, duties and obligations he had to fulfill there. She didn't know how often and under what circumstances he assumed his draconic form and how much time he existed as a man. She didn't even know if there were others like him and how the dragons viewed a Mandrac's need to be with people.

She lay down in the soft grass as her thoughts continued to drift and her love continued to grow.

It was the fussing of the horses that made Hilendra realize she had fallen asleep. Disoriented for a moment, she sluggishly opened her eyes and reminded herself where she was and how she'd gotten there.

*Where is –*

Saaldon was squatting beside her, watching her with a musing smile. And he was a man once more.

Hilendra quickly sat up and threw her arms around him. "I'm so glad you're back and you're safe," she murmured against his warm neck then stamped it with grateful kisses.

She couldn't seem to hold him tightly enough as her senses drank in the evidence of his very human masculinity. Saaldon had donned the robe the wagon driver had left behind, but Hilendra could still feel the muscular contours of his back and shoulders beneath the fabric, could still smell the unique, faintly herbal fragrance of his skin and hair. Rosemary? Dittany? It didn't matter. What mattered was that he'd returned uninjured. She held his beautiful face in her hands and gazed into his depthless eyes, which seemed to contain a great deal of wisdom for a man so young.

"You've made me very happy," Saaldon whispered. His thumbs caressed Hilendra's cheekbones as his long fingers swept lightly along her jaw and down her neck.

Her desire for him spiraled wildly. "How?" she asked. "Just tell me how and I'll try to keep doing it."

He studied her a moment longer. "By loving me. If you can keep doing that, I'll keep being happy."

Eyes moistening, Hilendra closed the small space between them. She gently touched his lips with her own. With his usual finesse, Saaldon heightened the passion of the kiss. His marvelous, soft lips pressed and moved against hers with delicate force then glided down her neck.

"I want to make love to the woman I love," he said against the fine skin of her throat.

His words and warm breath seemed to vibrate through Hilendra. Her hand fell to his cock, already rigid enough to part the loose robe he wore. His balls were nestled heavily in the grass like two eggs. She was ready for him. After fighting against stimulation by that thong with its brass spheres, she was ready to surrender to flesh and blood.

Wet and willing, her pussy already throbbing with anticipation, Hilendra further parted Saaldon's garment and lifted herself above his lap. "I have to have you now," she gasped, her tight nipples abraded by the coarse cloth of her shift.

Saaldon nipped at them as she lowered her body onto his welcoming rod. "Then have me."

Hilendra uttered a tremulous sigh as she felt his hot, turgid flesh sink into her. Sliding up and down, forward and back, she felt her bud connect repeatedly with the wiry spring of hair on his pubis and the thick root of his cock. Her sleek inner muscles didn't have to strain to grip his shaft. Dense and ribbed with swollen veins, it filled her, massaged her, coaxed her.

Saaldon moaned the way she'd never heard a man moan. The low sound was almost like a song. Hilendra crushed her mouth to his, trying to capture the song,



absorb it from his lips and suck it from his tongue. Her whole body began to tighten around him.

After a final, sliding plunge down the length of his hardness, her hips made a small, instinctive swivel...and at that instant the head of his cock thrust against her wet lining, the base of his cock pulsed against her slippery clit and an orgasm thundered through her, from core to limbs. Just as the pleasure of it seemed to be tearing her apart, Saaldon clutched her against him and sounded a low, throaty roar. His cock pulsated strongly, seemed to be racked by a string of throbs that shot his cream far into her open body. Hilendra vaguely wished she could both taste and feel it as it spurting out of him.

Breathing harshly, they drooped in each other's arms.

"I love you," Saaldon whispered against the damp hair at her temple. "And I won't give you up."

No words had ever brought Hilendra such joy. "Promise?"

"Yes. I promise."

He helped her up. Hand in hand, they walked the short distance to the wagon and unhitched the horses from the tree.

"Oh, I almost forgot something," Saaldon said.

He ambled through the grass until he found the broadsword then moved to the road and picked up the dagger. Tossing both in the back of the wagon, he climbed onto its bench, where Hilendra already sat.

"By the way, where did you leave that man?" she asked. Snapping the reins, she guided the horses in the direction of Galdesh. "Did you take him into Brodagia?"

Saaldon rested a hand on her thigh. Hilendra liked it that he didn't insist on driving the wagon, as most men would have. "I was going to," he said. "I wanted to fly right over the castle and drop him into the courtyard. But I changed my mind as soon as you told me to be careful." Smiling, he looked at her. "You made me realize I have too much to live for to take stupid risks."

Returning his smile, Hilendra briefly covered his hand with hers. "I'm glad."

"So I put aside my pride and anger and set that jackass on a hilltop. He'll have some distance to hike, but at least he's alive."

"At least *you're* alive," Hilendra said. She kept looking at him. "Saaldon, what do we do now? Where do we go? How shall we live?"

He gazed into the distance. "I don't know."

"Will you...be a Mandrac for the rest of your life?"

His gaze flickered in her direction. "Yes. I've been marked. It can't be reversed."

"Are there others like you in the Farfields?"

"Not at this point in time. Now I'm the only one."

Hilendra sensed he needed reassurance. It was easy for her to give. "I don't want you to think my feelings are influenced by the nature of your life. I will love you, Saaldon, regardless of what circumstances fate bestows on us. You must believe me."

His only response, at first, was to gently squeeze her leg. Hilendra thought she detected a glistening rise of moisture in his eyes. "I will do everything in my power," he said gruffly, "to keep you from being unhappy. Even if it means —"

"Stop," she said in a firm voice, knowing what he was going to say. "You promised never to give me up. And I'm going to hold you to that promise."

To her surprise, Saaldon began to chuckle. "Dear Mother," he muttered, "I never realized I was wedding my fortunes to an overbearing shrew."

Caught off-guard by his sauciness, Hilendra nearly ran the wagon off the road as she turned toward him. Saaldon laughed and grabbed the reins. "There's much about me you're going to need to get used to," he said, slipping her a sidelong glance. "And the dragon is the least of it."

Once she was over her shock, Hilendra had to struggle to suppress a grin. She looked at her lover's gleaming, wind-tossed hair, the strong, clean lines of his profile, the sleek muscles of his forearms. And she immediately knew she could get used to

many things. Stubbornness, sentimentality, stark sensuality, a wicked sense of humor...yes, she could accommodate all that. She could accommodate much more than that. Quite easily.

*"Who's the jackass now?"* she asked tartly.

Saaldon's laughter freshened.

\* \* \* \* \*

Even sitting in her bathing pond, the Dame looked quite regal. The three small maidens who surrounded her were preening her meticulously, using their foreclaws and tongues. They paid particular attention to the undersides of her scales, which they lifted quite delicately. Saaldon had always thought it a bit odd, given how dragons looked, that they were so fastidious. But they did quite pride themselves on their cleanliness and on the sheen of their natural armor.

"I humbly thank you," he said to the Dame in Dragon-thought, "for agreeing to see me so promptly."

She dipped her head in acknowledgment. "Altruism and bravery bring many rewards. You've demonstrated both, much to the benefit of this community."

"I could do no less," Saaldon said. "The dragons, and you in particular, have been very kind to me."

"You are a good-hearted creature. Therefore, it was my pleasure." The Dame lowered her bulk and completely submersed it in the pond. She turned to and fro, swirling the water about her and getting it under her scales. When she rose, the water cascaded from her body as if she were a large, glistening boulder beneath a falls. "I realize you're here," she said, "to report on your mission to the Callers Cliff and explain why you deviated from it." She dipped her horned head beneath the surface and let water spill down her neck. Then, with eyes sharp as chunks of amber, she fixed her gaze on Saaldon. "I also sense there is another reason for your appearance here. Am I correct?"

“Yes.” His heart beat a little faster. “First, though, the business that most concerns you. I met with all the appropriate masters. They took my message quite seriously. The offenders are certainly in custody by now and the masters are proceeding with their investigation.”

“Excellent,” the Dame said, obviously pleased. “Let us hope there are no more Brodagians slithering around Galdesh, plotting ruin.”

“Actually, there *was* one more. He’s the reason I was late in returning.”

The Dame narrowed her eyes. “Explain.”

“The third man was stationed in the Cauldron, apparently to keep watch over a certain woman who possesses a unique and valuable gift. The Brodagian operatives, you see, were aware of her gift. They’d planned on snatching the woman once their mission in Galdesh was concluded. They were going to take her back to their homeland and...” Saaldon couldn’t bring himself to finish the thought, it was so odious to him.

“Use her,” the Dame concluded with sympathy.

“Yes. But they decided to kidnap her sooner than originally planned. Today in fact.”

Carefully raising her wings, the Dame dismissed her servers. She continued her conversation with Saaldon once they’d flown away from the pond. “Might this woman be the one who healed your leg?” The question was posed gently, but with obvious shrewdness.

Saaldon lowered his gaze. “Yes.”

“And might she be the one with whom you experienced or hope to experience the Euphoria?”

Saaldon’s body tensed as he prepared to be honest. “Both.” He timorously looked up. To his surprise and relief, he felt the Dame smile.

“We’ll pick up this thread after you’ve finished your story,” she said. “Now why did the Brodagians change their plan?”

“One of them discovered this woman was...consorting with a Mandrac.”

“Does she not have a name?” the Dame asked rather impatiently.

“Yes. Hilendra.”

“Ah.” The Dame dipped her head. “The empath. We’re all rather fond of her. Go on.”

Encouraged by her approval, Saaldon’s communication became less circumspect. “The Brodagians wanted to get her away from me as quickly as possible. They fear the Farfields dragons.”

“As they should,” the Dame interjected.

“So, as Hilendra rode back from the Callers Cliff this morning, that man from the valley waylaid her. He was taking her to Brodagia. I found them on the northern High Road. After issuing the man a warning, I transported him to the outskirts of Brodagia then escorted Hilendra back to the Cauldron.”

“Escorted...as a dragon or as a man?”

Again Saaldon’s heart pounded. “As a man.”

The Dame retreated for a few moments into private thought. Dragons, Saaldon had learned, had a kind of mental curtain. Once it was drawn, their thoughts were concealed from all other creatures.

When the Dame addressed him again, she did so carefully, with consideration. “You’ve been an exemplary member of this community. You needn’t chide yourself for anything you’ve done, Saaldon, for you have always acted with honor. I’ve *suspected* the day would come when you would begin to long for a mate. This is the normal course for dragons as well as men. And all other animals, for that matter. But I haven’t been *entirely* certain in your case because a Mandrac...well, he is an unusual creature. I know from both our lore and my own experience that some Mandracs choose never to couple. Some want draconic mates. Some want human spouses. Now tell me, do you wish Hilendra to undergo the transformation? Does *she* wish it?”

Saaldon knew what the Dame meant—did he and Hilendra want her to become a hybrid such as himself. But he'd never thought to ask her. Such a question didn't seem appropriate, certainly not at this early stage.

"We're content to be together as human beings," he answered. "We love and delight in each other very much. As for Hilendra's future desires, I cannot predict them. I doubt even *she* can. I do know that being a Mandrac requires a monumental adjustment and it's one I would never presume to expect of her."

"I do understand and I laud your sensitivity." Once more, the Dame delivered her thoughts with what Saaldon had come to interpret as a smile. "Besides, I get the impression you rather enjoy your human form. I'm sure it can be...employed in the service of intimacy, in ways a dragon's body cannot."

Blood rose into Saaldon's face, heating it. Dragons couldn't visibly blush, but the physiological process was essentially the same. "True," he admitted. "But there are also acts you can perform that humans cannot." For a fleeting, selfish moment, he thought how fully and rapturously he and Hilendra could share their passion if they both *were* Mandracs. But it didn't really matter. He was blissfully content making love to her as a man.

"You neglected to conceal that thought," the Dame pointed out with gentle humor. "But I fully appreciated it."

Now the heat in Saaldon's face became so intense that steam drifted from his ears as well as his nostrils.

The Dame tossed her head back and sang in delight. "I almost envy you, Saaldon. Now tell me this. How and where do you wish to be with your lady love?"

He'd already given the issue a good deal of consideration. "I was hoping we could be granted permission to travel back and forth between the Farfields and the Cauldron. I want you to know I would not shirk my duties here, madam. Whatever you require of me would still be done, well and promptly. And Hilendra, I believe, would become an asset to this community."

“She already has been. While here, however, she must be willing to abide by our laws. And she would need instruction on how to travel with you by air,” the Dame noted. “By land, it would be a long, tedious and possibly dangerous journey.”

“The Kingdom of Galdesh owes us both a great debt,” Saaldon said. “I’m sure the Dragon Riders would teach her how to travel safely. And of course I would be particularly cautious in my flights.” He took the liberty of craning his neck slightly, the better to implore his queen. “Please let us make the Farfields one of our homes. I know the Cauldron residents, given their nature, will accept us.”

The Dame lumbered out of the pond. Shaking off the water, she settled into the grass and spread her wings to dry them in the sun. “Let it not be said that dragons are more small-minded than humans. Yes, dear Saaldon, you may bring your lady to the Farfields and make a home here. We look forward to welcoming her.”

Saaldon bowed. “Thank you, madam.” Then he added, exuberantly, “I wish I could kiss you!”

“I’m not entirely certain what that would entail,” the Dame said, “but I believe it would be a wasted effort.”

## Chapter Seven

Hilendra would have been inexpressibly happy to spend all her days this way—lazing naked on a soft, shaded carpet of grass beside a softly burbling, crystal clear stream, loosely entwined in the arms of the man she adored. Actually, being any place at any time, regardless of how much or little clothing she wore, would have made her inexpressibly happy...as long as Saaldon was near.

He leaned over her. With the tip of one finger, Hilendra traced the clean outline of his lips. Saaldon's eyes, which had a startling green clarity in sunlight, were now a soft, rich jade, subtly faceted. She wanted to dive into them.

"Are you ready for your first trip to the Farfields?" he asked, brushing a dandelion across her nipples.

Hilendra rolled toward him and slipped a hand into his hair. Pushing her breasts against his body, she urged his warm, cushiony lips into contact with hers. She felt Saaldon's arm curl around her back, caressing it as he pulled her closer, crushing her soft breasts against his hard, mounded chest. Their tongues met and wrestled, sliding and gliding.

"You didn't answer my question," Saaldon said against her mouth.

"You won't stop tantalizing me long enough," Hilendra chided.

Saaldon made a dramatic show of releasing her. Lying on his back, he crossed his legs and folded his arms over his chest. Hilendra eyed his silky, semi-erect cock, which refused to be restrained. *Soon*, she told herself. *I'll get to that soon enough*. For the moment, she contented herself with fingering the fine eddies of dark hair on his forearms and chest, glimmering so sweetly in the sun.

"I'm ready," she murmured through a smile. The moisture between her legs was impossible to ignore.



Smiling too, Saaldon obviously caught the double meaning of her answer. “Are you sure the saddle fits you properly? Remember, it should —”

“Be snug enough to make me feel secure yet have enough ‘play’ to give my body some mobility. Yes I know. And I feel fine with it. Truly.” Her hand trailed down the low, tight ridges of his abdomen. “Besides, I know how careful you’ll be.”

The process of readying Hilendra for flight had gone on for the past twelve days. Saddlers had carefully measured both her and Saaldon, in his draconic form, then constructed the seat. Dragon Riders had provided expert instruction. The journey, they’d continually assured her, would be an easy one compared with *their* rides, which usually took place in the much more dangerous and chaotic context of battle.

Tomorrow at dawn, she and Saaldon would meet at the Callers Cliff, where the custom-made saddle already awaited her. Together they would fly off to the other part of their new life together, the part that lay in the Farfields, among dragons.

As Saaldon had already explained to her, his duties within the Farfields community were neither difficult nor time-consuming. He helped gather food, primarily, and tend to the older and more infirm creatures. When need be, he facilitated communication between the dragons and their human neighbors, particularly when diplomatic negotiations were involved. But Saaldon had only been called upon to do this twice—the first time, when a somewhat deranged shepherd had wandered into Farfields territory, the second, when there was a dispute with Urkinia over a strip of land. He’d never had to fly into battle though. Mandracs were only expected to serve as warriors if the Farfields itself was under attack.

So Saaldon had told her they could easily spend the majority of their time in the Cauldron, where they now were.

Hilendra rested her head on his chest and felt the implacable beating of his heart. “I hope they accept me and allow me to be useful to them,” she murmured. It was a wish she’d expressed a score of times. Her and Saaldon’s bond would not feel fully blessed if the dragons shunned her.

He tenderly stroked her hair. "They will, sweetness. I know they will."

Lifting her head, Hilendra slid her hands over the expanse of Saaldon's chest, following the finely threaded sweep of hair that embellished his tanned skin and tough muscles. She would never be able to resist the invitation of his body. As soon as his nipples pebbled beneath her fingers, she dipped to them, tugging at each one with her lips, flicking it with her tongue. A satisfied hum came from Saaldon. Even his sounds of arousal, always so throaty and seductive, piqued Hilendra's desire.

Open-mouthed, she glided her lips and tongue down the center of his rib cage to his taut stomach, relishing the mild, salty tang of misted sweat on his flesh. She probed the shallow pucker of his navel, eliciting something like a giggle from Saaldon, then let her mouth follow the arrow of dark hair that led to the broad, wiry cushion of his pubic hair. She nuzzled it, reveling in the soft friction against her lips and chin, nose and cheeks, drinking in the unmistakably masculine scent he released. Her fingers dug into and beneath the sides of his narrow hips, trying to feel the firm swell of his buttocks.

She began kissing her way down the narrow twin gullies between Saaldon's legs and pubic bone. His cock twitched and rose in anticipation. Hilendra could not and would not disappoint him. She rose up, bracing herself with her arms, and swung her breasts over his cock head, teasing it with her hard nipples and letting it tease her. Saaldon's mouth opened on a sharp exhalation, then another and another. His hips thrust upward as he tried to spear her pendulous breasts with his rod.

Smiling wickedly, Hilendra shook a finger at him before once again lowering herself to his groin. As her hands grasped Saaldon's lean thighs, she pulled her mouth across the top of his shaft, gently plucking its silky skin with her lips. His cock swelled further, the veins distending, the plump, tender head rising toward the clear sky. She gripped the base with one hand and tripped the point of her tongue along the thick vessel that bulged on its underside. Swiveling her hand, she darted her middle finger behind his root, pressing and massaging the hidden patch of sensitive flesh. Saaldon's

hips shifted as a more guttural groan vibrated deep in his throat. His erection grew and stiffened further.

Broadening and tightening her grip on the pillar, Hilendra guided the tip of her tongue along the thin cleft in its cap. Her lips slipped over it, pulling at and flexing against the soft rim. Saaldon muttered something in a strained voice, something that indicated control succumbing to pleasure. Driven by it, Hilendra squeezed his rigid shaft as her mouth did full, fast slides down its length. Saaldon cried out. His hips jerked forward. Hilendra tightened the embrace of her lips, her tongue, her hand and began a firm pumping and sucking, savoring the hot density of his organ as it plunged toward her throat and the rich, heady scent of male arousal. Hilendra felt like a sublimely sensual succubus, feeding on Saaldon's very manhood. Her left hand cupped and juggled his heavy balls as her right hand continued its rhythmic stroking. Closing her eyes, she gave herself over to him as much as he was surrendering to her.

But that was not to be. Saaldon's legs began to tremble. His entire midsection tensed. Almost flinching as if he'd been struck, his body bowed slightly and he ejaculated, the strong pulsations of his cock leaving hot pools of cream on the back of Hilendra's tongue. As she swallowed, he deposited more...until he had no more left to give. She'd drained him. For a moment or two, Saaldon's long, strong body seemed as limp and immobile as a shed snakeskin in the grass.

Hilendra lifted her head and licked her lips. That magnificent, demanding cock shrank helplessly within her loosely curled hand. She leaned over and tenderly kissed it. "I could suck your cock forever."

Saaldon covered his face with his hands and chuckled. "No you couldn't. Any longer than this and it would completely dissolve."

Straddling his body, Hilendra eased his hands away from his face and kissed him. She felt Saaldon's hands move into her hair as it cascaded on either side of them. His luscious lips caused more fluid to trickle from her pussy.

"I can feel your wetness on my belly," he murmured, holding her hair back just far enough to gaze into her eyes.

"Maybe we should clean and refresh ourselves in the stream."

Saaldon gave her a dubious look. "I don't know. If I see your body slicked with water, I'll get hard again and have to fuck you."

"Do you think so?"

"I'm virtually certain."

Smiling, Hilendra moved off him and grabbed his hand. "Well, then what are you waiting for?"

Together, they bounded to the stream like a pair of nature sprites. Saaldon caught Hilendra around the waist and pulled her beneath the surface with him, where he kissed her again. When they rose into the air, her hands still on the solid slope of his shoulders, they paused. Hilendra peered at and through the veil of water that shimmered on her lover's face.

All she saw there were Saaldon's own darkly handsome features, Saaldon's warm, beguiling smile.

"I'm so glad we found each other," she said, twining her arms around him. "I love you. Oh, how I love you."

\* \* \* \* \*

At the base of the Callers Cliff, near the pair of majestic *irsii* trees that flanked the portal of the Wing and Tongue lodge, Pidor pulled their horse to a halt.

"Why are you stopping?" Hilendra asked at his back. She dug her fingers into his ribs and shifted anxiously in the saddle. Even though they were early, she didn't want to dawdle.

Pidor half turned in the saddle to address her over his shoulder. "Hillie, when will I be able to meet Saaldon? Man-to-man, I mean."

"I told you, you've *already* met him. You've worked with him. Quite a number of times in fact. You just didn't know it...any more than I did. But every time he appeared, no matter in what guise he appeared, we always liked him."

"I know." Pidor bit at his lower lip. "But I would just feel better if I met him when he was himself." His eyes shifted to look at her. "Do you know what I mean?"

Laughing lightly, Hilendra gave him a hug. "I think so. You're a dear, overprotective friend who's feeling a little confused and concerned right now. But, yes, you *will* meet Saaldon, probably within a few days. And after we return from this trip to the Farfields, you'll likely be seeing a great deal of him. I suspect the three of us will become like family."

Pidor relented with a smile. "I believe you."

"You should. Just as I have come to believe your cards."

"You should," Pidor echoed, his smile widening.

"But, remember," Hilendra said, "you're the only Galdeshian, aside from me, who knows Saaldon is a Mandrac. And it must stay that way if we're to have any hope of living a peaceful life together."

Reaching around to pat her hand, Pidor said, "Your secret is safe with me. I swear it on my soul. All that matters to me is your happiness, Hillie. And I believe that your happiness is now secure."

She kissed his shoulder. "Come on, I have a very important appointment to keep."

When they reached the plateau of the Callers Cliff, the masters of Galdesh's dragon-related orders were already assembled there. Again it was Xentis who stepped forward, since this was his domain.

"Ah, there's our goodwill ambassador." He caught up Hilendra's hands as soon as she dismounted and daintily kissed both sides of her face. "So it appears our draconic friends have taken quite a liking to you. I can't say I'm surprised."

Hilendra felt herself blush. "Thank you." She wasn't used to volleys of praise. Now more than ever she was determined to earn the dragons' trust and respect. "I only hope I prove a credit to the kingdom."

The other masters now stood before her. Dalnach spoke next. "I'm sure you will. You seem to have a gift for communicating with those creatures."

"This is an idea long overdue," Xentis said. "There should always have been a liaison between Galdesh and the Farfields community."

"Excuse me, but may I interject something?" It was Orlik, Master of the Healers. His smile was considerably more subdued than the others'. Stepping up to Hilendra, he said, "Please convey to the dragons our sincere and deep regret over the suffering inflicted on them by a former member of my order. I feel greater shame than I can express. If there's any way Galdesh can make up for this..."

"Master Orlik," Hilendra said gently, "the dragons are exceedingly reasonable and fair. I'm sure they hold Brodagia accountable, not Galdesh. The Higher Orders were duped by those men, along with everybody else. But I'll convey your message nonetheless."

She guessed the masters weren't aware of her connection to Elswin and Purnab or of the attempt to kidnap her. In fact she hoped all of Galdesh would forever remain in the dark. Too many questions would be asked if these matters came to light. And they were questions that could expose her special gift and lead to the servitude she so feared.

At least Elswin and Purnab, their guilt established beyond a doubt, were now imprisoned at the castle and likely facing an unpleasant fate. From the moment they were taken into custody, they hadn't been inclined to talk much about anything. The masters had kept the dragons apprised of every development regarding the conspirators and Saaldon had in turn relayed the same information to Hilendra. She was finally beginning to rest easy, knowing her ill-advised relationship with the two men would soon be nothing more than a fading memory.

As Orlik thanked her and stepped away, Hilendra saw a large, gleaming raven perched in a pine tree near the edge of the Cliff. She wasn't sure at first why it caught her attention. But as she regarded it, she noticed that its dark, bead-like eyes seemed trained on her. It also had a thin, curving line of white feathers on its coal-black breast. She squinted, trying to make out the pattern—for a pattern, resulting in some familiar image, it seemed to be. Was the bird a common visitor here? She was about to ask someone when the masters began murmuring and pointing beyond the hills. As if the raven understood their excitement, it turned its head to look.

Her heart pounding, Hilendra gazed into the hazy distance beyond the Cliff. At first she saw nothing more than a shifting silhouette against the backdrop of sky—a sinuous shape, a scalloped form. Then there was a glimmer of green, a spark of blue as the rising sun's rays were caught and diffused by the body knifing through the air.

He was diving and rising, circling and gliding. *Out of joy*, Hilendra suddenly realized. Saaldon wasn't simply delighting in his dragon form, he was celebrating it. She could feel his exuberance lapping at her, buoying her, even across the distance that separated them.

She had to force herself to keep from running to the edge of the Callers Cliff and holding out her arms. Saaldon would need room to land. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the master of the Dragon Riders gather up her saddle and bring it forward, its leather straps trailing behind him like tentacles. She saw the raven in the pine tree lift itself up and spread its black wings, as if in welcome. The white feathers on its breast seemed to form the outline of a drinking vessel, a chalice or goblet. Even if she was only imagining this, the sight made Hilendra's hope rise like the morning sun. She felt her face break into a broad, irrepressible grin.

Saaldon made a breathtaking landing. Wings uplifted so that they pointed above his head, he seemed to float to the ground like some colorful, featherlight shield. Once his hind legs were firmly planted on the earth, he gracefully stretched his neck and sent a plume of fire and song into the heavens. Shivering, Hilendra stepped up to him. He

immediately lowered his head and neck, although his startling green eyes were turned up to her.

“Regardless of your form,” she whispered, placing a hand on his forehead and leaning toward him, “you’re still the most beautiful sight that has ever graced my eyes. I love you—body, mind, heart and soul. I cannot wait for us to start our new life together.”

Saaldon briefly closed his eyes. Otherwise, he didn’t move. Hilendra felt a response to her declaration, a response so strong it was like a palpable force, a gust of balmy wind. His mind, his heart, his whole spirit seemed to pulse with love for her.

In thought, Hilendra asked him if he recognized the raven that sat in the tree and watched them. She felt him smile. *Bronwil*, he said, *has come to bless us. I don’t know why she’s chosen to wear that symbol though.*

Hilendra turned her head and pointedly looked at the bird. She thought of the chalices on Pidor’s cards. “I know why.” As soon as she said this, the raven cocked its head and let out a prolonged, wavering caw.

The Master of the Dragon Riders walked up to her. “Are you ready, miss?” he asked quietly.

She smoothed her dress. “Yes.”

He hoisted the custom-made seat onto the base of the dragon’s neck, lodging it between two of the vertical backplates. Hilendra had learned, from both Saaldon and the Riders, that it was critically important a saddle be positioned properly. It couldn’t impede a dragon’s wing movement. The master secured the seat around Saaldon’s neck then helped Hilendra climb into it. She inserted her slippered feet into the stirrups and cinched a belt around her waist. In lieu of a pommel, she had a leather-covered bar to grip. There was no bit, no harness. There were no reins of any kind. Because this dragon didn’t need to be guided and controlled, he didn’t need restrictive tack.

“You’re quite secure now,” the master said, giving the seat a couple of tugs.

Saaldon curved his long neck to glance back at his companion.



“Yes, it feels good,” Hilendra said with a reassuring smile.

Pidor hurried up to them. He put a hand on the saddle as he gazed into the dragon’s eyes. “Take care of her.”

Saaldon slowly closed and opened his lids.

Pidor looked up at his friend. “Be happy, Hillie.”

She grasped his hand. “I will. Finally I will. We’ll see you in a few days.”

As Pidor and the Master of the Dragon Riders went to join the other masters, making certain to give the dragon enough room, the raven suddenly extended its wings, raised its head and gave out a series of yawps. Hilendra’s whole body broke out in gooseflesh. Gripping the bar before her, she felt the flex of Saaldon’s muscular hind legs, saw the impressive spread of his wings. Before she could think about it, he sprang off the Cliff.

Her stomach fluttered and flipped. Her head felt like a dandelion gone to seed, all drifting pieces of fuzz. And then, as she both heard and felt the strong thrumming of Saaldon’s wings, as she saw the humped green hills unroll beneath them and spread into a patchwork of farm fields and a rich brocade of meadows and forests, she was overcome by sheer exhilaration.

Hilendra grinned so broadly it made her face ache. She couldn’t seem to stop grinning. When a dragon flew, she realized, it became part of the air. Saaldon’s massive body now seemed like a mere current in the ether, a filament within the fabric of the sky. He glided smoothly, almost silently along. Far off to her left, Hilendra saw the ivory-colored towers and battlements of a castle, morning mist still shrouding the ramparts at its base. Off to her right were tall hills, thickly studded with trees. Occasionally, beneath her, a ribbon of water winked in the sunlight or small white dots, like pieces of down, drifted along an undulating expanse of moor—herds of sheep, she realized with delight.

Her world was suddenly so much larger, so full of wonder and promise.

Hilendra sat up straighter in her regal saddle and squinted into the sky directly ahead. A dark shape, what appeared to be a wedge, was moving toward them. Her heart hitched. The form looked aggressive, threatening. Saaldon descended slightly. Was it an evasive move?

As the airborne arrowhead moved closer, it broke into segments. Hilendra stared more intently.

“Dear Mother, it’s dragons!” she cried. It was a group of seven dragons, flying toward them. They rose above her and Saaldon, their movements gracefully synchronized, and formed a circle.

A welcoming, protective circle.

The bright blue sky seemed to burst open...and release flower petals spangled with iridescent dewdrops. They fell around the Mandrac and his rider like a splintered rainbow, the soft shards of color and glistening beads of water dropping onto Hilendra’s lap and slipping between Saaldon’s scales. He raised his head and sang out a jubilant greeting.

And Hilendra, too full of love and joy to contain her bliss, did the same.

*End*

## 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](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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