

THE ELFIN KNIGHT

by

Emily Veinglory

THE ELFIN KNIGHT

A Lady Aibell Press/Chippewa Publishing Publication, June 2006

Chippewa Publishing LLC P.O. Box 662 Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin 54729

Available Formats:

Adobe Acrobat Reader (PDF)

Other available formats:

Palm Doc (PDB), Rocket/REB1100 (RB), Pocket PC 1.0+ Compatible, Franklin eBookMan (FUB), hiebook (KML), iSilo (PDB), Mobipocket (PRC), OEBFF Format (IMP), Microsoft Reader (LIT), (HTML).

THE ELFIN KNIGHT Copyright © 2006 Emily Veinglory Edited by Ricki Marking-Camuto Cover Art by Djinn Proofed by Brandy Overton

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book may not be reproduced in whole, or in part, by any means, without the written consent of the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination, or are fictitiously used. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

WARNING: The contents of this book are intended for mature audiences 18 years of age and older only. Language, violence, and sexual situations may apply.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

THE ELFIN KNIGHT

Mark smiled as he sketched the elfin knight's regal profile. The irony that he was drawing fantasy art from life did not escape him. Aelrhinn, 'Rhinn' as he like to be called, lounged in the bow window, clothed in a grass-green tunic and a leather belt with a stirrup cup hanging from it by a chain. A russet cloak pooled at his feet upon the dusty floorboards.

Mark had moved to this remote cottage several years ago and met his peculiar neighbour almost immediately—a real elf, living within sight of the glowing streetlights of one of the more far flung suburbs of Wellington City.

"Will you not offer me tea?" Rhinn said softly.

"Of course."

Mark set his 4B pencil aside and dropped his sketchpad onto the cluttered desk.

"Will you let me take you away to be my love?"

The question was well-worn with use, but Rhinn's serious intent was still as evident as deep carvings on a weathered tombstone. Mark merely shook his head, amazed at the elf's persistence.

He went through to the small kitchen to plug in the kettle. Even from there, he could hear Rhinn's dispirited sigh. Yet it held a tone this time that gave him pause. He clicked down the switch on the plastic jug then went back to the low arched doorway and looked into his parlour.

It was just starting to darken outside, so Rhinn was partly silhouetted against the great uncurtained window. Incongruous details crowded him on each side: the computer and scanner on an old wooden desk and the stereo and television on a plank bench. Rhinn seemed...tired. A less jaded eye would have gone no further than the radiant beauty of his gilt hair and porcelain skin and the amethystine depths of his luminous eyes, but Mark could not help but notice that the gilt was a shade less bright, the porcelain less fine and the amethyst more clouded than it should be.

"What's amiss?" Mark asked. "You must be used to the small disappointment of my refusal by now. Those were the first words you spoke to me six years ago, and on all the many occasions since, I have never wavered. Why will you not turn your attentions elsewhere?"

Rhinn did not even look up. His gaze was fixed on some distant point beyond the framed Holman Hunt print of a mermaid that hung above the workstation.

Mark inspected his own heart one more time; there was something of love there—sullen and neglected. When a beautiful elf had appeared with ardent declarations of love at first sight, Mark had been too busy doubting his sanity to properly assess his own feelings. Since then, he simply hadn't dared to let them out.

Others might have thought Mark's fascination with fantasy would have made him peculiarly vulnerable to such an offer—indeed, the part of the fairy tales he believed in most was true love. What he simply could not believe was that such a creature could truly be in love with a man so ordinary as he. Mark Farish, of average height, middling years, and moderate artistic talent. He had weathered an excruciating, nerdy childhood and then rather than hazarding university, he had become mired in the doldrums of a quiet, suburban life—first working in a bookshop and then freelancing as an illustrator when he could get enough work that way.

That elves truly existed? That was fantastic. That an elfin knight would love him from the first instant that their eyes met? That was simply beyond belief. Mark had no idea what Rhinn's true motivation was, but he wasn't going to walk into it, not even for one who had become his only friend.

Rhinn bent over and picked up the sketchpad. He surveyed Mark's work with a smile. "With time, you have come to flatter me less."

"Is there any need for flattery between friends? And is there any way I could depict you that would hide your beauty?"

Mark ignored the kettle's hissing crescendo and went over to stand before Rhinn.

"There is something wrong, isn't there?" he asked. "Something behind this sudden melancholy of yours."

From where Mark stood, Rhinn's face was just at the height of his elbow, and it seemed so natural to reach out his hand toward Rhinn's bowed head. Some subtle charge in the air made the elf's long, fine hair sway in a nonexistent breeze, and the skin on Mark's arms prickled. His fingertips were within a few millimetres of touching him when he felt a warm rush in his groin. He pulled back as if scalded by such instant, sexual desire.

"What was that?" Mark exclaimed.

Rhinn smiled sadly. "No deliberate glamour. It is just a side effect of my... loneliness." He looked up at Mark and raised one hand to tuck the veil of his hair behind his finely pointed ear. "You believe me, don't you? That I would never use a glamour on you?"

Mark fanned his face with one hand, embarrassed at the sudden flush in his cheeks. Yet it had been such a sudden, incautious arousal that it hardly felt his own. His body settled easily back into its usual quietus. Mark smiled even at the thought that Rhinn would be so unsubtle in seduction...or even that he could be driven to the attempt. Rhinn seemed to regard courtship as he did the rest of the world, with the ingrained aloofness of one used to being courted rather than paying court. However, it seemed important to Rhinn that he had Mark's trust on that matter.

"I know you wouldn't do that," Mark said, "and I know my own feelings well enough to recognize those that are foreign. But Rhinn, if you are lonely here in my company, it's because you need someone who can give you more, which you will not find sitting here in my parlour. I wonder if, as your true friend, I should ask that you come here less often, for you will not find love elsewhere while you pine for it here."

Rhinn gave Mark a subtly stricken look that shook his resolve and almost toppled it.

"Truly," Mark said, trying to convince himself as much as Rhinn. "You respect my choice in words, but in your heart you are still—God knows why—fixed on me."

"I'll never mention it again," Rhinn said dismissively. "My word."

There was still that slight taint of fear in Rhinn's eyes, and it shook Mark to see even a chink of vulnerability in him. Rhinn was slight in form, but he normally seemed formidable all the same, possessing the slimness of a steel blade. A sneaking intuition was growing in Mark that there was something seriously wrong with Rhinn. It was not like him to be so disconcerted.

He heard the furiously boiling kettle automatically click off.

"Go find some other beloved," Mark chided. "Why don't you?"

"I'll...try," Rhinn said. "Truly I shall. And in the meantime, I see no need for you to do without your model."

He assayed a smile, which Mark could not help but return.

"But I do not need a model every night," Mark added softly. "I think perhaps you might find other diversions, if not the one you truly seek."

Mark almost hoped that Rhinn might find some like-minded man or woman to assuage his loneliness, so recently admitted. He never asked Rhinn about his own kind, knowing from long experience that he would say nothing on that matter except that he had been exiled from Underhill.

"And what about you, my friend?" Rhinn asked. "You are as alone as I when we are not together." He was relaxing now, assured Mark would not make him an exile from the little parlour.

Mark turned his back on the question, having no answer for it. He retreated to the kitchen and made tea. He grabbed a Hello Kitty mug for himself and a rose pattern teacup for Rhinn..."his" cup by long habit.

When he took Rhinn his tea, the elf seemed his usual self again, with that slight arrogant tilt to his head. Mark's reply came to him then. "I think that the man who is right for me will find me. And unlike you, I am not impatient."

"I do wonder at that," Rhinn replied mildly. "Human lives are too short to waste on waiting."

"I think that is for me to say," he replied easily as he set his cup in its accustomed place on the scarred desk. He took his sketchpad back from Rhinn and surveyed the sketch with disfavour. It did not quite capture the uncanny symmetry of Rhinn's features or the subtle way emotions played across such a pure canvas. Mark's elven pictures were the basis of his small fame as a freelance artist, and it was no surprise given that he had the unique advantage of a live model for that race.

"Of course," Rhinn said at last. "I only hope that you find someone worthy of you."

Mark set aside his work, now hopelessly distracted. "I wonder at you. I am not a handsome youth. I am blessed only with muddy brown hair, an ordinary face and form. I am not noticeably quick-witted—or kind—and I make only a meagre living from the one talent I have. What is it in me that has such a hold on you?"

Rhinn sipped his tea a moment, building his reply. "When I first saw you, I saw the full handsomeness of an opened flower, which will always outshine a mere bud. I saw hair the colour of mahogany, a face as fair as your soul is pure, and a body that spurs more earthly desires. And you twirled a sprig of clover in your hand and said, 'Good day, Sir Elf. It is truly a fine morning to be riding.' Not being fooled by my glamour, and not doubting for a moment the unlikely truth of what you saw."

"And you said, 'Will you let me take you to Elfland to be my love?" Mark added.

"But you replied, 'Not on the first date.""

They both smiled at the memory. A small chime from Mark's watch reminded him of the time. "It's time for Stargate Atlantis."

"Could you not miss it even this once?" Rhinn would never stay in the house while the computer or the television was on.

"Not even this once," Mark said firmly.

Rhinn put his teacup down on the window seat as he rose. "I hope your prince does come," he said as he stooped for his cloak. "A man such as you should not settle for a mere knight." There was a peculiar lack of sarcasm in his voice.

Mark frowned at his friend's retreating form as it slipped palely down the path with the grass overgrown on either side. He flicked on the TV with the remote and booted up his computer. He opened his "elfknight" folder and arranged the files by date. He pulled out some of his earliest pictures, from that euphoric time just after he had first bought Crag Cottage. A direct comparison proved difficult as his style had changed in the intervening years, and his skill had grown. But it was not just his less acute eye or less agile rendering that made the Rhinn of a few years back seem paler, straighter, and more luminous. His eyes, then a vivid purple touched with magenta, were now tending toward a moody violet. His skin had been a pallid challenge to Mark's artistry, taking on colour only from the quality of the light and the reflected hues around him. Now it held more of its own tones—muted, jaundiced shades. It must have been a gradual decline, but Rhinn was definitely ailing. For all that he spoke glibly of a human's brief span, it was Rhinn who seemed to be fading.

Mark felt his lips press into a grim, flat line. Rhinn was so secretive that he would never be able to find out what was wrong, let alone what help a mere mortal might provide. Mark looked back to the window; the day was falling into evening now. In a moment like this, he wished he had another friend to confide his worries to, someone who might have some idea what he might do.

* * * *

"Ah-huh, ah-huh," Mark said as he tapped his pencil against his pad.

On the other side of the phone, the editor droned on about the changes they wanted.

"The elves are great, truly, but they need to be a lot more slender. The dwarfs aren't as good; we want realism, you know. The halflings are okay..."

Mark knew his limits as an artist. He drew well from reference, but working from imagination, his images became flat and unconvincing. There was a time when he'd worked mainly on commercial art—vegetables for supermarket advertisements, smiling couples in front of their new house, even teddy bears and holly sprigs for the front of greeting cards—but a lot of that sort of work was going to photographers, now and only the card work kept coming in steadily. He had rather fallen into the fantasy work when doing a little online research immediately after meeting Rhinn. It was RPG stuff mainly and did not pay terribly well; most months, he was lucky to cover the mortgage and utilities and bring home a basic diet of toast and veggies.

He made a few desultory notes about the changes he needed to make and tossed the pencil back in the chipped jar that was its home. He'd just been paid for a fully painted cover: \$500 and a little breathing space—perhaps a week or so before he'd have to start scrambling for new jobs.

Or he could go with Rhinn.

Somewhere, a sullen scale tipped as if each of Rhinn's requests was a grain of sand set against the leaden weight of Mark's disbelief—and his recent promise of silence the pebble that tipped it. Mark wanted to go to Underhill, to love Rhinn—the real world be damned. After all, what had the real world ever provided but enough scorn and ridicule to make him almost a hermit? It would only be apt that he leave it all behind even if only to enter his creeping madness completely.

Rhinn came in silently; he always did. Mark had toyed with the idea of putting a little bell over the door like in a shop...or around his neck on a little ribbon. He smiled at the thought. On this occasion, the light alerted him that he was not alone—or perhaps something even less tangible than that. But when he looked up and into eyes of sapphire blue, the sort that all the worst sort of love poetry is written in praise of, he knew the room was better for having the elf in it.

"No," said a voice like tiny chiming bells. "Not Rhinn."

This elf was female and purely otherworldly. It was as if she were made entirely of alabaster and magic without even a hint of flesh.

"There is a story I must tell you," this dazzling female said. "It is of a young knight who argued with his prince and with his blood still high, he went out a-riding. And as he went, a damsel of his own kind delayed him. She was a witch and a renowned beauty." She smiled then as if the beauty's identity would be clear to any man.

"She had loved him a long time and thought to comfort him and win him to her side if only for a night. But he just brushed her aside, so she decided to have a little revenge. She knew that he was wont to go riding in the human lands, and so she cast a spell upon him. The next one he saw, that one he would love. This knight who spurned her would suffer the humiliation of being besotted with some bestial human woman...or man."

Silently, the scales tipped back into their proper place. Impossible things remained impossible, and ordinary men, ordinary. Mark listened to the elf maiden and looked bitterly into her kaleidoscopic eyes.

She continued in more biting tones: "Only I underestimated his tenacity and that of my prince in not seeking his lost liegeman until it was almost too late. But I have come for Aelrhinn, and you must let him go."

Mark looked at her dully, feeling a frown crease his brow. "He is not mine to keep. Take him and be gone."

He turned back to his notes and looked at them entirely without seeing. At the edge of his vision, he fancied he saw the elf woman stiffen with surprise.

"But you are the one he loves!" she declared, as if affronted at winning so easily.

"Oh aye, but not the one who loves him. Take him back; he ails. I daresay he has been away too long."

She placed her hands upon the desk and leaned forward. "Almost too long to live. Six years, three hundred and sixty three days. Two more days and he dies."

Mark wondered if it was shock he felt; it was rather a peaceful sensation in which all feelings were banished and even his senses seemed smothered beneath a blanket of indifference. Rhinn had been fooled into false love, and Mark could only salvage a little pride from his long, insightful cynicism.

"We have nothing more to speak of, my lady," he said, although part of his mind measured her as a model and found little wanting.

Another figure darkened the doorway. In disbelief Mark exclaimed, "Are elves just like buses then? Not one for most of my life and then three together!"

This one was even smaller than Rhinn but dressed in finery with a scarlet embroidered cloak and golden brooch over his ivory tunic and hose. Was this, perhaps, the prince? The female elf curtseyed and backed away from him.

"Prince Falhame," she murmured.

"Ceithlee," he replied sharply, "what are you doing here?"

Suddenly she seemed flustered. "I merely wished to explain to this man that...I mean if I..." "Speak the whole truth and quickly," he snapped. "I feel I have waited too long for it already."

There was a long silence before Ceithlee crumbled. "Aelrhinn only tarries here because I glamoured him with a love spell. They were used so lightly then. The old queen did not disapprove."

"The new prince does."

"And with good cause," she replied, contrite. "I know that now. My foolishness is what kept him so long away, so far from home and soon to die. We must tell him and take him home."

"Ceithlee, be gone and leave this matter in your prince's care."

Mark watched Falhame usher the elfin woman out and close the door firmly behind her. He turned. Mark had no way of knowing how much elves tended to look alike, but the prince's face much resembled Rhinn's, although it was a little finer and had the pallor and glow that Rhinn was losing. Seven years, it seemed, was too long to be away from home.

"Forgive me for intruding," the prince said as he sat uninvited on the window seat. "Ceithlee has explained much, and now I think our foolish errors must be explained to you, the only one who can put them right."

Many angry words piled upon Mark's tongue, but he spoke none of them. What would be the point? "Speak then," he said grimly as he leaned back in his chair and folded his arms defensively before him.

"The old queen encouraged games of love in her court to entertain her. She allowed her subjects to trick each other, even to force their wills and bodies upon each other. When I came to power, change came slowly. Love spells were in common use, though I did most explicitly ban them." Falhame's voice was clipped with remembered anger, but as he looked at Mark, his expression softened and he sighed. "That was why I was so angry when I found the best of my knights disobeying me. He went to one of the old women and procured a love charm—and worst of all, he tried to use it upon me."

Mark's mind whirled with so many sudden revelations. "You?" he said softly.

"Me, fool that he was. I would not have turned him away if he had come to me openly. If I am honest, that is what made me angry and made me act too harshly...in my righteousness I became what I condemned. I put a most coercive spell upon Aelrhinn."

"Excuse me, but—I do not think you need to tell me this."

"But I do, and this is why: I was as foolish as any of them. I put a spell on him in revenge. A spell that he must leave my keep and come by love honestly, and whomever he next loved, he must bring back to me. The one he loved must come back to the keep for love of him and no other cause. Only then would I take him back. I never imagined he would go next to human lands, or be held here to his peril by another spell. But Ceithlee is wrong to suggest he should be told. My spell was made strong by my anger and it is irrevocable; the only way to break it is too fulfil it. You must come back with him and never tell him what has passed 'til afterward. Once he is back with us, it can be put right...for everyone."

Mark tore his eyes away. After a few moments, he responded, "Very well. You may expect us soon, certainly." He looked back to the desktop, daring to do nothing else.

"I looked for him," Falhame said. "Well, not at first, but I looked. Something blocked me from finding him until now. I looked and I would have prevented you any pain, if I could have." "Go," Mark said tersely. "Just go."

Only when he heard the door close did he glance up to the empty room. He looked out the window and saw the two elves, the woman and the prince, meet at the end of the path and walk together toward the meadow. Only then did the tears slide free of his control.

He had wanted something that was too beautiful, too perfect to be his, and he was being punished for that hubris once again. In a flash, he remembered that first fumbled attempt at kiss in the changing room and the disgusted rebuff. He remembered every pointless affair—from Brian who later confessed to 'doing anyone when the pints are in' to Sarah who'd been bet she couldn't pull a queer. He remembered the cool kids at school chanting 'Mark's a faggot' over and over, and he'd never learnt to say: 'So what if I am!'

He'd felt love, certainly, albeit of a hushed and closeted kind. But it seemed that nobody had ever been foolish enough to return it, and there had to be a reason for that. No one ever had loved him, let alone an elfin knight, a poor elfin knight who, it seemed, had been cursed with him.

Well, he admitted it now. He loved Rhinn and like the cliché said...that meant he had to set him free.

* * * *

Mark didn't imagine he was putting up much of a front, but he tried. Still, within moments of letting himself in, Rhinn was standing before him reaching out.

"Mark, my love, what is..."

Mark twisted from his grip. "Rhinn don't!" At Rhinn's touch, desire ran from his heart to his groin like quicksilver. It was fire and desire and pain beyond bearing.

Rhinn stood, almost quivering with tension. "Has somebody hurt you?"

"No."

"Mark, you lie. You have never before lied to me."

Mark leaned back against the wall and squeezed his eyes closed. "Rhinn, if you love me, I am going to ask you to do something; if you love me, you will do it."

"You finally believe it, don't you? You finally believe I love you." Rhinn's face broke open with joy at Mark's late and grudging concession.

Mark's arms dropped to his sides, he opened his eyes and looked at Rhinn. Even ill and in shabby clothes, it was his friend Rhinn. Even if he had been somehow not an elf, this would have been the one man he loved.

"Rhinn, I want you to take me back to your home, wherever that may be. Now, or as soon as it may be accomplished. Now, and without discussion."

Rhinn regarded him a long moment with growing consternation, but then his expression softened. "I should not accept such terms, and if you love me, you should not demand them. But I have been too long from home, and too long from your heart. Just tell me one thing and it shall be as you say, and I will ask for no further explanation."

"What is it Rhinn?" Mark feared any of a dozen awkward questions.

"Do you love me?"

Well, that one was easy. "Yes, Rhinn, I do."

"Then it shall be as you ask." Rhinn gave him a 'you'll keep' look, but wasn't about to miss his chance, it seemed.

The preparations were easily made. Rhinn seemed not to know the others had been there, and he was good to his word. He told Mark to bring only what he could not bear to leave behind, all else would be provided upon their arrival. For his part, Mark felt no need to take much; he

was not intending to stay. He took his sketchbook—he was rarely parted from it—and a few clothes and fruit from the bowl for fear the food there would not agree with him.

It was dusk when they came out to the meadow. Rhinn's horse appeared by his side—a white mare that all but glowed by the moon.

Rhinn was cautious as he put one gloved hand most gently on Mark's shoulder. It was an echo of the prince's pitying touch that made Mark stiffen. He knew he must be giving the worst sort of mixed signals. All he needed to do was get it done. He was not looking forward to the moment where Rhinn saw how he had been duped and bewitched...and just what he had being paying court to all these years. He winced at the thought.

"It's all right, Mark," he said softly. "You are giving up a lot, a whole world, but you can come back easily. I would never hold you if you chose to leave. Just come with me now and let me show you Underhill. I think that's what you need to see to know that I am real, and that a simple elf amongst his kind is really nothing so special. I only hope it is me you love, not that I am of elfin kind."

Rhinn seemed truly nervous as they came to a pair of oaks that stood down near the stream. Mark wasn't sure what he was expecting, but he hardly noticed the passage when it came. They passed between the trees and suddenly it was a balmy midmorning upon the lee slope of a wooded hill. Before them, a dirt road stretched into the valley clothed with pale halls and towers stretching up into a cloudless turquoise sky.

Rhinn smiled and turned to him; Mark wished so desperately that it could all be his.

Rhinn's reception party appeared, quickly swelling as they walked. A throng of elves drew Rhinn into the square where a celebration began. There was dancing—so graceful it seemed to defy gravity—to music that would shame the birds. Mark stood back in Rhinn's wake, and though Rhinn's family and friends regarded their guest curiously, they seem to respect the distance he set, as did Rhinn.

Each time another of his kind took Rhinn into a fond embrace, scolded him for his absence, or exclaimed at his poor health, Mark felt a strange pain. He was giving Rhinn what he needed, and he was losing him.

Rhinn named them each and their connection: sister, cousin, friend or colleague. Mark smiled thinly, but his body was rigid with the attempt to stop his foolish tears from returning. It was almost easier when Rhinn left him a moment to speak with the prince. He met Falhame's eyes across the distance and ignored those of the throng around him. Mark tried to wordlessly plead, *Just a little longer, a little longer before I have to give Rhinn up*.

Finally, Rhinn's arm circled around him. "Come with me."

They went through wide door, down a long hall, and then up small spiralling stairs to a golden doorway.

"These rooms are ours," Rhinn announced. Indeed, their few possessions lay upon an inlaid table by the shuttered window. "What is this mood of yours?" he muttered more quietly. He dropped his cloak upon a chair and turned to Mark. "Here we are alone, as we have been for so many long evenings, but if you regret this, then we shall return this very moment."

Mark knew better; now he had seen Rhinn with his kin, he recognized how weakened the elf was. But he could not say as much without giving himself away. "No," he said. "I came here because I love you."

"So you have said, twice now and truly. I had all but lost hope. I thought I might even die of a broken heart. But looking at you, Mark, you make me whole. You are my beloved even though it embarrasses you to have it said."

Rhinn laid a hand against Mark's heated cheek and leaned forward, most gently kissing Mark. Mark closed his eyes to welcome a darkness in which anything could happen—even dreams coming true. It felt like his soul was on his lips and his body was full of fire. His conscience was but a faint shadow, soon stifled. Perhaps Rhinn was bewitched but Mark was besotted; this was such small recompense for all he would soon have to leave behind.

Rhinn slipped out of his own clothes easily, standing naked without any shame. Mark, for the burning of his cheeks, dared not even look directly. Rhinn was pure, lithe beauty in every aspect. The elf smiled and stepped toward him, his delicate fingers unbuttoning his shirt and moving smoothly to the dome of Mark's jeans.

"So unsure," Rhinn whispered. "Will you tell me to stop?"

He leaned in again and they kissed. Mark's eyes drooped closed as he felt soft lips pressed against his. His felt his shirt fall back from his shoulders and slide to the floor. Rhinn's tongue flickered against his teeth and Mark opened his mouth greedily.

He stumbled, his shins colliding with the low bed...and he fell backwards. Rhinn grew bolder, pulling Mark's jeans off and his underwear. Mark felt embarrassed to look up and see Rhinn watching him. He was hardly the fittest of men, and the late afternoon light would show his failings clearly. Rhinn leaned over him and reached out his hand to turn Mark's chin toward him. Mark was thus forced to look deep into Rhinn's eyes, and he saw there, without doubt, that Rhinn did not find him ugly—not ugly at all.

Mark lay still upon his back, all but trembling as Rhinn pressed down against him. The elf's slender thigh parted his legs as his lips teased with a skein of soft kisses down his chest and neck. Mark started as Rhinn bit him gently over his left nipple, but he reached up to put his hands about Rhinn's narrow waist and smoothed his palms down over Rhinn's taut buttocks.

His splayed fingers traced the exquisite contours up again along Rhinn's back and shoulders. He felt his heart beating double-time and lost patience with any thought of foreplay. He didn't want slow, gentle teasing, but the hardest, most impatient passion. His right hand came up under Rhinn's flaxen fall of hair and cupped the back of his head. He pulled the elf toward him in another crushing kiss. This time, he opened himself entirely; their tongues twined together. Mark parted his legs and felt the full weight of Rhinn's body against his stomach and groin.

Mark's cock stood rigid, crushed between their bodies and sliding in the sweat building between them. Mark arched his back and rocked gently, feeling the close, hard contact of their bodies. He felt Rhinn reach down, the back of his hand sliding between them and then pushing up to part their bodies. Rhinn took Mark's cock in his smooth palm. Mark lay back very still as Rhinn's thumb stroked the head of his penis, teasing back the hood and sliding over the moist head.

Mark felt every muscle tense and his balls drew taut up against his achingly hard cock. He tried to hold himself and prolong the sensation but he had nowhere near enough self-control.

"Rhinn," he said. "I want you...will you..."

Rhinn seemed to know exactly what he meant. "So impatient now, my love?" He spoke softly, but did not tarry to comply.

Rhinn's hand moved down the shaft of Mark's cock and cupped his balls before tracing down the sensitive seam that lead to his ass. Rhinn leaned down, supported only by one elbow, and licked the palm of his hand in a slow, promissory gesture. Mark lay back, closing his eyes.

He felt Rhinn position himself carefully. Mark's body gave gradually to the intrusion. The round head of his lover's penis broached him, entering just an inch before retreating, taunting him with the slightest of kisses. He strained toward Rhinn impatiently.

In a smooth extraordinary thrust, Rhinn pushed into him. Mark groaned, amazed at the sensation of opening, of surrender. Chills swept up his spine as he clutched at Rhinn's back, urging him on. Rhinn pulled back only to drive in more deeply to the root. Mark wrapped his legs up over Rhinn's waist and clung to him as tightly as he could. They rocked together, Rhinn pushing into him and the feeling building in his groin like a bed of embers that leapt to kindling.

The whole world dwindled to a palette of sensation: harsh breath, salty sweat, tight heat, and the hard, swift rhythm of fucking—at once profane and sublime. They built inexorably to a tight explosion of release that seemed shared by both bodies yet greater than both.

Mark felt Rhinn dwindle within him. They drooped to lie side by side, still together. They said nothing more as they held each other a long, long time before slipping into sleep.

* * * *

With dawn, Rhinn was called away and with unfeigned reluctance, he rose. "I will return soon, my love; we have plans to make."

Mark untangled himself from Rhinn, surprised to find that their bodies in love and sleep were perfectly suited. He had struggled to stay awake, to treasure the memory, to hang greedily to each second in Rhinn's arms no matter how dishonestly he came by them.

Once Rhinn had gone, Mark got out of bed. There were elfin clothes laid out for him in the outer chamber, but he let them lie. He had already taken more than he deserved. He packed his few things, and on an impulse, he opened the window shutters.

A golden sun was rising above the distant mountains. The town grew up from amidst the forest, but was still somehow part of it. A mist rose from a river and beneath it, a distant waterfall, just in view, sparkled with refracted light. More by instinct than intent, Mark lifted his pencil. The scene grew upon the blank page of the sketchbook. He lost time, unknowing, stippling the cloud that sprawled across the endless sky.

He felt someone behind him. It was the prince, whose eyes quickly took in Mark's human garb and backpack perched upon the bed.

"I'm told Mark is your name, but no one said you were an artist." Falhame took the sketchpad from him and regarded it with some awe.

"It is just a doodle."

"It is most beautiful. This is what we lack, you know. Elves may sing, but not compose; we dance, but others make the dances; we sew, but always the same patterns. There is great magic in elfin kind and we are the best at all we do, but there is no art in us—just an emptiness alive with sorcery. I sometimes think that is what ails the land—parts of it grow barren, you know. I think the land wants to be seen by artists, not just by eyes."

"That is all very poetic," Mark said as he picked up his bag, "But not to the point."

"Why do you leave?" Falhame offered Mark his sketchpad. "Aelrhinn says that you love him, and I understand you must have feared it was only a spell on his part. I certainly understood your hurry to be left alone and reluctance to know his kin and friends until the answer was known, but..."

"You mean...you mean the spell is gone?"

"From the moment he returned. Dear Mark, how foolish of me not to have made this clear." Mark sat limply on the end of the bed. "But it was that spell that..."

Falhame's smile widened. "Under the shelter of rank weeds, sometimes beautiful flowers may grow. Rhinn loves you; he has told me so. And like any elf, I know when the truth is

spoken. He loves you truly. I came to give you this." Falhame proffered an amulet. "This will allow you to pass freely between our worlds. But like Rhinn, I hope to see you stay. It is a new era here in Underhill—a time for true love, not mere magic; for art hand in hand with skill; a time where our humble keep might just deserve a man as selfless and extraordinary as you."

"Mark?" Rhinn stood in the doorway. "Is anything wrong?"

Perhaps for the first time, there was nothing at all wrong...just a few things to explain.

* * * *

Afterward, Mark and Rhinn lay together in the bright daylight. Mark, embarrassed, pulled the blanket up over himself, but Rhinn just laughed and pull it down again.

"I was worried when I saw you with Falhame. He is very beautiful."

"Is he?" Mark asked.

"Very beautiful, more virtuous than me, and a prince as well. I thought once that I loved him, but I did not know much about that feeling then, because I thought it could be forced. Somehow, I just don't think real love can work that way, nor false love feel like this."

Mark lay sated in Rhinn's embrace. "You are more extraordinary even than I had realized."

"You must realize now that many elves will find you extraordinary for your dark eyes and artist's soul. They fear the human lands with their steel and singing wires, but humans have always burned with something that draws us. You could have your pick, whilst I am but one pale knight amongst scores."

"Well, I suppose we are both ordinary in some ways, and wonderful in others, like everybody else," Mark said lightly, but it was a revelation to him in a way.

Anyone could be loved by anyone; everyone could in some small way deserve it. It had taken rather a lot to teach him that—but now he had his love, his elfin knight, and he would never be letting go.

THE END

About the Author

Emily Veinglory

Emily Veinglory (veinglory.com) is a writer of fantasy and erotic romance. She writes many types of romance but is best know for her gay romance e-books with fantasy and paranormal themes. She is also involved in book reviewing, illustration and stock photography. Emily is a New Zealander currently living in Indiana and working as a postdoctoral researcher in the area of animal behavior.

Our authors love to hear from their readers!

You can write to Emily here:

Emily Veinglory c/o Chippewa Publishing LLC P.O. Box 662 Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin 54729



Lady Aibell Press

http://www.ladyaibell.com

a division of Chippewa Publishing LLC

Catching Your Dreams of Fiction!

http://www.chippewapublishing.com