



*Their passion is perfection...but treachery lurks in the shadows.*

Emilia ra Elawyn, Princess of the Silverhaven Bright Elves, is shocked when she overhears her stepmother's plans to banish her from court to the dry deserts of the barbarian horde. Emilia's sin? Her magical stone, the source of the power to rule over her people, has not awakened. Without it she can never claim the throne.

Desperate to escape her fate, she offers herself to a visiting Shadow Elf ambassador—and his guard. Once compromised, she's certain the barbarians will refuse her.

Rorek Northmark can't deny the princess tempts him to distraction. It isn't as simple as allowing himself—and his guard, Jo'el—to indulge in her luscious body. Touching her means getting tangled up in court politics, the one thing he wants to avoid. Still, her plea touches the only soft spot in his hardened heart, and he can't bring himself to push her away.

Yet nothing is as it seems in the Bright Court, and their one night of exquisite pleasure could trap them all in a web of mortal danger...

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex (including m/m and m/f/m), naughty language, some magical sex along with sexual magic, a desperate princess and the men who love her, elves and spells and betrayal oh my! and enough heat to start small fires. Cold drink recommended.

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# Flawed

*Ember Case*

## Dedication

To my little sis. You've been the first set of eyes I turn to, and the shoulder I lean on. Thank you.

To the Romance Divas. My online home, my support group and some of the best writers I know. More than just a little of what I've learned there went into writing *Flawed*. Thank you to each one of you.

And always, for my wonderful husband. You know when I need a break, and know when I need to be left alone to get it all done. They're all for you.

# Chapter One

## *Flawed.*

The word echoed in Emilia's ears as she slipped unnoticed from the quiet hall outside the receiving room. Futile tears unexpectedly spilled from her eyes and she fled blindly down the palace halls. But she couldn't outrun the venomous words she had overheard spilling from her stepmother's lips.

"With no Stone of Power, she isn't much use to her father here at court. That sliver of dead mineral on her forehead is every bit as useless as the time she wastes with the mages. King Vayle has agreed to send her away if the stone still has not awoken after her birthmoon has passed." Satisfaction had been clearly evident in Gisa's voice. Emilia had lingered in the hallway, unnoticed by the ladies gathered just inside the doorway.

"Where would the king send her?" The question came from one of the handful of women clustered around Gisa like so many vultures around a fresh carcass. Gossip was the currency of the court and word that the princess could soon effectively be banished was high coin indeed.

"Does it truly matter? To the deserts of the south likely. There are many clan lords that will gladly take a princess of the forest in handfast. Several of the clansmen we welcomed tonight have expressed an interest in such a union. Even with one so flawed."

Her father's consort had never hidden her distaste for Emilia. In the dozen years since Gisa had seduced her way into Vayle's bed, she'd driven every wedge possible between the king and his daughter. What had begun as a somewhat-discreet power play had developed into a dislike for Emilia that her stepmother no longer tried to hide. Now her stepmother was openly reveling in the thought that soon, Emilia could be removed from the court for good. Gisa was not from Silverhaven herself, and could not claim the title of Queen to the Bright Elf people. But she hungered for every scrap of power she could claw from her marriage to the king.

Anger, humiliation and pain screamed in her heart for release. Her father was nearing the end of his mortal life. The man who had once carried her on his shoulders and taught her to love the forest he ruled had faded away to a shell of the striking figure he once had been. Even the Stone of Power that had once pulsed between his eyes had begun to dim. If Gisa succeeded in having Emilia removed from court, how long would it be before the king's consort ruled the council, the palace fortress of Silverhaven, even the great forest of Silvertop, queen in all but name?

The noise of the court's revelry was fading behind her as she rounded another twisting turn in the maze that formed the palace halls. With fumbling fingers, Emilia pushed open the next door she came to and slipped soundlessly into the shadow-filled room. Closing it behind her, she leaned her overheated face against the wood's comforting coolness. Her escape may not have been elegant, but with any luck it had gone unnoticed. Taking a deep breath and holding it in, she listened for signs anyone had noticed her departure and followed her.

She heard nothing but the rapid pounding of her heart and the shallow breaths she forced into her burning lungs. The tears she refused to let fall were blinked away, and she swallowed against the bitter taste of defeat that lingered in their wake. Satisfied her escape from the court receiving line had not been seen, Emilia sagged against the door in relief.

Attempting to calm herself from the ugly scene she had fled, she rolled her flushed face against the coolness of the wood. First one side, then the other, before she let the warming surface press against the useless dark rock that rested in her forehead. There was a distant sensation of pressure where the stone met her flesh, an unwanted reminder of her most obvious shortcoming. The stone that should have been a source of great magical power was nothing more than a daily reminder that she was, indeed, as flawed as a princess could be.

A low moan from the room behind her jerked her from her thoughts. Spinning around to find the source, Emilia stared openmouthed in surprise at the scene before her.

*Gods alive.*

Firelight cast a dim light over a couple near the fireplace. A large male body reclined across the brocade cushions of a finely carved settee, one long leg propped against the back of the small sofa and one braced on the floor. His thighs were spread wide, giving her a clear view of the naked muscled chest that rose from a slender waist. A cream-colored shirt of the finest shadowsilk was unbuttoned across his skin, framing the sculpted muscles and smooth ebony skin in light.

His head was thrown back in abandoned pleasure, allowing shadows to flicker across the planes of his face. A rising flame threw him into light, and then his features were cast again into the shadows. Through the haze of shock she felt a stab of recognition. Rorek Northmark, Lord Magician of Darkknell, the visiting ambassador and blood cousin to King Torek of the Shadow Elf, was sprawled in lusty abandon as she had never seen him before.

On the floor by his side, a male Shadow Elf knelt in sensual service. His lips were wrapped around the swollen ebony shaft that rose from the ambassador's lap, lustily sucking at the flesh he embraced. As Emilia watched, Rorek thrust slowly into the eager mouth. His lover's enthusiastic head bobbed up and down drawing a deep groan in response.

Emilia froze, unable to tear her gaze from them. She'd never seen such a beautiful carnal act. Their faces were lost again in the darkness, but she could hear a husky moan as it filled the room. All she could see of them were lips and shaft, moving to a sensual tempo that only they could hear.

"That's it. Take it all." Rorek's voice was low, the foreign accent making his words rough and encouraging. His hands rose from the shadows to grasp the eager head working over him, his hips rising to thrust in time with his lover's motions. The scene before her drove every other thought from her head. Her body felt hot. A curious weakness made her legs tremble beneath her. Her mouth watered at the sight of their enjoyment, and between her thighs she could feel growing moisture at the thought of how they must be feeling, so lost in their pleasure.

"The princess has come to play." Rorek's rough, mocking voice came from the other side of the room, shocking a gasp from her.

*Oh Goddess.*

With a graceful flick of his fingers, mage lights sprang to life around the room. Her stunned gaze locked on eyes as bright as polished gems. She hardly recognized the look in those eyes. Dark, and as green as the forest at midnight, they often reflected bored indifference. Tonight they were alive with passion.

She had no doubt that Rorek was enjoying every bit of the shock that must be stamped across her face. There was a momentary flash of something—surprise, or anticipation—in his shadowed face that was quickly gone, replaced by his usual disdain. Emilia was left feeling she'd missed something important.

His hands kept the man kneeling between his legs from turning.

"Well, pet? Have you come to play?" The corner of his hard lips curved up in his usual grin of mockery, his rich velvet voice sending shivers down her spine.

"No, I... See, I was... There was a..." Gods above. How was she going to explain this one if she couldn't even find her tongue? Couldn't think of anything more than using her suddenly confused tongue to taste his twilight flesh, trace the lines of his cock where it rose from the shadowy nest of curls? Wanted to run her hands up those rock-hard thighs until they met at his shaft, and caress the swollen sack that held his balls, breathe in the musky scent of hunger that would rise from his skin in his passion?

She had mastered the skill of ignoring him for the near year he had been at court. His taunting comments and formal manners had driven her crazy until she had learned to control her responses. But she had never seen him in private, never dared to see him outside the semi-formality of the court. And now this dark angel thought she had sought him out to play?

With a harsh mental shake, Emilia fell back on a lifetime of courtly manners. Bowing her head the slightest bit, she tore her gaze from them and focused on the space several inches above Rorek's head. "My lord. I beg your pardon for the interruption."

"I would not have imagined a princess begging for anything."



The mockery in his voice was irresistible. Her gaze snapped back to his. Thoughtful eyes were set deep above a straight nose. Midnight black skin stretched across the most perfect face she'd ever seen. His face was smooth, unmarked by scars of war, all hard planes and chiseled corners. Shadow court magician and ambassador he might be, but there wasn't a bit of softness to him. Only the dangerous, wicked curve of his lips, and the mocking smirk that he cast her way, tempered his imposing gaze.

*What in the name of the Goddess have I gotten myself into?*

Emilia's numb fingers fumbled behind her for the doorknob. Maybe if she slipped out now without answering they would forget she had ever been there.

The man on his knees by the fire finally shifted, pulling against the hands that held his head to be able to look up at her. When the firelight flared to light the room Emilia's suspicions were confirmed. Jo'el, Rorek's constant bodyguard and sometimes lover, was unmistakable with his dark bald head and broad shoulders. His face was lean, the features rough, almost savage. He wore only a pair of tight pants that clung to his powerful thighs. His bare back and the flex and play of well-formed muscles held her attention as he turned to study her.

Rorek and Jo'el were well known in the Bright Elf court for their appetites. The Shadow Elves were a lusty race, with none of the restraint and control of her own people. They lived a life of wild passions, giving in to their carnal pleasures whenever and with whomever they pleased, making no effort to rein them in.

Through her alarm Emilia fought to keep her voice even. "No, my lord. I just..."

What could she tell them? That her last desperate tries this morning to awaken the dim stone on her forehead had failed? That the magic that should have been her birthright had never come to be, leaving her without throne claim or power? Perhaps she could tell him about the hidden pity of her younger sisters, and the open ridicule of her stepmother that had pushed her over the edge at last and sent her running from the elfin court?

Should she tell them they were the most arousing vision she had ever seen? How passion was all but unknown to her, and that her one attempt to take a lover had ended in a humiliation that had opened her eyes to a new set of defects she had not known she bore?

Maybe she should shout it in the courtyard, that the soon-to-be-banished princess of Silverhaven was a powerless mage, unable to master even the basic enchantment that would awaken the Stone of Power that should have guided her thoughts and magic.

Rorek was eying her from his spot on the settee as a hawk would a mouse, his black eyes narrowed with intense concentration. His hands guided his still-hard cock into Jo'el's willing mouth with steady motions. "If you did not come to play, why were you skulking around the visitor's wing of the palace?"

"I wasn't skulking." Outrage filled her voice, adding strength where she had been weak.

“Perhaps you have an assignation with your own lover. Is that what it is? The visitors that just arrived from the desert Southern Plains are a bit rougher than the usual royal petitioners. Maybe you’re hungry for something you can’t find from your refined Bright Elf suitors.”

Emilia watched in fascination as his jaw clenched in a visible attempt at control. He kept his hands on his guard’s head, directing his movements even as he baited Emilia.

“I wasn’t planning to meet my lover. I mean... I don’t have a—I wasn’t planning anything.” Stripped of her usual self-assurance, Emilia felt the heat rush to her cheeks as she stumbled like a schoolgirl over the thought of having a lover.

“That sounds like a lot of protesting for one who claims her reasons for being here are innocent.” The candles in the room flared, and then settled into a steady glow around them as Rorek relaxed back into the cushions once again, folding his broad arms behind his neck and pillowing his head in their wide frame.

In the brighter light, she could see the swollen hardness of his cock where it jutted from a thatch of enticing curls. Jo’el was sucking gently on the twin balls that hung between Rorek’s thighs, resembling a pair of juicy *jheri* fruit. He ran one hand in a slow, steady caress up and down the hard length of Rorek’s cock, pumping the flesh that still glistened from his mouth.

For a long moment she watched in silence, unable to tear her gaze from them. The urge to step closer, stand beside them to get a better view, had her body tensing.

“So why did you slip in here if it was not to meet a lover?” Rorek’s words jerked her from the sensual spell they had unknowingly woven over her. His low voice was rough now with passion, raw with hunger and need.

“I was looking for a quiet place to think.” Her voice sounded breathless to her ears.

“In the middle of a ball?”

Her nervous gaze snapped back to Rorek’s, finding his gaze locked tightly on her own. Disbelief was evident on his face.

“Desperate times...” she muttered.

“What could a pampered palace princess such as you know of desperation? Did the stewards cut off your dress allowance?”

Emilia stared at Rorek. How could he sit and carry on such a conversation as if they were meeting over sweet fruit and elder tea, while his manhood was being licked and sucked like the most delectable of treats? And why was such an improper scene sending these delicious shivers racing through her veins?

A low, ragged cry came from Rorek, bringing a rush of moisture to Emilia’s thighs. Her gaze dropped again, unable to stop watching as Jo’el lavished his attention on Rorek’s cock. Up and down, with deliberate slowness, his lips embraced the swollen flesh. After a moment, he pulled back, scattering gentle bites down the shaft before sucking again on the swollen sack beneath.

The silence grew taut with anticipation, and Emilia searched for words to fill it. “I know more of desperation than I’d care to, for sure.” She worried her lower lip with her teeth, sucking the flesh into her mouth.

Rorek’s answer came softly to her ears. “I’m sure we can show you a thing or two that can help you forget your troubles.”

She swallowed a gasp at the suggestion. Had she just been propositioned?

“Lose your tongue, little one? Come over here and I’ll show you how to put that mouth to good use on my cock.”

*Good Lord.* Her gaze flew to his crotch at his crude invitation. Emilia’s face grew hot as she watched his hand come down to grip his cock, rubbing along the hard flesh.

That curious tingle had spread through her body. Unaccustomed warmth between her legs had cast out veins of heat, prickles of sensation that left a quiver of excitement behind. A faint buzzing began in her head, a vague dizziness that had her leaning against the closed door at her back for support.

What was happening to her? Her skin felt tight and hot, hypersensitive to the light fabric that was so skillfully draped around her body. The scent of musk filled her nostrils, and with a shocked exclamation she realized it was rising from her own skin.

Was this desire? Or was the magician playing tricks with her head?

Jo’el had returned to sucking on the dark cock, his cheeks hollowing as he sped his pace. Emilia watched as his tongue came out to lick the hard flesh, leaving behind a layer of moisture and drawing another appreciative groan from Rorek. Emilia wondered fleetingly what that flesh would taste like between her lips. What his manhood would feel like if she replaced Jo’el’s lips with her own.

“Mmmm, yes. Just a bit faster... Ahhh.” A low groan came from Rorek. She thought for a moment he had forgotten her, lost in his pleasure. Another flare of light from the mage fires showed Rorek’s head thrown back in abandon, a look of ecstasy stamped on his features. Still his brilliant eyes watched her, a taunting twist on his handsome lips.

Once before she had tried to take a lover, instinct driving her to believe that if she could become a woman, perhaps her power would come to her in full. Somehow her attempt had gone horribly wrong, leaving her crying in unexplainable pain before they’d come close to completing the deed. Her would-be lover had fled her bed as if the hounds of hell hunted him. For weeks after she had buried herself in her studies, searching for a cause for the defects that tormented her. With time she had buried the memory behind a shell of indifference, focusing on awakening her magic.

She had come into the room tonight looking for a way out of a desperate situation. Thoughts raced through her head now. Her life raised in the politics of court helped her balance the scales of want and need, prejudice and desire, in the blink of an eye. Maybe she hadn’t stumbled on the perfect solution, but it was the only one she had at hand.

His offer hung there, waiting for her answer. Staring straight into Rorek's mocking smile she made her choice. "Show me."

## Chapter Two

“I thought you would... What?” Rorek straightened up in his seat. His ears must be playing tricks on him, leading him to think he had heard exactly what his aching cock wanted to hear. There was no way Emilia ra Elawyn, Princess of the Blood of Silverhaven, had just invited him to—

“I said, show me.” She took several brave steps forward on tiny feet, coming to a halt near the middle of the room, and stared down at him with a look of nervous excitement in her wide sapphire blue eyes. The large stone on her forehead lay dim. “Exactly what did you want me to do with my mouth?”

At her words a rush of pleasure shot through his gut. She was stunning, even without the brilliant glow that should have sparkled above her eyes. From the moment she had greeted him at court, he’d been entranced. She was like no other woman he’d met, from his home in the depths of Darkknell and across the broad-reaching lands of the Northern Span. Small even among the Bright Elf, her head barely reached his shoulders when he was standing. Silvery white hair flowed in sheaths of light, passing the slender curves of her hips and kissing the softness of her ass when she moved.

More than her beauty, it was her cool, remote demeanor that had caught his attention. The Bright Elves were a race of passionate beings. They cherished beauty and art, and their passion for life was second to none. Laughter and music were the most common sounds of the Bright Elf court, and smiles and flirting were second nature.

Emilia showed none of this natural gaiety. Her features were almost haunting in their formal stillness when she was surrounded by the vivacious nature of her kin. Serious and thoughtful, her brilliant blue eyes watched the world around her with a shadow of sadness. Her lips would form in a polite smile, but never had he heard a laugh come from the graceful curves. Her remoteness had prickled at him, and he had taken every opportunity when they met to try to tease a response from her. But the harder he tried, the more she had retreated behind her cool, reserved front. His fascination had not gone unnoticed. Jo’el had mocked him more than once over his interest in the princess.

Tonight it seemed that façade of remoteness had finally shattered. A rapid pulse beat wildly at the base of her throat. Rorek watched as she licked her trembling lips, her small pink tongue flickering out and disappearing after a quick swipe that left the fleshy surface damply glistening. He could too easily imagine how his cock would feel slipping into that tempting wetness.

*She’d be a delicious mouthful.* Even in mindspeak, Jo’el’s voice was deep and lusty. His blood-bonded guard’s amused interest was evident.

*And she could start a royal incident. She's no idea what she's asking for.* Rorek scowled down at his friend.

*Perhaps she finally took your attention seriously. She seems to know exactly what she's asking for, I'm thinking.* His friend's eyes had returned to the slender beauty who now stood beside them, even as he continued sucking Rorek's cock.

*Ah, hells. I was trying to get her to open up a bit, unbend that stiff spine. I never thought she'd actually come to search out our chambers. Next you'll be telling me that we would be terrible guests not to give her what she so nicely asked for.* Rorek mocked his friend, getting nothing more than a mental shrug in return.

Amusing though it had been to tease her, Rorek had sure as hell never imagined she'd take him up on the implied dare. He'd thought to see her pull on that remote mask that she wore so well, followed perhaps by a carefully formal departure. The stunned look of amazement on her face as she had watched Jo'el bring him to the brink of pleasure had been the first time he had ever seen her at a loss for words.

She'd been the only one of the Bright Elves that had caught his interest since he'd arrived at Silverhaven, and he'd been sure she was the one he could never have. Princesses of the Blood did not consort with a mere ambassador from Darkknell, even one so closely related to the Shadow Elf king. For the three seasons he'd been in Silverhaven, he had avoided the politics of bedding any of the members of the fair court, a task made easier by a genuine lack of interest in those who pursued him. Courtesans and courtiers alike, they were interested in playing political games, a pursuit he avoided like the direful plague of swamp fever. He had been quite happy sharing his passions with Jo'el and the occasional group of visiting Shadow Elf merchants and emissaries.

Now his deepest unfulfilled desire was standing in front of him, offering herself up in all her deliciously tantalizing glory.

"I'm not sure you can handle the kind of lessons we would give you, princess."

"It won't be princess much longer." Her voice was unexpectedly raw, her hurt evident by the resolute way she forced the words out.

"No?" Now that was interesting. The Bright Elves were a close-lipped race, clinging tightly to their customs and traditions. He'd been many months at court now and hadn't been able to uncover more than the most casual rumor of trouble. While he had been made comfortable and was welcome at the many formal court events, there had been a clear boundary to what the elves of the court would say in his presence. What could be brewing that would lead to the removal of the princess from succession? As eldest child of the king, Emilia should be accepted by the court as her father's heir.

One slender foot at a time, she slipped off her silken slippers, kicking them aside to stand in her bare feet before him. Her answer, when it came, was bold. "I think it is time I expanded my horizons. You seem like just the Shadow Elf to help with that." Was it nerves or excitement that put such an appealing quiver in

her voice? Her words were out of character. Gods help him, they sent a shiver of response through him despite his doubts.

A muffled snicker came from Jo'el. Rorek glared at his friend. The guard rarely spoke, and never around strangers. He was more comfortable using the mindspeak they'd shared since they were bonded by blood and magic when he felt the need to express himself. Jo'el caught his mental warning and snorted back the rest of his laughter, creating an interesting vibration against the flesh he still attended to. Etiquette be damned, he was daring Rorek to take the princess up on her outrageous offer.

Rorek watched in amazement as Emilia crossed the room in three determined steps. With her usual grace she bent her knees until she knelt on the floor by his chest, her skirts brushing against Jo'el. Rorek scowled at her in warning, trying unsuccessfully to ignore the fresh scent of sweet musk that rode her skin. His scowl had scared off men made of harsher stuff than her, but she met his gaze without fear.

"I don't think I'm the elf you're looking for."

She lifted her rounded chin and returned his glare with a determined look. "I think you're exactly who I'm looking for." The stubborn words were betrayed by the faintest quiver when her pale hand reached out for his flesh.

Her hand was warm against his stomach when she touched him. Hesitant. She had no way to know how that simple caress would feel so close to his aching shaft. Maybe she needed to be shown.

With a mental nudge from Rorek, Jo'el moved back to sit on his heels. Rorek grabbed her wrist, trying and failing to ignore the satiny feel of her skin under his rough fingers. Anticipating her reaction, he placed her palm against his swollen cock and cupped her fingers around his width, flexing his hips to drive himself fully into her hand. He let himself groan, giving voice to his hunger at her caress, watching her face for any hint of uncertainty as the sound reached her ears. Rorek held her gaze with his own, waiting for the minute she would break and run from the dim room to the safe dullness of the party outside.

Emilia stared back at him with her bright blue eyes, a pink flush staining the moon white cream of her cheeks. One deep, shuddering breath came from her chest, and her fingers tensed under his own. Then they pressed into the flesh beneath, moving with a shatteringly unschooled stroke to explore his cock.

If possible, he grew harder under her inquisitive motions. Rorek watched in shock as she traced his flesh. Her pale skin wrapped around his ebony flesh, measuring the turgid length. His eager cock jerked in answer. A damp spot appeared on the head as his body responded to her touch.

His control was strained to the breaking point. Staring into her stunned eyes, watching the delicate flush rise and fall in her creamy cheeks as she studied his cock, was almost more than he could take. Rorek cursed and tightened his hand on her wrist, stopping her movement.

"Did I do something wrong?" Her voice was low and unsure, far from her usual steady tone. A curious urge to reassure her came over him.

*Oh no.* There was no way that was going to be happening. No matter how much she insisted, the princess wasn't ready for the type of games she was intent on playing.

Rorek looked back down at Emilia's hand, grateful that her explorations had stopped long enough for him to regain control. Deliberately, he allowed his mask of civility to slip and let show a true glimpse of the deep hunger her innocent touch had awoken in him. "You did nothing wrong at all. In fact, your hand felt very sweet stroking my cock. But I don't think you heard what I said. I'm not sure you can handle the lessons *we* would give you, Princess Emilia."

Her wide eyes flashed as she threw a look back toward Jo'el. His bodyguard, praise the Gods, played along and cast a lewd grin her way, running his eyes over the slender curves of her body.

Her voice trembled when she answered. "I heard you just fine, my lord. I am looking forward to it."

Her hand tightened once again under his, squeezing the flesh that leapt in response to her touch.

*Mother of the night!* What was it going to take to scare her off?

As much as his body was aching for a taste of her sweetness, there was no way in hell she was ready for what she was asking him for. He wasn't sure he bought her claim of readiness either. For all her apparent eagerness, her hand had touched him with the hesitancy of someone who had never touched the flesh of a man before. And despite her insistence, there was a hint of desperation to her actions that prodded the conscience he tried to pretend wasn't there.

The voice of cold reason told him to get rid of her before he opened doors he was not willing to go through. But the ruthless side of him that had earned him his role in Silverhaven to start with found he was intrigued by the girl. Never had he met such an enticing, determined little elf. The unavoidable sense that she was hiding something from him wouldn't let him push her out the door without finding out what. The thought of thrusting his hardness inside her fair-skinned wetness had his aching balls praying for release, even while his conscience told him to send her away.

"I don't mingle with the Bright Elves, princess. The last thing I want is an angry court mob beating down my door, crying that I've ruined their innocent princess and demanding my head for the privilege." Struck with inspiration, he thrust a hand down the low neckline that was so close to his lap, pulling the silken fabric away until her perfectly rounded breasts were framed by the fabric. Roughly, he palmed one mound, toying with the tight pink nipple that popped into his waiting hand. "These are lovely, but not worth the trouble you would cause me tomorrow."

For a moment he allowed himself to enjoy the feel of her soft skin against his own. Her breath came faster as he rolled her sensitive flesh between his fingers, emerging in uneven gasps from her lungs. With a final pinch, he pulled his hand back, leaving the turgid peak to taunt him above the line of satin.

"Listen, princess—"

"Emilia."



“Fine. Emilia. You seem to be a nice-enough young princess. Surely you’ve got an equally nice noble Bright Elf out there eager to marry you. Settle down into a charming life, and get busy making adorable little royal heirs to raise. You may think you want a bit of excitement before you do that, but I am here to tell you, excitement isn’t all it’s made out to be.”

He saw the first flash of temper in her eyes. “Nice young noble? Let me tell you about the bright future I’ve got out there waiting for me, my lord.”

With her anger, she had lost focus on his flesh. Her hand slid away to yank at her top, covering the too-tempting skin he had revealed.

“My stepmother, the king’s consort, has convinced my father that without a Stone of Power I am a shame to the court. ‘Flawed’, as she so eloquently put it. The visiting barbarians from the Southern Plains you mention? They are here to see if any of them would be willing to remove the princess with all her flaws from the court as their consort. Tomorrow she plans to announce the end of my birthmoon celebration. My magic has not awoken, and my future will be in her hands. Gisa had me removed from my seat on the council a full cycle ago, and the chamberlain will no longer allow me into his private chambers. With my father ill, I can not even petition him not to banish me—in fact, I have not seen my father other than across the floors of the hall for nearly that same full cycle.”

Her voice caught on a ragged cry, emotion welling in her eyes. He had to admire her strength as she blinked away tears, swallowed deeply and continued her tale in a voice wiped of self-pity.

“The only thing the men of the Southern Plains are known for more than their brutal treatment of their women is their bigoted racial pride. Though they’d think a Bright Elf hardly better than a fifth wife, they would grudgingly accept as consort a Bright Elf princess for the gains it would get them with the court. But a princess who openly embraces a Shadow Elf as a lover? She would be untouchable to them. They’d rather break all ties with the Court of Stones than to take me into their clans once I have lain with a Shadow Elf. Again I tell you, that you, Lord Rorek, are indeed the very elf I am looking for.”

Rorek stared at her, for once in his life unsure what to do. A part of him was furious at the future she described. The thought of the beauty before him being sent to the harsh life that awaited her on the scorched plains sickened him. Her fair skin would burn and blister in the unaccustomed heat. As a consort princess, she would have no rights as a wife, but would be expected to always be available to the man she was promised to. The men of the plains were not much more than animals, their passions as rough as the land they lived in. Her only value would become her body, and it would be harshly used.

This wasn’t his problem to solve, he told himself. He owed loyalty only to his king and had no duty beyond that. He wasn’t inclined to look for entanglements when he had an obligation to fulfill. And he had a job to do here, a duty that had kept him from his home these many seasons.

But if he turned her out that door, he might just as well be banishing her to the Southern Plains himself. And all he had to do to keep that from happening was let her spend one night, one long, deliciously sinful night, in his bed.

His cock throbbed in anticipation at the thought. “You want us to compromise you thoroughly, ruin your reputation so that they will refuse to have you in their clan?”

“Yes. That is exactly what I want.” A flash of hope appeared in her eyes, prodding at the heart he refused to admit he still had.

“And what of tomorrow? Your stepmother—won’t she just find some other man to send you off to instead? How do you know you won’t be going from a bad situation to a worse one?”

“I’ll have to leave it to you to see that my reputation is so stained that no man would have me to bear his name, won’t I?”

He stared down at her in disbelief. What she said was making a twisted sort of sense. That the Queen Consort, Gisa, was at the middle of the mess was not a surprise after the pieces he had put together these three seasons past.

“Where will you stand with your court after a night in our bed? Will they consider you just as tarnished by our touch?”

“The Bright Elves do not share the prejudices of our savage neighbors. I am an adult now six seasons past, long able to choose my lovers. Who I choose to spend my time with should be my own business, not that of the court or my stepmother.” He could sense nothing from her but a desperate sincerity that pierced even his hardened heart.

A woman he wanted more than any he had ever met was all but begging him to fuck her. And Gods help him, but he wanted her. Desire flared in his gut with the heat of the molten rock from the lava pits of Darkknell, straining his tenuous hold over his passion. Duty had sent him here, but nothing said he couldn’t enjoy his stay.

*Are you thinking with your head or with your cock?* The calm voice of his bodyguard spoke to him, helping Rorek bring his emotions under control. Jo’el had listened quietly to the story as it spilled from Emilia’s soft lips, and now offered his silent council when he felt it justified. Despite his mischievous prodding of a few minutes before, the guard’s naturally suspicious nature was alert for trouble.

*For once my head and flesh are in agreement. The princess requires something we seem remarkably suited to deliver. If we find unexpected pleasure from our duties, I’ll accept the blessing of the Goddess.*

A long silence fell, a pause pregnant with choice and heavy with possibility.

*And if trouble finds us down this path?*

*Then I’ll be glad to have the best guard I could ask for at my back, and in my bed.*

Rorek was sure there were more reasons to turn her away than there could be for allowing her to stay. Staring into her pleading eyes, he couldn't find a good reason to care. All he could think about was the Bright Elf who sat so quietly by his side, waiting for his answer.

"One night. That's all I need from you. A few hours of your time. Please, ambassador. You are my last hope."

He wasn't sure if it was passion or compassion that pulled him to his feet. But he rose from his seat regardless, enjoying the way her eyes widened as his cock filled her vision before he pulled her to her feet.

So she was nervous, even though she hid it well. He let his gaze wander down her soft curves, hesitating on the generously curved breasts and slender hips. Deliberately, he held her still as he paced behind her to study her rounded ass. By the time he had completed a circle and stood in front of her again, her cheeks had once more flushed to that delightful shade of pink.

"What do you think Jo'el? Do you think our princess can keep us entertained for the night?"

Jo'el nodded slowly, his lips curved in their usual mocking smile. "I thought you would never ask."

## Chapter Three

*What have I done?*

Emilia followed Rorek's broad back through the side door that led into their private guest chambers. Distantly, she heard Rorek dismiss the waiting servants for the remainder of the evening, with instructions they were not to be disturbed. And then he was leading her into his sleeping chamber.

It was a masculine room, without any of the soft touches a woman would have added over a lengthy stay. The floors were covered with woven carpets, the walls hung with thick drapes that would hold out the coming Silverhaven winter chill. Fine linen covered the thick down mattress, and half a dozen pillows were stacked neatly against the carved wooden headboard. There was no lace to soften the edges, no flowers gracing the heavy table or matching chests. A single painting hung over the already-laid hearth, a lush and vivid scene of the serene glade in the heart of Silvertop forest. She'd never had reason to venture into the private visitors' chambers of the palace, and wondered if each guest's quarters were as suited to their inhabitant as this one appeared.

Her gaze was pulled to the large bed. She stared at the wide expanse with trepidation while she wondered what she should do now. Everything had moved so fast. She wanted this, had jumped at the chance to hold her future in her hands and shape it with the decisions she made. But she shivered with uncertainty at what she had just committed herself to. The wall of confidence she kept between her and the world had shattered, leaving her to face the Shadow Elves with nothing but her desire and her pride.

Behind her the door closed with a soft thud, startling a squeak from her. Jo'el turned the lock then crossed the room to the bed, dropping with careless grace to lounge on the surface. The light in the room flared briefly as Rorek set the waiting fire burning, casting light onto the starkly harsh lines of the guard's dark face.

From behind her came the soft rustling of fabric. She spun, and saw that Rorek had already stripped off his jacket, flinging it toward a chair. Clad in his still-unbuttoned shirt and breeches, he filled the room with his presence.

"Do you wish to change your mind? You have not been gone long from the halls. I'm sure you can find an excuse for your absence." Rorek's long legs moved in deceptively unhurried strides as they carried him to her. His lips were curved into a lazy grin, but his eyes were serious.

“No. My decision was made of my own will. I have no need to change it.” No matter the shivers that sent waves of uncertainty through her stomach, or the fine tremors she felt in her clenched hands. Truly, this was where she wanted to be.

“Are you sure?” His swept a rough hand through her long hair, twining his fingers in the thick, heavy locks and pulling it over one shoulder. The skin at her neck prickled as the air washed across it.

“I am not in the mood to be gentle. Not tonight. I can let you go, if you tell me now. But I won’t offer the choice again.”

“Yes. I am sure. I am right where I choose to be tonight.” Pride had carried her this far, though her courage seemed to have deserted her at the door. Now the feel of his fingers brushing the sensitive skin of her nape, the almost rough tug of his hand in her hair, sent a shiver of longing through her limbs. Curiosity was beginning to unfurl like a ribbon in her gut, her naturally inquisitive nature awake and eager to learn. She couldn’t banish the image of Rorek and his guard from her mind. Their flesh, stark black on black, so different from her own pale body. The throaty groans Rorek had made as Jo’el handled his manhood. Their total abandonment to the moment, with no thought of anything beyond what they were feeling together. She ached for it all.

Rorek slid his hand around her throat, stroking the curve of her neck and tracing across the bare skin. Her flesh prickled as the chill was swept away by the warmth of his caress. Up his finger went, brushing the high sweep of her cheek, tracing the line of her eyebrow in a deliciously sweet move. He hesitated for a moment when his finger encountered the stone upon her forehead. Lower his fingers went, tracking across the satin neckline until he circled the tautness of her nipple. Her body jerked in response.

“How does that feel, princess?”

She shivered at the harsh timbre in his voice. Her breasts tingled under his touch, and the urge to push herself into his hand swept through her. Her legs quivered at the thought.

Immediately, he put his other arm around her, pulling her closer and supporting her against his body. Against the softness of her stomach, she felt the unmistakable swelling of his erection, a hot brand that pressed through linen and silk. She froze, her heart pounding in her chest, before forcing herself to relax into his arms. This was her choice. And she’d be damned if she was going to shrink away from his body like a young, inexperienced schoolgirl. She shifted, rubbing the gently curved swell of her stomach against his hardness. Rorek’s breath hissed in through his teeth, and he tightened his arm around her.

He studied her face, his dark eyes narrowed in concentration. Emilia looked up to meet his gaze, determined not to shy away from him now.

Rorek and his guard exchanged a look, and then to her surprise the arms around her loosened. “Care to play maid to our princess, Jo’el?”

“With pleasure.” In the space of a heartbeat, the guard was behind her, his fingers busy with the row of tiny fastenings. Before she could think of protesting, the thought fled her mind, chased away by the sudden knowledge that she was about to be kissed.

Rorek framed her face with his hands. He traced his thumb across the seam of her lips, lightly pressing at the plump softness. Then his lips were on hers, roughly demanding she open and let him in.

His taste filled her senses. The faint hint of wine lingered on his breath, teasing her with the promise of heady delights. Sampling the moist heat of her mouth he licked inward, lightly tickling the sensitive tissues within.

Shyly, she brushed his tongue with her own, and was inspired by his response to try it again. With the second tentative brush, he sucked gently, encouraging her to follow him into a dance of mouths and tongues. A shiver of heat shot up her spine, arrowing out into her veins and pooling in a liquid rush between her legs.

A sound of desire fought clear of her throat. At the noise, Rorek crushed her lips beneath his, sweeping his tongue deeper into her moistness and overpowering her exploring kiss with his own. He used his tongue to duel with hers, chasing into her depths and retreating, insisting she follow for a further taste of heaven. This was no slow wooing, no asking for her response, but a harsh and imperative demand for her surrender.

Emilia closed her eyes under his assault, all her awareness focusing on the intense heat that he was drawing from her with his kiss. A series of tremors had begun in her stomach, an ache she didn’t know how to ease. Firmly, he stroked the tender flesh of her mouth, flicking at her tongue, nibbling on her lips, stroking and licking until she craved him with an unknown hunger.

Behind her, Jo’el had loosened the ties on her bodice. He slipped his strong hands under the straps, further enflaming her already-heated skin as he pushed the fabric down her arms. Emilia felt a wanton pleasure as it pooled at her feet, leaving her standing in her filmy undergarments. Quickly, they too were slipped aside to join the dress on the floor. Jo’el’s ran his fingers across her bared back, exploring the pale skin he had exposed. His lips pressed to her neck, and with a curiously erotic motion, the guard nipped and licked the sensitive skin of her nape. He slid his hands between her and Rorek to circle around her bare midriff, tracing delicate patterns across her exposed stomach as he pulled her back against his body.

“Look at me.” Rorek cupped her chin in one large hand, holding her motionless in his grasp. Her eyes flew open at the command, then widened as she followed his gaze down her naked body.

His fingers stroked gently at a newly bared nipple. The sight of her tender white breast being caressed by his darker hand did odd things to her nerves. Slowly, he circled one ruby crest, making a sound of approval as the sensitive flesh puckered in response. He smiled down at her, the wicked charm that was such a part of him there to see. “Do you like that?”

“Yes.” The word came out a breathless gasp. He plucked at her nipple, rolling the pinkened nub between his fingers.

“Do you want me to lick your breasts? Run my tongue across this creamy flesh, and feast on your sweetness here?”

Emilia pictured what he described, imagined his lips, his talented tongue doing what his fingers were doing. Wordlessly, she arched into his hand, asking for more.

He chuckled wolfishly, tormenting her as he molded the burgeoning flesh into distended peaks. “Say it. I want to hear your sweet voice asking for what you want.”

“Yes. Please. I want you to...lick me.”

Rorek murmured his approval. He lowered his head until his lips hovered just above her. Slowly, he placed a delicate lick on one peak, leaving a moist trail on the sensitive flesh. He licked a line across her chest, tracing a path from one breast to the other. The shocking heat of his mouth closed around her as he sucked leisurely, driving her closer to the brink of insanity.

Jo’el tightened his arm around her as she relaxed fully into his embrace. “Are you wet for us? Between your thighs, do you ache for the touch of a hand? My cock is hard for you, eager to sink into the hot depths of your cunt.” His voice was husky in her ear.

His blunt words thrilled her, even as the crudeness of his language drew a gasp of shock from her lips. With one firm hand, he gripped the breast still damp from Rorek’s mouth, massaging the aching fullness in his palm. He rubbed himself against the crevice between her buttocks, letting her feel his swollen flesh through the thin breeches. *Cock*. The word echoed in her mind. What a delightful sound it had, both erotic and crude at once.

Jo’el lowered his hand on her midriff to trace the line of hair atop her thighs, daring to dip into the moist curls and comb them through his fingers. When he moved his fingers lower yet, sliding firmly into the vee of her legs, Emilia’s head fell back against his shoulder. She was caught unprepared by the sensations their wicked hands were wringing from her willing flesh. Surely feeling this much pleasure from the pair of them must be unnatural? Nothing she’d experienced before had come close to sending her down this reckless path of feeling. But right now she couldn’t care about anything other than the wild rush of sensation that was sweeping through her flesh.

Jo’el took advantage of her position, grasping her chin and bringing his lips down to swallow hers. His mouth thrust her into twilight. Where Rorek had been all heat and hunger, kissing Jo’el was like being swallowed by the night. Dark and dangerous, but with an edge of cool control, he swept her into his shadows.

Greedily, she lost herself in the kiss. Jo’el was a bit shorter than the shadow mage, but the top of her head still barely reached his chin. His hands guided her head, tilting it back farther to give him the access he demanded. His body was built like the great jungle cats that prowled the forest. Long, lean muscles

moved sleekly beneath his ebony skin, a promise of power and grace. The heat of him surrounded her, warming her until she felt she could melt in a sinfully satisfied pile at his feet.

Emilia could no longer think. All that mattered were the hands that stroked her, and the mouths that had carried her into desire. She shivered under the two sets of hands, the dual mouths, the warring passions at her front and back.

Jo'el released her from his kiss. Rorek pulled his lips away from her breast. His eyes glittered with hunger as he watched her, caught in the throes of desire. "Beautiful. Your skin is flushed with excitement, your lips are swollen and begging for our attention. And your breasts are enough to make a man crawl for the privilege of suckling at them.

"I want to taste this sweet honey." Rorek's voice was husky, his fingers firm as they returned to stroking her skin. One hand had traced a path from her breasts down to her core. She felt a jolt as they eased along her sex, cupping her and stroking the bud that his fingers had sought out.

Emilia's gaze flew to meet Rorek's. Slowly, relentlessly, he rubbed the sensitive nub nestled high between her thighs, holding it lightly between thumb and finger.

"Will you lay down and spread your legs for me, princess? Do you want me to taste your velvet flesh?" Lust glittered in his eyes, along with a daring smirk that told her he expected she would back down now.

She swallowed, feeling the weight of her choices bear down on her shoulders. This was what she wanted, she reminded herself. Her choice, her future.

"Yes, my lord. That is exactly what I want." Before she could have a second thought, she pulled free of their arms and crossed to the bed, perching gingerly on the side to eye Rorek expectantly.

He glowered at her, seeming frustrated by her determination to see this through. Emilia tossed him a smug smile, only to bite her lip as he rose to stand by her side.

Jo'el moved to sit by her on the bed, his body warm and hard beside hers. "So much uncertainty in your beautiful eyes. Relax. There's nothing to be found tonight but pleasure."

He smoothed his fingers over her shoulders, applying just enough pressure to encourage her backwards onto the coverlet. The mattress gave beneath her with a whisper as she scooted to the center, and then she laid back to be surrounded by its comforting softness.

Rorek stood at the foot of the wide bed, watching as she was soothed by his guard. The shirt slid slowly down his muscled arms. Beneath the fabric, his chest was more muscled than she'd expected. The barest sprinkle of hair covered his lower stomach, disappearing into the breeches that clung tightly to his swollen manhood.

Emilia moaned in anticipation as Rorek grasped her thighs, spreading them apart and looking down at her exposed body. Holding her legs wide, he slid onto the bed, settling himself between her open legs on his stomach. Emilia had never felt so exposed, so vulnerable. She tensed her muscles, making a short-lived



attempt to close her legs again. “Don’t hide from me, pet. Let me show you pleasure you’ve never known before.”

He touched her lightly behind her knees, then his hands slid up to cup her thighs again. Her fear evaporated and she relaxed, leaving her pleasure in his hands. Anticipation filled her. Determined to embrace this night, she pushed thoughts of her past failures from her mind and let the newfound thrill of arousal grow. Tonight, with these two as her lovers, she would find a way past the barriers that had held her back before.

Firm, seeking, he moved his fingers across her, teasing the sensitive skin of her upper thighs before moving to the folds of flesh at her core. Taking his time, he lowered his head slowly, blowing gently against her navel, the curve of her belly, then finally her exposed mound. The warm air tickled, drawing a startled gasp of laughter from her that turned to a moan as his mouth pressed to lave the indentation of her belly. His head moved lower, lips and tongue nibbling their way through her curls to the sensitive skin below.

Shock reeled through her as her body came alive under his knowing hands. She raised her head, desperate to see what was making her body draw tight with anticipation.

A burning heat filled her as she felt a finger enter her, sliding slowly into her center. “Your cunt is the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted, princess. It’s driving me crazy, thinking about sinking my cock balls-deep into you.”

He moved his finger within her, stretching and rubbing in the most delightful manner. Shimmers of splendor spread in sharp waves from his touch. Emilia watched dazed as he pulled his finger out, rubbing lower until she could no longer see his hand. She gasped when he traced the shadowed crevice of her rosebud. Startled, she squirmed and tried to wiggle away from the unexpected touch.

“I told you we would touch you everywhere. Relax, princess. Let us take care of your enjoyment.”

His mouth took over. He licked again and again at her center, feeding the ache into a throbbing need that was soon driving her insane. Then he began to rub his thumb in tiny circles around her most sensitive nub, wringing a cry of delighted pleasure from her throat.

Dizzied by the rush of heat, she moved frantically against the cool linen. Her body was so hot, and a great sensation of need had drawn her skin tight. Lines of fire raced from her core to her head, wringing an almost painful shiver from her in response. Frantically, she rolled her head against the covers. Why did release escape her?

Frustration, hunger, pain, joined to draw a scream of frustration from a throat gone dry. She grasped at the coverlet as she arched up against him, craving release from the growing pressure inside, needing to be closer to the mouth that had brought her to the brink of delight.

“I need...” What did she need? She wasn’t sure, but it lurked just past the edge of sanity.

“Let go now, Emilia. Come for him. You can fly if you just let it happen.” Jo’el’s voice murmured in her ear, as he cupped her breasts in his hands and fondled her newly sensitive nipples. Her body convulsed in his arms.

She wanted release. Craved it, reached for it. But it hung just out of reach. Emilia strained, every muscle in her aching body desperate for something she’d never experienced. Then a backlash of torment released upon her, an agony of sensation tearing through her loins with the sharpness of a well-honed blade. Unbearable misery pulled her into its grasp, flames of suffering that raced from her loins to her forehead. A piercing sensation between her eyes sent her hands flying to her head, pressing desperately in a vain attempt to drive away the stabbing pain.

On a cry of defeat, she jerked from their arms and rolled to her side. Curling up into a ball, she fought the tears that tried to escape. In ways her stepmother could never imagine, Emilia finally had to accept that she was deeply, truly flawed.

## Chapter Four

Rorek ran his hands soothingly across Emilia's hips. She'd curled in upon herself, her arms clutched tightly around her legs in a self-protective gesture that tore at his heart. With her knees tucked up to her chin, all he could see was her slender back, tensely quivering with emotion.

*She hurts.* Jo'el's mind voice was harsh, even as he moved his hand in gentle strokes that mirrored Rorek's own. Slowly the two petted her, giving her a moment to calm from the storm of sensations that gripped her.

*But from what? We did nothing to cause her pain. Her pleasure was there, her peak at her fingertips. Her passion was swelling, so close I could taste it on her skin.* Rorek studied the princess. There was a great sense of wrongness to this, a heavy feeling in his gut. Her skin was cooling beneath his hand, and delicate shivers wracked her slender frame. Murmuring quietly, he circled his arms around her, bringing her back to rest against the warmth of his flesh.

"Emilia, what is wrong? Are you injured?" Rorek questioned her, ready to call for aid at the slightest hint of need.

A quivering sigh was the only answer he received.

*Is she wounded in some way? Does she need a cleric to tend to her?* Rorek spared a look for his worried guard. There was unusual concern in Jo'el's thoughts and on his face as the guard studied the slight body of the Bright Elf before them. The guard had formed no bonds in his life beyond the one he shared with Rorek—he had once dryly said that their blood bond gave him all the trouble he needed in his life. But even his hardened heart was touched by the Bright Elf's pain.

For the first time in his many years as a mage, Rorek regretted that healing magic was not something he had mastered. His magical talents were focused on the offensive arts. He had great control over the elements and an affinity for traps and poisons. The skills of mending the body were beyond his powers.

But what if her pain was caused not by something physical, but something magical in nature? Maybe there was an arcane answer to the torment that held her in its grasp.

*Guard, Jo'el. I don't like the way this feels.* In an instant, the bodyguard was on his feet by the door. Without question, his friend brought the knives that were never far away into his hands, and stood ready to battle any bodily threat that came their way.

Satisfied that there could be no surprise physical attack, Rorek turned his focus to his magic. With a whisper, he grasped the power that lay waiting for his call. Cautiously, he practiced his art, extending his

personal shields to surround Emilia in a protective shield of buffering. If she had been magically tampered with, the last thing he wanted was to unknowingly trigger any destructive watchdog spell that could have been set in place. Until he ruled out for certain the possibility she had been bespelled, he was taking no more chances.

It took only seconds and his shield was expanded to protect them both. Rorek turned his attention from creating to sensing and began searching for signs of arcane tampering.

Magic swirled unseen in the air around him, the natural forces shifting in unnatural patterns as he called them to his bidding. Runes of sorcery flashed in the air overhead as Rorek whispered the words to trigger them, each one an attempt to divine magical tampering. The arcane runes flared brightly when the words of incantation were voiced, then died away when no signs of magic were found.

Rorek watched as the fourth rune faded over Emilia's still-shaking body. He hesitated, wondering if he had wasted time looking for something that wasn't there. Maybe Emilia was physically ill, and he had spent precious time searching for a magical cause when what she needed was a physician.

In frustration, he triggered the rune of deception. It was one of the least reliable runes, as it would respond to any hint of guile or falsehood. What person didn't surround themselves with some bit of fabrication? Shoes that lifted them higher, a spell to hide physical shortcomings. A few years added to their age, to add authority to their words. The only good use of this rune was to show the object of deceit. A glow would surround a physical fabrication, showing what artifice had been used. A verbal falsehood would cast a shadow over the speaker's face. Magical deception would likewise set a glow around the source of the magic.

Lines of fire appeared as soon as the words of the rune left his lips, visible only to his sight. Rorek watched narrow-eyed as the rune responded to his command. In brilliant arcs of orange light, the flames found their target. Emilia's eyes remained closed, her hands still clutched at the now-glowing stone on her forehead, unaware that magecraft had found the source of her agony.

*They have bespelled her, Jo'el.* With a mental curse, Rorek cradled Emilia closer, as if he could put another barrier between her and whatever was threatening her. Anger threatened to strip away his control, a consuming fury that something as pure as a royal power artifact had been tampered with.

*You must free her. Then, we will find those who are responsible.* Jo'el calmed him with his thoughts.

*Yes. And then they will find out what happens when one toys with the forces of power.* They would soon regret their actions, he swore.

Rorek studied the quivering body that lay in his arms. What spell had they used, and why? Who had dared tamper with a Stone of Power? It would have taken a magician of great skill to master such abilities, and then to cast the spell undetected in the halls of the king himself.

His gaze flickered to the stone on her forehead. Rune light still glowed in its deepest facets, bringing the dim amber stone to shimmering life. The light began to fade along with his spell, leaving shadow memories that hinted at the depths of power lurking within.

He had to break the spell. Forcefully, he quelled his outrage at the evidence of such a blatant misuse of magic, concentrating instead on the stone that housed both power and spell. In its glimmering depths lurked the answers. It would take the delicate touch of a master to free them, along with the power of a high-order mage. Rorek was both. Grimly, he set to work, using every bit of the abilities he had spent so many years mastering.

As he probed deeper, he found there were three spells to be broken, woven together with twisted intent on their unknowing victim. The first and most potent was a smothering spell, its sole focus to keep the Stone of Power from waking. It was a powerful transmutation spell, able to turn the essence of power within the stone into an absence of power.

Tightly bound to this was the second spell. A savage phrase spilled from Rorek's mouth as he studied it. Instead of transmuting power away from the Stone of Power, this one used the power of evocation on the core of Emilia's passions. There had been elves born into the royal family who were not gifted with the magic to awaken their stones. Instead, they used their sexuality to arouse what limited powers their stones could confer upon them without magic. The spell of evocation cast on Emilia had prevented her from using the power of sex to awaken her stone. Any arousal she felt was soon twisted into discomfort, and any erotic pleasure became torturous.

And there, wrapped around the transmutation and evocation, tying them into a nasty bundle of magic, lay the third spell. A spell of illusion, it would make this entire nasty trio of spells invisible to all but a top-tier Master Mage who was actively looking for the spells.

For a long moment, he studied his options. Lifting a spell cast by another magician was always tricky. Lifting three master-magician spells, spells he had no hand in the crafting of, was going to test him as he'd never been tested before.

A dead Stone of Power, a passionless princess and invisible magic. There was a powerful foe lurking in the fortress of the Bright Elves. Rorek swore he'd do everything he could to bring it to its knees.

## Chapter Five

Emilia moaned and cradled her head in her arms. Pain still held her in its jagged grasp, but someone was calling her, demanding she answer.

“Princess, I need you to listen to me.” The voice was rough, insistent, cutting through the haze that had wrapped itself around her thoughts.

Rorek. He was the one calling her. The pain began to recede as she focused on his voice.

“Rorek.” She opened her eyes to find him leaning over her protectively. One strong hand stroked her cheek in an oddly soothing caress. Cradled in the warmth of his body, she felt the pain begin to slip away. Past his broad shoulders she could see Jo’el standing near the door, twin daggers of deadly shadowsteel in his hands.

“How is your head?” the mage asked quietly. His eyes had shadowed with concern, and tight lines bracketed the corners of his mouth.

“It is...not quite so painful.” Cautiously, she relaxed her arms, letting them fall from their tight grasp around her legs. The pain was now fading, leaving only the searing memory of her failure. Tears gathered in her eyes, rolling free before she could blink them back.

“Ahh, princess.” He turned her to face him. Then she was again in his arms, sheltered against his naked chest, cocooned in his embrace. “Everything will be all right.” His lips were a breath away, so close she felt the warm brush of air with his words.

Emilia just shook her head. How could she explain that she would never be all right, that the one desperate plan she had come up with to keep her from banishment had blown up in her face like a misspoken spell? Unable to face his concern, or worse, pity, she buried her face against the warm skin of his neck.

Rorek cupped his hand under her chin, refusing to let her hide. “Where is the courage that brought you to our rooms? Look at me, bright one.”

Unhappily, Emilia shifted in his arms, then lifted her head. He was likely tired of having her snivel on his shoulder. But his gaze, when she met it, was full of warm concern.

“I’ll be fine. You were right. This was a very bad idea. Let me up and I will be out of your way. I am sorry to have interrupted your—”

Her words were cut short by his mouth on hers. Harsh, forceful, it demanded she open to him. On a broken moan, she did. His tongue thrust in, tasting, exploring, devouring every sensitive, damp inch and

marking her as his with a kiss that shook her to her soul. Just as quickly, he released her, pulling back a bit to study her with his piercing gaze.

“You have nothing to apologize for. Don’t think for a minute that I regret bringing you to my bed. And I’m glad to say, you will not be rid of us so easily tonight. You are going to be stuck with me for a bit longer.”

A touch of foreboding slithered down Emilia’s spine. Speechless, she stared at the pulse that beat against his throat, focusing on the steady throb as she waited for him to continue.

“It seems we have a problem.”

Her confused gaze flew to his, trying to discern from his expression just what he knew. Had he already figured out just how flawed she was? Bleakly, she tugged at the sheet, futilely attempting to shield herself from his study.

He ignored her movement, concentrating on her face.

“Princess Emilia, you have been bespelled.”

*Bespelled.* A flare of anger sparked to life inside her, a hot ball in her gut. What game was he playing with her? Had her humiliating attempt to seduce him not been embarrassing enough? Or had he somehow seen what had happened as a reflection on himself, and chosen magical trickery as a balm for his ego?

“Ambassador, I do not know what kind of game you are trying to play here. But I cannot see what you hope to accomplish with this. Who would have bespelled me, and how? The king’s magicians would have noticed any magical activity that went on under their own roof.” Her voice grew stronger as she spoke, anger fueling her resolve.

“That’s one of many questions I have, princess. Who indeed? How could they pull off such a move against the king’s own heir? And why? The spell—spells, actually—are very specific in their nature. There are few magicians who could master them and cast them unnoticed.”

“Would you be one of those magicians with the skill to master them, my lord ambassador?”

The flare of his nostrils, the sudden harsh line of his lips was its own answer.

“You should be hoping so, princess, if you wish to see yourself free of them.”

Her heart suddenly drumming in her chest, Emilia felt the first hint of uncertainty. What if he were telling the truth? What if she really were suffering under the effects of a spell?

Who *would* have done something so dangerous, and for what reward?

Tiny bumps chased across her shoulders and down her arms as the chill of fear swept over her. “What spells? What have they done to me?”

“Three spells have been cast on you, each one bound to the others. The first has smothered your Stone of Power, taking from you your birthright. The second has robbed you of your sensuality, your woman’s power that is your gift from the Goddess and a part to your magic. And the third spell shields them all, making the magic used against you invisible to the eyes of all but the most powerful.”

Emilia looked up at him, shock stealing away her voice. Could it be true? Had her magic, her very birthright, been stolen away? For over a dozen years she'd been attempting to awaken the power that should have been hers. For most of those years, she had held herself to blame for the failure.

It hit her then—the hope, the fury, the fear. The aching need to know that she was whole, and not an imperfect shell of what a royal of power should be. With every bit of her, she longed to be complete.

“Who did this to me? Why?” Emilia searched desperately through her memories for any trace of the magic performed on her.

“I don't know—yet. The magical signatures are not known to me.” Each spell cast, Emilia knew, left the mark of its caster behind, a residue that tied it to the magician who had cast it.

“Can you break the spells?” Her hands fisted tightly until the smoothly curved tips bit into her palms. The pain tugged at her, bringing her out of her thoughts and into the moment.

“I can.” Certainty filled his voice, while conviction was stamped in harsh lines across his grim face. “And I will.”

Large, warm, his powerful hands cupped her head with surprisingly gentle strength. Emilia's eyes shut at his quiet command. The last shards of pain slid away under the soft massaging movements of his fingertips, and her body relaxed without question under his touch.

She trusted him, she realized. From the moment she'd stepped through the doors into his rooms tonight, she'd been through a maelstrom of emotions. Anger, fear, hurt, desire, hunger, pain. And still he held her, promised her help. Offered her hope.

“I've warded the room already, which will prevent anyone outside from sensing the magic happening here. When these spells are undone, the energy that is released will try to return to its source.” His voice was soothing, deep and rough, yet faintly melodious as he settled her with words. Emilia wondered if he were using magic to mesmerize her, or if his words and fingers alone were doing the job. Either way she found she was calmer, more focused than she'd been in weeks. The desperation and anger that had been building up inside her were calmed.

He traced one finger faintly across her forehead, massaging the line where skin met stone.

“This beauty is going to wake up as soon as the smothering spell is lifted. And after a dozen years of being smothered, it is going to wake up at full, undisciplined power. I'll do what I can to channel the magic that escapes you, but I want you to do everything you can to harness your power as quickly as you can. Imagine a bottomless well—deep, with no beginning and no end.”

The image formed behind her closed eyes. Still water, dusky and calm. No bottom, only a surface smooth and settled.

“That is where your power will go. Bottomless, without end. No matter how much raw energy your stone wakes with, you must believe you can channel it into this limitless vessel.”



The image of still water now seemed vast, filled with unlimited possibilities. Emilia gave a slight nod to show she understood.

“This may feel a bit odd...”

For a moment, she felt nothing. Then the skin on her face began to tingle, as if a thousand tiny spiders ran back and forth beneath the surface. Uncomfortably, she tensed, her flesh beginning to tighten in reaction.

“Relax, princess.” Something warm and soft soothed her—his hand, stroking away the quivers of sensation.

He brushed her chin with his lips, dipping down to trace the column of her neck. Emilia’s head bowed back, offering the vulnerable skin of her throat to him. A murmur of approval came from him, the sound vibrating against her exquisitely.

Rorek shifted, his large body coming fully over hers to cradle her beneath him. He settled his legs into the vee of her hips, fitting into the curves of her body as though made for her. Pulling her into an embrace that was both protective and intimate he slid one arm beneath her shoulders.

Then he was kissing her, raw demand and male power crushing her lips. He tasted of hunger, darkly impatient, as he claimed her mouth as his own. His energy flooded her, wiping away doubts and memory of pain. The world around her faded away, until all that remained was a single point of contact where his mouth met hers. And then that point expanded, swelling to encompass her from the tips of her tingling toes to the top of her spinning head.

Emilia panted when he drew away. She clung tightly to his shoulders, attempting to pull him back. His kiss had left her aching, wanting. Needing.

“Touch me.” The words sounded ripped from his throat, urgent with his hunger. Her heart pounding in response to his commanding tone, Emilia obeyed without question.

She traced her fingers over the tight muscles of his back, tunneling her hands through the satiny hair at his nape. Emilia skimmed her hands across the smooth skin of his shoulders, then pulled him closer. Already achingly sensitive, her nipples tightened further as they rubbed against his chest, reminding her of her nakedness.

She traced lower, finding the rough line where breeches met skin. Demandingly, she pushed at the fabric, wanting to feel his warmth completely against her own. Rorek wiggled encouragingly in response, his sensuous movements placing his hips just where she needed them to be, allowing her to slide the no-longer-wanted clothes from his body.

Then he was naked, his body hard and heavy against her own. Between her legs, she felt the length of his cock. The vision of how its turgid length had looked being licked by his guard flashed in her mind. The flesh was as dark as midnight, as strong as shadowsteel. Both weapon and tool, it lay against her eager flesh.

Rorek caught her gaze with his own. The hunger in his eyes was a burning flame that threatened to consume her. His face was a mask of control, even as the flush of passion rode his hollowed cheeks. Then his mouth took hers again, his lips a hot iron that branded her as his. Her eyes slid shut as a whispered spell flowed from his open mouth to hers, pouring a column of crystal clarity down her suddenly parched throat into a soul that had been starving without knowing for a dozen years.

A flash of power swelled, and Emilia shivered as it rode her sensitive skin. Then an inaudible click, deep in her gut, ripped her world apart and scattered the pieces of her soul to the winds of the Gods.

Time seemed to stand frozen around them. In that instant, it seemed as though her life had been lived in shadows, every instant hidden from true knowing by a haze of deception. Now her senses came awake and alive as never before.

Rorek's mouth on hers suddenly tasted of spirits as intoxicatingly strong as if she'd drunk them herself. The scent of musk rolled off his skin, redolent with the smell of desire. His lips were the brush of a thousand butterflies, the shivering delight of a summer breeze, the sultry heat of a forbidden treat. Every touch was a joy, every taste and scent a treasure to be savored and linger over.

She opened her eyes and the colors of the world exploded around her. The brilliance of life shimmered where his skin touched hers, flares of power echoing with an ultraviolet light that had never been visible to her eyes before.

Her skin felt too tight, stretched as though she was being forced to fit inside a body too small to hold her. The bed linen against her back was an unbearably rough caress, the touch of each individual strand of thread seeming as unique as the touch of the silkworms that had formed them. With only a thought they warmed to her touch, softening and embracing her body in an unexpected embrace.

The moment swelled, frozen with promise, ripe with the possibility of destruction. Incredible strength filled her, struggling to escape the constrictions of unnatural binding. The power demanded its freedom, fighting to the surface and threatening to tear violently from her skin as a dragon hatchling crushes through the egg that has protected it for its young developing life.

Temptation beckoned.

Her skin began to heat as a raging flame seemed to burn it from the inside out. Throbbing need raced in her veins, a hunger she had never known before. The vast wave of power pulsed through the room with a sinuous force, and in shock she realized it came from her. She felt like a stranger in her own body. An all-powerful, wickedly tempted stranger.

"Focus, princess." The words were sharp, pulling her back from the edge of...what? Then the words were gone, and she was seduced anew by the swell of her own burgeoning strength.

Her magic grew, filling the room with its skin-tingling presence. She began to sweat as the room heated, and her lungs were filled with air that grew warmer with each breath she drew.

"Emilia."

Rorek's voice was a loud rebuke in her newly sensitive ears. Her magic flared, quick to anger at the insult. With a thought, she sent a tendril of power to smother his voice, unwilling to have her ears echo under the onslaught of his will.

The call of passion consumed her. So much power, flexing and writhing across her skin, demanding an outlet. A sense of panic filled her as she searched for an outlet, a way to release the beast that had consumed her.

Above her, Rorek's midnight eyes blazed. His hips moved against her own, bringing her back from the thrall of power. For an instant, the needs of magic ceded to the call of desire. Her legs came up to circle his hips, rubbing herself in demand against his cock. His name was ripped from her throat as she pulled at his shoulders.

A violent shiver ran the length of him and his breath hissed from wordless lips. Grasping her hips in his hands he stilled her, refusing her the dominance she was trying to grab.

Frantic now, her body convulsed against him. Her power flexed and flailed, surrounding them with roaring hunger that insisted on fulfillment. Distracted by the needs of her flesh, her power flew free, and she felt the wildness creep in as her shattered control fled.

She wanted more. Her body craved the hardness of his body entering her own. Canting her hips forward, she thrust insistently at his cock. Her howl of frustration filled the room when he refused to give her the penetration that her body craved.

She felt the throbbing pull of their power as his magic battled her own, fighting to bend her to his will. Then into the whirl of rage that was building inside her came a kernel of peace.

*Emilia.* Quiet, calm, Rorek's voice slid into her mind on a whisper. *Picture the pool, princess. Channel your power.*

She licked lips gone dry, the parched flesh thirsting for moisture. With his words came the image of a pool—deep, endless, still. Her magic raced through the room, searching for an outlet. Frantic at her loss of control, she threw her efforts into forcing her power into the depths.

*Give me my voice back, princess.* He spoke again in her mind, his mental words echoing steely resolve. Emilia's neck arched as he licked at the tender hollow in her throat, and she shivered as warm breath and moist lips woke sensitive nerves to shimmering life. Between her legs, he stroked at her bud, building a raging need to please him in return for the release only his body could grant.

Emilia relaxed a string of power she had forgotten she held. He moved his fingers faster, rewarding her for her obedience. Her body quivered its answer, her legs clenching at his hips insistently.

Rorek groaned in response, his voice released from her leash. She heard the tension in the sound, knew he felt the pull of passion as strongly as she did herself. Why was he holding back? She needed this, the completion that he still refused her. He slid his arm around her waist to pull her body tightly to his. Too

tight, too close, trapping his swollen cock against her belly. His body became a cage, forcing her to remain still beneath him when she longed to soar.

Her moans of need became a roar of frustration as she writhed and sobbed in his arms. The pool of power inside her shimmered, responding to her need. If he would not give her what she required, she would take it. Her gaze met his, desperate anger battling steady control.

Rorek looked towards the door, and Jo'el turned to them as if called. He still cradled the twin daggers in his large hands. Smoothly, he crossed the room, sliding his blades into waiting sheaths as he passed a nearby table. His eyes gleamed with hunger, the only visible emotion on his otherwise-still face.

"Hold her, Jo'el. The princess seems to have lost her patience, and my work has barely begun."

Emilia thought that the words were more for her benefit than for the guard, who had climbed onto the bed beside her and pulled her arms over her head before Rorek had finished speaking.

Rorek rose to his knees. Jo'el bent over her, using one strong hand to cradle the sensitive skin on her wrists. Both caress and threat were implied by his firm grasp. He ran the other across her throat, trailing warm fingertips down the sensitive skin of her chest until his fingers splayed across the skin of her belly, then traced lower still.

His hand slid between her thighs. The carnal hunger that Rorek had held at bay roared to life at the guard's touch. With his fingers, he sought the sensitive nub of flesh and began to stroke it gently. Every muscle in her body clenched in response to his movements.

"Oh Gods," she breathed. Rorek moved to her other side and knelt by her hip, leaving her writhing between the hardness of their bodies. Jo'el bent over her, his mouth seeking the taut tip of one rosy nipple and sucking it firmly between his lips. The feel of his tongue and teeth as they delicately nibbled her breast had her arching her back, aching to have him pull more of the sensitive flesh into his mouth. Relentlessly, he sucked, pulling at the nipple until her body throbbed in an echoing rhythm. She forgot everything but the hot throb of need that was beckoning her ever closer to release.

Licking, sucking, devouring, Jo'el's teeth and tongue teased her sensitive nipples until his name was wrenched from her lips. The world ceased to exist but for the three in this room, and the wants and needs that consumed her.

Distantly, she heard Rorek begin to chant, a low rumble of words in a language she could not follow. Her eyes flew to meet his gaze as she felt the air in the room grow heavy, condensing beneath the power in his words. Breathing became difficult, her lungs laboring from one gasp of breath to another. And then on the next breath came a new rush of power, cleansing warmth that swept away a smothering coldness she hadn't even realized had possessed her until it was gone.

It slid through her body, racing through her veins in response to the words Rorek whispered. Jo'el flicked his fingers across her clit, focusing her attention on the urgent need that had grown to consume her.

"Please. I need..." She thrashed desperately against the hands that held her.

The firm hand between her thighs quickened in response, stroking her to a fevered pitch. She canted her hips upwards, doubling the agonizing pleasure his touch was raising. So close to the edge, she flew ever higher, racing to a finish she had never dreamed to reach.

The stone between her eyes began to glow, casting a circle of warm light that she could feel more than see. The core of power she had mastered expanded, until her body seemed filled with an irresistible strength. Her very heart pulsed with its force, throbbing with need and hunger for release.

Control slipped her grasp. Her climax was coming, bearing down on her with the unavoidable force of the winter winds sweeping in across the eastern seas. With a cry of discovery, Emilia flew over the peak to find the exquisite pleasure that thrust her into paradise.

## Chapter Six

“Come back to us, princess.” Emilia’s eyes flew open to meet Rorek’s gaze. As the spells that chained her had broken under his power, he had watched her through her climax. The brilliance of the stone that had flared to life between her eyes had stunned him, as had the urgent flare of passion she had woken in him as she writhed in his arms. Now he pulled her up, cradling her against his chest in the sweetest of embraces.

His body hungered to feel her tight wetness wrapped around him. Watching her come apart beneath Jo’el’s mouth and hands had only fed his needs. He still rode the sword edge of demanding arousal. His cock throbbed for the touch of her sweet fingers. His skin ached for the hot sweep of her tongue. But the needs of his flesh were going to have to wait for another time.

He had the undeniable feeling that events had been set in motion tonight that would change everything about the life he had known. Every magically enhanced sense he possessed had flared to alarming life when the second spell had broken. His wards had held their magic inside the room, but he had been shocked by the full strength of the power that had awoken in the princess.

With newfound tenderness, he brushed his lips against her own. Emilia’s skin hummed beneath his lips, a faint vibration as her magic sensed his own and responded. Curious, he lowered his mouth to rest his lips against the amber stone that glowed on her fair forehead. It seemed to pulse in response as power met power, answering his unspoken questions with a surprising sense of intelligence and purpose. The stone was almost alive with a puzzling, magnificent force he’d never before encountered.

*She’s magnificent.* His guard’s thoughts echoed his own, and he nodded agreement.

“Did you break the spells?” Emilia’s voice was strong, without any sign of fear or nervousness. Her clear blue eyes met his own, no hint of the desperation that had been there before remaining. Her fear had faded, and she seemed more the confident, remote princess he had watched for nine months than the desperate woman of a few hours ago. But the passionate, responsive woman that had awoken in their arms was now there as well. Admiration for the royal heir took a deeper hold in his soul.

“Two broken. First, the evocation that held you from your body’s natural sensuality, then the transmutation that kept your Stone of Power from awakening. The third, the spell of illusion, was dispelled when the first two broke.” He felt a deep satisfaction knowing he’d thwarted someone’s plans for the princess. Now if he could only find out who was behind those plans to start with.

Emilia pushed herself up to sit cross-legged on the bed. She raised a hand to her forehead, one curious finger tracing the glowing stone. Rorek was surprised at his sense of loss when her body no longer touched his own.

“What does it look like?”

“It is a rich, golden amber, princess. It darkened to an opaque reddish color in your arousal, but has since returned to a yellow gold clarity. It glows with power against your skin.”

“The stone has awoken.” The words came from her lush mouth in a stunned whisper. “I had given up believing it would ever happen.”

A short silence fell after her words, as if she expected them to understand exactly what this meant to her. Rorek threw his guard a questioning look, but Jo’el was as puzzled as he was.

“Princess, I know that the royals of the Bright Elves have what your people call a Stone of Power. But outside Silverhaven, the meaning of the Court of Stones is not known. And inside Silverhaven, it isn’t something the Bright Elves I’ve talked with have been willing to explain to an outsider.”

She nodded, a light of understanding coming to her eyes. “The Gods of the Court of Stones have shared their power with our people since our earliest memories. The Stone of Power is the physical manifestation of that power, the symbol of the blessing of the Gods.”

The amber stone began to glow brighter at her words. Catching sight of her reflection in a mirror near the door, Emilia pushed up from the bed and crossed the room, her movements graceful and quick. Rorek forced himself to let her move away, even though every step took her farther from him. She stopped when she neared the glass, her skin paling as she got her first look at the stone glowing with the light of its full power. “Sweet Mother.” Her voice was low, as awe robbed her of all but a whisper of speech.

The muffled whisper of footsteps in the outer room jerked Rorek to his feet. Light flashed on shadowsteel as Jo’el leapt from the bed and grabbed his daggers in one smooth movement.

There was a feeling of pressure as his wards were tested. They held, but... “They are attempting to break my shields. Stand clear of the door, princess, in case they succeed.”

Wide-eyed, she nodded and stepped back. For a long breath there was quiet, and the air grew momentarily heavy, then cleared. Suddenly the room was filled with the stench of rotting flesh.

“They dare try to throw death magic at us?” Rorek felt a chill go down his spine as he recognized the taste of desperation in the spells being cast against them. Quickly, he strengthened his wards against the new attack, forcing the undead powers out of the room.

*We can hold our position for a bit but we are at a disadvantage here* Jo’el noted.

“Agreed.”

At Emilia’s startled look, Rorek spared the time to explain. “Jo’el feels we are not in a good spot here. Our attackers hold the only exit.”

“Do you share mindspeech?”

“Since we were blood bound.” Before he could explain further, the door began shaking in its frame, forcing Rorek to throw a spell of reinforcement across the entrance.

He immediately began to feel the strain from maintaining the mental wards while magically reinforcing the physical barrier. The combined efforts of the spells drew heavily on his power. Gritting his teeth, he set himself to holding off the attacks as long as he could, and strained for the power to cast a protective barrier spell in the small space where he stood. “Jo’el, come closer. I can only surround a small space with a shield of reflection. You need to be inside it.” The guard backed up until he was close enough for Rorek’s spell to cover him.

Suddenly Emilia’s hand was in his. To his shock, he felt her magic rise through their joined flesh, a warm flow of power that rushed through his veins and left him almost light-headed from the combined energy. It wasn’t the first time he’d worked with joined powers, but he could not remember any other time that the magics had combined so instinctively, twining together as tightly and flawlessly as if the two mages had spent a lifetime learning to tame their powers into a complementary force. Emilia caught his gaze with her own, and he nearly smiled at the awed excitement he felt in her mind.

“It’s incredible, isn’t it, princess? Feeling your power answer your call, bending it to your will, molding it to your purpose.”

“I’ve never felt anything like it,” she whispered.

“Neither have I, quite like this,” he admitted.

Just how strong was their combined power? By himself he would by now be stretched nearly to the point of collapse from the double demands the attack was putting on him. With Emilia’s hand in his, he felt refreshed. Pulling her strength as his own, he was able to set a third spell in place. The air around them shimmered briefly as the protective bubble formed, then winked out of sight, invisible until needed.

“Can you tell who is behind this, Rorek?” Jo’el asked the question out loud, his raspy voice tight with anger. That an ambassador would be attacked while he held guest status was an unheard of breach of diplomatic protocol.

Rorek focused on the spells still being flung at his wards. He couldn’t identify the caster, but the magical signature was now familiar.

“Whoever he or she is, it is the same mage who bespelled the princess.” He might not know the mind behind them, but he recognized the bitter signature to the casting after his earlier work to break the spells. From the sounds coming from outside the door, he would soon be face-to-face with the source.

A loud roar shook the floor beneath their feet. A cloud of dust and smoke filled the room, all but the space inside his spell barrier. Rorek remained still, Emilia’s hand holding firmly to his. Nothing had ever felt so right.



## Chapter Seven

They came in, not through the door but through a hole that was blasted straight through the wall itself. Evidently too impatient to take the time to break through the shielded, reinforced door, the attackers had instead opened the room from floor to ceiling by taking out a chunk of the thick wood and stone wall, making a gap as wide across as three men standing arm in arm. Messy, but certainly effective.

Emilia peered through the haze, her back straight and her head high. Regally, she glared at the still-faceless bodies across the dust-filled, smoky room. Her panic of earlier was gone, and a new sense of confidence filled her. If those who had ambushed them here expected a quick and bloodless victory, they were about to learn differently.

When the dust began to settle, she could make out the shapes of half a dozen attackers gathered in the opening. Instinctively, she ducked behind Rorek and Jo'el, following the impulse to hide her newly awoken stone from the view of their assailants. Rorek's hand squeezed hers reassuringly, but he kept his eyes on the attackers.

With the merging of their power had come a shocking bond with the magician himself. She felt him in her mind, a steady and vibrant presence that was both foreign and reassuring. His emotions were clearer than his thoughts but she could read both if she tried.

Right now he was furious.

The smoke continued to clear. She held her tongue, waiting to see who would speak.

"Ambassador Northmark. Our magicians sensed a problem in your chamber tonight." Emilia wondered why she wasn't surprised to hear her stepmother's taunting voice.

"How interesting. There was no problem here, until someone tried to enter uninvited." Rorek's voice was calm, with no sign of the violence she felt through their bond.

"The council will disagree, I think. Using magic to seduce the princess and ruin an approved alliance with the southern clans will not be looked upon kindly."

Emilia couldn't hold her tongue in the face of such lies. "If there was seduction, Stepmother, it was on my side. And there was no magic involved in that."

"Foolish girl! Stop hiding behind these outsiders and come here. The council will want to speak to you after this."

Rorek's hand in hers tightened warningly. Hearing the impatient sound of swords being pulled from sheaths by the waiting guards, Emilia decided she would rather stay where she was for the moment.

“Your magician must have been mistaken, Consort Gisa. Perhaps he mistook my shielding spells for something else. I assure you, there was no ill magic worked within this room tonight.”

“You lie, Ambassador Rorek. Mage Dalgare here said that it felt like outside magic was being worked here. Shameful, that a guest in Silverhaven would take advantage of our hospitality this way.” Dalgare was Gisa’s magician, brought with her when she came to Silverhaven. He had worked in the shadows behind Gisa’s skirts when they had first arrived, gradually taking more power in the Silverhaven mage hierarchy until he had taken the seat of court magician three cycles ago. Since then he had ruled the court mages.

Gisa was silent for a minute, evidently weighing her options. When she spoke again, her decision became clear. “And to use such forces to kill the princess—shocking.” Emilia shivered. The woman must be mad to reveal her plans so clearly. Mad, or certain of her success.

Emilia was going to go with mad.

In the space of a heartbeat, a deadly assault was launched. Deadly for those attacking at least. The guards threw themselves at what they thought were vulnerable victims. Emilia saw the shield flare to life as four bodies met the protective shield, then crumbled soundlessly to the ground, leaving a scent of scorched flesh.

Gisa yelled out, a cry of furious denial. “No! They must die. They cannot leave here alive to tell of what happened.” The quiet voice of the magician beside Gisa grew frantic as he changed his spells, but nothing he conjured could break the shield powered by Rorek and herself.

“Enough, Stepmother.” Emilia stepped from behind Rorek’s broad back, giving her stepmother a first look at the stone that glowed with unmistakable power between her eyes. “Your plot has been revealed.”

She felt Rorek reaching, shaping their power and flinging it into one more spell. A glowing field surrounded Gisa and her pet magician, caging them in place and preventing them from fleeing if they had tried.

Her stepmother’s eyes widened with shock. Emilia took a small bit of satisfaction from seeing the woman struck momentarily speechless. The consort stared at the Stone of Power, bitter hatred twisting her features until she was unrecognizable as the woman who had plotted for power for so long. Her mouth was contorted in a silent grimace of disbelief. Unfortunately, the silence did not last long.

“What sort of trickery is this? You ungrateful bitch. I’ve raised you for half your life, and now you try to use your magic to trap me? Your father is a sick old man, not even capable of ruling this court any longer. Who knows what would have happened to the council if I had not been here to guide them.”

Gisa’s motion to her mage was so slight that Emilia would have missed it. Through the link with Rorek, she caught it, and understood it for what it was—an order.

“Don’t try it. You’ll—”

Rorek’s words were cut off by a muffled explosion. The consort’s mage, obeying an order from his ruler, had tried one last evocation, intended to blast through the bonds of the spell that held them. His

attempt proved fatal. Unable to break through, the mage's power lashed out at the forces trapped within the barrier. Emilia watched wide-eyed as her stepmother and the mage seemed to dissolve before her eyes. Within seconds, the two bodies had collapsed upon themselves, torn apart by the spell the mage had carelessly set in motion. Then the bodies turned to dust, and whatever powers had been called forth returned to their origins with a growl of disgust.

## Chapter Eight

Several hours later, Emilia found herself moving quickly through the low-lit halls toward the rooms Rorek and Jo'el had been moved to after the earlier attack. Seconds after Gisa and her faithful mage had died, an entire regiment of the Palace Guard had descended on the ambassador's room, drawn by the sounds of the fight. She'd barely had time to exchange a word with Rorek or Jo'el before she was swept off to the council's chamber for an emergency session. But the entire time they'd been apart her thoughts had been of them.

The council had been stunned by the night's events. She'd faced a grueling series of questions, a large part of it conducted under the truth spells of the council mages. With her Stone of Power now alive, there had been no doubt about the honesty of her responses, and eventually the council had accepted the truth of her answers.

The happiest moment of the session had been when word was sent from the king's physician. King Vayle had pulled himself from his sickbed, feeling better than he had in many days. Emilia and the council suspected his illness had been the work of Gisa's pet mage, not a natural sickness, and that his recovery was tied to the death of the mage and his spells. She had stopped in the king's rooms after finishing with the council, and he had been moved to tears when he saw her Stone of Power had finally come to life. His exhaustion had been clear, and she'd left after promising through happy tears of her own to return tomorrow with the details of what had passed while he was ill.

Now she all but ran through the halls of the palace, impatient to reach her lovers. *Lovers*. They were quite a pair. Rorek, with his infuriating charm, his mocking wit, his roguish good looks. Jo'el, so intimidating with his silent, watchful presence. They were as different as two elves could be. But they shared one thing—her. She grinned at the thought, and picked up her skirts to move faster.

What if she had imagined the bond that had joined them earlier? The moment her magic had mingled with Rorek's, she had felt she had the world at her fingertips. His magic had grounded her own, giving her the control she desperately needed. Through that link had come a connection with Jo'el that had lent her strength and clarity as well. Her heart, soul, the essence of her being had recognized them as if they were a missing part of herself. But had they felt the same?

Would they be waiting for her? Did they ache for her, as she ached for them?

Emilia jumped when a shadow separated itself from the wall near Rorek's door, and then relaxed. With half a dozen of his smooth gliding steps, Jo'el stood beside her when a moment before she would

have sworn there was no one but herself in the hall. “That’s a nice trick. You’ll have to teach me how to become invisible like that one day.”

Jo’el took her hand. His twilight eyes were solemn when they met hers. “He’s waiting for you.”

Emilia’s breath caught. “Rorek?”

“He is questioning himself. His mind is filled with doubts, and his heart is shadowed.” The guard studied her in the uncertain light of the hallway, his face unreadable.

“And you?”

She was treated with a rare smile from the fierce-looking elf. “Rorek is my rock, my center. Our bond is deep, and I give him things that no one else can. But he had forgotten how to laugh until he saw you.”

“I make him laugh?” Why did the thought make her insides melt?

“He’s been more alive in the time we have been here than I’ve seen him in many a cycle. When the Gods send sunlight into the shadows, it is not for this guard to question.”

“But Rorek questions everything.”

“He is cousin to the king. I am only a guard.”

“More than a guard, I think. Earlier, Rorek said blood bound. What does that mean?”

“It is...complicated. Bound through magic and blood, we are closer than brothers, more than friends.”

“Lovers.”

“As you saw. I can read his thoughts, even though he has tried tonight to shut me out.” Jo’el flicked his gaze to the closed door at the end of the hall.

“Why is he shutting you out?”

“Because he is getting ready to tell you goodbye.”

Emilia’s heart seemed for an instant to stop beating. “Why?” The word came in a whisper.

“For you.” With those words and a look full of expectations she wasn’t sure she could meet, Jo’el let loose her hand and faded back into the shadows. When Emilia finally recovered from the shock enough to follow, he was gone.

She swallowed hard. Rorek was going to leave. Without giving them a chance to even explore what they had found together.

Oh, no he was not. Determination flared in her gut. Taking a deep breath, she raised her hand. The door opened before she could knock. Rorek stood there dressed only in his breeches, a bleak look in his eyes.

Before he could say a word she was in his arms. Hungry, demanding his response, she kissed him. Expecting resistance, she was ready for it when he kept his lips closed to hers. Emilia let her demand show, licking at the seam where his lips were pressed together, nibbling along the line of flesh, demanding he open until he gave in with a groan. His mouth tasted like desperate hunger. When his tongue finally

plunged into her waiting mouth she felt like she'd come home from a journey she'd thought would never end.

He picked her up, his arms tight around her waist as he swung her through the doorway. Nudging the door with one foot he closed them in, shutting the palace and its problems out. For now, this time, they were only a man and a woman alone.

Before they had made it halfway across the room, he had loosened the ties on her dress, and it dropped forgotten in a pool of abandoned satin as he carried her to the bed. Her magic flared to life, recognizing in Rorek something that completed her as nothing else ever could.

Her body felt hot as the flames of need ran wild. Emilia quivered in his arms, unable to stop the trembling that had started the minute his hands touched her flesh. Greedy to touch him in return, she ran her hands over his bare ebony shoulders, tracing his dark flesh with fingertips that yearned to feel his skin under her own. A ragged moan came from his throat when her fingernails raked the tightly clenched muscles of his back, bringing a quick smile to her lips.

"I want you, princess. I ache to feel your fair body wrapped around mine, hear my name on your lips." His voice was rough, his breath coming fast against her cheek. With a harsh growl, he laid her on the bed, moving his fingers swiftly to strip her of her undergarments. Then she was naked. His hungry gaze consumed her in a lingering caress full of starkly approving arousal.

"I told myself if you came back to me tonight we would only talk." His jaw was tight, his fingers clenched by his sides.

"Talk later, Rorek. Make love to me now." How could she talk when her body was on fire for his touch? Reaching for his hands, she placed them against her belly. Her magic flared as his skin met hers, a golden spark that cast shimmering light on the bed. His power pulsed in response, their energy merging once again. She could sense his urgency through the link, feel his desire for her. She shivered as their combined thirst cried out to be sated.

He shifted his hands, stroking up across the pale skin of her stomach. Ripples of delight followed his touch. When he reached her breasts he slowed his movements, drawing out the pleasure. Her nipples clenched in answer, forming into tight buds that throbbed for more.

By the time he replaced his lips with his fingers she was hungry for the feel of his mouth on her skin. She groaned as he surrounded one plump aching tip with moist heat, rasping the tender peak with his curled tongue. When he sucked her flesh deeper into his mouth, shaping nipple and breast with his tongue and lips, her body throbbed in response. He tugged, his cheeks flexing with the pull, and her body arched into his.

She held her breath, desperate for the exhilarating rush of pleasure that was racing to claim her. The feel of him pressed against her, his hands cradling her closer, his body tight with need, drove her higher.

“Gods, you are so beautiful.” His voice was hoarse as he eased away. “I want to lick your creamy skin from the tip of your toes to the top of your head, and taste every inch in between. But I think that is going to have to wait for later.”

He pulled back to stand by the bed, leaving her skin still warm from his touch. She watched wide-eyed as he unbuttoned his breeches and pushed them from his lean hips. Her eyes went to the flesh he had exposed, now nakedly, shockingly erect. And coming closer.

Sliding one leg onto the bed, he knelt by her head. Close enough to touch, all that beautiful flesh near enough that the smell of him filled her senses. Her fingers clenched into fists, itching with the urge to stroke. He seemed almost to read her mind.

“Touch me. Let me feel your sweet hands touching me.” The strained note to his voice told her how much he wanted to feel her hands on his flesh.

With only a moment’s hesitation, Emilia gave in to the impulse. Slowly, she sat and reached for him, placing one hand on the hard thigh that was closest to her hip. In hushed silence, she ran her fingers across the hair-dusted hardness, delighting in the quiver of muscle beneath her palm.

“How shall I touch you?”

“Any way that pleases you.”

Uncertainly, she studied him, looking for a hint to his desires. Rorek took her hand in his, raised it to his lips and tenderly sucked on each tip in turn. After lavishing attention to each finger, he lowered her hand to rest on his chest.

“Start here. Run your fingers across my skin. Feel the difference, the softness of the tips of your fingers against me.” Shyly, she followed his directions, enjoying the way his muscles clenched beneath her touch.

“Stroke my nipples. Men get pleasure from such a caress, just as women do.”

Emilia circled the ridges made by the ebony crests. A rough cry was pulled from him by her exploring touch. Delighted at his response, she echoed the move on his other side, tweaking it more firmly. Remembering the ecstasy his mouth had given her, she placed her lips on his chest. Gently, she tugged at the nipple, stroking it with her tongue and drawing it into her mouth. His groan this time was raw, a ragged sound that was filled with primal need.

Emilia grew bolder as his body responded eagerly to her touches. She trailed her hand down, past the rippling muscles of his chest, and traced the dimpled concave of his stomach. She smoothed her fingers through the few hairs that were scattered below, delighting as his body tensed under her seeking hand. His response was an instinctive, sensual movement of hips and thighs, pleading that she touch him lower.

“Touch my cock.”

Her eyes dropped to his erection. Long and broad, it thrust up from his lap, rising from a curly nest of black hair. The wide shaft was smooth, as dark as the skin that covered the rest of his body. It thickened at

the head into a plum shape. She shivered at the thought of being possessed by him, uncertain how he would fit that into her much-smaller body. He watched her with burning eyes as she slid her hand lower to trace the line of hair.

Sweat beaded on his face as her hand began to explore. He grew harder at her touch and his cock swelled in her hand, too thick for her fingers to meet when she tried to encircle him. Emilia ran her hand down the velvety skin until it just kissed his pelvis, then pulled slowly back up until she cupped the swollen tip. His flesh trembled in response, and a bead of moisture pooled under her grasp.

“Do that again.” His voice came out in a whisper of sound. She felt his pleasure through their link, a sweet bubbling heat that flowed through her core like sun-warmed honey. His pulse beat heavily, throbbing through the swollen flesh she caressed.

Emilia lowered her head until her lips just brushed his cock. He smelled of musk, salty and rich. He clenched the sheets by his thighs, his strong hands straining the fabric. She shivered at the thought of what would happen when he lost control.

She dabbed at him with her tongue. The taste of him filled her mouth, cream and salt. Delicious. She slid her lips around him, filling her mouth with his hardness. Saliva flooded her mouth and she swallowed, jumping when Rorek groaned in response.

“You’re killing me, princess.” His hand was in her hair, pulling her off just when she would have sucked him deeper into her mouth. She could feel his excitement, a throbbing need that mirrored the ache in her sex. With a lithe movement, he had her stretched on her back, his hands cupping her ass. Her thighs were spread open across his lap as he knelt, nudging the folds of her sex with his cock, but he didn’t enter.

Emilia smiled shyly up at him, curiously enjoying her helpless position. She trusted him like she had trusted no other. “Now who’s teasing who?” She writhed in his grasp, straining against his hold until he was nestled against her wetness.

The head of his cock slid slowly, just a finger length into her body. She tightened around him, feeling the delicious pressure as he eased into her core. Then sobbed when he pulled slowly out. He made her burn with a wild need that threatened to tear her soul from her body, and teased her with his retreat.

“Rorek, please. I need you.” She whimpered as he moved, another slow, measured stroke that must have been designed to drive her insane.

“You are too small, too tight, princess. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t mind a bit of hurt. I can’t stand not having you. Now, Rorek, I need—”

His mouth covered hers, cutting off her words before she could beg. And beg she would have, if it would ease this sweet torture. For a moment, she was distracted by his lips, soothed by the tender touch of his tongue stroking against her own. Then he began to move again.



Full, so full. Her body stretched under the steady pushing as his cock began to forge its way into her. Emilia panted softly, torn by the need to breathe and the need to soar. The urge to push closer fought the need to pull away. And still the pressure grew as his body claimed hers.

He shifted his hands, tilting her up until her hips cradled his own. And then with a word, he claimed her—heart, body and soul.

“Mine.”

His thrust breached the last barrier of her innocence. For an endless moment, the world stopped around her. Her heart seemed to cease to beat, her lungs to breathe, and there was nothing but the burning pain in her body and the one word that rippled across the boundaries of the world she knew.

Her body surged upwards, the pain disappearing into a pleasure greater than any she had ever known. Again, Rorek plunged deep inside her. He held her closer, wrapping her tightly in his hard, firm grasp, then drove into her with unrestrained surges. Her body climbed higher to meet his, faster and faster until their bodies moved in perfect harmony. Magic met magic and became something more, until her climax swept through her in pulses of ecstasy. Above her, Rorek tensed, then thrust into her with a hoarse shout that echoed in the chamber. “Mine!”

“I love you, Rorek.” The words came from her in a whisper.

Two mages, joined with their power. In an instant they became one.

## Chapter Nine

Rorek stared down at the woman nestled sleepily into the curve of his shoulder. Her pale skin bore a rosy flush from their lovemaking that made her more beautiful than ever. She was the most precious thing he'd ever held. She had been untouched, giving him a gift that he would always treasure. And in the midst of passion, he had claimed her as his, and been claimed in return. But it was a claim they had no right to make.

She was the heir to the Silverhaven throne. He was a cousin to the Shadow Elf king, but he was one of several dozen cousins in a very large court. They not only came from different races, but from different castes in their royal lines. Her future would come with a crown, and with someone who would sit on the throne beside her, sharing the burdens and joys of ruling her people.

Then there was Jo'el, his bonded guardian. Emilia had seemed willing to accept him into her bed, but how would she feel when she understood the bond that tied him to his lifelong friend? Deeper than that of a brother, more than that of mere lovers, the shadow bond would tie them together for the rest of their lives. Rorek could sense Jo'el waiting nearby.

They would have to leave Silverhaven. He would have nothing but the memory of this night with Emilia and the magic they had shared. He would return to his cousin and ask to be assigned to another post. Maybe he would eventually be able to think of the Bright Elf princess without feeling as if a ragged hole had been torn through his heart.

He shielded his mind, trying to raise a barrier between them before he lost his soul along with his heart. A wave of coolness swept over him as the shield snapped into place.

"What are you worrying about?" Emilia's head shifted on his shoulder, trying to meet his gaze. Her husky voice demanded an answer. She stroked him lazily with one dainty hand, tracing languid circles around his navel. Feeling his body respond, he caught her hand in his own and held her tightly.

"Us. You are Emilia ra Elawyn, Princess of the Blood of Silverhaven. I am merely a cousin to a king, and not even a very closely blooded cousin."

"What does that have to do with us, Rorek? We are also a woman and a man."

"We aren't—"

She moved her hand, jerking from his grasp to make a sharply dismissive gesture. When she spoke, her voice carried the determination and strength he had come to respect in her. "We aren't what, Rorek? I'd

rather talk about what we are. I may be new to my magic, but I had the impression that the bond we shared was not a common one. Is that true? Have you ever felt this with another before me?”

“No.” He watched as her stone glowed, and he swore he felt a flare of satisfaction coming from the amber facets.

“And what of this—” In a pointed motion she moved her hand, encompassing them both and the bed they had turned into a rumpled, decadent pile of tousled covers and misplaced pillows. “Are you telling me that what we shared here was not just as special?”

Sighing softly, Rorek pulled her hand to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss into her palm. “Emilia, *this* as you refer to it was wondrous. If you were just another mage, I could never let you go. But you are no commoner, not even minor nobility that can make her match for desire, or even for love.”

He was startled by the peal of laughter that came from her then. “Sweet Goddess, Rorek. You woke my powers. My Stone of Power has not only accepted you, it has welcomed you. I can *feel* it, how it responds to you. By every sign, you have the approval of the Gods themselves. If you think my court will care that you weren’t born into an appropriately royal house, and reject you for that, you’ve got a lot to learn about the Bright Elves and our ways.”

Gently grasping her chin, he stared deeply into her eyes and lowered the shields he had thought to protect himself with. As soon as he did, he felt the warmth of her magic embrace him. The pleasure, the joy of her blossoming love was there in her heart.

“Don’t think I will let you walk out of here without a fight. I waited my whole life to feel this way. You make me whole, when I never thought to be. Our magic knows. Our powers know. Please, Rorek. Look into your heart, and believe what you see there.”

If he’d had any doubts, her words striped them away. She’d captivated him from the moment he had seen her. Desperation had driven her to his bed, but magic and love had found them there.

“Besides, Jo’el seemed as if he would be very disappointed if I didn’t convince you to stay.”

“He did?” When had his guard decided to take an active roll in matchmaking?

“Umm hmm. I think you should tell him to come join us and stop lurking in the hallways now.”

Suddenly serious, Emilia caught his face in her hands, her palms cradling his cheeks until he met her gaze. “I know this is early. But I do love you, Rorek. My heart knows, my mind knows and my magic knows.”

“And Jo’el?”

“Do I love him? Not yet. But he is a part of you. I feel him in you, and you in him. I do not think it will be long before I come to have feelings for this man that means so much to you. And if you cannot be happy here in Silverhaven, I will give up my place in succession, and come with you to Darkhaven. My life is now bound to you, my heart to yours.”

He caught her mouth in a scorching kiss, unable to resist her sweetness. “Emilia, I don’t care where we live. If your future is here, then our future is here. You captured my heart, and your magic calls to my own.”

She threw her arms around him, drawing him closer. “Then stay with me. I spent most of my life believing that I was flawed. Now I know I was only missing the part of me that made me complete—you.” Tears sparkled in her eyes, but he knew they were tears of joy.

His kiss this time was a promise. “You were never flawed, Emilia. But I’ll happily spend the rest of my life showing you just how perfect I think you are—for us.”

*Jo’el, get in here.* Rorek sent the mental order, even as he tugged Emilia closer to him, rolling back into the pillows until she sprawled over him. With a satisfied groan, she followed, her body flowing over his until her curves were pressed against him. Behind her, he sensed movement, and Jo’el separated himself from the shadows.

## Chapter Ten

“Get on the bed.” Rorek growled the words, but his mood was almost playful.

Jo’el moved quickly to comply. In seconds, he had shed his clothes and was in the middle of tangled sheets and hot naked flesh. He couldn’t decide which to touch first, the hard ebony flesh he knew as intimately as his own, or the soft fair skin that smelled of sunshine and cinnamon.

“What do you want us to do, princess?” Rorek’s voice was rougher than usual as he growled the question.

“Love me.” A slight hitch gave her words added meaning, a plea for more than just their bodies to pleasure hers.

Unable to resist, Jo’el brushed aside the curtain of pale hair that flowed across her shoulders to expose the sensitive skin of her back. He ran his tongue down the center line, nibbling gently at the hollow where spine met waist. The scent of sex filled his nostrils, and he slid lower, relishing the earthy smells of her arousal. Instinctively, she bowed her back, pushing her hips up and giving him better access to her most sensitive flesh.

“Jo’el.” She twisted her head to stare down at him over one pale shoulder as she moaned his name. He buried his face between her legs, working his tongue through the moisture that was waiting for him there. The taste of her filled him, musky and sweet.

*Turn her over for me.* Never had Jo’el been so grateful that he could talk to Rorek with his mind as when his mouth was busy elsewhere. Soon she was sprawled across the bed between them, her pussy now right in front of his eager lips. Rorek’s hands began a sensual exploration of her breasts, first massaging one pale mound then tweaking at its swollen nipple.

“Open up for me, princess.” She shifted her hips, giving Jo’el room to lie fully between her legs. With a pleased murmur, he licked through her curls, rewarding her with firm pressure from his tongue as he lapped at her slit. Excited cries and moans left her lips in a steady flow.

When he reached her clit, she raised her hips from the bed in reaction. Bucking up to meet him, she began to plead with them. “Please, I need more.” When he dragged his thumb through the wetness to press against her swollen nub, she thrashed in response.

“Jo’el, please—fuck me now.” Her voice was a sweet mixture of desperation and desire.

“I will. Just not yet.” One finger, then two slid into her sweet honey. His tongue moved faster, and he began alternating licks with gentle nips of his teeth. Finally, he sucked her clit into his mouth, running his

tongue down the sensitive flesh. Her body tensed, her bared skin flushed a rosy shade, and then she came with a scream.

He pulled away, sitting back on his heels to watch as her frantic breathing slowed. When she opened her eyes at last, his cock pulsed in answer to the passion still stamped across her face.

“More?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know how beautiful that was?” Rorek was watching her, had been watching her through her climax. His eyes glittered with sensual hunger. With one large hand, he was slowly stroking his rigid cock.

Emilia watched avidly to see what pleased him. Rorek had stopped her earlier, before she had done more than taste him. She was determined to finish exploring his enticingly unfamiliar body now that she had the chance.

Eagerly, she rose to her knees, turning to face the dark mage. She cupped his shaft in her hand, drawing an encouraging moan from his lips. Wrapping her fingers tighter around him, she stroked from base to tip.

The mushroom-shaped head swelled, and fluid flowed from the small opening. Without thinking, she licked him clean, pleased with the earthy taste of his need.

“Gods!” Rorek thrust up, pumping his cock through her open lips and filling her mouth. He buried his hands in her hair and set up a slow, steady rhythm of thrust and retreat.

“Suck.” Rorek’s one-word command had her instinctively obeying. He groaned again and tightened his grip.

Behind her, Jo’el wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her back until her ass rested against his hips. His swollen cock pressed against her thighs, and she rubbed herself against it with a happy purr. Then she shifted, laying her arms across Rorek’s thighs to support her weight and spreading her legs in an open invitation. In the space of a heartbeat, Jo’el thrust deep, sheathing himself in her core. He murmured his approval as her flesh welcomed him home.

Jo’el’s powerful thighs flexed, moving her faster. She reached for control, wanting to take longer with their pleasure. But the deep thrusts from behind, the hard cock that was filling her mouth, stripped her of any urge to slow. Carnal hunger nipped at her heels, and she felt her body speed to answer a need as old as time. Her pussy clenched around him and her legs began to quiver.

Her fingers moved down Rorek’s cock, dipping to tease his balls with her touch. Then her hands stilled, and a hot flood of power swelled from the three of them and raced through her veins.

Behind her, Jo’el tensed, thrusting faster as his control snapped. Gripping her hips, he pounded harder and deeper. The feel of his cock stroking her tight passage pushed her to the edge.

A final cry of pleasure came from Rorek's throat and then her mouth was flooded with the rush of his warm salty fluids. Instinctively, she swallowed, happy to find she enjoyed his essence as much as he had hers. With one last deep thrust, Jo'el climaxed behind her, and she came undone, following them to the end.

Her heart slowed to a normal pace as they collapsed into a sweaty but satisfied heap. Snuggling into their arms, Emilia could not remember ever feeling so happy. In one incredible night she had found love, magic and had her father returned to her. From desperation she had found strength and love.

Who could tell what the future would hold? She knew she couldn't wait to find out.

## About the Author

Ember Case was born in Louisville, Kentucky, the second of five children. After a dozen years in the Blue Grass State, another dozen in Alabama, college and work as a waitress, bartender, office clerk, veterinary assistant, cashier and bookkeeper, she settled on the east coast of Florida.

There she met her husband and learned to slow down and have one job at a time. Two children and twelve years of marriage later, she decided it was time to start the adventure she'd been dreaming about her whole life. Now she spends a large part of her day putting on paper the fantasies that take life in her imagination.

If she had spare time, she'd probably enjoy spending it cooking, gardening and practicing photography. She enjoys them anyway, just not as often as she'd like.

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To learn more about Ember Case please visit [www.embercase.com](http://www.embercase.com).



Look for these titles by Ember Case

*Now Available:*

Hunting the Huntress

*Nilana has one night to make the choice of a lifetime: Accept the love of two men, or keep hunting—alone.*

## Hunting the Huntress

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No man has ever tempted Nilana to give up her freedom. Life as a huntress has given this shapeshifter everything she thought she could ever want. But one look at the warrior and the shaman who have come to run the Harvest Hunt has her questioning her own decision.

Tate and Cheveyo have ridden far across the plains, drawn by dreams of the woman they are sure will unite their tribe. They just never thought they'd have to convince their fantasy woman that they are the future she has never considered.

They have one night to convince the huntress that becoming the hunted can lead to a beginning, not the end of all she holds dear.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Hunting the Huntress:*

The moon had barely begun its path through the night sky when she'd slipped away from the maidens. Hoping she'd gotten away from camp before the warriors had time to begin their hunt, she'd headed for a quiet spot by the river. After covering the slight trail her footsteps had made she let her totem answer the lunar call, enjoying the feel of the autumn wind ruffling through her fur as she breathed deeply the smells of the coming night.

She'd headed for the river alone, eager to lose her scent in the quick running water. A hunter could not follow where there was no trail. She had been almost giddy with her power as she headed out under the clear, bright sky of the early twilight.

She had hoped for a quick run through the night followed by a quiet evening of rest under the full moon while the hunt went on without her. Her hopes had been quickly dashed. It was there by the river they had found her, the warrior and the shaman. She'd stared at them for a moment, unable to believe they had tracked her down.

And there the chase had begun.

She should have taken them more seriously. Overconfident in her ability to hide her trail from any hunter in her tribe, she had taken them lightly when she first picked up their scent. Nilana admitted it had thrilled her just a bit to be pursued by the men so many of the maidens were dreaming of. That excitement had faded as they proved hard to shake from her trail. She should have remembered her role tonight was that of prey, not huntress. It was a truth driven home again and again as they ran her down the path they wanted her to take.

A glance over her shoulder now showed only one form behind her. Tate, the warrior. His longer legs continued to eat the ground between them. Under other circumstances, she would have enjoyed watching him run. His glossy brown coat rippled with the powerful muscles beneath. There was awesome strength in his lean body, whether he took the form of man or cougar. As a man he stood head and shoulders above the warriors of her tribe, his long body impressively formed of muscles and sinew. But when he called his cougar totem to take its form, he became the *Chimaga* who was already the source of legends.

Pursuit by the legend had lost its charm for Nilana. She needed to get to higher ground.

The canyon curved ahead and she used the tight corners to her advantage. Her legs were shorter than his, but her agile body was better able to take the corners at high speed. Shooting out of the last curve, she saw a fork ahead in the path. *Yes!* With any luck one of the branches would lead up and out to the forested foothills where she would have the advantage. To freedom.

*Get out of the canyon. Get to the hills.* The two thoughts ran through her head with the rhythm of her paws as she sped across dry ground.

She poured her last reserves of energy into a final burst of speed. Higher ground was to the left, and that way should lie freedom. Great bounding leaps took her onward, hope adding strength to her feet as she reached the split.

Already springing for the left path, she roared her anger when she found she had been outmaneuvered. The shaman Cheveyo stood guard there quietly, a furry, gray shadow blocking her path.

With a snarl of frustration, Nilana headed right, further down the canyon. She had not scouted this far past the forking canyon during the days of hunting and had no idea what lay ahead. Desperately she prayed for a way out. *If this path dead ends...*

It did indeed dead end.

Nilana skidded to a stop and began to pace the small space, her tail whipping behind her as she studied the steep walls on all three sides. She had been herded into the canyon like a buffalo in the hunt. She admitted the hunters had chosen their trap well, running their target into the ground and making sure there was no escape. She could have admired their skill, if she were not the prey.

Angry howls escaped her as she sprang from one side of the canyon to the other. Desperation clawed at her. Capture during the harvest hunt was not only a blow to her pride. It could mean an end to her freedom. Her heart pounded with frenzied outrage.

A muted roar came from behind her. They had managed to corner her, but she was not down yet.

Nilana backed into the corner made by the rough, rocky walls. She would not give in without a fight. She put her backside to the wall and faced the opening, then dropped to a crouch. A warning rumble escaped her throat. Let them come to her.

*In the darkest of nights, hope shines through.*

## My Lady

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Pawn in her father's maniacal quest for power, Princess Nae Corda doesn't see any way of escaping her impending marriage to the leader of the Oonkaen. That is until a dark shadow enters her prison-like bedroom—and offers her hope.

King Tyan will do anything to save his kingdom and the lives of his goblin people—even if it means flying into his enemy's land to steal away an elvish princess. Ty has plans for Princess Nae. What he didn't plan on was falling for her—heart, wing and soul.

But in a world where war, dragons, lies and danger lurk everywhere, the future is uncertain at best.

Warning: This title contains dragons, goblins and elves all behaving badly.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for My Lady:*

In her rooms, Rynae Corda, the only daughter of Callum Corda, the Bruin Sidhe's king, lay on her bed. Unable to sleep, she lay staring up at the ornate wood carvings all along the underside of her bed's canopy.

Though it was night, her eyes could easily make out even the finest detail. The carvings told a story. It was one she loved, one she remember from childhood, told to her time and again by her beloved nurse, Eda. She had been more of a mother than the woman who'd born Rynae. Her guide, her mentor, her friend.

Now dead.

She closed her eyes before the tears could fall.

There would be no more tears.

She would bury each and every vestige of emotion under a layer of ice. She would need it, because if she let herself feel anything, she would feel everything. And the fear of what lay before her was enough to choke her.

Eda had tried to help her escape.

Eda had paid with her life.

Nae would pay with her virgin's blood in six more months, and in guilt for the rest of her very long life.

*"You have nothing to feel guilty over, beloved."*

Nae tuned out the familiar sound of her brother's voice, although it was hard to do when he spoke within her mind.

He sighed and although hundreds, perhaps thousands of miles separated them, she heard the sad, resigned noise as easily as if he had stood next to her. Of course, he'd never once stood next to her—she'd never even met him outside these silent communications and the odd dream.

Only thirty-two, Nae had been born years after the bloody goblins had taken her brother captive. There had been times when her brother had been the only grounding force in her life, the only one who'd ever truly cared for her.

It was the royal blood in her veins, her bosom, hips and belly that made her so very valuable to her father. A royal whore, already sold off to the highest bidder. Nae squeezed her eyes tight and tried not to think about Guldric, tried not to think about what was coming.

*"You sound resigned to your fate, Nae. But you cannot resign yourself to it—you cannot give in."*

She rolled onto her back and sighed. "So very easy for you to say, brother mine. But you're not the one held captive in this gilded cage. The one ally I had is now dead, dead because she tried to help me. What else should I do but resign myself?"

*"So you've changed your mind about being mated to the Eruke?"*

Changed her mind? Nae shuddered and covered her face with her hands. No, she hadn't changed her mind. She'd rather slit her wrists with a dinner knife—except her father had already foreseen that possibility and her food was served to her cut down to pieces so small, even a small child could chew them with ease. She'd rather throw herself from her window and crash into the hard, unforgiving seas below, but he'd placed bars of iron, platinum and silver over her windows. The bars were done in a lovely, artistic swirl, and they very effectively kept her from taking that avenue as well.

*"I do not wish you to escape by ending your life, beloved, so please, stop thinking about all the ways you'd like to end it,"* Valin said, his mind's voice harsh and cold.

"Even death is better than mating with that...that monster," she said, rolling onto her belly and pressing her face to her pillow. The Eruke truly was a monster, though his outward appearance was a bit deceptive. He was easy enough to look upon, she supposed. But she feared him. She feared the lust in his eyes when he looked upon her, the way he'd fondled her in front of her father as they discussed the marriage agreement, the way he'd pinched her nipples and then shoved her skirts up and pushed two thick, long fingers into her virgin's sheath to check for her hymen. He'd grunted in satisfaction and then warned her father, "She's to be just as tight the night we wed."

Her father had shown no emotion at the display. None. Not disgust, outrage, not even amusement. He couldn't have cared less to see his daughter treated so.

Perversely, Nae had taken to using her own fingers on her body far more often than she had before. Whether it would make a difference, she didn't know, though in truth, she doubted it would matter overmuch.

It wasn't the marriage bed she feared, not truly. It was just going to the marriage bed with *him*. He would hurt her. She saw the desire for pain in his eyes. Because he was so much larger than she, that pain would be even worse. He stood nearly two heads taller and Nae wasn't a petite woman. She was slender, but like many elves, she was tall, easily as tall as many mortal men. But Guldric was nearly twice as wide as she was, weighed twice as much, if not more. He had big, battle-hardened hands, the brutal strength one would expect to find in a barbarian king and absolutely nothing of kindness or compassion lived within him.

She knew. Because she could see within his heart. If he had any kind of soul, she would have seen within it as well. But he was soulless, and there was nothing there for her to see.

To see within the heart and soul, these were her gifts. To look within another and know their strengths, their weakness, their passions and their fears. It was that gift, perhaps, as much as her body that Guldric wanted.

He thought he'd use her as his pet seer by day and his broodmare by night. The Bruin Sidhe's men might not father children easily, but their women, it seemed, were very fertile. Particularly with seed from those outside their own kind.

"I cannot do this, Valin," she whispered and damn her weakness, those tears once more burned her eyes. She blinked them back, determined not to give her father another tear, determined not to give her future another tear. She might be the daughter of a corrupt, treacherous man, but her blood was royal. Her blood was elvish. Once upon a time, that had meant something grand.

*"You are something grand, beloved. Do not despair. You'll have another chance, a chance to escape what our father would do. You must just be ready...and brave enough to take that chance."*



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