



# Violet Summers

*Queens of Merab*  
**Temair's Fyre**

Changeling Press

# **The Queens of Mareb 1: Temair's Fyre Violet Summers**

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**ISBN: 978-1-60521-331-6**

**Formats Available:**

**HTML, Adobe PDF, EPub**

**MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader**

**Publisher:**

**Changeling Press LLC**

**PO Box 1046**

**Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046**

**[www.ChangelingPress.com](http://www.ChangelingPress.com)**

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## **The Queens of Mareb 1: Temair's Fyre Violet Summers**

On the world of Merab, women rule, while men wield the magic. It's been an equitable system, until now. Temair knew that one day she'd have to step up and take her place as Queen of Emetra; she just didn't expect for it to happen so soon!

Now she finds herself on a Tour of the Queendom in search of her four Consorts -- the four men whose Elemental magic will awaken hers. The first stop of her journey is in the Fyre Lands, where a stern and sexy Fyre Lord strikes sparks off the prickly princess.

It's only when Temair's life is threatened by rebels that Miach, Lord Fyre, realizes the depth of his feelings for the princess. Faced with rebellion and betrayal, Miach and Temair must find the strength within themselves and within each other in order to take the first steps to being true rulers.

## Chapter One

Temair couldn't ignore the brisk, powerful knock on her door. She recognized the sound and knew it was her father, Denich - her Fyre sire. She sighed and closed her book. The intensity of the knocking increased, and she shook the wrinkles out of her skirt as she hurried to answer it.

Just as she'd suspected, Denich stepped through the door, then shut it gently behind himself. Denich did almost everything -- except knocking -- gently, a trait that Temair, who shared his temperament, knew was misleading. His temper was as hot as his fyre. So was hers.

In spite of the simmering aggression he hid behind his calm demeanor, Denich had always been the one to soothe her after one of her infrequent nightmares. Temair knew she was safe with him.

"Father Fyre." She smiled at him in genuine pleasure and stood on tip-toe to press a kiss on his cheek. He returned her embrace, but behind the smile, his eyes were worried. "What's wrong, papa?"

"Nothing's wrong, exactly," he answered softly as he led her back to the window seat where she loved to spend hours engrossed in her books. He seated himself beside her, then winced and withdrew her book from under his bottom.

"In study as usual, I see." He gave the book a closer look. "Haven't you read this one already?"

It was a history of the ancient battles that had swept Merab before three powerful Queens were able to consolidate and regulate the world's natural magic on the world's three continents: the animals of Turnin, the magical creatures of Zirah, and the Elemental magic of Temair's own continent, Emetra.

She smiled and took the book from his hand, setting it on the table behind her. "It's better than any fictional adventure ever written." She shrugged. "Bringing order from chaos..." Temair shrugged again self-deprecatingly. "Well, it appeals to me."

Denich touched her hand. "Bringing order from chaos..." her father mused. "That is rather what brings me to you this morning." A comforting frisson of warmth radiated from his touch. "Temmie, your mother has sent me to retrieve you. You are to join the family in her private rooms."

Temair's heart skipped beat. "There is something wrong." She rose quickly and headed for the door. "Is she all right? I mean, she has been looking a bit pale lately."

Denich laughed as he caught up to her outside her chamber. "I assure you, Temair, you needn't worry about your mother's health at the moment."

\* \* \*

The Queen's private bed chamber was one of Temair's favorite rooms in the palace. The warm cream and gold of the walls was offset with vibrant jewel-toned accessories that reflected the Elements -- and personalities -- of all four of Temair's fathers. It was comforting and familiar.

What was not comforting and familiar was the sight of her mother, sitting up in bed while Torrent, Temair's Rayne Father, held a cloth to Akasha's head.

Temair shot a furious glance at Denich. "You said she was fine," she muttered as she ran to her mother's side.

Her mother smiled and pulled Temair down to cuddle beside her, much as she'd done when Temair was a small child. "Don't worry so much, Temmie. I am perfectly all right."

A snort had both women turning to Tobin, her Aire father. He was all but vibrating with suppressed excitement; his long, snowy hair lifting faintly in an unseen breeze. The Queen laughed. "My Lord Aire, do you wish to tell our daughter our news?" Tobin's pale gray eyes sparkled, a sure sign of good things to come.

Tobin laced his hands behind his back and rocked back on his heels, grinning. "We're pregnant."

Temair didn't know whom to hug first. She turned and wrapped her arms around her mother, tears of joy flooding her eyes, then rose to throw herself into her Aire father's arms. He was laughing as he spun her around and passed her to her Rayne father. By the time she ended up in the arms of Marl, her Earth father, Temair was dizzy with more than joy.

Moving back to her mother's side, Temair snuggled down with her head on her mother's shoulder. "Everything's okay so far?" The entire family had grieved Akasha's inability to carry another baby to term, but Temair had also battled loneliness until Nuriel and Sorcha had come to foster with her, as their mothers had with Akasha. The castle could be a very empty place for a small girl alone.

She sat up abruptly as a horrifying thought filled her mind. "Oh, no," she breathed. Her mother's sigh verified the horrible realization she'd had. "It's time, isn't it?"

Akasha pulled her back down, into her embrace. "I'm going to the country, at least for the duration of my pregnancy," her mother confirmed. Temair gave her a pleading look, but subsided immediately when her mother added, "I won't let anything interfere with this child's well-being."

"Of course," Temair responded quietly. She'd known this day would come, but her mother was still so young and vital that she hadn't expected it for years. Her stomach cramped at the thought of the responsibility.

"There's more, Tem," Denich added, sitting next to her on the side of the bed.

Her tummy tightened further. "I'm... I'm expected to find my Consorts... Now."

Denich took her hand and sent healing warmth surging through her body. "You must be bound to your Consorts before you can ascend."

Temair bit her bottom lip. She barely knew what to do with one male, much less four. She was only twenty-four! She should have years before she had to think about this. Oh, and by the four elements, she would have to visit each royal house in search of her mates.

She was well on her way to a full out panic attack when her mother's words penetrated. "Of course, I won't abdicate until you've returned from your tour," Akasha was saying. "Once you've returned, the ministers will help you to untangle all the political red-tape involved in ruling." Her mother paused, looking worried. "There is one item that I need to tell you about."

Temair waited. Her fathers, all four of them, looked outraged, while her mother looked troubled.

"There are rumors throughout the land that factions of men plan to rebel against us and our sister Queens."

Temair sucked in a startled breath. That was the last thing she'd expected to hear. "Why?"

The Queen shrugged her shoulders. "There are several theories floating about. Some men have claimed abuse by their wives. Others don't like how property rights are distributed. We have always had grumbles but now there have been a few skirmishes between our guards and the rebels."

"Idiot men," muttered Marl. The Earth Lord had no patience with what he saw as foolishness, and clearly this supposed rebellion fell into that category. "Maybe if they were doing their job and protecting their women, they'd get the rewards they feel they deserve."

Akasha sent Marl a loving smile. "Not all men are as remarkable as *my* men, my lord."

Marl returned her smile with one of such surprising sweetness it nearly caused Temair's tears to return.

Akasha turned back to her daughter. "Temair, my darling, you are more than ready to take my place. Choose your mates well. Choose men who will be good advisors to you, but choose also men who light your heart." Another painfully sweet look passed between the Queen and her four Consorts.

Temair nodded her head and kissed her mother's cheek. Inside she was all but screaming in terror. While she didn't much care for it, she'd learned the protocol and



history. She'd read every biography and autobiography of the Queens of Merab she could get her hands on. But all the book-knowledge in the world couldn't prepare her for the actuality of being Queen. There was no point in arguing about it, though. The only thing begging for a delay would accomplish was to add stress to her mother's already perilous pregnancy. No, Temair would have to suck it up and do what was best for her country, her family, and her unborn baby sister or brother.

\* \* \*

Akasha sighed and leaned back against her pillows. Temair was as prepared as a young woman could be to ascend as Queen. Akasha had no reservations in that respect. What worried her was how her daughter would fare in the search for her four husbands.

Torrent ran a hand over the cloth on her head and Akasha sighed again, this time in pleasure. Her husbands were as eager for this child as she was. They'd suffered at her side through the miscarriages and stillbirths, and she knew they would sacrifice their lives, if necessary, to protect her throughout her pregnancy.

Denich joined Torrent as Marl, her Earth mate, moved to stand by Tobin. "She's terrified," Denich commented, and the other three men nodded their agreement.

"She'll do fine," Marl insisted, as solid and unflappable as ever.

"She'll do fine," Tobin agreed, elbowing Marl in the ribs. "Once she figures out what it is she's supposed to be doing."

## Chapter Two

Nuriel heaved a sigh and flung herself across Temair's bed. "A kingdom full of beautiful men, and we get stuck with the oldest and pruniest of your mother's warriors." Nuriel hadn't been quiet in her disappointment over their escorts' lack of sex appeal.

"I'm not here to have a fling with the guards," Temair reminded her, moving to help her maid lay out her clothing for the evening's formal dinner.

"I know! That's the point," Nuriel wailed. "If you're about to tie yourself down forever, the least she could have done was make sure you had someone 'fling-worthy' in your escort."

Temair rolled her eyes, then smiled gratefully as Sorcha moved to join her at the wardrobe.

"Thanks, Sorch." Before this trip Temair had never been responsible for tending to her own clothing. She still wouldn't have, but her maid had taken suddenly ill mid-journey. They'd had to leave the poor woman at an inn just over the border into the Fyre Lands.

"It's strange," Sorcha mused. "The way Stephania got so sick."

"I'm sure it was something she ate," Temair commented, running a damp cloth over her leather slippers.

"The only thing she ate that we didn't was that fruit tart," Nuriel pointed out, rolling over on her stomach and kicking her legs in the air.

"I guess it's lucky for me that I'm allergic to strawberries," Temair agreed.

"And lucky for Ellie and me that we didn't want to eat it in front of you," Sorcha added.

Nuriel shot Sorcha a dark look. "Don't call me that." Sorcha just grinned.

"Well," Temair interrupted the incipient fight. "Hopefully she'll be recovered enough to join up with us on our next stop." Temair headed for the vanity and began removing the pins from her hair.

Nuriel hurried to her side and snatched up the brush before Temair could reach it. "We can only hope," she agreed. "May the elements help you, girl, if you have to do your own hair for this whole tour."

Temair and Sorcha's eyes met in a moment of perfect, exasperated understanding as Nuriel began to tame Temair's wild curls.

\* \* \*

Even Temair had to be impressed by Lady Fyre's hospitality. Her hostess had arranged a welcome feast that would awe the Queen herself. Temair blinked, realizing that soon she would be the Queen herself. Her head spun a bit, and not from the untouched Fyre Brandy that filled her glass.

Sorcha leaned in and whispered, "I think you should be insulted. The eldest son isn't here."

"Don't be silly," Nuriel hissed from Temair's other side. "I hear he's nothing but a sullen thug. We don't want him here." Temair pressed her fingers to her temples, trying in vain to press back the headache pounding there. "Besides, Vashti and Yakob are delicious."

Temair had to agree. Vashti and Yakob, Lady Fyre's two younger sons, were quite lovely to look at. Unfortunately, Yakob seemed more interested in gaining the attention of Temair's very male guards; and Vashti, while paying superficial attention to Temair, was having trouble dragging his eyes off Nuriel's abundant cleavage.

"Yakob's not an option," Sorcha muttered, echoing Temair's thoughts. "He likes boys." Nuriel gasped, then narrowed her eyes and studied the man in question. Finally she gave a disappointed huff.

"Yes, I guess I see what you mean." She brightened immediately, though. "But Vashti is absolutely beautiful." She fanned one hand over her exposed bosom, and

didn't seem to notice how Vashti's eyes followed the movement. Temair and Sorcha shared amused eye-rolls.

"Yes, he is," Temair whispered back. "But he appears to be as dumb as a rock."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing," Sorcha argued quietly. "Dumb as a rock means you can manage him without any trouble."

"And enjoy the scenery while you do it," Nuriel added happily.

Temair knew she should agree with them. She knew that taking easily manipulated arm candy as a Consort could make her life potentially easier. Yet that wasn't what she wanted. Her mother had been able to take the time to choose her Consorts for love. Temair knew that wasn't an option for her, but she'd hoped for at least friendship and mutual respect. Somehow she didn't see Vashti tearing his attention away from the mirror, or the nearest beautiful woman, long enough for her to develop either for him.

She was jolted from her musings by the clear chime of crystal as Lady Fyre rose.

"We are more than honored that our Crown Princess and her esteemed companions have chosen us for the first stop on this, their tour." Appreciative murmurs whispered up and down the table, masking Sorcha's softly muttered, "Yeah, well, it was the closest Noble House."

Temair stifled a wholly inappropriate laugh.

"Fyre House is noted for many things," Lady Fyre continued, oblivious to her esteemed guests' running commentary. "Of course for the strength and passion of our people." Vashti shot Temair a suggestive smile and wink, and she had to choke down another laugh at how ridiculous it made him look. His mother continued blithely. "Also for our amazing spirits," she raised a glass of Fyre Brandy and her guests joined her in a toast. "But what few people have witnessed is the beauty of our art." She made an elegant gesture toward the doorway, where a group of men dressed in soft burgundy trousers and snug, short-sleeved shirts emblazoned with glittering gold flames were entering with silent grace.

"I present to you the royal Fyre Dancers!" She clapped her hands and the men immediately began a clapping, stomping rhythm. Within moments Nuriel and Sorcha's commentary stopped as all three women were caught up in the beauty created by the Lady's Fyre Dancers.

\* \* \*

Temair placed her hand on Vashti's arm and allowed him to lead her down the winding corridor that led to the heart of House Flame's power. She would have preferred to go to her chamber and read a bit before bed -- she would have preferred to be almost anywhere else besides with the insipid Vashti -- but Nuriel had been so excited when the young Fyre Lord had offered them the tour, that Temair hadn't been able to say no. Now, as they entered the large chamber, a sullen crimson glow lit the air, painting everyone in its light with the suggestion of heat.

She heard Nuriel's indrawn breath behind her, and Sorcha's little hum of approval and suppressed a smile. Of course Nuriel would be entranced by the near naked men diligently working with the flames. Even Temair had to admit they were an impressive sight. And Sorcha would admire the dedication of the men training.

"This, of course, is the seat of our power." Vashti had kept up his narration for the bulk of their tour. Temair knew that most women would be caught up in the sound of his voice, the expressions on his boyishly handsome face. She just found him puffed-up and tedious.

She gave a little sigh and tried to look attentive.

"The men of Fyre," he continued, "draw their magic from the sacred flame." He indicated the deep pit where the crimson glow originated. "Depending on the nobility of a man's birth and the extent of his fyre he might need to be in close contact with the flame in order to access his magic." He gave her a self-satisfied smile. "I can access my fyre from anywhere on the estate," he murmured suggestively. Nuriel gave an appreciative giggle. Sorcha gave a decidedly unladylike snort. Temair just rolled her eyes.

In an attempt to keep from giving voice to a rather sarcastic comment, she cast her gaze around the chamber. Everywhere she looked, men were training. To one side, a good looking man was carefully winding a whip of flame around his body. The flame originated in a pillar in one palm, crawled up his arm and across his shoulders. It was clearly supposed to continue down his other arm and pool in his opposite palm, but the man cursed foully as the flame sputtered, flashed over his torso, and then died. Vashti laughed a bit mockingly, and Temair liked him even less.

In another corner a pair of slender youths shot balls of flame at each other in rapid succession. As each mass of fyre approached, the young man in question would attempt to capture the flame and turn it back on his attacker. One of the combatants lifted a hand and closed a fist around his adversary's fyre ball, extinguishing it neatly. Both young men shouted in victory, pausing in their mock battle to exchange a high-five that shot sparks in a halo around them.

Temair had never really considered the military implications of Fyre House. It was obvious to her that the men of Fyre were training to use their flame as a weapon, and from what she'd observed, many of them were becoming quite adept. She didn't know whether to feel comforted by this development or, in light of the rebellion, a bit threatened.

As the two young Fyre Warriors danced around each other in infectious joy, another man entered the chamber. Temair's gaze snapped back to him as he gave one of the celebrants a sharp rap on the back of the head and muttered, "Act like this during battle and you'd be dead." The boys stopped their capering, looking abashed. Temair paid little attention to their guilty looks. Her attention was riveted by the new arrival.

He was taller and broader than most of the men in the room. His hair, bound in a warrior's knot on the top of his head, was darker than any she'd seen since her arrival at the Noble House, darker even than Vashti's deep flame red. This man's hair was nearly black, the color of rubies over black silk.

His skin was the fair, milky color of a natural redhead. Lighter even than the cream of Sorcha's complexion, and lacking her friend's generous smattering of freckles.

No, this man's skin was flawless, stretched like shimmering velvet over a set of muscles put on breathtaking display by the brief loin-cloth that was his only concession to modesty.

Temair's eyes helplessly traced the silky looking line of dark hair leading from his navel to the low band of natural cotton.

She knew the exact moment he became aware of their group. He was warned by Nuriel's appreciative whisper of, "Oh, my." His eyes, chaos-black and lit with amber sparks, flicked disinterestedly over them all. That incandescent gaze dismissed Vashti contemptuously, skimmed over her entirely and lingered over Nuriel and Sorcha with predictable appreciation before passing on in disinterest.

For the first time ever, Temair felt a flicker of jealousy over her friends' extravagant beauty.

"Who is that?" Nuriel breathed, and Vashti heaved a put-upon sigh.

"That's just Miach," he muttered, clearly resentful.

"The eldest son?" Sorcha questioned.

"Yes," Vashti snapped, an irritated bite in his voice. "The glorious eldest son."

Miach had strode to the fyre pit and was holding one hand over the blaze.

As Temair watched, a slender thread of flame wound up from the pit and wrapped lovingly around his arm. Temair felt her own flame, a legacy from her Fyre Lord father, flicker deep at her core and blinked in surprise. She'd never felt one of the elements so clearly.

Miach moved to face another man, also clad only in a loincloth and rope of fyre, and bowed respectfully. The man returned the gesture, and the two shifted into graceful positions facing one another.

"What are they doing?" Nuriel breathed, as Miach and the rather lovely man he faced each raised an arm behind himself, arching over in a pose that reminded Temair of a scorpion ready to strike.

"Fyeria," Vashti answered in a bored voice.

"Fee-etta?" Nuriel questioned in her best little girl voice. Temair was too interested in the reply to roll her eyes as she usually did when Nuriel went all helpless female.

"Fyeria," Vashti repeated slowly. "It's an archaic fighting style that some of the more obsessive compulsive males have adopted." Most of the men who'd been training or just hanging around the area had moved to circle the two combatants. One of the young Fyre Warriors Temair had watched earlier began a rhythmic clapping and was soon joined by the others. In seconds the chamber was filled with the deep clapping and stomping of dozens of hands and feet.

Miach and his opponent stood poised for a long moment then, as if by some invisible signal, both exploded into motion. The men passed each other in a modified cartwheel, bent arms used to propel them upward into elegant, flaming arcs.

"It's like the dancers at dinner," Sorchia noted, and Vashti nodded.

"Exactly. It's considered a cultural art more than a legitimate form of combat." Miach chose that moment to prove his brother wrong, springing lithely into a handstand and executing a series of leg-scissoring kicks that knocked his opponent's face from one side to the other. The other warrior dropped to the ground, and Temair assumed the match was over, but she was wrong. Instead the fallen man caught himself on one hand, elbow bent, and spun to knock Miach's hands out from under him. Miach tumbled into a graceful fall, immediately rolling to his feet to repeat the bent-armed cartwheel that seemed to form the base of the fighting style.

"It looks pretty combative to me," she murmured. Vashti gave her a startled look; she hadn't had much to say all evening, so apparently he'd thought she couldn't speak. Nuriel nudged her shoulder and gave a soft sigh.

"It looks pretty sexy to me," she murmured back.

"Oh, yeah," Sorchia added. All three women laughed quietly.

"Well," Vashti interrupted rather loudly, "if you like that sort of base entertainment. Personally," he took a hold of Temair's arm and began to lead her rather emphatically from the chamber, "I prefer more cerebral pursuits."



"Um," Sorcha choked back a giggle. "Do you mean *cerebral*?"

"Right," he responded. "Like I said."

Temair didn't bother to pay attention to the rest of the conversation. She was too busy looking over her shoulder at the battle still taking place on the floor. Miach had paused, frozen for a split second while dodging a spinning kick from his opponent. As she watched, his fyre-whip curled the length of his arm, crawled over his shoulder and pooled in his other hand.

He turned his head abruptly and their eyes met for one scorching second where he seemed to really see her. Aside from her parents, no one really saw Temair when Nuriel and Sorcha were around, and Temair had always liked it that way. Now, with Miach's crackling black eyes burning into her, Temair couldn't think, could barely breath, and she was more certain than ever that being invisible was a good thing.

His attention left her with an almost audible snap as he turned back to his fight.

## Chapter Three

Temair tried desperately to keep her attention on Vashti. By the elements, he was getting on her last nerve. If she had to listen to him blather any more about how his tailor was the most sought after in the kingdom, she was going to scream. He might be beautiful to look at, but he would be a horrible advisor. Her options, though, were limited and he was the only one of the three brothers to be formally presented as a Consort.

“Princess, I assume I can bring my clothing designer with me to your home?” His question brought her out of her thoughts.

“Huh? Oh, sorry. My Consorts will be allowed to bring anything they choose to make them more comfortable.” They’d been on their walk for nearly an hour now. It was the first time they’d been completely alone since her arrival. She’d tried desperately to act interested in what he had to say, but she’d never been good at keeping her emotions off her face.

Instead, she let Vashti talk away as she looked at the wonderful foliage in the gardens. Large red and orange fyre lilies lined the cobblestone path they walked on. Long yellow ivy climbed the onyx garden walls, and black swallows fluttered around them. She loved the vibrancy of the place. The bright colors fascinated her. The temperature here was much hotter than she was used to, a dry heat, but she enjoyed the warmth.

A spot of dark ruby caught her attention and Temair looked for the source. Miach was leaning against the midnight wall, the red of his hair a stark contrast to his pale flesh. The dark ruby tresses were pulled back from his face, exposing knife-edged cheekbones. He didn’t bother to hide his scowl. She felt as though he was looking deep into her very soul, and finding her lacking. He was dressed in a simple white linen shirt

and black breeches. His black leather boots rose to just above his knees, emphasizing his strong, muscular thighs.

Temair was so taken by his appearance she forgot to watch the uneven path, and snagged her foot on a loose cobblestone. With no help from Vashti, who'd paused several paces ahead of her to glare at his brother, Temair wind-milled her arms until she regained her balance. As she straightened herself, the book she was carrying fell to the ground. She had bent over to retrieve it when she heard him speak.

"I didn't realize they taught princesses to read." Just like his fyre, Miach's voice was deep and rich. Temair's belly filled with an equal amount of warmth, which she told herself was caused by irritation.

"Yes, well, I imagine there is a lot about princesses you don't know." Temair retorted.

"I can assure you, madam, that I have known my share of noble women, and reading a dusty book is not high on the list of things they enjoy."

She wanted to slap the smirk off of his face. She just bet he'd known more than his share of noble women. And she was quite sure that reading was the last interest he'd discussed with them. The idea set off a spark of jealousy that burned in her chest, though Temair knew it was a totally irrational reaction to this man who clearly held nothing but contempt for her.

Vashti laughed. "Miach is one to talk. He can't keep out of the fyre pit long enough to notice much of anything, including our fairer sex."

"Watch your tongue, little brother. You spend far too much time in front of the mirror to know what I do. I don't have time to walk around thinking of nothing but myself; I'm training our warriors to serve the Fyre Lands."

"And your Queen," Temair interjected.

"Yes, and the Queen," he agreed readily enough, but his sarcastic tone didn't escape her notice.

"Keep to the pits, Miach," Vashti sniped. "You have no idea how to behave with a woman. You might as well be one of the rebels."

"Little brother, I remind you again not to talk about what you do not know." Miach's anger sent a gust of heat across the garden path.

"Do you sympathize with the rebels?" Temair held her breath as she waited for Miach to answer. She couldn't explain to herself why his answer was so important, but it was.

He merely shrugged. "Princess, you live in a palace and most likely see only a small sample of how men are treated by their women. So, maybe I do sympathize with those who want better lives, who don't want to be taken advantage of or, worse yet, abused."

"I assure you, sir, our Queen does not tolerate abuses against anyone, be they woman or man." The idea that her mother would allow a male to be harmed was ridiculous. Akasha loved her people -- all of her people -- and would sacrifice herself, if need be, for any one of them.

Miach bowed slightly. "I never meant to imply that Queen Akasha condones such things."

"Come, Princess," Vashti interrupted loudly. "Let us finish our walk." Temair took the arm he offered, ignoring her reluctance to spend any more time with the vain peacock of a man. "I think my brother has made himself enough of an ass today," he continued as he led her majestically down the path.

She felt Miach's eyes on her back. Little fingers of warmth danced up and down her spine. Her body tingled and her temperature rose. She didn't like her body's reaction to the rude warrior any more than she appreciated his whiny-puss of a brother. It made her feel out of control and off balance. She took a deep breath, determined to ignore it.

Vashti led her around a corner, into a beautifully sculpted maze. Hedges rose imposingly around them. It was like something from one of Nuriel's romances, and Temair was instantly enchanted. Barely ten feet down the path, though, she heard a swish of sound and before she could even blink, an arrow of pure flame streaked toward her. She jerked back, instinctively trying to avoid the flaming missile, which just

missed her thigh, slicing through her skirt and pinning her briefly to the hedges before igniting in a rush.

More arrows flew, and Temair tried to split her focus between batting out the flames that were trying to crawl up her skirt, and dodging the new threats.

"Help!" Vashti shrieked, hiding briefly behind Temair as flames rained down on them. "There's someone here!" he screamed, and took off down the path leaving Temair alone slapping at her flaming dress.

Miraculously, the hail of arrows stopped, and the smoldering blazes in the hedges fizzled out. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for the fyre consuming her dress. An icy tendril of fear crawled over her flesh as she attempted to douse the magical flame.

One minute she was furiously slapping at the material of her gown, and the next she was on the ground, slammed hard onto the stone path. The heavy weight on top of her added to her panic and she began to punch and scratch at her attacker. Someone grabbed both her wrists and pinned them tightly on either side of her head.

"Princess! Be still. Let me absorb the fyre." She quieted immediately when she recognized Miach's deep voice. He let go of one of her wrists and skimmed his hand down her body. She pushed up on one elbow to watch; fear, adrenaline and fascination warring inside her. He let his hand hover over her burning skirt and before her astonished eyes the flame jumped from her dress to his hand. He held it there for a moment, a spiral of flame dancing over his hard, callused palm, before clenching his fist and extinguishing the flame.

She'd read about the awesome abilities of the Fyre Warriors, had pestered Denich on more than one occasion to demonstrate his abilities, but her fyre father had never demonstrated his command of flame in front of her. His abilities weren't a toy, or meant for mere amusement, he'd explained to a disappointed Temair. They were meant as a weapon, and one should never draw a weapon unless he or she was prepared to use it.

Now, she was mesmerized by the beauty of man and fyre becoming one. Her own skin began to tingle and the feeling wasn't unpleasant. It was wild, causing her thighs to tighten and her nipples to harden. Heat rose from her skin; the air around them wavered from the sudden rise in temperature.

"Your fyre is alive," Miach whispered. His voice was a seductive match, igniting her. His sinfully handsome face moved over hers. His chaos-black eyes sparkled with red as they looked into hers.

She began to sweat as the heat between them scorched their clothed bodies.

Hardly knowing what she was doing, Temair raised her head as he lowered his, and their lips touched. The light brush shot electricity back and forth on their shared breath. His tongue whipped out and burned her until she opened her mouth. He dove in deep then slowed to explore her mouth. She slid her own along his, tentatively at first. He tasted hot and spicy, and she couldn't seem to get enough.

He dropped her other arm and drove his fingers into her hair, kneading her scalp and warming her from head to toe. He pushed his knee between her legs, and she spread her thighs as wide as her skirt would allow. He moved in between them, sliding into place as neatly as if he'd been sculpted to fit her body. Their clothing did nothing to hide the evidence of his desire.

Temair wrapped her arms around his strong back, her fingers digging into his heated muscles. By the elements, nothing had ever felt as right as lying beneath this man, sampling his strength and tasting his passion.

"Princess," he whispered, seeming to read her mind. "You taste like the finest fyre brandy." He nipped her neck, branding her skin with his hot mouth.

"Temair." She hissed at the sensation.

"Hmm?" he mumbled between velvety licks and sharp nips to the delicate hollow where her neck met her shoulder.

"Call me by my given name. Temair."

The Crown Princess. He never, ever would have thought that of the three women visiting Fyre House, this one was the next in line to the throne. She was too quiet. Too unassuming. She spoke very little when in the company of her companions.

He was shocked almost to his senses. He spared a brief thought for the fact that he was aching to get his hands all over a woman who was here for a husband, who could take him from his home, from his life, without a second thought. It was almost enough to stop him. But then her lips rose again to press moistly against his, and he was lost.

Miach was entranced by the taste of her mouth. She was a unique mixture of sweetness and fyre, a potent flavor he'd never tasted on another woman's tongue. A flavor that he already craved beyond sanity. Her soft body cradled his much harder one, and he was lost in the feel of such suppleness. Her hair was like silk and he could have stroked it for hours. It wasn't enough to take her mouth; he needed to feel her skin against his.

Breaking the kiss, he gazed into her deep brown eyes, looking for a reason to stop this madness. She was here for his useless younger brother, and it certainly wasn't a smart idea to give in to the raging lust flaring out of control between them. He reached for his usual discipline, the single-minded focus that had allowed him to become the greatest Fyeria artist in the Fyre Lands. It was nowhere to be found. Right now all he could focus on, all he wanted, was her naked and spread beneath him.

"Unbutton yourself, Princess," he demanded harshly.

"Lord Fyre?" she replied, her eyes aglow with a mix of desire and apprehension. Miach sent a lick of flame down the front of his shirt. The soft fabric fell open obligingly, exposing his bare chest to her wide-eyed gaze.

While she ate him up with her eyes, he turned his attention to her garments. Another lick of flame, carefully controlled, and the front of her gown all but burst open under the weight of her breasts. She gasped as the heavy globes sprang free, and moaned when he bent his arms and rubbed his bare chest over the sensitive, satiny flesh. Her nipples drew tight, flushing a deep ruby red, and his mouth began to water.

A small bead of sweat slid down into the valley formed by her ample cleavage, and Miach was done, any faint hope of resistance evaporating like a wisp of steam.

He bent down and followed the droplet, licking the salty moisture and savoring her taste. She was fyre, and lust, and spice; and Miach's cock was aching and burning for her. He ground against her mindlessly, feeling her low cry vibrate through the softness of her breast to tingle against his lips. She seemed equally mindless as she wound her fingers in his hair, tangling in the band that kept it from his face.

"Princess, are you so eager to feel my mouth on your breasts?" The question was ridiculous, but he loved her reaction. Her eyes grew larger and a small amber flame lit in them. Oh, yes, she liked it when he spoke to her so intimately.

He blew a hot breath across the tip of her breast. "Tell me, Temair, do you want me to wrap my lips around your nipple and suck?" His breath dusted her whole breast as he continued. "Or shall I lick across it?" Her eyes widened further and she rocked her pelvis against his. "Should I bite down on it? Would you scream for me, Princess? Would I feel the fyre that is even now simmering deep in your belly?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes to any of it. To all of it. Just touch me, Miach. Touch me before I burn up." Her ragged plea was all the permission he needed, and more. His mouth descended upon her breast, first licking around her nipple before sucking it into his mouth. His teeth clamped down on the small bud, scraping lightly back and forth, while his tongue flickered over the tip.

Her hips jerked as her hands tightened in his hair. He ground himself between her legs in response as he moved to her other breast. The heat they created was overwhelming, and Miach could feel the sweat from their sexual energy begin to gather on his spine.

A loud clapping, punctuated by several gasps and one feminine cry, sounded behind them.

"She has chosen!" Miach froze at the sound of his mother's voice. "Our fair princess has chosen! The mating flame is proof to all that Miach has been chosen as first Consort to our future Queen!"



## Chapter Four

Cool air suddenly doused the heat Temair was drowning in. For some cruel reason, Miach was no longer devouring her breasts. Instead he was tugging the bodice of her dress together. All at once, Lady Fyre's voice penetrated, and Temair's mind cleared in a rush.

Once she'd raised her own hands to her dress, Miach pulled gently away from her. Temair was shocked at how bereft she felt without his touch. It was as though, until he'd touched her, she'd never realized how cold and alone she'd been. Now, having experienced his fyre, she wondered how she could go back to living without it.

She looked at him, confused and embarrassed, and he returned her gaze with blank, cool eyes as he offered his hand to assist her to her feet. His face was even paler than usual, his jaw tight, and those luscious lips that had so recently pleased her were flattened in a hard line. Temair realized that, in her distraction, she'd missed something important.

Lady Fyre approached, kissing her son's cheek and then kissing Temair's hand. "I am so happy you have chosen Miach. He is our best warrior and will give you a strong daughter."

Tem blinked as reality set in. "Lady Fyre, I think..." but she was cut off.

"We saw the mating flame rise into the aire from the House, and had to run and find out whom you had chosen. I expected to find you with Vashti, but I'm so thrilled you chose Miach. I truly know that you will be a good and wise Queen to our land." Lady Fyre's pleasure was written over her face.

Temair swallowed hard, and opened her mouth to correct Lady Fyre's misconception, but paused as Sorcha and Nuriel, who'd followed the Lady into the maze, shook their heads wildly.

She stood still as she silently reviewed the history of the Fyre Lands. Her breath caught as she realized the import of the Lady's words. If their interlude had caused the mating flame, then Miach was truly destined to be her Consort.

While Temair didn't believe so strongly in fate, the Fyre people did. They held their traditions close. She knew that to deny Miach as her Consort would bring humiliation to him, and to his family. It was possible, even likely, that they would lose their status as rulers of their House.

The Fyre people were much more conservative and old fashioned than any of the other elemental nations. Temair knew that she could not sentence this man, or his family, to such an existence. It didn't matter how much he might irritate her with his arrogance and superiority; she couldn't allow him to be shamed.

Instead she plastered a smile on her face. "Thank you, Lady Fyre. Now I formally petition you. I have chosen Miach, first son of the House of Fyre, as my Consort and ask the Lady if she is agreeable to my choice."

Lady Fyre clapped her hands again and laughed. "Of course, Princess Temair, I give my eldest son over to you as your first Consort."

Temair felt like a ten ton rock had been set upon her shoulders with the ritual words. She'd just bound her destiny to a man who, aside from burning the clothing from her body, seemed to feel nothing but disdain for her. Even now he stood glowering at the ground, silent as their fates were decided.

Even worse, she realized, the drama wasn't over. As much as she hated court etiquette and protocol, there was still a wedding ceremony to be endured. Not to mention the consummation. A tiny flicker of interest sparked at the thought. If the consummation was anything like the moments they'd just shared, perhaps Miach might have one benefit as a Consort.

\* \* \*

Miach was stunned into silence as Temair asked his mother for him, and that good Lady handed him over like a piece of property. He tempered his anger as best he could, considering the situation. It wasn't Temair's fault, or even his mother's. No one

had forced him to touch the Princess, and none of them could have predicted the appearance of the magical mating flame. It was so rare, and had been so long in manifesting, that he hadn't even considered it.

He'd just never dreamed he'd ever marry, much less marry the Crown Princess. Miach had purposely built a life which would ensure his bachelor status would remain exactly that, for he had no desire to be any woman's possession. He did sympathize with the rebel groups forming all over Merab, because he'd seen men who were treated horribly by their women.

Miach was certain, however, that Queen Akasha was a true and just leader, and he was just as certain that Temair would follow in her mother's footsteps. What he wasn't sure about was how much Temair understood about the men's plight in the Queendom, or what she would do once she'd been enlightened. Being Consort would also allow him some influence with his wife. Maybe she would be open to changes in the law that would protect those who most needed it.

Besides, there was something different about Temair. She may be a bookworm, she may not be the most stunning of the three Princesses, but she had a spark within her. He'd seen it in her eyes when she looked at him. Miach liked the way she gazed directly into his eyes.

He forced a smile as his mother approached him. She grabbed his hands and he bent to kiss her cheek.

"Make me proud, my son," she whispered, for his ears only. Over his mother's shoulders he watched as Temair clasped her hands tightly together, a troubled look on her face. He would make his mother proud, and he would claim this woman who had intrigued him and made him want her beyond common sense.

\* \* \*

Nuriel was standing at the window, her attention split almost evenly between their discussion with Lady Fyre and the sight of all the guards searching the perimeter of the garden for a clue of Temair's attacker. Sorcha rolled her eyes in resigned amusement. She'd had to drag her own attention from the guards, but for a very

different reason. While Nuriel was appreciating the very fine... assets of the men of Fyre, Sorchia was itching to make sure that they were taking their investigation seriously enough.

The fact that Temair had been shot at -- *shot* at -- so soon after her maid's mysterious "food poisoning" had Sorchia's nerves twanging.

"Miach would never damage his honor by refusing to mate with the Princess after compromising her so..." Lady Fyre's voice jerked Sorchia back to the present and she suppressed a rather un-princess-like snort. From what she'd seen, Temair had been doing every bit as much compromising as the sullen Miach.

"Still," Miach's mother continued, "He may find reasons to... delay the event."

"Temmie wouldn't delay the event," Nuriel put in, never taking her eyes off the men working outside the window. "But the longer we wait, the more nervous she'll become."

Sorchia had to agree, and she really didn't blame Temair. Of the three of them, Nuriel was the only one who'd had any experience with men. Temair had ignored them because, until Miach, she'd never found one who interested her as much as one of her books. As for Sorchia, she'd always seen them as a means to an end. She needed to be stronger, more independent, and training with the guards was the best way to achieve that. When you watched them swear and spit and scratch themselves in less than polite places, it was easy to ignore the ideas of romance and sensuality.

"We should do it tonight," Sorchia abruptly blurted. If it were her, it would be the sooner done the better.

Lady Fyre clapped her hands together like a girl. "It's so soon, but I'm sure we can come up with something wonderful for them!"

Nuriel finally dragged her gaze off the guards combing through the garden, and glided to the table Lady Fyre had settled at.

"We've got the dress, of course," Nuriel fluttered. Temair had all four of her mating ceremony dresses with her. "I'll do her hair." She sent Lady Fyre a sudden, alarmed glance, and Sorchia thought perhaps she'd considered the more important

preparations -- the security. She should have known better. "We'll need flowers," Nuriel said in an intense voice. "And is your kitchen staff up to another feast so soon?"

Lady Fyre sniffed in offense, though Sorcha could see the pleasure and calculation behind the woman's cobalt eyes. "She'll carry fyre lilies, of course," the woman assured Nuriel. "And certainly my kitchen is up to the challenge. This is a noble house, Princess, not some mere merchant home."

Sorcha sighed and excused herself to go and tell the head of Temair's guard begin to coordinate security with the head of the Fyre Guarda. Someone had to be practical.

## Chapter Five

Temair stared at herself in the large mirror that had been set up so her mother and fathers could attend her first mating ceremony, and tried to blank out everything in the room.

It was easier than she would have expected, since her own reflection was so very startling.

Her mousy brown hair glistened with some concoction Nuriel had combed through the strands before piling it on top of her head and securing it with a delicate copper tiara. Her normally plain brown eyes were huge and dark in her pale face. The lashes looked unusually long and sooty, casting mysterious shadows on her cheeks. The real surprise, though, was her body.

Temair prided herself on being honest, and she knew her strengths and weaknesses well. Her mind was her main strength, followed -- she liked to think -- by her compassion and sense of humor. Her appearance was low on the list.

Oh, she didn't consider herself ugly. Not really. Just plain. Sorchia, with her tangle of red curls and lithe body, was striking. Nuriel, with her generous curves and golden tresses, was lovely. Temair was quiet, plain and a little thicker than society considered attractive. And she'd been fine with that.

But then, she'd never known she could look like this.

Her gown was a rich creamy gold that picked up the golden glow in her skin. In honor of her new Consort's family, it was embroidered with flames in a multitude of shades from deep gold to deep scarlet, which spread down from the v-neckline to curl playfully over breasts that suddenly looked succulent rather than too heavy. Around her waist she wore a belt of heavy copper links, which seemed to emphasize, or maybe even create, a curved waistline that Temair had never noticed she possessed. The heavy

silk of the garment alternately clung to and skimmed her body, giving the illusion of heat hovering over the surface of a lake. All at once, plain and thick had become mysterious and voluptuous. The sight was distracting, to say the least.

The reflection wavered and Temair found herself looking into her mother's teary gaze. Her fathers clustered around, and Temair suddenly had a deep need to be buried in their comforting embraces. Denich, her fyre father, seemed to sense her need. He stepped up and laid his palm on the surface of the mirror. Temair did the same, and imagined she could feel his heat through the magical glass.

"Oh, Temmie," her mother breathed. "You've become such a beautiful woman."

Temair choked on a teary laugh. "Mama, I think someone's bewitched the mirror."

"Nonsense!" Lady Fyre had moved to Temair's side without her noticing it. "You favor the Fyre and the Earth," she told Temair briskly. "You're all mystery and hidden depths." She sent Temair's Aire and Rayne fathers a bright smile. "No offense."

Temair laughed again, this time more naturally as all four of her fathers regarded her future mother-in-law with raised eyebrows. Well, she was marrying into a Noble House after all. They had to expect the Lady there to be a bit of a snob.

"Lady Fyre," Akasha spoke formally, all trace of emotion now safely concealed behind her eyes. "You honor us with the gift of your eldest son."

"Your Highness, what is ours is yours, as it should be." Snob or not, Lady Fyre definitely knew how to work her protocol, curtsying deeply to the Queen.

A deep, jarring drumbeat interrupted any further conversation. Nuriel and Sorcha appeared at Temair's side, hustling her to stand facing a large bowl of fyre. Vashti and Yakob, Miach's two brothers, stood facing her. Vashti's good looks were greatly marred by the pout twisting his features. While she had reservations about Miach as a Consort, Temair looked at Vashti and knew she'd had a lucky escape.

Then she looked at the empty space between the brothers and wondered if Miach was the one who'd escaped.

Just when she was starting to worry, the drum sounded again, and Miach appeared. He stepped up, slightly in front of his brothers, met her eyes across the sacred flames that separated them, and utterly stole her breath.

His black ruby hair was loose -- the first time she'd ever seen it so -- and flowed like silk over his shoulders. His clothing matched hers; heavy cream and gold satin embroidered with the flames of his House clung to the breadth of his shoulders. Cream breeches emphasized the hard muscles of his thighs, and tall brown boots showcased his long calves.

He was utterly beautiful. So much more beautiful than her.

But then Temair remembered the woman in the mirror, that reflection that was and was not her all at the same time, and thought maybe that woman stood a chance with a man like Miach.

She was beautiful. How had he missed that before?

Miach stood facing Temair across the sacred fyre, and felt himself drowning in her eyes. Far from being plain brown, they glowed with sparks of amber light, tiny flames calling out to his own fyre. For the first time he felt a tingle of anticipation at the thought of being her mate. He'd tasted, far too briefly, her passion. He'd also experienced the sharp edge of her tongue. The woman before him now also demonstrated a poise and calm that soothed his own restlessness. *Yes, Miach thought, this could be an acceptable match after all.*

The priest stepped forward and broke the hypnotic hold of her gaze, drawing Miach's attention back to the task at hand. He was about to become a husband. It was something he'd never seriously considered.

He'd known, of course, that he or one of his brothers would be called upon to offer himself. Miach had just assumed it would be Vashti who drew the short straw. From the look on his younger brother's face, Vashti had expected the honor, too, and was none too pleased to see Miach in his place.



Now, Miach was faced with the prospect of being husband, lover and advisor. Of sharing his wife's affections with three other men. Of being a father -- sooner rather than later. He felt his shoulders tense under the burden of responsibility. Then Temair's gaze snared his again, and that wonderful sense of calm filled him.

"Princess," the priest intoned in a deep voice marked by a low current of jubilation. "Have you chosen your first Consort?"

Temair's eyes never left Miach's. "I have."

"And of what House do you choose, Princess?" The priest's pride was evident in the laughter in his voice and the twinkle of his eye.

"I choose my first Consort of the House of Fyre." Her voice was as steady as her gaze, and Miach again had the sensation of drowning.

"And who do you choose?" From the corner of his eye, Miach caught the wink the priest sent in his direction, and suppressed the impulse to smile.

"I choose Miach, first son of Lady Fyre."

"What say you, Miach, first son of Lady Fyre? Will you share your fyre with your Princess? Will you comfort and defend her? Will you strive with her to build and protect a strong Queendom?" Like Temair, Miach kept his gaze steady on hers as he answered. He may have been responding to the priest's ritual question, but his words were for her alone.

"I will do so." His voice was firm and sure. "I offer the Lady my body, my fyre, and my protection." It was the answer that the ritual demanded, but Miach felt something more, something deeper, seething under the surface.

"Then if my Lady Ambassador will come forth." The priest gestured to Sorcha who, as the Princess of Turnin, was standing in as Ambassador as well. The fiery-haired princess fit into the surroundings well, Miach thought. She could easily be mistaken for a Fyre Lady herself.

Sorcha turned to a satin cushion and lifted two delicate copper wrist cuffs, and turned to face Temair.

"Sister of my heart, fellow ruler and friend," she began in an uncustomarily soft voice. "Will you accept the bonds of mating as a symbol to all that you are bound to your people in the House of Fyre?"

Temair held out her wrists for Sorchá to enclose in the cuffs. "I will do so," she answered firmly.

Sorchá turned to Miach. He noticed that her gaze was a lot more direct than when she'd faced Temair. In fact, if he didn't know better, he'd say it was almost threatening.

"Miach of the Noble House of Fyre, will you accept the bonds of mating as a symbol to all that the people of the House of Fyre are bound to the support and protection of their Queen?"

Miach held out his wrists, expecting a pang of resentment, or at least unease. He was surprised to discover that the only emotion to fill him in that moment was relief. It was almost as if he'd been living for, preparing for, this moment when he gave himself over to Temair, forever. "I will do so."

Sorchá gestured, and Miach laid both hands over the delicate copper cuffs around Temair's wrists. Temair responded by wrapping her fingers around his own cuffs. Her fingers were short and surprisingly slender. They slid off the slick metal, and Miach caught his breath at the sensation of skin against skin. An unexpected surge of heat accompanied her touch. He knew she felt it too by the way her eyes flew to meet his.

Oblivious to the low-level heat simmering between them, Sorchá layered her hands over theirs and began to chant in a low, lovely voice. The words themselves were strange to Miach, murmured sweetly in a language he didn't understand, but the intention sang clearly through flesh and bone, through the cuffs he wore and deeper, into his very blood.

When Sorchá raised her hands from theirs, the copper bands were sealed seamlessly around their wrists, a mute witness to the commitment they'd made.

"By the four elements of Emetra," Sorcha intoned. "By the blood of Zirah's beasts, and by the soul of Turnin's magic, you have bound yourselves together." Her voice throbbed with emotion, and chill-bumps erupt over Miach's flesh.

He felt Temair begin to tremble, and instinctively tightened his grip, unthinkingly sharing his strength with her. She met his eyes again, a flicker of amber in a sea of fathomless brown. *This is how it begins*, he realized. *This is just the first time I'll gift her with my strength*. He had to wonder what path this first time was setting him upon. Then Temair gave him a tentative, hesitant smile, and he realized that whatever the path, he'd tread it willingly.

\* \* \*

Temair paced her chamber restlessly, an untouched snifter of fyre brandy clutched in one hand. She'd left the marriage feast nearly an hour ago, alone as custom dictated, to be prepared for her wedding night. Nuriel and Sorcha had immediately joined her, of course, the former bound and determined to strip her down and strap her into some lacy concoction; the latter prepared to defend her to the death.

Temair, though, had stood up for herself. To everyone's shock, including her own, she'd informed Nuriel that while she appreciated her foster sister's help, she'd just await her husband in her bridal dress.

Alone now, she was debating her choice. For one thing, custom required her groom to be brought to her, carried on the shoulders of his male relatives, and deposited in the bed beside her. That would be hard to do if she was dressed and wandering the room.

For another thing, she was afraid that staying up and dressed might give the impression that she was nervous about what was going to happen between them. Or worse, someone might think that she was insecure about how she'd look, all naked and waiting; about how Miach would react to the sight. And that was not the case at all. She was perfectly confident and comfortable with her looks, or lack thereof, and was totally prepared for the events of the night to come.

Yeah. Right.

She felt so beautiful in her dress, though. The memory of the look in Miach's eyes when he'd first seen her sent a trickle of heat through her core.

Temair gave a self-mocking little snort of laughter, and took a healthy sip of her brandy. Her snort quickly turned into a frantic gasp for air as the liqueur scalded a path down her throat, blistering her airway as it went.

Of course, that's when the groom's party arrived.

\* \* \*

The low-down simmer of arousal had been plaguing Miach since his interlude with Temair in the garden. That warm glow had ignited at the sight of her in her wedding finery, and had continued to smolder hotter with each minute that passed. The wedding feast had become a kind of torture as he watched her nibble daintily at her meal, and imagined those sharp little teeth sinking into his skin. With each sip of wine, she'd trailed her tongue along the full curve of her bottom lip, and Miach had all but begged her for mercy.

He found himself wishing they shared customs with the Rayne Houses, whose wedding ceremonies featured ritual dances. At least then he'd be able to take her in his arms, to mold all that soft heat against his own achingly hard body.

When she'd departed for her nuptial preparations, it had seemed a mixed blessing. No longer subjected to the sight of her all but orally pleasuring her dinner, Miach had almost forced his own wild response under control. Then he'd begun to imagine what her preparations might consist of. The vision of her, naked and pink and flushed damp with arousal had whipped the blood he'd managed to cool back up to a furious boil in mere seconds, leaving him more aroused and achy than before.

When, thank the elements, the time had come for his procession to the bedchamber, he'd been more than ready. A fact that Darmon, his sparring partner and best friend, was more than willing to point out.

"So much for the reluctant bride-groom, eh?" Darmon needled, shrugging his shoulder hard so he nearly unseated Miach, who was perched precariously with one buttock on Darmon's broad shoulder, and the other on Yakob's.

"Shut up," he replied briefly, too aroused to rise to Darmon's bait. Hell, the only bait he was even aware of tonight belonged to a brown-eyed minx whose fyre was all the more powerful for being virtually untapped.

They finally arrived at the door, and Vashti stepped forward, pounding on the heavy oak imperiously. Miach thought his little brother looked like he'd just as soon be pounding on Miach's skull. He suppressed a chuckle. But only if it didn't ruin Vashti's manicure.

"Your groom cometh," Vashti intoned solemnly, projecting over the coarse jokes and ribald commentary of the grooms-party until they fell mostly silent. "Your Consort arriveth!" The men stood, waiting expectantly for the ceremonial greeting and invitation. And waiting. And waiting. Just about the time Miach began to fear his bride had made a run for it, he caught the faintest sound of muffled choking. Arousal flashed to adrenaline in an instant. He knew Darmon and Yakob heard it, too, because both men went tense and battle-ready in a heartbeat.

"The door," Miach roared, and felt grim satisfaction when one of the young men he'd been training in the Fyeria shoved Vashti out of the way to blast the heavy oak panel open.

The sight that met his eyes sent his battle instincts into over-drive. Temair, his surprisingly beautiful bride, was sagging against a small table beside the bed. One slender hand clutched at her throat while the other tore at the bodice of her dress. A snifter lay shattered at her feet, a small pool of what looked like brandy surrounding the shards of crystal.

*Poison? "Treachery!"* The word was a battle cry as Darmon and Yakob shifted, giving him the boost he needed, and then Miach was catapulting through the air, cartwheeling into the room, intent on rescuing his bride.

\* \* \*

Oh. Sacred. Elements.

Temair tried to sort out what was happening, but the brandy had deprived her of oxygen, and things were happening so fast that her head was in a whirl. *Dammit, this*

*was why I don't drink!* Before she knew it, Miach had scooped her into surprisingly gentle arms, and laid her on the bed. She flapped her hands at him ineffectually as he yanked at her bodice.

"Don't struggle, my Queen," he murmured urgently. The use of her title made a definite impression, causing her to catch her breath sharply and sending her into another paroxysm of coughing. "Can you tell me what happened?"

No. She really couldn't. Her vocal cords had been seared away by the potent brandy -- *stupid to gulp the fyre brandy without testing it first. She wasn't a drinker; she knew better than to swill.*

"It will be fine, Spark," he continued. *Spark? Really?* Temair thought she liked that title better than Queen. "We'll get the healer, and he'll figure out what you've been poisoned with."

She finally managed to suck in a draft of air, and the oxygen coupled with Miach's words brought Temair a moment of clarity. With horrified amusement she realized that he'd misinterpreted the situation terribly, and it gave her the push she needed to force words past her abused larynx.

"The brandy," she rasped.

"The brandy was poisoned?" Miach looked over his shoulder at Darmon. "Get Dorn." He turned to Temair. "That's our healer." Returning his attention to his most trusted friend, he added, "Then find the Captain of the Guarda. Tell him the Crown Princess has been poisoned. It was concealed in her fyre brandy." He stroked Temair's cheek tenderly, clearly intent on soothing her as she struggled to interrupt him. "I want to know who had access to this chamber." The steel and rage in his voice was chilling. Except it wasn't a shiver of fear that quivered through her. It was a deep, visceral thrill at the sight of her mate ready to do battle on her behalf.

She managed to drag her attention off the forbidding lines of her Consort's face long enough to choke out a denial.

"Not poison." Damn. Her voice sounded like it had been dragged over a mile of gravel. Miach's gaze flew to meet hers, and Temair felt a flush of embarrassment climb her cheeks. "Just the brandy."

"Darmon," he called, stopping the man who'd begun to make his way through the crowd at the door. Temair realized she had the attention of every man in the room, and felt herself flush an even deeper red.

"I don't drink," she explained in a rough, humiliated whisper. "I took too big a swallow and it went down the wrong pipe." Her voice trailed off at the indecipherable look in those crimson flecked black eyes. *Oh, elements. Don't be mad.*

"And the brandy is potent," he finally finished for her when it became clear she'd run out of words. She nodded in mute misery as the nearest of Miach's escort hastily disguised his laugh as a cough.

Miach slowly shook his head and the corner of that full, sensual mouth quirked upward. Temair had a sinking feeling that the indecipherable look in his eyes was amusement at her expense.

"Do you need the healer?" he questioned. "He could give you a draught to sooth your throat."

"No," she answered emphatically. "The last thing I need is another witness to my stupidity."

He was wearing a full-fledged smile now, one of genuine amusement, not like the sardonic twist to his lips in the garden, and it made him simply, breathtakingly beautiful.

"It seems we don't have need of the healer after all," Miach said to Darmon in a surprisingly bland voice. "In fact," he added, addressing their entire audience, "I believe I have the situation well in hand."

A few muffled chuckles murmured through the group, and Temair had to resist the urge to bury her face in her hands. Then a familiar voice cut through the group.

"Apparently our future Queen has no head for liquor," Vashti commented acidly. "Nor does she seem to have the stamina to handle our fyre."

Temair struggled to her elbows in outrage, but before she could drop the arrogant ass where he stood, Miach was towering over him, backing his younger brother out of the room with the mere force of his anger. Temair felt that secret little thrill course through her again. Her mate was wicked sexy when he was enraged on her behalf.

"You will speak respectfully to the Crown Princess, your future Queen, and my wife," he gritted out. The air around him shimmered, and Temair realized he was radiating heat. Yes, wicked sexy indeed.

"It's no disrespect to speak the truth," Vashti countered sullenly, but he was clearly wilting under Miach's anger. Temair had a sudden vision of her wedding night deteriorating into a brawl and ending with a visit from the healer after all. It was time to act like the Crown Princess, not a helpless female. She pushed herself to her feet, and stalked toward the brothers.

"Then it's no disrespect for me to say that you are a narcissistic, ignorant twit with more fashion sense than brains," she rasped. She stepped between the men as she spoke, meeting Vashti's eyes coolly. Miach's hard body was a wall of heat at her back and his mere presence cemented her confidence as she added, "And by fashion sense I mean that you are more vain than a girl fresh from the school room, and give the appearance of a courtesan."

Vashti's eyes widened and his cheeks flushed an ugly red in affront, and for a moment she thought he might retaliate, but at Miach's threatening growl the younger man went pale again. With a final, venomous glare he turned and fled the room.

This time the laughter from the men was approving.



## Chapter Six

The room cleared quickly after that, leaving a very embarrassed Temair alone with her obviously adrenaline-fueled Consort.

“Well,” she mused aloud, “I certainly made a regal impression on everyone.”

Miach burst into laughter, and even as she sank down on the side of the bed and hid her face in her hands Temair had to appreciate the sound.

“You made a *strong* impression, at any rate,” he agreed, moving to claim a snifter and pour himself a drought of the cursed fyre brandy that had started the whole debacle.

“If you’re going to rule a people consumed by fyre,” he continued, moving to stand before her, “you’ll have to learn to brave the flame.” He offered her the glass, but Temair shook her head firmly.

“Once tonight was enough, thank you very much.”

“Just a little sip,” he coaxed, stroking the edge of the glass over her lower lip. A faint burn tingled the sensitive skin.

She must have gasped a little at the sensation, because Miach’s lips twisted in that little quirk she was beginning to recognize. He stood over her, invading her space and sucking the oxygen out of the room. And, dammit, she couldn’t afford to lose any more oxygen tonight.

He propped one knee on the bed by her hip, surrounding her with his body and his heat. She felt like she was drowning in a lake of fyre. He made her feel tiny, a sensation that was completely unfamiliar. It made her feel delicate, vulnerable. It also made her body hum with the potential of the moment.

“C’mon, Spark,” he murmured, eyes flaring as she ran her tongue over her burning lip. “Just a tiny sip.”

All at once their interaction was no longer about Miach teaching Temair to drink the potent fyre brandy. It was suddenly something else entirely.

"I don't want to," she murmured softly, and the amber in his chaos-black eyes flared again. The quirk spread into a dangerous, sensual smile.

"Do it for me," he insisted, dipping a finger in the brandy and lightly painting her mouth with the brew. She licked her lips, much more deliberately this time, and savored the deep crimson embers that seemed to flicker deeply in his gaze. She liked those flickers of fyre. She liked the way his breath caught almost imperceptibly when her tongue sneaked out to bathe her mouth. She especially liked the way his tongue mirrored the motion. She wanted more.

"Make me," she whispered, and almost moaned in delight when the flecks of fyre in his eyes ignited.

"Do you really want to dare me, my Queen?" His voice had dropped to a low growl, very like the rumble he'd threatened Vashti with. She felt the tender space between her legs swell and flood with wet heat, and it gave her the courage to continue.

"I think I can handle you, my Lord Husband."

*My Lord Husband.* Miach was completely unprepared for how much he liked the sound of that. Almost as much as he liked the spark in her eyes as she dared him to dominate her.

Taking a sip of the fyre brandy, he breathed out hard through his nose and savored the burn. Her eyes seemed riveted to him; he felt her gaze like a physical touch as she watched him swallow. Her absorption with the sight gave him an idea.

Miach took another small sip of brandy, but this one he held in his mouth. He reached up to cup her face in one hand, marveling for a moment at how large his hand seemed against her delicate jaw, and then used his thumb to gently force her chin down until her mouth opened.

Leaning in, Miach covered her lips with his own and, before she could pull away or protest, he allowed a slow trickle of brandy to flow from his mouth to hers. He drank

in her gasp greedily and took the little sound she made as an invitation. He snaked his tongue over her lips, stroking with a velvet rasp, and soothing the sting left by the brandy.

Her breath was coming fast and hot against his lips when he drew back, and he felt it clear to his groin. "More?" he growled, and she made a soft sound of denial, then totally ruined the effect by arching her back and stretching to reach him as he hovered over her.

Miach took another sip of brandy, fed it to her from his own lips, and drank down the soft cry of pleasure she gave in return. Fuck, but she was a sexy breather. The little sounds she made, the whimpers of desire and the gasps of surprised pleasure, shot straight to his dick, sending the blood throbbing thick and hot.

Blindly, he set the snifter aside, reaching instead to cradle her face in both hands. He didn't want to play anymore. He wanted to taste her, to drink her so deeply her flavor would always be on his tongue.

Miach tasted as good as she remembered; wild and hot and spiced with the fyre brandy. He teased her with lips and tongue, darting caresses that felt as though they stroked places far lower than her mouth, until she was fairly frantic for more.

Just when she would have begged for a deeper kiss, his hands left her face, skimming over her body to wrap firmly around her hips. Before she could react, or even guess his intention, he'd lifted her as if she weighed no more than a feather and hefted her to the center of the bed.

She stared, mouth open embarrassingly, as he crawled onto the bed, straddling her hips and planting his hands on either side of her head. Gorgeous. Absolutely, mouthwateringly gorgeous. And hers.

Something broke free inside her with an almost audible snap, and suddenly looking wasn't enough. She wanted skin. She needed touch.

Temair reached up and tangled her hands in the skeins of black ruby hair that framed Miach's face, and hauled his mouth down to hers. He tried to resist, tried to

tease and keep control of the moment, but Temair would not be denied. She wrapped her fingers tighter in his hair, loving the surprisingly cool, silky feel of the stuff, and nipped sharply at his bottom lip. Miach gave up the struggle, groaned deep in his chest, and simply devoured her mouth.

The fyre was coursing through her veins, boiling up from some inner core she'd never known even existed. She opened for Miach's kiss -- her lips, her mind and that well of magic that was erupting through her -- and let herself be consumed.

He dropped to his elbows, pressing her into the surface of the bed, imprinting his body in hard, demanding lines along hers. *Skin*. She wanted skin. Needed touch.

Reluctantly she freed her hands from his hair, letting it fall like a rain of cool fyre around them, and ran her fingers greedily along the length of his back. Hard, rippling muscles under heavy silk taunted her starved senses. With clumsy, groping fingers she yanked at his tunic, dragging it up as far as his ribs before flattening her hands on sleek, velvety skin.

Sacred fyre, he was so hot beneath her touch. Temair ran her palms the length of his spine, dragging her nails along the deep groove and gasping into his mouth when he growled and rubbed against her like a giant cat.

"More," she panted, catching his lower lip in her teeth and tugging lightly.

"I'll give you more," he gritted back, pushing up to loom over her on his knees. She whimpered in denial, wanting him back, missing the searing heat of him against her, but her protest quickly died as he jerked at the leather belting his tunic, then ripped the heavy silk over his head.

Glorious. She'd almost forgotten the beauty of his body. She wouldn't forget ever again. Muscles hard and tight from years of training in the Fyeria looked as though they'd been carved in moonlit marble. He looked cool, until one noticed the flames raging in those chaos-black eyes, but Temair knew better now. She'd felt him simmer under her touch.

Pushing up on her elbows, she braced herself and reached out for the touch she needed so desperately. He tensed as she ran one finger lightly along the sharp line of

his collar bone, then back to tease the hollow of his throat. When she took her exploration lower, one taunting finger ghosting over his flesh, he shivered in reaction. Temair felt her fyre rise to the surface, shimmering over her skin, turning Miach's skin faintly pink under her touch.

Her eyes widened at the sight, and at his guttural groan of, "Oh, fuck, Spark."

Miach fell back, sitting on his heels and yanking roughly at the laces of his breeches. Temair took advantage of his distraction to wriggle out from under him and crawl up until they were knee to knee.

While he was busy tearing at the leather ties that were suddenly far too tight, she laid her hands gently against his chest. His breath hitched and his own hands went still as she closed her eyes and concentrated on the heat rolling through her like lava.

"So good, Spark," he muttered. "So hot."

His hands lifted to cover hers, pressing hard into his chest. His nipples peaked under her palms, and he made a rough noise, a harsh little grunt that stabbed straight to her womb.

"Do, me, Spark," he growled, "Burn me up with those hot little hands," he ground her palms over his nipples and they both moaned. "Scald me with that wicked mouth." He leaned in and made a quick swipe across her bottom lip with his tongue, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. "But remember, Princess," he rasped against her lips, his breath washing her in liquid heat. "Remember that whatever you do to me, I'm going to do to you."

*Oh, elements, yes,* she thought incoherently. As if his words had freed her, she leaned in and rubbed her body along the length of his, trapping her hands between them. She stroked over his pecs, then dipped her head to trace the faint pink flush her palms had left behind on his skin.

His breath stuttered with the first brush of her tongue, and she smiled against his chest. She whisked the pads of her thumbs over his nipples, and when he grunted again, she dragged her nails over the tight points, remembering how he'd touched her just that morning.

His muttered, "Fuck," was music to her ears.

Resting her forehead against his collarbone, she fastened her lips over one rosy nipple, biting down just a little when he jerked in response. Running her heated fingertips down his sides, she traced the deep v-cut of muscles that arched toward his groin.

He, in the meantime, had returned to his battle with his laces, yanking almost frantically at the knotted leather.

Temair turned her attention to his other nipple, catching the very tip between her teeth and worrying it gently.

The sound he made was rougher than a groan, deeper than a growl. It was the call of a male animal for his mate. A flash of heat washed over her hands, and she looked down the length of their bodies in time to see the laces of his breeches crumble to ash beneath Miach's hand. All at once her hand was filled with burning, pulsing cock.

Almost instantly his hands covered hers, leading them down and showing her how to touch him, how to cup his balls in the palm of one hand, while massaging the base of his cock with the other.

Rearing up from a neat mass of black ruby curls, his cock stood thick and proud, prodding insistently at her palm. Even this part of him was beautiful, she realized wonderingly. As hard and pale as marble, lightly flushed with blood, blushing a deep rose at the full, thick crown. It was satiny in her grasp, satin over steel and damp at the tip. She wondered how it tasted.

Miach had lowered his head, pressing his cheek against hers, following her gaze down the lines of their bodies to where she was stroking compulsively along his throbbing length. "If you wish to save your wedding dress," he gritted out, his breath heating her neck, "then you will remove it now. Fuck." He gasped as she traced one burning finger around the head. "Spark, I swear by the elements, if you don't stop now I'll turn your clothes to ash to get to you."

Slowly, dreamily, she released him and sat back on her heels.

"Naked," he snapped impatiently. "Now."

Temair complied happily, nimbly working loose the clasp on her heavy copper belt before rising up again to pull her skirts from beneath her. Miach paused in dragging off his boots to watch as she worked the rich fabric over her head, leaving her in nothing but a tissue thin chemise and silk stockings that were gartered at her thighs.

Without a word, he rolled on the bed, taking her down beneath him. "Turn about's only fair," he muttered against her breast, his mouth hot and wet through her chemise. Cupping the full globe in his palm, he let a simmer of fyre brand her, as she had branded him.

When her breath caught, he rumbled a dangerous laugh against the inner curve of her breast, then scraped his thumbnail lightly over her nipple. The bud of flesh immediately sprang to life, drawing tight and needy under his touch. Still smiling, he covered it with his mouth, bathing her in molten heat before dragging his teeth lightly to the tip.

Temair groaned, winding one hand in his hair, dragging the silky strands over her. The other hand she stroked down his back, memorizing the feel of his skin so satiny beneath her touch.

He made a rough noise and took as much of her breast as he could into his mouth, sucking deeply. Temair returned the sound, using her grip on his hair to press him even closer while burrowing her free hand under the loosened waistband of his breeches.

Miach switched sides, treating her neglected breast to the same exquisite torture, and she could do nothing but arch and moan beneath him. Inspiration struck, and she wriggled until she'd worked her legs apart enough for him to slide neatly into place, that gorgeous, rosy cock dragging the sheer gauze of her chemise over the sensitive spot that she'd never really noticed lay between her thighs.

The intense rush of pleasure distracted her for a moment. It must have distracted him, too, because he paused in his tormenting of her nipple and rasped out a stream of sex words and profanity that made her almost dizzy with lust. Finally, though, she

remembered her plan, and drew her knees up until she could hook her feet in the waistband of his breeches. With one slow, deliberate motion, Temair worked the snug fabric down the heavy columns of Miach's thighs, baring still more silky, hair-dusted skin for her pleasure.

Miach pushed off her with a low, vicious curse. "Naked," he repeated, ripping his breeches roughly off, along with his stockings, and sending them to heap on the floor.

It just kept hitting her, over and over again, how amazingly gorgeous her Consort was. His body was sculpted, a work of athletically ripped perfection. His skin shone like moonlit ivory. The length of his hair fell like a midnight waterfall over his chest and shoulders, giving her glimpses of tight pink nipples that all but begged for her mouth. A silky line of equally dark hair picked up just below his navel, leading like an arrow to the well-trimmed mat of curls that surrounded his cock.

His cock. Endlessly fascinating, utterly intriguing.

Before she could reach out and touch, he was back on the bed, drawing her up to her knees and peeling her out of her chemise. Instinct had her reaching to cover her breasts and her mons, but Miach was having none of that. He gathered her hands in a gentle, unbreakable grasp, and used the press of his body to take her down to the bed. He raised her hands and pressed them firmly against the mattress on either side of her head, baring her body for his delectation.

"Stay," he murmured, raising up on one elbow, propping himself over her. "I've been imagining this moment since I first tasted you," he whispered into the curve of her neck, sending a host of shivers over her skin. "I've been remembering the taste of your pretty nipples." He lowered his head to sip lightly at each furled bud. "Been imagining the satin of your skin beneath my hands." Those hands were tracing curving patterns over her sides, stroking the soft skin of her belly where it swelled above her mons. "Been imagining how you'd taste." He slid down her body, taking gentle, wet bites of skin as he went, finally sucking a dark bruise into the skin just below her navel.



Temair moaned, held captive by his will and his words, but she had no desire for escape. No, all she desired was more.

"All day," he muttered against her belly, the feathery touch of his lips sending shivers of reaction over her skin. "All through the ceremony, all through that fucking feast, all I could think about was how your pussy would taste." He slid further down, working his shoulders between and then under her thighs. "And now, I'm going to find out."

## Chapter Seven

He licked at her inner thighs, long, languorous swipes that scalded the senses, and hissed out his appreciation. "So sweet, Spark."

And then, he simply devoured her.

Temair had never felt anything so intense, so consuming, as Miach's mouth on her pussy. He sealed his mouth over her and drank her in as if she was the most delicious nectar, and he was dying of thirst. His upper lip pressed hard against her clit, and sent jolts of electric pleasure through her. His tongue was busy, nimble and curious, exploring each fold, each tiny crease.

She didn't know how much more she could take. The pleasure was too intense, too sharp; she felt as though she might be slashed to pieces by it. Or burned to ashes.

He worked his jaw, dragging his bottom teeth lightly over her weeping pussy, sliding down further to tease the very opening of her body with that firm, velvety tongue.

"Miach," she wailed. "Oh, elements."

He lifted his head briefly, just long enough to send her a wicked smile. His lips were red and swollen, evidence of his passion; and they were wet, evidence of hers. Then he lowered his head again and totally incinerated her.

His tongue fucked strongly into her, owning her in a way she'd never known was possible. Her cries rose, musical and frantic, as he drew the pleasure tighter and tighter around her until, finally, it exploded in a burst of fyre that lit the room.

"Spark," he whispered against her still pulsing flesh as the light faded. "You are so beautiful." He laid his face against her belly, rubbing his cheek against the soft skin. "Thank you for gifting me with your passion, with your fyre."

"Come here," she commanded. Her release had been more powerful than she'd ever dreamed, but Temair wanted more. When he didn't move fast enough to suit her, she wound her fingers back through his hair, pulling him up the length of her body until they were once again face to face.

His mouth and chin glistened with her honey, and she couldn't resist leaning up and taking a taste. She placed a soft, sucking kiss on his chin, and realized he was right; she did taste sweet. The combination of them, her sweet juices and his salty skin, was more intoxicating than even the fyre brandy.

He shuddered against her, his swollen, burning cock dragging over her drenched folds. She smiled at the reaction, loved the sight of him nearly consumed by his lust, and licked slowly up his cheek.

"Elements, woman," he rasped. "I'll spend here and now if you don't stop."

"I want you to spend," she replied, focusing her efforts on his mouth, darting her tongue over his lips teasingly, and then pulling away when he tried to capture her. "I gave you my fyre, now you must give me yours."

Miach groaned, a deep, guttural sound that seemed to come from the depths of his soul. "My Queen has only to command it," he finally managed, sounding as though the words were dragged from the depth of his being.

"Come inside me, Miach," she whispered against his mouth. "Fill me with your cock." He jerked against her again, and she realized with satisfaction that she wasn't the only one aroused by words. "Fill me with your fyre, husband."

He obeyed her command, but slowly. His arms, braced on either side of her head, shook with the strain, but he took her gently. It wasn't what she'd wanted, but as that glorious, enormous cock began to dig its way into her untried flesh, Temair was grateful for his restraint.

"You are so..." He paused and hissed out a swearword that just heightened her excitement. "So tight, Spark. So hot, and wet, and tight." He drove in a scant inch more, and Temair thought that surely that must be it; surely he was all the way inside.

She looked down, eager to see where their bodies sealed together, and was shocked to realize that he was only half-way in. *Oh, sacred fyre*, she thought. *It won't fit.*

Miach dropped his head to the bed next to hers, turning to press wet, hot kisses to her throat. As if he could read her mind, he whispered, "You're hugging me, kissing me with your sweet, sweet pussy. You were made for me, Temair. Made to take my cock."

Then he was in, all the way in, and fireworks were exploding behind her closed eyelids. Her breath caught, held. She grew lightheaded. There was pain, sharp and scarlet, but it was fleeting, leaving only one reality. He was inside her, and nothing had ever felt so true, so right.

He moved slowly, a long, shuddering drag until he almost left her, until the wide head of his cock stretched the tender opening of her body. Then he thrust, forging in with one forceful surge, filling her body and her soul.

Temair wrapped her legs around him, hooking her ankles over his thighs, arching closer. She craved the rub of his body over hers, and he obliged her, skin sliding over skin, sweat damp and blazing hot.

"More." She didn't recognize her own voice; it was so wracked with need.

"I'll give you more," he growled, thrusting harder, deeper, straight to her heart. "I'll give you everything."

Everything. He gave her his body, harder, faster. He gave her the words she craved, telling her how she felt to him, how she made him feel. And finally, when she knew she couldn't take another second, when her body was stretched as tight as a violin string, he gave her his fyre and took her own into himself.

His cock swelled, grew harder, hotter, and the rhythm of his hips stuttered as he lost his cadence. Then he was truly filling her, drowning her in liquid fyre until she overflowed. Each stunning, burning spurt flashed through her, igniting her own orgasm. The room flared with light, crimson and gold, the mating flame, the proof of their passion in tangible form.

\* \* \*

Temair stretched languorously, savoring the cool silk of the sheets against her bare body. She snickered under her breath. She was deliciously achy, sore in places she'd never even noticed before. A soothing heat flowed across the bed, bathing her in comfort, and she turned her head to behold her husband. The man responsible for all the exquisite aches and pains she was currently enjoying.

Miach was awake, much to her embarrassment, and watching her unusually slow process of waking up. With that uncanny way he had of reading her mind, she shouldn't have been surprised when he reached out a hand and laid it gently over her belly. Healing warmth radiated from his touch to all the hidden places inside that protested their rough use.

"Better?" he questioned softly.

"Perfect," she answered, meaning the word sincerely. Each twinge was a reminder of the passion they'd shared. A passion that had opened a connection to the fyre inside Temair. She could feel it, seething inside her, a power and strength she'd never anticipated. Between the fyre in her Consort's eyes, and the fyre in her own soul Temair felt, for the first time, like she might truly be strong enough to be a good Queen to her people.

"I trust you slept well, Wife." Wife. Miach's lips curled in amusement at the word. Temair found herself laughing out loud. So this was what it felt like to be someone's wife.

"Yes, my Lord Husband, I slept very well," she replied softly, remembering just what had left her so tired and relaxed. The soothing warmth from his touch was quickly intensifying into something else entirely, and tingles began to spark over her body. "I'm wide awake now," she added, meeting his eyes. "Completely well rested, as well."

His smile grew wicked. "Are you saying that, perhaps, you have energy to spare?" He teased her with his touch as much as with his words, tracing heated trails over her abdomen.

"Indeed," she agreed, placing her hand over his and guiding those naughty fingers where she wanted them most. He seemed more than willing to cooperate,

sliding the thick digits deeply into the already slick folds of her pussy. Temair hummed in appreciation. "Let's burn some energy, Lord Fyre," she murmured.

\* \* \*

The next time she awoke, she felt a moment's panic because she couldn't move. It took only seconds to realize why. Miach slept, boneless and heavy, draped across her.

His face was buried next to her cheek, in her pillow. His hand tangled in her hair. His arm wrapped securely around her waist, and his thigh wedged snugly between her thighs.

It took only seconds more to realize that she really liked waking up this way. Her enjoyment was cut short, however, by a loud pounding on the bedchamber door.

Miach woke with a start, instantly aware, dark eyes flashing as his attention jerked to the door.

"Miach," a deep male voice called through the heavy wood. "Wakey-wakey, little lovebird."

Temair didn't know who flushed more at the gentle taunt, herself or her warrior of a husband.

"Dammit, Darmon," he yelled irritably. "It's my fucking honeymoon. Go. Away."

Temair tried to wriggle out from under him, mortified at the thought of these near strangers barging into the room and finding her naked and sticky. Miach pressed her more securely into the bedding.

"Ah, ah, ah," added another voice. Yakob. "When you marry royalty, you don't get to have a vacation, big brother." He punctuated his words with more pounding on the door. "There are affairs of state to be dealt with."

Miach caught her gaze with his. "You can tell them to go," he whispered. "You're the Queen, or nearly so. You can tell them the *affairs of state*," he rolled his eyes at the words, "can wait an hour." She wriggled again, and felt his cock stir against her hip. "Or maybe two," he amended.

"Are you alive in there, Temair?" At the sound of Sorcha's voice, Miach clearly gave up. Dropping his head back to the pillow with a nearly silent groan, he finally allowed Temair to slide out from under his bulk.

"Temmie?" Nuriel joined the chorus, and Temair reached hastily for a silky green robe.

"Fine," she shouted when the pounding began again. "I'm alive, and fine, and will be ready for breakfast in about ten minutes."

"Breakfast?" Darmon again, laughing. "Your Highness, it's past noon!"

"It's what?" she squeaked. They would be leaving in the morning at first light for the base of Emetra's great mountains, to enter the caverns of the Earth House and find her second Consort. There was far too much to do for her and Miach to have slept half the day away.

"Five minutes," she shouted, throwing his breeches at her husband, who was lounging in the bed, clearly enjoying the sight of her flustered efforts to dress. "Get dressed," she hissed at him, struggling her way into her chemise.

"We'll be in the dining hall," Sorcha called through the door.

"Unless you need help dressing," Nuriel added brightly.

"You just want to see Miach naked," Sorcha snapped back.

"How can you say that?" Nuriel's deceptively innocent voice was fading away, along with their footsteps. "I just want to be a supportive friend."

Temair turned, red-faced, to look at Miach who exploded with laughter.

"You have interesting friends, Spark," he finally managed.

"Indeed," she said, giving in to her own laughter. "And Ellie probably did just want to see you naked." She climbed back onto the bed and walked over to his side on her knees. "But," she told him firmly, pressing one hand to his chest, and cupping his balls with the other, "All this nakedness belongs to me now."

Miach's eyes flared, and his cock swelled against her wrist.

"So," Temair concluded, scrambling back off the bed and grabbing a dress from the wardrobe, "She will just have to content herself with hearing all about it."

She kept her back turned so he couldn't see her laughing as he sputtered.



## Chapter Eight

Miach placed his hand at the small of Temair's back as she led the way to the table where a delectable brunch had been laid out. She was quickly seated at the head, with Miach to her right. Her next Consort would soon sit to her left.

He offered her some fruit as well as cheese, before taking off the lid of a silver bowl to serve her some fragrant, crispy meat. He topped off her plate with a thick slice of bread. It wasn't until Yakob kicked him under the table with a teasing grin that Miach realized he'd instinctively served his Queen before taking any food for himself.

Temair seemed to be enjoying her meal. She bit into a succulent slice of fruit, and moaned her appreciation as the juice dribbled over her chin. He bristled as every male eye at the table, including Yakob, who usually ignored such things -- at least where women were concerned -- riveted to her sensual reaction. He realized she wasn't even aware that she'd made the sound out loud when her eyes fluttered opened, and a blush reddened her cheeks as she found herself the focus of everyone's attention.

"Sorry," she sighed with a wry smile. "I don't suppose that was very Queenly."

Nuriel bustled to Temair's side from her seat at the table, and wrapped a supportive arm around her friend.

"Nonsense," Nuriel scolded affectionately. "However you choose to act is Queenly, silly. You're going to be the Queen. How could you not be Queenly?" She sent a flirtatious look in Miach's direction. "Besides, you clearly worked up an appetite last night."

Miach refused to squirm at the young Princess' innuendo.

"I wish we had more time here," Temair said, firmly changing the subject.

Miach raised his hand and stroked her cheek. "I, too, wish we could stay longer." He turned to Darmon, who had joined them for the meal. "Are the plans for our travel detail taken care of?"

Darmon nodded. "Everyone's in place. We've replaced two of the Princess' personal guard with members of the Fyre Guarda, as discussed."

"Of course they fired the only two guards under the age of a hundred," Nuriel grumbled, returning to her seat. Sorcha smacked the back of her head and muttered back, "They replaced the two guards who spent the most time avoiding their duties, Ellie, so hush."

Nuriel gave her a dirty look. "Don't call me that."

"Enough!" Temair commanded. The entire company fell silent, turning their attention to their future Queen. Miach watched, filled with pride and surprise as his quiet, unassuming princess became a formidable leader before his very eyes.

"Who's been replaced?" she asked Darmon in a quieter tone.

"Forn and Stuar," he answered. "Stuar seemed happy for the break," he added with a smile. "But Forn was pretty upset with his dismissal. He kept arguing that clearly the Fyre Warriors weren't up for the duty, else the Princess wouldn't have been attacked in the gardens."

"I didn't know we'd told the guards about the attack yet," Sorcha said slowly. "I thought that, for the sake of security, we were waiting until just before we left."

"You're right," Temair agreed. "Forn shouldn't know anything about the attack."

"He was there." Yakob's statement surprised them all. "I've seen him wander off many times." Now, that did not surprise Miach. Forn was easily the most attractive and youngest of Temair's guards. Yakob continued. "He doesn't seem to have bonded with any of the other guards, and when Vashti came tearing out of the gardens screaming like a little girl, Forn came running from the opposite direction. I assumed he was rushing to protect Vashti from a would-be assassin."

Sorcha looked ready to commit murder. "It was Forn's responsibility to serve our meals during the journey," she stated in a soft, deadly voice.

"But he was so sweet to me," Nuriel began. Then, in a surprising show of seriousness she continued, "I guess that being sweet to a princess isn't a guarantee of morals or loyalty." Miach spared a moment to feel sorry for the golden-haired beauty, who was so clearly disillusioned.

Temair regained his attention with an unhappy little laugh. "I was going to say, 'Why would he want to hurt me?' but I guess that's a bit naïve." Looking suddenly stricken, she turned to Miach. "He was never mistreated, Miach. I swear to you. Neither my mother nor I ever gave him reason to rebel."

"I know, Spark," he soothed. And he did know. He knew as surely as he knew his own name, and the power of his element that Temair was a fair and just woman, and he knew that the woman who'd raised her must share those qualities.

"Let's go," Temair muttered darkly.

"Spark," he began, but she immediately cut him off.

"Let's go. I will face this man and know why he thinks he is justified in attempting murder."

"Do you actually think I'll let you anywhere near this criminal?" Miach knew he sounded arrogant but, damn it, he was a warrior, and sworn to protect her. More than his honor, though, he knew that if Temair were injured, there was a big part of him that would never recover.

"Do you think I'm incapable of handling myself?" Her deep brown eyes danced with scarlet sparks, her fyre leaping to the surface. "More, husband, do you think you can stop me?"

She was right, he realized. As Crown Princess, her power not only trumped his, it dwarfed it. Taking a deep, calming breath, Miach leaned in and spoke for her ears only. "I won't let him hurt you, Spark."

Her smile was like sunrise. "I won't let him hurt you, either, my Lord Husband," she responded just as softly.

In the end the entire group went. Miach and Darmon, as the most skilled warriors, took the lead. Yakob and the three princesses followed close behind.

Forn wasn't in the guards' quarters. Nor was he in the mess hall. Stuar, who was sitting down to an early lunch, told Temair that he thought Forn had gone to the stables to check the horses before tomorrow's long trip.

Sure enough, the traitorous guard was in the stable checking the horses. He was checking to make sure that the burrs he'd planted along the inside of the saddle blankets were securely in place. When someone put their weight on the saddle, the burrs would dig deeply into the horse's tender flesh, causing them to panic, rear, and most likely injure or even kill their rider.

The guard froze when the company entered the stable. He took one look at Miach's face, saw what must have looked like certain death, and turned and ran.

"Stop, Forn," Miach snarled.

The young man looked back for just a second before he hauled himself up on his mount, which waited saddled and ready outside the stable doors.

Miach's temper started to burn as his fyre awakened. He raised both hands and called forth his living flame, no thought in his mind except to stop this man who'd threatened his Queen, his wife...

"Forn," he screamed, throwing his right arm forward. A whip of fyre shot from his outstretched fingers to wrap around the corrupt guard's torso. Miach yanked and watched in satisfaction as the man flipped backwards off of his horse.

Temair caught her breath as her Consort wrapped her traitorous former guard in a whip of flame and pulled him from his mount. The young man, whose family heritage was of the Fyre Lands, stood up and pulled out a sword which gleamed red with flame, and raced back toward Miach.

"Miach!" Temair couldn't hold back her fearful cry as Forn made his suicidal charge at her Consort. But she'd forgotten what Miach was: a Fyre Warrior, a master of the Fyeria.

Forn threw himself at Miach, but Miach was no longer there. By the time Forn reached the place Miach had been standing, the First Consort was already rolling out of

a graceful somersault, moving with almost inhuman speed to stand behind his would-be attacker. Deprived of his target, Forn turned his attention to the crowd gathered and watching the spectacle.

The villain's attention fixed on Temair, and she bared her teeth back at him in rage. She felt her own fyre rise, felt almost as if she could incinerate the betrayer herself, but she never got the chance. Miach, who'd instantly noted the direction of Forn's glare, acted. Without warning, he threw out his hand, and a ball of fyre burst from his palm to catch the confused Forn between the shoulder blades. The rebel collapsed with a shriek, rolling over and over as though he could extinguish Miach's fyre, or somehow lessen his own pain.

"Temair, I told you to stay back," he grumbled, approaching the writhing man and setting a large, booted foot in the center of his chest. Forn moaned pitifully, but no one paid him any heed.

Outraged by Forn's betrayal, overwhelmed with fear at what could have happened to her husband, and irritated that the Fyre Lord still seemed to think she couldn't look out for herself, Temair marched over to Miach, placing one hand on her hip.

"My Lord Husband," she began in a low, furious voice. "I understand that you are trying to protect me, and I am grateful to have you, but I am capable of protecting myself, and my people." She moved closer and softened her tone. "Miach, I need for you to show your faith in me, in my strength. If you doubt me, how will our people ever come to trust me?"

Miach's gaze cooled slightly at her words, and he gave a brief, abrupt nod. Temair decided to take what she could get. Clearly she and Miach had some issues to work on.

She turned her attention to Forn. She never would have guessed this handsome young man could have been behind the flaming arrow or the poisoned food. Not only did he look young and sweet, but he'd always behaved graciously to her.

"Forn." She knelt beside him, needing to look in his eyes as she asked the one question filling her heart. "Why? What have I done that makes you want to kill me?" The words came out on a mere thread of sound, and she cleared her throat, trying to recover from the hurt she felt.

"Why?" Forn sneered. "Because you've done nothing to fix what's happening, not only in Emetra, but in all of Merab."

"You need to explain yourself," Temair answered. It was clear that Forn was a rebel, clear that there was more to the country's unrest than her mother seemed aware of. Still Temair was unsure why Forn was so angry at her specifically.

"You'll see, Princess," the fallen guard snapped, more like a rabid animal than a man. "This ends nothing."

"You're damned right nothing's ended," Miach seethed from behind her. When her husband took her arm, she allowed him to gently raise her to her feet. He was showing more control than she'd expected.

"We've only just gotten started, traitor," he hissed, stepping back in preparation for dragging Forn to his feet. The guard moved too quickly, though. Before Miach could even grab hold of his arm, Forn had yanked free a vial that hung on a chain around his neck. As Miach lunged for his hand, Forn caught the stopper in his teeth and jerked. In the blink of an eye, the fallen man had downed the contents. Fist clenched around the vial, he muttered, "*vitalias exitus*." Instantly smoke curled around him, seeping from ears, eyes, nose and mouth. Forn let out an agonized scream, then collapsed on the ground, dead.

## Epilogue

Temair sat proudly in the saddle, and looked back as her entourage prepared to leave the House of Fyre. Miach still eyed her worriedly, but he was willing to accept that she needed to at least begin the journey with a show of strength.

The mirrored conference that morning with her mother had been troubling. Like Temair, Queen Akasha had no evidence of the abuses the rebels claimed were happening. Temair had been reluctant to share the full extent of the danger she'd been in for fear of upsetting her mother's already precarious pregnancy, so she'd kept many of the details to herself. A lack of communication might handicap her, but it was a trade she was willing to make in exchange for her sibling's safe delivery.

Her personal guard of eight gathered around her. Darmon and Michel, both powerful Fyre Warriors, had joined her escort. With each stop of her tour, two new guards would be added, until her personal guard was truly hers, not a guard borrowed from her mother. She knew Darmon's presence, in particular, comforted Miach. Not only was Darmon a friend, but Temair knew Miach considered him the only Warrior whose strength equaled Miach's own.

She sent a brief smile to Sorch, who had also opted to ride for the beginning of the journey. Nuriel was comfortably ensconced in a coach with a stack of romance novels. *So, Temair thought, it's pretty much business as usual.*

Miach, who'd been riding along the side of their column, cantered up to join her at the head of the group. "Ready, Spark?" His eyes glinted in the sunlight, chaos-black and sparked with fyre.

"Ready, My Lord Husband," she responded with a smile, feeling her own fyre flare in response. She wondered if she'd ever get used to her reaction to this beautiful,

formidable man. She thought not. She hoped not. She rather liked the slow dip her tummy did every time their gazes met.

"Once we're on our way," he confided, "my mother will contact Lady Rayne and Lady Earth and inform them of our change in plans."

"I hope Lady Earth isn't too offended that we're delaying our visit to her Lands," Temair responded. After a long conference with the Queen, the head of Temair's guard and the Commander of the Fyre Guarda, it had been decided that they should change their schedule. The betrayer knew they headed next for Earth House, so instead they would go to the Rayne Lands.

"My mother seems more concerned for Lady Rayne," he answered dryly. "Apparently it is quite tragic for her to lose a week of preparation time."

Temair thought sadly of her poisoned maid, of her mother's high-risk pregnancy, and of her surprise mating with Miach. "Preparation is all well and good, but it's the things we don't prepare for that shape our lives."

Miach leaned forward in the saddle, cupping her face in his hard, hot palm. "I wasn't prepared for you in the least," he agreed. "This isn't the shape I'd planned for my life to take."

Temair felt her heart drop at his words. After all the emotion of the last few days, did Miach resent his place at her side? It wasn't as if he'd had a choice. Neither of them had.

He ended her painful reflection with the brush of his mouth over hers. "This isn't what I planned," he repeated. "But nothing has ever felt so right. I promised you my body, my fyre and my protection, my Queen." His smile lit the morning more brightly than the sun. "It's a promise I'm happy to keep."

With a final, firm press of his lips on hers, Miach raised his arm and let fly a flaming arrow. With a loud cheer, the people of the Fyre Lands sent Miach and Temair on to their future.



## **Violet Summers**

Violet Summers is a married mother of three beautiful children, including one set of twins, one rambunctious puppy, and one husband, except when she's a single mom of one spoiled teenaged God-child, three spoiled kitties, and two spoiled, elderly parents. Both of Violet's personalities are very busy!

No, Violet has not suffered a psychotic break yet (though she may after dealing with creating web-pages and MySpace accounts). Violet is actually the writing team of Sierra Summers and Violet (VJ) Johnson.

Neither woman can remember quite when she started writing, though VJ has a vague memory of a story written in the seventies about a girl named Carmel (that's Car-MELL) who wore designer Sassoon "shapes," or jeans. It was not, she says, her finest work.

Both women read voraciously, and in a multitude of genres. Sierra classifies them as "readers, as opposed to readers of romance. This means when we write, we're as concerned with the story as we are with the sex." That said, Sierra has been known to boycott books where the characters haven't "done the deed," by page 125.

Sierra and VJ live in Southeast Michigan, and the spice of the Metro-Detroit area often flavors their work. "Why look for a more glamorous setting," VJ asks, "when we've got the beautiful, re-vitalized Downtown area to draw from?"

Violet Summers writes in a variety of genres, from contemporary to paranormal; from soft BDSM to fantasy. The two things all her stories have in common are their deeply emotional stories and their scorching erotic love scenes.

Sierra and VJ love to hear from their readers. You can contact them at [VioletSummers@yahoo.com](mailto:VioletSummers@yahoo.com), or on MySpace and Facebook!