



Violet Summers

Queens of Merab
Temair's Rayne

Changeling Press

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The Queens of Merab 2: Temair's Rayne

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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.

She's found her first Consort, the prickly Fyre Lord Miach, and they journey on to the Rayne Lands, where Miach comments the local uniform consists of... skin!

Rayne Lord Dathan is Miach's polar opposite, fun and easygoing. Temair immediately wants him, while Miach wants to get as far away from him as possible. When the threats against Temair's life escalate, Dathan must step up and prove to his Princess and her First Consort that he's strong enough to love them, and strong enough to defend them -- and their world -- as well.

Prologue

"They'll arrive tonight? That doesn't give us much time to plan." The conspirator frowned as he studied the nobleman facing him through the enchanted mirror. "I thought they visited the Earth Lands first."

"It's all the fault of that fool, Forn," the man in the mirror replied with a sneer. "If he'd managed to do his job, the crown princess would be dead, and we'd be well on our way to a new, patriarchal world." The

conspirator noticed the fanatical light in the nobleman's eyes with the slightest bit of unease. Fanatics made mistakes.

"Well," he finally retorted, "the men of Villa Rayne are up for the challenge. We'll take the necessary steps to protect the men of our realm, as well as those oppressed and enslaved in Turnin and Zirah."

"See that you do," the nobleman snapped imperiously. "The fate of all men rests on your shoulders. Do not let us down."

Chapter One

Miach ducked under the rain of flower petals pelting down on their caravan and tried to force a smile. From the apprehensive looks on the faces of the children they were riding past, he didn't think he'd succeeded very well.

The journey to Villa Rayne had taken nearly two weeks -- two weeks of both emotional and physical exertion. The emotional exertion had come from the knowledge that his new wife, the Crown Princess Temair, was the target of a political assassin. He'd spent his days keeping vigilant watch over her, vetting the safety of everyone and everything that came in contact with her. As far as the physical exertion -- Miach's smile became a bit more genuine, if no less dangerous. Well, he could blame his new wife for that, too.

Temair had been virtually untouched when he'd met her, an innocent filled with dewy promise. That promise had been well fulfilled. The once shy princess had become a virtual tigress in bed.

Miach couldn't help but wonder how that dynamic would change now, as she sought her second consort. Would two men occupying her bed prove too much for even Temair's insatiable libido?

* * *

Dathan stood at his mother's side, waiting to greet the Royal Entourage. He knew that, as the eldest son, he'd come under the tightest scrutiny as a possible Consort. He also knew that, of the seven sons of Rayne, he was the least suited to the job, and the least likely to be given a second glance.

Dathan enjoyed life far too much to become a politician. Besides, his temper -- as incredibly difficult as it was to stir -- was legendary among the citizens of the Rayne Lands. A Royal Consort needed to be far more serious and have much better control of his emotions than Dathan did.

And he was perfectly content with that knowledge. Until, that is, he got his first glimpse of the Royal Party.

They rode in a loose wedge formation much like the one Dathan and his family had taken up on the stairs to Villa Rayne. The Crown Princess took the lead, with the man who must be her First Consort riding

ever so slightly behind her and to her right.

She was smaller than he'd expected, and rounder. Her posture was perfectly straight, and she sat her horse beautifully. As they approached she turned, probably to listen to something the pretty, but obvious, blonde riding behind and to her left had to say. Whatever the blonde, undoubtedly one of the other princesses accompanying her on her tour, said must have been funny, because Emetra's Crown Princess tipped back her head and laughed.

They'd come close enough that he caught the tail end of her laughter, and it vibrated in him like a rain drop in a pool, sending ripples along his skin that tickled his balls and dragged out a full-body shiver of reaction. That laughter matched the rest of her, rich and voluptuous. Her hair, a deep brown, tumbled freely over her shoulders, and was scattered with the flower petals the people of his land had welcomed her with. It gave her a whimsical, approachable air. Her eyes were dark, too, in a face that he'd almost call plain if it weren't for the incandescence that lit her up with her laughter.

The man next to her seemed her polar opposite. He, too, sat tall in the saddle, but where the Princess seemed all softness, her Consort seemed all steel. Dathan let his gaze take in every inch of the man, from the toes of his black boots to the warrior's top-knot in which he'd confined hair so dark a red it looked almost black. The flower petals glowing white in that silky hair didn't look whimsical at all.

There was nothing plain about The Consort. And damn if the man didn't seem to demand his title in all capital letters. He was pure sex, which Dathan appreciated on a purely aesthetic level. His people were rarely bound by gender in their choice of lovers. The People of Rayne had long ago learned that it was a person's soul that called to you, not mechanics like whether they were an innie or an outtie.

So the luscious little Princess had a hottie for her first Consort. It was nothing to Dathan. It simply meant one of his brothers would have double the eye-candy once he'd joined with them. For some reason the idea didn't sit well with Dathan. Then the Consort had to go and totally fuck up Dathan's comfortable little world.

The Princess turned to her husband and said something indecipherable, laughter still lighting her face. Her husband shook his head as he responded, a tiny smile quirking the corner of a tantalizing mouth, and his eyes rolling with amused resignation. Lips still tilted, the Consort glanced in his direction, and Dathan felt it like a blow. The alabaster man with the black-ruby hair narrowed chaos-black eyes, and the look arrowed straight to Dathan's dick. He felt the ripples caused by the Princess's laughter threaten to become waves.

Well, hell, he thought. This was not a situation he'd planned for.

* * *

"Great Mother," Nuriel breathed behind her, just loudly enough for Temair to hear. She twisted in her saddle and looked questioningly at her foster sister.

"Just look at them," the lovely blonde continued in an awed voice, her eyes devouring the seven gorgeous men ranged in a tight arrow on the stairs to Villa Rayne.

The seven sons of Rayne ranged in age from sixteen to thirty, Temair remembered. She let her gaze roam from one to the next, and had to admit Nuriel had a point. Each was more gorgeous than the next. They stood proudly, their golden beauty on display, covered only by low-riding sarongs in a multitude of shades of blue.

Nuriel sighed gustily, and Temair didn't even try to suppress her laughter at her friend's salacious appreciation of their hostess's sons. Her days of silence were over. They had to be if she were to be an effective Queen.

To her right, Miach snorted derisively. "It's no wonder she's got her own little army of sons, as the local uniform seems to be skin." When she turned his way, though, Miach had that little smile playing around the corners of his mouth. The one that lit a fire in her core, and sent lava rolling through her pussy.

"I'd ask if you were jealous," she quipped, laughing again at his outraged expression. "But you know full well you're as gorgeous as any of them." She gave him an exaggerated once-over. "Actually, My Lord Husband, you're more glorious than most of them."

Nuriel and Sorcha -- who was riding slightly behind Miach and to his right -- had been listening, and now both women joined Temair's laughter as the rather moody Miach preened, subtly of course, under Temair's compliment. Her sister princesses, though, didn't receive the benefit of his smoldering gaze, and the promise of his body. That was reserved for Temair alone.

Firmly drawing her attention away from her Consort's sculpted body and back to the task at hand, Temair directed her gaze to Lady Rayne, who was waiting regally at the top of the stairs. Her silvery-blue hair was dressed in elaborate braids, most likely to combat the heavy humidity of the land. Temair could already feel her own curls drooping and concentrated for a moment on the fyre within her, which had awakened at her joining with Miach. It took a moment, but she was delighted to feel the moisture gathering at her nape and weighing down her hair begin to evaporate.

The man standing next to the Lady, Temair knew, was her eldest son. The Lord of Rayne, the Lady had explained during their mirrored conversation, was out with the hunting parties. They'd not expected the Royal Visit for another few weeks, and so were "woefully unprepared." Considering the parade of dancing citizens tossing handfuls of flower petals at her, Temair was a bit daunted at the idea of what *prepared* would have looked like.

She hadn't paid a lot of attention to the eldest son during their approach. The Lady had also mentioned in their conversation that she thought one or two of her younger sons would make a good match for Temair. Her eldest, she'd confided, was a bit of a playboy, and not well suited for a life of politics.

Now, after fully appreciating the banquet of half-naked male flesh ranged over the stairs, Temair found her attention on the eldest son. He wore his hair in a loose, shoulder length cut; full of layers that should have made it look shaggy, but instead made it look tousled, as if he'd just crawled out of bed. It looked almost black from a distance, much like Miach's, but when he shifted into the light she realized it was instead a deep, indigo blue, fitting of his element. He tossed his head, flipping longish bangs out of his eyes, and for Temair, for just a second, time stopped.

His almond-shaped eyes were dark, but as his gaze met hers they flashed with brilliant blue sparks. Temair felt that look like a physical touch, tingling over her body in a way very similar to Miach's tendrils of fyre.

She must have caught her breath, or made some sort of noise or movement, because Miach was instantly at her side, utterly disregarding the protocol that dictated he should stay a stride behind.

"What is it, Spark?" he asked, his gaze following the line of hers. His movement, thankfully, broke the attention of the eldest son of Rayne, who flicked his gaze in Miach's direction. This left Temair's attention

free to notice the way young Lord Rayne's eyes widened and Miach's narrowed as their gazes touched.

Interesting.

* * *

Miach sat next to his wife and tried not to glower. It wasn't easy. He wasn't a particularly social animal by nature, and something about the informal, relaxed, half-naked Rayne folk set his teeth on edge.

Ok, he admitted as a lovely young woman leaned over his shoulder to refill his goblet, it wasn't so much the Rayne people that bothered him. It was one particular Rayne person who was pressing his buttons.

Dathan, the eldest Son of Rayne, had jogged forward with a deceptively lazy looking gait and lifted Temair from her saddle before Miach even managed to dismount. The look that passed between the two had been electric and, in spite of the fact that he knew Temair was there specifically to find her second Consort, he found himself gritting his teeth in displeasure.

Not that the man had done anything inappropriate. To the contrary, he'd been nothing but polite, friendly and welcoming. It was just the way he looked at them, laughter and secrets in his tip-tilted eyes. If he'd only been looking at Temair, Miach wouldn't have particularly liked it, but he'd have understood. But Dathan was looking at him, too, and the gleam in those blue-black eyes was every bit as greedy when they locked on Miach as it was when they coasted over Temair's lush form.

At the moment, Dathan was sending sultry glances at Temair from his seat at his mother's right hand. Nuriel, to Temair's left, was giggling with one of Lady Rayne's younger sons and Sorcha, who sat in her usual spot to Miach's right, was in an intent conversation with the head of Lady Rayne's private guard. As Temair exchanged pleasantries with the Lady, Miach had the chance to take in his surroundings.

He hadn't been kidding when he'd remarked that the local uniform seemed to be skin. The men wore sarongs of bleached linen that wrapped low on their waists, baring disturbing amounts of golden-bronze skin. For the formal dinner, the Seven Sons of Rayne had added loosely fitted shirts of linen so fine Miach could make out the shadows of Dathan's nipples.

He blinked hard, wrenching his gaze away from the other man. He didn't know why he couldn't seem to keep his gaze to himself, but the compulsion to stare left a prickly ball of nerves in his stomach.

The women. He'd barely noticed what the women were wearing on the ride approaching the villa. In fact, he hadn't really noticed at all, until Temair had appeared, ready for the feast. Then he had most definitely noticed.

The women of Rayne wore perfectly demure gowns, cut simply and designed to skim the flesh in deference to the sultry climate. Perfectly demure, that is, until one noticed that they were crafted of a fabric so gauzy and fine that it revealed as much as it concealed. Temair's gown was a warm, glowing peach. The rich chocolate tones of her eyes and hair shone deep and lustrous against the gauzy fabric. The velvety buds of her nipples cast enticing shadows, fairly begging for his mouth, and the gauzy skirt caressed her thighs and mound like a lover.

He'd known the people of the Fyre Lands were a conservative bunch. He'd assumed, since the princesses had fit in with them so easily, that life at Court would be equally conservative. Now he wondered. They were eating outdoors, surrounded by lush flowers and lit by torches, sitting on cushions around a calm, recessed pool while being attended by partially clothed servants. He realized with some

surprise that all three princesses seemed every bit as comfortable here as in the formal dining hall at Fyre House.

Sorcha passed him a serving dish that appeared to be one side of a large, iridescent shell, and he turned to offer it to Temair first. The torchlight played over her hair, painting it with streaks of gold and amber. She gave a slow, wicked smile and looked at him from beneath sooty lashes. Her warm brown eyes flickered with the crimson flames of her fyre, and he felt his belly heat.

“Will you take some, My Lord Husband?” Damned if her voice didn’t get more sultry every day.

“I’ll take anything my Queen chooses to offer,” he responded, forgetting for a moment the crowd surrounding them.

Temair’s smile grew as she examined the bowl and lifted a succulent slice of fruit. She brought it to her lips, sucking the drop of nectar that trembled at the end of the triangular slice in a way so perfectly erotic that Miach felt his breeches strain and his dick weep. Then, just when he thought he might disgrace himself -- whether by spending in his breeches like a green boy, or sweeping his wife into his arms and whisking her to their rooms he wasn’t sure -- she released the fruit with one last lick of her delectable pink tongue, and raised it to Miach’s lips.

He swore he could taste her on the fruit.

Her eyes stayed on him, on his lips as he licked away the sticky juice of the fruit. On his throat, working smoothly as he swallowed. On the erection threatening to burst free of his breeches with the slightest encouragement.

Her gaze, sparkling with fyre, called to his own flame, and Miach’s skin burned. He knew if he’d left it loose, his hair would be rising on currents of heat. Tendrils of Temair’s hair that had worked loose from the elaborate braids Nuriel had wound it in were even now floating free to frame her glowing face.

Miach hadn’t planned to wed. He’d had no desire to be a Consort. But, by all the Elements, he wanted this woman who was now his wife with an unholy passion.

Feeling heat tingle over him from another direction, Miach turned. He wasn’t surprised to meet Dathan’s sloe-eyed gaze. Miach shivered. He’d never known Rayne eyes could burn so hot.

He was jerked back to reality when Lady Rayne clapped her hands loudly, drawing the company’s attention to her.

“We are honored by the presence of our Crown Princess and her Consort,” the Lady said. Her voice was cool, filled with the laughter of a bubbling stream. “Indeed,” she continued, “we are most honored by all our Royal guests.” She sent a warm smile toward Nuriel, who dimpled back, and Sorcha, who inclined her head regally.

“I wish your visit to be one you remember fondly,” the Lady said. She waved her hand gracefully over the reflecting pool they were seated around, and a group of people glided out to stand firmly on the surface. “So I offer you a sight few have been privileged to see.” She smiled with obvious pride and anticipation. “The Rayne Dance.”

Chapter Two

Temair dragged her attention from Miach and the promise of pleasure in his eyes, and turned her gaze to the five people standing calmly on the surface of the pool. Three women and two men, each clothed in a jewel-toned sarong that wrapped low on the hips. The women wore matching bands over their breasts, leaving plump, golden mounds of cleavage exposed. All five wore flowers around wrists and ankles, vibrant blooms in their hair. They were perfectly exotic, perfectly beautiful.

A young man to one side of the pool lifted a stringed instrument onto his lap and began to coax out a slow, sinuous tune. The dancers shifted as one, and began to move with the music.

Their hips wound circles and figures of eight in time to the music, their hands drifted as though floating through water. It was elemental and erotic in the same way as the Fyeria, calling strongly to the magic within her.

Subtly, a woman's voice joined the music, adding an aching descant to the hypnotic song. Temair caught her breath in sympathy at the loneliness in the song, feeling tears gather in her eyes. To her left, she heard Nuriel snuffle. Glancing past Miach, whose fyre appeared ready to explode at any moment, she saw Sorcha, jaw tense against the emotion of the performance.

Slowly the tempo of the music changed, soft percussion and the rush of rain-sticks entering the mix. The pain ebbed from the singer's voice, and the dancers picked up their tempo, hips swaying, arms twining. Gently slanted eyes gleamed slyly from beneath thick lashes, and the music became teasing, delighted. Temair caught her breath again, this time in wonder as fountains of glowing, jewel-toned water arced over the dancers, joining the dance in joyful cascades of color.

The song built, layer upon layer, growing to a crescendo that left every person around the table breathless, until the dancers arched ecstatically, suddenly still, sensual human sculptures with sprays of multi-hued water frozen around them.

There was an instant of silence, then Temair rose to her knees, applauding wildly, trying to diffuse some of the arousal rushing through her veins. As if she'd broken a spell, the others joined in, clapping and even pounding the wide lip of marble that surrounded the pool in their appreciation.

Miach, rigid as a statue himself, let out a deep breath and leaned over to whisper in her ear. "How soon can we leave?"

The words sent licks of heat down her neck, and her nipples peaked almost painfully. "You know we've got to stay through the entertainment," she responded, aiming for a repressive tone, but only managing to sound regretful.

"Fuck," he muttered, settling back on his cushion, and Temair couldn't repress her laugh of pure joy.

So she was on the fast track to the throne, whether she wanted it or not. So there was unrest in the Queendom. So the least suitable of Lady Rayne's sons appealed to her the most. When Miach looked at

her with the flame simmering in his chaos-black eyes, none of that mattered. She had what she wanted.

* * *

Dathan grinned as his youngest brother approached the little blonde princess who was traveling with his princess and offered to teach her the dance. The blonde, the princess from Turnin he thought, eagerly accepted, bouncing to her feet and into the sapphire-haired youth's arms.

When his first brother, Aquil, rose Dathan expected him to approach the red-haired princess, but he didn't. Instead he cut a path directly to the Crown Princess, dropping gracefully to one knee and offering her his hand. She turned to her Consort with a raised eyebrow, and the man shrugged negligently, casting a rather satisfied glance from Aquil to Dathan.

Temair grinned at his brother and allowed herself to be led to the reflecting pool. Her eyes widened as she stepped onto the surface, and Dathan knew she was experiencing one of the manifestations of Rayne. The pool would feel firm and resilient under her bare feet, warm as bathwater. Moving behind her, Aquil took her hands in his, guiding them to float at her sides as he began to teach her the motions of the dance.

Glancing back at the Consort, it seemed to Dathan the man looked a bit lonely. Allowing himself a low chuckle, Dathan set about to remedy the situation.

He strolled around the pool, enjoying the low buzz of anticipation in his balls, the slow, sweet flow of the blood in his veins. A small, disgusted voice in the back of his head was warning him to stop; reminding him that Temair was not for him, and neither was her beautiful Consort. His head counseled common sense. His body ignored it.

He'd felt the Consort's eyes on him throughout the evening, burning over him until he expected to see steam rising from his skin. So he was surprised the man didn't notice his approach. Of course, with the delicious little Crown Princess dancing between the spumes of water on the surface of the once calm reflecting pool, Dathan supposed he couldn't blame him for being distracted.

"She's nothing like I expected," he commented, dropping to his knees next to the Consort. He just barely repressed a triumphant grin when the man jerked in surprise. He could feel those black eyes burning over him, so he carefully kept his gaze on the Princess, waiting with unaccustomed patience for the man's reply.

Finally, after what seemed like an hour, the other man answered, "She's absolutely unique." There was affection in that guarded reply, and Dathan found himself glad of it. The sweetly curved woman dancing in the rayne deserved affection in her matings.

He sent the other man a sideways look and saw his black gaze was once again on the Princess, scarlet flickers lighting the burning depths.

"She seems to like that one," the Consort commented, tipping his head to indicate Aquil, who had moved in front of the princess and was demonstrating the hip roll that was the foundation of the Rayne Dance. Dathan had to agree. Her vivid smile flashed often. And his brother seemed quite enamored, searching out opportunities to touch her at every turn. Aquil would make a good Consort, would be a good match, he thought, for the man burning so brightly next to him. So why, he wondered, did the idea send ice-water through his veins?

Unconsciously, Dathan shifted closer to the Fyre Consort, spreading his knees to bracket the man

between his thighs. The Consort went instantly rigid, still as the marble he appeared carved from. Heat radiated from him, raising a light sweat across Dathan's chest, sending a sultry trickle down the line of his spine, and he couldn't resist needling the man.

"But do *you* like that one?" he teased, leaning in. He didn't bother to hide his laugh this time when the other man shifted away.

"It doesn't really matter whether or not I like him," the Consort replied stiffly. "It's Temair who'll have to deal with him."

"Well, that's a pity," Dathan responded, moving to regain the space the other man had put between them. Black eyes cut to the side, spearing him through and sending a flash flood of heat straight to his cock. He rose up on his knees, pressing lightly against the Consort's side, and he thought he might just spontaneously combust at the heat pouring off the man. He leaned in and let his words drift over the alabaster skin of the other man's neck on a wash of heat. "Because whichever of us Temair chooses..." He paused to savor her given name on his tongue -- and to savor the way the other man shuddered almost helplessly as Dathan's words licked over his skin. "Whichever one would be willing to deal with you."

The Fyre Lord jerked violently away, falling nearly off his cushion. He shot Dathan an enraged glare, and Dathan tried hard not to laugh in his beautiful, furious face.

"That won't be an issue," the Fyre Consort hissed, flames seeming to crackle in the words.

Dathan just grinned and pushed lithely to his feet. "Well, it certainly won't be an issue for me if I let my little brother have all the fun," he agreed. Walking backward, keeping the pale warrior's gaze the whole way, Dathan crossed the pool and entered the dance.

* * *

Miach was furious, angrier than he could ever remember being. It wasn't the idea of man-love. While the practice was rare in the Fyre Lands, it wasn't condemned. Hell, his own brother had a discreet but definite preference for the male sex. It wasn't even the idea of another man desiring him.

Fuck. Miach couldn't put his finger on what it was, only that having the eldest son of Rayne press cool and silky against his side had sent a veil of red over his vision and a flash of electricity crackling over his body that were almost unbearable.

He couldn't tear his eyes off the young Lord as he made his way to Temair's side, cheerfully shoos his brother off to find another partner. Then he couldn't tear his eyes off the pair of them. Dathan shared Miach's height, and was all long, rangy muscle. He moved behind Temair, pulling her up against his front, and spread big, golden hands over her hips, guiding her in the movements of the dance.

Miach was transfixed by the sight of those long fingers wrapping around her waist, sliding down to press the gentle mound of her abdomen, pressing her deeper into the cradle of his hips. And, sweet Mother, the man's hips moved as if they'd been oiled. Slow and dirty, smooth and quick, Dathan guided Temair in the dance, and she followed every grind and sway.

He dragged his gaze to her face, and nearly groaned at what he saw. Her eyes were heavy lidded, her lips full and red. It was the face she wore in their bed-chamber, full of lust and passion. And it was all for the blue-haired bastard grinding his dick against her back.

“Oh, dear.” Sorcha’s low voice brought Miach’s attention back with a jolt. He cast her a questioning look that must have been a bit more stony than usual, because she raised an inquiring brow.

“Oh, dear, what?” he managed to grit out.

“Oh, dear, he’s not the one the two of you should be courting.”

“I beg your pardon?” His tone had been known to send seasoned warriors into retreat. The slender, fire-haired princess just stared him down.

Finally she deigned to continue. “Obviously he’s got ridiculous chemistry with Temair,” she said, inclining her head to where the pair was dancing. Dathan had spun Temair to face him, stood a breath away from her, hands wrapped round her hips, guiding her in slinky circles.

“It’s also clear that there’s some sort of chemistry going on between him and you --”

Miach interrupted her before she could continue. “The only thing between us is my very fervent desire that Temair choose someone else as Second Consort.”

Sorcha gave him a pitying smile. “You keep telling yourself that, Lord Fyre.” Miach choked back a growl. “At any rate,” she continued, “we have it from his own mother that Lord Dathan isn’t Consort material. He’s too unpredictable.”

Unpredictable. Miach supposed that was one word to describe him.

* * *

Temair was floating, warm mists caressing her, the sheer gauze of her dress stroking her skin with every movement.

Aquil had been a good dancer, a good instructor, and just generally good fun. Dathan was all of that, and more. With each touch of his hands, she felt herself go liquid. The sight of his golden skin glowing against the damp peach of her dress sent bolts of heat straight to her pussy, flooding her with arousal.

When he spun her around to face him, the intensity in his blue-black eyes rocked her to the core. There was laughter there, to be sure. And the playful curve of his full lips made her want to laugh, too. But behind the laughing exterior she could almost see a whirlpool of passions, and that hint of wildness stirred her unbearably.

“I should be dancing with one of your brothers,” she murmured. His gaze dropped to her mouth and Temair couldn’t seem to help herself. She slowly swiped her tongue along her lower lip, savoring the catch in his breath at the action. Oh, she was very, very bad.

“Undoubtedly my mother and your Consort think so,” he replied. His hands were huge. He’d set his palms to her hips, burning through her dress, and now he swept his thumbs upwards, skating along the lower curve of her breasts.

He eased her around again, her back to his front, and she shuddered, breath stuttering in her chest. Miach was watching them, the flames in his chaos-black eyes clear even at a distance. She knew the set of his jaw, the sensual cast to his mouth. She knew it, and her body burned for him.

Just as her body burned for the man pressed against her, close as two rayne drops. His cock was a steel bar against her lower back, scalding heat and cool water all at once.

She felt the tremor start, deep inside, and let her gaze lock with Miach's. Without a word, he stood and moved to the edge of the pool. She felt Dathan's breath on her neck, a sigh, then he took her hand in his, raising it to press his lips to her wrist.

Her pulse leapt, Dathan's breath hitched, and Miach's eyes flared.

With an absent stroke of her fingers through the rough silk of Dathan's hair, Temair murmured, "Goodnight," and moved toward the man at the edge of the pool. As she stepped away from Dathan's warmth, she was aware of a sense of loss, one that was only soothed a little by his soft response.

"Until tomorrow, Princess."

Chapter Three

She didn't stop when she reached Miach's side, didn't even pause to touch him. Just met his burning eyes with her own and muttered, "Hurry."

She kept her good-nights brief; a word to Lady Rayne who, if her dancing eyes were anything to go by, knew full well why Temair suddenly felt fatigued.

She was all but running by the time they reached their chamber. She fumbled the doorknob, and Miach pressed against her from behind, wrapping one arm around her waist, trapping her between his hard, scorching chest and the hard, cool wood of the door. He pressed her there for a moment, burning the knowledge of his arousal into her back, before reaching around her to manage the stubborn lock.

They tumbled into the room, and she spun in his arms, knocking him back against the closed door and dragging his shirt free of his breeches, searching for skin. Sacred Elements, Miach's skin -- silky, hot and hers. The muscles along his sides flexed against her palms as he yanked his shirt over his head, baring still more pale, moonlit ivory skin. She leaned in, starving for the touch of him, the taste, and opened her mouth over one tight pink nipple, sucked hard and savored the low cry and the hungry jerk of his hips against hers.

"Spark," he groaned as she licked her way across his chest, giving the other nipple the same treatment. "Fuck! Spark, let me..."

He was groping with her dress, trying to drag the skirt up and pull the whole thing over her head. While Temair wasn't opposed to the idea -- after all, she was crazed for as much skin-to-skin contact as possible -- she didn't want to let go of him long enough to help.

“Later,” she mumbled against the smooth skin of his ribcage. He was so fine, so gorgeous. Sometimes it was more than she could fathom, that he was hers.

They’d had two weeks together, and all of it traveling. All of it overshadowed by the rebellion in the Queendom that had threatened her life more than once. They’d spent their days riding, their evenings strategizing, and their nights in a nearly frantic tumble of bare limbs before collapsing into exhausted sleep, only to wake and do it all over again the next day.

Since their wedding night, they hadn’t had the opportunity to go slow; to explore. Temair had every intention of remedying that oversight now.

She opened her mouth over the skin of his right pec and let his flavor wash over her. Creamy smooth, fresh and with just a hint of the hot spice she always associated with him, his taste rolled over her tongue.

“You taste so good,” she murmured against the hard muscle. Miach moaned in response, lifting a hand to spear through the maze of braids Nuriel had wound her hair into until he could cup her skull in the palm of his hand.

“Let me taste you, Spark,” he rasped in response, using his grip to pull her gently but firmly back. “Let me lick those pretty nipples and then let me feast on your sweet, sweet pussy.”

He was tugging, guiding her away from him, and this time Temair wasn’t going to allow it. Using the space he’d put between them, she laid both hands over his chest, grinding her palms lightly over his nipples. He arched into the touch, and she smiled. She loved how sensitive his nipples were, almost as sensitive as her own.

She felt the heat building in her hands. It was no longer a surprise when it happened. When Miach had freed her passion, he’d freed her fyre as well. The first time she’d traced trails of fyre over his skin, he’d groaned at the pleasure. The first time she’d cupped his cock in burning hands, he’d nearly shot at the intensity of the sensation.

Hmmm. Another thing to explore.

“Later,” she repeated, resisting his pull. The tug of his hands in her hair sent a shocking zap of electricity straight to her clit, and she gasped, biting into the curve of muscle just below his nipple.

“Right now, I’m busy,” she continued, dragging her fingers down his torso, dragging pink lines in the pale flesh, first with her nails, then with the fyre in her touch.

“Sweet Fyre, Spark,” he growled as she tucked her fingers in the waistband of his breeches. “Let me fuck you. I’ll make you feel so good.”

She’d have to think about it later, the hint of desperation in his voice. It seemed that Lord Fyre didn’t respond well to losing control. It shouldn’t surprise her. The Elements knew he’d kept her helpless to his touch for the last two weeks.

Temair dropped her hands, flattening them against his inner thighs. He jolted in response with a muttered, “fuck.”

“Oh, I will,” she promised. His hand was still in her hair, tugging gently, fingers flexing against her scalp. She rubbed her cheek against his chest. It was almost like he couldn’t decide whether to pull her away or

crush her closer.

She tipped her face down, resting her forehead on his chest so she could see what she was doing. Slowly she dragged her open hands the length of his inner thighs, not stopping until she cupped his balls in one burning palm, and the root of his cock in the other. He dropped his head back against the door with a solid *thunk*, and his fingers tightened, pulling hard and dragging free a spurt of fyre that started somewhere in her core and washed out to tingle over her fingers and toes, crackling over every inch of skin in between.

Drawing a deep, calming breath, she decided to try one of Miach's favorite tricks. Concentrating on the fyre flowing like lava through her veins, Temair focused hard and drew one finger down the laces of his breeches. Miach let out a low roar and ground his balls down against her palm as the laces turned to ash. His breeches sprang open, his cock surging free to slap into her hand with a meaty thud.

"Let me fuck you, Spark," he growled. It was the same voice he'd used defending her, the same voice he used when he was coming, and liquid heat flooded her.

"Later," she muttered. "I told you, I'm busy."

He gave a strangled shout of frustration, which Temair ignored. She was too busy curling her fingers into his waistband. When she dropped to her knees, she dragged the tight material with her, abandoning it mid-thigh, because she'd found something more interesting to curl her fingers around.

Full and fat and so hard it stood straight up, curving just enough to strafe the skin under his navel, Miach's cock was a work of art. Temair didn't think she'd ever get tired of looking at it, touching it. Like the rest of him, it was as hard and smooth as carved ivory. The plump, heart-shaped cap shone a deep rose, and a matching flush spread over the velvety skin of his balls and up the root of his shaft.

He'd let her play, shown her how to stroke, when and where to squeeze. He'd even allowed her a brief taste or two, quick butterfly licks, but he always managed to distract her before she got her fill. Tonight Temair wasn't going to be distracted. She'd wanted him all day -- sweet Mother, she always wanted him -- but the dance, and Dathan's touch, and Miach's eyes on them had all combined to create a seething, boiling whirlpool of need that she knew wouldn't be satisfied by merely laying back and letting Miach make her feel good.

She wrapped her fingers around him near the root of his cock and, Sacred Elements, he was so thick she couldn't even make her fingers meet. Pressing it up against his flat belly, she nuzzled her face against him like a kitten, breathing in his spicy, musky scent and rubbing his cock over her whole face.

"Fuck." His free hand fisted, slammed back against the door, as every muscle in his body drew taut. Leashed power, that's what he was. Coiled, and ready to spring.

She opened her mouth and rubbed wet, hot caresses up the throbbing length, memorizing every taste, every texture. Miach's cock lured her, endlessly fascinated her. She wanted to touch and taste and devour every burning inch.

Settling back on her heels, she went to work. He filled her hand to overflowing -- hard, hot and vitally alive. Resting her cheek on his thigh, she explored him with her fingers; first the heavy shaft, then the velvety skin of his balls. His skin was so soft, satin along the shaft, velvet underneath. She wanted to rub him all over herself, feel that satiny warmth over her cheeks and chin.

Moving closer, she nuzzled her cheek along his throbbing length. When he moaned and slammed his fist back against the door again, a rush of liquid heat flashed through her, soaking the thin fabric of her gown where it was trapped between her thighs.

Rubbing her cheek along the length, she pressed his cock up flat against his belly again, exposing the tender sac beneath. The fragile flesh was rosy here, slightly crinkly and soft to the touch. Temair cast her gaze up the length of Miach's body, loving the strained, agonized look on his face almost as much as she loved the musky, spicy scent of his arousal.

He'd tipped his head back and the line of his throat was beyond beautiful to her. His mouth parted under ragged breath; his eyes were tightly closed. The hand that wasn't buried in her hair clawed ineffectually at the door.

He must have sensed her scrutiny because those chaos-black eyes opened just a sliver, just enough for the fire crackling in their depths to sear her. With his eyes on her like a fiery touch, Temair leaned in and very deliberately licked a path up the shallow valley between his balls.

"Sweet Mother, Temair." She'd never heard his voice so deep, almost animalistic. "When I get my hands on you..." He trailed off, and she figured he must have realized that it wasn't much of a threat. She *loved* it when he got his hands on her.

She cupped his sac in one hand, gently toying with the loose flesh. His scent intensified, as did his heat, leaving her giddy with arousal.

"Fine," he hissed, twisting his fingers tighter in her hair. "If you're going to play down there, then fucking suck it."

He tugged upward, trying to guide her mouth where he wanted it, but Temair resisted.

"Bossy," she breathed against him, and almost laughed at the sheer power of it when his cock twitched in response. He groaned, a low rumble of sound. "I'll get there, my Lord Husband," she murmured, drawing her tongue along the heavy vein that decorated the under-side of his shaft.

"Spark." She looked up the length of his body once again -- the clean, sculpted lines of his torso, the slight twitching of over-stimulated nerves under satiny pale flesh. So beautiful.

All at once she knew his patience was at an end. She could tell by the tension in his muscles, the grip he kept on her hair. Rising higher on her knees, she bent with one graceful motion and captured the very crown of his cock between her lips.

Time slowed, then snapped into fast forward as his taste exploded over her tongue, salt and burn. His low, growling moan rose to a roar, and his whole body jerked, arching forward 'til only his head rested against the door.

Both hands were on her head now, fingers clenched, but he didn't shove her down, didn't try to control her movements at all. It was more like he just needed something to hold on to, to keep from flying apart.

She sucked lightly, trying to catch every drop of his essence, to make it a part of herself. He tasted so good.

She confined her attentions to the head, using her tongue to probe the ridge beneath the crown. She

rubbed over the spot beneath, and Miach made a noise that ventured dangerously near a whimper. His thighs trembled on either side of her, and Temair redoubled her efforts, determined to draw more of those amazing sounds from his arched throat.

No longer content with just a taste, she lowered her head, savoring the pull of his hands in her hair as she slowly engulfed him in her mouth. There was so much of him; he overflowed her hands, overflowed her mouth. She took him deep, not stopping until she felt him touch the back of her throat.

He panted, hands clenching, breath stuttering. She lifted her eyes, catching his glinting gaze with her own, and swallowed. Miach gasped, and a great billow of heat engulfed them. Before her dazzled eyes, licks of fire crawled over his skin, crimson-gold whips of flame casting every ridged muscle in dramatic relief.

Those chaos-black eyes glowed almost solid red, deep and as desperate as his voice when he gritted out, "Finish me, Spark. Sweet Mother, I'm dying here."

She would have smiled if she'd been able to do so around the thick length of him. Instead she just reveled in the heat, in the fire passing from her to him, then back in an endlessly electric circuit that burned away all fear, all doubt.

It took a moment to get it all coordinated, but then the rhythm fell into place; a hard suck and bob of her head coupled with the hard, fast pump of her fist, and in seconds his hips were jerking, those delicious, choked off whimpers stroking over her body like a physical touch.

"Now, Spark," he gasped, and his hands tightened painfully in her hair as his release flooded her mouth. Bitter salt, burning fire, and a sweet spice that was addictive. Temair knew she'd never get enough of the taste of Miach's cum.

He'd barely finished, not even giving her the chance to lick him clean, when he pulled her up, using his grip on her hair to bring her mouth almost violently to his.

"I should fucking spank you," he grunted between hungry kisses. When he pulled back to lick traces of his own release from the corner of her mouth, Temair's pussy clenched demandingly, needing to be filled.

"You could try," she gasped back, licking at his jaw, his chin, anywhere she could reach.

"Is that a dare, Spark?" His cock was still half-hard, pressing against her hip in wet promise. His eyes kindled anew, and Temair shivered at the intent there.

"And if it is?" she questioned, catching his chin lightly between her teeth for a warning nip.

He gave no warning at all. One moment she was pressed against him, held in place by his grip on her head, the next he'd swept her into his arms and was tossing her onto the bed. She started to push up on her elbows, but he didn't give her the chance. A flick of his wrist and she was bound, manacles of fire around her wrists, pinning her hands high above her head.

Revenge was sweet, and Miach set about it with every bit of his concentration, every bit of the strategizing he excelled at. Precise blades of flame dealt with the bodice of her dress, baring breasts swollen with need.

Flames light as a feather's touch brushed over aching nipples, sending her writhing on the bed, hands fisted as she pulled desperately against the bonds that should have burned her, but didn't.

Miach's mouth followed, hotter even than the flames he tortured her with, tracing a winding path over her breasts and down her ribcage. He sent his flame ahead, a heated taunt on her already burning skin.

"Miach, please." The words were a whisper, forced from a throat tight with sensation.

"Turnabout's a bitch, isn't it?" he murmured back, sending a teasing tendril of flame to lick over her clit. Temair screamed as the sensation seared through her, arching in a pleasure so intense it was painful. "Shall I let you come, Spark?" She could barely make sense of his words, so caught up was she in the pleasure. "Or shall I hold you on that edge?" Flame licked along her slit, a deeper pleasure, a clenching in her womb.

"Please, Miach." Now the words were a sob, a wrenching of emotion and sensation as his flames licked over her, stroking her skin, teasing the entrance to her body, electrifying the heavy coating of moisture on her thighs and the lips of her pussy.

He was hard again, fully hard and pulsing against her hip. "Please what, Spark?" His voice was dark with the promise of pleasure.

"Please be inside me," she cried. "Please fill me with your flame." The words came easier, rushing from her like lava from a volcano. "Please fuck me, Husband, and burn down the world."

He groaned, a primal growl of warning and lodged the head of his cock at the mouth of her pussy. She arched against him, desperate for his penetration, but the bonds of fyre he'd tethered her with did their job, holding her firm against the bed.

Another groan and he leaned over her, covering her with his body, sheltering her and owning her all at once. Wrapping long fingers over her wrists, over her marriage cuffs and the bonds of flame he'd used to bind her, Miach swiveled his hips and entered her one slow, agonizing inch at a time.

Her hands were bound but her legs were free, and in an inspired move Temair arched up and wrapped them tight around his waist. That was all it took, and Miach's iron control finally shattered. His hips moved, a graceful, swirling thrust that filled her, stroked everywhere that needed stroking, and sent her careening toward insanity.

She came with a billow of heat that lifted tendrils of his hair where they'd worked loose of his top-knot, breaking against him in waves of intensity that grew rather than subsiding.

As she clenched around him, he pulled her closer, lowering one hand to drag her hips higher, slide her tighter and faster over his cock.

It felt like hours before she came down, hours of pounding, punishing pleasure before her brain cleared enough for her to be aware of her surroundings.

Miach was still inside her, still searingly hot and achingly hard. His lips pulled back in a grimace, and a low groan rasped from his throat, and Temair was struck once again by his sheer beauty. And he was hers.

"Fuck me, Miach." Still bound, she couldn't reach his mouth, so she turned her head and pressed her lips to his arm. He jerked against her, that low groan rising in volume, and she pressed harder with both lips and words. "Come in me, Husband." She licked daintily at the corded muscle of his forearm as he

gritted out a curse. “Fill me with your heat, with your fyre.” The steady rhythm of his hips hitched, stuttered. “I’ll come again,” she promised wickedly, “just from feeling you spurt your flame inside me.”

He came with a roar, hot surges of his hips, scalding sprays of his seed, and to her shock, Temair kept her promise, convulsing helplessly around him, sharing his pleasure.

Chapter Four

“So what do you think of them?” Temair’s voice was soft, as she lay draped languidly across Miach’s chest.

“The Sons?” He considered for a moment. “Aquil seems... adequate,” he finally answered. “I haven’t really talked to any of the others.”

“Oh, really?” Temair tipped her head back enough to give a teasing smile. “I could have sworn I saw you speaking with the eldest before he joined me in the dance.”

Miach’s body tensed beneath her. “I thought he wasn’t up for consideration.” All the lazy satisfaction of the previous moments had drained from his voice.

“Well,” she agreed, “he certainly wasn’t first on the list. But there’s something about him...” Something. The amazing chemistry that sent desire flooding through her veins.

“He’s obnoxious,” Miach stated flatly. “He’s presumptuous and completely inappropriate.”

She propped her forearms on his chest and looked at him. His face was totally closed to her, much like when they’d first met. “I can see he made an impression. He might have been a bit... friendly,” she allowed, “but he didn’t do anything obnoxious or presumptuous with me.”

“He’s frivolous. He doesn’t have the moral fiber to be a Consort.”

He had the same look on his face that he wore when discussing his younger brother, Vashti, whom she knew he despised. Curiouser and curiouser.

“All right. What on Emetra did he do to make you so angry?”

A dark flush spread over Miach’s cheekbones, staining the ivory flesh with hot color. Her stoic, serious Consort actually fidgeted beneath her.

“He implied...” he trailed off, seeming almost unsure of how to continue.

“Implied?” The blush darkened at her question. She could practically hear his teeth grinding.

“He implied that your Rayne Consort would be... accessible...” Another pause. “He said that your Rayne Consort might expect...” Finally, in one breath he gritted out, “He implied that he’d be happy to become as close to me as he would to you.”

“Oh,” she said, nonplussed. Then, as his full meaning dawned on her, “Oh!”

“He’s completely amoral. Completely ruled by the head between his legs instead of the one on his shoulders.”

Temair couldn’t repress a small smile. He was protesting awfully hard. “So, I take it you would not be open to such an offer?” Miach’s mouth dropped open in a most endearing manner, and Temair giggled.

“Of course not!” Those black eyes crackled with agitation. “It would never even occur to me!” He looked at her in silence for a moment. “Besides, your Consorts are there for you, not for each other.”

“Oh, Miach,” she sighed. “My Consorts will be family. They will have to be a support system for each other and for our children as well, if we are to be happy together.”

“He’s still a poor choice,” Miach muttered, looking away. Temair pressed a kiss to his rigid jaw, and let the subject go.

But she couldn’t quite get out of her mind the fact that, under the shock and agitation in his black-ruby eyes, there had been a flicker of something that looked suspiciously like interest.

* * *

The next morning, Temair wandered through the lush grounds of Villa Rayne. Large, lacy fronds hung low from the trees in varying shades of blue and green, while pink and purple blossoms provided startling pops of color. The humidity made for a place of tropical beauty.

It was difficult, in a place of such tranquil beauty, to worry about her would-be attackers; especially since there’d been no attempts made since they’d left the Fyre Lands. Miach and Sorchia didn’t seem to have the same problem remembering the potential danger, though. She’d finally resorted to begging Nuriel to distract them so she could slip away and have some time to herself. They’d be pissed at her machinations, but it was worth it to be able to relax.

She followed a winding path until she came upon a blue-green lagoon, complete with mini-waterfall. Faint rainbows shone in the mist where the cascade of water made contact with the calm waters of the lagoon. Temair laughed out loud in delight. Until taking this tour, she’d never really been anywhere in Emetra other than the Capitol. She’d heard some stories of her fathers’ homelands, but the stories paled in comparison to the realities she’d experienced.

A wide, sheer canopy covered part of the sandy expanse near the water, its pale blue color staining the white sand as the sun glowed through the fabric. The area beneath the canopy was furnished with comfortable lounging furniture; freestanding hammocks shared space with low-slung chairs and comfortable chaise loungers. No one was around, but she’d expected that. When she’d spoken with Lady Rayne last night, the woman had explained to her that, while the grounds around the Noble House weren’t strictly private, it was rare that the citizens ventured onto the land close to the House.

Choosing a wide, comfortable looking chaise, Temair sat down and exhaled, looking out to the crystal blue waters.

She loved this Land. Its simplicity and beauty were breathtaking. The Children of Rayne were friendly and relaxed, true lovers of life. Life here moved like the calm waters she now stared at, slow and smooth with barely a ripple. Poor Miach was slightly uncomfortable with the informality of the Land. She wished her Consort could relax and enjoy his surroundings, but she knew it was unlikely to happen. The Fyre Lands were much more formal and conservative. The easy-going lifestyle was completely foreign to him. Of course, Dathan's teasing wasn't helping matters any.

No, relaxation wasn't in Miach's nature in the first place, and after the attempt on her life, he was even more intensely casting a suspicious eye on anyone he came into contact with.

A shiver of awareness trembled through her, letting her know she was no longer alone. It felt very like her awareness of Miach, only somehow cooler, refreshing instead of intense.

"Princess, you are far too lovely to look so serious."

She smiled as Dathan walked into the tent. "Lord Rayne, I am always serious."

Dathan grinned. "A waste of energy when you are surrounded by all this beauty."

She tipped her head back and looked up at him. "Tell me, are you always so informal? So easy with life?"

Dathan sat next to her, his presence causing a shiver to skate along the back of her neck. The awareness she had of him reminded her so strongly of her reaction to Miach. It didn't matter how unsuitable he might be, Temair couldn't help enjoying Dathan's company.

"Life requires a balance," he answered while reaching out to toy idly with one of her curls. "While seriousness and formality certainly have their place, that place is not here and now."

He twirled the hair along her temple, seemingly absorbed by what he was doing. When those long, golden fingers brushed lightly over the tip of her ear, Temair shivered again with pleasure. Such a light, innocent touch, yet she felt it as vividly as a stroke between her thighs.

"Shall I show you the joy of just living in the moment, without any expectation other than feeling good?"

She wanted to say yes with an urgency that surprised her, but she wasn't entirely sure what she'd be agreeing to. Dathan seemed to sense her distress. He stood, and with another of his heart-stopping grins, offered her his hand. Unable to help herself, Temair returned his smile and allowed him to tug her from her seat.

"Come, Princess," he teased, towing her toward the water's edge. "Come and play with me for a while."

He didn't stop pulling her along until the water swirled around her calves, cool and smooth. He moved behind her, one arm wrapped loosely around her waist while he pointed out the brightly colored fish darting around near their feet. One brilliant emerald fish scooted the length of her calf, seemingly investigating the interloper. Temair couldn't suppress her giggle at the light, tickling sensation of fishy lips along her skin.

Dathan towered over her, a sensation she should be used to since she was by no stretch of the

imagination tall. In fact, all four of her fathers, Nuriel and Sorcha, and most especially Miach towered over her, too. Somehow though, with Dathan the sensation was new all over again. She felt wrapped in the cool, silken brush of his skin. His jaw brushed lightly against her temple as he leaned over her, the gentle scrape of his emerging beard seeming painfully intimate. His breath washed, warm and moist, over her cheek and throat. And, oh Sacred Elements, she could feel the press of his cock against the small of her back; their garments so thin it nearly felt like skin to skin.

It was a lure she wasn't quite ready to give in to. Instead she twisted lithely in his partial embrace, reached down with one hand and scooped, sending a glittering arc of water straight in his face. Dathan gasped, a stunned look on his stunning face, and for one moment Temair was almost afraid she'd made him angry. Then he sucked in a huge, watery breath and roared with laughter.

Grabbing her around the waist, he spun in circles, not stopping until they were both breathless with laughter, water spraying like diamonds from the hem of her skirt.

When he finally released her, Temair staggered a bit, giddy and dizzy from the play. He caught her again, a hand twisting in her loose dress to pull her up tight against his body. She lost her breath again, this time at the intensity of the heat flashing through her at the sensation of all that hard, golden muscle pressed against her own soft curves.

The edges of his smile had grown softer, more sensual, and she found herself responding, her body going fluid and wet under his intent gaze.

Moving slowly, giving her plenty of time to pull back or stop him, Dathan bent his dark head and brushed his lips over hers. His kiss was cool, like the ocean and, she could have sworn, slightly salty.

The rush of sensation from his mouth on hers was instant. Her skin heated where it pressed against his, her fyre meeting his rayne in a steamy cloud. Something stirred deep within her, and suddenly cool swirls of sensation slid down her spine like drops of water.

His tongue stroked lightly along her bottom lip, as smooth as the surface of still water, and as liquid. That gentle touch rocked her to the core, leaving her flushed again, and off-balance. Suddenly needing some sort of anchor in this flood of sensation, she reached out to him, laying her palms on his chest. The golden skin shivered beneath her touch. When one finger brushed his flat, male nipple, the velvety flesh tightened, drawing up into a soft point. He caught his breath at the touch and his sigh flowed from his mouth to hers.

Her pussy swelled, a rush of liquid slicking the tender flesh between her thighs, and she was taken aback by the ease with which she was ready to take him.

He pulled back and his intent gaze met hers. His dark eyes were alight with swirling blue, the illusion of rushing water reflected in them.

* * *

Dathan didn't think he'd ever wanted so much in his life. He wanted to run, but couldn't move a muscle. He wanted to get lost in her shy embrace and fierce eyes. Her taste burned on his tongue, and he'd swear her touch was seared into his skin.

He pulled back, needing aire, needing something to regain his equilibrium, but then his eyes met hers and he might as well have been swamped by a tidal wave. Those quiet hazel eyes flashed a deep aqua blue.

Hell. Dathan didn't even try to hold back his groan. *Oh, fucking Hell*. He'd known it, known it when he'd first seen her, heard her laughter. Dathan just might want Emetra's Crown Princess even more than he wanted his freedom.

He scooped her into his arms, ignoring her protests about how heavy she was and how she could walk perfectly well. To Dathan, she was a perfect, warm armful; one he was painfully reluctant to let go. But he placed her gently on a chaise because, as amazing as she felt in his arms, he wanted more from her. More of her.

She lay back, propped on her elbows, and watched him, all glowing eyes and moist red lips. His cock was so damn hard he thought he might explode from the visual feast alone. He wanted to ravage her. He wanted to protect her. He wanted to run his hand up her thigh and under her gauzy dress and press his fingers into her pussy to see if she was as wet as he imagined her to be. Most of all, he just wanted to touch her, to absorb her satin heat into his very skin.

She must have read his turmoil in his gaze, because hers suddenly became uncertain. In spite of her position, in spite of the magic swirling around her and her magnetic pull on him Dathan realized that, in the end, Temair was just a young woman struggling to find her path through a twisted landscape.

"We should stop." He hated the words, hated the choked sound of his own voice. "This is something you should save for your Rayne Consort."

Temair shifted so she could raise her hand, cupping his jaw. Her warm touch shivered through him.

"I don't want to stop, Dathan," she murmured, and the words licked over him like fire. "In the next few days I'm going to make decisions that all of Emetra will have to live with. I'm going to make choices that will affect my life and the lives of my Consorts, whether for better or worse. Right now..." She cupped his jaw, letting her thumb sweep over his lower lip. "Right now I just want to rest, to bask in the beauty of Rayne, and to experience all you have to show me."

Her words devastated him, humbled him. Her magic had washed over him with their brief kiss. Now it knocked him to his knees.

"I'm not worthy of your trust, Princess." He moved to sit at her hip on the chaise, stroking a hand up her calf to rest on her knee because he couldn't stand another second without touching her. "But I am yours." And if the words sounded like a vow, like a promise of more than his body, he'd worry about it later, because she was licking her plump lower lip, and the sight shot straight to his cock like lightning over water.

He placed his other hand on her bare knee and slid both hands up, slow and easy gauging her reaction. He pushed the damp, gauzy fabric of her dress upward until it gathered at her waist. When she only lowered her lids and leaned back slightly, he ventured further, placing a palm on each knee and gently easing her legs apart.

Her legs were like satin to the touch. She was bare between her thighs, glossy wet with arousal, and Dathan's mouth began to water. A light coating of moisture formed on Dathan's brow, sweat gathering along his hairline. He cupped a hand around one plump thigh and stroked his thumb over the sensitive skin behind her knee. She sighed and fell back on the chaise, humming in pleasure as he repeated the caress.

He smiled at her reaction, and bent to lace chaste kisses from her knee to mid-thigh. He gripped each of

her thighs and moved them even further apart to give himself a better view, and more room to work.

He rubbed his cheek over her inner thigh, and knew his smile grew hungry when the soft flesh grew pink from the abrasion of his stubble. He needed more, suddenly needed to taste her more than he needed air. More, even, than he needed the magic of his rayne. He licked a line of liquid heat along the back of her knee. Her sigh told him she liked that as much as he loved the taste of her skin.

Moving swiftly, he came to his knees on the chaise between her legs, draping the silken limbs over his own thighs, opening her fully to his eyes and his mouth.

Her pussy was gorgeous, flushed lips swollen with arousal and coated with the honey of her passion. He bent, intent on tasting her sweet nectar, but paused when he caught a small movement from the corner of his eye.

Dathan readily admitted he wasn't the most serious of men. He liked to play, looked at life as an adventure. That didn't make him unobservant or stupid. He might be a lover instead of a fighter, but as the eldest son of Villa Rayne, he'd been trained to be both. Maybe he tended to look at his battle training as a game of strategy and power. It was a game he was very good at, and one he'd yet to be beaten at.

A glimmer of alabaster skin, a glint of black-ruby hair, and Dathan knew he didn't have to worry about who was hidden among the thick foliage. Miach had followed Temair down to the lagoon, no doubt to keep a watchful eye on her.

He flashed a smile toward the tree line and extended his tongue, deliberately giving the man in the trees a show. He wondered if Miach was regretting his self-appointed guard duty.

With the first stroke of his tongue over her velvety folds, any thought of teasing the First Consort evaporated from his mind like steam. She tasted sweet, honey and salt, and a unique spice he just knew was all hers. He used his thumbs to spread her wide, and dove in. He wrapped his lips around her clit, feeling a rush of power, of magic, flood him as she arched against his mouth.

He could feel Miach watching, feel his gaze like a whip of flame along his spine, but all thoughts of taunting the other man were gone. No, at some level of his awareness, Dathan was pleasuring the Consort every bit as much as he was pleasuring the Princess.

Sucking gently, he pulled her clit deeper into his mouth. She threw her head back and pushed her pelvis upward to give him more access. Planting a wide palm on her lower belly to keep her still, he pulled back slightly, inhaling her scent. Honey and sea salt, it went straight to his head and the words *more, more, more*, pounded in his brain.

Slowly and deliberately he sank two fingers into her weeping channel, feeling the strong, muscular walls pulse around him, sucking him deeper into her wet heat. He thrust deep, hitting that magic spot that dragged loose a cry that arched her in his grasp and clenched her almost painfully around his fingers.

Her climax exploded, glorious to behold, and with it, so did her magic. Like a tidal wave crashing over a dam, her rayne burst free, her orgasm filling his hand with liquid fire. With a thought, he drew her rayne into himself, absorbing the evidence of her release and reveling in the feel of her magic, her sex.

His body ached with the need for his own release and, as though she knew what he needed, Temair gently pushed him back until he was sitting on his heels before her. She rose to her own knees, movements languid and sensual enough to steal his breath.

Her small, deft fingers worked the knot in his sarong, leaving him totally naked to her gaze. Dathan held himself perfectly still as she inspected him savoring the fascination in her gaze, the way her tongue slicked over her lower lip in obvious anticipation. Unable to stop himself, he grasped his cock, making long, hard strokes along the hard, thick length, pausing to tease the super sensitive skin up under his sac. It was, he knew, as much a show for Miach as it was for his Princess.

They exchanged no words. None were necessary. What they were doing felt too right. They'd connected on a level that defied logic, and while he might be the last man qualified to be her Consort, Dathan knew no one at Villa Rayne was more qualified to be her lover.

Chapter Five

Miach had a perfectly unobstructed view of the lovers from his place amid the trees. He'd had no intention of spying on them, had just planned to follow Temair to the lagoon and keep watch, make sure she was safe in her solitude.

He'd started to come forward when Dathan arrived, determined to keep her safe from the man's casual advances. Why couldn't the bastard have focused on Sorcha? Or Nuriel? Yes, Nuriel would have more than welcomed a dalliance with the Rayne Lord.

He stopped dead at the sound of Temair's laughter. It wasn't that he'd never heard her laugh. In fact, she laughed often, and the Elements knew he'd laughed more in his brief time with her than in the rest of his life combined. But there was such a note of innocent enjoyment in this laughter that he couldn't bring himself to disrupt her pleasure.

He'd nearly come forward again when Dathan had swept her into his arms, laying her gently on the chaise. He'd been certain the fool had allowed her to be hurt, maybe stung by some water-dwelling creature. Again he was frozen in his tracks, this time by the way Dathan touched her, confident and teasing, as though he knew she wouldn't resist. And she didn't.

He caught his breath as Dathan placed his hand on her knee, trying desperately to ignore the pulse in his own cock. A blue spark flickered in her eyes, a spark he could see even from this far away, and Miach was frozen in place. He recognized the desire on both of their faces for it mirrored his own.

Temair was truly a beauty to behold and he was riveted as Dathan slid his hands up her legs. Miach's cock, already half hard from watching them play, shot to full readiness in a painful rush. He might as well have been down there tasting Temair's sweet juices himself.

His hand strayed to press hard against the throbbing flesh, trying to sooth some of the ache. She arched in Dathan's grasp, crying out in the way Miach knew signaled her pleasure, and Miach's cock gave a hard, hungry throb. An odd, dual sensation shot up his spine; cool water and the hot spark of his fyre, and the electrical storm it set off in his nervous system made his knees weak.

He didn't realize he'd squeezed his eyes shut until he dragged them open again. Temair was kneeling now, facing Dathan, picking at the knot securing his sarong and revealing a cock as long and hard as Miach's own. He tried to look away, but the Rayne Lord was stroking himself, lingering at all the places Miach knew would make him crazy with pleasure.

Dathan was the very image of strength and male perfection. His golden skin stretched silkily over long, hard muscle. His chest was free of hair, but a thin blue-black trail picked up below his navel and arrowed down to that impressive dick. A mat of silky dark curls surrounded the base, and Miach imagined Temair's fingers tangled in it, tugging pressure that would make the Rayne Lord beg for mercy.

As if she'd read his mind, Temair leaned in, stroking her hands up the insides of Dathan's thighs. The Rayne Lord's head dropped back in obvious pleasure when she cupped one tiny hand around his balls and wrapped the other around the base of his cock, just below Dathan's own grasp.

She tilted her head and licked the tip of Dathan's cock. Miach choked back a moan. He knew exactly how that felt, the heat and madness of Spark's mouth on his dick. The Rayne Lord responded dramatically, moaning loudly enough that Miach could hear him, and leaning back into a deep arch, hands braced behind him on the chaise, dick an angry exclamation point aimed at Temair's swollen lips.

She spread her legs, sinking lower; the better to reach that blood-dark crown. Her dress had fallen to puddle around her hips, but instead of hiding her, the nearly transparent fabric only highlighted the most intriguing sights. The generous heart shape of her ass, spread wide by her position. The dip at the base of her spine that fairly cried out to be licked.

When she braced her hands on Dathan's straining thighs and buried her nose beneath his sac, Miach gave up the struggle for control. He fumbled with the laces on his breeches, and managed to pull himself free as Dathan's sharp cry of pleasure cut the peaceful silence. He knew, Miach just knew Temair had taken the Rayne Lord's balls into her mouth, rolling the testes over her tongue.

Miach gripped his own sac, tugging sharply, using the pain to fend off the orgasm that threatened to overwhelm him with every tilt of Temair's head, every choked cry from the seemingly unflappable Rayne Lord.

Temair drew back long enough to give Dathan a teasing glance, then in one long, smooth motion she took that long, golden cock deep into her throat. Miach stroked his own aching dick in time with her movements. She took Dathan deep, Miach stroked from root to tip. She stopped to suck at the tip; Miach jerked his fist over his own aching cock-head.

Dathan's cock glistened with moisture. Temair's saliva, Miach knew, but also Dathan's own pre-cum. Miach's dick wept in sympathy, the slickness making the almost painful drag of his hand sweet.

Temair nibbled her way down the side of Dathan's shaft, pausing to give a noisy suck to his balls. Dathan gasped and tangled one hand in the Princess's hair. The position left him in a graceful arch, weight supported on one trembling arm, head thrown back in ecstasy. It was the most beautiful, carnal sight Miach had ever witnessed. He couldn't help but wonder how the Rayne Lord's hands felt tangled in Temair's hair. How he tasted on her lips.

The Rayne Lord turned his head in Miach's direction. His eyes heavy lidded, lips parted and wet, Miach could tell from the new jerky rhythm of the other man's breathing that Dathan was a second away from coming. Miach stroked harder and faster, scalded by the sight of Temair's lips stretched to surround

Dathan's dick, of Dathan clinging to control by a thread. Fuck, he realized. He was hanging on by a thread himself.

Then Dathan effectively cut that thread, sending Miach into a freefall he might never recover from. The Rayne Lord focused his ocean-streaked eyes and Miach would swear the other man could see him. A slow lick over a full lower lip, a naughty smile, and Dathan was shooting, streaking pearly ropes into Temair's mouth, over her lips, even onto her breasts where her dress gaped open.

The sight sent Miach over, scalding streaks of liquid fire lacing over his fist, searing jagged stripes along his own abdomen and over his sleeveless tunic. The force of his climax sent heat billowing around him, enough that the leaves around him shifted in the current, and would probably have withered if it weren't so fucking humid.

Miach slammed his eyes closed, shutting out the visual, caught in a sensory overload that was more than he could bear. He stroked himself soft, only stopping when he became so sensitive the pleasure bled into pain.

Eyes still closed, he stuffed himself back into his breeches, yanking impatiently at his laces. Finally, he got pissed at himself for being a coward and forced his eyes open. Dathan and Temair were fully dressed and composed, smiling indulgently at a pair of excited young girls. Miach wondered sourly if they'd managed to cover Dathan's cock before their guests arrived.

As he crouched to wipe his slick hand on the thick moss at his feet, a heavy sense of uneasiness settled in his gut. Any man would be jealous to see his wife finding such pleasure in another's arms, and Miach *was* jealous, but not for the expected reasons.

He was jealous because he'd wanted to join in. He'd reveled in the sensuality of the moment, drunk in every whimper and sigh to pass Temair's flushed lips. And had it been Aquil, or any of the other sons of Rayne down there with her, he probably *would* have joined in.

No, the sense of uneasiness had nothing to do with Temair's actions, and everything to do with her choice of partner.

Dathan taunted him, teased him with ideas and emotions Miach had never experienced. Had never expected to experience. He'd never planned to fall in love, to be a husband let alone First Consort to the Queen. Was he in love with Temair? What he felt for her certainly exceeded friendship, ventured into near obsession. Wrapping his head around that concept had about exhausted his imagination. Adding the idea of a... not a relationship... a dalliance? Adding the idea of a dalliance with the Rayne Consort was enough to twist his mind into greasy knots of anxiety.

And that was even before he took into account the fact that he was not a lover of men.

He needed to speak to Temair and find out what her feelings were where Dathan was concerned. He had no right to tell her who she may choose as Consort, but he could damn well try and dissuade her from making a choice that may put her very safety, and his very sanity, at risk.

The man was not of the right temperament to make sure that Temair was always looked after and protected. Miach had no doubts that Dathan would make her laugh, keep her entertained. And he was obviously a skilled enough lover. Without the threat of a rebellion that might be enough, but with the uncertainty that was moving through Emetra, Miach wasn't willing to take any chances with his Princess's life.

It had nothing to do with his own feelings.

* * *

The man in the shadows smiled as the First Consort swore softly and headed back to Villa Rayne.

Taking stock of the situation, the rebel conspirator was well pleased. The Crown Princess was obviously leaning toward Lord Dathan, the most flighty and irresponsible of Lady Rayne's sons, which would create a vulnerability that the rebel was eager to exploit. Add to that the clear fact that the First Consort was caught on the twin horns of desire and resentment, and the conspirator was quite sure he'd have no problem at all when the time came to make his move.

He all but rubbed his hands together in glee as he headed back to his rooms in the Villa to contact his noble ally.

* * *

Two days later, Temair was as confused as ever. She knew intellectually that Dathan was all wrong for the job of Consort. Miach called him flakey. Temair wouldn't go that far, but she was well aware that Dathan's priorities lay more in the areas of relaxation and entertainment. She knew this, but her heart and body didn't seem care whether or not he was the appropriate choice. Nor did her magic.

She'd barely seen him since their interlude by the lagoon -- his family and her entourage had made sure of it -- but his touch still seemed to hum over her skin. Even Miach's mind-bending lovemaking didn't wipe Dathan from her mind. On the contrary, every one of Miach's touches seemed to deepen and resonate with the echo of Dathan's.

The problem, Temair realized, was that her personal desires seemed at odds with what was best for the Queendom. Aquil, whom she'd spent numerous hours with over the last two days, was the perfect choice for Emetra. He was well spoken, politically savvy, handsome in a manner uncommonly dignified for a man of only twenty-four years, and he even seemed to get along with Miach.

Yes, Aquil seemed best for Emetra, but Dathan seemed best for her.

He was utterly charming, but lacked the tact and subtlety of his younger brother. He was utterly gorgeous, and he knew it, but instead of being vain, he seemed to take his looks as a sort of genetic joke. The warmth of his personality overshadowed his physical perfection -- just barely -- inviting everyone in his vicinity to come closer. He didn't give a hoot for politics or protocol, didn't seem to care about a person's social standing or even their political leanings.

Perhaps the most troubling thing was his disregard for the unrest in the country. At the previous night's dinner, Miach had very pointedly asked him what he thought of the rebel cause. Dathan's answer, that he'd not seen signs of unrest among the Rayne folk, and he didn't think it was cause to worry overmuch, had just reinforced Miach's apparent dislike for the man. Of course, Miach didn't need anything to make him dislike Dathan more. Every time the two men were in the same room, Miach's whole body went tense and battle ready. She stroked a finger along one of her marriage bracelets and smiled. Temair shouldn't have found it so adorable, but she couldn't help it, not when it was so crystal clear that there was something a lot more powerful than dislike brewing in Miach's chaos-black eyes when he looked at Dathan.

With her feelings still in such a jumble, she was glad to sit down with her friends for a late lunch. She wished she could share her concerns with her mother, but she didn't dare risk upsetting her at this stage in her pregnancy. Perhaps with their combined wisdom, as limited as that may be, she, Sorchha and Nuriel could figure out what she was going to do.

* * *

Nuriel raised her brows inquiringly as Temair flopped into her seat with a deep sigh. She'd noticed that her foster sister seemed increasingly troubled over the last few days, and since there had been no sign of the rebel attacks that had plagued their visit to Fyre House, she assumed Temair was angsty over her choice of Consort.

Why Temair was angsty was a source of confusion to her. All seven of the Sons of Rayne were beautiful. While the three youngest, at sixteen, seventeen and nineteen, were a bit on the young side, as far as Nuriel was concerned any of the older four would be an excellent choice.

"This is much more difficult than choosing Miach was," Temair muttered, piling her plate with chunks of tropical fruit that was lightly fermented in sugar and liqueur.

Sorchha laughed as she helped herself to a piece of still steaming bread. "That's because you and Miach were caught being naughty, so you didn't actually have to make a choice."

Temair shot her an irritated look, but stuffed a wedge of melon into her mouth rather than answering.

"I don't understand the problem," Nuriel put in. "They're all pleasant. They're all drop-dead gorgeous. Just pick one."

"They're not interchangeable, Ellie," Sorchha scolded, using the nickname Nuriel despised. "They're as individual as the three of us."

"I know that," Nuriel huffed. "And don't call me Ellie." Sorchha and Temair both grinned, and Nuriel had to restrain herself from throwing a berry at them. "I just meant that they are all pleasant in their own unique way, and since none of them are ugly, it would be hard to go wrong."

Temair sighed again. "I suppose Aquil is the logical choice."

"Oh, he'd do very well," Nuriel agreed. "He's got a lovely singing voice, did you notice? And when he brought you flowers last night before dinner, I about swooned." The flowers, Nuriel thought, had been a much more romantic gesture than the single iridescent shell Dathan had left on Temair's breakfast plate.

Temair gave a little growl of frustration and tugged at her hair with both hands. "He's perfect," she agreed. "He'd be perfect even if he couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. But he leaves me cold."

"How anyone could look at that man and be left cold is completely beyond my ability to understand," Nuriel commented, earning a dark look from Sorchha. "I'm just saying..."

"But it isn't Aquil you want, is it?" Sorchha asked, with one of her spooky, magic priestess looks that seemed to pierce to a person's very soul.

Temair just tugged harder on her hair and groaned.

“He’d be a disaster at Court.” Sorcha had turned back to Temair and spoke seriously. Nuriel felt like she’d missed a part of the conversation.

“I know,” Temair agreed. She rolled her eyes ruefully. “But tell that to my libido.”

“You’ve got the beginnings of blue sparks in your eyes, too.”

Nuriel leaned in and peered at Temair’s eyes. Until Sorcha had mentioned it, she hadn’t noticed the vague cobalt flickers in Temair’s warm brown eyes.

“Yeah.” Temair stopped pulling at her hair and dragged her fingers through the tousled mass. “My magic and my body seem to be on the same page.” She closed her eyes and dropped her head back against the high back of her chair. “Unfortunately, I think it’s the wrong page.”

“Has he given you any indication what he wants?” Temair gave Sorcha a very dry, very amused look. The redhead blushed a tiny bit, milk-pale skin flushing rosy pink, as she murmured, “Oh.” She shook her head, sending sparks of copper fire through her riot of curls. “Well, has he given a hint that he wants something other than that?”

Nuriel narrowed her eyes in irritation. She hated when her foster sisters had conversations that left her out. “Ok, you’ve lost me,” she interrupted, drawing both women’s eyes to her. “We clearly aren’t talking about Aquil anymore. Care to clue me in?”

It wasn’t Temair or Sorcha who answered, though. Instead a deep, resonant voice came from the back of the room.

“They’re talking about the half-wit,” Miach said sourly, approaching the table. Nuriel’s brows rose again. The crimson sparks that usually lurked in his eyes were nearly ablaze.

“The...?” Nuriel was still feeling a little clueless, and she didn’t like it. She might not be all serious like Temair, or all militant like Sorcha, but that didn’t mean she was stupid

“Dathan.” Miach practically spit out the name.

“Oooh.” Suddenly the conversation made sense. Nuriel gave a little laugh, “Now I feel like the half-wit.”

Sorcha gave her a brief, commiserating smile, before turning back to the drama that was unfolding before them.

“My Lady.” Miach had clearly forced the deference in his tone. Beneath the words, his emotions seethed. “You must realize how bad Dathan would be for us,” he paused. “I mean, for Emetra.”

“I understand your concerns, My Lord Husband,” Temair replied, leaning forward to lace her fingers over Miach’s marriage cuffs. Nuriel blinked, because she’d swear sparks passed between them at the innocent touch. “I even share them,” the Crown Princess continued. Her eyes warmed, and it was clear that the woman speaking now was Miach’s wife, not the ascending Queen. “And yet those concerns don’t change how I feel.”

“And what of my feelings, Spark?” Miach responded softly, and Nuriel could practically feel those feelings, so to speak, billowing off him in waves of heat.

“I need to go for a walk,” Sorcha suddenly announced, rising abruptly. When Nuriel made no move to follow -- no way was she missing what happened next -- Sorcha grabbed her by the arm and tugged her to her feet. “I need company,” the redhead announced, towing Nuriel’s unwilling self toward the door. As her foster sister dragged her from the room, Nuriel had time to see that neither Temair nor Miach seemed to have noticed their departure.

Chapter Six

Miach could have singed himself for asking the question, and for a number of reasons, the most obvious being that it was Temair who would rule Emetra, not Miach. Temair was the one who would keep the magic balanced, and Temair was the one who got to make the choices. But it wasn’t the implied questioning of Temair’s authority and judgment that made Miach sick to his stomach. It was the fact that he’d acknowledged his growing feelings for Temair out loud, and had even acknowledged he might have feelings about Dathan.

It wasn’t his place to feel. More, he loathed the feeling of vulnerability it gave him.

Almost as if she could sense his turmoil Temair slipped from her chair to kneel between his spread thighs, reaching up to cup his face in her hands.

“I don’t want you to be unhappy,” she said. The heat of her touch radiated through his skin, sending warmth cascading through his entire body. The amber lights of her fyre flickered in her eyes, overpowering the faint glimmers of blue that had been there since her rendezvous with Dathan by the lagoon.

“It’s not about my happiness.” Miach was trying desperately to put the situation back in perspective, but from the look in his wife’s eyes, it wasn’t working. “My happiness doesn’t matter, My Lady,” he continued firmly. “What matters is your safety, and the security of Emetra.”

Temair let her hands glide down, the firm yet gentle pressure on the back of his neck sending licks of flame in the wake of her comforting warmth. “Miach, do you really believe he’d allow me to be endangered?”

Torn by his conflicting emotions, Miach pushed out of his chair, pulling free of Temair’s touch. He looked down at her and something broke loose in his chest, arousal and anger, and confusion because the remembered image of Temair taking Dathan’s throbbing cock between her full lips was making Miach every bit as hard as the sight of her on her knees at his feet. He hurriedly reached down, helping her to rise.

The soft look in her eyes was like fuel to the flame of his fyre, and he began to pace, trying to work off some of the angry energy burning through him.

“Would he allow you to be endangered? Not knowingly.” The admission cost nothing; it was true, as far

as it went. “Would he allow you to be endangered, perhaps even put you in danger through his negligence? Oh, absolutely.” He turned to face her. Her brow was furrowed, her clear eyes troubled.

“I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration,” she said tentatively, but Miach didn’t let her finish. He couldn’t. He’d said his feelings didn’t matter, and he meant it. But since he meant it, he was desperate to find a reason that didn’t involve him to keep her from choosing Dathan as her second Consort.

“He doesn’t even acknowledge the fucking rebellion, Spark!” he burst out. “You could have died *twice*, and all he has to say is ‘It doesn’t concern me overmuch.’” Miach spoke the last words in an uncanny imitation of Dathan’s lazy delivery.

Temair moved to face him, planting herself firmly in his path when he’d have continued pacing. “I’m not disagreeing with your reasons.”

And Miach would be damned if he’d let her patronize him. “Then choose, Aquil,” he told her flatly.

“Oh, Miach.” She sighed, and allowed him to move around her. “I wish it was that easy.”

* * *

Dathan stood outside the doors to the breakfast room, hidden from sight and felt his temper come to a boil. He’d known he knocked Miach off kilter. He’d even enjoyed it. The Fyre Lord was so tightly wound Dathan knew that when he let go it would be explosive. He’d just assumed that explosion would be sexual in nature.

Hearing that Miach actually believed he would allow Temair to be hurt filled Dathan with so much rage he didn’t know what to do with it.

When the Fyre Lord stormed out of the room, Dathan was waiting for him. He followed Miach, grimly satisfied when the man stalked toward the training grounds for the Rayne warriors.

Before he could actually enter the training grounds, Dathan grabbed his arm, spinning Miach around to face him.

“What the fuck?”

If Dathan had been any less pissed, the livid anger on the Consort’s face would have knocked him back a step. As it was, he was every bit as furious. “That’s my line,” he spit back at the pale man. “What the fuck do you mean, saying I’d let Temair be hurt? Where the fuck do you get off even thinking it?”

“Where do I get off?” Fyre crawled the length of Miach’s arms, which were left bare by his sleeveless, belted tunic. The sparks tingled over Dathan’s hands, and he jerked away, unwilling to be distracted by the man’s almost magnetic pull.

Miach blinked, then jerked back in a delayed response to the snap of chemistry between them. Taking a deep breath, he continued. “I get off because you don’t even acknowledge a threat. How the fuck can you protect her when you’re so oblivious to the danger that you’d do her out in the open with no concession to safety?”

“I said,” Dathan returned with forced patience, “that I hadn’t seen evidence of rebellion in the Rayne Lands.” He stepped closer, crowding Miach and savoring the leap of awareness in the Consort’s eyes,

and the refusal to back down. “Just because I didn’t think it appropriate to discuss at a public dinner doesn’t mean I discount that there might be a threat.”

Miach growled low in his throat, clearly still enraged. But Dathan saw something else under the anger; something that looked a lot like fear. And it was more than the fear for Temair’s safety. That flash of vulnerability doused his anger like a bucket of ice water.

“And I didn’t have to take security precautions at the lagoon.” He was sharing space, sharing Aire, practically sharing breath with the Consort. “I knew you were there. I didn’t need to keep watch.” Of course, he’d known Miach was just as wrapped up in the heat of Dathan and Temair’s encounter as they were, but there was no need to share that knowledge with the seething man standing before him.

Deciding to tempt the tiger just a bit more, he reached up to cup Miach’s tense jaw, noting the hot color that burned across the Consort’s cheekbones. “It’s easier, isn’t it? Deciding I’m a negligent, oblivious fool? If you didn’t have that belief to cling to, you might have to examine why you’re really so opposed to me as Temair’s Consort.”

Miach seemed frozen under his touch, and Dathan knew the other man was every bit as aware as he was of the current flowing between them.

“Think on it, Lord Fyre.” He breathed the words against Miach’s mouth, and the pale man jerked back, blinking almost as if coming out of a trance. “Think on it, and ask yourself what the real reason for your resistance is.”

Miach snarled an almost unintelligible curse and shoved Dathan hard, regaining his personal space before spinning and stalking into the training grounds. Dathan blew out a long breath and reached down to press a soothing palm to the erection tenting his sarong. He might have worried that he’d pushed the Consort too hard if he hadn’t seen a matching bulge straining against his breeches.

* * *

Temair had too much on her mind to stay in Rayne House. It was easier to think out in the open air.

Dathan. She understood Miach’s misgivings about him. She even shared many of them. Still there was something about the Rayne Lord, the look he had in his eyes, like he knew a secret and enjoyed keeping it from the world. He was gorgeous to behold, but there was more to him than that.

He was intelligent, charming and at ease among people. He would make a good diplomat, something her first Consort was not. No, Miach was a General; her great tactician. Miach might be a disaster with tact and subtlety, but she knew he’d never allow her to come to harm.

With Dathan she experienced the light-hearted side of life. It was a lifeline she would need when she ascended to the throne. She’d witnessed her mother during difficult times, had witnessed how her fathers were able to comfort and soothe their Queen. Temair wanted the same thing for her own life.

She was just afraid she was letting her own desires influence her to make the wrong choice for Emetra. Was there really room for joy in a Queendom under attack and the threat of treason?

Walking quietly through the grounds, she let all the arguments for not choosing Dathan weigh down on her until she once again found herself at the lagoon where he’d brought her such pleasure a few short days ago.

Wearily she sat down next to the water. Her rayne magic had stirred to life under Dathan's touch, and she felt a pull to the tranquil azure pool stronger than ever before. The gentle ripples on the surface and glinting flashes of tiny fish lulled her into an almost trancelike state. Suddenly she wanted more, more of the peace the water promised, a floating freedom from the difficult choices she needed to make sooner rather than later.

She glanced around to make sure she was completely alone, and smiled at the solitude. On the other side of the lagoon, the waterfall tumbled down, chaos emphasizing the peace of the rest of the pool. It was a perfect reflection of the turbulence in her own mind. Standing, she quickly stripped out of her thin gown, so that she was clad only in her thin chemise.

Temair waded slowly into the lagoon, not stopping until the water reached her thighs, her chemise floating around her like a pale blue cloud. Tipping her head back, she soaked in the dappled sunlight, trying to absorb the peace into her very pores.

Bright fish darted around her legs, and she swished her hands through the water, laughing softly as the little jewel-toned creatures followed her movements. Completely at peace for the first time in days, she pushed off with her feet, letting the water catch her, floating in utter silence and tranquility.

* * *

Dathan hadn't followed Temair this time. In fact, he'd been trying to avoid her, to avoid the choice she'd soon make that would alter his life forever. He found he wasn't sure what choice he wanted her to make.

He did not want to be a Royal Consort. But he wanted Temair to the point of obsession. He didn't think he could stand back and calmly watch his brother marry her, then wish them well and go back to his own carefree life.

He imagined Miach's face at the wedding ceremony, looking at Aquil with a mix of relief and satisfaction that would only hide the man's true desires. Dathan hadn't seen any sign that Aquil was interested in Miach as anything other than a fellow strategist, but he couldn't suppress the slight tingle of jealousy at the idea of his brother living in the First Consort's pocket.

He'd had to take a good long look at his own motivations, as well. The Consort drew him like no other ever had, and Dathan'd had to examine if his attraction to Temair was just a means to an end. He'd banished that worry with a mere glance into her warm, laughing eyes. The Consort might make him hard, but the Princess warmed his heart. For the first time in his life, he'd found something he was willing to work for, and it had to do with more than his dick. Of course, the memory of her taste, spicy and heated on his tongue, made his dick pretty happy about the situation, too.

Uncharacteristically caught up in his own thoughts, Dathan was at the top of the waterfall, poised to dive before he saw her.

Temair floated on her back, hair a sable halo around her head and shoulders. Her pale pink chemise was transparent in the water, only emphasizing the dark shadows of her nipples and pussy. The gauzy cloth billowed around her as she languorously swept her arms and legs, propelling herself lazily around the pool of water.

Her eyes were opened, but not quite focused. Dathan looked up and smiled when he realized what she was doing. From her position in the pond, Temair was surveying the clouds as they skimmed across the

sky. He'd just bet she was looking for shapes in the fluffy masses, perhaps even making up stories about the things she saw. He imagined her doing the same with her daughters, with their daughters, and felt that treacherous melting in his chest again.

Cliff diving forgotten, Dathan relaxed and watched her. Something about the Princess calmed him, slowed down the whirling in his head and caused him to think about finding his pleasures in one place instead of many. He wondered if she had the same effect on the Consort, and snorted out a laugh. If that were the case, he'd hate to see how tightly wound the man had been before bonding with her.

It took him a minute to realize she was in distress.

Her gentle, languid movements grew more deliberate; the peaceful smoothness of her face grew tight and strained. Then the water around her began to boil, tranquil azure taking on the angry gray of storm clouds. Before Dathan's horrified eyes, Temair jack-knifed, bending sharply at the waist as if someone had wrapped their arms around her to drag her beneath the suddenly seething water.

Dathan was diving for the pool, cutting through air and water like an arrow before she'd touched bottom.

Chapter Seven

Temair had lost herself in the hypnotic rocking of the water, the almost painful beauty of the rainbow-hued clouds overhead. It felt so good to just let everything go, to just focus on being in the moment instead of the anxiety inducing decisions on the horizon. She wondered if this sense of ease was a hallmark of Rayne magic, or if it came from one particular Child of Rayne. Because, Temair realized, she would always associate this feeling of utter peace with Dathan, no matter what choice she made.

She was as close to meditation as she'd ever been when she registered the change in the magic surrounding her. Where moments ago the water had been responding to her tentatively questing magic by warming and cradling her, its gentle touch had suddenly become controlling and restrictive. She tried to raise a hand, only to discover that the water was holding her like a binding.

A flicker of fear ignited in her mind. She was trapped, stuck like a fly on sticky paper. The water had gone cold, sending an aching chill into her muscles and bones as her connection to the magic of the world reacted to this perversion of rayne. In that final, lucid moment, Temair knew she was in mortal danger.

The water felt alive, almost human in its malevolence. She pulled frantically at her infant rayne magic, desperate to keep herself afloat. Images tumbled in her mind: Nuriel and Sorcha's good-natured bickering. The look on her fathers' faces when they'd announced her mother's pregnancy. Dathan's laughing, slanted eyes. The beautiful arch of Miach's throat as he came, filling her with fyre and pleasure.

Yes, there was pain for the loss her friends and family would suffer. Regret over what she might have had with the Rayne Lord. But the thought of leaving Miach filled her with such rage that her fyre leapt to

the fore. Lightning flashed over the surface of the water, bringing the already turbulent pond to a literal boil. For one instant she felt Miach as if he were with her, raging in her mind, then the connection was severed as icy chains whipped around her waist, dragging her under.

She hit the bottom of the pool and was unable to move, chained by an unseen force. An invisible weight pressed down on her chest, forcing out what little air she had left in her lungs. Her eyes widened as her vision went black at the edges. She was so painfully cold. Darkness surrounded her as her struggles grew weaker and weaker, and Temair realized she was dying.

* * *

Dathan broke the surface of the lagoon in time to see Temair go still on the sandy bottom. A roar of rage and denial filled his mind as he reached her side. Whatever force held her pinned to the bottom fought him but, as frivolous as he was, there wasn't another Child of Rayne stronger than First Son Dathan in a rage. A vicious focusing of his mind and the water around Temair went soft and fluid, allowing him to wrap an arm around her ribcage and propel them rapidly to the surface. Another sharp thought and the water surged, washing them to the rocky sand at the edge of the pool.

She wasn't breathing. The information would terrify him later. Now there was no room in his head for emotion other than rage; only rage and action. He turned her to her back in a motion of deceptive gentleness and sealed his mouth over her mouth and nose, inhaling sharply, drawing the poisoned water from her lungs, from her very pores. It was bitter on his tongue. Lifting his head he blew out, sending the tainted water out in a burst of hissing steam.

Steam trickled from Temair's mouth and nose as well, and as her lungs began to clear, she began to cough convulsively. He covered her mouth with his own again and began to breathe air deep into her lungs. One hand lay on her chest, calling the last of the bespelled water from her lungs, forcing air in and the water out. She coughed more violently, and he realized she was alive. The realization cut through the rage, but just barely, leaving room for other emotions. He'd never been so afraid in his life.

He turned her to her side to make it easier for her body to expel the water, and rubbed her back with a trembling hand. His Princess had almost died in his own home. Rage rushed through him again, pulsing and hot. All at once he understood Miach's worry. Dathan wouldn't be so lax where the Princess's safety was concerned ever again.

The pool he found her in had been bewitched. Dathan recognized elemental magic. A brutal, questing thought confirmed it, and confirmed that the one who'd created the spell was nowhere to be found. He snarled in frustration. He wanted, needed, to get his hands on the criminal, needed to face the traitor and destroy him as he'd almost destroyed Temair.

The traitor had to be a Child of Rayne and the knowledge tore at Dathan's gut. He hadn't discounted the rebellion, but he hadn't been able to believe it would touch the Rayne Lands, hadn't been able to accept that one of his own people was capable of treason. He'd been foolish and almost mortally wrong.

Temair had stopped coughing and was now shivering. A low, rough whimper cut through his self-abuse, yanking all his attention back to the precious woman before him.

"I can't understand why someone wants me dead." Her whispered words destroyed the weak defenses he had left. There was no way he was entrusting his Princess to his brother. She was his, his and Miach's, and while he might see himself as a lover and not a fighter, in Temair he'd finally found something worth fighting for to the death.

But there was no enemy here, and it wasn't a warrior she needed right now.

He sighed deeply and placed his finger under her chin, tilting her face up until her wounded gaze met his. "Princess, I will find the ones responsible for trying to harm you and deal with them personally." He caught a tear that slid from the corner of her eye, his thumb absorbing the salty drop.

She gave a shaky laugh, and murmured, "Miach might have something to say about that."

"Miach has earned the right to say whatever he wants," he muttered in return, then caught her gaze with his own. "But don't you dare tell him I said that." He smiled, but it felt strained, not his usual easy grin. "He's far too arrogant already."

The sound of her broken laughter, her ability to smile in death's wake, the sensation of her tear merging with his own magic all combined to reignite his fury; since there was no enemy to unleash it upon, that fury manifested itself as passion. Dathan cupped her face and caught her mouth with his, not a slow sweet kiss, but a hungry, frantic one. One meant to reassure them both that she was indeed alive and safe with him.

Her arms wrapped around his neck and she returned his kiss with matching hunger and frantic desire. Fear and rage transformed into something else, an elemental need to reaffirm life.

Her hands met his at the knot in his sarong, and together they ripped it free, hands fumbling, never breaking their kiss. There was no pause, no slowing down. Just a soul-deep need to touch and taste, to burn the sight of her on the bottom of the pool out of his mind.

Naked and burning for her touch, Dathan drew back and crouched over her, straddling her knees. She was so beautiful to him, he wondered how he'd ever thought she was plain. Her eyes glowed, her own rich brown dancing with the amber lights of her fyre and the blue flares of rayne.

Her body was still cool from the lagoon, and he set about warming her from the bottom up. Shifting back still further, he took one slender foot in his hand, pressing his lips to the arch and breathing warmth and life against her skin. She sighed and stretched, the curve of her body an enticement he didn't even attempt to resist. Instead he coasted his mouth to her ankle, licking teasingly at the thin, delicate skin.

He let his hands lead the way up her calves, stroking the silken skin reverently before following the same path with his mouth, pushing her skirt out of the way with each caress. His hands led the way up her calf and was followed by his mouth. He kept track of every whimper as he worked his way up her body, every gasp and every sigh. She moaned softly as his tongue stroked along the back of her knee. Vivid azure surged through the warm brown of her eyes like a tidal wave when his tongue swirled around the tops of both her thighs.

"Open for me, Princess." Dathan needed her in that moment as much as she needed him. Maybe more. He'd nearly lost something he hadn't recognized, hadn't realized was as necessary as the very rayne that gave life to his magic.

"Yes," she gasped. One slender hand yanked desperately at her skirt, dragging it impatiently up and out of the way, the other tangled in his wet hair, pulling him closer to where he wanted to be.

"Yes," he echoed, then lost the ability to speak, or even to think, as he submerged himself in the wet heat of her pussy.

* * *

The hot, velvety rasp of Dathan's tongue whipped Temair into a frenzied state of need. She was alive, she was safe, and she needed. Needed to be Dathan's. Needed to know he was hers. Grabbing the back of his head, she began to grind down on his mouth. She needed release, needed to expel the adrenaline that was humming through her body at breakneck speed.

Unwilling to be patient any longer, she managed to push his head away enough to come to her own knees. Planting her hands on his shoulders, she shoved until he let her wrestle him down. Jerking the loose fabric of her skirt out of the way, she crawled on top of him, catching the heady scent of the greenery crushed beneath his body and breathing it in. Sliding down his long, tanned torso she opened her mouth, licking hot, wet kisses over his neck, his shoulder, his pecs, not stopping when he hissed out a breath and arched against her. Not stopping when he grasped her waist and kneaded the soft curve of her hip. Not stopping until she felt his cock hit her belly.

Finally where she wanted to be, Temair sat up and wrapped her hand around the thick base of his cock. He moaned, that involuntary cry that was already as familiar and enflaming as Miach's dirty, whispered promises, and she couldn't wait one more second.

"I need you inside me now," she bit out as she sank down his length. His cry this time was sharper, his beautiful, golden body tense beneath her as he obviously fought for control. But she didn't want him in control. The stretch of him inside her, the burn as he filled her beyond pleasure to that line where pain and ecstasy danced hand in hand, made her crazy to have him as wild as she was.

She ran her hands roughly over the satiny skin of his chest, almost trying to absorb him through her fingertips. Catching his bronzed nipples between her fingers, she pinched, coaxing them to respond to her touch. He threw his head back as his pelvis jerked upward to meet her, thrust for thrust.

Miach had awakened her passion, but through Dathan's sensuality she was learning her sexual power.

He pushed up on one elbow, keeping the other firm on her hip. His eyes raked over her, burning her flesh through the thin fabric of her dress. They were so in synch it felt like their very minds were linked. Grasping her skirt, Temair wrenched the damp fabric over her head, baring herself to his avid gaze.

Dathan collapsed back, hips churning against hers, but it only took him a second to push back up, as if he needed to watch her as much as he needed to feel her.

The hand on her hip slid down to grasp her ass as she rode him, taking him harder, faster, deeper. He arched further up, sweet Mother so beautiful, and caught a nipple between his lips. She cried out and slammed down harder, trying to somehow diffuse the intensity of the sensation. He shuddered under her, and let her feel the edge of his teeth, a sharp caress that had her crying out and spearing her fingers through his dark hair, locking them in.

He looked up and this time it was Temair who kissed him with scalding hunger, her lips burning on his while her pussy clamped tightly around him, strong internal muscles squeezing every inch of his burning, throbbing cock.

They set up a blistering pace, an exquisite rhythm. She could feel his orgasm coming, see it in the tight line of his jaw, and knew her own wasn't far behind. His eyes surged bright, ocean blue and he thrust hard, filling her more deeply than she could have imagined.

He gave a low, guttural moan, and flipped them, hands on her hips, dragging her onto his cock. She wrapped her legs high around his back, and pushed him closer with her heels, grinding her throbbing clit against his pubic bone and setting off the first hungry shudders. Dathan stiffened and pressed deeper still, jerking and moaning as he filled her with his pleasure and his seed. The sight of his pleasure, the fiery spurt of it inside of her, touched off her own, and she came apart around him.

* * *

Miach had been sparring with Darmon when he felt it, the unmistakable surge of Temair's fyre. But where he was used to that lash of flame being accompanied by a rush of pleasure, now it rode a wave of fear.

The sudden undeniable knowledge that she was in danger, she needed him, froze him in his tracks, earning him a shout and curse from his best friend and sparring partner as Darmon quickly extinguished a whip of fyre that would have singed even the powerful Lord of Fyre.

Miach didn't even spare a grateful thought for Darmon's expertise at the Fyeria, just turned and all but flew from the practice grounds. He'd felt the malevolence surrounding Temair's fyre, felt the drowning anguish and the loss of consciousness, and cursed himself with every pounding step for letting her out of his sight.

He didn't think, just ran, cutting through foliage and dodging willowy branches until he broke free of the lush jungle that made up so much of the Rayne Lands. He was so primed for battle he reacted before his brain had even had time to process what he was seeing. With a thought and a flick of his magic, Dathan was flying through the air, landing hard on his back and held down by a web of flame. When Temair surged to her feet, teeth bared to fight, Miach's logical brain kicked in, and he began to take stock of the situation.

Temair was under attack, but not the kind he'd expected. No, she'd been under sensual assault, the kind that left her mouth moist and hot, her pussy wet and swollen.

"Miach!" He heard her, but he couldn't respond. Not yet.

He knew, he damned well fucking knew it wasn't mere sex that had called out to his magic.

"Miach, stop!" She moved closer, getting right up in his face, fierce and pulsing with magic and with life. She closed her hand over his fist, the fist he had clenched, holding that fiery net over Dathan. "He's not the one who hurt me," she added, sliding her hand down to wrap around his marriage cuff.

"What the fuck happened, Spark?" It took a monumental effort to get the words out, to form coherent thought past the conflagration of rage burning through him.

Before she could answer, his net of fyre flared, sputtered, and vanished under a surge of sheer ice. In the blink of an eye, Dathan was on his feet, his too-handsome face twisted in a grimace of rage that matched Miach's own.

All that adrenaline needed an outlet, and since there wasn't a clear enemy to be seen, he decided Dathan would make as good a target as any.

Somehow he kept his hands gentle as he shifted Temair behind himself, but there was nothing of

gentleness in him when he faced Dathan across the clearing.

Without offering the man the courtesy of a bow or even a word, Miach gathered his fyre, still amazed at the power he could pull so far from home. A happy side effect of his mating with the future queen. A side effect he took full advantage of, sending a heavy ball of fyre at Dathan.

The Rayne Lord surprised him again, catching the fyre in one big hand and collapsing it with a hiss of steam. Miach fired again, shooting a barrage of flame at the golden man, distracting Dathan so that Miach could once again lash out with a fiery whip, binding the Rayne warrior's arms to his sides.

Dathan didn't stand idle and allow himself to be subdued, though. Just as Miach was about to sneer out his victory, the Rayne Lord flexed wide shoulders, and Miach's net of fyre glowed blue, transformed, and suddenly it wasn't a net of fyre, but a snare of water, flowing back on Miach to bind him every bit as neatly as he'd contained Dathan just seconds before.

"What are you doing?" Temair's panted out words sounded dim and far away. His rage and disbelief made him almost deaf to her. He'd never been beaten before. No one had ever even come close.

With a primal roar, Miach let loose the full scope of his fyre, dissolving Dathan's net. The distance between them dissolved just as neatly, and all at once they were hand-to-hand, fist to fist. There was nothing of the elegant Fyeria in this fight. It was dirty and ruthless, too filled with emotion for strategy or thought.

He was so caught up in the battle that the deluge of ice water that suddenly doused them hit him like... well, like a deluge of ice water. Dathan seemed equally stunned, standing as still as Miach, so close their bare chests were touching, in a silence broken only by their rough breaths.

"I said," Temair repeated in a soft, deadly voice, "What. Are. You. Doing?"

Miach dragged a deep breath, for once unaffected by the touch of Dathan's skin on his own. "I think I should be asking him that," he finally responded once he'd regained control of his vocal cords.

"Don't think," she snapped, and he dragged his attention to her, finally realizing he wasn't dealing with his wife. He was dealing with his Queen, and she was pissed.

"He was defending you," Dathan replied for him, and Miach had to choke back a snarl.

"I don't need your help," he rasped.

Temair growled, a sound that made his dick perk up and take notice in spite of the completely inappropriate circumstances, and snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Oh, Consort, I think you need all the help you can get right now," she countered. She sent a narrow look in Dathan's direction. "Continue."

"Obviously he felt your distress," the Rayne Lord said in a tight voice that betrayed his own tension. "He came to rescue you, and I was the nearest threat he perceived."

"You are no threat to me, little boy," Miach gritted out, trying to step away and realizing too late that Temair's magic, no matter how untutored it was, held him anchored firmly to the ground.

"Then why do you run every time you see me, big man? Why did you leap at the first opportunity to

attack like a rabid animal?”

It was fortunate Temair had a hold on them then, because Miach thought he just might have killed the Rayne Lord for his gall.

Chapter Eight

“Both of you, shut up!” Miach had murder in his eyes, Dathan had trouble in his, and Temair felt ready to flay them both. Sensing both men were near the breaking point, she released her hold on them enough to let Miach jerk away from Dathan. Her magic was an odd hybrid of theirs, clearly of Rayne, but shot through with fyre in a melding that had stopped both men dead in their tracks.

It was definitely worth studying, experimenting with. But later. For now...

“Is he right?” she asked Miach. Before he could stammer out a denial, she clarified. “Did you feel the attack on me? Is that what brought you here?”

He was struggling for rationality, fighting hard to regain his precious control, and she let him have a moment, gesturing sharply for silence when Dathan would have goaded him further.

After a long moment, Miach drew a deep breath and forcibly relaxed his shoulders. “It felt like I was drowning,” he answered, his voice low and pained. “Like I couldn’t breathe, only I knew it wasn’t me.” His eyes met hers, and sheer, screaming Hell was in their fiery depths, obliterating the black and leaving only scarlet flame. “I knew it was you, Spark, and I knew I couldn’t get to you in time.”

She had to catch her breath at the emotion in his low voice, the anguish in those burning eyes. She’d known her feelings for Miach were growing with every day, had suspected he felt more than mere friendship for her, but she hadn’t dared to hope for the depth of feeling pouring off him now.

She had to drag her attention away from him. There was no time for romance or sentimentality now. Now it was time to be the Ruler of Emetra. She turned to Dathan, who stood silent and looking vaguely amused. Temair knew better, though. She knew that under that smirking façade, Dathan was every bit as shaken as she and Miach were, not only by the attack, but by the force of their coming together.

“I know what I felt, Dathan,” she said softly, and the glint in his eyes mellowed. “What did you see?”

“The water grew cloudy, gray,” he began, glittering eyes vague as he thought back. “It looked as though someone grabbed you from below, pulling you under.” His gaze sharpened again, met hers. “But it wasn’t so much what I saw, Temair, as what I felt.” To her surprise he turned his gaze to Miach as he continued, and there was no hint of humor to be seen. “The water was wrong, the magic tainted. Temair’s rayne magic has already awakened enough that she should have been able to free herself easily. Instead the water held her like a tether.”

Miach's jaw tightened, and Temair braced herself to separate the men again but, not for the first time, her First Consort surprised her.

"It was the same when she was attacked at Fyre House," he confirmed. "Flames she should easily have been able to quench, but which refused to die." His expression hardened still further, reminding her more than ever of a beautiful marble statue. "Do you finally acknowledge that the rebellion has, indeed, touched the Rayne Lands?"

Dathan's nod was abrupt, angry. "As much as it sickens me, I can not deny the obvious."

Just as Temair thought it was safe to relax, Miach exploded again, sending a small but scalding burst of flame in Dathan's direction. "Then why the fuck aren't you hunting down whoever did this instead of..."

"Instead of what, Consort?" Temair asked, thinking it was a damned good thing he'd paused when he did. Dathan apparently realized what a close save it had been, too, as his smirk returned at almost full force.

Amazingly, however, the Rayne Lord kept his opinion, and his amusement, to himself. "Whoever set the spell was long gone before it was ever activated."

"Do you think it could have been just a generic spell, meant to cause trouble to whoever happened to take a swim today?" She knew the question was a silly one, but she just couldn't accept the reality that there was someone out there trying to kill her.

Dathan turned to her with a sad smile. "I wish that were true. I hate that you're a target even more than I hate the fact that there is a traitor among the Children of Rayne." He sighed, drawing her eyes back to the broad expanse of his golden chest, the velvety nubs of his nipples reddened from her mouth and fingers.

Both men reacted to the heat and tension she felt growing between her thighs, Dathan with the lowering of lids over tilted blue eyes, and Miach with the warning growl of an animal pushed too far too fast.

Dathan broke the spell, clearing his throat and continuing in a somewhat grudging voice. "Unfortunately, your moody Consort has the right of it. This spell was meant for you, sweetheart. Meant to end you."

His blue eyes went icy, and when he spoke Temair could see that he and Miach were once again in silent accord.

"That is not something we'll allow to happen."

* * *

They retreated to the Villa in troubled silence, Dathan filled with a dread and grief that was utterly foreign to him. Once they'd arrived, Miach sought out Darmon, the only man he'd trust to guard his Princess. Once Temair's safety was assured, Miach and Dathan assembled Lady Rayne and the Captain of the Villa's Guard. To Temair's very vocal dismay, Miach also insisted on fetching the Villa's Chief Healer, a man named Storm, whose eyes matched his name. By the time Temair had changed to dry clothing and, accompanied by Darmon, collected her foster sisters, the group was assembled by the Reflecting Pool.

Dathan kept his voice slow and steady as he told the others that there had been yet another, nearly successful attempt on Temair's life. He remembered her unmoving body at the bottom of the pool and

anger swelled within, a boiling kind of rage that would scald anyone who crossed him.

“We have a traitor among us,” he pronounced, a sick feeling filling his heart. A soft, feminine gasp drew his attention to the doorway. Losha, one of the scullery maids stood, a dusting cloth in her hand. Dathan frowned and saw Miach do the same. There was no reason for the maid to be present at this very private meeting. He didn’t allow himself to be sidetracked, however, continuing his announcement, “The Princess’s private guard has already begun their investigation. They will not be working alone. I personally intend to supervise the investigation.” He ignored Miach’s scowl, now directed at him, and concluded, “Rest assured we shall find out who has betrayed our Princess.”

The head of the Villa’s security seconded his intentions and began delegating assignments to the Rayne Guards, while Miach did the same with the Princess’s private Guard. Listening to the Consort, Dathan found a new respect for the man’s serious demeanor, and admiration for his wicked knack for strategy.

As he turned to Temair, movement caught his eye. Losha had approached Storm, her lovely bronzed face marred by anxiety and tears. While Dathan watched, the Healer touched the maid’s face, absorbing her tears in an intimate act reserved for lovers.

Dathan frowned in consternation. Storm was betrothed, had been so since adolescence. In fact, his fiancé was one of Dathan’s distant cousins. For the man to show such public affection for a woman not his intended was a sign of disrespect that Dathan couldn’t ignore. He suppressed a sigh. He couldn’t ignore it, but he could wait to deal with it after Temair’s attacker had been apprehended.

In the mean time, he could at least attempt to maneuver the Healer into some semblance of decency. “Storm, can you tell me if any lasting damage was done to the Princess?” Temair snorted in disgust, but Dathan ignored her. Yes, he wanted to distract the Healer, but he was also genuinely worried for Temair.

The Healer looked at the Princess with an unreadable gaze. “I can see nothing that would cause future problems for the Princess.” He smiled, but it wasn’t a friendly expression. “She’s very lucky you were there to rescue her. Had she been trapped at the bottom of the lagoon much longer, she would not have survived.”

Dathan stilled, and felt Miach and Temair do the same. Storm had moved closer to the pool, and Losha followed, as if drawn by a magnet. Or by magic.

The rage that filled him threatened to boil over, and he felt paralyzed with it. It was Miach who spoke, and his quiet statement stopped those few people who were still near the pool.

“Lord Rayne never said the Princess was trapped in the lagoon. In fact, he never mentioned the nature of the attack at all, merely that it occurred.”

Storm turned and faced them; his blue eyes turning a dull grey that reflected the clouds of the event he was named for. In that moment, Dathan knew he was right. Storm was the traitor.

“How could you do such a thing, Storm?” He didn’t even try to keep the anger and pain from his voice. “You’re betrothed to my cousin, will soon be a member of my family.” The anger was overcoming the pain, and his voice rose with every word. “You’re a healer, Storm, not a killer. How could you have done this?”

Storm backed slowly onto the surface of the pool. He was strong in Rayne magic, and easily kept the surface firm. Reaching out, he wrapped his arm around Losha, holding her tightly to him.

“How could I do this?” He sent a venomous look at Temair. “Because of our wonderful Lady,” his hate-filled gaze shifted to include Lady Rayne, “Because of our benevolent Queen I am forced to marry someone I can’t stand the sight of, a woman who is selfish, cold and manipulative.”

Dathan edged slowly toward them. “Why not petition Lady Rayne to be released from the betrothal?”

“I did!” Lady Rayne blinked and covered her mouth with her hand, looking ill. “The Lady,” he sneered, “turned me down. As did our glorious Queen. Apparently the demands of that woman carry more weight than the pleas of a mere man.” The Healer clutched the little maid closer. She clung to him, looking grief-stricken. “I love Losha,” Storm announced, “and she loves me. I will do whatever is necessary to ensure that she and I remain together. More,” he continued, “I will do whatever I may to ensure no other man is forced into an unwanted union. The abuse must stop. It will stop.”

Dathan felt a moment of pity for the man, and a moment of confusion. Why would his mother have denied Storm’s request? For that matter, why would the Queen? Then the image of Temair, limp and lifeless on the sandy bottom of the lagoon filled his mind, and pity gave way to resolve.

He raised his hands, gathering his Rayne, and the surface of the Reflecting Pool began to churn beneath the Healer’s feet.

“You have committed treason, Storm. You must pay for your crime against the Crown Princess, against the Children of Rayne and against Emetra.” He threw his hands out, and his Rayne formed two snaking whips that would wrap around the traitorous Healer, capturing him in unbreakable bonds.

“We. Will. Not. Go. Away.” Storm’s eyes lit with an unholy glow as he held his hand flat over the seething waters of the Reflecting Pool. Clearly straining, he made a fist and jerked his hand upward, pulling up a solid wall of water between himself and Losha, and Dathan.

Dathan’s Rayne slammed into the wall, instantly dissipating it, but Storm and Losha were gone.

A bellow of rage ripped from his chest, and he was distantly aware of the way everyone around him stepped cautiously away. Everyone except Temair and Miach.

Turning to Temair he wound one hand in her hair and dragged her body against his. Lowering his head, he crushed his mouth over hers trying to say with his kiss what he wasn’t ready to say in words. *You’re safe. I’ll protect you. Mine.*

Miach growled low in his throat, loud in the hushed silence surrounding them, and Dathan broke the kiss with a grim smile. Turning to Darmon he ordered, “Take her back to her rooms.” The guard raised a brow, but didn’t argue. Miach growled again, louder, and Dathan wondered what pissed the Consort off more, his public display of affection, or his ordering around Temair’s guard as though he had the right to do so.

He watched for a moment as Temair and the other princesses followed the guard back into the Villa, then closed his eyes and stretched out his senses, sending his Rayne deep into the Reflecting Pool.

Chapter Nine

Temair paced in her rooms impatiently. She'd kicked Nuriel and Sorchia out almost immediately after arriving, needing the silence to consider her situation. There was an organized plot to assassinate her. She hadn't even ascended the throne, and she was hated already.

Temair was well aware that not everyone in Emetra loved her mother. The Queen often had to make difficult decisions, and more than once Temair had seen her mother agonize over the choices she was forced to make.

To make matters even more complicated, Temair understood Storm's anger. A male in Emetra did not have the option of breaking a betrothal contract; only women had that prerogative. Still, it was unsettling that both his Lady and the Queen had dismissed his petition with what appeared to be very little investigation.

It was an issue she would have to look into when she returned home, though at this point it was far beyond remedy. At any rate, she could do nothing about it until she'd collected all four Consorts. Her tour had to come first, before she could ascend, before she could look into Storm's accusations and the rebellion that she suspected was much more serious than any of them had realized.

The doors to her room opened; the noise made her jerk in surprise. Miach stepped in, his face clouded with his customary scowl. He met her questioning look with an abrupt shake of his head.

"We couldn't find the bastard, but when we do I promise I am going to shred him in two before I burn his bones to ash."

Her Fyre awakened as it recognized its match in Miach. Fighting the tremor of fear that threatened to overwhelm her, Temair walked into Miach's embrace. He opened his arms and wrapped them tightly around her. She instantly calmed, feeling safe in her Consorts arms.

"You will be accompanied by guards at all times." Temair sighed into his chest, but before she could utter a word Miach placed a finger under her chin to tilt her face up so he could rest his forehead against hers. "No arguments. Nothing is more important than your safety. Not even your preference for solitude. I will not risk you to these rebels." His eyes crackled with emotion. "I cannot lose you, Spark. My Fyre would die without you."

Tears threatened at his intense words. Her feelings for the Fyre Warrior had grown with every day spent in his company, and she reveled in the idea that his might have, as well.

"I know you're right, my Lord Husband. And I'll allow your guards to follow me around." His mouth tilted in that almost smile that she loved, and she felt her heart skip a beat. He was so beautiful. "I have no desire to die, Miach. And thank you." He raised a brow in question. "Thank you for taking such wonderful care of me."

Miach kissed her, slow and deep until she felt the Fyre melting through her like warm honey. She could taste his fear, like ashes on her tongue, and the burn of his determination to keep her safe.

Her mother had told her once that finding a true Consort was like discovering something new about yourself. Every moment with Miach, Temair discovered new reserves of strength, both magical and emotional.

She knew that if she took Dathan as her second Consort, she and Miach would both discover new facets to themselves. Now she just had to convince Miach that was a good thing.

* * *

Miach sighed and pressed his forehead to hers again when she broke their kiss. He knew what was coming next and thought he'd prepared himself for it until she spoke the words.

"I've chosen Dathan as my Second Consort." Miach took a deep breath as dread and something he absolutely refused to name squeezed his heart.

"He is frivolous, and far too easy-going for my comfort." Temair rubbed her smooth cheek against his and smiled. Miach wanted to smash something. "He goes out of his way to piss me off on a continual basis," he muttered. "He gets off on annoying me." It was a losing argument and he knew it, but it was all he had. "Have you considered what kinds of things he will teach our daughter?"

Temair laid her hand on his chest, drawing heat from his body. "I imagine he'll teach her how to enjoy life, as you will teach her to be a fierce and disciplined warrior." Ah, yes, his daughter would learn to fight as well as anyone on Emetra.

"Miach, I would never make this match if I thought it would truly hurt you." She pulled back and met his gaze. Her deep brown eyes now held flecks of amber fyre and blue rayne, and were more beautiful than ever. "You and Dathan are more alike than you think." He frowned and she laughed softly, pressing a warm kiss to his chin. "Yes indeed, my warrior. You are both strong, brave men who have taught me new things about myself. You will both protect me with your very lives." She kissed him again, a soft press of her lips against his. "I know that Dathan says things to make you crazy, but you have to admit that he only does it because you rise to the challenge."

He knew her arguments were sound, and that she was right. He still didn't have to be happy about it. He contented himself with the promise that if Dathan gave him any trouble, he wouldn't mind kicking the Rayne Lord's ass on a regular basis.

Miach drew a deep breath and reached for the calm he always felt in Temair's arms. He took her hand in his and lifted her fingers to his mouth, and spoke softly against her skin. "I will stand by your decision, my Queen, because I know your heart and I know that it's one of the most beautiful things about you.

* * *

She found Dathan staring moodily into the Reflecting Pool.

"So serious, my Lord." She moved to stand in front of him, reaching up to rub gently at the frown creasing his brow. "Are you all right, Dathan?"

The look he gave her was one of pain and fury combined. "Me? I'm not the one who was nearly murdered by our so-called Healer." Temair wrapped her arms around him and snuggled close, sharing the warmth of her Fyre and the comfort of her embrace.

She let him bask for a moment, for which he was grateful. He hadn't realized how much he'd needed her until she was in his arms. Finally she pulled away and met his eyes, the blue in hers swirling hypnotically.

"I need to speak with you before tonight's dinner," she said, every inch the Queen now.

"You've made your choice then?" his frown deepened.

"I have chosen my Second Consort."

* * *

Dathan's stomach knotted as he waited for his Princess to continue. How things in his life had changed so quickly. He loved his life as it was, had no desire to take on the responsibilities of being a Royal Consort. With her shy smile and passionate ways, not to mention her First Consort -- who Dathan had come to care about almost as much as the Princess herself -- Temair had completely changed his priorities. He wanted to hear her name him as Second Consort.

She laid her hand on his chest, looking up at him with such a serious expression he wanted to kiss it off of her face.

"Dathan, I want you as my Second Consort. If you agree, I intend to ask your mother tonight at the feast. Do you accept my proposal?"

Dathan's heart leapt as she spoke the words he'd have sworn he'd never wanted to hear. Those words soothed him like a thirsty man who'd been given a drink of cool water.

He leaned forward and softly kissed her forehead. "I am already yours, sweetheart," he told her, only now realizing just how true the words were. "I will gladly be your Second Consort, Temair. I would have been broken-hearted had you chosen another."

Her eyes were shot through with blue sparks as she pulled him down to seal his acceptance with a kiss. Dathan's Rayne swirled inside of him wanting to merge with its mate.

She broke the kiss but stayed in his arms. "There is one thing you must promise me." Her voice was deadly serious now, woman and Queen in full agreement. "You must be careful with Miach. It's one thing to tease in fun. It's quite another do or say something that causes him true distress."

Dathan smiled. His Princess had such a beautiful heart, and the capacity to love so freely. Her protection of Miach just made Dathan love her more. Love? He nearly missed what she was saying under the weight of the realization. He was falling in love with the Crown Princess, with the woman who would be Queen. With the woman who would be his wife.

"If things between you and Miach grow into something more," she was saying, "then it must be because Miach desires and is ready for it, too."

"I understand, my Princess, and will do as you bid where Miach is concerned," he mumbled softly, still stunned by the knowledge he had somehow, when he wasn't paying attention, fallen in love. She smiled broadly and his heart squeezed, reminding him how extraordinarily beautiful she was.

"I've chosen very, very well, I think," she murmured, pressing a soft kiss directly above his heart.

* * *

While tonight's feast was much more subdued, it was still grand. At Miach and Dathan's insistence, they'd moved inside in the interests of security. Temair sat to the left of Lady Rayne; Miach, Sorchu and Nuriel lined up to her right. On the other side of the Lady sat her sons, Dathan first, followed by the rest of the men in order of age. Temair had to agree with Nuriel's whispered assessment that they provide a feast for the eyes that rivaled the succulent meal laid out on the table.

Through the meal Dathan watched her. She felt his blue-black eyes on her, roaming over her body. He even gave Miach several sly-eyed winks, which caused her Consort to stiffen with what she was sure was pure annoyance. She carefully kept her smile to herself. Life with these two promised to never be boring.

After the servants had whisked away the emptied platters and dishes, Temair rose and turned to her hostess. The Lady stood as well, facing the Princess with a solemn expression as the room fell silent.

"Lady Rayne, I formally petition you. I have chosen Dathan first son of Villa Rayne as my Second Consort, and ask the Lady if she is agreeable to my choice." It was so much easier this time, the petition. Unlike her claiming of Miach, this claiming was deliberate, well thought out.

The Lady's blue eyes widened and darted to Dathan, who'd come to his feet and waited with a tiny smile quirked his full, sensual lips. Her eyes misted and her expression filled with oceans of affection as she inclined her head. "Yes Princess Temair, I give my eldest son over to you as Second Consort." Her eyes danced in a way that reminded Temair rather vividly of Dathan's. "Do you know what you're getting yourself into?"

Dathan grinned and rolled his eyes, and she heard Miach's snort of amusement behind her, and she was filled with such peace and joy that she thought she might burst.

Dathan moved to stand before his mother. "Not nice," he murmured, still smiling, and bent to kiss her brow. Turning to Temair, he surprised her by dropping to one knee. Lifting her hand to his lips, he pressed a light kiss to her fingertips before pressing her palm against his jaw. The room erupted in celebration as Temair reached behind her for Miach's hand, drawing him into the circle of emotion. Her fire and rayne surrounded her in love and warmth, and Temair soaked up the perfection of the moment.

* * *

This was a very different wedding ceremony. While the words were the same, the energy in the air was not. Where at her marriage to Miach the air had pulsed with tension and excitement, the witnesses of Temair's Rayne wedding radiated pure joy until she felt wrapped in a blanket of happiness.

They stood in the center of the Reflecting Pool, the heart of Rayne's magic. A large enchanted mirror stood to the side, next to Lady Rayne and her newly returned husband. In spite of the gravity of the situation, Temair couldn't help but note that Dathan came by his stunning looks honestly.

The Queen and her Consorts looked on calmly. Temair was sure she was the only one to notice the hint of a question in her mother's eyes. Torrent, her Rayne Sire, had skewered Dathan with a searching look, and she wondered what her father thought of her choice for Second Consort.

Sorchu stood next to the Officiant, leaving Miach to flank Temair along with Nuriel. The Princess of the mythical lands had a speculative gleam in her eyes, one that Temair knew Miach probably shared. She'd

felt his body tense as he stepped onto the temporarily firm surface of the pool and suspected that his insistence on wearing his boots was causing him some difficulty in balance. They may be wicked sexy, but she knew the thick soles would keep him from sensing the subtle shifts on the surface that would make graceful balance possible.

All those perceptions dimmed as Dathan stepped forward to face her. His eyes glowed almost solid blue, giving the appearance of sunlight through deep water. His full lips curled in a smile that was so clearly anticipation that Temair felt things low in her belly go liquid and hot.

“Princess.” The priest’s voice was a musical ripple. “Have you chosen your Second Consort?”

“I have,” Temair responded with a smile that echoed Dathan’s. His eyes filled with a quiet joy at the firmness of her response, a calm different from the easy-going *’est la vie* she was accustomed to seeing there. She’d almost venture to say he seemed... focused.

“And of what House do you choose, Princess?”

“I choose my Second Consort of Villa Rayne.” A rush of happy murmurs surged over the gathered Children of Rayne like ripples dancing on the surface of a pool.

“And whom do you choose?”

“I choose Dathan, first son of Lady Rayne.” She almost felt Miach sigh beside her and spared a thought to hope this marriage was the right choice for her Consort as well as for Emetra.

“What say you, Dathan, first son of Lady Rayne? Will you share your Rayne with your Princess? Will you comfort and defend her? Will you strive with her to build and protect a strong Queendom?”

Dathan’s gaze never left hers. The unmistakable joy and satisfaction took on a depth of commitment that seemed to validate her choice. “I will do so,” his voice was firm and sure. “I offer the Lady my body, my Rayne, and my protection.” The words might be rote, but the promise in his eyes was not.

“My Lady Ambassador?” The priest gestured Sorcha forward. She gave Temair a small smile. She might have some reservations about Dathan, but Temair knew her friend would unconditionally support their union.

The flame-haired princess faced Temair with two delicate silver cuffs lying on her palms.

“Sister of my heart, fellow ruler and friend.” Her words were soft, but firm. “Will you accept the bonds of mating as a symbol to all that you are bound to your people, the Children of Rayne?”

Temair held out her wrists for Sorcha to enclose in the cuffs. “I will do so,” she answered, her voice as soft and resolved as Sorcha’s had been.

Sorcha turned to Dathan, who gave her a mischievous smile. She reluctantly returned the expression as she lifted heavy silver cuffs to present to him. “Dathan of the Noble House of Rayne, will you accept the bonds of mating as a symbol to all that the Children of Rayne are bound to the support and protection of their Queen?”

Dathan never hesitated, just offered his wrists to be bound and spoke with utter certainty. “I will do so.”

“And will you respect your fellow Consorts, giving them the support and friendship they need and deserve?”

Temair felt Miach go still at her side, not even breathing as Sorcha added the unexpected promise to Dathan’s ritual vows. If the moment hadn’t been so fraught with emotion and possibilities, Temair might have hugged her friend for knowing so perfectly what Miach needed, and providing it with no drama or discussion.

Dathan only raised a brow at the impromptu addition. His gaze flickered to Miach, and he made this promise directly to Temair’s First Consort. “I will do so.”

Sorcha gestured, and Dathan laid both hands over the delicate silver cuffs around Temair’s wrists. Temair responded by wrapping her fingers around his cuffs, and Sorcha immediately layered her hands over theirs and began to chant the mysterious, musical words that would join her with Dathan for eternity.

When Sorcha raised her hands from theirs, the thick silver bands around Dathan’s wrists were sealed without even a seam to show they’d ever been open. Temair examined her own cuffs. The copper symbolizing her joining with Miach had always reminded her of a delicate flame, wrapping around her wrists in fine licks of rosy metal. Dathan’s cuffs had twined through the flames, graceful curves of silver that evoked ocean waves, a cool counterpoint to Miach’s heat.

“By the four elements of Emetra,” Sorcha concluded, “By the blood of Zirah’s beasts, and by the soul of Turnin’s magic, you have bound yourselves together.” Magic shivered in her voice, trembled in the aire. Temair felt the tiny hairs on her body raise in anticipation, and saw Dathan’s heavy, dark hair lift in an invisible breeze. Something clicked, soul deep and unalterable, and looking into Dathan’s eyes, Temair knew the future had just altered. She could only hope it was for the better.

* * *

Nuriel dropped next to Sorcha, breathless with laughter and exertion from dancing. Sometime while she’d been clasped in Aquil’s thick golden arms, Temair and her Consorts had made their exit, leaving the party unobtrusively.

Sorcha was staring into the reflecting pool, eyes intent and otherworldly. It was easy for Nuriel to forget that her childhood friend would one day be the most powerful sorceress on the planet. Nights like tonight, when Sorcha’s power shivered on the aire and secrets whispered in her voice, Nuriel had no trouble remembering.

“We’ll keep her safe, Sorch,” she told her friend, already knowing what had the princess so grim.

“We’ve done a pathetic job of it so far,” Sorcha responded morosely.

“We’ve been on a sharp learning curve.” Nuriel shifted closer, laying her head on Sorcha’s shoulder and playfully blowing a fiery curl out of her way. “We know better now, and we won’t be so lax in the future.”

“We can’t lose her, Ellie.” Sorcha turned to her, dislodging her. Wide green eyes burned intently. “I can’t lose either of you.”

“Don’t call me that.” But her heart hurt at the fear in Sorcha’s eyes. She leaned in and wrapped her arms around her friend. “None of us are going to be lost, Sorch.” Drawing back, she met Sorcha’s eyes,

letting her own fill with the rock-hard resolve that she rarely allowed to show. “We know better now,” she repeated. “We have Miach and Dathan. Soon we’ll have the magic of Aire and Earth, as well. These rebels won’t win.”

Some of the fyre in Sorcha’s eyes calmed, but Nuriel could tell her friend was far from convinced.

“I hope you’re right, Ellie.” Sorcha’s gaze wandered once more to the reflecting pool. “I really, really hope you’re right.”

Chapter Ten

Amazingly, Dathan was nervous. He laughed a little at himself. He’d never been nervous about sex, not even his first time. But now, facing his sweet little wife, his fucking formidable Queen, he was fairly shaking in his boots. Or would have been if he’d been wearing boots. Like the Consort.

Yes, Miach was another source of anxiety, though Dathan was loathe to admit it. He’d promised Temair he’d back off. He knew he needed to back off or he’d alienate the man forever. Hell, he wanted to back off. As much as the man compelled him, he didn’t actually want to truly upset him. But, sweet Mother, the Consort drew him, and Dathan knew he’d have to keep his wits about him to avoid pushing Miach further than he was ready to go.

Casting his eye around the room, Dathan saw the small bar set up in one corner. With an inaudible sigh of relief, he moved to pour himself a small glass of pale blue liqueur, a potent brew the Children of Rayne were known for.

“A drink, sweetheart?” he asked Temair.

“Perhaps later,” she answered with a slow smile that suggested she was well aware of his nerves.

“We’ve got fyre brandy, too,” he added. “If you’d prefer it.”

Temair made a little choking sound, and for the first time ever Dathan heard the Consort laugh. He turned to face the pale man with one brow raised, and Miach miraculously kept his smile.

“Spark doesn’t drink much.”

“Oaf,” she muttered, smacking at his shoulder as she moved around him to face Dathan, her hand extended imperiously. “Give it here.”

Hmmm. A power play with him smack in the middle. Interesting. He handed over the glass with a raised brow, grinning when Miach murmured, “Take it slow, my Queen,” and she shot them both a dark scowl.

But she did sip the blue liquid cautiously.

Dathan smiled even wider as the pleasure dawned in her eyes. Rayne liqueur was very different from fyre brandy, sliding over the tongue with deceptive sweetness. He reached out to drag his thumb over the damp surface of her lower lip as the drink hit her belly, landing with a soft explosion of heat that had her catching her breath.

“Try it.” She turned to offer Miach the cup, and he took it with a faint curl to the edge of his lips that suggested a smile.

“Trying to get me tipsy so I’ll lose my inhibitions?” he questioned dryly, but Dathan thought there was a thread of seriousness to the words. Damned if it didn’t tug at his heartstrings just a little bit.

“There’s nothing to be inhibited about tonight,” he told the other man firmly. “Nothing but our beautiful Queen, our sweet woman, bare before us and waiting to be pleased.”

A spark kindled in Miach’s eyes as they traced over Temair’s body, outlined clearly by the pale aqua gauze of her wedding dress. “Not bare yet,” he commented in his deep, resonant voice, and Dathan saw Temair shiver at the words.

Dathan grinned. He couldn’t seem to stop smiling. Moving up to sandwich Temair between them he sent Miach a conspiratorial wink. “Let’s remedy that right now.”

* * *

Temair sighed at the sensation of being completely engulfed by her two Consorts. Miach stood at her back like a pillar of living flame, Dathan pressed against her front as fluid as the rayne that fueled his magic.

When her Rayne Consort cupped her chin and took her lips in a long, heated kiss, Temair let herself melt.

Miach’s hands shifted to her waist, steadying her as her knees went weak while Dathan ate at her mouth as though he’d been starving for her. One big hand collared her neck as the other held her face still, and Dathan simply devoured her. Teeth tugged at sensitive lips. Tongue plundered slick flesh. She couldn’t breathe, but she was fine with that. Dathan could breathe for her.

Behind her, Miach had picked loose the laces of her wedding gown. He shifted back a scant inch or two and cool aire sent shivers down her spine. One arm lifted without any conscious thought on her part, reaching behind to wrap around his neck, pulling him closer. He pressed against her, all hard heat radiating through the silky-soft fabric of his clothing.

Now it was Dathan’s turn to pull back. Miach slid to his knees behind her, tugging her bodice down to bare her breasts for Dathan’s pleasure. Dathan’s pleasure was to cup them in callused hands and bury his face in the deep valley between them.

“You feel so good, sweetheart,” he mumbled into the soft flesh. “Smell so good.” He burrowed deeper, his tongue sneaking out to trace swirling patterns on her cleavage. “Taste so good...” His words trailed off as he strung quick, stinging kisses over the full globes of her breasts. Funny to think that just a few short weeks ago she’d considered her breasts too full, too heavy. First Miach and now Dathan had shown her the error of that sort of thinking. Her Consorts clearly adored her “excess” flesh.

As if to prove her point, Dathan dropped to his knees and pressed a hot kiss to the under-curve of one breast before sucking the nipple into his mouth. Electricity flickered over her, sparkling along every nerve.

Behind her, Miach had tugged her dress to pool at her feet. He paused to breathe wet kisses at the base of her spine, then stood and stepped back, freeing her to focus all her attention on Dathan.

Up-tilted eyes glinted beneath blue-black bangs, giving him a wicked, teasing look. Temair rested her hand on his head, fingers combing through his hair until she could meet his gaze more clearly. Longing and affection vied with the sheer lust simmering there.

She let her hand drop to his shoulder. His skin was warm to the touch, golden velvet, and hers to stroke to her heart's content. As she trailed her fingers over his shoulders, teasing the sharp line of his collarbone, Dathan leaned in and began pressing hot, wet kisses in a slow line down her belly. She hummed out her approval as he took deep, soft bites of the tender crease where hip joined leg.

He wrapped his palms around the backs of her thighs, steadying her and drawing her legs further apart at the same time. Temair let him guide her, content to follow his lead.

With a soft groan, he leaned in and buried his mouth between her legs. He ate at her like she was the sweetest, most succulent fruit he'd ever encountered. His tongue snaked between her swollen lips to scoop up the honeyed juices that flowed from her pussy like rayne. Her knees sagged, and Miach stepped close again, supporting her from behind, adding his heat to the whirlpool of desire surrounding her.

Just when she thought she'd go over, when the pleasure built to the point of pain, Dathan stood and began yanking at the tie of his sarong. In an instant he was mouthwateringly naked.

Miach tensed behind her, his cock digging into the small of her back, and Temair couldn't resist grinding her bottom against him. He was as hard as marble against her back, his cock a brand against her. He gave a low groan at her gyrations, and she just had to smile.

Reaching back, she wrapped her hand around Miach's hip, tugging impatiently at his breeches. Dathan stood before her, a feast for the eyes. Temair didn't think she'd ever tire of seeing him, of the feel of his velvety skin. But there was something about Miach. He was so conservative, so formal, that the sensation of his naked skin, so silky against hers, was incredibly precious, insanely arousing.

"You, too, my Lord Fyre," she murmured, tugging harder at the fabric keeping him from her. "I want you naked, too."

He groaned again, and she felt his hand delve between them, tugging at laces, dragging his shirt over his head. Dathan watched silently, with obvious hunger that Temair knew was directed as much at Miach as at herself. The thought gave her a little thrill, and she fervently hoped that the day would come when she could enjoy watching her Consorts enjoy each other.

Turning, she pushed Miach back until his legs hit the bed, then gave him a playful shove that toppled him onto his back. Grinning at the look of anticipation in his eyes, she crawled on top of him, leaning in to kiss him with a hunger that suddenly bordered on desperation.

"Naked," she breathed against his lips, and jerked at the laces of his breeches. He went still beneath her, body jolting slightly, and she realized that Dathan had yanked the boots from Miach's feet. Before Miach could react, or Temair could begin to worry, Dathan pressed against her from behind, devoting all his

attention to licking and nibbling at her neck.

With a short, gasping cry, Temair arched back, dragging her aching pussy over Miach's erection even as she pressed back into Dathan's embrace. The Rayne Lord reached around, cupping her breasts in large, callused hands, squeezing her nipples between his fingers until she squirmed in delight.

Miach swore softly and did some squirming of his own, thrusting his cock against her. He reached up to wrap his long fingers around her waist, and she felt him hesitate a moment when he brushed against Dathan's velvety skin, then he was dragging her down against him, intensifying the press of their bodies.

"The lady said naked," Dathan reminded them, and lifted Temair off of Miach and into his own arms. Miach jack-knifed up and obligingly tugged his breeches off, then stretched out on the bed, naked and glorious.

Shifting so that Temair could wrap her legs around his hips, Dathan cupped her bottom in his hands, splitting the cheeks wide. Miach grunted at the sight, and Temair spared a second to miss her usually vocal lover's naughty talk. She hoped that as he became more comfortable with Dathan's presence, the commentary would begin again, because the dirtier he talked, the wetter she got.

Dathan ripped her back to the present by pressing one long, thick finger against her rear opening. "Have you ever been taken here?" he asked softly, stroking over the puckered flesh and making her squirm. "Ever taken anything in this gorgeous, tight little ass?"

"No," she panted, torn between pulling away and arching back into his touch.

His smile was pure sin when he looked down at Miach, who'd propped himself on his elbows to watch. "Care to do the honors?"

"Oh, fuck yeah." Miach's cock gave a hungry twitch at the invitation. And everything in her went liquid and hot.

"Have you ever done it like this before?" Dathan asked Miach, slowly working his finger into her resisting passage. It hurt, but... not.

Miach shook his head in the negative, and Dathan's smile grew even naughtier. "Oh, you're going to love this, Consort."

Temair wondered if either man noticed that it almost sounded like Dathan was referring to Miach as his Consort. A glance at Dathan's burning eyes suggested that the implication had been deliberate.

Dathan set a knee on the bed near Miach's hip and leaned over the man to reach the low table beside the bed. An iron-hard arm around Temair's waist kept her clasped to his chest, while Miach burned like fyre beneath them. A quick scuffle through a drawer, and he pushed back up, a cobalt glass bottle clutched in his hand.

"Watch and learn, Consort," he teased, and lay Temair next to Miach on the bed.

Chapter Eleven

Miach was in sensory overload. Temair was spread out next to him, nipples red and swollen from Dathan's hands and mouth, a shiny glaze of moisture on her thighs betraying her arousal.

Dathan stood before them, proud and aroused, sloe eyes filled with a knowledge that wrapped Miach in fiery bonds. As Miach watched, the Rayne Lord knelt and tugged Temair to the foot of the bed, kneeling between her spread thighs. Filling his palm with oil from the glass bottle he'd set on the floor next to him, the golden man cupped the other hand under Temair's bottom and tilted her up.

With slow, deliberate movements he drizzled the oil from his palm to pool between her plump cheeks, puddling enticingly over her rear passage. Dipping his head, Dathan opened his mouth over her pussy. Temair gave a high, breathy cry and arched into the suction. The very instant she arched, Dathan buried one finger in her tight little asshole.

She shrieked at the sensation and arched even more sharply, grinding against the finger that was now thrusting lightly into her shuddering body. Miach couldn't help but imagine how hot she must be there, how tight.

He pushed up higher, trying for a better view. Dathan had pulled back a bit, licking languorously along the folds of Temair's pussy, stopping occasionally to suck at the lips or nip at the sensitive skin where her thigh met her groin.

When she was surging against his mouth, fists twisted in the coverlet, he slowly worked in a second finger. She screamed, and Miach had to grab the base of his dick to keep from spending.

"Ah, fuck, Miach." Dathan's voice was just a little bit ragged. His lips were red and his chin was wet with Temair's juices. Miach had a brief, insane urge to lick the sweetness from the Rayne Lord's mouth. He told himself he was horrified by the idea, but his dick certainly didn't get that memo, surging even harder in his grip.

"She's so hot," Dathan continued. "Like a burning little fist." Temair was lifting into the thrusts of Dathan's fingers, whimpering in obvious ecstasy. He sent Miach a knowing glance through shaggy bangs. "You won't last two strokes."

And that little shit did not just challenge him.

"You're awfully cocky there, number two," he responded, moving to all fours and crawling over to kneel by Temair's hip at the foot of the bed. "Maybe you're afraid you won't last two strokes."

Dathan's finger thrusts into the princess's rear passage had slowed as they talked. That blue-black gaze locked with Miach's own and flared. Miach wondered what the Rayne Lord saw in his eyes.

Before he could taunt the man further, Temair pushed up on one elbow and reached out to smack him in the back of the head. Miach jerked his attention to her and found his lovely, sweet-natured wife glaring at him. She turned to include Dathan in her baleful gaze and said, "If one of you doesn't start that stroking now, I'm going to do some stroking of my own and leave you to fend for yourselves." Slender fingers

slipped down to stroke between her thighs, and both Dathan and Miach lurched into motion.

* * *

Temair had no problem letting Dathan take the lead in their lovemaking, and she absolutely loved the heat simmering between her Consorts, but if one of them didn't get inside her in ten seconds or less, she thought she might spontaneously combust.

At Dathan's direction, Miach reclined on the bed, a long stretch of chiseled beauty propped on a mound of fluffy pillows.

"I've stretched you a bit," Dathan told her. And, sweet Mother, had he ever. "But it's still going to be a tight, hot, perfect fit for Lord Tree-Trunk over there."

Miach gave a low growl, but Temair thought she detected a hint of pleased pride in those chaos-black eyes.

"So, here's how it's going to work, at least this first time." Dathan lifted Temair to her knees on the bed, pausing to lap teasingly at her nipples until she was whimpering and a low, steady growl was pulsing from Miach's chest.

Once he had the two of them reduced to nearly mindless arousal, Dathan cupped her elbows in his palms and guided her to straddle Miach's thighs. The Fyre Lord's cock was so hard it rose to meet her, riding the slick crease of her buttocks demandingly and drawing groans of pleasure from them both. Dathan's eyes glowed in arousal at the sight of them.

"Lord Fyre will very slowly, very carefully," he shot Miach a look and Miach responded with a rude hand gesture that startled a sputter of laughter from Temair, "fill your sweet little ass with that tree trunk between his legs." Temair glanced behind in time to see Miach roll his eyes in that way he had that always made her go all syrupy inside.

"Once he's buried balls-deep until he doesn't know if he can hold it in for one second longer, you'll lay back against him so you're open to me." Tip-tilted blue eyes smiled down at her as she all but panted in arousal. "Then, sweetheart, I'm going to fuck you so deep you'll feel me all the way to your heart."

Temair blinked at an unexpected surge of tenderness, and reached up to stroke Dathan's cheek. "I already feel you in my heart, Husband," she whispered. He blinked slowly, and a smile of surpassing sweetness spread across his face like sunrise. "Now," she continued more briskly, "less talk. More sex."

Dathan laughed and took her hands to steady her. Miach rose behind her, cupping her cheeks and splitting her wide. His hiss of appreciation sent a thrill straight to her womb.

Her second Consort leaned in and captured her mouth in a deep, wet kiss just as the velvet tip of Miach's cock nudged against her opening. He went slowly, working the fat head from side to side, but the stretch was still painful.

"Oh fuck, Spark," he grated out behind her. "So tight." His breath came ragged and loud. "So hot."

She sobbed into Dathan's mouth and his hands, gentle in her hair, soothed her.

It seemed to take an eternity, but finally Miach was buried deep in her ass, filling her to the point of pain.

And yet beneath the pain was a bone-deep satisfaction at having her First Consort so deeply inside of her.

“Move, Consort.” Dathan’s voice was low and vibrant. “Just a little. Just enough to make it feel good.”

Surprisingly, Miach complied without an argument or even a snarky quip. He was breathing hard, like the aire hurt him, and she assumed he was too busy trying to control his reaction to her to worry about reacting to Dathan.

She expected it to hurt more. The initial stretch had been more painful than she’d anticipated, almost painful beyond bearing. So it came as a very pleasant surprise when Miach’s slow, pulsing movements brought a dark, decadent sort of pleasure.

“Lean back,” Dathan murmured, and Miach complied. The movement sent a charge of sensation through the nerve rich tissues of her ass and she clenched down. He moaned and jerked at the sensation, and they both went still, knowing he’d shoot with even a tiny bit of stimulation.

Once the crisis had passed, Dathan crawled up to kneel between their legs. Propping himself over them on one arm, he drew one of Temair’s thighs up over his hip with the other.

Slowly, one torturous inch at a time, he wedged the swollen, fat head of his cock into her sheath. It took an eternity, but it was worth it. When the ridge of his head dragged over Miach’s, the friction sent an electric current through her that must have transmitted to both men, because they each jerked deeper into her, grunting and gasping reverent curse words against her skin.

Dathan paused, catching his breath and, she suspected, regaining his control, before starting a slow thrust and retreat that had her toes curling. After a moment, Miach picked up the rhythm, then started a counterpoint.

Dathan thrust in, Miach pulled out. Each movement dragged their cocks over each other. Each long, thrust stretched her to the point of delirium.

She moaned and thrashed, needing more, and they obliged her, picking up speed, hitting harder and deeper.

She clawed Dathan’s back, and he swore. His thrusts shortened and he swiveled his hips in a quick and dirty dance that sent shivers through her pussy, a mini-climax that milked both the cocks wedged soul-deep inside of her.

“Fuck, fuck, fuckfuckfuck.” Miach’s voice rose with every word and his strong body arched against her back. His hands dug into her hips, deep enough to leave bruises, and she felt her pussy clench at the thought. She wanted him to bruise her, to mark her. She wanted to bear the evidence of his passion.

He’d lost all rhythm, surging into her with choppy movements that dragged him against Dathan’s cock in unpredictable jerks. Dathan groaned like a dying man and reached around her. Somehow, instead of grasping her shoulders, which is what she was sure he’d intended, Dathan ended up with his hands hooked over Miach’s shoulders, pulling the Fyre Lord even tighter against her back.

The men’s cocks rubbed against each other, separated only by the tissue-thin membrane between her front and back passages. Each stroke sent a new jolt of sensation through her, clenching muscles stretched to the breaking point. Each clench of her muscles yanked a matching grunt of pleasure from her

Consorts, a sharper thrust, until they were all caught up in a feedback loop of pleasure.

Miach was sitting up now, the curves of his chest sliding against her back. He swelled inside her, a familiar and welcome sensation that told her he was ready to explode.

“Coming, Spark,” he gasped into the hair at her nape. “Can’t hold it back.”

“Yes,” she groaned, tightening herself around him the best she could. He caught his breath then shouted, slamming into her with a force that would have been unbearable if she’d been even a little less aroused.

And then he was coming, filling her with liquid fyre, filling her in places no one had ever touched. She reached behind, wrapping one hand in the tangled silk of his hair, feeling him slide more easily inside her as his cum overflowed her.

“Love you,” she panted, turning her head to breathe the words into his neck. She’d thought he was done, but he cried out at the words and began jerking anew. More hot spits of cum, this time accompanied by lacy threads of fyre dancing over her body.

It was enough to send Dathan crashing after him. With a broken shout, the Rayne Lord fell forward, propelling Temair and Miach backwards on the bed as his hips slammed into her like a jackhammer, stroking her with every thrust, until he gave one last, heaving thrust and dug deep, pulsing hard and flooding her with still more sweet cream.

It must have jolted Miach where their cocks wedged together because he gave another involuntary cry and arched his still firm cock in another jerky thrust, rubbing over Dathan from the inside, and sending sparks of response through her own convulsing flesh.

Temair finally let herself go, flung over the edge of her own climax by the feel of her Consorts’ orgasms. Every muscle drew painfully tight, then snapped like an overstressed elastic, convulsing muscles she’d never even guessed she had, squeezing every drip of cum from her groaning Consorts, and tossing her body and emotions until she feared it would never end. But she didn’t really want it to end, she wanted this sense of closeness, oneness, to last forever.

Finally she collapsed back on Miach’s heaving chest. Dathan hovered over her, panting, supported on one shaking arm. Sweat soaked his hair, plastering a few strands to his forehead before dripping down to trace a cool path across her collarbone. He leaned down to lick up the drop, then froze and all three of them groaned as the movement sent aftershocks shuddering through them all.

After a long, shivering moment, he dropped to the side, leaving enough room for her to slide off Miach, sandwiched between their overheated bodies. Miach rolled to face her, his chaos-black eyes leaping with scarlet flames.

“Did you mean it, Spark?” he rasped. There was a vulnerability in his gaze she’d never seen before.

“I did, Miach.” Somehow she found the energy to lift her hand, cupping his face and drawing him down for a sweet, chaste kiss. “The Mother chose well for me when she gave me you. And I do love you.” She pressed another kiss to his damp lips. “Very much.”

He moaned and took control of the kiss, drinking the words from her lips. He kissed her endlessly, and Dathan stroked her back, soothing her. When Miach finally relinquished her mouth and dropped to his back next to her, a smile curved his red, swollen lips. A real smile, not the dry quirk that was all he

usually allowed. Temair found herself smiling, too. When she felt Dathan's soft laughter against her side, she could practically feel the click.

Rebellion be damned. For this moment, everything was perfect in the Queendom.

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 godchild, 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, or on MySpace and Facebook!