



BORN INTO FIRE

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Loose Id

Shadow Elements:
Born into Fire

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www.loose-id.com

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Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.

—Aesop

In the Beginning...

Eons ago, a mighty wizard risked the peril of the void that is Ghen and drew forth the primal elements. He merged element and man to create the Ryalda, champions ordained to guard the world of form. But the emptiness beyond battled back. The warrior heroes fought, but in the end, were consumed by the formless Ghen.

Now, Shadows bleed into the world.

And Sentinels watch...to maintain balance...and defend against the Elements.

Chapter One

A breeze—that was him—fluttered the ivory curtains. Moonlight streamed through the open window, outlining the sleeping form beneath the sheet covering the queen-size bed. He hovered. Why had he answered the call of her element? He had no right. Anguish wrenched through him. Long ago, he'd answered the call of another Element, and she'd paid with her life. The memory—the pain—didn't stop the rake of his gaze down the cotton sheet that revealed every lush curve of the sleeping woman's body. Desire streaked through him. The fabric ruffled in response to his command, then slid downward.

He sucked in a harsh breath. Softly molded shoulders gave way to rounded breasts tipped with quarter-size nipples, then a flat tummy and trim thighs led to long, toned legs. An unexpected vision surfaced of those legs wrapped tight around his waist while he thrust into her. The swirling vortex that was his core leaped into a furious dance.

Go, his mind commanded.

Fluid veins of amber light erupted beneath her skin. He stood frozen, her fire a drag on his wind that lay open the ache buried deep within.

Leave, came a second panicked admonition.

She inhaled.

Realization hit. *Too late.*

She drew him deep into her lungs. Warmth infused him in a heady rush. He struggled in desperation to escape the current, but each beat of her heart thrummed through him, echoing in his mind in a thunderous rhythm. The flow of blood through her veins washed over him like a thick velvet river.

And he gave in.

As if sensing him, she hesitated, then breathed him out on a shaky exhale. He shuddered, the loss tearing a howl of fury from him.

More. She wanted more. He needed more.

As wind, he lay beyond tangible comprehension, a cool breeze, nothing more. He could take a small piece and not imprint on her. This woman would be born into fire—without him.

In one decadent breath, he draped himself over her, *touched* all of her. Her heated skin cooled. No mortal man could experience her as he did. No mortal man could touch her as he could. He chilled the air over her nipples, then watched as they peaked and felt them pucker. Commanding a gentle breeze, he caressed her contours, fitting his shape to hers.

She moaned. Excitement rocketed through him, and the current within him swirled. She shivered beneath him. He hesitated. Even a second too long would leave her with a sense of familiarity. He must leave or risk revealing himself—or worse, bonding.

Heat pooled between her legs. Every fiber of his being screamed *go*. Yet, as if anchored by unseen chains, he remained motionless, unable to tear his eyes from the sight of energy that built in her erogenous points.

Only a moment, his heart urged. A mere whisper of her essence to ease the emptiness. Then he would leave.

He focused hot pressure, the wispy kiss of an Air Element, to her neck. As he trailed the pressure to her nipple, he turned the air icy. She bowed off the bed. He filled the space behind her arched back, curving up toward her neck and down across her rounded buttocks. Her breath came in quick pants, frosting in the air—*in him*.

Frigid pressure tightened her nipples to erect peaks. He swirled air around the tips. She collapsed, thrashing on the pillow, and covered her breasts as if to ease the aching cold he created. Her hands heated until they glowed. *The fire within her.*

The glow spread up her arms, radiated out from her torso, and emitted a scorching heat that heightened his frequency to a fevered pitch. Fire. *Fiera*. His heart constricted. He had no right to name her. He would not be the one to bring her into being. She would seek another. But he would have this memory.

Air spun around her body. Faster, hotter. The friction against her skin hardened him. His core grew heavier. *Spread your legs*. The unbidden words echoed in his mind, but the unspoken command carried on the current of his breath and caressed her ear. She pulled her legs up and, knees bent, opened wide for him. He glided downward until his breath disturbed the auburn curls covering her mound.

Scent of her arousal penetrated his core. Need to shift into human form and taste her sweet nectar pooled energy into his center. He moved upward, concentrating until he held the gossamer form of a man, and settled vaporous hips between her thighs. In air form, he couldn't slip his tongue into the sweet recesses of her mouth, couldn't spread her damp folds, or plunge his rigid cock into the forbidden depths of her. But he could feel the heat.

Open for me, he coaxed.

Fiera moaned and reached between her legs. With a delicate stroke, she traced the seam of her pussy. He vibrated the air over her clit. A soft smile tilted her lips. Satisfaction rippled through him. She wanted more.

In a cyclone of current, he swirled around her. Strands of her flaming red hair danced in the static-filled air. Her peach-hued nipples puckered, her chest rose and fell with each deep breath she took.

More energy. Faster wind. *Yes*. Her hips rose off the bed, and she plunged a finger inside her channel. When she fit a second finger into her drenched opening and thrust deep, energy shot in a jagged pattern from his core to her channel. She cried out. Her eyelids fluttered, but she didn't wake.

With her free hand she touched her clit and thrust wildly against an unseen force. *Him*. Gyrating her hips, bucking and arching, she fucked him, but used her own fingers. His mind whirled with her energy. It was as if *she* swirled around him.

The other female Air Element, the one who now haunted him, had engulfed him as Fiera did. He forced the anguished recollection into the fury of energy. Fiera convulsed in pleasure. He envisioned thrusting his solid cock into her channel, her sheathing him with breath-stealing strength. He clenched against the intensifying need to shift into human form and centered his energy on the torrential wave of her release and absorbed the fragrance of her cream as she cried out.

Chapter Two

Kenna Lang jackknifed upright in bed. Wind blasted over her fevered flesh. Her pussy pulsed with the sudden emptiness, and she dragged in breath with a final wave of orgasm. Holy shit. *A dream.*

She jammed her eyes shut and mentally clutched at the receding edges of the erotic vision. A barely distinguishable whirlpooling shadow moved against the darkness within her mind, then evaporated. An answering echo of pleasure clenched her pussy.

Wind fluttered over her, cooling the sweat-dampened hair at her temples, soothing her rampant heartbeat. She opened her eyes and stood. The room seemed to shift. She grabbed the edge of her grandmother's armoire and inhaled a steadying breath. Curtains billowed at the window opposite the bed, then stilled. Rain and wooded scents lingered in the air...as did the heavy aroma of sex.

She took two steps, scooped up the robe that had fallen from the bed, and slipped her arms inside the long sleeves as she crossed to the window. Cool air washed over her heated skin when she drew near, and she let the robe fall open. Goose bumps chased the breeze across her arms. Despite the chill—needing the chill—she leaned into the brisk air and gazed heavenward. Stars sparkled in the cloudless night sky over Lakewood, Colorado. A hawk screeched in the distance. A storm had blown straight through while she slept.

Kenna faced the bed. The sheet lay in a tangled mess across the mattress. She'd flung her pillow clear to the door. The chaos explained the uneasy feeling in her belly. She'd obviously had a fitful night. But the dream, the sexual energy, had been so real. Given the hard orgasm that woke her, she should be feeling ready to

take on the world. Yet sexual tension still hummed through her like a live wire. Another wave of shivers raced across her flesh. She'd come, but the experience had been unlike any she'd ever dreamed—or imagined. She hadn't been that aroused...ever.

She grimaced. The pent-up anxiety over her upcoming show must have channeled into emotional chaos. Just thinking about the show started the gnawing in her stomach that had begun when Michael Laird first contacted her three months ago. This was her first major glass art exhibit—and it was now only two weeks away. Half a dozen crates had been shipped to the gallery. Several in-progress pieces lined a shelf in her workshop, but it was the special not yet started project that had her nervous. As a child, she'd envisioned the piece, and good or bad, the dragons she called Drakaura would define her as an artist.

A nervous quiver radiated through her. Marshall Thomas would be attending the show. She hadn't seen her mentor since showing him her first attempt at Drakaura two years ago. He'd accused her of copying William Gudentrath, and she'd walked out without a word.

She understood the risk of blowing dragons in glass. William's dragon glass goblets were world renowned. But he worked in muted copper, dark wine, ivory, and soft green, whereas her Drakaura was vivid greens, reds, and oranges. Still, Marshall's accusations had played into the very fear that her critics fueled: the hidden passion within the glass was missing. What would they think of her dragon theme? What would Marshall think of it?

He had read about her upcoming show. His congratulations had included an offer to fly in from Texas and help out. Sadness tugged at her. She missed him, the way he brought the art to life for her, his patient teaching. But was she ready to see him?

Kenna shrugged off the anxiety, changed into faded jeans and a T-shirt, then started down the stairs of the two-story Colonial that had once been her grandmother's home. The third step creaked. Kenna smiled. The seventh step would

grumble next, then the eighth, and lastly, the twelfth. Many found the groans of an old house creepy, but she knew the sounds began and ended with the wind.

Ten minutes later, a hot cup of coffee in hand, Kenna walked the few feet from the house to her garage turned workshop. She slipped the key in the lock and opened the door. A breeze wafted past as she entered.

Her heart always jump-started at the sight of the three glassblowing furnaces that dominated the workshop. A massive five-by-six freestanding crucible furnace to melt the glass sat near the farthest right-hand corner. To its right, along the garage doors, a six-by-four front-loading annealing oven used to slowly cool the glass sat on steel legs, while a pipe-shaped insulated firebrick glory hole furnace used to reheat the glass lay beside it. Five years of eating alphabet soup, bread, and skim milk had been worth it.

Nearer the middle of the room sat the marver, the steel table where she worked the glass. Two parallel rails held the pipe while she worked with the glass to form the skin. Blown glass filled the shelves lining all four walls.

Kenna closed and locked the door, then crossed to the workbench and set her coffee and keys on the tabletop. After lighting the glory hole furnace, she stood, her gaze on the far shelf where she'd tucked away the piece she'd named *Twilight Glide*: a solid fire-colored base with a translucent yellow half-moon in the middle. A swirling crimson stem rose from the moon, and a sleek dragon, its dark green wings spread, soared above. Not quite *Drakaura*, but nothing like *Gudentrath*. This new piece was to follow the others already shipped to the Michael Laird Gallery for the *Emergence of the Dragon* exhibit.

The yet uncreated centerpiece rose in memory as if stepping from the furnace fully formed. A tremor of familiar excitement fluttered her heart. Dreams as a child had conjured feathered dragons that guarded her in the deepest part of the night. Their memory outlived even Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy and metamorphosed into the *Drakaura*, sensual creatures that flowed in harmony with the glass. A soft breeze skimmed across her arms. Kenna smiled.

Today was the day.

* * *

At the sound of a hard rap on the door, Kenna sloshed coffee onto her fingers. “Shit.”

She set the cup on the table and shook her hand. Another knock, this one louder. She stood, wiping her hand on her jeans. Who in their right mind would be at her house at 3:30 in the morning? She hurried to the door, reached for the lock, then paused. A psychopath probably wouldn’t knock, but sane people didn’t pay social calls at this hour either. She rose up on tiptoes and peered out the peephole.

Hadyn Stiles. Kenna ducked. What did *he* want? Hadyn was a collector—a very handsome, rich collector—she’d met at a small but prestigious local gallery that had included a few pieces of her work in a show two weeks ago.

Hadyn knocked again. “Kenna?”

Hadyn’s interest in her work had thrilled her. His interest in *her* was startling. With platinum blond hair, broad shoulders, and striking blue eyes, the guy was drop-dead gorgeous.

He knocked harder. “Kenna.”

Shit. She twisted the lock and opened the door.

He grinned. “What’s up?”

She stepped aside as he entered. “I was about to ask you the same question.”

“I saw the fire and thought you might like company.”

“Nice try. I just fired the furnace. It couldn’t possibly be hot enough to be seen from the street yet.” Not to mention, the fire would be damn hard to see from the exclusive new townhomes on the hills ten miles out of town.

He smiled. “No?”

The nonchalant answer, along with the fact he prowled like a panther, irritated her. “What are you doing here so early?”

Hadyn stopped at her bench and picked up an amber rod. “What are you making this morning? Another dragon?”

Kenna hurried to him and snatched the rod from his hand. “Yes, more dragons.”

He fingered the emerald green rod that sat alongside the burnt orange. “Even more unique color choices than usual.”

Kenna thought of the personal collection shelved in her house. Unlike those here, her private dragons deviated from the typical earth tones but still weren’t the real Drakaura of her dreams. Suddenly, Kenna was glad she hadn’t shared them with Hadyn.

She maneuvered between him and the table. “You still haven’t said why you’re here.”

A gust of wind howled through the rafters. Shivers raced over her flesh. “Is another storm rolling in?” She rubbed her upper arms.

“Are you alone, Kenna?”

She stilled. “Of course.” Kenna narrowed her eyes. “Until you showed up. Do you usually make social calls in the middle of the night?”

“You’re special.” Hadyn sauntered to a shelf and trailed his finger over a blue and orange fairy in repose. “You have a unique gift.”

Unique? Some critics claimed she showed potential, but was no Chihuly. One reviewer said her work lacked the fire and movement of the master blower. She told herself the fact they compared her to a master like Chihuly was what counted, but she was blowing smoke up her own ass and knew it.

Hadyn looked at her. “I’m curious where you get the inspiration for your dragons.”

Kenna hesitated. *Strange that he waited two weeks to ask that.* “I suppose where all artists get their inspiration. We find beauty and magic in the glass.”

“Magic? Yes. Your dragons are magical.” He faced her. “Together, we could create so much more.”

Her heart sank. As flattering as his attention was, she’d hoped his interest in her art was sincere. “Magic as in...” *Please don’t let him spout poetic verse about making love or burning passion.*

“I just meant we could heat it up in here.”

The sudden urge to bludgeon him with the thickest of her glass pieces forced her to clasp her hands behind her back. She couldn’t halt the mental picture of her melting the glass so that the cops never found the murder weapon.

It didn’t matter. She didn’t need Hadyn Stiles. Despite the fact she was no Chihuly, she was doing well. The Michael Laird Gallery had international contacts. International interest could push her career to the next level—if she could get Hadyn out of her shop. Any sexual energy she wanted to tap into fizzled into annoyance.

“I want to get some work done. If you would—”

A blast of wind whipped open the door, slamming the wood into the wall with a bang. Dust swirled in a vortex of churning air that swept through the garage.

“The door!” She rushed to the table in the rear of the garage and steadied a fragile fourteen-inch vase.

A howl echoed through the rafters. Flames arced from the furnace, then snuffed out.

Kenna blinked. “What the—” Another gust of wind whipped through the garage. “Close the damn door,” she ordered an instant before Hadyn slammed it shut.

She hurried to the open face of the furnace to find only a red glow. What had happened? Furnaces didn’t blow out. She checked the damper. Open. She straightened and caught sight of Hadyn standing near the door. Rage glinted in his

eyes. Kenna stilled. How much did she actually know about this man? Until now, he'd always seemed eager to please. Too eager, maybe?

Wind whipped past her. She turned, caught sight of the open window at the back of the garage, and hurried to close it. The room went silent. Warm air settled on her skin like a protective blanket. A tingle started in her nipples and spread through her. Just like when she'd awoken earlier, the earthy scent of rain and woods hung in the air. Kenna inhaled, and her anxiety morphed into a calm yet arousing tranquility like...a gentle tropical breeze against her naked flesh.

Damn, she needed to blow. She swore she heard a man chuckle and faced Hadyn. His lips were set in a tight line. At least the anger was gone. Maybe she'd misread him. This day, short as it had been, was one long string of weird. Whatever Hadyn's problem, his attitude would spoil her flow. Her fingers twitched with renewed desire to channel this creative energy. *Hallelujah*.

"Thanks for stopping by, Hadyn, but I need to get to work. You understand."

He nodded toward the furnace. "Your furnace isn't working."

"I've dealt with finicky furnaces before. No need to worry."

He took a purposeful step toward her. Air blasted between them. "I do worry about you, Kenna."

She strode to the door. "I've taken care of myself for twenty-seven years. I don't mean to be rude, but really, I want to be alone."

He stepped to her side. "If you need anything, call."

She couldn't deny a measure of relief. This was the sweet man she'd known the past few weeks. "I'll keep that in mind."

Kenna opened the door. A soft breeze kissed her cheek, but the force of a few minutes before had passed. A twinge of regret tugged at her. The wind was exhilarating—when it wasn't threatening to knock her on her ass.

Hadyn paused in the doorway as if to say more, then left. She closed and locked the door. Turning her attention to the crucible, she crossed the room,

dropped to her hands and knees, and checked the valves. Well, hell, a broken valve. A trip into downtown Denver for the part would do the trick.

She shut off the gas and glanced at the clock. 3:51. The art store opened at 8:00. Kenna grabbed the coffee cup, crossed to the door, and peered through the peephole. The walkway was empty. *Thank God*. The last thing she needed was Hadyn's enthusiastic offer to accompany her to the art store. She opened the door and stepped outside. Another gust of wind blasted from within the shop. The door sucked from her fingers and slammed shut. She jumped back, her gaze glued to the handle. Had she left a window open?

Leaves from the giant maple behind the garage rustled and drew her attention skyward. Clouds edged with moonlight moved as shadow against light and slowly morphed into a distorted version of Drakaura's image, wings spread, thin tail whipping behind. She stared, her mind slipping back to that first childhood dream of Drakaura, colors so deep and rich, they filled the room as the dragon watched her in silence. The clouds overhead darkened, and the vision vanished.

Kenna shivered, then hurried inside. She set the mug on the kitchen counter and climbed the stairs to the old attic pull-down in the hallway. The familiar creak of wood as she pulled the string that unfolded the stairs brought a rush of emotion. She hadn't been in the attic since Grandmother died six years ago, when she had stored her keepsakes alongside the older woman's trunks.

She climbed up, crossed to the trunk, knelt, and ran a palm across the lid. Dust roiled up among the murky shadows in a turbulent dance. She chuckled. Grandma would give a scolding if she saw such a mess. Kenna opened the lid and lifted the linen-wrapped frame from on top of the other mementos, then settled back and unwrapped her first drawing of Drakaura. Despite chips in the Indonesian teakwood frame and the fading of the dragon's red and yellow head feathers, the intensity in his eyes remained.

Kenna envisioned herself astride his back as they soared high above the earth. He dipped, and she hugged his smooth neck, her legs tightening around his belly,

wind whipping her auburn hair into tiny lightning bolts. A gust of wind rattled the rafters, startling her from the dream. The breeze gentled, yet the hairs at her nape tingled. Despite knowing the thought was foolish, she quieted her breathing and listened for footsteps on the stairs.

The scent of wood and rain unexpectedly floated on the air. Desire coursed through her, and last night's dream returned of the tall, broad-shouldered man who thrust his cock deep inside her. Her pussy tightened. She released a slow breath, then refocused on Drakaura and flipped over the picture. Taped to the back were the two yellowed newspaper clippings about her fifth grade win that her grandmother had saved. Hadyn asked about her inspiration. This secret belonged to her alone. It wasn't the oddity she cared about concealing, but how the dragon called to her. She turned the frame back over and stared at the drawing. The image radiated off the page with the intensity of a desert mirage.

Discomfort brought a flush to her skin. In those final months before her mother died, Kenna's stories of Drakaura standing over her bed had come with the admonition, "*There are no such things as imaginary friends.*"

Kenna exhaled an unsteady breath. Her mother's dogged belief in only the things she could see had widened the rapidly growing gulf between them. Of course, Mother had been right. Dragons weren't real. But Kenna didn't understand that until it was too late, and her parents died in a car crash when she was fourteen. Thank God, Jared had understood.

Sisterly affection brought a smile. Though they were twins, Jared became the parents they lost when their grandmother was awarded custody. He took care of them. Six years later, he joined the Navy.

She missed him. But that's how it was for the family of a Navy SEAL. Still, he made sure she got a good education and spent every moment off duty with her. Nearly two years had passed since their last visit, and ten months since his last letter. Some of the joy went out of her. He wouldn't be there for her first major showing.

What would he think about the way she'd brought her childhood dreams to life inside the glass?

Chapter Three

Erion paced the kitchen. Tension knotted his shoulders. Pressure tightened his chest. He'd fucked up. He shouldn't have been there, shouldn't have stayed, and most certainly, shouldn't want to return. Yet he did.

He sat at the table and stared out the bay window into the woods that butted up against his condo. Dawn crested over the trees. The clock ticked, the sound a hollow echo as he tried to make sense of what had happened.

Kenna had yet to metamorphose into her element. Yet he'd burned as fire inside her. His cock thickened with the memory. Never had he experienced such force with another Element—and before the *Giris*. How was this possible?

What of me? Airiana whispered from deep within his psyche.

Pain slashed through him. The veil of memory lifted, and the years rolled back to 1930, the Chicago speakeasy the *Harrison*, and Hailey Hopewell. Her sultry voice poured through the microphone as smooth as the fifteen-year-old rum Erion kept aside for his best customers. He'd stood behind the bar opposite the stage, mesmerized as he had been every night for the past six months. The low-cut, white flapper dress Hailey wore glittered against the soft light around the crowded dance floor in contrast to her dark Nubian skin. He'd never known a woman like her; young, wise, and beyond beautiful. His elbow jostled, and Erion shifted his attention to Burt.

The head bartender grinned. "You been drooling over that dame for six months. When you gonna make a move, boss?"

He'd made a move, all right, that very night, only to discover the young singer was Airiana, an eighty-year-old, full-fledged Air Element. He'd been only twenty-

nine, a man old enough to recognize a woman he wanted, yet too young an Element to recognize the physical clues that gave away one Element to another. She *had* recognized his Air Element, but hadn't understood his strength. She, along with her gift, had been snuffed out when he'd consumed her during their merging.

Darkness drew the memory back into the corner of his soul where Airiana's core remained. Erion swallowed the lump in his throat. Her call had commanded him—he felt as if he'd taken a hit to the gut. Airiana had commanded him, but Kenna could own him. Which explained why he'd made the mistake of answering the call of her fire.

"Fool," he snarled.

Until tonight, no one had moved him as Airiana had. He'd seen to that. He'd known other Elements, had loved women, but none of them were Airiana. No other Element would be risked because of him.

Yet, if he didn't return, Hadyn would claim Kenna's fire and worse, enslave her. Wind raged in Erion's core. As Element, the compulsion to claim her and partake of her fire would be too Herculean to resist—he'd proved that last night. Could he resist even in human form?

What would it be like to touch her as a man? To caress her supple flesh, alive and heated, beneath his fingers? His hands clenched, the weight of her smooth breast filling his palm still so real. As air, he'd caused her nipples to pucker. But to tease with nips and tongue, to seal his lips around the raised peak and feel her fiery flesh heat within his mouth...

He closed his eyes. How easily he could feel her power...the pleasure. A vision of him sweeping out the window, headed for her bedroom, relaxed his body into the sense of weightless separation of body from element that preceded transformation. His atoms began to fall in on themselves, and his clothes loosened on his body. Erion jerked from the trance, heart racing.

He jolted from the chair and grasped the coffee cup sitting on the counter, then paused, the same chill he'd experienced last night when the Fire Element had

arrived creeping over him. She needed him. Erion shook his head. Not him, just someone. When Hadyn showed up last night, he should have withdrawn, but the thought of Kenna with another man only minutes after he'd left her bed had filled Erion with unreasonable jealousy. Yet he had no right to her, was dangerous for her.

Despite the fact the current of his wind had shifted when Hadyn arrived, Erion hadn't recognized Hadyn's element. He'd been too damn caught up in *her*. Hadyn's predatory reaction when he sensed Erion was what had revealed his element *and* his intentions. The eddy of wind in Erion's core swirled faster. Hadyn meant to possess Kenna. No fully formed Element took from a youngling before the *Giris*. The first metamorphosis into Element had to be free of energy drain. To absorb the emerging Element's energy enslaved their element in psychic bondage.

Erion dumped the now cold coffee from his cup and poured a second one. Kenna was young, an infant not yet formed in her element. Yet their brief connection had betrayed her potential. That strength must be what had drawn Hadyn, just as she had pulled Erion to her during the night. The fact her emerging element naturally called to Elements didn't curtail the sudden jealousy. Had she summoned Hadyn the same way? Had Hadyn touched her as he had?

Erion's fingers tightened convulsively around the cup. He shouldn't have gone to her, shouldn't have savored the sweet essence of her body. He had no right. Neither did Hadyn. Coffee swirled faster and faster until the liquid splashed over the rim and onto his hand. Erion cursed and tossed the coffee into the sink, then set the cup on the counter and snatched up the folded towel on the counter. In one swipe he cleaned the spill, then wiped his hand and tossed the towel aside.

Hadyn couldn't be allowed to imprint upon Fiera. Erion would blow him to the far side of time if necessary. No other Element could be permitted to interfere with her natural metamorphosis. She had a rare gift that she couldn't yet conceive. Erion stilled. He would protect her from the Fire Element.

Who would protect her from him?

Anguished regret squeezed his chest. He would never be more than an elusive breeze caressing her simmering flesh, making her come with a stolen touch in the night. Blood rushed into his shaft with the memory. His hardened flesh resonated with an echo of the fire that had singed him. Kenna had offered herself to him without reserve.

Erion's heartbeat spiked. Legends whispered of his ancestors commingling in unnatural ways. He wanted like hell to *commingle* with Kenna—in every possible way. His cock throbbed, and his balls ached. He closed his eyes, the feel of her nipples as he swirled around them vivid. Blood pounded in his ears. The fragrance of her cream had driven him higher.

He unzipped his jeans and eased the tight pressure on his cock. He slid a hand into his briefs, wrapped his fingers firmly around the base of his shaft, and stroked the heated length. Beads of moisture seeped from the tip of the engorged crown. Erion shoved jeans and briefs past his hips and widened his stance. Would her eyes glint with desire at the sight of how aroused he was for her?

Another firm stroke.

He pictured Kenna kneeling before him, her ready mouth watering for a taste of him.

Faster. He squeezed, intensifying the pleasure, yet holding back the orgasm. His fingers were rough. Hers would be long and slender, caressing him while she worked the rigid shaft and sucked the head, lips and fist meeting in the middle.

Erion thrust forward. He pressed his thumb along the thick bulging vein running the length, imagining it was her hot, soft mouth taking all of him. With his free hand, he cupped his sac and rolled his balls in his palm, wishing it was her sweet lips surrounding them, flicking them with her tongue.

If she were kneeling before him, he'd tunnel his fingers into her fiery hair. Ah fuck, he was close to coming. He stumbled forward, barely catching himself on the counter before he crashed to his knees.

Erion thrust again. The tang and musk of his desire scented the air. He pumped harder, faster. The fantasy vivid—real. Her fire would blaze in a swirl around him, rubbing, massaging his nipples, the tip of his cock. Erion groaned. He drove into the fire, caught and consumed in the current. He threw his head back, clenched his jaw, and hissed out a sharp breath. Jets of hot cum spurted and drizzled over his fingers as his cock pulsed with pleasure.

He collapsed against the counter, gasping for breath. His heart pounded too fast. He fought the urge to shift so he could escape the rushing roar in his ears.

Fuck. Erion shook his head. He had to pull himself together. He had to forget her fire. He thought of her, alone in her shop. Hadyn would return for her. So would Erion. He had to. She wasn't safe. His only purpose in seeing her again was to protect her—even from himself.

* * *

Heat crashed over Erion in a wave. He swirled the energy in his vortex, his wind sucking oxygen from Hadyn's fire in a tight string. The drag unexpectedly went slack, and Erion spiraled backward across the parking lot behind the art store and slammed into an SUV. The monstrous vehicle shuddered, and the car alarm blared like a sick heartbeat as he bounced off.

The shimmer of heat that was Hadyn rocketed toward him for another strike. Erion shot upward, the rim of his wind funnel narrowing as he climbed higher. Hadyn neared, and Erion yanked the tip of his funnel up, then drove the sharp point into the now glowing blanket of heat. Fire blazed in a howl of fury, the fringe of flames snapping around Erion as if freed from ties that had held it taut. Translucent orange and yellow banded around him and squeezed.

Erion bucked in resistance to the sudden vacuum. Pain ripped through him, his edges singed by fiery licks. The eddy slowed. Fingers of fire snaked around the outer rim of his funnel, climbing higher, tightening, choking like a massive python. Erion relaxed his shape and began to slip through the thick spider web of red-

orange tendrils. Hadyn intensified his heat. White-hot blues appeared in the thick mass.

A door banged open, loud enough to be heard over the incessant rise and fall of the car alarm. “Whose goddamn car alarm is that?” a man said. “What the hell?”

Hadyn flickered. Erion sucked his air inside the whirlpool, yanking the Fire Element into his churning center. Hadyn snapped back in a shimmering wall of heat and slammed down onto him. A dizzying current sucked air from his center. Erion gasped for breath.

Kenna.

He glanced toward the man still standing in the café doorway, staring in their direction. If he could escape inside... Erion concentrated his core inward, drawing his wind into a smaller and smaller mass, then, in one mighty blast, jettisoned through the wall of fire. Heat scorched his edge, then broke off when he blew past the man into the café.

Erion whirled, then stilled, the throb of his center a deafening roar. The man standing at the door shifted, and Erion realized he was watching Hadyn leave. Erion moved to the door, fluttering past the stunned man in a cool breeze, and spotted Hadyn’s shimmering heat in the distance. The Fire Element’s sudden attack betrayed his desperation. If he wanted Kenna badly enough to launch an open clash, what else was he capable of?

Rage swelled Erion’s wind. Kenna was close enough to the *Giris* that a trauma could trigger her transformation. If that moment came at a time when Erion was weakened from being in element form too long, Hadyn could kill him. Kenna would have no defense. Hadyn would claim her fire. Erion cursed and headed for his BMW, parked where he’d been sitting when Hadyn attacked.

He had to stay close, not as Erion the Air Element and sure as hell not as a stalker, but as Eric Gray, art collector and—God help him—friend.

* * *

Erion pushed through the door of the art store and nearly ran down the aisle in his hurry to find Kenna before realizing the clerk's eyes were on him. Erion slowed and shoved his hands into the front pockets of his black jeans. He scanned a shelf filled with diamond hand pads, files, pliers, tweezers, scraper, and—he squinted at the tag on the shelf below a pile of screwdriver-looking objects and read *Bead Reamer*. What the hell was *that*?

He turned the corner of the aisle and nearly tripped over Kenna. She squatted on her haunches, a small valve in her hand as she studied similar pieces of equipment on the shelf. She twisted and stared over her shoulder at him. Their eyes met. Erion removed his hands from his pockets. The blush coloring her cheeks reminded him of the glow that colored her skin when she came. Wind swirled in his center, and his body began to dissolve in on itself in readiness for transformation. He slammed down the invisible wall between his wind and the fire that sparked within her core.

She smiled. “You look a little lost.”

“I am.”

Tension eased in his shoulders, but anxiety churned in his stomach. His first words would lead him down a path of lies and deceit. For her protection, he reminded himself. Desire slipped through his veins. Whether or not she knew it, she needed him, and he was too damn close to being glad for it. He was lying to her, deceiving her—for noble reasons. Yeah, he was some fucking knight in shining armor.

“Do you work here?”

She chuckled. “No, but I should. The employee discount would save me a fortune.” She stood and extended a hand. “Kenna Lang.”

He took her hand in his, and his head lightened. “Eri—Eric Gray.”

He hadn't been Eric since his element emerged. The name sounded foreign on his lips, but her hand, warm and soft, felt as natural entwined in his as a rainbow

to rain. Intoxicating adrenaline flowed through his veins, and blood rushed into his cock at the sensation of flesh against flesh. He had only experienced her touch in his form as air but had glimpsed the heated demands those fingers could make. He released her. Her blush deepened. Had she felt the connection as strongly as he had?

Her brows furrowed. "Have we met?"

"I've seen your work." He wasn't likely to forget the pieces displayed in her garage. "Brilliant use of color."

"Brilliant?" Her smile faltered, then broadened. "I like that. Thank you. I have a show coming up at the Michael Laird Gallery. If you want to come..."

Erion gave a small nod. He wanted nothing more than to *come*, buried full hilt inside of her. *Fuck*. He'd been here all of sixty seconds and already wanted too much. Was it too much?

Maybe...just once, he could touch her as a man. Erion cut off the thought. His response to her was part of their dual nature of human and element, both sides needing physical and emotional connections.

She squatted again, and he ran his gaze down her red hair and past her waist to the shapely ass. Damn the Fire Element for hunting her. And damn himself for wanting her so badly.

He yanked his gaze back to the shelf she was studying and forced an even voice. "Do you ever give private showings?"

Kenna paused, fingers lightly grasping a tip of red cane, a rod of colored glass, from the lower shelf.

"I'd love to see more of your work," he added before she could refuse.

She pulled the red cane from the shelf, inhaled deeply, and sighed. Erion tensed, certain the moment of silence was the worst of his life.

"I'm working today," she said. "Well, after I fix the furnace. I think the glory hole overheated. Gotta be the temp valve." She lifted the valve over her head and

wiggled it. “I should be up and blowing in no time.” She pivoted in her squat and looked up at him. “So you really like my work?”

Sweat beaded on his brow. “Absolutely.” It wasn’t a lie. “Your perspective is...interesting.”

“Interesting?”

He smiled, chasing the worry from her piercing hazel eyes. “Interesting and beautiful.” *Like you.*

She paused. “Not quite a private showing, but I could give you a preview.”

Sight of the uncertain smile that lifted a corner of her mouth brought an unfamiliar rush of emotion. Understanding hit, and pain cut through Erion as if his insides were being carved out with a dull knife. It wasn’t the need to fuck Kenna or even bond with her that compelled him to be near her. Yes, he wanted all that, God knew how he wanted it, but the underlying need that drove him was a far more powerful force than the desire to touch her body or fire.

Fear unlike any Erion had ever experienced rose to the surface in a rush. If Hadyn discovered the truth, Kenna would be in even more danger than she already was. Because Erion wouldn’t be able to protect her.

Chapter Four

Kenna stared into deep-set chocolate eyes flecked with gold. What the hell was she doing? Just because the guy smelled like rain and woods didn't mean she should flirt shamelessly. Okay, he looked fabulous, tall—she bet standing next to him, her gaze would meet his neck, and what a nice neck, not thick like a bodybuilder, but fit. Bronzed skin that conjured pictures of Aztec gods and the orgies in their honor.

His shirt, taut across sculpted muscle, revealed contoured pectorals and a flat stomach. A curtain of shiny black hair, pulled into a ponytail at the base of his neck with a piece of leather, hung to the middle of his back. Her eyes tracked lower to the bulging fly of his jeans.

Hell, no! She wasn't going there. She knew plenty of handsome men. Hadyn was gorgeous, but she'd kicked him to the curb just that morning. What happened to the alone time she so desperately coveted? She'd wanted to tap into that sexual energy, and now all she could think about was having this dark-haired, dark-eyed man tap into her—balls-deep.

Heat radiated from her pussy, and fever swept through her body. Too hot. A warning flashed in her head. *Sensory overload*. Look away. Shit. Her nipples hardened beneath her lace bra and rose to visible peaks, poking through her pink T-shirt. Maybe he wouldn't notice. His gaze hadn't dropped to her breasts but instead stared directly into her eyes.

Kenna licked her dry lips. "Do you have something to write on? I'll give you directions."

He grasped her arm and pulled her to her feet. "Let me take that." He gently disengaged the valve from her fingers, and she started alongside him toward the front of the store.

"Wait." Kenna halted. "I need a frame and wall mount."

"Back wall, on the left," the clerk called from the register.

"Thanks." She weaved one row over and hurried toward the rear of the store. Her heart pounded. *What is the matter with me?*

"Over there?" a deep male voice said behind her.

"Jeezus!" She spun.

Her breath caught at the sheer power in Eric's broad shoulders and tapered torso only inches from her face. She tilted her head back to meet his gaze. Why hadn't she heard him following her?

He pointed past the corner of the aisle where they stood.

"Huh?" she said.

"The frames."

Kenna slid her gaze along his muscular arm past the long forefinger to a high shelf on the back wall where an assortment of wood frames was stacked. She jerked her gaze back to his. Amusement sparkled in his eyes.

She forced a level tone and said, "Thanks," then took four steps to the shelf.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him standing still as a statue as she flipped through the frames until she found an intricately carved, rich wood frame with scrollwork along the side. She faced him.

He smiled. "Ready?"

Kenna nodded, and he waited for her to come up alongside before walking toward the front of the store. As they rounded the shelf, she dropped back a step and let out a silent breath at the sight of black jeans defining a firm ass. The sexual tension that had hummed since that morning strung taut. Nice rounded globes, and if the hidden delights in front were as impressive as the rear...

Yeah, she'd blow him, but she intended to stay on course. She had a show to prepare for. However, she could blow long, thick, phallic vases in his honor. Once cooled, she'd run her hands along the smooth contours while thinking of him. Damn, maybe she ought to just blow a glass dildo. Then she could imagine him while she plunged the object deep into her channel.

What in the hell was wrong with her? She'd morphed into an overheated sex fiend. Warmth pooled in her core and licked at her erogenous zones.

He set her supplies on the counter. Movement in the cabled muscles of his arms inspired fluid curves and spiraling colors within her imagination. Maybe he was just what she needed.

Contrast between colors, open and closed forms, and the body wraps. Yes, the body wraps. The stripe of color applied to the body of the blown glass. The vision gave way to images of her body wrapped with his. It would be too easy to toss her blowpipe to blow his pipe. Glass wouldn't be the only thing heating up.

He smiled at her. Her heart pounded as if...as if she knew him. Not just the scent that still lingered from her erotic dream, but a baser emotional connection. *Déjà vu*. She pushed the ridiculous thought aside. She'd probably noticed him at an exhibit. And then forgotten that strong square jaw, straight nose, and thick brows. She focused on his mouth. Given the chance, that mouth could wreak havoc on a woman's body...her body.

Damn, did the store have the heat on? Sweat trickled between her breasts. Wetness dampened her panties. Her glass wasn't the only reason she wanted to take Eric to the gallery. She was interested. He seemed to be as well.

She grabbed her bag of supplies and faced him.

"I'll follow you," he said before she could suggest it.

"Perfect." She preceded him out of the store, aware of his gaze boring into her back. She went to her truck and watched Eric climb behind the wheel of a silver coupe with black-tinted windows. Once behind the wheel, she waved as she passed him in the parking lot.

The gallery wasn't far, not far enough for her to reconsider her decision to take a perfect stranger there during off-business hours. She checked her rearview mirror. Eric hadn't reconsidered either.

A few minutes later they pulled into the nearly vacant parking lot of the large building. Michael's Jag sat parked in his reserved space. At least she wouldn't be alone with Eric. That thought quelled the ache between her legs. But not by much.

Eric pulled in beside her and stepped from his vehicle. A crisp morning breeze scented the air. He turned into the gust and breathed deeply. His broad chest expanded, stretching the fabric of his shirt as he rolled his strong shoulders. He faced her and smiled.

Kenna melted. A spark of awareness bloomed into something indefinable. Something she'd never felt before but liked.

He approached. "You okay?"

She nodded. "Um. Yeah." She pointed to double steel doors next to a large bay door. "We can go in the back. Michael's here."

Eric followed her across the parking lot. The easy cadence of their walk belied the wild pounding in her chest. The air around her seemed to sizzle with his nearness. Adrenaline thrummed through her body. She was excited to show him her art. Having the approval of Michael validated her work, but Eric was more like the people who would come to her show. His impression could give her a glimpse into how she might be received by the public. They reached the door, and she pressed the doorbell to the right.

"This place is huge." Eric's gaze slid up the two-story tall brick building to where stained-glass windows lined the upper floor.

"It used to be a church."

The metal door clanked as a slide bolt unlocked from the inside. The door slowly opened until Michael stood in the doorway.

“Kenna, sweetheart, what are you doing here?” He grasped her shoulders and kissed each cheek. “You should be in your shop creating masterpieces for the show.” The teasing note of reprimand emphasized his obvious pride.

Kenna smiled. “I will be later today. I wanted to show my friend”—she glanced to Eric—“some of the pieces for the show.”

Michael’s gaze raked over Eric, and Kenna nearly laughed when he crooned, “Any friend of yours is a friend of mine.” She understood the attraction.

He held the door open for them. Eric paused, eyes intently on her; then he took a pensive step forward. Familiarity washed over her as she followed him inside. She shook off the eerie feeling.

“There is coffee and croissants in the galley.” Michael relocked the door. “Help yourself and come to my office before you leave.”

“Sure. And thanks. I’m starving.”

Kenna led Eric down a long corridor to a stock room where her pieces were being stored. She twisted the handle and pushed open the heavy door. Eric closed the space between them, his chest brushing her back as he braced his palm on the door and held it open.

She shifted, staring in his face. His lips were so close. Stubble shadowed his angular jaw. This close, she could see his eyes weren’t just brown. Copper and gold swirled through the mesmerizing irises. He held her spellbound. Her breath caught in her chest, and her pulse spiked. What the hell was this ball of hot need simmering in her belly?

* * *

Erion was in trouble. Heat radiated off Kenna in waves. Heat meant for him. How in hell was it possible that she was his mate? Legend said that when the great wizard Siusaidh took earth, wind, fire, and air from the chaos of Ghen, he tore them apart at their core and commingled their essences with humans to create the Ryalda, Erion and Kenna’s ancestors. The separate pieces now sought their other

halves in a wild need to coalesce. Quantum entanglement is what modern science called the phenomena: two parts of the same entity. Somewhere in his and Kenna's history, they shared a *spark*, an infinitesimal piece of matter that triggered the instinct to mate—at *all cost*.

Worse, the joining, the moment the *sparks* connect, is the weakest moment in an Element's existence.

Kenna shifted, jarring him back to her as she felt along the wall and flipped the switch. Overhead lighting flickered, then flared bright. He followed her into the large open room, letting the door click shut behind them. Metal racks filled with small crates and boxes lined the walls. Larger crates and boxes were stacked in groups throughout the room.

Kenna dropped her keys on a long table in the center of the room, then crossed to a group of crates near the right wall. She lifted the lid from the largest crate and knelt. Carefully, she parted the packing straw and reached inside.

"I made this using the incalmo technique." She lifted a large vase. Green, topaz, and royal blue were ribboned in separate sections. Sparkles glittered within the vibrant emerald green at the top. "Each section has to be blown separately, then joined while the glass is still hot."

Erion stood transfixed, staring as her finger traced the smooth seams upward where the color grew more intense near the top. Blood rushed into his shaft as he envisioned her mapping the planes of his body with the same delicate touch.

"Michael has a perfect spot for the piece," she went on. "A beam of light will shine through the glass, making the colors explode." Excitement laced her voice. Her chest rose and fell with each warm breath that passed over her soft, plump lips.

"Beautiful," he murmured.

Her head snapped up, and he cursed when her eyes lowered with understanding. Dammit, he'd been staring. He swallowed the torrent of desire barely kept in check and forced his attention on the glass. "Show me another."

For the next twenty minutes, Kenna sifted through the crates, lifting the fragile works of art and trusting him to handle them. She became engrossed in sharing what inspired the individual pieces.

"I'm nervous and excited," she said as she repacked a fluted bowl in its small crate. "This is my first major exhibit. One bad show can end a career before it begins." She carefully set the crate back on the shelf. "The glass-blowing world isn't exactly breaking open. Only a few artists even have names you'd recognize."

Erion nodded as he rested his hip against the edge of a large crate. "You'll do great. Your work is special."

She paused, head cocked to one side. "Why do I feel like I know you?"

Breath froze in his lungs. Fuck, her element recognized him. His arrested thoughts flashed to her room...her bed. His mind raced. Was this because they were mates, or had he imprinted himself on her last night?

Which was worse?

She positioned herself beside him. Slowly, her head lifted, and their gazes met. Breath mingled. She turned and stepped in front of him.

"Kenna," he said in a hoarse whisper.

She lifted on tiptoes and brushed her lips against his. Heat streaked through him. If he didn't end this torment, he'd end up claiming her here and now. He grasped her shoulders with the intention of easing away from the kiss, but her lips were soft, and her mouth opened for him. Her unique feminine taste sent him over the edge, and he thrust his tongue inside.

Kenna moaned, and Erion was lost. He threaded his fingers under her hair and gently grasped her nape. Her fingers curled around his forearm as she leaned in, and he deepened the kiss. The flesh beneath his fingertips heated. But the fire he fought was the blazing need coursing through his body and channeling into his groin. His cock swelled, lengthening and hardening.

Her grip on his arm tightened, and she nibbled his lower lip before finally breaking the kiss. For a split second, he felt his resistance crumble. A picture flashed of him yanking her jeans down, ripping off her panties, and tracing the seam of her pussy with his cockhead, then parting her folds and sliding his shaft into her wet heat.

Would she welcome him, knowing his motives? He could reason he was there to protect her, but he could do that without touching. At the moment he wanted so much more than a touch or a kiss. He wanted to fuck her more than he wanted his next breath. Kenna's mouth lifted in a tentative smile, jolting him from the image.

"Sorry," she said. "I don't know what got into me."

Erion swallowed hard. He had.

She surprised him by pushing away from him. "I've planned a special piece."

Kenna crossed to the end of the wire shelf near the corner where a small crate sat on the shelf. She paused. The distance between them allowed him to breathe, force reason back into place. Whatever she wanted to show him was obviously important. He commanded his legs into motion and stepped to her side.

"What is it?"

Kenna gave him a tremulous smile that tugged at his heart, then pulled the crate from the shelf. He followed her to the table. She set the box down and lifted the top, then pulled four twelve-inch pieces from inside and laid them on the table.

Erion's heart jump-started. The thick bubble wrap that protected the glass distorted the pieces, but there was no mistaking the color and shape. He stared as she unwrapped the first piece and set it on the table. The reds, greens, and yellows were more muted than the real-life dragons, but there was no doubt.

Kenna was blowing Drakaura.

The dragon shape-shifters' ancestors had stood alongside the Ryalda when the chaos threatened to devour the world of form after Siusaidh took from its essence to

create the Element champions. Today, however, the Drakaura *policed* his kind. Judge, jury, and executioners, they enforced their own brand of justice.

Erion's mind raced. But how did Kenna know of them?

A chill slithered down his spine. *Hadyn*. The Drakaura were hunting the Fire Element. They had been known to chase an Element for centuries in order to catch him or her. They must have inadvertently revealed themselves to Kenna.

Erion's blood chilled even more. Just how close had Hadyn gotten to Kenna that the dragons could appear in her dreams, for that was how she would have perceived them when they came for Hadyn in the night? *In the night*.

Hadyn had been in Kenna's bed.

Steely resolve threaded through Erion. He would find the Fire Element and tear him apart molecule by molecule.

Kenna unwrapped the fourth dragon and gently set it on the table before looking at him.

Fear, rage, and, worse, jealousy, clouded Erion's mind. But he forced a level voice. "They're quite unusual. Where did you get the idea?"

Her expression faltered. Erion recognized the hurt in her eyes and cursed. It wasn't her fault Hadyn brought the Drakaura to her doorstep. He turned his attention to the pieces and forced himself to pick up one of them.

"I've never seen anything like them." He ran a finger along a red-feathered wing that was tucked tight against the dragon's sleek body. Erion looked at her. "Dragons aren't usually depicted with feathers." He grinned. "I'm in awe of your imagination."

Relief flooded her face. "I...I've never told anyone. Well, my family, but my parents—my mother—thought I was crazy." Kenna blushed. "Of course, it was just my imagination, but as a kid, I didn't know that."

"A kid?" he burst out.

She blinked, and he feigned a sheepish look. “You’ve been a genius since childhood?”

She blinked again, but this time, the blush deepened. “A childhood dream, nothing more. I can’t really take credit.”

He wanted to hug her and swing her around. Hadyn was just some guy who was trying to get into her pants—at least, as far as she was concerned. That still left the question of why the Drakaura had come to her. He’d never heard of that before, but he’d find out. And when he did, he’d kick their asses back to Ghen where they’d banished his ancestors.

Chapter Five

Kenna hoped the key wouldn't slip from her damp palm as she slipped it into the garage door lock. Eric had followed her home from the gallery. She wouldn't have thought she was the love/lust-at-first-sight type. Yet, here he stood, dark and beautiful, his breath hot on her neck and smelling like a wet dream. Wait. That would be her. She was the one dripping cream from her pussy and imagining his cock in full glorious detail. She'd never considered her art sexual, but the direction her thoughts were taking now, the only pieces she'd be able to blow were erotic.

Her reaction had to explain why she'd invited him back to her workshop. At the art store, he'd ask if she did private showings. She hadn't declined outright, but taking him to the gallery clearly said *no private showings*. Yet when she sat with him and Michael after the preview, she'd offered to show him how she *created her magic*, as he'd put it. Damn. Flattery was one powerful aphrodisiac, after all.

The lock clicked, and she pushed open the door, practically falling across the threshold. She caught herself as Eric said in a near whisper, "Magnificent." He stood in the doorway staring at the three furnaces.

Pride swelled within her.

His gaze shifted to her. "You tamed those beasts?"

A thrill sent her heart racing. He understood. She nodded, afraid even a word would break the spell.

He returned his attention to the furnaces and said in a serious voice, "Where do you keep the whip?"

Kenna laughed—hard.

When her laughter died, he lifted the bag of supplies. "Where do you want this?"

She pointed to the left. "My bench."

He headed for the table, and she followed. Satisfaction rippled through her as he paused in setting the bag on the bench and stared at the shelf that displayed *Twilight Gold*.

Eric finally placed her supplies on the bench and crossed to the shelf. Kenna held her breath as he traced a finger along a wing, down the dragon's back to the stem, before finally resting on the base.

He twisted and looked at her over his shoulder, his gaze so intense, she sucked in the breath she'd been holding. "The colors in this piece are more intense than those in the pieces you showed me at the gallery. I thought those were the special projects you mentioned."

Kenna shook her head. "None of them are the special piece. They're going to accentuate the real Drakaura."

"Drakaura?" he repeated in a quiet voice.

Her breath caught. The look in his eyes reminded her of...*Hadyn*. What was it with men and dragons? Did the mythical creatures somehow threaten them? Or was it just her dragons?

Eric's gaze shifted back to the piece. "You really have captured their essence."

Her heart skipped a beat. He spoke as if he knew...as if he understood. An odd sense of gratitude spread through her. This man was nothing like Hadyn. She touched her cheek. Was she blushing? Kenna dropped her gaze to the bag of supplies, then reached inside and fished for the valve.

"There won't be any dragons unleashed today if I don't get the fire to burn in the belly of that iron beast." Her fingers closed around metal. Kenna pulled the valve from the bag and crossed to the glory hole furnace, then knelt at the rear and began fitting the part into the pipe.

“Can I help?”

She glanced up sharply, heart thumping, to find him standing over her. How had he sneaked up on her again? She hadn’t heard or felt his approach.

“How much do you know about furnaces?”

“I know how to get things hot.”

Kenna fumbled the valve, barely catching it before it clattered to the floor. She steadied her hand and refitted the valve to the pipe. “Then you know about the crucible, the glory hole—”

“The glory hole?”

“And”—Kenna paused in turning the valve and looked up, eyes narrowed—“the leher?”

“You’re right. I don’t know anything about furnaces or blowing glass.”

“I guess you were lucky that I happened into the store.”

A corner of his mouth twitched into a smile. “You could say that.”

Not yet, but he was about to get lucky. Kenna returned her attention to the valve. Demonstrating the art of blowing glass was the last thing on her mind. Carnal thoughts of him fucking her sent a ripple of desire through her. Intense heat burned her stomach. She gave the valve a final turn, then stood and wiped her hands on the seat of her pants. She tugged on the collar of her T-shirt.

The extreme heat of the torches and furnace could raise the temperature in the garage into the triple digits. Heat didn’t bother her. But Eric warmed her in an unfamiliar way. Rather than the radiant heat from the furnace, his presence started a fire deep inside her.

“So, I guess you haven’t had much experience blowing glass,” she said. “What do you do?”

“Investments, overseas mostly, and a bit of importing and exporting.”

She sighed. “Someday, I’d love to see my work in European galleries.” She turned on the controls, and the furnace roared to life.

"I can help you with that."

"Nope, all fixed."

"I meant getting your work overseas."

"Really?"

Kenna straightened and turned toward him so quickly, she stumbled on the discarded valve lying on the floor. She clutched at thin air, her fingers closing over his hand. Cool flesh beneath her fingers startled her, and she jerked back.

He hissed through clenched teeth. "Your hands are hot."

She yanked her gaze to his face. "And yours are so cool."

Kenna took a tentative step closer.

Eric backed away. "No," he whispered. "It's too soon."

She paused at his vocalizing her thoughts. A spark jumped between them. Kenna whirled, looking for the source of electricity. Had one of the furnaces—the room swam. She swayed. Strong fingers closed around her arms. Cool air penetrated the places beneath his fingers; then heat seared beneath her flesh as if she burned from the inside out.

"Goddammit," Eric cursed.

She looked up into his face. Light twisted in the dilated pupils of his eyes. "Wha—" She jammed her eyes shut and shook her head in an effort to clear her vision. "I think you're making me swoon."

He gave a hoarse laugh and trailed cool fingertips over her forehead as if to soothe. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Eric?" Fear boiled in her belly. "What did you do to me?"

"I've made you want me."

She tried laughing, but the sound came out a croak through her dry throat. Fever spiked. *Breathe*. She couldn't breathe. "I feel like I'm on fire."

He grasped the edges of her T-shirt. "Lift your arms."

She obeyed, and he dragged the shirt over her head. Cool air washed over her. Kenna drew in a long draught of fresh air and lifted her gaze to meet his. Gone was the play of light in his irises. The pupils were now mere vertical slits. Cat eyes. A sleek jaguar.

Kenna reached up and cupped the back of his neck. He flinched. She hesitated, then realized his startlement was because her warm hands met his cool flesh, and pulled him closer. An inch from her mouth, he halted the lowering of his head. She lifted on tiptoes and slid a needy kiss against his lips. Warmth and cool mixed. Her head swam.

“Fever,” she whispered.

He groaned and traced the seam of her mouth with his tongue. She imagined the slow slide of his cock matching the languorous strokes of his tongue against hers. The heat between her legs intensified. With trembling hands, she placed her palms on him and slowly tracked the contours of his sculpted chest. Controlled power simmered beneath his strained muscles. Kenna twined her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss.

The temperature rose. Eric yanked her hard against his body and savagely claimed her lips. She gasped. Earthy, clean tastes of rain, spices, and mountain air sizzled on her tongue. His tongue curled around hers and sucked it into his mouth. He swept the soft tissues of her mouth and spiraled her senses out of control. His urgent kisses were fierce and needy. She ached for even more. Ached with a desperation she didn’t understand, only intrinsically understood that he could ease the fire scorching her internally.

One hand on her back, he stroked as he crushed her tighter to his chest, flattening her breasts against him. His fingers trailed cool swirls along her back. God, she wanted him. A bra strap slipped down her arm. Kenna rubbed against him, and the smooth cotton of his shirt rubbed against the exposed edge of the nipple. She slipped the straps down both arms, then unhooked the front and let the bra drop. Eric sucked in a breath.

Desire shot through her at the blatantly male response, and her nipples tightened. She needed him, *now*. Kenna grasped his hand and covered a breast with it. Cool fingers closed around her flesh. She cried out and pressed his palm closer.

“Eric,” she pleaded.

“Kenna,” he said in a hoarse voice and kneaded the breast.

“Cold,” she murmured. “So cold. Feels so good.”

Was she sick? If she was, Eric was the cure. She shivered and burned. No, this wasn’t like anything she’d ever experienced. This was almost supernatural.

Eric slathered kisses down her neck. She shuddered at the icy sensation of his mouth. Like hot ice. Kenna threaded her fingers through his hair. Everywhere, she felt him everywhere. She pressed against him, seeking the cool release from the blazing inferno roaring through her body.

“I want to touch you.” She slipped her hands under his shirt and brushed fingertips against pebbled nipples.

Kenna shoved the shirt up and came face-to-face with the broad expanse of tanned chest. She kissed a breastbone, a pec, then a nipple.

With a growl, he yanked his shirt over his head. In a jerky motion, he tugged open the buttons on her jeans then shoved them down past her hips. Kenna kicked off her sandals, then threw her arms around his neck as he lifted her onto the table in one fluid motion. Heat from her pussy burned her inner thighs.

Eric pulled the jeans the rest of the way off her body and whispered, “Spread your legs.”

Kenna froze. Those words. Her dream. Her throat constricted. He pressed his lips to hers, and she breathed easier. He straightened.

She stared up at him. “Who are you?”

Gently, he kissed her, sipping at her lips as he eased between her thighs, then whispered, “I didn’t want to be, but I’m exactly who you need.”

She glanced down at his jeans, tight around his cock, then looked back at his face. "And that is..."

"Erion."

"Erion? But you said—"

"I know," he soothed. "But, here, now, I'm Erion for you."

The name washed over with the hint of a cool rain on the horizon. "I'm hot." She reached between her legs and slipped her finger between her inflamed folds. "I need you here. Touch me, Er-Erion."

He pulled back, his gaze piercing clear to her soul. A chill raced up her spine. Not from fear. She wanted him with a ferocity she'd never before experienced. Kenna grabbed the front of his jeans and tugged open the snap. The rasp of the zipper lowering caused her pulse to jump. A thin dark dusting of hair trailed from his navel into his briefs. She slipped a shaky hand inside, fingertips grazing the silken softness.

"Ah fuck." His head fell back, and his eyes closed.

She fondled the length of his thick, hard shaft.

"Your hands are hot." He pushed his jeans past his hips, and his cock thrust forward from a thatch of black springy hair. The heated scent of musk and male strengthened.

His cock was huge, long and smooth. Dark veins threaded the length and pulsed beneath her fingers. She stroked him from base to tip, but rather than turning hotter with her touch, he cooled in her firm grip. Clear liquid seeped from the slit in the engorged darkened mushroom.

Liquid fire flowed from her pussy. She needed his cold steel inside her fiery depths. "Erion, I need you. *Now*."

He shucked his jeans. But instead of plunging his cock where she desperately needed and dousing the inferno raging in her core, he dropped to his knees on the concrete floor. Wrapping his hands around her ankles, he lifted her legs over his

shoulders. Closer, his mouth inched; his gaze locked with hers. Feral hunger glinted in his eyes as his breath fluttered her curls.

She inhaled sharply. Last night she'd dreamed of him. "I know you."

"Yes. As I know you." He waited, and she did as she'd done in her dream and spread her pussy lips for him.

Wet licks of his tongue coaxed her clit from behind its hood. She moaned. He growled and opened his mouth wider. His tongue swirled around the clit, then flicked lower to lap the hot cream from her tunnel.

One arm on the table, she braced her body and pinched a nipple with the other. A string tightened from nipple to clit. Euphoria clouded her mind. Erion continued to lick her folds, stab his tongue into her hot center, and suck her aching clit. Pleasure rippled through her. Her body vibrated, and sweat sizzled on her skin. Rocking her hips, she thrust her mound against his mouth.

"I'm coming," she gasped as orgasmic release jolted through her. "Oh God, *yes*." Her trembling thighs locked to the sides of his head. "Right *there*."

Erion slid his hands under her ass, buried his mouth in her curls, and sucked as she rode her orgasm.

Whoever he was, she needed him—right where he was—between her legs. Kenna's mind shattered into a million white-hot sparks.

Chapter Six

Erion paused in trailing a finger from nipple to pussy. Color glowed brighter where he touched. Fire danced through her hair, and an amber glow radiated just beneath the surface of her skin. She was magnificent, and she was his...for this moment. He leaned forward and brushed her lips with his. She opened her mouth. Fire sparked behind her eyelids. Tongues tangled, and he closed his eyes in wonderment of the heat radiating from her.

Awe turned to savage hunger. Erion devoured her skin with his mouth—her lips, chin, neck, breasts. He rolled his tongue against one nipple, then the other, and finally sucked the first into his greedy mouth. Tiny sparks stung, then snapped. Kenna arched her pelvis.

She needed him.

“Airiana.”

The whispered name startled him. He faltered.

“Erion?” Kenna questioned.

He sucked in a breath. She lay before him on the cusp. He had sworn to keep Hadyn from interfering with her emerging element. Yet Erion himself now posed the greater danger. And all because she was his mate. Anguish tightened his chest. What sort of sick cosmic joke was this? Most Elements went lifetimes, even eons, before encountering their mates. Yet he’d found his barely into his life as an Element, and she not yet born into fire. And there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it.

“Please,” she pleaded.

His cock throbbed. Precum dripped from the slit in the crown. He needed to pound into her channel with all the power of his body *and* his element. Already, her fire drew on his air with an intensity that said she was near emergence. If she transformed while their bodies were joined, would he be able to keep his element from emerging?

“I need you.” She reached down, fingered her slit, and parted her folds.

Moisture clung to her curls and glistened on her flushed pussy. Heat radiated out and upward. His cock jerked. He had to be inside her. She was safe as long as he stayed in human form.

Kenna grabbed his arm, pulled him close, then wrapped her legs around his waist and rubbed her juices on his belly. “Don’t stop.”

Heat like thick, molten lava scorched a trail across his cool skin. Erion grasped her legs and opened them wider. He wrapped his fingers around the base of his rigid shaft, fit the head to her opening, and plunged into her. A torrent of need built like a churning whirlpool leading to his center. Faster. Harder. Her hot sheath sucked him deep, gripped him, and scorched his length. Friction increased.

Flames leaped to life in the glory hole furnace. Wind rattled the rafters. Erion stamped down his element. A mental cry of agony rang through his head even as weightlessness fell in on him. Pleasure radiated out from his core. His orgasm began to build—an all-encompassing sensation. Slapping sounds of their wet joined bodies penetrated the rapture. Erion snapped from the trance. *No!* He could not shift. Kenna lifted to meet his frenzied thrusts. Faster.

Her channel tightened around him. Another moment and she would orgasm—this time, with him inside her. Her skin glowed. He startled at the sight of an ethereal aura surrounding her. Nearly white, the energy radiated from her in dancing waves. Of its own accord, his wind funneled from his core into the primal fire smoldering within her.

His heart soared. Like the gravitational pull of the sun, her fire drew his energy. Heat intensified, glowing brighter. Spasms clenched her internal walls tight

to his shaft. Hot cream flooded from her pussy onto his balls. Scorching heat radiated from her and surrounded him.

He gritted his teeth against the compulsion to merge. Kenna opened her eyes. Fire glinted in her desire-clouded gaze. If he stared into that fire... *No!* Erion pulled from her body. The white light snapped back around her like a rubber band. She cried out. He forced back the shock of separation. Her fire had died without his air. He breathed in ragged gasps. Her element was safe...and he had remained a man.

He lifted her from the table and set her feet on the floor. "Bend over and hold on."

She stared, eyes unfocused, and he roughly turned her. "Grab the table," he ordered.

She grasped the edges. Erion gripped her hips, slipped his cock inside her channel, and pistoned into her drenched passage. She rose onto tiptoes, giving him deeper penetration. He groaned. Arm muscles bunched as his grasp on her hips tightened.

He ran his thumb over the dimples just above her buttocks. She threw her head back, hair cascading over her shoulders. He thrust into her with greater force. Kenna convulsed around him. Her entire body clenched and trembled with release.

The exquisite friction drew his balls up tight. Blood rushed from his head. "Ah, fuck." A final thrust, hard and deep, lifted her off the ground. His cock pulsed as hot ribbons of cum shot from his shaft. He remained buried full hilt until the last of the spasms ebbed. He wrapped his arms around Kenna and clutched her close to keep her from collapsing.

Erion closed his eyes, trembling, and breathed deeply of her scent. What had he done?

* * *

Erion leaned against the wall. He'd put on his jeans but left the button undone. He shouldn't touch her again, but he'd proven he could and not shift into

element form—and he intended to have as much of her as possible until she was out of reach. He wasn't sure what he'd do once her fire emerged, but getting as far away from her as possible was number one on the agenda. The moon might not be far enough, but he'd bury himself in some hole in China if he had to.

Once her element emerged, it would call to him with an intensity that would make what they'd already experienced look like child's play. And it would be like that every time their *sparks* were compelled to merge. If not the first time, eventually, he would consume her. She would *never* be safe with him.

"We're going to begin with an easy piece," Kenna's soft voice broke into the cloud of desperation forming around him. She dipped the tip of a preheated blowpipe into the crucible and gathered molten glass on the end. "You want to pick up the glass like you might gather honey on a spoon."

He heard the words, but his attention was on the movement in her arms, the flow of energy between her and the heat. He'd never seen anything like it. She had no concept of how she controlled the fire in the glass. He bit back the laugh that had been tickling the back of his throat since she'd stretched the red-striped tube socks with toes cut out over her arms.

"I didn't see socks in the art-store supplies."

Kenna chuckled. "This glass is about two thousand degrees." She cast him a glance over her shoulder. "Which explains the orange glow."

"Smart-ass."

"You'd be the expert on asses," she said, "since you've been staring at mine the last hour."

"It's a beautiful shape."

"My ass or the glass?"

A corner of her mouth twitched, but she kept her eyes on the glass as she rolled the ball of molten mass onto a flat thick sheet of steel to cool as she shaped it.

When she picked up the blowpipe and pressed her lips to the tube to blow, Erion took a step toward her.

She put up a hand in warning. “When you’re near, I get feverish. I need to work the piece before it cools.”

“So once you commit to a blowjob, you see it to the end?”

She rolled her eyes but snorted a laugh and continued to blow and work the piece against the fruitwood blocks.

Minutes turned into an hour, and Erion found himself lost in a world of shapes and color he hadn’t known existed. Her world, he realized. Though she wasn’t yet aware of it, Kenna had already begun to merge with her art. She lost herself in the art and seemed unaware of his presence until she picked up a new tool, named it, explained its use, then demonstrated with a patience that touched him.

First, she formed a bottom, then began blowing sides. Erion soon recognized the beginnings of a scalloped bowl. Once the cantaloupe-size bowl was formed, she curled one end up on itself, then began blowing something into the bowl’s center. One, two, and finally three thinner scalloped bowls shared the space in a variety of fluttering shapes and iridescent blues, pinks, and purples. The sea, Erion thought, and pictured filmy sea creatures floating through their watery element. She transferred the piece to an iron rod she’d called a punty and spent another half an hour finalizing sides and edges.

When she finally sat back, scrutinized the piece, then proudly pronounced it finished for now, Erion forced himself to breathe, then extended a hand. “Come here.”

Kenna smiled, and mischief sparkled in her hazel eyes as she rolled the socks down her arms. She dropped them on the floor and hurried toward him. His cock thickened, pushing against his jeans. His balls tingled and tightened. Kenna stepped into his arms. Heat pulsed in his core.

A tremor rocked his belly. Fire, *her element*, the cause of both color and form, was calling not just his element, but his body, emitting powerful waves of energy.

Always, Element sought Element. The body was the pleasure point. But now...Erion breathed deep and kissed her, releasing a breath into her mouth and, despite knowing he only shortened their time, fed the fire emerging in her.

The tingle increased, vibrating out his cock. As her element drew closer to the surface, she would need more from him. Like any hungry beast, she would take as much as he allowed. She deepened the kiss, her mouth moist and warm. He envisioned endless days with her at the furnace, him feeding her fire while she created art, her feeding his need for her. Tasting her, licking her, fucking her. He was her mate. It should be him who completed her just as she would him. Instead, he was the man who would spread dirt over her empty grave if he stayed with her.

Kenna hugged him tighter, and his heart wrenched. Those days would remain a dream. He would stay until that last moment before she transformed. *The Girls*. Right now, he planned on making her come, again and again, until she screamed. Then burst into flames, his mind quietly added, but—Erion's mind jerked to attention in unison with the slam of a car door.

Hadyn Stiles.

Kenna broke from the kiss. She hurried to the window on the street side of the workshop and shoved back the curtain. Hairs prickled on the back of Erion's neck. Hadyn strode up the driveway.

Erion was instantly behind Kenna. He slipped an arm around her waist and pressed his chest to her back. He forced back the impulse to shift into element and wrap her in a protective vacuum. She wasn't ready to shift—he sure as hell wasn't ready to confess the truth about himself. Fear of telling her and fear of Hadyn exposing him shot to the surface in a chaotic jumble. *How will I explain the truth?* Would she feel betrayed?

She turned in his arms. "It's only Hadyn. He's harmless. I met him at the gallery. I'll give him credit for tenacity. The guy won't take a hint."

Erion looked past her out the window. She was mistaken. The tall, blond-haired man walking up the driveway was anything but harmless. What was he up

to? Hadyn knew Erion was here just as Erion had sensed his presence, yet he was paying a visit as any normal human would.

Erion dropped his gaze back to Kenna's face and trailed a finger along her cheek. "We men know a good thing when we see it."

She shrugged. "There's a big difference—and I don't mean that." She glanced at his crotch and grinned. "I hope you don't think I sleep with all the men I meet, because I don't." She winked. "Just the smart-asses."

Gratitude washed over him. If he hadn't found Kenna before Hadyn exposed his element to her, she would have bonded to him, perhaps even desired him. But she desired Erion—without the bond. She might not understand why she wanted him, but she did, and no one could take that from him.

Kenna planted a kiss on his jaw. "I'll get rid of him."

Erion released her and lifted his gaze to stare out the window and straight into Hadyn's eyes. Fiery embers crackled in those blue depths. Wind whipped inside Erion in reaction to the Fire Element's proximity. Erion veiled his thoughts, especially his feelings for Kenna. The Fire Element couldn't be allowed to glean any information about the driving force behind their connection. A terrifying thought struck. Was it too late? Had Hadyn already deduced the truth? Was that why Hadyn had attacked him? No. That didn't make sense. If Hadyn knew, he would simply wait for that moment of weakness when Erion and Kenna's spark's merged, then kill him and take Kenna.

Hadyn strode four more paces and reached the door as Kenna opened it. "Hadyn, I'm sorry, but I wish you had called. I'm working and don't have time for company."

Hadyn smiled, but a pulse in the side of his jaw belied the action. Frustration showed on Kenna's face. If she had any idea how her open choice of him over Hadyn fueled his anger, she would get as far away from him as possible.

"I had hoped I was more than just company," Hadyn said.

Satisfaction shot through Erion when none of Kenna's heat ignited for Hadyn.

He stepped forward, and she automatically moved aside. He halted in the threshold, his eyes locked with Erion's. "I thought you didn't have time for company."

"Erion and I are working."

"Erion," Hadyn repeated, then murmured, "Air."

"What?" Kenna glanced at Erion.

Erion gave her a soft smile. "Erion is Albanian for wind."

Her brow furrowed, and his heart leaped at the thought she might recognize the significance of the name.

She smiled. "I like it. Now," she started for the furnace, "if you'll excuse us, Hadyn."

Hadyn's gaze dropped to her ass, and Erion realized he smelled their sex. Hadyn's gaze jerked to the open button of Erion's jeans, then up to his eyes.

"Careful," Erion cautioned. *"She is not yet aware of her element. Force her before her time, and I will kill you."*

Hadyn sneered. *"As you did when you ran from me in the parking lot?"*

Erion gave a mocking laugh, then inhaled a small breath and sent a quiet swirl of air across the room. The edges of Hadyn's shirt ruffled.

The space around Erion heated with the narrowing of Hadyn's eyes. The look dissolved into a condescending twist of his mouth. "No", Hadyn telepathically replied, *"her fire is still buried within"*. "You have no claim."

"What was that, Hadyn?" she asked.

"I said, you fixed the flame. I see your furnace is working."

"Yes," she replied absently and bent over the scalloped bowl.

Hadyn's glare cut back to Erion. *"She is mine"*. He took a threatening step forward.

"I have to work." They both turned to see Kenna sitting at her bench, brows raised. "Put away the testosterone. Hadyn, I'll see you later."

“I can show you out,” Erion said.

“I know the way.” *“And I will be back.”*

The door blew open.

Hadyn stopped.

“Damn door!” Kenna cried.

Erion glared. *I’ll be waiting.*

Hadyn whirled and strode through the door without a backward glance. Erion took three steps, softly clicked the door shut, and faced Kenna.

She stood, arms crossed over her chest. “Want to tell me what that was all about?”

“He’s a prick, and I didn’t like him checking out your ass. He wants in your pants.” It wasn’t a lie. The Fire Element did want her, body, mind, and soul. Suddenly Erion realized what he had to do...and his heart broke.

Chapter Seven

Half an hour later, Erion sat on a high stool with Kenna standing between his legs. They faced the furnace, her back to his chest. His hands covered hers as, together, they dipped the heated blowpipe into the crucible and gathered a melon-size glob of molten glass. At twenty-four hundred degrees, the glass looked almost white. His insides felt as liquid and hot as the dripping glass.

Subtle shifts in her movement pressed her rounded ass against his groin. He tried to focus on the glass, but her scent filled his nose. Her body warmed where it pressed against his. Sweat rolled down his back and beaded across his brow, but she seemed oblivious to the increase in temperature. She hadn't covered her arms with the socks.

As he knew it would, her element was gathering strength. Triggering the transformation would be easy. Once the *Giris* was complete, Erion would deal with Hadyn; then he could leave, knowing Kenna was safe from Hadyn...and him. But not just yet. A few more minutes, one last taste before he said good-bye forever.

Bubbles rose out of the mass. Kenna bent and lowered the temperature on the furnace to two thousand degrees, then straightened and again snuggled her ass firmly against his hardening cock. He groaned, grasped her hips, and ground his erection into the sweet cleft.

"To be a good student, you must pay attention."

"I can't help it if I'm hot for teacher." He covered her hands with his again.

Kenna continued to turn and roll the molten core. "Now we begin forming the shape of the glass."

She hadn't told him what they were making, but promised it would be worth the effort. As long as he kept his hands on hers, he didn't care. Heat coiled up from the furnace and slid between their arms, blanketing her skin. A coral glow radiated out from her flesh and blended with the amber glow from the glass.

Erion held his breath. Air swooshed from his arms, fanning the heat waiting for a single command from her to ignite. Her concentration was on the glass. With gentle pressure, she pushed his leg, turning them both toward the marver, where she rolled the glass onto the steel surface.

"This will cool the skin—"

"I can cool your skin." He blew an icy breath against her neck.

Kenna shivered but said in a stern voice, "We're focusing on the glass. We need to form a skin, so we can blow bubbles." She cast him a wicked glance over her shoulder, then faced forward again.

The momentary distraction caused the molten form to slip from the blowpipe. She reached out and grasped the edge of the heated glass.

"Kenna—" He grabbed for her arm, then halted.

Her element already guided her hands. She was acting on instinct with her fire. His heart pounded. The time was here, whether he was ready or not. His few minutes were up. She folded the glass over, evening out the edge, then grabbed the fruitwood, ladlelike tool she'd called a block, and began shaping the glass.

He watched fascinated until she had formed an eight-inch oblong piece of glass. White-hot color eventually gave way to clear glass with thick dark blues and greens rippling through the center.

Erion half expected Kenna to pick up the object and slide her hand up and down its smooth surface. He imagined her fiery fingers mimicking the motion along his length, and shuddered. Pressure increased as his engorged cock further swelled behind the zipper of his jeans. In his mind, he heard her whisper *yes*, and he stilled. She wiggled her ass against his rigid arousal, and he realized she'd been reading his

mind. He had to satiate his hunger for her—now, before it was too late. He stood, reached around her waist, and undid the button on her jeans.

“Erion.”

He unzipped her jeans, tugged them down her hips, then shoved aside her red thong and parted the folds of her pussy.

“I’ll never finish,” she protested as she braced against the bench and leaned forward so that he had access to her from behind.

He nuzzled her ear as he slid a finger inside her drenched pussy. “We’ll finish.” He pushed her panties past her hips. “But I have to touch you. Now.”

Hot juices coated his finger. He commanded a tiny breeze from his finger into her core. She gasped softly and moved against him. The block slipped from her grasp and clattered to the concrete floor.

“Hot,” she whispered.

“Sweet torture,” he replied and thrust his finger deeper into her honeyed channel. “Is that what you want?”

“More,” she pleaded.

He slid another finger into the tight passage. She pressed against his hand. He kissed her neck, infusing her skin with chilled air. Kenna gasped.

She abruptly reached out and grabbed the blown glass—a dildo, Erion realized with a jolt. He stared. Heat radiated off her in waves from contact with the glass. The piece glowed in her hand, a natural conduit to channel her element. She settled back against him, holding the dildo as if fondling newly formed molten glass was the most natural thing in the world. *It was.*

For her.

“Fuck me,” she whispered and grasped his hand.

He entwined his fingers with hers around the phallus. The glass should have burned his hand. Instead, it cooled with his touch. His heart pounded. How was he able to touch fire? They hadn’t bonded. Her element hadn’t emerged, yet she

controlled the heat so that he could touch the glass. Was he wrong? Had her element emerged? No! He had to touch her one more time.

Erion slid the dildo through her drenched curls, parted her folds, and rubbed the end against her clit. Cream sizzled on the glass, and the sweet scent of her warm juices rose in the air. She hissed and rocked against the glass, attempting to impale herself on it. Fire arced from the furnace.

Erion gave a low laugh. "Easy, baby. Not so fast."

She reached between her legs. "I have to come."

He resisted the force of her fire as it drew wind from his being. Holding the dildo between her pussy lips, he denied her the orgasm she desperately sought. With his free hand, he tugged her shirt over her head.

Cream coated the glass as he rubbed it back and forth against her folds. "Do you want this?"

"Yes," she whimpered.

Erion set the dildo beside Kenna, then picked her up and gently laid her on the marver. Eyes on her face, he yanked off her jeans and thong, then grasped the phallus and eased it deep into her channel. Kenna's eyes rolled back into her head, and she bowed off the table. Bending over her, he blew on her soaked pussy.

Red and blue colored cane on a shelf to their left began to melt in a slow drizzle. In the corner, water bubbled in the ten-gallon dispenser. Erion glanced back at her. Kenna heated everything near her, including his blood.

He rubbed the dildo against her, eased the thick glass between her legs until she writhed on the table and cried out in a language he understood all too well. Desperation clawed at his conscience. The instinct to mate was surfacing.

He funneled a tiny extension of his air to her. Wind gusted through the rafters. Fire popped in the kiln. Erion rammed the glass fast and deep. Amber light radiated from Kenna's flesh. Blinding flashes burned his eyes, but he couldn't tear his stare from the dildo. The glass glowed with the iridescence of the northern

lights. Her emerging fire...her life force. He had never witnessed the *Giris* so intimately, and he never would again. This woman was his.

They'd begun the mating process.

Careful, he reminded himself. Her need to mate would compel him to give his *spark*. Strong, determined, beautiful. *His*. The thought rocked him to his core. Could he claim the woman and deny his mate?

"Erion."

Hunger to feast and the inability to refuse her demands answered the question. Erion pulled the dildo from her pussy and fastened his mouth to her clit. Sliding his tongue between her folds, he drank from her scorching pussy. Her hips lifted off the table and thrust against his mouth. Erion eased away and plunged the dildo back into her channel, then brought his mouth to her again and flicked her clit with his tongue. Sweet, tangy flavors floated across his palate. He lapped at her cream, savored her essence.

Closing his eyes, he allowed his mind to dip into the tangled thoughts ricocheting in her mind. Time halted. She merged. Breath caught in his throat. A scream tore through her mind. "*Erion!*"

"Fiera," he answered before realizing he'd called her by the Element name he had no right to give.

He ripped the dildo from her channel. Glass sizzled against his palm. He tossed it aside. The clatter of the glass rang high in unison with the fly of his jeans as he yanked down the zipper and shoved them down his thighs.

"Ohhh." She lifted her hips and gave several hard, quick thrusts against the air swirling around her.

"Shhh, hold on, sweetheart."

"Hurry," she pleaded.

The kiln crackled. Erion startled. Tiny flames danced upward. An arc of fire leaped across the garage. He jerked his gaze to the swirling vortex overhead. A

man's form shimmered in the flames. *Hadyn*. The male Fire Element commanded the inferno. Erion's blood chilled. If Fiera emerged now, and he merged with her—their sparks merged—it was over for them both.

The eyes glowed. Erion met the challenge with one of his own. "*Mine.*"

"Yes," Kenna murmured, dragging his attention back to her.

Erion stared at the woman who was no longer wholly human. Flames, color, and energy weaved through her hair. Her skin radiated light, and God help him, he felt the connection of her element as much as his own. The compulsion to thrust his cock into her tightened his body as if he was about to implode. Realization hit with the force of a thunderclap. Their surroundings faded. Time slowed as if they spun on the rim of a distant black hole, with Fiera as the nexus that flickered like a beacon in the black depths. If he dragged the Fire Element with him into her vortex, they would be torn apart and cease to exist. Kenna would be safe, and he would have the fate he deserved...welcomed.

Peace settled. He stood within the eye of the storm. He could bond with her, merge as Elements, and *give* her his air. That would ensure he didn't consume her as he had Airiana—as long as their sparks didn't merge.

The roar of flames intruded upon the silence of his thoughts. The room snapped back into focus. He inhaled sharply. Hadyn's heat intensified. Rage filled Erion. Flames encroached on the pocket of calm that cocooned them. A tear slipped down Erion's cheek. He'd sworn to protect Airiana, yet what remained of her would cease to exist because he must now protect Fiera.

Erion locked his gaze on to Kenna, *Fiera*, and the fire emerging in her eyes.

"*Forgive me, Airiana.*"

He plunged his cock into Fiera's channel. Long hard strokes, a cyclone of energy.

She wrapped her legs tight around his hips and locked him to her. Her internal walls tightened. Heat rolled off her skin. He pulled her upright, grasped

her ass, and lifted her into his arms. Kenna entwined her arms around his neck and hugged him close. He continued the thrusting rhythm.

Erion gritted his teeth against the intensity. The pleasure he experienced, making love to her as a man, paled in comparison to the rush of euphoric energy now coursing through him. One breath, one heartbeat, they merged on the physical level. One more step, and they would enter the realm of Shadow where only Element existed.

The flames that were Hadyn glowed blue at the edges. The beast roared around them. Erion crushed his lips to Kenna's. Her tongue slid into his mouth. Tasting, savoring, and joining. Her taut nipples pressed against his chest, searing his flesh.

Kenna pulled back. "Hot," she moaned. "Need air." "*Erion*". The call echoed in his mind. "*I need your air—I need you.*"

Satisfaction rocketed through Erion. She wanted *him*. Her desire was more than he deserved. He would give her all he had.

He released a small stream of wind from his core. The current swirled around them. Faster. She absorbed his element, burning brighter, shifting into fire in his arms. His cock pounded into the flames. Fire and air flowed between their joined bodies.

A pull in the innermost part of himself suddenly felt as if he were being torn apart from the inside out. *The spark*. Erion fell in on his element. His clothing dropped to the ground as his physical mass metamorphosed into air. The furnace crackled. Arcs of fire leaped in hard-pointed tendrils from Hadyn. Kenna liquefied, and Fiera emerged in long orange flames tipped with white. Hadyn exploded between them. Erion channeled air into her fire. Sounds of rushing wind filled the garage, then centered on Fiera.

Blue flames of Hadyn twisted in a vicious dance. Erion engulfed her in a whirlpool, drawing oxygen from the farthest corners of the garage. He would kill Hadyn while feeding Fiera.

Erion forced a tiny eddy deep inside himself. He drew the air from around them, gave to Fiera, but kept the small center, the spark, separate. Slowly, his insides began to tear apart, but he concentrated on Fiera, ignored the pain. Deeper, stronger, he drew energy from the room, from Hadyn.

A primal roar of rage cut through the tumult. The consuming hiss of fire grew more intense as Erion sucked the last molecule from his victim. The hiss rose to a high pitch, then stopped. Hadyn was gone.

Two Elements twisted in frenzied ballet. Fire burned white-hot. Erion's wind churned Fiera into a torch of elemental power.

She abruptly winked out. *Gone.*

Erion gave a scream of terror. "*No!*"

Chapter Eight

A rushing filled Kenna's ears. Heat pooled into a tiny point at her center, and the weight of atoms forming into matter replaced the weightlessness of flames. She felt as if she was falling inward and, in a sudden bolt of energy, shifted from fire back to woman.

The feel of Erion's cock still lodged deep inside her body jarred her. She trembled but dared not unwrap her legs from around his waist. She'd erupted into flames. *Literally*. Panic rose on a wave of bubbling heat. Erupting into flames wasn't possible. People who spontaneously combusted became a pile of ash. They didn't experience earth-shattering orgasms. Yet, in testament to her desire, flames of yearning still licked at her core. An answering ache pulsed deep in her pussy. And she breathed, felt...lived. *Impossible*.

Erion clutched her so close, she could barely breathe, his head buried in her neck. His hands trembled. She knew how he felt! Her insides smoldered. Her *sanctuary* smoldered. Nearest them, large glass sculptures dripped in half-melted globs on the shelves and tables. Smaller pieces had puddled and still drained down shelves like slow-moving rivulets of lava into a multicolored mass where the concrete floor slanted slightly toward the house.

Why hadn't the fire department been alerted? Kenna swallowed, her throat a dry bed of sandpaper. What would have happened if the fire department had come? She would have been carted off for dissection by the world's scientists. And Erion?

She gasped softly. He had shifted into rushing wind that fed her. Shock replaced comprehension with dizzying speed. Hadyn. Gorgeous, rich Hadyn was

fire—a fire that would have consumed her. How did she know that? Because she and Erion had shared more than their bodies.

“You’re safe from Hadyn.”

“You’re in my head?” She rocked against Erion, scrambling to free herself from his embrace. Her stomach pitched. They’d merged minds...souls.

“You’re free from Hadyn. He sought to enslave you.”

And Erion freed her.

Freed her into what?

She pushed from his chest. Her mouth burned. “Down,” she croaked.

He gently lifted her off him. The chill of loss stunned her. Her toes touched cold concrete, and she shivered.

He hugged her to his chest. “Fiera.”

Fiera. The name startled yet invoked images of sharp orange flames leaping heavenward in an effort to stretch farther into the unknown. She wasn’t Kenna anymore. She was...more.

Her gaze riveted on the glass dildo lying forgotten—and half melted—on the floor. Blown glass took days to cool in the lehr, yet she had picked up the phallus moments after it came out of the furnace and impaled herself on it. She grappled with the reality—reality, what was reality? She had held a molten-hot piece of glass, Erion had shoved it inside her—and she’d liked it. That was some fucking reality.

Her body still hummed with having gone from the ball of fire back into herself. Her imagination had always been vivid. Her dreams, often in 3-D color that would shame the big screen, felt real, alive. Working with glass was her attempt to bring those dreams to life. Now, only moments after waking as a woman, the dreamlike quality of having shared consciousness with Erion warred with the reality that was the shambles of her workshop.

She and Erion—their elements—had *merged*.

Shock rippled through her anew. Air—his wind—now softly whistled through the chambers of her heart. Kenna tentatively tuned into the rhythm of the intimate song, then startled at sensing the hunger that lay beyond the quiet of his protective embrace. In her mind's eye, she stretched out a hand to touch his need. Pain lashed out. She stifled a cry and snatched her hand back. Guilt flooded her...his guilt. *Airiana*. Kenna startled. Another being like Erion...like her, lived inside him. Airiana, a female Air Element. She had been a part of their *merging*. Tears welled in Kenna's eyes, only they weren't hers. They were Airiana's.

"Water," she croaked.

Erion hesitated, then released her. He turned and headed toward the slop sink at the far corner of the garage. She inhaled sharply at sight of his muscled buttocks. Fever heated her blood. Every muscle burned in exhaustion, but she wanted more—more fire, more air...more of the merging.

At the slop sink, Erion picked up the ceramic coffee cup she'd left there that morning and filled it with water. When he faced her, his gaze dropped to her breasts. She started at the thrill jolting through her. Even after the fire, the destruction, the all-consuming lust, he still wanted her. Evidence of how much was revealed in the growing length and thickening girth of his cock.

Erion returned. Wordlessly, he slipped a hand around her nape and brought the cup to her lips. She closed her eyes and sipped. Guilt seeped from him. Why? She opened her eyes as he set the cup on the marver. He pulled her into his arms, then gently blew into her face. Heat radiated from her center. Desire warred with confusion. *Airiana*.

No, Kenna mentally shook herself. She must first understand the confusing yet comforting presence of this other *Element*. She looked up at Erion. "Who is she? I feel her." Kenna touched his chest.

He tensed beneath her fingers. "I'm sorry. I never meant for her to merge with you. I didn't know she could."

Confusion coiled in her stomach, along with what she knew to be true. Kenna shuddered. “Hadyn meant to kill you and enslave me.”

Erion gently squeezed her arm. She startled at the tremble in his fingers, then gasped at the realization conveyed in his touch.

“You intended to...to die for me.” The room reeled. What was this insanity?

Garbled whispers rose in Kenna’s head. She shook her head in an effort to clear the choking fog. *Airiana*—too many thoughts. Strength, determination. An eddy of wind with Airiana at the center. The female Air Element existed within Erion. And now, somehow, within Kenna as well.

“Why am I hearing her?” Kenna demanded in a voice she knew was near to hysteria. “How the fuck did this happen— how did *we* happen?”

Erion didn’t immediately answer but finally said, “Like you, her element called to mine.”

“Like me?” Kenna recalled how, ten seconds after meeting him in the art store, she had wanted to rip off his clothes. That had been a first. Even now, a thread of heat ran from her breasts to pussy. She wanted his cock inside her—wanted to merge. As if reading her mind, he trailed fingers up her arm and across her collarbone.

“Tell me about her,” Kenna demanded. “And...I want to know about the rest. Look at me. I’m scared. I’m hot. I feel this incredibly overwhelming connection to you, *and her*, and I know this isn’t normal. This is fucking crazy, and I feel like I’m going crazy. We need to talk.” She glanced around and swallowed. “But not here. Let’s go into the house.”

Erion took a step back as if she’d sprouted horns.

His thoughts slipped into hers. “*I should leave...before it’s too late. Maybe it already is too late.*”

Kenna seized his arm. “Too late for what?”

Airiana's full-throated laugh floated through Kenna's mind. She straightened, understanding dawning. "Airiana."

* * *

Airiana's whispers filled Erion's mind. For so long he'd shut out her wind song. A wave of crippling guilt turned his legs to rubber. He grabbed for the table.

"Erion!" Kenna seized his shoulders and shoved him back.

Hard wood jammed into his hip, and he grabbed the table edge.

"Erion."

He lifted his head and met her gaze. Tears shimmered in the hazel depths of her eyes.

"No," Kenna said, "don't shut her out. Listen to her song."

Erion shook his head in an effort to drive the crooning softness from his mind. He straightened. Beautiful glass pooled in melted ruin around them. What more proof did he need of the threat he posed? And—another crippling wave of guilt washed over him—he'd nearly consumed Kenna as he had Airiana. But he hadn't. Why? He shoved aside the questions with a mental snarl. What difference did it make? He wouldn't make the same mistake. Kenna had survived the metamorphosis. Guilt piled higher with the realization that he had burdened Fiera with the responsibility of Airiana. He hadn't known that could happen, but he should have.

Erion stumbled back two paces. Even now, his need for Fiera overwhelmed. "I have to go." He turned, muscles already giving way to the weightlessness of transformation.

"No!" She seized his arm. You can't just leave me here after...my God, my workshop—Airiana and I—" She choked. "I killed another human being."

Erion grabbed her shoulders. "No. Hadyn signed his death warrant when he interfered with the *Giris*. He meant to enslave you, Kenna. You know that. It was him or you. I wasn't about to let him have you."

Scalding fire singed him to the core.

Fire lit in her gaze. “You can’t just fuck me, turn me into...into...”

“I didn’t *turn* you into anything.”

She glared. “What happened here required us both.”

“The joining, yes, that took us both. The *Giris*—your transformation.” He shook his head. “You were on the cusp.”

Kenna gave a mocking laugh. “Semantics.”

Erion gave her a hard shake. “Do you want to die? Or would you prefer to kill me?”

Her eyes widened. Remorse dug deep, but he would not relent. She was once again a woman, and he would leave her as such to find her way safely. Erion thrust her away from him and collapsed in on himself, shifting into air as he jettisoned upward.

She whirled, her head upturned toward him. “Erion!”

She reached skyward, stretching as if she could hold wind. Her fingers glowed. Fire curled around her hand, twisting and churning into a blazing orb. Kenna screamed, dropped to her knees, and shook the flames from her fingers.

Erion swooped downward for one last feel of her skin, even if only to feel her in wind form, then realized the folly and veered toward the door. “*Don’t fight it, Fiera. It’s who you are.*”

“Don’t leave me.” The words came from Fiera, but it was Airiana’s voice he heard.

His heart wrenched. What was wrong with him?

Sparks lit the room. He glanced back. Kenna’s eyes blazed; determination radiated from her being. Tightness in his swirling core unexpectedly anchored him five feet from the door, and he swirled in place like a ribbon caught on a branch.

Impossible. What force could cage him? Memory rose of last night in her bedroom, and the feeling that he was nothing more than a moth drawn to her flame.

Airiana. Erion turned his senses inward. Air, Airiana's wind, pulled at him with the ferocity of a storm, straining to connect him to Fiera's fire—just as it had last night.

Shock rolled over him. Airiana above all understood why he couldn't stay. She had never before exerted her wind force. He hadn't known she could. Why now? Anger shot through him. She had manipulated his thoughts. He channeled his air downward through the concrete floor and into the ground. He would tunnel through the earth if necessary. She would not alter his destiny again. Windows shook with the gale force of his current, and the door burst open. Erion pushed forward with all his might and blew out of Fiera's life.

* * *

Kenna leaped for the door. She seized the handle, fingers tightening in readiness to slam it shut. Instead, she stepped forward and closed the door with a nearly silent click, then turned. She slumped against the wood and began to shake. Fear wasn't what immobilized her, nor doubt, but belief. She was no longer human, and Erion wasn't—had never been—human.

Hadyn—a prickle rose on her arms—Hadyn had watched her with Erion. The anger radiating from his blue flames had fed the inferno that destroyed her work. She stared at the wreckage. Disbelief morphed into anger. The warmth of Erion's touch, the electric hum of their mingling still remained, but the man...the Element, was gone.

Sight of her half-melted workshop had taken her breath earlier. Now, standing alone among the ruin that touched even the farthest edges of the room, reality gripped her like a lead weight dragging her to the bottom of the ocean. This was no dream. This was a nightmare, and Erion had left her to face it alone.

Anger flared. Erion had protected her. Why, then, had he left? Airiana, the female Air Element, had tried to prevent his leaving.

Despite the oddity, Kenna closed her eyes and whispered, "Airiana, bring him back." She waited, but only the furious beating of her heart broke the stillness. *Damn him.*

A sudden knock caused her to jump away from the door.

“Kenna!”

She whirled toward the door. *Mrs. Patrick*. The old busybody lived two doors down. She must have noticed something wrong and come to investigate.

“Kenna!” The knocking jarred the door.

Kenna threw her weight against the wood and grabbed the knob. She glanced at her jeans and shirt across the room on the floor. If she dashed for the clothes, Mrs. Patrick would charge inside. If she locked the door, the old woman was sure to hear it and be doubly suspicious. A locked door would pale in comparison to the spectacle of melted glass. Kenna reached up and slowly clicked the deadbolt shut.

“Kenna?”

Leave it to the old biddy to have great hearing.

Kenna hurried toward her clothes. “I’m in the middle of something, Mrs. Patrick.”

“But the door.” The handle jiggled.

“Yes, I’m working.” Kenna scooped up her shirt and slipped it over her head.

Mrs. Patrick didn’t reply. Kenna paused, heard nothing, then tugged on her jeans and grabbed her thong panties as she started for the door. She halted. *Twilight Glide*.

She spun around. An orange glob occupied the spot on the shelf where the fire-colored base, yellow half-moon with the crimson stem holding a dragon had sat. Tears stung her eyes. How could she possibly replace *Twilight Glide*? Her gaze caught on the rods carefully chosen for Drakaura, now melted on the shelf. The garage might as well have erupted in flames.

She inhaled a sharp breath at the mental picture of bursting into flames at the Michael Laird Gallery during her showing. Would she have to give up her art, her friends, her life? Another thought shook her. What if she only burst into flames

during sex? She paused. The thought should frighten her. Strangely, it didn't. What did frighten her was facing this uncertain future without Erion.

He had kept the garage from burning down. Did she need him to keep her from burning down buildings or, worse, people? Her knees weakened. She grasped the edge of the marver. Erion had protected her through this *Giris*, had preserved her ovens, perhaps even her life. Could she function without him? Could she—

“Get a grip,” she snapped. *Start with a shower. Get yourself together.* She began to shake again.

Anger resurfaced along with determination. She'd find Erion. He had a whole lot more to explain to her. Once she'd pried the words from his mouth, she'd kick his ass. Then she would kiss him, tell him she needed him, and make him realize he couldn't shut her out as he had Airiana.

Chapter Nine

Kenna peered out the peephole, found the walkway empty, then unlocked the door and hurried across to the house. Two minutes later, in the bathroom, she turned on the shower and stripped off jeans and T-shirt. She straightened, then cried out at the sight of her reflection in the mirror. An intense light burned in her hazel irises like a coal fire at the mouth of a bellows.

And her hair. She touched a tangled lock of the copper-streaked mass. Was this what Erion had seen when his cock was buried deep inside her? With trembling fingers, she began at her collarbone and traced a line downward along skin that glowed as if baked in the summer sun until she cupped her full breasts. Nipples beaded. Reds, copper, and oranges danced beneath the surface of her skin.

She sucked in a breath, suddenly aware of a warming deep inside just below her belly button. She released her breasts and flattened a palm over the spot. An answering pulse of muted yellow burst out around the hand like a tiny bomb blast. Kenna yanked back her hand and stared. Erion had drawn her into another world, a fantastical world...his world. Yet, a world she didn't understand.

Slowly, she again covered the warm place on her belly and closed her eyes. She startled at the unexpected vision of Erion, broad shoulders, bronzed torso, and long, dark hair. His smile, the slight dimple in his left cheek, the way his eyes moved over her while she worked.

Blood rushed through her veins and into her pounding heart. How could she need him again when only moments ago he'd filled, stretched, breathed into her? Her tummy swooped as she recalled the strain in his jaw when he'd plunged his cock deep inside, over and over, until he erupted in ecstasy. Kenna slipped a finger

into the thatch of copper curls between her legs, tracing the moist seam of her pussy lips.

“Erion,” she whispered, parting her folds and grazing her clit with a fingertip.

Heat traveled her spine with lightning speed. She snapped open her eyes and drew in a sharp breath at the sight of amber streaks that veined out beneath her cheeks. If she ignited here in the bathroom, she would burn down her grandmother’s house. Erion! Where was Erion? How did she stop this? Could she stop this? Fear clawed at her psyche. She didn’t want this, didn’t want heat coursing through her like she was some boiling volcano. Closing her eyes, she wished away the fire, the intense flames stoking in her core. Slowly, she opened her eyes and stared at the stranger in the mirror. *That’s not me.* Panic threatened to overwhelm her.

She shoved aside the shower curtain and nearly fell into the claw-footed tub in her frenzy to get under the spray of water. Cool water beaded, then sizzled across her skin like thousands of tiny dancing molecules. Head bowed, she stood unmoving under the water, unwilling and afraid to end the pleasurable sensation. Steam clouded the room.

At last, Kenna cautiously tipped her face upward toward the showerhead. Water washed over her as naturally as it had for the last twenty-seven years. Her skin cooled, and the trembling inside began to subside. She lathered and rinsed her hair, then grabbed the loofah and soaped it with body wash.

Erion had called her Fiera. Kenna lathered her shoulders, then worked her way down. She’d felt the rightness of the name, just as she’d felt the rightness of opening herself to him. She slowed in washing her belly. If her body never again reacted as fire, would the last few hours fade into the familiar but distant experience that all dreams became?

She slid the loofah across her flesh and around the curve of her hips. Would the memory of Erion fade? She hadn’t just reveled in the way he touched her body. There was an intrinsic connection. She’d known him in her dreams...and at first

glance. She couldn't explain it any more than she could explain the flames burning within her. It simply was.

Tipping her soapy head back into the water, she allowed the bubbles to rinse away. Tears unexpectedly sprang to her eyes. *Hadyn*. A choked sob broke the soft drizzle of water over her body. Erion was right. Hadyn would have killed him and enslaved her. But that didn't change the fact that she'd taken another person's life. She hadn't thought herself capable of that, no matter what—and she hadn't been. She hadn't been given a choice.

Was that how her brother Jared felt? Had he been forced to kill? She remembered his visit four years ago, and the haunted look in his eyes that told her he'd ended a man's life. His refusal to talk about it confirmed the truth. That look had never quite gone away. How would—she fumbled with the loofah, then froze, chest tight with awareness. Someone was in the house. Not the house, *the garage*. How could she know this? She didn't know how she knew, but there was no doubt. Cold threaded through her. She hadn't locked the workshop. If Mrs. Patrick had gone snooping—a flush of fear displaced the cold. The intruder wasn't Mrs. Patrick. *Hadyn*? Erion said he was dead.

Kenna twisted the water handles to the Off position. The pounding of her heart thundered in the silence. She quickly stepped from the tub and slipped on the jeans and T-shirt she'd worn earlier. Ignoring the water that dripped from her hair and drenched her back, she crept down the stairs, careful to avoid the steps that creaked. In the kitchen doorway, she halted and stared at the door leading outside. Blood rushed through her ears with the force of Niagara Falls. The get-a-hold-of-yourself shower hadn't done a damn bit of good. She tamped down the fear, forced her legs into action, and crossed to the door.

"Mrs. Patrick?" Kenna opened the door a crack.

The space between the walkway and garage was empty. Clouds had rolled in, and the early afternoon sky threatened rain. Wind whistled in the trees, rustling the leaves. The soft sound, usually soothing, sent chills over her wet skin. She

opened the door wide enough to squeeze through and hurried to the garage. With a shaky hand, she grasped the knob and inched open the door.

Kenna scanned the room. Everything looked as it had twenty minutes ago. Relief was displaced by the realization that the tightening in her chest remained. She strained her ears for sounds of breathing or movement, but heard only the pounding of her heart. Could she turn to fire at will? She eased inside, her gaze on the furnaces large enough to hide three men, and inched to the left in an effort to see around the mammoth pieces of metal.

Arms' length from the marver, she glimpsed blond hair an instant before the man shot from behind the crucible furnace, headed toward the door. Tight jeans and a leather jacket accentuated the menace of his lean, six-foot-two-inch frame.

Kenna screamed, and her fingers burned. Flames sprang up and raced along her arms toward her chest. Terror ripped through her. She was burning up. *Erion!* How did she stop the fire? What should she do? She jerked her gaze to the shelves for something to throw at the intruder. The heat abruptly focused into a tightening orb.

Heat singed her fingertips as a ball of fire combusted to life in her right hand. Adrenaline rocketed through her. She cried out, flinging the fire from her hand. The blazing orb arced across the space as the heat surged hotter. Oh God, she had weapons. *She* was the weapon! What else hadn't Erion told her?

"Stay back," she shouted as another ball of fire formed in her hand. Oh hell, she held fire, but what to do with it? "Stay back or...or else."

Another man leaped from behind the annealing furnace. "Kenna!"

She jerked in his direction. On instinct, she hurled the sphere of fire. Flames exploded on the concrete between them. Emerald green eyes glinted behind the wall of fire an instant before he twisted aside, shielding his eyes with a hand.

He backed away from the blaze. "We're here to help!"

Another ball of fire rose in her palm. *Help?* "Who are you?"

A mighty animal roar sounded near the door. Kenna spun toward the sound. She stumbled back a step. The magical beast of her dreams stood where the leather-wearing Adonis had been an instant ago. She stared at the apparition in all its brilliant colors. From its feathered head to a tail that thinned to twinelike thickness with half a dozen long feathers at the tip, the dragon towered over her.

Drakaura.

As if in answer to her thoughts, the creature spread its eight-foot feathered wings and roared again. Kenna fought dizzying blackness. His body went taut, wings rigid as stone as a filmy wall of white light shot from his chest and surrounded the wall of fire. The flames died with barely a whimper.

The blaze in her palm pulsed. His wings fluttered. Kenna tensed, but he dropped his wings and tucked them along his feathery, scaled sides.

“Ormond,” the man admonished.

The dragon blinked large green eyes, then shrank and shifted back into human form.

The room spun. Pressure pounded at her temples. Her knees buckled, and she dropped to the concrete floor, palms breaking the fall and scraping on rough concrete.

“Who—what—are you?”

Ormond stepped forward, and her core warmed in unison with another pulse from the fire in her palm as she shoved up onto shaky legs.

He halted and gave a slow nod. “Yes.”

The murmured word held an understanding that struck a chord deep inside her.

“Kenna,” the other man said.

She shot the dragon man a warning look, then shifted her attention back.

“The fire.” He nodded at her palm.

Kenna glanced at the flame. She took a deep cleansing breath and willed the fire away. The flickering heat seemed to melt back into her palm, and the glow dimmed to a barely banked amber glow, as if she'd turned off the gas valve on her furnace. A strange excitement quivered in her stomach. Was controlling the fire that easy?

"Forgive us," he said.

She jerked from staring at her palm and focused on the man again.

"When you left your workshop, we had no idea you would return so soon."

Anger hit like a bucket of ice water. "Who the hell are you, and what are you doing in my garage? This is my house!"

"Calm down," he said. "This is an investigation into the occurrences here today."

"Investigation?" *Occurrences?* Had they watched her and Erion fuck? She narrowed her eyes. "Who—" She cast a glance at Drakaura. Despite the anger, she couldn't keep emotion from choking her words. "*What* are you?"

"We need to know what happened here," he said.

She gave a harsh laugh. "*I* was here, and I don't know what happened."

"There are greater forces than us at work here," the dragon man said.

She snapped her gaze to him. "I've always called you Drakaura."

His expression remained impassive. "I am one of many."

"The Fire Element could return any minute," the man interjected. "You must tell us everything."

Kenna frowned. "Fire Element—you mean Hadyn. He's—" She halted, her insides twisting. Was her part in the murder of another human being something she wanted to admit to complete strangers—to dragons? "What are you doing in my home?" she demanded.

"Hunting the Fire Element."

"Hunting?"

“Yes.”

“Well, you’re too late. He’s gone.” She glanced at the dragon man, then looked back at the man and pinned him with a hard stare. “And what gives you the right to hunt people?”

“We are sentinels. Our purpose is to deal with criminals.”

“What is that, some sort of supernatural police?”

“We are descendants of the Watchtower Lords, the great watchers. Today, we are simple sentinels.”

“Sentinels? Shouldn’t you be here to protect me then?” She studied him. “Look around. I don’t know anything about this, and I’m tired of guessing. You must know a lot more than I do.” She raised her hand to indicate the shambles of her garage. “You tell me what’s happening.”

His gaze sharpened. “We know you merged with the Air Element.”

Kenna flushed. *They had been watching.* Anger sent a flush of scorching heat through her. “How dare you invade my privacy? Get out!”

“Enough,” the dragon man roared, and Kenna took a startled step backward. “The battle you fought with Hadyn is just the beginning,” he said. “Now that your element has emerged, he will become desperate. When he returns, he will claim you.”

“Claim me? No one claims me.” The unexpected realization that Erion could claim her and she wouldn’t fight him took her breath.

Ormond gave a condescending laugh. “She is completely ignorant, Wyvern. The Fire Element will claim her. We cannot wait.”

“Can’t wait for what?” Kenna blurted. “What the hell does that mean?”

“When in element form, you are energy,” Wyvern said. “Until you learn how to control that energy, you are vulnerable, and that energy—your power—can be enslaved.”

“Why didn’t you intervene? He was here for the taking.”

Wyvern shrugged. "We hoped you would kill Hadyn."

She opened her mouth to deny being a killer, but guilt stabbed soul deep. "You son of a bitch. What the hell is wrong with you?" What kind of lunatics inhabited this world she'd been thrown into? "What police force hopes innocent bystanders will kill their criminals for them?"

"He will kill you."

"Then protect me," she snapped.

Wyvern shook his head impatiently. "We aren't here to guard you. We protect the world *from* your kind."

"My kind? No one has to be protected from me."

"No?"

She ignored the heat that pulsed in her. "No."

"Only moments ago you were ready to kill me and Ormond."

"You broke into my home, and he"—Kenna jabbed a finger in the dragon man's direction—"scared the shit out of me! He's Drakaura. I've carried his image in my mind for as long as I can remember. How would you feel if Santa Claus actually came down your chimney?"

Wyvern gave a slow, implacable shake of his head that made her want to singe his eyebrows. "Ormond was only trying to escape. If you had hit him with your fire, you would have killed him."

"I could have killed you *both*," she retorted with false bravado, "but I threw the fire on the floor instead." Not that she'd aimed her attack. The fireball could have landed anywhere as she tried to fling it from her hand. "As for Hadyn, you'll have to figure out for yourself what happened. I won't help you."

"He will claim you...or kill you," Wyvern said.

"I'll take my chances."

"The Fire Element will destroy anything or anyone to attain that which he desires," Ormond said. "What of your art and your bond with the Air Element?"

"You know nothing of our bond," she snarled. "You're wasting your time. What kind of police—" Kenna halted. "What the hell are you?"

"We are Drakaura," Wyvern said.

She narrowed her eyes. "That's a name. *What* are you?"

A corner of his mouth lifted, and Kenna wasn't sure if it was pity or condescension. She didn't like these Drakaura.

"How would you explain to a planet of cats what humans are?" he asked. Before she could reply that she didn't give a damn, he went on. "Like you, we live as humans. But, instead of having the ability to shift into element form as you, we become dragons. In dragon form we exert power over Elements."

Dread began to seep through her. "What sort of power?"

"We have the ability to counter your element. You saw how Ormond extinguished your fire. It is our destiny to defeat Elements."

"Defeat Elements?"

Wyvern frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Not if you plan on killing me."

He looked stunned. "We have no authority to kill you. You have not transgressed. Hadyn is the transgressor. He must be destroyed."

"What has he done?"

"He decimated a village in Scotland."

"A whole village?" She looked from Wyvern to Ormond. "Impossible. A murder spree that large would be international news."

"Today, yes. But this village was destroyed one hundred and ninety years ago."

"Almost two hundred years? How old is he?" Her mind spun. How old was Erion?

"Our earliest report on Hadyn was two hundred and fifty years ago."

"Kenna?"

She whirled at the sound of Mrs. Patrick's voice.

The old woman stood in the doorway, staring. "What happened?" She stepped into the garage. "I knew it. I've always said those beasts were a hazard."

Kenna startled, then realized Mrs. Patrick referred to the furnaces.

"You could've burned down the neighborhood." The old busybody pinned Wyvern with a glare. Kenna tensed when she shifted her focus to Ormond. "Tsk. Tsk," she clucked. "A different man every hour."

"We'd better get going, Kenna," Wyvern said. "Be sure to call that professional locksmith as we suggested. We'll file a report and see if we can track down the people who did this."

"Vandals?" Mrs. Patrick repeated.

Wyvern strode to her side. "That's right. Someone took a blowtorch to Kenna's glass."

Mrs. Patrick looked around the workshop as if seeing it with new eyes. "Oh, yes. How terrible." Her gaze stopped on Kenna, brow furrowed in distaste. "It looks as if they took a blowtorch to your hair as well."

"Oh, this." Dammit. She'd forgotten about her hair. Kenna lifted a lock. "I'm just experimenting with color."

"Can we escort you home?" Wyvern asked Mrs. Patrick. "With the perpetrator on the loose, we can't be too careful."

"Oh, yes," she said with a nervous shake of her head. "Kenna, you do as these detectives say and get the proper lock on this door." Mrs. Patrick looked up at Wyvern. "I worry about her, a young woman alone in that big house."

Ormond flanked Mrs. Patrick's right. He cast Kenna a glance. "We worry about her too."

Kenna started forward, then stopped. She wanted them to leave, yet the idea of being alone frightened her. "I—"

"Yes, Kenna," Wyvern said, "we'll check on you later."

She gave a stiff nod. Hadyn was dead. She didn't need them. She didn't need anyone. Pain knifed through her heart. Most of all, she didn't want to need Erion. She'd keep telling herself that until she believed it.

Chapter Ten

The soft chime of the doorbell jarred Kenna from the turkey sandwich she'd been staring at for the last half hour. She jerked her gaze to the Copper Harbor wall clock hanging over the kitchen bay window: 5:30. She wasn't expecting anyone. Her stomach twisted. She hadn't been expecting anyone when Erion blew into her room—her bed—in the early hours of the morning either. Or Hadyn with his demented machinations. Erion left her, and Hadyn was dead. Neither would be standing outside her front door, and—Kenna swallowed against a dry throat—Erion had proven he wouldn't bother knocking.

This newest surprise visitor was probably Mrs. Patrick come to check on her after the *break-in*. A quiver radiated through Kenna. She couldn't chance seeing anyone. Mrs. Patrick had commented on the copper streaks that stood out against Kenna's natural auburn color. Someone else, someone more intuitive, more observant, someone who knew her, would *know* the difference went beyond the new hair color. The doorbell rang again.

Kenna jumped. She shoved the chair back, rose, and took three steps to the window. She inched open the curtain and scanned the driveway and curb in front. Only her gray sedan sat in the driveway. Dammit, anyone standing at the front door wasn't visible from the window. Had to be Mrs. Patrick. She would go away.

Kenna returned to the table and eased into the seat. She had to cancel the show at Michael Laird's gallery. Her chest tightened. Once word spread of the cancellation, no other gallery would chance taking on a diva who had bowed out of her first show. Her career was over.

But Erion had a career. Surely she could live a normal life like he did? Damn him. For all she knew, he'd spent the last thousand years learning how to be *normal*. Still, was it possible she could live as she had before? She imagined Michael's gallery in flames, dozens of people trapped inside while she consumed the building *and them* with her flames.

A sob broke through the morbid vision, and she dropped her head onto the arms lying on the table and gave in to tears. A tap on the window snapped her head up. Kenna gasped. Marshall stared at her through the paned glass of the back door's upper half. What the—what was he doing here?

"Kenna?" His deep voice penetrated the glass.

She stared, unable to move. She couldn't open the door, couldn't talk to this man who knew her better than anyone—*except Jared*. Her heart beat faster. She hadn't considered how many people her *situation* was going to affect. How would she hide from her brother what had happened to her?

"Kenna, what's wrong?" Marshall demanded.

The knob turned. She leaped to her feet, then froze when the door opened and he filled the doorway, tall, dark, and ruggedly handsome. Just as she remembered. At forty-five years old, he was as fit as most men her age, his broad shoulders and angled features mature, dark eyes penetrating...knowing. He'd been the father she lost at fourteen, taking on the surrogate role, but she wasn't naive enough not to understand why women chased him halfway around the world.

"What's wrong?" he demanded again.

"What are you doing here? The show isn't for a few weeks." She extended a hand as if to touch him, recalled the play of color beneath her skin, then yanked it back before the fire phenomena could reemerge.

"I decided to surprise you by coming early," Marshall said. "I want to bask in the excitement with you."

"More like stress."

He took a step toward her. "This is your moment, but sweetheart, you look like hell. What's happened? Jared?"

Her heart wrenched at the concern in his voice. She shook her head. "No, no, Jared's fine. I—" Her mind worked double time for an answer. "I had a break-in, lost everything."

Marshall dropped the leather duffel she hadn't noticed him carrying and stepped up to her. He enfolded her in his arms. She stiffened, recollection of bursting into flames while in Erion's embrace still too real to call mere memory.

Marshall leaned back and looked into her face. "I know I pissed you off, but are you going to hold a grudge for two years?" He lifted a corner of his mouth just as she'd seen him do a million times before, and the dam burst. Tears rolled down her cheeks. He pulled her close, and she buried her face in his chest. He stroked her hair. "It'll be all right."

She wanted to shout that it wouldn't be all right, could never again be all right, that he should run as far and as fast as he could, but she cried until the tears ran dry, then allowed him to gently push her back into the chair. He lowered himself onto the seat to her left.

"What happened?"

"Someone torched my garage. The glass is destroyed. Everything I still had here is gone."

Surprise flickered in his eyes, but he said in a level voice, "What did the police say?"

"They aren't hopeful. They'll do what they can and follow up with any leads." Kenna held her breath, praying he wouldn't demand to see a report or an officer who had taken the imaginary report.

"Any idea who would do something like this?"

She shook her head.

"A competitor maybe?"

Kenna stared. "I...I can't believe such a thing. I've never heard of anything like that."

He shrugged. "You know how competitive the art world is. You're up and coming. Stranger things have happened."

He didn't know the half of it. "They hinted it was probably just some kids. Vandalism, at its best."

Marshall rose. "Let's take a look."

Kenna shot to her feet. "No—I mean, I don't want to deal with this right now. You just arrived, and—"

"The show is in three weeks. You have to replace the lost pieces. There's no time to fool around." He started for the door.

Kenna shoved past him and whirled. "Not now, Marshall."

"It can't be that bad. Let me take a look at what we're up against." He grasped her shoulders and gently moved her aside.

Her heart pounded as if running a race against greyhounds, yet she remained frozen as he opened the door. How would she explain the melted glass to a man who had glass instead of blood flowing through his veins? He wouldn't be fooled by the *someone took a torch to the glass* line as Mrs. Patrick had been. Kenna broke from the trance and lunged after him. He reached the garage door a second before her and stepped inside.

"Christ."

She halted at his side, her gaze transfixed on the glass pieces that rippled around the room from shelves nearest the marver to the outer corners of the garage in a wave that transitioned melted globs to barely marred edges. Hadyn's fire *and* her fire had destroyed her art, had created this mess. She startled at the realization that neither the shelves nor the walls were burned.

Kenna jerked her eyes to the ovens. Not a hint of damage. She swung her gaze to the curtains, and tears sprang to the surface. The short, sheer apple print looked

as new as the day she'd put it up. *Erion*. Heat had melted the glass, but he had contained the flames, saved the ovens and the building...her life.

"What the hell happened?" Marshall's hard voice yanked her back to him.

She met his gaze. "I told you, vandals."

As expected, he stared, the gears in his head clearly churning, looking for some reasonable explanation for the strange apparition that surrounded them. She kept her eyes locked with his. No matter how much he might wonder, he couldn't know. After returning to human form, she'd seen the garage as being in shambles. Shock of morphing into flames had skewed her perception. The damage was bad—she'd lost at least a year's work—but the fact the fire hadn't touched anything but the glass made it more explainable.

"No one could possibly cause this much damage without the fire being visible from outside," he said. "Someone had to see something." His tone said he wasn't ignoring the oddity, but simply hadn't put his finger on it—yet. She would make sure he was gone before he had the chance to get any closer to the truth.

Kenna shook her head. "My neighbors know I'm a glassblower. They wouldn't know the difference. They could easily mistake a blowtorch glow for the ovens."

His gaze bore into her, and the sliver of relief she'd allowed herself to feel drowned in the apprehension that burrowed into the pit of her stomach.

"What's going on, Kenna? Your workshop looks like an atom bomb leveled the glass, you—" He lifted a lock of her copper-streaked hair. "It's gorgeous, but what vat did you dip your head in? And that tan. I've never seen anything like it."

She shoved his hand aside. "It's been two years, Marshall. People change."

He studied her. "Change, or have been changed?"

She stared. He knew. *Impossible*. The garage, her appearance, was odd, but not odd enough for him to know, *really know*. Fear strained her nerves. It wasn't the strangeness of the things around her; it was her—and he knew her.

She opened her mouth to weave another lie into her story, but Marshall halted her lie with another question. "How much did you lose?"

* * *

Kenna sat across the kitchen table from Marshall, a list of the glass pieces she'd lost in front of him. One more hour of her life had passed, and the dream was now *not* the last few hours, but the twenty-seven years that had preceded them. Reality now encompassed the hours since she'd met Erion. Life changed, reality changed. Who she was, what she was, had changed beyond recognition.

Marshall looked up from the paper. "Get a clean-up crew in here tomorrow, and you'll be back in business day after tomorrow."

Kenna nodded, numb with acceptance. She would replenish her stock, live as she had the last five years in quiet solitude, just another local artist whose work was sold in local shops. No Michael Laird show, no shows at all. She swallowed back a lump in her throat. A void, like a black hole, deepened in her gut. She'd lost the life she knew. And ached in ways she never had before for an existence she couldn't understand. Not without Erion. She would find him, make him understand he couldn't live without her, any more than Airiana could live without him.

Since Erion left, the female Air Element had remained silent. That frightened Kenna. But she also couldn't deny the relief at being able to sit across from her mentor and not fear that he would somehow sense the voice she heard.

Kenna shifted her gaze to Marshall. He scribbled on the paper where he'd listed the ruined pieces. In his typical take-charge manner, he planned on getting her up and running and back in the game...back with other people. A tremor radiated through her. There wasn't a chance in hell she was going to let that happen.

"I'm canceling the show."

His head snapped up. "You're overreacting. It's a loss, but you can create pieces to replace the ones you lost."

Kenna shook her head. "It's too much, too soon. I can't risk putting Michael in that position. If I don't deliver the rest of the pieces, he'll be in trouble. I won't put his reputation on the line."

Marshall set his pencil down. "You can do plenty in two weeks. What's the real problem?"

"Did you see my workshop?" She froze, realizing the door she'd opened with the statement.

"It's a mess, all right."

"I can't work in there," she cut in. "And what clean-up crew can get hardened glass off concrete?"

"I'll take a sledgehammer to it myself if I have to."

Tears sprang to her eyes. He would do just that. Despite it all, the oddity, her attitude, he would put himself on the line for her. His fatherly interest was coming to the fore. Kenna clamped down on the sentimentality. Better to hurt Marshall than to burn him to a crisp.

"It's not open for debate. I'm canceling the show. I'll get somebody to clean up, but there's no need for you to hang around. I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing."

His brow rose. "You're kicking me out?"

"Nothing's changed, Marshall." Her heart jumped into overdrive. Would he buy it?

"Plenty's changed, and don't try telling me it's because of our last conversation. I let you be, Kenna. You're a big girl, and you have to find your own way, but we both know my warning wasn't anything you hadn't already considered."

"It was an accusation," she shot back with genuine feeling. "You accused me of stealing, not having enough imagination to come up with something on my own."

His face softened. "What I said was, people would think you didn't have enough imagination. You wouldn't be the first to be called a Gudentrath copycat."

Kenna lifted her chin, memory of his words as real as they had been two years ago. “You said *people*, but you meant *me*.”

“You’ve clearly proven me wrong.”

Kenna blinked. She’d only half believed her own words. To hear him confirm her fears—her head whirled. Had everything been a lie, his belief in her, her ability as an artist...her very humanity?

“What’s going on, Kenna?”

His demand yanked her focus back to him. “I...I told you.”

“No, you haven’t.”

“I’ve lost a year’s worth of work, and there has to be something else wrong?”

“Doesn’t have to be,” he replied. “But there is.”

Fear shot through her, but this time, she was ready for his suspicion. Kenna gave a harsh laugh. “Problem is, Marshall, you were expecting the same doe-eyed girl you knew.”

“Two years couldn’t change you into the cynical woman of the world you’re trying to sell me.”

He rose and strode to where his duffel sat near the door. He picked up the bag and faced her. Her heart pounded. He was leaving just like that. Just as her mother and father had, just as Jared had...just like Erion.

She was truly alone.

Chapter Eleven

Filmy blue flitted across the darkness of Kenna's dream world. She shifted fitfully in her sleep. Air shimmered into a translucent shadow against black, circled once, and covered her. She resisted the comforting warmth. The covering grew heavy and the masculine weight of muscled shoulders and thighs pressed her into the mattress. A moist mouth nuzzled her ear.

"Erion," she murmured in drowsy awareness.

Sudden tears burned the corners of her eyes. Her mind fought for the reason behind the tears even as she arched her naked breasts against his chest. He gave a low laugh.

Kenna snapped open her eyes. She fumbled with the bedside lamp. Light flooded the room. She jammed her eyes shut against the blinding intrusion, but not before discerning Hadyn's blue eyes staring down at her. She bucked but instantly stopped, feeling his erection hard against her thigh.

"This is what you want," he said.

She opened her eyes, grimaced against the still-too-bright light. "You son of a bitch. Get off me!"

He ground his cock against her.

She bit back the fear and seized his shoulders. "*Get*"—she shoved, grunting with the force of each word—"off."

His weight pinned her to the bed. Kenna started to yank a knee up, then realized doing so would settle his hips between her legs. Her stomach roiled at the thought of him inside her. Her head spun. Erion had said Hadyn was dead. Why had he lied?

"This is what Erion gave you." Hadyn slid his cock against her flesh again.

Kenna froze. Fury lit his eyes like fireworks. Wyvern and Ormond had been right. Why hadn't she listened? Because she'd believed Erion. Had she known Hadyn was still alive, she would have listened to the Drakaura. Now they were gone.

Erion was gone.

Her blood froze. But Marshall wasn't gone. He slept across the hall in the spare bedroom.

Fear tightened her chest and lungs to near choking. If he heard her struggle, he would charge into the room, and Hadyn would snuff him out without a second thought. Why hadn't she forced him to leave when he'd faced her, duffel in hand, and asked where he was supposed to sleep? Though she hadn't wanted to admit it, she'd nearly given into tears when she realized she'd misread the fact he'd simply picked up his duffel in readiness to take it to the room where he would sleep. That was quintessential Marshal. He said little and did much. But she'd been right in telling him to go. Now, he was in danger, and if anything happened to him, it would be her fault.

"You enjoyed fucking the man." Hadyn's sneer sent her heart on an erratic beat. "You merged with his air." Hadyn thrust his cock against her. "Now you'll feel my fire."

She forestalled a cringe. If he sensed her weakness, sensed Marshall so nearby, both their lives would be over. She lifted her chin. "Never. I chose Erion over you."

"I'll have you one way or the other. All at once, or little by little." Hadyn flattened a palm on her ribs and began sliding the hand toward her breast.

"Erion will kill you." Kenna cursed the tremor in her voice.

The hand stopped, and Hadyn lowered his mouth to within an inch of hers. "Our combined fire will easily defeat him."

“You’re insane. I’ll never merge with you the way I did with Erion.”

He laughed. “Fight me. Taking it will be far more pleasurable.”

Heat coiled in her stomach, then burst through her body.

A satisfied smile curled the edges of his mouth. “Very good.”

Warmth emanated from him. Her mind raced. *Stay human and be raped, or shift and let him claim my element.* Tears burned behind her eyes. What if he forced the change? What if she forced him? Kenna envisioned her grandmother’s house ablaze. She would gladly sacrifice the house, but not Marshall, to keep her fire from Hadyn.

“Resist,” he soothed. “It will heighten the energy when we merge.” He shifted so that his arms caged her head and fisted a hand in her hair. “Your colors are brilliant.”

His breath warmed her face. He smiled the handsome smile she’d seen the first time they met, and her stomach turned. “I will enjoy you, then savor the memory once your fire is mine.” His eyes darkened. “The longer the taking, the better the memory.”

Her core bubbled. Terror ripped through her in a heated frenzy that fed the fire. *No! Not now. Not ever.*

He leaned closer. She twisted her head aside, but his fingers tightened on her hair and forced her face back to his. She jammed her eyes shut, calling forth Erion’s face, dark eyes, easy smile. Just as when Erion thrust into her, the feeling of imploding into flames spread through her.

No!

Memory of his firm touch was displaced by Hadyn’s lips touching hers. Kenna bit down on his lower lip. He grunted and crushed her in a brutal kiss. She clamped her mouth tight, but blood seeped through her lips, the metallic taste warm on her tongue. A palm gripped her breast with steely strength. Heat—*Hadyn’s fire*—shot through her nipple and warmed her center.

No, she mentally commanded, and the sensation vanished. Hadyn shoved a knee between her legs. Fear froze her. He was trying to ignite her fire by fucking her as Erion had. Kenna locked ankle over ankle. He wedged his other knee between her legs. She strained with the effort to keep her ankles locked while twisting in an effort to displace him.

He seized her hips and straightened her. She grunted as his full weight abruptly centered on her chest. Tears choked her. If she ignited while Hadyn was inside her, he would enslave her, then kill Marshall. His final revenge would be when he destroyed Erion. Hadyn released one hip and pinched her nipple. Needlelike pain pierced to the bone.

"I will have you, then deal with Erion," Hadyn hissed. "Never fear, sweetheart. The memory of these moments is what he will take with him into oblivion." Hadyn reached back and seized a calf, yanking the leg free of the ankle hold.

Hadyn would claim her—as Ormond had predicted. What did that mean? Was Airiana enslaved by Erion? She *lived* inside him. Kenna began to tremble. Would she become imprisoned inside Hadyn? What about Erion? Once he learned what Hadyn had done, he wouldn't rest until Hadyn was dead—or die in the process. Could Erion—her kind—die? Kenna choked back a sob. She would be helping Hadyn kill Erion. She had to get away from the house, from Marshall. Lead Hadyn as far away as possible, then kill him so he couldn't return for Erion. Could she? Did she have any other choice?

No.

Heat erupted in her core.

Kenna fell in on herself. Scorching pain ripped through her. She cried out. Hadyn's weight pushed her downward as they spiraled into nothingness, their bodies locked in an obscene death battle. She gasped against the intense sense of stretching into tiny fragments, then breath-stealing tearing that pulled her apart at the very core. Hadyn's weight vanished, and she shot outward as a tiny, blazing shooting star.

As if from deep inside a tunnel, his gasp echoed back at her. His roar of fury blasted through the barrier, causing a ringing inside her consciousness beyond any she'd ever heard with her ears. Dizziness disoriented her. A shimmering wall of heat sped toward her like a tsunami. *Breathe*. She couldn't breathe. She rolled across the air as if a helpless feather on the wind. *Wind*. She needed air. She needed Erion. No. She had to lead Hadyn *away* from Erion. Away from Marshall, from the world and into whatever oblivion he had intended for Erion.

"Come with me". The angelic voice of the Air Element whistled in Kenna's mind.

A force propelled her across open air.

"Come with me."

"No"! Kenna fought the force.

Scorching blue flames singed her edges.

She had to get away. Kenna spun toward the window and raced forward. An instant before she shot through the glass, Fiera screamed.

Chapter Twelve

Erion tried focusing on the figures displayed on the computer screen, but memory of Kenna persisted, hazel eyes bright, skin glowing as if lit within from the sun, her hair the color of a thousand suns as it had been after her transformation. He could envision her beneath him on the rug in front of the fireplace that smoldered with embers, his cock inside her, her eyes hazy with desire. They could spend weeks in his secluded cabin. He'd never get enough of her.

He jarred from the erotic picture. "Isn't one woman's death on your hands enough?" he snarled.

Erion reached for the Scotch sitting untouched on his desk, then paused. She needed him.

He allowed his hand to drop onto his thigh and gave a harsh laugh. "I need her." He leaned back in the black leather office chair and raked fingers through his hair.

For millennia, Elements had emerged and thrived without his help. Fiera wasn't the first. She wouldn't be the last. *But none of them had been his mate.* It didn't matter. She would be the last for him. Kenna's existence as Fiera depended on him keeping as far away from her as possible. She deserved the chance for a full life. He would focus on Global Enterprises, leave the *Giris*—and mating—to others. But that didn't mean he would forget her. Forget the sweet taste of her soft lips or the way she clutched at his shoulders as he filled her hot sheath with his throbbing cock. No, he'd ache for her, ache for her breathless sighs after orgasm. Ache for eternity. He'd never forget, because he'd never feel as good as he did in her arms, in her body...in her fire.

The phone rang. Erion swung his attention to the sleek black earpiece sitting on his desk. The number flashing was his London office. Miriam Weatherbee, his manager. She would want to discuss his newest project—the importation of classic cars to the UK. His favorite was the 1969 *Mustang Fastback* 390 with a V8. Not in the popular red, but rather the soft, olive green with a thick black stripe down the middle of the car.

Kenna belonged in a car like that. He could see her, red hair flying wild as they raced down the highway, windows all the way down. She would flash that heart-stopping smile at him, and he would take her anywhere in the world she wanted to go.

But he would never again see that smile, feel the rush of excitement that tightened his chest at the sound of her husky laugh. Another man would experience all that—and more.

The picture vanished, and the ringing phone blared. He snatched up the receiver. “Miriam—”

A crash through the window to the right of his desk brought Erion to his feet. The chair hit the carpet with a thud. A baseball-size ball of fire smoldered on the carpet. He threw the phone to the carpet alongside the chair. This wasn’t simple fire. The blue-hot flames were Element.

Hadyn.

But he’d destroyed the Fire Element. Erion started to give way to the weightlessness of his element, then stopped. The figure taking shape in the fire wasn’t Hadyn.

He drew in a sharp breath. Kenna—no—*Fiera*.

She rose to her full five-feet-six-inch height, and the fire evaporated with a whoosh, leaving only a naked woman. She clutched at the air, as if off balance, and collapsed. Erion caught her before she hit the carpet. He hugged her trembling body close. She gasped for air.

“Slow, deep even breaths,” he ordered. “It’s always jarring the first few times. Concentrate on your breathing.”

She clung to his shirt, dragging in air. “I don’t understand,” she wheezed.

“I know.” Erion tightened his hold on her. “It’s not the same as when we merged.”

Kenna shook her head. “No.” She gulped air, then coughed. “I—” She coughed again. “I didn’t want to change into human form.”

He leaned back and looked down at her. “Why not?”

She dragged in another breath. “I was trying to turn around and fly away.”

He stiffened. What had he expected?

Kenna twisted and looked over her shoulder at the shattered window.

“Don’t worry about the window,” he said.

She looked back at him, eyes wide. “I have to turn”—a coughing fit nearly doubled her over—“to fire.”

Erion swept her into his arms and strode to the sofa in front of the fire. He sat down, settling her on his lap. She pushed from his chest and looked in the direction of the window again.

“Forget about the damn window,” he said. “Concentrate on your center. Bring your human form into harmony with your element.” She tried pushing off his chest. Erion seized her shoulders and gave her a shake. “Kenna.”

Their eyes locked. Fire blazed within her irises. The shift back into human form had disoriented her. He gave her another small shake.

“Focus, baby. Stay with me.”

She frowned. “I am here with you. That’s the problem.”

His heart twisted. He didn’t blame her for wanting to get as far away from him as possible, but he couldn’t allow her to shift while in this state of flux. She had to learn to control the metamorphosis or risk chaos. An Element out of control could cause havoc on the environment without being conscious of the destruction.

“Easy,” he said. “Once you’re centered, you can shift back into fire.”

Her buttocks warmed over his cock. His body pulsed, and his mind numbed. He jarred with the unfamiliar feeling; then fear tightened his chest. Their *sparks*. He was responding to her as a mate. He yanked back, despite the pain.

“I need to be fire again,” she said. “*Now*.”

“Dammit, Kenna, do as I say. Shift fully into human form.” How long could he resist the compulsion to experience the wholeness of being inside her? If he didn’t get her to shift back fully into human form—“Let your body reassemble,” he ordered. “Then you can shift back into fire and get as far away from me as you want.” And he would speed in the opposite direction.

“I tried that,” she snapped. “But something drew me here.”

Realization gave way to anger. “*Airiana*.” He cursed again. “Close your mind to her.”

Kenna frowned in confusion. “No.”

“Kenna—”

She looked at the window again.

“What is your obsession with that window?”

She seized his shoulders. “The little ball of fire I became when I traveled here was nothing like the blaze I became when you were inside me. I need to be that blaze again.”

“What are you—”

Kenna shifted, straddling his hips. She began unbuckling his belt, her nimble fingers making quick work with the loop. Her breasts were inches from his face, nipples rosy and erect.

Erion gritted his teeth against the throb in his balls. He grabbed her hands. “What are you doing?”

She gave him an impatient look. “I told you. I need to be that intense fire again. We need to merge, join, whatever you call it. I need you to fuck me.”

He shoved her hands away from his belt. "There's not a chance in hell I'll risk your life by having sex with you again."

She glanced down at his bulging jeans. "I think that's open for debate. You look ready to me."

"I gave into that desire once. Never again."

Kenna leaned close. "Then we'll both die."

* * *

"Is that what you want?" Kenna demanded.

"What are you talking about?" Erion grasped her shoulders, and she realized he intended to shove her off his lap.

"Hadyn followed me," she blurted.

Erion's expression turned to stone. "Hadyn's dead."

She shook her head. "He isn't." She forced back the memory of Hadyn on top of her, his body pressing into hers. "He's alive and well, and he wants me *and you*."

"I destroyed him—"

"No, he came for me." Erion's grip on her shoulders tightened. "That's why I'm here—I mean, I didn't intend on coming here. My only thought was to get away. I didn't care where I was going, anywhere away from Marshall."

"Marshall?"

"I didn't know I'd found you until I crashed through that window."

"Who the hell is Marshall?" Erion demanded.

"My mentor. He came to help prepare for the upcoming show. When Hadyn showed up, I had to make sure he didn't find Marshall in the bedroom. He—" Her voice broke.

Pain scalded Erion's heart. She had already replaced him? Good, he told himself in a savage voice. She needs someone who won't hurt her. She needs someone who can protect her. Erion forced back the pain that was squeezing his chest like a massive vise and focused on Kenna.

“Easy,” he soothed. “Slow down. Tell me what happened.”

She glanced around the room. “Where am I?”

“Like your garage, this is my sanctuary. We’re about three hundred miles from your home.”

“Three hundred miles?”

“In Element form we travel at speeds greater than you’ve ever experienced. You aren’t human, Kenna. You can travel miles in moments.”

She gave her head a hard shake. “I only just left my bedroom.”

“Your bedroom?” Erion repeated.

She reached for his belt. “We don’t have time. He’ll find me again. He’s in a rage, and his anger is directed at you. I won’t let him kill you.”

Erion grasped her hands.

She met his gaze. “Please, I need you. Together, we can stop him.”

“You came here from your bedroom?”

Her heart raced at the steel in his voice. She wanted to deny the truth, but knew he already saw it in her eyes.

Erion’s gaze sharpened. “He came to your bed because you chose me over him.”

“Erion—”

“Son of a bitch. Did he touch you?”

Kenna shoved his hands off hers and began tugging on the belt in an effort to pull it from the jeans’ loops. “We don’t have time to talk.” She grunted with the effort of freeing the belt. “We need to hurry.”

“Did you merge with him?”

At the harshness in his voice, she looked up. A whirlpool of energy swirled in his eyes.

Erion gave her a shake. “Did. He. Succeed?”

“No.” The muscled thighs beneath her began to dissolve. Kenna threw her arms around Erion’s neck. “No!” A rushing sound filled the air, and she tumbled onto the couch, clutching Erion’s shirt. The man was gone.

She yanked her attention to the tornado-like mass racing toward the door and leaped to her feet. “Erion! I’ll follow. I won’t let you face Hadyn without me.”

Heat roared to life with her next step, and Kenna imploded in on herself in a burst of flames. Pain ripped through her, but she ignored the searing sensation and rocketed toward the swirling maelstrom. The mass abruptly turned toward her. She choked, feeling as if all air had been sucked from her lungs. Sounds of air rushing with a mighty force filled her ears.

The weight of matter forming from the weightlessness of her fire brought her partially re-formed feet in contact with the carpet again. Spinning pressure became cabled arms holding her tight. The clean scent of wood and rain surrounded her. Erion’s long black hair fell around her nakedness.

“You little fool,” he whispered with the rush of dying wind. “I shouldn’t—”

“Yes. Only you, Erion. Only you spark my fire.”

“The *spark*.” He growled as his mouth closed over hers. Her heart leaped when his tongue traced the seam of her lips, then thrust inside. Wet, hot strokes seared the inside of her mouth. He tasted good. Kenna leaned into his growing erection.

Erion broke the kiss, rested his forehead against hers, and released a shuddering breath. He shifted his hands to her shoulders in a light touch, but the tight line around his mouth said the tension hadn’t eased.

“Don’t leave me again. I need you.” She placed a soft kiss on his lips, then, lifting on tiptoes, aligned her damp curls with his cock, erect and thrusting from a thatch of dark springy hair. Kenna pressed her taut nipples into the hard plane of his chest and flicked her tongue against his jaw.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said.

“You won’t, unless you say you don’t feel anything for me.”

Erion groaned. "I feel too much."

"Show me. Make love to me," she whispered. He kissed her again as she slid her hand between them and stroked the velvety length of his shaft from base to the moist swollen mushroom. His muscles tensed beneath her fingers, yet he didn't move.

"I won't let him hurt you," he said.

"And I won't let you fight him alone. We face him together ...or I'll find him myself."

Erion yanked her close. She held her breath in the long moment before he cupped her buttocks and lifted her.

"Guide me in," he rasped.

Kenna reached between them and gripped his cock. His jaw tightened, and she watched his expression as, using her juices, she moistened the sensitive crown of his rod at the entrance of her wet heat. She rubbed the head along her folds. Erion groaned and closed his eyes. Cream dripped from her slit. He backed her against the wall. She grunted with the force of his body pinning hers as he slid inside until completely sheathed in her hot, stretched glove.

Rearing back, he plunged again. And again. Each hard thrust reaffirmed all she'd known. She was his as much as he was meant to be hers. Her body burned from his touch. His air seeped into her soul. The heat intensified. How could she deny the power of their connection? She couldn't, and with each delicious slide of his cock into her quivering channel, she slipped more under his spell.

Euphoric waves of pleasure rolled through her with each powerful thrust. Kenna tightened her internal muscles around his shaft and squeezed. She braced her hands on his shoulders, digging her nails into his flesh as he increased the fierce tempo. Erion leaned forward. He rasped his tongue over her nipple, circling the areola. She shivered, and he closed his wet mouth over the tip and gently sucked. Kenna arched into his mouth. She gripped the sides of his head as he laved

the beaded tip again, cooling her heated flesh with his breath, then gently biting her. Pleasure streaked from nipple to pussy. She hungered for more.

“Erion.” She pulled him close and rocked her hips.

He grasped her waist, helping her raise and lower on his stiff stalk. Amber glow radiated from her skin beneath his fingers. Liquid warmth flooded through her channel and around his cock. A wave of pale crimson color flowed through her and surrounded her.

Erion increased his speed, building momentum and stoking the fires simmering within her. “Let go, baby.”

She let her head fall back. “Yes, more. I need more.”

He pumped deeper, long strokes out and hard thrusts forward. Pleasure crashed over her. Kenna cried out. Arcs of golden light emanated from between her breasts, spreading out to encompass him in her fiery energy. Erion tensed. Muscles hardened beneath her fingers.

He groaned, and pulsing jets of cum spurt from his cockhead. Continuing to rock her, he worked her clit against the base of his shaft. Kenna reached between them and opened her folds. His cock rubbed against her clit in exquisite agony.

Awareness of another presence penetrated the haze of desire. She tried to concentrate. “*Airiana*”? The presence drew closer. Pressure built within Kenna. She opened her mind. “*Airiana*”, she mentally called.

“No,” Erion ground out between thrusts. “Hadyr.”

Fear slammed through her. The physical sensations of Erion sliding in and out of her soaked pussy transferred into every nerve, every synapse, transmitting orgasmic energy that rippled pleasure through her like a cresting wave. Fiera ignited, and he collapsed into air.

Brighter, hotter, the storm of their passion reached out, built inch by inch to a crescendo. Erion’s element isolated their joining in a swirling vortex of wind and

fire, with them at the eye of the storm. Pride swelled in Fiera. Erion would not let Hadyn near her—until she was ready.

The walls vibrated. Awareness settled deep in her being. The Fire Element was pooling his energy. A picture crashed to the floor, but their cocoon remained quiet. Even when the frame split and glass shattered, no sound penetrated their shelter. Blue flames seeped up from where wall met floor. Hadyn gathered strength. So did she.

Erion's wind closed in around her. Dread unexpectedly threaded through her like the slow crawl of a caterpillar. *Erion*. Why was he afraid? The flame creeping up the walls emitted little heat. Hadyn was no match for them.

Erion began edging them toward the door. Fiera extended her flames. Fire swirled throughout the churning wind vortex that was Erion. Blessed heat burned through her outer edges to the core of her being.

Her attention riveted on the door an instant before a blast blew it from its hinges. The wood sailed end over end across the room and splintered against the mantle. Pieces fell onto the brick in front of the fireplace as a deafening roar of wind filled Fiera's ears. Heat collapsed in around them. Fear clamped down on her and squeezed.

Hadyn had the cabin surrounded.

Erion's air thinned to a funnel, its spinning tail feeding into her center. The upper rim reached to the ceiling, then turned in on itself and slammed back down on the carpet, encasing her. Energy surged through her like a violent current of electricity. Erion was sucking the oxygen from the cabin and channeling it to her. He suffocated Hadyn, while feeding her *his life*. Erion meant to do now what he failed to do in her workshop—sacrifice himself to save her.

In a panic, Fiera willed a wall between herself and the onslaught of wind. A tremor rocked the cabin. Heat shimmered around them. Erion forced more air into her flames. She commanded herself to become Kenna, but couldn't halt the long draughts of oxygen her fire drank in.

“No”! Her mental scream resonated off Erion’s walls of air.

Soft wind abruptly whistled through her center. He was imprinting his final song upon her heart. Despair choked her.

“Erion, no.”

The shimmering heat wavered, and the roar of a wounded beast joined the thunderous rush of wind. The funnel spun faster, building momentum.

She had to stop him, to hold him close, but recognized the pull of separation. Fiera commanded her fire higher, racing up the wall of wind, then over the edges of the funnel. She plummeted down the outer edges to the carpet, then streaked across the carpet to where the blue flame poured into the room.

She charged like lightning into Hadyn’s flame and exploded. Marbled reds, yellows, and pinks of a supernova burst across her vision. She stretched like a rubber band, ready to snap back on itself. A shock wave of transparent greens and blues appeared. Shadowed blue revealed the form of a man. Hadyn. His eyes glittered and locked on to her. *Desolation*. The eyes narrowed, then shifted to the weakened funnel that was Erion.

“No!” she shouted.

Hadyn shot forward. Fiera leaped toward him as a wall of fire. He passed through like a bullet. Pain seared her insides. She whirled and lashed a whip of flames at him. Fire collided with fire. A brilliant flash of light lit the room. Time stood still as the vortex of swirling wind slowed and became a spinning black hole. Erion’s brown eyes riveted on her, stared for an instant, then winked out. Fiera snapped back on herself with a force that wrenched a cry of agony from her.

Kenna collapsed to the floor.

Chapter Thirteen

Kenna dragged in a heavy breath. The acrid smell of burned carpet singed her nostrils. She rose to her knees and wheezed in another harsh breath. Erion's words rang in her mind. *Concentrate on your center. Bring your human form into harmony with your element.* A picture of her body, whole, human, flashed in her mind, and the dimly lit room snapped into focus.

The lamp on Erion's desk was tipped on its side. Lightbulb shards lay scattered in jagged pieces across the mahogany top. Splintered pieces of the front door were strewn across the carpet near the fireplace. Tiny wisps of smoke curled up from the carpet edges around the walls.

Where was the ruin? The cabin should be ablaze. Had Erion preserved his home as he had her workshop? She shoved upward onto shaky legs. Where was Erion? *God, please let him be here.* Kenna stilled. Where was Hadyn? Her gaze caught on the closed door in the far corner of the room.

Dread wound its way through her. "Erion?"

She sprinted for the door.

Kenna threw open the door to a dark room. The scent of wood and spice hung in the air. She groped for and located a switch on the wall. Soft light illuminated an unmade sleigh-style bed against the left wall.

A moment of confusion immobilized her at the sight of neatly folded laundry on the bed. How had that bit of order remained when even the window on the wall opposite her lay shattered on the carpet not five feet away? How had Erion preserved her workshop, this cabin, when so much destructive power had

surrounded them? Emotion—love, she realized—swelled inside her. He had saved her a second time. *Oh God*. She had to find him.

Accordion doors to a small closet on the wall to her right stood slightly ajar. She glimpsed a shower through the open door in the far corner.

“Erion!”

Kenna rushed to the bathroom only to find it empty. She faced the bedroom. Tears streamed down her cheeks. He couldn’t have simply disappeared. *But he did*. She raced to the living room and out the front door, then halted. Moonlight filtered through the trees surrounding the cabin. Frogs and crickets played a thunderous symphony in the darkness.

“*Erion, please be here.*”

She’d been careful to throw her fire only at Hadyn. The flash of light that had followed couldn’t mean—no, she hadn’t read Erion’s intent correctly when they’d merged. He was here. He had to be, because if he wasn’t—fear bubbled up from her chest and tightened her throat. Had he let her fire incinerate Hadyn *and him*?

Tears blurred her vision. Her chest heaved. Erion had kept her safe, yet she’d killed him. A sob broke through. Dear God, why had Airiana led her to Erion?

“Erion,” the wind echoed in response, then added a barely audible, “*Ghen*.”

Kenna tensed. “*Airiana*”? She stepped closer to the darkness and strained her ears, but heard only an answering crescendo from the crickets and frogs.

“Airiana!”

Rustling in the trees yanked her attention to the right. Iridescent green shimmered against moonlight filtering through the branches. Kenna squinted. The outline of two sets of wings spreading in readiness for flight became visible. *Drakaura*. What were they doing here? Anger flared. Why hadn’t they intervened? The fire within her rekindled.

Their mighty wings began a slow beat, and their feet left the ground. Her body dissolved, and Fiera rocketed forward. A piercing high whine ripped through her.

Dizziness threatened. She faltered, her fire sizzling on the edges as if short-circuiting. *No*. She forced calm and concentrated on veering in the direction of the dragons.

Fiera streaked higher, until she was over the trees and, despite the darkness, her keen sight found Wyvern's deep green eyes staring up at her from within the evergreens. Both dragons rose above the trees, and she dived for Wyvern's head. He swerved downward, barely missing the top of the nearest evergreen.

Back in her garage, Wyvern had said that they had no authority to kill her. She had not transgressed. She centered her inward fire. This might change his mind. Heat pumped through her. Ormond's cry pierced the air. He understood she meant to fight. *Good*. She willed a wall of fire, and shimmering flames jetted upward in front of the dragons. She cried out in unison with their screeches. It had been so easy.

The dragons clamped their wings to their sides and turned upward, parallel with the blazing wall. They meant to go over the top! Fiera raced heavenward, dragging the inferno higher with her. The dragons veered left as if to go around the fire. She halted and extended her arms out at her sides. Despite the trembling deep inside her, balls of fire ignited in her palms.

Like two mighty catapults, she lobbed the flames. Fire spread across air, then dropped like a canopy around the dragons. Their wings unfurled, and they slowed until hovering about thirty feet below the roof of fire. The flames danced with the eddy of air created by the sure, powerful beat of their wings.

"Extinguish the net," Wyvern ordered.

"Fuck you." Energy surged through the flames of her element.

An answering glow emanated from Ormond's chest.

She couldn't prevent a sob. "You let Erion die." Lavalike heat churned in her center.

"Ghen."

Her mind snapped to attention. She gazed wildly about, searching for the source of the barely audible word. “What the hell is Ghen?” she shouted.

In two beats of his wings, Wyvern rose to a foot below the burning canopy top. “How do you know of Ghen?”

She jerked her gaze to him. “What is it?”

“Where did you learn that word?” he demanded.

“You first,” she ordered.

His tail flicked in what she realized was annoyance, but he said, “Ghen is the void, the chaos. It’s where your kind go when they cease to exist.”

She faltered. “Hell?”

“Hell is a myth. Ghen is the place where form cannot exist. It is the chaos.”

Fiera remembered Airiana. The Air Element still lived despite not having a body. Why wasn’t she in this Ghen? “Where is this place?”

“Beyond Peridheigh.”

“Don’t fuck with me!” The thought of flames moving closer to the Drakaura resounded in her head; then the canopy of flames snapped to within inches of the dragon’s slow-flapping wings. *Holy shit!* “Try extinguishing this fire as easily as you did that tiny ball of flame in my garage,” she snarled.

“Wyvern,” Ormond growled, and a tremor rocked her insides at the realization that these creatures were equipped to do just that. They were hunting Hadyn, a Fire Element accustomed to using his element. Unlike her, a neophyte.

“Peridheigh is the barrier separating the world of form from Ghen,” Wyvern said.

“That’s it?”

“The great wizard Siusaidh created the Ryalda—your progenitors—from the elements within Ghen,” he went on. “When your kind ceases to exist, your essence returns to Ghen, your ancestors’ place of origin.” His eyes darkened, and he added

in a mutter, “The Ryalda should not have returned to the world of form after Ghen reclaimed them.”

“What do you mean?”

“The wind, fire, earth, and air that Siusaidh took from Ghen caused a rift. They belong to Ghen. Their life force is part of the void’s balance. Ghen leaked into the world of form, drawn by the essence that now connected it to this world. Ryalda hurled themselves into the void to prevent chaos from devouring all form. Centuries later, we learned some found a way back into this world. Only, these Ryalda were strangers, nothing like the great heroes of old who protected mankind. They are parasites that exist in this world only as Shadow.”

“Shadow?” She sneered. He spoke in circles. She needed to find Erion, not listen to stories of myths and legends. “A shadow is a reflection caused by light.”

“Not shadow as you know it. The Ryalda are trapped between worlds, never fully in one or the other. Their human selves—their form—cannot exist in Ghen, but their Element selves must remain in Ghen.” Wyvern gave her a penetrating look. “Your kind is the children of the Ryalda. You are Elements.”

“How can Elements exist in this world when the Ryalda can’t?”

“It is not that the Ryalda cannot exist here, but that Ghen cannot lose balance. You are Ryalda incarnate. Element and human perfectly combined, as Siusaidh intended. Your perfection comes in that your element draws its energy from within the world of form. Ghen is not threatened.”

“Erion is in this Ghen?” she demanded.

“He can be nowhere else.”

Kenna envisioned Erion stretched thin across a silent void, knowing, but not seeing, touching no one, alone for eternity. She choked back a sob. The heat within her jumped to a temperature beyond what she’d experienced in her few hours as fire.

Wyvern’s eyes widened. “Fiera!”

Ormond gave a piercing screech.

“You’ll kill us all,” Wyvern cried.

She stared down at them. “Then you can come for me in hell.”

Memory of Erion snapped into her mental vision—tall, dark, muscled—and her essence tightened as if a hard spring. Pain stabbed through her like an ice pick plunged into her heart. A sharp humming filled the air. She winced. The Drakaura whirled and dived toward the ground.

She felt herself falling. The temperature rose. Moisture beaded, then sizzled. Fire seared through her as she tumbled forward. The canopy of fire evaporated, and soft moonlight flitted across her vision an instant before a blinding flash gave way to nothingness.

Chapter Fourteen

An ache rippled through Erion with a steady pulse. He tensed against the exquisite agony.

Erion.

Kenna's voice haunted him. The husky tone drove him mad. Despite the emptiness, the recollection had survived the eons that had passed since he pumped into her body with all the power of his element. The chasm that separated them had yet to erase that knowledge. He would someday forget. Until then, he would cling to the memory knowing, when they merged, he had known her love...and he would not be forgotten. They were mated.

"Erion," came a second whisper.

He gave in to the dream.

Warmth rippled across him in a soft wave. Dark blurred against dark. Heat burst through him. He startled. This dream, so real, was stronger than the memory he'd held fast to upon ripping through the barrier separating light from dark.

Color erupted in the blackness. He cried out in a noiseless voice against the harsh contrast. Another burst of heat. His heart wrenched. Despair washed over him, and he seized the memory, plunging headlong into it. This echo of her love would accompany him into the final nothingness.

"Erion!"

This was no seductive whisper. This was a sharp demand that sent him spiraling out of control.

In the blackness that surrounded him, there was no night or day, no up or down...nothingness. He felt wobbly, as if he might fall off the edge of some unknown precipice. Was he finally going insane? He concentrated on the dream, her voice.

“Erion, stop.”

The downward spiral stopped, and he was once again suspended between unknown spaces.

“Come with me,” she whispered.

Yes! They would go together into the final oblivion where he would cease to exist. Better to go now while some vestige of humanity remained rather than go mad. Erion cleared his mind of all but her. Another flash of color. This time he didn’t flinch. He would take this last bit of her with him. Kenna, the woman, and Fiera, his heart. Warmth enveloped him. He choked back a groan.

“Come home with me.”

“Yes.”

The warmth increased. Wind deafened him. Instinctively, he resisted, then forced himself to give in. He wanted to go with her. He was pulled as if being sucked through a tiny hole. Erion focused on the tenor of her voice. The rushing of air grew louder.

Pain slashed through him. Voices filled his head, drowning out Fiera’s voice. A scream rent the air—his scream. Pressure weighted on him. He fought the force. He hit something hard. Erion gasped, the breath knocked out of him.

Lights winked against a canopy of darkness far above him. A bright burning orb blinded him. Pain stabbed through his eyes. He jammed them shut, then snapped them open again. He could *see*. Lying on his back, he stared into the night sky at the moon, the familiar constellations of Scorpius, Lyra, and Aquila. He bolted upright. He held his human form, strong, muscled, *and naked*, as he had been so long ago when he’d left Fiera. How was this possible?

A dream. This must be a dream. The transition from the void to final death had catapulted his mind back to that happier time. His chest tightened with emotion. To be a man once more and touch the earth. He dug fingers into moist ground. So real. But why hadn't he conjured Kenna?

Erion pushed to his feet, surprised to find his legs steady. He glanced around the small clearing. Trees surrounded him. There was something familiar... This was the forest outside his cabin. A rustling sounded behind him. He whirled and came face-to-face with two Drakaura. Erion tensed. He hadn't seen any of the shape-shifters in years.

"How were you able to return?" the dragon nearest him demanded.

A faint warning bell rang in Erion's head. "What are you doing here?"

"Where is the female Fire Element?"

Erion startled. Why was he dreaming this?

"How did you escape the void?" the dragon demanded again.

"What are you talking about? Are you—" Erion choked. "Are you saying this is real?" His head spun. He was home. That meant—

"Where is Kenna?"

Understanding hit like a freight train. Fiera had entered Ghen for him. He centered his energy on the dragons. "You sent her there. I'll fucking blow you to oblivion."

"We didn't send her there. She chose freely."

"That's what you say every time you sentence one of us to that hell."

Erion concentrated on falling in on himself. Nothing happened. He closed his eyes and envisioned his wind. Still nothing.

He pinned the dragons with a glare. "What have you done? Why can't I shift?"

The dragon who had spoken a moment ago said, "We did nothing. Perhaps your return from Ghen—"

"You'd like to see us all there," Erion snarled. "Get the fuck out of here."

He spun and headed toward the cabin on a dead run. Maybe Kenna had returned to where they'd battled Hadyn.

A moment later, Erion paused in the open doorway of the empty room. Embers still smoldered in the fireplace. Smoke hung in the air. The cabin was just as it had been when he'd catapulted out of the world of form. An eternity had passed in the void, but mere moments had ticked by in this world. His gut twisted. Even if Kenna followed him directly out of Ghen, she could experience infinity as he had.

He rushed into the bedroom. Everything lay as he'd left it. He grabbed a pair of shorts from the clean laundry on his bed and pulled them on, then shrugged on a T-shirt while returning to the living room.

Two men in jeans and leather jackets stood outside the doorway. Erion sneered. Drakaura *pretending* to be human.

He strode through the door and halted in front of them. "Send me back to Ghen."

"You are no threat now," one replied as if injured. "It's the Ryalda who should not be reentering this world."

"It's the Drakaura who banished them to that hell."

"Like Fiera, they chose," he insisted.

"So you'd have us believe. I won't be as easily manipulated." Erion shut his eyes and concentrated every atom in his body on his element, but still, he remained a man. He opened his eyes and glared. "What the hell happened to me?"

"You cannot save her," the other said.

Erion clenched his hands into fists. "I'll kill you."

He lunged toward them. They retreated, growing outward as if melting into the air to take shape as dragons, their great wings spreading in readiness for flight. Erion threw a right punch in the closest dragon's belly. The beast gave a cry, and the colorful feathers melted back into human flesh. Erion punched his jaw. The man's head snapped back, and he stumbled several paces.

“You’re tough when facing an Element,” Erion hissed. “Too damned bad your code of ethics won’t allow you to kill humans.” He drew back for another punch. The man threw up his hands to ward off the next blow.

“Wyvern!”

Erion spun to face the dragon who had cried out. The creature lowered his wings and shifted back into human form.

Erion dragged in a breath. “Why did you let her come for me?”

“We couldn’t stop her,” Wyvern said. “We ordered her not to go.”

“Bullshit. Is this your newest strategy for getting Elements into Ghen?”

“She crossed the barrier before we could stop her,” he insisted.

“She didn’t know about Ghen.”

“She was chanting the word when she came out of the cabin.”

“Chanting? She—” *Airiana*. But why? “Why are you here?” Erion demanded.

“Hadyr.”

“You’re too late.” Erion grabbed Wyvern by the throat.

“Wyvern!” the other man shouted.

“Keep the fuck back, or I’ll kill him,” Erion warned. He stepped up to within an inch of Wyvern’s face. “You were there when we merged.”

“We did not interfere,” Wyvern wheezed.

Erion released his neck and punched him in the belly. Wyvern doubled over and dragged in a breath.

“It was none of your fucking business.” Erion drew back and landed another punch.

Wyvern collapsed to his knees, gasping for air.

Erion squatted beside him. “How do I get her back?”

Wyvern looked up at him and rasped, “You don’t.”

“You sent her there, and you will tell me how to get her back.”

“We did not—”

“I won’t leave her in that hell.” Erion grabbed him again.

“They said Ghen wasn’t hell,” Kenna said.

Erion shot to his feet and swung to face her. She stood five feet from him, naked in the moonlight and even more beautiful than he remembered. He closed the distance between them but stopped short and stared.

“How were you able to return?” Wyvern demanded.

Erion whirled. “Interfere, and I’ll kill you.” He shot a glance at the other man. “Both of you.”

He faced Kenna. She stared up at him, and he was suddenly sure he was dreaming after all. She shivered.

“You’re cold.” He pulled off his shirt.

Kenna lifted her arms, and Erion slid the shirt over her head. She glanced down, fingering the edge of the garment where it hung to her thigh. Then she lifted her face to his. A corner of her mouth turned upward in a gentle smile.

“I couldn’t leave you there.” She touched his cheek.

He closed his eyes. Trembling fingers traced a line along his jaw. Then her hand was gone, and he opened his eyes to see her step past him toward the Drakaura.

“You said Ghen wasn’t hell.” The vehemence in her voice startled Erion.

“Hell is a mythical place of punishment, torment,” Wyvern replied. “Ghen is simply the void. It is what exists beyond—”

“The world of form,” she cut in. “You try living there, then tell me it isn’t hell.” She faced Erion. “Are you all right?”

He gave a shaky laugh. “Yes, though not unchanged.” At the stricken look on her face, he quickly added, “I’m fine, just a little shaken up. I thought I was dreaming.”

She gave him a rueful smile. “You put up a fight coming back.”

He started to reply that he hadn't put up a fight at all, when she stepped closer and wrapped her arms around his waist. "You shouldn't have done it."

Cool fingers trailed his flushed skin. *Cool fingers*. Her element hadn't warmed to his touch as it had before. Acute pain pierced his chest. He was no longer Erion, *the Element*.

He shrugged off her hand. She frowned, but he couldn't answer the question in her eyes. Without his air, how could he protect her? Their bond remained even with his element in oblivion.

Erion looked past her at the Drakaura. "Is Hadyn in Ghen?"

"We can't be sure," Wyvern said. "You two should be in the void."

Kenna shivered. "I'm not sure I would wish that place on anyone. Not even Hadyn."

"He would have killed you," Erion replied.

She took a deep breath. "I know. But we can forget about him." She laid a tentative hand on Erion's arm. "I can't believe all that's happened since you blew into my life." A corner of her mouth lifted in a faltering smile.

Another wave of regret washed over him. He would never blow into her again. He smiled gently. "You have your whole life to figure out where you go from here."

The smile vanished. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I—"

"Erion."

"Isn't it obvious?" He glanced down at where her hand lay on his arm.

Her gaze dropped to her hand, then lifted to his face again. "No. Nothing is obvious."

"*Nothing* is exactly the problem. Kenna, there's no answering fire in you when you touch me. Our elements are no longer merged."

She glanced at her hand again, then looked back at him, frowning. "We can make love, merge again."

He gave a mirthless laugh. “Do you sense any air in me?”

“I don’t know how to sense air.”

Erion grasped her hand and placed it over his heart. His pulse spiked. A slow stretch began to harden his shaft. He forced back the desire. He couldn’t let her know how he still reacted to her—nor could he let the Drakaura know.

“I’m a man, human, no longer Element.”

Tears filled her eyes. “Ghen.”

“Yes. My element, my air, remained in the void.”

Kenna launched herself into his arms and buried her face in his chest. “I’m so sorry.”

Erion gritted his teeth. Her nipples prodded him through the thin fabric of his shirt. He grabbed her shoulders, roughly pushing her back so that he looked down into her tear-stained face.

“I don’t need your pity.”

She blinked, then stared a moment before yanking free. “Pity? Did you lose your mind in that place too?”

“I have nothing to offer Fiera. I’ll go back to being Eric Gray, ordinary man.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “It’s been a long time.”

Her eyes narrowed, and her cheeks flushed. He wasn’t sure if she was simply angry or if Fiera was about to emerge.

“You deserve someone who can share both halves of who you are,” he said in a hard voice. “You deserve better than me.”

“You think I fell in love with you because of your *element*? I didn’t know what you were or what I was to become. For all I knew—”

“What did you say?” he demanded.

“I’m saying you’re an idiot if you think I give a damn about your element.”

“You can’t love me, Kenna.”

She arched a brow. “Really? So as a man, you don’t think you could love me, the woman? Like Hadyn, you were only interested in my element?”

“Of course not.”

“You used me—used my fire.”

“I’m not like you anymore!” he shouted.

“Until yesterday, I wasn’t like me either.”

He couldn’t prevent a laugh. “You’ll adjust.”

She gave him a penetrating look. “Just like you’ll adjust to who you are now.”

“It’s not the same.” He faltered. “I’m not whole.”

Kenna’s eyes widened. “Airiana. She led me to you in the void.”

Fear knifed through Erion. He’d been so obsessed with the changes in him, he hadn’t thought about Airiana.

He’d stranded her in Ghen.

Chapter Fifteen

“Erion!” Kenna cried as Erion fell to his knees.

She dropped down beside him on the cool ground.

He looked at her. “What have I done?”

Her heart wrenched. Erion had taken Hadyn into oblivion in order to save her and sentenced Airiana to a timeless hell.

Kenna placed a hand on his arm. “You couldn’t know.”

“But I forgot her. How—” He broke off.

“It’s that place,” she said with a vehemence that sent heat spiraling through her. “It’s—it’s soulless.” He paled, and she cursed her stupidity, adding in a gentler tone, “I worried you wouldn’t remember me. I called for you, pulled as hard as I could, but you were—I don’t know—stuck.”

He frowned. “I heard you. I thought you were a dream.”

Kenna jumped to her feet. “I’ll bring her back.” Heat warmed in her core.

Erion surged upward. He yanked her against him. “No!”

She shoved at his chest. Her teeth rattled with the hard shake he gave her.

“I can’t live with knowing I’m responsible for both of you being there,” he rasped.

She stilled. The fierce pounding of his heart beat against her breasts. Kenna stared into his face. “I saved you. Let me save her.”

“For all you know, you left your element there as well,” he said.

She dropped her gaze to her stomach. A soft glow lit the space between their bodies.

Erion whirled toward the Drakaura. "Stop her." He took a step toward them. "Stop her." He lowered his voice. "I beg you."

"Who is Airiana?" Wyvern demanded.

Kenna's heart twisted at the pain that crossed Erion's face.

"She was the first Element I merged with. I...I consumed her."

"*Consumed* her?"

Wyvern's sharp reply yanked Kenna's attention to him.

"Yes," Erion replied.

Kenna tensed at the intense look that entered Wyvern's eyes. "Yet she has *existed* in your consciousness since?" He exchanged a glance with Ormond.

Erion glanced from one man to the other. "What is it?"

Wyvern gave a single, slow shake of his head. "No Element survives being consumed."

Erion barked a harsh laugh, but Kenna cut off any reply he intended to give. "I sensed her. She lived within him."

"Impossible." Wyvern's attention shifted to Erion. "Had you consumed her, she would cease to exist. She could not affect your return from Ghen."

"You profess to know what goes on in that place?" Erion snarled. "I'll make sure my next trip to hell fits into the neat little box you think it should."

"*I heard her*," Kenna cut in.

"There is only one explanation," Wyvern said. "She is not Element, but is Shadow."

"Ryalda?" Erion said. "Fuck—"

"You did not consume one of your own kind," Ormond snapped. "She is *Shadow*. She possessed you."

"I don't understand," Kenna said.

"Shadows are the Ryalda that reenter the world of form. They are—"

“Parasites that exist in this world only as Shadow,” Kenna ended, recalling what they had told her only moments ago. Had it been such a short time since she had gone into Ghen?

“You’re talking demon possession,” Erion said and sneered. “Airiana possessed the song of an angel. She was air.”

“Unknowing symbiotic relationships. So yes, they are demons in nature,” Ormond said.

“No Ryalda have entered our world for centuries,” Erion said. “You saw to that when you sealed the door—and every crack you could find.”

“And she is a perfect example of why that was necessary. The Shadows are not like you.” Ormond stared hard at Erion. “Shadows don’t care who or what they use—she used you.”

Erion’s fists worked at his side. I don’t give a damn—

“Wait,” Kenna cut in. She looked at the men. “How can you be so certain Airiana was Shadow and not an Element?”

“He knows.” Wyvern stared hard at Erion. “You did not experience her as you did Fiera.”

“You son of a bitch.” Erion lunged for him.

“Erion!” Kenna seized his arm and yanked him back.

He turned blazing eyes on her.

“Please,” she whispered.

His mouth thinned, but he turned his attention back to the men. “This better be good.”

“Shadows appear human,” Wyvern said, “but cannot experience the world of form. They must attach themselves to humans in order to do so.”

“But I’m not human,” Erion countered.

“No, but your kind are closer to their natural selves than humans. You are, in effect, a symbiotic extension. Imagine how much more they experience through you

than is possible through humans.” Wyvern regarded him. “Your experience with Airiana was not like that of Elements.” His brows rose in challenge.

Erion didn’t immediately answer, and Kenna feared his anger would get the better of him.

“Kenna is the first since Airiana,” he finally said.

She gasped. He looked at her, the despair in his eyes so deep, she wanted to cry.

“After Airiana, I couldn’t chance stealing another Element’s life.” He paused. “She was a singer. Her voice—” He broke off.

“That explains her wind song,” Kenna murmured.

He nodded, then returned his attention to Wyvern. “This is bullshit.”

“Have you heard of an Element living with another after being consumed?” Wyvern demanded in an impatient tone.

Erion shot Kenna a glance, and she realized Wyvern had finally made a hit. “You believed you’d destroyed Hadyn,” she said. “If you’d consumed him, he would have lived within you.”

“I consumed Airiana...as we merged. Not in battle.”

“Do you understand why we can’t allow Shadows into the world of form?” Wyvern asked. “She led you to Kenna. She’d manipulate both of you in hopes of experiencing Fiera’s existence as well.”

Something in Erion’s expression stopped Kenna cold. Wyvern must have noticed as well, for he said, “Wait.”

The strange tone in his voice sent a wave of fear through Kenna. “What haven’t you told me?” she demanded.

“Airiana didn’t lead him to you,” Wyvern said.

“Shut your fucking mouth.” Erion took a threatening step toward him.

Wyvern looked at Erion. “Kenna is your mate.”

“Motherfucker,” Erion cursed.

"That explains why she could find you in Ghen," Wyvern said.

Shock rolled over Kenna. Her heart pounded so loud, the rushing in her ears and the heat that churned in her stomach frightened her. "Erion?"

He whirled, and their eyes met.

"What is he talking about?"

Erion threw a dark glance in their direction. "They're lunatics, Kenna, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Erion, please."

He looked back at her. A long moment of silence passed before he said, "What do you want me to say?"

The trees spun around her. "Only the truth. Is it true?"

He didn't reply.

"What does this mean?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he said. "I'm a man now. It doesn't mean a fucking thing."

"Airiana stripped you of your air," Wyvern said. "Can you see now why we won't allow Shadows back into the world of form? She possessed you. Lied to you. And will do it to others if we allow her to return."

Erion whirled on him. "You say you protect the world from Shadow. I say you condemn beings of beauty to an eternity of darkness." He gave Wyvern a disdainful look, then added in a dark mutter, "*Alal*."

"Alal?" Kenna repeated.

"Not us," Wyvern said. "The Air Shadow stripped you of your air and kept it with her in Ghen. We cannot blame her. She is what she is. Just as we are. This is our destiny."

"Destiny?" Erion repeated with such vehemence, Kenna stepped closer and placed a calming hand on his arm. "You Drakaura never tire of using that fucking line. You really expect us to accept your claim to be among the first beings Tiamat created as a reason for hunting us?"

“We protect the world from your kind *and* from Shadows,” Wyvern said.

Erion gave a mocking laugh. “Self-appointed judges.”

Wyvern’s eyes flashed. “You had no inhibitions about destroying the Fire Element.”

“To protect Kenna. Now shift into your natural form and get out.”

They looked at Kenna.

“Never mind her,” he said. “She’s not going to your precious Ghen. I’ll see to that.”

“But Airiana,” Kenna said.

“I’ll take care of Airiana.”

“But how? You can’t—”

His eyes blazed. “Can’t what?”

This time, she couldn’t halt the tears. “You can’t go for her. But I can.”

* * *

Blood rushed through Erion’s ears in a deafening roar. “Never!” He seized her shoulders.

Tears rolled down Kenna’s cheeks. “I’m just as responsible as you. I know how much you loved her, and that no one can take her place. I have to—”

“No one can take her place?” he repeated. “You think I love her?”

“I understand. I didn’t expect—”

“I love *you*.”

Kenna’s eyes widened.

“Didn’t you hear what the Drakaura said?” Erion’s fingers dug into her shoulders. “You’re my mate.” He stared hard into her hazel eyes. “But I can’t be the man—the Element you need—until I fix this.”

She searched his face. “How can you do that?”

He hesitated, but knew she would never let him walk away without hearing the truth. He also needed answers. "There is a way back."

"Siusaidh can return him," Wyvern said.

Erion released Kenna and faced the Drakaura. "So the legends are true?"

Understanding flashed in the man's eyes, followed by anger.

Erion grunted a mocking laugh. "That's right. I wasn't sure. But you just confirmed what I needed to know."

"Siusaidh?" Kenna said. "The creator of the Ryalda?"

Erion shot Wyvern a menacing look. "Did you outline our entire history while I was gone?"

"The history of the Ryalda also belongs to her. And she would not be denied."

Erion gave a derisive snort, despite the fact he couldn't wholly blame the shape-shifter. Even the great Drakaura didn't stand a chance against his woman's fury.

"What are these legends?" Kenna demanded.

"Siusaidh still lives," Erion said.

"How is that possible? My God, where is he?" Her eyes widened. "How old is he—how the hell long do we live?"

Hysteria tinged her voice, and Erion said in a calm voice, "You must know we don't measure time as humans do. Our lifetimes are not like theirs."

"How long will you be gone? How will you return?"

How could he tell her? But he didn't have to. Understanding dawned in her eyes.

"You don't know when you'll return. Or if you will."

Erion traced her cheek with the back of a hand. "I need the truth, and I need to be whole again." He smiled gently. "I have to find Airiana."

"You said *we*."

“What?”

“‘We don’t measure time as humans do.’ But you’re not part of that *we* anymore. How many lifetimes before you have your answers, *Eric*?”

He stiffened. She understood, and he couldn’t fault her anger, but that didn’t lessen the sting. “I may not find the answers in my human lifetime, but I’m sure as hell going to try.”

She shoved away from him. “I’ll end this now.”

He recognized the igniting of fire in her core almost before it began. “Kenna!”

He grabbed her arm. Heat coursed through her, warming his fingers. He couldn’t stop her. “Think!” he shouted. “There’s no way in hell you can find her.” He lowered his voice. “If they’re right, you found me only because we’re mates, parts of the same whole.”

Kenna frowned, and he could see the wheels turning in her head. “I can find her.”

Erion gave her a hard shake. “Even if you did, she’ll strip you of your element as she did me. Who will bring you back? Them?” He jerked her head in the direction of the Drakaura. “You’ll leave me here alone to die in agony, Kenna. Stay for Eric, the man. Please.” He leaned his forehead against hers. “I can’t lose you.”

Kenna’s fire flickered, but her resolve was anything but vanquished. It was now or never.

Despite the heat in her flesh, Erion hugged her to him. “Get out of here!” he shouted at the Drakaura. “Now! You can’t stop her, but I can.”

Their dark leather jackets melted into feathers as they spread their wings and lifted into the air above the cabin.

Kenna burned against Erion’s bare chest. He held her tighter. “Baby, don’t go. Remember when you asked me to stay. I didn’t listen. I’m sorry, but listen to me now. We can still be strong together.”

His heart broke. He had chosen. He would remain here with Kenna. Airiana would remain in Ghen until he could find a way back to her and to the truth.

Kenna continued to heat.

“I can’t feed you, can’t merge with you—dammit, Kenna.”

He kissed her. Her lips, warm with the igniting fire, cooled. She opened for him without hesitation. He thrust his tongue inside, soothing her, touching, tempting her to stay and face endless nights with this and more, so much more.

Kenna threw her arms around his neck and pressed closer. Erion groaned and slid his hands beneath the shirt. Her bare ass molded to his palms. He needed her more than he needed his next breath—the breath of wind he might never again hold.

“Erion.” She reached between them and traced the rigid line of his erection through the fabric of his shorts. “I need to touch you.”

He leaned his head back and hissed through his clenched teeth. “Then touch me.”

Kenna pulled the snap free on his shorts and lowered the zipper. Cool night air rushed over his skin. Blood rushed into his shaft with pleasurable pain. With deliberate slowness, she slipped her fingers inside, teasing him, causing his balls to draw close to his body. He wanted inside her *now*.

She wrapped her hand around the girth and stroked from base to tip. Precum leaked from the slit and trickled over the engorged sensitive head.

“Continue to stroke my cock, and I’m going to fuck you right here on the ground.” He hesitated. “Are you aroused, Kenna? Even knowing I can’t stoke your fire, can’t breathe air into your element?”

She kissed his jaw, then dragged her tongue along the whisker stubble of his jaw. “Touch me and find out.”

Erion pulled the T-shirt up and over her head. The fabric dropped to the ground beside them. Naked in the moonlight, she appeared so vulnerable, so human. Only he knew the power of her inner strength.

“You’re beautiful.” Threading his fingers through hair, he fanned her fiery locks around her shoulders. Glints of simmering fire sparked in her eyes. Pressure built in his chest, and the magnitude of all she’d done for him crashed in on his heart.

“You make me feel beautiful,” she said. “Like the fire in my glass, I burn when I’m with you.” Her eyes darkened.

“Promise me you won’t try to return to Ghen,” he said. “Not even for Airiana.”

Kenna paused. “You would leave her there?”

“No, the Drakaura have confirmed there’s a chance of saving her.”

“What if they’re right, and she doesn’t belong in our world?”

“We’ve shared the same body for decades. Ghen hasn’t crumbled without her essence. “Either way, I—we—need the truth.”

Kenna cupped his face in her hands. “Then we’ll find her.” She drew his lips to hers.

Her lips had cooled. He pushed aside the sadness the realization caused and pulled her close. Her body molded to his hard muscles. Her mouth opened, and he thrust his tongue inside. Hot wet strokes and gentle sucking intensified his need.

Erion slipped his arm behind her knees and lifted. Kenna threw her arms around his neck. Cradled in his arms, one pebbled nipple grazed his chest. He strode into the cabin and headed for the brightly lit bedroom. Kenna took an earlobe into her mouth and sucked. He tensed when his cock flexed.

In the bedroom, he released her legs and slid her nude body down his length. Her feet touched the floor, and she trailed one long wet kiss across his neck.

Kenna nuzzled his ear. “Make love to me, Erion.”

Erion stepped back and dropped his shorts. Her gaze traveled down his torso to his cock. Quivers trembled in his stomach when she sat on the bed and wrapped her fingers around the root. She leaned forward and took him into her mouth.

He groaned and put a hand on the back of her head, guiding her to take more of his length between her lips. Her tongue caressed the shaft in sweet agony as she milked his cock and sucked the head. Flicking her tongue against the slit, she lapped the seeping precum. Taking him into the heat of her wet mouth again, she sucked hard.

Erion gritted his teeth. The torture was exquisite, but he wanted inside, wanted her pinned beneath him as he thrust into her, reaffirming that their bond surpassed Element and went to the core of a man and woman in love.

Erion eased his cock out of her mouth, then bent and swept her mouth with a passionate kiss. Her arms circled his neck. He shoved the folded clothes from the bed; then, holding her, he scooted them higher on the mattress and settled between her thighs.

“I love you,” she whispered.

He fit the head of his cock to her opening and, in a full, hard thrust, filled her. Kenna cried out, arched her hips, and wrapped her legs around his back. Her heels dug into his ass as she reached back and braced herself against the headboard. Erion poured his soul into her with each rhythmic plunge into her heated sheath. He couldn’t feed her element, but he understood the needs of the woman.

He gave, held off his release until her pussy closed around his shaft in a viselike hold during orgasm. Pleasure rolled through him at the sensation of her vibrating internal walls clenching his cock. Bracing his weight with his arms, he shifted his hips and sank deeper. Her skin flushed, and her nipples puckered.

“I love you, Kenna. I would die for you.”

She moaned. “Thank God you didn’t.” She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “Make love to me, Erion.

“For eternity.”

Chapter Sixteen

Erion set the newspaper on the table beside Kenna's marver.

She turned the pipe holding a piece of glass she was working, then glanced to the open page of the newspaper. The small headline read, REPORTS OF UFO OVER CANDLEWOOD LAKE STILL TRICKLE IN.

Kenna groaned. "God, will they ever let it be?"

He grunted a laugh. "A UFO that bright is big news."

She shot him a deprecating look. "UFO, my ass."

"Your ass is correct." He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "That's what you get for combusting on a moonlit night and streaking across the city. When you get a chance, take a look at page three of the art section."

She halted in working the glass. "Really?"

He nodded.

Kenna looked wildly around, clearly wanting to put the glass down, but had nowhere to put the molten glob. He watched for a couple more seconds before she looked up at him and scowled.

"Don't just stand there. Do something."

"What would you have me do? Without the socks on my arms, I can't get near that stuff."

Her eyes narrowed. She didn't use socks on her arms anymore, not since her fire emerged. "*Read the review.*"

“Ahh,” Erion replied, his voice dripping with innocence, and picked up the paper. He flipped to page three of the art section—he’d already dog-eared the page—and began reading.

“Michael Laird has once again unearthed a diamond. Last Saturday, the *Origins* show featured four pieces by glass artist Kenna Lang. The first three pieces, *Supernova Passing in the Night*, *The Cosmic Barrier*, and *Starlight* grab the senses in a world of brilliant color bursting upon deep space. But as much as those pieces depicted the synergy of color and dark in a world of shape and form, the fourth piece, *Lost in the Darkness*, portrays darkness as a merciless void where color suffocates. This critic will not soon forget the tiny sparks of light and color that were hidden among the shadows.”

Erion looked up.

Kenna stared, her eyes swimming with unshed emotion. “I don’t believe it.”

“It’s in the paper. It must be true.”

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, blinked back moisture. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You did it the hard way.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Smart-ass.” She began turning the pipe again.

“Marshall called,” Erion said.

Kenna glanced up sharply.

“He made it back to Dallas just fine. I told him you were in the workshop.”

She nodded, and Erion read relief in her eyes. Marshall had stayed through the show, then went home, accepting—if not completely satisfied—that the *break-in* was the work of hoodlums. Her secret was safe.

Erion returned his attention to the paper.

A moment later, she asked, "Did you get the airline tickets?"

He paused in rereading the review but didn't look up. He'd tried every trick in the book to make her see reason, but she was intent on following him halfway around the world in search of the answers he needed.

"Erion," she said. "Remember, we do this together."

He shifted his attention to her. No fear shone in her eyes. No reflection of the promise he'd extracted from her given in exchange for his promise that as soon as he learned something of Siusaidh, they would set out together. Simply, she was his partner, in pursuit of answers...and in life.

"It's going to take time to track down any of the ancient ones. This isn't likely to happen anytime soon," he replied.

She shrugged "I don't know why not. How many old wizards do you think are hanging around? Besides, I've always wanted to see the cradle of civilization."

"You've always wanted to visit southwest Asia? Uh-huh."

She transferred the glass to the marver. Erion laid the paper on the table, stepped up behind her, and wrapped his arms around her waist.

She relaxed against him. "Buy the tickets today, Erion." She shifted her hips. Erion gripped her tighter and ground his cock into the crack of her ass. She gave a contented sigh, and he thought he would come right there.

"There's something you never told me," she said.

"What's that?" He reached around the front of her jeans, opened the snap, and lowered the zipper.

"What Alal means."

The bright room fell away, and Erion again stood outside his cabin that night three weeks ago with the Drakaura, when he thought he'd lost Kenna forever. He

still had to find out why their kind had come to her as a child. He buried his face in her neck and breathed deeply of her scent. Then slowly, he slid his mouth to her ear and whispered, “Destroyer.”

THE END

About the Authors

Tarah Scott

Award winning published author Tarah Scott cut her teeth on authors such as, Georgette Heyer, Zane Grey, and Amanda Quick. Her favorite book is *A Tale of Two Cities*, with *Gone with the Wind* as a close second. She writes classical romance, suspense, horror and mainstream.

Born in New Mexico, Tarah grew up in the Southwest. Fifteen years ago, she relocated to Westchester County, New York, where she and her daughter reside in a lakeside community. Don't be fooled by what sounds like a quiet life. The city that never sleeps is only an hour away, and this Texas girl and her New York bred daughter wouldn't have it any other way.

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KyAnn Waters

KyAnn Waters lives in Utah with her husband, two children, and two dogs. She spends her days writing and her evenings with her family. She enjoys sporting events on the television, thrillers on the big screen, and hot scenes between the pages of her books.

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