

Enslaved

When an elemental witch first comes into her power, she has no control over her gift. If her gift is fire, nine times out of ten, someone will die because fire does one thing and one thing only.

It consumes.

Everything.

Everything but the elemental.

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BRIAR

Ash and smoke.

My nose twitches. I roll over, hugging my pillow as I will myself into a new dream. A better one without fire, ash, and—

“Briar!”

My eyes snap open and I bolt upright.

It’s real. The fire is real.

“Briar!”

Aunt Mel.

I fling myself out of bed, shoving the blankets away as I go. I don’t bother with lights. No time. Not important. “Aunt Mel!”

Silence.

My hands fumble for my bedroom door, and I tear it open. The acrid fumes choke me, thick black smoke snaking its way down the hallway. I cover my mouth with my hand as I charge toward where it's thickest.

Aunt Mel's room.

Please don't let me be too late. Please don't let me have done this again.

I burst through the open door, and I sag in relief. Thank the Goddess.

Aunt Mel, in a long-sleeve white cotton nightdress, her long brown hair hanging loose around her face, beats back the flames pouring from her closet with a wet blanket. She's doing the best she can, but a coughing, one-armed woman can only do so much.

Tears stream down my face as I bolt across the room, snatch the blanket from her, and immediately take over. "Go call the fire department and wait outside. I'll—" Acrid smoke forces its way down my throat, stealing my air. I spend the next several seconds coughing so hard that my lungs burn with each ragged breath.

I will myself to stop coughing.

This is my fault. I have to fix it.

Her hand closes around my arm, but I shrug it off. "Go. I'll do it."

When she doesn't move, I nudge her toward the door. "And don't come back. Wait outside. I'll deal with this."

Reluctantly, she backs away, her one hand clamped over her mouth, cheeks red and eyes streaming as bad as mine.

The moment I'm sure she's leaving, I turn away. Gripping the wet blanket with both hands, I beat at the worst of the flames, fighting back each cough that threatens to emerge.

An eternity later, the wet blanket has extinguished most of the flames on Aunt Mel's once-burgundy bedroom carpet. I inch further into the closet. Her clothes will be destroyed by now, but I refuse to let this fire take her house.

My powers have taken too much from her already.

A hand clamps hard around my surprisingly sore right shoulder. I shift my burning eyes toward the man in a yellow jacket and black helmet standing close beside me. I didn't even hear the fire trucks arrive.