

The Elementalists

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Chapter 1

Self-Rescue Mission

IT WAS THE EXPLOSION THAT WOKE FRANKIE UP. HER HEART WAS POUNDING, SHE WAS drenched in sweat, and the noise was like someone firing a shotgun into a metal trashcan. And yes, somehow, she knew what that sounded like; it was the whisper of a memory in her throbbing head: her grandfather's farm in eastern Pennsylvania, blowing up Coke bottles, shooting at road signs. Her old life. She knew that stuff.

But what she didn't know was why her leg burned like it was on fire, or why her head was bandaged in white gauze like a mummy (she could see it in the blurry mirror across from where she lay), or why her right wrist was handcuffed to a hospital bed like she was some sort of criminal. Was she a criminal? She couldn't remember. Her memory was fuzzy—almost there, but not quite.

What did she remember? Her name. Her brother's name—Cruz. Where was he? She knew they were virtually homeless now, squatting in DC, and that their mother hadn't been around in a few days. Frankie knew her birthday was last Monday, which was how long ago now? She'd turned fourteen. Did they normally handcuff fourteen-year-olds? Seems a little excessive. Not like she was an axe-murderer or anything.

At least, she didn't think she was. Who knows, maybe she was a desperate bank robber.

Frankie blinked her eyes while listening to a soft ringing in her ears. Concussion, she thought. Her head felt like someone had whacked it with a bowling pin, and that

made her think of bowling with her grandparents in Pennsylvania once upon a time, and then she remembered her bowling average was 122. Weird. She thought she should be a better bowler than that... But right now, she could hardly focus. The lights in the hospital room were dimmed almost to nonexistent, and a nebulous grayish blur collected at the corner of her vision with occasional shiny spots here and there. Her brain was protesting, not working as quickly as usual, as if it were mad at her for the rough treatment it had received. But for the life of her, she couldn't remember what that rough treatment was. Something to do with falling from up high, right?

It did no good to try and swing her legs over the edge of the bed. The chain of the handcuff was short enough to give her very little room to move. A pillow was propped under her left knee, so she strained to look down and see why her leg was burning. No such luck. Her head swam and she felt like throwing up. Frankie was pretty sure she had a broken rib. Wow, someone beat the tar out of her maybe. No, that wasn't right. Where was Cruz?

Wait. Wasn't there, like, an explosion just a few seconds ago? Now she heard screaming and shouting, fighting and scuffling from somewhere below her. And another explosion rocked the hospital and vibrated the windows. Hey, it was dark outside. Frankie could see a crescent moon looking green and bored and forlorn hanging in the empty blackness. Buck up, Moon! At least you're not shackled to the bed with a broken rib and half a memory. Why was she so sweaty?

Oh, yeah, people were fighting outside. Was that normal? Now it sounded like they were *arguing* with each other. She caught snippets of different voices, "...going on? Don't move," "...should've told us," and "...discuss this later, please?"

"Um..." Her voice cracked 'cause her throat was parched. "Hello? Mr. Policeman? Nurse? Anybody? I'm still handcuffed to the bed. Can I get a drink of water?" There was no response from the voices outside. "Well, can I at least go to the bathroom? Hello?"

There were a few seconds of silence, and then there was a loud *bang!* on the door to her hospital room. Before she could even be startled by the noise, the door suddenly disintegrated, and Frankie knew *that* was odd. Not often do doors disintegrate. Shards of it whizzed through the air, harsh white light split the dimness of the room, and she finally remembered to scream while yanking on her handcuff, which did nothing more than suck

the wind out of her as a rib stabbed with pain. Her calf muscle felt like it split open, and her head throbbed to the pulse of her galloping heart.

A middle-aged man, hand glowing, in a floor-length trench coat, barreled into the room, closely followed by three, uh, kids. Like her own age, or maybe two were a little older. How come *they* weren't handcuffed?

All right, wait, that man's hand is glowing a golden color...

Frankie screamed again and pulled even harder on the handcuff, so much so her wrist started bleeding. Two of the kids pushed past Glow-man and approached her bed.

"Gee, Wiz, did ya hafta give it so much juice? Cadence blew up the door!" A short boy with choppy blond hair that fell in his pale blue eyes gave Glow-man a sour look. "Scare her half to death, why don't ya!"

Frankie started to shout for help, but cut off suddenly when she heard the boy speak. "Gee-whiz?" she mumbled, almost incoherent.

"No, gee... Wiz. Like his name is Wiz." The boy with the chewed up hair smiled down at her. The handcuffed girl was taller than he was, which was typical. She looked sort of Latina, but with lighter hair and greenish eyes. She was nice looking, in a terrified, handcuffed-to-the-bed, don't-kill-me kind of way.

"Don't call me Wiz, Quincy, it's disrespectful," the man in the trench coat said as his hand grew dark.

Quincy rolled his eyes and pushed back his sweaty, uneven bangs. "My uncle. Thinks we should always call him 'Professor Linden.' 'Course that was before we blasted our way into a hospital and knocked out the cop in front of your room. Seems stupid to call him Professor now, huh?"

"Can we hurry this up? That... *thing's* coming. No way a refrigerator's gonna slow it up for long." This came from another boy standing just behind Quincy. He was a black kid with a Jamaican accent and frizzy dreadlocks to his collar, and he was kinda pudgy too. He seemed a little older, maybe fifteen, sixteen.

A third kid, a bossy-looking girl with an upturned nose and glasses, was peering nervously out the shattered doorway. Her light brown hair was wafting in the wind.

Wait. Wafting? What wind? They were inside. There was no wind.

“Hey, get away from me!” Frankie shrieked as the second boy pushed around Quincy and leaned over her, raising his hand toward her cuff.

“What’s your problem, girl?” The Jamaican boy jerked his hand back like she’d tried to bite him. That gave her an idea. If he tried it again, she *would* bite him.

“She’s freaked, Mal. You’d be too if someone just blew up your hospital room.” Quincy smiled down at her again, turning on the charm, and pointed a thumb at his chest. “It’s okay, really. We’re the good guys.”

“Oh, really?!” She sounded like she didn’t believe him. That hurt a little...

“Hurry up!” Wiz yelled, storming over to the bed. “We’ve got, like, five seconds before that Fire elemental’s on us.”

“Fire elemental?” Frankie asked, forgetting herself for a second.

“Well, there’s no Water elementalists here,” Quincy said as if everything were now explained. “We’re a little outmatched. Hence the explosions. We slammed it into a refrigerator.”

“Right,” Frankie nodded. She addressed the only adult in the room. “Uh, will you explain what’s going on here?”

“Later,” Professor Linden said. He looked nervous, like he knew what was locked in the refrigerator was *bad news*. “Mal, get rid of the handcuff. Let’s go!”

“I ain’t gonna hurt you. Okay? I’m just gonna melt the cuff.” Mal raised his hand slowly. It started to glow silver and Frankie bit back another scream. “It’s okay. Just gonna...”

He tapped the cuff with his silver index finger and the metal liquefied, or evaporated, or did something quite unlike what metal’s supposed to do. Point is, the handcuff disintegrated like the door had, and Frankie was free from the hospital bed.

“Can you stand?” Quincy asked her.

Frankie wanted to roll out of the bed and run screaming out into the hallway, but she quickly realized she was in a hospital gown. You know, those stupid breezy no-back, checkered gowns. “Um, I don’t have my clothes.”

The kids did a quick search of the room but turned up nothing. No time to hunt them down. Wiz doffed his trench coat. “Here.” It smelled like gasoline and woodchips. And sweat.

“Yuck. I am not going *anywhere* with you guys!” Frankie tried to curl up and scooch to the top of the bed, as far away from these weirdos as possible. “Where’s Cruz?” she yelled as her calf flared in pain. Ah, now she saw it—a huge bandage ran down the length of her leg.

“Oh, we’re gonna go bust your brother out next,” Quincy replied, as if that were a perfectly normal thing to do. “He’s in juvie.”

“What?!”

“You have to trust us, Francesca; we need to go,” Professor Linden said. He bounced from foot to foot, trying to keep all four children in his eyesight.

“How do you know who I am?” she demanded.

“We haven’t got *time* for this, guys! Just grab her,” the girl by the door yelled, and the air around her seemed to crackle with electricity.

“We’re hurrying, Cadence!” Mal yelled back.

“We’re here to rescue you,” Quincy told Frankie.

“Rescue me? Who *are* you?”

“Schoolmates. Er... well, we *will* be schoolmates, if we get out of here.”

“Come on, girl, we’ll explain later. Right now, Barbeque Man is on the way.” Mal yanked the trench coat out of Linden’s hand and tossed it to Frankie.

Her foggy mind was doing somersaults, just like her stomach. Should she trust them? Their hands glowed, and that Cadence girl’s hair whipped around without wind and she smelled like a hairdryer that popped a breaker. They all looked like a bunch of circus freaks.

But did she have a choice? Something clicked in her half-memory, and she made up her mind to go with them.

Willing her numb legs to move, she gingerly slid out of the bed, not putting any weight on her left foot, and drew on the stinky trench coat which was fifty-sizes too big for her. *Now* who looked like a clown? She flopped her hands which were swallowed by the sleeves, and in the insanity of the whole moment, she snickered.

“Totally a great fashion statement.” Cadence smirked. But before Frankie could throw back a retort about the girl’s upturned nose and glasses, there was another

explosion that rocked the hospital. How come she couldn't hear people running and screaming? Were they the only ones in this place?

"Uh-oh," Cadence said, and her voice sounded afraid. "He's coming. We gotta *move*."

What happened in the next five minutes, Frankie was not quite sure. It was a total blur. Mal and Quincy helped her limp out into the hallway, but the pain was excruciating. Professor Linden's hand started glowing gold again, and somehow Frankie could tell he was feeding Cadence energy. Her brother Cruz could do that, too, she remembered suddenly. It was starting to come back to her.

A uniformed policeman was slumped over a chair just outside the door. A spy thriller paperback entitled *Detergent* was lying on the floor next to him.

"Is that cop dead?" Frankie asked.

"No, I knocked him out, but it blew up the door," Cadence answered simply. "Let's go. The elemental won't bother him. He's after you."

That wasn't a reassuring thing to say. Why was a Fire elemental after her? And what the heck *was* a Fire elemental? Frankie was sweating even more now from the exertion and the heavy trench coat. They started shuffling to their right. At the end of the hall was an elevator.

How come there weren't any doctors or nurses or patients around? "Is this hospital deserted?"

"Probably by now," the professor muttered, looking over his shoulder. "I'm sure once the Fire elemental blew open the front doors, most everyone bolted. Hospitals have procedures when there's a terrorist attack. But whoever couldn't get out will be safe once we get out of the building. The elemental's not after—"

"Right," Frankie cut him off. "Fire elemental's after *me*. Got that part. Anyone care to tell me *why*?"

Quincy looked like he was seething and glared at his uncle. "Yeah, see, Mal, Cadence and me? We just found out about elementals about twenty minutes ago, so this is new to us too. Apparently all the *adults* at school felt it was necessary not to inform us *kids* about the elementals." He shot eye-daggers at Professor Linden.

“And with good reason,” Wiz began, but he was cut off again as the elevator at the end of the hall dinged.

The metal doors slid open to reveal what could only be described as a monster.

Frankie screamed louder than ever, and even the other children recoiled in fear. Cadence was visibly trembling. Only the professor seemed okay with the fact that an eight-foot-tall wall of flame walked out of the elevator, melting the doors with its white-hot talons. Somehow, the whole place wasn't going up in a smoldering explosion, but Frankie had no idea why. Maybe the elemental could control what it burned?

What was just as disturbing to her as the fire monster, was the fact that she noticed with perfect clarity a melting plastic sign, just above the up-and-down buttons. It read: “In Case of Fire, Do NOT Use Elevator,” and it showed a little stick-man running away from flames.

The humor of the sign was not lost on her at that moment, and she almost pointed it out to her rescuers when the elemental bellowed and *spoke English*.

“Give me the girl,” it hissed, and its voice crackled like sparks.

“Like, how about no?” Quincy looked like he was screwing up his courage, and now *his* hands were glowing gold like his uncle's. She wondered what kind of powers he had. He was shorter than her, maybe a bit younger, and his chewed-up hair kinda looked stupid, but she was hoping he'd whip out a magic fire extinguisher or something. Instead he just stood there looking at his uncle.

Some hero... Frankie thought.

The Fire elemental was roughly human, with bulky arms and legs wreathed in orange and red flames. Its chest was massively broad and white-hot. It had smoldering black eyes and a gaping maw of what looked like sharp teeth. A mane of fire crackled off the top of its head, dancing this way and that, like a candle in a gentle breeze, with the occasional spark pinging off to sizzle on the hospital's slate gray tile.

Out of the corner of her eye, Frankie noticed Cadence was floating off the ground about six inches, and the ozone smell surrounding her was getting stronger. The pug-nosed girl's hair was whipping around her face, and her hands were outstretched, glowing white.

“Oh, you control the air!” Frankie commented just audibly. “Now I'm gettin' it.”

“But Fire consumes Air,” the beast chuckled and took a menacing step forward. “Give me the girl. Now.”

“And once again, the answer is no.” This from Professor Wiz. Now, why didn’t he do some snazzy junk-fu and whip out a magic squirt gun or something? Between him and his nephew, just what were these guys? The masters of glow?

“Someone got an idea?” Quincy asked.

“On it.” Mal shot his hand behind his head, and there was an audible *zap!* Suddenly, the knocked-out policeguy’s revolver was flying through the air and landed neatly into the kid’s hand. *I see*, Frankie thought. *He can control metal*. Like that one dude with the purple helmet in the *X-men* movies. *Okay, that’s pretty cool*.

Mal put off the safety, took aim at the Fire elemental and squeezed off a round. The bang made Frankie’s head hurt, but the elemental shimmered and smirked as the bullet whizzed right through its chest and buried itself in the elevator wall.

The elemental looked over its shoulder at the smoking bullet hole and gave the burning approximation of a smile. “What the flamin’ smokestack are you *doing*, human?”

“Nothing,” Mal retorted. “Standing around, reloading...” And he fired another round at its head, the sound making Frankie wince.

The Fire beast cocked its head as the bullet passed through, as if to say, *What, are you kidding me?*

“Okay. I’m done,” Mal said, throwing the gun on the floor.

“I could’ve told you *that* wouldn’t work,” Quincy bit out.

“Shut up, Quincy, you’re just standing there like a glow stick!”

Quincy stuck his tongue out at Mal. *Immature boys...* Frankie huffed to herself.

The Fire elemental cleared its throat. “Uh, excuse me... Can we focus here? Look, wielders, there is no need for you all to perish,” the wall of fire said calmly, spreading its massive hands in a gesture of peace. It brushed a spark off its shoulder, which splattered on the ground with a hiss. “I just want her.” A flaming, crooked finger pointed directly at Frankie.

“Well, you can’t have her, how many times do we have to tell you? Now go away, or I shall taunt you a second time!” Cadence was still floating off the ground, and the air around her seemed to glitter with a golden-white energy.

Wiz and Quincy are infusing their strength with hers, Frankie realized. They were like Energizer bunnies or something. Kinda lame against a fire monster, but kinda cool in its own way, she supposed.

Wonder if I’ve got any special powers? She tried to activate her Spidey-senses or whip out some Wolverine claws or something. Nothing happened except her head hurt worse, and her leg throbbed, and now she *really* had to go to the bathroom.

“Um, excuse me. Uh, Mr. Flick-My-Bic?” She held up her hand like she was asking the teacher a question. “Listen. I’ve taken a knock to the head, and I’ve got amnesia or something. I have *no idea* who you are or who *they* are. I really don’t think I can be of any help to you, so what d’ya say we all just take the, er, stairs back down and get a cup of coffee, or whatever eight-foot-tall flaming demons drink, you know, and just, uh, really just talk this over like civilized human beings... or whatever you are.”

The Fire elemental tossed back its mane of flames and guffawed. “You got spunk, wielder. I’ll give you that.”

“The heck’s he mean, *welder?*” Frankie asked Quincy.

“No, he said *wielder.*” Quincy held up his glowing hands as if that cleared everything up.

Frankie wanted to say, “That doesn’t answer the question,” but the elemental bellowed and charged them all.

Cadence released a blast of air like a horizontal tornado, and in the center of the vortex was a bolt of lightning that made Frankie’s hair stand on end. It blew into the elemental with enough force to knock down a barn, and for just a second, Frankie thought maybe the girl would blow the brute out like a candle. But all it did was slow it down.

Everything happened so quickly, Frankie didn’t know who did what. Quincy and Wiz jumped in front of Cadence, raising, like, some cloudy-shield thingy; Mal was scrambling to push Frankie out of the elemental’s bull-charge; but then something clicked in Frankie’s screaming brain, and she remembered. She stretched out her hand which started glowing gold too. *Oh, hey, I’m an Energizer bunny girl!*

“Stop!” she commanded, not knowing where this energy was coming from, but it was flowing out of her fingers. And would you believe it, the Fire elemental froze!

Or rather, time froze. Or slowed down or something. The Fire elemental started moving through Super-Glue, one millimeter at a time. The snarl on its face melted into a look of confusion. Apparently the elemental was the only thing affected by her golden glowing. The kids around her stared agape, and even the professor had a look of shock as he stretched out his own glowing hand. Somehow, Frankie knew he was sucking out the elemental’s energy, a vacuum that funneled the energy out of the hospital and into the atmosphere. Slowing down time gave him the precious seconds to do it. This all made sense to Frankie’s overworked brain, and it reminded her of physical science class back at her old school in Pennsylvania: *energy can neither be created nor destroyed, it simply changes forms.*

Sure enough, with a roar caught in its throat, the flames surrounding the elemental started to sputter, kind of like when you put the lid back on a candle and it gradually consumes all the oxygen in its glass bottle. Just before it reached them, like a match that burns out, the Fire elemental evaporated, and there were five panting humans standing a couple yards away from a policeman who groaned and stirred. The air smelled like someone put out a campfire with creek water.

“I get it,” Frankie whispered as she lowered her hands. “Wielders.”

Quincy nodded. “You’re an Æther wielder.”

“And you can manipulate the flow of time apparently.” Professor Linden seemed surprised. “Interesting. It’s been twenty years since I’ve met a time-wielder.”

“I didn’t know Mistys could control time!” Mal exclaimed, kicking the gun back toward the cop, who was regaining consciousness.

“Rarely. Like, one in a thousand Æther elementalists,” Linden replied.

“And Æther people are the most rare. So you’re *really* special.” Quincy whistled appreciatively.

“Well, that’s great. We need to go get my brother outta jail, but before I start pounding you all with questions, there’s something I gotta do first.”

“What’s that?”

Frankie disappeared through the Ladies’ Room door.

Cadence burst out laughing. “I like her. She’s got attitude.” And then she followed her into the girls’ bathroom, leaving the boys standing around, shaking their heads. Typical.

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