

Elemental Cascade

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Titles by this Author

Fuel to the Fire trilogy:

Fuel to the Fire (book 1)

Ruler's Desire (book 2)

Elemental Cascade (book 3)

Labyrinth of Labyrinths series:

Alloria (book 1)

Eye of Dominion (book 2)

Stand alone:

Imperfect Strangers (Adult: psychological thriller)

Void (Adult: psychological mystery)

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C H A P T E R

1

Winter snow leant upon gates, paused by milestones and shrouded the village as though it were a place of the dead. Through the still clear air, came a mother's scream. Davran was the first to turn and see, but it was Ronyn that jumped the gate and pounded up the hill, churning knee deep drifts into frantic flurries. Some fifty yards away, standing in the gash of light spilling from the open cottage door, the woman fell to her knees, her hands held out in pleading to a young girl being invisibly led by her hand towards a clutch of pale silky-trunked trees.

Hesperus grabbed Davran's wrist – the only way for him to touch his former power since the good and evil aspect of the planet merged. Pulling Davran close to his side, he held out his free hand. A globe of shimmering light rippled in his palm. Instantly it grew to encapsulate both him and Davran. Ronyn was now halfway between the woman and the young girl, visibly tiring, slowing as the girl got perilously close to the trees.

Hesperus focused on the tree line, and with a whoosh that left the others batting away an engulfing eruption of snow they disappeared.

Davran grabbed the girl's shoulders the instant they materialised beside her and turned with a smirk to see the flabbergasted look on Ronyn's face. He stopped running and leaned over, panting heavily, his hands on his knees.

"Just in time," Davran said, shelving a rise of inappropriate mirth as she turned to look through the trees and saw, as expected, a litter of small skulls and other

young bones stripped clean of flesh, the freshness of them glaringly pink against the recent snow fall.

“Or just too late,” corrected Hesperus, as he looked deep into the girl’s blank-eyed stare. “The darkness has already swamped her mind.”

“You could have told me... you were... going to...” Ronyn managed to say through ragged breaths as Davran and Hesperus walked towards him.

“Like you gave us a chance,” said Davran taking Ronyn’s hand in hers. “You took off like a bunyip down a burrow.”

Had they managed to reach the girl in time, Davran would by now have been laughing, and teasing Ronyn all the more. Had they managed to finally capture Grizzle, Hesperus would have been joining in. As it was they worked glumly, leading the marionette-like child back to the cottage. Handing her to the mother’s waiting arms, the three of them silently walked down the hill, where Skappstekker and Brant waited.

Skappstekker raised his brow questioningly.

Hesperus simply shook his head in reply.

“At least you tried son,” said Brant, trying for a little cheer, clapping his boy on the shoulder before helping Hesperus and Davran to climb the gate.

“It wasn’t supposed to be this way,” Skappstekker pointed out as they continued back along the lane. “Saurian was defeated and that was remarkable. That it was by the hand of his daughter here was incredible. That he eventually felt true love for Davran, in turn collapsing the boundary between our worlds was unbelievable. I suppose it all turning out well from that point on would have been beyond miraculous.”

“So, we’re no closer to catching this Grizzle witch, then?” Brant quizzed, trying his utmost to make it sound like a statement and not the umpteenth child-like question. “Should we not go up there and chase her down? How fast can a stooped old woman be?”

“She’s not here, Brant.” Hesperus looked across the field and mentally scanned the woodland’s many secret pockets. “She’s nowhere near here. Now I’ve seen a child that was almost a victim, as opposed to the remains of one long since taken, I know what Grizzle has been doing. She’d entered the girl’s mind and was drawing her away. That child was lost to this world before she even left the cottage. Grizzle has been here. She’s eaten children here. But at that time she was taking children from elsewhere. There is a little upside, though; I think not all of Grizzle’s power was released from the amulet when Saurian died. Some of it must still reside in that portion of the amulet around Davran’s neck.”

Davran shuddered, not wanting to think that the golden fist against her chest had anything remotely connected to the witch woman. She gave Brant a silent half-smile. It was a pity that many of the magistrates committed suicide when Saurian’s reign ended. As far back as she could remember she had always wished them dead; now some of them were, she wished them alive. The few that still lived had scattered and gone into hiding, no doubt afraid of the bitter resentment and angry grudges that would constantly follow them. If anyone had the skills to track down Grizzle it was the magistrates. They could find anyone, and they never gave up, the very reason they were so hated in the first place.

Brant reflected Davran’s smile, showing a hint of something that told her he understood what she was going through. She counted back and realised it was only eight months ago that he and his family had taken her in. Without question he had accepted her as part of his family, taking her for a boy that he rescued from a ledge, a boy that he smiled at in the same way he smiled at his own sons. Upon discovering that she was a girl he had also learned of the existence of a world parallel to their own, a world that resided in the gaps of their own. The smile he gave her since those discoveries was softer, more affectionate, and told her that he was just as pleased to see her still alive as he was his own son.

Brant had already come to terms with the idea of losing them for good. He had thought he'd seen the last of Ronyn and Davran, after watching them disappear through the void on the black dragon that he helped to train. He had never expected to see them again, thinking that Ronyn returning Davran to the place from whence she came was a one-way trip to a sure and certain death. And now here they were, reunited, two worlds that once each lived in the gaps of the other, realigned and occupying the same space. But Brant's world of peace, a world where he had once retired from training dragons to a life of milling flour, was now a place of terror, a place where the most terrifying of creatures roamed freely and where people regularly met death in its most grizzly form. Davran could see all this in the man as he looked at her, not the exact thoughts, but their essence, in his fluctuating aura. Knowing the man as she did, made it easier for her to read, but with Hesperus's help such a reading got easier every day.

"Are you certain it wouldn't have been better had this Saurian lived?" Brant said, turning from Davran to question Hesperus directly.

"It may have been initially, Brant." Hesperus shrugged. "Who knows if he had really changed or not, if he truly had the capacity to embrace goodness and hold onto it. We can never fully know a person, even those closest to us."

"It would have been worse," Skappstekker put in. "I still find it hard to believe he'd changed, despite all Davran has told us. Grizzle's a mere irritation in comparison. A beastly creature that needs to be controlled, just like the razor hounds and the black dragons. Yes, Saurian had Grizzle contained, and that may have looked like an act of goodness, but he fed her with young children all the same. He was a monster, and monsters don't change over night."

"Maybe you're right," said Davran. "But I never claimed he'd changed over night."

"A few weeks then. Same difference. Do you really think he changed his ways, just to please you, in a matter of weeks?"

“I accept he was a monster, but I saw a change in him,” Davran argued. “I think he desired change long before he met me, and that’s why the change was so sudden. Initially he was using me, because he knew he needed me to break the boundary. He admitted as much. But, then he wanted to know what love felt like. He’d never experienced it. Do you know when he felt it first, for real? When a bird that I’d raised from a chick died, and I cried about it. He placed his hand over his heart and said: *‘I felt a sensation of pain here, when I saw you cry for the creature. I didn’t love you before; I know that now, because it didn’t feel like this. I don’t know if I can care about others in the same way though’*. It was the honesty in his statement that made the rest ring true.”

Davran looked at Skappstekker, waiting for further argument. He said nothing, but he raised his eyebrows and looked away.

“He changed at the end,” Davran, added turning to Hesperus. “The unfortunates’ existence was not down to him.” The pride she felt for having saved them from their never ending torture, for being the saviour of the dead-who-were-not-dead, for releasing them from an endless future trapped between life and death was quite evident in her tone.

Skappstekker sniffed. “Maybe he changed because it *was* his end. If a person is going to die they want their genes to carry on. They want their life to have amounted to something. He handed you the ruling hand, Davran, because you are his daughter and that was the closest he could get to keeping it for himself.”

“That is a possibility,” said Hesperus. “Regardless, Saurian has gone, for better or for worse, and everyone is entitled to think of him what they will. I like to think anyone can be anything they want to be, given enough motivation. Sometimes evil men will do good and good men will do evil. Each and every one of us has the capacity to travel to the extremes of both. Maybe Saurian would have changed in this world. Maybe he genuinely did feel love for Davran.”

“Guess we’ll never know,” Brant offered. “And I’d say it doesn’t really matter. But it’s getting mighty cold, so I say we make haste back to the cottage. Them storm clouds look mighty black and heavy with snow.”

The realignment of the two worlds that had been separated for millennia had brought with it weather never before seen in Southern Scar. This small town where the Dragon Trainers’ Guild was situated had never before seen snow, and it had certainly never been so cold. It was for that reason that the guild was situated here, for it’s well known that dragons cannot tolerate extreme cold. When Davran had left Southern Scar to travel through the boundary with Ronyn it had been the hottest place she had ever experienced; it was now the coldest.

A handler of beasts approached, huddled in furs, his head down. He gave them a nod then grunted antagonistically, as he passed by.

Hesperus halted and stood still, pausing a moment as if in thought. Purposefully not turning to face the man, he then asked: “How is it out there?”

“A losing battle,” The handler called back, like Hesperus he stopped walking, and like Hesperus he spoke without turning. “We lose two men ter one beast. Them lightning whips yer gave us help, but not much. Saurian was a sadistic... We lived in fear under his rule... At least the beasts stayed in the wilds. Yer should’a left things as they were... Things is worse now than they ever were.”

Hesperus refused to bite, and walked on. Davran looked at Hesperus then back at the handler who stood motionless, his back to them still, his posture stiff, as if waiting for them to turn back and approach him. His aura rippled: the blue of uncertainty coiling a strangling twist around the purple of deceit. The blue might be sadness, she considered. She still had trouble distinguishing the subtle shades of those two, but the purple was most definitely deceit.

“Things’d’ve been better had Saurian lived,” said the Handler, a tone in his voice that invited an argumentative response.

“That just goes to show how much you knew him,” Skappstekker shouted, his opinion clearly set. “Maybe Saurian did keep the beasts beyond the cut, but he fed handlers and their families to the captured creatures when they didn’t toe the line.” As the handler finally slumped into his fur wrap and moved on, trudging through the cold to the dwelling of whichever resident had been persuaded to give him and his family shelter, Skappstekker continued to mutter and grumble. “Nobody’s seen the things I’ve seen. This world is full of fools who don’t look at the bigger picture.”

“You have to feel sorry for them, though,” said Brant, looking back as the handler disappeared in the swirling white haze. “I feel sorry for all the people from your world, Davran; to have had so little, to think your suffering was over, and then end then up with nothing at all.”

“Most feel fortunate to have nothing,” Davran replied, smiling at Ronyn as he took hold of her hand. “To have nothing’s not so bad; at least it can’t be taken away.”

Davran’s mind turned to her first visit to the arena, looking up at the bodies manacled on the walls, barely alive and suffering. Disguised as a boy at the time, she had feared the same fate, or worse, if she were caught. She recalled watching a handler of beasts like the one they had just passed: big and muscular, but not strong enough to free the hand caught in the chain that was tethered to the razor hound. She’d watched him get ripped to shreds as the crowd looked on and cheered, cheered for all they were worth, cheered so they didn’t meet a fate like those on the wall, cheered in hope of reward, in hope of rancid meat or stale bread, cheered so they didn’t get punished.

Sometimes nothing is better than something, she thought, looking at Hesperus and his aura coloured blue with doubt, or maybe sadness. *The two are closely linked,* she recalled him telling her, *and this is not an exact science. You have to take into account the context at the time.* She had no need to see the ring he wore, presently stuffed into deep pockets, to know it would show the same colour. The man once

had such power, the ring connected to its source, but now he had little other than the knowledge of how to use it, able to do so only through direct contact with her. Davran was the opposite: control of the power, but with no access to the knowledge of its use.

“We’ll go this way,” Hesperus demanded, speaking much louder than was entirely necessary, speeding his pace all of a sudden, his aura swinging to the yellow of enthusiasm, or excitement, – two more phases of emotion that were closely linked – as he steered the group the long way around Brant’s family dwelling.

While Davran silently questioned the reason for going the long way, the others were strangely co-operative, rushing after Hesperus and urging her to catch up.

Voices that had tormented Davran’s ear prior to Hesperus dictating their route seemed to have suddenly hushed, their abrupt absence the only reason she was actually aware they had been there at all. She strained hard, trying to hear them again, but as she turned and followed the group’s change of direction she heard nothing more.

C H A P T E R

2

Felicia fussed around, brushing snow back out of the doorway, almost bowling Skappstekker from his feet as he tried to remove his boots. “Brant,” she moaned, “Honestly, I’d swear you’ve dragged in as much snow as you could manage. Close that door Ronyn, you’re letting all the heat out.”

Brant rolled his eyes as he caught Skappstekker’s smirk, and hung his coat over the banister pole before heading towards the kitchen.

“Don’t open that door!” Felicia snapped.

“Ah... Yes. Forgot.” Brant halted his hand on the doorknob, grimacing as he shrank his head into his shoulders.

“Ronyn, hang your father’s coat in the proper place. I swear I married a fool.”

“What’s going on?” Davran demanded, noticing every single aura in the room had coloured purple with deceit: a light hue, so reflecting on Hesperus’s teachings, nothing malicious. Had she had this talent months ago she would have seen the blackish-purple enveloping Hesperus, back when he tricked Brant into training the black dragon, the creature that was her only means of returning to the place of her birth: the black, supposedly pure evil, world that was now merged with the one of supposed pure goodness. Maybe it had once been true, tens of thousands of years ago when the ancient Keepers had created the separation; over time though, balance had been restored.

“Ready,” shouted Varna from the other side of the door.

Ready for what? Thought Davran. *What're you up to, Mother?*

“Ok,” Felicia called, her voice over-loud with exuberance, leading Davran by the hand to the kitchen door.

Felicia opened the door slowly to a room with the lights turned low. As Davran’s eyes adjusted she saw scores of faces eerily lit from below by pale flickering candlelight.

“Surprise,” they yelled in unison.

“It’s a belated birth-date party,” Ronyn informed her, leaning over her shoulder and planting a clumsy kiss on her ear.

Felicia leaned into the kitchen and turned up the wick of the closest light. “We didn’t know you’d turned sixteen when you were with us,” Felicia said, giving the hand she still held a squeeze. “So... happy birth-date.”

Happy birth-date... A strange concept to someone who had dreaded the arrival of each and every birth-date she could remember marking. Yes they were marked, even in the dark place where she grew up – marked, but never celebrated. They were marked in that they told how close a child was getting to the day of their choosing, when a male – if big and strong enough – would be selected as a palace guard (elite, like Malvert if they were particularly large and strong), and a female – if deemed pretty enough – would be selected as a handmaid. Davran had marked every birth-date other than this one as a boy to avoid being taken by Saurian as such a handmaid, to avoid being taken at fifteen, and groomed for a life of sexual slavery that began at the age of eighteen. As Saurian’s daughter the fate had come close to befalling her at the age of sixteen.

Davran looked at her mother, and at Samaq – the man she had thought was her biological father until fairly recently – standing side by side behind a massive cake, the candles still flickering above it, casting a ripple of warm light that illuminated the smiles on their faces. Her mother looked beautiful in this world, having bathed and indulged in Felicia’s glorious potions. Varna’s skin glowed, her hair glistened,

and her eyes sparkled. The woman was more beautiful than Davran had ever realised.

“Come on then,” Ronyn’s brother, Kale, urged. “Blow out the candles, and make a wish. I’m starving.”

“You don’t know what starving is,” Varna sniped, looking Felicia in the eye, a slight snarl of contempt curling her upper lip.

“What was that?” Felicia demanded, the scowl on her face an obvious indication that she’d actually heard.

Every person in the room turned their gaze first to Varna, then to Felicia as she banged hard on the opposite side of the table; the fat in her arms and shoulders jiggled as the thump echoed around the silent room.

“You heard,” Varna growled. “That boy has enough fat on him ter last fer months. Starving! Try eating squeal bug stew.” Varna turned away from Felicia and glared at Kale.

“Poke your spite at me, not my boy. I’ll wring your scrawny neck, missis.”

“And you. Spoiling my daughter with fancy food and then—”

“I took care of Davran when she came to us. Petrified she was. In a right sorry state. If you’d been a better mother—”

“Take that back,” Samaq yelled, his face boiling with rage.

“Don’t you yell at my wife,” Brant shouted, pushing passed Davran, storming into the kitchen with his fist raised.

“You people,” Samaq snarled. “Yer think this world is yours because it looks more like the place yer’ve allus lived in, because our dwellings were built of crap and washed away when the sky-water came, because you’re housing us. I saw a man walking from the butcher today with payment of scraps that even Saurian wouldn’t have offered as food. The man is a skilled cabinetmaker. He mends chairs fer a fat butcher from your world an’ gets scraps fer his efforts. Sinew an’ fat. SCRAPs!”

“SCRAPS!” Councillor Storrit, chairman of the Dragon Trainers’ Guild, echoed, shouting above Varna and Felicia, who had gone off on another tangent. “That’s all there is to be had because of them razor creatures you dragged from your world.”

“We dragged,” Farfell shouted. “We dragged... What, like they’re our pets er somethin’? We’ve been hiding from them our entire lives. Were it not fer Davran—”

“Leave my daughter out er it,” Samaq demanded turning to face Farfell, globs of spit flying with his words.

“Yer What? She’s not even yer daughter,” Farfell responded. “My Maia gets killed by Davran’s actual butcher of a father while we search fer her in caves, and she’s not even there, but fancying it up in some far off world-o-plenty.”

The arguments grew and grew, tangent diverging from tangent, thread knotting onto thread. Tarrik backed up Farfell, Farfell argued against Tarrik’s support. Samaq backed up Varna. Brant supported Felicia. Varna told Samaq to mind his own, as Davran has nothing to do with him. Felicia argued that Samaq may not be Davran’s real father but at least he hadn’t threatened to kill her, unlike her scrawny mother, who had. Farfell’s twin sons, Melvin and Rowul, began arguing over the cake, breaking chunks off. Malvert pinned Storrit in a corner, threatening to feed him to the razor hounds. Kale grabbed a chunk of the cake and argued that his piece was smaller than those the twins had grabbed. Khalil, standing no taller than the cake, paced the table demanding they drop references to small, stating that he was sick and tired of the word being used in a derogatory fashion.

“SHUT UP!” Davran yelled from the doorway, seeing the aura of black contempt flooding the room with hate. A strange black/red mist swirled like wisps of smoke around their heads. “All of you just SHUT UP.”

“Do you see what I see?” Hesperus said

Davran turned to see Skappstekker, standing behind her in the hallway, shaking his head negatively in response to the question Hesperus had actually directed at her.

“Red,” said Davran, as that was the only thing that actually looked out of place, and therefore worthy of mention by the Keeper.

“Exactly,” Hesperus cut in, needing no further confirmation, as he grabbed Davran’s wrist and dragged her into the middle of the kitchen.

A whoosh of air expanded from them and pushed to the extremities of the room, blowing out the candles on the devastated cake, suffocating the glowing wicks that burned behind frosted globes, plunging the entire, suddenly silent room into darkness.