

Unable to Breathe

Ryder followed the scent that was uniquely Kyra. Screams echoed through the dark, and after several minutes, her smell changed. Tinged with iron, she was bleeding. Anger perfuse him in a way he couldn't understand. He ended up at several dead ends. Kyra was stumbling blindly through the caves. But he felt he was getting closer; her scent stronger.

He halted when he finally entered a large cavern. And froze, trying to take everything in. Then he saw her, her blue eyes sparkling in the dark of the cavern. He didn't move as her eyes darted around, panicked.

"Kyra?"

Her head swung in his direction but he knew she couldn't see as well in the dark as he could. "It smells like death," she whispered. "It's choking me." She clawed at her throat, causing small scratches that started to bleed.

"Kyra, are you hurt?" he asked, stepping toward her slowly. He wasn't sure what had prompted her to take off like she had, or why she was now curled up in a ball.

She shook her head no, and he could see tears streaking down her cheeks. "Did you know that air holds memories?" she said frantically. "Holds pictures, visions, life, and death, stories of what has come and gone. Lives it has touched."

Ryder hadn't known that. He couldn't imagine hearing and seeing what could be trapped in the air. As a Tracker, he knew the air held many things, things he explored as a Tracker. But as an Air Element, the air did something completely different to Kyra. And at the moment, it looked like it was killing her.

"The air," she looked around the dark cavern, "is trapped with the souls and lives of what happened here." Her body stiffened and then convulsed. Ryder rushed over to her. Once the convulsion stopped, she looked at him. Her bright blue eyes glowed in the dark, beautiful as ever. "Terrible things have happened here," she whispered in pain.

Kyra clutched at the front of his shirt. "There isn't any air down here, Ryder. I'm an Air Element and this air is dead" She shook her head, struggling to take a full breath. "I can't breathe down here." Tears ran down her face and he brushed them away.

"Then let's get out of here." He offered her his hand.

Kyra closed her eyes and leaned her head back. "There isn't any air down here and something horrible is going on. Look around! The souls are trapped. The screams held in the air are desperate to be heard. But they aren't because there isn't any air!" she bellowed.

Ryder stood and looked around. Several tables sat littered with things you would find in a laboratory—microscopes and incubators. A generator rested in one corner. "What is this?" Metal fridges hung open, the contents spilled all over the floor.

Kyra grabbed his pant leg. "Someone is doing something very, very wrong. Creating things, living and dead." She looked around frantically as if someone would stop her next words. "Mostly dead, and they hurt," she cried. "They hurt so badly."

More screams pierced the darkness, and Ryder thanked the Gods they weren't from Kyra. He sent up a prayer for the poor soul. Kyra wrapped her arms around her head, as if that would stop the sound. Kyra was right—something horrible was taking place in this mountain. And they needed to find out exactly what it was. But at that moment, his main concern was Kyra.

"Make it stop," she moaned. "Something very, very bad is happening down here," she said again.

Ryder couldn't agree more, but he had to get Kyra out of there. "Can you walk?" he asked, bending down again.

"There isn't any air down here. How can anything live where there isn't any air?" She cried, "It hurts." She clutched at her chest. "She is being tortured." More screaming from the tunnels.

Ryder wrapped his arms around Kyra and picked her up. "There is something very wrong with this place," she whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck. She pressed herself against him. "I am an Air Element. I can't breathe down here." She emphasized it by taking short little gasps. "It kills us, drives us insane. We need to be able to breathe air, fresh air."

That information would've been nice to know before they'd gone looking in the caves in the first place. He was going to kick someone's ass over this. She should never have been brought here. Just being in the caves was deadly for her. Damn it. She'd just become a liability. And he didn't do liabilities.

"Why?" Ryder asked her. "Why would you come into this place knowing that?"

"The lights and the voices," she whispered her breath catching as she tried to breathe. Kyra looked up at him. Her eyes had turned silver. It was an eerie color that made her look unearthly. "Ryder, I can't breathe."

Ryder knew it was a bad idea, but he couldn't help himself. "You can breathe." He whispered the words against her lips and she inhaled the breath he offered. "See?" She nodded slightly and he gently blew into her slack mouth. Her eyes closed and her head leaned against his shoulder. Before he knew it, his lips were pressed against hers. He told himself that he was just helping her. Pulling away, he drew in more air and inhaled her beautiful scent. He nuzzled her neck and just behind her ear, inhaling deeply where her scent was the strongest. Kyra tilted her head and breathed in his exhalation. For Ryder, it was the most erotic feeling in the world; he would breathe out and she would inhale, pulling it deeply into herself. They breathed like that until Kyra had relaxed against him. He held her close, his lips brushing against hers several times. His tongue dipped in to taste her, and he stumbled against the wall, one hand going out to catch himself. Her taste went straight to his head, like alcohol. If another scream hadn't erupted through the cave, he would've lingered longer, exploring every part of her mouth, her taste, her smell.