

The Phoenix

Mielea closed her eyes, silently drawing a deep breath. As she did so, the sharp, pungent smell of the volcano's toxic gases made her throat and nostrils burn, the acrid feeling spreading down to her lungs. For a long moment, she held her breath, savoring the pain. Then she exhaled, the gas burning almost twice as much as it made its way over her throat again.

Slowly she opened her eyes, surveying the surroundings. The volcanic vapors made her eyes water and smart, adding to the pains already emanating from all around her body.

Lava and hot magma ran freely all around her, the rocky outcropping she was standing on protecting her. Her body was riddled with burns: minor blisters on the neck, deep wounds finding their way to the nerves on the legs and arms.

"From the fire we came," Mielea spoke, her voice rasp and hoarse. She would have wanted to swallow, but her throat was dry. "In fire we are all shaped, in fire do we grow. I give my greetings to the purest of this power of creation, the cleansing and renewing heat of the volcano."

She drew a deep breath and continued. "Through pain comes growth, and without pain, there can be no birth. I give myself as a sacrifice to the essential element of fire, the essential element of pain."

Slowly, Mielea took off the simple sandals she had been wearing. Taking support from the stones so she wouldn't lose her balance, she lowered her left foot into the stream of lava. Inhaling sharply as the searing pain shot through her leg, she killed the reflex to withdraw it through sheer force of will.

She paused for a moment, struggling to bring the pain under control. Her foot was sinking into the hot lava, leaving it immersed in the magma halfway up the knee. A long, torturous moment later, she found enough willpower to lift her right foot into the stream, as well.

The agony was overwhelming now, but Mielea still suppressed the impulse to scream. Her mouth was wide open, the toxic gases filling her lungs, her quickly-weakening legs soon giving away. She stared in front of her, but her eyes no longer saw, her mind too possessed by the pain to pay the surroundings any attention anymore.

Then she blinked, and for a moment Mielea saw again, a huge flame building up at the top of the volcano. The brightness was painful to behold, but in the face of what she was already enduring, it was a drop in the ocean.

The flame formed, took shape - it was a man, a monster, a child, a beast, a woman. It held her gaze, it dominated her mind. It surrounded her, enveloped her in heat, but now it was a pleasant heat, a comforting, healing warmth. It passed over her wounds, fading away their pain. It caressed her, pleased her - it was a sensual, longing feeling, a feeling of having returned to one's origins.

'You have done well, child,' a voice so soft Mielea couldn't tell if she'd really heard it or not, a voice echoing in the crackle of the fire.

"Like a phoenix," Mielea whispered and lost her consciousness, plunging head-first into the hot, moldering lava.

Consciousness was slow to return, elusively playing on the edge of her mind. She was chasing the wind, trying to step on her own shadow.

The flame-beast still watched her. The afterimage of it had been burned on her retina, her constant companion in the dreamscape. But no matter what she did, she couldn't place a form on it - it was constantly changing, so subtly she couldn't even see the change before it had already taken place.

'Be diverse', the wind whispered. 'Be shifting, flexible, and you will never be destroyed.'

The sun was bright in the sky, and Mielea raised her hand to cover her eyes. When she looked away from the sky, she saw her own shadow, frozen in place.

She raised her foot and stepped on her shadow, and the dreamscape faded...