

Fire and Ice

Book One: The Fey

1

He was walking in the woods, one warm summer day. I watched, unnoticed, from a nearby tree. He was wandering, daydreaming, until, smack, he tripped over a stick and fell headfirst into Springmaid's Lake. I laughed so hard that I toppled from the branches. He seemed less than amused as he climbed out of the now murky water.

"My name's Ember," I said. The two ice blue eyes that stared out at me from behind his ankle-length silver strands, now stringy and sopping wet, looked hot enough to sear my flesh.

"Listen, I'm sorry." "Don't be so huffy," I added quietly to myself.

He started to walk away with a cat-like sway that matched perfectly with his lithe, waif frame, soft brown leather pants, and cream leather vest. Then, he stopped. He turned around and just looked at me for a minute. I used that minute to examine the expansive line of chest that was showing, due to the soggianness of his shirt. It was well muscled, in a compact sort of way, hairless, and as stony white as the rest of his features.

Once we'd both gawked as long as was polite, he said, "My name's Ice. Pleased to meet you." He stuck out a still dripping hand, and I took it.

"So, whatcha doin' here, Ice? You new?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, guardedly.

"You a drifter?"

"No."

"Rogue?"

"No."

"Bandit?"

"Look, what business of yours is it why I wander?"

By this time he was rather angry with me, and the fact that I didn't deserve it made me a little irritated too.

"Well then, Mr. Cranky pants, my next question is who shoved that stick up your butt and would you like some help removing it?" His face turned bright red, which is hard to do when your complexion is the color of bleached flour, and I swear I saw smoke coming out of his ears. As he stood there and started to sputter, I pinched his behind as hard as I could and ran for my life. He let out a tremendous roar and took off after me. His legs are longer than mine, he's 2'4", while I'm 2' nothing, so he caught me quickly. When he did, he wrestled me to the ground and about tickled me silly. He didn't stop until we were both laughing so hard we had to gasp for air. After we relearned how to breathe, he said in a serious tone, "You're a very bold girl, Ember."

"You bet your bottom!" I said, raising my eyebrows in jest.

"I think it's taken enough damage for today," he laughed. It was a sweet, melodious sound, like chimes in the wind. He smiled, and it melted my bones and warmed my soul.

"You can't do that to me," I said, my voice betraying my emotion. "I'm a fire faerie," I continued. He broadened his smile, and said,

"Members of the Barrak tribe of Sebentaria do anything they wish." His voice was husky, like deer fur along the skin—he was doing it on purpose. I called him on it, slapping his chest and using the leverage to push myself to my feet. He continued to lie there like a proverbial sex-god, his face a mask of questioning indifference. I chuckled a little and started to walk back towards the lake. When he didn't get up after a few paces, I turned around and asked,

“Aren’t you coming?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said, getting to his feet. When I got back to the lake, I caught a glimpse of myself in the water. My flame red hair, characteristic of my race, was filled with twigs and leaves. My matching red leather shorts and midriff halter-top didn’t fare much better. My golden skin was covered in dust. I took a moment to recompose myself, and when I finished picking out all the things that didn’t belong, I stole a glance at Ice. He was looking in a quite interested fashion at my derrière. Oh well, I guess no one could blame him. My shorts were awfully short and my whole body is well toned. He caught me peeking and looked away, embarrassed.

Well, now what?” he asked.

“You’re the one on the mission,” I answered. This seemed to unnerve him, though I didn’t know why.

“Is there any way that I could charm you into taking me to the palace?” he asked.

“If that’s where you want to go. You look like you could use a warm bath, some clean, dry clothes, and a good, hot meal.”

“Lead the way.”

With that, we walked in relative silence back through town to the castle in the center, each lost in our own thoughts. Who was this handsome stranger and what did he want with my family? Too many questions, zero on the answers list. I hate that.

2

When we reached the palace, Magie, our washerwoman herded us off to the respective baths, men’s and ladies being separate, of course. I stripped off the sticky, dirty clothes and sank down into the warm, sudsy water. After I had soaked for about twenty minutes, I scrubbed off the remains of the day’s adventure and slipped out of the tub. I wrapped in a soft, tan, cotton towel

embroidered with the royal seal, two faeries fighting with spears. The background is half earth green and half royal blue, and the faeries wear rust colored tunics belted with gold rope. I shook my head and walked over to the mirror. I began to comb through my hair, again noting that when wet, it's the color of quickly cooling blood. I hate how short it is, it doesn't even reach my shoulders. Father and I will definitely be having a talk about growing it out, and very soon. I'm not a little girl anymore, and if I'm responsible for acting like an adult, the least they can do is let me grow my hair long like one. I started to turn away, and noticed how bright the gold was in my skin that day. Its base is pure, milky white, with gold undertones, but if I stay in the sun too long, it starts to shine, and the gold becomes like glitter covering my entire body. The marks of royalty aren't always subtle. It has been the sign of our people since the beginning of time. My family has always ruled this land, since before written history anyway. No one knows of a time before the Seraelia's ruled. It has been foretold that one day the golden mark will leave my family and a new leader will arise. Actually, it says a dual leader. Most believe that this means that Azaria will be taken over by a foreign land, but I don't know what to make of it. Anyhow, I quickly dressed in a light, tan cotton shift, and hurried to return to Ice.

He was already waiting inside the banquet hall. By the look on his face, he hadn't endured too many of the tortures I know the chambermaids could dish out. The impossibly long, cherry wood table was covered with food—aphids, boiled greens, fried gummet roots, and, oohhh, at the very end of the table, I spotted my favorite, darven berries. I had been scouting them out in the forest when I found Ice. They are definitely worth the bother, all red and crunchy and tangy but sweet. Someone coughed, and it brought my attention back to the head of the table, where my father sat.

“If you would please take your seat, Princess, then we could begin.”

As he said the word “Princess,” Ice choked on whatever was inside the delicate crystal goblet that he held carefully in his left hand. At first I couldn't imagine what the garnet colored liquid was, but then it dawned on me—it was fresh blood. This must be some sort of special occasion.

Oopsies, I forgot. How typical of me.

Anyway, when Ice recovered from his little mishap enough to speak, he coughed, "You're Princess Ember?"

The emphasis on "You're" and "Princess" made me start to get angry. "Ya-ah, is that a problem? Why do you think I offered to help you? How do you think we got into the palace?" People who don't think irritate me. My irritation made him indignant.

"I thought you were a servant on holiday and you going to help me get an audience with the princess. Why would I ever think you were royalty? What kind of princes runs around in the trees, wearing such inappropriate attire? Where were your guards?"

Just then, father interjected with, "Yes, Ember, where were your guards? How many times do you have to be told about leaving the palace alone? You're going to get hurt."

Mother interrupted, "Can't we please have this argument with less people around?"

"There are never less people around. This house is always full of people. Why do you think I leave by myself? I get so sick of it. But I suppose that it can wait until after dinner." Father started to object, but mother silenced him with a look. The rest of the guests mingled quietly, but the Seraelias ate in silence.

Once all present had eaten their fill, father suggested that we retire to the drawing room for a smoke. Women do not smoke, of course, but mother and I both understood that our presence was requested also. Not a word was exchanged during the short trip down the hall. Father settled in his large, brown, Sakra wood chair, with its bottom strung tight with green willow branches. Mother and I took the cream sofa with the burgundy and teal embroidered leaves. Ice stood by the door, leaning causally on the hand carved frame. Little did he know he was pressing his body into my dead relatives. Upon death, we all return to the fire from which we come, and a carved wooden effigy becomes our home, somewhere in the walls of the palace. Gone but not forgotten, we can still lend

our strength and support. In times of danger, many things in the palace can be called upon for aid, but that's a tale to be told in time. Since it's usually considered rude to rub your behind against the remains of someone's ancestors, mother insisted that Ice take a seat.

He sat in the chair next to the door, the one carved to look like a swan. I'm certain he didn't know that with the proper words and a little faerie blood, that chair would take flight. No matter, there was no need for that. Father had had enough niceties, and began his usual tirade. "Ember, how many times do you have to be told? You are the most reckless, ungrateful child our family has ever seen! You don't even have sense enough to stay home of the feast of Enzenar. Or did you forget? 'I forgot, daddy, I'm sorry.' 'Daddy, I didn't mean it.' 'It won't happen again daddy.' Well, no more. You are a princess and you will act like one, do you hear me? You will not leave court for at least a month, and after that, only when I am sure that you are responsible enough to return."

What? "But daddy!"

"No buts."

Well that was it I stormed out of the room while everyone else watched. A few feet away, I slunk down against the wall. I couldn't know what happened after that, but a few minutes later Ice emerged, walked over, and sat down next to me.

"You really did it this time. Your mother's trying to talk to him, but it's not doing much good."

Just then, I got an idea. "Hey Ice, take me with you. You said you needed an audience with Princess Ember, and I'm right here. I'll help you, do whatever you want, just get me out of here."

"What? Are you mad? Every guard in the kingdom will be after me! I'll be beheaded!"

No, you won't, I'll make sure of it. C'mon, please, I want to help, and I'm getting out of here, with or without you."

A look of absolute horror crossed his face, but through clenched teeth, he agreed. We walked calmly back to my room, and, like a gentleman, he waited outside while I gathered my things.

I shoved some clothes in a pack, and a few other little tidbits I knew would come in handy, then put on a big black cloak over my outfit and pulled the hood down low over my face. If it could get me out this morning, it could get me out now. Ice and I went to the kitchen and hoarded as much food as we could carry, at his insistence, for the journey ahead. We snuck out of the gates and headed out for what would be the wildest ride of my life.

3

Once we were a safe distance from town, I asked, "So what exactly is this mystical quest you're on anyway?"

"You really wanna know?"

"Well ya-ah, if I'm going to help you, shouldn't I know what's going on?"

"I can see why our parents get frustrated with you. If you must know, let's make camp. I'll tell you once we have a place to sleep and a fire."

By this time, it had been full dark for a while, and there were no lingering rays of sunlight to guide us in our preparations. I gathered sticks while Ice unrolled some strange, yucky looking cloth for god knows what. I made a successful fire pit and with a little faerie magic, we had a nice warm blaze to park next to.

"Have a seat," he said, patting one of the yucky cloth things.

"On that?" I said, wrinkling up my nose.

"This is called a bed roll. It's what you sleep on when you're away from your four poster with silk sheets and down blankets. Might as well get used to it now."

I stared at it a while longer and, eventually, sat down. We got out a loaf of dry crusty bread and some cheese for a midnight snack. Once we'd settled in for the night, Ice began his tale.

"I don't know what you've been told about the Sebentarians, but I'm going to tell you the real

story. My people aren't barbarians. We abandoned the former court structure years ago and our people became nomadic, but we still worship Ace the same as you do. We didn't even want to abandon the court, but my family came into other responsibilities. Nevertheless, my people's lifestyle is irrelevant. Back to the story. The Denvens have ruled since the beginning of eternity. Legend states that the first Denven came directly from the jeweled tree itself, birthed from one of its diamond encrusted seedpods. No matter though, our people have guarded and protected the tree for as long as we have existed..."

"The jeweled tree is a myth," I interrupted. "No one has even seen it, or proven its existence."

"That's what we wanted you to think. If you were the keeper of the root of all magic, would you project it to the world?"

"Can you prove it?"

"Ye who disbelieve," he said, pulling an expensive looking ring from one of his delicately manicured fingers.

"Hey, that's mine!" I exclaimed, "I was given that at my christening!" I tried to grab it away, but he pulled back his hand like a flash of lightning.

"It is not, you dirty crook! This is my family ring, the last thing my father gave me before he died. How dare you try to take this from me? Don' you have enough of your own riches in your palace, you spoiled little brat?"

During all the commotion, we had both stood up, and I had looked down at my hand. My ring was firmly in place. I was shaking with fear that Ice would leave me here and red with embarrassment because if he did it would be my own fault. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Think before you speak! "...I'm sorry Ice, I thought it was mine. I have one just like it, right here on my finger." I offered my hand. "See?"

"I already know," he said scornfully. "Now, where was I? Oh, yes, the tree. I was told that one of each of the elementals had one of these rings. Recently I found out that there was a book that tells the history of the rings, and a prophecy of the future."

"Was?" I interrupted. "Where is it now?"

"Destroyed."

I gasped "But..."

"Now, just wait a minute. The reason I know about it, The Book of Zorn, is because I found a couple of pages. That's how I knew to look for you. Would you care to read them?"

I knew my eyes were wide and shiny, but I was perfectly calm as I extend my hand to take the ancient text. I even said "thank you," as I took the pages from his hands.

I read voraciously what little there was, and when I was through, I had as many questions as answers.

"So let me get this straight. The jeweled tree is the source of all magic, and you've been keeping it holed up in some frozen cave like the parchment said to. You abandoned the monarchy to care for the tree, right?"

"Yes."

"So where do I come in? Sure, I've got the ring now, and if all this is true, it contains a sliver from the heart of the tree, a drop of blood from the original fire faerie, and truly isn't made of stone, but petrified sap from the mother of us all, but the prophesy has not yet come."

"Actually, it has," he said solemnly. He hesitated before continuing, "One day, many many years ago, a shiny black seedpod began to grow on the tree. We wondered what could be inside this beautiful new mystery, but as all the fey know, the magic of life must be waited upon. We waited and watched as the thing grew. Unlike any other seedpod, it never opened to give forth is fruit, just kept getting bigger and bigger. Then, one day, when I was an infant, a second pod began growing beside

the first. More and more pods kept growing over the years, until they covered an entire limb of the tree. My father knew that something was wrong, because an awful stench grew, and, one by one, the pods began to drip a thick, black, poisonous liquid. Wherever it touched the tree, it withered. Father knew that if he left the onyx pods alone, they would kill the tree, so one fateful morning, he went in with his ax and chopped off the foul limb. When it fell to the ground, the largest and oldest pod broke open. A vile liquid poured fourth, and Xendar stepped out.

“The dark heart?” I said, near tears and shaking with fear. Ice continued as if he were the only being left in the universe. Maybe for him, he was.

“One by one, the other pods burst open, and hundreds of horrible creatures were born. From the oldest pods came the ugliest creatures, but the newer ones held somewhat well formed beings. Finally, only one tiny pod remained whole. Xendar took that pod and ran off with it to Tareb Island. Before he left, he gave orders for some of his creatures to...to...”

He couldn't finish. By this time, his eyes had gotten insanely wide from a mix of anger and fear. I knew the rest of the story. His parents had died, and it hadn't been pretty. Ice's jaw and fists were clenched, and he looked as if at any moment he would tear himself to bits. I've never been a bleeding heart, but I was ready to lay down and die for this sad, scared little boy standing before me. I wrapped my arms around him, and knew why his parents had named him Ice. I could feel the frost circulating in my bloodstream upon contact. I called to the part of me that calls to fire, and spread my warmth into his body. After about fifteen minutes, a small whisper slipped nearly inaudibly out of his throat.

“He gave me the ring and told me to run.”

“I know, I know, shhh,” I cooed in my most soothing voice.

“But I didn't even try to save them. I just ran.”

"And because you ran, you lived, and now everyone else can live because we will save them. I promise."

I could tell how much he needed to believe that, needed to believe he had done the right thing, the only thing. We slumped down onto one of the bedrolls, and I pulled one of the blankets over us. We slept wrapped in the blanket and the comfort of each other's arms until the sun rose the next morning. It was a fitful sleep for both of us, Ice lost in his own nightmares, I in the ones I had seen in his eyes, and we were both glad when those first gentle rays peeked over the horizon.

4

"So, where are we headed?" I asked.

"Now or eventually?"

"Both," I answered.

"Well, right now we're in search of the other two rings. One belongs to an earth faerie and one belongs to a water faerie. The book of Zorn said that the four..."

"Strengths must unite to divide the weaknesses, I know. I read it too, remember?"

"Well, then why did you ask?"

"Because I need to know if we're looking for Ella or Aria first."

"Who are they?"

"Oh, just a couple of friends of mine with rings just like ours."

"You already know who holds the rings? This cuts months of our searching!"

He looked like he was about to hug me, but then he remembered that he was trying to play tough guy, so he settled back into his serious demeanor.

"Well, which of them is closer? We'll head there first."

“Well then, it’s off to Veredun to find Ella.” We traveled hard all that day and most of the next, hardly exchanging a word except to comment on direction or to agree to stop and set up camp. Then, we arrived in Verdun with the last rays of sunlight on the third day of our expedition. I started to march right up to the castle to ask to be let in when Ice grabbed me by the shoulder, violently jerking me back, and hissed in my ear,

“Just where do you think you’re going?”

I spun around, angry. “Up to the castle to get Ella, where do you think, you overbearing bumble?”

“Oh, will you just walk right in and pronounce you Princess Ember Seraelia of Azaria, when no doubt word has reached this land that you’ve been kidnapped. That’ll be a fine end to this little adventure.”

I was indignant. “Well you didn’t have to be so rude about it,” I huffed.

“Where is her room?” he asked.

“In the left tower on the seventh floor.”

“Good. We’ll scale the wall once it’s full dark.”

“But the attendants...” I started to protest.

He interrupted, “You just leave them to me.”

“You’ll not harm anyone in the house of Mattice, not with my permission.” I was furious. How could he think I would lead him here and just let him do this? What a fool.

“I will harm none, I swear it on my word of honor.”

“If you touch so much as one hair...”

“I swore on my word of honor, what more do you want from me?”

He was angry. Very angry, in fact. I felt sullen and we waited just outside the city gates for full dark. We unrolled our beds to nap for the next couple of hours, as we would get no sleep that night.

As stealthy as a thief, night came upon us and it was time to move. We wrapped up in our cloaks and approached the gate. The city guard stopped us, naturally.

“Who are you and what is your business?”

Ice stepped up to the challenge. “We are humble servants of the King of Azaria come in search of news of the Princess Ember. Might we find refuge in your kingdom this night before continuing about our business?”

The guard looked unconvinced, but he let us in anyway, as he could find no fault in Ice’s little story. We crept along the alleys up to the castle, and Ice pulled a grappling hook out of his bag.

“Where did that come from?” I whispered.

“Always be prepared,” he replied as he swung the hook right onto Ella’s windowsill. He climbed up and perched precariously on the ledge. He motioned for me to follow. I wanted to ask him if he was nuts, because we would never both fit on that narrow ledge, but he would never have heard me unless I shouted, which was out of the question. So I climbed up. He gave me a hand up to the ledge and put his arm around my back to keep me from falling as we peered silently through the window. Ella had not yet gone to bed, so the room was empty. Ice took a tiny, pointed metal stick out of his bag of tricks and cut a neat little square out of the center of the glass, slightly bigger than his fist. Then he put on some thick gloves and proceeded to break out all of the glass from the window. With one hand in front and one behind, he pulled until the frame was clean. I was amazed at this little trick, and I said so as we stepped inside. I also told him about Ella’s nurse that still slept in her bed with her.

“That could pose a problem,” he mumbled to himself, “but I’ve just the solution.”

We stood in the closet behind Ella's lavish garments to wait until all was in place. Finally, after what seemed like hours to me, Ella and Sandra, her nurse, came in, got ready for bed, and put out the lights. We waited for nearly an hour before Ice made his move. He had a small leather pouch in hand as he dropped flat on the floor and scooted, inch by inch, out of the closet. When he was finally free of the tangle of garments, he stood and walked very carefully over to the bed, his leather boots never making a sound. When he got within a hand span of the bed, he pulled a small amount of powder out of the leather bag and sprinkled some of it on Sandra's face. Then he motioned for me to come out. I stepped carefully from the closet and tiptoed over to where he stood. He walked around the bed and, simultaneously, grabbed Ella up out of the bed, pinned her arms down with his right arm and clamped his left hand over her mouth. He pulled her up against his chest and said, "Shhh."

Her eyes were wide but she could see me, so she didn't struggle. I walked around and put my hand on her shoulder and whispered, "Ella, I have something very important to talk to you about. I need you to pack some things quickly and come with us." Quickly I added, "It'll be fun." She got out her leather bag and packed up some clothes and a few other little things and we all went back out of the window. We walked carefully into the garden and sat down on one of the many stone benches.

The first words out of Ice's mouth were, "Where's the ring?"

"You can just hold your horses," I snapped. He didn't have to be such a jerk all the time, contrary to popular belief.

"I have it around my neck," Ella said, tugging the silver chain holding her ring from beneath her blouse.

"Good," Ice grumped.

"We 'kidnapped,'" I made the quote signs, "You from your room tonight because we're off on a little adventure and we need you to come along. "

“Little Adventure?” Ice hissed, “Is that all this is to you? You moronic child!”

“Will you shut up for just one minute and let me finish? Quit being a jerk.”

“A jerk?” His eyes widened in rage. “Somebody around here has to be an adult....” I waved my hand to silence him.

“We have to get Aria and stop the dark heart from taking over the universe. I know it sounds corny, but it’s the true. I read in a scrap of a book Ice found,” I pointed at him, sulking as usual, “that the four who bear the rings are the only ones who can defeat Xendar and restore peace and goodness to their rightful places.” Ella sort of frowned at me.

“Ember, when are you going to stop with all this nonsense, running around in the middle of the night on mystic quests to save the world? We are adults now, we can’t continue with this sort of folly. I have things to do tomorrow, meetings to attend. I have to be fitted for my birthday gown. I can not possibly follow you to Ace knows where to do some dancing ritual to the moon. I’ve got to get some sleep.” She started back towards the castle.

“Wait, Ella, you have to believe me. I’ll show you the book.” I motioned for Ice to hand over the pages. “Here.” She sat and read what little there was.

“Well then. I guess you finally do get to be the savior of the world.” She smiled, eyes wide with girlish excitement. “I love you Ember, you always have the most fun.” She paused for a moment, grinning like a fool. “Let’s get moving then. Ari will never believe this!”

We walked back through the streets and camped in the woods that night, and headed for the Fedorian Ocean with the first light of day. Aria was a water faerie, and the most noble in all her “lands” as well. We had all grown up together, Ari, Ella, and I, we had played together as children.

Insert mid description here...journey, etc.

Find Ari, move back towards Azaria, great battle.

Elves between? Find others and bring Ari in last?