



Fire Girl



By Ardath Rekha

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Synopsis: Pyreon, the Fire Queen, heads to Crematoria to find out if Riddick was successful in breaking Kyra (not Jack) out of the prison for her.

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The Fire Elemental, Pyreon, strode across the surface of Crematoria. Periodically she paused, examining the newly-charred remains of escapees with a worried frown. Things, she thought, had not gone well. But the two bodies she feared seeing most of all among the remains were not there. There was hope yet. She just needed to make sure.

Entry into the prison was a simple matter for a being who ruled fire. In the last five years, she had become confident and adept with her gifts and no longer feared or hid them as she once had. The forges were hers to command now.

"This," she muttered, taking in the chaos around her, "is not good."

Bodies littered the place, including several she recognized. Not the ones she feared seeing dead, though, and she consoled herself with that. Maybe Toombs had gotten them out safely. Still, she had to be sure. She strode deeper into the prison.

If someone had wanted to create a replica of Hell itself, she thought, they'd have made this. The place had fallen into chaos. The guard dogs had been loosed, and the guards appeared to have all been killed. People were hiding from the beasts, which were currently feasting on a prisoner they'd managed to corner.

"What the hell happened here?" she sighed.

"Your friend did, Lady," a familiar voice answered her. "A little help here might be nice."

Pyreon turned to see Toombs watching her from behind the bars of one of the hounds' cages, watching with the hungry eyes of a man who hadn't eaten in more than a day. She walked over to the cage and opened it for him.

"Riddick was here?" she asked, needing to be sure he meant what she thought.

"Oh yeah he was," Toombs grumbled. "Left me behind when he went, too. You Elementals owe me big time. My whole troop's been slaughtered."

Pyreon winced. She'd seen their bodies – some of them – when she'd come in. "I'm sorry. How did this happen? The mission was supposed to be relatively easy."

Toombs fell in beside her as she headed for the surface again, warily keeping her between him and the roaming dogs, who refused to go anywhere near her. "The best laid plans of mice and pretty girls, you know what I'm saying?"

She glanced at him, genuinely baffled. "No."

Toombs shrugged. "Things fuck up."

"Such as?"

"Such as the Necromongers got to Helion Prime early. Such as that Imam guy was killed by them—"

"Uncle Abu's dead?" The pang that went through her was intense. *I never should have left. I should have stayed and overseen all of this, not hidden away like I was still some scared thirteen-year-old.* "What of Lajjun and Ziza?"

"They're safe," Toombs grumbled. "We got 'em clear. And then we had to go grab Riddick from the Necromongers because they were gonna put the whammy on his brain."

"God, this is a mess!" Pyreon groaned. "He was just supposed to get them clear, and then come here for her, and then meet me."

"Maybe you should have tried *telling* him that," Toombs shot back.

"If you'll remember, that was the approach I wanted to take. This cloak-and-dagger crap was Aereon's idea." Pyreon touched her hand to the lock on one of the surface doors, melting it. She opened the door cautiously, mindful of the effect full sunlight would have on the man behind her.

The intense light of Crematoria's sun caressed her skin, fire stoking fire. She estimated they had a minute or two until it set and it was safe for Toombs to set foot on the surface.

"Did he at least get Kyra out of here?" she asked while they waited.

"Yeah, she was with him when a bunch of 'em left. Didn't seem happy with him, though." He sounded amused.

"She doesn't like him," she commented with a sigh. "She never approved of me getting so close to him, and she *really* was pissed off when I told her about Chillingsworth."

"Her own damn fault, if you ask me," Toombs chuckled. "She was your bodyguard, right? So if she'd been *with* you—"

“She was drawing the assassins away,” Pyreon interrupted, leaping to Kyra’s defense as she always did. Aereon, too, hadn’t been understanding and had refused to engineer a formal release. *Everybody’s always blaming my friends for things that are my fault.*

The last rays of daylight vanished and she opened the door wide for Toombs, heading out onto the surface. There was an excellent rocky outcropping halfway to the hangar, that most people missed because it was off to the side of a straight run, in which a person could comfortably hide from the sun during its next pass. She headed for it, motioning for him to follow her.

“Still,” Toombs answered after a moment. “In that case she doesn’t have a right to get mad at you for taking care of yourself. I thought you did a damn good job, myself. That was an impressive shot.”

A hint of a smile crept over Pyreon’s lips as she glanced at the mercenary. “Just how many times have you watched that security tape?”

Toombs grinned. “A whole hell of a lot of times. Had to study how Riddick took Junner down, you know. In case I got stuck in hand-to-hand with him. What *I* don’t get is why you just didn’t use your whammy to get out of there.”

Pyreon rolled her eyes. “You do know the definition of ‘incognito,’ right? I was *hiding*. I didn’t know for sure *who* I could trust.”

“So you’d kill for the man but you wouldn’t tell him you were the Fire Queen?”

She shrugged and sighed, feeling more than a little guilty about that. “I guess that’s about the size of it.”

It had been three years before her desperation to find Kyra had driven her to tell Imam the truth about who she was, and beg for his help. Riddick had been long gone at that point, although she’d suspected even then that the cleric had known how to reach him. She still didn’t know how she was going to explain all of this to Riddick when they saw each other again.

The sun would rise soon, she realized with a frown. Toombs was dawdling, checking bodies. “Hurry,” she told him, wracking her brain for something she could do to protect him if the sun rose before they reached the shelter. Watching someone die was something she hated more than anything; she’d seen far too much death in her short life.

Toombs picked up his pace a little, but not enough. *Why is he doing this? If I can’t guard him from the sun’s rays—*

Inspiration struck and left her feeling a little foolish. She knew how to protect him. She’d have realized it even sooner except that her last several years of life had been all about *avoiding* the grand gesture, not engaging in it.

As the first hints of dawn touched the horizon, the ground beneath her shoes began to smoke. Soon, a sooty black cloud billowed around her, throwing its shadow over Toombs as he walked. It arched over him, to continue its protective effect as the sun rose higher.

If I’d thought of this sooner, I could have been here to see them across the planet’s surface, she thought to herself. Then her eyes passed over the remains of a Necromonger soldier. *And probably fallen right into the Lord Marshal’s lap. Damn it. What were **they** doing here?*

Her ship was waiting in the hangar. She reached out to it and started the engines with a thought, remembering how she’d done the opposite years ago.

Never had a doubt. She’d said that to Riddick when he’d returned to the cave, and she’d been genuinely glad to see him, but he’d never known what she’d *really* meant by that. Huddled with the others, she’d been struggling to find a way to save them all without tipping her hand. One thing she *had* been able to do with ease was reach out and suppress the fuel cells of the skiff, hoping that Riddick would come back for Fry – and consequently all of them – when he realized he couldn’t make it take off on his own... and hoping she could stretch the last of their light until he did. At least she’d sensed the bioluminescence of the glow-worms before the flame had failed, and had summoned the little creatures to her. It had all worked out far better than she had deserved, she thought.

Nobody had ever remarked on her peculiarities, among the other crash survivors. When she’d remained fully dressed in the baking heat – despite the fact that her long sleeves were *not* the cooling type worn by Imam, his boys, and even Paris – seemingly nobody had thought a thing about it. A normal girl would have collapsed from heat stroke in that getup, but she’d been just fine. She’d been relieved by that, because Kyra’s instructions (“Tell no one. Show no one. Lie if you must, *kill* if you must, but *don’t let anybody know who and what you are!*”) had been very specific. And then there had been Johns.

Pyreon knew better than to trust mercenaries, even the ones her people employed, and she’d quickly known that Johns was the worst kind of all. If he’d realized how high the price on her head was, he’d have

gleefully sold her out. She hadn't dared reveal herself, in any way, while he lived, and by the time Riddick killed him, so many had died that she'd feared the recriminations the survivors would aim at her if they knew how much power she'd had at her disposal.

The ramp on her ship opened with her approach and she sighed, remembering. Regretting. She could have been a living flame for them, using her burgeoning powers to drive the darkness back from around them and keep the creatures at bay. If she'd dared, she could have made that terrifying run through the darkness into a well-lit stroll. She hadn't, and she blamed herself for every single death that had occurred in the darkness.

Toombs seated himself beside her in the cockpit and began hitting switches. She frowned at him.

"What are you doing?"

"Tapping into the security cameras. I figure we can see what happened, who made it out of here alive." He grinned at her. "See? I'm still useful."

She chuckled, shaking her head. Toombs annoyed her sometimes, and she still hated thinking about her brief stay on the *Kubla Khan*, but he *was* good at what he did. In a moment they were watching the surveillance videos for the last two days.

"Wait! There!" She held her breath as Toombs rewound to the first appearance of people in the hangar, and then watched the scene unfold. Her stomach slowly clenched into a hard knot.

"That's not good," he said beside her.

"God, everything went wrong!" she groaned, and then her eyes widened. "What the... Kyra, no!"

"You're kidding. She ran for their ship? I thought bodyguards with her kind of experience had some basic brain power."

Pyreon shot a sour look at Toombs, but she couldn't really argue. *What the hell was going through her head?*

She knew, though, or thought she did. After all, she'd been the one who had filled Kyra in on all the particulars of the plan, mere days before Riddick was due to arrive. Kyra had known that Aereon would be on the Basilica soon, to try to negotiate a truce again, and that whatever mental hold the Necromongers had on her could be broken by the Air Queen. And, of course, she felt no real liking or loyalty for Riddick, who had—

Damn it, how come I only just saw it? She was jealous of him. Because he became my protector when she couldn't be.

She wondered what kinds of things the two had said to each other in the bowels of Crematoria. Had Kyra stuck to the story? Had she said the things she'd been instructed to, so that he'd believe he was looking at "Jack?"

"He won't do it," Imam had told her when she'd first suggested asking Riddick to rescue her friend. "He is a pragmatist. If it were you in the prison, he might be willing to enter it to bring you out. But a woman he's never met? Even if he consented to do it, which I doubt, the price would be higher than you can pay while the war is still on." And Aereon had agreed.

Hence the deception, she thought as she began powering up her ship. *Oh what a tangled web we weave...*

Everything had gone wrong. Absolutely everything. No wonder nobody had made it to the rendezvous.

Toombs strapped in beside her as she prepared to launch. "So where are we heading?"

"The Basilica."

His eyes widened and he stared at her in shock. "Are you out of your frigging gourd, little girl? You want to talk about 'out of the frying pan and into the fire—'"

"I *am* the fire."

"You can't just sashay in there and ask for Kyra, you know. They've been after you for years. Do you even remember how all this began? They killed your mother, and if Kyra hadn't gotten you away—"

"I remember *very* well what happened, Toombs!" she snapped. "I'm not leaving her behind again!"

"She'd tell you to, and you know it," he persisted.

Pyreon sighed and rubbed at the bridge of her nose, knowing that he was right but not wanting to admit it. Kyra had tried to talk her out of the rescue attempt, too.

"Leave it," she'd said, leaning against one of Crematoria's walls and sighing. "I'm okay here. It's not the Ritz, but nobody messes with me, and I get enough to eat. Long as I know you're alive and well, I'm happy. Means I did my job right."

But that hadn't been good enough for Pyreon... who still often thought of herself as Jack when the burden she carried became too much to look at. She needed Kyra beside her again, watching out for her, making her acerbic observations about the world around them. She needed her "big sister" back. Even if it meant deceiving Riddick into thinking Kyra was her, long enough for him to engineer her rescue. Even if it meant tricking the man she loved almost as much as she loved Kyra herself.

Even if it meant going head-to-head with the Lord Marshal before her powers had fully bloomed.

Homing in on the Basilica was remarkably easy. For whatever reason, it hadn't gone far. Docking was easy as well, although it usually was. The Necromongers were very willing to have guests, and convert them. It was the *leaving* that could be tricky.

Stepping out of her ship, she let flames run along her skin and clothes, and crackle through her hair. Today she would wear the outward trappings of her powers, in the hope that it would intimidate these fanatics a little. "Take me to the Lord Marshal, now," she demanded in what she hoped was an imperious tone.

Strangely, the Necromongers seemed off their game. One led her towards the throne room, Toombs following her and muttering about what a bad idea all of this was. She was aware of curious stares and whispers around her. She let the flames crackle even more brightly, hoping they would inspire the sort of fear she was beginning to feel.

This is a stupid idea. What the hell am I doing? Then she thought again of Kyra's gentle blue eyes, and her resolve firmed again. Today, if they did not give her back the people she loved, she would find out just what her powers could accomplish. She wondered if she should char the Basilica from within. *Guess I might get to find out.*

The Necromonger whispered to a man clad in black robes who stood by the throne room's entry arch. The man stiffened, and then raised his voice to be heard above the low murmur of voices.

"Her Highness, Pyreon of the Elementals, to see the Lord Marshal."

Here I go, Pyreon thought, suddenly feeling small and vulnerable and *Jack* again. She strode forward into the room.

Her heart hammered as she saw Aereon near the throne, looking both shocked and angry with her. *Damn it, she was supposed to have gotten clear by now, too. Why is she still here? Did I just guarantee our defeat?*

The Lord Marshal had his back to her, ignoring her. Bastard. He'd murdered her mother and ended her childhood irrevocably, taken everyone she loved from her, and now he wouldn't even look her in the eye...

"What brings you here?" the man beside him, who *was* meeting her gaze, asked.

"You have something of mine and I want it back," she demanded, keeping her voice level and arrogant.

The Lord Marshal remained silent. She let her eyes move to him. Damn, he was big. She'd tried to imagine him as a tiny, puny, impotent little man who used armies and brute force to compensate... but he was every bit as large as she remembered Riddick being.

"And what, exactly, would that be?" his aide asked, unperturbed by her demand.

"A woman. Her name is Kyra Pollanes. I want her back." She raised her chin, hoping he'd notice the way she was deliberately letting a yellow flame crackle warningly through her green eyes. *Believe I have the power to burn you all down where you stand.* It might even be true. She hoped it was... and hoped even more that she wouldn't have to find out.

"You're too late. She's dead." The voice was dark and rumbling and sent a bolt of shock through her belly. Her eyes turned to the Lord Marshal once more.

He was turning. Turning at last to face her—

Riddick.

She stared at him in shock, in growing horror. *He* was the Lord Marshal? How was this possible?

His expression was grave and cold. "Jack."

She swallowed, and felt the flames licking over her skin die down almost completely as if quenched by his look of censure. "Riddick."

He pulled off his helmet and tossed it aside onto the throne, and stalked closer to her. She forced herself to stand her ground.

"You know," he rumbled at her, "if you'd told me what was going on, a lot less people woulda died. Including your Kyra."

“That was my fault,” Aereon spoke up. “She wanted to ask you for help, but al-Walid and I believed that—”

“I’m not talking to you,” Riddick snapped. Aereon fell silent.

Apparently unafraid of the flames, Riddick reached out and put his hand on Pyreon’s shoulder. She willed the fire away, banking it down before it could so much as singe him. Her heart felt completely hollow. Kyra was dead?

No, oh no...

“Where is she?” Jack – all of her inner Fire Queen had fled for the moment and she was simply Jack again, not Pyreon – whispered.

“I’ll show you,” he said, and began steering her out of the throne room. She let him, her body feeling numb with loss.

The room was small, quiet, and dim. At its center was a stately bier, draped with silk. Kyra lay upon it, dressed in an elegant robe, her wild hair washed and combed out for the first time in ages. She looked serene and beautiful, the way she had when she’d been the captain of Pyreon’s personal bodyguard, and often her public surrogate, in the days before the assassins came. But even from a distance, it was obvious how still and cold she was. No fire was left within her. No life.

Nothing.

Kyra was dead.

Jack moved forward to her and hesitantly reached out, touching her cheek. Pain she’d felt only once before, as she’d held her mother’s body in her arms, filled her again. *Everything I ever knew or cared about has been taken from me...*

She sobbed for several long minutes before a large, surprisingly gentle hand rested on her shoulder again. She looked up at Riddick and was surprised to see sympathy and mourning on *his* face as well.

“I’m sorry, kid. She died helping me kill the old Lord Marshal. Aereon... told me how much she meant to you.” His eyes suddenly flashed dangerously. “But you’d better know right now this is the last time you ever try to fuck with me, for any reason. You already paid for these lies. So did I. Next time you pull any kinda shit like this, I don’t care if you can burn me where I stand, I’ll make it so *you* can’t sit down for a *month*.”

Grief and sudden, shocked amusement warred in her throat and what emerged was strangled, half a sob and half a laugh. She covered her mouth with her hand, struggling with her warring emotions. Grief. Relief. Wistful longing, for even a few more moments with Kyra. Amusement at the fact that Riddick had just threatened her with a spanking. Heat at the thought of him touching her.

Nobody had ever flustered her the way Riddick did. She had to look away for a moment. Closing her eyes, she rested her cheek on Kyra’s chest and tried to pretend that she could hear the older girl’s familiar, beloved heartbeat.

What should I do, Ky? she asked, wishing Kyra could answer her. *What happens now?*

Almost as though he was answering her question, Riddick spoke again. “The other Elementals are on their way here. Aereon said you’d show up without being summoned.”

Jack’s eyes popped open and she turned to look at him. “The Mareon and the Gaieon are coming here?” She’d only met them once, long ago, when she was still a little girl. She wondered if they were still the same ones, or if they’d died and been succeeded the way her mother had.

Riddick nodded. “Once you’re all here, we’re gonna negotiate the peace terms.”

Peace... peace at last with the Necromongers. An end to the violence and the fear. Jack felt her eyes and nose sting. *Oh god, Kyra, if only you could have lived to see this day...*

And suddenly she realized that Kyra had died to make it possible. The only other death that could have moved Riddick to this point would have been her *own*, and with no successor Fire Queen yet born, that death would have plunged the universe into worse chaos than ever.

She turned back to Kyra, gazing down at her serene face, remembering the promise she’d made years ago.

“Listen to me, Jackie. You’re the Pyreon now, and my Queen, and what I’m swearing to you, I swear on my life and my soul. I will keep you safe. I will never, ever let them find you. And one day, somehow, whatever it takes, I will to see to it that you don’t have to hide anymore, ever again. Believe me.”

She’d been right, too. She’d done it.

“I will always be with you, Jackie. No matter where you go or what you do. I’m always with you, and always will be. And you will always be safe.”

Jack hoped that Kyra knew she'd succeeded in keeping her promise, hoped that she'd died knowing she'd won.

"You were right," she whispered. "You were always with me."

She felt Riddick flinch where his hand lay on her shoulder. Strange. Had Kyra said something about that to him? Leaning down, she kissed Kyra goodbye and stifled the sob that tried to rise in her throat.

You will always be with me, Kyra. But I'm still going to miss you so much.

She forced herself to turn, wiping her face as she met Riddick's gaze. "So, uh... what are your terms?"

Riddick gave her a wry, strained smile. "Not sure yet. What are yours?"

She leaned against him and let him start walking her back out of the little room and over to the throne. "I have no idea. Guess I'll have to find out what Aereon thinks. She's been doing this whole statecraft thing for decades... I've just been in hiding."

"Long as I still get paid," a voice she'd forgotten about cut in, "you guys can have whatever else you want."

Toombs was sitting by Aereon, both of them looking a little annoyed with each other. Riddick snorted in derision.

"The dogs didn't get you? Guess you must taste as bad as you smell."

"Hey, I'd better get paid, and paid well for all this shit, because Lord Marshal or not you're still worth a *lot* of money and—"

"Their Highnesses, Mareon and Gaieon of the Elementals, to see the Lord Marshal!" the man in the arch called out. Two women in flowing robes were approaching, one as old as Aereon and the other only a few years older than *she* was.

Jack took a deep breath, and let a hint of her fire run over her skin again. It was time. Time to be the Fire Queen. She wished Kyra was with her for this, to hold her hand, but the feel of Riddick's hand on her shoulder was almost as good. She covered it with her own, and hoped she could make Kyra proud of her.

Showtime...