

WITCHFIRE

*a fantasy novel by
Ardath Mayhar & Ron Fortier
with illustrations by Rob Davis*



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Airship 27 Productions Presents
"WITCHFIRE"

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"He hoped she would be young and pretty..."

Prologue

-1-

When she was very young, she had sat as a novice at the feet of Mother Kalavela, learning the ancient arts.

“There are three elements, giving us all life,” Kalavela had said. “Fire. Air. Water. You must learn to master all three, it is true, but never forget that it is fire that is the giver and the destroyer. It is fire that warms the universe. It is fire that nullifies the cold powers of darkness. Witchfire.”

The old woman sat hunched in her unlikely tweed suit, her face tracked with light and shadow, as well as with wrinkles provided by long living and deep thought. Morgan remembered drawing a deep breath, as if inhaling the truth that had been given to her. Yet she had shivered, nevertheless.

-2-

Ralph Zimmer prided himself on his knack of reading character from slight clues. At a glance, he could judge people. The walk, the expression, the general carriage might tell almost anyone what he wanted to know, but Ralph's talent lay deeper than that. He intuited, immediately and accurately, what sort of a person was approaching even from a good distance.

Now he stood in a clump of pines, hidden from any chance glint of light from the nearby street lamp. He was tense with waiting. Patience, although a necessary quality in his missions, was never something he enjoyed. Rather he endured. All his talents would come into use soon enough. This warm July night was his element: it was too early for the theater crowds, yet too late for strollers or lovers. The hour was his ally, for now only solitary people were apt to cross his path.

His hands were a bit damp. The plastic handle of the butcher knife was pleasant within his grasp, though he felt his muscles beginning to tighten just a bit. That had been triggered by the footsteps approaching along the cement walk.

They were light, fast, and crisp. Pumps, he guessed. The click-click was distinctly feminine. He licked his lips and leaned forward to peer through the concealing foliage. He hoped she would be young and pretty. The pretty ones were always more satisfying than the plain Janes. The pretty ones had so much more to live for. As she came into view, moving quickly along a branch path, he was elated.

She was tall, her long legs carrying her along energetically. High heels, full plaid skirt, spotless white blouse whose short sleeves revealed her tanned arms... she was damn near perfect in all respects. He continued to stare. The long black hair was black as a gypsy's and rode on her shoulders and back like a lion's mane. Regal.

She was beautiful like the models that graced the covers of Vogue. Classic,

but not cute. A dark complexion, almost Mediterranean, with a wide forehead, arching brows and a slender nose over full, sensual lips. Her haughtiness derived from distinct cheekbones and piercing green eyes that seemed to dart about like fireflies. Gypsy. The word fit her perfectly.

She walked with the sure, rapid gait of a city woman, clutching her small brown purse to her side. She moved through the quiet little park as though it was her own living room. Totally at ease in her surroundings. That sureness told him she was a businesswoman. Law or corporate finance, maybe. There was no trace of the indefinable hesitancy that surrounded women who looked to men for protection.

She was much different from his last two targets. More difficult, perhaps, but variety was the spice that seasoned his strange hobby. It gave an extra pleasure to the death that he dealt.

She was coming quickly, almost parallel with his position. He tensed for a spring into the path. With the first... the waitress... he had been clumsy and had almost lost her. The second had gone much better. Practice made perfect as the old saying went. Now he knew exactly what to do and his muscles responded smoothly, the habit becoming established.

Yet he somehow wasn't fast enough. The woman stopped in her tracks and turned toward the shadow in which he had just begun his motion. He froze. Could she see him? Impossible! There had been no sound, no motion of a leaf or branch. She stood calmly, looking into the darkness with such directness and assurance that he felt breathless. Caught!

Bitch! He thought. I'll carve you like a chicken!

Her voice fell between them so softly that he wondered if he was actually hearing it all. Had his mind wiggled out? But the words were there, as if rising from inside himself.

"Come out of the trees. Come now!"

Zimmer felt a spasm of terror grip his heart. The woman brought her hands up chest-high. They were empty, and he found the time to wonder what had become of her purse. Then they moved purposefully, and he forgot such unimportant matters. The woman was moving her hands, describing patterns in the mottled light and shadow of the lamp and leaves.

"Come out! I command you in the sacred name of Adonay!"

Something seized Zimmer in an irresistible grip. The web patterns caught him, moving his feet as he tried frantically to resist. With heart-wrenching shock, he realized that he was moving into the open area of grass, before the spot where she stood. Panic fought with mutinous limbs, but they kept on walking forward, as if the connection between brain and legs had been broken... or short-circuited. He had never been so scared in all his life.

As he came near to the woman, she made a different sort of gesture. Suddenly, he found his fingers losing their grip on his knife. The blade seemed to weigh a ton as his lifeless fingers relinquished the hilt. The knife, instrument of passion and vengeance, fell to the grass.

His feet stopped short, too near to his tormentor. Now he looked into eyes so green that even the streetlight's glare could not leach their color. They blazed with emotion. Hatred?

Anger? He never was able to identify or understand what it was he saw there.

The voice whispered, "Agent of the Dark, the Destroyer, the force of anti-life, you have taken lives for your pleasure. You have desecrated bodies and sent souls, unready, into that which is beyond. Now you must atone for your crimes."

Despite his overwhelming fear, Zimmer was no coward. He steadied his voice, as well as he could manage, and croaked, "Look, Lady, I don't know what you're talking about. Honest! Let me go! Please?"

Her bewitching hands flickered. Another pattern formed, and Zimmer's world dissolved into a sea of pain. He caught his head between his hands and screamed. As he crumbled to the grass, his body twisted, convulsing with agony.

Still he heard the voice, strained through the nets of torture. "Only when you confess your crimes, not once but as many times as need be, will you be released from this punishment."

He screamed, his throat aching with the effort. His brain seemed to flame, his skull to shatter with the surges of agony. His cries echoed across the park. He couldn't bring himself to worry that they would bring policemen hurrying to see what was happening. Even when heavy footsteps pounded across the turf beyond the next band of trees, he could not control his voice.

The woman looked down at him, the green eyes glowing strangely in the lamp light. Then she turned and was gone into the trees behind which he had hidden.

Guns drawn, two officers panted into the clearing. Zimmer was still screaming. One of the cops dropped to his knees and felt the suffering man over for injuries.

"Okay, Buddy, I can't find a thing wrong with you. Shut up and tell us what's the matter?"

Zimmer kept on screaming, louder and louder.

"Paul, get an ambulance out here. Maybe this guy's bleeding inside or something. I can't see anything wrong on the outside of him."

"Right, Frank. Won't take ten minutes to get one here."

"I did it," Zimmer keened before the one name Paul could move. "I killed those two girls!"

The patrolmen exchanged glances. Frank knelt again beside Zimmer and touched his shoulder. "What the hell are you saying? You killed somebody?"

Zimmer knew he was betraying himself. That he would suffer for that as much as he was hurting now, but it didn't matter. The pain, which had been devouring him, began to fade the instant he made his confession. His only thought was to fight free of that all-consuming pain, no matter what the consequences might be.

"I killed the two girls in the park, last week. I did it! You got to believe me! My knife is in the grass over there. To your right!"

The standing cop moved to the spot Zimmer indicated.

"Son of a bitch! Frank, he's not kidding. There's a knife here, all right. Big enough to carve a steer."

Zimmer laughed, light-headed with relief. He stretched, moving his head cautiously. He laughed again... nothing mattered now. The pain was gone. Just like that.

Frank, his gaze fixed on the laughing man, pushed back his cap and whistled. "I'll be damned. We got us the Park Butcher, it looks like. But he's crazy as a bedbug."

Zimmer, reveling in his freedom from pain, didn't care. He didn't know that every time he tried to renege on his confession he would find himself in self-same agony again.

He never knew that only in one way had he assessed his intended victim correctly. She with the glowing green eyes was indeed a businesswoman.

Her business was witchcraft.

Chapter 1

Thomas Axel thumped his fist on the polished teak of his desktop. His square face was red with annoyance.

“Dammit, Darryl! What’s taking so long? When I employ people, I expect results!”

Darryl Waitman turned off his ears for a long moment. Let the old man run himself down. As he waited, he looked about the room, feeling with all his acquisitive senses the power emanating from it. Its very furnishings breathed the elegance that only world-controlling affluence can attain. The wine-red rugs, ankle-deep: the elaborate teak wood desk that was hooked through a computer network to all parts of the globe, the fine paintings on the walls all breathed effortless control.

He looked unobtrusively at the chair in which the president of C.C.I. was sitting. It was almost a throne. The man who ran Construction Consortium International held strings in his pudgy hands that could halt materials needed by projects in Moscow or Beirut or San Francisco.

He would sit in that chair, Waitman knew, if he only had the wit and the patience to manage that brand of power. He was only thirty-eight, the youngest Managing Vice-President in C.C.I.’s history. Tom Axel might be the tenant of the throne, now, but he was old. He couldn’t last for much longer.

Yet the old fool had an iron core to him. Waitman had learned that, watching the old man wheel and deal, manipulating unwitting dupes, eliminating dangers to himself and his empire with malicious relish. As one cutthroat to another, he respected the man as much as he could find it in himself to respect anyone. And he admired him unstintingly for his genius in covering his tracks. Between inspired accountants, which he had been a master at hiring, and six feet of good, rich earth, which the old man was not averse to using to cover up delicate matters, he had kept his reputation and that of C.C.I. impeccable for almost half a century.

Darryl knew where a couple of those graves were located, as well as who was inside them. That information might, one day, give him an edge he needed. In the meantime, he found that his name, Waitman, was all too appropriate. Even poetic, if one was fanciful.

There was a pause in the babble from the chair. Darryl looked into the older man’s eyes with the honest assurance he had cultivated so carefully.

“Rest assured, Mr. Axel, Lucien Wicker has the reputation for efficiency that you require of such people.

“As well, he can perform his... ah, services... in ways that never suggest foul play. The ordinary specialist in the field invariably does leave certain identifiable traces. Wicker’s jobs, on the other hand, pose puzzles that the police cannot solve and wouldn’t believe even if they could.”

Axel stubbed out a cigar in the loaded ashtray. “I hope, for your sake, that you’re right about that. If this Appleton thing isn’t handled fast, he might get his information to someone who could and would use it against us. We cannot have that. Damn sloppy work on the part of Accounting. Inexcusably sloppy.”

I warned you, Waitman thought. But he said, "The matter has been corrected, Sir. We dismissed several people. Others have disappeared completely. You can be sure that the affair is being handled effectively. I also believe you will find Mr. Wicker to be a most useful ally."

"Employee!"

"Not quite, Mr. Axel. Wicker is a unique man. A very dangerous man with unequalled talents. He does not place himself in a subservient position for anyone. Not even C.C.I. He is no minor contractor of services. He is powerful. Very powerful, if you understand my gist. But he is also one hundred percent dependable. I have been given complete assurances of that."

Axel fumbled another cigar from an inner pocket. Waitman whipped out his platinum lighter.

The president squinted through a cloud of odorous smoke. "You've used this Wicker chap before?"

Thanking his stars for the air conditioning, Waitman coughed softly. Then he nodded. "Twice. Most successfully." But he was thinking, If the old bastard keeps this up, I probably won't have to kill him after all. He'll do himself in with those awful cigars.

Axel was speaking again. "This one had better be successful. All our tails are in the crack, this time. Appleton could blow the whistle on the entire worldwide operation. A trillion dollars a year, right down the bloody hatch and all of us off to prison. Or worse. We've done a bit of housekeeping, along the way. If the law began looking into all our operations, they just might locate some of the dust we've swept under the rug. If you take my gist?"

Waitman nodded. "I think, when all is said and done, you will agree that Mr. Wicker is just the answer we've been looking for."

As if on cue, the intercom buzzed. Axel cocked his chair bolt upright and barked, "Yes, Lilith?"

"An outside call, Sir. Lucien Wicker."

"Put him on."

Click-pause... Waitman could hear it from where he sat.

Then, "Is this Thomas Axel?" The voice, even at such distance, was cool, assured, and somehow disturbing.

"Yes, dammit. Speaking."

"The Appleton account has been successfully terminated."

"Excellent. Most excellent. There will be a bonus in this for you, Wicker."

"Money is, of course useful. I may also ask a favor, sometime in the future. If, naturally, my services are suitably appreciated."

"Waitman will be in touch with you. Everything will continue to be done through him."

"As you wish. Good day, Sir." The line fell silent.

Tom Axel blew a cloud of foul smoke into the air and beamed. He was very content. Whereas Darryl Waitman leaned back in his leather chair and watched, eyes slitted.

Soon, he mused. Sooner than you think, old man. You're starting to lose your grip. I can see it happening. And when you lose, I'll win.

CHAPTER 1

Morgan Rein bolted her door, hit the light-switch, and threw her purse onto the sky-blue sofa. Her white Angora cat, sleeping there, opened one eye, saw it was she and closed it again.

Morgan moved to the window, where she paused before drawing the draperies, staring down onto the display of lights below her high-rise apartment. The city looked like a field of sparkling jewels fanning out to the dark horizon beyond. The stars above competed with their own natural brilliance. It was a beautiful night.

The cat stretched, washed one paw reflectively, then drew himself into a dignified position, paws together, tail curled neatly around them. He sneered delicately at the purse that had waked him.

“Good evening, Scratch,” she greeted. The cat winked at her deliberately, curled up and put his furry head on a cream-colored pillow.

Morgan smiled and glanced at her watch. Almost midnight. It had taken her longer to go across town than she had thought. She unbuttoned her blouse, hurrying toward the bathroom. She dropped her clothing into a hamper and turned on the shower. Beneath the warm spray, she turned, scrubbed, and washed her long, silk-smooth hair. She must be clean for the ritual.

She walked naked to the closet and drew out the long robe of white linen. Freshly laundered, it smelled of soap and starch, and she pulled it over her head. Her skin warmed to its familiar touch. A green ribbon from the drawer confined her still-damp hair snugly. That touch, too, was familiar, reminding her of long-ago matters.

She glanced into the full-length mirror and was satisfied. She was ready.

In the living room, Morgan went to one of the long bookshelves that lined its walls. A weathered volume slid into her hand, its leather worn and fragile, now. She crossed the room to slip between the draperies without opening them. She went through a glass door onto the balcony. The breeze was cool on her skin, and subtle scents of her green and blooming plants filled the small rectangular space.

Her bare feet were chilly as she moved to the end of the balcony, where a small wrought-iron table held two candles in silver holders and a silver dish filled with sweet incense.

Morgan opened the book: the pages fell apart at the center, where two newspaper clippings had been placed. She lighted the candles, laid the book between them, and sat to read once again the bits of newsprint. The tiny puddles of light from the candles revealed again the stories of the two women. Dead women, now.

They had names, jobs, lives, and personalities that the cold print had not addressed. Betty Phillips, cocktail waitress, the clipping said. But Morgan glimpsed, inside herself, a round, merry face, with round eyes. Something else... a child. A most beloved child. But the news account made no mention of that either.

Paula Eaton. Morgan closed her eyes to see a slight figure dancing, entranced by the music and its own motion. Someone else... parents? Audiences? Someone

in the background, beaming approval for her dance.

She closed the book and held the clippings in her right hand. Her eyes closed, she prayed to the dual faiths that she professed. Then she touched the paper to the candle flames. She held them, even when the small fires reached her fingertips, and as she felt the pain she sent toward those spirits, removed untimely from the world, all the peace she could find in her own spirit.

The moon floated serenely above her. Lights were going out below. After a time, Morgan rose and went back into her apartment, carrying the book carefully. She restored it to its place on the shelf. She was weary to the bone. The powers upon which she called drew much of their potency from her own flesh.

Again she showered, toweled, and climbed between the cool, smooth bed linens. She sighed with a calm, inner relief. Her profession was a difficult one, trying at times, and distressing at others. She closed her eyes, her dark lashes curling on her cheeks in the dim light coming through the blinds.

A face swam into view, behind her eyes. Lucien! Morgan sat upright, her hands against her heart. She had seen his face clearly. It had been dark with anger.

But why think of Lucien? Why now? It had been so many years! And now she was armed against him, as she had not been as a child. Mother Kalavela had alleviated the hell he had made of her childhood, over the years. She had been taught how to cope with such practitioners of the Dark.

Still there had been no word of her brother, no trace of his existence upon the inner chart of her mind for so very long... surely...

She drew a deliberate breath, held it, and expelled it just as deliberately. Her taut nerves relaxed. The panic reaction that had almost overwhelmed her in that vulnerable span between sleep and waking had eased.

If Lucien still lived, still worked his ugly craft, she could do nothing about it tonight.

Tomorrow, rested, she might investigate this odd apparition.