

Elemental Magic

Four all-new
stories of romance,
fantasy, and natural
enchantment

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HUNTRESS MOON

From Elemental Magic Anthology

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Chapter One

The ancient ones have always understood the wolf. Their totems often show the animal with eyes that are calm, focused, benevolent. Yet other totems depict the wolf with red eyes and fangs bared, his visage—for want of a better word—tormented.

"Which do you choose? Disgrace or slavery?"

Zarah sat very still, her hands clasped in her lap to keep them from trembling.

"What if I choose disgrace?" she asked.

"The tumor in your mother's breast is growing. You will watch her die a slow, painful death."

Zarah struggled to keep her features even. Since the moment she had entered Scanlon's massive stone and timber mansion, she had known from his expression that he was holding the trump card in a game of power and politics.

Now she sat in his comfortable reception room with an untouched glass of red wine resting on the wooden table in front of her.

"How can you let a helpless woman suffer?" she asked.

Scanlon smoothed a hammy hand down the edge of his embroidered tunic, his fingers like sausage links. With his broad shoulders and long legs, he might have been athletic in his school days. Now his body had gone to fat. And his long hair hung limply around his ears. He had been the head of the council for more than seven years. A long time in the political life of White Flint, where alliances constantly shifted. And a particularly long time for a man with only minimal psychic talents.

"Fenda's plight is not my fault. Your father should have thought about his wife and daughter when he embezzled money from the treasury."

"He was an honest man. He would never have broken our laws."

Scanlon gave her a knowing look. "Not even to import spices from the south?"

She blanched. She knew that her father had dealt with smugglers who avoided the city-state's import taxes. All the nobles did it. It was a small sin compared to stealing money from the treasury.

"He was caught, convicted, and executed," Scanlon said, his voice low but firm.

She wanted to scream that it was a lie. One of his enemies on the council must have arranged for him to be caught with White Flint money bags in his strong room. But there was no use protesting his innocence. After the presumed crime, the trial and the execution had been carried out with lightning speed.

Her father was gone. Her coward of a brother had stolen the emergency money hidden in the house and fled into the badlands. And she was left to deal with the consequences of the whole mess.

Scanlon looked like a jackal that had cornered a rabbit and was anticipating a tasty meal. "I don't expect you to stay a slave forever. Once you find out what Griffin is hiding, you're free to come back to White Flint."

"And how would I get home? Sun Acres is miles from here."

"I'll send a crack team to kidnap you from the city and bring you back, once you've gotten the information I need."

Was that possible? Or was Scanlon offering her hope when she had none?

"If I agree, you'll have an expert psychic treat my mother's illness while I'm gone?"

"Of course."

"How will I know you're fulfilling your part of the bargain?"

"You have to trust me," he said, his voice smooth.

Impossible. But her choices were limited.

She licked her lips. "What do I have to do?"

"You agree?"

"Tell me the whole thing."

Scanlon took a sip from his wineglass, then leaned back in his comfortable leather chair and looked her up and down, his gaze lingering on her blond hair, her well-shaped lips and her high breasts.

"As you know, Sun Acres had been a threat to us for years. After one of their leaders, Falcone, disappeared, a man named Griffin stepped into the power vacuum."

She had heard her father talking about Griffin. He'd admired the man's progressive policies. Apparently, in this world of shifting alliances and private armies, Scanlon disagreed.

"For several months, Griffin has been acting secretive. He's hiding something and we want to know what it is. We have discovered that he is looking for a slave girl to share his bed. I'll make sure it's you. And that will put you in the perfect position to spy on him. Then you can send information back to me—using your skill with the flame."

She stared at him—stunned. "His bed?" she whispered. She'd been raised as the daughter of nobles. And she'd expected to marry one of the powerful men of the city—a man seeking an alliance with her family. Now that would be impossible.

Scanlon gave her a knowing grin. "He's reputed to be a skilled lover. You won't be disappointed."

"But I... haven't..."

"My dear, your virginity is part of your charm."

She was still absorbing that when a flicker of movement made her head whip around. A short, spindly man wearing a blue tunic stood in the doorway.

"Are we ready to start?" he asked.

She gaped at him. "Alroy?"

He gave her a quick half bow. She'd known him since she was a little girl—when she'd been taken away from her family and sent to the school where psychic talents were nurtured. He'd been one of her teachers. A harsh man who was quick to use a switch on children who were slow to learn.

He knew all her skills. And all her weaknesses. And when she'd graduated two years ago, she'd thanked the Great Mother that she was never going to see him again.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"We're going to establish a communications link."

Her chest was so tight that she could barely breathe.

"We?"

"You're adept with the flame. So am I."

"I... was never that... good..." she stammered.

"You didn't have to be an expert at anything, because your father had other plans for you. Now you're going to reach your full potential."

And if I can't, will you whip me? She kept the question locked in her throat, because she knew that voicing it would only make things worse.

"Come with me."

She looked at Scanlon. "You assume I've agreed?"

"Have you?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then go on. The sooner you pass the tests, the better."

Feeling like she was going to her execution, she followed Alroy down the hall to a small room with a wooden table and two chairs. When he ordered her to sit, she sat, as though she were back in his classroom.

He pulled two small oil lamps from the bag he was carrying. "Let's get started."

She answered with a tight nod. She had come to the end of life as she had known it. And the sooner she finished her assignment, the better.

He pushed one of the lamps toward her. "Use your thoughts to light the flame."

She gulped and tried to focus on the wick. But she was too tense to make anything happen.

"Do it!" he said in a steely voice.

She tried to clear her mind and obey him.

Griffin paced the length of his bedroom, then stopped at the window and stared out into the walled garden where the shapes of trees and bushes blurred in the moonlight. He had always liked night better than the day.

But no more.

He squeezed one large hand into a fist and slammed it against the other flattened palm, welcoming the pain of knuckles striking flesh.

He was a tall man with dark hair, a powerful intellect, lips that women had called sensual, and deep-set dark eyes that could make an opponent in the council chamber stop talking in midsentence.

He knew the world had once been very different. With power held by countries, not cities. But he had to work within the system that existed now. Lucky for him he had been born into one of the city's noble families. But he had never taken the privileges of birth for granted. Not in a place like Sun Acres where you had to rely on talent and cunning to get power and keep it.

He had worked hard to become one of the top men on the council. And he wasn't going to make the same mistakes as his former associate, Falcone.

The man and some of his private army had apparently paid with their lives for his miscalculations, although no one seemed willing to claim credit for ridding the city of the menace.

That was six months ago, and while nobles were jockeying for position, Griffin had quietly consolidated his power. It helped that he didn't want the glory. He was content to work behind the scenes.

Life in his little corner of the world might not be as safe and comfortable as in the old days before the psychic change, but he could make things better—at least for some of the residents of Sun Acres.

He had been content with his life. He had thought about forging an alliance through marriage. And then disaster had struck.

His own private disaster.

"Carfolian hell," he muttered under his breath.

He had a problem—a sickness—that threatened to destroy him. Yet he could trust no one to help him. Because the moment he whispered his secret to another living soul, he was finished.

So he had started doing his own research, plowing through the library of the school where children with psychic potential were trained. Every city-state had a similar facility, and he had spent ten years of his life being trained and indoctrinated. He hadn't been one of the most talented students. But he was an adept, nonetheless.

He had watched and listened and learned everything he could, and he was sure that some book in the restricted library would hold the key to his salvation.

He wanted to go to the school now. But under the present circumstances, that would be taking too much

of a risk.

So he paced back to the low chest along the wall and picked up the bottle of spirits that sat there.

After pouring several inches of the amber liquid into a glass tumbler, he held it up to the light, swirling it in the vessel.

The glass was ancient and rare. From the old times before the change. When household goods had been manufactured in smooth-running factories. He took a swallow of the fiery liquid, then another, feeling the heat hit his belly.

With luck, it would settle him down so that he could sleep.

Chapter Two

Zarah had suffered through a week of agony and humiliation. She had survived this long. She could survive the rest of it because she had to.

She and the fourteen other slaves had been chained hand to hand as they walked toward Sun Acres. But now her hands were free, with the chains still dangling. To control her movements, her right foot was secured to a post pounded into the ground.

Maybe a strong man could have worked it loose. But she was too exhausted to even try.

Her feet were sore. Her muscles ached. And her stomach clenched with hunger. Never had she put out so much effort with so little to eat.

She and the others in the group had walked all day—away from the only home she had ever known, and into the badlands, the lawless void between cities. Were they ten miles from White Flint? Twelve? She couldn't be sure. But she knew they were heading northeast, unless Scanlon had lied about that.

Two of the guards rode horses. But most walked alongside the men and women secured in a line like animals going to slaughter.

The guards held their spears and whips at the ready, partly to keep the slaves in line and partly to protect their owner's property. Zarah and the other captives were a valuable commodity that would fetch a good price in Sun Acres.

Her blond hair was matted. Her knee was scraped where she had fallen. As she lay with the thin blanket folded around her, the ground was hard under her slender frame. But she was exhausted enough to sleep. A rough hand on her shoulder woke her. She would have screamed, but another hand clamped over her mouth.

In the light from the fire, she saw a man hovering over her.

Was this a raid? Thieves bent on stealing the slaves?

But no one else moved, and she realized with a sudden jolt of fear that the attack was only on her.

She felt something cold against her neck.

"Scream, and I'll slit your throat," the man hissed, his breath sour in her nostrils. He must be one of the guards.

She clenched her teeth, trying to evaluate her options. Was he fool enough to destroy valuable property?

She didn't know.

From the smell of his breath, she thought he had been drinking. Maybe liquor had shattered his judgment.

One of his hands pulled the blanket aside and groped at her breasts through the bodice of her shapeless dress. The other hand reached for the hem, pulling it up above her thighs.

So rape was going to be the final humiliation of the day. Or was death better than this life that had been thrust upon her?

Remembering the chain that still dangled from her right hand, she raised her arm in an arc, slamming the

metal links down on the back of the man's head.

He screamed, and she pushed against him, trying to roll him off her body.

Roused from sleep, the woman next to her reared up, reaching for the assailant's hair, pulling as she called out in a loud voice, "No! Stop! Get off her."

"Bitch."

He lashed out a hand, slamming it across the other woman's face.

More slaves had awakened. Wide-eyed, they stared at Zarah and the other captive struggling with the guard.

Then strong hands lifted the man away and flung him to the ground.

"You fool! She's being sold as a virgin. You can't bring down the price we'll get for her."

The whole camp was awake now.

The rapist gasped as something solid connected with his midsection. Then he screamed.

She didn't see what happened to him. She only knew that one of the guards dragged him off into the bushes and left him there.

She turned her face away as the man in charge crouched beside her, then grabbed her chin and brought her face back to his. "Did he penetrate you?"

Zarah swallowed hard. "No."

As she tried to shrink away, he reached between her legs, poking at her, then lifted his hand and examined his fingers in the firelight.

"No blood. Good."

Sick and humiliated, she fumbled for her blanket, pulling it over herself again. Tears stung her eyes, and she fought to hold them back.

When a hand reached toward her, she jumped.

But it was only the woman who had come to her aid.

"Thank you. I should have thanked you," Zarah whispered.

"That's okay."

"You could have gotten hurt—or punished."

The other woman shrugged. "I was pretty sure someone would stop him. It was a matter of holding him off," she whispered.

The woman rolled toward Zarah, clasping a hand across her shoulder, silently stroking her back and hair.

"It's all right to cry."

"No."

She didn't want to cry. She wanted to show these bastards that she was strong. But she couldn't stop the tears from leaking from her eyes and sliding down her cheeks.

The woman rocked her, soothed her. After a few moments, she said, "It's going to be all right."

"How could it?" Zarah managed.

"I don't know. But I think I feel it. You were strong. You fought him. Few slaves would do that. He was counting on your being weak and afraid."

Zarah nodded, then whispered, "Can you read the future?"

The woman hesitated. "Sometimes."

"Do you know my fate?"

"No. They've given me a drug that dampens my powers."

Zarah nodded. She had been given drugs for the journey, too, because the men who were taking her

from White Flint to Sun Acres had no idea of her clandestine assignment. But the dampers would wear off—she hoped.

"My name is Quinn," the woman said.

Up until now, Zarah had tried to keep to herself in this terrible time of humiliation. The other slaves were a sorry, beaten-down lot. But this woman seemed different. Quietly, she whispered her own name.

"Zarah."

"You haven't been a slave for long," Quinn murmured.

Around them, people stirred, probably trying to get back to sleep—or maybe listening. What if one of them was a spy? What if this woman was?

Zarah lowered her voice. "How do you know?"

Quinn laughed softly. "You're not worn out. And you have a way about you. The way of a free woman who has lost her position."

"Yes," Zarah admitted, then asked, "Were you born a slave?"

"No. I was free until I was ten. Then my city—The Preserve at Eden Brook—was raided by soldiers from Hammond Town. We lived near the outer wall. They took my family captive. And they discovered I had talents. So I went to the school for psychics in Hammond Town."

"What can you do besides read the future?"

"I... run equipment. I can light an oven and keep it hot. Or I can make a water pump work."

"Ah..."

So, as an adept and then a skilled worker, Quinn had been treated relatively well.

"A few months ago, Hammond Town was raided by White Flint. That's how I ended up here."

"But why are they selling you? You have valuable skills."

She spoke in a barely audible whisper. "The woman who ran the kitchen where I was sent had fewer talents than I do. She's the love child of a noble, so she had enough influence to get me out of there."

"I'm sorry," Zarah answered.

"Quiet!" one of the guards shouted, slapping a whip on the ground close to Zarah's cheek. Instantly she closed her mouth and rolled to her back.

She had a long day of walking ahead of her. And another after that. And perhaps another. She already felt like she might die of fatigue. That part of the ordeal would be over when she reached Sun Acres. The next part might be worse.

Alroy had made her practice with the flame—over and over. He'd set up tests where they had to communicate from different rooms of the mansion. Then from across the city. After five days, he had told Scanlon that she was ready for the assignment.

She hadn't felt ready. What if she couldn't do it from so far away?

She thought of her mother, living in a small room in the servants' quarters in Scanlon's great house. Her mother had been a beautiful woman who was proud of her thick golden hair and her smooth skin. Now she looked old and sick. She'd tried to hide her pain and fear, but Zarah had seen it all too well.

Scanlon had given them a few minutes alone to say good-bye. Probably because he knew that would stiffen Zarah's resolve to carry out her assignment. He'd been right. She'd promised fiercely that she would save the two of them. In the next few days, she had to make good on that promise.

Chapter Three

As a noble's daughter, Zarah had loved the market where her father and the other men bought and sold purebred horses. She'd sit in the visitors' gallery watching the magnificent animals and listening to the

discussions about their good points and their bad.

But she had never been to a slave market. Never known that it was the same for people. Only the slave-animals could listen to the discussions going on around them.

The Sun Acres slave auction was in a large stone building in the commercial quarter of the city, with open display areas and many small rooms where the consignments were housed.

The guards brought the captives from White Flint to a dining hall where they were given a decent meal for the first time in days. Bread and cheese and even some fresh fruit and vegetables.

She and Quinn looked at each other across the table. Zarah longed to ask what would happen next. But they had been warned not to talk. So she only ate and drank—and worried.

Then the men and women were separated. First they were given a medical exam. Since Zarah was being sold as a virgin, she had to lie down on a narrow table and spread her legs so that a wrinkled old woman could probe her private parts to confirm her condition.

"There was an incident on the trail," the tall heavy man who seemed to be in charge of the auction said.

"Is she still untouched."

"She's a virgin."

The man, whose name was Teledor, stroked his chin. "I'm almost disappointed. I'd like to fuck her myself before I sell her off."

Zarah sucked in a sharp breath, but they ignored her.

"She's pretty. And refined. She'll fetch a good price."

"I know a couple of nobles who will be interested in her."

"Griffin and Lloyd?"

Griffin. That was the man she'd been sent here to spy on. She wanted to hear more about him, but she didn't dare ask.

They kept talking, but not about Griffin.

"The last woman Lloyd bought died."

"He said it was an accident."

"He gets his pleasure from hurting his partners." The old woman glanced at Zarah and saw that the blood had drained from her face.

She touched the slave master's arm. "Come into the hall."

He glanced at Zarah, then nodded.

In the hallway, they continued talking in low voices. Then the woman returned. "You can rest in your cell for a few hours. Then we'll take you to the baths."

Griffin turned the message in his hand. It was on heavy paper, a rare commodity in Sun Acres.

"Private slave viewing at 8 P.M. The woman will interest you. She will be for sale at the morning auction. Reply to Teledor."

He knew the procedure. The woman would be taken to one of the bathing rooms. And she would think she was alone. But men would be watching in darkened cubicles behind the grille-work that covered what looked like decorative panels.

He'd been there before. They'd never shown him a woman he wanted for a bedmate. Nevertheless, the experience had turned him on.

Tonight he hesitated. There was danger for him going out after dark. But he knew he would be in a private room. If anything went wrong, he could leave without being seen.

So he sent back his acceptance, then wondered if he was making a mistake.

Slave women led Zarah to a large bathroom with a tile floor and walls and a large candelabra hanging from the ceiling. As she watched, they filled a large wooden tub with hot, scented water.

"Why are they letting me bathe?" she asked.

"So you'll look nice and smell nice tomorrow."

"The auction's tomorrow?"

"Yes. There's good soap. And lotion for your face and body. You should take advantage of them."

After the dry dusty walk across the badlands, the idea of soap and hot water was heavenly.

"Thank you."

"Take off your clothes. We'll bring you a clean gown. Better fabric."

She looked at the women, then pulled the rough dress over her head. The other slaves studied her body with interest. When one of them glanced toward the grillework halfway up on the wall, she followed the woman's gaze. "What's up there?"

"Nothing."

"Enjoy your bath," the other woman said quickly.

Zarah suddenly wanted to cover her breasts with her arm. And shield her thigh with the other hand. Instead she climbed quickly into the tub. Staying as far down in the water as she could, she began to wash.

They had made her think she would be alone here. But now she had the horrible feeling that she was being watched—by men.

Closing her eyes, she enjoyed the hot water and the soap. Finally, the two women came back and ordered her to get out. The towel they gave her was too small to wrap around her body, so she dried as quickly as she could. When she started to pull on her dress, one of them stopped her.

"Dry your hair first."

"Why?"

"So your dress won't get wet."

She did as she was told, wondering who was enjoying the view of her naked body as she stood with her arms raised above her head, rubbing the strands of her hair with the towel, making her breasts jiggle as she worked, trying to pretend she was alone.

The next morning, as she waited in the holding room, ready to go on the auction block, she couldn't see what was happening in the arena, but she could hear nobles bidding for another woman.

She glanced at Quinn, who was among her group.

"It will be over soon," the other woman whispered.

If only that were true.

Her heart was pounding when the man named Teledor pointed to her. "Let's have this one now."

Two guards pulled her to her feet and marched her out the door, to the side of a room with a waist-high barrier separating the center ring from what must be a viewing area—like at the horse auction. Bright lights shone on the center of the room, and she cringed away as she saw a large wooden cross on a small raised platform. The audience was in shadow, but she sensed a crowd of men beyond the barrier, and her stomach tied itself into a knot.

"We have a very exciting offering now. A woman from a noble family. Refined and certified as a virgin. Well educated and modest in her demeanor. Her name is Zarah."

Before she could gasp, one of the guards pulled the gown over her head, leaving her naked.

Then he and the other man each took one of her arms and marched her to the center of the room and up

onto the raised platform. Each of them fixed one of her wrists to manacles on the horizontal beam of the cross. Then they spread her legs several inches apart and chained her ankles to rings on the floor. She was naked and exposed, and one of the men wound a crank, turning the platform on which she stood, giving a view of her naked figure to all sides of the room. From beyond the lights, she could hear men commenting on her body.

Teledor walked to her and lifted one of her breasts, then squeezed her nipple.

When she winced, he said, "She's very sensitive to touch. And ripe for the picking."

He ran his hand down her body, stroking his fingers through her pubic hair, and she heard herself make a whimpering sound.

When he let her go, she stood rigidly, staring toward the top of the wall, wishing she could simply die.

"We'll start the bidding at one hundred new dollars," Teledor said.

"One hundred."

"One hundred and fifty."

"Two hundred."

"Two fifty."

At first there were many voices from beyond the lights. Then only two.

The bidding went up and up. And she knew that these two men must want her badly.

She fought not to take her lip between her teeth while they decided her fate.

Was one of them Griffin? And one Lloyd? She had no way of knowing for sure. But she used every ounce of mental power she possessed to reach out to the one named Griffin.

"Damn you," one of the voices growled. "She's not worth that much, and you know it."

Footsteps stomped out of the room, and she held her breath.

"Sold."

Great Mother, who had bought her?

Chapter Four

"You can fuck her here, Griffin. In one of the private rooms," a man in the audience called out.

Others laughed.

She cringed away from the voice and the laughter. Yet at the same time, she let out a sigh. It was Griffin.

The man who had bought her was Griffin. Had someone mentally guided his desires? Was that why he was willing to pay so much for her?

"Put her gown on and take her to the side door. I have another purchase to make."

The guards released her hands and feet. One of them threw her dress at her and she quickly pulled it over her head. They took her out a different door, then led her to a small room with wooden benches along the wall.

She waited for almost half an hour. When the door opened, she expected to see the man who had bought her. But it was Quinn who stepped into the room.

"What are you doing here?" Zarah asked.

"The same person bought me."

"Thank the Great Mother," Zarah breathed, then felt her breath hitch.

Quinn crossed the room and gave her a hug. "Was it bad?" she whispered.

"They stripped me—and chained me to a cross."

Quinn winced. "They didn't do that to me. I guess because I'm only going to run kitchen equipment." She looked quickly away.

"And I'm going to the master's bed," Zarah whispered.

The other woman glanced around, then drew Zarah into the corner of the room. "Maybe that's not so bad. I heard them talking about him. He's a fair man."

Zarah licked her dry lips. Before she lost her nerve, she asked, "Quinn, have you been with a man? In bed?"

"Yes."

"Was it good—or bad?"

"I was with the boy I loved, and it was very good."

"But with Griffin, it could be bad."

"With the other one—Lloyd, it would have been worse than you can imagine."

Zarah sucked in a sharp breath. "How do you know?"

"They had you isolated from the other women. But where I was, I could hear some of the slaves talking. About Lloyd. And Griffin. Lloyd... likes to hurt women. That gives him sexual pleasure."

Zarah made a strangled sound.

"Griffin isn't like that. I think he'll want to please you."

"Why do you think so?"

"I saw him. He looks like a decent man."

"He can do anything he wants with me."

Quinn laid a hand on her arm. "It's better if you don't assume the worst."

"I'm scared," Zarah whispered, surprised that she'd been able to admit that much—to a slave girl. But now she was a slave girl, too. And Quinn was the only friend she had.

The other woman raised her head and gave Zarah a direct look. "Did you ever... touch yourself? Give yourself pleasure... between your legs?"

Zarah flushed scarlet, and her voice thinned. "How can you ask me that?"

"Because I'm trying to help you. When sex is good with a partner, that's what it's like—only better."

"Really?" she whispered, her face still hot.

Quinn kept her voice even. "Did you play with your breasts?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I... never thought of it."

"But you thought of the other."

She struggled to stand there facing Quinn. She could never have imagined this conversation. Not in a thousand years. And she had as good as admitted something shameful. Something she never should have done.

Quinn must have followed her thoughts. "It's good that you did. Because you know what arousal feels like. And sexual climax."

"Is that what it's called? The part at the end?"

"Yes. Or coming."

The need for information overcame her embarrassment. "With a man... he... puts... his penis inside you?"

"Yes. Don't you know anything?"

She answered with a nervous laugh. "Not much—apparently. Most of what my mother told me was about keeping anyone from doing that—until I was married."

Quinn snorted.

"Doesn't it hurt?" Zarah asked quickly. "When he does it? I mean—how can it feel *good*?"

"It hurts the first time." She was silent for a moment. "Not after that."

"Why did you hesitate?"

"Because it depends... on if he wants to please you. And if you want to respond to him."

"You're making it complicated."

"It's not. The most important thing for you to remember is that it should be... pleasurable. And if you let him arouse you, it *will* be. So don't try to protect yourself by keeping your mind away from what he's doing. Let yourself get into it."

"How?"

"When he touches you—and kisses you, let it make you hot. Kiss him back. Touch him."

"His penis?" she managed, hardly able to picture touching him there.

"Well, he won't expect a virgin to be that bold. But maybe his nipples. He'll like that."

"His nipples—what should I do to them?"

"The same thing he does to yours."

Zarah took that in. She was getting up her courage to ask another question when the door opened, and she snapped her mouth closed.

Another man stepped in. He was balding and dressed like a servant in a short tunic and leather sandals.

Zarah looked him up and down. "You're not Griffin."

"Hardly. I am Philip. I run his household. I'm to take you home."

He pulled manacles and a chain from the leather bag slung over his shoulder.

"You don't need those," Quinn said. "We're not going anywhere."

"I'm sorry. City rules," he muttered as he clamped a cuff on her left wrist, then joined it by a chain to Zarah's right hand.

He led them from the room and into a hallway. A man was waiting there—watching her. A craggy-looking woman was standing beside him, her dark eyes fixed on Zarah.

Suddenly she felt as though the woman could see into her head, and she looked quickly away.

"You lost the bid, Lloyd," Philip said.

"I wanted to have one more look at her."

He stepped forward, and Zarah instinctively cringed away.

Philip moved quickly between her and the other man. "Try to be a good loser," he said.

"You dare to talk to me like that?" the man named Lloyd asked.

"She belongs to Griffin now. You've lost."

"We'll see," Lloyd snapped, then turned away.

Zarah stood there trembling.

Philip turned to her. "You don't have to be afraid of him."

Easy for him to say. Lloyd hadn't looked at Philip with lust and something else. Something she couldn't name.

When Philip led them out of the building and into the street, Zarah felt as if a hundred-pound weight had been lifted off her chest.

Trying to take in her new surroundings, she gazed at the cobbled streets, the buildings stained with wood smoke, much like a scene in *White Flint*.

People walked past, some of them stopping to look, and Zarah cringed as they stared at her chains. Then

Philip hustled them into a horse-drawn cart with wooden hoops over the top holding up a cloth roof. Philip climbed in front, leaving the new slaves in back.

"Griffin's rich," Quinn whispered.

"Yes."

Small windows were cut in the side of the cloth, and Quinn and Zarah stood at the side of the conveyance, holding on to wooden posts so they could keep their gazes glued to the opening as the horses pulled them slowly through the streets.

The view was severely restricted, but Zarah got the feeling that Sun Acres was larger than White Flint. Once she had worn an expensive watch. Now she could only estimate the time that passed. As far as she was concerned, the ride could take forever, but she thought it was probably an hour later that they pulled through large metal gates into a paved courtyard.

The gates clanked closed behind them. The house beyond was bigger than where her parents had lived. Apparently Griffin was rich indeed.

Her mouth was so dry she could barely swallow. She had survived this far. Now her real job would begin.

Griffin stood at a window on the second floor, looking down at the wagon. When Philip opened the curtain at the back and the two women stepped out, he felt a jolt of anticipation, his total focus on Zarah. She was small and delicate, with a heart-shaped face and a slender body, with high, firm breasts.

Pound for pound, he had paid a fortune for her. More than any slave woman was worth. But he had been taken with her as he'd watched her bathe the night before. Then, this morning, the idea of Lloyd getting his hands on her had made him sick, so he'd kept bidding. And now he had her.

He pressed his palms against the sides of his tunic. He was standing at a distance from her again—watching.

At the bath and in the auction, he'd had no choice. Now she was his property, and he could do whatever he wanted with her.

He wanted to get his hands on her. But he didn't want to screw up their relationship.

Their relationship? With a slave?

Well, it was obvious from the way she held herself that she had once been more than that.

Did she know her place now? Was she really what he wanted?

Zarah was given a small room to herself, a luxury that surprised her. The toilet was down the hall.

A middle-aged woman named Branda, who was in charge of the female slaves, told Zarah to dress for dinner. She would be taking her evening meal with the master.

The clothing in her closet was not so different from what she had worn at home, although none of the dinner dresses were as modest as she would have liked. Of course, Griffin had seen her naked and chained to a cross. Shuddering, she thrust that image from her mind and picked a gown from the closet.

The fabric clung to her body and was cut high under her breasts, but the neckline was high. And the green color matched her eyes and brought out the warm tone of her skin.

The room also had two mirrors, a long one on the wall and one at the dressing table—another luxury.

As she studied her reflection, she felt a chill travel over her skin. She was making herself attractive to Griffin so he would take her as his bedmate. But she didn't want to sleep with him. And she didn't want to spy on him, either.

Then she thought of her mother back in White Flint, and she firmed her resolve. Sitting down at the dressing table, she began to stroke on some lip and cheek color and found she had to rest her elbow on

the table to steady her hand.

Branda opened the door without knocking. "Hurry."

Zarah stood, swaying a little on her bare feet. She had been given no shoes and no underwear, so that she felt at a disadvantage.

The other woman swept her with a studied appraisal. "You look lovely. He should be pleased."

Zarah swallowed and said nothing as Branda led her down the hall toward an isolated wing of the house. Two guards stood on either side of a wide doorway. One of them gave her a knowing look as he opened the door.

Her heart was pounding as she stepped through, and he closed it behind her.

She went very still, looking around. She was in a small reception room. Beyond was a garden courtyard with plants and a bubbling fountain. A man stood with his back to her. He was dressed in an evening tunic of rich burgundy and he wore leather sandals on his feet. His hair was dark, his shoulders were wide, and his legs were muscular.

She had been told this man was evil. An enemy of White Flint. And here she was—at his mercy.

When he turned, his gaze went straight to her, and she felt as though he could look right through the gown.

Maybe he could. Maybe that was one of his talents.

"Come in," he said in a deep, masculine voice.

She came toward him, trying not to look like she was studying him.

A slave didn't study her master, but she couldn't stop herself from taking in details. He wore just the sandals and tunic. No jewelry. Dark hair showed above the deep vee at his neckline. Raising her eyes, she saw that the hair on his head was dark and thick and cut short. His brows were wide above chocolate brown eyes.

She knew a few basic facts about him that Scanlon had told her. Griffin had been to the school for adepts. His father had been a minor council member who had died five years ago. His mother had been one of the young beauties of the city. In some ways his early life had been like hers. But when he'd grown up, he had chosen to become a power in Sun Acres.

Now, here she was with the man himself. And in the next second, he could order her to go to his bed and take off her gown.

When he spoke, his words came to her over the buzzing of her own blood in her ears.

"How are you settling in?" he asked politely as though she were a guest in his house, not a slave.

"Well," she answered, wishing she could match his tone. But she heard the slight tremble in her own voice.

"I've had dinner sent over from the kitchen." He gestured toward a table set in one corner of the courtyard. It had a white cloth, gleaming cutlery and fine china plates that must have been manufactured long ago. A cart with covered dishes sat next to the table.

Griffin lifted a lid, and the delicious aroma of roast chicken wafted toward her. To her embarrassment, she heard her stomach growl.

"You're hungry," he murmured.

"I... yes."

"Sit down."

She sat and he served her some of the chicken, then what looked like mashed potatoes—only more yellow.

He also poured her a glass of white wine. She had never drunk much. But because she was nervous, she took a swallow, then another.

He served himself, then sat down opposite her, as though they were equals.

She studied him from under lowered lashes and decided she liked his looks, even if she wished he were a little less formidable.

They both ate some of the chicken, which was tender and delicious, and she silently ordered herself not to gulp down the meal.

The man and the wine were making her light-headed. Was the drink drugged? Was that part of his plan for her? He'd drunk some, too. But not as much as she.

He had the power to do anything he wanted, yet he seemed nervous.

"You're well educated?" he asked.

"I went to the school for adepts."

"Ah. So you have hidden powers."

"My talents are small."

"And they are?"

"I can... soothe away minor pains in others."

"A convenient skill."

"And I can calm animals."

A look she couldn't read crossed his face. "Interesting. What else?"

She shrugged. She couldn't tell him about her communication power with the flame. She must keep that hidden. "I think they kept me in the school as a courtesy to my family. My father was on the council," she added and wished she hadn't felt it necessary to add that detail.

He touched his temple. "How did you get that scar?"

"When I was a little girl, I fell and hit my head against the edge of a table."

He nodded, still staring at her. "So how did you end up as a slave?"

She almost choked on the bite of chicken she'd just eaten. After swallowing carefully, she said, "My father was convicted of a crime he didn't commit. And executed."

"Oh?"

"They said he raided the city treasury. He would never have done that."

"Then how was he convicted?"

"He had enemies—just as you do," she snapped, then realized that she had stepped over the line with Griffin.

He kept his gaze on her. Instead of responding to her comment, he asked, "What about your mother?"

She recognized the danger in that question, then considered the answer carefully. "She's dying," she finally said.

"Of what?"

"She has... cancer."

"I'm sorry. Can't they treat her?"

"Perhaps. But they didn't think the wife of an executed criminal was worth saving."

He answered with a tight nod, and she hoped he was satisfied with the answer.

"What was your father's name?"

"Arturo."

"I haven't heard of him."

"You have spies in White Flint?" she asked, then knew at once that she had made a mistake by bringing up the subject. Intrigue wasn't her strong suit, and already she was getting herself into trouble. Griffin tipped his head to the side, studying her. "That's not a subject we should be discussing."

Chapter Five

"I'm sorry. I overstepped," Zarah whispered.

"Try to remember your place," he said, his voice sharper than it had been.

"Yes, sir," she said, hating the subservience in her voice. Clearing her throat, she said, "You're on the council here?"

"Yes."

"What's your most important goal for the city?"

He looked startled, then sat back in his seat. "Keeping us safe. Making sure there are jobs for everyone. Stopping the endless wars."

"How do you do all that?"

"I'd like to form an alliance with one of the nearby cities—so we stop draining our resources in fighting. Along with that, I'd like to set up trade agreements. Each city could produce what it does best—and sell it to the other at a fair price."

She stared at him. "That's very... progressive."

He laughed. "Maybe in today's world. But the ideas are quite old. Have you ever read the old books—about what life was like before the psychic change?"

"No. The old books were forbidden in White Flint."

"They're forbidden here—to all but a few men." He shifted in his seat. "You've never heard of the United States of America?"

"No."

"That's what they used to have here. A confederation of states—that all cooperated and ceded many powers to a central government. The seat of that government was Washington—a city not too far from here."

She blinked. "You know a lot."

He shrugged. "I've made it my business to educate myself—to learn more than they taught in school."

She nodded. She'd been told that this man was evil. Instead, she found him intelligent and fascinating.

He ate in silence for several minutes. She'd lost her appetite when they'd talked about her family. Now she took a few more bites of food.

A small bell rang, and she looked up, startled. "Pardon me," he said and got up from the table. Opening the door, he took a folded piece of paper from a messenger and read it. His face turned to a scowl.

"There's trouble at an entertainment venue in the city. I'll need to send soldiers. I'll be back," he said.

He left her alone at the table. After a few minutes, she got up and wandered around the room, examining the plantings and the stone planters. Another door led to a large bedroom. His bedroom. She wanted to stay away from it, but she was drawn to the softly lighted room. She could see a wide bed with four posts at the corners and high shelves crammed with old books.

He would take her to that bed tonight. She shivered. She was attracted to him. But she was sure he wasn't going to give her time to get to know him before he...

She cut off the thought and focused on the bookshelves. She longed to take some of the volumes down and examine them.

He read a lot. And he seemed to have the best interests of his city at heart. She sensed he was someone

she could like and admire—if the circumstances had been different.

But he had bought her like a thoroughbred horse. He could do what he wanted with her. And she was here to please him—and spy on him.

Suddenly it was difficult to catch her breath. A faint breeze was blowing through one of the open windows, and she walked unsteadily to the grillework, where she stood breathing in the cooler air. She heard a door open, heard footsteps cross the courtyard. She went rigid as she felt him come up behind her and put his hands on her arms.

"I'm sorry to have left you."

"You don't have to apologize. I know you're a busy man."

"This has to be difficult for you."

"Yes," she whispered.

"How are you feeling?"

"A little shaky," she managed to say.

He turned her slowly toward him, and she ordered herself not to resist when he pulled her body against his.

She trembled as he stroked his hands over her shoulders and down her back.

"Perhaps we can help each other out."

When she didn't answer, he murmured, "Relax."

"That's difficult."

"Because I frighten you?"

"No," she said quickly, probably too quickly. "You're not what I expected at all."

"What did you expect?"

"A man who would exercise his... rights over me."

His voice was low and steady. "Is this so different than it would have been? Your father would have arranged a marriage for you. Probably to a man you hardly knew. And you would have had no choice about marrying him."

"Marrying..." she answered, suddenly remembering what her life had been—and what it was now.

"We'll try not to make this too unpleasant for you."

She stood stiffly as he tipped her head up, then slowly lowered his mouth, lightly stroking his lips against hers.

Her stomach clenched, and she ordered herself to relax. He could do anything he wanted with her now.

But she remembered what Quinn had told her. It could be good with him, if she let herself enjoy it.

She focused on the sensation of his lips moving against hers. She had kissed a few men. And she hadn't thought the experience was anything special. But she liked the way Griffin's lips felt, liked the way he moved them against hers. And when his tongue stroked against the seam of her lips, she let herself open for him.

He made a sound of approval as he played with her mouth, his tongue stroking the sensitive tissue inside her lips then playing with her teeth and finally sliding his tongue against hers.

She might have been shocked, but she reminded herself what Quinn had advised. So she focused on the sensations he was creating. What he was doing felt wonderful.

She could do a lot worse. No—she shouldn't think in those terms. This was not her husband. Not a permanent relationship. She had been sent here to spy on this man.

The thought made her stiffen.

He felt her muscles tighten and misinterpreted the reason. "Let yourself enjoy this."

His hands slid up her ribs, then along the sides of her breasts, and she made a shocked sound.

"You've never let anyone do that?" he murmured.

"No."

He worked his fingers inward, skimming over her nipples through the thin fabric of her gown, and she realized that the cold air had made them bud. Or perhaps it was his touch. When he stroked the hardened tips, hot sensations shot through her, and she caught her breath.

The gown had a row of buttons down the front. He slid the top six open, one by one, then reached inside, cupping her breast in his large hand before pushing the fabric aside and lowering his head so that he could stroke her nipple with his tongue, then suck it into his mouth.

"Oh!"

He blew gently on the wet bud, then spoke with his mouth centimeters away. "You like that?"

"Yes," she managed, then remembered what Quinn had said. "Can I touch you there?" she asked in a voice she couldn't quite hold steady.

"Gods, yes."

He quickly unbuttoned the top of his tunic, and she slipped her hand inside, stroking the hair on his chest, then encountering a flat nipple. When she slid her finger back and forth across it, he made a low sound of approval.

While she was still exploring his chest, he reached down and pulled up her gown, raising the hem so that he could slip his hand under and stroke her knee.

She tensed as his fingers glided their way up to her thigh.

"Relax."

She tried, but she was scared now. It was one thing to talk about this. It was quite another to have a man she had just met working his hand up her leg. But those were the rules of the game that she had been ordered to play.

Trying not to think about the role that had been thrust upon her, she focused on physical sensations.

He kissed her neck, his lips and tongue spreading warmth downward through her body. And she found she liked that as much as his lips on hers.

"You're very sensitive. That's good."

As he spoke, his hand traveled higher up her thigh, then glided into the most intimate territory.

She had touched herself there. Given herself pleasure. And what Quinn had told her was true. She had prepared herself for a man's attentions. She closed her eyes as he slid his hand through her sensitive folds, finding the bud where the greatest sensation lay, then stroking downward again. From the way he touched her, she knew that he understood a woman's pleasure very well.

She gasped as he did what she had never done herself, slipped his large finger inside her.

"Does that hurt?" he asked urgently.

"No." She swallowed, then answered honestly. "It feels good."

She felt him smile as he bent to nuzzle his lips against her breasts while his finger stroked in and out of her, then traveled upward again, driving her toward what she knew was the ultimate pleasure.

He kept her poised on the edge of completion, and she tried to increase the friction by pressing against his fingers.

"You need to come."

"Yes," she gasped, hardly able to believe she had made such an admission.

When he moved his hand away, she cried out in frustration. But he only lifted her onto the wide window ledge, pressing her back against the grillework, lifting her skirt to her lap, and opening her legs.

A jolt of alarm lulled her from her sensual haze. "What?"

"Shhh." He went down on his knees, so that his mouth was at the level of her hips.

She didn't understand what he meant to do, and for a moment she froze in embarrassed shock as he knelt on the floor, his face level with her woman's parts.

She tried to struggle away when he leaned toward her, but he held her in place with his large hands on her thighs, then pressed his mouth to her.

"Don't!" she cried out in panic.

"It's all right. Don't fight me," he answered, then began to caress her with his lips and tongue, using them as he had used his fingers. She went rigid at the intimate contact. But she was too aroused not to respond. As he licked and sucked at her and stroked his finger in and out of her, the exquisite attentions brought her up and over the edge, so that she cried out as she reached sexual climax.

While she was still vibrating with the aftershocks, he stood and pulled his tunic aside.

Again, she had no idea of what he intended. He took her by surprise, when her body was still limp with pleasure.

There was a moment of pain when his large penis penetrated her. But the pain was over by the time he began to thrust. She held on to his shoulders, her heart pounding as she listened to his jerky breathing.

Then she felt his body shudder, felt him pour himself into her.

He made a rough sound and gathered her close, holding her as his head sank to her shoulder.

When he withdrew from her, she stared up at him.

"You tricked me," she murmured. "I thought you would take me to bed to do that."

"Was the outcome worth the subterfuge?"

"Yes."

"Good." He lifted her in his arms and carried her through the courtyard and into the bedroom. Setting her on her feet, he pulled the gown over her head and tossed it away.

Before she could react to her nakedness, he put out the lamp on the table before pulling the covers aside and eased her into the bed.

Then he pulled off his own tunic and sent it to join the gown.

Naked, he climbed into the big bed beside her.

"Are you all right?" he murmured as he stroked her arm.

"More than all right."

"It wasn't so bad?" he asked, his voice teasing, or perhaps he wanted reassurance.

"You know it was... good."

"I hoped it would be."

"Why?"

"I want lovemaking to be good between us."

She wanted to ask what he intended for the future. She had sense enough not to demand answers. And what did it matter what he intended? She wouldn't be here long—would she?

He kissed her cheek. "Sleep."

Physically and emotionally exhausted and at the same time relieved that the sexual initiation was over, she closed her eyes. He could have raped her. Instead he had very skillfully seduced her and given her intense pleasure. She was grateful for that. And also sick and shaky. She was supposed to be spying on