

Rainy Skies: Lull before Storm
By Luthiea Wu

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CHAPTER 1

The cobblestones responded with an especially loud ringing sound as the corpulent man made his way down the dim and quiet street in the dead of the night. It was not exactly the ideal time to be taking a casual stroll for everyone feared the demonic attacks that came with sundown but then again, the man was not *exactly* everyone.

The attack came without warning as Rat Demons sprang from nowhere and headed straight for the grossly overweight man, howling and claws slashing as they came. Only to bounce off a shield that came up barely in time. Fazed by this unexpected development in what had seemed at first to be overwhelming odds in their favour, the Rat Demons retreated to a safe distance while their tasty prey shimmered into a slim young woman with brown streaks in her dark hair and lavender eyes.

Cheated of their dinner, the demons howled their disappointment but kept their distance from the young woman. These were demons that had little magical powers at their disposal but relied mostly on brute strength. The woman on the other hand fairly glowed with power and did not seem in the least inclined to accept polite requests to power down so they could have a fair fight.

“My name is Rain Eveil,” the young woman informed the demons pleasantly, “and I’ve been requested by the Town Mayor to ask you to leave immediately. Unless you *prefer* the less civilized way.”

Rain graced the nervous demons with a feral grin.

The Rat Demons were at a loss for action. Here was an apparently formidable Magian who could take them out with a single thought and yet...

“She’s one and we’re many,” one Rat Demon pointed out unnecessarily. “We can take her down!”

Without further ado, the demons squared their shoulders and launched a ferocious attack; despite the shield still obviously

gleaming around the Magian. Rain dismissed the shield with a flick of her mind and held her right hand out as if she meant to grab the first demon in mid-air. It looked like the stupidest thing to do, and the leading demon apparently thought so too for it howled in triumph and opened its huge jaw to bite down on her arm.

It didn't expect her right arm to flare in sudden brilliance. The Rat Demon screeched in pain as soon as it touched the light and continued doing so until it was completely dissipated. The other demons stopped dead in their tracks and stared wide-eyed at what must have seemed like a nightmare. Their nerve broke and the Rat Demons turned as one to flee.

"Not so fast dearies," Rain assured their retreating backs affably. With one swift movement, she plucked her white jade flute from under her sash and swept it in an outward arc. Darts that seemed purely made of light materialized and shot forward of their own accord. With fearsome accuracy, the darts struck every one of the demons and vaporized them on the spot.

As the demons' dying bays faded away on the night breeze, Rain searched the immediate vicinity with her mind but there did not seem to be any more demons so she relaxed marginally. A good Magian was always prepared after all.

Satisfied that she had taken care of the town's problem for good, Rain changed her appearance to that of the corpulent man again, and continued her way down the street towards the Town Mayor's residence.

She didn't notice the ominous figure hidden in the shadows on the roofs.

CHAPTER 2

"I can see her at the gate." Thiea Bey, a tall athletic woman with short flaxen hair, dropped quietly beside Yvi Weil. "Looks like Rain had no problem dealing with the Rat Demons after all."

"Did *you* ever have a doubt?" Yvi flicked her auburn hair and

smiled mischievously at Thiea. “Rain graduated near the top of her class at the Magian Academy after all.”

“Of course not,” Thiea retorted in good humour. “I’m just glad the Rat Demons didn’t decide to strike here instead.”

Rain’s corpulent guise ambled into the courtyard in front of the Town Mayor’s residence and shimmered into her usual self, much to the discomfort of the patrolling guards nearby.

“Is the Mayor alright?” Rain asked in concern as Yvi and Thiea hurried towards her. “I’m pretty sure I got all the Rats but it doesn’t hurt to be safe.”

“He’s fine,” Yvi replied airily with amusement in her azure eyes. “He’s currently shivering under his bed but at least he’s in one piece.”

“How did you guess that the Rat Demons were after him in the first place?” Thiea asked. “They were killing everyone they could lay their paws on after all.”

“*That’s* what they want you to think.” Rain smiled as she pulled a parchment from seemingly nowhere and handed it to Thiea. “Take a look at this list of all the people who had been killed for the past month and tell me one thing they have in common.”

Thiea and Yvi studied the parchment intently.

“They’re all known supporters of the Humans Against Demons movement?” Thiea raised her eyebrow.

“Are you saying that the Rats were only targeting those who were in the movement?”

Rain nodded. “Exactly, and killing the Mayor who’s one of the more prominent figures will definitely throw a spanner into the works.”

“But who is the mastermind behind these mass assassinations?” Yvi asked curiously. “The demons?”

“Who else could it be?” An odd expression burned in Rain’s lavender eyes. “They’re all murderers, every single one of them.”

The earring wrapped around her right ear glinted somewhat menacingly under the dim lights that filtered from the Mayor’s house. It was a subtle symbol that served to remind all of Rain’s

Magian status wherever she went and it gave Yvi the creeps every time she saw the earring. It was as if the earring had a life of its own and Yvi never understood why it had to be a hideous claw-like thing with a single eye of all things. The Order definitely needed to take some lessons in fashion accessorising.

“Well, whatever it is, our mission is now accomplished.” Thiea cut into Yvi’s thoughts dismissively. “Let’s collect our fee and get out of here. I’m positively starving.”

“You’re always starving.” Rain’s eyes lost the strange burning look as she turned with a teasing smile to Thiea. “Sometimes I wonder where all the food you ate went.”

“To my brain of course,” Thiea laughed. “Why do you think I’m so incredibly smart...?”

As Yvi followed her fellow bounty hunters, she began to wonder what could have caused that expression of hidden pain and repressed anger in Rain’s eyes.

CHAPTER 3

“You...you sure you got all the demons?” The portly Mayor sat in his armchair, beady eyes darting to the windows while he licked his lips nervously.

Thick gold chains hung loosely around his fleshy neck protruding from the rich clothes he wore. His young wife stood behind him with an empty expression, completely devoid of any personality that Rain could discern.

“Naturally, Your Excellency,” Thiea replied wryly. “We may be *useless females* but we do deliver as promised.”

The Mayor gulped at her sardonic tone, remembering that very morning when they were first ushered into his presence in his study. Three young women who looked more like they belonged in someone’s harem stood before him as if they had every right to do so. Thiea who was the tallest of the three women stepped forward and bowed respectfully.

“Good morning, Your Ex...”

“What is this?” he barked at his henchmen who flinched at his high-pitched voice. “I told you get someone who can get rid of the Rat Demons! Not *useless females* who’re only good for entertainment!”

Thiea’s inky eyes hardened while the shorter of her two companions coughed slightly and drew the Mayor’s attention. At first he didn’t notice anything amiss about the young woman. Then he saw the earring on her right ear.

The ruby glinted from the single eye on her earlobe and the Mayor suddenly felt shivers crawl down his back.

“My name is Rain. I can take care of the Rat Demons for you.” The young Magian bowed slightly with her disconcerting lavender eyes still on him. “I assure you that despite being *females*, we’re really quite good at what we do.”

The Mayor swallowed the inexplicable fear he felt every time he laid eyes on a Magian and tried to regain his composure.

“Are...are you sure? Many men have come to me claiming they could get rid of the Rat Demons and none of them have come back alive!”

“Ev...even my Magian has failed to subdue the demons and got mauled by them instead!” The Mayor hit the table with his podgy fists in increasing frustration.

Rain eyed him coolly. “Absolutely.”

Given that he had no other choice, the Mayor accepted their help. At a price that almost gave him a heart attack, no thanks to the auburn-haired beauty who haggled like a marketplace hawker.

“Your Excellency?” Thiea broke into his thoughts. “It’s getting late and we’ll like to be paid, please.”

“Wha...what?” The Mayor blinked in confusion at the blonde woman.

Thiea repeated her words slowly.

“Oh, yes. Of course.” The Mayor waved his servant over and the young man handed a heavy money bag to Thiea.

“Many thanks Your Excellency.” Thiea weighed the money bag

in her hands carefully and smiled. “Hope to do business with you again.”

The Mayor sniffed disdainfully but said nothing. The three women bowed and took their leave. His young wife remained behind his armchair, quiet and diffident, just the way he liked his women.

Oh well, the Mayor thought to himself, at least the three women had gotten rid of the demons and he could finally sleep easy tonight. He looked lasciviously over his shoulder at his delectable wife. Perhaps some fun in bed was in order as well.

CHAPTER 4

The luxurious four-post bed creaked vigorously in the dark room, its lacy curtains moving back and forth with a kind of sick rhythm. Moonlight shone through a nearby open window, its glow barely reaching the foot of the bed where various clothes were strewn carelessly.

A shadow flashed across the moon’s path on the heavily carpeted floor but the occupants of the creaking bed seemed completely oblivious to it. Then the curtains were lifted and the Mayor looked up in astonishment, sweat beading on his forehead.

The cold lavender eyes were the last thing he saw alive...

The pair of patrolling guards winced at a particularly piercing shriek from the Mayor’s bedroom.

“His Excellency must be having a *really* good time with his latest wife,” one of them noted with a dry glance at the Mayor’s bedroom window.

“Yeah, but I wish he’d keep it down.” His partner rolled his eyes heavenwards. “Does he have any idea how distracting it is to patrol the grounds to the sounds of his copulation?”

“Our esteemed Mayor believes in sharing his joy with the rest of us underlings.” The first guard slaps his partner on the shoulder with

a wide grin. “Come on, we still have more grounds to cover before our shift is over.”

They walked away, content in the knowledge that it was going to be a peaceful night but neither of them detected the shadowy figure watching them from the Mayor’s bedroom window.

The shooting stars streaked across the night sky like golden streamers and the breeze ran its cool fingers through her dark brown-streaked hair. Fragrant petals of moonflowers danced around her in a field that stretched as far as the eye could see.

For a while, Rain had no idea where she was. Then she remembered. This was the secret hideout of her childhood where she used to go whenever she got the chance to sneak out of the village at night. This was where she dreamt of adventures in faraway lands, breathing in the heavenly scent as she did so.

This was also where she first met him.

“Little girl....” Rain heard an achingly familiar voice and turned.

A tall figure in white flowing clothes stood some distance away. Long honey brown hair framed a face she could barely make out but Rain could tell by the profile that it was a man.

“What are you doing out here all by yourself?” he asked her.

But before she could answer him, stabs of unimaginable pain pierced through her brain.

Rain jerked her eyes open and sat up abruptly in the bed, clutching her throbbing head with both hands. Breathing hard to get her rapidly beating heart under control, Rain was surprised to feel a trail of wetness down her right cheek. She touched a finger to her face and stared at the single droplet of crystal tear.

It had been a long time since she had that dream, so why was it returning now? Rain couldn’t understand and couldn’t think, intense her headache was. The sky outside the inn slowly brightened into shades of red, gold and blue. Suddenly the town bell sounded urgently in the distance and shouts could be heard just below her room window.

“Wha...?” Thiea sat up in her bed and stretched lazily with a huge yawn. “What in the world are they yelling about so early in the morning?”

“I don’t know.” Rain made her way to the window and looked out cautiously.

Groups of the Mayor’s soldiers were scurrying to and fro like ants under attack. Rain narrowed her lavender eyes. Something bad must have happened at the Mayor’s residence for the soldiers to be this panicky. It couldn’t have been the Rat Demons again for she had scanned the entire town last night to be sure.

“Looks like we’ll have to get out of town quickly,” Thiea noted with a raised eyebrow beside her. “I sure have no intention of being held back for troublesome questioning.”

Rain agreed, then realised with a start that her headache was gone.

“Are you alright?” Thiea peered at her in concern. “You seem pretty pale.”

“I’m fine.” Rain smiled wanly. “But...,”

She glanced around their room in bemusement. “Where’s Yvi?”

CHAPTER 5

Rain already had her hand up to knock on the door when said door was wrenched open and out rushed a *very* upset young man, who was of all things, *weeping piteously*. Rain exchanged a bewildered look with Thiea and looked into the room. Yvi in a dressing gown was dreamily brushing her long red hair before a mirror.

“Please don’t tell me you broke another heart,” Rain said in exasperation as she stepped into the room, followed by Thiea who closed the door firmly behind her.

“I didn’t ‘break’ his heart as you so crudely put it,” Yvi retorted as she put down her brush and shot Rain a wilting glance. “I merely told him not to take last night too seriously.”

“Which is the same as breaking hearts as far as I’m concerned,” Rain returned sharply. “When are you going to learn that playing with people’s feelings is not the right thing to do?”

“I can’t help it if men throw themselves at me.” Yvi got up from her seat and started dressing. “They should know better than to pin me down after a one-night stand. Besides, things I say in a moment of passion simply can’t be taken seriously.”

Rain sighed heavily and Thiea laughed.

“Well, you could send some my way if you can’t handle them all,” Thiea suggested.

Rain turned around slowly, stared at Thiea incredulously before she sank her face into her hands and groaned.

“One is bad enough but *two*?! I don’t think I’m emotionally equipped for two man-eaters.”

Some commotion outside the window caught Thiea’s attention so she glanced out onto the street below. A crowd of *terribly* enraged women bellowing for Yvi’s blood were marching into the inn.

“Ah, Yvi?”

“What?”

“I think you better get ready soon because I don’t think you’d want to be here when they arrive.” Thiea pointed casually out the window.

Rain squeezed beside her to look out and widened her eyes before she rounded angrily on Yvi.

“You prey on *married* men too?!”

“Can we please argue about this later?” Thiea asked plaintively with one hand on the window sill. “They’re going to find out which room you’re in any moment now.”

Heavy footsteps on the stairs outside Yvi’s room punctuated her statement.

“I’ll deal with you later,” Rain promised with a threatening tone before she went to the window where Thiea had already disappeared through to the roof. Yvi followed with a long-suffering expression and deftly swung herself to where Thiea was waiting for them.

The door in Yvi's room started to rattle in its frame.

"You want to float us to our horses?" Thiea gestured towards their rides at the side of the inn.

Rain sighed and shot a poisonous look at Yvi who pretended she did not see it. The young Magian narrowed her eyes before she concentrated on the three of them and levitated them carefully down onto the horses which whickered softly but otherwise kept their cool. Their owners had done it enough times that the horses were used to it.

"Quietly now," Thiea cautioned as they steered their horses away from the inn. It was just as well for the enraged wives were waving choppers at the fleeing trio and screaming bloody murder.

"Remind me never to bring you anywhere where there are men," Rain said as if she had been mortally insulted.

"You speak as if I prey on every man I come across," Yvi observed with an injured tone.

"*Really?* It sure did appear that way to me."

"I will have you know I have exquisite taste in men and not *every* man fulfils my expectations." Yvi said loftily.

"She's right, you know," Thiea muttered to Rain.

"Bah." Was all Rain said.

CHAPTER 6

"Why is everyone looking so stressed out?" Yvi raised her eyebrow at the crowds of people milling around the marketplace and muttering among themselves.

"Did the Rat Demons make another appearance while I was busy?"

"Let's ask someone." Thiea caught the eye of a little beggar and crooked her finger at him.

"Milady?" The boy who looked no older than ten years of age approached Thiea's horse apprehensively.

"Tell us what just happened and you'll get to earn this." Thiea

plucked a silver coin from her coin pouch and held it out enticingly.

The boy eyed the silver coin greedily. “Yesh, milady. Dey been saying the Mayor and him wife were found dead in their bed dish very mornin’.”

“Found dead?!” Yvi asked in shock. “But... how... when?!”

“I haf a no idea, milady,” The beggar shrugged nonchalantly. “Dey said the Mayor and him wife must haf been murdered last night and them soldiers haf been searchin’ through the entire town for them suspicious characters.”

“I see, thanks for the information.” Thiea flicked the silver coin to the boy who caught it deftly and disappeared into the crowd almost immediately.

“This...is quite unexpected.” Rain frowned. “Why would he suddenly be murdered so soon after we’ve dealt with the Rat Demons?”

“You think there’re more Rat Demons around?” Thiea asked as they began to steer their horses through the crowds of people. “Maybe they sneaked into town during the night.”

“Impossible.” Rain shook her head firmly. “I would have felt them otherwise.”

“The poor wife,” Yvi sighed in sympathy. “To be married to that disgusting fellow was bad enough. To be *killed in the same bed as him* is even worse.”

“Maybe she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Thiea lifted her dark eyes up to the morning sky contemplatively. “Innocent victims always are.”

Rain said nothing and the three women rode in silence for a while, each absorbed in their own private thoughts.

“Well, whatever the case. Let’s leave town before they start arresting ‘suspicious’ people.” Thiea glanced suggestively at the sword that rode on her hip. “You two may look like demure ladies on a morning ride but I don’t.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be easy.” Rain pointed to where soldier-manned blockades had already been placed at the town gates.

“Darn. I was hoping to avoid a situation like that.” Thiea frowned. “Is there any back way out of this town or something?”

“Why can’t we just ride up to them and ask to be let through?” Yvi tilted her head to one side in curiosity. “It’s not as if we did anything wrong.”

“I doubt they’ll listen to a word we say,” Rain replied dryly. “It *was* their Mayor who had been killed after all. They’re bound to secure the town and make sure no one leaves until the culprit has been found.”

“And it could take weeks before that happens,” Thiea sighed heavily. “Whoever is good enough to get past the Mayor’s guards would have left town by now.”

“*I* know a back way out of town,” an amused voice came from somewhere above them and startled the three women.

Thiea turned on her horse and looked up into the warm brown eyes of a man leaning casually out of a low shophouse. A pair of eye glasses sat snugly on his well-formed nose and lent a certain scholarly air to a face that seemed otherwise ordinary.

“Who are you?” Thiea raised a wary eyebrow. “And do you know how rude it is to eavesdrop on other people’s conversations?”

“I know.” The man inclined his head in an oddly formal fashion and smiled. “I apologise for the intrusion into your privacy but I... have a proposition for you.”

CHAPTER 7

“A proposition?” Thiea raised her other eyebrow in scepticism. “How interesting, considering it comes from a guy leaning from the balcony of a prostitute’s den.”

The man reddened and coughed slightly in embarrassment. “Erm...well, but that shouldn’t affect our discussions, right?”

“You have no idea,” Thiea deadpanned while Yvi and Rain hid their smiles without much success.

The man laughed, “Alright, I know how misleading my current

location is but it's really because I couldn't find an available inn and the ladies have kindly offered me a place to stay."

"Right. I'm sure you have a good reason for it." Thiea turned her mount's head and began to ride away, followed by Yvi and Rain who were most amused by the strange man.

"Wait! Wait!" The man waved his arms somewhat frantically. "I do have a proposition for you! I need an escort and I'm willing to pay a high price for it!"

At the sound of the word 'pay', Yvi paused and regarded the man speculatively.

"Thiea, why don't you listen to his proposition first?" she suggested with a gleam in her azure eyes. "It's not as if we have something urgent to attend to."

"We do," Thiea threw over her shoulder. "We need get some breakfast. That's pretty urgent in my opinion."

"In that case, why don't you join us for breakfast, Mister...?" Yvi flashed her most dazzling smile at the man while Rain rolled her eyes heavenwards.

"Just Edius, my lady." The man bowed. "I'll be most happy to have breakfast with such beautiful ladies."

"Well, Just Edius." Yvi inclined her head coyly in return. "I look forward to hearing your proposition then."

Rain sighed.

Thiea stared hard at Edius sitting opposite her while the inn bustled with busy servers and rowdy customers who were already drunk.

"Alright, whose idea it was to bring him here?" she asked without taking her eyes off an increasingly nervous Edius.

"It was mine," Yvi spoke up as she placed a hand on Edius' shoulder protectively. "I feel we should give him a chance to present his proposition first before we decide to ignore him completely."

"*And get into his pants while you're at it,*" Rain muttered under her breath.

“What did you just say, my dearest friend of many years?” Yvi turned to her with a smile that was all teeth and little sweetness.

“Nothing,” Rain replied just as sweetly. “You must have heard me wrongly.”

She then turned to Thiea. “Just hear him out. It’s not as if we can’t reject him if we don’t like what he’s proposing.”

“Alright.” Thiea leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “You have five minutes.”

Edius grinned winningly at her and Thiea was suddenly struck by how strangely familiar he looked. It was as if she had seen him somewhere before but couldn’t put a finger on exactly where.

Well, Thiea thought to herself as she settled back to listen to Edius, maybe she’ll remember it later.

CHAPTER 8

Edius introduced himself as Edius Mil and a trader of precious stones which he intended to trade in all over the kingdom.

“Edius Mil?” Thiea asked curiously. “You don’t happen to be related to the Milton family, do you?”

“Is that the noble family who provides all the military brains to the kingdom?” Yvi wanted to know. “I’ve heard quite a bit about them.”

“You’re right.” Edius smiled. “But I’m not related to them in anyway at all. It’s just been my...ah...fortune to share part of my name with them.”

“You say you’re a trader of precious stones,” Rain spoke up intently. “So what has that got to do with showing us a back way out of this town?”

“As you know, precious stones are not exactly the safest things to have on my person,” Edius began to explain. “So I need an armed escort of guards to accompany me on my travels until my goods are safely unloaded at the city of Akros.”

“Akros?” Yvi threw a surprised look at Edius. “But that’s like at

the edge of all known civilisation. Why would anyone want to buy precious stones there?”

“They demand and I supply.” Edius tilted his head to one side. “So are you willing to be my armed escorts? I’ll pay a good price and you’ll get to leave this town.”

“But why us?” Thiea raised her eyebrow. “I’m sure there’re other escort agencies in town which you can approach. Why would you entrust your safety to three women who may not be as competent as you think?”

“Because I’ve heard of what you’re capable of, Thiea Bey.” Edius leaned forward with a smile. “You were once one of the most promising City Guards in the capital.”

Thiea’s eyes narrowed while her companions tensed. “And how would you know that when I haven’t even told you who I am?”

Edius shrugged. “Lucky guess. I spend a lot of time in the capital so I pretty much know everything that goes on. The descriptions don’t really do you justice though. You’re much prettier in person.”

Thiea stared at Edius, not knowing what to make of his words. It was true she was once a City Guard at the capital. She had left because of the overwhelming sexist attitude towards female City Guards but never had she expected this stranger to know anything about her, much less her name. Thiea may have been one of more outstanding City Guards of her time but the gender discrimination of her superiors made sure she remained near the bottom of the ranks *and* obscurity. She could definitely smell a rat somewhere.

“Well it looks like you’ve got yourself an admirer, Thiea.” Yvi threw her a ‘so-do-we-accept-his-offer’ look.

The flaxen-haired woman considered. If they stayed any longer in this town, chances are they would be picked up very soon for questioning by the authorities. Although they had nothing to do with the Mayor’s murder, it would be a complete waste of time. Time that they could better spend on hunting down bounties...*or* escorting a precious stones merchant.

Even if it was all some kind of trap, Thiea was sure her

companions would be able to handle it. Yvi for all her apparent fragility was a formidable street fighter while Rain could take on the magical attacks. All in all, it was a risk worth taking. Not to mention the monetary reward that would come in handy if Edius was exactly as he had described.

A glance at both Rain and Yvi told her they were willing to go for it so Thiea made up her mind.

“Very well.” She raised her eyes to Edius’ warm brown ones. “We’ll take on the job. At a price...,” Thiea held up a hand before Edius could say anything, “that Yvi will negotiate with you.”

Yvi’s eyes gleamed with anticipation and she rubbed her hands gleefully.

“So, Master Edius.” She unleashed one of her sultry looks and watched Edius squirm in embarrassment with a knowing smile dancing on her luscious lips. “What is your first offer?”

CHAPTER 9

The alley was dark and just big enough for two horses to walk side by side. Water could be heard dripping in the distance and rats scurried away at the sight of the four riders. Yvi grumbled incessantly behind Thiea and Edius as they made their way down the alley to a small warehouse at the very end.

Rain rode primly at Yvi’s side, stealing amused glances at her from time to time. Finally she could take it no longer and started to laugh somewhat uncontrollably.

“What are *you* laughing at?” Yvi demanded sourly.

Rain wiped the tears from her eyes, chuckling at the sight of Yvi’s indignant expression.

“I still can’t believe Edius had you soundly beaten during negotiations. And to think you had your charms on at full force!”

“Don’t you *dare* remind me about it,” Yvi sulked and continued riding with her nose in the air, pointedly ignoring Rain.

Rain giggled. “Well Edius, I really got to take my hat off to you.

Do you know you're the *first* man ever to out-negotiate Yvi?"

Edius smiled modestly. "Nah...it was really Yvi who gave leeway to me."

"Such a humble man." Rain gazed at him with new-found respect. "You don't find many such men these days. And you gave us such a generous offer too."

Yvi sniffed disbelievingly.

The group arrived at the end of the alley and stopped before a rundown warehouse that looked abandoned. The second floor of the building was exposed to the open like a gaping jaw. A light breeze smelling like it came from the sewers scattered the various debris that littered the ground.

"Where exactly are you taking us?" Thiea asked Edius warily. "I sure don't see an exit out of town anywhere near here."

Edius dismounted and led his horse to the door of the warehouse, carefully pushing it in. The door protested loudly but swung inwards without much resistance. Edius turned and winked at Thiea.

"Trust me; I know what I'm doing. Just follow my lead." Then he disappeared into the darkness within the warehouse.

"I hate it when people say that," Thiea muttered under her breath before she slipped off her horse, followed by Rain and Yvi.

"Hold it *right there*, ladies." A voice suddenly cut through the air like a crack of the whip.

The three women turned cautiously to face the source of the voice, only to find a group of menacing-looking soldiers at the mouth of another alley to the right of the warehouse.

Their Squad Captain, a tall burly man with a single eyebrow that stretched from one end of his face to the other, stood before them with a hand on the hilt of his sword.

"What are you three ladies doing here in such a deserted place?" he asked them suspiciously, taking in Thiea's sword at her hip, Rain's white jade flute and Yvi from head to toe.

The three women remained quiet. Then Edius suddenly poked

his head from the warehouse.

“Ladies, why aren’t you....” He paused in mid-sentence as he realised there were more than just Thiea and her companions around.

“Who are you?!” the Squad Captain barked. “Come out to where I can see you!”

Edius cautiously edged out from the warehouse and moved to Thiea’s side.

“So... what’s with this crowd here?” The Squad Captain narrowed his eyes and moved forward to scrutinise them. “You people are not trying to do something illegal, are you?”

CHAPTER 10

“Of course not, Captain.” Edius gave him a smile meant to convey harmlessness. “We’re just here to... ah... check out the area for our new business.”

“Your new business?” The Squad Captain raised his eyebrow disbelievingly. “This place has been abandoned to the rats for over ten years and *you* want to start up a new business here?”

His subordinates laughed in derision but Edius’ demeanour never wavered.

“Yes, Captain,” the brown-haired man agreed affably. “It’s one of the cheapest places to rent after all.”

“Well, I’m afraid you people will have to put off checking this place out. There’s been an order for any suspicious people to be taken in for questioning.” The Squad Captain stared at them with unfriendly eyes. “And I’ve just decided to pick you guys.”

“Not even if we plead otherwise?” Edius took a step closer to the Squad Captain and lifted his right hand where something glinted with a seductive shine.

The burly man looked once at the few gold coins in Edius’ hands with a sneer. Then with a swipe of his hand, the Squad Captain took the coins and walked back to his men.

“Arrest them,” he told his men with a malicious glance thrown at Thiea and the rest. “Be sure not to mess up the ladies too much.”

Thiea’s eyes narrowed as she mentally assessed the advancing men who fanned out in a U-shape with their swords drawn. There were typically ten men to each squad. Excluding the Squad Captain who didn’t seem inclined to join the fight, there were nine against four. Not exactly the best of odds, Thiea thought in resignation but she was confident her companions could take on at least two apiece.

Then with a start, she realised Edius was no longer with them.

“Where’s Edius?” an astonished Thiea asked Rain who had moved up to stand on her right while Yvi took her place on the left.

Rain shrugged as she drew her flute in a smooth motion. “Who knows? He could be expecting us to earn our keep right here, right now.”

“I just knew he wasn’t as perfect as you seem to think, Rain,” Yvi smirked.

“Shut up,” Rain retorted absently. “Let’s get this over with already.”

The soldiers charged at them from all sides. Thiea stepped forward to engage the leading fighter while Rain ducked under the attack of one soldier and swept his feet from under him with her legs. A pair of sharp throwing knives materialised in Yvi’s hands and caught a sword between them just in time.

“Find the man!” the Squad Captain ordered one of his men. “Don’t let him get away from us!”

His underling nodded and headed for the abandoned warehouse with his sword at the ready.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Yvi kicked her opponent in the guts and flicked her hand once.

The soldier toppled over with a knife in his back and a surprised expression on his face. Thiea swiftly dispatched two of the soldiers before she moved to help Rain who was hard-pressed a few feet away.

“Can’t you use your powers to deal with them, Rain?” Thiea yelled over the clashing of swords. “We’re sort of in a hurry here!”

“You know very well I can’t!” Rain panted as she managed to get under her opponent’s guard and knocked him unconscious with her flute. “I’m under Magian’s Vow not to harm humans using my powers!”

Thia swore under her breath as more soldiers headed her way. “Remind me to write a letter of complaint to the Magian Order about that! That has to be one of the stupidest vows *of all time!*”

“*Ladies, move!*” Someone yelled from somewhere above and Thia looked up in bewilderment.

Edius was on the exposed second floor and about to push a cart full of bricks onto their unprotected heads.

CHAPTER 11

Thia swore a little more fluently and threw herself to one side as the cartful of bricks slammed onto the ground with great force and rained shards of bricks everywhere. One soldier went down as he was hit by a flying brick while another disappeared with a cry under the cart. The women’s horses backed away fearfully at all the commotion.

“*Quick! Into the warehouse with your horses!*” Edius yelled down before he turned to run back inside.

“Darn! I’m so going to charge him extra for messing up my hair!” Yvi coughed and tried to dust off her hair to no avail.

“Quit worrying about your looks and *hurry up!*” Rain snapped as she ran past Yvi. “Nobody’s gonna care even if you look like Metis!” ...[001]

Yvi followed with a black scowl at Rain’s back, leading her unwilling horse into the inky darkness of the warehouse.

“Over here, ladies!” Edius’ voice came to them and a flare lighted up some distance away, revealing an open trapdoor on the ground and the brown-haired man.

Thia threw a worried look at the door, beyond which the Squad Captain was shouting at the top of his voice.

“Get them, you idiots! Three *women* and you can’t even take them down!”

Rain and Yvi hurried to the opening on the ground and were surprised to see a flight of dirty stone stairs heading downwards.

“We’re supposed to go in here?” Yvi raised a disbelieving eyebrow at Edius.

Edius nodded curtly. “Yes, you ladies go in first. I have to make sure we don’t leave any hints of our exit.”

But the horses refused to enter what appeared to them to be a bottomless pit so Rain blindfolded them with a few pieces of cloth she seemingly pulled from empty air.

“I’m curious as to where you keep these things, Rain,” Thiea commented wryly behind Rain as they guided their mounts down the stairs in a line. “You surprise me sometimes.”

Rain turned and grinned at her.

Making sure they didn’t leave any noticeable tracks behind them, Edius entered the passageway behind Thiea and pressed something on one of the walls. With a slight grinding sound, a stone slab sealed the entry to the warehouse. It was just in time as well for the group could hear the enraged sounds of soldiers storming into the warehouse in an search for their escapees.

“That was close,” Yvi said in front of Rain, staring at the stone slab above Edius’ head. “So what’s the next move?”

Edius held up his flare a little higher and lit the dusty corridor filled with cobwebs ahead.

“We walk all the way to the end.”

CHAPTER 12

The forest was tranquil yet bustling with animal life at the same time. Birds chirped a song that only they could understand as they fluttered from tree to tree. A squirrel ran down the trunk of a tree, then paused with its nose in the air.

Suddenly the ground near it erupted and soil began to fall

inwards. The squirrel squealed in terror as it scrambled away. Edius poked his head out of the hole cautiously to scan the surroundings carefully. When he was sure that no potential enemy was in sight, he climbed out and held his hand out to Yvi. The horses followed, shaking their heads as if relieved to be out in the fresh air.

“Where is this place?” Rain asked curiously as she shaded her eyes against the startling bright sunshine. “It looks like we’re not within the town anymore.”

“You’re right.” Edius grinned. “That passageway we just came from was actually an underground tunnel dug by smugglers to enter town without having to pay taxes.”

“Amazing.” Yvi gazed at the dark hole in the ground admiringly. “I really should take note of this location.”

“I doubt we can return to the town after what happened just now, Yvi,” Thiea told her childhood friend dryly. “The Squad Captain will be putting up wanted posters all over the place if I’m not wrong.”

Yvi turned and winked mischievously at her.

“You forget I’m an expert at disguises, Thiea,” she said. “No one will ever recognise me.”

“Let’s make a move on, shall we?” Edius began feeling the area around the opening in the ground and tapped once when he felt something. “We have a long way to go to the next town.”

A stone slab moved ponderously to seal the hole. Edius then kicked some soil and grass over the slab to mask its presence.

“So Master Edius...,” Thiea began to say as the brown-haired man climbed onto his own horse, noting in distraction that he had a thin ponytail down his back.

“Just Edius will do, Thiea.” Edius smiled at her in an oddly familiar manner. “Let’s not stand on formality since we’re gonna be working together for *quite* some time.”

Thiea coughed in discomfiture while Yvi nudged Rain subtly with an impish expression.

“Ahem...right. So Edius, I just want to find out something from you. Are you actually trained in any form of fighting at all? Because

you sure disappeared really quickly back there when you knew there was going to be a fight.”

“Nope,” Edius replied airily as the group started picking up their pace. “I’ve studied some military tactics in my free time but that’s about it.”

“It’s rare to find a man who’s woefully inept in fighting,” Yvi commented. “How did you manage to survive before you met us?”

“A little luck and a whole lot of planning.” Edius flashed an enigmatic smile at the auburn-haired woman. “Just as not all women are born to be prostitutes, not all men are born warriors either.”

“I can agree with that,” Rain spoke up. “You don’t have to be a man to be a warrior after all. Just take a look at Thiea.”

“You agree with everything he says, Rain,” Yvi laughed. “Don’t you have an opinion of your own?”

Rain narrowed her eyes dangerously at Yvi before she snapped her fingers once. A gust of wind weaved around them and shook a tree branch just ahead of them. As Yvi passed beneath the branch still laughing at her own joke, water that had accumulated on the leaves due to the morning dew splashed onto her.

CHAPTER 13

Cold wind howled through the dark forest and sent the leaves rustling eerily in the swaying trees. Fog seemed to cover everything in sight, leaving only marginal view of what lay ahead on their path. Yvi threw a nervous glance at their surroundings and raised her eyebrow at Edius who was studying a map intently with a flare held close.

“Where did you say the nearest roadside inn was again?” Yvi asked him suspiciously. “You’re lost, aren’t you? Just admit you’ve gotten us lost in this forsaken forest!”

“I’m not lost,” Edius stared at his map absently. “I’m just not sure where we’re, that’s all.”

“It means ‘lost’ as far as I’m concerned,” Yvi replied testily. “Where are we going to spend the night now? I sure am not going to

stay in this forest one minute longer!”

“Will you stop making a fuss, Yvi?” Thiea sighed. “It’s not that big a deal to just camp here for a night.”

Rain remained silent as she eyed the trees warily with one hand on her flute. Ever since they had entered the forest earlier, she felt like they were constantly being watched. The feeling intensified when night fell and Rain knew they couldn’t stop to camp in the forest. Not if they valued their lives.

“We can’t...,” she began to say but paused when the air took on a distinctive aromatic tinge of roasted meat.

“Roasted meat?” Thiea asked incredulously. “Here in the middle of nowhere?”

“The roadside inn must be nearby.” Edius brightened. “Come on, the smell’s coming from that way.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Edius,” Rain’s voice stopped him before he could urge his horse to go forward. “Don’t you find it suspicious to even smell food in a *deserted* forest?”

“What deserted forest?” Yvi pointed at something half-hidden among the dark trees. “There’s that roadside inn we’ve been looking for! Great, now we don’t have to camp out in the open.”

Rain and Thiea exchanged suspicious glances. Rain could have sworn the small building had not been there when they rode past just a few minutes before. And now it was blinking merrily with warm inviting lights as if beckoning them with open arms.

“What’re we waiting for?” Yvi asked impatiently. “Let’s go! I’m freezing *and* hungry.”

Before Rain could say more in objection, lightning flashed across the inky skies above and thunder rumbled. A sudden downpour drenched them to the skin immediately and left no question as to where they were to spend the night. Rain glared at the sky and muttered angrily under her breath.

Thiea looked at Rain uncertainly. “So...do we go to that inn or not?”

“Since they went to *so much trouble* to get us there, I don’t see why not,” Rain replied in irritation. “Let’s just get it over and done

with.”

“Erm, who are the ‘they’ Rain was talking about?” Edius asked Thiea in a low tone as they rode towards the blinking lights with Rain in the lead, looking extremely annoyed.

“Supernatural stuff,” Thiea whispered back. “You better be prepared to make a run for it, just in case.”

Edius stared at her in disbelief, not sure if she was really serious or simply joking.

CHAPTER 14

The group stopped before the small inn and dismounted almost as one. Boisterous sounds of laughing and dining filtered out to them from the common room while shadows can be seen moving behind window shutters on the second floor. A sign depicting a fox standing on its hind legs and holding a foaming tankard in its left paw creaked above them as the rain lashed down relentlessly.

Rain led the way into the inn and found the common room filled to the brim with merry-makers. Everyone seemed to be in a good mood as they put their arms around the nearest drinker and sang a rowdy song at the top of their voices. Serving ladies weaved around the tables with smiles on their rosy faces and good-natured banter. A huge brass pot hung in the fireplace, emitting heavenly smells of a well-cooked stew.

Yvi squeezed in beside Rain and looked upon the scene with approval.

“Just the thing I need after being drenched. *Twice*,” Yvi threw a sidelong glance but Rain’s attention was already grabbed by the sight of a stunning woman sashaying towards them.

“Welcome to my humble inn.” The woman, who was even taller than Thiea, bowed slightly but low enough to reveal her generous cleavage. “Will you need a room each?”

“We’re on a tight budget,” Rain replied with a small smile. “Two rooms will suffice. One for our boss over there and one for

us.”

The woman’s eyes caressed a reddening Edius from top to toe and bowed in acknowledgement, her heaving bosom barely held in by her revealing dress.

“Of course, please follow me,” she invited in a sultry voice and headed for a flight of stairs twirling upwards to the second floor.

When the group reached the foot of the stairs, they looked up to see a beautiful young man with gorgeous black locks making his graceful way down at the same time. The time he took to reach them was only a few seconds but Rain felt as if she had been staring at the young man forever, so enticing was his beauty. She knew the rest of her companions were equally affected, especially Yvi whose partiality to comely young men was legendary.

He passed them with a mischievous smile playing on his lips, knowing full well his effect on them. Yvi watched him with open appreciation as he walked to the common room, then turned to wink at Rain.

“*He’s so gonna be mine,*” Yvi mouthed confidently before following the lady inn proprietor up the stairs.

Rain stared after Yvi and sighed in resignation while Thiea tried not to laugh.

“Is this ah...something I should know about?” Edius asked with a baffled expression.

“Trust me, Edius,” Thiea deadpanned, patting him on the shoulder. “You’re better off not knowing.”

“Are you girls coming or not?” Yvi’s irritated voice came from above. “Don’t think I don’t know that you’re gossiping behind my back!”

“Coming, coming,” Rain called out.

“*Like we’re half the gossip that you are,*” she muttered under her breath but still loud enough for Edius to hear her.

“I heard that!”

CHAPTER 15

“I’m going downstairs for a bite first,” Yvi announced, putting one hand on the door knob with a look that brooked no argument.

“You’re not even going to wait for us to clean up?” Rain asked wryly from the window where she had been keeping watch.

“What clean up?” Yvi raised her eyebrow. “You’ve been standing at that window the whole time I was changing into dry clothes. What *exactly* are you staring at anyway?”

“That pretty boy who just passed us on the staircase,” Rain gestured with her chin. “I can see him from where I’m standing.”

“Really? Where?” Yvi slid up beside Rain with great interest and looked across the small courtyard to the opposite doorway where the young man was flirting with one of the serving ladies.

“Good, that’ll save me the trouble of turning the place upside down for him,” she noted with a satisfied flick of her hair over her shoulders.

“Aren’t you going to eat first?” Thiea towelled her hair dry and flung it onto a nearby chair. “You were complaining about being hungry just now.”

“Her kind of hunger is different from ours, Thiea.” Rain replied sagely. “We ordinary mortals can make do with hot food but Yvi here has no choice but to turn to hot-blooded males. Best if seasoned delicately.”

“You’re just jealous I can get any male I want,” Yvi laughed. “Well, see you girls later.”

“I sure hope so,” Rain murmured as she drew some glowing symbols in mid air and sent the symbols floating towards Yvi’s back with a push of her palm.

The glowing symbols settled onto Yvi and faded away without a sound.

“You really think there’s something wrong with this place, huh?” Thiea asked after Yvi had closed the door. “What did you put onto Yvi’s back anyway?”

“A protection talisman,” Rain explained as she pulled some dry clothes from her waterproof travelling gear. “Not that *I* think she’ll

need it but it's better to be safe than sorry.”

Thiea grinned. “So what's our next step?”

Rain looked at her with a wicked gleam in her lavender eyes. “Go downstairs and call for a tub of warm bathing water for me, will you?”

Thiea strolled up the stairs munching on a shrivelled apple that she had found at the bottom of her travelling gear. With all the precaution that Rain seemed to be taking, it seemed wise not to eat anything that was served. Besides, the hail-fellow-well-met atmosphere in the common room was *really* getting on her nerves.

Thiea had been to quite a number of inns in her lifetime and *no* inn had been this clean, polite or cheerful. People who frequented inns were a smelly, sullen lot who did nothing but fight or spit on other people's shoes. Those who drunk themselves to insensibility slept on the dirt-packed floor with flies crawling on them and no one gave a damn.

Thiea sighed, wondering when was the last time she had a real hot meal. The last meal she had seemed like *ages* ago. She hoped Rain would fix whatever was seeking to ensnare them soon so they could ride on to the next town and get a *decent* rest. Travelling on horseback was *definitely* more tiring than it looked.

Then without warning, a soft step on the wooden boards caught her ears.

Thiea slipped into the shadows and sneaked a glance round the corner. The lady inn proprietor was elegantly but determinedly making for Edius' room at the end of the corridor.

CHAPTER 16

Rain leaned her forehead against the windowpane and watched her namesake patter rhythmically onto the courtyard. A movement to the right caught her eye so she turned slightly to see Yvi in stalker mode circling the courtyard towards her beautiful target.

From all appearances, the young man seemed unaware of the impending peril to his integrity but Rain knew otherwise. She could literally see his ears pricking in Yvi's direction even as he leaned casually against the doorframe.

Yvi however, was not in a hurry to hook her quarry just yet. She waited till the serving lady left in blushing giggles before making her move. Then as if she was merely on a stroll and didn't expect to run into him, Yvi put on an exaggerated expression of astonishment. Rain couldn't hear what Yvi was saying to him but she was sure it was along the innocent lines of,

“*Oh*, hello. You seem pretty familiar...have I seen you somewhere before?”

It was a pickup line that was done to death but no matter how many times Yvi used it, her beauty always ensured that her prey would fall for it. It was Yvi's sure-win tactic and Rain never understood why no male could actually think through his lust-addled brain.

The day someone could *actually* stand up to Yvi's persuasive nature, Rain thought in amusement, would be the day for much celebration and fireworks.

After a few minutes of flirtatious chatting, the young man extended his arm to Yvi invitingly. Before Rain could see where he was taking Yvi for a rendezvous, however, she was distracted by a knock on the door.

The tall young man outside her door was no less beautiful than the one Yvi had snared. With blond hair dusting his roguish green eyes and clothes that fitted his slimly muscular body snugly, he looked like a prince charming ready to sweep Rain off her feet.

“You had your friend call for a tub of warm bathing water?” he asked her with a melting smile. “I'm here to deliver it.”

“That was quick,” Rain remarked as she stood aside to let him in. “My friend just went downstairs for a few minutes and you're already here.”

“We believe in speedy service, my lady.” The young man clapped once and a flurry of chambermaids hurried in to prepare

Rain's tub of bathing water.

The tub was ready within minutes and the chambermaids filed out, leaving Rain alone with the delectable young man.

"This is impressive." Rain gazed at the tub approvingly and flashed a sweet smile at him. "You guys sure are efficient."

"We believe in taking our level of service to the *highest level possible*." He reappeared beside Rain like a dream, whispering seductively into her ear.

Rain stared up into his impossibly green eyes, unable to resist the lure in them.

"I didn't quite catch your name back then," she said dreamily, feeling as if she was about to fall into the man's arms. "What did you say your name was again?"

"I didn't." The green eyes twinkled while strong arms pulled Rain closer into a warm embrace. "But you can just call me Kit."

"Kit..." Her eyes barely open, Rain's head sank into Kit's shoulders.

With a triumphant smile, Kit lifted Rain easily and carried her over to the last of the three beds in the room. He placed her gently onto the scented covers, one tender hand brushing strands of hair away from her face. Then he slowly pulled at the ribbon holding the top part of her clothes together.

"No wonder I felt something was not quite right about you," a familiar voice observed dryly behind him. "You're a fox spirit, aren't you?"

CHAPTER 17

Kit spun around to stare at where the voice was coming from. Instead of lying tranquilly on the bed, Rain was leaning against the windowsill with crossed arms and grave lavender eyes.

"Im...impossible!" Kit's eyes widened at the sight of Rain, "You..."

His eyes swung back to the bed in panic but Rain was no longer

there; her slender form disappeared into thin air.

“Did you *really* think I would be so easily seduced by the likes of you?” Rain asked with a raised eyebrow. “Well, you’re admittedly a rather tasty man but...you’re just not my type.”

Kit’s back stiffened at her words in outrage.

“What do you mean I’m not *your* type?” he spat, his eyes elongating into slits while his jaw stretched into a snout.

“*No* woman has ever told me I’m not her type. How *dare* you reject me as you would a common man!”

He sprang at her with outrage written all over his now transformed face but Rain simply sighed.

“You should know you’re no match for me,” she told him in annoyance as a sudden gush of wind swirled around her and slammed Kit forcefully against the wall.

“Alright, I’m not a very patient person so you better talk,” Rain narrowed her lavender eyes at Kit pinned helplessly on the wall. “Who’s been going to all the trouble to trap us here?”

Kit laughed bitterly, “Did you *really* think I would be so easily defeated by *you*, Magian?”

His green eyes glowed eerily with power and broke Rain’s hold on him. Landing lightly on the ground, Kit flung a fireball at her. Rain ducked just in time but the fireball hit the window behind her, breaking it into shards that rained onto the courtyard.

Kit didn’t just stop at one fireball. He threw one after another at Rain relentlessly but she managed to dodge them all, although barely. She swore as a fireball came a little too close and almost singed her hair.

“Don’t you think you’re taking rejection a *little* too seriously?” Rain yelled over the loud explosions on either side of her and had to resort to erecting a shield to protect herself from flying pieces of destroyed furniture.

“Get over it already! Like seriously, haven’t you been rejected by a woman before?”

Kit roared, rage contorting his face, and hurled more fireballs in her direction. The fireballs hit Rain’s shield with vengeance,

gradually eating away at it despite her best efforts to keep it up.

“Darn, me and my stupid mouth.” Perspiration beaded on Rain’s face as she tried to maintain the shield while thinking of another way to escape.

She decided that a distraction was in order but what? Her shield was already taking most of her concentration and the only way out of the room was through the window behind her that Kit had broken earlier.

Just then, the door to the room rattled in its frame.

“Rain?” Thiea’s concerned voice called out from the corridor. “What’s going on in there?”

The door shook as if someone was throwing her entire weight on it.

“Rain!! Open the damn door!”

Kit threw a glance at the fast collapsing door, then slowly turned with a smug smile on his face to look at Rain. A fireball, far larger and hotter than any before it, materialised in his clawed right hand.

“Say goodbye to your friend, *Magian*.” He smirked cruelly and tossed the fireball at the door.

CHAPTER 18

“Thiea, get away from the door!!” Rain yelled at the top of her voice, dismissing her fading shield.

She grabbed her flute from her sash but before she could swing it, Kit materialised behind her with his claws at the ready.

“Prepare to die, *Magian*!” He slashed down, only to meet Rain’s timely block with her flute.

She could not hope to hold him off for long however for Kit was far stronger than any human man. As Rain struggled to keep his claws at bay, the fireball hit the door with a loud explosion and swallowed it whole. The force of the blast slammed Rain and Kit against the wall, almost knocking them out.

“Rain!! Rain!! Where are you?!” Rain vaguely heard Thiea’s

voice over the crackling flames but her head was spinning too much for her to be sure.

“Thi...Thiea?” She struggled to raise herself, choking on the thick smoke that had already filled the room.

Then she found herself lifted off the ground with Kit’s hands around her neck, her feet kicking at him futilely. With air rapidly leaving her lungs, Rain struggled to summon her fallen flute which lay just below her to no avail. Kit grinned insanely at her and squeezed harder.

Rain grabbed his forearms, trying her best to concentrate. This was her last chance at survival and if she screwed it up, she was definitely a goner.

“There’s no escape for you this time, my lovely Magian,” Kit jeered, then frowned at Rain’s hands uselessly holding onto his forearms.

Her hands started to glow in increasing brightness, vaporising its way rapidly up his arm. Kit screamed in pain and let Rain go as if she was a hot coal. She fell to the ground, trying to get her breath in the smoke-choked air. Kit stared at his fast vaporising arm in horror before flinging himself out of the window in desperation.

“Rain!” A bemused Thiea appeared above Rain with her sword drawn and quickly helped her to her feet. “What in the world just happened? I didn’t know your flirting can be *this* combustible!”

“Shut up,” Rain croaked. “*Just get us out of here!*”

Suddenly, the floor planks beneath them gave way and sent them falling into nothingness. The walls around them followed but miraculously, none of them hit Rain and Thiea. The women screamed all the way down to the bottom where a pile of already broken planks were waiting for them. They landed on the pile with a loud ‘oof’ and the wind literally knocked out of them.

For a moment, the women lay motionless as they struggled to get their breath back. Rain felt like a thousand pins were stabbing her from head to toe; her neck felt bruised and she was sure there was a permanent mark somewhere on her body given the rough treatment she had from Kit.

“Awww....” Thiea groaned like a woman in labour. “This has got to be the worst fall I ever had to take!”

“Quit complaining.” Rain lay still, not sure if she was up to moving anything yet. “I got manhandled by a fox spirit on top of having the roof drop on top of me, so I’m the only one entitled to grumbling rights.”

Thiea threw a wry look at Rain who was staring up at the now exposed roof as if the rain dripping through and onto her face was a fascinating sight.

“Yes, yes. I’m sure you do, Rain. But whatever happened back there?”

“The guy who delivered my bathing water turned out to be a fox spirit,” Rain sighed. “I exposed him and he got angry ‘cos I told him he wasn’t my type.”

Thiea rolled her eyes heavenwards. “So he decided to beat you up in return for rejecting him?”

“Yeah.” Rain decided to take a risk and moved her fingers to make sure they weren’t broken. “But actually he was just changing the topic. He just *plain* refused to answer my question on who went to all the trouble of ensnaring us.”

“So what’re we...,” Thiea was just about to say something when Yvi’s dramatically bewildered voice cut in from somewhere to their right.

“Oh. My. Goodness. *What in the world just happened here?*”

CHAPTER 19

Rain and Thiea turned their eyes to Yvi who looked amazingly unscathed despite all that had happened. Although her top was just a little off shoulder and her slightly damp hair had a few stalks of straw in it, Yvi appeared none the worse from the collapse of the inn.

“Behold the ever immaculate Yvi.” Rain sat up slowly with a long-suffering expression on her grimy face. “The one woman who

still looks flawless even after the roof has dropped on her.”

“Unlike someone I know, I don’t wait around when the roof starts breaking apart.” Yvi crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows at Rain. “I got out even before you broke the window to our room.”

“I didn’t break it,” Rain said sourly. “It was the fox spirit I was attempting to trap. He got mad after I exposed him and started throwing tantrums.”

“Actually he got mad after she rejected him,” Thiea added helpfully, “so their fight got beyond just tantrums.”

“Was it a tall blonde guy with green eyes?” Yvi asked. “I was hiding among the trees when I saw him dashing past holding his arm as if it hurt really badly.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Rain started massaging her sore neck. “Unless there is more than one blond guy with green eyes that I know of.”

Yvi paused for a brief moment, trying to recall his appearance.

“He’s cute,” Yvi finally concluded with a solemn nod, then she frowned at Rain. “But why did you reject him?”

Rain stared at her old friend incredulously.

“I’m *so* not answering that lame question!” she retorted. “Life is not a race to see how many men you can bed, you know. I’m surprised you even survived your encounter with that fox spirit you seduced!”

“Oh *rats!*” Thiea gasped before Yvi could answer in indignation. “In all the excitement, I forgot about Edius!”

“What happened to him?” Rain sat up a little straighter. “I thought you were supposed to keep an eye on him.”

“I know,” Thiea answered ruefully. “Right after I relayed your request for the bathing water, I saw the lady inn proprietor entering Edius’ room. I followed her and tried to hear what they were up to through the keyhole.”

“Well, did you manage to hear anything?” Rain pressed intently.

“I could hear some conversation going on but their voices were muffled.” Thiea frowned thoughtfully. “Then suddenly I heard a shatter of glass so I thought Edius was in trouble and crashed my

way in.”

“But by the time I got into the room, no one was around.”

“Maybe the woman kidnapped Edius to have a good time,” Yvi suggested impishly. “You all saw how she looked at Edius when we first entered the inn.”

“Great, that’s all we need,” Rain muttered. “*More* man-eaters.”

“But how are we going to find Edius?” Thiea looked worried. “We have no idea where the woman took him and what we’re up against.”

“We can always leave him behind,” Yvi proposed brightly. “He paid us a deposit after all.”

Rain and Thiea turned as one to aim an unfriendly stare at Yvi.

“What did you say again?” Rain asked in a dangerously low tone, her eyes flashing even in the dimness of the collapsed inn.

Yvi held up both hands in a pacifying gesture. “I was kidding. *Just kidding.*”

Rain didn’t look very convinced but she pushed herself off the pile she landed in and stretched herself.

“C’mon girls, we’ve got a man in distress to rescue.”

CHAPTER 20

“I wonder where all the other people we saw in the inn just now disappeared to?” Yvi asked curiously as the women gathered their scattered belongings from the ruins of the inn.

“They were illusions to begin with,” Rain replied as she gazed searchingly around. “Didn’t you notice anything funny about them *at all?*”

“I was distracted, remember?” Yvi said wryly. “Everything else ceases to exist when I have my sights set on a pretty target.”

“So what *else* is new?” Thiea deadpanned. “You’ve been like this since the first time we met as kids. Thankfully you only became a man-eater when you were of suitable age.”

“Of course,” Yvi sniffed disdainfully. “I do have my principles

after all.”

Rain spotted her flute right beside the spot she landed and picked it up with a great sense of relief. The white jade flute had been with her for as long as she could remember and Rain couldn't imagine a day without it. It had been her constant companion since the first day she stepped into the Magian Academy although Rain never really learnt how to play the flute.

It served more as a formidable weapon for her than as a musical instrument but amazingly, it had never broken despite the abuse Rain regularly subjected it to as a busy Magian. Perhaps it was the unique way it was shaped, a heron's head with glinting ruby eyes at one end of a slender form built with the sturdiest jade.

Back in her schooling days at the Magian Academy, Rain's fellow classmates had always been curious about her flute since it looked nothing like the conventional musical instrument. A few even tried to steal it for their own but somehow, no matter where or how carefully it was hidden, the flute always managed to find its way back to Rain. She never had to worry about it being missing. It was as if the flute had a mind of its own and acknowledged no one but her as its owner.

Rain caressed the flute tenderly, feeling warmth flow into her fingers and into her body. Strength slowly returned to her battered limbs, much to her surprise.

“Rain?” Thiea cut into her thoughts with concern written all over her face. “Are you alright? Do you need to take a longer break? You were the one who's the most beaten among us three after all.”

The dark-haired woman gave a wan smile. “I'm fine. I may not look much but I'm really tougher than I look.”

“Yeah, as long as Rain can still insult me, she's fine.” Yvi popped her head between Thiea and Rain with a large grin. “Come on, or Edius will really be eaten up by that woman.”

Rain exchanged amused glances with Thiea and followed Yvi out of the ruins to where the horses were left, grazing among the dark trees. The women loaded their belongings onto their horses before mounting them nimbly.

“Now let’s see. . . .” Rain closed her eyes and took a deep breath to focus her concentration on the presence she had come to familiarise herself with in the course of their journey together.

Unlike demons, however, humans typically had a weaker aura unless they were Magians so it meant more effort on her part. Rain frowned as her mind searched the surrounding forest but found no sign of Edius. She decided to expand her circle and spanned out further.

“Is Rain trying to find Edius with her mind?” She could hear Yvi ask Thiea in a whisper.

The forest around them remained silent, with not even a single cricket’s chirp. Their horses stirred nervously, nickering as if anxious to be away from a place that smelt dangerous to them.

A flicker of a familiar aura sparkled once in Rain’s mind eye and she grabbed it without hesitation. Her lavender eyes snapped open in triumph.

“Found him!” Rain urged her horse to speed towards the direction where she felt Edius’ presence. “Follow me!”

“You know where Edius is?” Thiea’s horse raced alongside Rain’s. “Is he alright?”

“He’s fine for the moment. But not for long.” Rain’s expression grew grim. “The woman is with him.”

CHAPTER 21

“Oh great, we’re outnumbered,” Yvi said in an undertone as they squeezed into a small spot behind a bush.

A small fire burnt in the middle of the forest clearing before them, throwing shadows on the faces of five people seated around it. Rain was not surprised to find Kit and the seductive woman among them. Edius appeared to be unrestrained but unconscious between Yvi’s lust target and a third stunning young man with silver hair cascading down his back.

The group appeared to be conducting some kind of discussion in

low voices. Rain had no idea what they were talking about from her position but it appeared that they were not planning to do anything to Edius. Yet.

“Looks like your Edius is safe for the moment,” she murmured to Thiea.

“And since when did he become *my Edius*?” Thiea raised her eyebrow at a mischievously grinning Rain.

“Since the day he laid eyes on you, of course,” Yvi chipped in. “I could have told you that from the start.”

Rain stifled her laughter at Thiea’s comical indignation and continued studying the group before them. Had the woman already made her move on Edius? Rain couldn’t be sure. If she was a fox spirit like Kit, things may possibly get a little tricky for them. Anyone who had been successfully seduced by a fox spirit was doomed to a life of slavery unless the spirit was destroyed for good.

Rain clutched her flute determinedly, steeling her wits for the inevitable battle ahead. No matter what it took, Edius had to be saved at all costs. Now that she knew what she was up against, Rain was sure she could at least put up a fight in her favour.

“Give me your weapons,” she whispered to Thiea and Yvi.

Concentrating her will on the sword and throwing knives presented before her, Rain sketched a symbol that glowed then disappeared onto the weapons. Thiea and Yvi gazed at her questioningly.

“The enemy we’re up against won’t be very intimidated by normal weapons,” Rain explained in a hushed voice. “This should give you further protection in addition to the talisman I already gave you both earlier.”

“You gave us a talisman earlier?” Yvi looked confused. “When?”

“I hear something.” Kit’s suspicious voice caused the women to duck further down behind the bush.

“You’re just being overly sensitive, Kit,” a male but sensuous voice purred. “The women couldn’t have found us here, no matter how good the Magian is.”

“Have you seen my wounds lately, Neil?” Kit spat the words out as if they were poison. “The Magian *knows* what she’s doing. I didn’t even realise she had created a double until she chose to reveal herself!”

“I still think you’re over exaggerating,” Neil replied lazily. “How can three beautiful ladies like them pose any danger to us? And even if they did, the three of us ought to be able to take them down easily.”

“There’s *only one* Magian after all. The other two just don’t stand a chance against us.”

“Yvi, you distract them while Rain and I sneak round to their back,” Thia instructed the auburn woman softly. “Give us fifteen seconds.”

Yvi nodded so the women began to make their way around the forest clearing. She waited till they were about halfway there; and then making sure her throwing knives were within her grasp, Yvi stood up in grand revealment.

“I’m so hurt by your words, Neil.” Her azure eyes bore into the dark-haired man’s startled but flawless face. “And so soon after our wonderful time together too.”

CHAPTER 22

“*You!*” Neil leapt to his feet in one smooth motion and faced Yvi.

“Exactly. *Me.*” Yvi crossed her arms at chest level, eyeing the beautiful young man before her. “Were you expecting someone else?”

The rest of his group stood up warily behind him.

“Where’re your friends, my little one?” The woman who had pretended to be the inn proprietor asked Yvi, “Surely you’re not foolish enough to sneak up on us alone?”

“Sorry, sister. I may not be as big as you are but I’m no ‘little one’ where my assets are concerned, thank you very much.” Yvi

raised her eyebrow challengingly.

“Neil can vouch for me, right?”

Unable to provide a suitably witty reply to Yvi’s riposte, the entire group gaped at her in a state of speechlessness while Neil blushed furiously.

Hidden among the shadowed trees behind the group, Rain lifted long-suffering eyes and shot a silent ‘*why me?*’ heavenwards as Thiea threw her an amused look. Yvi has certainly succeeded beyond all expectations to distract their enemies with her outrageous words. Rain decided to step in before Yvi completely destroyed their hard-won reputation for good.

“Don’t move.” Rain moved into sight and signalled Thiea over to Edius’ side. “Don’t try anything funny or...”

“Or else what, Magian?” The woman turned and regarded Rain calmly, her eyes appearing as if they had no pupils in the dim light. A hint of fangs peeked over her luscious lips. “You think with your own pathetic powers, you can hope to defeat all of us?”

“And you *think* with your own pathetic underestimation of us; you can hope to defeat us, *vampire?*” Rain threw the woman’s words back with a raised eyebrow.

She paused for a moment. “Yvi’s lame joke of a threat just now didn’t count though.”

“Hey!” Yvi looked insulted from the other side of the forest clearing. “That wasn’t a lame joke alright. I was telling the truth!”

The female vampire studied Rain with a strange expression. “I’m impressed. You’re certainly as strong as he had described.”

Rain stared in mystification. Who was the ‘he’ the woman was speaking of? Faulty as her memory sometimes could be, Rain was sure no one of her acquaintance would be on friendly terms with a vampire *of all creatures*.

Thiea reached Edius’ side and tried to wake him up with some difficulty. Left without a choice, she took out a phial of smelling salts and waved it under his nose. It soon worked for Edius’ eyes snapped open almost immediately.

“Are you alright?” Thiea helped him to stand up but Edius was

too groggy to keep his balance.

“What did you do to him?” the tall blond woman demanded angrily.

“I’ve done nothing to him.” The woman spread her hands open in a mocking gesture of pacification. “Your man has merely acceded to my suggestion to fall asleep.”

“Don’t play coy with me,” Thiea retorted. “Edius won’t just fall asleep just because you said so.”

Her reaction surprised Rain. Thiea had always been calm and level-headed even in the face of overwhelming odds. Why was she reacting in a manner that was unlike her usual self where Edius was concerned?

“Feeling a little anxious over a man, lady warrior?” The silver haired man spoke up with a slow smile curving his lips.

“I didn’t know you manly types could *actually* fall for someone.”

CHAPTER 23

“Oh, that was low,” Yvi pronounced in a voice of dramatic doom. “That was the absolute last thing you should have said, beautiful man or not.”

Rain glanced gingerly at Thiea who was still holding on to a wobbly Edius. She couldn’t quite see the expression on her friend’s face but she knew Thiea had always been a tad touchy about being called a manly type. Being a City Guard for most of her life in the capital had forced Thiea to put much of her femininity aside to fit in with the tough criteria of the City Troops.

As a result, Thiea was seen more as a fellow trooper than a female in her own right. No one wanted to date a woman who was a far better fighter nor did they acknowledge a female who was an intellectual equal or better. Although Thiea was an extremely capable City Guard, her superiors never gave her a chance to climb up to higher ranks. So Thiea was perpetually stuck at the bottom

while her fellow all-male City Guards moved on to better things.

The last straw came when one of her commanding officers asked her into his office and suggested in no uncertain terms that if she were to dispense with certain favours, her position would be much more admirable. It earned the commanding officer a bloodied nose and he would have ended up in a far worse state, had Thiea not controlled herself with tremendous difficulty.

Despite the fact that the commanding officer had made inappropriate advances to begin with, Thiea was thrown into jail without a fair trial. Rain and Yvi had originally planned to break her out until news about how someone from the stuff of Generals had stood up in Thiea's defense reached them.

Thiea was released without further fuss but she was warned sternly never to step into the City Guard headquarters henceforth. Ashamed to go back to her family home where generations of women had made a lifelong career of being City Guards, Thiea decided to become a bounty hunter and wait for a better time to return instead.

Rain then decided to quit her boring (and lowly paid) Magian position at a nearby village while Yvi declared the capital city completely devoid of tasty men. Ignoring Thiea's weak protests, the three women left the capital to become three of the few female bounty hunters around. Thanks to Thiea's fighting prowess, Rain's magic and Yvi's information gathering talent, they managed to carve a niche in what was predominantly a male domain. Other bounty hunters grudgingly gave them leeway and for the first time, Thiea was happy being in her element.

At least until someone made the mistake of declaring her being too manly to make a decent woman, like now.

Sure enough, Thiea shifted her eyes to the silver-haired man with the deliberation of a python about to strike. Edius stirred in her arms with slightly more energy and tried to stand up on his own two feet.

"Eh... what... what's going on here?" He threw an astonished, though still slightly groggy look around the clearing. "Thiea?"

He turned to the woman but she ignored him pointedly only to draw out her sword slowly.

“I *dare* you to say that again,” Thiea said to the silver-haired man in a low but threatening voice.

Taken aback by Thiea’s burning eyes, the silver-haired man started to take an unconscious step backward but realised it just in time to stop himself.

“Well, it’s the truth,” he defended himself. “You can’t deny the fact that you’re much less feminine than your two friends. At least they have a fighting chance of getting a man in this lifetime.”

Rain slapped a palm to her forehead while Yvi sighed in great sympathy and Edius made strange choking noises.

Thiea’s entire demeanour changed. Growling under her breath, the woman advanced on the silver-haired man with a menacing air.

“There, there.” The female vampire stepped between Thiea and her prey. “I can’t have you hurting my boys, can I?”

“*Stay out of my way,*” Thiea snarled, then widened her eyes as she was lifted into the air by something invisible grabbing her neck.

“No, *you* stay away from my boys.” The female vampire closed her fist and Thiea started gasping for air.

“Thiea!” Rain tried to go her old friend’s rescue but was blocked by Kit instead.

“And where do you think you’re going, my lovely Magian?” The tall blond man bared his teeth at her. “You and I still have a score to settle.”

CHAPTER 24

“Are you really so eager for more damage?” Rain raised her eyebrow. “Are you like, a sadist or something?”

“No. I just want to see the look on your face when I defeat you once and for all.” Kit’s face transformed into his foxy form and a ball of fire materialized in his disfigured hand. “You’re just too cocky for your own good, my lovely Magian.”

“Stop calling me that,” Rain retorted irritably. “I’m *not your lovely Magian.*”

“My bad,” Kit drew his lips back in a snarl. “Let’s get down to serious business then!”

He threw the fireball at Rain but she managed to dodge him by flipping herself to the left towards Thiea. The fiery ball hit the tree behind her, causing them to burst into flames. The fire spread to other trees and a forest fire was soon imminent.

Taking advantage of the sudden but distracting flare-up, Rain stretched her right hand towards the female vampire and gave her a less than gentle mental push. The voluptuous woman was flung backwards into her remaining boys, crashing into them like a ball in a game of tenpins. It broke her hold on Thiea, however, and Edius amazingly managed to catch her half-conscious friend as she dropped. ...[002]

“Yvi, get the two of them out of here!” Rain yelled at Yvi who was staring in bemusement at the tangle of limbs on the ground before her, “I’ll hold them off for as long as I can!”

Yvi regained her composure and nodded. Putting two fingers to her lips, the auburn woman whistled shrilly for their mounts. The horses galloped into the clearing and stopped beside Yvi who grabbed their reins before running towards Edius and Thiea.

They managed to get Thiea seated on her horse, then threw themselves over their respective mounts before charging for freedom. Meanwhile, Kit stalked Rain with a look of frustrated outrage on his foxy face. Rain backed away and drew her flute.

“You know you *really got to calm down.*” Rain threw a worried look at the fallen trio who were beginning to untangle themselves from the ground. “Can’t you take a girl’s rejection with good grace for once?”

“I mean, I bet there’re a lot of women who’ll go for nicely scarred men like you. It gives off a mysterious air that drives women crazy.”

“I’m not convinced,” Kit told her with narrowed eyes. “You got to try harder than that.”

By this time, the flames had eaten its way halfway around the clearing. The heat was getting unbearable and Rain began to wonder if she could escape with her life intact. Then without warning, a past lesson from her days in the Magian Academy sprang up in her mind.

“Although the more powerful vampires are able to walk about in broad daylight,” Rain’s vampire expert instructor droned on a particularly hot and lazy afternoon, “they’re just as susceptible to the threat of fire because it’s a cleansing force that could take their powers away and reduce them to ashes.”

“But fire is just as much a threat to all living things, isn’t it?” an overly perky student raised his hand to ask. “I mean it kills humans too, doesn’t it?”

The instructor pushed the glasses up his sharp nose and beamed at the hardworking chap. “Yes, but vampires have no souls. Once destroyed, they’re gone forever, unlike humans who have the afterlife to look forward to at least.”

That’s it! Rain thought to herself in triumph. Vampires are afraid of fire!

CHAPTER 25

The fire now seemed a lot friendlier than before as a plan materialized in Rain’s mind. She lowered her flute, a move which surprised Kit enough to stop advancing.

“I know it’s my lack of good taste that caused me to reject you in the first place.” Rain lifted teary eyes to his green ones and added slightly trembling lips for good measure.

“But won’t you forgive me for my oversight?”

Rain fervently hoped that the tears she had welled up on the spur of the moment would work. The years growing up with Yvi the drama queen had taught her a few tricks of the theatrics but she wasn’t sure if her act would fool Kit or not.

Kit’s ferocious expression softened. Taking advantage of his temporary distraction, Rain caught hold of a burning branch with

her mind and nudged it. The branch crashed down from the blazing tree, landing alarmingly near the female vampire. As Rain expected, the woman shrieked and jumped away in a somewhat comical fashion with fear alight in her pupil-less eyes.

Was it enough to work in her favour? Rain wasn't sure but one thing was certain. She was going to join the ranks of the dearly departed Magians *very soon* if her plan failed.

Much to her gratification however, the female vampire's fear of fire overruled any evil plans her enemies may have for Rain.

"Kit, we got to leave this place before it burns down on us!" Neil yelled over the crackling of fire while the silver-haired man wrapped the trembling vampire protectively in his cloak.

"I'll catch up with you and Zule later." Kit kept his eyes on Rain. "I still have unfinished business with our lovely Magian."

Neil nodded. Then in a blink of an eye, the trio disappeared.

The smoke in the air got thicker as the fire engulfed more trees, crackling merrily on its way. Heat and slight desperation at Kit's plain refusal to leave her alone made perspiration slide down Rain's face for the second time within a few hours. She may have successfully cut down the number of opponents to a manageable individual but from the looks of things, that person was fast becoming *unmanageable*.

Rain wanted to howl in frustration. Had her rejection of Kit *really* been so traumatising? Did he have to go so far just to prove that she had made a serious mistake in rejecting him? In the whole of Rain's (admittedly pitiful) rejection history, she could only think of one other idiot who would stoop to such levels.

That idiot however, Rain thought wryly to herself, was far easier to dispatch than Kit.

"This place is getting too hot for our rendezvous," Kit's voice suddenly whispered into her ear, his warm breath teasing. "Let's go for a ride, shall we?"

Rats! He's too fast for me! Rain swore mentally and tried to move out of range but Kit grabbed her none too gently from behind and their surroundings blurred into a spiral of reds and blacks.

“I would advise you not to struggle too much.” Kit kept Rain prisoner against his firm body with a strong grip. “We’re travelling through an alternate reality that only we fox spirits have access to. If I drop you, you’ll never see your friends again.”

Rain could almost hear the smug smile in Kit’s voice and it irritated her nearly to point where she didn’t care if he dropped her or not. She just wanted to strangle him with her bare hands.

“You do realise that the moment you let me go, I’m gonna kick your ass real good, right?”

Kit’s arms tightened around her, much to Rain’s extreme chagrin.

“I’m counting on it.”

CHAPTER 26

After what seemed like eternity, during which Kit seemed to thoroughly enjoy their close proximity much to Rain’s annoyance, they landed in what appeared to another part of the forest. Rain could still see the smoke billowing in the east and hoped fervently that the dampness from the earlier rain would be enough deterrence.

Not only would the fire deprive the poor forest animals of their homes, it would also be troublesome to outrun it. That was, unless Kit was willing to release Rain and let her go *unmolested*.

“We’re already out of your so-called alternate reality, fox spirit,” Rain told the warm presence at her back icily. “Will you be so kind as to release me *already*?”

“I don’t see why you have to be so huffy about it.” Kit loosened his arms, much to Rain’s relief. “I’m the one who got his arms burnt almost to the point of no return.”

“*Excuse me?*” Rain stared at him incredulously from a safe distance away. “You were the one who *insisted* on being huffy about the whole rejection thing.”

“You can’t blame me.” Kit shrugged. “I’ve never been rejected before.”

Rain rubbed tiredly at the right side of her head where the dull throbbing of a severe headache had already begun.

“*Whatever,*” she said in exasperation. “Just what do you *want* with me? All this merry-go-round is starting to give me a headache.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Kit tilted his head slightly to one side and regarded Rain with suddenly serious eyes. “I like you.”

“Well, I don’t...” Rain started to say, then stopped to stare at the blonde young man in absolute astonishment.

“What...what did you just say?”

“I said I like you,” Kit repeated himself good-naturedly. “Which part of that statement was unclear?”

For the first time in her life, Rain was rendered speechless beyond her ability to salvage. Rain, who had made it her lifelong career to terminate demons and other malicious beings, was *actually* being confessed to by a fox spirit? It was a situation that Rain had no answer to, despite the books she regularly devoured in the Magian library when she was still a student at the Magian Academy.

“Some form of a response would have been nice, Rain Eveil,” Kit spoke up when the pause stretched into a few minutes of nerve-wrecking silence.

Rain’s eyebrow shot up.

“That’s *interesting.*” She crossed her arms. “How would *you* have known my full name when I never introduced myself formally?”

Kit’s expression turned wary. “I overheard your friend call out your name when we were back at the inn.”

“Nice try. She didn’t call my name in full.”

Rain swung her flute to point at Kit threateningly. “I’m not going to repeat myself again. Who are you? And who’s behind the attacks on us?”

“Why do you persist in seeing us as the enemy?” The look in Kit’s eyes seemed somewhat sad but Rain couldn’t be sure if it was sincere.

“Is it really *impossible* for us to be friends?”

“Are you kidding me?” Rain couldn’t believe her ears. “We humans and monsters like you can *never* be friends! You things kill with no discretion at all!”

“How can you be so sure that *we*’re the ones who kill without discretion?” Kit asked her gravely, then turned as if to leave.

“You may want to think about what your *own kind* have been doing all this time, Rain,” the blond man threw over his shoulder. “They are not *exactly* saints themselves.”

Then he was gone.

CHAPTER 27

“I wonder where Rain is,” Yvi asked of the crackling firebut got no reply from either Edius or Thiea.

Not that she minded since Thiea was still officially out and Edius was almost beside himself trying to ensure that she was comfortable. As Yvi watched Edius hovering over Thiea with an almost comic concern, she thought back to his earlier actions and wondered. There was something about the whole matter that just didn’t ring right. Yvi was willing to bet her entire secret stash of gold coins that it was more than a simple kidnapping by a vampire and some fox spirits. Edius was *definitely* not an unwilling victim if her intuition was right.

“*Finally.*”

A sudden rustling behind Yvi stunned her into jumping up and drawing her twin knives. Rain emerged from the bushes wearing an extremely annoyed expression.

“Oh, it’s you.” Yvi lowered her knives and returned them to their usual hiding places. “What took you so long? Kit proved to be a better lover than you expected?”

Rain stared at her with cold eyes.

“Does anything else but sex fills that brain of yours?” she asked. “Because I’m seriously wondering if you were supposed to be born a man instead.”

“Whoever set the rule that only men were entitled to promiscuity?” Yvi replied airily. “But seriously, *what* took you so long? I would have gone looking for you if not for the fact that Thiea was still out.”

Rain threw a quick worried look at Thiea and begun gnawing on her nails.

“She still hasn’t woken up yet? Did you use the smelling salts?”

“We used everything short of waving my smelly feet under her nose,” Yvi assured Rain, “but Thiea still hasn’t regained consciousness yet.”

“Is she going to be alright?” Edius looked up at Rain and Yvi distraughtly. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“I really don’t know.” Rain knelt down beside Thiea and felt the pulse at the side of her neck but there was nothing irregular about it.

“Maybe we should get Edius to bestow the kiss of life on Thiea,” Yvi suggested thoughtfully beside Rain.

Edius made a slight choking sound while Thiea’s eyelids twitched slightly, much to Rain’s amusement.

“That is a *brilliant* idea, Yvi.” The young Magian looked at Edius across Thiea’s prone body. “Why don’t you give it a try, Edius?”

“M... me?” Edius looked both hesitant and comically eager but before they could discuss it any further, Thiea sat up suddenly and glared at all three of them.

“I’m fine now. No need to bestow any kiss of life on me.”

“Awww...,” Yvi groaned in disappointment, “you just had to go spoil my anticipation, Thiea.”

Thiea got to her feet huffily, studiously avoiding Edius’ eyes as she did so.

“Well, sorry to disappoint you then.” Thiea went to her horse and adjusted the saddle straps before swinging herself up.

“Shall we make a move?”

“Erm... are you sure you’re alright, Thiea?” Rain watched her anxiously. “You... ah... got into a fight with a vampire after all.”

“I’m fine.” Thiea’s eyes still stared straight ahead. “We should

reach the next town by morning if we ride hard.”

Rain exchanged looks with Yvi, and then stole a glance at Edius. Although his face didn't reveal anything, Rain could tell that Thiea's behaviour had been a discouragement of sorts for him. She was about to reach out with a comforting hand when a voice suddenly whispered in the depths of her mind.

Rain...

“Rain?” Yvi peered into her face with concern. “You don't look so good. Are you alright?”

“I'm fine.” Rain felt her lips move as if she was not in control of her own body. “You guys go ahead. I'll catch up with you later.”

Yvi and Thiea gave her strange looks but didn't pursue it any further. As soon as the horse beats faded into the distance, Rain fell to one knee and bowed her head before the shadowy figure that had materialised out of thin air.

“What are your orders, Master?”

CHAPTER 28

“You have done well in Cruor, Rain.” The figure, cloaked from head to toe, spoke in a cultured but slithery voice. “The people there now suspect the Demons of foul play and no longer tolerate them as they once did.”

Rain bowed her head in acknowledgement. “The Mayor was an excellent choice, Master. Now they will finally see the Demons for what they really are.” Her eyes burnt with feverish hatred. “*Murderers.*”

“I now have another mission for you. There have been rumours of a woman in the East getting impregnated by a Demon. Find her and *kill her.*”

“Kill her, Master?” Rain's voice became uncertain. “But...”

“What have I told you many times over, Rain?” Her Master's voice seemed to curl around her neck, caressing it with a menacing intent. “The Demons should never have been allowed to exist in the

first place.”

“The foolish humans who choose to stand on the Demons’ side are not to be spared either. You of all people ought to know that better than anyone, Rain.” Cold fingers touched Rain’s chin and tipped her face up.

Her Master’s eyes glowed from within the hood. Then Rain gasped as fire seemed to flash across her sight. Heat invaded her senses and caused her to blink in confusion. Rain looked around, widening her eyes at the furiously burning houses. The smell of roasted flesh choked her nostrils.

“*Rain!*” A middle-aged woman, half burnt by the flames that raged around them dragged herself towards the young woman.

She stared down at the woman’s blackened face.

“Mo... mother?”

“It...it’s the Demon!” Rain’s mother lifted a trembling finger and pointed behind her. “Kill it, Rain. *Kill it!*”

Rain looked back and to her horror, a tall pale figure emerged from among the flames licking ineffectively at his clothes. She wasn’t sure how she knew it was a male but something told her she wasn’t far off the truth.

“Stand back.” Rain drew her flute and stood protectively in front of her mother. “Come any nearer and you’ll regret it!”

The figure seemed not to heed her warning and continued to advance, the intense heat masking his features until he was no more than a few feet away. Then Rain gasped and stepped back involuntarily. It was a beautiful man with long honey brown hair flowing over his shoulders. His eyes were green with golden flecks and his ears ended in a sharp point.

White hot pain shot through Rain’s head, knocking her onto her knees in pain as her flute fell ineffectively to the ground.

“*Rain....*” The man held out his hand out to her. “*Come with me, Rain.*”

“Kill it, Rain,” her mother rasped behind her as the fire shot up into the inky skies above them. “*It burnt down the entire village and tried to kill your own mother! Kill it!*”

Shivers shook Rain's body as she tried to control the pain that had immobilised her to no avail.

"*Kill it! Kill it!*" her mother screeched.

"Stop it." Rain grabbed her throbbing head and shut her eyes tightly. "*Please stop it!*"

"*Rain...it's me...Lucian.*" The man came nearer as if to take her into his embrace. "*You're hurt, Rain. Let me take you to safety.*"

He touched her gently on the shoulder; and triggered a series of bright lights behind her eyes. Rain looked up only to see a terrible monster staring down at her, its claws gripping her shoulder tightly.

"Get away from me!" she screamed, fear coursing through her every vein as she scrambled backwards from the monster with her hand held out in front of her. "Don't touch me!"

"*Rain....*" the monster called her name again and tried to reach out for her again.

"NOOOOO!" Her hand began to glow a brilliant light that increased in intensity with every breath she took.

The monster recoiled from the light that grew stronger and stronger until a light dart of sorts shot out from her hand and hit it directly in the chest.

The crackling sounds of the fire died away instantly, almost as if it was never there in the first place. Freed from the pain that had taken over her head earlier, Rain collapsed to the ground in a half-conscious state. Her Master stood over her, his face hidden by his cowl.

"Soon, my lovely little firebird," he whispered insidiously as he bent over her and lifted her easily in his arms, "you'll be free of all the pain...when *he* decides to face me once and for all..."

To be continued...

[001]: A female monster with poisonous snakes for hair, said to have been killed by a revered Magian hundreds of years ago. The tale of this incredible feat is still being circulated by storytellers and it's considered an insult to be told one looks like Metis.

[002]: A game where players roll a ball down a wooden alley to hit a triangular group of ten pins.