

Moriana's Rain

“Come to me night winds! Come to my bidding!”

Flashes of lightning slashed across the dark sky like an angry strobe light, but the lone figure at the top of the hill remained immobile.

I watched, fascinated. Even for a witch Moriana was intense. She stood high above the rushing waters of the Mississippi River, with her arms dramatically pointing toward the heavens. Other than imploring the gathering storm, I had no idea what she was doing. The clouds boiled over her head, and the smell of ozone and magic hung heavy in the air.

I had only been in the St. Louis area as an apprentice witch with Moriana for a month, but she'd never done anything this totally awesome before. We'd made potions, learned chants, regular witchcraft stuff. This was way better.

I glanced at Simon standing so straight and tall next to me. So cute, really. He'd been an apprentice wizard for two years, which made him eighteen and my senior by two years. That automatically made him hot, but he really was a hottie. Blond hair, not like my honey color, but flaxen-blond, like Spike. You know, Buffy? Yeah, I watch reruns. Anyway, Simon has eyes the color of a clear blue sky. Sigh. Too bad he's a wizard.

With a sudden roar, the sky opened in a spectacular show of lightning webs, but still Moriana didn't stir. What was she waiting for?

I looked at Simon again. This time he felt my gaze and looked over to smile at me.

Oooh, I loved that smile.

“Quite a show, huh?” he whispered.

I nodded. “But what's she going to do?” I kept my voice as quiet as his.

He looked incredulous. “The storm, Ari. You didn't think it came up on its own, did you?”

I looked away from his penetrating gaze. I wasn't about to admit that's exactly what I'd thought. This whole show was hers? Wow. I hoped to never get crossways with that kind of gynomous power.

“The wood nymphs petitioned her to bring rain to the forest. Fire season is approaching,” Simon explained.

He always knew more than I did and was predictably taking it all in stride. Of course, I'd found out in the last month that he was a lot more experienced in almost everything than I was. Being male, he'd been allowed a freedom often denied to females of the same age. And like a typical wizard he found it necessary to frequently remind me of that fact. He wasn't obnoxious about it, actually he was very nice, but that arrogance that seemed the trademark of so many wizards was definitely part of Simon. Not his coolest trait.

In contrast, I had been fairly sheltered, first by my parents, then my grandparents and Great-Gran. I was learning that had been both a blessing and a curse.

More thunder and lightning rolled in, and I turned my attention back to the display our mentor was creating. The massive energy in the atmosphere was exhilarating. Moriana's lips moved with the words of some chant, but the sounds didn't carry to the bottom of the slope,

where Simon and I watched. She suddenly made a huge stirring motion with her arms, and the wind began to whirl, pulling her long black hair out around her. The sky split open, and rain pour everywhere—except where Moriana stood.

I was soaked in seconds. Simon and I made a mad dash for the shelter of the car and scrambled inside. We were trying to wipe our faces off with paper tissues I found in the glove box when Moriana joined us a few minutes later. I swear there wasn't a drop of water on her. Was I impressed? You bet!

“Well, young ones,” she said with satisfaction, her timeless face beaming, “that should take care of the drought. And perhaps other things as well. I think the community has been well served tonight.” Suddenly noticing our disheveled appearance, she asked, “Did you both get wet? Tsk, tsk, you really should pay closer attention when I'm giving a demonstration. Then you would know when to run for cover. Well, never mind, the rain will do you no harm.”

She started her eighteen-year-old black Ford sedan—built the same year Simon was born—and headed back for the city suburbs, driving with her usual reckless abandon. Simon and I hung on and waited for it to be over. She hadn't killed us yet; we could only hope her luck would hold.

* * *

After the evening downpour, the morning dawned bright and cheery, promising another day of scorching heat. The Midwest in August often was oppressive later in the day. But early, it wasn't so bad, and I stretched at my bedroom window as I thought about the day ahead.

Curses. Now that was something to think about. I was bound to learn something important about curses today. Moriana had been asked to lift a curse from a dying elf. I'd never even seen anyone who'd been cursed, unless, of course, you counted the vampires. Their souls were cursed, but no one knew how to lift that kind of affliction. Not anyone. Not even Moriana.

As a white witch I wasn't allowed to make curses, but I was learning how to cure them. I already knew some simple cures, like removing warts and pimples, but nothing big. Nothing like the demon curse that had made the elf sick. I could hardly wait to see what Moriana would do!

“Arianna, are you ready? We must be on our way in a few minutes.” That had been three hours ago. It takes our mentor forever to get going. First she has her morning meditation, then she communes with her garden, feeds the wild animals, and discusses the coming day with her familiar Harry, a tri-colored alley cat. After this schedule is completed, she's ready to consider the day's schedule. Today had been no different, and that's why we were leaving the house almost a half-hour late for our mid-morning appointment.

The elf family lived in a simple white house in the suburbs. The yard was well-tended with blooming flower boxes on the front porch. Two pre-school children sat on the steps and yelled a warning that we had finally arrived.

Moriana breezed up to the front stoop, smiled absently at the children, and proceeded to enter the front door without waiting for the occupants to answer. Simon and I looked hesitantly at each other but followed, and the children fell in behind us.

“Where is my patient?” she demanded of the tall woman standing in the living room.

The woman bowed her head stiffly, her ash blonde, tidily bound hair remaining firmly in place.

“Welcome to our home. My husband is right this way.” She turned and led Moriana to a narrow hallway and opened the first door. We all trooped along, including the children, who had now been joined by a shaggy yellow dog.

“This is Elwood,” the woman announced, “and I am Elmira, his wife. I am sorry you

were called on such a hopeless case.”

I stifled a gasp at the sight of him.

“How long has he been this way?” Even Moriana sounded appalled.

The figure identified as Elwood lay on a wooden bed, covered in white sheets. His tall, lanky form was painfully thin, and his skin hung like it was unattached to the remaining flesh beneath. His color was sallow, and I could barely perceive his chest movement. He appeared to be unconscious. Elwood was on his death bed.

“How long?” Moriana repeated.

“A week. No more,” the woman replied. “We thought he had the flu. When he didn’t get better in a few days, we called the doctor. He suggested it was a demon curse. That’s when Elwood’s brother insisted on calling you.”

“You sound doubtful. Do you think the doctor is wrong?” Moriana asked.

Elmira shrugged. “A curse seems so unlikely.”

“We shall see.” Moriana moved toward the bed. “You should not have waited so long. Death moves close. But no mind, I will stay the reaper's steps.”

I looked at the shrunken body again. Surely Moriana was being overly optimistic.

My mentor's hands moved close to his face, never touching it but following the planes, moving up and down and finally across.

“I will need the bag from my car,” she said, turning to Simon. “Both of you will be needed to assist in this,” she added including me. “The family must leave until the cure is completed.”

The woman obediently removed her children and the dog from the room. She kept her eyes down as if wary of meeting our gaze. Adults often have that reaction toward witches. The children, on the other hand, were merely curious and reluctant to go. Elmira had to pull them from the room.

When Simon returned and the door was closed, Moriana began her ritual, immediately slipping into teaching mode.

“Our ceremony will combine banishing and blessing. And because someone has targeted this man, we shall also add protection.” She opened her bag and took out a small pitcher. “Arianna, please fill this with water from the kitchen.”

Elmira met me with a question on her face as soon as I opened the door. I explained my errand, and she directed me to the back of the house and the small, neat kitchen. The kids were sitting at the table with coloring books. I smiled and filled the pitcher quickly. The little girl, motioned for me to look at her picture. So, I made a brief detour, glanced at the stick horse she was drawing, and nodded my approval. As I turned to leave, my arm brushed against a dark blue cloak on a hook near the back door and came away wet. I smiled, thinking someone else had gotten caught in the storm last night.

When I returned to the room, Moriana had already set four candles in place and drawn the circle. She instructed Simon and I to wash our hands in water and sea salt before entering the circle. She had already cleansed herself in a ritual bath before we left home.

After she welcomed the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water, each represented by a candle, she motioned Simon and me to the sides of the bed, while she stood at the foot. As we joined hands, a triangle was formed, and Moriana began the plea for the banishing ritual.

“Oh Gracious Goddess, we come to you tonight, asking you to hear our supplication on behalf of this soul, Elwood, who has been defiled by the curse of a demon—a curse intended to do him terrible harm.

“Oh Gracious Goddess, we need your assistance times three: to banish the curse, to bless the soul, to protect the spirit.”

She picked up a piece of parchment she had placed on the bed and wrote the requests on it, rolled it up into a scroll, wrapped it with a white cord, and tied a knot.

“With knot number 1, this spell has begun.”

She handed the scroll to me, and I tied the second knot, saying, “With knot number 2, this spell shall come true.”

Then it was Simon’s turn. “With knot number 3, so ever may it be.”

And we continued moving the scroll around our small circle, tying a new knot with each line.

“With knot number four, let evil come no more.”

“With knot number five, keep this man and spell alive.”

“With knot number six, this curse shall we nix.”

“With knot number seven, beseech the powers of heaven.”

“With knot number eight, unseal his present fate.”

“With knot number nine, hear this prayer of mine.”

“By the Goddess’ gracious gift, this evil curse shall lift.”

Concluding the incantation, Moriana placed the completed scroll on Elwood’s chest and waved an incense stick to the four directions.

“By the grace of the Goddess who protects us all, I proclaim this spell complete. So shall it ever be.”

Without another word, Moriana laid her hand gently upon the brow of the sleeping figure, nodded after a moment, and left the room. Simon and I gathered the supplies and quickly followed. We found her talking with Elmira.

“Within a few hours he will wake. He will be cured but weak. Give him a drink of strong tea made from these seeds. Nothing else for an hour.” Moriana handed her a packet. “Now, you must tell me how this happened.”

“I don’t know,” Elmira said. “I have no idea why anyone would hurt him.”

Moriana tapped her cheek with a long painted fingernail. “Then we must ask the demon who did this.”

Easy for Moriana to say. Where do you find a demon to ask?

On the ride home, I was silent for a long time, thinking over the events of the last hour. Finally I spoke up.

“I don’t understand, Moriana. That was a very simple knot spell. How could that cure something as bad as a demon curse?”

I was sitting in the back seat, but I could see her face in the rear view mirror. Her mouth curved in a smile.

“A spell’s magic is not in the complexity of the ritual but in the sincerity and power of the spell maker. Does that seem so strange, witchling?”

“I guess not. But I had hoped if I learned the secret chants I could do anything I wanted. It sucks to find out it doesn’t work that way.”

Moriana and Simon both laughed.

“Don’t be so impatient,” she said. “You’ll learn. The power grows with time and use. Knowing the right chants will help, but the real power you’ll find inside yourself.”

With that rather vague statement, the witch lesson for the day seemed to be over. Moriana immediately turned her attention to the search for the demon.

“Ordinarily having a demon in town would not be an event of great urgency, but this demon seems bent on doing harm. So, we must find it quickly before it causes more mischief,” she said, more to herself than to us. “I need to have a look in the mirror.”

No, she wasn't worried about her appearance. She was talking about scrying, a form of divination. Moriana used a black mirror framed in silver--about the size of a dinner plate--as the medium to focus her psychic talents. If all things coalesced as she intended, the mirror would reveal a picture of the demon's hiding place. Not all witches had the ability to scry, and I'd only seen it done once before by a second or third cousin. Life with Moriana was turning out to be a real adventure.

I watched her from the doorway of her sanctuary, a solitary room where she did her meditations. A witch's altar stood in the center with her family Book of Shadows, black pot, chalice, pentacle and incense burner. She kept the room filled with plants, dried herbs, crystals and candles, and she regularly performed cleansing ceremonies, sweeping it with her witch's broom to keep the chamber attuned to her magic alone. No one else was allowed to enter, except under very special occasions, and only after total body cleansing. When she worked from the sanctuary, Simon and I watched from the doorway.

There really wasn't much to watch, she was slowly swinging a small crystal on a chain over the mirror. Periodically she would stoop and peer at the mirror from an angle.

“What's she doing now?” I asked Simon.

“The vision becomes clearer if you focus across the surface. See how she is looking from the side? She sees something and is attempting to improve the image.”

“How does the angle help?”

“Just trust that it does,” he said.

Yeah right. Simon didn't know the answer either. Guys seem to find it hard to admit they don't know something. But sometimes magical rules just exist without logical explanation. For the present, I chalked this off as another one of those. Later I'd ask Moriana or look through the magic books.

“Ah ha,” came from the sanctuary. It sounded like Moriana had found our demon. Or something else interesting. She was easily distracted by any new event or piece of information that she found fascinating.

She exited the room beaming. “We have a trip to make.”

“Did you find the demon?” I asked.

“I found four. Now we'll have some fun. Come, witchling. Simon, my bag.” She swept through the parlor where we'd been standing, into the kitchen and out the back door. Simon and I scrambled to catch up. She just might leave us behind if we didn't hustle. When Moriana was ready to go, you went.

I checked to make sure I had my silver dagger in the sheath at my waist and my bracelet with its set of protective charms. I always kept both with me--the dagger since I entered weaponry training at age seven and the bracelet since my initiation in June. While the protection charms are standard witch accessories, the dagger was a bit unusual. It's because I was born with the birthmark of a crescent moon on my ankle. It means your destiny is to be a Guardian, a supernatural cop who keeps the peace between the magic and human worlds. I'd been in training since I was born and had now entered the apprenticeship phase. I was finally getting to learn the witchy stuff.

When we had piled in the car and were on our way, Moriana explained what she learned. “The demons are in a crypt in an old cemetery. They were counting money when I saw them. I

could not hear what they were saying, because the cemetery's ancient voices were too loud. But it looked as if someone had paid them well."

"Paid them?" I questioned, looking back and forth from Moriana to Simon.

"Demons often work as mercenaries," Simon supplied. "Selling their services to whoever will pay."

"Someone hired them to curse the elf?"

"It is possible," Moriana said and added brightly, "We shall ask them that very question."

And they, of course, would answer since it was Moriana asking.

I remembered her comment about the cemetery's voices and shivered. It was uncomfortable for many magic users to enter cemeteries. The voices of the dead were often loud and angry or sad. It was draining to those of us who could feel empathy. Demons, on the other hand, thrived on misery and would find it an invigorating place to be. I spent the rest of the ride concentrating on strengthening my mental shields.

The cemetery was tucked away in a long derelict section of town, surrounded by an industrial district and abandoned lots, overgrown with weeds and brush. There were three crypts large enough to be inhabited by our demons, but a demon smell of burnt sulfur clearly wafted from the farthest from the old iron gate at the entrance. The grounds themselves were mowed but not neatly trimmed. It gave off an impression of neglect.

The crypt was made of stone with a single entrance and twin gargoyles guarding the door. Moriana paused, mumbled something under her breath, stepped back and the door swung slowly open.

I peeked around Moriana.

Four demons stood on the other side. Flame red eyes. Dark, cadaverous figures, wrapped in long black capes with red lining. Three of the creatures were immobile, as if frozen in time. The obvious leader stood with legs braced apart, arrogant, sinister.

"Well, if it isn't the witches three," he snarled. "And not very bright witches to just walk into our abode."

"Mind your manners, demonkin," said Moriana mildly. "We may yet spare your lives."

The demon leader laughed, a harsh, grating sound. "Brave words, witch, but hardly prophetic. It is you who will die today."

"No one needs to die. All you must do is tell us who hired you to curse the elf, and then you may depart this city."

The leader laughed again; this time he was joined by his companions. Moriana wasn't going to like their attitude. Suddenly the leader leaped forward, grabbing for Moriana's throat, and his companions rushed at Simon and me. I braced myself, and managed to withstand the first attack without going down. The crypt was really too small for such a fight. We kept bumping into each other and ended up rolling around in the dust, picking up dirt and cobwebs.

The demon trying to rip my throat was physically stronger but not as quick. I used my martial arts training to avoid his grasping nails and flipped him over my shoulder. He landed on top of Simon, who had another demon pinned on the floor. The collision allowed his demon attacker to break free. Both demons turned on me, but Simon caught one of them with a swift kick to the jaw.

I spared a brief glance at Moriana who was chanting under her breath and holding off the leader and one of his cohorts by some kind of energy barrier. Unfortunately, she couldn't use witch fire or even a stunner through the barrier, so it was a stand-off.

"You have one last chance," Moriana told them. "Agree to my terms, and you may live."

“Not bloody likely,” the leader snarled. “We were paid well to keep our mouths shut. Besides, you can’t keep this barrier up forever.”

“No,” she agreed, “but I can do much worse things.” She flicked both set of fingers at them. “Poof.”

And with that simple word, the barrier and the two demons dissipated into the air. At the same time, Simon snapped the neck of his assailant, and I followed up by stabbing the last demon in the heart with my silver dagger.

I turned to see Moriana watching us with a look of consternation. “Witchling? Young wizard? Why aren’t you using your magic? Getting all dirty and rolling around on the floor really was not necessary. But then, the young are always so energetic,” she added, as if to herself. Her eyes swept around the crypt. “We might as well go. There’s no one left to answer our questions. Pity. We really needed to know who set these events in motion. Never mind. We’ll find another way.”

With that confident declaration, she exited the mausoleum at her usual brisk stride.

As we approached the car, an elderly man straightened from pulling weeds near the front gate. He appeared worn, tired, biding his time until called to another existence.

“Are you the caretaker?” Moriana asked.

“Yep. Do you have loved ones here?” he said, gazing around at the neglected graveyard. “I suppose you feel it needs better care,” he added wearily.

“No, to both your questions,” she replied. “I merely wanted to ask what you could tell us about the creatures who have been living in that crypt.”

“I don’t bother the likes of them. They didn’t cause no trouble. I’m just one old man. I can’t—”

“I wasn’t asking you to bother anything,” Moriana interrupted. “Tell me what you have observed.”

“I just seen them come and go. Always at night.”

“Has anyone come to see them?”

“Well, now, they had one visitor. A week ago and again last night. My house is right over there.” He pointed at a small cottage barely visible through the trees. “So I seen when the stranger came. A figure draped in a dark blue cloak. Didn’t stay long. Afterwards them demons was mighty happy. I heard a lot of laughter.”

“Was this a man or woman?”

“Couldn’t tell for sure. Sorta tall and thin is all I saw. Last night it was pouring rain. Hard to see anything.”

Oh, wow. I tugged on Moriana’s sleeve. “I know the answer,” I said.

Moriana turned her mild gaze on me. “Have you figured it out, clever witchling?”

“Yes, I’m sure of it,” I said, sharing a smile with her. “Except I don’t know why.”

“Then, let’s go ask the final question.”

Back in the car, Simon immediately demanded, “So give. What have you figured out?”

But I was learning. I shook my head. Half the fun was in the revelation. “You’ll see.”

Moriana chuckled. She’d obviously figured it out too, but I didn’t know how. She hadn’t seen what I did. Maybe she’d sensed the truth from the beginning and had just been waiting for one of us to solve it on our own.

“That’s not fair,” Simon declared. “I share with you.”

And it was true, he did, but often with a superior smirk on his face. I was going to enjoy my advantage for just a little while.

Simon sat back to sulk, and the rest of the ride was in silence.

Elmira answered the door when we arrived at the elf home. Elwood was sitting on the living room couch, looking much improved. The children were playing on the floor with the dog.

"Did you come to check on your patient?" she asked.

"We have one more question," Moriana said. Her eyes dropped to the children. "I think this would be better in private."

Elmira hesitated, then ushered the children into their room.

"How are you feeling Elwood?"

He smiled. "Glad to be up and about, Moriana. Thanks to you."

"I can't imagine what you haven't already asked," Elmira said re-entering the room.

Moriana ignored her and sat beside Elwood. "I wanted to tell you the demons who cursed you are gone, rather permanently. We found them inhabiting a cemetery crypt. Unfortunately, they weren't very cooperative, and it was necessary to dispose of them. You will not be troubled by the creatures again. However..." She looked at me and raised a brow.

"You're not out of danger yet, sir," I said, stepping forward.

"Whyever not?" Elwood looked surprised. "Moriana just said they wouldn't be any more trouble."

"Yes, that's right. But they were only hired assassins. It was your wife who tried to kill you." I turned to Elmira as her husband gasped. "But I don't know why."

She didn't speak for several long moments. "You're just a child. You wouldn't understand. I wanted to be free of him." Elmira clasped her hands tightly in front of her. "Elves are not allowed to divorce, and if I left him he would keep the children and the property. If he was dead, I would get it all." She turned her gaze on him. "I know where you go every Friday night. After twelve year of marriage, you would do this to me?"

I'd heard stories about the rage of a woman scorned, and I guess she felt trapped in her marriage, but it wasn't an excuse for murder.

"Elmira," her husband started to say.

"I don't want to hear it." The woman ignored him and looked at us. "How did you know?"

"Arianna?" my mentor encouraged.

"The blue cloak." When Elmira still looked puzzled, I explained. "While I was getting water from the kitchen, I bumped into a damp cloak hanging by the back door. No one would have been out in last night's downpour, especially with a critically ill spouse, unless it was an emergency or they were hiding something. You were the figure in the cemetery. The demons were so happy because you brought the final payoff."

Elmira's entire body seemed to slump. "Exposed by a coat."

"Well, actually..." I looked at my mentor and smiled, wondering just how prescient she was. "In the end, what really tripped you up was Moriana's rain."