

Winter's Child

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Submitted: April 6, 2006

Updated: April 6, 2006

When Shiva took on human form to attend Deling City's Eden Festival, she hadn't counted on falling in love with the local monster hunter.

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1 - Prologue

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-PROLOGUE-

She had watched humanity for a long time.

Through ice-blue eyes she had observed their movements as they roamed to and fro upon the tiny orb they called home. Amused, she watched them as a whole for a while. Then, for a change of pace, she decided to watch a more select group.

Though she saw nothing wrong with it, those who dwelt in the same realm as she found her behaviour worrisome to say the least. At first, when all of Mankind had taken an interest, it had not been a problem. Shiva's interests were now focused on one city, and that was more risky.

"Shiva," Ifrit warned her, "back off. Man is trouble. We all know that. Your curiosity won't do you any good."

"We've been over this many times before, Ifrit," Shiva pointed out. "And each time I find myself pointing out that your fears are completely unfounded."

"Empty words." Ifrit told her. "You can say that all you want for now. But one day you'll regret this fascination. Give it up now, Shiva, before it is too late."

"No," she told him. "My mind is made up. I'm going to Deling City. The people there have an annual celebration that looks like a lot of fun. This year I intend to be there."

She turned to go to the point where the worlds met, walking to that place with purposeful steps that wavered only when Siren ran up to her with tears in her eyes.

"Don't go, Sis!"

"It's only for a little while, Siren." Shiva tried to reassure her younger sibling. "I'll come back soon." Siren hung her head, tears falling from her eyes as her older sister vanished from their world.

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-CHAPTER 01-

The early morning streets of Deling City were a-bustle with preparations for the annual Eden Festival. Sweepers rid the curbs of stray trash while road crews touched up the streets' markings and filled in the cracks.

Shopkeepers polished their windows and touched up their signs while employees cleaned up the sidewalks, and passed the time of day by whistling or humming favourite tunes.

Restaurants had serving tables set up outside and the aromas of food filled the air and had much of the crowd itching to try whatever newrecipes the chefs had created for the festival. It was, after all, anEden Festival tradition for the top chef from each restaurant or cafeto attempt a new masterpiece for the crowd to try.

"Good morning, Rin." One of the shopkeepers called to a friend of his as the young man passed by.

"Looking forward to the festivities?"

"As always," Marin Loire grinned, his eyes a-twinkle.

Marin had been a regular visitor at the annual festival since he'd fled his simple home in the seaside township of Esthar to escape the terrible reign of the Sorceress Adel four years ago when he'd still been a teenager.

He was a handsome young man in his early twenties now, with saddlebrown eyes and jet black hair worn down to his waist, bound up in the type of decorative wrap that the men of Deling City wore to festivals such as this one.

"It's going to be another good one this year," Marin commented. "The hotel chef's got something really incredible this year or my nose is a liar."

"Both our noses are deceivers if that's the case," the shopkeeper agreed. "I must agree it smelled wonderful. How's work these days?"

"Business is thriving, unfortunately," Marin sighed. "The monsters areprobably worse in Esthar, though. I wonder if anyone there is stillalive."

"Despots rarely kill off an entire town," the shopkeeper remarked. "But, come now. Today's the Eden Festival. This is not the time for lamentation."

"You're right." Marin agreed.

"I have to get back to this," he indicated the storefront with a sweeping gesture. "But perhaps I'll see you at the parade?"

"Perhaps so," Marin agreed as the shopkeeper resumed his chores and he strolled away, eyes watchful for any stray monsters that might try to disrupt the festival.

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-CHAPTER 02

Clad in a cloak of icy blue, the blond woman hummed a song she'd heard earlier that afternoon as she made her way through the crowded streets.

She could hear snippets of conversation as she sought out a spot from which to watch the parade. She smiled at the boy who had just got a new puppy for his birthday and found herself wondering why some human beings chose to spend a large part of their lives in the company of lower lifeforms.

As she thought on this mystery, she missed the curb and stumbled, tearing her new dress and skinning her knee. "Ouch," she complained.

"Here," Marin knelt beside her, "permit me. I fear I have no spells to heal wounded dresses. But that knee should be no trouble."

Shiva watched as Marin cast a cura spell on her knee. She could feel it healing, and watched as the blood vanished from the site where the wound had been.

"Thank you," she told him. She wasn't entirely sure what the words meant, but she had observed that human beings who used them in these situations tended to be more highly thought of than those who did not.

"You're quite welcome," Marin told her as he helped her to her feet. "My name's Marin, by the way.

Marin Loire. I'm the local monster hunter."

"Reine deGlace," she told him. "I'm a visitor in town."

"You've come for the Eden Festival, then?" Marin asked.

"Yes," Reine nodded. "Monster hunter, did you say? I've been in training recently for that. What types do you get around here?"

"Fly monsters mostly," Marin shrugged. "But this conversation must wait for now. Look! The parade is starting!"

Reine looked in the direction Marin was pointing as the parade made its way down the street. The crowd on either side waved flags and cheered as it went by.

Marin found himself stealing glances at Reine. He smiled at her as she became caught up in the cheering. She was, he thought, a woman he would not mind seeing again.

Deciding to throw caution to the wind, he turned to her as the parade ended.

"I hope I'm not being too forward," he told her, "But, if you're not too busy tomorrow, I'd like to show you around the city."

Reine had been planning to return to her realm that evening. But she found the idea of walking down the streets of Deling City with this young man to be an interesting idea.

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-CHAPTER 03

"Hi, Mom," Marin said on the phone as he fiddled with his hair for the fifth time that morning. "I'm doing okay... I met a nice woman at the festival last night... No, not that kind of woman. Nice in the way you approve of... She skinned her knee, so I healed her. She was very polite... Reine deGlace... Yes, she is pretty." he checked his teeth in the mirror while his mother replied. Once he was satisfied he continued. "I'm going to show her around town... No, not a date as such... We'll have to see... I'll let you know. How are things in Galbadia? I miss Esthar, too, Mom. Someone will defeat Adel one day... Me? Nah. I'm a good monster hunter. But I could never take on Adel. I've got to run... Love you, too. Bye."

He put the phone down and hurried out the door as the bus pulled up.

* * * * *

Reine watched the puppies and kittens through the petshop window while she waited for Marin. He had promised to show her the town today. Last night, she'd agreed on a whim. But today she genuinely found herself looking forward to their day together.

Marin seemed a nice young man. He'd certainly been considerate enough to help her when she'd hurt her knee. As she remembered the way he'd healed her, she wondered if he had any brothers or sisters.

"He'd certainly be good with kids someday," she told herself as the kittens batted the window and the puppies frolicked.

"The puppy or me?" Marin asked her.

"Oh!" Reine exclaimed as she spun around to face him. "Um..." she found herself blushing, though she wasn't entirely sure why she should be doing so.

"So, where would you like to go today?"

"I'm not very familiar with the town. Why don't you pick a place?"

"Well, what do you like to do?" Marin inquired.

"Do?" Reine hadn't considered this question before.

"What activities do you enjoy?"

"I've never really given it much thought."

"Tell you what," Marin suggested, "why don't we look at some of the other shops for now. Maybe you'll think of something you'd like to do by the time lunchtime rolls around?"

"That sounds fine."

Marin extended his arm and Reine took it, allowing him to lead her away from the petshop.

"I originally came from Esthar," Marin told Reine. "It's a small cliffside town overlooking the water. Mostly scientists. My mother was a waitress there. Even scientists have to poke their heads out of the lab and eat once in a while. My dad worked at one of the shops at the mall."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" Reine inquired.

"I did once. Six sisters and three brothers. Our house was a bit overcrowded, but we didn't mind."

"You sound as if they were dead or something."

Marin nodded.

"I'm sorry," Reine put a hand on his shoulder. "How did it happen?"

"They died during the invasion." Seeing the confused expression on her face, he explained further.

"When Sorceress Adel took over Esthar she killed many of the people who tried to stop her. My father resisted her and was killed along with my brothers and sisters. I thought I was the only one in my family to make it out alive. But a little over a year ago, I learned that my mother, too, had escaped and was living in Galbadia."

"Oh, Marin," Reine gasped. "How awful to lose so much of your family so quickly."

"I wanted my mother to come live in Deling City, but she's too scared to leave Galb..." he stopped and drew a shotgun from inside his coat as a heavily armoured creature lumbered up to them, making threatening noises as it approached.

"Armadodo," Reine recognised. "We were just learning about them in class."

"In class?" Marin asked, firing at the Armadodo, the bullet bouncing over its armoured hide. "How old are you?"

"Much older than you could ever imagine," Reine told him as she cast an ice attack upon the Armadodo.

"But be assured, I am most definitely old enough to be fighting Armadodos by your side on the streets of Deling City."

Marin watched the grace with which she cast her attack, and found he could not take his eyes off of her. The monster had not been defeated, but Reine's attack had, at least, knocked it onto its back. With its soft underbelly laid bare, it was now an easy target for a shotgun.

Marin Loire took careful aim and squeezed the trigger as Reine watched him with the same intensity with which he'd gazed upon her only moments before. The bullet struck true, and the Armadodo fell dead upon ground.

Knowing what was to come, they clasped each other and waited for the creature's final attack, a miniquake, to pass.

"Are you okay?" Marin asked, once the ground had stopped shaking.

"I think so," Reine checked herself. "It's a shame though, in a way. No little wounds for you to heal."

"Ah well," Marin smiled. "There'll be other monsters, and other chances for me to heal you again."

"I look forward to that," Reine smiled. The human heart she currently possessed was beating rapidly in her chest, and she was sure that it wasn't entirely from fighting an Armadodo.

Marin chanced a glance at Reine and saw the same look in her eyes that he knew was present in his own. They'd only met the day before, but he was already certain of two things.

He was in love with Reine deGlace. And Reine was in love with him.

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-CHAPTER 04

Siren sat thoughtfully upon her favourite rock as she practiced on her harp. The beautiful tones were marred all of a sudden by a misplayed note. Frowning, she tried the offending sequence for the fifth time.

After three more tries, she gave up.

"Shiva," she wailed, "why haven't you come home? It's been four months now! You should be here with me! Aren't you sick of that mortal, yet?"

Looking into her Mirror of Farsight, she saw Shiva still in her human guise walking arm-in-arm with the admittedly handsome mortal. As she watched, they stopped walking just long enough to exchange a moment of conversation followed by Shiva throwing her arms around her companion and kissing him soundly.

"NO!" Siren cried. Young though she was for her kind, she knew exactly what she had just witnessed. Things had clearly gone on too long if her sister was entertaining the notion of settling down with a human.

Making her way to the point where the worlds met, she slipped through to around the corner from Marin and Reine.

* * * * *

The new engagement ring that encircled Reine's finger sparkled in the midafternoon sunlight as she and Marin turned the corner and found themselves facing an angry demigoddess.

"You don't belong here, Shiva," Siren wailed. "Look at you. You don't even have a tenth of your power in this form."

"I know my power is weaker in this body," Reine told Siren. "But Marin is strong, and we work well together. Plus, we're in love. So you'll have to get along without me for a while longer."

"Just leave him, Sis," Siren pleaded. "Forget him."

"I can't," Reine smiled.

Siren stared at her. "You're..."

Reine nodded.

"You're welcome to stay and help with the baby," Marin offered. "We could certainly use an extra pair of hands around the house."

Siren shook her head as she allowed herself to vanish back to where she'd come from. "I can't. I have my own obligations."

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-CHAPTER 05

Janine Loire eyed her future daughter-in-law with mild disapproval. The young lady was clearly pregnant, though not very far along.

"Young people these days," she scolded, "always getting ahead of themselves. If I showed up in town in that condition without a husband in my day, I'd have been stoned alive."

"Times change, Mom." Marin told her. "And Reine has agreed to marry me."

"A little late, but better than not at all," Janine sighed. "So, when do you plan on having your wedding?"

"Next weekend," Marin replied.

"So, Reine, tell me about yourself."

"Well," Reine replied, "I've only been in town for a few months. I wouldn't have stayed at all if it hadn't been for Marin."

"Love at first sight, was it?" Janine smiled in understanding. "That would certainly explain why you two couldn't keep your hands off each other."

* * * * *

Siren stood at the doors to the council chambers, debating. She'd made the journey without hesitation, wanting her sister home. But now that she had reached her destination, she suddenly wasn't so sure about what lie ahead.

"Little Siren has come to visit us then," Eden inquired as she stepped out of the chamber doors, golden wings a-glimmer. "But without Shiva. Tell me, where is your sister?"

"She fell in love with a man living in Deling City, Mistress Eden," Siren confessed. "During your festival."

"And I take it she is at home pining?"

"She is with him. Pregnant."

"I see." Eden closed her eyes. Of all the Guardians, only she bore gift of FutureSight. She shared her visions with no one, but did not hesitate to share ideas so that some futures might be guaranteed and others might be averted. In the unfolding events that sprang from the marriage of Marin and Reine, she saw the salvation of Esthar and the liberation of two races. This child, she knew, must be allowed to be born.

Siren waited for Eden's next words.

"Your sister will not be summoned home until after the first of the year," Eden told her. "Her human body cannot handle the body she has placed upon it. She will have her baby, hold him in her arms, and name him with her dying breath. Then she will return here."

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-CHAPTER 06-

Reine rose from her bed and walked into the bathroom.

After taking care of the necessities, she returned to her bedroom.

As she sat there, gazing at her wedding gown, she began to have second thoughts. This wasn't just a week in the mortal realm, or even a year. She would be there for the rest of her mortal life. True, that would be eighty years at most, but was it what she really wanted?

"Shiva."

Reine turned and hugged her sister. "I can't do it, Siren," she lamented.

"Yes, you can."

Siren had been sent the moment Eden had sensed Reine's hesitation. There was too much at stake for Reine to back out now. The fate of the world rested in the hands of the child she bore and the son he would one day beget.

"But, to be gone from you for so long," Reine sobbed.

"It won't be that long. Reine, you won't be happy at home. You love Marin too much. We both know that."

"But what about you? How will you get along without me?"

"I'll be fine. Besides, you have to stay. Eden says this little guy," she touched the small swell in Reine's belly where her child rested, "is going to be very important some day."

"Eden doesn't share her visions unless they're important," Reine thought aloud as she studied her veil.

"Okay, then. I'll stay, if it's that important. Besides, you're right. I do love Marin. Promise me you'll stay for the wedding."

"I will."

"Tell me something, did Eden say if I was having a boy or a girl?"

"A boy," Siren told her. "Are you thinking about what to name him?"

"We already decided that a month ago," Reine replied as she got into her wedding gown. "It would have been Angelina if it had been a girl."

"Pretty name. So, what are you calling your son?"

"Laguna," Reine replied. "Laguna Loire."