

**Songs of the Seasons,
Song One**



**A SAMPLE
of the short story by
Janine K. Spendlove**

Songs of the Seasons, Song One: Girl

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This story has adult themes throughout
and is not intended for the
Young Adult audience.



COLUMBUS DAY WEEKEND

Sergeant Milton Sorenson, United States Marine Corps, knew better than to go spelunking alone in his favorite caving system. It was isolated, only locals knew about it, and miles of winding, pitted, treacherous road up the mountain ensured that only the most robust of four wheel drives could make it, keeping most would-be tourists at bay. If anything happened to him, like falling down a deep shaft and breaking his leg, he'd probably die before anyone found him.

And that suited him just fine. Not the dying bit—the adrenalin of going out on his own and doing something potentially dangerous. He expected to be thrilled, and he expected to have a great time. What he didn't expect was to encounter a naked, half-drowned, red-headed woman making her way up to the main cavern entrance.

"Ma'am, can I help you?" Judging by the water puddling around her, she must have fallen into the underground river. She

had to be freezing. He started unbuttoning his plaid, flannel shirt to put over her. Why was she naked? Where were her clothes?

She fixed her gaze on him, and in the yellow light of his flashlight he could see that she had mischievous, sea green eyes. Her mouth split into a welcoming grin, and she walked with the grace of a dancer over to him.

“Ma’am?” It was all he could do to avoid staring at her voluptuous curves.

“Hello. I am Almera.” A foreign accent, lilting and songlike—similar to what he’d heard a Welsh-born fellow Marine use—flowed from her mouth. She stood in front of him, completely unabashed by her lack of clothing. She was quite short—barely over five feet in height, and Milt struggled to keep his eyes above her neck. The shadows hid much, but not everything. This woman had curves.

He stuck out his hand for her to shake and kept his eyes firmly locked on hers. “I’m Milton, though most just call me Milt. Pleased to meet ya.”

She ignored his proffered hand, and eyes crinkling at the corners from the size of her grin, threw her arms up around his neck in a tight embrace and pressed her lips against his, in what would have been a very chaste kiss had he known her beforehand and had she been dressed.

His flashlight hit the cave floor with a loud, plastic clatter, switching off with the impact and plunging them into inky darkness. He firmly grasped her shoulders and held her out at arm’s length.

“Are. You. Crazy?” He bit out each word, trying to reign in his anger. “What’re you thinkin’ walkin’ ‘round naked and kissin’ a strange man like that? It’s like you’re askin’ for trouble!”

“You are very tall, but you don’t have pointed ears, so you can’t be an elf. Though the way you speak makes me think that you are.” She laughed, as if at some inside joke.

"I'm being serious, ma'am." He let go of her shoulders and felt around in the dark for his flashlight. He turned it on and jumped back, startled. Her face was right next to his.

"Please, call me Almera. And so am I—being serious that is. You act as if you've never met a dryad. Or at the very least have never heard of how we greet new acquaintances." The musical lilt to her voice was entrancing. Milt caught himself staring at the shape and lines of her plump lips and nearly kissed her again. He stood up and shook his head to clear it—she was ethereal, beautiful, and dangerous. Dangerously close to making him behave like a damn fool.

Wait—did she say something about elves and dryads? He groaned to himself. She was a crazy, lost tourist who had taken Dungeons and Dragons a bit too seriously, it seemed. *Just my luck.* Well, he'd see her safely back to town and drop her off at the police station. She was their problem, not his.

"Ma'am, er, I mean Almera, didya need a ride back to town? I didn't see any other cars outside."

"Cars?" She said the word as if it was unfamiliar, sounding it out, like she was tasting it. Yeah, she definitely needed a ride. But she couldn't go anywhere in public in her current state. Milt took his shirt off and held it out to her. She looked at it curiously, but didn't take it. He held it up like a coat and sighed. *It's like dealing with a child.*

"Put your arms through it."

She stared at the shirt and wrinkled her nose in distaste. Sighing again, he reached out and thrust her arms through the sleeves and didn't even bother asking her to button it up herself. His neck flushed a deep red as he accidentally grazed her breast with calloused fingertips as he buttoned up the shirt, but she didn't seem to mind. In fact, she just stood there staring at him with an amused smile on her face.

Yeah, definitely crazy.

Finally finished, he took her hand and led her toward the half-moon entrance of the main cavern. She followed obligingly, completely unconcerned that she was going somewhere with a strange man. How did she know he wasn't going to rape her and then hack her into tiny bits?

"Almera, you really need to be more care--"

The words died on his lips as they stepped, blinking, out into the sunlight. He was very grateful that his shirt was long enough to hit her knees, but it scooped up on the sides showing a silvery-white expanse of smooth skin along her thigh. He'd never seen anyone so fair-skinned in his life—not even an albino. And this wasn't like that at all; her skin didn't lack pigmentation, it was just that the color was silvery-white, and she had absolutely no freckles—which one would expect on skin that fair. His eyes made their way up her torso to her brilliant, flame-red hair. It was so shockingly red that it had to come out of a box; no color like that existed in nature—at least, not among mammals. Her hair was braided in hundreds of tiny, wild braids that had seashells, bells, and other trinkets and baubles woven in them.

His father, a stern, retired Marine Sergeant Major, would have called her a hippy, but she wasn't that at all. If Milt had had to describe her, he'd have said she was more like a tropical bird or fish. She was the very definition of exotic.

And she was beautiful.

She frowned at him. "Is there something wrong? Do I have to wear this strange sarong for much longer? I'd far prefer not to wear anything, but then you are very tall and keep your hair short like many of the elves of the hunting clan do. Perhaps your race is like theirs, and you require clothing to be worn? Such a shame. What is your race by the way? This is a different place though, isn't it? I do think these woods are pretty and remind me of the woods on the shore near Vevila. At least from what I could see. I haven't left the water much before."

Milt just stared at her. He had no idea what to make of her or what to do with her. *I should just turn around and leave her.* But he couldn't. As for her questions, he didn't even know where to start. Instead he opened up the passenger door of his black F-150 and helped her inside. She stared at everything as if she'd never been inside a truck before, which—he was starting to realize—she probably hadn't. *Where did she come from?* The Smoky Mountains had some back woods, but nothing that isolated—even the most ignorant mountain dweller had seen a truck. *Hell, most of 'em have a truck.*

He sat on the driver's side, fumbling through his pockets looking for his keys, and tried to answer her questions as best he could.

"Ma'am, I'm not sure where you're from, but this here is America, and we don't run 'round naked. Well, except for some people during Mardi Gras, but that's different." She opened her mouth to ask another question, probably what Mardi Gras was, so he quickly pressed on. "So, yes, you need to keep my shirt on 'til we can get you something else to wear." He bit his lip, trying to remember what else she'd asked. Ah yes, his race. He looked down at his lean, tanned arms and didn't figure she meant skin color. He didn't want to feed into her delusions but...

"I'm a human, ma'am." With that, he shoved his keys in the ignition and turned them. The engine roared to life, and the radio came on, blaring an old Jethro Tull song from the classic rock station. Almera shrieked and slid across the bench seat and cowered against him. He instinctively wrapped his arms around her, feeling an unbidden need to protect and comfort her.

"Hey, it's okay, it's just the radio." He reached out with one hand and switched it off. "See, nothin' to be afraid of."

She straightened up and pulled her knees to her chest. "This place is very strange."

He was about to retort that she was very strange herself when

he noticed her feet perched on his truck bench. Not that he minded her feet there; it was the feet themselves he was surprised by. For someone so petite he'd expected her to have tiny feet as well. Not so. Her feet were at least as long as his, and at six feet tall, his feet were big. Not only were her feet disproportionately long, but her toes were nearly as long as her fingers, and he could make out a thin web of translucent skin between them. Webbed toes from the mountain dwellers was nothing too surprising, but this was a mutation far beyond anything he'd ever heard of, or seen. They almost looked like fins...

He felt her gaze on him, and he realized he was staring.

"Uh, sorry, ma'am, I just ain't never seen feet like that before. Don't suppose you have pointed ears to go along with them." Milt said this last bit jokingly, trying to lighten the mood a bit and remind himself that this poor girl was just that, a girl. A HUMAN girl.

She cocked her round face to the side and narrowed her green eyes at him mischievously. "I already told you, I'm not an elf. I'm a dryad." Then she obligingly lifted her hair away to show him her ears. Or rather, lack of ears.

Not only were they not pointed, but they almost didn't exist. Where ears should have been, instead was a thumbnail sized flap of skin that was currently not flush with her scalp, presumably to allow sound to enter her ear canal. As if that wasn't strange enough, it was what was below her ear flap that caught his attention.

Three vertical two-inch-long slits lay parallel to each other on her neck. They were...

"Gills." She pointed at them. "So I can breathe under water."

"What *are* you?" Milt pressed himself against the door of the truck, and as far away from her as he could get. Webbed toes and missing ears were one thing, but gills?

She laughed in her musical voice and placed an abnormally

cool hand on his forearm. "I just told you, I'm a dryad. Surely you must have heard of my kind before?"

"Ma'am, I stopped believing in faerie tales a long time ago."

Almera instantly became serious and looked around furtively. "That was foolish of you."

Milt just looked at her. He didn't know what to think. Either she was what she claimed to be, or she was an escapee from the loony bin. He remembered her gills and realized that perhaps she was both. Regardless, he couldn't just leave her here. With a sigh, he pushed in the clutch and put the truck in first gear.

"I suppose you don't have anywhere to go. I've got to get back to the base, so I guess you'll just have to come to New Orleans with me. If that's okay."

"New Orleans?"

"It's the name of the city I'm currently stationed at. Well, actually, I'm stationed at Belle Chase, but it's right near there."

"Does it have water?"

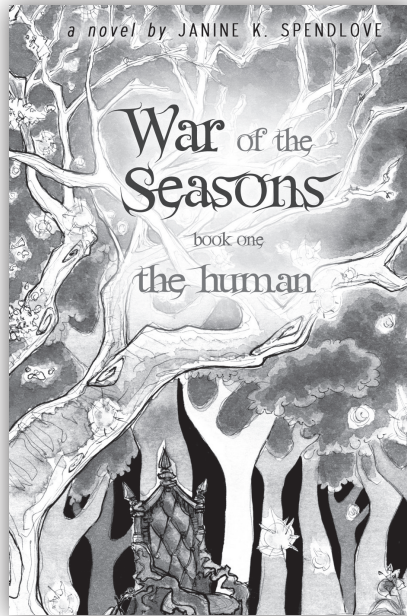
He snorted. "Yes ma'am. You'll have the Mississippi and the Gulf to swim in." He didn't bother mentioning the strong currents or levels of pollution in the river—maybe, if he was lucky, she'd forget all about it.



END OF SAMPLE

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About the Author

Janine K. Spendlove is a KC-130 pilot for the United States Marine Corps who graduated from Brigham Young University in 1999 with a BA in History Teaching. An avid runner, she also enjoys knitting, playing Beatles tunes on her guitar, and spending time with her family. She currently resides with her husband and daughter in Maryland. Her first novel, *War of the Seasons, Book One: The Human*, was published in June 2011, and she's also had several short stories published in various anthologies. She is currently at work on her next novel.