

**Songs of the Seasons,  
Song Four**



**Fire and Rain**

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

Songs of the Seasons, Song Four: Fire and Rain

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**S**HE TOSSED HER LONG RED HAIR, arrayed in dozens of braids, over her shoulder, unconsciously exposing the dryad gills positioned directly behind her pointed elf ears.

I sat across from Adair in the Ailesit's sitting room while my master conversed with the Ailesit—she called herself a “human,” of all things. They were outside on the porch overlooking the channel while I tried not to stare at the half-blood before me. But I couldn't help myself.

A half-dryad, half-elf was unheard of.

It wasn't that our peoples didn't get along—Ai knew that dryads would lie with anyone—but her elf half intrigued me.

Adair caught me staring and smiled. I returned her smile with a tentative one of my own. After all, I didn't want to be rude.

“Hello, I'm Eirus.” I held out my hand for her to grip in the

traditional elf greeting among new acquaintances. She stared at it for a moment, blinking her silver elf eyes at me. Suddenly a dash of orange sparked across them, and she took my warm hand in her cool one and pulled me down into a crushing hug.

“Hullo, Eisrus. I’m Adair, and it’s so very nice to meet ya.”

I immediately stiffened at the intimate gesture but found myself inexplicably relaxing into her embrace. Her voice, lilt-ing and musical, with an accent so different from my own, instantly put me at ease.

She squeezed tighter, and I gasped for breath while my mind swirled around the memory of the flash of color I’d seen in her eyes. She’d known me for all of a minute and was already sharing her emotions with me. I was touched, yet also confused; what did she mean by it? I’d been training under my master for years now, and only recently had Eáchan allowed me to see some of her colors.

The girl released me, grinned, and flopped back down on the stuffed chair behind her.

“Don’t worry, hunter. I’m not goin’ to kiss ya. Da says I can’t go ‘round kissin’ elves in greeting or you may all faint or somesuch. Says it would be scandalous.”

She looked at me, one red eyebrow raised against her alabaster skin. “You’re not goin’ to faint, are ya?”

I realized I was still standing there, mouth hanging open like a squalling gnome babe, so I snapped it shut.

“I am not a hunter.” I recalled the moment, nearly six years ago, when Eáchan took me on as her apprentice. It was the proudest day of my life. She was the greatest hunter my clan had ever seen, and she wasn’t just any hunter, she was *the* Hunter, the clan chief.

“At least, not yet. Not for many years yet.” I looked behind me and sat carefully back down in my carved wooden chair.

Adair grinned broadly and continued to stare at me with glittering orange excitement coloring her eyes.

“What do you find so humorous?”

“You.” She cocked her head to the side. “Are you always this uptight? Maybe you should take a bath.”

“Excuse me?” Confused by her turn of conversation, I surreptitiously tried to smell myself. I’d bathed last night before retiring for the evening and hadn’t done anything strenuous yet today. Was I breaking out in a nervous sweat? But what did I have to be nervous about? She was just a girl.

Was she using her alluring dryad magic without me noticing? I sat up straighter in my chair, determined not to fall prey to her.

“Take a bath, or go for a swim.” She slung her shapely legs over the arm of the chair.

I quickly averted my eyes and looked around the spacious, sunlit room as her minuscule, green sarong gapped open momentarily near her stomach. I supposed I should have been grateful she wore anything at all. From everything I’d heard, dryads abhorred clothing. Though, given that we were in the queen’s palace, it made sense that she was trying to maintain some semblance of decency.

I realized she was still talking, completely oblivious to my distraction.

“...I always go for a swim when I’m feeling out of sorts. Or a bath. Water in general soothes me.”

“But do you never commune with the trees? You are half-elf, are you not?” The words were out of my mouth before I could recall them, and I felt my cheeks heat with embarrassment. It was a very personal question, and we’d only just met.

Her eyes darkened to blue and she looked away, focusing her gaze on a yellow vase holding purple spring flowers on the

other side of the airy room, near some gauzy window coverings. “Do *you* commune with the trees, Eirus?”

“Yes, of course.” I sat back in my chair, once again confused by her question and at the same time fascinated by the sound of my name on her lips.

“While I’m certain you talk to the wood in your own way, the only way elves can now, it can be nothing to what a dryad feels when in touch with water.”

She turned to look at me, and I realized the blue in her eyes was not sadness for herself but pity for me.

“The only way elves can... now?” I stiffened. Elves, like any creature in Ailionora, were tied to nature. We would die without it. “Just what are you implying?”

She straightened, her casual manner gone. “I don’t mean to offend, I just thought that without your magic...”

“You thought that with our access to magic gone, we couldn’t talk to trees?” I narrowed my eyes, struggling to keep my emotions at bay. What was wrong with me?

“Well...”

“We may not be able to wield magic anymore, but I assure you, it is still there in the wild of nature.” I closed my eyes and took a calming breath. I hardly knew this girl... why couldn’t I control my emotions around her? “I still talk to trees. Just because I can’t hear them doesn’t mean they don’t listen.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Eirus!” My master strode into the room, her brows furrowed and her lips pressed into a thin line. I’d never seen her so close to losing her composure. “We are leaving.”

She scooped up her precious iron-tipped bow from the low table before me. Giving Adair a scathing look, my master stormed out of the room, leaving me nothing to do but follow in her wake.



**S**IX WOOD SPRITES EMERGED FROM BETWEEN the trees, their red eyes glowing in the darkening sky. Adair and Eirus stood back to back, and he felt her reach behind and into his quiver. She pulled out an arrow and held it before her, and Eirus wished she had heeded him by mounting Ped and running for the sea.

The little tree fey scuttled forward on their short legs, and Eirus drew his bow and aimed. What good a stone-tipped arrow would do against them while they were at full strength he didn't know. Iron was precious and difficult to find.

The sprites raised their spindly arms, each hefting a rock, ready to throw.

Eirus could feel Adair's breath quickening, and he spared her a glance. Her eyes were orange! She wasn't frightened at all. If anything, the mad dryad was excited.

So typical.

His moment of distraction nearly proved fatal as he just managed to duck as a rock flew past his head. Eirus loosed his arrow directly into the maw in the bark he assumed was the sprite's mouth, hoping to slow the fey down. Ped, their selkie companion, leapt out of the woods, trampling one of the sprites beneath his saucer-sized paws. He gave a barking growl at the shrieking faerie, clamped his jaws around its crown, and began whacking it against the trunk of a tree, knocking autumn leaves to the cold ground with every blow.

Eirus felt the flow of the hunt come over him and marveled in the fact that he could now feel the magic coursing through him, thanks to the Ailesit. He drew another arrow and watched as Adair danced gracefully between a pair of sprites, dousing one with a spray of salt.

*It shrieked as the salt burned through its bark, and Eisrus loosed another arrow, putting the weakened and injured fey out of its misery.*

*There were only three sprites left and they backed away, chattering loudly amongst themselves. Adair met his gaze from across the clearing and smiled.*

*“See, I told ya—”*

*The temperature dropped, and Eisrus watched as his breath suddenly became visible before him in a condensed cloud.*

*“No...” Eisrus felt his breath catch in his chest as he moved his trembling fingers back to grasp another arrow.*

*A swirl of stinging snow exploded between Eisrus and Adair, and when it cleared, the largest bear the elf had ever seen stood between them.*

*Pure white and standing erect on his hind legs, the bear’s intelligent, mad gaze swiveled until it trained on Adair.*

*The Winter King had found them.*



**M**Y PEOPLE TENDED TO STAY AWAY from those not of our kind. It’s not that we were intolerant—or at least I didn’t think so at the time—just that when a race is dwindling, it tends to turn inward in preservation. Right or wrong, elves didn’t couple with other races. It just wasn’t done.

I had heard stories and I knew it wasn’t always that way. Elves used to be immortal, so the fact that male elves could only sire one child was not a bad thing; in fact, it kept Ailionora from being overrun by undying elves.

But everything changed when we were betrayed by the Lord of the Spring. Cursed with mortality, we were slowly dy-

ing out. It was genocide over millennia, but genocide nonetheless. And so, for an elf to waste that one shot at a child on another race, especially one as flighty as the dryads... well, it was the deepest betrayal fathomable.

And yet, an elf had done it, and I watched from a distance as the evidence of that coupling swam in the Ailes channel around the Queen's Island. The water was wide and deep here, and I knew Adair would not be able to resist getting in.

I honestly don't know why I followed her there. Perhaps it was because I felt badly about snapping at her the previous day. Or because I'd seen the way the others elves avoided her and I felt guilty. Or perhaps it was because she was a curiosity, something so different from anything else I'd experienced in the limited scope of my life up to that point.

All I'd ever known before Adair were these islands—primarily the Hunters' Isle as both my parents were hunters—and a year spent with each of the eleven other clans learning about their ways as well. But I never doubted I'd be a hunter.

When the inverted triangle ailach showed up under my left eye, signifying me as a member of the hunter clan, everyone else knew it as well. My life became nothing but the hunt then. Years of arrows and stalking. Targets and trails.

But Adair, she was different. She was new.

She was wild.

A blast of cold water hit me square in the face.

"What in the name of Ai..." My words trailed off as I saw Adair grinning at me over the edge of the wooden dock.

"Thought you could sneak up on me, did ya?"

"No, I just... Eáchan is in a clan chief meeting with the queen, and after how we rushed out yesterday..." I realized how pathetic my explanation sounded and dragged my fingers through my short, muddy brown hair in frustration. I was

a fool.

“Aww, did you come to check on me, hunter?” Her eyes swirled a mischievous orange, and I began to wonder if they were always that color.

“I told you, I’m not a hunter. Yet.” I sat down on the edge of the dock, dangling my booted legs over the edge. A chilly wind ghosted by, and I was thankful my mother had insisted I wear a long-sleeved tunic and a wool cloak today. The sun did not yet give much warmth, though it was very nearly spring.

“That’s right.” She cocked her head to the side, tossing her long braids back over her shoulder. “When do you suppose you will be a hunter?”

I shrugged. “That all depends.”

“On?”

“My master. She says I’m doing a good job, so perhaps five or ten more years? But I could be very wrong. Some apprentices train until they are forty.” I didn’t tell her my secret hope that it would be closer to two or three for me.

“And then you’ll be a hunter?” She lowered herself back down into the water and began a backstroke. It was only then I realized she was not wearing a stitch of clothing.

*Dryad indeed!*

I averted my eyes and tried to suppress the blush I felt while I scanned the opposite shoreline. Normally the sight of the woods across the way would have calmed me, but all I could think of was the naked dryad swimming back toward me. My mind raced to gather the threads of our conversation, and I focused on wording a proper response.

“And then I will *not* be a hunter. Then I will go on my Grand Tour, and when I come back—if I come back—a formal Ascension ceremony will be held, and *then* I will be proclaimed a hunter.”

“Oh...” Treading water before me, she tapped a finger on my left toe, leaving a wet spot on the suede leather. “That sounds overly complicated. If the ailach shows up on its own, who are the clan leaders to test you? Magic knows where your heart is.”

“So you *do* know something of our ways.”

“Aye, my da is an elf, after all.” She laughed, her musical voice blending naturally with the sound of the water lapping against the dock. “You know, I always assumed he had friends here, but I had no idea Queen Eánna numbered among them.”

“What?” My focus came back down to meet her curious eyes. The traitor and the queen... friends?

“Aye, she housed us in the palace after we arrived, and I thought that was just to be courteous because we brought the Ailesit with us. But no, she came to visit night before last, and she and da talked all night, and then yesterday morning she asked me to bring the Ailesit to the meeting after she woke up—humans sleep a lot, did you know that?”

Barely giving me a chance to process everything she’d said, much less respond to her question, Adair pressed on.

“They eat a lot, too. But I took the Ailesit to the meeting—her name is Story and she’s my friend—and at the meeting I helped come up with the plan to restore *The Ailes*.” She beamed with pride at this, and all I could do was nod.

This was all new to me. What plan? Restore *The Ailes*? If the tree that embodied our magic was restored, then that would mean....

“Oi, are you listening to me?”

I blinked my eyes and looked back down at Adair. She was releasing my boot after giving it a hard tug, leaving a wet handprint on it. “I’m sorry, I was distracted.”

She laughed again. “Oh, I’m not upset. I often get dis-

tracted. Da says I need to work on my focusing. On paying attention when other people speak, that I shouldn't do all the talkin', but sometimes people don't talk, and then it's quiet, and that's odd, and I don't like that. Friends should talk." She cocked her head to the side, and her orange eyes swirled with a bit of yellow.

*What could possibly be causing her concern?*

"Are we friends?"

I stiffened, feeling my bow and quiver dig into my back at my sudden movement. What kind of question was that?

I was an elf.

She was... well, an elf, too. In a way.

I looked at her worried eyes and realized I wanted nothing more than for a smile to come back to her face.

I didn't see why we couldn't be friends. As long as my master didn't know.

"I don't know." My mouth betrayed me as one corner tipped up in a smile of its own accord. "How old are you? I'm not friends with children."

"I'm not a child! I'm nearly fifteen."

"Nearly fifteen is fourteen." I leaned back against my elbows, enjoying the sunshine sparking off the clear water.

"I'm old enough to have pups of my own, therefore, I'm an adult."

I raised an eyebrow, trying to maintain my cool façade when all I could think of was what Adair had just said. "Is that all it takes in dryad society?"

She nodded her head, quite seriously. "Oh yes. Old enough to have pups means you're old enough to work and contribute to the whole." She rested her arms against the dock, creating a pool of water around her skin. "And what about you? How old are ya?"

"Twenty three."

She snorted.

"What?"

"*You're* the child."

"Says the fourteen year old." I knew I was being unfair. She was marked as an adult by her people, and I was still viewed as... well, not quite as a child, but certainly not as an adult by mine. Still, my pride had been wounded.

"Says the fourteen year old who has seen more of this world than you can even imagine." Her eyes had darkened from orange to blue, and I swallowed my retort. I'd hurt her feelings.

"Would you tell me about it?"

"What, the world?"

"Aye, if you wouldn't mind. Ailionora is vast. I can only imagine the things you've seen."

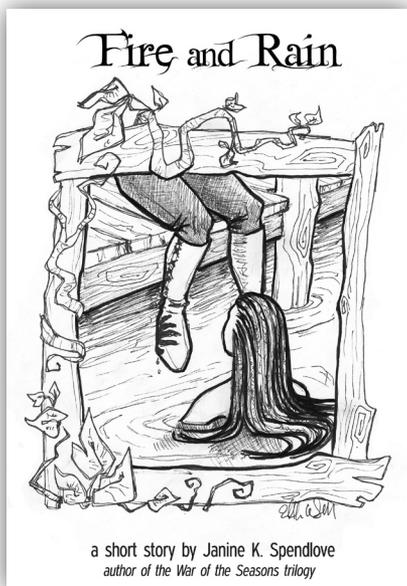
Her grin was back, as were the orange sparks in her eyes. I found I never wanted them to leave. Unless they were replaced by purple. I quickly banished that improper train of thought and focused on what she was asking me.

"What do you want to hear about first? Gnomes, trolls, or da'nan?"



**END OF SAMPLE**

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### **About the Author**

Janine K. Spendlove is a KC-130 pilot in the United States Marine Corps. In the Science Fiction and Fantasy World she is primarily known for her best-selling trilogy, *War of the Seasons*. She has several short stories published in various anthologies alongside such authors as Aaron Allston, Jean Rabe, Michael A. Stackpole, Bryan Young, and Timothy Zahn. She is also the co-founder of GeekGirlsRun, a community for geek girls (and guys) who just want to run, share, have fun, and encourage each other. A graduate of Brigham Young University, Janine loves pugs, enjoys knitting, making costumes, playing Beatles tunes on her guitar, and spending time with her family. She resides with her husband and daughter in Washington, DC. She is currently at work on her next novel.