

War of the Seasons

book three

the hunter

*A SAMPLE OF
THE NOVEL BY
JANINE K. SPENDLOVE*



War of the Seasons, Book Three: The Hunter

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CHAPTER ONE

LAMENT

THE SMELL OF FRESH CUT BLOSSOMS wafted through the crisp, late autumn breeze. Story inhaled deeply, trying to capture some of the peace of the moment before returning to the harsh reality before her.

Eachan's body lay in a small, wooden canoe. The boat was painted at intervals with a stylized, upside-down, black triangle, the hunter clan's ailach. The elf was wrapped from head to toe in green and brown dyed linen strips, and bundles of late-blooming, white flowers from the queen's garden lined the upper rim of the canoe.

Story let out her breath and watched it coalesce in the cold air before shifting her gaze toward Eirus. The young elf had been wheeled out to the funeral in a wooden chair, bundled up to his neck in several warm blankets. A swath of cotton fabric covered his hunter clan ailach and bound up the socket where his left eye should have been. With his remaining eye, he stared broodingly at the body of his dead master.

Eirus looked as though he'd been mauled by a mountain troll, and Story was more than a little shocked to see him after the state he'd been in the previous evening. The fact that Eirus was still alive after the torture the Winter King's faeries had administered to him was a testament to the healer clan's skill.

Yellow and blue swirls of emotion colored Eirus's gaze,

and Story knew who the worry was for: not Eachan, for she was beyond worry now, but for Adair, Story's half-sister.

Story forced herself to banish the tide of guilt and anxiety that threatened to overwhelm her and looked across the assembled elves. She tried not to feel like an outsider, like an interloper, but she knew that many of the elves would never accept her as one of them. As belonging. Elves didn't take well to those not of their kind.

Story could only see the colors in the eyes of a few—the ones she knew better—while the rest remained a sedate silver. She didn't take offense. Once elves made an emotional connection with another it could never be broken, so elves tended to be very cautious with whom they shared their emotions.

Unlike Adair...

Story wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand.

I still have to tell our mother what happened. It's all my fault.

The thought filled her with anxiety, nearly as much as the post-funeral summons that awaited her. Eínlin wanted to resume her dreamwalking studies, but after the horrid nightmare she'd suffered through last night—

No. I won't go back.

The haunting a capella melody the choir of elves sang recounted all the triumphs and tragedies of Eachan's life. Story's insides tied into knots over the part she knew was coming. The end. Eachan's end. Giving her life to save a human, or rather, a half-blood.

Giving her life to save me.

The wind, swirling red and brown leaves, cut through the group gathered at the dock to pay their final respects to the former hunter clan leader. The leaves dropped into the water below, and a few settled on Eachan's wrapped remains.

Eírnin passed Story his handkerchief, and she held her

betrothed's hand in thanks over the oft-repeated gesture. He squeezed her hand back in the familiar pattern of three, *I love you*.

An image of Morrigann, the Spring Prince, frozen for all eternity in a solid block of ice by his father, the Winter King, flashed through her mind. The memory of his glittering violet eyes following her about the space, trying to warn her to run. Trying to protect her still. She knew she could see him again if she only—

No! I won't go back to the dreamscape!

She squeezed her sea-green eyes shut and turned toward Éirnin, pressing her face against the black tribal pattern of tattoos on the left side of his neck. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as Éirnin's arms came around her, holding her tightly to him. Story could almost feel the disapproving gazes from several of the other elves, but in that moment could not care. There were so many more important things to be concerned about now than worrying about offending the prudish sensibilities of the older elves.

The elves from Eásphor's clan brought their song to a close, and Éirnin disengaged his arms from around her, leaving Story feeling cold and alone. After pressing a quick kiss to her temple, Éirnin joined the other clan leaders, and they walked to Queen Eánna as one. The queen was resplendent, as always, in white with each of the different clan's ailachs embroidered in gold along the hem of her floor-length cloak.

She held out her hand toward Éirnin, and Story caught a glimpse of the precious iron cuff the queen wore around her wrist—a recent precaution, now that the fey were getting bolder. Éirnin took the queen's hand and then held his other hand out to Éibhilin, the Warrior, who wore, as the other clan leaders did, a brown and green linen mourning band on his bare upper left arm.

The ancient wooden dock of the Hunters' Isle creaked under the weight of the twelve assembled clan leaders and their queen, but Story knew it would not fall. Like the rest of the lightly wooded, small island, the dock was well cared for by the few remaining members of the hunter clan. The calm water of the sound surrounding the island cluster that made up the elf city of Ailes lapped calmly against the deeply sunk wooden beams of the dock and rich earth shores of the isle, belying the churning in Story's mind and heart.

Unlike the other elves on the dock, Eíbhílin, along with the rest of the warrior clan, had not wrapped himself in a cloak or other warming layers. Clad simply in fringed leather breeches and heavily beaded moccasins with a matching beaded chest shield, Eíbhílin held out his hand to the well bundled up Eálie. The Artist's delicate hand emerged from beneath her many layers of furs and wraps and grasped the Warrior's hand firmly. Story could just make out the graceful pattern of swirling tattoos that surrounded the elf's eyes, reminding her of a Venetian mask, which contrasted sharply with the decidedly Mongolian vibe she received from the clan's general attire.

The other clan leaders all followed suit, clasp hands from the Windtalker to the Builder, and then, as one, they raised their arms overhead.

The water around Eachan rippled, and the canoe moved out onto the water, seemingly of its own accord.

A familiar hand found Story's and grasped it. Despite the somberness of the occasion, Story couldn't help but smile briefly upon seeing big, bulky, red-headed, and oh-so human Josh. Her oldest friend, Josh was a comfort in these tumultuous times, a reminder of her past on Earth.

She leaned her head against Josh's shoulder, feeling, only for a moment, that maybe, just maybe, everything would be all right. Eventually.

The clan leaders and the queen lowered their arms in unison, and Eachan's boat winked out of existence.



"Are you happy?" Josh asked Story as they paused in the courtyard near a sapling apple tree in a marble planter. Story furrowed her eyebrows in confusion, and Josh hastily clarified. "I mean, aside from the obvious."

Story's frown deepened, and she replied sarcastically, "You mean aside from Eachan dying to save me, and my sister getting kidnapped so she can be sacrificed by a psychotic sidhe who wants to unleash Chaos and destroy all the worlds?"

Un-swayed by her defensive mechanisms, or maybe it was just because he knew her better than anyone else, Josh shrugged. "I don't know what half of that means, but yeah, aside from that."

He cocked his head to the side and followed Story's gaze toward the group heading into the queen's marble palace. Story's heart raced knowing what would come after the council on the looming war with the Winter King. Eínlin would want to see Story, and the Dreamwalker would try to teach her the waking dream again and—

"Are you okay?" Josh placed a hand on Story's shoulder, and she jumped.

"Yes. No. I don't know." She watched as her fiancé Éirnin, along with the other clan leaders, trailed behind Queen Eánna through the sweeping white archways of the main entrance to the palace. The clan leaders were accompanied by a long-bearded, hairy, brown dwarf called Durgin, who could be overheard grumbling about the red dwarves and how they had yet to make

an appearance. The brown dwarf eyed the water surrounding the island with caution. Mister Borgmester, the mayor of Piney Green, the largest gnome village in Ailionora, patted Durgin on the shoulder in what Story interpreted as reassurance. It seemed to have worked as the dwarf stopped grumbling. For the moment.

Just before he walked through the entrance, Éirnin turned, and Story thought she caught a slight frown on his face when he saw her and Josh together. She waved her hand and smiled, so very happy to see Éirnin up and moving after the months he'd spent in a coma, slowing dying, poisoned by the treacherous sidhe.

His frown disappeared as he smiled back and then stepped under the archway to rejoin the group.

"To answer your first question, yes. I'm happy." Story turned to look up at Josh. At nearly six feet of height, she had been used to being eye to eye with most men on Earth, or looking down at them. She was happy that her oldest friend could make eye contact with most of the elves without feeling small. They could be an intimidating lot.

"Very happy," Story repeated, twisting the engagement ring she wore on the third finger of her left hand. She sat down on the edge of the marble planter and patted the space next to her. She tucked her calf-length, green, wool cloak tightly around her to keep out the worst of the wind. "Now, what I'm wondering is what the heck you are doing here in Ailionora instead of getting ready to use that football scholarship at Tennessee?"

Josh shoved his hands into the pocket of his black, hooded sweatshirt and sat down heavily next to Story. They locked eyes, his sky blue and hers sea green, and Story remembered the last time they'd shared that look.

The smell of assorted pizzas was thick in the air as Officer Waddell slid into the booth across from Story.

"How ya doin', Story?"

"I'm fine..." Something was wrong; Story could tell. Something about the way Officer Waddell wouldn't meet her eyes and instead focused on the wood paneling over Story's shoulder.

Just then Josh emerged from the back where the restrooms were, and Officer Waddell turned her head toward the focus of Story's gaze. Josh's smile slipped from his face, and Story dug her fingers into her purple and black striped, curly hair, bracing herself for what was coming.

Somehow Story knew. She knew even before Josh sat down next to her, squeezing his linebacker's bulk into the booth. Even before Officer Waddell said the words that would change Story's life forever.

"Story, it's about your family. I'm sorry, but there's been an accident..."

It was like watching an old, silent film playing out before her.

Josh looked like he didn't know what to do. Like he wanted to cry or maybe punch a wall. Possibly both.

Officer Waddell went over the details of the accident, and Story just nodded along because that seemed like the thing to do at the time.

Eventually, Officer Waddell stopped talking and allowed Josh to lead Story out of the restaurant, back to his house.

Josh's mom had greeted them with red-rimmed eyes when they'd arrived, and she guided Story to the spare room, or rather, Story's room; she'd been the most frequent occupant over the past sixteen years during her summer visits.

As the door closed behind them, and the reality of what had just happened washed over her, she knew in that moment that nothing would ever be the same again.

"Story? Hello... Anyone home?" Josh waved a hand in front of Story's face.

"Oh, sorry. Just remembering..." Story shook her head as if to clear her mind and focused on Josh's concerned face. "So,

like I said, it's great to see you again and all, but..." She let the question hang in the air.

Josh quirked his mouth in bemusement and raised one fiery red eyebrow. "Really, Story? Really? After all we've been through? All our history? You're really wondering why I would travel through a hidden, magical portal with a half-naked, blue-haired mer-man—"

"Dryad. Mer-folk are dangerous, carnivorous, and shark-like."

"—Fine, blue-haired *dryad* claiming to be your brother, though he's... uh, dark skinned, and you're..." Josh looked over her lightly tanned, olive completion, so much darker than his own pale, freckled skin. "...well, my point is you don't look at all alike."

Josh's normally suppressed Smoky Mountain accent was thickening as he became more aggravated. "Yeah, I know y'all got the same mom. So as I was saying, I followed your brother, swam through miles of water, though you know I hate to swim—courtesy of you always trying to drown me when we were kids—"

"I was just trying to help you hold your breath longer." Story suppressed a grin over the memories of them racing to the pond near his home and swimming for hours each day of their summer vacations.

Josh's voice rose as he spoke over her protestations. "—because you *tried to drown me all the time*, and I did it all just to make sure that note you sent me wasn't a lie and that you really were alive and well, because the last time I saw you, you were hangin' off the edge of a cliff sayin' your last goodbyes to me before *you let go*."

Story lowered her head, feeling completely and rightfully chastised. "Josh, I'm sorry."

"That all you have to say?"

“What more can I say?”

“Oh, I don’t know. How about you’re sorry for leaving me wondering what happened to you for months, for letting me fret and worry if you were alive, for making me and everyone else in town think maybe I was crazy, that maybe you’d just up and run away. I don’t know, maybe you could’ve come home!” He held up a hand, cutting her off. “You know what? Save it. You’re alive. I’m good; I can go home now.” Josh’s mouth snapped shut, and he stared out onto the dock before them. Little puffs of breath crystallized in the frigid air as his breathing, fast and agitated, eventually began to slow down.

Story wormed her fingers into Josh’s clenched fist and felt him ease up after a moment. She leaned her head on his shoulder, and after a breath or two, he leaned his head against hers. No matter how angry he became with her, it never lasted. He always forgave her in the end, and she, in turn, him.

“I *am* sorry. For all that and more.” She patted their joined hands. “You really going to just turn around and leave?”

He gave a defeated sigh. “Well, I did just get here. Maybe I’ll stay a bit longer. You know, to explore a bit. Not every day you discover a new world.”

Story chuckled. “Yeah, true. Though I’ve gotta admit that even weirder than seeing you here, Josh, is seeing someone in jeans and a hoodie again.”

Josh laughed and disentangled his fingers from Story’s before slinging his arm around her waist and pulling her in tighter. “Yeah, interesting fashion choices I’ve noticed here. It’s like everyone’s at a Renn Faire, or like it’s Halloween... ‘cept it’s all more real feeling, if that makes sense?”

Nodding her head, Story smiled. “Definitely. I think it’s interesting that, though they’re all elves, each clan has a unique culture and Ailach.”

“Ailach?”

"The different clan tattoos they all have around their eyes. They get them once they reach adolescence and whatever skill they show the most affinity for emerges. Most of the time, they stay in the clans they were born into, but you never know with the mages."

"You mean like that dreamwalker guy, Heinlin, is it? He looks like an old kung fu master or something. He told me to make sure you go see him after 'council' or whatever that means."

Story tensed. "That would be Eínlin, and he's not just a dreamwalker, he's *the* Dreamwalker, the clan leader. And yes, he's a mage." She bit her lower lip and felt a wave of nausea at the thought of dreamwalking so soon after last night. Besides, catching up with Josh was far more urgent than answering the Dreamwalker's summons, though Story doubted Eínlin would see it that way.

"Eye-een-leen." Josh pronounced slowly, careful to get each syllable correct. "It's so hard to keep all their names straight. They're all practically the same."

This caused Story to laugh, recalling one of her first conversations with Eírnin nearly ten months before where he'd expressed his disgust over seemingly random human names. "To each their own, I suppose," she told Josh.

He chuckled along with her for a moment before narrowing his eyes. Gently nudging her chin to one side, he followed the fading scar along her cheek and then pulled her bare arms from under her cloak, taking in the faint bite marks all along them.

"Jeez, Story, you look like hell. What happened?"

"A nasty water fey, among many things. They seem to have it out for me." Shifting her eyes away from him, Story shrugged and pulled her arms back under her cloak. "It could be worse. The scars will fade, mostly. The healers are good at their job."

She blinked back a sudden swell of tears as the memory surfaced of the Spring Prince wrapping her in warmth and healing magic. She would certainly be dead if not for him, and he'd weakened himself drastically to save her.

It's all my fault. He's in prison because of me.

Suddenly, the sound of hundreds, if not thousands, of selkies crashing up through the surface of the water permeated the air. Atop each walrus-sized seal rode a naked dryad armed with a trident and net. Story and Josh, along with the handful of remaining elves nearby, stared in surprise.

"Whoa," Josh said, taking in all the different colors and hues of the nearest dryads; they looked like a varied school of tropical fish. "So I guess you and your brother have pretty tame coloring."

Story's eyes fixed on someone she thought she'd *never* see set foot on the elf queen's island. At least, not while Eánna was still queen of the elves.

The centermost dryad, with the pearly white, nearly translucent skin, and hair so vividly red it was almost fuchsia, wore a pearl and coral crown atop her head, proclaiming her the elected queen of the dryads. Her face bore a fierce smile, not unlike those of her accompanying dryad army, and her hair spilled down around her in dozens of hip-length braids. The braids were entwined with ribbons of assorted colors and a half a dozen precious metal bells that Story knew tinkled softly during the rare times the dryad walked on the surface.

Story fingered the small silver bell that hung from one of her foremost purple and black braids. Braids that Adair had put in. Letting out a slow breath, she got to her feet and motioned for Josh to rise as well.

"Come on, Josh. Time for you to meet my mom."



CHAPTER TWO

UNEXPECTED

QUEEN ALMERA LEAPT FROM THE BACK of her selkie as it neared the marble platform meant for gondolas, the standard means of transportation within the city of Ailes. She landed nimbly on her feet, and before Story could open her mouth in greeting, the dryad pulled her into a tight, wet hug and then stood up on her toes to kiss her much taller daughter's lips.

"Daughter, I have missed you. I am so very glad you are alright and not kidnapped like my poor darling Adair." Her rapid-fire speech, coupled with the thick, Welsh-sounding accent she, and all dryads, had made it difficult for Story to understand her mother at times like this. But, at least the burden of telling her mother what happened to Adair had been lifted.

"Of course I don't blame you, not one bit, but I do wish you two wouldn't have swum off, or at least would have both come home together instead of sending Adair off on her own—"

"Mom, she was hardly alone; I sent Eisrus with her—"

"I know; Corcoran has told me what happened to that poor boy."

"How did Corcoran tell you? He just saw him last night, and Vevila is days away, even on a selkie. How are you already here?" Story looked around for her blue-haired, dryad half-brother. As far as she knew he'd been on the queen's island since

the night before when he and Josh had discovered Eirus half-dead and brought him here to be healed.

Though he had been conspicuously absent from Eachan's funeral... There! Corcoran was emerging from a swell of water atop a selkie of his own. Understanding clicked. *Selkies truly are the fastest creatures under the sea, and he only had to get close enough to send his thoughts to a sentry, and so on and so on—*

"We were already on our way, daughter. When Adair disappeared—as is typical for that errant child—and didn't come back, and then I heard nothing from Eánna..." Story's mother squeezed her tighter and Story coughed, straining for breath.

"Oh, daughter, daughter, I am so glad you are alright."

"Too... tight," Story gasped.

Almera loosened her grip on Story but did not let go. "I'm sorry, daughter, I often forget how fragile humans are." Her eyes lingered on the fading scar that ran from brow to chin on Story's face, and Story could tell she wanted to talk about it. Story shook her head, warning her mother off. Now was not the time.

A wave of salt water hit them as Almera's selkie leapt from the water and transformed into a horse-sized, floppy-eared Great Dane. She proceeded to shake herself off, further soaking Story, her mother, and Josh, who was still sputtering from the shock of the selkie's first wave of water.

Disentangling herself from her wet, naked mother, Story turned to her friend. "Josh, this is my mom, Almera. Mom, this is my oldest friend, Josh."

Almera's sea-green eyes widened in recognition of his name. "You are the one to whom my Corcoran delivered the letter." She then threw her arms up around Josh's neck and pulled him down into an awkward hug and gave him a full kiss on the lips before releasing him.

"Uh, yes ma'am." This time Josh's sputtering was not due to a sudden onslaught of cold water. He kept his eyes fixed on

Almera's face, though, given that she was so much shorter than him, it was very difficult to avoid seeing what she wasn't bothering to cover.

Story unclasped her cloak and threw it around her mother's now dry body. The hair on her head—the only body hair dryads had, actually—was fully dry too. *Yet another dryad trick I either didn't inherit or never learned*, Story thought sourly.

Her mother eyed the cloak with disdain but didn't remove it. The queen shifted her gaze back up to Josh. "My Corcoran speaks highly of you and counts you a friend."

"Indeed I do!" Corcoran's voice boomed from behind Story. "Hello again, sister."

Whirling around, Story smiled as her brother scooped her into a tight hug she gladly returned and then kissed her. The customary dryad greeting used to make Story uncomfortable, but she'd adjusted. Though, she hadn't fully embraced that side of her heritage. She was simply not used to the level of affection dryads generally showed one another regardless of gender or familial ties.

They are nymphs, after all, Story reminded herself. The fact that they were usually completely naked generally made their customary greeting all the more awkward for non-dryads, and Story was grateful that Corcoran had at least thought to tie a small sarong around his hips upon leaving the water.

Corcoran released Story and immediately pulled Josh into a hug and kissed him on the lips just as the queen had. Josh froze but didn't freak out, the way Story expected he would.

"Dude, seriously, do you have to do that *every* time you see me?" Josh awkwardly patted Corcoran's back and then tried to ease away from the shorter, but much stronger, dryad.

Corcoran finally released Josh and, stepping back from him, cocked his head to the side. "Joshua Reid, I have already

told you my name is not 'dude.' I do not know why you persist in calling me that."

"Yeah, well, I don't know why you persist in calling me by my full name, or why you think you gotta kiss me every time you see me. I already told you I'm not gay."

The dryad raised an eyebrow. "I thought you would be much happier now that you have been re-united with my sister. Is that not what you wanted?"

Josh sighed and looked at Story. "Dude, your family is weird."

She laughed and nodded. "Tell me about it."

"And why don't you ever greet me like that?"

Story elbowed him in the ribs, still chuckling.

"Joshua Reid, her name is not 'dude' either. It is Story Melissa Sorenson—"

Story held up a hand to Corcoran's mouth; there were more important things to address now. "It's fine. Josh can call me whatever he'd like." She then turned toward her mother who had watched the entire exchange with a merry gleam in her sea-green eyes. Having spent some time in the human world, Almera definitely understood the culture clash that was going on and was clearly amused by it.

"It's great to see you, Mom, really it is, but..." Story tried to think of how best to phrase her question without causing offense. She really *was* glad to see her mother. "Well, you always said you'd never come here. To the queen's island."

Almera shifted her gaze to the side and tossed her hair. "I have come to aid in getting my daughter back from Winter, of course. Do you think I will allow one of my children to be sacrificed?"

Story didn't bother mentioning that Almera didn't exactly have a great track record when it came to sticking around and actually raising any of her kids. Dryad "pups" were raised in

schools by everyone in the community until they were able to reproduce; at that point, they were on their own. So Adair, at the ripe old age of fifteen, was an adult by her people's standards and had been for some years.

It was a concept that the elves struggled with. They didn't consider someone an adult until they'd finished their apprenticeship—which varied greatly depending on the clan, but generally speaking was not until they were into their thirties or forties. Story also had a hard time considering her little sister to be an adult, especially as, at eighteen, Story herself was barely an adult by most human standards, and she certainly didn't feel like one.

"Okay, but Mom, every time I've invited you here you say that you aren't exactly welcome..."

Almera's face lost her generally merry look, and for the first time, Story saw an aloof expression cross her face. "Why should I not come to the court of the elves? Am I not a queen myself and therefore an equal to Eánna? Besides, I have done nothing wrong, and if they are forming an army to go after the sidhe, then," Almera raised her arms high overhead and a charge of magic filled the air around them, "I and my dryads will be party to it." An explosion of water punctuated her words, and her army of dryads and selkies cheered and barked their affirmation.

"Hey, Story, you've got a fan." Josh pointed behind Story. "Howdy kid."

Looking over her shoulder, Story saw fourteen-year-old Eavon quickly cast her eyes to the ground. The pretty, light-brown-skinned elf from the builder clan was one of the queen's handmaidens and self assigned lady-in-waiting, of sorts, to Story.

Oh no... is she blushing? Why is she blushing? Must be all the naked dryads. How scandalous. Before Story could give it more

thought, Eavon raised her eyes to peak at Josh before addressing Story.

“Ailesit, the queen wishes you to join the council.” The girl’s soft, Irish lilt was nearly too quiet to be heard. She raised her head higher and stared wide-eyed at the army of dryads arrayed in the water before her, orange and yellow flashes of curiosity mixed with concern replacing the very evident purple in her eyes that had been there before.

Story frowned. It was never a good sign if the queen was calling her into council, given that half the elves viewed her as a savior of their race and the other half despised her for condemning them to mortality.

“Please tell the queen I will be right there.” Story eyed her mother out of the corner of her eye. “And that I’ve brought a guest... she may not want the full council present for this.”

Eavon nodded her head, gave Josh a shy smile, and spun around, running back to the castle, her hip-length, glossy black hair and white cloak fluttering behind her in the wind.

Story shuddered, goose bumps springing out onto her arms, as the wind cut through the simple, white, sleeveless shift she generally wore when at the queen’s palace. Almera tried to return her cloak, and Story held up a hand, stopping her.

“Keep it. You’ll want to be dressed for this.”

Unswayed, Almera tossed the cloak to Story, while Josh very quickly found the detailed architecture and columns of the palace fascinating. The dryad queen walked up to her selkie and untied a scrap of fabric from around her neck. The oversized dog-like creature responded by leaning down and bathing Almera’s face in slobbery kisses. She laughed and patted the creature on her neck.

“Thank you, Otarii.” She tied the ice-blue, mollusk silk saron around her hips and turned to face her daughter, arms held up for inspection. “See, I am dressed and perfectly presentable.”

Then she sighed. “Though clothes are such a bother; I don’t know how you can stand it.”

Story and Josh exchanged a knowing look, and he stifled a grin, which nearly made Story chuckle out loud. If the dryad queen considered wearing something that barely covered her curvy bottom—leaving her long hair perilously hanging over her very large breasts—perfectly presentable, who were they to say otherwise?

“If you say so, Mom.” Story began walking up the marble steps in her white silk slippers, hating that the cold weather had finally demanded she wear something approximating shoes. “Let’s get this over with.”

“I think I’ll hang out with Corcoran for a bit.” Josh motioned his head toward the dryad, and Story gave him a grateful smile. This would be awkward enough without extra people there.

Almera bounded up the stairs to join Story. Josh and Corcoran waved before turning and walking toward the now submerging dryad army. Story waved back and couldn’t help smiling over their conversation.

“Dude, seriously, how can you stand to wear just that little loin cloth thingy? Don’t you *ever* get cold?”

“No, and as I have told you before—”

“Yeah, dude, I know, your name’s Corcoran and not dude.”



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About the Author

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