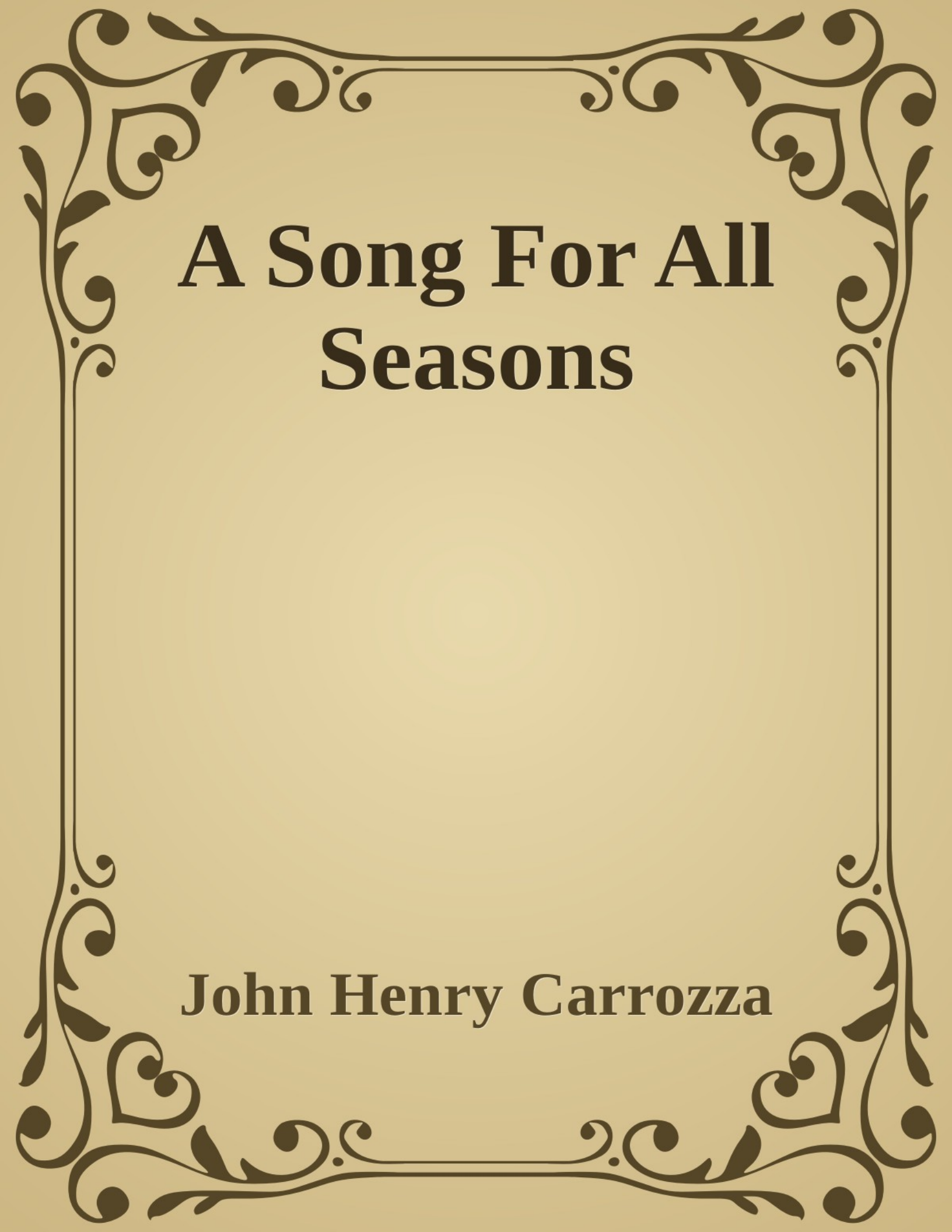


A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a dark brown color, framing the entire page. The border is symmetrical and ornate, with larger flourishes at the corners and smaller ones along the sides.

A Song For All Seasons

John Henry Carrozza

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By John Henry Carrozza

Winter was in the living room when the doorbell rang. He was just straightening the books on the coffee table beneath the pinewood rafters of the cathedral ceiling. Michelangelo's Frescoes should rest on top of The Images of Frank Stella, he had decided, because it was smaller, when the familiar sound of echoing chimes casually drifted into the room from the foyer, where the brass cylinders hung - wriggling, as a jellyfish - beside the door. He placed the books in a stately fashion on top of one another and directed himself to the front door, as the now-distant ringing meandered through the labyrinthine house and cautiously faded into hiding amidst a wilderness of carved woodwork.

He saw the chariot of Summer through a window as he traversed the room, and checked his collar when he reached the massive oaken bas-relief which was the front door.

"Why Summer," he said when the evening air slapped his face and caressed his hair, "you're early this year."

Yes, I know," replied a man with a bottle of champagne in his hand. I'm late every year, so I thought I'd break with tradition and come early for once."

"Just so you don't stay all night."

"Oh no," Summer was quick to reply, then smiling. "I'll leave that to Autumn."

"Now, now," Winter cautioned, taking the bottle from the Summer's extended hand. "Let's not go carrying on rumors. You know how the winds tend to blow this time of year."

"Yes, and your lawn is waving."

Suddenly, Winter became aware of another guest as Summer was stepping inside. She had been standing quietly behind Summer, at the edge of the landing, leaning against the rail.

"Spring? I didn't see you there! Did you come with Summer?"

"Why yes, of course I did," she said, as if it were a well-known fact, and she carried herself to the doorway, lifting her green sequined dress above her feet as she crossed the threshold. She smiled, half-laughingly, half-embarrassingly, as she passed by.

"Summer, you old dog!" Winter called out to his guest, who was now in the living room, eyeing the Stella book on the coffee table.

Summer looked up through a corbeled archway, smiling as Spring spun to face Winter, who was pushing the front door closed behind him.

"Now, now..." she said and then wandered into the great vaulted room, followed by Winter, who was shaking his head and grinning at Summer.

"Where can I put my coat?" asked Spring, sliding the fur from her pale soft shoulders.

"Oh, of course," said Winter, as he approached her to take the sable coat. "I'm sorry I'll put them in the hall closet." He took Spring's coat and Summer's scarf and jacket and hung them where he said he would, and just as he was coming back into the room, Autumn entered from the kitchen with a plate of crackers and dip.

"Hors d'oeuvres, anyone?" she offered politely.

Spring looked at Summer, and Summer looked at Winter, returning the grin, then turned back to the hostess.

"Autumn," he began. "I didn't see your car out front."

"It's in the garage," she replied, as she carried the tray to a buffet along the wall to her left.

Summer shifted his gaze back to Winter, who could not help cracking a smile.

"Autumn arrived this afternoon," he explained. "I let her park her car in the garage so it wouldn't get rained on."

"But it didn't rain this afternoon, Summer pointed out.

"We thought it might," said Winter; and then, walking towards the bar: "What can I get you to drink?"

"Scotch and soda," was Summer's request.

"I'll just have a glass of water," came the voice of Spring, who was sitting in a chair beside the fireplace, wherein a yule log spat cinders at random into the charred hearth.

Autumn set down the refreshments and turned to find Summer eyeing her inquisitively. She responded by raising her eyebrows and walking over to help Winter at the bar. Summer reclined upon the herringbone sofa and lifted a book from the coffee table. "When did you become interested in Frank Stella?" he asked.

"Oh, I saw an exhibit of his work in Chicago a few months ago," Winter said, as he poured himself a glass of bourbon. "I never knew his work was so big.

Summer laughed. "That it is."

"I mean, one piece," Winter sipped at his drink. "One piece was two stories high. I've been thinking of getting a painting of his to put in here."

"In this room, with all this eighteenth-century furniture?"

"Sure. Oh, not one of those new three-dimensional collages with all the bright colors. I mean something simple from his early years. Like, just a big black square or something."

"Boy, that'd liven the place up," interjected Spring, who was now sunken, legs crossed, into the warm leather armchair across the room.

"Well, it was just an idea," Winter offered in defense.

Autumn handed Summer his drink and was carrying a glass of water to Spring when she said "I thought it was a good idea." She tried handing the glass to Spring, who was sunken too deep in the chair to take it, so she placed on the Corinthian pedestal beside her instead.

"Last year you said you were going to get a Van Gogh," reminded Summer.

"Yeah, well that was just a phase," Winter replied, with a not-so-sly wink.

Winter took a long sip of bourbon and meandered over to the cracker tray. "I hear you took up golf."

"Yeah, that's right," Summer confessed. "Where did you hear that?"

"Vesper told me."

"Vesper? How would she know?"

"She's been sleeping with one of your foursome." Winter smiled and masticated a mouthful of cheese dip and wheat.

Spring gasped and sat up straight, interested in the conversation at last. "Who? God, what a slut!"

"Well, after all, Spring," said Autumn graciously. "She is the Goddess of Love. She has a reputation to uphold.

Spring and Winter both laughed while Summer remained in thought. "Well, it couldn't be Hermes," he was saying. "He's a raving queen. Osiris

isn't her type. It must be Dr. Lewis" and Winter raised his eyebrows as an affirmative "maybe."

Spring slapped the arm of her chair. "She always did have a thing for mortals," she declared, and then sunk back into the depths of the recliner.

"You shouldn't speak so verdantly, Spring," cautioned Winter.

Spring gaped, taken aback, and looked to Autumn for support.

Autumn merely smiled. "You are wearing green.

"Spring huffed and crossed her arms. "Are you saying I'm not ripe? Venus is the immature one."

"You're in full bloom, my dear," said Summer. "But you know you always have been jealous of your sister."

"Well why not? She's always gotten everything she's ever wanted."

"You mean everything you always wanted?"

Summer and Spring sat, eyes transfixed for several seconds before Summer finally looked down to find his drink. As if sensing a cue, Spring reached for her glass as well, but could not reach it, and so sighed instead, and Winter chose this moment to break the silence.

"Let me show you what I've done with the backyard, Summer. You're gonna love it."

"Sure," Summer agreed, standing.

Winter looked to the limp figure which hung in a chair across the room and motioned with his glass for her to follow.

"No thanks," she replied. "I'll stay here and talk with Autumn."

Autumn gazed at the ceiling and smiled wearily.

When the two men had left, Spring spoke out suddenly. "I'm not jealous of Venus."

"I never said you were," Autumn defended.

"Oh, I know you all think it. It's just that ..." Spring uncrossed and crossed her legs. "She's so beautiful and well ... "

"And so are you," Autumn finished. "You favor her very much. I guess beauty just runs in your family."

"And yours."

"Oh, come now Spring. Don't tell me you're jealous of me, too."

"Well, I have a right to be jealous of whomever I wish. And why not? You're just as beautiful as Venus and more elegant ... and certainly more intelligent."

"But you're intelligent, too."

"And what about Winter?"

"What about him?"

"There's no point in pretending any longer, Autumn. Everyone knows about you two. You go places together. People see you, and they talk ... but

I've seen the way you look at each other."

"Spring! You're jealous because of Winter?"

"So you admit you're more than just friends?"

"What difference does it make? You don't have an eye for him, do you?"

"I never said that." Spring stood and carried her water across the bar and dumped it in the sink.

"Well, even if there is something between Winter and me," Autumn continued. "You needn't be jealous. What about Summer? You came here with him, didn't you?"

Spring uncapped a bottle of brandy as she replied. There's nothing between Summer and me. He just offered me a ride here, that's all." She poured over ice to fill half of her glass and re-corked the bottle.

"When did you start drinking?" asked Autumn suddenly.

"Tonight," Spring answered, as she took a long swig of her poison. She shook her head and took a deep breath afterwards.

"Summer is a wonderful match for you, Spring. He's handsome and fun... Venus would envy you. And I'm sure he likes you. In fact I know it - I've heard him say so."

"When?"

"Here ... last year."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes. And you like him, too, n'est pas?”

“Of course I do, but ...”

“I want you to tell him tonight. This is the perfect chance.”

Spring lifted her glass, contemplated taking another sip, and then stopped. "Okay, Autumn. I will tonight." She put the drink to her lips and took another swallow. "Autumn," she said after a moment of silence. "Tell me the truth. Did you really arrive here this afternoon?"

“No.”

“When?”

“Thanksgiving afternoon.”

Spring smiled and took another sip of brandy, feeling she was acquiring a taste for it, and Autumn found herself smiling as well.

The clover-filled lawn rolled carpet-like away from the back of the house, past a cobblestone patio and wrought iron furniture, and tucked itself neatly beneath a rolling stream some seventy yards away. Beyond the water, a garden of pine trees sprung up like weeds and cast themselves into the distant waning light to the west, and where the river turned west as well, the trees had leapt the chasm and were marching their way towards the top of the hill. Along the back wall of the house stood a parade of topiary creatures - toad-like, bird-like, imp-like - all beasts of mythical origin. They stood

poised and ready against the wall or crouched beneath the windows, trying not to be seen. A cobblestone path led from the patio on one side of the lawn to a rose garden on the other. The bushes were cut back for the season, but four rose trees stood tall above the shivering thorns - barren, but proud nonetheless. A bird bath marked the end of the garden and the start of a trail leading to a grotto ("It's a place of magic and beauty," Winter had assured Summer as they passed by the trail). The forest encroached on all sides and met the grassy expanse at a tepid stream. The lord and his guest stood by a footbridge, which Winter had built, and who pointed out a rowboat docked beside it. "There's a small lake around that second bend." He motioned through the trees to a hill beyond which the lake hid itself from view.

"There was an erosion problem, so I dug the bed myself. It would normally be frozen this time of year, but I thought I would keep things warmer this week ... for tonight especially."

"Why tonight?"

"Well, you know. It's New Year's Eve ... you guys are here."

"It's Autumn, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Last year you two disappeared for a while after dinner. I have a sneaky suspicion you might do the same thing tonight."

"You're certainly adamant about her and me, aren't you?"

"Well it's true, isn't it?"

"Why does it matter?"

"I don't understand why you're trying to keep this thing a secret. I mean, everybody suspects that you two have something going. Hell, you ought to be proud of it. I mean, Autumn ... she's ..."

"Look, Summer, you know how people are - and gods especially. As soon as our relationship becomes common knowledge, they're gonna move in on her and me and I don't want any competition. I love Autumn, and she loves me and we don't need any distractions. So don't tell anybody about this. In fact dispel what rumors you can. They'll believe you."

There was a long pause, during which only the brook spoke, singing the song that it sings for all seasons, without beginning or end, with more meaning than any mind could fathom and more feeling than any soul could muster ... a random, happy, mournful tune - the backbeat of a chaotic world, and Winter found himself humming along with it.

Finally, Summer broke the spell. "What do you think about Spring?"

Winter stopped humming and looked up from the water. "Hmm?"

"Spring. What do you think of her?"

"What do I think of her you mean, for you?"

"Well, yeah."

Winter grinned and prodded Summer's shoulder. "Ha ha!" He laughed.
"Why you devil! You really do like her, don't you?"

Summer shoved his hands in his pockets and stepped onto the bridge.
"Yeah, I do. I really do."

"Well, have you said anything to her about it?"

"No."

"Well, why don't you? Invite her out for dinner or dancing. She'd love to, I'm sure."

"I don't know."

"Christ, Summer. You see how insecure she is ... the way she acted in there about Vesper. Hasn't Vesper approached you before ... propositioned you, I mean?"

"On several occasions, but ..."

"And you turned her down, right?"

"Yes, of course, but I ..."

"So, don't you see how proud Spring would feel if you asked her out? Then Vesper would be jealous of her for a change."

"I would like to see the tables turned like that." Summer gripped the white picket railing and looked downstream. "But do you think she really would? I mean, do you think she really likes me?"

"Of course she does. Anyone could see that."

"Anyone except a fool in love."

"My, this is serious." Winter gaited onto the bridge and placed his hand on Summer's shoulder. "After dinner," he said. "Autumn and I will let you two alone."

Summer looked at him, and Winter raised an eyebrow. A snapping twig caught the pair's attention, and they looked across the stream to see a bright orange bird fluttering away through the trees.

"What kind of bird was that?" Asked Summer. "I've never seen such bright plumage this time of year."

Winter closed his eyes and put his hand to his head. "That was no bird," he said, then looking down at the running water beneath their feet. "That was Cybele."

"Cybele? But I thought she had given up that nonsense years ago."

"Spying, yes. But the rumors about Autumn and me must have sparked her interest."

"And you just confessed they weren't just rumors."

"Damn that woman!" Winter stormed off the bridge and onto the grass, causing a frost to form around his feet. "She's made my life impossible for two hundred years now. Why doesn't she leave me alone?"

"Maybe because she still loves you," offered Summer, following his friend up the lawn.

“No! If she loved me, she wouldn't make me miserable like this. She's just jealous is all. Why can't she get it through her head that I don't love her? Hell, Summer I don't know why I ever married her in the first place.”

“Oh come on, Winter! You were crazy about her. I remember. And you spent five happy centuries together. I guess she's just having a harder time of letting go than you did.”

They stopped in the center of the yard and Winter conjectured as he spoke, as if he were casting a spell. "You want to know what's so crazy about all this,” he cried. "And I never told anyone this, but she's the one who wanted the divorce, not me.”

Summer stared at him blankly.

"Oh, I agreed soon enough, alright. After she accused me of sleeping with every goddess and mortal on or above the planet. You know I was faithful to her. I had to be. I was in love with her. I didn't want anybody else. But once she got it in her head I was fooling around she just flipped out. I thought she was mad. I still do. It took me a long time to get over it, but I adjusted eventually. I mean, my life was unbearable with her. I had no choice, really I couldn't reason with her. But you know what's the craziest thing of all - is that sometimes now, I still actually miss her. Not too often now that I have Autumn to take my mind off her ... and I do love Autumn,

don't get me wrong ... but I don't know. There's some part of her that I just can't be free of.”

Winter's words drifted off as he looked at the sky, watching the cirrus nimbus clouds forming at random, miles overhead.

Summer was quiet for a time, gazing at the silently waving grass around his feet. Finally he looked up, and Winter's eyes met his. “Did you ever find out why she thought you were unfaithful?” Summer asked cautiously.

“No. I haven't a clue,” Winter answered as he glanced back at the forest where Cybele had been; and then he looked towards the house, which was reflecting an eerie glow from the sinking ember of the sun. "I think we'd better start dinner. I'm getting hungry."

“Yeah, agreed Summer "So am I."

The long shadows of the pair slithered as they traversed the yard, gaining quietly upon the stately house and its beastly parade, and as they passed the topiary along the wall they both felt as if they were being watched.

Autumn laughed.

“No, really,” Winter explained. "I saw it on television last week."

"A remote control toothbrush?" asked Summer, looking up from his plate.

“Yeah, it's great. You can brush your teeth from across the room."

"Well that's great if you have false teeth I suppose," Autumn interjected, still laughing.

Spring: "Or for mothers who want to be certain their kids are brushing before bedtime."

Summer: "That's it. What will those crazy mortals think up next?"

Autumn: "Probably a car that drives itself and buys the groceries."

Winter: "It's amazing how much effort humans are willing to go through to make life effortless."

Summer: "Pretty soon, people won't even have to get out of bed in the morning. They'll be able to do everything with the push of a button."

Spring: "It's like they're trying to make gods of themselves."

Silence shrouded the room like a blanket, as three intense faces turned to meet Spring.

Spring moved uneasily in her chair and then smiled. "Oh don't worry," she assured. "At least they can't live forever."

"Not yet," said Winter, as he drained the puddle from the base of his wine glass.

Autumn stood silently and began clearing the table. Winter followed her cue, and the two guests eloped to the living room. When they were alone in the kitchen, Autumn was the first to speak. "I think Spring and Summer make a nice couple, don't you?" she whispered.

“Yeah, sure,” Winter agreed half-heartedly.

"Winter, what's wrong with you? Ever since you came back from the garden with Summer, you've been awfully tense. Did he say something or ...” Her voice trailed off as she began loading the dishwasher.

Winter leaned his hands against the counter and stared through a frozen window.

“And now it's starting to snow outside,” Autumn continued. “Your mind is obviously someplace else tonight.” She slid the remaining dish into the plastic frame and moved to where Winter stood. "What's bothering you?" she asked, placing her damp hand upon his arm.

He turned his head to face her. "It's Cybele," he said.

Autumn looked down at his hands, which were clamped nervously to the countertop, and let her eyes stay there, fixed upon the pulsing veins above his fingers.

"She was here tonight," he continued. "Out there in the garden. I didn't see her until she flew away."

Autumn looked up suddenly. “You mean she was disguised as a bird?" she asked eagerly.

“Yes."

“Well then, how do you know it was her?"

"It was her," he said quietly, annunciating each word with precision.

"What do you suppose she wanted?" Autumn asked, releasing his arm and moving about him like a satellite.

"She was spying, Autumn," he answered, turning away from the window to follow her movement. "She wanted to find out if what people are saying about us is true."

"And?" Autumn prodded, pacing.

"I confessed to Summer... and I think she was listening."

Autumn stopped and crossed her arms. "That bitch," she said gruffly. "What business is it of hers what you do now? Even if you were sleeping all over the planet, how can she hold a grudge for so long? She's the one who wanted the divorce and now she won't leave us alone!"

"Well, I was never unfaithful to Cybele! You must believe me. I don't know where she ever got the idea that I ..." His voice trailed off suddenly, and then he began again. "How do you know about all that? I never told you. I never told anyone. No one knows but Cybele and I. We agreed that I would take the blame for the divorce."

Autumn turned away.

"What do you mean, 'us'?" Winter continued. "She hasn't been bothering you, has she? And where did you hear about what happened? I told you myself that it was I who filed for divorce."

"I don't know," Autumn said sharply. "I don't know where I got it from. I just made it up I guess. I ..."

Autumn turned around and tears were beading in her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that ...". She wandered to the island in the center of the kitchen and leaned against it. "We love each other, Winter. And I don't want anything to get in the way of our happiness. Cybele is an evil, jealous immortal. And it makes me furious the way she torments you so. If she had any respect at all, she'd leave you alone"

Winter walked slowly to Autumn's side.

"Well, she's obviously not the only one who's jealous around here," he said, and Autumn's eyes rose to meet his.

"I know," Autumn said, her gaze returning to her feet. "I'm sorry"

Winter extended a hand to Autumn's shoulder, then took her carefully in his arms and they held each other motionless for an eternal moment.

"Come on," Autumn said at last, wiping tears from her eyes. "Let's go for a boat ride."

The snow had stopped falling, and the yard was left with an icy covering which more closely resembled a doily than a blanket. Across the wintry scape moved two figures, hand in hand, silhouetted by a dim moonlight filtering down through fleeting clouds, and by the pale cast of incandescent

light, which sprayed out of the house behind them like the flickering glow of a jack-o-lantern.

When they reached the babbling stream and approached the bridge, Winter saw in the place where the rowboat usually slept a lonely rope holding hands with the water.

"What the?" he questioned to no one in particular. "What is it?" came Autumn's voice from behind him.

"The boat is gone," replied Winter, looking about.

Autumn caught his shoulder and motioned to edge of the water. Two pairs of shoes lay strewn along the bank one of a man's tan dress style, the other a pair of elegant green high-heels.

"It seems," noted Autumn, "that Spring and Summer are getting along just fine."

Winter grinned. "Yeah," he chuckled. "Just fine indeed."

Autumn wandered onto the tiny bridge, whose cold wooden planks glistened in the shadowy moonlight. She leaned back on the railing and waited, as if for a train which was already late.

Finally, Winter, who had been gazing downstream and wincing knowingly, turned to face a grinning Autumn.

The pale light filtered down through the tangled arms of leafless poplars and wizened oaks, casting eerie shadows across the rippling water which

wavered beneath the figure of Autumn as she unbuttoned her blouse.

The pair lay on the frozen ground beside the river in silence for quite some time, holding each other close for warmth, listening to the sound of flowing water, before Winter whispered, "I must be in heaven."

Autumn laughed softly. "You've been hanging around those mortals too long, my dear."

To think that this never has to end," said Winter proudly. "We can be together for eternity here, or anywhere."

Yes, Autumn sighed. "Just the two of us, forever."

Their lips embraced as the sound of snapping twigs caught their attention. Quickly, Autumn stood up and retrieved her blouse and skirt, pulling them on in the shadow of an ancient maple tree, as Winter pulled on his trousers and fumbled around for his shirt. He was reaching for his socks when he heard footsteps on the bridge. Looking up, he found the dark figure of a woman treading slowly above the flowing stream, in and out of the wintry light. Finally she stopped at the foot of the bridge some yards away from Winter, and the Man in the Moon gazed upon her face through a hole in the canopy.

"Cybele!" Winter cried "What are you doing here?"

The woman stepped closer, moving elegantly over the frost. "Oh," she said, her voice calm and even. "Just taking a little walk." She carried herself

to within an arm's reach of Winter and paused. "Nice evening for a stroll, wouldn't you say?"

"I might," Winter replied.

Cybele continued walking then, past Winter, and stopped at the edge of a shadowy glade a few feet from the water's edge.

"Why, Autumn," she said happily. How nice to see you. You must be out for a stroll, too."

Autumn's eyes glowed beneath the tree, but she remained silent "Oh," Cybele said, noticing Autumn's feet. "But I see that you have forgotten your shoes. Your feet must be frigid." She glanced back at Winter. "Or are they?"

"What the hell do you want?" Winter asked abruptly.

Cybele laughed. "Winter, darling, I believe the proper question is what does she want?" She pointed to the figure of Autumn, who stood frozen in the shadows.

"I beg your pardon," Winter began. "But what exactly are you talking about?"

Cybele grinned and spun her body around to face Winter directly and moved closer to him. "I've done some investigating, love," she said. "And I've come to some interesting conclusions."

Winter squinted questioningly as Cybele spoke.

"It seems I was wrong about you, my dear," she continued coyly. "I accused you falsely and I do hope you'll forgive me." She slinked to Winter's side, batting her eyes. "You see," she began, and then suddenly smiled, her voice gaining austerity. "It was Autumn who informed me that you were having an affair, and I believed her." She laughed.

Winter looked to Autumn, who remained frozen. He sensed that the shadows around her were moving, but assumed it to be the wind blowing the trees and looked back to Cybele. "That's a lie!" he torted.

"Is it? Well then why don't you ask her?"

Winter suddenly remembered the conversation in the kitchen and turned once more to Autumn. As he did, the shadows began swirling, and Autumn leapt forward, startled, and spun about as a circular wall of snake-like vines erupted all around her, swirling and weaving about one another with lightning speed, encaging her in an organic tracery as Winter rushed towards her.

Too late, she darted to reach him, finding only a wall of fleshy latticework, a web through which she could see Winter approaching with the gait of a wounded soldier and Cybele laughing in the distance.

Winter reached the woven cage and pressed face to it like a prisoner, his gaze meeting Autumn's eyes, which were full of fear and sorrow. He spun around and confronted Cybele. "What have you done to her?" he screamed.

Cybele walked slowly, calmly towards the pair as Winter stared in disbelief. "Not to worry, darling," she said casually. "Our dear Autumn is merely trapped within a cage of truth. All she need do is answer my questions correctly and the vines will just wither away."

Winter blinked as if trying to dispel a dream. He looked back to Autumn, pleading with his eyes.

"I love you," Autumn said.

Cybele cocked her head like a spaniel. "How sweet," she said. "My dear Winter, you have an admirer."

Winter grasped the vines, which were as thick as prison bars, and as cold, and pulled with all his strength. The flora stood its ground. Realizing he had no other alternative, he leered at Cybele and then turned away to the forest. "Alright, damn it!" He breathed heavily. "Ask her."

Autumn gasped and then looked to Cybele with the eyes of a beggar.

Cybele grinned. "Listen carefully, my dear," she began. "And don't buzz in until I have finished the question." She clasped her hands behind her back and paced like a prosecuting attorney. "Did you come to me one evening two centuries ago and tell me that my husband, Winter, was having an affair?"

Autumn bit her lip and looked above her. The reticulum enveloped her in shadow and illuminated the cumulating clouds like the pages of a holy

book.

She looked at Winter, who had turned away, and then back at Cybele.

"Yes," she confessed, and lowered her eyes.

Winter spun around. "Autumn?" he queried. "It's true?"

"And with whom did you inform me that he was having an affair?"

Cybele prodded .

Autumn looked into Winter's eyes, which seemed hazy through her swelling tears. "Me," she said, without breaking that gaze.

Winter had to look away. He looked to Cybele. He looked to the house. He looked to the sky. Finally, his eyes returned to Autumn. "Why?" he asked

"Because I love you," she cried. "I did then, and I do now, and I always will. I wanted to be with you so badly, but you were in love with her. And I just couldn't stand it. I ... I ..." She met his gaze once more. "I'm sorry, Winter. I'm really, truly sorry."

Cybele was smiling widely when Winter looked at her.

"But Winter," Autumn continued. "Oh, Winter does that matter so much now? Does it matter what I did then, after all this time?"

Time? Winter thought.

"You love me now, don't you?" Autumn pressed. "Not her. Don't you? Don't you, Winter?"

Snowflakes began drifting down through the bracken as Winter laughed. "Listen to you two, would you? You're so jealous of each other ... you're worse than Spring and Vesper. If I didn't know better I would think you were sisters."

The two women looked at each other suddenly and then regarded their feet in unison.

Winter's face turned solemn as his eyes wandered between the pair. He did find a striking resemblance all of a sudden. "No," he laughed. "You can't be."

Autumn looked up and nodded faintly.

"Sisters? But I never knew."

"Nobody knew," Cybele said

Winter laughed and ambled towards the god-hewn bridge as the snowfall grew heavy. Behind him, the vines which held Autumn in check shriveled quietly apart and withered to the ground and soon were shrouded by crystals of fluffy ice.

He stood on the bridge and gazed downstream as the rowboat rounded a bend and made its way slowly ashore.

Summer guided the boat carefully to the bridge and tied the rope snugly before helping Spring over the side. He looked at Winter, who was still

laughing, and then saw the two women standing quietly inland, arms crossed and facing in opposite directions.

Spring and Summer eyed each other quizzically as they gathered their shoes from the pebbled bank.

Summer approached Winter cautiously on the bridge. He caught his gaze and raised a querying eyebrow.

Winter answered the unspoken question as he continued to laugh. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"I'll take your word for it," Summer assured him, glancing back at the tiffing women.

"Come on," Spring called to Summer. "It's almost midnight. You don't want to miss the apple do you?"

"Of course not," Summer replied. He hopped off the bridge and took Spring's hand. They began towards the ever-watchful house beneath an even snowfall, followed by Winter, who was still laughing.

"Where are you going?" Autumn questioned as he passed.

"It's almost midnight," he told her. "You don't want to miss the apple do you?"

"Hmmp!" Autumn grunted, and then as the trio grew small in the distance: "This is all your fault Cybele!"

“My fault?” the accused protested. “He was mine first, fair and square. And you had to deceive me to take him away. How can you say you love him? You're just jealous is all.”

“Well, neither of us has him now. I hope you're happy.”

Their voices bantered and their breath became frozen in the wintery air as a heavy white downpour shrouded them from their surroundings, with only their heated argument to keep them warm, as the last seconds of the year drained slowly away and the stream behind them reached yet another chorus in its hypnotic song.