

The four siblings sat in a silent repose around their mother's bed.

"Ah," she murmured softly, taking Autumn's hand in hers. "Everything must come to an end. That is the way of the world. Even I, mother of all nature, cannot continue forever."

"Oh, Mother...." Summer's voice drifted off as Spring's tears fell on her bedspread like soft April rains.

"You are wonderful children. Your father would be proud." Then, silently as a doe in the woods, Mother Nature slipped away.

They said their final goodbyes at the funeral the next day. Mother Nature was buried with proper respect. Even after the grieving family left, the woodland animals remained as a silent vigil through the night. Through the darkness, shooting stars fell like tears from the heavens.

A week later, Nature's children gathered at the request of the Grand Advisor, the head of Mother Nature's Cabinet.

"Please accept my apologies for the loss of your mother. Her passing hurt me deeply. I cannot imagine what you are going through. But, alas, life cannot stand still forever. The kingdom requires direction, and it is time for a new ruler to be chosen."

The four looked at him with renewed interest.

"But which child would succeed her- that's something she never expressed." The siblings' faces registered shock and puzzlement.

"So- what does that mean for us?" The question was posed by Winter.

“Well, the Cabinet believes it is up to you to choose who will become the next king,” looking at Autumn and Summer, “or queen,” looking at Winter and Spring.

Aware of the tension he’d created, the Grand Advisor excused himself, leaving them to muse.

Each sibling sized the others up. First was the oldest, Winter, cold, calculating and cutthroat. Next was Autumn, his ego the size of the baldric he kept secured to his waist. Oversized. Then came Summer, a kind, free spirited soul. Finally there was Spring, the youngest. She was very shy, keeping mostly to herself. She’d been their father’s favorite, a fact that made the others very jealous.

But who had qualities entitling them to be the next ruler? Did it go to who had already done the most for the benefit of the kingdom? The oldest? The wisest? This was what fueled many debates over the coming weeks, mostly between Winter and Autumn. Spring sat at the table, head down while Summer toyed idly with the various colorful birds perched on his shoulder. Many days followed this same pattern, until one day the siblings assembled in the Great Room to continue the debates, but the usually punctual Spring did not appear. The day of debating was continued without her. When she did not show up for dinner, the siblings were concerned enough to check her chambers.

The door to her rooms were slightly open. They creaked it wide, Summer calling Spring’s name, but eliciting nothing. They entered the sitting room and passed into the bedroom.

Summer’s eyes opened fearfully as Winter gasped and Autumn’s hand went to his sword.

The bedroom was torn apart, the covers of her bed on an upturned nightstand. All the rest of the furniture was flung about, also. There was still no sign of Spring.

They all knew what had happened there, but no one wanted to voice it.

Finally, Autumn gathered his courage. “Signs of a struggle.”

“Why would...” Summer’s voice faded out and realization dawned when he saw Winter and Autumn glaring ferociously at each other.

“No!” yelled Summer. “Suspicion won’t solve anything. We may be trying save our sister’s life, and all you can do is look at each other and think about how the other is at fault. How petty! The best we can do is plan a search and pray.”

This rare burst of anger brought Autumn and Winter to their senses, though much tension remained in the room.

So the three planned what to do. The next day, they would announce the abduction of their sister and organize a search party, it was too late to do it that day. If Spring was not found within a month, the decision of who would be the next king or queen would be made without her. They retired early, stricken by the loss of their sister.

That night, Summer went to the castle parapet to stargaze, as he did when he wanted to think. A guard saw him by the telescope while making his rounds about the castle. When the guard passed by Summer’s telescope later that night, he thought it was strange Summer wasn’t there, even though Summer would have had to pass by him on the way back to the Royal Chambers, and he didn’t remember that happening. Did the Prince pass him on the way back? He tried to remember, his brain not as fast as it once was. He didn’t think the Prince had...no, he was sure of it. So where could he be? Peering over the wall, he blinked hard. What was that at the bottom of the castle? It didn’t look like a rock, and it certainly wasn’t a tree. He realized what it was, and

reeling backwards, he took off running. He ran to Autumn's rooms and knocked loudly on the door.

"Yes, what? What is it?" The guard told Autumn about what had happened to Summer.

Autumn's brow furled, he told the guard to inform Winter, and ask her to meet him in the Great Room.

"But what of Spring? Should I tell her, too?" The kingdom had not yet been informed of Spring's disappearance, it had only happened earlier that night.

"No, no- I'll deal with her." Autumn wanted to tell the kingdom about both of the strange occurrences at the same time.

The brother and sister met in the Great Room. After drinks were served, Autumn ordered the servants to leave and shut the door. He wanted them to be able to talk freely. The silence that followed was terse and intense, broken only by the sound of drink being sipped out of golden goblets. Winter spoke first.

"I know you think I killed Summer, and you know I think you killed him."

Autumn flashed to his feet. "I did not kill summer."

Winter leapt to her feet, also. "That would mean you're accusing me, wouldn't it?"

"You are the only one who would want him dead."

"You mean, besides yourself."

A strong wind blew through the room. The air grew cold and lightning crackled. Autumn's hand gripped his sword hilt, while Winter unsheathed the dagger she kept belted around her waist.

Autumn coughed suddenly. Winter fell to the floor, Autumn followed. They were both coughed violently, but they eventually went as still and lifeless as the rest of the room. Lifeless, that is, except the small hooded figure who slipped from the shadows and into the hallway, slipping the rest of the hemlock into their pocket.

She'd tidy up the story later. Summer's fall would be presented as a tragic, though accidental, death. Winter and Autumn killed each other in a fight, pushed to the edge by the recent death of their brother.

The figure pushed back her hood.

And she, Spring, would be queen.