

BELTANE FIRE

By

Jane Toombs

© copyright by Jane Toombs, April 2005
Cover Art by Kat Richards, © copyright April 2005
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

"But, Damara, it's not just any old party--Terry and Sal belong to Life Extensions. And their place on the beach near Silver Sands is ideal for a May First Beltane celebration, bonfire and all."

Damara Ruskin reached way into the middle drawer of her office desk and removed the last few paper clips, dumped them in the canvas bag on the desktop, then looked at her friend Chelsea. "You know I'm not into New Age stuff."

Chelsea stooped, picked up a stray pen from the floor and pointed it at Damara. "Think of it as a farewell party for finally quitting B.B.& H. I just can't believe you actually retired at forty-one. You certainly don't look it. I'd kill for that golden hair of yours. Before you leave you simply must tell me who your hairdresser is and what color rinse she uses."

Damara touched her French twist. "I don't use a rinse--not yet, at least. As for retiring, believe me, the choice between being unemployed in San Diego and working my butt off for the company's new owners in Dallas was not at all difficult."

"So what're you going to do with your time?"

Damara made a show of stuffing papers from the top of her desk into the bag. What was she going to do? Her departure package meant she didn't have to hunt for another job right away. Relax on the beach? That'd get old fast. "Maybe I'll take up gardening."

Chelsea snorted. "In your tenth floor condo?"

"Whatever."

"Come on, celebrate with us. It'll be fun--Terry and Sal are so into Celtic traditions."

Which Damara wasn't. But since Chelsea had always been hard to discourage, she offered an equivocal, "I'll think about it." She didn't mention May 1st was her birthday and no one had offered to celebrate it with her.

* * * *

Shoner Trivent hadn't had the slightest intention of spending the first evening of May at some boring beach party where, if it could be believed, they were intending to dance around a maypole. He'd tossed the invitation a week ago. But with his catamaran up for repairs, a planned fishing trip canceled, and a permanent split from his latest girlfriend, he suddenly had no other plans. And, damn it, it was his birthday. His parents had called from where they were vacationing in Hawaii to wish him happy, his mother going on about how she couldn't imagine where the years had gone, was he actually forty-seven now?

Hell, he had trouble believing it himself.

He rummaged through the trash for the invitation so he'd know where to go if he decided some kind of a celebration on a birthday, no matter how distant from his interests, was better than nothing,

Life Extensions? He rolled his eyes.

* * * *

"Listen up, gang," Terry Salesa said, banging on a bongo drum to capture everyone's attention. "Beltane is mysterious and wonder-filled, a time of renewal, when the seeds of change and growth are planted."

Damara noticed the dark-haired man to her left looked as bored as she felt.

"Regeneration," Terry went on, "as symbolized by the fire Sal is lighting, a fire that purifies by burning away the dross."

"So we'll wind up as gold nuggets?" the man next to her said.

"Or ashes," she told him. Which earned her a look from a pair of cynical green eyes.

"One caution," Terry said. "On Beltane evening, you must remember not to look back.. Some say the dead follow, others, the inexplicable, equally dangerous. So, now cast inhibitions aside and we'll hie to the maypole."

Damara hung back when the others followed Terry. The dark-haired man, who hadn't moved, either, said, "I'm Shonor Trivent. I take it you're not a Celtic enthusiast."

"Not so's you'd notice." She smiled and told him her name. Probably forty or so, she decided, but tanned and buff, looking good in black shorts and T-shirt.

Nodding toward the picture on his shirt, she said, "I take it you're a catamaran enthusiast." Before he could answer, Chelsea hurried up, crying, "Oh, there you are, Damara. Come on, it's almost maypole time."

Ignoring her protests, Chelsea grabbed her hand. Looking at Shoner, Chelsea added, "You, too. After all, the maypole dance is a fertility symbol and so we need to alternate male and female." He shook his head, unmoving, but made no attempt to persuade Damara not to go. So, okay, he wasn't attracted to her type. She shrugged mentally. Who cared?

She allowed Chelsea to pull her away, but she was definitely not going to go dancing around any Celtic symbol. Before they reached the maypole, Damara freed her hand. "You go ahead, I need to use--" She waved a hand.

"Okay, see you later." Chelsea hurried off.

Damara turned in the opposite direction, away from the fire and the maypole, walked to the water's edge, kicked off her sandals and strolled along the beach. The sun had set, leaving a few ribbons of salmon and

red decorating the darkening sky. Pinpoints of light winked here and there out on the dark ocean. Tiny waves, still chilly in May, rolled over her bare feet.

After a time she heard splashing behind her, someone else fleeing the Beltane scene. She paused and looked around to see who it was. Shoner? Yes, she thought so, but wasn't quite sure since he, standing in the foaming surf, was turned away from her, staring at something behind him. Damara blinked. What was that shimmering curtain that looked ready to engulf him? Surely some kind of illusion.

As she remembered Terry's warning about not to look back, a roar startled her. Before she had time to react, the shimmer turned into a giant wave that swallowed Shoner, then reached for her. She tried to flee, but the wave grabbed her and swept them both away.

* * * *

Damara opened her eyes. When she saw the stems of grass and other plants, she realized she lay on her side, apparently in a field of some kind. But hadn't a wave...? The thought slipped away and vanished. She sat up and looked around, blinked, and then smiled.

Of course. She'd taken a nap in this meadow, surrounded by flowering plants, as befitted. Damia, Goddess of Flora. But why was her hair bound up? She reached back, removed the clasps that held the twist at the back of her head, and it spilled golden over her shoulders. Rising, she smoothed the ankle-length white gown she wore, making sure the sapphire brooch held the vee of the bodice modestly closed. As she slipped on the sandals lying in the grass, the faint scent of the sea came to her. Though the ocean lay just beyond the wooded copse at the bottom of the meadow, the trees usually sifted out the sea smell before it reached here. She glanced quickly around and spotted the dark-haired man staring at her from a few yards away. That explained the briny tang in the air.

Shonet! May the Goddess blast him where he stood! He had nothing to do with this first day of May. Her day. Why couldn't he keep to the bottom of the ocean with the merfolk, where a Sea God obviously belonged? She wavered between walking away without acknowledging his presence or demanding to know why he'd invaded her meadow. Wearing a silky black garment, yet. Beltane celebrated spring, flowers, the renewal of life. No one except Shonet would dress in black.

"I was ordered to come," he growled, even though she hadn't asked.

Ordered? That meant the Old Ones were interfering. Why? Damia frowned as he approached.

"I don't like it any better than you do." His voice held the snap of waves hitting the high cliffs farther

down from here. The stormy blue green of his eyes told her that he spoke the truth.

Which meant she couldn't order him to leave. Why, oh, why must the Old Ones involve her in whatever they were plotting?

"Just don't get in my way," she told him.

His seal's bark of laughter held no humor. "I'm to choose the pole, then partner you in the dance."

She glared at him, shaking her head. "On May Day, who partners me is my choice."

"You can't think I partner you willingly." He sketched a mocking bow. "Beautiful as you are, I'd rather have any other woman." Then he turned and walked toward the woods, stopping to pick up the ax he'd left among the flowers.

Damia half-expected to see steam rise off her bare arms from the fire of her fury. He who chose the pole to be danced around became the symbol of fertility on this day, the pole representing his manhood. While his partner....

"No!" she cried. "Never." She turned her face to the sky. "You can't expect me to-to--"

She stamped her foot. "Not with him."

White as milk

Black as silk.

She might have imagined she heard the whisper if clouds hadn't immediately covered the sun. The day grew dark and oppressive. Day became night, leaving her in blackness unrelieved by so much as a single star. She hugged herself, realizing she'd gone too far. Goddess though she was, the Old Ones were not to be defied.

* * * *

In the woods, ax in hand, Shonet scowled at the sapling he'd chosen. Why did they choose her for his partner? Not that Damia wasn't beautiful. Hair as golden as the sun, eyes the blue of the sky, her body made for lovemaking. But they didn't connect in the way a male and female must if they wanted to mate.

She was land. He was sea. They were opponents, not partners. Why were the Old Ones trying to force them together?

He gazed up through the tree branches at what he could see of the sky. "I do not do this willingly," he cried.

The fragment of blue overhead vanished behind clouds as an unseen voice chanted:

She shall save.

He shall have.

The day darkened and apprehension clenched his jaw. His hand tightened on the ax handle as darkness dropped over him like a shroud.

When he could see again, he found himself on a featureless plain, still gripping the ax. Though no sun shone, a gray, depressing sort of light surrounded him. Except for a human figure some distance behind him, he was alone. The chill of evil he felt seemed pervasive, rather than emanating from any one source. He tried to project himself back to the sea, but nothing happened. A power loss as well, then. Since he could see no advantage in journeying on to nowhere, he waited for whoever it was to catch up. A woman, if the gown was any indication. A white gown with a sapphire brooch at the bodice, he remembered. Blue like her eyes. So Damia had defied the Old Ones as well.

"You!" she exclaimed as she neared.

"Who else? They're determined to throw us together."

"But where are we?" She glanced around and shivered. "This is not any place I recognize. Not a good place, either. I refuse to stay."

He waited while she attempted to use her power to go elsewhere, certain it was in vain.

"By the Great Mother, what has happened to me?" she cried.

"The Old Ones."

She stared at him, finally nodding. "We're being punished for disagreeing. Do you know where we are?"

Before he found an answer, a frightful shriek sent a chill through him.

"The gwiddon." Damia's whisper was barely audible as she eased closer to him.

With their natural powers gone, they were helpless against the witch hag, whose long curving nails contained deadly poison. He scanned the surrounding plain, noting a stand of trees had appeared on their right. Her abode? The shrill, ear-piercing shriek came again, but not from the direction of the trees.

"Run!" he urged, grasping Damia's hand, then headed for what he hoped was a nemeton, a sacred grove.

They'd almost reached the trees when the flap of wings made him look over his shoulder.

The gwiddon, seated atop a huge vulture-like creature, flew close behind.

"The ash," Damia gasped. "Head for the ash. She can't come near it."

Aware they'd never reach any tree in time, Shonet shouted, "Keep running!" at Damia and let her go. He stopped, whirled around, aimed the ax blade at the vulture's breast and flung it as hard as he could.

The bird gave a horrendous squawk as the ax blade sliced into his chest, then dropped like a stone. Shonet raced for the trees.

He found Damia under the nearest ash. Turning to see what had happened to the gwiddon, he saw her hobbling toward the grove. Injured some from the fall, but not enough.

Damia waved a broken branch with fringed leaves at him. He paid little attention, cursing himself for coming ashore without his trident. Now he was completely unarmed, unable to challenge the gwiddon. If she got close enough, no matter what he tried to do, she'd poison him with her fingernails.

As the hag neared, she began to circle the ash tree, mumbling what he knew must be a spell. Soon the earth began to shake under their feet, as though the ash were trying to pull up its roots.

The witch meant to destroy the tree that protected them.

Before he realized what Damia intended to do, she darted toward the gwiddon and tossed the broken branch into her face.

To his amazement, the hag flung up her hands, shrieking, and vanished in a puff of offensive yellow smoke. The ground stopped shaking.

"A rowan branch," Damia told him. "Even without its red berries, rowan is a potent weapon against witches. She won't be back."

Now he recognized the smaller tree next to the ash as a rowan. Not that he'd known rowan was useful against a gwiddon. But then, he was of the sea, not the land, as Damia was. He glanced at her and saw

she'd placed both of her palms against the trunk of the ash, intoning a prayer of thanks. The pale gray of the sky in this strange place, was fast darkening.

"We'll be safe enough in this nemeton for the night," Damia said, as she took her hands from the tree. "The ash tells me it is a sacred grove. Tomorrow...." Her voice trailed off.

He hoped she was right about being safe. He trusted nothing in this alien land. Still, a cover of trees was preferable to that endless plain. How he longed for the sea. "There is no use discussing tomorrow beforehand when we don't know what the Old Ones intend to do next."

"I'd try to atone for my defiance, if--" she paused, eyeing him. "If they hadn't brought you into the Beltane celebration."

He shot her a dark look. "You'd rather mate with one of the land's local louts?"

She raised her chin. "I don't intend to mate at all. Not until I'm ready to choose for myself."

Though Shonet had never lusted after her, Damia's rejection irked him. Any other woman would have leaped at the chance to be his mate. "Perhaps I shall inform the Old Ones I withdraw my objection to their wishes." He looked her up and down, his gaze lingering at the vee of her gown. "You're comely enough for a land goddess."

"I will never submit to you!"

A bolt of lightning split the earth in front of the ash tree. Thunder rumbled angrily. Wind whipped through the tree's branches, sending a flurry of broken twigs onto their heads.

"Have you lost all sense?" Shonet demanded. "Become mad as a geilt?"

Damia hugged herself, obviously distressed by the Old Ones' display of displeasure. But she made no answer.

Shonet swallowed the words that sprang to his lips. Nothing he could say would be more powerful than what the Old Ones had told her. "Tomorrow may bring new trials," he said at last. "Whether you wish it or not, we must rest side by side in case of danger." He eased down to the ground, his back to the trunk of the ash.

She held out for a time, scowling, but finally joined him, taking care to leave enough space between them so they would not accidentally touch. Still, she was near enough so he could detect her scent. Flowery, of course, but underneath lay her own woman's scent, indescribably enticing. Now it was his turn to scowl as he became aroused.

Sleep grasped Damia first, and her head fell onto his shoulder. Unable to resist the impulse, he slid an arm around her shoulders and held her close to his side, breathing in her irresistible scent until he thought his lust might make him explode. Being the Sea God, he'd never had to take any female by force. All came willingly, eagerly to his embrace. But at the moment, he was sorely tempted. When sleep finally caught him, he sank gratefully into oblivion.

* * * *

Shonet woke abruptly, leaping to his feet, searching for whatever alarm had startled him. He saw no danger in the dim dawn. Turning to look at Damia, he found her missing. At the same moment, a white hart ambled toward him from the other side of the rowan tree. He stared into the animal's wrong-colored eyes, blue instead of brown, and realized what had happened.

"Afraid of me, are you, Damia?" he muttered.

The hart tossed her head and bounded away through the trees.

Before he could start after her, he felt his body twist and change, saw his hands become clawed forefeet, his face narrowing to a snout as he became a huge black deerhound. As he raced after the hart, words ran through his mind:

White as milk

Black as silk.

Damia glanced behind her and saw, not the figure of a man, but that of a four-footed creature. A black hound chased her. And she knew who he really was. Ah, but she was fleet of foot and could outrun any creature.

The race went on and on, threading among the trees until the grove suddenly vanished and the edge of a cliff lay before her. Far down at its bottom lay tumbled rocks and a rollicking stream. Instantly she shifted into a white dove, sailing off into space and spiraling up and up. She saw the black deerhound come to a stop at the cliff edge--and change as well. A black falcon rose into the air, its powerful wings sending it soaring high above her.

The falcon would dive, she knew, and grasp the dove in his cruel talons. What now? Staring at the stream below, she hurtled downward toward the water. Just before hitting it, she became a white duck, diving

down into a watery kingdom of safety. When she rose to the surface and paddled downstream, she kept looking to see if he followed. The green-eyed black river otter humping along the bank saw her at the same time as the duck she was spotted him. He promptly dived into the stream. Her only chance was to become herself again.

Damia waded from the water with as much dignity as she could muster, hair dripping, her wet gown clinging to her, and stared balefully at Shonet, whose black clothes were as wet as hers. "I suppose it doesn't bother you," she muttered, wringing water from her skirts.

"Wet clothes? Why wouldn't they? In the sea I go bare."

Without willing it, her gaze was drawn to him and the way his damp tunic stretched taut across his muscled chest. And below.... She flushed and averted her eyes.

She heard his chuckle with great annoyance. "Why can't you let me alone?"

"You know the answer."

True. He hadn't willed all this anymore than she had. The Old Ones had thrown them together. When she'd awoken this morning and found herself in his arms, she'd been more frightened than angry because she'd found herself, at least for a moment, unwilling to move. Which had triggered the series of shapeshifting.

"At least where we are now is a great improvement over that featureless plain," he said. "Though I miss seeing the sun. Did you notice if there were fish in the stream with you?"

"Yes, there were," she snapped.

"So we eat."

He caught three trout by tickling them. She was pleasantly surprised to find she'd regained her power to start fires, so he cooked the fish. Even without the sun, the weather was warm, and her gown dried as they sat on a river rock eating the trout. Birds chirped in the willows along the stream, and frogs called from a nearby marsh. Much like home, but still feeling alien. For one thing, there were no flowers. Not on the plain, not in the grove, not here along the stream.

"I enjoy this water," he said, as he gathered up the skin and bones of the trout. "But a freshwater creek is not my sea."

She watched him walk downstream to toss the fish remains into the water to nourish more of their kind, as was right and proper. He crouched on the bank murmuring words she couldn't hear, but knew must be thanks.

A sudden clatter caught her attention, hoofs on rock, and she jumped up to look around.

Yes, a horse, its rider wearing an antlered helmet--or were those antlers real?--driving straight at her. She leaped from the rock to the ground, poised to dive into the stream, but he was on her before she could. He leaned from his mount, grabbed her around the waist and clutched her to him with one arm, while turning the horse away from the stream. She heard Shonet's angry shout, felt the bolt of power he flung at the horse, a bolt that sizzled harmlessly as it struck a protective shield. If the rider had been an ordinary human, she would have freed herself by now. The shield confirmed her realization that no mere man had abducted her. She was the captive of an antlered man, someone far more powerful than either she or Shonet.

"Cernunnos!" The name burst from Shonet like a curse. He flung a bolt of sea power at the horse only to see it fail. Shaking his fist upward at the Old Ones, he shouted, "I tell you I'll accept her and then you let that blasted animal-head take her. Why?"

He expected no answer and got none. Not unless it was his sudden compulsion to climb onto the rock where she'd been sitting. There, shining like sunlight on the sea, was her sapphire brooch, its gold pin missing. Scooping it up, he closed his hand around the brooch and felt her presence. Not here, but Damia all the same. She'd left him the way to find her.

I'm on my way, he sent. Look for me by a stream or river.

A black otter plunged into the water, heading downstream, in the direction the horse had been heading.

* * * *

When the word Shonet had shouted at her abductor penetrated through Damia's fear, her terror reached a new level. Cernunnos! Not only a powerful god, but a vicious one. Most of his victims didn't survive the well-nigh continuous rape he subjected them to. Even if they did, they met the same fate as the others--cut into pieces and thrown to the forest beasts he lived among. If she didn't escape before he brought her into the depths of his forest, she was doomed. But how was escape possible?

Goddess though she was, his power blocked hers. If she couldn't use any power, how was it possible to get away from this beast-man? As she tried to calm her mind enough to think clearly, she felt a pinprick at her breast. Looking down, she saw her sapphire brooch was missing. The pinprick? As casually as she could, she raised her hand to the bodice of her gown, her fingers curving around the broken-off end of the brooch pin. After easing it from the fabric, she concealed the pin within her palm and lowered her

hand. A weapon, maybe, but a puny one. How could she use it to best advantage? Or at all?

Try to jab it into her captor? But how much damage would this small pin wreak? What else...? Her thoughts scattered as she paid heed to a mind sending. Shonet. After he finished, she stored his message away and concentrated again on the pin. What if she stuck it into the horse? Hmm. If she hit a sensitive enough area she might spook the animal and make him unmanageable long enough so Cernunnos would have to release his hold on her to control his steed. Then what? If she fell or jumped off, he'd certainly stop the horse and recapture her. Also, she might be injured in the fall. She could shift, but to what? He was known to have a feel for all animals and would spot her for whatever animal she chose to become. Maybe that's how he'd found her to begin with, by tracking the white hart and white dove--though the white duck, being a water bird, may have thrown him off the trail for a time.

So, no shifting to animals. Still, wasn't she Goddess of all that grew?

Moments later, her target chosen, she leaned forward and jabbed the gold pin into the horse's neck as far as it would go. The steed whinnied shrilly and reared up onto his hind legs. The second she felt the rider's tight hold around her waist ease, she shimmied out of his grasp and flung herself sideways off the horse, changing on the way down.

When she hit, she burrowed into the ground, becoming mostly roots, with only a few of her vine leaves showing above the earth. She felt the stomping of heavy feet. When at last the feet moved away far enough so their tread no longer made a tremor, she extended the vine, its seeking tendrils finding new ground to burrow in and become roots. Then she discarded the old roots, and grew apace from the new ones. Using this method to advance, the vine slowly moved farther and farther from the trail.

Since the vine Damia had changed herself into was a water-seeker, she knew the plant's instinct would guide her to the nearest water source. From time to time she felt the tremor of heavy footsteps and paused in her growth until the footsteps passed on. She had no way to measure the time it took for the vine to come upon a river, but when its leaves dipped into water, she risked changing back.

Once again herself, she glanced warily around and found herself gazing into the sea-green eyes of a black otter. She grabbed for the otter and was hugging him even before he changed back to Shonet.

He held her tightly and she clung, not wanting to let him go. Never had she expected to feel this way about anyone, much less the Sea God. The briny scent that was a part of him now enticed her to move closer, eager to become a part of him. It must be because she was glad to see a friend in this inimical place. For friends they'd become. Only friends. She eased away, forcing a bright smile.

"Right," he said. "Time we moved on. That beast-head won't give up easily. I recognize the taste of this river--it runs into the sea. By heading downstream, we'll reach the ocean." He gestured toward a coracle. "Found this abandoned with a hole in the bottom on my way here, and used mending power to fix the hole. Climb aboard."

Damia sat in the center of the small round boat, holding to the sides as it bobbed its way down the rushing river. Shonet used a crudely fashioned oar to steer around rocks and navigate the rapids. Watching his smooth and graceful maneuvers, she admired his skillfulness. But then, the river, like the sea, was water. His element.

When at last the gray sky darkened, he said, "I can smell the sea, but we still have a ways yet to go. The mouth of this river holds dangers I dare not try to navigate after nightfall. We'll camp ashore and go on at first light. With no thick woods to either side, we're safe enough from Cernunnos. He hunts only in the forests."

She nodded.

As they pulled the coracle onto the bank, she asked, "What danger lies at the mouth of the river?"

"Morrigan haunts it at night. While she and I have a truce, she, like Cernunnos, is no one to tangle with."

Morrigan, the fearful siren of the sea, who lured men to their death by drowning. Damia sighed. "I've often wondered why the Old Ones allow evil as well as good."

He grinned at her. "To keep us on our toes. To make us appreciate good after encountering evil. Who knows?"

She gave him a rueful smile, thinking she'd best be quiet, since she'd already been punished for annoying the Old Ones.

Though there seemed to be no chill to the night air, she didn't object when he lay down beside her on the ground. Without a blanket for cover, they'd sleep better by profiting from each other's warmth. If there were flowers, she thought drowsily, I could create a fragrant blanket for us. Except flower blankets were not for friends, but for those who'd handfasted. For her own handfast choice, she'd make a circlet of flowers and show whoever was her love by placing the gift on his head like a crown. What flowers would she choose for a Sea God, who wasn't of the land where flowers grew? But why should she care? Shonet wouldn't be her chosen one. Ever.

* * * *

Damia woke from a pleasant dream of being held in the caring arms of someone who cherished her, and found at least part of the dream was true, since she was snuggled in Shonet's embrace. She held him, too,

enjoying the feel of hard muscle under the smoothness of his skin.

With his face so close to hers, she was breathing in his breath, as he was hers, and this sharing struck her as highly intimate. Why then, did she relish every moment of it?

She shouldn't, and would move away. Soon.

When she sensed, rather than saw, his head move even closer, she drew in her breath, anticipation tingling through her. Then his lips touched hers and she sighed her pleasure into his mouth as he deepened the first tentative kiss.

Who could have dreamed Shonet's kiss would send fire through her veins, heating every part of her until she believed she might melt into a pool of wanting? His hand slid over the curve of her hip, bringing her against him and she felt the hardness of his male part. Instead of frightening her, this made her press closer. His hand moved up, easing into the vee of her bodice to caress her bare breast. The kiss and his caress made her want more, need more of him. More kisses, more caresses, more intimacy.

Dear Goddess, could the Old Ones be right?

With that thought careening though her mind, she pulled free, gasping.

"What are we doing?" Her voice sounded hoarse in her own ears.

"Enjoying each other." He, too, was hoarse.

"But we shouldn't be."

"Why not?"

"Because-because...." Her words trailed off. What was the reason?

His sigh was deep and sounded regretful. "You may have the right of it, this not being the time of their choice."

No need to ask whose choice. Or what they'd set for a time. But May Day was long past. Was it now too late?

"I have your sapphire brooch," he said. "Here's something from me." His hand found hers and he placed something smooth and round into it. "Now turn away from me."

She did and felt him curl around her back, his arms holding her close. His nearness and the press of his

maleness against her back made her ache with her need for him. She clutched his gift to her tightly in one hand, wondering if she'd ever fall back asleep, tired as she was. It took a long time.

* * * *

Damia woke chilled to another gray day. Unable to feel Shonet's closeness, she sat up and looked around. He was nowhere in sight. Calling his name, she got to her feet and began searching. The coracle was still on the bank, but Shonet didn't answer her calls. Nor could she find him anywhere close by. She was alone. He'd deserted her.

As she swallowed a lump in her throat, she grew aware that she gripped something in her right fist. She opened her hand and stared down at a glittering green gemstone. Green like his eyes. Emerald? She had something of his, he had something of hers. They were linked.

Where are you? she mind sent.

His answer was so faint, she had trouble grasping it. Far beneath the sea. Not by choice.

Though she urged him to explain, no more messages came to her.

If he was in the sea, but not by his choice, he hadn't deliberately left her. Someone had forced him to leave. Made him a prisoner? Certainly not Cernunnos, if Shonet was at the bottom of the sea.

Hurrying to the coracle, she pushed it down the bank into the water, holding it still with her power while she climbed into the boat and took up the oar. Downriver the coracle floated with her desperately trying to avoid the rocks. When the freshening wind finally brought the smell of salt to her, the rocks grew fewer, and she took the chance to look around. Soon she could see the gray of open water ahead, the now bitter wind tossing the sea's white hair. Damia knew she dare not venture out into the foaming waves in this tiny boat she couldn't control.

While she could still do so, she struggled to the right-hand riverbank and climbed from the coracle, abandoning it to the river's current. Watching it twirl round and round as it was borne away and out into the sea, despair clouded her thinking. Whatever could she try next? A sudden splash startled her, and she whirled to find its cause. When she did, she couldn't believe her eyes.

A green-haired mermaid, naked to where the scales began at her waist sat on a large stone at the edge of the river, her tail submerged in the water. "From the way yer eyes bug out, I take it ye've never seen the likes of me afore," the creature said tartly.

No, not a creature. The merfolk were people of the sea. Remembering her manners, Damia pulled herself together. "I'm sorry if my staring was offensive. Indeed, I never have seen a mermaid in my entire life."

"Ye have now, and me name is Lura. Ye must come with me now to free our Sea God, lest another usurp his reign. Shonet we know, this Lyr we do not. We merfolk don't care for change." She reached a hand toward Damia. "Come."

Damia raised her hands, palms up. "How can I come with you into the sea?"

Lura cast her a withering look. "He says ye have power to change. Do so."

"You mean...?"

Lura merely raised her eyebrows.

"But the waves are so high."

"Why should waves bother merfolk?" Lura shook her head. "Ye seem dimwitted. I hope he's made the right choice in choosing ye."

Why was she dithering when Shonet needed her? True, she had nothing to do with the sea, so had never even imagined changing into a sea creature, but with Lura in front of her showing what a mermaid looked like, she ought to be capable of changing into one.

But would she be able to breathe underwater as merfolk must? Enough delay! She'd flown as a dove, hadn't she?

Summoning up her power, Damia advanced to the verge of the river, tucked Shonet's emerald into a pocket of her gown, then made the change.

"And past time, too," Lura told her as the new mermaid splashed into the water. "Follow me."

As Damia swam, at first the wind blew spray into her face, but as soon as they left the mouth of the river for the sea, Lura dove under the waves. Damia hesitated only a moment before following her, knowing she must trust that her present form knew what to do beneath the water. She soon discovered how much easier it was to swim under the surging waves, minimally aware she was no longer breathing through her nose, but taking water in through unobtrusive gills in the scales near her waist. Merfolk belonged beneath the sea, and for the time being she was one of them.

How different everything looked through the sheen of the water. Brightly colored fish swam ahead of

them, weaving through thick growths of seaweed, much like birds flying through a grove of trees. Damia stared at pink and coral-colored growths on the sea floor with what looked to be waving petals. Flowers?

Anenomes. Sea flowers. The answer in her mind meant Lura had caught her question.

On land we, too, have anemones we call wind flowers, she sent back, marveling at how the sea, in its own way, paralleled the land.

The sea floor began to slope downward, becoming steeper as they swam on. To one side, Damia glimpsed a familiar object gone strangely askew, belatedly realizing what she'd seen was a wrecked and sunken ship. Suddenly the sea no longer felt as welcoming. In her mermaid form she was safe enough here, but to her real shape, this was an alien place.

There. Lura's mind send jarred her out of her musings. Something strange loomed just ahead. As they swam closer, she saw a transparent dome attached to the sea floor. Inside lay a merman. Why was he imprisoned in such a way?

You look, but do not see, Lura's send chided.

The merman inside the dome stirred and turned to face them. To Damia's horror, she recognized Shonet as the prisoner.

Lura sent, We know not how to release our Sea God from this death cage of Lyr's. You alone have the knowledge. Use it quickly or Shonet will die because air, instead of water, is trapped with him inside the dome. Lyr has bound him into his merman form. Like all merfolk, he can breathe air only for short periods of time. Hurry!

Damia immediately called up her power. When nothing happened, it took her long moments to realize why. She drew her power from the land, but this was the sea. Her power was not the answer. But what else did she have that could set him free? Staring into Shonet's eyes in despair, she saw something in their green depths that evoked a response from her. Love.

His gaze, showing his love for her, made her understand a painful truth. Now that it was too late, she realized she loved him as well.

Without her willing it, her fingers began to work imaginary flowers, wind flowers, the anemones of the land, into a circlet, intertwining the fragile petals of pink, purple, rose and white. In a flash she had it finished. Because the floral circlet was imaginary, she could send it through the barrier that held him prisoner, could set her crown of love atop his drooping head. For an instant she felt she was inside with him, actually crowning him with a circlet of real flowers. He reached for her, and then the world spun dizzily.

* * * *

Damia came to herself in a meadow of flowers, showered with sunshine. But where was Shonet? Looking around, she saw the small stand of trees nearby. He'd gone there with an ax, hadn't he? As she ran toward the trees, her thoughts blurred in confusion--how had they gotten here from the sea? When she saw him surveying a small ash, her mind cleared. This was Beltane and he was choosing the tree for their maypole dance.

"Yes," she told him. "In honor of the ash that protected us." She wasn't sure where her words came from, but knew they were true.

He nodded and swung the ax against the trunk. She watched the play of his strong muscles under his black tunic, eager to feel them once again under her hands. Drawing in the faint smell of brine that always clung to him, she savored its tang and smiled.

But she mustn't tarry here, she must hie to where the pole he was cutting would be thrust into the ground, penetrating deep into the earth through the hole in Mother Earth she must dig, using her power.

Later, as they stood with the gathering crowd of people admiring the flower-decorated maypole, the ribbons still wrapped tightly around the pole, Damia looked at Shonet, blushing at the glow lighting his sea-green eyes. Soon they each would each choose a ribbon and lead the other men and woman in the weaving dance in and out until all the ribbons were free. Then they'd dance the ribbons back onto the pole again, Damia and Shonet, committing one to the other as they wove the seeds of growth for the new spring.

While she danced joyously, Damia anticipated what was to come in the evening, while the sacred bonfires, teine eigen, the need-fires, shot flames skyward.

Shonet, brushing against his chosen one in the weaving dance, drank in her beauty, intoxicated by what shone in her eyes, brilliant and clear, sparkling more than the sapphire brooch on her bosom. Mended, wasn't it? The thought that soon she would be his forever banished the question about the brooch.

When the long shadows of evening stretched dark onto the land, he stood among the meadow flowers and watched Damia light the fires. Each year before, he'd come from the sea to stand alone on the beach watching the flames, hearing music and laughter. Foolish ones, he'd scoffed. Only now did he realize how lonely he'd felt. Glancing up, he murmured his thanks to the Old Ones, who had seen what was in his heart.

* * * *

Now that the time she waited for so eagerly was actually here, Damia's fingers shook as she wove the anemones she'd gathered into a circlet. The flower blanket had been easy because she'd used her power to weave it, but the circlet had to be hand-done because it came from the heart.

As she interlaced the petals, it seemed to her that she'd woven an anemone circlet once before. She frowned, but the thought drifted away and vanished before she could catch and hold it. When at last the circlet was complete, she hesitated a moment before approaching Shonet.

"Thank you," she whispered to the Old Ones, who had sent her the perfect mate.

Pulse pounding, she forced herself to walk slowly to where her mate-to-be waited among the flowers. She stopped before him, stood on tiptoe and, as she settled her crown of love onto his head, once again she felt the eerie sensation that she'd done this before.

"Yes," he said, as though aware of her thoughts. "In the sea."

Their eyes met, and the truth flashed through them of the trials they'd endured before realizing they were meant for each other.

"But it's still Beltane--how can that be?" she cried.

"Do not the Old Ones control time?" He reached for her.

She melted against him and they sunk into the flowers still entwined. Over them the floral blanket formed a tent, hiding them from the other Beltane celebrants.

The perfume of the blossoms mingled with Shonet's tinge of brine in perfect harmony, as they undressed one another. She felt the arousing caress of skin on skin and moaned in pleasure. His kiss was far more memorable than the one she'd held in her mind. All thought fled as they explored the wonders of each other's lips, intertwining tongues. He touched her breasts, exciting her almost beyond endurance. Her fingers found the hard thickness of what made him a man, making him groan and call her name.

Though this was her first time, she knew the hot and velvety wetness at her core presaged his entrance. "Now," she begged.

But his fingers caressed her there instead, sending her into such quivering spasms of delight that, when he finally penetrated her, she scarcely felt the tiny stab of pain, entranced by the wondrous sensation of being filled by what she so desperately needed. They flowed together in their own sacred dance, celebrating Beltane, yes, but equally celebrating themselves as true mates. When she cried out, consumed with more pleasure than she'd known existed, he shouted with her, the sound carrying to the other pairs celebrating, and announcing that Spring was here, the seeds had been planted, the world would go on.

She did save.

He did have.

The words drifted to Damia and Shonet. A blessing from the Old Ones.

* * * *

The cool ocean waves washed over Damara and Shoner's bare feet as, clothed only in moonlight, they lay locked in the aftermath of consummation at the waterline. They gazed into each other's eyes, seeing more than two lonely people coming together. What they saw made them smile.

When they finally broke apart and dressed, she asked, "Since we seem to be back on a Pacific beach near Terry and Sal's, are you up for the maypole dance?"

He laughed and gave her a quick kiss. "After what happened, I'd follow you anywhere."

She raised her hand, fingers touching his face. "But what really did happen?"

"I lay no claim to being an ancient god, but if it wasn't real, it had to be the world's best damn hallucination. Whatever we did or did not go through, all I care about is that it brought you to me."

"And you to me."

He kissed her again, a lingering, loving kiss. And then, hand in hand, they strolled back toward the flickering flames of the bonfire.

* * * *

Shoner ran a hand through his hair as he replayed the words he'd just heard. Looking down at his wife, he said, "Damara, when I said I'd follow you anywhere, I never expected it to be into a doctor's office to be told we're having twins, of all things."

She smiled up at him. "That's what we get for doing what we did on that beach at Beltane. We didn't stop to think about it being a fertility celebration."

He hugged her to him. "Yeah, I know. And I'm happy we'll be parents. But twins? Whoever the Old Ones might be, I think they overdid the fertility thing."

The End