



Beltane's Bride by Nicole Hurley-Moore

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Beltane's Bride

Alvina sat still as the dappled sunlight warmed her old body. It was good to breathe the sweet air and listen to the music of the young.

She opened her eyes and watched the scene before her. The village had made their annual journey to the sacred grove in the middle of the deep forest. It was Beltane and all had gathered to give thanks to the gods for their bounty.

A great fire burned brightly in the middle of the clearing and tonight the bride would be presented to Cernunnos. It was symbolic, as not one of the brides was ever taken but the tradition carried on. The people must give thanks for the fruits of the forest, its wildlife and the trees and herbs which sustained them.

The women wore crowns on their unbound hair, made from twigs, leaves, berries and flowers. They danced to the rhythmic beat of the drum around the ancient elderberry tree. Children ran about weaving this way and that through the trees, their laughter carried on the wind.

“Old mother – this is for you.”

Alvina turned her head and saw a girl holding out a floral crown.

“You are kind, child – to think of an old woman.”

“It would not be the festival without you, mother. You are always here... just like the forest itself.”

Alvina smiled as she allowed the girl to put the crown on her head.

“There, you look beautiful.”

Alvina chuckled. “Ah, you are as sweet as honey. I thank thee for my crown but go and dance while you can.”

“I have all day and night to dance, mother.”

“Ah, but the days slip by as quickly as droplets in a fast running stream. Go and enjoy yourself. Besides, I see that young man looking at you...you can see in his eyes that he wants you, child. I might be old but even I can remember such a look. The question is, do you want him?”

“Aye,” the girl whispered as she leant forward. “But I have not told him yet.”

“By the way his eyes follow you, Jenet – I would say you have hooked him as surely as any fish on a line. Go and make it a Beltane that you will both always remember.”

Jenet dipped down and kiss Alvina’s cheek.

“You are a wise woman.”

“I am an old woman,” she said with a smile. “Go now, enjoy your day and I will sit here and let the sun warm my bones.”

The girl spun away and ran over to the young man leaning against the birch tree. She stopped in front of him, smiled and held out her hand. Alvina saw the boy’s expression, it was a mixture of love, hope and wanting.

An unexpected wave of longing swept over her as she remembered what it was like to have a man look at her in such a way. Long ago, when she had been as young as Jenet – there had been a boy... a man with strong hands and a handsome face. Alvina closed her eyes for a second so she could conjure his image in her heart's eye. Balrick had been tall, with chestnut brown hair and soft hazel eyes. He had wanted her and his bold stare had been filled with just as much passion as the boy's.

Balrick had been daring and snatched a kiss from her behind the great oak. Alvina had felt sure that her father would happen across them – the heightened danger made the kiss even sweeter. They had taken each other by the banks of the stream which ran not far from this very spot. She had been blessed with a man who loved her and a family; but all things pass... each autumn turns into winter.

She rubbed her chest between her breasts... he died long ago but after all this time it still hurt.

She was the only one left, all of those she had loved were gone... Alvina sighed and shifted her position. She had lived too long. This would be her last Beltane... her last summer, she felt it in her bones. So perhaps she should just sit back enjoy the wind in her hair and the bird song.

Alvina...

She looked around, to see who was calling her name. But how could that be...since all who knew it were dead? To the village she was wise one or old mother, no one had said her name aloud for longer than she could remember.

Alvina...

And yet there it was again, the voice called her but she could not be sure if it was just in her head. She stood up and leant heavily against her staff. The clearing was filled with the revelling villagers. Drums, whistles and cymbals clashed as the people danced and ate and laughed.

She heard it then, a child crying somewhere behind her... somewhere in the dark wood. It was faint but Alvina could still make it out.

One of the children must be lost, turned around in the trees and confused. She had better go and rescue the poor little thing. She may be ancient but no one knew this forest like her. She had been born here and in her youth had run down every path that twisted through the dense undergrowth.

Alvina turned away from the revels and headed into the shadow of the trees. She found it difficult to walk on the uneven ground. Frowning, she plodded on – the tragedy of growing old was that your body rebelled against you. Steadily she carried on, picking her way over the forest floor and sometimes using her staff to lean on while she caught her breath. The noise from the clearing began to dim and the child's crying became louder.

Well, at least I'm going in the right direction.

But something stirred in her mind.

"I've done this before," she said to the trees as she passed. "When I was a girl... I found a child in the forest, caught in a trap."

Alvina stopped for a moment and pressed her humped back against the trunk of an oak. As she rested for a second she tried to remember a warm summer long ago. She was only small, eight maybe nine winters old. She had been running through the forest when she heard the crying and found a boy.

His leg had been snared and a small wooded stake was embedded in his leg, just above his ankle.

“Hush now and I will help you,” Alvina said as she inched her way forward. She did want to help this boy but there was something about him that made her shiver.

The boy looked up and stared at Alvina with large green eyes. Their colour was almost luminous and it took all her courage to kneel down next to him.

“Are you going to kill me?”

Alvina shook her head. “Nay, I will help you. It will hurt when I take your foot out of the trap. I don’t want to hurt you... but it will all the same.”

The boy nodded. “I understand.”

“How did you become trapped?”

“I was running through the trees and stumbled into it,” the boy said as he placed his hand on Alvina’s shoulder. Was it to give himself courage as he braced for the pain or was it to encourage her on... she would never know.

“I’m sorry you got hurt... are you ready?”

“Aye.”

Alvina didn’t hesitate as she pulled the stake out of the boy’s leg. He let out a howl of pain which echoed through the woods as he scurried away from the trap and Alvina.

She tore a strip off her skirt and edged forward. Dark red blood trickled from the wound.

“Here let me bind it.”

The boy nodded but watched her warily as if she was about to sprout horns and drag him to the netherworld. Alvina ignored him, while she wound the strip of cloth around and around his skinny leg. She tied and tucked in the ends of the bandage before she sat back on her haunches and looked at him.

Other than his green eyes, the boy had golden skin and dark hair that fell to his shoulders. His face was narrow and angular there was beauty in a savage way and a touch of other worldliness.

“Tis the best I can do,” she said as she pointed to the bandage.

The boy tilted his head to one side. “You are kind, I did not expect that.”

Alvina frowned, what did he mean by that?

“I should go, my father will be waiting for me.” Alvina stood up. “Do you need help?”

The boy leant on a tumbled log and pushed himself to his feet. Gingerly he put weight on his sore leg.

“Nay, I am recovered.”

Alvina shook her head. “You will need to tend that when you get home... you do have a home don’t you?”

“And if I said no, what would you do?”

“I would take you home with me.”

“Even though you fear me?”

“Aye, you need to be taken care of... even if you scare me.”

“What is your name?”

“Alvina.”

The boy leant forward and kissed her on the cheek. “I will repay your kindness one day, Alvina. I promise.”

But he never did – Alvina had never seen the strange boy again. Although she always hoped that he was safe and managed to make it home.

The crying brought her back to the present.

“I’m coming child,” she muttered as she started to walk towards the sound.

The crying always seemed to be coming from somewhere ahead. But even though Alvina plodded steadily through the forest, she never seemed to reach it. The sound taunted her, leading her deeper and deeper into the tangled wood.

She paused for a minute and leaned heavily on her staff. She dragged in a breath and scanned the trees. Alvina had spent all her life in this forest, she knew every path and turn, every pool and dark cave but as she stood still, listening to the cries of the child she realised that she did not recognise this place.

“I’ve turned myself about...,” she muttered with a shake of her head. “My father would be ashamed of me.”

Looking up at the tall trees and the tangle of undergrowth, Alvina told herself that the only reason she didn’t know where this place was because the forest was overgrown. If she walked a little farther up the path she would surely be able to work out where she was. She tilted her head to one side as she tried to pinpoint the crying. How the child had managed to

stray this far away from the clearing was beyond her. Little imp, it would no doubt be a lesson that he would long remember.

Alvina pushed herself to keep going. Her throat was dry and her legs were beginning to ache. She should have told young Jenet about the crying child, at least then the rescue would have taken half the time. At this rate she doubted she would make it back to the clearing before the sun set.

She slipped between a copse of flowering rowan tree, their sweet perfume filling the summer air. Brambles tried to catch and cling to the hemline of her grey skirt as she manoeuvred through several moss covered rocks. Alvina placed her hand on one of the large rocks for balance as she passed. The stone was cold under her palm and the moss was damp and soft.

The crying was getting louder; the child must be behind the next bend in the path.

Alvina hurried as best she could along the overgrown path until she broke through the dense tree line and found herself in a small clearing. A thin stream of water ran down a rugged rock face and into a stone pool. The edges of the pool were carved with symbols and knotwork. The grass beneath her feet was soft and green and around the pool there were yellow crocus and wildflowers. It was a beautiful place, a mysterious place and one she had never seen before.

A shudder tingled up her spine as she noticed the boy sitting against the pool. He raised his head and stared back at her. His eyes were the same green as the boy from her childhood. There was no hint of tears.

“We have met before; but how can this be?” Alvina glanced at his foot, this time there was no hunter’s trap holding him captive. ‘Why have you brought me here?’”

The boy stood up before sweeping into a deep bow. He was just as beautiful as she remembered him but there was something else about him, that trace of other worldliness that terrified her. He had dark hair that hung almost to his shoulders and was dressed in brown and green.

‘Alvina, it is good to see you again.’

She bowed her head. “Time, my lord has taken its toll on my body – but not you.”

“I am outside of time, it does not govern me.”

“Ah, when we last met I was but a child. Since then I have been mother and wife and now the ancient crone stands before you.” Alvina shook her head. “Time can be cruel.”

“And yet I still see the girl that once was and as well as the pretty maid that was once kiss under the great oak by the side of the river.” The boy said as he walked forward.

Alvina instinctively took a step back. “How did you know that?”

“I’m summoned every year to run through these woods. I see, I know all that happens. Have no fear, Alvina – I will not harm you.’ He held out his hand and waited for her to take it. “Come and sit by the pool. The waters are cool and you are in need of rest.”

Alvina took a breath before she placed her gnarled hand in his. She glanced down, her hand was old with thin skin and age marks while the boy’s was smooth and firm.

“The walk was a long one and I would be grateful for a sip of water.” She leant against him as he guided her over to the deep pool and settled her by its edge.

From the leather pouch that hung from his belt he took a small cup made out of wood. He dipped it into the waters and then held it out to Alvina.

“Here, drink.”

Alvina took a sip, it was cool and sweet as it trickled down her throat.

“You have my thanks. Once, long ago I saved you and now it seems that after all these years you have repaid the kindness.”

“The debt, you mean.”

“There was never a debt. I was able to help you when you needed it and that is all,” she said with a smile before she took another sip. “It is good to sit in the forest and listen to the sounds all around. I fear that it will be my last time.”

“Aye, this could well be the last Beltane you will see.”

The words confirmed the feelings she had harboured deep inside her. Should she be sad at knowing her life would soon come to an end? Alvina closed her eyes for a moment and looked within her – no, there was a sense of relief. All things must die and so must she.

She opened her eyes and saw the boy was studying her.

“Forgive me, I slipped away for an instant.”

“Would you like to?”

“What?”

“Slip away with me?” The boy took several steps away from her until he was standing in the middle of the clearing. “You see, things are not what they seem.”

A cold blast of air ripped through the clearing and circled around them. A whirlwind of leaves and flowers whipped about and Alvina found it hard to see. Shielding her eyes with her hand she watched as the boy appeared to blur and then grow into a man. The wind died

down and standing before her was a tall and vibrant man with stag like horns. Alvina's heart hammered as knelt before him.

"My lord, Cernunnos. God of the forest and all wild things. I am honoured that you would reveal yourself to me." Alvina kept her head down in the soft grass but was aware that Cernunnos came closer.

"Rise Alvina, I have not come for you to cower before me," he said as he squatted down next to her. "I have watched you from the day you saved me in the wood and I have a question to ask you."

Alvina peered up through her lashes. The boy had been beautiful but the man god was magnificent. There was a wild beauty to his face, his green eyes nearly glowed in the late afternoon sun and the planes of his face were almost too sharp. A hint of a smile touched his lips. She pushed herself up and stood before him, her eyes directed to the ground.

"Look at me, Alvina."

Alvina glanced up and swallowed hard. He was an imposing sight and she trembled.

"What do you wish to ask me, my lord?"

"Would you come with me? Would you run through the forest paths by my side? Would you stay with me?"

"Why?"

"You were once kind to me even though you were afraid. I would have you with me," he said as he stepped forward and looked down at her.

"I am old and I doubt that I can run. But with whatever time is left, I will stay with you in this forest – if that is what you wish."

“It is.” He reached out and touched a strand of her hair. “The colour reminds me of the flames of Beltane.”

Alvina gave a small nod. “Perhaps it did once, long ago.”

“And still does,” he said as he drew the strand forward so Alvina could see it.

Her breath seemed to stop in her chest and her eyes widened with surprise as she looked at the dark russet strand of hair. She looked down at her hands and saw that they were smooth and slim. Alvina whirled around and looked in the waters of the pool. The age spots and wrinkles had disappeared and a young Alvina stared back at her. It was a face that she had not seen in many years. She looked as she had done when Balrick had kissed under the oak tree.

“What magic is this?” She ran her hand over the side of her face.

“My magic.” Cernunnos said as he stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

Alvina could not stop looking at her reflection. “You have given me again, my lord – I am grateful.”

“It is not your gratitude that I seek,” he whispered in her ear.

“What then? Name it and if it is in my power to give you, it is yours.”

“I want your heart, Alvina. The kindness you did me once has stayed with me. I have watched you as the years trickled away like the waters of this fall. I have watched you live, laugh and love until there are only a handful of days before you. And now at the end, I ask that you stay with me and walk through these ancient paths by my side for I tire of walking alone.”

Alvina stared at their reflection. He stood tall and strong behind her waiting for her answer. He was offering her a gift and yet she hesitated. She had been preparing for death and if she took Cernunnos's offer she would live again. Wasn't one lifetime enough?

"What is your answer?"

She sought his gaze in the water and in that instant she saw the loneliness in his green eyes. Just as she couldn't leave him when they were children, she knew that she couldn't abandon him now. Alvira reached up and covered his hand with her own.

"I will stay with you," she said as she turned and looked up at him.

"Promise?"

"Aye, I give you my oath."

"Then seal your pledge with a kiss," he said as a smile played across his lips.

He dipped his head and caught her mouth. His lips were warm and firm against hers. Alvina had forgotten what it was like to be kissed, she had forgotten how much she craved it until now. His arms slipped around her and pulled her close as Alvina kissed him back. A warm ember began to catch and burn in her as long lost warmth and longing resurfaced. Slowly she wound her arms around his waist and pulled him closer.

Alvina woke with a start and for a second or two she didn't know where she was. She turned her head and realised that she was back in the large clearing with the rest of the village. The sun had set and the sky was beginning to darken. Around the great fire the woman danced as several of the young men showed off their agility and courage as they leapt

through the flames. The scent of smoke travelled on the air along the sound of music and laughter.

Alvina went to stand up but a pain shot through her hips and she tumbled back onto the log. Looking down at her hands she saw that they were once again gnarled. Her hand flew to her cheek and she felt the loose skin and wrinkles of her face. She sucked in a breath and tried to push the anguish from brimming up and swallowing her whole.

It had been a dream, a beautiful dream that was as fleeting as a bird in flight. But it had felt so real. She closed her eyes tightly and she could still taste him on her lips. Nay, it had to be real.

Hot tears ran down her face and she wiped them away with the back of her hand as she thought of what she had lost.

Forgive me, I would have stayed with you if I could. Forgive me.

She fumbled for her staff and once again tried to gain her feet. Her hips ached and her back caught but after a moment she was able to stand as long as she had the support of the stick. Her heart hurt for she had gone back on her oath and left him alone. She thought to walk back into the woods and try to find Cernunnos and try and explain that she did not want to desert him. She needed to let him know that if she could she would have stayed with him forever. But as she managed to take a few steps a great roar went up from the villagers.

Startled she turned around just as young Jenet ran over to her.

“Old mother, come with me,” she said as she linked her arm with Alvina’s “It’s time for the bride to be presented to Cernunnos.”

“Nay, I must go.”

“But you can’t go back to village by yourself – tis dark and you will not be safe.”

“I’m not going to the village. I need to go back into the forest.”

“You must stay where it is safe,” Jenet said as she gave Alvina a tug to get her moving towards the middle of the clearing.

Jenet led Alvina past the fire and to two large thrones made of wood, sticks, and leaves. ‘Make way, make way for old mother,’ she cried out as she pushed through the villagers until she had found the perfect spot. “From here we will see everything,” she said with a smile as she patted Alvina’s arm.

Another roar from the crowd as one of the young men leapt through the fire. Red hot sparks flew up into the dark sky towards the stars. He wore antlers strapped to his head that was meant to symbolize the god of wild things – Cernunnos. He danced and whirled and wove his way through the villagers until he stood in front of one of the thrones and waited for his bride.

Alvina wanted to run away. She wanted the peace of the night covered forest, she wanted to hide from the noise and the music and the people. But Jenet held onto her arm and she was forced to watch the ceremony unfold.

From the far side of clearing just near the sacred grove a woman appeared dressed in a long green shift and on her head was a crown of flowers. Slowly she walked towards the throne, while two girls danced in front of her throwing petals into the air. But just before she could join the rest of the village, the sound of a hunting horn echoed through the darkness of the forest.

The music stopped as the horn blasted again. The people grew silent until the only sound that could be heard was the popping and hiss of the fire.

“Where is it coming from?” Jenet whispered as she held onto Alvina’s arm a little too tightly.

“From the forest,” Alvina said as she moved her arm but was unable to shake Jenet’s grasp.

The horn sounded for a third time over a now silent gathering. A large stag broke through the tree line.

“’Tis Cernunnos,” Alvina said as a wave of relief washed over her. He was here and she would be able to explain that she never meant to leave him.

“Nay, ‘tis only a stag,” said the man standing next to her. “’Tis an offering from the forest. We should kill it and feast.”

“And tell me, when you killed your last deer was that also heralded by a horn?” Alvina turned her head and gave him a pointed look.

“No, old mother – it wasn’t,” he said as he lowered his head.

“’Tis Cernunnos – he has honoured us and the offerings we bring!” one of the villagers cried out.

“Aye, he has come for his bride!” said another.

On hearing this, the girl who was dressed up as his bride let out a shriek and ran as fast as she could to shelter behind the young man with the antler strapped to his head.

“Don’t let him take me! He wasn’t meant to take me!” she whimpered as she clung to the young man.

“Oh hush, child,” Alvina said.

The stag walked forward as a great wind blew through the trees and whipped over the clearing. It circled around the stag and its form began to blur.

Jenet trembled beside her and Alvina gave her a squeeze. “All will be well, you have nothing to fear.”

The majority of people fell to their knees and cowered together as Cernunnos changed into the form of a man. His green eyes twinkled as he scanned the clearing.

“I come to collect an oath and with it my bride.”

The girl who was dressed as the bride started crying louder and Alvina rolled her eyes. She went to step forward but Jenet tried to hold her back. She turned and gave the girl a smile.

“All is well, Jenet. Let me go, so I can do what is right.”

Jenet shook her head. “But old mother, I don’t understand.”

Alvina kissed the girl on the forehead. “I know you don’t, but you will,” she said as she straightened up and walked towards Cernunnos. At first she hobbled and leant heavily on her staff as she moved forward but with each step the easier it became. Her eyes locked onto his and she felt the flare of excitement begin to burn as he smiled at her.

“Alvina.” He held out his hand and waited for her to come to him.

“My lord,” She said as she threw away her staff and dropped her cloak from her shoulders. She glanced down at her hands and saw that they were once again slim, smooth and young. She heard a gasp come from the people behind her and she knew that old mother had disappeared and been replaced by Alvina.

She took his hand and dropped easily into a deep curtsy.

“You intend to keep your promise?”

Alvina stood and walked into his arms. She reached up and cupped the side of his handsome face with her hand.

“With all my heart.”

“That is all I ask,” he said before his lips brushed against her. “Then come my Alvina, to the wild wood and we shall run together forever with the deer and the hare.”

“Why have you honoured me, my lord? There are others who are more worthy than I”

He pulled back and stared down at her. “But none of them have ever shown me the kindness you did. None of them wanted to care for me. Don’t you understand Alvina, I’ve loved you all your life.”

Alvina smiled as her heart skipped a beat. “Then take me home, where I belong.”

He picked her up and she wound her arms around his neck. The wind swirled around them as he carried her through the sacred grove and into the night drenched forest – away from the clearing and the life she had once known.

The End

Thanks so much for taking the time to read my little story. I hope you enjoyed it. ☺ If you would like to tell me what you thought, I'd love to hear from you.

You can find me here –

<http://www.nicolehurley-moore.com/#!contact/c1kcz>

I write historical, fantasy and contemporary romances. However if you're into magically inspired stories, you might like to check out these -

Black is the Colour – Tales from the Hearthfire

A Medieval fairytale

Ciana has loved Oran all her life and nothing, not even her father will prevent them from being together. But the Mayor of Stonemark has higher aspirations for his daughter than the village blacksmith. He engages the help of a witch and dark magic to bend Ciana to his will.

Oran knows that he doesn't deserve Ciana. But their love is stronger than the metal he forges and welds. She has his heart and he will never turn from her no matter the cost.

They plan to run away and start a new life far beyond her father's reach. But their escape comes too late.

Separated, Ciana will need all her strength to journey through the deep forest and save Oran from the witch's curse. Alone and with only a trail of black feathers to follow, Ciana will fight against the odds and attempt to bring her lover home.

Rain

1216 AD

Nuri is caught between heaven and hell. Two men fight for her love and her soul. The first is Maras, an elemental being who follows the storms. The second is Brother Erebus, a pious monk whose tortured soul is twisted by his desire for her. But Nuri may sacrifice more than her heart when the Church brands her angel a demon. As Brother Erebus will do anything to protect her soul from the silver haired devil, even if he has to crush her body to do it.

Until the Stars Burn Cold

Forbidden love.

In ancient Persia, in the town of Adwan, Jinn is ripped from his beloved Shuri's side. He is cursed into a ring as punishment for daring to love the wrong woman. Empires crumble, centuries pass and Jinn is still captive. That is until present day antiques dealer, Mia Templeton accidentally releases him.

Jinn is cursed into a ring as punishment for daring to love the wrong woman. Centuries pass, empires crumble and he is still the ring's captive. That is until present day antiques dealer, Mia Templeton accidentally releases him.

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Nicole xx

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