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## Midnight Tea by Moonlight

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Merlena stared out her window, watching the small, bobbing light getting closer. She had decided a minute or so before that the light was not marsh-fire as she had first thought, but probably a person. Probably. She could never be sure what might show up in this place. Even after all the time she had spent here she couldn't guarantee what was going to happen the next day.

Merlena leaned forward, resting her head on her hands and watching the small spot as it wove back and forth. At this distance she couldn't quite tell if whoever (or whatever) was carrying the light was getting closer or stumbling around lost. The maze of wooden bridges between her house and the main part of the bog she lived in was rather complicated and not all that sturdy. To be honest, it was rather a miracle that none of the bridges had collapsed into the murky water of the bog years ago. Or that something hadn't destroyed them while she was out. She didn't think that she could repair the bridges if they were damaged.

Her attention returned to the light. It was still there, which was a good sign. Usually by this time the less determined (more like desperate) would have already turned around and gone home. Or attempted to. She wouldn't be surprised to learn that half of the people who tried to reach her never made it home again, regardless of whether they reached her or not. The bog was no place to be, even in the daylight. It was a whole other world in the dark, and not all the monsters looking for a midnight snack were easy to see.

And there it went—wait, it was back. Not moving anymore though. Probably trying to catch their breath after a close call. They were much closer now, so if all went well they would probably stumble their way to her front door in the next... half hour or so. More than enough time to boil some water and make some tea before her visitor arrived. Getting up, Merlena stretched and picked up her staff, heading over to stoke the fire and gather a pail for water. She paused to pull on a cloak before going out the side door towards the small well dug behind her house.

Moving quickly, she slipped past the gnarled old trees that had managed to survive on the island and ignored the rustling leaves of the climbing vines clinging to the house's wall. If she was lucky she would have the water and be back in the house before any of the more violent carnivorous plants that called the water around her island home woke up and tried to eat her.

She managed to gather the water and get back inside just as the strangle vines around the upper windows began to slip down far enough to catch her around the neck. Ducking under the lowest vine she closed the door firmly and went to check on the progress of her visitor. They were on the last leg of the bridges now, only a few minutes away, and she was a little surprised at how quickly they had recovered and moved on. Ah well, the water wouldn't be hot enough before they arrived, but it would be close.

Dumping the water into the cauldron over the fire, she moved on to the rack of herbs and shelves full of bottles next to it, trying to guess what her visitor might be wanting. She had started trying to guess what her visitors might want before they arrived. She wasn't always that good at it, but it was a way to spend the time while she waited for them to stumble the last few steps to her house. Now what could they want...

Love potion? Not that she actually HAD any, but every once in a while some young fool who heard that there was a witch living in the bog would stumble their way in and try to buy one. Where the whole witch rumor came from, she wasn't sure. It was probably the best thing that the locals could come up with. She called herself a potion master, but had had to admit there was clearly something unnatural going on after she had figured out more time had passed in the world outside her bog than she had first thought. The fact that she wasn't aging really didn't help matters either, so she simply did her best not to think about it much.

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Usually whenever someone came asking for a love potion she would mix up some different aphrodisiacs into a tea and then send them on their way, but she didn't think that was it. Too late in the evening for even the youngest and most lovestruck fool to risk life and limb.

So then what? Maybe a poison? She had to admit that those were her best works. Living in a swamp full of rare and deadly plants certainly had its perks. Then again, most people could find cheaper potion makers near to home. Far quicker too, though there was that group that had been through recently looking for something nasty to coat a dagger... maybe they had told a friend who was interested in a silent killer?

Or maybe someone had overheard the group and had come to her for an antidote. That would be awkward. She certainly hoped that it was one she could provide for them if that was what they had come to get. As bad as it might sound, she didn't know all the counter-potions to the poisons she made. The last thing she wanted to do was admit that to a possible client. She knew as much about medicine as she did antidotes.

Medicine. That wasn't something that she was often asked for, but it was a possibility. No one had been here for any of that since that plague had gone through the country... oh, about eighty, maybe ninety years ago.

The knock on the door interrupted her train of thought and she turned, glancing over to the cauldron. Not boiling yet, but there were some bubbles so it was close. Leaving her staff leaning against the shelves she made her way slowly to the front door, smoothing the skirt of her dress and running a hand through her pale pink hair, making herself look presentable.

The man she saw waiting for her outside the door was middle-aged, a touch tall but otherwise average with brown hair, brown eyes and tan skin. A glance at his hand showed calluses and dirt. A worker of some sort then, not a wealthy man. How curious. Usually the locals were too nervous to come looking for her.

A second glance took in the fact that he didn't seem have anything to pay her with. Usually her clients were quick to prove they could pay for whatever they came about. Either that or they were quick to say that they could bring something to pay her with later. She could still remember the man who had offered to bring her his first child as the second part of her payment. She had accepted the offer, but she wasn't really planning on him going through with it. At least she hoped he wouldn't. She had no idea what to do with a child. Even if she did the marsh was no place for an infant.

The man cleared his throat and she came back to the present. He was shifting on his feet now, looking nervous. She looked into his face, studying him, and smiled. This man wasn't here on a whim, or for something frivolous. He wanted something. Maybe even needed something.

Merlena stepped back, beckoning him inside "Please, come in. It's not a night to be out so late."

He nodded nervously, slipping in and glancing around her home. He glanced back at her and paused, eyes widening slightly as he opened his mouth, then thought differently and closed it. So he had noticed her hair and had been too well raised (or was trying hard to make a good impression) to mention it.

Oh yes. This would be fun. "Don't be shy, come near the stove and warm yourself up."

He followed her warily, glancing about as if expecting a specter or monster to jump out at him from the shadows. She came up to the fire and made a show of putting more wood on and warming her hands, letting him calm down and settle in. Finally, she straightened and turned to him with a small smile.

"Tell me, what can I do for you?"