

## Skyclad in Moonlight

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*I knew a guy who walked around skyclad in moonlight. He's doing 5-7 upstate.*

I carry a light within that may flicker but will not die. My strength is the armour of my ancestors. I feel the chainmail of responsibility heavy on my shoulders. I need to clothe myself in their folklore and magic. I know if I weaken, the tears held inside will slide damp and dismal into the hollow of my throat. I must prevail. I have made my life anew, carved a niche where both the healer and seer parts of my psyche can thrive and grow.

In the past, I was called a witch, shunned until some charm, potion or spell was wanted. Then villagers would creep to my cottage. Each whispered their requests through the crack in the ill-fitting door. Then they melted away, into the darkness again. That life ended when a stupid girl, driven mad with jealousy and despair, killed herself over a man. One of the bottles I used for my potions and lotions was beside her. I knew it was a harmless herbal emollient for her to rub into her skin. It softened it and it smelled sweet. She had used it before, without any ill effects.

Knowing the hypocritical elders of the village as I did, my mind-eye could picture them huddled in front of the smoky fire in the tavern, pewter pots in hand. The local brew would imbue them with the courage to decide my fate. Given their lack of education, they feared any woman who displayed even a modicum of intelligence.

There was not much time to save myself. I had neither a carriage nor a horse. This limited the distance I could put between myself and the hoard of drunken creatures hell-bent on my destruction. I tried to hold back the frissons of fear that would incapacitate me if allowed full rein. It was so difficult. Tears blurred my sight as I looked around the cottage. Generations of my family have laid down a patina of love and wisdom here. I felt it in the very fabric of the walls. Could I leave this behind? If I wanted to survive, I would have to—I realised that. I sank to the ground, my legs too weak to hold me up. No matter how strong the vibrations from the past were, they were not enough. I felt a miasma of despair eroding my spirit and courage.

I knew I could not surrender; not only would my life be unbearable, but I wouldn't have a life for long anyway. I could almost hear the crackle of the fire and the wild cries of those villagers and elders who hated me so much and feared me more. No, that was never going to happen. I searched my mind for a solution. Suddenly, I remembered my grandmother's Book of Shadows. Could there be something there to aid me? I finally located it at the bottom of an old, battered tin trunk. Why haven't I looked at this before? Not only was the wisdom of my grandma held within the vellum pages. This font of wisdom had obviously been passed down through the line for centuries. Each wise woman, in turn, has left her mark.

As quickly as I could, I skimmed through the pages, becoming desperate to find a solution—any solution. Finally, I found it. I concocted a transportation spell. I would move forward in time, but not in space, to an era where Wiccan and Pagan beliefs would be both tolerated and accepted. Before I left my old world, I wrote a will. I bequeathed the family cottage to the future me. I started off, with one last look at my home, my shelter. I had left the cottage in disarray, thrown a lot of my belongings around, and smashed a couple of old chairs. It looked like robbers had taken me. I even spilt some pig's blood around. My feet felt the grass and broken twigs as I walked the familiar path in the dead of night to a small copse a few miles from the village. I dug a hole with an old bent fire shovel I'd found months ago that couldn't be traced back to me. I buried everything I needed for the future. Then I used the spell.

I felt so free of tension, I had to be careful. As filled with euphoria as I was, I still had to deal with the mundane day-to-day elements of my new life.. Luckily, I had brought grandma's Book of Shadows into the future with me. It proved invaluable. It was a tricky couple of days, though. I needed all the trappings of a 21st-century person. I quickly found out that I had no birth certificate, no national insurance number, no past at all, unless one looked back to around 1860. Luckily I had planned to use some of grandma's spells. This enabled me to cut down on any waiting time when putting in requests for what I was calling replacement documents. I had also found a little spell that made any official see what I wanted them to see on the pieces of paper I handed them. Any information I gave them was officially inputted into the correct database on, say, a Monday. I then only had to jump forward ten days or so to collect the finished paperwork. I knew I needed to be meticulous in charting where I'd been and when. I could not change the future for fear of an anomaly. If I changed anyone's life, it could start a ripple effect through time.

The beauty of being able to move backwards and forwards also meant that I could find the point at which I was back staying in the cottage. I would know then that all my hard work had been successful. I had built a past. In doing so, my future clicked into place, and I could slip into my new life, and relax. Being back in my old home was truly wonderful. Of course, I faced a few hurdles. For instance, there was the new lexicon. My poor ears and brain could not equate the swift, silver-sharp phrases with the past's slow, guttural conversations. Luckily, once I had bought a TV and learned how to use the remote, I had a thousand voices from whom I could learn. There was no looking back once I had a laptop. It was a wondrous thing to feel free, to know my abilities and beliefs no longer had to be hidden. Moving forward also meant Azedar, a warlock whose attention I had striven to avoid, was left behind too. He was an evil man who did terrible things in the name of magic.

He had decided that the two of us would start a dynasty, a family of strong witches and warlocks. He, of course, would reap the benefits derived from any nefarious spells etc. bought and used. Much like he was already doing, but on a larger scale. I can not describe how my body, and my soul, shrank from the thought of being near that awful person. The air of evil that surrounded him made me shudder. He was leech-like, and I felt my power and spirit were depleted when he was close.

With a small sigh, I was back in the present again. Five years have gone by so quickly. My online New Age business was growing, which explained why I was out here just after midnight. I wanted to follow the beliefs of ages past tonight. The meadow was bathed in a torpid silver glow. I felt its touch as I

walked, skyclad in moonlight. While gathering plants to be used in magic rituals or for potions, it was best to wait for a full moon. Nothing should come between the skin and that soft and sensual light. Beneath my feet, the heady scent of wild herbs drifted on the lightest breeze as each became crushed and bruised, filling me with peace. I had forgotten the quiet despair of a broken spirit. A new strength within me spiralled and was released to heal as the sweet herbs did. I continued to gather what I needed to fulfil the orders I had waiting.

I was jolted out of my reverie by a rumble of sullen thunder. I became aware of the night sky. A sharp wind whipped the light layer of clouds that had been drifting serenely overhead. All at once, I felt vulnerable. Where there is thunder, could lightning be far behind? I turned to go back. There stood the warlock Azedar, the evil spinner of spells, the taker of minds, the one who I had travelled to the future to escape. How had he found me? On his face was an expression of loathing. His hate-filled gaze seared my skin. He spoke, but there was only silence. Even so, I could understand the terrible words dripping like venom from his lips. I shuddered. Terror once more gripped my heart. Trembling limbs threatened to give way. The life-giving breath I needed felt trapped in my throat, which was closed tight with panic. I took a step back, then another. Weirdly, Azedar did not follow me.

Something was amiss. The warlock I knew would have cast a spell to paralyse me by now. I could see a ripple-like effect on the figure in front of me. Holding my breath, I ran straight through the shape, which was without material form or substance. There was no corporeal body in this world. I was safe and free. Then I felt the sharp, vicious talons digging into my flesh. Azedar, a destroyer of bodies and souls, had opened a rift between his century and this. I was dragged from the life I had built. Filled with pain and despair, I screamed in denial. No one would ever know what had happened. I was going to be lost forever in time.

I managed to grab hold of the old cotton shopping bag that held the herbs and flowers I had picked. I had put the Book of Shadows in it, too—luckily, it came everywhere with me. There was one thing held within its pages that I could utilise to get away from Azedar. I did need to check the wording of the invisibility incantation; it was one I had intoned so often that I could mutter it by rote. I used it to find out quietly who was doing what to whom, when asked. That has been very useful and lucrative over the past few years. This more modern world was no different from the time I had run from. Lovers still loved, men still thought they were misunderstood. Women still needed to be wanted, and wanted to be needed. Just as the warlock's claw-like hands were about to pull me through the tear he'd made between the two time zones, I whispered:

**"If dust is light, light is fast, the air is pure and clear. Dost thou take each part of me, make it disappear? "**

A shaft of dazzling, bright silver light hit me. Azader started to pull me out of the rift. I felt his long finger nails dig into my arms. He knew he had me because he could feel my weight dragging him forward.

Suddenly he realised he should be able to see me, but there was nothing there. The shock made him lose his grip. While he was still reeling, I fell through, landed on the ground and darted away. I turned a corner, stopped, and looked back. I almost laughed out loud at the look on his face. There stood a man who thought he had taken back what he considered to be a possession, only to find he had nothing. I had no time to enjoy the sight, however. My next task was to send \*\*\**him*\*\*\* back to a place from where he could never return.

I hurried out of the village. I moved through the back streets without even having to think, where next? I had to get to the cottage to find out where in time I was. I thanked the Goddess that I always carried the Book of Shadows with me. That would prove to the current incumbent who I was. This was not the ideal way to meet my ancestor, but I knew she would help me. I didn't think it would be wise to enter her home with this family book in my possession. There was that problem with the anomaly I mentioned before. I moved to a huge tree that was very old and gnarly. I reached up and tucked my bag into a crevice in the lower branches. That taken care of, I walked up to the cottage door. Before I could raise my hand to knock, the door opened. In front of me was the oldest breathing person I had ever seen. Everything about her screamed "Witch."

"Get inside, quickly," she croaked. "He will be here in minutes. Use your invisibility spell now." I did just that. "I will keep them talking. You must find an incantation to send that monster out of this realm for good." I heard them before they swung around the bend in the path. Loud voices, jangling horse bridles, and raucous laughter. Some twelve men grouped themselves in front of the door of the cottage.

"Where is she, crone?" I heard Azadar shout. "It will be best for you if you give her up." My dear, brave, great, great grandmother faced that mob, looked each of them in the eye, then turned back to Azadar. "I know you all. I know your families. I have brought most of you into this world. I have given you tinctures to cure you, ointments to soothe you, potions to give you what you yearn for. Is this how you treat me in return? "

One young lad, braver than the rest, turned to the men around him and said, "Mistress Harraughty is correct, we owe her more than this disservice." Before anyone could react, Azadar drew his sword and sliced the poor boy's throat open.

The primaeval sound his father made tore my heart into a thousand pieces. Low and tortured, it boded ill for Azadar. This was a pivotal time. I knew, I simply knew, that Azadar was finally on his own. Each of these men, who had backed him through fear, which was mixed with greed, now saw that he cared nothing for any of them. They could so easily be next. In the interim, I had not been idle. I almost had a plan. In the dim light of the cottage, I was drawn to the long table at the back of the room, the place I knew so well. This was where meals were eaten, potions made and spells cast around this well-scrubbed pine monolith. What I needed, I would most surely find there. I would not need the ingredients hanging from the hooks above it. My fervent wish was that the Book of Shadows would be where it should be. If

not, all was lost. This time, this one time, was when I could wreak vengeance on what was less than a man.

It was there, in a silk kerchief, ready to aid me in vanquishing an evil tyrant. When I found the incantation, all I needed was voice enough to cut through the night, strength enough to hold my ground, and the conviction that I had all my kin behind me, stretching back through the ages. I cast aside the spell that had hidden me and opened the door. The horsemen, as one, backed away from Azadar. I moved forward, taking hold of my kin's hand. In a voice I had no idea I could produce, I exclaimed:

**"The man who causes pain will feel it. Whoever deals out death will feel it. robs and maims will feel it. Those who have no soul will feel it. To Oymyakon's frigid fields be gone. Then, for only seconds, feel it. "**

I had banished him to the vast snow-covered wilderness of Oymyakon, in a time before time. With an extreme subarctic climate, it was the coldest place in the world. I knew later I would feel guilty about what I had done, but it was the only way. Without thinking about it, I took a deep relaxing breath, then another. The air smelled cleaner somehow and there was a warm breeze carressing my skin. Then I knew I had been right to send that monster away. Even the space around me felt as though it had healed.

Shamefaced and silent, the men turned back to the village. I knew future generations of my family would be left in peace now, free to live in this cottage and do so without fear driving their every waking moment. That meant, in theory, I could return to my own time. I gave it a second's consideration. On reflection, I didn't think I could give up my laptop, central heating and morning espresso, even for the delights of fresh well water and hot and cold running rats.

The End.

*Kate's a newbie to **another** realm, but I get the feeling she'll be with us again. At least, I hope so. This story delighted me as did my email conversations with Kate. Her obvious joy in her work shines through her sprightly prose. Welcome aboard, Kate. Enjoy your stay.*