

"Dark Moons and Dead People"

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The moon is new, and it's dark. Black, almost. This is the worst time of the month for me-- menstruation hits on the night of the new moon, unfailingly, leaving me utterly at odds with the world with the surge of hormones and cramps. As if that weren't enough, the new moon is also the night when the dregs of the spirit world rumble sullenly in the world-- the darkness in the night gives them that freedom.

I'm not Death... or at least, not someone with his capabilities. I am just a plain old... necromancer, I guess. I see the dead. I talk to the dead. Sometimes I eat dinner with them, too, though it generally ends up being me munching on a sandwich as some supremely depressed newcomer moans about his or her demise. As far as I know about my otherworldly origins, there's been some sort of spiritual sort of inheritance passed down through my line and some story of someone who was Death's mistress many, many years ago-- though I'm not completely sure about that. The upshot about all this is that I am actually unique in a fairly huge way, unlike all those depressed children who pretend to be different though they're really all similar to everyone else. But the downside is that the tie to the dead is never shut... and so while I nod in passing to every ghost I see, everyone else thinks I'm the local insane asylum escapee.

It doesn't help that I'm sort of the keeper of the cemetery here. It's an old place. Graves here date all the way back through the seventeenth century. We have our share of stern aldermen and saintly housewives and god-fearing men and women; and then we have our murderers and liars and thieves. And beneath the more contemporary additions, we have the remnants of a few ancient armies and things so

long forgotten that they don't even remember who they are themselves. Those are the really dangerous entities here, but they almost never do anything besides lend this place a creepy atmosphere.

It used to be a right terrible place to be, this graveyard; people still won't come near it after twilight, and certainly not before dawn. The only really safe time to be here is between high noon and two-o'clock. But that's for everyone else. I live behind the gates that keep the dead in, mostly because the shack on the premise came with the job. During the day I tend the grounds; at night, I hang with the dead. (Sometimes I even carry a dim old-fashioned kerosene lantern when I feel like I need some humor.)

Remember how I said I didn't have Death's capabilities? I really don't, honestly. Death can do a lot of stuff-- spirits await his beck and call, willingly or unwillingly, and it's he who created the laws that govern them. I suppose that I just enforce his work here with the bindings on the boundaries of the land to keep them from interfering with the living. Basically, when they dead rise up, I knock 'em back down. But only in my graveyard.

But back to the new moons I was talking about. This one will be *awful*. It lands on All Hallow's, or the thirty-first of October, or Halloween, whatever you call it. Without the sun's reflection to light the night, there's that much less of a binding on their power, and there is even less I can do on the day of the year when the spirit world's presence is at its strongest. I've been building up the wards on this land over the past month, with the general chicken-blood rituals and occasional ominous Latin chants, but there's really only so much I can do. All I have is this old book filled with notes passed down to me

by my great-grandparents, and it's HUGE-- trying to find any one reference in it is like hiking through a swamp.

The council I'd held the night before with those who dwelt in my cemetery were not happy to listen to my pleas. They didn't like the control I'd been exercising over their actions in the past. The dissidents, the unruliest of their lot, were rousing those of like minds to their cause, and there were few spirits who were neutral about the issue-- and even less who cared for my views. And there was a powerful new spirit, recently interred but weeks ago; a former local businessman or some such. Vicious, he was. Whatever cruel streak he controlled in life was left free now, added to his lingering fury for no longer living. He'd been murdered, too--some altercation with a business partner. His was a commanding presence, and he was not at all inclined to listen to one such as I. Already his arrival had started an uproar in the dwellers here, and there seemed to have been a recent upheaval in the hierarchy.

Needless to say, I was a more than a little concerned. So this evening I anxiously watched the gates of the cemetery from my front window as the crowd of spirits took shape in front of them. They wanted to leave, as always; and I would not let them, as always.

The sun slipped below the horizon. The last rays of light dimmed. I knew the wards were solid; once set into the land, they were nigh unbreakable. So said that crummy book, so said the stories I'd heard... As long as I refused to let the spirits pass, none could leave. But still, the crowd in front of the gate worried me. This was different from the years past. These spirits were not trying to get out. They were expecting something. They were waiting.

For what?

My answer came much later after dusk had settled and slipped into night. The spirits at the gate had only grown in number, and I remained steadfastly at my window vigil. The increase in the crowd was worrisome--especially so since the Nameless Ones (I call them the Really Really Old Ones) had actually manifested and were stalking around in their indistinct shapes.

Then, the businessman arrived. I sensed his violent presence moments before he became visible. His arrival caused a stir; like a ripple effect, the spirits' attention shifted gradually until he was the focus. Ugly emotions thrummed in an almost tangible vibration; I could see fine ripples in the cup of cold tea on the windowsill and I thought I could hear a faint note hum that was almost musical. My stomach twisted into a knot: this was definitely not good.

The hum turned into a shriek, and the gates blasted open as the wards that had been in place for a near century shattered. I gasped and fell against the windowsill as the anchor locking the wards to me was pulled taut and ripped free. The crowd roared and surged out through the gates as I gasped like some dying fish against the windowpane.

I got back to my feet and staggered to the door-- but it was too late. They had started their rampage through the town and there was nothing I could do to stop them.

There was a faint scream that echoed in the chill air that was answered by another and another. My stomach flipped as the number grew. There was not a lot that spirits could do to those behind secure thresholds, safe in their homes, but

for those who lived in apartments or who were out on the streets...

I figured I should probably try to do something, so I did the sensible thing and went to the basement. I had no idea what to do, but I thought that the really old book might be able to do something. Scratch that, it was my only choice-- I had no idea what to do.

I flipped through the book, scanning the pages. Stories and ideas were eyed and dismissed. Nearly everything was about strengthening wards that previously existed and creating new ones--in the middle of the day, in broad daylight. Hardly helpful.

My attention was caught by a hasty scribble that mentioned blood bindings. A blood binding, I remembered, was incredibly powerful. It was a difficult, ancient spell, unbelievably crude, and determined almost entirely by the mental strength of the binder--but the payoff was enormous. It could be used to stop or reign in powerful, unhappy spirits... or large groups of annoyed ghosts. I held the spot with a finger and flipped back a little more, and found the directions to run the ritual.

Shit, I thought. That'll be hard. But this was my cemetery, and it was my responsibility...

I stood for a moment in front of the open book. Then I went to the shelves and started pulling out what I'd need. I tried not to thin about what would happen, because there was no point in psyching yourself out before the main event... right?

Twenty minutes later I was standing in the very heart of the graveyard-- the middle of the eldest and most ancient

resting sites. I will not lie, even I thought it was creepy. I carefully traced a pentacle in a circle seven feet across and set a fat pillar candle at each of the five points, each encircled by a glass candle protector to keep the flames from blowing out in the wind. I set out an old stone bowl and crouched next to it. Taking a deep breath, I slashed the flint knife that was the last tool of the ritual down my forearm along the vein. No, I do not have a needless flair for the dramatic-- this is what the spell required.

The blood poured into the bowl. When I judged I had enough for what I was going to do I whipped out the roll of gauze I'd tucked into my coat pocket and wrapped most of it tightly over the throbbing cut. I judged that I had spilled nearly a quart of blood. Ridiculously dangerous, of course, but the price demanded of the spell.

I stood up with difficulty holding the bowl in front of me. I tipped it-- a little blood splashed to the ground-- and then I knew where every spirit who regularly inhabited the ground currently was.

I heard the ghostly screams of the townspeople and saw flashes of what was going on in the town: a spirit tormented a terrified little girl it had cornered in a dark alley, a group of teenagers chased by a demented feminine ghost ran towards a car, a fierce, charging hunt down Main Street that had some skeletal riders mounted on scorched-looking horses.

I shivered and shook the sensations from my head and began the chant that called the dead back to the cemetery. This chant was very, very simple-- a few words repeated over and over that, I think, translated roughly to "Come hither and

stay," though it looked like it was in Etruscan or another language equally odd and obscure and I wasn't really sure.

The instant they became aware of what I was doing, they fought. Another chorus of screams rose, but they were from no living throats. I raised my voice and continued the chant, tipped the bowl, and began to pour my blood into the ground, tracing the pentacle I'd made earlier with a thin, unbroken stream of the still warm liquid.

Bands of iron wrapped around my lungs and the temperature dropped to frigidity. The spirits-- all of them-- were crammed around me, crowded up against the circle, frosting over the ground and causing the candles to flicker wildly. They howled at me, naked fury adding its own peculiar scream to the din. I shuddered and my chant stuttered, chest heaving as the cold sank into my lungs and froze my breath. I continued to speak and pour, though I had an idea that I was screaming the words. I couldn't hear a thing.

The last of the blood closed the final point of the star, and the terrible cacophony ratcheted up another few decibels. My ears popped and I dropped the bowl and clapped my hands over my ears; the next thing I knew, I'd fallen and curled up into a nauseated ball in the center of the circle. The spirits were still fighting the binding, but miraculously it appeared I hadn't smudged any lines, and the spell was still there. I forced them down and down and down, and it felt like I was trying to sustain some supremely high note in the middle of a complicated aria. The count went on and on and on, and suddenly everything stopped.

When I woke up, it was drizzling. It had clearly been some time: gray dawn was breaking over the horizon, and I was soaked through and bitterly cold.

A young man in a black business suit was sitting on his heels next to me, supremely unconcerned about the water that was plastering his hair to his forehead. He grinned when he saw I was awake and started to speak. I tried for a few seconds to hear what he was saying before he stopped and frowned. He reached out and gently covered my ears with his hands; I felt a sharp pain and suddenly I could hear the wind sloughing through the rickety old trees that bordered the fence.

"Hello there," he said in a light baritone. "You did something right stupid, aye?"

I stared at him. "What?"

He shook his head with a cheery grin. "Don't worry about your dead, that binding'll keep them quiet for a year at the least."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded faintly, and sat up. It was a really stupid decision, because the whole world started spinning way too fast and I started to fall over again.

The man made a disapproving noise and caught me. "Here, I'll help," he said, and pulled out a shiny silver hip flask. He made me drink a few sips of whatever he had in it-- it tasted a lot like alcohol and cinnamon-- and within seconds the world stopped flicking in and out of focus.

He pulled me up and linked an arm around my waist before I could stop him. "Let me get you inside," he informed me without the least sense of me having a choice. "You can clean up the mess later."

"What? Wait--"

The guy completely ignored me as he propelled me across the graveyard and back to my house. Within minutes he had hauled me up the steps to the front and had successfully deposited me in a squishy hand-me-down armchair in front of the fireplace.

"Here," he said when he'd covered me with a quilt over my protests. He pulled a slender volume out of a pocket and handed it to me. "This should help with the rebuilding of the wards. They'll be better than the ones that were here before-- not that that's saying much."

I looked at the book. It was bound in black leather. I opened it and blinked at the precisely inked writing that filled the pages.

"Thanks," I said slowly, and looked up in time to see him open my front door

"My pleasure," he said, and tipped a non-existent hat. "Just whistle me up if something else happens."

"Wait! How--"

"Inside of the back cover!" he answered, and the door shut behind him.

I flipped the book over and cracked the binding in my haste to see what was written in the back of the little book. *Malach*, it said-- part of the ancient Hebrew title for Death-- and following it was a seven-digit phone number.