

Part Three

THE BLUE MOON

By *Madame Morpheme*

Following a visit by a powerful spectre, self-employed medium Madame Morpheme finally summoned her lost lover, Javier, to her side. Appearing as a mutilated ghost, Javier was more concerned about the needs of his paramour and disappeared on an errand before explaining the tragedy that had befallen him. Once again, our heroine was left grieving and at the mercy of her uninvited roommates.

New York City, 1967

MY doves, the blood red ruby in the ring I wear on my right pinkie is glimmering in the candlelight. I inherited the ring from my grandmother, and it's as if she knows I'm going to have to pawn it, even though she's been far away, in the beyond-the-beyond for many years now.

I like to indulge in fantasy as much as anyone, but certain life situations necessitate realism, for instance, when your rent is overdue. I miss Javier, but I'm sick of the longing. Javier found his way back to me once, but a second time, when I'm down on my charm and black magic (never mind luck), seems too much to expect. I know firsthand it takes a while for ghosts to learn their powers.

Damn Javier for disappearing to find

me rent money and a pretzel. That was a fool's errand, not a hero's quest. It's easier to suppress all melancholic agony and be angry at him for leaving — and the fact I spent all my savings looking for him the first time. When you work for yourself, cancelling appointments is always a bad idea.

I've grown comfortable here on the top floor of the St. Mark's Hotel but it's time to move to a smaller, cheaper room on the second floor. Moving is stressful enough, but I'm also trying to get my old clients back, and hustling for new ones. I just need to hold it together until after my new client arrives tonight. He's a referral. All I know about him is that he's tall and is looking for someone from the other side. I can handle whatever grief he brings: this place is already saturated in it. I just need him to show up. As you know, I've been running my business out of my room for a long time, but police visits after a recent spate of violence, robberies, and accidental deaths have placed the hotel's reputation somewhere in its rock bottom basement. That, and my ghost roommates are too noisy and disruptive for some of my more sensitive clients. It's hectic.

Tonight of all nights my deceased mother is also skittering around the

hotel's airspace in a fretful tizzy, annoying me. I'd prefer to pack up my things in (relative) peace.

My roommates are not happy about the impending move. They all lived in the budget rooms before they each met their demise, and somehow they know if they tag along with me, their grief will intensify. Or, in Ace's case, amplify. Visual and auditory reminders will trigger their worst memories. I've been coaching them on following the path to the light instead, but they won't listen.

I need to pack quickly. Half my gowns are folded on my bed in neat rows, but there are dozens more to go. I glance away for a second and Chardonnay manages to undo all my work. The dresses are all strewn across the floor.

"Stop that! I mean it."

"You're mean," she says. "I'm not going downstairs, wh-where I... he...."

"So don't. You're welcome to cross over now. I've told you how." I start refolding dresses, beginning with a favourite royal blue one.

"Accept you're dead and drift gracefully towards your light!" Harmony singsongs, while filching my best scissors from my dressing table as if I won't notice.

Ace drops down from the ceiling and pushes Harmony out of the way. "Pick another tarot card. We've got to change your fortune!"

"It's going to be the same again," I sigh.

"No, no. I shuffled the deck for 20 minutes this time," Ace insists, his ghost face floating inches away from mine. "Pick!"

I pull a card from the middle of the deck and turn it over. The Tower. As if still onstage, Ace does an over-dramatic

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rockstar dropkick split to the floor and all the cards from the deck fly across the room. "Everything is not falling apart," he grumbles. "Why not The Sun? Why not The Star? Why no cups and no particulars?"

I stop folding and smile. "I've taught you a thing or two. But it's pentacles, honey."

"Watch what I can do now, though." Ace waves his hands and gathers the full deck back through the air into a tidy pile in his grasp. He sits down on the bed on a pile of feather boas and begins shuffling again.

I nod, acknowledging his newfound agility, and fold a pink polyester mini dress with a wavy red bric-a-brac trim. But Harmony is too quiet. I turn and catch her standing by the window, clumps of her ghost hair in one hand, scissors in the other.

"Oh, Harmony, it's just going to reappear. You can't change any more." Chardonnay grabs the scissors and stabs herself in the gut. There's a splurt of ghost blood. I look away as she pokes a scissor blade into her left eye.

"You should have become an English teacher, like I told you," my mother whispers in my left ear. "This is nonsense. It's your grandmother's ring and all. You'd have health benefits. And a pension," she whispers in my right ear, circling. "Lunch breaks."

"Not now!" I shout, exasperated.

Everyone ignores Chardonnay as she pops her right eyeball in and out of her skull.

"Auuughh!" Harmony's long hair reappears and she lunges at Chardonnay for the scissors to try again.

I feel a dizzy twinge, and the metal of my grandmother's ring tightens around my finger. I can't handle a premonition right now. Maybe it's just time for a break.

"Who wants some Madame Zee?" I pull my favourite hardcover book of spells off the shelf and sit down beside Ace on the bed.

"It's zed, my dear," my mother whispers in my ear. "Tsk."

"It's zee in New York," I growl.

"You told us that already." Harmony whines. My roommates aren't charmed

by my mother either, mostly because she never talks directly to them. It's rude. Chardonnay plucks both of her eyes out and rolls them in her hand. It's her new thing to express irritation.

"Chapter four. Okay, listen up because we need this. 'Protective spells,'" I read. "It is of utmost importance for any psychic medium to keep her environment clean and clear of negative, or even malevolent, energies. Beyond the basic techniques with sage, incense, and Palo Santo sticks covered in chapter three, there are a few advanced spells you should incorporate into your everyday practice."

Chardonnay nods in agreement as she flies upwards to perch on the ceiling. Ace hands me a card. I turn it over, show him it's The Tower again, and hand it back. Harmony dances her fingers across the book's cover. "Read the story," she prompts.

"Any scrying bowl used for the purpose of seeing into the future can also be used to collect dark energies. Fill the bowl with water when you leave for a short time and set it in the furthest corner of the room from the door. Upon your return, dispose of the water down a drain immediately."

"Do you even have a crying bowl?" Ace peers at my shelf of magic props, candles, and tinctures as he continues to shuffle the cards.

"No, I don't have a proper scrying bowl. But here's another option: spell for protecting entryways. Envision a bright light marking a vivid and fortified boundary between your door and the outside."

I stop reading. "I guess I can't do that, you know, in case Javier is trying to come back." I scowl. "I know he's probably not, but if he is, and I make a protective boundary around the door, how will he know to fly through the window?" Chardonnay pulls the curtains back and gazes outside.

"Wow," she says, enigmatically.

I place the book in a cardboard packing box and start adding the props and trinkets from the shelf.

"Whoah! How'd I do that!" As Ace shuffles the tarot deck, dollar bills appear between the cards. Harmony pulls them out and starts collecting a stack.

"Money!" Chardonnay claps her hands. "I'm putting everything back. We're staying."

"Well, maybe. It'll tide us over for awhile if I can convince my clients to start showing up again." I smile and look out the window at the rare, blue-tinted moon, knowing I'm receiving a second chance. There could be no brighter sign. I turn and scan the shadows for a glimmer.

"Javier. You're back."

"I kept my promise, *mi tesoro*."

His voice! I nearly weep. "I want to see you," I wave my hands through the air, and watch Javier's sturdy shape begin to flicker in and out, like static on a television. "What happened to you?"

"I can't tell you. It's for your safety. There are some things you shouldn't know." Javier's face re-materializes in front of mine, but more faded and serious than before.

"Tell me."

"I was working as a courier for a company. In secret." Javier's ghost eyes flash bright, then dim. "They said I lost a package. A wooden crate with something very important inside. But it wasn't there for me to pick up in the first place, so how could I drop it off? They wouldn't believe me."

Javier waves his hand at Harmony and she places the stack of bills in it. He bows and hands the money to me. "I didn't get a final paycheck. So I went back and retrieved what I was owed. For you."

Chardonnay dances around the room as I count the bills. She returns all the gowns to hangers, and trinkets to the shelf. She cracks the cardboard packing box, flattens it, and shoves it under the bed. I calculate I have enough for another two weeks of rent

and expenses.

There's a shriek and I look up. What's Harmony freaking out about now?

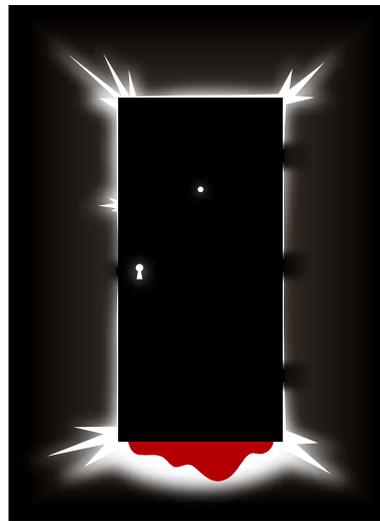
My roommates fly back in terror, clustering in the upper corner of the room. They've never huddled together like that before. Chardonnay and Ace aren't easily spooked. Harmony is so scared she doesn't make a sound. She points towards the door, her pale ghost arm cutting an arc of cold light through the candlelit gloom.

There's a curdling scream, followed by a thud and the rustle of something heavy dragging across the floor. Then a horrible scraping sound, like shards of bone across a long blade. It's all coming from the hallway, outside my door. I look down to see Javier's hands on my shoulders.

"Shhh," he whispers.

"You deserve better than this, my dear," my mother scolds.

The bright fluorescent light from the hall glows in the gap around the doorframe. I envision a neon pink protective rectangle around it, but it's too late. Dark liquid flows in from the hall. It pools on the floorboards and drifts like an oil spill towards my feet. I kneel down and dab my finger in, lifting it up to the light. Human blood. Pints of it. Then, as it slows to a trickle and coagulates, the distinctive smell of death.



I feel Harmony whoosh around in frantic circles overhead and watch Javier flicker beside me, fading in and out. I shiver in dread.

The doorknob rattles. Someone is trying to get in.

I hear footsteps back and forth in the hall. There are no sirens — no one is coming to rescue us. This is some dangerous business. I twist my grandmother's ring on my finger. I hide the money in my book of spells. I see visions of the door smashing as it's

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kicked through, the harsh fluorescent light spilling in, a malevolent man on the other side, his face shrouded in silhouette. He is wearing black cut-off leather gloves with missing fingers and steel-toed boots. In his hand is a small, sharp, antique metal saw. I don't know how much time we have before the first board on the door cracks and splinters in two, and the lock gives way, but I know this is what will happen. This is my new client.

"I'm sorry, *mi corazon*," Javier whispers and crouches at my feet as if to hold me steady. "They must have followed me here. One of them has powers. Like you."

"No, my love." I say. "It was my mistake. I invited the darkness in."

Ace drops the deck of cards and we all watch them flutter through the air before clattering to the floor. The Tower is crumbling. □

Part four of "The Medium is the Message" appears in the next issue of *Curios and Conundrums*.