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- Edward Bryant, *Locus* (USA)

# **So Dark the Night**

**(A Zinnea & Nightstalk Mystery)**

**by Cliff Burns**

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*for my Creator*

## Book I

April - May

“For wisdom is the property of the dead,  
A something incompatible with life; and power  
Like everything that has the stain of blood,  
A property of the living; but no stain  
Can come upon the visage of the moon  
When it has looked in glory from a cloud.”

“Blood and the Moon” by W.B. Yeats

“For the thing which I greatly feared  
is come upon me, and that which I was  
afraid of is come unto me.”

*The Book of Job*

*I want to confess.*

*This is a mystery, isn't it, and in most whodunits doesn't someone break down, sooner or later, seeking to rid themselves of an insupportable burden of guilt or, at the very least, rationalize their bad behavior? For others, it's a golden opportunity to gloat over nefarious deeds and bask in the glory of their criminal genius. They clearly relish the retelling and don't mind thoughtfully summarizing their twisted schemes for the folks who lost the thread somewhere around Chapter Eight.*

*Whatever their motivation, clearing the slate seems to come as something of a relief to the majority of wrong-doers. Naming their sins, acknowledging ownership of their crimes (without necessarily taking responsibility for them).*

*I want to make one thing clear: this is a confession, not an apology. I have no regrets when I admit, freely and with hand on heart, that I fell in love with Cassandra Zinnea the moment I set eyes on her.*

*You'd understand if you met her. The woman had an unbelievable presence, a movie star quality. Effortlessly exotic, the life force radiating from her creating an intoxicating aura of grace and elegance and sensuality.*

*The combination of beauty and that otherworldly charisma was irresistible to anyone who was on the receiving end. Including me. Especially me.*

*I've described our initial encounter before<sup>1</sup> so I won't repeat myself. Suffice to say, she made quite a first impression. Framed in the narrow doorway, a six foot-two-inch Amazon, wearing a chocolate brown, cashmere blazer and dark slacks, cut thin to accentuate the longest legs I have ever seen.*

*It's funny. At the time, I'd been with After Hours Investigations nearly six months. I had seniority, plenty of on the job experience...and yet right from the start, she was the one in charge. I deferred to her automatically; she was a natural born leader while I filled the role of adoring follower and/or brutal sidekick.*

*In the two years we were together, we found ourselves in some pretty hairy situations. I soon came to rely on her exceptional mind, physical courage and pluck...along with other talents not specifically mentioned in her curriculum vitae.*

*It was part of my job to write up daily reports for our employer. Once Cassandra Zinnea came on board, those reports expanded and I began keeping more detailed notes, especially when a case was odd or unusual for one reason or another. I suppose it could be argued that my efforts were an attempt to preserve some sort of historical record. There is also ample evidence to suggest that my Casebooks amount to little more than an extended love letter to my partner.*

*Gradually those archives, kept in heavy-duty, three-inch binders, expanded to impressive proportions. It seemed like every investigation warranted at least a few pages; understandable, perhaps, in light of the type of clientele our agency seemed to attract.*

*We had our share of duds, no question, but there were quite a few thrills and chills along the way too. There is, however, one particular case that found us at the very top of our game. Simply put, it had everything: murder, mayhem, supernatural creatures and demon spawn galore. Yeah, it was pretty far out, even by our standards.*

*There were hints, numerous signs and portents. The cats, of course. And maybe there's something to that "lines of energy" theory. Invisible strands of magical power*

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<sup>1</sup> "The Long Nap" (*The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Volume I*)

*converging on one spot. All I know for certain is that for a short period of time the city of Ilium was the focal point for a bizarre series of events, culminating in a thrilling battle with the forces of darkness and chaos that left over twenty people dead and many others permanently scarred by the experience.*

*And I was there, ladies and gents, right in the thick of things, so I'm in a good position to offer my version of what took place, who was involved, etc. I couldn't be everywhere at once so those scenes and exchanges I didn't personally witness, I've reconstructed. Certain details have been added (or omitted) for the purposes of clarity.*

*That said, in my opinion this is the only accurate account of the circumstances leading up to the "bombing" of the Leiber Building currently available. After all, the official story is that some kind of radical terrorist group was responsible for the carnage. Well, I suppose they had to say something...*

*The reality, as you're about to discover, is far more fantastic and shocking than anyone has been willing to acknowledge. And since I am a living witness, a survivor, as it were, I suppose it's up to me to set the record straight.*

*Evgeny Davidovitch Nightstalk*

## I

“We have a great deal to do,” he said sharply, “even before we leave this house. It’s pretty dark—and there’s a Thing in the garden.”

- Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild* (Samuel Weiser, Inc.; 1992) <sup>2</sup>

It was a few minutes before midnight. The witching hour.

Late for some, still early for others. Those who shun daylight and its bright attractions, venturing out only after the sun goes down.

People like me.

“Shades”, “nighthawks”...call us what you want. Nocturnal souls, temperamentally unsuited for the humdrum, nine-to-five existence of the “Gray” world. Some individuals are just wired up differently, tuned to other frequencies. You’ll find us in all walks of life: convenience store clerks, cab drivers, E.R. nurses, security guards. Hell, I heard even the President is a closet Shade. Or maybe it’s his guilty conscience keeping him awake.

Creatures of the night, every one of us. Our senses and reflexes heightened, eyes adapted to the dark. Because once dusk descends, you need all the advantages you can get. The smart ones go where the shadows are deepest. They know...

*There are those who prefer to hunt by night.*

Alone or in packs, alert for any movement, attacking without warning, killing without conscience. Predators, born and bred...

The three cars drew scant notice. They were, apparently, dark in colour, blue or maybe green, it was hard to tell because of the street lights. The way they wash everything out. Expensive, possibly foreign. License plates? You must be joking. Scores of witnesses about but no one paying attention to street traffic; they had other things on their minds. Thus the convoy of cars motoring past left nary a ripple in its wake, barely registering at all.

The lead vehicle slowed, signaling a right turn into St. Andrew’s Park. The second and third cars followed close behind. Sightseers or visiting businessmen, out for a scenic cruise around Erie after a night on the town. But a few hundred meters inside the park the cars turned again, away from the water, into a tangle of lanes that led to the picnic area, tennis courts and three separate parking lots. In the daytime, people came here to jog, eat their lunches or toss a football around. At night it’s a different story, the trees and hedges providing cover for drug deals, sexual assaults, cruising...anything your heart desires. Desperation the only prerequisite.

The cars’ headlights pointed the way, the procession moving at a steady, unhurried pace. Finally the first car’s brake lights flashed, the other two slowing immediately and pulling in behind it.

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<sup>2</sup> Most quotes courtesy Cassandra Zinnea

Five or six men got out. They approached the middle vehicle, surrounding it and smoothly extracting one of its occupants, closing ranks around him.

No indication of fear or resistance on his part. He seemed to be moving of his own volition, walking among them without displaying any outward signs of anxiety. No one saying anything. Very professional, this crew, all business.

They escorted him to the nearest bench. At one time the benches were made of wood, repainted every spring. But then the fuckin' skateboarders showed up and basically smashed them to splinters. Doing their stupid tricks and stunts. Now the benches are metal, practically indestructible and uncomfortable as hell.

They chained him down, binding his feet first, cinching them good and tight. Then they secured his wrists, shackling them to the steel support behind him. One of the men sauntered over, opened a trunk lid and returned with what looked like a gas can.

*It was a gas can.*

He proceeded to empty it over the chained man, drenching him.

Now someone else emerged from one of the vehicles. Tall and bald. Pale, thin face, Max Schreck without the teeth and stuck-on ears. Wearing a long, flowing cape, believe it or not. Very commanding presence. Towering over the captive man, throwing his arms in the air and reciting something that sounded like a record being played backward.

The guy on the bench was shaking his head, groaning, the gasoline burning his eyes. He spat on the ground, regarding the bald guy blearily, listening to his weird chatter. He had to know what was going on, what was about to happen. But did he try to talk his way out of it, make deals, offer to divulge sensitive information? At least yell for help?

Nope. I don't see him doing that.

But was he brave...or resigned?

With a final flourish, the caped figure stepped back and nodded to his accomplices.

They never hesitated. They had a job to do and they did it.

*They set him on fire.*

It was a terrible thing to behold but none of them seemed the slightest bit fazed by what they were witnessing. The sight of flesh melting and unraveling in thin strips like tissue paper. The smell of burning hair, charred meat and viscera.

And, of course, the *screams*...

It wasn't long before the cops started receiving calls about strange goings on in St. Andrew's Park. A unit was dispatched to check out reports of a suspicious fire and, at the same time, show the colours to any freaks in the vicinity. The patrol car made its way through the park. At one point the two policemen noticed people running, cutting across the grass boulevards and crashing through the low brush and hedges. The cops pulled over and followed on foot, pushing through a ring of gawking bystanders, all too aware that they were outnumbered and a long way from home.

One look at the feature attraction and the boys in blue were on the horn, yelling for backup. Within minutes, the place was swarming with five-o.

The scorched grass was steaming, the body still smoking, most horribly from the eye sockets and gaping mouth. One cop loudly inquired if anyone had brought

marshmallows. A rookie spewed triple-glazed doughnuts onto the grass in front of him. The senior officer present tried to maintain order, keep everyone back, doing his best to preserve the integrity of the crime scene until the investigating detectives arrived. Wojcek and Faro were on call, the assholes. One car left to resume its patrol. They were short-handed again and couldn't spare the men. Cutbacks were a bitch.

To kill time, the cops took turns laying bets, most tending to the view that this was a gangland thing. A settling of scores. Someone mentioned the Colombians, they were big on sending messages. Or the Asians—maybe some kinda weird *tong* shit?

On one point everyone was unanimous: *whoever* was behind this and whatever their motivations, it sure was one lousy fucking way to die.

“Listen to this, Nightstalk,” Cassandra Zinnea said, “and tell me what you think.”

I was seated opposite her, on my (neater) side of our shared desk. Which was really just a big, oak table that took up most of the center of the room. It had once resided in a school classroom and sported hand-carved hearts and daggers, fading graffiti along the lines of *Leticia V. gives good head* and *Fuck all teachers*.

I was unsticking the keys of my ancient Underwood typewriter for the umpteenth time in the past hour. Struggling to catch up on paperwork, my brain going too fast for my fingers. We were *years* behind and my partner, while an otherwise excellent operative and top-flight investigator, couldn't be bothered with mundane tasks like typing progress reports and filling out expense forms. So that was left up to me. And let me add, for the record, that liquid paper is the greatest invention since consensual sex.

Not to belabor the point or anything, but it was *her* fault I was reduced to using the manual monster in the first place. Her body's crazy electrical field wreaked havoc on computers, fax machines, copiers, etc., relegating us to the Stone Age, technologically speaking.

She read from the book she was holding:

“No one kneads us again out of earth and clay,  
no one incants our dust.  
No one.

Blessed art thou, No One.  
In thy sight would  
we bloom.  
In thy  
spite.

A nothing  
we were, are now, and ever  
shall be, blooming:  
the Nothing-, the  
No-One's-Rose...”<sup>3</sup>

She looked up. “There's more but...I wanted you to hear that part.”

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<sup>3</sup> From *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (Translation by John Felstiner)

“Cripes,” I muttered, plucking apart two more keys with black-tipped fingers, “and I thought *I* was cynical. That guy takes the cake.”

“Cynical...*hmmm.*”

“It's pretty bloody bleak, you have to admit.”

“It's called ‘Psalm’ and it's written by Paul Celan. Brilliant, amazing poet. His family died in a concentration camp but somehow he survived.”

“Is it from our collection?” I indicated the bookshelves lining the wall to my left. They went all the way to the ceiling and were crammed with hundreds of mystical, occult, and metaphysical tomes covering everything from the arcane to the ridiculous. I'm talking about mouldering books of spells, philtres and potions dating back millennia vying for space with *Bullfinch's Mythology* and Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Graves' *White Goddess*. Colin Wilson's *The Occult*. A copy of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (excellent bathroom reading). At least four unauthorized biographies of Michael Jackson. Every single Charles Berlitz book. I kid you not.

Instead of answering, she fixed her attention on the telephone. “Excuse me,” she said, a beat or two before it started ringing. She grinned, knowing how much I hated that particular parlour trick.

“*After Hours Investigations*: ‘Solving mysteries while the competition sleeps—’ *What?* Could you repeat that? Yes, that's what I thought you said. Well, now....” She leaned back in her chair. “Let's be clear on this. Exactly how *big* is it? Because I have to tell you, sport, with me size *definitely* counts. I've had experiences with some seriously well-hung—”

I reached over and jammed my thumb down on the button. “I wish you wouldn't do that. It only encourages the perverts.” It was a variation of a rebuke I'd delivered on at least a dozen prior occasions. “If the Old Man would spring for it, we could get call display and then I'd find out who these creeps are, drive over and lay a serious hurtin' on 'em.”

She was more forgiving. “It livens things up around here. And if I can give some poor loser a thrill, I say why not? Besides, if *you'd* answer once in awhile--”

“Ah *ah.*” I waggled an ink-stained finger at her. “Let's not go there. We have a clear division of responsibilities in this organization. Not only that,” playing the martyr card, “I have to do all the grunt work around here so answering the phone is the *least* you can do.”

“Gee,” she said, arching one meticulously plucked eyebrow, “I seem to recall an occasion or two when I've done a good deal *more* than my fair share. Like the time I saved your butt from a vicious, man-eating *striga* in that fleabag hotel in Phoenix. The one you were just about to...you know. You remember *that* particular incident, don't you?”<sup>4</sup>

I winced. It hadn't been one of my finer hours and she knew it. “I think people like it better when a woman answers. It's more, uh, reassuring.”

“Bull.”

“The Old Man said so?” I ventured hopelessly.

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<sup>4</sup> “The Phantom in Room 306” (*The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Vol. II*). Observant readers will note how often in the course of our adventures I fall prey to succubus-like creatures. See: “The Mystery of Crooked Lake” (*The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Vol. I*), “The Lady and the Stake” (*Casebooks, Vol. I*); “Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap” (*Casebooks, Vol. II*), “Bloody Harvest” (*Casebooks, Vol. II*); “The Girl With the 1-900 Eyes” (*Casebooks, Vol. III*); etc.

She sniggered.

I suppose I could have pulled rank since I had seniority and was, ergo, her superior. In reality, that amounted to a small hill of rotting lima beans. When it came to sheer brain power, natural talent, education, social standing and just about every other important criterion you care to name, Cassandra Zinnea left me eating her dust.

She had a sharp mind, the moves and agility of a champion athlete and the face of a super model. I told her once she was a cross between Carolyn Jones (the original “Morticia Addams”) and Uma Thurman. Then I made the mistake of asking what actor or character *I* brought to mind and she hardly gave it any thought before replying: “I’d have to say Bob Hoskins. Yeah. A short, mean, hairy, hard-headed cannonball, that’s you. Ferociously loyal and not nearly as dumb as he lets on. The best friend and asskickingest sidekick a girl could ask for.”

I took it as a compliment so I wouldn’t have to kill her

The phone buzzed. I pointedly kept typing and picking apart keys. Finally she gave in and answered, though I could feel the heat of her disapproving gaze on my bald spot.

“Yes, sir?” The call originated from the inner office, about twenty feet and a locked door away. Cassandra scribbled on a pad, jotting furiously as she tried to keep up. “Right. Yes, sir, will do. And we have nothing more at this point? Uh huh. So is this an official case then? I mean, is there an actual client or--yes, I understand. Very good, sir.” Her hand shook as she hung up. Talking to the Old Man did that to you.

“What did he say?” My heart had speeded up and every detail in the room seemed more vivid.

“The usual: find out what we can and do what’s necessary.”

“So...what exactly are we dealing with?”

“Something bad.” She read off the notes she had ticked down: *midnight...St. Andrew’s Park...man burned...no suspects at this time...*

I didn’t like the sound of it and said so. Then: “I wonder how he heard.” I checked my watch. “It’s not even twelve-thirty. Who’s his source? How did he know? Does he have a police scanner? Maybe he uses a fucking Ouija board--”

“Who knows? He has his ways, that’s why he’s the Old Man. We’d better get going.” She marked her place in the Celan book and stood, stretching sinuously. It was a breath-taking sight. “To St. Andrew’s Park, Jeeves.” I unhooked my jacket from the back of my chair. “Shouldn’t be too hard to find. And if all else fails, we’ll just let that trusty nose of yours show us the way...”

Strange, but true: I possess a special faculty that enables me to locate crime scenes almost by innate instinct.<sup>5</sup> I just drive around and gradually feel myself drawn to a certain area, then a certain street, an otherwise nondescript house in the middle of a seemingly ordinary block...

Within fifteen minutes I was signaling to turn into the park, passing a row of short, neo-Soviet apartment blocks on the left. “Lego architecture,” my partner sniffed, with evident disdain.

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<sup>5</sup> As highlighted in “The Affair of the Scotsman’s Kilt”, “Who Framed Roger Radek?” (*The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Vol. I*); “The Curse of the Danish”, “Marlowe’s Last Case” (*Casebooks, Vol. II*); etc.

After that, it was easy. We actually followed the coroner's meat wagon right to the spot. There were a number of cops milling about, looking very serious and official. You could see they were spooked.

They had affixed yellow crime scene tape to everything in sight and considerately draped a plastic tarp over the crispy critter on the bench. There were a good number of bystanders and rubber-neckers, as well as a TV news crew that were about to deliver their first "Live" report from the scene. *Vultures*.

It didn't take long to get ourselves up to speed, mainly by tapping the news hounds. They were giddy, thrilled at scooping their rival station, high-fiving one another after finishing their brief segment.

The victim was as yet unidentified and details were still sketchy but it was almost certain that he had been alive and conscious when set ablaze. Heaving forward in those chains, screaming until the blood and tissue boiled in his throat—

I was glad the breeze was blowing the other way.

Killing someone by setting them on fire. What in the name of whatever god currently in vogue had this man done to deserve such treatment? The extreme nature of the act suggested a grudge, an old score settled. Then again, sometimes druggies did crazy things to each other for no reason at all. But the Old Man wouldn't interest himself in something like that. As usual, it was up to us to fill in the blanks.

First things first: who was the dead guy and what was his story (and they always had one)? If we were lucky there might even be eyewitnesses, although from past experience I knew our chances on that front weren't great. For most people the distinction between a cop and a private dick is an extremely fine one. What it comes down to is *they don't want to get involved*.

Cassandra was chatting up a uniformed rookie with vomit stains on his pant cuffs. She rewarded him for one particularly interesting tidbit with her phone number. From the expression on the kid's face you'd have thought he'd just won a lottery. And, in a way, I guess he had.

I gritted my teeth and tried to find something else to look at. Unfortunately, the first two things my eyes settled on were the distinctive figures of Detectives Dennis Wojack and Stanley Faro, closing in on me like a couple of famished wolves.

"Well, well, if it ain't Dr. Watson," Faro sneered. He was as big and ugly as a Yeti with mange. About as smart too. "I was just telling my partner here how *weird* you Shades get after awhile. Must be from never seeing the sun." He eyed me up and down. "You're a fuckin' waste, Nightstalk, you know that? Always playin' second banana to her. Easy to see which of you is the brains of the operation." It was a pitiful crack, what passed for wit down at the cop shop. Faro had allegedly been demoted to the graveyard shift as punishment for hassling an attractive hooker (i.e. undercover policewoman) for a free blowjob. You could tell he'd never catch on to the unique rhythms of the night.

"I thought I told you to mind your own business, shit for brains." Wojack had an old grudge to settle with me and wasn't one to forgive and forget. Fine with me. As long as they kept the peace and didn't make a nuisance of themselves, I promised myself I wouldn't grab the two of them and wring their necks like a couple of corn-fed chickens.

I could see they were getting ready to run me off. Before it got to that point Cassandra arrived, radiating positive vibes and clouds of enticing pheromones. "*Hel-lo*, boys," she purred. "Funny how our paths keep crossing, isn't it?"

Wojeck scowled. “Goddamnit, woman, tell the Old Man to stay outta this. Let us ordinary, hard-working cops handle it and you bunch fuck off. Make sure you pass that along.”

“Roger, wilco, A-okay,” Cassandra affirmed, saluting briskly. “Now be a good boy and tell me: who was the guest of honour at tonight's barbeque? Seems like a lot of trouble to go through to kill somebody. Why not just shoot the guy? Come on, Dennis,” she pouted, practically fluttering her eyelashes at the ugly mug. “You can tell me...”

Wojeck looked like he was about to say something. He opened his mouth but Faro jabbed him with an admonitory elbow. Wojeck glared at Cassandra. “Don’t think you can fuck with me. You screw up this investigation, either one of you, and I’ll nail you up like Jesus at Easter.”

She rolled her eyes. “Will you at least tell us--”

“I’m telling you, it’s *nothing*. Forget about it.” Wojeck yawned, clearly bored with life in general. “Likely just another gangbang thing. This guy’ll turn out to be some shitbag dealer who got in too deep and got taught a very important lesson.”

“Which was?” This I had to hear.

Either my eyes were deceiving me or he actually smiled. “Don’t play with matches.”

Faro guffawed. “Good one, Den. Right below the fuckin’ waterline.”

“Thanks for your help,” Cassandra called as they trudged off, slapping each other on the back, too busy or too tired to get into it with us.

“So what do you think? Was he right about this being gang-related?”

At first I thought she was going to play it inscrutable and not answer. “I’d say there was a definite purpose to this. Burning him, the suffering it would inflict...” She sounded distant, dreamy. “It’s close to my period so I feel extra sensitive tonight. Can you feel it, the energy?” Closing her eyes. “What happened here? Who was this guy to leave a signature like that?”

“Cass?”

She rubbed her forehead. “This place is still hot...wow, the residuals are just...the air is practically *buzzing*.”

I didn’t hear any buzzing. Then again my teeth were chattering so loud it was hard to hear anything. It was cold and getting colder. Not good for my arthritis. My poor hands were aching and I’d forgotten my calfskin gloves in the car. Meanwhile, the tarp had blown or slipped off the body. Someone in the thinning crowd moaned. It wasn’t a pretty sight.

She turned to me. “Can you get some readings? I’m curious to see what the equipment says.”

The problem was I couldn’t get close enough to take accurate measurements. Which meant that eight grand worth of paranormal gear in my trunk was, for all intents and purposes, useless. I did my best, going to work with the tri-field meter, testing for electrical and magnetic activity in the area. I paced about the perimeter—there were definite “hot” spots, unexplained spikes worthy of further investigation. I started jotting down numbers, noting the location of my findings on a rough sketch I made of the crime scene.

“Take a look. You’re right about one thing: mucho E-M energy was released here tonight.” I showed her what I had. The unit was about the size and shape of a cell phone. She read it over my shoulder.

“Well, well...” She paused, absorbing the figures. She knew the numbers and math better than I did but didn’t seem inclined to share her impressions.

“We should get going,” I urged. Faro was glaring in our direction. “I don’t think there’s much more to learn here.”

She didn’t answer right away. “Sorry...I was kind of drifting a bit.” A wan smile. “Wow, I feel just *zapped*. Whatever caused this...” She thrust her hands into her coat pockets. “*Brrrr*. First, let’s take a few discreet pictures, have a word with some of these people. Find out if anyone saw anything.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.” I trailed after her. “Then what?”

“I’ll make some calls. I think it’s time to consult an expert.”

I winced, knowing what that probably meant. “So which crackpot do you intend wasting our time and money on this time? Keeping in mind the Old Man has been paying closer attention to our expenses of late and asking some pointed questions.” Not that my protests would make the slightest impression. It didn’t matter that I was a *guy*, a full-fledged alpha male with the excess body hair to prove it. In the end, she usually got her way.

“I want to talk to Eva Jauch.”

“You mean *Madame* Eva, don’t you? Why not Sanjay, that asshole astrologer guy or Perry, the sheep entrails dude? At least they’re mildly amusing.”

She shook her head stubbornly. “Eva *knows* things.”

“Eva is nothing but a two-bit, crazy old dope fiend, a fraud in every sense of the word. You’ve seen how she operates.”

She chuckled. “You’re just mad because she blabbed about how madly in love with me you are.” I blushed from head to toe. “It’s okay, Nightstalk, you big palooka,” she cooed. “I love you too.”

The number of spectators had dwindled, the cold taking its toll on even the hardiest ghouls. “This is a waste of time and you know it. Nobody’ll know anything, nobody saw anything--”

“Use a little charm and persuasion,” she suggested. Then she glanced at me. “On second thought,” she amended, “maybe you’d better let *me* do the talking...”

I’d had my share of run-ins with Eva Jauch and wasn’t anxious to repeat the experience. Ours wasn’t what you’d call a warm and fuzzy relationship. We maintained a mutual dislike that was based, in part, on the fact that we hated each other’s guts.

I considered her nothing more than a crafty charlatan who preyed on the gullible and stupid. She operated out of a tiny storefront in a neighborhood that was in the process of being “reclaimed”. The yuppies hadn’t chased the junkies and whores out yet but it was only a matter of time. Yuppies are like the creature in “The Thing”: once they start multiplying, you’re fucked.

We got there just after ten the following evening. The lights were on, her sandwich board propped out front. “*Readings and Consultations: By Appointment Only.*”

I didn’t have much truck with mediums and psychics and “Madame” Eva was one of the reasons why. She claimed all sorts of extrasensory powers but I suspected her

“gift” had more to do with reading a person’s body language, a relatively commonplace talent. She’d tell you a bunch of general stuff and based on how you reacted (she could detect the subtlest twitch), she’d either pursue a point or back off and try something else.

“All that crap she spouts about being able to read people’s auras--”

“She *can*,” my partner insisted.

“Yeah, right. Supposedly she sees different colours and shit? So, what, if your aura’s purple you need to get laid and if it’s orange you should eat more fiber...”

Needless to say, Cassandra turned a deaf ear to my complaints. She put an inordinate amount of faith in Eva. And I have to admit that on at least one occasion, during our search for the Riverdale Stalker, she did provide a valuable clue that aided in the apprehension of the homicidal, ax-murdering DJ, Ronnie Cummins.<sup>6</sup>

Eva was ushering out a shell-shocked client--apparently the news from beyond wasn’t always good--when we showed up.

As soon as you walked in, you found yourself in a small sitting room. It contained a couple of over-stuffed armchairs, a hideously ugly floor lamp, a round table and four fold-up metal chairs.

Eva ignored me but greeted my partner warmly. “Cassandra, my dear, let me look at you. You’re simply *gorgeous*. Helen of Troy only *wished* she had your cheekbones.” She finally grudgingly acknowledged my presence. “So...she brought you. Mr. Personality.” Her eyes narrowed as she pretended to access her special faculties or whatever. “Still in love with her, I see, and not doing anything about it. How pathetic.” I fumed, enduring the humiliation while at the same time visualizing wrapping my fingers around her wattled throat and *squeezing*. “What are you waiting for, lover boy? You think she respects a man who won’t come and *take* her? That’s not the way of her kind.”

“That’s enough, Eva,” Cassandra chided her. “Nightstalk promised he’d be nice.”

“You’re not man enough for her,” Eva concluded, and I fought the urge to introduce her to the fucking spirits, up close and personal.

*Because we all knew it was true. Every word of it.*

“Madame Eva,” Cassandra, trying to keep things from turning ugly, “this is a professional visit. Last night, just after midnight, something happened--”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Eva swayed, suddenly faint, and Cassandra helped her over to one of the armchairs. It vented a cloud of dust and cat hair as she settled into it. “I felt it about midnight, as you say,” she whispered hoarsely, “like a cold, sharp knife going right through my heart. There was a shock wave, ripples in the ether like—like--”

“A disturbance in the Force?” I suggested innocently.

Cassandra frowned but Eva pretended not to have heard.

Despite my uncouth behavior, Eva agreed to assist our investigation. Cassandra said she didn’t trust cards, finding them too “amorphous and inexact” (I nearly laughed out loud). Instead she gave Eva a small baggie of soil we’d collected from the park.

Within moments of thrusting her chubby fingers into the dirt, a spasm went through Eva’s body and she began to moan and sway from side to side.

“...smoke...terrible stench...*ugh*...there’s only one thing that smells like that...burnt offerings for Moloch...it begins...an evil tide, washing over us...*no one will escape*...”

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<sup>6</sup> An account I dubbed “Killing Them Softly With His Song” (*The Casebooks of Zinne & Nightstalk, Vol. III*)

“Is there a message?” Cassandra asked, but the spirits weren't interested in a dialogue, preferring the stream of consciousness approach.

“...bright days will pass...soon comes the cold and dark...streets running with blood...they're coming...*they're coming*...”

Pretty standard stuff, a verbal salad of cryptic utterances and unconnected phrases that were supposed to pass for visions or prophecies. It was all I could do to keep from rolling my eyes.

“...so much suffering and death... word from the Black Tower... *time to cull the herd*... hunger... fury... fiends with ancient faces... old... old beyond time...”

And so on.

I probably should have been taking notes but, frankly, couldn't be bothered. As far as I was concerned, we might as well have put our questions to one of those magic eight balls.

Eva trailed off and showed signs of rejoining us in the non-spiritual realm. Once back, she regarded us vacantly, as if trying to remember who we were and what we were doing in her tacky sitting room. *Oh, brother*. “I felt a strong connection tonight.” She appeared exhausted by her exertions, serving as a living conduit between two separate dimensions. “Everything is in flux, there's much turmoil and confusion over there.”

“Is that why nothing you told us made a lick of sense?” I asked.

She didn't like that. “You are a stupid man with a closed, ugly mind. But *she* understands,” indicating Cassandra, “so it doesn't matter what you think.”

“Tell us about it, Eva,” Cassandra urged.

Eva shook her head. She dragged the hassock over with one foot so she could prop up her thick, hairy legs. Something had been at the hassock, either a cat or a playful werewolf. “I can only describe bits and pieces. Impressions. I get a sense of great upheaval. We're at a pivotal time right now, there are changes coming, something there, just over the horizon.”

“Can you be a *wee* bit more specific?” I requested. “‘Something over the horizon. Changes coming.’ That seems kind of...*vague*. Is it just me or is that vague?”

“Nightstalk...” Cassandra warned.

“I mean, *come on*.” My patience evaporated like desert rain. “You people are all the same. ‘You'll find the body near water.’ ‘The child will be found by a man with a limp’.” I flung up my hands in exasperation. “We came here looking for some hard evidence, something we can use. Instead we get...fuckin' mumbo-jumbo.”

I could feel my partner's eyes on me. If her glare got any hotter, I'd end up with a sunburn.

Eva, however, refused to be goaded. She hauled herself to her feet and tottered toward a beaded curtain that led to her living quarters. “You must be careful, my dear. Beware the counsel of fools like this one. I sense great danger. Please, I'm very tired. I can tell you nothing more tonight. If you prefer to pay with a credit card, let me know. I keep the slips in the back.” The curtain parted with a dry rattle and she disappeared from view. Soon afterward, I could smell pot smoke.

“Hey, could I get a receipt for that?” I called after her. No answer. I tugged a couple of twenties out of my thin wallet and left them on the table. “I guess she's too busy recharging her batteries.”

Cassandra didn't find my smart-ass attitude funny at all. She said it was one of my least attractive qualities. Far worse than the premature balding thing.

After leaving Eva's, we drove around, stopping whenever we spotted anybody we knew and who owed us for past favours. We spent several hours buttonholing various weirdos and fuckups, learning little of value. It put me in a foul mood, itching to make like Picasso on someone's face.

Sadly, no opportunity presented itself. Instead it was back to the office in the wee hours to type up my nightly progress report, a task which, if I was lucky, I'd be able to complete by sunrise.

Bellied up to my ancient, round-keyed Underwood. I've tried other manual typewriters but they can't stand up to the pounding. I have what you might call a heavy touch.

Setting things down on paper helped put my thoughts in some semblance of order. The Old Man liked reports to be clear and concise. I had specific instructions to avoid unnecessary detail and speculation. That I saved for the *Casebooks*.

As I worked away, my partner was busy raiding our bookshelves, creating an architecturally unsound pile of books on her side of the desk. She was a speed-reader with almost perfect recall and could devour a book in the time it took most people to use the john.

Yet as far as I knew, my partner had never even *peeked* inside one of my *Casebooks*. I tried to convince myself it didn't bug me. My style was likely too hard-boiled for her tastes. She preferred "literary" authors. The more depressing the better. Celan the latest in a long line.

I cobbled together a summary of our consultation with Eva, playing up the invaluable insights we had gained, making a mountain out of an anthill. Hey, I wanted that forty bucks back, receipt or no receipt.

I stuck the carbon copy of the report in a file I'd begun, as yet unnamed. The original I slipped under the Old Man's door.

It was after five a.m. and I was winding down. "Any idea where this is leading? I've got my own theory," I offered cagily, "but I'm probably way off base. So if there's something you want to tell me--"

She was stuffing books into her bag. I noticed a few with Latin titles. "It's late, Nightstalk, nearly closing time. Let's call it quits. Go grab some breakfast and give your brain a rest. I'll see you back here tonight and we'll find out what the Old Man's turned up in the meantime."

"Do I take it we're working overtime on this one?" Usually we were on from Tuesday to Saturday but when something heavy came up, that schedule tended to go out the window.

"I think you can make that assumption," she confirmed. "Knowing our employer, he'll want this wrapped up as soon as possible." She hoisted her bag.

"You *know* something, don't you?" I accused her. "You've got a hunch but you're holding out on me."

"Stop being so paranoid." She blew me a kiss from the door. "Ta ta, Nightstalk. Don't stay up too late." She left, taking all the life in the room with her.

It was getting light outside. I watched from the window as she walked up the street, playing my accustomed role of ineffectual voyeur. She held her head high and her step was lively and confident. She looked like she was about to break out into a song and dance routine. I lowered the blinds on the dirty windows; the ones facing south we'd papered over with three layers of aluminum foil.

I slipped a plastic sheath over the Underwood. Thought I heard it groan in relief.

I pulled on my coat, making sure I had my gloves. Turned off the lights on the way out.

Time to head home to the bachelor apartment/crypt where I spent the daylight hours. There was no air conditioning, no swimming pool, but it *did* come equipped with about a hundred cable channels. Any distraction was welcome, as long as it kept me from brooding about who Cassandra was with and what she was doing. That sort of thing could drive a guy around the bend.

It was hard being in love with a woman like Cassandra Zinnea. She was brilliant and bedevilled, both saint and sinner. The finest human being I had the pleasure of knowing and, also, the most haunted. She was her own worst enemy and try as I might to protect her, against such a clever and willful adversary my chances were, I knew, somewhere between slim and none.

As usual, I beat Cassandra to the office. Punctuality was *not* among her many virtues. It was 8:30 p.m. on the dot when I slid my key into the lock and pushed open the door.

### **After Hours Investigations “While the competition sleeps...”**

The Old Man was never able to hire a receptionist who lasted more than a week. The kind of clients our outfit attracted, the stuff we had to deal with relating to the otherworldly, uncanny or just plain *wacky*...well, it tended to have a negative effect on impressionable minds.

When we weren't around, an ancient (i.e. *pre-digital*) Duophone answering machine took our messages. I checked as soon as I got in, rewinding the tape to the beginning and letting it play. Three of the callers were heavy breathers, hoping to catch Cassandra in. One guy wanted us to fly to Iraq with him and recover the last remaining copy of the *Necronomicon* before agents of the Dark Lord Asmodeus beat him to it and--  
*Ho hum.*

We got a lot of calls like that.

One time we even took up the chase although, admittedly, that very peculiar affair ended in tragedy all around.<sup>7</sup>

A few months previously the Old Man had left a memo saying he wanted to advertise us as “paranormal investigators” but Cassandra and I talked him out of it. We had a hard enough time getting respect from other private dicks as it was. We put up with a lot of “Mulder and Scully” crap and that shit wore thin *real* fast.

Dealing with clients was bad enough. No wonder the receptionists bailed. Some of the people who walked through our door were real lu-lu's. “Renfields”, Cassandra

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<sup>7</sup> “The Bad Book” (*The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Volume I*)

called them, after the fly-eating lunatic in *Dracula*. In some instances it was all too appropriate.

During a free moment, I'd done a quick count and determined that in the two years we'd worked together, Cass and I had handled over 90 cases. I won't say our success rate was perfect but we won a helluva lot more than we lost. Having a genius for a partner helped, but it was more than that. We had chemistry. Together, we were a *machine*. Brain and brawn. Beauty and the beast.

Read the *Casebooks*, gentle reader, it's all there. The many great adventures of Cassandra Zinnea and her steadfast companion-in-arms Evgeny Davidovitch Nightstalk. Our numerous crazy high jinks and miraculous escapes...that helped make the petty, tedious, day-to-day stuff easier to bear. *Most* of the time.

It was hard getting a handle on this latest deal. The Old Man thought it was important and Cassandra was definitely acting keyed up. But maybe it really *was* nothing, a botched drug deal or what have you. Of no concern to us, just the boss waving his dick around, Cassandra and me running hither and yon like a couple of headless chickens, trying to solve a case that existed only in his convoluted mind.

Cassandra came floating in twenty minutes later and right away I noticed the fresh welt on her throat, visible despite the high collar of the turtleneck she had taken great care selecting. She hastily adjusted the collar but the damage was done.

My partner had some rather, ah, odd proclivities for someone so beautiful and intelligent. She liked to walk on the wild side, as the saying goes. When that hag Eva snipped that I wasn't man enough for Cassandra, what she meant was that I lacked the strength and cruelty necessary to satisfy her bent desires. As I discovered early in our relationship, while investigating *The House on High Street*,<sup>8</sup> Cassandra's tastes ran to the extreme, involving practices that to certain prudish-minded people might seem...well, it would be indiscreet if I went into more detail than I already have.

Man enough? Let's see: I was short, balding on top, hairy as a binobo ape everywhere else and boring to boot. I had an irritable bowel and the beginnings of arthritis in my hands and lower back. I plodded along cheerlessly through life, no close friends or meaningful relationships and would have been lonely except that for the most part I didn't much *like* people. Cassandra made great leaps of logic (I connected the dots). She had brainstorm (I chased red herrings). She was sexy and exciting and *Cassandra*. I was me. You didn't need second sight to know it would never work out.

I made coffee the way we both liked it, strong enough to raise the dead. She took a tentative sip of the infernal brew. "Oooo, that's *perfect*, Nightstalk." Coming over with her cup, leaning down to give me a hug, careful not to spill. She had managed to squeeze in a shower and smelled good, no spunky after aroma. I got a close up look at the hickey. There was another two inches below it. I wondered where the trail led.

"Good grief, woman," I burst out, "who are you dating, Bela Lugosi?"

She pulled away and walked back to her side of the desk. Once seated, she didn't touch her coffee and seemed ill at ease. Then she looked directly at me. "Do you forgive me?" Plaintively. "Tell me you do. Better yet," she corrected herself, "tell me you love me. That no matter what, I can always count on the knowledge that you'll never be ashamed of me. That you won't accuse and punish me if I...fall off the high wire every once in awhile. Okay? Nightstalk?"

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<sup>8</sup> Included in *The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk (Volume I)*

I cleared my throat. “The Old Man dug up some stuff for us to look over. I highlighted a few things I thought we should—”

“Say it, Nightstalk.” I avoided her eyes, they were scary with need. “Absolve me. Make me feel *clean*.”

“—some items of interest--”

She was trying to work magic with those eyes, which had changed colour again, to a shade close to amber. “Say it.”

“—no identification so far of our John Doe in the park. According to the Old Man’s sources, the cops don’t know much about him except that he was white, male and in his early to mid-thirties--”

“*Nightstalk...*”

I closed myself off as best as I could, shoring up my mental defenses, raising every shield I had. “There’s also an analysis of the readings and soil samples we took at the scene.” My voice sounded squeaky. “They confirm a massive expenditure of EM energy. We’ve definitely tweaked the Old Man’s interest with this one. He says we’re to drop everything else and refuse any new cases.” She was giving me the evil eye. I hoped it wasn’t the real thing, they could be nasty. I tuned out her displeasure and disappointment, hurting with intent. “So why is it,” I continued, “that when Mr. X becomes Johnny the Human Torch there’s such a big, honkin’ energy burst? This guy went off like a fuckin’ supernova--”

“It tells us he wasn’t just some low-life druggie. Which means everything that happened was premeditated and carefully choreographed. There’s an intention behind this, a design waiting to be revealed.” She simply couldn’t resist the opportunity to talk about the case. “It’s even plausible that it’s part of a ritual or magickal working. Don’t forget, this all took place just after midnight on May Eve, Beltane, a very significant date on the occult calendar.” She glanced over and saw the look on my face. “Something wrong?”

“Goddamnit, Cassandra, you’ve been sitting on this all along,” I complained. “This Beltane stuff--”

“It’s just something that occurred to me,” she protested. “I was planning on telling you.”

I shook my head. “So toasting our guy releases a humungous amount of energy...so what? What does that get them?”

“It’s possible someone was seeking to gain power by channeling or absorbing it in some way.”

My heart speeded up. “But who would need that sort of energy?”

She nodded, trying (I thought) not to look smug. “Who indeed?”

Then it hit me. “Oh, shit. *Shit*.” I closed my eyes. “This is black arts crap, isn’t it? *Fuck*. I should’ve known.”

“Well done, my dear Watson,” she congratulated me.

“*Quit that*. It’s like you’re patronizing me.” I was still seething about the love tattoos. “I *hate* occult shit. Those people are fuckin’ psychos.

“I’m sorry, Evvie,” she said, sounding very timid and contrite. “And I *don’t* patronize you. I want you to know that I respect you and value your insights and opinions.” She radiated peaceful, calming vibes but they just bounced off me. “The

police think this killing was underworld related. What nonsense. Not with those readings.”

I couldn't resist a dig. “And let's not forget what Eva told us. All that shit about disturbances in the ether. There's all the confirmation we need right there.”

“Don't be such a bitch, Evgeny.” She was definitely mad. She hardly ever swore.

I tried to joke it away. “I certainly don't wish to offend you by impugning the integrity of such a highly respected and unimpeachable expert on the so-called—”

“Forget it,” she snapped.

I could smell ozone. “Okay, okay...” I decided I'd pushed things far enough. “I'll keep my opinions about Eva to myself from now on. Promise.”

“*And?*”

I was stumped...and then realized what she was after. “Oh...and I, uh, love you.”

“*What?*” She cupped a hand beside her ear. “I didn't hear you.”

“Damn it, woman, I—I love you, all right? Are you satisfied? I worship the toilet seat you perch on. I worship the holy tampon you—”

“That will be sufficient.”

The air was clear again and we were back on the same page. I suspected she'd used some kind of glamour or enchantment on me but, of course, could prove nothing. Then again, she hardly needed ancient spells and burnt toenail clippings to win me over.

I was hers, body and soul, and would be 'til the day I died.

Afterward, she insisted we take a drive down by the lake. She needed to get away. No way to claim mileage for it, money right out of my pocket but, never mind, off we went. I'd parked about a block from our building and as soon as we were within sight of the car I heard her go “Uh oh”.

And then I saw why.

Some *idiot* had crammed his vehicle into the space right behind the Taurus, effectively wedging me in. There were other places available but he had chosen, of his own free will, to plant himself right flush against my rear bumper.

I growled.

“No, Evvie, *please...*”

Fuck that. I went behind his car, got hold of his rear bumper and lifted. It was one of those Buick Centuries, a decent-sized car, so I had to really put my back into it. My shirt ripped under my armpit but I managed to lift and drag the ass end of the Century into the street then went around and did the same to the front. When buddy got back, he was in for a big surprise...if the city hadn't hauled his car off to the impound lot in the meantime.

My partner was waiting for me in the Taurus. She knew better than to say anything, merely clucked her tongue and shook her head at such immature antics.

A long, curving road took us past the marina and the old docks. I kept going and finally pulled off and parked beneath the rusting skeleton of the 45<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge. I took the key from the ignition and was about to ask her the purpose of our pleasure cruise, when she abruptly opened her door and got out.

She walked down to the water's edge, getting toxic and likely radioactive sludge all over a nice pair of shoes. She didn't seem to notice, her eyes fixed on the dark water,

her thoughts elsewhere. The bridge takes you to Parmeter Island, where you can check out the landfill, walk around the grounds of the old territorial prison or visit the mass grave of the people who died during a cholera epidemic right after WW II. Too many to count apparently. The place is creepy, over-run with ghosts and bogeys. Cass and I hated it when a case took us out to the island. It was sort of like our version of “Chinatown”.<sup>9</sup>

I spit into the dark. A superstition of mine. “Do you want to talk about it? Bare your soul and all that crap.” I waited. “You seem, I dunno, kind of blue or something.”

“Not now,” she answered, “maybe later.”

“Is it something I said?”

“Nightstalk...” She sounded tired.

I kept plugging. “Sometimes when you talk about stuff it doesn’t seem like such a big deal.”

“It’s nothing. *Really*. I just needed to get out of the office.”

“Should I wait in the car?”

She answered without turning around. “Suit yourself. I only need a few minutes.”

Twenty minutes later she was still in the same position. I had wandered up the shore a ways, chucked some stones, counted the stars and had pretty much run out of things to do. Then I decided enough was enough and went back to roust her. I cleared my throat, letting her know I was there. “Uh, it’s getting kinda late. You need more time?”

She didn’t reply right away, kept looking out at the island. I could see lights, a few dots of yellow and white. Maybe the squatters’ camp. The city administration was supposedly negotiating a deal with Gregory Fischer, the real estate tycoon, to redevelop the entire area--the old docks, the island—putting up luxury towers and condominiums, restoring the waterfront, sinking a couple billion dollars into a giant pipe dream. And, as always, the taxpayers would end up footing the bill.

“I can’t shake this feeling.” Wrapping her arms around herself. “There’s something about this case that bothers me. I’ve never felt like this.”

“It’s a terrible thing, burning somebody like that. It got to me too.” A rare admission.

She came toward me, leaving septic footprints behind her, standing close enough for me to smell the muck...and the alluring tang of her perfume. It was a potent combination. “I think I’ve wrecked my shoes.”

“No kidding.”

“They’re soaked through.” She kicked them off. “*Ewww*, look at my feet.”

“Hey, don’t be walking around here like that.” I scooped her up in my arms. “There might be needles and shit.”

“Oh, Nightstalk,” she said, her voice going all delicate and fluttery, “you are *such* a gentleman.” She curled into me. I bore her easily back to the car, taking my time getting there.

“This is ridiculous. I wonder how many other partners put up with this.”

But we both knew it was just hot air.

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<sup>9</sup> See: “The Unusual Suspects”, “Dead on Revival” (*The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Volume I*); “Sorry, Wrong Caliber”; “Hell on Wheels” (*Casebooks, Vol. II*)

I convinced her to go home early and dropped her off at her apartment building, near the old campus. Kind of a rundown place, the neighborhood none too friendly. I waited until she was safely inside before taking off.

Picked up coffee and a cruller on the way back to the office. Tried not to think about her, how it felt holding her in my arms. It was no use. I found myself literally counting the ways I loved her, a menace on four wheels as I navigated the early morning streets.

Once my report was done (it didn't take long), I decided to update my *Casebook* notes. I took the opportunity to revisit old cases, flipping through the binders, pausing over the ones that provoked the fondest memories. By the time I finished, the sun was threatening to beat me home. Still I lingered, taking in all the personal touches that brought to mind my partner, the gorgeous and maddening Cassandra Zinnea.

There was her mug ("*A witch is a woman who knows what she wants!*"), a pack of breath mints, some hair clips, lip balm, a badly gnawed pencil. Her half of the desktop was a brilliant mess: notes and newspaper clippings and dog-eared, broken-backed books stained with yellow highlighter; takeout containers, food scraps and coffee slops...in stark contrast to the prissy order and tidiness that delineated my area. I spotted the Celan volume amid the debris, picked it up, opened it. My eyes falling on a short, blunt stanza at the top of the page 233:

“You were my death:  
you I could hold  
while everything slipped from me.”

I closed the book, suddenly two hundred and twenty pounds of prickling gooseflesh. I stuck my report under the Old Man's door and paused, listening for any sounds from within. Nothing. I pulled on my jacket, closed and locked the door behind me. No alarms necessary, my partner's protective spells and hexes took care of that.

I started down the stairs just as Maude Dreyfuss came out of her store. She'd spent most of the night doing inventory (one of the many perks of owning a small, family-run business). She was a former dominatrix now plying her trade as the hardest working purveyor of sex toys in the Greater Ilium area. Thanks to her tireless efforts, *The Tool Shed* (open 5:00 p.m. – 1:00 a.m.) was a going concern. She rented the upstairs to the Old Man cheap with the understanding that we would keep an eye on her shop which, until we moved in, had been robbed more times than Wells Fargo.

Maude's next words were music to my ears. “Hey, I think your movies might be in. We got a bunch of boxes delivered late yesterday afternoon. I haven't had a chance to go through them yet. On your way home, huh? Well, ask Tara about them tonight.”

“Yeah, uh, Tara.” I hesitated before saying it. “Nice girl. But...I was wondering. She's such a shy little thing. Aren't you worried about her working in, y'know, such an unusual environment? The kind of people that come in here, especially at night. She seems...uncomfortable at times.”

“She's *seventeen*, Nightstalk. It's not like she's an innocent. If one of my customers wants to buy a twelve inch rubber cock with a spring-loaded chicken on the end, she can bloody well grin and bear it.”

I summoned a weak smile, remembering the cheap rent. “Sure, okay. And—and obviously you know best,” I finished lamely, reaching for the outside door.

“But let me know if she gives you or Cassandra any trouble. You know, service-wise.”

That brought me up short. “So...Cass frequents your establishment as well?”

She looked at me slyly. “*Nightstalk*. You know as well as I do that the privacy of my clientele is my number one priority. Discretion guaranteed.” She winked as she passed me, calling back: “You have a great day.”

Thanks to the arrival of those movies, things were definitely looking up. At that moment, I was probably as *happy* as it’s possible for me to get. Because I had something to look forward to and that didn’t happen nearly often enough.

I never brought people home with me or encouraged what few acquaintances I had to drop by for visits.

It was a conscious decision I made *not* to humiliate myself. Basically I lived in a single room apartment. A minuscule living room, alcove kitchen and closet-sized bathroom. That was it. Home sweet fucking home. I slept on a fold out couch I’d had since Christ was a youngster. Most of the time I didn’t even bother opening it up. The windows, a small one in the kitchen and another in the can, were both blacked out. Tin foil and duct tape. Rubber stripping tacked around the edges of the door. When I turned out the lights I wanted it *dark*.

My TV rested on one of those blue plastic milk crates restaurants are always leaving by their back doors. A CD player and a combination DVD/ VCR console—good quality stuff, lacking only serial numbers—sat on another crate beside it. *Voila!* That was my entertainment unit.

Not much in terms of personal touches or mementos. A couple of TV trays, some ratty-looking movie posters thumbtacked to the walls: “Eraserhead”, “Clockwork Orange”, “The Wild Bunch”. Books piled everywhere; lots of mysteries, Golden Age SF, true crime. Others I’d borrowed or pinched off my partner. She didn’t begrudge me, maybe getting a kick out of a lunkhead like me slogging through Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus* or Anthony Storr’s introduction to the theories of Jung. The only problem was she insisted that we talk about the books afterward, *discuss* them. Mostly I kept mum but every so often I’d open my big mouth and blow it by saying something totally stupid and irrelevant. A half-bright hick spouting off about the “contemporary resonances” one could find in *Heart of Darkness* or *Jude the Obscure*.

Christ.

One time, when we were returning from an out of town trip, I made an off the cuff comment about a particularly funky sexual act I’d come across in a memoir penned by some ex-porn queen.

“Oh, I’ve done that,” she responded breezily. “It’s not as difficult as it sounds. Having good balance is the key.” It took all of my self-restraint to keep my hands on the wheel. She looked at me, twigging to the sudden awkwardness. “Hey, different strokes for different folks, *Nightstalk*.”

Most of my off-duty hours were spent availing myself of the programming offered by the building’s communal satellite dish. The package tenants received included scores of channels, everything from Toons to Euro porn. Fuck, you name it, I had it.

Even at 5:30 a.m. you were guaranteed to find *something* worth watching. An old “Star Trek” episode, a Portuguese soap opera or a classy French skin flick. And if I couldn’t find anything to yank my chain, I could always turn to my personal stash. There were tall stacks of videotapes and DVD’s beside the TV. I had some mainstream stuff but for the most part it was porn. Soft and hard. Something for every mood. Loosely subdivided into “Cheerleaders”, “Spanking”, “Oriental Girls”, “French Maid”, etc.

Women of all ages, shapes and sizes, each of them ready, willing and eager to please.

Oh, and I forgot to mention Tree. My house pet and/or built-in home security system. If you haven’t met, introductions are in order:

Tree sat in a white ceramic planter on the far side of the couch. Upon casual inspection, you’d think she was one of those miniature palms. Good, sturdy trunk and long, lush green leaves with razor thin edges and sharp, tapering points.

Cassandra gave me Tree right after we crossed paths, nearly fatally, with the arch villain and Nobel Prize winning mathematician Angus Podgorny. He resented our pivotal role in bringing about his downfall and swore his revenge as he was being led from the dock.<sup>10</sup>

Much of Podgorny’s network was left intact after his conviction and Cass thought Tree might come in handy in case a bunch of his beastie boys busted in on me some night. I was kind of touched and also insulted, if you know what I mean. It was like *she* was trying to protect *me*. Despite initial misgivings and one or two minor incidents that nearly cost me some fingers, for the most part Tree and I got along pretty well. She was good company and as a personal watchdog, er, sentinel, I couldn’t have asked for anything better.

The first thing I did when I got home was go to the fridge and fetch a fresh hamburger patty. It couldn’t be frozen and it had to be lean and pink. Any brown spots and there could be dire consequences. I stood on one side of the couch and sort of lobbed the patty in Tree’s direction—

--flinching as the fucking thing *erupted* into life, snapping the patty out of mid-air, the long, green fronds actually disguised jaws and teeth. In two quick gulps the quarter pound of meat was gone and a placated Tree subsided into stillness and, I hoped, dormancy.

Cass told me Tree was the perfect companion for someone like me. She didn’t require any special care or attention, just a hunk of meat once a day. No light, no other food, fertilizer or water needed. Oh, and I should avoid smoking, she hated that.

*She?*

*Of course* Tree was female. Couldn’t I tell?

Er, no, actually, I couldn’t.

I made damn sure I obeyed my partner’s instructions to the letter, resisting the urge to over-feed Tree (“I can’t emphasize what a mistake that would be”) or substituting anything other than fresh ground meat (“not advisable under *any* circumstances”). The daily feeding ritual still scared the piss out of me. The sheer *speed* of the thing was incredible. But I liked the fact that she was cheap and almost maintenance-free. She would be a formidable adversary for any housebreakers. Very territorial. I’d hate to have that old girl mad at *me*, that’s for damn sure...

<sup>10</sup> “The Death of Pi” (*The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Vol. III*)

The building was humming with activity. Early risers firing up showers and getting their breakfasts ready, while shift workers stumbled home, bleary-eyed and cranky, their body cycles and bio-rhythms hopelessly screwed up, not used to keeping a vampire's hours.

Me, I've always been a night person. A natural Shade. Same with my father and my sister Constance. Cassandra too—she said she only really came to life after midnight. Her peak hours were between one and four a.m. That's when she was practically unstoppable, especially if the moon was waxing.

I watched CNN for awhile but then I got lucky and came across some sumo wrestling. I finished one beer and started another. Those fat bastards were amazingly quick and agile. They *hurtled* at each other, colliding with a sickening thud of flesh. Very primal.

After that ended, it was time to get down to business.

I couldn't make up my mind. Was I in the mood for horny sorority girls or a horny stewardess with a hankering to join the "mile high" club in style...

Instead I reached for a tape I'd watched over and over again, catching the flick on Channel 68 one morning, only managing to record the last half. There were no end credits so I never got the movie's title or even the name of the actress. The one who bore such a startling resemblance to...well, not *startling*. From certain angles, perhaps, when the lighting was just right—

Every time I played the tape I felt strange. Like I'd crossed a line. The actress was tall, blonde, with just the right mix of sauciness and elegance. She had a slight accent, it sounded Scandinavian to me. It was hard to tell, she didn't have many lines. Just a near-perfect butt that she accentuated with microskirts and eye-grabbing thongs. She was very enthusiastic and convincing during sex scenes, making eager noises, urging her lover on, her climaxes monumental and seemingly authentic. I wondered if she'd studied under Strasberg (so to speak).

When the movie was over and I finished I felt...bad. Depressed. Wishing I'd had the courage to throw a blanket over Tree so she wouldn't be a witness to my transgression. Sure, I knew she didn't have eyes *per se* but there must be some kind of visual receptors involved. A sensory organ that could detect my presence in the room and track a hunk of meat thrown in her direction.

I indulged in a brief bout of self-loathing before finally nodding off. And so ended another far from perfect day in the life of Evgeny Davidovitch Nightstalk, mediocre sleuth and pervert extraordinaire. Not much of a life, surely. But it was the one I'd been given and, being the strong, silent type, it would have been out of character for me to complain.

## II

“The bright day is done, and we are for the dark.”  
William Shakespeare, *Romeo & Juliet*

*Monday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>*

As soon as the sun went down, I was a new man.

When the sky darkens and street lights start winking on, a city takes on a different character, transformed into something mysterious, dangerous, spooky. A place of jagged, reaching shadows, half-concealed faces, secrets and surprises.

For a detective, it's the perfect atmosphere.

Have you ever seen a film *noir* where most of the action takes place in the daytime? Or a horror flick? My partner pointed out that for uncounted thousands of years humankind has feared the night because our most trusted sense, sight, is neutralized, near useless, once we lose the light. That kind of thinking always makes me scratch my bald spot in irritation. To my mind, a nocturnal existence actually *improves* your chances of survival, especially if you happen to be one of the hunted. For one thing, there are a lot more places to hide in the dark.

I ate a late supper at *Mother's*, a joint not far from my apartment. Claimed my usual spot at the counter, sugar, salt, napkins and condiments within easy reach. It's a small establishment and Sam Mother runs the place basically by himself. He doesn't appreciate cracks about his name, by the way. Matter of fact, there isn't much Sam *does* appreciate, except maybe the sound of his cash register ringing merrily away. The man is a workaholic, open 365 days of the year, including Christmas. It's a neighborhood joke: his two sons ran off and joined the army to escape his autocratic ways. True story. Sam's still pretty bitter about it so it's wise not to bring it up.

Sam took my order, walked through a set of swinging doors to the kitchen and started preparing my meal. A real one-man operation.

The supper rush was over. The only other patron was a guy sipping cold coffee by the window. He looked like someone who'd lost his soul in a loaded game of three-card monte. There were big, fat zeroes where his eyes should have been. Life can do that sometimes.

Sam makes a killer Greek salad. Lots of feta cheese and olives saltier than the Dead Sea. Followed by a club sandwich and free coffee refill. And the best part of it was that I'd been frequenting the place for *years* and in all that time scarcely ten words had passed between us. Mainly we communicated via grunts and gestures. Showing our true roots.

When I hit the street again I felt spectacular, like a regular *flanneur*, a citizen of a modern city of wonders, graced with tall towers and teeming with life, a veritable microcosm of human endeavor (see what working in close proximity to Cassandra Zinna could do to a person?). I exited the parking lot and within five minutes was angling for the on-ramp. I drove in to mid-town and even though I was forced to take Finlayson

Drive, which was *still* under construction, and had to put up with three different detours, I never lost my temper once. My partner would've been proud of me.

Midtown empties out after five o'clock. A mass exodus to the suburbs. Good riddance. More room for the rest of us. There are a couple of under-rated blues bars and plenty of ethnic places to eat. Joints the Grays...er sorry, I mean the white collar, daytime crowd, don't even know exist.

I saw some people I recognized, emerging for the first time in twelve hours. Lots of visible minorities, single women, unemployed; Shades by virtue of their low standing in the socio-economic pecking order. Scrubbing toilets and shampooing carpets and cleaning the big office towers from sunset to sunup to put food on the table because, contrary to popular belief, people *do* starve to death in this country.

I pushed through the door of *The Tool Shed* and found some guy giving grief to poor Tara.

"—ordered that Slippery Suzie doll over *five* weeks ago, goddamnit! That's *five* weeks. There's a minimum expectation of service here, isn't there?" Buddy was wearing a good quality army parka but when I got close enough I saw he was shivering like a dog pissing razor blades. Ex-dope fiend of one kind or other. I knew him, vaguely, disliked him instinctively. People like him give porn a bad name.

Tara looked stricken, taking his bullshit personally. "I'll check our records again but I'm sure it'll be here as soon as—"

"And make sure they send the one with the heated snatch. I don't want there to be any more screw-ups." Mr. Parka's agitation was almost comical. He *really* wanted that fucking doll. "I mean, can't you just get on the blower with your supplier and find out what the hold up is?"

"Well, as I said, that's my mother's department."

"Will you tell Maude for me that Ernie is very upset?" He zipped up his parka and crossed his arms. "Say 'Ernie told me to tell you that he is very upset about his Slippery Suzie'. You got that? And then maybe we'll see some action. Okay, point made." He finally gave way at the counter, glancing at me as he passed.

"Hey," he grunted.

"You should try getting a *real* girlfriend, Ern."

"Yeah, and fuck you too, pal." And out the door he went.

I waited until Tara finished writing down '*Ernie very upset about Slippery Sally*'. She had the handwriting of a twelve year-old kid. Big and loopy. When she looked up, she was beet red.

"Tara," I began.

"Oh, hi, Mr. Nightstalk."

I tried to think of the best way to broach it. "Does the word *penis* bother you?" More blood rushed to her face. "*Vagina? Nipples? Ass?*" She shuddered. "Kiddo, you've *got* to tell your mother that you shouldn't be working in a place like this. You're not suited for it. Tell her you're allergic to latex or something."

"It's no use." She settled onto a tall stool behind the cash register. "She can't find anybody decent to work here. They steal from the till or walk out with merchandise. Or give their friends big discounts. Shit like that."

"Yeah, but I'm guessing dildoes probably don't make them nauseous."

She clapped a hand over her mouth. “I can’t help it. It’s the rubbery smell. And the big, mushroomy heads.” She gagged.

“Easy, girl. Try not to think about it.”

She took deep breaths. “Maybe...maybe I’ll get used to it. Like Mom. God, she can talk about *anything* with these sickos.”

I resented that. “Well...not *all* of them are sickos. But the point is that you need to explain the situation to her. I don’t think she understands how difficult this is for you.”

She thought about it but shook her head. “She needs me to help out. I have to learn to be more like her. She knows all about this shit. It doesn’t embarrass *her*. Fuckin’ penis leashes and butt plugs and...” She swallowed hard.

“There’s a garbage can behind you.” While we waited for her gorge to settle, I reflected on it and had to admit she was right. Maude was absolutely unflappable. She could talk knowledgeably about the most bizarre appliance or sexual act and sound completely business-like the whole time. “Okay, well, I thought I needed to say something. It’s your life, kiddo.”

“Thanks. I have to desensitize myself, that’s all. Get it through my head that I’m a sales girl and it’s just, y’know, product.” She looked at me. “Um, was there something you wanted or...?”

“Well, ” I almost hated to mention it. “Your mom said some movies I ordered might be in.” She went over and opened the drawer where the DVDs and VHS tapes were kept.

“Was it a special order? There should be something with your name on it—”

“They were about tit-fucking,” I piped up helpfully. “And I think a pair of rubber breasts come with them.”

She made a gurgling noise and lunged for the wastebasket.

“Oh, *shit*...sorry, Tara.” The sound of her woofing made my stomach churn. I told her I’d come back for the films later and hightailed it out of there before I made things worse.

I felt bad for Tara but also, I admit, a tad let down for my own sake. I’d *really* been looking forward to having a crack at those fake tits.

The good news was my partner had beaten me to work for a change. The bad news was she had company.

Philippe DeBarge was everything I was not: tall, handsome, debonair and (I had reason to suspect) a former lover of Cassandra Zinnea. *That* I would never forgive him for. Besides, he was such a fucking asshole, with his Hermes ties and designer suits and perfectly coiffed hair and that flowery cologne he applied with a bloody soup ladle.

He reminded me of Pierce Brosnan.

I’ve never liked Pierce Brosnan.

He wasn’t stupid but he wasn’t brilliant and witty and wonderful the way an ex-paramour of my partner should have been. He was vain, petty and his ego rivaled that of an Old Testament deity. We’d met on two prior occasions<sup>11</sup> and neither of us had acquitted ourselves well in terms of behavior or basic civility. I saw the sparks that flew

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<sup>11</sup> “Paris, in the Spring (With Dead People)” (*The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Vol. I*); “The Return of the Ripper” (*Casebooks, Vol. II*)

whenever they were around each other and it really got to me. Imagining the two of them together and not having to work very hard at it.

And here he was again, in the flesh, sitting in *my* chair, next to *my* woman. He pretended not to notice me. *I* pretended not to notice the pompous prick had his “Order of Dupin” prominently displayed on the lapel of his Euro-trash suit jacket. Fucking show-off.

Then I caught wise to the fact that they were holding hands. I checked again and saw that *he* was the one doing the holding. Her fingers were limp and unresponsive, not giving back any pressure. I eased up a bit. Almost pitied the guy. I knew what it was like to fail to measure up to the somewhat warped standards of Cassandra Zinnea. I knew what it was like to be found wanting.

He leaned close and whispered something in her ear and she gave a little nod while, at the same time, nimbly extracting her hand from his. Nicely done, I thought.

“Ah, at last we are graced by the presence of your, how do you say, *amanuensis*? Is that the correct term?” I had no idea but strongly suspected I was being insulted. And he *still* hadn’t gotten out of my chair. I pondered the best way to deal with the situation. Rip off his head and stick it up his ass? Tie his balls in a sheepshank behind his ears?

My partner, reading my mind, tried a diversionary tactic. “Philippe’s here on business, Nightstalk. Specifically, that business in St. Andrew’s Park.” She met my eye...and winked at me. I heard her voice in my head, as clear as a bell: *Yeah, I know he’s a blowhard but let’s pump him for as much information as we can get.* I wasn’t the slightest bit telepathic, of course, but could sort of “think/speak” short sentences on our private wavelength, which she was usually able to decipher: *Okay, but don’t expect me to kiss his hairy, puckered arse.* “He’s acting on behalf of a certain organization that shall remain nameless—” Otherwise known as the Brethren of Purity, *aka* The Black Brotherhood, *aka* Dickheads United. “—and he’s come to, well, I guess you could say he’s here to assist our investigation.”

“Call it...an advisory role,” he clarified. “Even so, my presence in Ilium must remain a closely kept secret, yes? And that is why I question the necessity of involving your *assistant*,” a withering glance in my direction, “in affairs that are beyond his, how do you say, purview.” That settled it. I hadn’t performed my patented sheepshank maneuver in a long time.

“Nightstalk is my *partner*, Philippe,” she responded tersely. “I consider him my equal in every way. You *will* address him with the respect he deserves.” You could practically hear the whip crack. DeBarge looked over at me, dipped his head in mock apology.

“No offense intended, Monsieur Nightstick. It is clear I have underestimated your status.” He glanced down. “Ah, I see you’ve noticed my ‘Dupin’. Bestowed only rarely, as I’m sure you know. And yet history will never record my actions or the circumstances under which I so undeservedly obtained it.” He brought a finger to his lips. “State secrets are the hardest to keep. And the most dangerous. But this medal is a mere bauble to me. I feel no sense of pride when I recall the accomplishments for which it was rewarded. To me, I am not a hero, only one who acted according to his training and—”

“Yeah, yeah. Word for word from your acceptance speech, I bet.” Cassandra stifled a giggle. “Go on, DeBarge, pull the other one, why don’t you?”

“The other what? I’m afraid I do not understand, Nightstick. Is that a sexual reference? Are you making a pass at me?”

“In your dreams, you little pimp.” I began to open and close my hands, pumping up my arms and shoulders.

“Getting back to the point of Philippe’s visit,” my partner prompted, hoping to appeal to our professionalism.

“Yeah, why *are* you here, DeBarge? Please do enlighten us, *s’il vous plait*. Before I take that Dupin of yours and—”

Again Cassandra headed me off at the pass. “I keep trying to tell you, Philippe is here to *help* us, Evgeny. We were waiting for you but he’s already let slip that the Brethren—sorry, Philippe—are short one deep cover guy. It’s not too much of a stretch to deduce that their missing agent and the burned man in the park are one and the same.”

“And what leads you to that conclusion?”

“Those readings you took. The energy released that night. I told you that was significant.”

“Arturs Esch, the agent in question, was a 5<sup>th</sup> Degree adept,” Philippe DeBarge said. “I knew him well. He was a top-flight operative. One of our best men.”

“Not any more,” I countered. But I had to admit it added an interesting new wrinkle to the case. “Okay, I’ll bite: what’s a member of the Black Brotherhood doing getting his ass barbecued on a park bench in our fair city? Seems a bit off the beaten path as far as you boys are concerned.”

He nodded. It was a question he’d been expecting. “For some time we have been aware of certain amateur occultists here in Ilium who meet and perform rituals, most of them relatively harmless. Black magic, if you will, but more closely resembling what has been referred to as ‘Satanism Lite’. But then we started hearing rumours of a more ominous nature, unsubstantiated yet disturbing. This coven was allegedly recreating certain rites proscribed for centuries. Behaving in a manner that was reckless, irresponsible, perhaps even dangerous.” I shook my head in disbelief but he paid me no mind. “Esch was given the task of infiltrating the group and was able to do so with the assistance of certain individuals who shall remain nameless. And then he either erred or was found out...*something* happened because, as you say, he was executed in this most grotesque and abominable manner.”

“You’re kidding, right?” It was worth a chuckle so I obliged. “You mean the Cabal, don’t you? The Baron’s group? I got news for you and the Brotherhood--they’re just a bunch of pseudo-satanic wackos who are into group sex and circle jerks. Dangerous? Those pussycats? They may sacrifice a goat or two in honour of Samhain or whatever but that’s about it. C’mon, partner,” I motioned to her, “say something. Explain it to this tool.” She was about to but DeBarge cut in again.

“We believe they are more dangerous than you think. In fact, they may be more dangerous than we dare believe.”

I made a face. “Oh, come on! We *live* here, all right? If they were a threat or up to no good, don’t you think we’d have heard about it by now? They’re strictly weekend warlocks, take my word for it.”

“Our sources say otherwise.”

“They’re fucked up society sluts and bored millionaires—”

“Yet their power and influence is growing.”

“They’re no threat to anybody—”

“That is not correct. They are tampering with powers and principalities they do not fully understand.”

“Boys...” Cassandra said.

“Yeah, says who?”

“Says *us*, that’s who.” He smacked his hand on the desk with considerable force. Squared his shoulders and threw out his chest. The Dupin caught the overhead light and glinted like fool’s gold. “And who are we? Merely an organization devoted to ensuring mankind achieves its rightful destiny, a sacred duty bestowed upon us many hundreds of years ago.” Now he was on his feet, his voice rising with emotion. “We Brethren have our ways, Monsieur Nightstick. Our powers of divination are not perfect but we have assessed the situation and see a clear pattern emerging. Our informants tell us that there are forbidden practices being performed, *blood rituals*, and therefore our mandate is clear.”

“But the Baron—”

“--may be inconsequential, as you say, but there are other parties involved whose motivations may not be so, what is the word, *benign*.”

“Boys.”

“Who?”

He looked smug. “Ah, as to that, I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to—”

“Gregory Fischer.” We both turned toward her. “A little birdie told me.” She shrugged, smiling impishly.

It was a pleasure to watch DeBarge fume. “That information is classified.” He pointed a finger at me. “*You* will not divulge what you have just heard to *anyone*.”

I was barely listening. “Gregory Fischer. *Wow*. That’s quite a catch for the Baron.”

“There have been rumours flying around for awhile. Apparently Fischer and his wife are serious occultists. They own an impressive collection of Crowley memorabilia. He has a genuine crush on A.C. Some call it an obsession.” She paused, considering. “And if the Fischers are involved, that means Victor Skorzeny is too.”

“Skorzeny?” I knew the name, of course. Along with Anton LaVey he was probably the best known Satanist of the past twenty or thirty years. “I thought he was retired. Or dead.”

“He’s been Gregory Fischer’s...I guess you’d call it spiritual advisor for some time.” She looked at DeBarge. “You think Fischer and Skorzeny are up to something, something potentially dangerous.”

He wouldn’t give her a straight answer. “We have *suspicious*,” he hedged. “We consider them worthy of further investigation. There are other factors, as well. Certain...anomalies, yes?”

“Like what?” I cracked. “Two-headed calves? Nine-legged spiders? Doughnuts shaped like the Virgin Mary?”

“No, monsieur,” he retorted, “I am referring, for instance, to the missing cats.”

That shut me up.

Cats were a touchy subject around *After Hours Investigations*.

We’d received our first call about six weeks previously. An old gal had lost her most prized possession, Kym, a gorgeous, spirited calico. It was a slow time for us but

not *that* slow. I asked the standard questions, tried to sound sympathetic and forgot about it as soon as I put the phone down.

The next evening there was a memo left on my side of the desk. The Old Man laying down the law: *Investigate all missing cat reports. Top Priority.*

So guess who had to drive all over the city, interviewing distraught pet owners, who were either befuddled old farts or misanthropic paranoids. As an interesting sidebar, it turned out that most of the folks who'd lost cats were either witches or adepts of one kind or another (whether they knew it or not). And the cats involved, without exception, were praised for their intelligence and inquisitiveness.

Cats are special creatures, even an unrepentant animal hater like yours truly has to acknowledge as much. They're the eyes and ears of the night, the best spies you could ask for. Diligent and attentive, curious and inconspicuous. Only now a bunch of them had vanished and try as we might, we hadn't been able to find hide nor hair of them. A few truant tabbies could be chalked up to roadkill, rogue dogs and random misfortune, but the number of felines MIA in such a short period of time pointed to other causes.

What was happening to them? On that point, we were stumped.

The reference to cats took some of the wind out of my sails. Advantage, Philippe. "So...so you're telling us that the Cabal is behind this epidemic of cat-nappings too?" Which, if true, was a pretty serious crime in and of itself. We night folk treat cats with mucho respect. We know they aren't just glorified rat-catchers. They're smart, resourceful and in one particular episode I can think of, an heroic kitty named Festus gave his last life to save Cassandra and I from almost certain annihilation.<sup>12</sup>

"The Breth—the organization I represent finds it worrisome, to say the least, when some of the leading felines in your community start disappearing. Without explanation, their fate as yet undetermined."

"Yes," my partner agreed, "it's troubling. Clearly these were special cats. And singled out for that reason. Textbook tactics. Eliminate scouts and sentries, depriving your enemy of critical intelligence. And, meanwhile, plan your attack..."

He was nodding in agreement.

"*Attack?* What attack?" Digging away at that bald spot again.

"It's all leading up to something," she declared, ignoring me.

"Undoubtedly," he agreed. They were looking at each other and from their blank expressions I could tell they were communicating telepathically, leaving poor I'il un-Gifted me out of the loop.

I felt myself getting hot under the collar. "Excuse me, the peanut gallery has a few questions. Like, for instance, what the hell are you two talking about?"

He seemed amused by my ignorance. The creep. I was a badly groomed mountain gorilla next to him. I might have been able to turn Philippe DeBarge inside out physically—I'd visualized it often enough—but if it came down to a magickal tussle between two adepts, he'd be going home with my ass in his back pocket. Usually we observed a prickly truce. It kept us from killing each other.

"I shall cooperate as much as I am able," he told us. "My role is to act as a liaison between my organization and the Old Man. However, there are some matters I will not or, I should say, *cannot* discuss." He shrugged. "You must

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<sup>12</sup> "Colonel Mustard, in the Library, With a Candlestick" (*The Casebooks of Zinne & Nightstalk, Vol. II*)

understand there is a limit, certain information or details that cannot be divulged under any circumstances. This is...as it must be. For all of our sakes.”

“You people fucking slay me,” I retorted. “*You* decide what we need to know and when we need to know it. What makes you so bloody omnipotent? *The Brethren of Purity*. What a crock. Your bunch are about as pure as yellow snow. And I know what sort of help we can expect from you: zilch. *Nada*. As in nada fuckin’ thing. We take all the risks and you get the glory.”

My partner looked none too pleased but my intended target was fairly vibrating with rage. “*Lies*,” he snapped. “Petty slanders. *Bullshit*.” We were making significant eye contact, staring each other down. I began clenching my fists again, inflating my arms and shoulders. Cass, clever girl, called it “going Popeye”.

“How’d you like to go home in an urn?” I snarled.

“And how would *you* like to be a capuchin monkee?” he replied. “The ones with the cute, puzzled little faces.”

“*Enough already*.” She was genuinely pissed. “How about I zap you *both* with a pacifying spell? Make you waltz around the room, singing old sea shanties together. You get the picture?”

“Aw, we didn’t mean anything,” I muttered, not liking the sound of *that* spell one bit.

But she wasn’t taking any more chances. “Philippe, unless you’ve got anything more to add...” He shrugged. “...then we thank you for dropping by. Now if you’ll excuse us, Nightstalk and I need to get down to work.”

“I hope you are able to shed some light on the true intentions of this so-called ‘Cabal’. My organization would appreciate your efforts and your... cooperation.” He looked nettled about something. Maybe I’d spoiled his evening. *Tsk, tsk*.

“Yeah, and in the meantime you and your buddies will sit on your arses while we do the shit work.” I laughed bitterly. “Don’t worry, we know the score.”

*Zing*. Got him again. “We have our mandate, you have yours,” he responded icily. “Sometimes it’s difficult to see the big picture from the bottom of the monkey cage, yes? Just do your job, Monsieur *Nightstick*. I also suggest you learn some manners. And pray that our paths don’t cross again, under less hospitable circumstances.” *Oooo, a threat*. Now the prick was kissing her hand. I’d make sure she washed it after he left. In *extra* hot water. You never knew where his lips might have been.

When he was gone, I reclaimed my chair, first ensuring that he hadn’t hexed it or, worse yet, changed the settings on me. I expected her to read me the riot act but all she said was: “Nightstalk, we’ll need him before this is over.”

I smiled, biting my tongue. Sometimes for the sake of maintaining an excellent working relationship you have to know when to quit.

But Philippe DeBarge’s visit touched a nerve in both of us and the mood was unsettled for the rest of the night. It reminded us of the fragile, precarious nature of our partnership, the care and discretion required to sustain it.

Honestly, it was a miracle it worked as well as it did.

Tuesday night—surprise, surprise--she beat me to work again.

I could smell her perfume as soon as I opened the office door. I started to call out a greeting...but she’d already come and gone.

She'd been doing some research, by the look of it. Her side of the desk was covered in file folders and *Post It Noted* books. Volumes on subjects relating to demonology, spell-casting, the most recent *Who's Who in Modern Witchcraft* and a remaindered copy of Gregory Fischer's best-selling autobiography, *Rich Beyond My Wildest Dreams*. But she hadn't found what she was looking for.

Deductive reasoning? Perhaps. Or it might have been the note she left:

*Nightstalk:  
Meet me at the Hall of Records around 11:00.  
See you there.  
C. Z.*

Neil was on duty, which was a nice stroke of luck. Floyd, the other guard, was a boozehound who sometimes passed out in one of the comfy seats in the basement film theatre, dead to the world. Useless if there happened to be a fire, a break-in...or a fellow Shade tapping on the front entrance of the library with his car key, trying to get his attention.

Neil was cool though. I waved at him through the glass and he motioned me around to the back. The staff parking lot was well lit and there was only one vehicle in evidence, a yellow Ford half-ton with more miles on it than a fleet of space shuttles. I assumed it belonged to the man himself.

Neil was holding open the door. "Thought it was you," he called out cheerfully. "C'mon in. I gotta re-jig the alarm within a minute or the security company'll be calling. Don't want the fuckin' cops showing up. A hassle with the pigs is the *last* thing I need."

"Hey," I said, "have some respect for our fine law enforcement professionals. If I'm not mistaken, you are presently in uniform so technically that makes you a pig too."

He shook his head. "I'm not a cop, man. Shit, I'd wear a fuckin' bunny suit as long as it got me a sweet job like this one."

Neil dealt with the security system then led me through the administration area, past the chief librarian's office and into the main part of the building. "Me and Floyd switched tonight. He was gonna try to catch his wife at something. Make her think he was going to work and then double back on her."

"I wouldn't blame her. Fuckin' old rummy."

He laughed. "Aw, Floyd isn't so bad. He's got some cool war stories. You should ask him sometime." He stopped by the escalator. "Well, I guess you know the way. I'll be around if you need me. Probably up by the internet computers, jamming with my buddies. Just gimme a shout."

"You still into that Irwin Allen crap?"

He looked hurt. "It ain't crap, Nightstalk. We're *Voyagers*, man. We love that stuff. There's this on-line chat room and we sit around for hours talking about our favorite episodes of *Land of the Giants* and *Lost in Space*. Those are classic programs, man. They don't make 'em like that any more."

I rolled my eyes. "You call yourself *Voyagers*? As in *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, right? Another classic?" He nodded, grinning sheepishly. "Kee-ripes, Neil, how many of your virtual pen pals still live in their parents' basement?"

He took it in good stride. “No point arguin’ with a closed mind. But you should log on to our website some day and have a look around. Check out some of the links.”

I grunted, conceding nothing. “I’ll come find you when I’m done.” He went up the escalator and I made my way past *Large Print Books* and *General Fiction*, then *Business* and *Social Sciences*...

The occult section consisted of four or five shelves next to *Religion & Philosophy*. Like our office collection, it was eclectic: from near death experiences to alien abduction. Jacques Vallee butted heads with Colin Wilson and Elaine Pagels shared uneasy shelf space with Erich Von Daniken.

I took down Montague Summers’ *Witchcraft & Black Magic*. It was marked with green tape, a *Reference* book and therefore no one was allowed to borrow it. Plus it was protected by at least a dozen aversion spells. Cassandra thought it very appropriate that a book by Summers, written with his poisonous, witch-hating pen, should serve the purpose it did.

I found page 177, closed my eyes and turned clockwise three times.

As an experiment, I’d once tried it with my eyes open. Didn’t work. Tried making only two turns and then opening my eyes. *Bad news*. Don’t even want to *think* about where I ended up that time.

Page 177.

Three times.

Eyes closed.

When I opened them, I was in the Hall of Records.

Think library. Think BIG library. Library of Congress. Times a million. Then times that by a *trillion*. And so on. Get the picture?

Hall of Records. As in *Akashic Records*. As in *only* the combined knowledge of the entire universe, stored and preserved in timeless ether, free for the asking.

You can access or retrieve data through a variety of formats. Print definitely *not* preferred (it’s unwieldy and takes up too much space). There are viewers and visors and virtual stations, as well as various ports and plugs for those fitted with cranial inputs...

Can’t decide? Confused by the sheer scale of the facility? That’s all right. There’s always Georgie, your ever-helpful guide, infinitely wise, anxious to be of service.

Aware of your presence the moment you arrive, a greeting already forming on his lips—

“Good afternoon, Mr. Nightstalk,” said Georgie. Somehow he managed to appear dignified and servile at the same time, a rather neat trick. “It is most agreeable to see you again.” If I was casting the part of Georgie, I’d pick someone like Sir John Gielgud. He would fit the bill perfectly, except he’s dead and not accepting bookings at the moment.

Georgie had a long, diamond-shaped face, with thick, bushy brows, an over-large nose and deep set, watery eyes. He was tall but his posture was so poor that he never seemed to tower over you. I liked that about him. His actual age was anyone’s guess, but his immense faculties were still, for the most part, intact.

“It’s afternoon here?” I looked around.

He chuckled. “It’s *always* afternoon here, sir. Three o’clock in the afternoon, to be precise. Just after teatime.”

I struggled to understand. “And you find...that helps?”

“It does wonders for staff morale, sir.” Staff? The only staff I’d ever seen was Georgie or one of his many clones or copies. But there would have to be other employees, wouldn’t there? Working behind the scenes.

“Oh. Okay.” I never knew how to take Georgie. He had to be *at least* an Eighth Degree but he was also supposed to be serving me, right? To be honest, I never felt completely at ease around him. I mean, one snap of his fingers and I might suddenly find myself the world’s only talking parsnip.

“And Miss Zinnea? Is she—”

“Late as usual? Yes, she is, as a matter of fact.”

“Ah, but here she comes now.” A second later she materialized a short distance away. She turned, spotted us and waved. This particular aisle was wider than the ones adjoining it; there was enough room for Georgie and me to stand side by side. If you looked both ways you could see for *miles* in either direction. Each connecting corridor represented a different area of endeavor, human or otherwise. The more esoteric your research, the deeper you were drawn into the Hall. But then you ran the risk of doing something really stupid like taking a wrong turn and getting *lost*.

Well, never fear, Georgie would find you.

Eventually.

We watched as my partner approached, looking smart in a navy blue, pinstriped outfit that must have set her back a ton. The way she wore it, it was worth every cent.

“Such a lovely woman,” Georgie observed.

“She sure is.”

“Right on time too,” she announced.

“Wrong,” I shot back. “You’re late. You’re always late. No clocks where you were or...”

“Nope. And you know I can’t wear watches,” she reminded me. “I fry them. It’s those nasty spikes in my electro-magnetics—*Fzzzt!*”

Georgie waited for us to finish our playful jousting, then came forward and offered his hand. He also *bowed*, a quick dip of the head. He never bowed to me. “Miss Zinnea.”

“Hello, Georgie.”

“You look, if I may say, magnificent.” Hey, he may have been older than the Sphinx and as chaste as a ninety-year old nun, but one look at her reminded him that he was, after all, a simulacrum of a *man*. Blew some of the accumulated book dust out of his system and got the lubricants flowing again. “How can I help you today?”

“We’re seeking information about a covenant that may be involved in a case of ritual murder.” She waited while he assimilated that. Was it my imagination or did there seem to be a slightly longer pause than usual?

“Can you be more specific?”

“Um, just the most recent scuttlebutt,” I improvised. “Anything you have on some of the more high profile members. Names: Baron Frederick von Stahl, Gregory Fischer and, uh, Victor Skorzeny—er, something wrong?”

He had an odd look on his face. He beckoned us closer...then, without warning, seized our elbows, gripping us tightly. There was no time to react, we could only hang on for dear life as he whisked us through the Hall of Records at speeds that would’ve

made Einstein swoon. He seemed to be steering us deeper into the facility, to a quieter, more discreet location.

Just as quickly as it began, our journey ended. We came to an abrupt stop, both of us lurching slightly as we regained our balance. “Uh...is there a problem, Georgie?” I watched him closely. Did he seem...*furtive*?

“I merely wanted to make you aware—” He lowered his voice. “There was another party requesting information along similar lines.”

“That party being Philippe Arnaud DeBarge, representing our friends, the Brethren of Purity, am I right?”

He was taken aback. “You surpass yourself, Mr. Nightstalk.”

I resisted the urge to stick my tongue out at Cassandra. “And did the aforementioned Monsieur DeBarge order a complete embargo on all relevant material or was he good enough to leave us some scraps?”

“As I told *him*, there really is very little information available. This particular coven is, dare I say, of rather slight repute. Baron von Stahl merits hardly a mention in *Who’s Who* and just about anything you wish to know about Mr. Fischer is available in the public domain.” Georgie shrugged. “I got the impression that Monsieur DeBarge didn’t feel there was any sensitive material to weed out.”

He led us into a tributary aisle filled with mouldy parchments and scroll-like cylinders. Sometimes we had to squeeze sideways between the stacks, holding our breath so we wouldn’t breathe in thousands of years of dust and decay. Soon I was completely turned around, as lost as a kid in the woods.

Finally he stopped beside a table hemmed in by two ordinary plastic chairs. They had somehow been finessed into a tiny alcove, a space devoted to study and contemplation...or solitary masturbation.

“You’ve used a light table before, of course.” Cassandra nodded and took a seat in one of the chairs. I hated the bloody things. You really had to focus and keep your thoughts on tight beam or else it fucked up the search engine. You ended up with a whole bunch of crap to sift through, most of it totally useless.

As soon as she made the connection, the surface of the table shimmered, awaiting her instructions.

“Please list all current members of the Cabal,” she said. Giving it an easy one to start with.

The table blinked and a sexless voice intoned. “Please specify.”

“The Cabal. Ilium. Frederick Von Stahl.”

“Please restate question.”

I let out my breath in frustration. Georgie looked apologetic. “The system has been giving us a bit of trouble of late,” he explained. “We’ve been trying to rectify the situation but, in the meantime, try to be patient.”

It took three or four more tries and an impressive display of concentration on her part but we finally got something. Names began to flash onscreen, a rapid fire roster that included both Gregory and Charlotte Fischer, Victor Skorzeny, Vivien Vickers and Kali Brust. Some names were highlighted in boldface, while others—

The screen hummed loudly and winked off.

“What the fuck’s wrong with this thing?” I complained. I scribbled the last of the names in my notebook: Tibor Benes, Joe Duthie and Julian Finchley.

He frowned. “This is most peculiar.” He came forward and placed his palm on the table. I heard him mutter something and then he was *gone*. Just like that.

“Shit. Now what?”

We had no way of knowing when he’d return. There were countless patrons making endless demands on his time. What if he *forgot* about us?

While we waited, my partner tried another tack. She went looking for related material and must have found a way in because the screen hummed to life again. This time it offered up a newspaper article on the Baron from our illustrious rag, *The Ilium Observer*, accompanied by a fuzzy picture taken at Davos with a telephoto lens. “Mystery Man Moves in the Highest Circles”. The Baron stood between a former Secretary of State and a member of the Kuwaiti royal family.

I’d heard from a hack I knew at the paper that the original version of the piece had packed more of a wallop. The reporter spent more than six months on the Baron’s trail and unearthed damning evidence regarding some of his more unsavory activities. The centre piece of the article was the affair that earned him the nickname “The Bandit of Bucharest”. It was a post-Cold War scandal involving Romania’s largest bank and a top-level cabinet official. Tipped off ahead of time, the Baron flew the coop with over a hundred million dollars siphoned from state coffers only minutes before the *polizei* came knocking.

When the hack turned in his story, twelve tons of shit hit the fan. The article was kept in limbo while libel lawyers were consulted. The lawyers talked to the publisher, who called in the editor and...well, you know how it is. The article was gutted, whittled down to a human interest story, the Baron transformed into a colourful jet-setter with “alleged” shady connections and “purported” friends in high places. Nothing incriminating, no smoking guns. All references to that “Bandit of Bucharest” business and the industrial espionage conducted on behalf of a certain Israeli aerospace firm eliminated—*snip, snip*. The Baron retained his air of mystery and the reporter later lost his job. Typical...

There was also an article from *People*, of all places. A photo spread on Gregory Fischer and his lovely trophy wife. On the slopes at Vail, playing *chemin de fer* at Monte Carlo and snuggling up on a love seat in their living room atop the Leiber Building. When the Revolution finally comes, people like them will be the first against the wall. That is, if I’m around to have any say about it.

Charlotte Roper-Fischer listed her hobbies and interests as “scuba diving, nude sun-bathing and stuff to do with fashion”. Her husband was the smartest man she had ever met and when asked for a role model or personal idol, thought hard for a full minute before replying: “Cher.”

“Christ, what a bimbo,” I snorted.

“Fischer didn’t marry her for her brains, dummy,” she pointed out.

“That much is obvious.”

“Don’t be such a simp, Nightstalk. She’s merely using the gifts she’s been blessed with to obtain a standard of living most of us can only dream about.” She sounded almost...wistful? I stared at her. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Maybe I do. She’s beautiful, you’re beautiful. People are always taking you for granted, thinking you can’t be both gorgeous *and* smart.” She tried to hide her smile. “She’ll never get the respect or credit she deserves. She could very well be a totally

decent, intelligent person only she's cursed because most of us can't get past the image we have of her as a gold-digging airhead."

She was shaking her head in amazement. "Evvie, Georgie was right, sometimes you really do surpass yourself." She took my hand, gave it a squeeze. "You're not such an old poop after all."

I squeezed back. "But I'll tell you right now you have *nothing* in common with that woman. She really is as dumb as a stick. I saw her being interviewed and Koko the gorilla has a higher I.Q. Her two main interests in life are her hair and shopping. On the other hand, you, my dear, are a fuckin' genius and that is no exaggeration." I think if Georgie hadn't rematerialized at that moment, she would have gotten up and hugged me. Damn him and his relentless competence!

"Please excuse the delay." He glanced at the table, shook his head regretfully. "Not much there, I'm afraid."

My partner sat back in her chair. "Not really, no. You're right, as far as these sort of groups go, they're pretty low-echelon. But I *am* curious about a few points. For instance, according to this," tapping the surface with a well-nibbled fingernail, "a number of the coven members are listed as inactive or, in the case of Paul Briere, missing altogether."

That gave me a start. I hadn't noticed the absence of Briere's name. The master chef was, as far as I knew, one of the Baron's closest confidantes.

Georgie shrugged. "The fault might lie in the system. I'm afraid I cannot vouch for the accuracy of this material. I *am* sorry."

I counted the names in my notebook. "Do there *have* to be thirteen members? Is that mandatory? Because with Briere gone and some of the others listed as inactive or whatever..."

"The figure of thirteen is part of popular folklore but not necessarily set in stone," Georgie stated.

"True." Something else was bothering her. "Did you notice the Baron was one of the members listed as inactive?"

"*What?*" I flipped back to my list.

"I've heard rumblings that there had been changes lately. Fischer and Victor Skorzeny cleaning house. Forcing out some of the old guard."

"The Baron would let them to do that?" Dumbfounded at the notion.

"He may not have been given much of a choice. Victor Skorzeny isn't a man you want to trifle with." She looked at Georgie. "You say your system's been giving you trouble lately?"

"Yes." Georgie's face clouded over. "I hesitate to say this but based on my preliminary investigations, it shows signs of tampering, perhaps even *corruption*."

We gaped at him. "I...wouldn't have believed that was possible," she ventured.

"Nor would I," he agreed, "but the evidence is persuasive. We have been seeking the source of the infiltration but thus far have had little success. I can only tell you that it appears to be the work of someone of considerable power and sophistication." He was clearly peeved. "Well, I shan't bore you with my speculations."

"Who would want to do something like that? What would be motivating them?"

He nodded. "Those are excellent questions, Mr. Nightstalk. Believe me when I say they are among the many for which we are currently seeking answers." He cleared

his throat. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I must be about my business. Do you require further assistance or--”

“No,” Cassandra replied, “you’ve given us plenty to think about. Thank you, Georgie.”

“My pleasure, Miss Zinnea. And good day to *you*, Mr. Nightstalk.”  
Before I could answer, he was gone.

The Cabal, under the Baron’s direction, consisted of rich, bored kooks who hoped that making a pact with the dark side would grease the way for a merger or help them scratch a sexual itch they’d endured and/or nurtured for many a long year. The majority of the Cabal-leros (Cass loved that one) were people who should have known better, one of them being Vivien Vickers. Yes, *the* Vivien Vickers, beloved siren of the silver screen. She always gave the impression of being a pretty sharp lady. How she ended up associating with a bunch of posers and dilettantes—

“I love Georgie.” Cassandra said, temporarily derailing my train of thought. “He makes me feel special. He’s so old-fashioned and elegant. A gentleman. Did you see how he kissed my hand as we were leaving?”

I steered the Taurus around two drunks dancing in the middle of the street. One of them flipped me the bird for this act of consideration. “It was very, uh, chivalrous,” I allowed, electing not to mention the rather prominent erection the archivist had sported while performing the aforementioned deed.

“That’s exactly the right word. *Chivalrous*. I like that in a man. So many guys I know are so...coarse. Present company excluded,” she quickly amended. She switched on the overhead light and began to dig through the contents of her purse. “Do you know how Sir Richard Francis Burton refers to a woman’s naughty bits?” She held up a paperback. *The Erotic Traveller*.

“Tell me.” I was mad at myself. I’d taken Finlayson Drive out of habit, somehow forgetting that much of it was closed off for resurfacing and maintenance, an annual rite of spring. I was about to make my second detour. At that moment, if she offered to give me a tutorial on the finer points of quantum physics, I would’ve welcomed the distraction.

“Mound of Venus’.” She sighed and settled back in the bucket seat. “*The Mound of Venus*. If I hear it one more time, I’m yours for the taking, Nightstalk, I swear. We’ll pull over and for the next hour we’ll forget about the case, our careers, the Old Man, everything. What do you say?”

*Mound of Venus! Mound of Venus!* But only thinking it. Even so, I was afraid to look at her. Afraid of what my face would reveal, even in such lousy light.

“Do you know your ears are glowing?” She giggled. “I’m serious. It’s like I’m seeing them in infrared. Their heat signatures. Now they’re actually *smoking*—”

“Could we *please* change the subject?” I groaned. I was *this* close to pulling the steering wheel off.

“Don’t you think that’s a big improvement over ‘cooze’ or ‘snatch’ or the various crude euphemisms people employ for such a sacred part of the anatomy?”

“Sacred?”

“Well, men worship it, don’t they?” she fired back.

“Certain ones,” I allowed. I could tell she was watching me so I kept my eyes straight ahead, approaching the third and, hopefully, last detour.

“Anyone I know?” she teased.

“I thought we were changing the subject.” I was sweating, literally on the hot seat. She was toying with me and part of me was enjoying it. Kind of.

“That was your ears, now we’re back to the Mound of Venus.” She sighed again.

“Y’know, it gets any muggier in here, we’re gonna have rain,” I bitched, cracking open the window to make my point.

“I was going to read you something...” She started paging through *The Erotic Traveller*.

“Please don’t,” I begged. “High class porn is wasted on a deviant like me.” I glanced over at her and we burst out laughing. We were giddy, stupid, our minds fried from trying to get a handle on this fucked up case, let alone *solving* it. Laughing was a release valve.

It got real quiet afterward. Almost like post-coital letdown. An awkward silence that lingered like a smelly beer fart.

For some reason I started thinking about the many long, dark nights we’d spent together over the past two years. Back at the office or, better yet, on stakeouts. Stuck in a car for hours on end with the most beautiful, intelligent woman I’d ever met. Tough job, huh?

What I remembered most about those nights was that they always seemed to end on an unsatisfactory note, important things left stubbornly unsaid. Both of us fearful, I suppose, of what the repercussions might be if certain words were ever spoken out loud.

Not that we didn’t have great conversations. Witness the following exchange, as recorded in my trusty notebook. At the time we were parked down the block from a restaurant where our suspect was enjoying a solitary meal. Needless to say, we were bored out of our minds and so:

### **Cassandra Zinnea on “The Goddess Within”**

ZINNEA: My whole routine? Are you serious?

NIGHTSTALK: Yeah. I’ll take it down in my distinctive shorthand. Type it up later.

ZINNEA: But will you be able to read it?

NIGHTSTALK: Just get on with it.

ZINNEA: Well, it may sound really weird and superstitious but I always get up on the same side of the bed. No matter where I am, I get out the right side. Because I know if I go left, it would throw off my whole day. I’d be a wreck. Are you sure you’re getting this? Are you doing it this way because I fried your tape recorder last week?

NIGHTSTALK: You didn’t have to touch it.

ZINNEA: I brushed it with my hand. Honestly, the way you carried on you would’ve thought it was a family heirloom or something.

NIGHTSTALK: I’m waiting here.

ZINNEA: The first thing I do every morning is re-align my *chi*. That's my life force. You know I'm very moon-oriented; the fuller it is, the better I feel. Unless I get moonstruck, of course—

NIGHTSTALK: Can you explain that?

ZINNEA: (*Giggling*) Well, you've seen me. When the moon is at its ripest, I sometimes get more, um, more *everything*. Smarter and faster and sexier...and, of course, the reverse is true. As the moon wanes—

NIGHTSTALK: You cry a lot.

ZINNEA: There's more to it than that! I'm vulnerable, at my lowest ebb. Really logey and out of sorts.

NIGHTSTALK: So what do you do to fight it?

ZINNEA: Try to keep my body and spirit in proper alignment. That whole mindfulness thing I've been trying to get you into. It would do wonders for you, believe me.

NIGHTSTALK: Right.

ZINNEA: I do this series of exercises to get everything back into synch. It's basically seven or eight different movements designed to, I don't know, reintegrate everything. I used to do them out on my balcony but the creep across the courtyard started taking pictures so now I use a yoga mat in my living room.

NIGHTSTALK: Could I see a few of them? Just to get the general idea.

ZINNEA: The first one goes...and then you move to...

*(And even though seated in the cramped confines of the Taurus, she proceeds to demonstrate a degree of flexibility that would make the compilers of the Kama Sutra drool.)*

Once I get limbered up you'd be surprised by the positions I can get myself into. Is that enough or--

NIGHTSTALK: Yeah, well, I think I get the point. What comes next?

ZINNEA: I should have mentioned that I always face east when I do my warmup. That's important. I focus on the power of the Earth rolling beneath me, drawing my strength from it. Calling on the Goddess to protect me and make me worthy of being her servant. Well...it's more complicated than that. There's sort of a pantheon of wise women. Selene, Artemis, Hecate: I call upon qualities that are associated with each of them. Maid, mother and crone.

NIGHTSTALK: So these are actual incantations requesting protection against, ah, curses and dark forces and that sort of thing.

ZINNEA: Well, there's that but there's also a whole other spiritual component that you're missing. It's about striving for communion with the infinite. Trying, through prayers and meditation, to achieve the sense of being an

extension of the cosmic mind. The all-pervasive female consciousness responsible for...*everything*. She gave birth to the Earth, the Heavens, space, time, eleven dimensions so far and still counting. It wasn't a Big Bang, Nightstalk, it was a Big *Squirt*. Did you just roll your eyes.

NIGHTSTALK: *Rii-iight*. But what about...you also have all sorts of amulets and talismans--

ZINNEA: I'm glad you make the distinction. Most people don't. And again, they aren't just about protection from evil. They represent part of my belief system, who I am and the things most important to me. Love, Eros, wonder, laughter, the pursuit of wisdom, justice--

*(Leaning forward to point out an assortment of symbols and stones hanging from her neck or from thin, silver bands on her wrists.)*

This is Hyacinth, for healing. And this reddish-brown stone is sarder, for passion. This signifies Mercury, for intelligence. Yggdrasil, the World Tree. And here's the cosmic egg. You gave me that one.

NIGHTSTALK: For infinity.

ZINNEA: For *forever*. It's my favorite.

NIGHTSTALK: And is that the end of your ritual preparations?

ZINNEA: You're still missing the point, Nightstalk. You shrink from the idea but it's my version of *prayer*. It's when I connect with the higher powers. Get my marching orders. I usually meditate for awhile, clear my mind for the day ahead. Do you have daymares? Aren't they the worst? I don't think nightmares even compare.

NIGHTSTALK: Daytime dreams seem more real, they're harder to shake after you wake up.

ZINNEA: You notice that too? And they're more believable, even when they don't make sense. *Scarier*. So that's part of the purification too. Purging the dreams that refuse to fade away, that might still be skulking around the dark corners of my mind. And then...well, other than taking a shower and popping a multivitamin right after I eat, that's about it. How about you

NIGHTSTALK: What do you mean?

ZINNEA: C'mon, Nightstalk, don't be coy. Don't you have certain rituals or whatever? Crazy superstitions?

NIGHTSTALK: I crack my knuckles.

ZINNEA: That's an annoying habit, not a ritual

NIGHTSTALK: At least once a week I like getting into a scrap with two or three seriously *big* guys. I'd say I'm fairly religious about it. That's how *I* stay mindful, doll.

ZINNEA: In that case, you're talking about a *felony*. You mean to tell me you don't have any crazy beliefs or customs, things you do in the privacy of your apartment? What do you do when you go home in the morning? (*Long pause*) Nightstalk?

NIGHTSTALK: That's personal. I think I've got all I need for now...

*Wednesday, May 5<sup>th</sup>*

The night after our trip to the Hall of Records, *After Hours Investigations* received a visitor. In my experience, such occasions rarely boded well. The people who came to see us in person invariably fell into two categories: they were either slightly loopy or out and out nuts. There didn't seem to be any middle ground. Mainly, it was locals, not too many clients willing to risk the drive into mid-town after dark. A silly prejudice; trouble will find you wherever you are, it's only a matter of time.

Dealing with the Renfields was the worst part. Street folk too far gone to know any better, assorted crackpots banging on our door, expecting us to fix their fucked up lives. Someone's been following them or they're secretly millionaires, see, except they've got amnesia and want to hire us to find out who they really are. One guy even tried to *stab* me. Apparently I reminded him of his older brother, Vern.

I preferred it when the Old Man assigned us a case, leaving a typed, unsigned memo on our desk, telling us to look into this or that. Situations ranging from the trivial to the near-lethal, depending on his whims.

The vast majority of the people entering our building through the street door made a sharp right turn into *The Tool Shed* to lay in a fresh supply of lubricants or pick up another batch of cappuccino-flavoured condoms. But around 11:45 someone came in and began a slow, steady advance up the steps. *Clump, clump, clump.*

I saw my partner tense and glance toward the door. "Oh, *drat*. I think I forgot to recharge the warding spell on the front door. I've been meaning to but--"

*Clump, clump...*

Whoever it was was right outside, although he or she seemed to be having trouble with the whole doorknob concept. "I've been expecting this." Her frown deepened as the scrabbling at the door became more frenzied. She fingered an amulet on her throat and mumbled a mantra of protection. My right hand brushed the pea shooter I kept duct-taped under my side of the desk. A palm-sized Smith & Wesson .38. It didn't come equipped with silver bullets but it would do the job.

"I don't think whatever it is is dangerous," she announced, "it's hardly giving off any life force—"

The door opened...and a few seconds later a dead man shambled in. He wasn't clutching a black bird rolled in newspaper. Then again, he wasn't packing an Uzi either, much to my relief. I left the .38 where it was, for now.

As far the living dead went, he wasn't what you would call a prime specimen. His face was battered and he dragged one leg, which had been badly mangled in some mishap. "Holy Diana, Nightstalk, do you know who that is?" I shook my head. "*It's Paul Briere.*"

I did a double take. I'd seen pictures of Chef Paul, even watched a few minutes of his Sunday morning cooking show once when I couldn't find anything else on. Still, I had a hard time associating that guy with the deadhead in front of me. "Are you sure?"

"He must have been wandering around for *hours*," Cassandra proposed. "Yes, he was lost, circling the block, trying to find the right door. Look at his injuries. I'll bet he can't see out of that eye. Nearly blind, confused..."

"Do you think someone waited too long to re-animate him or whatever?" I couldn't believe how clinical I sounded when confronted by such a macabre scene. Talk about jaded.

She came around the desk but was reluctant to approach the corpse formerly known as Paul Briere. "This a terrible thing. Someone truly evil has done this."

He was facing the wrong way, trying to speak. It came out garbled, verbal mush.

"*Oi!*" I called, snapping my fingers. "We're over here, Paul buddy. *Hey!*" I waved my arms, trying to catch the attention of his good eye.

"Don't, Nightstalk," she implored. "It's not his fault this has been done to him. He's a victim, not a bad guy. Look at him," she said and we watched as he slowly tacked in our direction. "Whoever's doing this is *sick*. I suspect they're using the power they gained from the park killing. This is black arts crap at its worst and I *hate* it."

It took him awhile but he finally got himself facing the right way.

He opened his mouth to deliver his message and promptly vomited a pint or two of fresh maggots and weevils onto the carpet.

She blanched. "Oh, *gross*. I am *not* cleaning that up, Nightstalk. No way. I'll take on the demons of hell, fend off magicians and warlocks and risk eternal damnation for this place, but I will not go *near* freshly puked maggots. That's a *blue* job, partner."

I glared at the offending cadaver. "You asshole. I oughta toss you out the window and see what kind of splash you make. You are fouling our personal space, motherfucker, and—"

"*Be... warned*," he gurgled. "You... are... in... *dangerrrr...*"

"This is *vicious*," Cassandra stated. "It's bad enough they've disturbed the dead, but to torture him like this..." Her lips were tight with anger.

"You are...tampering...you must...stop." More maggots pattered onto the carpet.

"I am going to toss my cookies in a minute," she gulped.

"Oh, for God's sake, woman! You've seen people ripped apart and decapitated before your eyes.<sup>13</sup> A few measly bugs shouldn't bother you." I was pretty brassed off at that point. It wouldn't be the first time I'd had to vacuum up maggots and I knew it wasn't a pleasant duty. "Okay, buster, finish saying whatever it is you have to say and then fuck off and decompose somewhere."

"Let *me* talk to him," she urged. Addressing the ambulatory corpse: "Who are you?" The stiff pivoted awkwardly to face her. "Who speaks through this poor creature?"

His lips moved, curling upward. An attempt at a smile? "You will...stop inquiries...live longer."

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<sup>13</sup> A few examples: "Medusa's Heir", "The Bride of the Nephew of the Son of Frankenstein", "Someone is Killing the Great Porn Stars of Europe" (*The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Vol. I*); "The Smiling Vivisectionist", "Charlie Was No Angel" (*Casebooks, Vol. II*); "The Affair of the Interesting Accountant" (*Casebooks, Vol. III*).

“Right. ‘Stop inquiries, live longer’. That seems pretty clear to me. Message received. Anything else, douchebag?”

“*Wait.*” She stood directly in front of him. “I want to know who this is. Whoever you are, you’ve been meddling with the Goetia.<sup>14</sup> You’ll pay dearly for that.”

“Perrrhaps,” the cadaver gurgled, with another twitch of those cracked, grey lips, “the Goetia...has been...meddling with me.”

She nodded and came over to stand beside me.

“So is that it?” I asked. “Nothing else you want to add, fuckface?”

He gazed at me, doll-eyed. “*There are some things...worse...than...death.*”

Hearing him say that gave me a funny feeling. Was it part of the warning or some surviving fragment of Paul Briere’s personality letting us know what hell was *really* like?

He tottered toward the door and I prayed he’d negotiate the stairs all right. I imagined what would happen if he slipped and took a bad fall. He’d come apart at the seams, explode all over the front landing like an over-ripe melon. Maggots are one thing; picking up bits and pieces of burst open dead guys something else. Definitely *not* part of my job description (I’d check the fine print to make sure).

I listened and he managed to make it down okay. Bless his decaying carcass.

“He’s on his last legs. Looking for somewhere to curl up and die. For good this time.” Her voice husky with emotion.

“R.I.P., motherfucker.” Displaying my usual sensitivity.

She moved back to her side of the desk. “I think this visit was most instructive, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” I concurred, “real educational. I never knew how many different varieties of maggots there are until now.” I went downstairs and borrowed Maude’s shop vac. Lugged it up to the office and got to work on the bug-splattered carpet while my partner ruminated, chair tipped back, her gaze directed at the ceiling. She was going through the clues, reviewing the evidence, synthesizing every piece of information we had accumulated thus far.

Or maybe it was all just an act; pretending to be deep and thoughtful so she could duck out on the maggot detail.

*Blue job, my great auntie’s panties.*

I finished the vacuuming. Considerately dumped and rinsed the receptacle before returning the machine to Maude, no worse for wear. When I came back, my partner was still in the same position, wearing the exact same expression.

“Okay, resident genius, let’s hear what’s on your mind.”

“Just analyzing things, factoring in some new variables.”

“Such as?”

“This tactic, or whatever you want to call it, was meant to impress us but in execution it seemed...clumsy.” She paused before continuing. “If the Cabal *was* responsible, their powers are still nascent, not fully formed.” She lapsed into silence again, her mind attacking the case from every conceivable angle, a multiplicity of viewpoints.

My job, on the other hand, was to point out the bleedin’ obvious. “But it also tells us these people are serious. Not every garden variety black magician can raise the dead.”

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<sup>14</sup> A grimoire or book of black magic devoted to the invocation and control of spirits

She fluffed her hair. It was longer again; curly, with red highlights. “True. However, whoever’s behind this is still developing as an adept. They’re not invulnerable—at least, not yet.”

“On the other hand, I’d say they’re showing real promise,” I commented.

“Did you hear what he said about the Goetia? He knew the quote.”

“Right. And what quote are we referring to?”

“The first time Allan Bennett met Aleister Crowley, he accused him of meddling with the Goetia. Crowley’s response was almost word for word what Briere said.”

“You said Gregory Fischer was really into Crowley.” She nodded. “Great. So he’s behind this. Showing off and trying to scare the piss out of us at the same time.”

“I’ll do what I can to protect us,” she promised. “I’ll upgrade office defenses, use stronger spells and counter-measures. I’ll make it so anything that doesn’t have a body temperature of a living, breathing human being can’t take more than three steps inside the door without getting zapped.”

“Make sure it covers mice. Something’s been getting into my junk food stash again.”

“You should be cutting down anyway.”

“Sure, kid, whatever you say. One last question: can you be sure *any* spell you come up with will work against people who have the power to send zombie-grams? Maybe...maybe this is beyond you.” I tried to choose my words carefully but it still came out wrong.

“I know what I’m doing, Nightstalk,” she snapped, getting up and going over to the bookshelves. She started hauling down heavy tomes, some of them lacking covers, their bindings warped and split. “If I have to bring out the heavy artillery, I will. Big-time conjuring. Smoking cauldrons, consecrated circles, the whole nine yards. Obviously the situation has changed and we have to take precautions. But I’m dealing with it, *okay?*”

“The Old Man should be helping more,” I complained, hoping to deflect her anger elsewhere. “Or your buddy DeBarge. Seems like we’re the ones running the risks.”

She shook her head. “Philippe has his own problems right now, believe me. As for the Old Man...behind that door,” she pointed, “he’s working his magic. Sometimes I feel the building humming and I know he’s up to something. It’s been like that *a lot* lately. In terms of helping us, I think they *both* assume we’re capable of taking care of ourselves. And they’re right. We’re the A-team, aren’t we? We’ve proven ourselves, survived our trial by fire. If there’s a problem, we can handle it.”

“I’m worried that sometimes people forget we’re, y’know, mere mortals. You’re good, kid, real good, but even you can’t outrun a bullet.” I loved that hard-boiled talk.

“The Old Man and Philippe have their priorities, we have ours.” She flashed a smile of encouragement my way. “Right now, the first thing we have to do is seal off those stairs to non-human entities. I think I know a nasty aversion spell that I can adapt into...” Paging through a text with thin, brittle pages, covered in fancy lettering.

I don’t know why, for some reason I couldn’t leave well enough alone. I pretended to be working on my report about the visit from the warmed up remains of Chef Paul, but all the while I was brooding. Trying to figure out what she could possibly see in someone like Philippe DeBarge.

I cleared my throat. “Y’know, come to think of it, it was probably your old boyfriend who tipped off the bad guys about us. Who knows what they have in store for us next. Maybe nail a fucking *cat* to our door.” Rubbing salt in that old wound. “Agents of the Black Brotherhood tend to draw attention, often not positive attention, if you get my drift.”

“Is there a point to this rather odd digression?” she inquired warily.

“Only that it isn’t surprising we’re having quasi-dead people dropping by not long after a friendly visit from one of the Brethren.” She was no longer immersed in the book in front of her; I had her complete attention. “Our buddy Philippe’s movements have likely been monitored since he got here, which means—”

She shook her head, visibly irritated with my reasoning. “Nightstalk, whatever you think of Philippe, the man is a consummate professional. He’d pick up any tail and lose them like *that*.” She snapped her fingers and a framed picture of Allan Pinkerton crashed to the floor on the other side of the room. She flinched and shrugged apologetically.

“Watch it,” I warned. “Remember what you’ve been reading.”

“Some of it must be rubbing off,” she quipped.

“No kidding.”

“I know you don’t like Philippe, Nightstalk—”

“Change ‘don’t like’ to ‘loathe’ and ‘Philippe’ to ‘pompous shithead’ and you’re pretty much spot on.”

“*Fine*. Regardless, we’re stuck with him. So whatever it is you have against him, I suggest you get over it.” She saw my sour puss. “Yes, Evgeny, he and I were very close at one time. Sorry about that. Sorry about my overall lousy taste in men. Is that what you want to hear? Are you happy now?”

I tried to act innocent but that’s never been my strong suit. “Hey, I’m sorry if I was out of line or—”

She slammed the book shut, producing an impressive cloud of dust. “No, it’s better if we deal with this right now. You despise Philippe, he despises you. I like both of you, but you also make me want to scream. The point is we’re all in this together and I expect everyone to act as adults and that *especially* applies to you.”

“Sorry as hell to have brought the whole thing up,” I said meekly, unsettled by her anger.

“Shut up.” She pointed her finger at me and I thought for a second she was going to *zap* me. She was mad enough. “Philippe is a pain but we’ll manage. All I ask is that you don’t mess things up to the point where we won’t have a chance to pry anything decent out of the supercilious bastard.”

“Okay. I hear you.” Submitting to her utterly, doing everything but baring my backside to her.

“For the record, I *hate* the way he talks down to you, like you’re some kind of moron or lackey.” Score one for Evgeny Nightstalk. “I also *hate* the way you try to bully him, puffing up and going all Popeye, cracking your knuckles like some kind of Neanderthal thug. Which is exactly the way he perceives you, by the way, so nice going.” Going on to the next point. “I *hate* the way he flirts with me when, truthfully, he has no more interest in me than a side of beef.” Then she unloaded her big guns. “And I absolutely *hate* the way you assume some kind of proprietary role over me, disapproving

of my lovers, *as if you have any right to tell me how to live my life*. We're partners, Nightstalk, and that's all we'll ever be so you'd better face it." I lowered my head. It was a worse beating than any I'd absorbed in my many years as a pugilist. I was on the verge of begging for mercy.

"Is it because—I'm only 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree?" Giving voice to my worst fear.

"That's part of it," she replied. "That's something else you have to deal with. You aren't Gifted and you don't cultivate what few powers you *do* have...but, Nightstalk, your biggest problem has always been *you don't believe*. Being an adept means transcending yourself, your limitations as a creature of flesh and blood. Drawing on the strength of a miraculous, *divine* source." She took pity on me, leaning forward, softening her tone. "Until you give yourself over to that higher power, Evgeny, Philip DeBarge is way out of your league."

"I still don't trust him," I declared obstinately.

"Oh, listen to yourself, Nightstalk! Philippe has devoted his entire life to cultivating his magical abilities. He is absolutely incorruptible. Do you know what the Brethren puts their people through, the training regimen? You don't speak for *five* years. Fourteen hours of instruction and meditation every day, seven days a week. No contact with the outside world. And the most important thing you learn, what's ingrained in your very being, is that the universe is a living entity, informed by a central, conscious, directed *will*. A will to life, a will to *create*. And we're part of it, everything sacred, everything divine. Even us. With all of our flaws and weaknesses..."

"I don't exactly live in denial, you know," I argued, trying to rally. "I've seen things with my own eyes that would drive most ordinary people nuts. I know these powers exist. You don't have to convince me."

"But you don't take it any further. Part of you will never accept anything I've just said. You're like one of those debunkers, willfully blind to the ineffable forces at work in the universe. Conscious energies that can be accessed by true believers. But you rationalize that away. To you, most adepts are some kind of clever sleight-of-hand artists, *illusionists*. 'All mediums are quacks, astrology is crap, religion is crap'. That about sums it up, doesn't it?" She stared across the desk at me, daring me to deny it.

"I—well, maybe. But still—still—" *What?* I was boxed in by her unrelenting logic.

"What do you find so hard to believe? You've seen ghosts and demons, every manner of phenomena...why can't you believe in a god or goddess? *Any* god? And if there's a god, doesn't that mean there's a possibility, even a probability, that there's an *anti-god*, a diametric opposite, the two forces eternally at war with each other? Call it Manichaeism, call it what you will."

"B-but I don't think I've ever denied the existence of these forces you're talking about."

"The higher powers I speak of are, to my mind, as real as this desk." She rapped her knuckles on its scarred surface. "Unseen and ever present. But it's not that way for you. In your heart, you're a skeptic. You see evil everywhere, people getting away with murder...but when things work out right for a change and good triumphs, you don't acknowledge the invisible hands responsible. The grand design that is slowly taking shape over great spans of time."

"You see design but maybe it's chance or plain, old coincidence."

“*There is no such thing as a coincidence.* Everything is connected. At least in the world *I* live in. You’re still half in and half out, not sure which way you’re going to jump.”

“I *want* to believe,” I blurted. “And as much as you may hate to hear it right now, you’re the one who makes me feel that way. You’re someone I really rely on to...put these things into perspective for me.”

She smiled, relenting. “Thank you. I’m glad you see me in that light. I also know you love me and that you’re trying to protect me from...the worst parts of who I am. You’re so solid and reassuring. Sometimes I think you’re the only thing that keeps me going. I mean that.” She ran her fingers along the edges of the dusty book in front of her.

“I’ll try to make nice with DeBarge,” I vowed. “And I promise I’ll work on the rest of it too. Maybe with your help I could take a crack at making at least 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree. The psychometry would be a bitch, I don’t have a sensitive bone in my body.”

“But at least you’d be *trying*. Of course I’ll help you. It’s the least I can do after my little tantrum.” She held out her hand. “Pals?”

“Always.”

She plunged back into the antique book, occasionally mumbling words or phrases, working on her pronunciation, committing relevant portions to memory.

I decided to put off writing the report on Maggot Man. I needed to be *doing* something.

I informed my partner I was going out to try to rustle up a few leads. Hopped in the Taurus and hit some places I knew. Private clubs and hangouts that never advertised and never closed. Establishments offering an assortment of attractions, as long as you weren’t too squeamish and minded your own damn business. I never stayed long. Whispered a word or two in certain ears. Trolling for information. No threats or intimidation. On my best behavior. Not looking to make any new enemies. Almost as an afterthought asking if anybody had run across my old buddy, Glen.

*Heard from Glen lately? You know Glen, right?*

Sure, everybody knew Glen.

If not by sight, then at least by reputation...

While I was out and about, my partner was exploring other, more rewarding avenues of investigation.

Almost as soon as I’d left the premises, a messenger arrived. Not your garden variety flunky either, some anonymous, blank-faced functionary with the personality of a doorstop.

The Baron, true to form, sent a *ghost*.

Fortunately, Cassandra was well-nigh unflappable when it came to apparitions. She told me she could always tell when a spook was in the vicinity; the fine, little hairs on her arms stood up.

“Who’s there?”

Something was flickering, coalescing over by the door, fading in and out like a radio signal from a lost ship. Finally she could make out who it was and smiled to herself. Expedited the ghost’s arrival by deactivating her defensive spells, reciting them backward, as custom required.

The ghost fully translated, though the resolution wasn't perfect and you could see through him in places. He seemed confused, looking about in bafflement.

"Hello, Roger. *Roger?* Over here..."

She caught his attention and he smiled in relief when he recognized her. "Ah, excellent. I thought for a moment I had transmitted to the wrong location. That can be most awkward." He gazed at her with an expression of bemused interest. His absent-mindedness was notorious.

"I take it there was something you were supposed to tell me?" she prompted him. "A message..."

"Ah! Yes, of course. Well, it's more of an invitation really."

She nodded. "When and where?"

"Yes, well, ah...it was supposed to be at your convenience." He shrugged. "But you know my employer."

"He really means fifteen minutes."

He seemed grateful for her intuitive grasp of the situation. "There will be a car waiting in front of the building." He hesitated. "Your colleague is not here tonight?"

"He's out."

The apparition, mission accomplished, was losing definition, nearly transparent. "So you will be coming alone? Good. That will please my master all the more."

The Baron was punctual, as usual.

Fifteen minutes and thirty seconds later she was being whisked on her way to Little Bavaria. She'd made two previous visits to the Baron's personal Xanadu, both times in my company.<sup>15</sup> Those encounters had been cordial, despite my best efforts to act up and generally misbehave.

Little Bavaria is supposedly a miniature version of a castle near Munich. It looks like something out of a fairy tale. Tall, rounded turrets and stained glass windows. There's even a moat of stagnant water and a drawbridge that swings down to admit you inside. It sits on a big parcel of expensive real estate in the city's most exclusive suburb, Breed Grove, Ilium's version of Bel Air. Not bad, when you consider the castle and its trimmings were built on the ill-gotten gains of all manner of nefarious schemes. The Baron was, if nothing else, a world-class swindler.

My partner didn't mind playing up to the old lech but I couldn't abide him. I thought that as far as phonies went, he gave Eva Jauch a run for her money.

The Baron liked to come across as a mysterious Count St. Germain figure. Eternally old and all-powerful. That whole "mystery man" routine, what a load of bullshit. He'd drop hints that he had been present at Waterloo or acted as special envoy to various Popes and potentates down through the ages. He knew his history and told a good yarn. Some of the details he threw in to add colour to his stories had a ring of authenticity to them. But I'd be willing to bet my last dollar that if you did some digging, you'd find out the guy was really one Walter S. Mitty, hick son of the best barber in Polk City, Iowa.

It probably wasn't coincidental that the Baron's unearthly messenger didn't show up until after I'd removed myself from the scene. He knew what I thought of him and his Cagliostro routine.

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<sup>15</sup> "Come, Darkness" (*The Casebooks of Zinne & Nightstalk, Volume I*); "The Tinger" (*Casebooks, Vol. III*)

The drawbridge came down with a rattle of thick chains. Once it *thunked* into place, the metallic grey Mercedes coupe continued on into the castle's courtyard.

She was ushered inside, passing across the threshold and through doors twelve feet high, sporting the Baron's ancestral crest (as far as I was ever able to make out, it depicted two badgers fucking on a four poster bed). Roger, appearing slightly more substantial here at home, led the way to the Baron's spacious study. She noticed as she followed him that despite his best efforts at preserving the illusion, Roger's feet weren't *quite* touching the ground.

The walls of the study were crammed floor-to-ceiling with precious first editions, works of arcana from down through the ages. The Baron's collection was legendary. There were volumes on every aspect of the supernatural and occult, many extremely rare (and not a few banned or proscribed by either the Vatican or the Brethren...or both).

Left to her own devices, she browsed, clucking with pleasure when she spotted certain titles. Tugging a leather bound book from its slot, she made herself comfortable in one of the big armchairs placed before the enormous hearth. A fire was burning but the brisk, flickering flames produced no appreciable heat. It was a spectral effect, meant to impress.

The Baron entered and found her deeply engrossed in the book.

"Just a moment," she said, without looking up from her reading, "I'd like to finish this section." He waited but inwardly he was likely fuming. Not a man known for his patience, our Baron. Finally she closed the book, stood and offered her hand. "Baron von Stahl. Frederick. How nice to see you again."

He smiled. "So. You have found something of interest in my collection of *incunabula*."

"Yes. Forgive my earlier impertinence." She held up the book. "I've never seen an actual copy of this. There are some who say it doesn't exist."

He took it from her. "May I?" Turning it over and glancing at the spine. "Hmm. Indeed. But please believe me when I tell you that its reputation far exceeds its actual value as a true artifact of the occult. It is a well-meaning blasphemy, nothing more. Portions of it are rather obvious reworkings of the *Kabbalah*. Which, of course, is where the search for knowledge *truly* begins." He motioned for her to reseal herself and settled into the armchair opposite her. "Don't you agree, my dear? Can you not tell the difference between pale imitation and the presence of...the ineffable?" He was keeping the banter light but she saw his eyes were tired and his posture less stiff and formal than usual.

"Something on your mind, Frederick? You appear..." She tried to be diplomatic. "Troubled."

He straightened. "I confess I am somewhat distracted this evening. Perhaps it is simply that I am overwhelmed by your ethereal beauty—"

"Take your hand off my knee, Baron, or I'll inherit the family jewels, if you get my meaning."

"Of course. Certainly." He sat back in the chair, absorbing the rebuff with good grace. "A token attempt at seduction, my dear. To preserve my reputation, you understand."

"I understand completely. Now tell me what's bothering you."

“Nothing, my dear. Simply a case of being over-tired.” His hands trembled. He tried lacing them together on his stomach but they kept jumping around on him. It took a great deal of effort to restrain them. “Shall I pour us some wine? Or perhaps you would prefer something stronger. I am, as always, your servant.”

She refused to allow the conversation to veer off-topic. “You know, I have a pretty good sense when someone’s lying to me, especially someone I’ve known for a number of years and whom I consider a friend.”

“Cassandra, I assure you—”

“Look, Frederick...” She didn’t cut him any slack, I give her credit for that. “I personally don’t care if you’re nine hundred years old and as wise as Solomon...or the world’s greatest grifter. Understand? Fake or fakir, it’s all the same to me. You’re someone I care about and if I can help you, I will. So spill it: what’s on your mind?”

He stared at her, taken aback by her directness. Clearly agitated, he got up and began to pace back and forth before the comfortless fire. “I find myself in a difficult situation. While I would like to reward your astuteness, at the same time I am afraid...” He paused. “Yes, that is exactly right: *I am afraid.*”

She closed her eyes, extending mental feelers. “You’re barely holding on,” she whispered, surprised at the intensity of what she was picking up. “You’re in over your head. You don’t know what to do. Things have spun out of control. You’re wondering if it’s too late to extricate yourself—”

Then, *wham*, powerful shields slammed into place, an insurmountable wall severing all contact between their two minds. He nodded in appreciation. “Impressive. *Very* good. The equivalent of a 5<sup>th</sup> Degree, I would say. In future, I must remember that and take proper precautions.”

“Your screens are leaking. You’re trying to hold too much in.”

Suddenly he really *did* look nine hundred years old. “Please,” he implored, “we must not speak of these things.”

He should have known better than that. “Where’s Paul Briere, Frederick?” He shuddered, closing his eyes. “Would you like to know? I saw him tonight. What was left of him.” She described the encounter.

“*Mein Gott...*”

“All right, Frederick,” she said, “I want to know what’s going on. You know me and you know you can trust me.”

“Yes, my dear. You’re quite right, I retain a great deal of respect for your formidable intellect *and* your discretion. You must understand that the only reason I cannot, ah, illuminate you further is out of concern for your safety. Endangering you, dear Cassandra, is one of the few sins I simply will not commit.”

She was touched. “But you brought me here tonight. Sent Roger to fetch me—”

He bowed, all stiffness and *faux* Prussian formality again. “Please forgive the inconvenience. It was an error in judgement on my part. I had heard the Old Man was looking into certain matters and I thought...I thought...”

“Thought you’d warn me?” She ventured. After a few seconds, he nodded. “Why risk it? I don’t understand. What’s your motivation? *Friendship*? Is that it?”

He smiled but, like the fire, it lacked warmth. “We are fellow explorers. Colleagues. Our life paths have taken us in different directions and yet we...I feel a

certain...” His head dropped. “Please, you must go now. Good night and fare you well.” He turned away.

“I know you. You would never have gone along with what they did to Paul or the killing of a Brethren agent, for that matter.” He stopped. “You created the Cabal, they’re *your* group. You were into sex magick and admitted to me that starting a coven was a great way to get laid.” His shoulders slumped perceptibly. She got up and moved toward him. “Now you stand by and watch *your* creation taken over, usurped by a *nouveau riche* buffoon.” She told me later that when she finished, she held her breath, not certain what sort of response her gambit would provoke.

He spoke without turning around. “Five years ago I moved to this inconsequential city and commenced work on what has charmingly been called Little Bavaria. At first, I did not know what drew me to this place but then I began to notice indications of great energies at work here. I had the matter looked into by eminent specialists and they confirmed my suspicions. It may be the proximity to a large body of water or the result of certain important ley lines converging. I have also heard stories that this area was once the site of an ancient Indian burial ground.<sup>16</sup> Possibly it was a place of sacrifice, where fierce savages ritually tortured and killed their prisoners.” He turned to face her. “Whatever the truth may be, there *is* something special about Ilium. Something in the air, you might say.” He wandered back and reseated himself. “I moved in and gradually attracted a group of like-minded individuals, fellow searchers all. We rejected the quaint notions of Christianity, Judaism and their pale imitators, outdated concepts of right and wrong. We sought freedom from the tyranny of the status quo and answers to great questions. For some of us, our group became a symbol of hope for a better world.”

“But then Gregory Fischer arrived on the scene.”

His upper lip curled in contempt. “That *peasant*. He is crude and unlearned and vacuous, as you have so accurately intuited. Enriched by risking other people’s money, nothing more than a parasite. A venture capitalist. *Ugh*. Do we really need to speak of these things?”

“Only if he’s the one behind what’s been going on.” He looked uncomfortable at her choice of words so she backed off. “Okay...look. If there’s *anything* you can tell me, some way that I might be of service to you—damnit, Freddie, I swear I’ll do my best to help. Nothing you say will leave this room.”

“Does that include your partner?”

“No,” she admitted. “I keep nothing from him and trust him with my soul.”

“Then he is not as big a lout as he pretends?”

She laughed. “Like a few others I can name, Nightstalk plays his role to the hilt. Surely you can acknowledge another consummate performer.”

He chuckled. “Of course. You are quite right. Your Mr. Nightstalk and I are like two great hams, bent on trying to upstage each other. If you trust him, that is good enough for me.” There was an interval of silence as he considered his next words. “But I confess I am torn. I don’t know what information can be safely imparted. I feel I must be...reticent, for both our sakes.”

“Who are you worried about, Gregory Fischer or Victor Skorzeny?”

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<sup>16</sup> I checked with this guy I know, Alvin Longbottom, who scoffed at the suggestion. “This whole area used to be one big swamp, dude. They had to fill it in to build your fuckin’ city. Only white people have that much time and energy to waste. You think Indians would be dumb enough to put a graveyard in a fuckin’ *swamp*?”

He flinched. “No, my dear,” he shook his head, his face grave. “Such boldness can have unfortunate, even fatal consequences.”

“Why? Can you at least tell me—”

He raised his hands, a quieting gesture. “Certain unnamed individuals have acquired powers far beyond their capacity to control. Somehow they have managed to gain access to depraved and profane texts.” His eyes lost focus; a sightless stare. “These same people are using my organization for their own evil ends. We were students, pilgrims of sorts. Enlightened amateurs. We dabbled, to be sure, but we were able to manifest certain tangible effects. That is undeniable. But for some this was not enough. So when...those people you mentioned arrived and began to insinuate themselves into our devoted circle, it created conflict, schism. There were private meetings from which I was excluded. Not only me--Paul and Vivien as well.”

“So Vivien isn’t part of this either?” He shook his head. “Good for her.” She leaned forward and he followed suit, so that their heads were only inches apart. “Now tell me the truth: what do you know about the killing of the Brethren agent? I need to know about Arturs Esch, Frederick.”

Baron Friedrich Burkhalter von Stahl answered without hesitation: “I had no part in the death of that poor devil. I did not have prior knowledge but...I doubt I could have stopped it even had I known. I told you, there are circles within circles in our group and I have been marginalized—”

“Marginalized? *You*? It’s your coven. Are you and the others going to allow that to happen?”

“What choice do we have?” He threw up his hands. “Do you think we want to end up like Paul? The rest are allied with Fischer and that asshole Skorzeny or else they’re deathly afraid of them. Skorzeny gives the impression he’s capable of anything. He’s the one to watch. Fischer is a mere playboy, him and that shrew of a wife. Capitalist swine. But no one dares question or raise their voice against them. Skorzeny and his goons see to that.”

“Who ordered the killing of the Brethren agent? Fischer or--”

He shifted uneasily. “*Please*, Cassandra, must we speak of this?”

“But why risk such a bold move?”

He shook his head. “I cannot say. But I know they will not hesitate to eliminate anyone who gets in their way. *No one is safe.*” His face pale, strained.

“Do you have any intention of forcing the issue, confronting Fischer and Skorzeny? Would there be any point trying to rally support among the others?”

He regarded her with condescension. “I think such things would not only be unwise but distinctly unhealthy as well.”

“But you can’t just give up and let them get away with it. You must do *something.*”

“Fight back? Challenge them to a duel, a black magic showdown at the O.K. Corral?” He shook his head. “I think not.”

“I can’t believe you’re letting them intimidate you.”

“As I told you, Skorzeny is a dangerous man. Pure evil. He and Fischer have done their job well. I am isolated, alone. There are meetings and I am not informed, decisions made without consulting me.” He clenched his fists and muttered a German epithet.

“What are they up to? Can you at least give me a hint?”

He was emphatic. “No, my dear. Your ignorance is probably the only thing keeping you alive right now. The ‘Cabal’ you used to know is no longer a harmless group of students and researchers. You have seen evidence of their growing power.”

“But what’s going on? You tell me to be careful and then you--”

“They have obtained certain items, artifacts that, when wielded by the wrong people, can be very, very dangerous. *But that is only the beginning.*”

The ominousness with which the pronouncement was delivered caused her to draw back from him. “Yet you refuse to do anything about it. I knew you were amoral, Baron, but I never took you for a coward.”

He averted his eyes. “As I have already explained, my enemies have taken on powers and abilities that I—” He froze. “*Cassandra...*”

She felt it too. A third presence in the room, as if someone had just entered and was waiting to be greeted and invited to join them for a spot of sherry and after dinner cigar. They looked about, a fruitless reflex. The intruder was not of the physical plane.

The Baron motioned her closer. “You see what it is like,” he whispered. “We must speak no more of this.”

A chilly breeze pushed past them. The fake fire was sputtering, dying down and then flaring up again. Someone making a point.

“I’ll...say good night then.” Movement behind her, the temperature around her plummeting. She could see her breath as she retrieved the book from the arm of the chair. “I was sure you’d have a copy of this. Thanks for loaning it to me on such short notice.”

He shrugged, playing along. “It is a trifle. As I indicated, there are far more powerful and authentic grimoires available. That said...” His eyes met hers. “One must always exercise caution these days. There are other principalities involving themselves in our petty affairs, entities beyond the comprehension of even an agile mind such as yours.”

Roger was waiting outside.

The Baron was shaken but remained in character. “I regret your visit cannot be a longer one. I do enjoy your company. Until we meet again, Miss Cassandra Zinnea.”

“Take care, Baron.” She surprised him by embracing him, using the opportunity to whisper: “Watch yourself, Freddie. Call if you need help.”

When she moved back, she saw that he was having difficulty maintaining his composure. “Whatever comes to pass was meant to be. This much I learned a long time ago.” He nodded and she caught on, switching over to telepathic mode: *Now you understand the forces at work. Be careful, my dear, and take all possible precautions.* He brought his heels together and bowed. “*Auf wiedersehen.*” The study door closed behind him.

Roger hovered at her elbow. She followed in his cool wake as he led the way back to the magnificent front doors.

“I hope to see you again soon, ma’am.”

“I hope so too, Roger. Good night.”

The driver had kept the Mercedes running so it was still warm for the return trip. She felt bad leaving him alone in that spooky, old castle. Wondered how many ghosts were chasing him, how many murders you could fit in a dozen lifetimes. One of the

drawbacks of being virtually immortal, the way the sins accumulate, across centuries of villainy, avarice and deceit. The victims who refuse to rest easy, their roaming spirits bent on revenge.

### III

“So-called ‘luck’ in investigation comes from diligent work. Observation without investigation or deduction is of little or no value.”

Edward Smith, *A Practical Guide For Private Investigators*  
(Paladin Press; 1990)

*Friday, May 7th*

Well, I may have been only a 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree but I still knew when I was being followed. Sixth sense or rampant paranoia? Sometimes I wasn't sure. For her part, my partner believed that most of us have at least some inherent extrasensory or supernatural powers, it's just a case of identifying and cultivating them.

Two nights after Cassandra's *tete a tete* with the Baron, I left our building and my spider sense immediately went *ping*. I estimated my tail to be about a hundred yards back and across the street. Now came the decision. Did I stay out in the open where he, she or it was unlikely to confront me or did I take an apparent shortcut down a dark, scary alley, deliberately inviting attack?

Those of you who can't guess the inevitable result of that line of reasoning haven't been paying close attention. But my pursuer refused to be drawn in and after my third fruitless detour into a dingy alley, I felt him withdraw. Sonofabitch wasn't up for a fight. Not that night.

Once I was satisfied he was gone, I made for O'Donnell Park. I was still keyed up. It had been nearly two weeks since I had dented someone's face with my knuckles and that was *way* too long by my standards. If I wasn't careful, I'd lose my edge.

I entered the park, finding it nearly deserted. It was only a block square, a patch of green space not far from the bus terminal. The fountain was working for a change, lit from beneath by blue, yellow and red lights. It created a weird effect, especially at night. The centerpiece of the fountain was a hideous sculpture of Joshua Talon Trainor, the man who founded Ilium in the mid-1700's. It was carved out of some kind of white stone and the artist must have been a fan of the old *Davy Crockett* TV series because Trainor bore an unmistakable resemblance to Fess Parker, coonskin cap and all. Joshua Talon Trainor with his arm extended, pointing the way to what was then little more than marshland, likely the worst spot on Lake Erie to locate a community. Was he a lunatic or a visionary? Legend has it that he liked the terrain because it provided good cover for his bootlegging racket.

I took a seat on a bench beside a metal garbage bin that looked like one of those Daleks from *Doctor Who*. The bench was bolted to cement blocks which were, in turn, bolted to the bedrock beneath. Theft-proofing, taken to ridiculous extremes.

It was a pretty innocent scene: a fine-looking figure of a man in his mid-to-late thirties taking his repose while, two benches away, two gay gentlemen tongue-kissed and fondled each other. Bats flew overhead, gorging on the bugs drawn by the multi-coloured lights of the fountain, a constant whisper of wings just above my line of vision.

The garbage can cleared its throat and I jumped about a foot. “Sorry about that, Nightstalk. You were sitting there so peacefully it seemed a shame to disturb you.”

So much for my spider sense. “Glen, you asshole,” I hissed, “I nearly crapped myself. What the hell are you doing, skulking around like that?”

“I wasn’t skulking,” the garbage can corrected me. “I left word to meet me in the park. Well, here I am.”

“Right, but—never mind, I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“Where’s your beauteous partner tonight?”

Egads, not another one. “Who knows? Back at the office probably.” “She is a most excellent example of the female species. Truly hot and—”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, “but I’m here and she’s not. Hope that don’t rain on your parade.”

He chuckled. “Sorry, man, didn’t mean anything. I know how you feel about her and all.”

“You don’t know squat,” I snarled. “Just talking through your arse, as usual.”

“Hey, hey, it’s all right, man, no need to get defensive. I see the way you look at her sometimes. Not that I’m spying or anything...”

I glared at the garbage can. “Being invisible gives you certain advantages, pal, but don’t abuse them. Not if you know what’s good for you.”

“She’s right, you really are an old poop, you know that, Nightstalk?” The metal barrel vibrated with laughter.

“Funny, I have this sudden, powerful urge to piss in a handy trash receptacle.”

“Okay, okay, don’t get hot under the collar. *Sheesh*. When you think about it, I’m doing you a favour just by showing up tonight. I heard you were looking for me and I could’ve ducked you for, like, months. Because you can’t find what you can’t see, right? Here one minute, gone the next. They don’t call me *el hombre invisible* for nothing.”

“I need some information—”

“*Huh uh*, no way, man, this isn’t that kind of conversation. Tonight I’m not taking requests. Tonight I’m just *telling*.” All at once I got this sinking feeling. “I hear you’ve been asking around about that weird shit that went down in St. Andrew’s Park, is that right?”

I managed to keep my seat but just barely. “I never said anything about that! I only said I was looking for you, I didn’t say why. *Fuck*.”

He snorted. “It’s all over the street, dude. The word is out. *Nobody* is to lend aid and assistance to you. The people involved are rumoured to be terminally fucking *evil* and if you mess with them you could end up invited to another wienie roast. Take it from me, this is one job you gotta pass on, man. Seriously.”

“And here I was hoping you’d help me find these shitheads. Maybe even I.D. them for us.”

The bin wasn’t impressed. “I.D. *this*, Nightstalk. I’m telling you, dawg, these are *not* people you want to fuck with. If they suspected I was sniffing around—man, I don’t even wanna go there. It’s all about self-preservation. I intend to lay low and not do *anything* to get on their bad side. In other words, this info you need? Forget it.”

“What’s got you so scared, Glen? You’re invulnerable, man! You said it yourself, *el hombre invisible*. Shit, you’re a fuckin’ legend in this city. You’re the *Shadow*, you go where you want, places no one else can. That’s why you’re so valuable to Cass and me. You are the *man*, Glen. At times like this, you’re one of the best weapons we’ve got.”

He sounded cautious. “Well...that’s true, I guess.”

I didn’t give him a chance to think about it. “With the cats disappearing, it’s like you’re the only game in town. We need you now more than ever. And in that sense it’s your responsibility to, uh, bear witness and help protect the weak and the vulnerable and—and the pathetic.”

“Still...” Doubtfully. “I wouldn’t want to end up charbroiled like that other poor fucker.”

“Not a chance.” I scoffed at the notion. “You can’t catch what you can’t see. Right?”

“Yeah. That’s right.” He wasn’t quite there yet but I was definitely making progress.

“So...so you see my point?” The two queers were whispering to each other, wondering what sort of freak would carry on an animated conversation with a garbage can. They decided not to take any chances, got up and moved off, watching me until they were a safe distance away. “I mean, just the fact that you showed up tonight means something, don’t you think? You were warned off but still you came. *Why?* Why agree to meet me if you’re so worried about your personal safety? What’s with that?”

He sounded embarrassed, and there was shame and pride mixed in there as well. “Uh, y’know, the loyalty thing, I guess. I didn’t want to keep ducking you without explaining why. But now you’ve got me thinking.” Some aluminum cans clinked inside the bin as he shifted. “Some people don’t understand the concept of recycling,” he complained. “So...as far as the park thing goes...” I waited. “Maybe I *could* do something for you. Sniff around a bit, see what’s out there.” I danced a victory jig in my head but outwardly showed no reaction. “If things seem like they’re about to get hairy, I can always fade like old cigar smoke and we forget the whole thing. Is that workable for you? I know I’m being, like, completely chickenshit but, y’know, those are my terms, take it or leave it.”

I nodded, then realized his sight lines probably weren’t too good in that thing. If he really *was* in there; sometimes I suspected the bugger of throwing his voice. “It’s a deal. No one expects you to endanger yourself, just find out what you can and come back in one piece.”

He was still fretting. “Well, that’s the thing, isn’t it? Not getting caught.” His voice dropped. “I hear these people are into some spooky shit, is that right?”

“Uh, could be,” I allowed, not wanting to risk scaring him off. “Look, all we’re asking is that you keep an ear to the ground. Give us a head’s up if we’re walking into

something. For Cassandra's sake, if nothing else. You wouldn't want *her* to get hurt, would you, Glen?" It was a dirty tactic but I needed him and that was that.

He groaned. "I must be nuts going along with this. You too, man. It's heavy shit, a lot of bad, *bad* ju-ju attached to it."

"In my case, I don't exactly have a choice." I reminded him. "The Old Man gives us an assignment and we do our job. These pussycats are up to something and we have to find out what their game is. That's where you come in. We need to hear about things *before* they happen, dig?"

"Yeah, yeah," the garbage can muttered. "And the thing is I *swore* I wouldn't put myself on the line for you guys again. Fuckin' hell, man, remember what nearly happened to me last time?"<sup>17</sup>

"Getting up in the morning is risky," I countered. "Look around you: this city's dying, pal, and lemme tell you, it's gonna be one ugly fucking death."

"Everyone's really tense lately, have you noticed? People acting jumpy and weird. Dudes getting cut or stomped for no reason. It's nuts. Ask the cops, they'll tell you. It's a zoo out there. Serious karmic misalignment. Can't you feel it?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sensitive that way. I get little twinges sometimes but that's about it. I think Cass would know what you're talking about. She's the Gifted one. Lately she's been extra touchy."

"Is it her period, do you think?"

"How the fuck would I know, Glen?" I seethed at his presumption. "What do I look like, her gynecologist?"

"Hey, man, I'm sorry. Mellow out."

"What a stupid fucking question." I debated giving the receptacle a resounding kick. "Besides, women aren't ruled by their cycles. That's a myth."

"My old lady is," he retorted, "and I got the lumps on my head to prove it." We both laughed. "Okay, Nightstalk," he said, "give me a few names and I'll see what I can do." He didn't know Skorzeny but when I mentioned Gregory Fischer, his reaction was immediate. "You're swimming with sharks, you know that, don't you?" For a second, I thought he was going to back out of our deal. "Fuck it, I'll give it a shot. I'll leave a message if anything turns up. Hey, change of subject, but what's the latest on the cat situation? Any news that's fit to repeat?"

I shrugged. "Nah. We're working on it but there's no leads, no *nothing*."

"Too bad. I knew some of them too. One was this huge, grey tom with six toes on both of his front paws. Fucker must have weighed fifteen pounds. Used to hang out behind my building. He was one tough hombre, all right."

I looked at my watch. "I'd better get going. I want to stop by the office again and see what Cassandra's turned up. Glen?"

"Still here, man."

"Sometimes it's hard to tell."

"When I split I always say 'good-bye' or 'catch you later' to let people know I'm booking."

"Do you ever hang around and eavesdrop?"

"Shit, *no*!" He sounded shocked. "Who wants to hear what people have to say once they figure you're gone." The receptacle shuddered. "Fuck that."

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<sup>17</sup> "The Sinister Dr. Sinistre" (*The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Volume III*)

“I see your point.”

“Sure. Besides, it would be a betrayal of trust, wouldn’t it?”

I had to laugh. “But, Glen, you eavesdrop on people all the time. That’s part of what you do.”

“But never on my *friends*.”

“Riiight. Well, stay in touch.”

“See you, Nightstalk.”

“Watch your shadow, Glen,” I warned him playfully, “it’s a dead giveaway.”

“Thanks for the advice. Say ‘hi’ to that babelicious partner of yours for me.”

“Will do.”

“You’re a lucky man, Nightstalk.”

“That’s what everyone keeps telling me.”

The phone rang just before one a.m. and things *really* started heating up.

“*After Hours Investigations*. ‘Solving the toughest cases while the—’” I looked over when I heard her gasp, saw from her face that it was bad. “Is that you, Frederick? Hang on...” She switched to the speaker and we could hear him breathing. When he spoke, his voice was muffled and some of what he was saying hard to make out.

“Cassandra, please, I implore you...”

“I’m here, Frederick. How can I--”

“Help me, please...please...help me...” He began to sob. “I cannot go on...they are destroying me...I am frightened, so frightened...even poor Roger...*mein Gott*...”

“Frederick, we’ll be right over, all right?” I pointed at myself, shaking my head vehemently. She scowled. “Did you hear me? We’ll be right there.”

“I—perhaps that is not for the best—”

“We’re on our way,” she retorted and hung up before he could argue the point further.

“Do I *have* to go?” I whined. “Maybe he’s just drunk or--”

“Get your coat,” she commanded. “I’m not driving up to that creepy mausoleum by myself. He’s in trouble and he needs us.”

As we donned our coats I voiced what was going through both our minds. “I wonder what the deal is. He sounded really freaked out, didn’t he? It’s not like the ol’ squarehead to lose his cool.” I held the door for her.

“He betrayed the Cabal. Now Fischer and Skorzeny are making him pay for it.” We hurried down the stairs. “They know he’s the one who alerted the Brethren. Once their suspicions were aroused, he knew the Brethren would send an agent to Ilium to check things out.” We waved at Tara Dreyfuss through the front window. She sat stoically at the counter while an elderly man sprayed something onto a pair of panties and pressed them to his nose, sniffing the material critically.

*Poor kid.*

I jogged to keep up with my long-limbed partner. “The *Baron* helping Philippe and his bunch? His mortal enemies? Have I missed something?”

“Don’t you always?” she teased.

“Don’t push your luck, woman.”

She explained on the way to Little Bavaria.

Her theory: the Baron narcs to the Brethren and Arturs Esch is dispatched to investigate the Cabal and find out what they're up to. But somehow Fischer and Skorzeny become wise to the situation and decide to eliminate the threat. Unfortunately for the Baron, the majority of the Cabal are cowed by their new masters, which leaves a shortlist of candidates for the role of Judas.

Once Esch's cover was blown it's possible he gave up everything before being killed. Either way, the Baron was a man marked for death and he'd known as much the night he'd sent Roger to collect her.

"And how exactly are we supposed to help him?" I bullied a small import into letting me slide in front of him and made the off ramp in the nick of time.

"At the very least we can comfort a frightened old man. Is that too much to ask?"

"Maybe we should pound a stake through his heart and put him out of his misery."

"You'd better be nice, Nightstalk."

"I'm *always* nice," I protested.

She didn't say anything for the next five miles. Probably didn't trust herself.

The imposing iron gates that usually barred the drive were wide open. *Not* a good sign. I drove through, accelerating up the lane. I had a bad feeling, warning klaxons going *whoop-whoop-whoop* inside my head.

The castle was lit up like there was a party in progress but we didn't see a living soul anywhere. None of the Baron's bodyguards or personal staff were in evidence. We weren't challenged or waved down as we bumped across the drawbridge and there was no response when we rang the front doorbell.

"Right," I said, "this is where we either do something *really* stupid or else call the cops and let them handle it."

"Watch my back," she said, reaching for the knob.

I rolled my eyes. *Here we go again...*

There was music playing somewhere. Something classical, Bach maybe or—

"Schubert," she supplied helpfully, "'Death and the Maiden'."

I sniffed. "Kee-ripes. What a *stink*." The inside of the Baron's mansion smelled of decomposition and shit. *Fresh* shit. Really rank.

"Definite indications of a psychic attack," she announced. "Stay on your toes, partner."

We found him in the study. The centre of his world. Surrounded and insulated by thousands of depraved tomes, the perfect spot for a last stand.

He had thoughtfully wrapped his face and hands with gauze, but thin, mucilaginous liquid, yellow in colour, was leaking through in places. "Boils!" The Baron roared. "A plague of boils has been visited upon me. An added indignity." He fumbled for a glass, drank deeply. "*Ah*. Good Kentucky bourbon. The best possible use for a revolting vegetable like corn."

I hung back but Cassandra approached him, shocked by his grievous condition. "Did Fischer do this to you?"

"Ach, more likely Skorzeny. They leave the dirty work to him. That is his specialty."

I spoke up. "Where is everybody? Your staff, your--"

“Gone. Flew the coop. Bastards! *Bastards!*” His face was leaking like a sieve. I had to look away.

“Why?” Cassandra asked.

“Scary noises. Things that go bump in the night.” He took another drink, slurping eagerly. “They used all the tricks in their arsenal. The walls ran blood, ghostly laughter, pictures falling down, doors slamming, candles levitating across the room...” He shook his head. “I had men I thought I could trust, good, strong men, *begging* to be let go, nearly in tears. *Ach*. I should have been like Howard Hughes and hired Mormons.” *Glug, glug*. Banging the glass down. “Look at me!” He thrust his wrapped hands at us. “I have been disfigured and abandoned and they are not done with me yet. First me and then you and then...” He was bawling again. “Forgive me but I have not slept. The pain--”

She knelt beside him. “Is this your punishment? For warning the Brethren?”

He leaned over, his voice cracking. “Something came and *ate* Roger. Do you understand? *It tore him to pieces before my eyes*. A creature conceived in a nightmare. It devoured his essence and I could do *nothing*. The power to create such a thing...unimaginable. Far beyond my amateurish fumbblings. I am an old fool...” Bowing his head. “You must go, save yourselves if you can.”

“Frederick? *Frederick*.” She spoke sharply to get his attention. “Tell us what you know. Help us help you.”

He gazed at her. Raised his hand, almost as if he intended to stroke her face, then lowered it. His regard was tender, doting. “I can see from your thoughts, which you have kindly opened to me, that you know some of it already. I congratulate you on your ingenuity, *liebschen*.” Pouring himself to another slug of bourbon, slopping it all over the place.

“I want to know why you betrayed the Cabal to the Brethren. Not just out of resentment toward Fischer, there has to be more to it than that.”

“That pretender, that *poseur* stole my people away from me, you understand? Acting like some sort of celebrity and winning them over with his tall tales and big promises. He perverted our ideals, performed secret rites, the blackest of the black arts. These people are dangerous and they must be *stopped*.”

“But what’s motivating them? Why risk provoking the Brethren by killing their agent?”

His face looked like it was melting. “The Black Brotherhood are of no concern to them. The forces they are bringing in to play dwarf the power of such moribund institutions. Besides, even the so-called Brethren of Purity are not immune to their corrupting influence.”

“What do you mean?” she asked excitedly.

“It is worse than you can imagine. They intend to—”

It happened so quickly there was no time to react. A silver letter opener with a decorative hilt (the badgers and four poster again) rose from the desktop and leaped through the air in one swift motion. The slim dagger was moving with considerable speed and force when it penetrated the Baron’s left eye, burying itself to the hilt in the soft, living brain behind it. Dead in a heartbeat.

“*Sonofabitch*.” I felt like breaking something. “You notice how that always happens to us? We’re just on the verge of learning something important, something

absolutely crucial to our case and the next thing we hear is ‘*gak gak*’. It never fails, every fuckin’ time—”

“Uh, Nightstalk, I think you’d better...”

“—before you can say ‘Jack Shit’ the key witness gets fuckin’ *offed* right before our eyes, this totally melodramatic and clichéd fuckin’—”

“*Nightstalk!* Would you shut up listen to me?” I broke off my rant. “*Whatever it was that got Frederick is still in here.*” We edged toward the center of the room, senses on high alert.

“It might be gone.”

“No.”

“Why would it hang around once it—”

“What was *that*?” She spun about. “It’s *definitely* still here. Something just brushed against me.”

Then it swooped past *me*, a moving stream of cool, fetid air. *Bogey*. I got the impression it was spiraling in closer with each circuit, looking for an opening.

“Let’s try for the door.” I was thoroughly unnerved at that point, ready to bolt like a spooked horse. “I’ll go first, see if I can draw its attention and then you make your break.”

“No, wait, we should—”

But I was already moving.

*The room exploded around us.*

Books burst from the shelves and blasted past us at supersonic speeds. Pictures and framed documents detached themselves from the walls and frisbeed about the chamber. We were leaping, ducking, spinning, doing everything we could to survive the furious onslaught. Only I wasn’t quite in Cass’s league so I got clipped several times, taking a hard wallop on the shoulder from a ten-pound Attic Greek dictionary while trying to avoid being decapitated by a hurtling *Malleus Mallificarum*.

We had to anticipate the trajectories of dozens of lethal missiles at once, dodging between them while trying to make progress toward the door. From the outside it must have sounded like a war was raging within the confines of the study. Thunderous impacts, concussions that rocked that area of the building--

--and then, a few seconds later, Cassandra and I scrambled out, looking a trifle flustered but showing no signs of apparent injury.

“You’ve still got the moves, Nightstalk,” she complimented me, patting my shoulder. I winced and hastily popped it back into place. Fit as a fiddle and ready to take on all comers. Her hair was tousled and two buttons had popped on her blouse. The bogey hadn’t so much as laid a glove on her. What a gal.

“Nothing a 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree can’t handle,” I replied modestly.

The frustrated bogey was still tossing things around the study, including the Baron’s lifeless body by the sound of it. Clearly disgusted with itself. Just to be on the safe side, Cassandra sealed the room with a a binding spell I’d seen her use previously. It would hold...for awhile.

I was anxious to get out of there. “Okay, what now?”

“How do *I* know, Nightstalk.” She sounded cross and upset. She’d really liked the old fart and mourned his rather icky passing. I heard her muttering something: “—should have known, set up like a bloody fool.”

“Set up how?” Once again, I was two or three steps behind her.

“There won’t be any fingerprints on that letter opener, Nightstalk. There *will* be a record of his call to our office. Now here we are and, thanks to my stupidity, we’re officially the last two people to see him alive.”

“...which makes *us* prime suspects. Holy shit.”

“We’ve got to get out of here.” To confirm that point, something heavy smashed against the door behind us. We jogged down the hallway.

“Couldn’t we call the cops and take our chances?”

She shook her head and shoved me ahead of her. “It’s a frame, Nightstalk. This whole thing. We haven’t been here in *months*, savvy?”

“Got it.”

“We’ll call from a convenience store.”

“An anonymous tip—” I wrenched open one of the tall front doors.

“That’s right,” I heard her say, “we don’t want to end up--”

We were two steps outside the door when they hit us with spotlights, cruel and unusual punishment for night people. The glare was dazzling. I grabbed Cass and pushed her behind me. Ready to defend her to the death even if I couldn’t see past the end of my bent nose. They cut the lights and I heard footsteps approaching.

My vision was clearing; I could make out two figures. I bared my teeth, started toward them, intending to inflict grievous harm--

“Well, well. Lookie what the cat dragged in.”

Someone, it seemed, had already made that call.

*Busted.*

They put us in separate rooms and left us to stew in our own juices. The bastards knew they didn’t have anything they could pin on us and that it was only a matter of time before the Old Man sent Arnie Beddoes or some other fast-talking shyster to spring us.

Detective Wojeck, in particular, was itching to hang a charge of “obstruction of justice” on us. He didn’t take kindly to the way we involved ourselves in police business. Never mind the many, many occasions we tackled cases the cops wouldn’t touch with a two-foot expandable baton, the real life “X Files” no one ever hears about.

Wojeck was petty and vindictive but Faro was a *bad* cop, plain and simple. Stupid, uninspired, hater of homos and non-caucasians and, oh yeah, especially *Shades*.

After awhile, the walls started closing in on me. The room was small and airless. There was a table and two chairs and, strangely enough, a half-empty box of tissues. Guess there isn’t too much even a crazed psychotic can do with a box of kleenex. Choke on it, I suppose.

They hadn’t officially arrested us. We were being “detained as material witnesses”, to quote Wojeck, who slipped his partner an evil wink as he said it. It wasn’t legal but they did it anyway. Locked us up without due process or just cause. Standard operating procedure as far as those boys were concerned.

At least they let me keep my watch...which meant I could check it every few minutes, the time *crawling* by on two broken legs and a shattered pelvis, nothing to do except stare at the bare walls. And pace. And get madder and madder.

*Some fun, huh, Nightstalk?*

The reception was a bit tinny but it was my girl, indulging in some telepathic teasing. She was six or eight feet away, sounding bright and chipper.

*I'll take the rubber hose treatment over this stuff any day, I sent back.*

*You may still get your chance. Faro really went wild over that "rent a cop" crack you made. That guy's on the take for sure.*

*I sniggered, unrepentant. How are they treating you, kid?*

*One nice detective sent out for some cappuccino. And I've got donuts and coffee cake and butter tarts...*

*I groaned.*

*It's your own fault, Nightstalk. You come across too gruff. It turns people off.*

*I let that slide. Any sign of when we're getting out of here?*

*I'm afraid our story didn't make a good impression. They still want to know why we didn't call for help from the house, why two law-abiding citizens were in such a hurry to leave the scene of a crime.*

*We were in a state of shock. The Baron called us but when we got there, the place was ransacked, he was dead, end of story.*

*That's the gist of what I'm telling them too. Let's make sure we keep our stories straight.*

*They're lucky that bogey had vacated the scene by the time they went inside.*

*Leaving no traces it had ever been there, she reminded me.*

*Which means, I pointed out, they've got nothing on us and no reason to be holding us. This whole thing is just Wojeck, pulling his prick.*

*They have a dead body and two witnesses telling half-truths or outright lies.*

*Details.*

*I'm glad you can be so glib, Nightstalk.*

*No prints, no motive, no crime. Case closed, sweetheart.*

*The non-verbal equivalent of a sigh. Faro wants to lean on you. He thinks they can trick you into making inconsistent statements.*

*Been doing some mind-reading, have you? You'd need an electron microscope to find anything in Faro's thick skull.*

*I'm just giving you fair warning, Evvie. They're going to push you hard.*

*Only I'll have you coaching me, won't I?*

*We have to be careful. Most importantly, you have to keep your temper. They're thinking a whole lot of nasty thoughts about you, partner.*

*I'm crying great big crocodile tears in here.*

*I've never seen you so mad. You ripped their car door right off its hinges--*

*They didn't have to bust us. We were cooperating, goddamnit!*

*Don't shout, Nightstalk, it gives me a headache.*

*Sorry.*

*You notice they didn't try to put cuffs on you?*

*Alone in my cubicle, I chuckled. Smart move on their part. I would've squashed them like bugs.*

*Have they been rough on you?*

*Worse. They're pretending I don't exist. They wanted a statement, I gave them one. I thought Wojeck was gonna blow a gasket. That's when I got dumped in here. Where I currently sit. And sit. Nothing to read and all the strippers are ugly.*

*They gave me a room with a couch and TV. Cable.*

*Those bastards!*

*They're just mad about that car door, Nightstalk. After all, how do you go about explaining something like that?*

They cut us loose around ten that morning.

It was a deliberate slap in the face, one final fuck-you-very-much from officers Mutt and Jeff. They opened the door and shoved us out into the white, blistering light of a lovely spring morning.

*Painful.* That doesn't begin to describe it. First the spotlights, now this. My poor eyes felt like steaming piss holes in the snow. We got a reprieve when Cassandra sweet-talked a young cop into loaning me his sunglasses so I could run to the nearest pharmacy and buy us some wraparound jobs that were as ugly as they were functional. When I returned with the shades, I told the kid I owed him one and made a mental note to remember his face. *Click.*

The sunglasses helped but we both had pounding headaches by the time we got to the office. I kept the Underwood under wraps, using a plain, old legal pad to write up a semi-coherent account of our latest escapades, while holding a cold paper towel pressed to my forehead to help me see better. It wasn't pretty but it would have to do.

I couldn't face the sunlight again. Cassandra left me there, on a fold out army cot we kept around for just such emergencies, while she endured a daylight cab ride so she could crash in her own bed.

I tried to sleep but, thanks to the headache, that turned out to be a tall order. At one point I was certain the door to the Old Man's office opened and sensed somebody standing beside me. I was about to pull off the paper towel for a look...but was seized by a sudden reluctance I can't explain to this day. I let my arm fall back to my side and waited a good long while before rising to resoak the towel, passing the door to the inner office on the way to the john, shivering at the thought of what might have emerged.

It was late afternoon and my head felt like a litter of sick puppies had slept in it. The pain was immune to the Tylenol tablets I kept popping at regular intervals. Strong coffee helped, incrementally.

At some point I noticed the memo he'd left:

*Z + N:*

*Please attempt post-mortem contact with Von Stahl.*

*Invaluable info might be obtained.*

*Apprise with results.*

*Top priority.*

I groaned, wadding up the note and lobbing it toward the wastebasket, narrowly missing the three pointer at the buzzer that would have won the game. The story of my life.

The instructions were unequivocal. There was nothing to interpret, no ambiguity to factor in. It meant another session with the irrepressible Eva Jauch and a creepy

conversation with the Baron's restless shade. Have I mentioned how much I hate séances?<sup>18</sup>

Cassandra came in around nine. She looked paler than usual and admitted she was subsisting solely on aspirin and bottled water. And she refused to take off her expensive designer shades, even within the relatively dim confines of the office. I sympathized.

I showed her the Old Man's memo and she got on the blower to Eva Jauch. The stars must have been in alignment or business on the slow side because she agreed to see us that night.

"Twelve o'clock? Fine, we'll be there. Yes, he'll be coming too." Cassandra glanced over at me and grinned. "I know, but we'll manage somehow." She was laughing as she hung up. "You don't want to know," she told me and, after giving it some thought, I decided she was probably right.

I've never understood why anyone would want to contact the dead. It seems so absurd to me. Once I kick the bucket why in the name of Harry Houdini would I want to hang about, answering questions like "who was supposed to get the silver set, Uncle Sidney, it was me, right?"

"Madame" Eva would counter by saying that some revenants have unfinished business on this plane. They might have died suddenly or violently and are disoriented, stuck in the *qliphoth*, a formless and terrifying void. Or, like her spirit guide, Austin, they could be well-meaning souls who voluntarily stay behind to help the rest of us. In my view, Eva smoked a tad too much of the wacky weed and had mistaken the movie "Ghost" for a documentary.

Nevertheless, there I was, five minutes to midnight, watching Cass greet the old charlatan. "Thank you for seeing us, Eva. We appreciate you making time for us this evening."

Eva led us to the table in her sitting room, indicating where she wanted us seated. "I'm worried about Mr. Short, Dark and Ugly over there. The spirits are easily disturbed and his negative energies might be...counter-productive." She eyed me appraisingly. "Look at that aura: black and sparking with violence and negativity. Whereas you—" turning to Cassandra, "--are a beacon of light. The departed will be drawn to you like moths. Ah, well," she raised her shoulders, "maybe you'll compensate for him."

She lit a dripless red candle and set it in the middle of the table. After turning off the lamps, she had us place our hands flat on the surface so that our pinkie fingers touched the person's on either side of us. My big, scarred mitts and thick, knobby digits looked odd next to their soft, feminine hands.

So far I'd minded my manners and kept my mouth shut. Ever since that blow-up at the office I'd been watching my step. I was determined to stay on Cassandra's good side even if it meant swallowing about five pounds of baloney doled out in heaping spoonfuls by a badly dressed harpy with the personality of a rottweiler. Maybe by absorbing Eva's abuse for the next hour or so, I'd chalk up a few karmic points to my credit. I was definitely in arrears in that department.

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<sup>18</sup> In at least four other accounts: "The Really BIG Shop of Horrors", "Stairway to Oblivion" (*The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Vol. I*); "The Burglar Who Thought He was Jesus", "Remembering Maria Ouspenskaya" (*Casebooks, Vol. II*). Vigilant readers will, no doubt, discover other examples...

I'd sat through a number of seances and was always amazed by the sheer banality of the information the dead passed along. Nothing like "Hey, I got a blowjob from Marilyn Monroe the other day" or "I finally know where they buried Jimmy Hoffa, Morty, and you're never gonna believe it!". No, instead it's that the spirits love us and watch over us and don't want us spending our money unwisely and do I know anybody whose middle initial starts with "C" because they're going to have a slight accident in a week or two, nothing serious but—

I'll say one thing for Eva, she dispensed with the usual histrionics mediums like to employ for effect. She didn't go for all that eye-rolling, speaking in tongues crap, cracking her knees and toes to simulate spirit rapping.

About a minute after we'd placed our hands on the table I saw her stiffen, turning her head as if she'd heard something. "I can feel you, Austin. Are you there? Come closer, don't be afraid. Will you come to us?" And that's when the spooky shit started because I *swear* I could hear the patter of child-sized feet running past us. "Hello, Austin." She inclined her head and spoke as if addressing a child at eye level. "How are you today? We're looking for a friend." She paused, listening. "No, don't be frightened, he's all right. He just *looks* scary." Cassandra applied pressure with her little finger and I took the hint and stayed mum. "Our friend's name is Baron Frederick von Stahl. He is well-known to the spirit world." I saw her nod. "Thank you, Austin." For our benefit: "Austin will find him. He's a good boy."

It sounded like someone running around on the ceiling above us. The flame wavered and flickered and I found myself devoutly hoping it wouldn't go out and leave us in the dark. "Focus on the candle. Let all other thoughts depart. Think of the Baron, how you remember him. Form an image of him in your minds. Concentrate. *Concentrate...*"

The modest ring of light cast by the candle left our faces in deep shadow. It was like we were floating in space. Nothing else was visible, nothing beyond the tiny bubble of light in which we were suspended. I got a sense of great depths around and beneath us. I wondered if I was experiencing some kind of drug flashback--and at that moment a weird current went through our hands, like a circuit had been closed.

"He's coming," Eva said.

Okay, I admit it, I was more than slightly freaked out. Seized by a feeling hard to put into words, a certainty not supported by any physical evidence that *there was something in that room besides us*.

Then, to my left, at the very limit of my vision, I saw movement. A cool breeze blew on the back of my neck. I solemnly swore to myself that not only was this the last séance I would ever attend, but that if anyone ever tried contacting *me* after I had joined the choir invisible, I'd loose the hounds of hell on them.

"Thank you, Austin. Thank you for bringing our friend to see us. Austin found him wandering. He says he hasn't completely accepted that he's passed over. He's angry and confused. Do you still wish to speak to him?"

Cassandra, without hesitation: "Yes."

"Are you there, Baron? I wish to make contact with Baron Frederick von Stahl. Please approach us and be heard. There are friends here who want to talk to you. Please, come forward. Are you there..."

--and will you accept charges for this call, I somehow resisted adding. I think Cassandra picked up on my giddiness because I felt her warning glare even in the near dark. I turned back toward Eva...and found myself face to face with the Baron.

It was the eeriest thing. It wasn't that her appearance physically changed, the bones rearranging themselves, her skull enlarging to take on the proportions of the Baron's massive dome. It was more the way she held herself, the posture and angle of her head just right, her carriage ramrod straight, shoulders squared. I suspected that had the light been better she would have had the sharp, alert gaze and crooked slash of a smile down pat too.

The candlelight seemed to be shrinking, darkness closing in on us.

The pitch and timbre of her voice didn't change much but it was still clearly the Baron who addressed us. It was beyond mimicry, the transformation utterly convincing. "I see you but it's like looking through a mist." She/he squinted at me. "Herr Nightstalk, the distinctive outlines of your body are quite unmistakable. Ah. And that must be Cassandra." The Baron looked about him. "I don't know this place." At last, he focussed his attention on my partner. "So...this is what it is like to be dead. *Pah!* I have absolutely no sexual desire and no requirements for food or liquor. What sort of afterlife is that?"

"Frederick," Cassandra urged, knowing how tenuous these contacts tended to be, "we were there when you were—when you died, remember?"

"It is...not clear. My memory...or perhaps the past isn't so important on this side."

"But we're still alive and need your help."

He sounded distracted. "I am...indifferent. To think about my former existence requires too much energy and already I feel myself dissipating. Perhaps in the end my essence will merely scatter to the far reaches of the universe. That would be...anticlimactic, don't you think?"

She pursued her point with admirable doggedness. "You were *murdered*. Your soul has not gone on because it requires closure. We can help with that. Once you're free of the ties that hold you here, I'm sure you'll be able to pass on. I guarantee it."

"The worst part is that I am so *alone*. And I am slowly losing myself. Oblivion awaits..."

"You are Baron Frederick von Stahl. You were a pioneer, a respected explorer in the world of the occult. You had many goals and dreams and someone came and took that from you. Took away everything, including your life."

"I don't remember dying. Was it gory and spectacular?"

"I'll say," I muttered.

"You were murdered in cold blood and the people responsible must be brought to account. You know this. Your spirit should be crying out for justice."

"Skorzeny...it was that bastard Skorzeny. He told us he had created an elemental. Performed a working to bring forth an entity to do his bidding. Most of us thought it was nonsense at first." He sighed, a dispirited spirit. "But it turned out we underestimated the cretin. It wasn't all parlour tricks."

"Was it Skorzeny or Fischer who ordered the hit on the Brethren agent?" I blurted out. I knew how these incorporeal types tended to wander off topic.

“Such knowledge is dangerous, Herr Nightstalk. Look where it got me. But I suppose the short answer to your question is: does it matter? Skorzeny and Fischer, they are one and the same. Fischer coaxed him out of retirement. God knows what sewer he found him in. But Skorzeny possesses great power, that is certain. The man is a sorcerer. An adept without a spark of humanity. That makes him very, very dangerous, *liebschen*.”

“But why do you think—”

“God, I detest them! They destroyed our group. They are evil and *must be stopped!*” The last few words emerged as a very Baron-like roar.

The table rattled, rose about six inches, then came down with a clatter, knocking over the candle and plunging the room into darkness.

There was movement all around us, formless shapes flowing and swirling in the gloom. I yearned to free my hands, grab my partner and bolt for the door.

“*Who is there?*” the Baron barked.

Something flew past me, too quick to see, and from the air above us came a howl that made my skin crawl. Eva rose from her seat and, without warning, flung herself backward. Cassandra and I seized her hands, clinging to her for dear life. By tradition, only an unbroken circle would preserve our safety. Eva arched her back, her spine bending to an impossible angle while Cassandra and I strained to maintain our grip.

“Nightstalk, I’m *slipping*—”

“Hang on, babe!” I shouted. But I was having a hard time too, Eva’s strength superhuman, nearly pulling us over on top of her.

Then, without warning, she collapsed into her chair, head lolling.

“We need a fucking light,” I hissed.

“It’s hunting him,” Eva Jauch moaned. “*Listen...*”

Another piercing cry from a different corner of the room, followed by an impression of something zipping past us, a desperate chase on the periphery of perception. I got a glimpse of a glowing blue-green ball scooting up the wall and through the ceiling. A moment later there was a terrified squawk and the ball reappeared, fleeing for its existence. Something came after it, red-eyed and lightning quick, seizing the ball and pulling it back through the ceiling. From directly overhead there were blood-curdling shrieks, Eva and Cassandra screaming along with it, experiencing the creature’s excruciating soul-death, a torrent of psychic pain—

And then silence.

I could hear someone panting. There was a slight whiff of ozone mixed with perfumed incense (sandalwood, I think).

“Lights,” Eva croaked. She was slumped over the table, wheezing for breath. Cassandra sprang to her assistance while I turned on the nearest lamp and then went around prying open windows, letting in fresh air. Got Eva a glass of water, straightened the table, cleaned up the candle mess and generally made myself useful.

“Are you all right?” Cassandra asked Eva, who had produced a fat joint from somewhere and was in the process of firing it up.

“Nothing like that has ever happened before,” Eva said, her voice quaking. “If there’s trouble, an angry or violent spirit, Austin always helps me.” She took a long hit off the bomber. “It was *awful*. I hope Austin is okay.”

Cassandra sought to reassure her. “I’m sure he’s fine.”

Eva blew smoke in my direction. “So what do *you* think about all of this? Don’t see something like that every day, do you? You need to go somewhere and change your underwear?” My partner coughed, covering her mouth with her hand.

I was still trying to assimilate everything, answered without thinking. “It was quite a show.”

“*Show?*” Her eyes narrowed into furious slits. “That was no show, peckerhead.”

“I don’t think Nightstalk meant—”

“Sure he did.” Eva waved the joint at me. “You think it was all an *act*? So how do you explain what happened? You want to search the place for projectors or secret panels, be my guest.”

“I didn’t mean any offense.” Backtracking hastily. “You’re right. I *don’t* have an explanation. For any of it.”

Eva was showing the effects of the weed, blinking up at us lazily. “I told you, lately it’s been crazy over there. Everything stirred up. I don’t feel welcome any more.” She offered me the joint. “Here. You’ll be needing this.”

I almost hated to ask. “Why do you say that?”

“That thing you saw, that was no projection, boy. It was a *soul-eater*. Lesser demon. Dumb but ferocious. If your enemies have access to creatures like that and are willing to pay the price for using them...” She grimaced.

“I get the picture.” I took a half-hearted toke. “By the way, sharing the same body with the Baron, that must have been quite the experience.”

“What do you know about it? *Huh?* Let me tell you what it’s like when you open yourself up and let one of *them* in.” She snatched the joint away from me. “What I do is go back into a deep, far corner of my mind and let them have the rest. We’re two separate people inside the same body. And I keep my firewalls up to make sure we stay that way. *Because you can’t trust them*. Some of them don’t want to give up control and go back. It’s dark there and they talk about a fog that covers everything. They can’t see very well and there are *creatures* moving through the mist. They pray for help from their gods and no one answers. People like me are a warm place to hide. It gives them the illusion they’re still alive.”

“But you *help* them,” Cassandra said. “You and Austin. You’ve sent many of them on their way. They aren’t damned or abandoned, they’re *lost*.”

“I won’t be going back, not for awhile. It seems alien to me now, hostile.” Eva Jauch reached over and took Cassandra’s hand. “It will be very dangerous from now on. They were watching and they know someone tried to contact the Baron. They *know* who we are...”

Cassandra ended up giving Eva twice her going rate, referring to the generous bonus as “hazard pay”. God knows how I was going to explain it to the Old Man. Just to be on the safe side I got her to write out a receipt so I could partially cover myself on that count.

They hugged at the door. When they parted, Eva had tears in her eyes. She caught me staring at her and cuffed my arm angrily. “You! You should look after her. Believe me, it’s gonna get a lot worse, sonny-boy. Bad times ahead. I can feel it. None of us are safe any more.” She shooed us out. “That’s it for me. I need to unwind. I’m getting to old for this stuff. Think I’ll get stoned and watch an old Marx Brothers

movie.” She stood in the doorway, watching us go. “Be careful. These people have no souls, remember that. They have no souls...and so they have nothing to lose.”

*To read the rest of So Dark the Night, buy the trade paperback (ISBN 978-0-9694853-3-9); available for ordering from your favorite bookstore or from Amazon.com. You can also visit the author's website, "Beautiful Desolation" and learn more about new releases and information relating to Cliff Burns's extensive body of published work.*