

So Dark the Night
(*A Zinnea & Nightstalk Mystery*)
by Cliff Burns

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, desperate to unburden their souls and dump the equivalent of about ten tons of accumulated guilt? For some, 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 so I won't repeat myself. Suffice to say, she made quite an impact on me. Framed in the narrow doorway, a six foot-two-*

* "The Human Beast" ([The Casebooks of Zinnea and Nightstalk, Volume I](#))

inch Amazon, wearing a chocolate brown, cashmere blazer and dark slacks, cut thin to accentuate the longest legs I have ever seen. Those killer eyes (green that day), her hair-bobbed short, she told me later, because she thought I'd like it better that way. She was right.

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 fortitude...along with other talents not specifically mentioned in her curriculum vitae.

It was part of my job to write up case reports for our employer. Once Cassandra came on board those reports expanded and I began to keep 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. It's amazing the clientele that comes your way when you're the only two gumshoes available to Shades.

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, challenging and engaging us like no other occasion that comes to mind. This case...well, 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 psychic or magical power converging on one spot. All I know is that for a short period of time the city of Ilium was the focal point for a bizarre series of events that remain unexplained to this very day.

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 the same time, of course, 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 Leiber Tower that you're likely to come across. After all, the official story is that some kind of radical terrorist group was behind everything. No suspects have been arrested and none ever will be. The terrorist group doesn't exist.

The reality is far more fantastic and harrowing 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)

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.

Our night-time existence forces our bodies to make certain adaptations. We acquire sharper senses, heightened reflexes, the ability to see in the dark. Because once dusk settles in, 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.

* Most quotes courtesy of Cassandra Zinnea

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-looking...possibly foreign. License plates? You must be joking. Scores of witnesses but no one paying attention to street traffic. They had other things on their minds.

The surveillance cameras, significantly, had been disabled, rendered inoperative, the cause of the malfunction never discovered. 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 was a different story, the trees and hedges providing cover for drug deals, sexual assaults, cruising...anything your l'il heart desired. Desperation the only prerequisite. No conscience required.

The cars' seeking headlights swept across a number of furtive-looking figures and idling vehicles, never slowing or increasing speed, a steady progression along those back lanes. Finally the first car's brake lights flashed, the other two slowing immediately and pulling in behind it.

Five or maybe six men got out. Let's say seven, including *him*.

Their prisoner. They reached in and drew him from the last vehicle and into their midst.

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 or distress. 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 steel and uncomfortable as hell. You can't sit and enjoy the day, read a newspaper, catch some rays or just hang and watch the girls walk by. Your ass hurts after a few minutes, you have to get up and move on. Fuckin' drag, man.

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 was getting out of a car. Tall and bald. Pale, thin face, Max Shreck without the teeth and batwing ears. Wearing a long, flowing cape, believe it or not. Very commanding presence. Sweeping over to 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 finally coming around--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 highly 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 flinched from it. In fact, the mood was one of polite interest. They didn't seem the slightest bit fazed by what they were witnessing. The sight of flesh melting and unraveling in 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 morbidly curious 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 his triple-glazed doughnuts onto the grass in front of him. The senior officer present tried to maintain order, keeping everyone back, doing his best to preserve the integrity of the crime scene.

Everyone stood around, cooling their heels, waiting for the investigating detectives to arrive. Wojeck 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, they 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 fucking horrible 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 huge 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 and 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, simply refused to lower herself to performing odious tasks like typing progress reports and filling out expense forms. So it was left up to me. And let me add, for the record, that liquid paper is the greatest invention since consensual sex.

Not to belabour 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 moulds us again out of earth and clay,
No one conjures our dust.
No one.

Praise be your name, no one.
For your sake
We shall flower.
Towards
you.

A nothing
we were, are, shall
remain, flowering:
the nothing-, the
no one's rose..." *

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

* "Psalm" by Paul Celan; Selected Poems of Paul Celan (Translated by Michael Hamburger; Persea Books; 1989)

"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 parents 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 volumes of mystic, 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 millenia 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 two 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 and drive over and lay a serious hurtin' on 'em."

She waved off my objections. "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 wagged a 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 deal with all the grunt work around here so I figure 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 more than my fair share. Like the time I saved your butt from a vicious, man-eating *striga* in that lousy, fleabag hotel in Phoenix. The one you were just about to...you know. You remember *that* particular incident, don't you?" *

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.

She sniggered.

* "The Phantom in Room 306" ([The Casebooks of Zinne & Nightstalk, Vol. II](#)). Observant readers may notice how often in the course of our adventures I manage to fall prey to succubus-like creatures; *see*: "The Mystery of Crooked Lake" ([Casebooks, Vol. I](#)), "The Lady and the Stake" ([Casebooks, Vol. I](#)); "The Long Nap" ([Casebooks, Vol. II](#)), "Bloody Harvest" ([Casebooks, Vol. II](#)); "The Girl With the 1-900 Eyes" ([Casebooks, Vol. III](#)), etc.

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. We both knew who *really* called the shots in our professional partnership. In terms of sheer brain power, natural talent, education, social standing and just about every other criteria you care to name, Cassandra Zinnea left me eating her dust.

She was Emma Peel, Miss Marple and Buffy the Vampire Slayer all rolled into one. 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 her 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.

"He says 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 we're supposed to—"

"I'm not sure. He never explained. You know what he's like. Just told us to poke around and see what we can find out."

"I wonder how he heard." I looked at my watch. "It's barely twelve-thirty. Who was his *source*? How did he know?" I gazed toward the inner door. "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. She stood, stretched 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: as I have related in the accounts of at least a half dozen previous cases*, I possess a special gift or faculty that enables me to locate crime scenes almost

* "The Affair of the Scotsman's Kilt" ([The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Vol. I](#)) ; "A Scandal in Bulemia" (Ibid.); "Who Framed Roger Radek?" ([Volume II](#)), etc.

by innate instinct. 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 tall, indistinguishable apartment blocks on our left. "Lego architecture," my partner sniffed, with evident disdain.

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, rubber-neckers, as well as a TV news crew that was already set up and delivering their first "Live" report from the scene. *Vultures*.

It didn't take long to get ourselves up to speed, mainly by tapping the newshounds. They were giddy, thrilled at having scooped their rival station, walking around whooping and high-fiving after finishing their brief segment.

The victim was as yet unidentified and details were still sketchy but it was clear that he (it *was* a he) had almost certainly been alive and conscious when he was 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 left to us to fill in the blanks for ourselves.

Well, as long as we were there anyway, we went to work finding out what we could. First, who was the dead guy? What was his story (and they always had one)? We might even scare up some eyewitnesses, although from past experience, I knew the chances weren't too good on that front. 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 paid back 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 Wojeck and Stanley Faro advancing toward me wearing menacing expressions.

"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 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 and

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 watch where you stick your nose, shit for brains." Wojeck had an old grudge to settle with me, going back to a slight tussle that erupted when he and his bully-boy partner tried to slap some cuffs on me. I snapped his bracelets effortlessly and then Faro's as well. Just two quick twists of the wrists. They decided upon further reflection not to book me that night. Came to the conclusion it wasn't worth the trouble. In return, I decided not to 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 at the two detectives. "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. "Any ideas? Any theories? Officially or unofficially..."

Wojeck seemed 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 try to sweet talk me," he warned her. "I mean it. I don't like it."

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 will 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.

He either caught a bad cramp 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. Not an execution, no...more like a sacrifice...this much energy...can you feel it, the air is practically *crackling*. Who was this guy to leave a signature like that?"

"Cass?"

But she was into a groove. "...so brazen...you can feel the contempt...like they're untouchable...mocking us...laughing in our faces..."

I didn't hear anyone laughing. 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'd be 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 practically useless under the circumstances. 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, carefully noting the location of my findings on a rough sketch I'd 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 checked the telemetry while I waited.

"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, noting that Faro was glaring in our direction. "I don't think there's much more to learn here."

She blinked. And again. Coming out of it. "Sorry...I was kind of drifting a bit." A wan smile. "Wow, I feel just *zapped*. Whatever caused this..." She shoved her hands into her coat pockets. "*Brrr*. First we'll take a few discreet pictures, then have a word with some of these people, see if there are any reliable eyewitnesses."

“I wouldn’t bet on it.” I shuffled 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 close attention to our expenses lately and might decide to call us on some of them." 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."

I knew it. "*Madame* Eva? Why not Roger, 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 you're madly in love with me." I blushed from head to toe. "It's okay, Nightstalk, you big palooka," she cooed. "I love you too."

The number of spectators had sharply dwindled. The cold taking its toll on even the sturdiest 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 it’s better if you 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 was not what you would call a warm and fuzzy relationship. We maintained a mutual dislike that was, in part, based on the fact that we hated each other's guts.

I considered her to be nothing more than a crafty charlatan who preyed on the gullible and stupid. She operated out of a tiny storefront in a neighbourhood 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 designs and shit?" I shook my head irritably. "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. *

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, some hideously ugly floor lamps, a round table about five feet in diameter and three folding metal chairs.

Eva ignored me completely but greeted my partner warmly. "Cassandra, my *dear* girl. Let me look at you. You're simply *gorgeous*. Helen of Troy only *wished* she had your cheekbones." She finally grudgingly acknowledged my presence. "Ah, you again. 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 and meanwhile visualized 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. "You're being too mean."

"You're not man enough for her," Eva sniffed 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

* An account I dubbed "Killing Them Softly With His Song" (see: [The Casebooks of Zinne & Nightstalk, Vol. II](#))

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, quoting one of my all-time favourite flicks.

Cassandra frowned at me but Eva pretended not to have heard.

Despite my uncouthness, 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 dirt from the park, offering nothing else by way of an explanation.

Within moments of thrusting her chubby fingers into the dirt, a spasm went through Eva's body and, eyes closed, she began to moan and sway from side to side. Had to give her credit, she put on a good show.

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

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

"...bright days will pass...soon comes the cold and dark ...a ten thousand year eclipse...they're coming...*they're coming...*"

Pretty much the 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 here 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. A cat had been at the hassock, either that or a playful werewolf. "I can only describe bits and pieces. Impressions. Everything is in a state of upheaval. We are at a pivotal time right now, there are changes coming, something there, just over the horizon."

"Can you be a trifle 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 gave me another warning look.

“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 could use. Instead we get...metaphysical weather reports.”

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. Instead she lurched 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. There is danger all around us now and the signs are not good. Please, I’m very tired. I can do no more tonight. I need to rest awhile. 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 right after that we 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 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 someone we knew and who maybe owed us for past favours. We spent several hours button-holing 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, there was no one to take my frustrations out on. 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.

Fed a sheet of carbon paper to my ancient, round-keyed Underwood. I'd tried other manual typewriters but found they couldn't stand up to the pounding. I have what you might call a heavy touch.

Putting things down on paper helped arrange my thoughts. The Old Man liked reports to be clear and concise. I avoided unnecessary detail and speculation. That I saved for the *Casebooks*.

As I worked away, I occasionally glanced across at my partner. She was 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 more "literary" authors. The more depressing the better. Celan the latest in a long line.

I cobbled together a summary of our consultation with Eva Jauch (making it sound more helpful and informative than had been the case). I also filed an expense claim for the forty bucks even though I didn't have a receipt. What the hell. You only live once.

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 all of 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, something that--"

She was stuffing books into her bag. I noticed a few had Latin titles. "It's late, Nightstalk, nearly closing time. Let's call it quits for now. 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 has turned up in the meantime."

"Do I take it we're working overtime on this one?" Not sounding too happy about it either. 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 or a gut feeling but you're holding out on me."

"You're being 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 usual 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 about three rolls of aluminum foil.

I slipped a plastic sheath over the Underwood I'd been beating up on for the past hour. I thought I heard it groan in relief.

I pulled on my coat, checking to make 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. Better that than the incessant brooding, wondering who Cassandra was with or daydreaming about things too foolish and embarrassing to mention.

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, undoubtedly, 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, infinitely small.

As usual I beat Cassandra to the office. Punctuality was not among her many virtues. It was 9:00 p.m. on the dot when I slid my key into the lock and pushed open the door.

After Hours Investigations
(followed by our peeled eyeball logo)
“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 things 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 recorded any pertinent information prospective clients might wish to leave. 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. The last guy wanted someone 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--

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. *

A few months previously the Old Man had left us 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 wore thin *real* fast.

Dealing with the clientele was bad enough. No wonder the receptionists bailed. Some of the people who called or walked through our door were real lu-lu's. "Renfields", Cassandra 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 80 cases. I won't say

* "The Bad Book", (The Casebooks of Zinne & Nightstalk, Vol. I)

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.

Okay, so not every client wants you to help recover the Maltese Falcon. In those eighty plus cases there had been a fair number of duds and many were "solved" with literally a phone call or two.

But there were other occasions where we were really put to the test, situations when our lives, sometimes our very *souls*, hung in balance, steady wits and stout hearts combining to help us escape almost certain death...or worse.

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

It was hard to get 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 Old Man 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.

It was that kind of thinking that kept me awake all day sometimes, my brain humming and clicking away, locked in an endless thoughtloop, a real ass-chewing chimera.

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 form-fitting 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, she meant that I lacked the strength and passion and cruelty necessary to satisfy Cassandra's bent desires. As I discovered early in our relationship, while investigating *The House on High Street*,* Cassandra's tastes ran to the extreme, a combination of pleasure and pain, seduction and repulsion that to certain prudish-minded people might seem...well, it would be indiscreet and unfair to her 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 real 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 brainstorms; I stumbled my way along. 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

* Included in [The Casebooks of Zinne & Nightstalk, Volume I](#)

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 chided her, "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 fact 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?"

I cleared my throat. "The Old Man updated the file and left it 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 nice and--and *clean*."

"—things of interest--"

She was trying to work magic with those eyes, which had changed colour again, to a shade close to amber. Like a cat's. "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 a trifle squeaky. "They confirm a massive expenditure of 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.

"The question, in my opinion," I continued, "is this: why is it that when Mr. X becomes Johnny the Human Torch there's that enormous energy burst? This guy went off like a supernova and what I want to know is--"

"It tells us he wasn't just some low-life druggie. He was a lot more than that. It's obvious. Everything that happened was premeditated and carefully choreographed. There is an intention behind this, a design that will gradually be revealed." She had temporarily forgotten our little spat, her mind fully engaged, revving into higher gear. "It's even plausible that it's part of an ancient and very complex ritual. Don't forget, this all took place just after midnight on May Eve, Beltane, a very significant date on the occult calendar." She looked over at me and saw the scowling face of a man who, mentally speaking, had been left in the dust. "What's 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 this humungous amount of energy...but 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.* You know I hate it. It’s like you’re patronizing me.” I was still seething about the love tattoos. “This shit always gets whacked out incredibly fast. We need to know who we’re dealing with. A shortlist of possible suspects, the real deal, no cranks...” Scribbling notes to myself, muttering under my breath.

“That’s good thinking, Evvie,” she complimented me, very earnest, trying to earn back some brownie points. “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, all the better to charm the sourness out of me.

“We’ve got to identify who’s behind this.”

Cassandra smiled. “The police think it’s underworld related. What nonsense. Not with those readings.” She paused, thoughtful.

I couldn’t resist a dig. “And what about what Eva told us. Hell, there’s all the proof you need right there.”

“Don’t be such a bitch, Evgeny,” she observed ascerbically. She was definitely mad. She hardly ever swore.

I tried to joke it away. “I certainly didn’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, look ...” I took a breath. “I’ll keep my views and opinions about Eva to myself from now on.”

“*And?*”

That left me stumped...but then I realized what she meant. “Oh...and I, uh, love you.”

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

I growled. “Damn it, woman, I—I love you, all right? Are you satisfied? I worship the toilet seat you sit down to pee on. I worship the holy tampon you—”

“That will be sufficient.”

But the air had cleared 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.

* * * *

Afterwards, she insisted we take a drive down by the lake. No explanation forthcoming, we just had to do it. 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 we walked along amiably enough...until we came within sight of the car and 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 on the block 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 until finally we pulled off and parked beneath the rusting skeleton of the 45th 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 right 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 though, 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 the cholera epidemic right after WW II. Too many to count apparently. The place is creepy, over-run with ghosts, poltergeists

and supernatural goings on. Cass and I hated it when a case took us out to the island. It was sort of like our version of “Chinatown”.*

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-five 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. Finally I'd had enough and went back to roust her. I cleared my throat to let her know I was there. "Um, I think we should, y'know, get going."

She didn't reply right away, just kept looking out at the island. Some lights were visible over there, a few dots of yellow and white in all that blackness. The city administration was supposedly negotiating some kind of deal with Gregory Fischer, Mr. real estate tycoon, to redevelop the entire area--the old docks, the island—putting up

* See: "The Executioner Is Not Mocked", "Fanfare for the Uncommon Spook" ([The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk, Volume I](#)); "Sorry, Wrong Calibre"; "The Bride Wore A Wire" ([Casebooks, Vol. II](#))

luxury towers and condominiums, restoring the waterfront, sinking a couple billion dollars into what amounted to a giant pipe dream.

“I can’t shake this feeling.” Wrapping her arms around herself. “There’s something about this case that, I don’t know, fills me with an awful sense of foreboding.”

“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 lemony 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, making her voice 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 grouched, “I wonder how many other partners have to put up with this?”

But we both knew it was just hot air.

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

I 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 careered through the early morning streets.

After the nightly report was done (it didn't take long) I decided to update my notes for the *Casebook*. I took the opportunity to revisit older cases, flipping through the binders, pausing over the ones that brought back fond 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 colleague and 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 and it literally fell open to page 275, a short, blunt stanza at the top of the page:

"You were my death
you I could hold
when all fell away 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 then 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 11:00 a.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, up until the time 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 have come in. We got a bunch of boxes delivered late yesterday afternoon. I haven't had a chance to go through them yet but I'm pretty sure. On your way home, huh? Well, ask Tara about them tonight."

"Yes, 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 late at night. She seems...uncomfortable at times."

"She's *seventeen*, Nightstalk. It's not like she's an innocent. If my customers want 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. "Yeah, I'm sure 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, the prospects of that suddenly seemed much brighter.

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 miniscule living room, an alcove kitchen and a closet-sized bathroom. That was it. Home sweet 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, just flopped onto the cushions and passed out in whatever position I landed. The windows, a small one in the kitchen and a smaller one in the can, were both blacked out. Tin foil and duct tape. Rubber stripping tacked around the edges of the outside door. When I turned out the lights I wanted it *dark*.

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

And not much more 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*. Big faves. Books stacked everywhere or stored in boxes beside the couch. 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 that she insisted on talking about the books afterward, *discussing* them, offering her insights, both of us pretending I understood them to the same depth and extent she did. Mostly I kept mum—but then, out of the blue, 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.

Or the time when we were returning from a rare trip out of town and 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 glanced over 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. There were movie channels

galore and all news stations, extreme sports, history, golf, knitting—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 something to yank my chain, I could always turn to my personal stash. There were tall columns 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 should also mention Tree. My housepet 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 Tree 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 after we crossed paths, nearly fatally, with the arch villain and Nobel Prize winning mathematician Angus Podgorny. He resented our crucial role in bringing about his downfall and swore his revenge as he was being led from the dock.*

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 kind of insulted, if you know what I mean. It was like

she was trying to take care of *me*. That was more than a year ago and 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 always 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?

No, 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. Sheesh, the sheer *speed* of the thing was incredible. But I liked the fact that she was cheap and almost maintenance-free.

* "The Death of Pi" ([The Casebooks of Zinnea & Nightstalk](#), Volume II)

She would be a formidable adversary for any housebreakers. Very territorial. I'd hate to have that old girl mad at *me*, I tell you...

I raised my beer can to Tree and toasted her ferocity.

The building was humming with activity. Early risers were 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 was when she was practically unstoppable, especially if the moon was waxing.

I watched CNN for awhile but then I got lucky when I was switching around 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 it 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 which 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 bout of self-loathing for a few minutes longer 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 with a bang but a *whimper*.

End of Part I...

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