
Dead of Night

Stefan Geist, private investigator, woke up in a stranger's home with a feeling of dread. It was night, but plenty of light came in through the windows, from streetlamps, the moon and the apartment building's other wing. As he got up from the kitchen couch, a cat came in from the hallway to rub against his legs and purr. He was certain it hadn't been in the house when he'd locked the door and windows earlier.

He tried the light switches on his way to the entrance. They didn't work, much like his own flashlight, so he fumbled blindly in his bag, coming up with a bundle. It unfolded into a heavy cloak, which he held in front of himself like a shield as he paced quietly through the rest of the apartment. He was beginning to see why it had been so easy convincing the owners to sleep elsewhere while he did his job.

Nothing out of the ordinary was apparent in the living room, apart from the clutter of furniture typical of a very old home. It smelled old, and he was tripping on various hard objects every other step. At one point, something grabbed his cloak, but it had simply snagged on a chair, just as a gust of wind made the poplar trees rustle noisily outside the window. He untangled himself and moved on.

A smaller hallway came next. The closed door in front had a bathroom sign on it, while the one on the left... that's where his hair stood on ends, and he lifted his cloak just in time to catch a dagger thrown from within. He grabbed the hilt, pushed the door open the rest of the way, then in a single motion lounged in and slashed through the air.

There was a moving shadow on the wall, and it wasn't his. A shadow with glowing eyes and a gash from shoulder to hip, which was already starting to heal.

"Oh, it's you, Spook," breathed Geist. He should have been used to the spectre's way of greeting him by now.

"Hiiiiii..." squealed the hinges behind him as the door slammed shut. A very cold shiver ran down his spine, but he stood his ground.

"So, how've you been?" he asked shakily, draping the cloak over his forearm so as to have at least one free hand.

"Gyyuuud..." It was the wardrobe doors this time.

"All right," he breathed. "I guess you're here for a reason. Is it the owners?"

Outside, the wind picked up. "Yesss..."

"Do they know?"

The wind changed direction. "Nuuuuu..."

Geist nodded. "Show me."

The shadow slid along the wall, ending up on the balcony door. It made Geist's skin crawl, but he reached over and worked the handle.

The balcony was enclosed, and as cluttered as the rest of the house. Three floors below, he could see the street, empty of cars at this hour. Nothing out of the ordinary. On a whim he turned, and started shaking as the lights reflected in the room window were arranging themselves into an inverted pentacle. While he watched, the moving reflections further morphed into a blurry face — a face with dead eyes and a gaping maw.

"Hissss..." said the wind. Big, soft fingers were pattering on the balcony windows behind him, seeking a way in. The door creaked, and he dashed through just in time to avoid being locked out. It was with frozen fingers that he tugged at the draperies to pull them closed. Suddenly it was very dark, and Spook was nowhere to be seen. At least the feeling of dread had subsided, so he felt his way to the door with feet that wouldn't listen.

This time the light switch worked, and the dim lightbulb revealed a bedroom with even older furniture than the rest of the place — likely from just after the war. A moldy smell floated in the air, and the furniture seemed ready to come crashing down on him as he spun around slowly. Aha. On the wall opposite the window hung a framed sepia photo with a black ribbon across a corner. The man in the portrait resembled the face that had appeared on the window.

"Idiots," muttered Geist. The entire room was a shrine to a dead man. That just wasn't done — cemeteries existed for a reason. Oh well, the spell was broken for now. It should hold until morning.

He made his way back to the kitchen, turning on every light on the way. As expected, the cat was distinctly absent again, and every possible exit was still locked. He got ready to spend the rest of the night in a slightly more pleasant manner.

Then the wind picked up again. He could hear it blow up the building's stairwell, a lugubrious howl coming closer. It made his blood freeze.

And the lights were dimming again. Time to break out the heavy guns.

But he didn't have any.
