

The Card Player

It was a cold day, colder than it had been, and the wind was blowing in hard from the North. It was afternoon too, about three o'clock, and quiet, the sort of eerie suburban quiet that deadens the air when most folks are at work during the daytime. But the leafy cul-de-sac had seemed more so, silent and deserted, and that had been the main reason for them choosing it. In and out, relatively quickly, and taking anything light that was of any real value with only a few extra minutes to have a brief nose round. It was the few people with all the money that was the problem. The masses just got by, while the poor sad wretches like them who had to scrape a living off the streets, they were the ones that needed it the most. The window had been half-open when they'd got there, so it didn't take much to simply lift the latch and clamber inside. This was going to be a cinch.

"Look at all this shit," Casper gasped, climbing in through the window after his friend and gazing about the living room they'd been delivered into. "We could get a few quid for this lot."

He heard Adie sniggering from the corner of the room and turned to see him playing with something he'd found on the mantelpiece.

"Look," he said, holding up the lipstick for him to see. "A chick's house. Let's see what else she's got."

Casper watched as Adie left the room in search of God knows what, and went to follow, but stopped as he caught sight of a book lying on the floor. Dropped, presumably, from the armchair, he would not even have given it a second look except for the scarlet stain

smearred across its cover. He stepped towards it, stooping to take a closer look. There were a number of little drops of red, and a number of them had been smudged together. He frowned as he stood up again, and noticed a line of the scarlet drops trailing beside the armchair that he had not seen before. He was sure it was blood, but he had never seen so much of it in one place like this before, except in films. He stepped back away from the chair, and then retreated out of the room altogether, pursuing Adie in his eager search for bounty.

Casper trotted into the kitchen, stopping briefly at the refrigerator to feed his hunger and fill up on what he could find - some salmon, a couple of rolls, an unhealthy dose of mayonnaise - before hurrying into the dining room across the hall. This too was empty, and cautiously he climbed the stairs to a strained and muffled sound coming from one of the bedrooms. Casting his head round one of the doors, he discovered Adie perched on the edge of a bed and holding a white bra up to his chest. He looked up as Casper entered, a mischievous grin spreading rapidly across his face.

"Look what I found," he said, snatching up a fistful of other silk underwear he had already pulled out from one of the drawers.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Casper murmured, looking uneasily around the room. "This isn't right, going through people's stuff."

"What's your problem?" Adie snapped, hurling the bra to the floor. "It's just some bitch's stuff. What do you care?"

Casper turned and stared at him. He was anxious, perhaps even a little scared.

"I found some blood downstairs."

"So?"

"So perhaps she's hurt herself," Casper explained. "Or maybe even died."

"Cool," Adie grinned once more, staring off into space, dreaming of the macabre possibilities. "Maybe the body's round here somewhere, decayed and rotting."

Casper stared at him, his nose curled with distaste.

"You're sick, you know that?"

Adie grinned at the comment. He kind of liked the sound of that.

"Look what else I found," he said, holding up a pack of cards. "It was hidden at the back of the drawer where she thought no one would find it."

"What is it?"

"Looks like a bunch of tarot cards or something," Adie explained, handing over the deck of pictured cards. "Cool skeletons and stuff. I'll stick 'em up on the wall when we get back."

A crackling sound came then from somewhere off the landing behind them before Casper could even take a look at the cards, and they both turned their heads startled. It sounded like branches breaking, or wood cracking and splintering, and yet it seemed so out of place to come from inside a house. It was very close by, almost as though it had come from one of the other upstairs rooms, and the two thieves stared at each other with a sudden alarm.

"What was that?" Casper hissed to his accomplice.

"Perhaps it's the woman," Adie replied. "Perhaps she's come back."

"Let's get out of here."

"Let's take a look first," Adie countered, and was off the bed and creeping eagerly towards the door, that

grin of his once more wrapped mischievously about his face.

Casper followed behind him uneasily. His hands were shaking, and his skin had suddenly got cold and clammy. He knew they shouldn't be doing this, breaking into people's houses and going through their stuff, but there was no money to be found on the street, and these people with their big houses seemed to have plenty. But it was this looking at the owners that was new, and it was starting to creep him out. Adie was already a few steps ahead of him, and Casper could see him peering into a second bedroom. Then another crackling sound came, like breaking timber, but off to their left and from the bathroom. Adie grinned over his shoulder, and whispered something about checking her out in the tub. Casper hissed at him to come back, but Adie was already at the door, and pushing it gently open.

Casper was at his back now, his heart thumping like crazy, trying to peer round him as they both entered the small bathroom together. There was indeed a figure in the room, kneeling down in front of the bath, and hunched over the side. But it was not the silk-clad lady that they'd hoped to find, but a man dressed all in black. He looked round suddenly as he heard their footsteps on the cold linoleum. His eyes were wide and bullish, the pupils set inside them sharp and piercing like tiny pinpricks, and his lips and chin ran with blood as he gorged himself on the corpse lying twisted in the bath. Here was the real owner of the house, lying dead in the bathtub, being slowly devoured by this hideous and unnatural creature.

Their eyes locked for a handful of terrifying seconds, blood running down the throat and neck of

the man that was not a man as he returned their shuddering stare. Then he seemed to be on his feet with chilling speed and coming after them, spiny tentacle-like fingers clawing out from beneath his robes, eager to clasp them and rip away their flesh. Casper stumbled backwards away from this clammy reaching grasp, knocking Adie to the floor as he fell back sprawling through the open doorway. He caught a brief glimpse of Adie trying to get to his feet, his fingers clawing the air for the door handle, but then he caught sight of the man dressed in black once more, looming over his friend's body and reaching for him in turn. Casper scrambled to his feet as a scream slipped freely from the back of his throat, and he found himself stumbling headlong for the stairs as he ran for his life. His blood was pounding hard and loud in his ears as he tumbled down the last few stairs and spilled out into the hallway, and it wasn't until he was outside in the street once more with the cool breeze of the day on his skin that he realised that Adie was no longer behind him.

He stood in the middle of the cul-de-sac, his chest heaving with panic, as he gazed back up at the placid and silent facade of the peaceful suburban house. Nothing moved. Nothing screamed. No curtains twitched. And there was no sound but the ruffling of the wind through the leaves of the tree-lined boulevard behind him. The front door still stood ajar, swinging gently beneath the weight of the breeze, but of Adie and the creature in black, there was no sign, and no hint of pursuit.

What should he do, Casper thought desperately? Return for his friend? Call the police? What if that thing was still in there? Of course it was in there,

where else would it be? It was probably feasting on Adie's body right now, sinking those terrible teeth deep into his legs and throat. Casper backed away a step, fearful of the creature dressed all in black, his imagination conjuring the memory of its ghastly face, its jaws and throat awash with the blood of the woman. Just what sort of creature would eat human flesh? Especially a creature that seemed less human than not, but still clever enough to look like one. Perhaps it had been human once, he tried to reason, and something had happened... Casper shook such horrible thoughts away. Whatever it was, it was real, and Adie was still trapped inside with it.

The wind gusted suddenly along the cul-de-sac, lifting his hair as he continued to stare up at the cold and silent house. It was no different to any other house on the street, just a normal everyday suburban house, and yet it petrified him now simply to look up at it. He took a breath, a breath of false courage, and took a step back towards the house. He's dead, was the only thought that kept sparking in his head. Adie's dead. Why risk your own life for a dead man? Casper tried to shake the fearful notion away, as well as the bloody image that came with it, of Adie lying on his back with his chest and stomach opened up to the creature that was even now feeding upon him. He reached the front gate, still flung back against the neatly cropped hedge. It was perhaps only ten or fifteen yards to the front door from here, he could see part of the inside through the narrow gap, quiet, motionless and deathly still. He wanted to call out his friend's name, or throw something through the breach simply to disturb that horrible silence, but as soon as he thought to open his mouth or stoop to pick up a stone, that same terrible

sound came from inside, of crackling branches and breaking bones.

It made something in his chest stutter, and his feeble body shudder, and a cry of panic suddenly tumbled out of his stricken throat as he stumbled helplessly back down the pathway away from the house. His legs buckled and turned to rubber as he felt himself fall backwards, catching himself only partially on the gate. The black iron spikes pierced his skin and sent dull ragged pains throughout his arm and hand. But it was enough to at least keep him upright, enough to allow him to turn and flee, and to run as hard as he could away from the house, with tears that streaked his eyes and baffled his escape.

As he reached the main road, however, the suddenness of the traffic and the proximity of the real world startled him, and he stumbled wildly across the pavement. Several pedestrians veered out of his way in order to avoid his ragged route, fearful of this dangerous youth. But he looked back only once, a half-glance shot quickly over his shoulder as he made his way along the pavement. There was nothing there to see, of course, and yet it must have been his imagination that conjured those same sounds of branches breaking on the air behind him.

Only once he was back in the squalid warehouse they called home did Casper stop running. Sweating profusely and breathing hard, he hauled himself up the ladder to the top floor loft to gaze out over the city. How was everyone going about their everyday business - shopping, working, collecting their kids - when there was a monster at work in a house amongst them? How could that be? How could that happen? It just made no sense. The same vivid image came back

to him to dispel the logic of all that he knew, of the blood and the teeth, and that same terrible sound of cracking that permeated his mud-thick thoughts. Was Adie still there, he wondered as he gazed up at the darkening sky, or had he managed somehow to escape? Yes, that made sense. Adie must have managed to escape out back. That was why they hadn't met up out the front. That made sense. It had to. His hopes were shallow, very shallow, but he knew that it was all he had.

Casper turned away from the windowless opening, and as he trudged back towards his mattress lying on the grimy floor at the back of the loft, he remembered the stinging ache that still seared through in his arm. With his back against the cold concrete wall, he pulled off his jacket, which was torn across the sleeve, and turned his arm to inspect the damage. The wounds - there were three puncture marks and some ragged grazing - were bloody and flecked with black paint and rust from the gate. It looked quite bad and now that he poked it with his finger, it stung like hell. He flinched at the pain and decided to leave it be. There was nothing he could do but let it get better on its own. Pulling his jacket back on he sat and stared into middle distance, thinking about the house they had dared to break into, while his arm throbbed incessantly, nagging him with its dull coarse agony.

The law was not the only thing they should have feared from their burglaries, it seemed. Just what was that thing, he wanted to know? And how did it come to even be alive? Something was digging into his side, distracting him, and he reached absently into his jacket pocket. It was the pack of cards that Adie had found in the woman's bedroom. He had forgotten that he'd

taken it, and he pulled out the deck and held it up in front of him.

The packet was not much to look at. Square, dull, uninteresting. Tugging open the flap at the top, Casper eased out the cards and began to look at them, one after the other. Yes, they were cool, some of them, but the sight of them couldn't help raise his spirits with the thought of his friend lying dead somewhere in that house. He shuffled them distantly as he stared back out through the windowless opening in the far wall. A great grey wall of heavy cloud was rolling swiftly in from the North. Even colder weather was coming. Great. What else could go wrong?

With his thoughts rattling around inside his head, Casper felt his hands shuffle the cards once again. But then he stopped as he went to shuffle them a third time as he heard a footstep echo up from the cold depths of the derelict building below. Was it even a footstep, he thought? Of course, what else could it have been. Perhaps it was Adie, come back to the warehouse just minutes after him. Casper sat up a little and strained his ears against the chill winds that blustered in through the many breaches of the empty building. No more footsteps followed the first. Not, at least, until he got to his feet and went to the doorway leading to the ladder. Then the footstep came once more, only more loudly, and close by. Casper spun on his heel, searching the shadows for the intruder already inside the building, and caught sight of a dark figure standing in front of the open window behind him. It was silhouetted against the bruised sky, but still illuminated sufficiently so that Casper could catch the vague shapes of its face. A chill ran across his body as his eyes deciphered the forms.

This was not Adie.

This was the monster from the cold suburban house.

Its skin glistened with a sickly yellow-white pallor, its eyes sunk deep into its skull and ringed with dark circles. The skin of its lips and chin was still stained from the blood of its human meal, its teeth chattering intermittently like the rickety ticking of an insect scuttling across a cold hard floor. Casper stood for a few moments just staring at this creature, this unnatural beast that ate human flesh. How had it gotten into the loft? There was only one door and he was stood in it. So just how had it managed to get behind him? The creature's eyes were dark and almost gone inside its head, but from just those two dark cavernous sockets, Casper could see the intent, the intent of butchery. You will die now, those cruel eyes seemed to say, and my chattering teeth will know your flesh and devour it swiftly.

A cold wind blustered through the loft then, chilling Casper as he watched this thing stare back at him from the mask of its human body. Once again he felt the weight of the cards in his hand, and as he remembered that he still had hold of them, he felt the creature's gaze go to them also. Was this what it wanted, Casper thought? Was this why it had followed him all the way back from the house? It seemed ludicrous, and yet he was certain now that its attention was fixed firmly upon the deck. For some reason, Casper felt himself slide the first card from the top of the deck, and as he did so, he saw the creature's brow shift slightly, and heard too its teeth clatter to a halt. So there they stood, for what seemed like an age, as Casper offered the top card forward, the monster

seemingly fearful at the sight of it. Then what followed, and Casper would never be sure of what did follow, was simply not to be believed. But happen it did, and it was to save his very life.

Casper pulled that top card, the card that the creature had seemed so terrified of, and held it out towards it. On its surface was a symbol, a symbol of fire, and as Casper turned it out towards the creature, so the card began to shake with a fury of its own. Fire came from that card, a ball of flame so hot and furious that it leapt from his hand to engulf the creature entirely. Casper faltered as he witnessed the scene, almost as though he was a spectator looking in upon the room, and watched horrified as the beast dressed all in black covered its head with its arms, as the flames leapt up and burned it like a raging living candle. Stumbling back through the open doorway, Casper forced the cards back into his jacket pocket as he hurled himself back down the ladder as the din of crackling bones and chattering teeth harried his back. Once out in the open air again, he ran like an athlete, as hard as he could, back across the waste ground, the way he had come only minutes before. He had to find Adie, that was the only thought now raging through his head. He was the only person he knew in this cruel dark city, and he only hoped that he would still be at the house and alive.

He met the same stares from the people on the streets that he'd seen as he'd fled the house the first time. Perhaps they were fearful of the intentions of this lad, hurling himself through town. Perhaps he was dangerous, or perhaps it was his hard breathing, his wide fearful eyes, or maybe even the words he heard himself jabbering as he ran. Can't be dead, he was

stammering, grinding bones, drinking blood. He can't be.

He eventually found his way back to the corner where the trees grew bright and abundant, their limbs bowing low against the cold Northerly wind that gusted through the cul-de-sac. Was there snow promised somewhere in those dark burgeoning clouds, or numbing rain that would come in driving sheets to chill him if he lasted unprotected until nightfall?

The leaves in the tree-lined cul-de-sac rustled and blustered beneath the ever-strengthening wind as he hurried beneath their billowing canopies. So normal, so suburban, and yet hiding a den of murder and bloodshed beneath a façade of mock-Tudor and landscaped gardens.

And then there it was. The house. Tucked away in a corner, and set back a little way from the road behind a low green neatly-cropped hedge. Casper stumbled to a ragged pace as he approached the small black iron gate, a gate that still probably carried scraps of his own blood on its spikes like trophies. The front door still stood ajar, inviting him inside, taunting him and daring him to go through. He went anyway, his false courage once more on his breath, to stand upon the threshold, gazing deep into the hallway now darkened by the decaying day.

The house was silent as the world continued to bluster outside. There were no sounds, no cries, no footsteps. With his pulse thumping rapidly around his body, he forced himself forward for the sake of his friend. The stairs went up to his right, and even as he slowly began to ascend, he kept a fearful eye on the door to the living room, the room where he had first noticed those droplets of blood.

On the landing, he could see that all the doors that ran off from it stood ajar. The bathroom was just yards away, he could be there in less than three strides, and yet something held him back. Suppose Adie was in there, he thought, slumped inside the bath beside the dead owner of the house. What if he too had been devoured by the creature, drained of blood, his arms and legs broken. The creature was back at the warehouse, dead, there was nothing to be feared from that thing now. Only what lay on the other side of the bathroom door mattered now, but his fear of seeing Adie's face battered and cracked open kept him from entering.

Casper's hands were shaking as he held tightly onto the banister at the top of the stairs. What was he to do? The bodies would be found sooner or later, by neighbours first surely, and then by the police. If he was seen here with them, he would surely be their first suspect. And a young man living rough and desperate on the street? Who would care about him enough to object? Especially with his record anyway. Slowly he turned back and began to descend, away from the bathroom door, and away from his friend that was probably lying dead behind it.

In the downstairs hallway, he paused for a moment, and then stepped dismally into the living room. Why he did this he had no idea, perhaps for one final look, perhaps to check to see if those droplets of blood had been wiped away. He stood gazing down at the book still lying on the carpet beside the armchair. The scarlet drops remained untouched. But then the sound of shallow breathing caught his attention from the corner of the room behind him, and he turned quickly, so quickly in fact that he lost his balance and toppled

awkwardly to the floor. Why had he not checked the room first? That was stupid. He had simply stepped inside and looked for the book. But he looked round now, though, and his eyes settled quickly on the darkened figure stood hidden amongst the unearthly shadows, a tall figure, cloaked by darkness, and his eyes, although cloaked by that same unearthly darkness, seemed fixed intently upon him.

"Good afternoon," was all the stranger uttered, the simplicity of the welcome disturbing, given the circumstances.

Casper stared at him, uncertain of what to do, and stammered the same unnerving welcome in reply.

"Something has gone on here, has it not?" the stranger continued, to which Casper could only offer a feeble nod of his head. Was this the police? Here, so soon? The stranger took a step forward, the first movement Casper had seen him make, and he now came into the grey light coming in through the living room window. He was certainly not the ugly creature he might have expected, a grim brother of the monster he had left to burn back at the warehouse, and yet nor did he seem like a policeman. He was human, this stranger, at least human looking, and his skin was unblemished, almost perfect and radiant beneath the dull light of the late afternoon. His hair was dark and burnished, his forehead smooth beneath it, and his smile was convincing now that it came upon his thin lips.

"You have something for me, I believe," the stranger said, the smile fixed like a mask of forced pleasantry. "I would like to have it back. Then we can depart on pleasant terms."

"Who are you?" Casper managed to utter,

scrabbling to his feet but needing the support of the armchair to keep himself upright.

"My name is Anameus," the stranger replied. "I have some property that I would like to reclaim. It's upon your person, if I'm not mistaken. I will just take it, if you please, and then I'll be on my way."

Casper stared at him, uncertain of what to say, but knowing suddenly that it was the pack of cards of which he spoke. What else could it be? His creature had been sent, no doubt, to reclaim it from the woman, and he and Adie had stumbled upon its work at the wrong time, unwittingly stealing the cards out from under this man's nose once again. Was that all Adie's death was? Bad timing? If they had chosen the house next door, might he even be alive still? Casper looked up as the man who had called himself Anameus took another step towards him. It was certain that he was growing impatient, perhaps even considering his brutal murder as well. Would he even allow him to live once he'd handed over the cards? Should he even hand over the cards at all, he wondered suddenly? There was something powerful in that small deck that he could still feel nudging his ribs through the lining of his jacket, that much was indeed certain. Could it be that simple to just hand over power like that?

"You delay," Anameus commented. "Why is that?" Casper stared at him, uncertain of what to do, and ran a shaking tongue over his dry lips.

"Give me back what is mine," the man continued. "That is only fair."

A movement in the shadows from across the room caught his attention, and Casper turned in its direction. A second figure loomed there, previously unseen, another minion of this man. It was getting dangerous,

this dealing with whatever forces stood before him. He knew he was nothing to them, a mere harmless human, and yet he felt that the deck of cards in his pocket could at least offer him some kind of protection. He could sense the second figure itching to be unleashed from the shadows that held him, and sensed too the ominous intent of Anameus, restraining himself from simply taking back his property with violence. Casper wanted to burn him with the same fire that he'd burned the other, but until he managed to discover just what he'd done, they were simply printed cards with pictures on them. Adie himself had thumbed through the cards in the woman's bedroom, and no fire had slipped from their surfaces. So what, then, had he done differently to conjure those deadly and destructive flames?

"Return my property," Anameus said more forcefully now, as another creature appeared from the hall to fill the doorway. This looked like the first, its eyes sunk deep and hollow, its teeth ticking with the eagerness to devour. His escape was sealed, and his eyes searched the room desperately now for another route. He didn't want to relinquish what he had found so quickly, and his eyes settled upon the living room window that thankfully still stood open. The creature at the door made a step into the room, and the shadows shifted as he felt the presence of more beings, unearthly and looming out of the darkness towards him. He ran then, darting away from their needle-like touch, evading their sickening grasp, and hurled himself out through the open window and back into the daylight.

He landed heavily, and found a mouthful of gritty dirt in his teeth as he fell into the flower border.

Hauling himself to his feet as he stumbled forward, he threw himself back down the path and out through the gate. He glanced over his shoulder only once as he headed back along the road, and did he even see right, because he thought he saw Anameus standing at the open window, his eyes fixed intently upon him, and a smile of admiration spreading casually across his face?

He had nowhere else to go, that was the cruel honesty, and he wandered for an hour or more through the dark city streets as the blinding wind berated him in freezing gusts. It numbed every part of his body, and he tried to keep it at his back as he walked, but gusts seemed to harry him from all directions, and no respite could be found. With his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his jacket, he kept his fingers clasped tightly around the magical deck of cards. He needed somewhere to get out of the cold and try to learn their secrets, and what wouldn't he give to be able to conjure that fire again, if only to keep himself warm for the night.

A bar was open up ahead, its glittering light spilling out across the pavement, and Casper crossed the street swiftly towards it. He had a few coins on him, not enough for a meal, but perhaps enough for a shot, and he guessed that his body could do with alcohol inside it more than it could food. He entered a heaving smoky atmosphere, blissful after the cold night outside, and wondered only briefly if it was safe here as his entrance caused a number of furtive glances in his direction. His clothes were torn and dirty, he knew that, and he hoped that they only stared at him for being homeless, and not as some kind of enemy, even if he might have stolen from one of their homes some previous night.

He ordered a whiskey and took it to the back of the

room, to a ill-lit booth in the corner. He sipped it slowly to make it last before pulling the cards from his pocket, taking them out one by one and laying them face up in front of him. The whiskey entered his system more rapidly that he'd expected, warming his throat and stomach, but drawing a haze of tiredness down over his eyes. He forced himself to concentrate, to stare at the cards and look for any connections between them, to find any reasons for magic. Here was the skeleton Adie had spoken of, and here the fire card, its edges singed and blackened from its recent use. Here was one with lightning sparking down from a cloud, and here a blade, glinting and new. These cards could be weapons perhaps, their pictures denoting their powerful force. But then there were others that didn't seem to follow. One of a stone tower, another of an ocean. One of a maiden in a long white gown, another of a two-headed dog. What could be the point of these other cards? He took another sip of the warming whiskey as he wondered just who might have made them.

He tried to think back to what had happened in the loft, why fire come from the fire card, and why he had been able to incinerate the creature that had hunted him down with it. The whiskey had started to deaden his body all over now, drawing a veil of fatigue over his thoughts and ideas. Perhaps a shot had not been wise after all. But at least the chill of the night outside had all but left him. He tried to focus once again. What had happened earlier in the loft?

He had shuffled the deck, he remembered that, but so what? Then he had heard the creature downstairs. Had he shuffled the deck a second time? He wasn't sure. Yes, he had, because that's when he had gotten up and found the creature standing behind him. He

had drawn the first card on the top, that had been the fire card, and the magic had done the rest. Was that it? It seemed ridiculous.

His mind was racing uncontrollably from both the insanity and the whiskey, and he collected up the cards and pushed them back together once again into a deck. He neatened the pack and then proceeded to shuffle them. He stared at them, nervously, and then slowly shuffled them once more. His hands were trembling as he slowly drew the top card out away from him, pointing it towards the bar. His eyes flinched as the card began to shake in his hand, and he only had time to see the picture on the top before the lightning bolt burst out from the card, its crackling white stream obliterating the side of the bar in a shuddering shower of wood shards and broken glass.

The explosion was sudden and devastating, and for a while the bar stood rattled in both silence and shock. Broken bottles tinkled across the floor, glasses smashing as they continued to roll from shattered shelving. Casper sat and gaped at the effect of the lightning card, as the rest of the customers in the establishment began to stumble forward with ragged cries and gasps of disbelief. Casper barely heard their suspicions or their shuddering moans of relief, not even as he picked up his stuff and staggered past them and back out into the night. Some may have said it had been a freak thunderstorm, others a terrorist attack, perhaps even chancing a guess at an exploding beer barrel. All ludicrous theories, but none more so than the truth. The cards were powerful, and vengeful, and he now knew the secret to unleashing that power. Oh, how he was going to deal those cards out one by one, drawing them face up with each and every terrible

death to the man who had killed his one and only friend in the world. Oh yes, Anameus, you would pay for that.

The freezing wind numbed his face as he stormed back through the city streets, back the way he had come, the heat of revenge warming his bones nearly as much as the whiskey had done. He would have that revenge, he repeatedly told himself as he marched, and he would climb those stairs and learn the truth about who had laid inside that bathtub. Would the owner of the house continue to lie alone, or would she be joined in the bath of her own blood by Adie? If any of those shrouded monsters were lying in wait for him, or even attempted to stop of control him, he would have them too, burned, blackened or dismembered, whatever death the cards chose for them.

As Casper reached the corner of the street, he stopped to glance to his left and right, checking the traffic that was intermittent at this hour. A string of cars passed from his right, driving swiftly by in the cold darkness. His eyes, however, picked out the shape of a figure huddled on the other side of the road a little further up. There were still a few people out on the streets, it was not that late, but there was something noticeable in the motionless stance of this figure, something not right. Casper stared at it without trying to be seen to be staring, but it just stood there, this thing, almost like a solid black smudge, with no movement and no discernible features. It dawned upon him slowly that this was one of Anameus' creatures, stood waiting and watching, perhaps even for his return. Shit, he thought. His surprise attack ended before it had begun. A shiver coursed through him as he wondered if there were any more of its kind

about, come to watch and follow him. Casper glanced along the road in the other direction, searching the shadows desperately for some other sign. He looked hard, gazing into the darkest of all the doorways and overhangs, and he found them here too.

Another of the dark creatures lurked motionless inside an empty bus shelter, only its head and shoulders visible as it gazed back at him. A third figure stood hunched beneath a line of trees, their limbs and overhanging branches disguising its twisted frame. He continued to search, both to his left and right, and even behind him, but could find no more. But because he could not see them, it did not necessarily mean that they were not there to be seen.

He started forward now, his pulse skittering inside his body, as he made his way deliberately across the road. Cars still came, from the left and the right, and people still walked the streets in either direction, and yet they all seemed ignorant of the unnatural creatures that walked beside them, sharing their space, lurking amongst them. There are monsters, Casper wanted to shout out to each and every one of them. Look around you and you will see them.

But as he thought this he quickened his pace, and thought too about how regular people with their regular lives and their regular jobs would listen to a homeless man telling them of how he could see demons and monsters, especially with the stench of whiskey on his breath. His loneliness came down upon him more heavily than that it ever had. He was alone. There was no one for him to turn to. Not now. Not with Adie dead.

His eyes caught those of a couple hurrying home, and he saw in that returned gaze exactly what they

would think of anything he might say. It chilled him. Perhaps more than the freezing wind. Perhaps more than the creatures following him. It echoed his own thoughts that he was alone. He would have no help tonight, or any other night. This was a solitary battle.

He realised that he'd wandered further away from the house than he'd expected, and now found that he had to double back a good part of the way. A short cut through an alleyway would afford him a long trek back along the main road, but he knew, even before he reached it, that it would be tantamount to suicide. His grip tightened on the deck of cards in his pocket. He had the power with him. What did he have to fear from these things? Only Anameus might give him a fight. These other things were just conjured beasts, lap dogs that would topple like felled trees. There would be no resistance from such things. He would kill them all, and scatter their broken bones like ash. Then the entrance to the unlit alleyway suddenly loomed into view, and with a forced breath, he stepped into its blackest depths.

The cold northerly wind hammered through the narrow thoroughfare, blustering with raging gusts. It was a struggle merely to stand upright against the howl it was throwing at him. His eyes streamed into blindness against it, as he tried to penetrate the almost total darkness, but he would be able to see nothing. He persevered, telling himself that this would save him time. He had to get back to the house before word reached Anameus of his intent. A sudden gust knocked him sideways, almost sending him to the foul litter-strewn ground. His hands went out to steady himself against the rough wooden boards that made up the alley, the wind seeming to be growing worse. He

glanced back behind him, his mind almost made up to return to the main road and take the long way round, but through his blinded sight he could make out that the entrance to the alleyway was no longer empty. The darkness of two shrouded creatures filled it, blocking the light from the streetlamps behind them, and as he stood and stared at them, slowly they began to approach.

The decision had been made, the creatures were after him, and he forced himself onward once more on his ragged journey. As he looked up, however, so he came face to face with yet more of Anameus' army. They blocked his route just yards ahead from him, their needle-like hands already reaching for him out of the darkness. Casper staggered to a halt, a cry of alarm already in his throat, as one of them caught hold of his jacket and dragged him into their fold. He was screaming now, yelling for them to let him go, but then he suddenly felt another constricting grasp, tugging at his ankle, and then another tearing at the front of his jeans.

His hand snatched out the deck of cards, and in the pitch blackness he struggled to pull them from the packet, his shaking fingers fumbling with them as the hands of the undead creatures pushed and pulled him, their clammy grasp upon him growing ever stronger as their tentacle-like claws sought to tear him apart. He had to do this right, he knew, or he would feel the needle-teeth of their terrible jaws, chattering blindly in the darkness of the alleyway.

Casper felt himself shuffle the deck, the cards slipping awkwardly between his fingers. He managed to keep a hold of them, and even to shuffle them a second time, but as his right hand told hold of the edge

of the top card, his teeth suddenly grinning with the eagerness to destroy these foul creatures, a blow came out of the night, swift and unseen, and sent the entire deck flying.

A breath froze in his throat as the touch of the cards left his grasp. He knew in that instant that he no longer possessed that power, and that his death must soon be imminent. The choking hold that the creatures had kept upon him left his flesh the very moment after, as they sought to recover their master's cards from the dark and filthy ground.

Casper staggered back away from them, his hands clasping his head and throat as the weight of what had happened sank into him. He had possessed magic, vast and powerful magic, and now he had lost it. He gazed down at the incoherent shapes fussing and chattering at his feet, rummaging through the dark grim matter for the cards that still lay there. A thought came that he should try to reclaim at least a few of them, but he realised that he had at least managed to retain his life. Would they even leave him to breathe after they had found the cards? He had no idea, and even as he turned to look for the two that had entered the alleyway behind him, he could see the entrance clear once more.

The dilemma heightened inside him, to stay to find a handful of cards at the expense of his life, or to leave swiftly before the monsters looked up to take out the throat that they had been choking only moments before. It was a question that seemed not to be easily answered, but he took a final look down at their surging forms still busy amongst the muck, before he turned and headed quickly away.

The remainder of the night passed without further incident. He returned to the loft, and slept only briefly beneath blankets that could not keep out the freezing cold. The charred husk of the first monster probably still stood where it had fallen, he had not looked for it amongst the tangled shadows, and for once he was glad that there was no electricity in the disused building to light the rooms.

As dawn broke, he left quickly to find somewhere new to stay, another building, another city, it didn't matter. His stomach ached from a hunger that had not been sated since the previous day, but he knew that he was unlikely to find anything just lying around waiting to be eaten. Adie was surely dead, he had to at least admit that. This city was bad, corrupt by monsters that nobody else had seen. But he had seen them, and he had been beaten by them. How could he have thought that he could win? He had held power for a matter of hours, and felt the strength and potential within himself for only a fraction of his life before it had been taken away. He had been arrogant to think that he could have defeated things that had moved unnoticed for countless years, perhaps even lived amongst mankind forever, how did he know? He looked at himself as he trekked back over the waste ground. What was he now? Just what he had always been. A homeless man with nothing to call his own. He was a ghost.

Casper made his way out towards the old town, keeping his back to the district that had claimed his friend's life. He knew a short cut out to a truck stop near the motorway where he would be able to pick up a lift to somewhere far away. He didn't know where, and didn't much care, just as long as it was far away

from this place.

The old town was quiet at dawn, just a handful of cars and delivery drivers passing through the cold gloomy streets. His stomach knotted again as he crossed a junction, that same Northerly wind gusting icily across its expanse, and he put a hand to it as if to let it know that nothing was coming anytime soon. He passed a row of terraced houses, some with their curtains drawn, others with concealing nets, and wondered if it would be wise to break into one swiftly, if only to put something in his belly before continuing on his way out of the city.

Passing a quiet road he slowed his pace a little to glance down its length. Plenty of money here, he thought to himself, even in this part of town, but not so much that the owners deemed burglar alarms necessary. But then something caught his eye, a brief glimpse of something dark and awkward slipping neatly through the shadows between two houses. It came and went so suddenly that Casper could barely grasp what it was. And then the wind suddenly gusted, lifting the heavy canopies of the trees that lined the road, and carrying that same dreadful sound of chattering teeth and breaking bones that he had heard before. Casper staggered back away from it, a shudder creeping back across his spine, and hurried quickly on in the direction of the truck stop and the motorway.