

# NIGHT SHADE



LIAM SMITH

## NIGHT SHADE

I sat down nervously at the wooden table. The old woman offered me food; something that was cooking over an open fire in a large pot, a gumbo or jambalaya perhaps. I noticed half a Farfetch'd carcass resting on a board next to the fire, and declined.

The hut was small, claustrophobic. The air was thick and hot, made hotter still by the small fire over which the cauldron sat. There were gaps in the slats between the boards of the floor, and I could see through to the swamp beneath. A thin wind rippled the pregnant water, stiff with reeds and lily pads. Tiny insects buzzed in the air, and the setting sun illuminated the silhouettes of wings flickering in the trees.

The woman busied herself at the pot. I wondered when she would attend to me, to the purpose for which I came to her. I watched her stir at the stew inside the pot, before picking up the carcass and shredding the meat from it. I looked around the cabin. There were many jars and containers, glass and clay, collected on a multitude of shelves. Some of them contained things I recognised – no, parts of things I recognised. Eyes, scales, tails. A Marowak skull rested on one high ledge.

I looked around when I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. The woman was unlidding a small crate. With both hands she hauled out a Paras. Its claws clacked and its eyes rolled to look up at her, but she pointed it away from her body, avoiding the pincers. She placed it on the table and I almost cried out for the creature, images of the gumbo flashing in my mind's eye. But the woman simply held down its clicking form and eased one of the mushrooms from its back. The Paras gave no sign of any pain, just continued to tap its claws impotently. A moment later and it was returned to its crate, and the mushroom removed to the cauldron.

I wanted her to stop cooking and help me. I'd met her yesterday at the bayou market; an Abra squatted down by her feet, a pack of cards on the table in front of her. I'd passed her stall thrice before picking up the courage to approach and, when I had, we'd barely spoken. She'd taken my hand and traced a brown finger over the lines in my palm. As she did so, I'd noticed the Abra open its eyes.

She'd told me the time and the place. And now here I was, perspiring in the muggy shack whilst the old woman cooked her dinner.

'Patience you, girl,' she said.

I looked back at her. Was I so obvious?

'Yes. I'm sorry.'

She placed a lid on the cauldron and shuffled across the creaking floor to sit opposite me. The dim light deepened the lines in her dark face, and I noticed that the necklace hanging into the folds of her dress seemed to be made from string and teeth.

'I can help you, child,' she said.

Well I should hope so. I didn't come out here for nothing.

## NIGHT SHADE

‘Please,’ I whispered.

She rested her chin on her ebony hands.

‘We will need the other,’ she murmured.

‘The other?’

‘You met him yesterday. You must wake him, in order that he may help you.’

I was confused. I’d met no one else at the market.

‘Where is he?’

She smiled, creasing the carved mahogany of her face.

‘You must dig.’

My hand dropped instinctively to the balls on my belt. She shook her head.

‘*You* must dig.’

She heaved to her feet and crossed to the window, beckoning me. I joined her, and her finger rose to point through the hanging trees.

‘Take the boat. Row through the trees – follow the skulls.’ I stared across the water to where her finger was directed, and saw a Marowak skull set into the hollow of a tree trunk – a twin to the one I’d seen minutes before on the shelf.

Inside, my heart sank. I was being led on. The old woman was inventing some fool’s errand for me to fail at – she couldn’t help me.

‘I know what haunts you, child. This must be done.’

Again, it was like she’d read my mind. Or perhaps I was reaching the end of my tether, and it was beginning to show.

‘And then what?’ I asked.

She opened a box on a low shelf, and shuffled the pack of cards inside. She picked one without turning any over.

‘Dig when you find this one,’ she said, holding up the card. *The Hermit*. She led me out the door and down a few wooden steps to where a small row boat was tied to a root. I stepped into it gingerly and it rocked beneath my feet, splashing in the swampy water. I made to untie the boat, but the rope was already coiled in the floor of the little vessel. I hadn’t seen her untie it. The boat was already starting to drift, and I scabbled for the oars. When I looked up the woman had vanished.

I slipped the oars into the turgid water and began to pull myself through the swamp, cutting through the surface layer of weeds and lilies, aiming for the tree in which the first skull rested. It took several heaves of the old oars before I found a rhythm, but once I did I was soon bobbing beneath the old bone. I looked around for the next skull and, following the gaze of the empty sockets above me, spied the marker in the distance, propped in the crook of two intersecting branches.

By the time I reached the third skull the sunlight was waning and my arms were aching. The air was like soup and sweat slid freely down my back. The last skull had guided me down a thin, meandering waterway – I’d lost my sense of direction, and the dark mass of the old woman’s shack was lost behind layers of foliage. The oars and the little boat creaked like joints as I rowed, and there were other sounds too – the chatter of

night time activity, the occasional hunting call – the sound of things coming out after dark. I rowed faster. I wanted to get this done.

The waterway led onwards beneath low hanging trees, and I had to slow down and duck beneath a bunch of hanging Kakuna. When I looked back up I saw a land mass emerging ahead. A small wooden jetty thrust out into the water, and a boardwalk led up to a lychgate. The little roof of the gate was decorated with a final Marowak skull. I let the boat drift towards the jetty – not a breeze or current disturbed its path. I secured it to a post with the damp rope and clambered out, my legs unsteady for a moment on the unyielding ground. I took a deep breath of the humid air and approached the gate. Its stone walls had fallen into mild disrepair, but the hollows opened by missing bricks had been plugged with more bones – nothing so large as those I'd been following, but smaller skulls, of Pidgery perhaps, or Raticate. A thin white mist hung in the air and I flinched when the uncoiled hinges of the gate scraped and screeched open. A spade rested against the stonework. I took it in both hands and entered the graveyard.

The headstones were arranged in no order I could discern: they were just a mob. I remembered the card the old woman had shown me, the image of the hermit drawn on in flat time-faded colours. I had to search for him here. A bird-call cracked the air behind me and I jumped, hands tightening round the spade. I shivered involuntarily and assessed the area.

The cemetery appeared to be circular. The crowd of gravestones was split down the middle by a dirt path – it seemed to be the only one, so I took it. The stones were many shapes and sizes – traditional square memorials were most common, but there were also arched graves and even some cross shapes. I saw a couple of sculpted domes and touched the balls on my belt – it seemed strange to see their likeness cast in funereal rock when their usual purpose was the containment of life.

At the centre of the cemetery the path widened into a circle, the dirt flattened over time by feet, paws and claws. I considered stopping and turning, but felt that it would be too easy to lose myself here. I kept going. The night was quiet and I realised that I was treading softly, as if to escape notice. Noises were dull here in the centre – no night squawks, no shuffle of movement, no rustle of trees.

I arrived at the far side of the graveyard. There was no gate here. It seemed the one through which I had entered was the only passage into this place. I realised now that I would have to walk amongst the graves in order to find my hermit. My clothes were damp but if anything the night was growing cooler – the beginnings of a nervous sweat. I rested the spade on my shoulder and began to tread a circular route inside the wall. When I passed over the dividing path again, I assumed I'd walked a full circle. When I'd crossed it twice more, I admitted to myself that the lychgate was gone.

I found my hermit after what seemed like hours. A Cubone statue, carved out of pale stone, stood on low pedestal. It matched the image on the card the woman had shown me. The earth before it seemed darker, as if the grave it marked had been freshly dug, and a soft poke of my spade confirmed this notion.

## NIGHT SHADE

'Dig', the woman had said. So I did.

The earth was loose and I shifted it easily, though the rough wood of the spade handle chafed my hands. The heap of soil grew larger as the hole grew deeper. It smelled faintly of iron. Of course I wondered what was buried here – surely not a corpse? All too soon my spade point thunked against something solid and I paused, my breathing heavy from the exertion. I dropped to my knees and used the spade to scrape away the soil from the buried surface. I dusted the last of the dirt away with my hands. I'd uncovered a coffin.

It was over two feet long, wooden and black. It was not straight in the manner of a contemporary casket, but tapered towards the head and foot in rough imitation of a human form. I felt I must remove it from its grave and upon doing so I found it light, as if empty, though my heart told me it was not. Keeping it flat, I placed it beside its headstone.

They say that prying killed the Persian. I figured that in this case, it was already dead. I ran my hand along the seam between coffin and lid, feeling for hinges. I dug my nails into the join and cracked the box open wide.

The Abra. It lay on its back, hands crossed over its golden chest. I stared at it for a while, unsure whether to replace the lid or not. The inside of the coffin was lined with white shards – it took a moment for me to realise they were shreds of paper. It took me another to recognise that small bones were mixed in too. It was breathing slowly, chest swelling in and out. It looked like the light was catching it as it moved, creating ripples on its skin, but I knew there was no light. Then its eyes opened.

They were all white. I couldn't see a pupil or an iris, just white slivers. I grew conscious, too, of a tension in the air, an electricity of sorts. I watched as the pile of earth beside the open grave began to fall down, into the hole in the earth. It began like a mudslide does in the mountains, as trickle at the top before sliding, pushed by some unseen force, back into the hole. The Abra's eyes closed again.

I closed the lid of the coffin. I could tell it was awake, and I felt irrationally as if it were watching me: sensing my movements and thoughts. I picked up the casket carefully and carried it through the maze of gravestones to the central path. I reached the gate and passed beneath it – the skulls in the walls held no fear for me. Once outside the boundaries of the cemetery I paused – it was dark out here, and I realised how late the hour must be. It crossed my mind that it hadn't been so dark in the graveyard, as if there had been some kind of inherent illumination in there. I dismissed these thoughts. Sometimes it is best not to question.

The sounds of the swamp at night were noisy now, the night not as still as it had been amongst the gravestones. The darkness was deep, and I had to tread carefully back down the boardwalk for fear of tripping and falling. I clambered into the boat, using my hands rather than my eyes to guide me. I pushed off and aimed for a hanging mass I took to be the Kakuna nest. Where was the moon tonight? I'd never needed it more. The boat creaked in the water, and I became aware of a light building behind me. I

looked back over my shoulder and saw the coffin was open; the radiance was coming from within, white with a purple tint to it. As I watched, the Abra began to rise. At first it seemed to be simply sitting up, unfurling from the coffin with its arms crossed over its chest, but when I saw its small golden feet float above the casket lining I realised that it was levitating. The light it generated was not a concentrated incandescence, like the sun or a candle flame, but more an ambient unveiling of the darkness around it. The Abra hovered perhaps a foot above the floor of the boat, a lantern to guide me, its soft violet glow providing ample light to see by. So it was that I returned to the old woman's shack.

The door stood slightly ajar and, since I had no hands free to knock, I nosed it open with my foot. I didn't know where to place the coffin, so I kept hold of it. The Abra had drifted in ahead of me. It had moved with a curious gait – half waddling, half floating – up to the hut whilst I secured the rowboat. Now it crouched beside the old woman. She seemed older than she had when I'd left just a little while ago – how long exactly? How long had I been gone? – though I guess the waxing night could simply have deepened the shadows in her face. I waited inside the door whilst she carried a plate to the table. There was some kind of cake on the plate: it looked like fruit cake, though in the dark it was hard to tell. The old woman sat down heavily on her creaking chair and started to break pieces from the cake, passing them down to the Abra. It took them in both hands and nibbled quickly, munching through several handfuls in under a minute. The woman looked up at me.

'Leave that outside.' She pointed at the coffin in my hands. I nodded, placing it outside the door of the shack. When I re-entered she beckoned me to a seat opposite her. I noticed there were two thick white candles at either end of the table, a pack of cards between them. Face down, I could see only the back of the topmost card. It was faded blue, with a red and white globe at its centre. The woman began to shuffle the cards with practiced ease, not quickly, but steadily, never bumping the cards into one another but rustling them together smoothly like leaves. She proffered them to me and, as soon as my hand touched them, I became aware of the Abra. I could see its face over the table and I felt sure that, as in the graveyard, it was watching me with some deeper vision. Some other sense.

I shuffled the cards clumsily for perhaps a minute before returning them to the woman's brown fingers. She squared the pack and placed it to her left. I watched, intrigued. She dealt slowly, card by card, placing each one down on the wooden table with its face up. She arranged five cards into a cross shape, and it reminded me of the headstones in the graveyard I'd explored that very night. The sixth and final card she placed to the right of the cross.

I didn't speak. The shack was very quiet – I knew I should have been able to hear the sounds of scurrying or squirming from the crates on the floor, or the odd pop or crack from the waning embers of the fire, but there was nothing. Even the sounds of the swamp were dulled, as if upon entering the hut they were absorbed into the heavy air, which seemed charged, like static before a storm. I could smell something beneath the

## NIGHT SHADE

zoo-like musk of the woman's caged companions, something spiced, not quite floral. Like pollen from some secret carnivorous swamp flower. I thought the candles might be emitting some scent as they burned. The Abra's eyes glowed moon-white.

The woman placed a finger on the first card, at the foot of the cross. She spoke.  
'The Ace of Cups.'

I looked at the card. Its colours were simple and flat – a red and white goblet, hemispherical at its top, overflowing with water, above a lake. The shores of the lake were illustrated, showing healthy, blooming Bellsprout and Weepinbell.

'This card represents your past, and its bearing on your present.'

I studied it across the table. My exertions this evening had tired me, and the shack was warm and dim. I felt my eyes fuzz a little as I concentrated.

'There has been a great joy in your past. A beginning.'

There'd been many joys in my life. Many beginnings. I nodded anyway. The woman's voice was deep, and I indulged it. She was looking at me. I locked eyes with her and nodded again. She raised her finger to the next card, on the left arm of the cross.

'The Moon.'

I looked at the card. It was easier to read than the last; this one was facing me. A bone coloured moon illuminated the scene: a river bank flanked by two stone towers. A Growlithe atop each tower, howling up at the sky. A Krabby, its back to me, crawling up from the water.

'You have been misled, child,' the woman said. 'Illusion, deception. All is not as it may seem to your eyes.'

'Who's misled me?' I asked. 'Who's deceiving me?'

The woman pointed at the card.

'You must see.'

I looked hard at the card. I recognised nothing – Growlithe were not native to these lands; I'd never seen one in the flesh. Krabby sometimes swam upstream from the sea, but I couldn't see what relevance one could have to me.

'You must see,' the woman said again. Her voice was low and resonant, and she spoke slowly. Her voice sounded like the swamp: dark, rich, warm. The smell of the candles was thick in the air and my eyes were blurry. The moon in the card seemed almost like a face, the shadows and lines in its surface like the hollows of eyes and the smears of ritual paint.

'You see,' she murmured. Her finger slid across the tabletop like a planchette on a Ouija board.

'Yes...' I whispered.

'Good. Keep looking.' The finger alighted on the right arm of the cross. I recognised the character on this one.

'The Hierophant,' spoke the woman. 'This one will aid you.'

The card depicted an Abra, seated before a willow tree. Both its hands were raised and one held a wand, topped with that ubiquitous red and white orb. My eyes drifted to the real creature across from me. Its eyes glowed and its body was still.

‘How?’ I asked.

‘He will teach,’ she replied. ‘Something that must be known.’

I was glad the card had implied something so directly, and was glad too that the Abra would be the one to assist me. I felt a connection to it, as if we had already helped one another through something, as if we were, in part, responsible for each other.

The woman was already indicating the next card, at the top of the cross. I recognised the creature on this one too, having encountered one once before in the mangroves.

‘The Two of Swords,’ said the woman. The card showed a Scyther. It stood by the sea, its arms crossed, lethal blades glinting and rippling in the candle flames. Its eyes were closed, and I could almost see the slight tremble of its muscles as it held the position. My head was intoxicated by the smell of the candles and the static-laced air.

‘Adversity,’ murmured my diviner, ‘danger, a duel.’

I was not surprised. I nodded her to continue.

‘The outcome is not known to me... Only that afterwards...’ the fatalistic finger traced to the heart of the cross ‘...there will be Death.’

My breath caught, and I forced my lungs to work once more as I examined the card. It depicted a desolate rocky landscape, with a village in the background, huddled against mountains and hills. A tower looked over the small town. I dragged my eyes away from the tiny haven to the foreground of the image. A dark shape, a short, squat creature I did not recognise. Its eyes were red and its teeth, displayed in a wide grin, were pearl-white. Stubby spikes ran down its back. I noticed a small sun was rising behind the mountains. It did not alleviate the icy feeling tightening in my stomach.

‘Is... Is it true death?’ I asked. The cards were, I knew, symbolic. Metaphors. Those red eyes filled me with dread.

The old woman cocked her head.

‘One you know will die. Not you. There is more to your future.’

My mouth felt dry, my insides heavy and cold. I had to ask again.

‘But is it death? Will someone I know truly die? Truly cease to live?’

I felt like I’d been shocked out of a trance, and I looked at what we were doing. Reading the future? Her tools of divination were simply slips of paper. I looked back at the Moon; the Scyther. Nothing more than flat ink.

‘You must believe this, girl,’ the woman cautioned. Her voice was bass, booming. ‘It is a warning and a truth. All you see will come to pass. There is death in your future. All you see is a version of the truth.’

I swallowed my anger, and my fear. I did not believe she could foresee the future, but even the symbol of death holds a certain power. And I did believe she was helping me. I bade her go on:



## NIGHT SHADE

‘The final card?’

As I looked at it, I found it difficult to focus. The other cards were still and flat – I saw nothing beyond the ink as I had done earlier. But the final card seemed almost to be shifting, showing several things at once. I blinked and squinted but I couldn’t make out a clear picture.

‘The World represents the final outcome of your life,’ the woman intoned. ‘Events tonight will affect the rest of your journey across this mortal plane. And beyond it.’

I narrowed my eyes. It did seem like a world, like several maps laid across one another till the lines meshed into an impenetrable pattern.

‘You will travel, you will learn. There are places in the world with wonders and challenges and you will meet them.’

‘In the future?’

‘Yes. Perhaps not for many years. But your journey begins this night.’

The woman watched me, looked into me with the same inner eye that I had felt the Abra use ever since I’d first unearthed it in the graveyard. At once she swept the spread of cards up into the deck and heaved to her feet.

‘The night is fleeting,’ she muttered. ‘Come, child.’

She led me out of the cabin, down the creaking mossy steps. The Abra had left ahead of us and crouched at the water’s edge. It seemed to be concentrating. The woman guided me.

‘Take his hand. You must do this together.’

I hunkered down next to my Hierophant. Though I’d travelled through the swamp with it I had not actually touched it. Its hands were clasped in front of it, and I had to pull them apart gently in order to take one in my own. They were hard, like scales, and I gasped as I felt a sharp shock like static electricity lance up my arm. I followed the gaze of those sickle-moon eyes out into the viscous boggy water until I felt the current in my arm increase. It wasn’t painful, though the initial shock had been – it was hot; scalding in an abstract way that I couldn’t define. It was as if I were the vessel for some vast power that was passing through me without touching me.

The water splashed as if an invisible pebble had been dropped into it. I watched the ripples fade before it happened again, and then again. Soon the disturbance began to find a motion, spinning into a small whirlpool out in the swamp. The gnarly hand in my own physically grabbed at me, holding me tight as its owner focused. I watched a dark object began to rise from the maelstrom and hover above the water, then drift towards the shore. It was a wooden box, and it landed at my feet.

The whirlpool slowed and faded, and the current between the Abra and I faded with it. It pulled its hand from mine and my arm felt numb, like a heavy weight had been placed on it for an hour. The old woman bent to retrieve the box, and I handed it up to her. Words had been scorched into the side and, though it was too dark to read, I

recognised the number twenty nine, as if it had been scored in with a red hot poker. Then a flood of pins and needles down my arm made me grimace.

‘Your champion,’ she said. ‘Which one is he?’

She was looking pointedly at the balls on my belt. My good hand automatically dropped to the first orb in the set. My first catch.

‘This was meant for him,’ she said. She placed her hand out, palm up. I slowly unclipped the ball and set it in her hand. She took the ball in one hand and the box under her arm, and returned to the shack. As I made to follow I felt something tug me back down.

The Abra’s eyes were closed once more: I sensed it was tired. I knelt in front of it, sensing some kind of telepathy guiding my actions. It raised its hand and I bent my head towards it, closing my eyes. I felt a hard fingertip trace on my face, a figure-of-eight that encircled both of my eyes before finishing in the centre of my forehead. The fingertip was removed and I opened my eyes again. The Abra was still now – not the still of psychic concentration but the still of rest. I considered for a moment, then picked it up. It was heavy now, heavier than it had been when I’d exhumed it. I carried it to the hut and placed it softly back in its casket. I closed the lid over it, and rose to find the woman behind me. She held out the ball she’d taken a minute before.

‘He is ready to fight. You are ready to see?’ I was puzzled for a moment, then thought of the fingertip scoping across my face. I nodded. She continued. ‘Then you are ready. See beyond the Moon’s mask to what truly faces you. Go now, child. Before the night is through.’

‘But...’ Was I to be dismissed so abruptly?

‘Go! Already the stars fade as the light of morning approaches. You must do this tonight!’

I nodded, backing away.

‘Thank you,’ I called, quietly. The woman nodded, still watching me. I turned myself from her, and trod my path through the mud. By the time I looked back, the hut was hidden behind vines and leaves.

At first my passage back was lit only by the stars, but I saw the dim glow of morning was beginning to relieve the darkness. I had been with the old woman all night and, though I felt tired, I was surprised at how much time had passed since I’d first picked my way through the swamp to her hut. Now I was relying on memory to guide my return, as Zubat flitted home to their nests above my head and Paras and Oddish crawled through the undergrowth.

Once I reached familiar paths it took me perhaps half an hour to reach my house. It stood in its clearing, low, quiet, still. I should have felt relief upon seeing it, but I hadn’t felt safe in my house for a week now. The swing chair on the veranda creaked a little in a slight breeze. The windows were dark, like the eye sockets in a skull.

I opened the door, and turned on the light. It flickered, finally producing a thin luminescence. Enough to see by, at least. I went to the kitchen to fetch a glass of water

## NIGHT SHADE

and the tap groaned as water spurting along the old pipe work. I winced at the noise as if scared of being overheard. Which, of course, I was.

I returned to the front room and sat in my old armchair. I knew it wouldn't be long. The light bulb hadn't warmed up yet; it was still burning low. There were deep shadows in the room, and I held the first ball on my belt for comfort. All was silent. The nocturnal hunters had returned to their nests and the morning callers had yet to awaken. It was cool in the house though, cooler than outside in the humid swampland. Almost... Cold, in fact.

The swing chair creaked again in the breeze, but no leaves rustled. I could see the shadow of the chair from the window, rocking a little. The light flickered once. I wrapped my hand firmly around the ball. The shadow chair was began to rock a little more, no more than a few inches of movement at first but swiftly getting stronger, as if it were caught in a gale. The light flickered again, and when it went dark the shadow chair would disappear with it. There was a creak from the roof, as if something were slithering across it, putting weight on the rafters. The light stuttered out again, but before it did I caught sight of a silhouette, of a figure sitting in the swing chair, with a top hat stuck on its head, swaying in its seat.

I stood slowly in the dark. I'd removed the ball from my belt and now it filled my hand. Its cool surface was calming to me. There was a fog building outside, a mist shroud that surrounded the house and tightened about it. The windows began to haze and, as I watched, an image began to appear in the condensation. An unseen finger was drawing a picture – a picture that had haunted me for days. A skull wearing a top hat, its mouth curved into a grin. There was a low chuckling sound that seemed to come from behind me but when I twisted around there was nothing to see. I spun again when I heard the floorboards creak, creak as if stepped on. Again, nothing. I ran for the door, wrenching it open and throwing my ball ahead of me. The red flash as it opened lit up the mist dome surrounding the house for a moment before unveiling my champion.

'Venonat!'

The big insect hit the floor with an acrobatic grace that belied its corpulent form. I'd caught Venonat in the marshes and trained it around the bayou. It knew the swamps as well as I did. Immediately its eyes sought for its opponent and its mandibles clicked in anticipation.

I sprinted out of the house, past the violently swinging chair and the creaks and groans of the old timber as it played unexpected host to some unseen power. Now I wheeled around again. Sure enough, a cloud of greenish smoke was forming in front of the porch. At its centre was a dark shape, a face, crowned with a raggedy top hat. Its black skin was painted white in affectation of a skull. Its red mouth opened and it boomed a cackle that turned my core to ice.

Venonat hopped ahead of me. It was not the first time I'd attempted to battle this apparition, but Venonat had never seemed as confident as it did now. I could see its red eyes glinting as they focused on the painted poltergeist.

Inside the house I could see the furniture rising and falling as if the house were being shaken up and down. The noise was thunderous, wood smacking wood, as the very structure of the place groaned under pressure and the swing chair danced like it was caught in a hurricane. It was terrifying.

‘*You must see,*’ the old woman had told me. But I wasn’t prepared for this – the demon was right in front of me. I could hear its banshee crowing, feel its malignant power. I was as helpless against it now as I’d ever been.

Venonat was hopping toward it and I could see the air shimmer as it tried to confuse its enemy with supersonic waves. It seemed to have some success – the ghoul was glaring at its enemy, and I noticed it flicker just like my houselights had done.

*Illusion, deception. All is not as it may seem to your eyes...*’ the woman had told me. Now I looked closely at the ghost. My eyes prickled and I remembered the Abra’s touch. The figure-eight circling my eyes. ‘*You must see...*’ I looked harder. Felt the prickling in my eyes warm down to an ache; a good ache. An ache of muscles well used. I saw beyond the face paint, the ragged hat. The green smoke darkened to a bruised purple. My demon was no more than a Gastly.

For a moment all was still. The Gastly knew its disguise had failed, and its gas aura darkened in vexation and surprise, the way a man’s face will grow ruddy in anger. Venonat didn’t pause. It must have seen through the ghost’s mask as soon as it had set eyes upon it. Now I saw the air between the two of them ripple as Venonat blasted at its opponent with Supersonic. The Gastly shook itself off and its eyes spun in its black face. It hissed and cackled again. Then it vanished.

The furniture in the house was still. The swing chair slowed and stopped. All was quiet.

I stuck close to Venonat. We turned slowly, scoping out the clearing.

‘Just because we can’t see it doesn’t mean it’s not here,’ I muttered. Venonat clicked in response.

There was a thump from behind me and I whipped around. Through the windows of my house I could see the furniture begin to rise and drop again. *Thump. Thump.* I scanned the clearing. Nothing –

- a *CACKLE* from behind me again. The Gastly was toying with me! There had to be a way to attack it.

I watched Venonat’s muscles bunch as it tried to Disable the ghost, taking pot shots into the night. I thought about Venonat’s abilities, searched my brain for any technique that could aid us.

‘Venonat...’ the plan formed in my mind as the crashing in the house grew louder and the cold began to bite at my flesh, ‘use Stun Spore. Everywhere!’

The insect nodded a split second before bouncing into the air and spinning around, scattering tiny golden spores from the hairs on its body. I held my breath as the shimmery cloud descended, catching just the slightest sharp scent of herbs and grass. I kept my eyes peeled open for signs. There – the spores stuck to something invisible,

something round. It was like seeing a shape in the patterns of a tree trunk; not obvious, but there nonetheless, glittering slightly in the fledgling glow of the morning sun. I pointed at the shape and used the last of my breath to shout for Venonat as the remnants of the cloud soaked into the dirt. A shimmer in the air between both combatants and a moment later the Gastly re-appeared, its disguise foiled for a second time. I gulped down clean air and yelled again.

‘Disable, Venonat, Disable!’

This time I knew the move had worked. Gastly’s form darkened to black for a second and it looked dazed, disoriented. The house was still again and we paused, re-evaluating our enemy. I knew little of Gastly, or what it would do now that it had been forced into a real battle. Even now the gas shroud around its face was whirling, its eyes sharpening their focus. The whirling gas brightened and the Gastly puffed its cheeks, blowing a beam of purple energy at Venonat, knocking it into a backwards somersault and landing it on its belly. It leapt up nearly straight away, its reflexes quick and resilience strong.

‘Fight back,’ I called, ‘Confusion!’

The red insect eyes flashed and the Gastly flew back as if punched.

‘Again! Its guard is down!’

Venonat advanced on the ghost, and I feel the air in the clearing thicken as my champion used what power it had against its opponent. As the gap between them lessened, the Gastly dropped further and further toward the ground, eyes glaring and beaten. I smiled in grim satisfaction. I’d found its weakness. I could scarcely believe the shrunken, faded creature falling to the floor had been the object of my nightmares, the demon terrorising me in my own home. I thumbed my belt and a thought crossed my mind: *catch it. Catch your enemy.*

I considered it. The captured ghost would make a somehow fitting addition to my party. How did the saying go? *Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.* I was tempted. Then I saw Venonat, no more than a foot away from the downed spectre. No. Venonat was my friend, and to imprison the Gastly in the same way would only devalue that friendship. Seeing the two of them, side by side, I knew where my loyalties lay.

‘Venonat, ease up,’ I said. The light in its large compound eyes dimmed and it released its captive. The Gastly hovered a few inches from the ground. I thought of all the torment it had put me through. I had to banish it for good.

‘Venonat. Poisonpowder.’

A lingering dose of poison would deter it from coming back. If the thrashing it had just taken didn’t put it off. Venonat obliged; a green particle mist drifted into the purple cloud that was the Gastly. I breathed easily now; my heart slowed. The adrenalin began to burn away. The terror was over.

I looked down. The Gastly was pulsing all over. At first I took it to be its reaction to the poison, but I noticed its shape was becoming more opaque, more defined. Its eyes were focusing again. Venonat took a step back on its large feet, uncertain.

Suddenly its movements seemed very ponderous. The Gastly's eyes rested on me, full of malice. Then it turned to Venonat.

Its tongue whipped out, thick, pink and freakishly long. It wrapped around the furry insect body, squeezing. I heard Venonat scream. The cry was high pitched and I felt it in my heart. I ran forward but the ghost's eyes flicked up and it was like invisible hands had grabbed my arms, holding me there, so far from helping the creature I loved. I could only watch as that awful pink tongue began to reel itself in, winding Venonat slowly towards the Gastly's mouth. The ghost had swelled in size; it must have absorbed the toxic powder, grown fat upon it. Venonat was dragged forwards, inch by inch, towards the gaping black maw. The Gastly was looking at me. Slowly, deliberately, it winked. Then it pulled Venonat into its mouth.

I screamed. Venonat was convulsing, shrieking, flailing to no avail inside its enemy. Its form was slowly flickering; one second it would be full, and tangible, the next I could see its fragile skeleton within its body. I could see the shapes of the trees through the joined bodies of the both of them as they dipped in and out of the visible world.

The Gastly was grinning through its bloated mouth, eyes bulging. Impossible though it seemed, it looked like it was growing even bigger, its form sharpening from a round face to a sharper, more human form. I was reminded of the dark, shadowy creature on the old woman's Death card, that black harbinger of pain and loss, and with it I was reminded of the Scyther card, the poised warrior symbolising this very battle. Venonat was fading before my very eyes, its struggles weaker now. I thought of the Hierophant that would help me: the Abra that had lit my passage through the swamp, whose power I'd felt as it gave me sight and whose hand I'd clasped as I'd become its vessel, raising that mysterious box from the water. A box that was meant for my champion, with its number twenty-nine branded into its damp wooden exterior.

'Venonat,' I whispered. My voice was spent, but I knew what to do. 'Venonat.'

My champion seemed to hear me and its blurry, damaged, fading eyes found mine.

'Venonat,' I croaked, then yelled, 'Psychic!'

I noticed that the world had been silent until my scream. But before the echo had faded, I became conscious of a high ringing sound, like a boiling kettle, quiet at first, but rising steadily in the clearing. The air was charging as I'd felt in the Abra's presence, but this was more potent, the pressure building in my head. The ringing grew, its pitch high on the edge of the audible spectrum. I could see Venonat too, clear as it had ever been, within the purple mass of what had been the Gastly. Now the ghoul was something else, something I didn't recognise. Purple, spiky. With worried eyes. It started to shake, like a creature in the cold. Venonat shone within, barely in control of the power it was unleashing. The ringing grew to a screaming zenith, the static in the air mounted and the pressure in my head peaked.

There was a moment of complete and perfect stillness.

Then the ghost exploded.

## NIGHT SHADE

The blast was not so much a sound as a release, a thunderclap that was felt as much as heard. The whole world seemed white for a moment, and as I began to see again I realised I could move. I rushed forward. The air felt empty, clean even, as if every bad thing had been burned away in one purging moment. My ears hummed a little from the sudden drop in pressure. The white veil in my eyes lifted and I fell to my knees by the side of Venonat. It lay on its back. Not moving. But it was there, whole, not blurry, not ghostly. I lay a hand on its blue furry body. I'd always been able to feel its heart before, the thrumming organ at its centre. Now there was just a dull pulse, slower than my own.

'Venonat,' I whispered. My voice was cracked, all used up from fear and screaming. 'Venonat, you did it. You got it. We're safe.'

Venonat's eyes were dark and slow. Something inside it had been taken. Eaten. Something vital. I felt tears run down my face.

'I'm safe, Venonat. You saved me.'

Its mandibles clicked once. I rested my head on its warm body. An unwanted image: the Death card, the skulking black shape in front of the mountains. Nothing could cheat it – its grin one of triumph, a cruel mouth full of sharp teeth. It always took what it promised. I pulled my head up again.

'Look Venonat,' I croaked. 'We made it till morning.' A thin ray of sunlight danced on the tree tops. It was a warm day but it wasn't humid. The air felt fresh and unsoiled. A sob burst out of my chest. A heart slowed in Venonat's. I pressed my face to it. Felt the sun's rays slide over my back. Another image: the Death card once more. But the dark shape in the foreground had faded as the sun rose behind the mountains, the village nestled beneath them coming to life in the morning radiance. My eyes started to burn, as if a light was being held up to the closed lids. I opened them. Venonat's body was glowing red. I let go and it started to shake, the glow brightening till the form inside became indistinct and shadowy. I backed away, fascinated, scared. The red light grew, and I could see nothing of my champion, my warrior. My friend. As I watched, the glowing red shape rose up into the air and erupted, and a winged form burst from within. Sleek, violet, graceful. It looped and plunged in a triumphant dance, and alighted in front of me. The sun to rise after a night of fear and death.

Venomoth.