

“The Intruder”

Fueled by an unusual feeling of trepidation in the air, Henry hastily struggled out of bed to turn on the lamp, sitting just a few feet away. The illumination it provided was unusually and inexplicably short-lived as the light immediately flickered away. He quickly tried again only to witness an identical result.

'Strange,' He thought. The light had never failed in the past unless a bulb had burnt out. Nothing about the lamp up until that point -- not the sound it made, nor the resistance of the switch itself -- had indicated that anything was wrong with it.

After another confusing moment, Henry pivoted in place to survey his bedroom. Initially, he saw nothing out of the ordinary; the room was wide, open, and dark. His windows and their shades, all undisturbed, effectively blocked out any foreign light that may have intruded upon his slumber. His gaze followed the windows as they guided him toward the wall across from the foot of his bed. There, on a sturdy desk positioned between a pair of tall bookshelves, laid the room's only visible light source for the moment -- a closed and charging laptop. And then it wasn't. The blue and blinking status light disappeared as a dull and darkened motion swept across the room.

Sudden fear jarred Henry out of his lethargy, and his fingers stumbled with the lamp switch to get a better view of the phenomenon occurring before him. After another heart-pounding moment, his fingers finally succeeded in rotating the switch, and the light flickered again to reveal a dark mass looming silently in the corner. The light hadn't remained long, and the shadow instantly blended back into the dark, quiet room.

It ceased to be quiet. Henry's heartbeat was now deafening, and his breath came in heavy, fast-paced successions. Panic boiled in his chest as he realized he might be dealing with an

intruder. Determined to reveal the criminal's identity and nature, Henry bolted for the window, yanked the shade down hard, and let it soar upward.

Blue-white moonlight struck the boy's tired eyes, and he turned toward the trespasser with a mixture of dread and curiosity. The sight he held before him was truly strange: a man with a dark cloak draped over his shoulders stood stoutly in a dark corner across the room. What made it even more strange to Henry was what the stranger wore beneath the robe, a checkered red and black suit jacket with pants to match.

"Who are you?" Henry's words seemed to clash with the quiet aura of the moonlit room. With his head hanging close to his chest, the man did not respond. He looked up from the floor to view his face.

The figure's windows to the soul were brightly-lit with an amber hue of flames. The boy immediately swore as the eyes glared upon him and made a panicked dash for the door. He had no desire to be abducted from his home and killed by whatever demon or devil stood in the corner.

When he reached the door, though, he found it to be inexplicably locked. How this was possible ultimately escaped him in his panic -- for the door had always lacked a lock -- but what didn't escape him was the reason for this inconsistency. Henry knew his soul was about to be taken or crushed or tortured, and so he let out a low, fearful moan.

As the demon-man remained motionless in the corner, Henry wondered if he could bargain with the bright-eyed thing; perhaps he could strike up some deal where he would toil in the depths of hell for half an eternity rather than all of eternity. It was unlikely, but he decided to give it a shot.

"What do you want?" He called out, trying to sound confident despite his panicked attempt at escaping several moments earlier.

Almost immediately, a mechanical sound emanated from the man's left side, and an arm extended from out of the cloak to offer an object to Henry. In response, he cautiously stepped forward to observe the object and was quite puzzled. It was a simple black sphere.

"What is this? Do you want me to take it?" The boy asked as he tried to piece together what the demon man's intentions were. It no longer seemed to Henry that it wanted to kill him or crush his soul; it could've easily accomplished that in the first moments of the encounter. Then again, the demon man might have been toying with him. He resolved to maintain a policy of cautiousness. "I'll take it if you want me to, but only if I absolutely must."

The creature said nothing in return. The ball inexplicably rotated smoothly in its rough hand to reveal that the object was not some extraordinary black sphere bewitched with evil magic. Instead, it was a simple eight ball. Henry chuckled nervously.

"So you, a demon dressed like some high-class chump, want me to play a game of billiards with you?"

The eight within the white circle rolled out of view, and a new, black one replaced it. However, it wasn't the only shape on this newly-exposed side of the ball; an upside-down triangle tinted a dark blue stood perfectly in the middle of the black circle. Shock recoiled through the boy as he immediately understood what the object was and went to grab it.

But Henry realized that he was too late to seize the device and save himself as a single damning phrase slowly appeared on the screen:

Outlook not so good.