

Libellus de Impura Mysterium

By James Williams

The train slowly rolled out of the gloom of the fog-shrouded evening and pulled into Arkham Rail Station. The station itself was near deserted, save for the lone porter walking slowly back and forth. As the train pulled to a stop, the porter blew on his whistle signaling its arrival, though no-one was there to hear. The porter looked ready to go about his business when a door slowly opened halfway down the train giving the porter a moment to pause. He glanced at his wristwatch and sighed, wondering who on earth would arrive on the late evening train from Boston.

“Um... excuse me?” called a thin reedy voice through the fog. The porter focussed his eyes in the gloom and blinked at the tall gaunt man who loomed out of the mist.

“Ayuh?” the porter asked.

The man clutched a briefcase and small suitcase to his chest and peered at the porter through his spectacles, fogged up by the heavy mist. “I was wondering, if there was a cab service at all?” he asked.

The porter appeared to think for a long moment, then shrugged slightly. “Bain’t gonna be no cabs a’ this hour. If’n ye wait a while, I ken drive ye to where ye wants to be headin’.”

The man thought this over for a moment and finally nodded almost absently. “Yes, yes, alright. I can wait.”

The porter led him into a small office. The light from the single naked globe hanging from the ceiling tried valiantly to fend off the oppressing darkness and mist but served instead only to heighten the gloom outside its single tiny window. The porter poured a cup of coffee from a thermos, handed it silently to the man and wandered back outside.

* * *

The grandfather clock struck eleven in the hallway and Dr. Bernard ‘Barney’ Bustoffson frowned. He glanced at the file in his hands again and the post-it note attached to the front with today’s date scrawled across it in his own hand. Even though he had just heard the clock strike eleven, he glanced at his watch. Eleven o’clock. He picked up a pen and tapped it thoughtfully against his pursed lips. He sighed heavily,

dropped the pen on his desk and made his way into the kitchen where he found Kilroy sitting at the dining table a Guinness in hand and a chocolate doughnut halfway to his mouth.

“Kilroy, you haven’t heard from Historian Carter at all, have you?”

Kilroy gave his friend a blank look. “Who?”

“Carter. He called this morning to say he would be arriving in Arkham today. English fellow. You took his message.”

Kilroy gave a non-committal grunt. “Oh, that feller. What about him?”

Barney frowned. “The last train was due in an hour ago. Carter said he would have been leaving Boston by rail in the early afternoon. I just expected to have heard from him by now.”

Kilroy took a swig of his Guinness and shrugged. “Maybe he missed the train, Barney.” He took a bite out of the doughnut and gave a small sigh of pleasure.

Barney frowned again and gave a half-shrug. “It’s possible I suppose,” he said, though the look on his face suggested he thought otherwise.

Kilroy opened his mouth to speak again when the doorbell rang. He chuckled. “And maybe that’s your man now.” He stood up from the table and grinned. “I’ll get it,” he added, heading for the front door.

Barney frowned and followed the Irishman to the front door. The mist rolled across the doorstep as the door opened to reveal a tall, pale man clutching a briefcase to his chest. Stood next to him was a small battered suitcase. The man’s hair was an unkempt mess that looked like it had last seen a comb some time in the late eighties. He pushed his glasses back up his nose and then offered his hand, half smiling and half frowning.

“Um, hello. I’m Carter. You must be Mr McDooley. And Dr. Bustoffson too I presume? Sorry I’m late, had to get a lift into town with the porter from the train station.”

Kilroy shook the man’s hand briefly and nodded for him to come in, picking up the battered suitcase. Barney nodded as Carter entered. “Welcome to S.P.O.N.G.E. headquarters, Carter. Come in.”

Barney closed the door behind them as Kilroy led Carter into the kitchen.

* * *

Later, the three men were seated around the dining table, Carter nursing a mug of weak coffee since, as he had explained in somewhat nervous tones, that too much caffeine made him ill, and Kilroy nursing another Guinness.

Carter opened the briefcase and produced a battered box of Krispy Kremes and slid them onto the table with a nervous chuckle. “Well, I said I’d bring doughnuts.” Barney glanced at the box briefly and watched as Kilroy flipped the box open with relish and pulled out a doughnut.

“I like this man already, Barney.” Kilroy said, grinning.

Barney nodded then looked back at Carter. “So what exactly brings you to Arkham, Carter?”

Carter sipped at his coffee slowly. “I’m sure you recall, Dr. Bustoffson, that shortly after I joined the Historian Network I contacted S.P.O.N.G.E. to inform you I would be in Arkham in early February and wished to stop by. Sadly, I could not make it out here in February due to an unexpected matter back home. I was to attend a will reading here as I have family in and around Arkham. When I couldn’t make it I contacted the lawyer handling the will and it’s contents and he made the necessary arrangements to keep aside whatever I might have inherited until I could make the trip here.”

Barney nodded slightly. “Well I’m glad you could make it this time around, Carter. It’s always a pleasure to meet with members of our Historian Network. How are things out in California?”

“Quiet, thankfully,” Carter replied. “I’ve had no luck contacting Historian Spencer, but I have met with Historian Gaijin. Interesting chap with a fondness for... unusual artifacts.”

Barney raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Carter nodded and chuckled. “Yeah. He has a collection of these little puzzleboxes. And a sculpture of what I can only assume is Cthulhu, though he swears they are completely safe and not... um... tainted in any way.”

Barney nodded. “I see.”

Carter sipped at his coffee again. “Is there any chance either of you could drop me off at the Bed and Breakfast? I’m not exactly sure where it is.”

Barney frowned. “Arkham Bed and Breakfast? It’ll be closed this late. I’ll grab you a blanket and you can sleep on the couch this evening. I’ll drop you off there in the morning.” He glanced at Kilroy who was tucking into his third doughnut, then looked

back at Carter. “Whatever you do, don’t let them put you in room five while you are there.”

* * *

The following afternoon, Historian Carter sat in his room at the Arkham Bed and Breakfast pouring over the documents he had been presented with earlier that day. Dorian Wyndham, the lawyer presiding over the remains of the Carter Estate had been pleasant enough, taking great pains to point out the numerous documents that needed signing, many of them in triplicate. Carter, it seemed, would be a reasonably wealthy man once everything was officially signed over to him. He chuckled quietly to himself as he glanced over the papers again and nodded in satisfaction. Everything looked in order so far as he knew.

He stood and stretched feeling tired. He hadn’t slept well last night. He’d lost count of the number of times Bustoffson’s cat, Rasputin, had woken him up sitting on his chest. Carter would have sworn blind the cat glared at him and hissed his name.

He picked up the box that the lawyer had left for him. Wyndham had explained that his associate had collected a number of books and items from the Carter Estate to do an evaluation and Wyndham had presented them to Carter who was now the rightful owner. He opened the box and peered through. There was assorted bric-a-brac in the box. An antique fob watch, what appeared to be a gold-plated cigar box engraved with the initials R.C., and two books. One of them was an early copy of *The Hieroglyphic Monad* by Dr John Dee, and the other had a Latin title that Carter did not recognize. *Libellus de Impura Mysterium*.

Carter leafed through the book and was unsurprised to find that very little of it made sense, especially the sigils and symbols on many of the pages. It was some kind of Cuneiform that was beyond Carter’s knowledge. He shrugged and dropped the book into the box and yawned. “I’ll give it to the S.P.O.N.G.E. guys tomorrow morning,” he muttered as he lay back on the bed hoping to catch a couple of hours decent sleep.

* * *

Dorian Wyndham looked over the Carter Estate file and smiled to himself. *Congratulations, Dorian*, he thought to himself, *you’ve made quite a lot of money today*. He had suffered a momentary attack of conscience earlier when he had wondered if ten per cent of the estate was perhaps too much to take, but the moment had passed and now he basked in his own glory and pride.

“What are you looking so pleased with?” his associate asked as he walked into their shared office. He stood in the doorway, partly obscuring the sign that read *Danforth, Faraday and Wyndham, P.C.* on the frosted glass window.

Wyndham grinned. “I’ve wrapped up the rest of the Carter Estate. Nathaniel Carter arrived in Arkham yesterday afternoon. I’m picking the papers up from him tomorrow morning.”

Richard Faraday frowned. “Oh? I thought he wasn’t going to be here until next week?”

Wyndham shrugged. “He was in here this morning. He signed some papers and took the rest with him.”

Faraday nodded and frowned again. “Say, uh, where’s the box I brought down from the Carter Estate?”

“I gave it to Mr. Carter to look through. A taster of the rest of the estate. All that garbage is his now anyway.” Wyndham looked down at the file again and smiled. All in all he had done a great day’s work in his own opinion. “What do you care anyway? After we collect our ten per cent of the estate we’ll be more than well off.”

When Faraday did not answer, Wyndham looked up. “Richie?”

But Richard Faraday had already left.

* * *

Carter found himself standing in a field of dying, yellow grass. A cool gentle breeze wafted over him, and chilled his soul. *Where am I?* he said out loud, and the words seemed dull, lifeless. Behind him stood a stone building that looked older than time itself, a terrible heat radiated from the structure that threatened to choke the very breath out of his body.

On impulse, Carter looked up into the sky. Grey and black clouds were spread carelessly across a fading purple sky. *How did I* – he began before a thunderous yowling roar cut through the air. He spun around turning towards the source of the sound and saw a stone tower rising high into the broiling clouds. A chanting came from the top of the tower that bored into his heart and froze his mind in terror.

“Hei! Aa-shanta 'nygh! Ia!”

Carter’s mind slowly began to work again, though his legs would not. He was frozen to the spot, able only to stare at the tower from which a blasphemous roiling cloud of black shadow slowly tumbled making a sound like a thousand howling ravenous dogs. Tumbling inside and throughout the shadows were numerous appendages, tentacles, and to Carter’s increasing horror, sharp teeth that gnashed and crashed through the inky blackness.

Carter felt the numbness in his legs trickle away as the power of locomotion returned to him. He screamed in horror as the cloud rolled towards him closer still, and he turned tail and fled. The yowling and yammering closed slowly on him as he ran, and he knew in his heart he could not escape it. The air seemed to freeze solid around him as the shadow grew still closer and then he felt an icy hard grip on his shoulder that began to squeeze tighter and tighter. The incessant squalling filled his ears and he...

... screamed aloud as he sat up on the bed. Sweat dripped from his brow as Carter dropped the book he had been clutching to his chest. The book slid off the bed and landed on the floor with a loud thud.

“No more... dairy for me... before sleeping,” he muttered as he tried to catch his breath. He fumbled at the bedside table and pulled on his glasses to look at his watch. It was five in the afternoon, he'd been asleep maybe a half an hour at most. He rolled out of bed and went into the bathroom. Staring into the mirror he saw he was even more pale than usual. He quickly splashed water on his face and ran his fingers through his hair trying to calm down.

“Just a dream. Just another nightmare,” he muttered as he wandered back into the bedroom. He glanced down at the book he had dropped. It was the *Libellus de Impura Mysterium*. He glanced at the box the lawyer had given him. “I thought I put this back...”

He picked the book up and flipped it open. And almost dropped it again in horror. There, on the page open before him, was an illustration of the tower.

Five minutes later, Carter was out the door and on his way to S.P.O.N.G.E. headquarters.

* * *

“Well, what do you think?” Barney asked Matrin Taylor later that evening.

Matrin shrugged and looked up at Barney with his one good eye. “Well, it's definitely a form of Summerian Cuneiform, but it's a dialect I am not familiar with. There are similarities, but it will take some time to translate. The title is obvious enough, though. *Libellus de Impura Mysterium*. In English that's -”

“The Book of Vile Secrets,” Barney replied. “Vile indeed, given the dream he related.”

Matrin raised the eyebrow that stood over his patched eye, then shook his head. “No, don't tell me. I'm sure deciphering this text will be cause enough for my own nightmares.”

Kilroy McDooley gave a sigh of resignation. “Shame really. I was just beginning to like this Carter feller. So what’ll happen to him do you think? Driven insane by the dreams? Or disappear never to be heard of again?”

Barney shook his head. “Hopefully neither of those things if we can get a decent translation out of that book and find out what happened to him. Matrin, can you give me an estimate of how long it will take you to get something useful out of the book?”

Matrin let out a long slow sigh. “It won’t be easy, Barney. I couldn’t give you any kind of simple estimate.”

Barney nodded. “I’ll expect something in the morning then.”

* * *

Carter sat on the edge of his bed flicking through what the Arkham Bed & Breakfast brochure described as ‘a plethora of televisual viewing entertainment’. What he had found so far was CNN, the History Channel, ESPN and four different channels all showing what looked to be an identical cooking gameshow. He switched the television off and lay back on the bed.

Just as he was about to doze off a knock came at the door. “One minute!” he called as he buttoned up his shirt. He peered through the peephole and saw an unfamiliar middle-aged man dressed in a beige expensive looking suit.

“Yes?” Carter asked, opening the door.

“Mr. Nathaniel Carter?” the man asked.

Carter frowned. “Yes?”

The man relaxed visibly and smiled. “Richard Faraday, I’m Dorian Wyndham’s associate.” He pulled a card out of his wallet and handed it to Carter. Carter glanced briefly at the card.

“May I come in, Mr. Carter?” Faraday asked.

Carter stepped back and opened the door for Faraday. “What’s the problem? Is it the documents? I haven’t signed them all just yet, I’ve been caught up... sightseeing.”

Faraday shook his head, then frowned. “It’s actually a little more complicated than that, Mr. Carter. It’s about one or two of the more obscure items in your inheritance.”

Carter raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

Faraday gave him a nervous smile. “Yes. Ahem. I couldn’t trouble you for a glass of water could I?”

Carter blinked. “Oh, of course. Forgive me.” He wandered into the small kitchen and began rummaging around for a glass.

Faraday walked over to the table on which the box of bric-a-brac lay and peered into it. “So,” he called out, “how do you like Arkham?” He frowned as he pulled out the cigar box and dropped it back into the box.

“It’s quite pleasant, actually,” Carter responded from the kitchen. “Reminds me a lot of England.” He chuckled slightly. “Not surprising really, since this whole area is part of New England.”

Faraday picked up the copy of John Dee’s *Hieroglyphic Monad* and cursed under his breath. It looked like he would have to do this the hard way.

Carter returned from the kitchen with a glass of water in his hand. “Here you are, Mr. Faraday,” he said with a smile. When he saw the nervous look on Faraday’s face, Carter frowned. “Is something wrong, Mr. Faraday?” It took Carter a moment to register that Faraday was holding a gun in his hand.

“Oh,” said Carter. “I see.”

* * *

Matrin Taylor stuck his hand into the box of day old Krispy Kremes and pulled out a sorry looking soggy custard cream. He frowned at it for a long moment before dropping it back into the box and grimacing.

Kilroy looked shocked. “You’re passing up on a perfectly good doughnut, Matrin. What are you playing at?” Kilroy filched the doughnut from within the box and ate it with relish. He smacked his lips once he was done and grinned. “Have fun with the translating, I’m off to Colm’s. It’s ladies night.” And with that, Kilroy disappeared out of the door.

Matrin watched him go and shook his head slightly and bent back to the book. Some of it made sense, or seemed to at least, but would then seem ridiculous. He had found one translation that apparently read ‘*Harken not unto the sounds of the Tower of The Walker In Shadow, and look unto the Forge for it will reveal a wielder of custard.*’

Matrin sighed. This would take a while.

* * *

In the dark still of the night atop Seminary Hill, something stirred. The fabric of reality stretched and warped ever so slightly. And then it belched. A powerful stench flooded the area and then all was still.

The air rippled momentarily and an echoing clicking sound whispered on the breeze.

* * *

In the warmth and relative safety of her room, Historian Landis sighed heavily as she watched the rippling effect on the Seminary Hill webcam. She picked up her cellphone and called Barney. She let it ring five times before hanging up and heading down to S.P.O.N.G.E. headquarters personally.

* * *

Barney walked into Matrin's laboratory with an expectant look on his face. "Well? How are we coming along?"

Matrin sighed. "Well, so far a lot of stuff that doesn't seem to make sense. But there are a couple of passages on this page that I am concerned about."

Barney peered over his shoulder at the book. "Hmm, that's the tower Carter says he saw in his dream. What have you got from it?"

Matrin glanced at his notes. "Two things of interest. Firstly there is this: *And lo! When the physician of the gods reaches his peak, the gates shall be opened fully, and the Realm of the Walker In Shadow shall become one with the mortal realm.* And then there is this, without which the realm of the Shadow Walker and the mortal realm cannot conjoin. *For only when the rightful wielder of this knowledge resides in the camp of the Walker shall the two realms become one.* I'm a little uncertain of some of the translations."

Barney nodded. "Which ones?"

"Key words, I'm afraid," Matrin sighed. "*Wielder, knowledge* and *camp*. Those are the closest translations that I can ascertain for now. Without being certain of those words, I can't be sure what steps we might take to avoid everything being in place for the conjunction described in the first passage."

"And the first passage?" Barney asked.

Matrin allowed himself a small smile. He was on firmer ground here. "The physician of the Greek gods was Mercury. This Friday, Mercury is at its Superior Conjunction with Earth."

“*When the physician of the gods reaches his peak...*” Barney murmured. “This Friday. That gives us three days to figure out for certain what the rest of this passage might mean and what we can do to make sure it doesn’t take place.” He paused for a moment, then looked at Matrin. “When was Mercury first discovered?”

Matrin frowned for a moment. “The 18th century sometime by Schroeter, why?”

Barney sighed. “How would an ancient Summerian text manage to make reference to a planet that wouldn’t be discovered for more than a thousand years?”

“Barney,” Matrin replied, “you should know well enough that in matters such as this, the laws of physics and the laws of space-time are quite often irrelevant.”

Barney nodded. “True. Well, keep researching. I want to know what that second passage means. In the mean time, I think I’ll go check on Carter.”

* * *

When Barney arrived at the Arkham Bed & Breakfast he knew something was wrong instantly. The door to room 2 stood wide open, light from the room within spilling out of the doorway. Barney was mildly surprised that Zelda Herschwitz wasn’t already poking around inside the room.

He entered the room cautiously and realized quickly that it was empty. A quick search turned up a number of interesting and worrying items. He found Carter’s wallet on the floor and by the door Carter’s glasses. One of the lenses was cracked and the frames were bent out of shape.

“Looks like Carter didn’t go easily,” he said quietly to himself. “Hmm, what’s this?” he muttered as he caught sight of something sticking out from under the bed. On closer inspection he saw it was a business card:

Danforth, Faraday & Wyndham

Attorneys at Law

RICHARD FARADAY

Partner

57 N Walnut Drive, Arkham, MA 12329
Phone (800) 555-1212 Fax (800) 555-1414
License #M29857

“Hmm,” Barney muttered turning the card over in his hands. “Interesting indeed.” He pocketed Carter’s wallet and the card and then picked Carter’s glasses up and carefully placed them inside his jacket. He turned the light off and looked at the bed for a moment.

“I wonder...” he murmured. He pulled his own wallet out and placed it on the bedside table and opened Carter’s wallet. *Carter, Nathaniel James*, the Permanent Resident Card in the wallet said. He glanced at the signature and noted that Carter’s signature slanted to the right. He’d read that you could learn a lot about a person by reading their handwriting. Unfortunately, Barney had never read the books that told you *how* to learn about a person from their handwriting. He tucked the wallet into his jacket and pulled out the glasses. He lay back on the bed, slipped the glasses on and closed his eyes.

“What did you see, Carter?” he murmured as he allowed himself to drift off to sleep.

* * *

Matrin sat alone at the table poring over the book. He scrawled notes beside him as he attempted to translate the work. *And lo, the wielder of custard shall know them and will call unto them and lead them unto the Forge.*

He muttered as he dropped the pencil and tore the paper off the pad. “Half of this makes no sense at all, and the rest is gibberish.” He scrunched the paper up in his hand and tossed it at the wastebasket. The ball of paper bounced gently off the rim and came to a stop almost a foot away from the basket. Matrin sighed and turned back to the book.

“*When the rightful wielder of this knowledge resides in the camp of the Walker...*” he muttered quietly. With his focus on the pages before him, Matrin was unaware of the shadow that fell across the table until it came to rest over the book.

He glanced up to see Landis standing across from him, the lamp behind her casting her shadow across the table. Matrin visibly relaxed. “What is it, Landis?”

She stood with her hands on her hips and a frown on her face. “We have a slight problem. Does anyone bother to keep an eye on Seminary Hill other than me? The webcam caught something interesting. Maybe you should take a look.”

Matrin let out a sigh. “Why is nothing ever easy?” he muttered as he followed Landis to the monitors. Landis sat down and tapped away at the keyboard. After a moment she frowned.

“Don’t you guys bother to record what the webcam is viewing?” she asked Matrin.

Matrin blinked in surprise. *You can do that?* he thought to himself. He glanced at the screen for a moment, then looked at Landis. “Uh, no. We, uh, have other things that take up our time.”

Landis shook her head slightly and pulled a CD out of her jacket pocket. She glanced at Matrin, shook her head again and placed it into the computer's CD-ROM drive.

After a moment they were both watching the Seminary webcam view. The time on the webcam showed that it was a little after eight in the evening. Matrin tapped at the time display on the screen. "That's almost five hours ago."

Landis nodded. "Watch."

Matrin watched the screen intently. "It's dark," he said after a moment. Landis hushed him and told him to watch. The darkness of Seminary Hill flickered suddenly on the screen. Something moved slightly.

"What was that?" Matrin asked. Landis didn't reply, instead rewinding the recorded image, enlarging it and playing it again at half-speed. Matrin watched the screen closely and stared in fascination as the transparent humanoid entity seemed to fold out of nothingness into view for a moment, and then fled off the screen.

Matrin sighed. "The gates are already opening."

Landis looked up from the computer screen. "What are we going to do about this?"

Matrin picked up the telephone and dialed. "We're going to do what we always do when something nasty shows up." He tucked the phone's handset in between his ear and his shoulder. "Rewind that image again, Landis, and see if you can make it a little clearer."

As Landis turned her attention to the computer, Matrin's call connected.

* * *

The lone figure crouched behind the small hillock as small arms fire exploded all around him. He clutched his Colt M4 Carbine machine gun to his chest and rolled out from behind the hillock to a crouch. He sighted briefly to his left and fired, then ahead and to the right and fired again. Two figures dropped in the near darkness and then he was up and running forwards.

The dirt kicked up in front of him as someone fired at him. He leaped forwards, tucked in and rolled to a standing position and fired again. Another figure in the darkness fell. Suddenly, all the firing stopped. He dropped into an alert crouch and watched carefully for any surprises. He hadn't been expecting this.

He checked the M203 Grenade Launcher mounted under his M4. It was loaded and ready to go... just in case.

“Uh.... Sir?” a voice called through the darkness.

He turned slightly at the sound of the voice. This was an unusual tactic. He decided to remain still for the moment, keeping aware of his peripherals and occasionally glancing behind himself.

“Sir? Uh, the drill’s over, Sir. You have a phone call,”

Dr Frank West stood up from his crouch and pulled the ski mask off his head. “Oh, I see.” He lowered his M4 and put the safety on as the ‘dead’ began to get up from where they had fallen, brushing paintball residue off themselves. The owner of the voice stepped out of the gloom brandishing a cellphone.

Frank took the phone and nodded. “West here.”

“Frank? It’s Matrin. How soon can you get down to Arkham?”

Frank frowned. “Depends on what I’m needed for. I was running night exercises.”

“Looks like an S&D, Frank. We’ve got an unknown entity on the loose, though I suspect it may be a phasing polyp. Can’t be sure at this moment. Also we have your basic end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it scenario on our hands.”

Frank grinned. “I’ll be there first thing in the morning.”

“Thanks, Frank.”

“No problem, Matrin. See you in the morning.” He tucked the cellphone into a pocket. He looked at his comrade for a moment. “Here,” he tossed his M4 paintball gun at his comrade. “Put this away and bring me the real thing.”

* * *

Barney awoke to the sound of one of the most horrific things he had ever heard. Faintly, the tinny sounds of *It’s Gonna Be Me* sung by NSync through the radio alarm clock by the bed could be heard. He pulled the clock’s plug from the wall and tossed it into the wastebasket.

He rubbed his eyes and remembered where he was. “Carter’s room at the B&B,” he muttered. He had not had any dreams that he could recall, and Carter had not shown up during the night. He looked at his watch. A little after six in the morning. He saw his wallet on the bedside table, picked it up and tucked it into his pocket.

“Time to see how Matrin is getting on with his translations,” he said to himself.

* * *

Two hours and a half a box of doughnuts later, S.P.O.N.G.E. headquarters was bustling. Frank had arrived an hour earlier and was still going over the webcam footage obtained by Landis. Les Bustoffson stood at his shoulder also observing. Matrin sat nursing a coffee while Barney read through Matrin's notes. Only Kilroy seemed unhappy and occasionally muttered about the 'ungodly hour' of the morning.

Barney frowned again. "*The wielder of custard will be taken by the Deceiving One,*" he read from the notes. He looked up at Matrin who shrugged. "I told you Barney, it's a strange dialect. It isn't easy to decipher."

Barney put the notes down and looked at the gathered men. "Let's go over what we know. Historian Carter arrived two days ago and acquired this book." He tapped the *Libellus* as he spoke. "He suffered nightmares while the book was in his possession. Nightmares about a tower pictured in this book. Sometime yesterday he was visited by a lawyer, Richard Faraday."

Barney tossed the lawyer's card onto the table. "And now, Carter is missing. The book tells us of 'gates opening' and a merging of the mortal realm with the realm of 'the Walker in Shadow'. And last night, something came through a rift on Seminary Hill."

Barney picked up one of the powdered doughnuts and munched on it thoughtfully. "According to this book we have two days to prevent this merge, and the 'gates' mentioned seem to already be weakening. Matrin believes that the creature caught on the webcam was a phasing polyp. This means we exercise caution. Those things are elusive and dangerous."

Barney sipped at his coffee and cleared his throat. "Now, as to what we do. Matrin and I will remain here and see what more we can learn from this book. Kilroy, you take Frank and Les with you. I want you to find Carter. There might be more we can learn from his dreams. Start by paying Richard Faraday a visit. Take the L.I.G.H.T. device with you and keep an eye out for that polyp. Don't go looking for it, I want to deal with this apocalypse event first. We can deal with the polyp later, providing we have a later."

Kilroy stroked his beard for a moment, then nodded. "Do you want us to do this immediately, or is there time for breakfast?"

Barney frowned and looked at his watch. "There's time for breakfast. Pass me another doughnut."

* * *

After breakfast, more discussions took place. Although nothing new was said, these discussions led to lunch, and it was already three in the afternoon by the time Kilroy, Les and Frank found themselves outside the offices of *Danforth, Faraday & Wyndham*.

“Looks like this is the place,” Kilroy said.

Frank reached a hand inside his jacket. “No problem. I’ll go in, take out any resistance and will let you guys know when it’s clear.”

Kilroy placed a hand on Frank’s shoulder. “I tell you what. How about we *all* go in, and just ask for Richard Faraday?”

Frank shrugged. “If you prefer.”

Kilroy led the others inside the building and into a small reception area. A young bored looking blonde woman who was chatting into the phone and painting her nails at the same time looked up with disinterest.

Frank reached into his jacket again. “I can drop her from here,” he said quietly.

Kilroy ignored him and walked up to the woman. “Excuse me,” he said, oozing the McDooley charm. “Would Mr. Faraday be available at all?”

The woman blinked and spoke into the phone. “I’ve got customers. I’ll call you later.” She put the phone down and put her nail polish away before smiling. “What can I do for you gentlemen?”

Kilroy’s charm switched on once more. He leaned forwards and smiled. “We’d like to speak to Mr. Faraday, please.”

“Mr. Faraday isn’t in.” the secretary replied.

Kilroy frowned. “How about Mr. Wyndham then?”

“He’s on vacation for the rest of the week,” the secretary said.

“Mr. Danforth, then?”

The secretary shook her head. “Mr. Danforth has been dead for two years. They leave his name on the door out of respect for his family.” The secretary tilted her head for a moment, then frowned. “Or maybe it was because they couldn’t be bothered paying to have the stationery, business cards and sign changed. I’m not really sure.”

Frank turned to Les and sighed. “Would have been easier my way.”

Kilroy looked at the woman sat before him and called upon every ounce of savoir-faire within him. He leaned forward and smiled, one eyebrow slightly raised. And for the tiniest of moments, the light seemed to glint off his smile. “We’re really, *really* anxious to meet with Mr. Faraday.” Kilroy looked down at the nameplate on her desk. *Delia Fowler*, it said. “So, *Delia*, we’d be *very* grateful if you could help us.”

Delia stared up at Kilroy. It was clear to both Frank and Les that the woman seemed to be smitten with Kilroy. Les turned to Frank and muttered. “How does he *do* that?”

Frank shrugged. “If I knew, I’d bottle the stuff and sell it.”

Delia stood slowly, not taking her eyes from Kilroy’s. “I’m not sure exactly where Mr. Faraday is. But I’m sure I could take a quick look in his planner.” She opened the door to the shared office of the lawyers behind her. “Although, I don’t know exactly where his planner might be.”

Kilroy smiled. “Shall I give you a hand looking?”

Delia smiled back. “Maybe you could give me two.”

She opened the door and disappeared into the office followed by Kilroy who pulled the door shut behind himself.

Frank and Les sat down in the reception area and collectively sighed.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Kilroy came out of the office tucking his shirt back in.

“About time,” Frank muttered. “It was starting to sound like you were strangling a cat in there.”

“So what did you find?” Les asked.

“Some interesting info,” Kilroy replied waving a diary planner, “I asked Delia if I could borrow this planner. There’s a lot of strange stuff in here listed over the last few days. We should probably head back to S.P.O.N.G.E. and show the others.”

Les took the planner and opened it up. “Hmm, this is yesterday’s entry. ‘*Go see Carter later. Must convince him to meet with Mr. Smith.*’ I wonder who this ‘Smith’ is?”

* * *

Barney sat reading through Matrin's notes trying to figure some of them out. "*Wielder of custard... wielder of knowledge.*" Barney shook his head. "Maybe it's all just nonsense after all, Matrin."

But Matrin wasn't listening. He was staring at the book with his mouth wide open, his eyes unblinking.

"Matrin?" asked Barney. "Are you alright?"

Matrin's mouth closed with an audible snap. "How could I have been so stupid?" he muttered. "It's as plain as the patch over my eye."

Barney was intrigued. "What is it, Matrin? What have you found?"

Matrin jabbed a finger at the text he was reading. "Here, this line. '*For only when the rightful wielder of this knowledge resides in the camp of the Walker shall the two realms become one.*' See the position of the glyphs in the sentence? The glyphs for *wielder* and *knowledge* are next to one another, but the glyph for *wielder* is dominant."

Barney blinked. "Um, so?"

Matrin jabbed his finger at another portion of text, apparently deaf to Barney's question. "Here, where it says '*The wielder of custard will be taken by the Deceiving One*', the glyph for *wielder* is not dominant, but subordinate. That's the difference!"

Barney blinked again. "I'm not sure what you mean, Matrin."

"The dominant glyph changes the base meaning of the word. It isn't *wielder*, it means *owner*. Which clarifies the meaning of the word *knowledge*. It's not '*the rightful wielder of this knowledge*' at all." Matrin looked up at Barney, his eye shining with understanding. "Knowledge can't be owned. But something that *contains* knowledge can be owned. The phrase translates more accurately as '*For only when the rightful owner of this book resides in the camp of the Walker shall the two realms become one.*' Do you see?"

Barney nodded. "Yes, I understand. But what of the subordinate *wielder*? What does that mean?"

Matrin shrugged. "*Carrier*, perhaps. Or possibly *bringer*, as in 'one who brings'. I'm not sure what the '*camp of the Walker*' is, but I am pretty sure we both know who the '*rightful owner of this book*' is."

"Carter," Barney muttered. "So we need to find Carter and make sure he never ends up in this '*camp of the Walker*'."

Matrin nods. “Easier said than done, though. We don’t know where he is, and can only guess that Faraday was the last one to see him. And I can only assume that the *camp of the Walker* is on the other side of those ‘gates’.” Matrin stroked at his chin for a moment. “Say, you don’t think Carter could have wandered through one of those gates, do you?”

Barney shook his head. “I don’t think so. I glanced over his Historian’s Entrance Exam. He answered the portal question with a resounding ‘no’. He’s the sort that avoids portals and gateways to other dimensions.”

Matrin nodded. “Clever.”

The door opened behind them and Kilroy entered brandishing the diary planner. “No Richard Faraday, but I found something else interesting.”

He tossed the planner onto the table. Barney and Matrin looked at the planner, then at each other for a moment before turning back to look at the Irishman.

“What did you find?” asked Barney.

Kilroy placed his hands on the table and leaned forwards looking at his two friends. “Faraday has been having nightmares too. He details snippets of them in his planner. Seems he had the book before Carter did. He makes several references to a ‘Mr. Smith’ in his planner as someone who is very interested in getting his hands on that book. He also makes references to Smith asking for a meeting with Carter. He also has an address for where Mr. Smith currently resides. Frank’s scouting that location out now, and Les is going over Carter’s room again to see if there’s anything else there that might help, and then he’s heading out to join Frank.”

Barney picked the planner up and turned it over in his hands carefully. He looked up at Kilroy. “This is a most interesting development.”

* * *

Frank looked at the tattered map of Arkham once more and sighed. He figured he was *roughly* in the right place. The address in the planner had simply been *Carter Estate on Delaporte Road*. He was on Delaporte road. And there were very few buildings up this close to the railway station. Tall imposing oak trees lined the road, allowing only a glimpse of sunlight to filter through their canopy. Frank stopped again in the shadows of the oaks and looked once more at the map, wondering if he had come too far up the road.

“Next time,” he muttered, “next time, I’ll drive up here.”

Frank sighed and headed off slowly towards the railway station, wishing he hadn’t volunteered to walk. The sound of an approaching vehicle caught his attention and he turned to look back down the road. An old pickup truck made it’s way slowly up

the road and pulled to a stop a few feet away. Les Bustoffson leaned out of the driver's window and smiled.

“You find the place yet, Frank?”

Frank shook his head. “Not yet,” he wandered back towards the truck and shrugged. “I figure it must be closer up to the station. You know if it *is* here, it puts the place a little too close to Seminary Hill for my liking. You got the L.I.G.H.T. device?”

Les reached over to the backseat and pulled up an unusual looking piece of equipment that looked something like a plunger with various bits of electronic gear attached to it and waved it in Frank's direction.

Frank pushed the device aside with his hand. “Don't point that thing at me! It might make me sterile!”

Les blinked uncertainly. “You think so?”

Frank shrugged. “How should I know? All I know is I'm not comfortable with you pointing it at me. Stop waving it around.”

Les put the device down in his lap, thought better of it, and then put it over in the backseat. After a moment, he covered it with a blanket. “Hop in, Frank. We'll cruise up to the station and back. See if we can't find the house we are looking for.”

Frank climbed into the pickup and the truck backfired as Les put it into gear and headed off up Delaporte Road.

* * *

The small apartment on West Street was quiet and still. The drapes were closed tight and the only sound to be heard was a quiet rhythmic hum. Richard Faraday, sitting in an overstuffed armchair, seemed at first appearances to be dead. It was only when you stared at him for any length of time and saw the slow rise and fall of his chest that you realized he was alive. The faint humming continued and Faraday's eyebrow twitched slightly. His eyes opened suddenly and flicked frantically from side to side before his gaze fell upon the small silver anvil that stood on the mantelpiece over the fireplace. The anvil seemed to vibrate slightly as the hum continued and a faint whisper could be heard in the humming.

“Hei! Aa-shanta 'nygh! Ia!”

Faraday sat up with a jerk and looked at the anvil. “I am here,” he whispered.

“Faraday... I need the book...bring... the book... to me...”

“Carter didn’t have it,” Faraday moaned and sank back into the chair. His eyes closed tight and he whimpered. “I thought he had the book, but he didn’t...”

“STOP! Your... whining... sickens me... Faraday. I have... neither the... time... nor desire... to listen... to... your... puling, Faraday...bring... the book... to me...”

Tears streamed from the tightly shut corners of Faraday’s eyes. “But...” he whispered, “you promised me... you promised it would end if I brought him to you.”

The air in front of Faraday seemed to coalesce for a moment and a shimmering translucent shadow flashed momentarily into existence. It reached one of it’s undulating limbs towards Faraday and then it was gone as quickly as it had appeared. Faraday’s eyes opened wide and he jerked upright again clutching at his chest with both his hands.

“Please... no...” he whispered.

“Fetch... the book... to me, Faraday... and you... will be... forgiven.”

Faraday sank to his knees, the pain in his chest gone. His hair, wet and slick with sweat, hung in his face. “Yes...” he whispered. “Yes... I will do as you ask...”

* * *

Les Bustoffson’s old pickup truck trundled slowly up the dirt road that served as a driveway into the Carter Estate. Oak trees lined both sides of the driveway that led to an old no longer working fountain. Dead leaves floated in the brackish water that pooled at the bottom of the defunct fountain, a sculpture of cherubs cavorting had green and black streaks where the water had once spouted.

Beyond the fountain stood an old lonely Victorian house, dried and dead ivy clinging to most of the outside walls and covering large areas of the shuttered windows. The pickup rolled to a stop by the fountain and its occupants sat and looked at the building in quiet contemplation.

“Well,” Les said quietly.

“Creepy looking,” offered Frank.

They continued looking at the old house.

“This must be the place,” Les said.

“Yeah,” Frank replied.

Beside them, the fountain sputtered as brackish water slowly began to trickle from the top of it. The noise made the two men start in shock. They watched the fountain as a nasty black liquid trickled down the side of the grotesque cherubs.

“You know,” Les said quietly, “Matrin would call that sort of thing a spontaneous psychokinetic response. Things suddenly turning themselves on when you approach.”

Frank nodded. “Or maybe, the vibrations from the truck dislodged some dirt in the pipes leading to the fountain allowing the water to begin moving again.”

Les looked at Frank. “Is that possible?”

Frank shrugged. “I think so. It’s a much more comforting thought than any kind of spontaneous psychos at least.”

Les nodded. “Okay, yeah. I’ll buy that. Vibrations.”

The two men climbed out of the truck and moved slowly toward the house. Some of the windows were shuttered but most appeared to be boarded up, the brown unhealthy ivy clinging to the boards and shutters alike. Les fumbled in the back seat and pulled out the L.I.G.H.T. device. Frank reached into his jacket and pulled out a pistol.

Les raised an eyebrow, but made no comment as the two men cautiously approached the building.

* * *

Kilroy tossed the empty Guinness can aside and let out a thunderous belch. He chuckled in the shocked silence that followed and grinned. “More room out than in.” he said to the astonished looking Landis. “So,” he asked, “what are you looking at here?”

Landis, wrinkling her nose at Kilroy’s behaviour, turned back to the computer screen and pointed at the image she was trying to enhance. “Trying to clear up this image so we can be certain what it is. Matrin believes it might be a phasing polyp, but it never hurts to be completely certain.”

Kilroy grunted. “Huh, it’d be better if it was just a glitch on the webcam.” He sighed and patted Landis on the shoulder. “Have fun with that.”

Kilroy wandered back into the kitchen where Matrin and Barney sat at the table still reading through Carter’s book. “Any luck?” he asked as he entered.

Matrin shook his head without looking up, while Barney didn’t even seem to notice Kilroy had entered. Kilroy tutted and poured himself some coffee. “We have any of those doughnuts left?” he asked.

When neither man responded, Kilroy let out a sigh of resignation, opened the refrigerator and peered inside. “Ah,” he said quietly, spying the battered box Carter had brought with him two days earlier, “come to Daddy.”

He pulled the box out of the fridge and frowned. It seemed disturbingly light. He opened the lid and then tossed the box onto the table in disgust where it lay open for all to see. The box was clearly devoid of doughnuts. “Now who would go and do something as cruel as leaving an empty box in the refrigerator?” he asked. When neither man answered, he sighed again. “Well, I suppose I’d better go get some more.”

Again no one answered him. Kilroy rolled his eyes and wandered off out of the kitchen muttering to himself.

Barney blinked as if aware of the box for the first time. A yellow drying glutinous gunk of matter smeared across the inside of the box seemed to be growing mould. He looked at it hard for a long moment. “Custard,” he said quietly.

Matrin looked up from his notes. “What’s that, Barney?”

But Barney appeared not to hear him. “*The wielder of custard.* The ‘bringer’ of custard. It’s almost ridiculous, really.”

Matrin put the book down. “Barney. What are you getting at?”

Barney picked up the empty box and tossed it towards Matrin. “Carter brought custard filled doughnuts with him to Arkham. It’s almost ridiculous, isn’t it? There was a struggle in his room. Someone kidnapped him. If Carter is both the ‘wielder of this knowledge’ and the ‘wielder of custard’ then all we need do is find this ‘Deceiving One’ and then we can find Carter.”

Matrin frowned. “Well, I guess it makes sense, though it seems a little bit of a stretch of the imagination...”

Barney raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Matrin, everything we *do* takes a stretch of the imagination. What was that other passage? The one you thought was complete nonsense?”

Matrin rummaged through his notes quickly. “Here it is. There are two. *Harken not unto the sounds of the Tower of The Walker In Shadow, and look unto the Forge for it will reveal the wielder of custard.* And this is the other one. *And lo, the wielder of custard shall know them and will call unto them and lead them unto the Forge.*”

Barney frowned in concentration, then snapped his fingers. “Forge. Blacksmith’s used a forge. And Faraday was very interested in having Carter meet a Mr. Smith. Perhaps the forge referred to in the book is Smith’s address! That would suggest that Carter will most likely be held there. Almost certainly against his will.”

Matrin stared at Barney for a long moment. “You know, Barney,” he said dryly, “your ability to take random snippets of information and make spurious leaps of logic to arrive at a laughable conclusion will never cease to amaze me.”

Barney shrugged. “It’s a gift. Call Kilroy’s cell. He and I are going up to Delaporte Road.”

Matrin scratched at his eyepatch, feeling an itch that wasn’t there. “But Frank and Les are already on their way up there, if not there already.”

Barney nodded. “Exactly. But whatever is up there, whoever this Mr. Smith is, no doubt wants to bring about the conjunction of Earth with this other dimension the book speaks of. Frank and Les may need backup.”

Matrin opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by another voice.

“I’m afraid it’s already too late for them. Mr. Smith doesn’t like visitors.”

The two men span around to see a wild-eyed man standing by the door to the backyard staring at them, one hand thrust into his jacket pocket. His hair was unkempt and sweaty. His eyes flashed from side to side, and then fell upon the book in front of Matrin. “I have come for the Libellus,” he said quietly.

Barney looked at the unfamiliar man and nodded. “Richard Faraday, I presume?”

The disheveled man turned his haunted eyes on Barney and pulled his hand out of his pocket to reveal a pistol. He pointed it at Barney and offered a strained smile. “You have me at the disadvantage,” he said. “Not that it matters. Sit down.”

Barney slowly sat at the table and looked over at Matrin, then back at Faraday. “Why do you want the book?”

“Sorry, no time for questions. You,” he gestured with the gun at Matrin. “Slide the book across the table slowly.”

Matrin sighed as a thousand witty retorts flooded into his mind. He remained silent, however. Common sense, not to mention missing limbs, told him that it was more prudent to do as the man asked. He closed the book and pushed it across the table.

Faraday grinned maniacally as he picked the book up. He waved the gun at Barney and Matrin. “Was nice to meet you both. Shame we won’t be meeting again. I’ll be leaving now.” Faraday backed slowly towards the backdoor.

The door to the living room swung open as Landis walked in, an empty mug in her hand. “More coffee for-” she began. Faraday swung the gun in her direction and

fired. The mug in her hand exploded as the bullet tore through it and lodged into the wall beside her. She dived to the ground as Faraday fired again, barely missing her. He turned the gun on Matrin and Barney and fired three more times. Barney dived to one side as Matrin was caught by one of the bullets and slumped slowly out of his chair.

A moment later it was over. The backdoor was wide open, the screen door clanging shut as Faraday fled, taking the book with him. Barney glanced at Landis as he heard tires screeching and saw that while she certainly frightened, she looked unharmed. A glance in Matrin's direction told Barney that Matrin had not been quite as lucky as the rest of them.

"Matrin?" he asked moving to his friend.

Barney could see blood swelling through Matrin's shirt around his armpit. Matrin was conscious but only barely. "Shot me," he muttered through clenched teeth. "Bastard shot me."

"Don't move, I'm going to take a look at the wound." Barney replied. He unbuttoned Matrin's shirt and gingerly moved it to one side. "Landis, get me some water and some cloth, quickly!"

Matrin grimaced as Barney removed his shirt. When Landis returned with the cloth and water, Barney began cleaning the blood away. "Well," he said when he was done cleaning the blood away, "it doesn't look too bad. The bullet grazed against the inside of your arm and your chest. You'll need bandages, and it'll hurt for some time, but you'll live."

Matrin sighed through clenched teeth. "The bastard shot me."

"Look at the bright side," Barney replied. "If it had been an inch higher he might have taken your good arm off at the shoulder." He turned to Landis. "Clean his wound and bandage him up. I'm going after Faraday."

Barney ran into Kilroy, armed with a six pack of Guinness and a fresh box of doughnuts, at the front door. Kilroy noticed his friend's expression immediately. He dropped the doughnuts and the Guinness onto a desk and grinned. "Where are we going?"

Barney looked at the Irishman and raised an eyebrow. "We're hunting a lawyer. I'll explain along the way."

* * *

Frank peered through the gloom inside the house. He held his gun in one hand, his flashlight in the other, scanning the large lobby of the house. Wilted plants stood in ancient pots, faded velvet carpet lay on the floor, leading a path from the front door, not

slightly ajar behind him, up the central staircase. There was a lot less dust than he had expected to find, and he wasn't sure if that worried him or made him feel more at ease.

Les was searching outside somewhere, he knew, and Frank again debated whether it was the person alone outside that died first in horror films, or the person alone in the house.

The sound of an approaching car made him stop in his tracks. He moved to one of the boarded up windows and peered out through the cracks. A dark blue SUV was slowly pulling up the gravel driveway. Frank watched as it came to a stop beside Les' pickup. The man who climbed out of the car was carrying something tight against his chest. He stared at the pickup truck for a long moment, then began glancing around nervously. Frank heard Les' muffled voice calling out somewhere outside and saw the man twitch nervously, looking around again. It took only a second for Frank to realize that the man was brandishing a gun in one of his hands. And it took only a second more for Frank to be out the door brandishing his own.

“Drop the weapon!” he shouted.

The man by the pickup truck started suddenly and then began firing wildly. Frank ducked and rolled to one side, coming up to a crouched position and fired back twice. The first bullet shattered the SUV's windscreen, the second blowing a hole through the driver's side window. Frank cursed himself for missing as the man fired more shots in his direction and began running to the side of the house.

Frank rose to his feet and dived off the front porch of the house, firing again. The man stumbled and rolled as one of the bullets caught him. He began scrabbling towards the side of the house for cover.

As Frank came to his feet he heard another car approaching and glanced back to the road to see the SPONGEmobile pulling up the driveway at speed.

He looked back to see that his assailant had already scrabbled around the corner.

Frank glanced back to see Les heading towards the SPONGEmobile as Barney and Kilroy climbed out of it. More shots were fired and the three of them hit the ground. There was a bursting popping sound as a stray bullet punctured one of the SPONGEmobile's tires. Frank signaled back to them from his position and pointed at Barney and Les to go around the house, then gestured to Kilroy to follow him.

The three nodded and Frank fired three shots towards the corner of the house. He couldn't see his quarry, but he didn't need to. He just needed to buy the others some time to move.

A moment later, Kilroy was beside him and Barney and Les had disappeared around the other side of the house. Kilroy nodded to Frank. “It's Faraday,” he said.

“He’s taken the book and shot Matrin in the process. Oh, don’t worry,” he added when he saw the look of concern on Frank’s face, “Matrin will be fine. Barney says the bullet only grazed him.”

Frank nodded.

“We want Faraday alive and able to talk, preferably. He knows where Carter is.” Kilroy added.

Frank nodded again. “Right, let’s go get him then.” The two of them edged slowly along the front of the house towards the corner Faraday was hiding behind. As they approached the corner they heard more gunshots, from behind the house. They heard Barney and Les shouting distantly. Frank glanced at Kilroy and the two of them bolted around the corner.

Behind the house stood a large barn, as dilapidated and old as the house. Frank blinked as he looked at the barn. Something was wrong with it. He blinked and looked again. There was something wrong with it all right. His sense of perspective was wrong. The end of the barn that seemed furthest away *also* seemed to be nearest. All the angles seemed off.

He caught sight of Les and Barney by the rear of the house and rushed over to them, Kilroy on his heels. “Where is he?” he asked as he caught up with them both.

Barney gestured in the direction of the barn. “He went inside. But look.” Barney was holding the book in his hands. “He dropped it when Les caught up with him. They struggled briefly and shots were fired, but they went wild. Faraday only managed to get away when he resorted to underhanded tactics.”

“Underhanded?” asked Frank.

Les turned to look at Frank. His face was pale. “He kneed me in the balls. Barney had already grabbed the book.”

“What about Carter?” asked Kilroy.

Barney gestured towards the grotesquely disfigured barn which seemed larger than it had been only a moment ago. “In there, I believe. Les, you sit this one out. I want you to take this book back to Matrin and stay with him. Matrin’s in no condition to fight should Faraday manage to make his way back there. Frank, Kilroy, you two come with me. We’re going to get Carter.”

Les nodded, but Kilroy stared. “What? We’re going in there? Have you seen the way the barn seems to bulge slightly? It looks like an Escher drawing.”

Barney nodded. "I realize that. It's dimensionally unstable. I believe it's a weak point between our world and the realm of the Shadow Walker mentioned in the book."

"And you want to go in there?" Kilroy asked, an incredulous tone in his voice.

Barney shook his head. "No, not really. But if Carter is in there, we need to find him and get him out. Otherwise, if that book is right, the whole world could end up looking like that barn, and before you know it, we'd have way more interdimensional horrors on our hands than we could ever hope to handle."

There was a long moment of silence among the four men as they each contemplated the gravity of the situation. After a while, Frank spoke.

"Alright, let's do it."

Kilroy sighed. "Fine, I'll go with you, but you're paying for the Guinness when we get back."

Barney grinned. "I knew I could count on you guys. Les, make sure this book gets back to Matrin and keep an eye out. There's still a rogue polyp wandering around somewhere."

* * *

Matrin lay asleep on the sofa, bandaged quite expertly by Landis. Sitting beside Matrin, watching over him quietly was his wife, Uta. She had said very little on the phone when Landis had called her, and had said nothing at all when she arrived. And she had sat in silence beside him since.

Landis had brought coffee for Uta a few minutes earlier, and it had gone untouched. Landis gave up trying to begin conversation and wandered out of the room, leaving Uta alone with her husband.

Uta sighed quietly and stroked her husband's forehead. "Vell," she said quietly, "another fine *verriwung* is this, hmmm?"

* * *

Barney, Frank and Kilroy looked at the barn in silence. Les had left almost fifteen minutes before, and the three men had not yet approached the barn in that time.

"So," Frank said eventually. "What's the actual plan?"

Barney cleared his throat. "Well, ideally, we enter the barn. We find Carter. And then we leave."

“Ideally?” asked Kilroy. “What if things aren’t ideal?”

Barney shrugged slightly. “Well then we enter the barn, we find ourselves in a random dimension that does not contain Carter, and live out our remaining years running away from whatever nasty creatures are indigenous to that dimension.”

Frank looked at the barn and blinked. “Is it just me, or does it seem to bulge outwards occasionally? I mean, it’s like the thing is breathing.”

Kilroy paled. “Thanks Frank, I didn’t need to hear that observation.”

Frank looked at Barney again. “So, the plan is basically, that we are just gonna walk in through the door?”

Barney nodded.

“Regardless of what might be in there?”

Barney nodded again.

“And if we don’t go in?”

Barney looked at Frank for a long moment. “If we don’t go in, then all life as we know it comes to an abrupt and most likely gruesome end tomorrow. Probably around supertime.”

Frank looked out at the barn again. “I knew I should have brought a bigger gun.”

Kilroy nodded. “Well let’s go then. No sense putting it off any longer. Faraday hasn’t come back out, so let’s go in.”

The three men approached the barn. Frank had been correct in his observation. The barn *did* seem to be breathing slowly. The air seemed to thicken the closer they got to the barn and a faint humming sound could be heard. They tried not to look directly at the barn since with every step they took closer, the barn seemed to change shape. They fixed their eyes on the ground before them and in a few moments, they found themselves stood before the small door Faraday had used.

Barney looked at his two companions and opened the door.

A dark flowing cloud spilled slowly out of the door, roiling across the ground at knee height. It was cold, almost freezing to touch. Inside the barn, the distortions to space seemed worse. It appeared to be the size of a cathedral inside. The walls on the inside were coated with an almost transparent yellow slime. The walls themselves bulged and flexed as if they were living tissue. The three men entered the barn and the door slammed shut behind them as they did.

Three dimensional space, which until now had struggled valiantly to maintain its normal shape, gave up abruptly and folded in on itself. Up became down *and* sideways. Back became front and up and down. Frank found that it was impossible to move, since now it seemed that when he moved he both moved in two directions at once and remained still at the same time. He opened his mouth to speak and found that the air was drawn out of his lungs before he could speak. The dark cloud was in here also, enveloping him in its cold caress, in front of him, around him and inside him. There was a tremendous flash of brilliant white light that lasted an eternity and no time at all, and Frank felt every molecule in his body explode.

* * *

Les pulled the old pickup into the driveway. He saw Uta's car parked out the front of S.P.O.N.G.E. headquarters and decided to let himself in the back door quietly. He found Landis sitting in the kitchen sipping coffee. He dropped the book on the table and poured himself a mug.

"How is Matrin?" he asked.

Landis shrugged. "He's sleeping. He hasn't slept since he started translating that book, and well, I guess being shot took the rest of his energy away."

"I saw Uta's car out front." Les said carefully.

Landis nodded. "She's been here about half an hour. She hasn't said a word. I thought it best to leave them alone. I see you got the book back."

Les nodded and took a seat. "Yeah. Barney asked me to bring it back. He took Frank and Kilroy with him to go find Carter. But seeing how gunhappy Faraday was, I'm not so sure they'll find Carter alive."

* * *

Frank felt something slapping at his face and he opened his eyes. "What? Where? Who?" he asked. Kilroy was knelt beside him slapping his face gently.

Frank slapped his hand away. "Okay, okay, enough. I'm awake."

Kilroy nodded and helped him up to his feet.

"So where are we and what happened?" he asked, looking around. So far as he could tell they were in the barn still. Three dimensional space seemed to have resumed its normal behaviour, and he glanced around. The barn was quite large from the inside. The stone walls were no longer covered in the slime he had seen before. At one end of the barn stood a huge stone oven, a fire roaring inside it. The door to the oven was

almost seven feet high. Tools hung on the walls and a large black anvil stood to one side, an enormous hammer leaned against it. Beside the oven was a large ironwrought cage covered in furs. There was a smell of blood and sweat in the air.

“Stone walls?” he asked quietly. I thought the barn was made of wood?”

Kilroy nodded. “It was. Barney’s outside. He tried to explain it to me, but I told him I didn’t want to know.”

Frank looked at the door and wandered over to it, pushing it open. Outside, where the house should have been was a huge grotesque fortified tower crafted out of black stone. His gaze was drawn to the top of it, which reached into the dark clouds. A storm brewed around the top of the tower, lightning flashing around it. And distantly, he could hear something else emanating from that tower. A faint chanting, or maybe singing. The grass beneath his feet was gray as if all the color had faded from it. Glancing around he saw that the color seemed to have faded out of everything, except for himself, Kilroy and Barney, who stood to one side staring at the tower.

Frank approached him and cleared his throat. “Kilroy says you can explain where we are?” he asked.

Barney turned and shrugged. “I have a theory. Judging from that tower, I would say we are in the ‘realm of the Walker In Shadow’. The barn served as some form of portal and sent us here.”

“It felt like my body was being torn apart.” Frank said.

Barney nodded. “Interdimensional matter transference. Molecule by molecule apparently. Essentially, we *were* torn apart and then reassembled here. Quite a painful process, too.”

“So Carter is in that tower, then?” asked Kilroy who had come to join them.

Barney shook his head. “*Harken not unto the sounds of the Tower of The Walker In Shadow, and look unto the Forge for it will reveal the wielder of custard.*”

Frank looked at him as if he were mad. “And what does that mean?”

Barney pointed at the huge stone barn Frank had come out of. “It means he is in there somewhere.”

Frank blinked. “The cage covered in furs? Well, then let’s get him out and go home. What are we waiting for? You could have done that while I was still out.”

Barney shook his head. “No, we couldn’t have. The barn on Delaporte road was unstable. It was always open to allow travel through to this dimension. But look around. Do you see anything that looks unstable?”

Frank shook his head. “What do you mean unstable?”

“What I mean is that here, at the moment, there is no obvious way back to our world.” Barney said quietly. “The trip was one way. Sometime tomorrow, the two realms will become one and we can go back, but by then there will be no point, since it will be too late. It will be hell on earth.”

Frank opened his mouth to reply, then fell silent. Barney was right. While everything might be unusual here, none of it was misshapen or bulging on a dimensional level that he could see. He sighed slowly. “Well. So we wasted our time?”

Barney shook his head. “Not necessarily. Faraday may be here somewhere. And Carter may yet be able to help.”

Frank nodded. “Well, let’s go see then.”

The three men re-entered the huge stone barn and began pulling the furs away from the cage. Inside the cage, curled into a ball, bare-chested and wearing tattered trousers was a white-haired man. Barney frowned and reached through the bars to shake the man’s arm.

The figure uncurled and scrambled away from Barney’s touch, both hands held out trembling in front of itself. It blinked and then frowned. “Doctor Bustoffson?” it asked.

“Carter?” Barney asked. “Is that you?”

The man slowly lowered his arms and nodded. Large welts and bruises covered his chest and upper arms and he slowly moved towards the front of the cage. “You should probably leave,” he said after a moment. “Mr. Smith really doesn’t like visitors.”

Kilroy stared at the man in shock. “His hair. It was black...”

Barney nodded and turned back to Kilroy. “Something terrible has happened to him. Something so terrifying that it drained all the color from his hair. I’ve read about such things, but have never seen it myself.” He turned to Frank. “Grab some of those tools and we’ll get him out of here.”

Frank went to look at the tools hanging on the walls while Barney continued to speak to Carter. “Carter? How do you feel?”

“Cold,” Carter said. “And hungry.”

Kilroy patted his pockets and pulled out a chocolate bar. “Here,” he said handing it through the bars. “It’s not much, I know...”

Carter took the candy solemnly. “Thank you.” He opened the bar and nibbled at it, chewing slowly. Barney watched thoughtfully.

“Carter, you seem surprisingly... together considering what you have been through,” Barney said. “Are you sure you are alright?”

Carter sighed. “All I am completely certain of is that I am in pain and I have been hurt. When Faraday came to the bed and breakfast, he pulled a gun on me. I tried to fight him, but he knocked me out.” Carter rubbed the back of his head and winced. “When I came to I was in here. I couldn’t find my glasses. I can’t see much without my glasses, just shapes and shadows, really. For which I am very thankful. All I am certain of about ‘Mr. Smith’ is that it has no definite shape.”

Barney smiled in bemusement. This man’s sanity had been saved by his inability to see the creature that had desired to bring him here. “Faraday brought you here?”

“Yes, he’s been here twice since then.” Carter replied.

Barney reached into his jacket pocket where he had put Carter’s glasses the day before and pulled them out. “Here.”

Carter took the glasses silently and put them on. He squinted through them. He fingered the bent frames and run a finger along the cracked lens. “Thanks,” he said after a while. “At least I can see now.”

Frank returned a moment later with a large spike and the hammer that had lain against the anvil. “Stand back,” he said. Carter scrambled to the far end of the cage as Frank slotted the spike into the cage’s lock.

On the third swing the lock snapped open. Once Carter was out, Barney took off his jacket and handed it to Carter who took it gratefully. “So,” Barney asked. “How did Faraday leave?”

Carter pulled the jacket on. “Through here,” he said, pointing at the large stone oven. “Through the forge.”

Barney, Frank and Kilroy looked the huge fire roaring inside the oven. “Through that? Was it lit at the time?”

Carter nodded. “It has always been warm, and there has always been the sound of a fire. He would open the door and walk through.”

Outside the faint singing ceased and a tumultuous roar began. It was the sound of a thousand screeching roaring voices. Carter's face paled considerably. "That's Mr. Smith."

The four men looked at each other for a moment, then Barney moved towards the door. Frank and Kilroy moved with him.

Carter pulled the door of the oven wide open. He turned back to the others who stood only feet away from the door leading outside. "You can't fight it. This isn't a polyp, or a deep one, or a migo. This isn't a servitor. This is a unique entity. It will kill you if you try to fight it."

The others turned to look at Carter who stood in front of the fires of the Forge. He shook his head. "Let's just go while we can." And with that he stepped into the fire and his body vanished. The roaring sound grew closer and the foundations of the barn began to tremble. Tools fell from their hooks and clattered on the ground.

"What do you think?" Kilroy asked.

Barney hesitated for only a second. "I think we run."

The three men bolted for the oven. The walls of the barn exploded behind them, stone debris and tools fell all around them as they dove into the flames of the Forge. The ululating roar behind them screeching in anger and frustration as they felt their bodies being torn apart and reformed an instant later.

The three men collapsed in a heap at the entrance of the barn. The black cloud roiled around them in anger, and then Carter was their grabbing at their arms.

"Come on!" he cried. "It's collapsing in on itself!"

Carter hauled Frank up onto his feet and the two of them hauled Kilroy and Barney up. The four men dashed towards the house as the sounds of wood splintering and tearing split the quiet of the evening night. Carter slumped against the wall, his strength spent, Barney and the others looked back to see the barn folding in on itself. There seemed to be some sort of central point into which the rest of the barn collapsed. Wind raged around them as they watched.

What was left of the barn stopped folding in on itself. For a second that seemed to last an hour, nothing moved. And then, it exploded outwards raining splinters and chunks of wood on the four men.

As the dust settled, Kilroy looked at Barney. "Is that it, then? Is it over, can we go home?"

Barney looked at the ruins of the barn and then looked at Kilroy. "For now."

EPILOGUE

Carter sat at the kitchen table in S.P.O.N.G.E. headquarters. He sipped his coffee quietly. A week had passed since the barn had imploded up on Delaporte road. Matrín was up and about and fine, other than occasional complaints about pain. Faraday had disappeared without trace, presumably somewhere out in the realm of the Walker in Shadow. The law office, with its now sole representative, Dorian Wyndham, had finalized the documents and Carter was free to move into the estate on Delaporte road whenever he wished. The only thing as yet unaccounted for was whatever it was that Landis had seen on the webcam.

He picked up the printout that sat on the table before him. It had arrived in his email account while he had been trapped in that cage. It seemed there was a distant relative that he had not known who was a member of the Historian Network. A Mitsy Carter, affiliated with S.A.C.E.M.O.T.H.

He smiled to himself. His own parents had passed away some time ago, and he'd been an only child. It would be nice to meet family. He shivered slightly. The ordeal was over, and Barney assured him that they had prevented the conjunction from occurring. But for all of the reassurances, Carter still felt uneasy. It was the dreams. Even though the book was tucked away in the S.P.O.N.G.E. library and Carter stayed away from it, the dreams persisted.

And they had slowly gotten worse. He took another sip of his coffee and rubbed at his eyes. He was tired, and no surprise. He had not slept for two days. Keeping himself busy to avoid having the dreams again.

His cellphone beeped on the table and he picked it up. "Carter."

"*Mr. Carter?*" the voice was distant, barely audible. It was a male voice that seemed vaguely familiar.

"Yes, this is Carter."

"*Mr. Carter. I am afraid I have some bad news for you.*"

Carter frowned. He looked at the cellphone screen to see the number of the caller, but it registered as 'Out Of Area'. He held the phone against his ear. "Who is this, please?"

"*It won't stop, Mr. Carter. It won't stop. He'll come for you. As long as you dream, Mr. Smith will be looking.*" The phone clicked and the call ended.

Carter stared in horror. He had recognized the voice finally. It had been the voice of the lawyer. The voice of the Deceiving One. The voice of Richard Faraday.