

This is an excerpt from

LITANY of DREAMS

An Arkham Horror Novel BY ARI MARMELL

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Dark incantations expose the minds of Miskatonic University students to supernatural horrors, in this chilling mystery novel of **Arkham Horror**

The mysterious disappearance of a gifted student at Miskatonic University spurs his troubled roommate, Elliot Raslo, into an investigation of his own. But Elliot already struggles against the maddening allure of a ceaseless chant that only he can hear... When Elliot's search converges with that of a Greenland Inuk's hunt for a stolen relic, they are left with yet more questions. Could there be a connection between Elliot's litany and the broken stone stele covered in antediluvian writings that had obsessed his friend? Learning the answers will draw them into the heart of a devilish plot to rebirth an ancient horror.

PROLOGUE

The aromas of life, rich and cloying and congealing in the back of his throat, danced arm in arm with the stink of putrefaction and death.

Wilmott Polaski, a pale and scrawny figure whose element included musty books and dusty shelves, jabbering students and bickering academics – and most assuredly did *not* include copses of thick boughs, glittering eyes peering from the shadows, swarms of insects and waterlogged socks – found himself uncertain as to which collection of scents was worse.

The boots he had hurriedly purchased for this sojourn fit poorly, and his coat was woefully inadequate. Mosquitoes, for which he would have thought the lingering winter chill would be too cold, hovered in thick clouds over the languid waters. Strange birds, or what he assumed to be birds, called in the distance. Ragged moss sagged from tired branches that always seemed to be reaching his way, perhaps attracted to his warmth in lieu of a spring thaw that refused to come.

Did Hockomock have alligators? He didn't think so, couldn't recall ever hearing of such creatures here. With every

glance toward the dark and rippling surface, always lapping uncomfortably close to the roadway, however, he grew less and less confident.

In short, the good professor deeply did not wish to be here. With any luck, he wouldn't have to be for long.

Another twenty minutes' walk produced nothing akin to an alligator, nor anything more hostile than those mosquitoes, but it did – finally! – bring into view the community he'd caught the train down from Arkham to find.

If, he observed with some disdain, one could even dignify it with the term.

It had no name, so far as he knew. No fixed borders, no shops, no municipal center or identity. Just a collection of scattered homes and tiny farms huddled on the edge of the Hockomock Swamp, a "community" only in the sense that the several dozen families who lived in these ramshackle domiciles interacted with one another on a somewhat regular basis, and seldomly with anyone else.

The houses were old, rickety, shingles and walls beginning to rot, the supports that held them above the muddy flats and potential floods bowing like the legs of a tired grandfather. While Wilmott heard sporadic sounds of labor in the distance, the striking of tools on wood or wet soil, he saw no one.

Nervously, he dug into his coat pocket, once more checking a bundle of handwritten notes and a hastily sketched diagram. He'd anticipated an unfriendly reception – from Henry Armitage and other fellow academics, he'd heard many a report of just how mistrustful some of these insular Massachusetts communities could be – but somehow the total absence of reception was more disturbing still.

According to his haphazard little map, however, he was still on course. With a sigh he returned the papers to his pocket and continued.

The water of the swamp puddled before him, occupying a shallow dip in the roadway. Mud squelched under his steps, threatening to yank the ill-fitting boots from his blistering feet. Wilmott swallowed a stream of profanity. Damn the useless Arkham police, damn Chester and damn himself for getting caught up in the young fool's endeavors!

He glanced skyward, hoping to estimate the time of day, how long he had to accomplish his self-assigned mission before he had to turn back if he wanted to beat the sunset. The sun, however, skulking behind layers of white cedar branches and fat, ponderous clouds, told him nothing. With more silent cursing, he turned his gaze once again to the path ahead...

Was that it? That house there, hunkered at the very edges of the deeper waters? Its wood sagging, windows sloping like sleep-heavy eyelids?

It could be. To judge by his last look at the map, it should be. Defying the nervous agitation in his gut and drawing himself up to his full, impressive – if woefully spindly – height, Wilmott marched forward and pounded his knuckles on the door.

It shuddered. Paint flecks snowed down to his feet. Nothing more.

Wilmott waited what he judged a polite interval, then knocked again, harder still.

And again.

What to do if nobody was home? Somehow, in all his

deliberations about whether to even come, all the time it took him to pinpoint and then reach his destination, he'd failed to consider so basic a hurdle. Perhaps this sort of thing was more complicated than he'd given—

The door finally swung open, with less a creaking than an angry and fiercely startling *crack*, as he raised his fist to try once more. Wilmott found himself staring at a yellowed shirt under frayed denim overalls.

He craned his head upward. An angry, reddened face, covered in the thick stubble of untended weeks, glared down at him.

"What?" The man's voice was as coarse as his chin and cheeks.

Wilmott removed his hat – as much to give himself a second to recover as out of courtesy. "Afternoon. Are you Woodrow Hennessy?"

"Who's askin'?" He spoke with a near-impenetrable drawl; Wilmott, for all his efforts to be kind, couldn't come up with a better term than *backwoods*.

"My name is Professor Wilmott Polaski, from Miskatonic University. I—"

"Got no use for university folk. If you're lookin' for a guide, go back'n ask over in Taunton." The door began to shut.

"No, you don't understand. I'm searching for a missing student. Chester Hennessy."

The door halted.

Taking that as an invitation to continue, Wilmott bulled on. "Chester's been gone for several weeks now, and I'm afraid the authorities have been stymied. I recalled that he'd mentioned you on occasion, and I thought perhaps—"

"Ain't talked to Chester in years. He an' his don't have truck with our side of the family."

Well, *that* wasn't right, not based on what Chester had said. "Mr Hennessy, perhaps if I might come in, we could discuss—"
"I said I don't know. Leave."

And now Wilmott was growing irate, not merely at the constant interruptions but the man's entire attitude. Did he not recognize the seriousness of the circumstances? Was he not concerned for his kin?

Perhaps the man somehow failed to understand. He was, after all, but an uneducated yokel.

"Mr Hennessy, I think perhaps I've failed to make myself clear. Chester is—"

The door opened all the way once more, and while Wilmott might not have been clear, the message conveyed by the pair of steel barrels that now hovered mere inches from his suddenly pallid face was unmistakable.

"Leave!"

Hands rising in sudden terror, one of them still clutching his hat, Wilmott backed away from the shotgun. Sheer luck prevented him from tripping over his own heels, or the rickety steps, as he retreated from the porch. He'd barely reached the roadway when the door slammed, hiding Hennessy – and his weapon – from view. The professor barely even heard it over his pounding heart.

He released a long, shaking breath.

"Well," he muttered. "That could certainly have gone better."

Instinct and rationality both urged him to turn around and leave, to head back to Taunton, check into a hotel for the night and hop aboard the first train back to Arkham in the morning. He'd already gone above and beyond the call of any duty owed a student by his professor.

But the project...

Nor was it merely his own ambitions that made Wilmott hesitate. He knew, absolutely knew as surely as if he'd read it in one of his own textbooks, that Woodrow Hennessy was lying to him.

It wasn't merely the man's behavior, though that, even for so isolated and unfriendly a community as this one, was certainly suspicious enough. It was Chester himself. On one of the rare occasions his relations had come up in conversation at all, Chester had specifically told him that he got on much better with the low side of the family than his parents did.

While "better" didn't necessarily mean "close," it certainly implied a stronger relationship than Woodrow claimed.

Although he turned and walked away from the Hennessy house, although it ran counter to his better judgment, Wilmott Polaski had already made a decision.

He didn't go far. Perhaps a mile at most, distant enough that Hennessy should think him gone, that no random member of the community – not that he'd seen any – would connect the stranger with that particular house.

And there, sitting upon a log at least marginally free of mildews or fungi or other swamp substances, he waited.

He knew the delay would mean stumbling his way back to civilization in the dark of night, at best; and at worst, genuine bodily harm. He deliberately shunted those thoughts aside. He felt himself on the verge of answers, possibly of saving not only his prize student but the project that would cement his own name in the textbooks he so valued.

Night fell, the avian and insectile songs of the Hockomock changed from one chorus to another and Wilmott Polaski shuffled his way back toward the crooked house.

He approached at an angle, wincing as he deliberately set his path through the cold waters, soaked almost to his knees. Should Hennessy open the front door and gaze out through the curtained, drooping windows, he ought to notice nothing amiss. And thankfully the sodden earth rose again around the house proper, if only just, so Wilmott shouldn't have to remain long within the muck.

The back of the place was, if anything, even more dilapidated than the front, whole sections softened with moisture and inner rot. The good professor had to remind himself more than once that such disrepair didn't necessarily reflect a slovenly nature on the part of the inhabitants, that the environment might well seep into the wood, strip the paint, bestow a patina of filth, regardless of all efforts to hold it at bay.

Not that he was *too* terribly inclined to give Hennessy the benefit of any doubt.

Lamplight leaking out from the ill-fitting shutters, and a bright moon glowing through the clouds that had grown thinner as dusk fell, provided just enough illumination for him to get by. Enough to note details of the house that he'd failed to observe earlier, when his focus has been entirely on the front door and the man within.

The most salient of those details was the lower level, beneath the house proper.

It had, perhaps, been constructed at a time when the surrounding waters were a bit lower than today. Standing mostly above ground, it couldn't rightly be called a basement, yet it was too large and structurally sound to be simply an under-floor hollow someone had bricked up. Whether it had existed since the structure was built, or whether someone had added it later, Wilmott wasn't architect enough to say.

Neither could he say with certainty why that lowest level didn't fully match the width of the rest of the house, creating a peculiar combination of partial cellar, partial crawlspace. It wasn't unique to the Hennessy place, either, as he'd seen similar construction on some other homes he'd passed. Perhaps it was to do with the inconsistent earth here at the swamp's edges, with portions solid enough to support construction standing adjacent to others that were far too soft? He didn't know.

He knew only that, beneath the sagging floor and between the wooden supports, stood walls of uneven stones and thick mortar.

A half-sunken cellar certainly felt like a good place for Hennessy to hide his secrets, and, if nothing else, one of its own narrow windows might provide ingress. Crouching low, shuddering at the slick mud beneath his fingers as he scrabbled for balance, Wilmott slid beneath the house's outer edges.

Picking his way between puddles and discarded, rusted tools, biting his lip to keep from exclaiming his revulsion at the cobwebs and skittering bugs, he neared the first of those windows...

"Isslaach thkulkris, isslaach cheoshash... Vnoktu vshuru shelosht escruatha..."

It might have been five voices or fifty; he knew only it was more than one. Resonating off one another, echoing in brick-walled rooms, filtered through cracked wood and the natural songs of the swamp, it seemed somehow more than the foreign tongue – or perhaps simple gibberish – that reached his ears.

"Svist ch'shultva ulveshtha ikravis... Isslaach ikravis vuloshku dlachvuul loshaa... Ulveshtha schlachtli vrulosht chevkuthaansa..."

On it went, intertwining until he couldn't tell one phrase from the next, and then repeating once more from the beginning.

Over and over as he sat and listened, trying and failing to make the slightest sense of it, growing somehow *heavier* with each repetition even though it never varied in volume. Something about the litany was... off. Unclean. He felt violated, as though something slick had wiggled on the back of his tongue as he swallowed a bite of what should have been a mundane meal. He found himself lightheaded and nauseated, staggering back a few steps from the window as he struggled to restrain his rising gorge.

The handle of the old shovel on which he stepped was rotten most of the way through, but with enough of a solid center to resound like a gunshot when it snapped beneath his foot. Disoriented and now terrified of being discovered, the professor turned and fled, splashing through the swampy waters and into the night, leaving the Hennessy house behind.

The house, but not the ghastly phrases, which now seemed determined to dog his every step.

"Isslaach thkulkris, isslaach cheoshash... Vnoktu vshuru

Two nights later, he returned yet again.

As before, he'd initially intended to flee, and found himself unable. Thoughts of Chester Hennessy and their shared endeavors occupied his waking hours, most of which he spent staring at the walls of his rented room or aimlessly wandering about town. When sleep had finally claimed him, he'd tossed in the grip of horrific nightmares, shivering so violently he'd bolted awake from vistas of frigid ice... howling winds... endless shadow... *something* reaching out for him, stretching, grasping...

And always, asleep or awake, nesting at the back of his mind, winding and twisting and coiling around itself over and over, that abhorrent, damnable verse. Had he been honest with himself, Wilmott would have admitted there was something to the mantra itself, far more than his concern for his missing student or even their endeavors, that kept him here.

Even when preparing his return to the house, however, he never allowed himself to consider it.

This time, thanks to a quick trip to Taunton's shops, he came prepared. A set of screwdrivers and miniature blades sat tucked in a bag at his belt, and he clutched a small lantern in one fist, an iron prybar in the other. Flimsy as the wood was, the last was almost overkill. The window frame scooped away like oatmeal; he could practically have made entry with his bare hands.

Wiggling, grunting, he wormed his way through the window and flopped to the mildewed stone floor, flinching from both the impact and the choking scent.

Only as he picked himself up did he realize that the odd recitation continued, that the people down here, whoever they were, were still repeating their mindless refrain. Up to that point he'd thought the words were merely in his head, as they had been for the past days.

That realization brought with it another wave of disorientation, as if the thought itself made him more susceptible. The hallway tilted around him, splintered in a kaleidoscope of fragments, before pulling itself back together and leaving only dizziness in its wake.

Wilmott staggered forward, one hand on the wall while the other clutched the lantern that now seemed a woefully insufficient source of light. The uneven floor made the vertigo harder to deal with, as broken stones reached up to trip him or sudden dips threatened to topple him. More than once the swamp crept in between the stones at the lowest points, resulting in puddles to splash or, on one or two occasions, even wade through.

Surely the passageway couldn't be this long? It must be his own confusion that had him nigh convinced he'd taken scores of steps already, rather than a mere handful.

When he stumbled yet again, glancing down angrily at his traitorous feet, he discovered it hadn't been the floor that tripped him this time.

The blue-gray of a Postal Service uniform, now tattered, hid most, but unfortunately not all, of the half-stripped skeleton beneath. Nor had it been time, the waters, nor even vermin that had torn away the flesh and tissue. Even through his disorientation, his horror, Wilmott clearly saw the jagged indentations on the bone that could only have

been left by human jaws.

He found himself continuing, with only the faintest memory of clambering back to his feet. He couldn't remember at precisely what point he'd collapsed, nor did he recall vomiting, though the acrid taste on his tongue suggested he had.

He thought, too, that he might have seen the remains of other savaged corpses beyond that of the unfortunate postman, had flashing, sporadic images of additional limbs, additional skulls, but once more his memory refused to cling to them well enough to be sure it was anything more than overwrought imagination.

His head ached, the skin uncomfortably tight around his skull. By the time the obvious notion of "Turn back! Get out!" penetrated his feverish mind, he'd already reached the end of the hall.

A cage of some sort, or a makeshift cell. He couldn't seem to focus on it clearly, or at least only bits and pieces stuck in his memory. He recalled stone walls and haphazard iron bars.

He recalled the stench of old sweat, of human filth.

Recalled not the one young man he sought but a small collection of faces, caked in mud and spit and blood and worse, some merely soiled but others subtly misshapen. If Chester had been among them, Wilmott never saw him.

It was from them, from chapped lips and ragged throats, that the alien chorus emerged. Over and over, almost but not entirely in unison so that the words seemed to vibrate in the ear.

"Svist ch'shultva ulveshtha ikravis..."

And Wilmott stepped toward them, his empty hand

outstretched to tug at the chain and padlock that sealed them in, his own mouth beginning to move, no thought or instinct in his head save to *join them*.

The vicious report of a shotgun, and the patter of stone fragments falling from the buckshot-marred ceiling, shook him from his trance.

In the entryway to a perpendicular hallway Wilmott had previously overlooked in his distraction, stood Woodrow Hennessy. He gripped his weapon in corpse-knuckled fists, and twisted fabric of makeshift plugs protruded from his ears.

"I told you to leave, God damn you!"

Had Wilmott been more together, more himself, he might have heard not only the fury but the horror and grief burdening the man's outburst.

But he was not, and did not. Howling in confusion and in fear, the professor spun and raced back the way he'd come.

He sloshed through pools, stumbled over corpses, scraped his hands as he scrabbled back through the open window. Even in the pitch dark, he only barely remembered to keep hold of his lantern. His thoughts – all those not wrapped up in the litany, endless, pounding – were of escape only. In his panic, then, it seemed to make sense that the monstrous rustic with madmen locked in his cellar would be far less keen to pursue him into the wild than back along the road.

By the time his pounding heart had slowed and his head ceased spinning long enough for him to recognize the downsides of such a plan, he was already hopelessly lost.

Hours passed. Wilmott shivered violently, soaked to the waist. Beneath the dark waters, the mud had finally sucked the oversized boot from his left foot, forcing him to limp with fear

that he would step on something piercing, slicing... or biting.

Unnamed creatures shrieked in the distant dark. The swamp rippled in the wake of swimming things.

From the muck below and the cedars all around, limbs snagged at his clothes, at his skin, making him start with frightened cries no matter how tightly he tried to keep his lips shut. Surely they were only branches, roots, vines. Yet in the flickering light of his lantern and in his thoughts – which felt ever warped, ever more sluggish, compressed in some mental vise – he could have sworn he saw them moving, flexing as they reached for him.

And that light itself had begun to fade, its dancing growing ever more frantic, as the flame licked thirstily at the last few traces of oil.

They both flared, then, the firelight and the panic together, in a final burst.

Before him, half-sunk in the swamp, vine-wrapped and coated in slime, was a black stone. He peered at writings carved in an alphabet unlike any he had ever seen before and could not possibly read – and yet which seemed, at some level below the conscious, perhaps even beyond the sapient, familiar. It tugged at him, a sensation that felt as physical as it did emotional. A shiver began at the back of his neck but died before it traveled far, as though his body no longer remembered how to move.

His lantern died, to reveal another source of illumination, coming up through the swamp behind him.

"Professor!" Woodrow Hennessy's voice was hoarse. He must have been calling out for some time. "Professor, can you hear me?"

He stepped into view, water sloshing around his calves. Wilmott Polaski tore his gaze from the stone, advanced toward the newcomer, and responded in the only way he could, with the only words he knew.

"Isslaach thkulkris, isslaach cheoshash..."

Hennessy might not have heard him – he still wore the plugs of fabric in his ears, seemed more frightened of what he might hear than of braving the swamp while deafened – but he clearly recognized the recitation all the same.

With a scream of fury, of guilt, of denial, but above all else of fear, he raised the shotgun toward the oncoming professor and fired.

CHAPTER ONE

It was a soft song, its notes made up of the shuffling of papers; the thump of leather-bound covers; the rolling of ladders and the scuffing of chairs; the swish of trousers, of skirts; and the dull hum of quiet conversations that were never *as* quiet as the students believed they were.

A soft song, filtering from dozens of rooms and arched halls, from every floor of Miskatonic University's famed Orne Library – and one that, on the average day, Daisy Walker found empowering, energizing for all its subtleties.

Today was not an average day. She had not, in fact, had many average days at all for the past few months.

At first, part of her unease might have been anxiety over her new responsibilities. This new term, spring '23, was only the second since Dr Armitage had put her in charge of the Special Collections, the restricted tomes and writings for which the Orne Library was most well known. The least precious of the books therein was worth more than her yearly salary, the value of the entire lot immeasurable, not just in money but in irreplaceable lore.

Daisy knew herself well enough, though, to realize that while nerves might have overcome her poise at first, she'd more than adapted to her new duties in the intervening months.

And some of that unease might be down to the contents of those tomes, which she'd made a point of studying once the position had opened and Armitage had first hinted he might consider her to fill it. While most of the Special Collection was merely old, some of its contents were ... peculiar.

She'd perused a few of them, when she had the opportunity: De Vermis Mysteriis, John Dee's partial Necronomicon, the del Arrio translation of the Cabala of Saboth. They spoke, those books, of ancient things, of sorceries long forgotten and of names that should have been. As windows into ancient cultures and beliefs, they fascinated her, but their actual content? She didn't believe a word of it, of course; it was no more real than the imaginings of Gogol or Stoker. Still, that hadn't prevented her from turning on a few extra lights during the later hours of her shifts, double-checking the locks before turning in for the night, or – now and again – waking in a panicked sweat from nightmares she could never clearly recall.

But again, Daisy knew herself well enough to know that no musty old myths or fairy tales would disturb her so thoroughly, or for so long.

No, it was-

"Miss Walker?"

"Oh!" The young librarian jolted in her chair, hands gripping the edge of her desk. It was, to the best of her memory, the first time anyone had opened the door to her office without her noticing.

That idea still took some getting used to: her office.

"Oh!" The echo came from the even younger woman, wide-eyed and round-faced, standing in the doorway. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to startle you."

Daisy brushed back a long curl of blonde hair. "That's quite all right, Abigail. I was just... lost in thought, I suppose." Not that she had any intention of revealing said thoughts, either regarding her books or... other concerns.

"I did knock," Abigail offered shyly. "But you didn't answer, and I *knew* you were in here, and I wanted to make sure you were all right." Then, perhaps noting a lingering vacancy in Daisy's expression, "*Are* you all right?"

"I'm fine. I suppose I was even more lost than I realized. You, ah, you needed something?"

Those wide eyes flickered aside, down, back to meet her own. "I just... That is, I thought I should ask if you needed anything done in the, um, the Special Collections?"

"I see." With an iron will, Daisy kept her lips from quirking in a knowing grin. "No, dear, nothing just now."

"Oh." Again the brief gaze off in the direction of the restricted chambers. "Are you, um, are you sure?"

The grin fought even harder to slip onto her face – but at the same time, she had to fight the urge to shake her head. Abigail Foreman was an industrious student worker, and Daisy would be happy to have her stay on once she'd graduated, should her interest in library economics lead her in that direction.

She was, however, a bit too readily diverted by particularly boy-shaped distractions.

"Your duties, Abigail, include providing assistance to students and patrons when they solicit it – not to go foisting it upon those who have made no such requests."

Abigail flushed until her skin practically glowed.

"Yes, miss. Sorry, miss."

Now Daisy did allow herself to smile, hoping to take some of the sting from the rebuke. "Now, I believe someone told me South American Studies needed re-shelving?"

Abigail took the offered escape, fleeing from the office, and Daisy released the sigh that had been building for the past few moments. She liked the girl, would normally have made far more allowances for her latest infatuation, might even have encouraged it.

Raslo. Why, of all the fine young lads Miskatonic's campus could offer, did the poor girl's attentions have to fall on Elliot Raslo? Even if he hadn't been mired in uncertainty and grief, even if everything in his life, everything at Miskatonic University, been fine and dandy, even then...

But that wasn't her secret to tell. The boy would have been mortified even to know that she knew.

Daisy stood – chair scraping across the floor – carefully smoothed her blouse and skirt, and left her office, turning in the opposite direction from Abigail's flight.

The outermost chamber of the Special Collection was a reading room, consisting only of a table, a handful of comfortably upholstered chairs, and a lamp. Students and visitors were permitted to make use of the collection only individually or in small groups, and only on limited occasions depending on seniority, the nature of their research and in exchange for volunteered labor. Over the past weeks, assuming

nobody else had reserved time, it was a coin toss whether or not Elliot would be here. Thus, Daisy wouldn't have been surprised to see him even if she hadn't already known, thanks to Abigail's blatant interest, that he was there.

The young man sat, elbows on the table, head in his hands, so that Daisy wasn't certain he was awake. His brown coat and his black hair were both rumpled. Time was, not so long ago, he'd have been chagrined even to be seen outside in such a state.

"Elliot?"

He was, indeed, awake. He looked up at her, bleary with exhaustion and churning emotion. His face – a bit darker complexioned than her own due to a Mediterranean grandparent – sported several days' worth of stubble.

"Is there news?"

It was his first question almost every time she saw him, no matter that she'd told him over and over that she would let him know the instant she heard anything.

"No." She pulled up a chair and sat across from him. "Nothing."

"Damn!" Then, quieting himself before she had to remind him to do so, "Useless, the lot of them."

She knew he meant the Arkham police. This, too, was part of the ritual, a conversation they'd had so often she had to assume he took some meager comfort in its repetition.

"They've precious little to go on," she told him. Indeed, they had almost nothing. Chester Hennessy, Elliot's best friend and roommate, had vanished without trace – a feat duplicated some weeks later by Professor Polaski, Chester's mentor and advisor in ongoing research.

"They're ignoring what little they have," Elliot insisted, rubbing a knuckle into his eye. "They're still treating them as separate incidents when any idiot can see they're not. Still insisting that Chester ran off because of that bitch—"

"Language, Mr Raslo!"

He recoiled as if she'd slapped him. "I- Of course. I'm so sorry, Miss Walker."

Daisy knew he meant it. Elliot was, if nothing else, a gentle, courteous soul. At least when he wasn't exhausted and frustrated and scared.

She laid her hand atop his, and managed not to wince as he clutched it like a life preserver. Normally she'd have moved the book that sat before him on the table, would have refused to let them rest their hands on its cover this way for fear the oils of their skin might damage the old material, but a brief moment or two wouldn't hurt it.

It wasn't the first time he'd asked for this one, either. He'd been weeks trying to retrace Chester's research, hoping that something in the missing student's recent endeavors – the project that had absorbed him, body and soul, for months – might shed some light, however feeble, on the mystery of his disappearance.

So far, unless he was keeping secrets from her, he'd had precisely the same amount of success as the police he cursed for idiots and fools: none whatsoever.

She didn't mind his presence, and certainly appreciated his help. Like Chester before him, in order to earn himself more time in the Special Collections, Elliot had volunteered to help sort unimportant documents for the Orne Library and the university as a whole: letters and personal papers willed them by alumni; old newspaper clippings; reports of historical artifacts stolen from museums and other universities for which they should be alert; and so forth. He claimed it was solely due to his efforts to find his missing roommate, but Daisy believed it was a way to feel closer to the friend he'd lost. Elliot was, on those days he could focus, even better at such mundane but essential tasks than Chester had been. Still, she'd grown worried at his mounting obsession, to say nothing of the damage to his academic standing. Daisy knew he must be missing classes in order to be here at all hours.

Had her leniency with the Special Collections and his research somehow led Chester Hennessy into harm's way? Unlikely as it seemed, it was that fear more than anything else that kept her awake nights, ate at her composure during the day. It was not a mistake she cared to repeat with his friend, however much he felt the need to follow.

"Elliot," she began finally, "you need to-"

It was only because Daisy hadn't shut the door to the reading room that the commotion reached them at all, that she heard the sudden cacophony intruding on the library's song. Not shouting, not yet, but voices raised in disagreement that could readily *become* shouting.

Or worse?

She rose, her back as stiff as her expression. Even at the best of times, Daisy had no patience for those who would disrupt the peace of her library. Whoever had foolishly elected to do so today, in the midst of all her other concerns, was liable to get an unfriendly piece of her mind. "I'm so sorry. Excuse me."

A swish of woolen skirts, and she was gone.

•••

Elliot watched her go, his weary mind not immediately registering the significance of what they'd heard.

Miss Walker, his instructors, his fellow students. They all attributed his constant distraction to grief and to worry, even if they couldn't possibly understand just how strongly he...

Well, they were partly right. But only partly.

And they attributed his research, his burning compulsion to retrace Chester's research, to an obsessive and almost certainly futile hope of locating him when the police and the man's own family could not.

They were partly right. But only partly.

The other part, he'd mentioned to no one.

That Chester had told him excitedly, on one particular evening, that the clue to finally break his mystery project – the one he claimed would exceed all his ambitions, would cement his name in the annals of archeological studies before he even completed his education – had been found. Though he had then balked at explaining precisely what he had found, or how it could help.

That in the final days before his disappearance, Chester had become distant, listless, constantly preoccupied. He'd slept poorly, barely spoken. Had taken to muttering to himself, sometimes in French, or in languages Elliot couldn't identify, let alone interpret.

Elliot's own studies, focusing as they did on the psychology of the human mind, led him to believe that his friend's efforts had transformed into a dangerous, perhaps even pathological obsession. He had finally committed himself to confronting Chester, though his heart pounded and his stomach coiled in on itself like a dying worm at the thought of what such an

intervention might do to their relationship – but Chester had disappeared before he'd gathered the courage to speak up.

And ever since...

Ever since, Elliot himself had awakened from jagged, half-remembered nightmares on more nights than not, shivering from a deep chill unrelated to the temperature of the room in which he slept. Nightmares not only of ice, but of things that moved in shadow, things that dwelt behind endless sheets of hail and sleet.

The dreams alone, he could have managed. It was the constant repetition that threatened to drive him mad.

Just a few words, a partial phrase. Something in that unknown language, something Chester had murmured only the once where Elliot could hear it. It lodged in the back of his mind, a constant itch he couldn't scratch, couldn't stop *trying* to scratch, echoing over and over, winding through every conversation, bubbling beneath every lecture, until he wanted to scream.

To scream those words.

It was that phrase, that fragment, that distracted him more than any search, more than any grief. And he knew, without knowing entirely how he knew, that it would have been far worse, might truly have stripped away all sanity and self-control, if it hadn't been for his *other* discovery in following Chester's research. That *other* mantra.

It was just a mantra, was it not? It couldn't really be-

Another burst of raised voices, not quite shouting, from whatever commotion was occurring out in the library, snapped him from rumination. Elliot forced himself from his chair. He doubted Miss Walker or the library staff would require any help to deal with whatever problem had arisen, and on the off-chance they did, he couldn't imagine what help he might be able to offer. So it was with more of a desperate need for diversion than any sense of duty that he proceeded down the hallway in her distant wake.

All normal activity within the library's main hall had come to a halt as students peered over their books and their papers at the confrontation brewing by the massive entryway. Several of the Orne staffers, and two of Miskatonic's uniformed security guards, were gathered in a clump around a stranger who'd apparently attempted to access the library.

The man didn't look remotely like student, staff, or alumni, and while the Orne Library was open to others, they either had to be invited researchers or to have made a formal appointment well in advance. To judge by the raised voices, some of which were clearly tired of repeating themselves, the stranger met neither qualification.

Elliot hadn't the faintest idea what to make of the man. He wasn't particularly tall, but his broad shoulders and proud bearing made him seem so. He wore a long, heavy coat that would have blended in well enough on the streets of Arkham, but the boots visible below his trouser cuffs, made of some supple leather, were of no style or fashion the young man had ever seen. Nor, for that matter, were the fellow's features, which were flatter and darker than Elliot's own. The young student was not especially well traveled, much as he wished otherwise, and unable to place the stranger's land of origin. He put Elliot in mind a bit of a Mongolian researcher he'd met once, and a bit of American Indian, but not precisely either.

"It's only a few questions!" The stranger's voice was deep,

resonant; his accent, like everything else about him, far enough beyond Elliot's experience that he couldn't place it. "Surely one of your librarians can spare me five minutes!"

One of the security guards began again to deny him, taking a menacing step nearer. It was, perhaps, the threat of the confrontation turning into a genuine brawl that inspired Daisy Walker, hovering at the edges of the commotion, to finally intervene.

"And what questions are those, Mr...?"

"Miss Walker," the security guard protested, "I don't think you oughta-"

"It's all right, Floyd."

The stranger turned her way, his coat drifting open to reveal an array of charms and amulets that hung from his neck by a veritable thicket of leather thongs and animal gut. From where he stood, Elliot thought, but couldn't be certain, he saw old bone, wood, stone, and thick leather trinkets, all of which were carved or stitched with small designs he couldn't, from this distance, make out.

"Shiwak," the man replied to Daisy's implied question. "Billy Shiwak."

"All right, Mr Shiwak. What's so urgent that you had to raise such a fuss in my library?"

No, not bone, Elliot decided, idly wondering why he was so focused on this man's – Shiwak's – accoutrements. *Ivory.*

After the past few moments of tension, Shiwak seemed almost confused now that he had the opportunity to pose his questions. He cast about for a few seconds, as though seeking his words.

"To begin with," he began, "I'm hoping you can tell me

where to find a man by the name of Jebediah Pembroke. I've been told—"

Elliot never found out *what* he'd been told, because Daisy Walker went deathly still at the mention of the name, though it meant nothing to Elliot himself. In his three and a half years at Miskatonic, Elliot had never seen her react that way to anything.

"How dare you?!"

Everyone, including the security guards and the newcomer himself, took a step back in shock.

Daisy continued, her voice nearly vibrating. "I don't know what sort of rumormongers and gossip you've been listening to, but I will not subject myself or these halls to your... your slander."

"Miss Walker, I'm certain I intended no insult. I simply-"

"I'll thank you to leave my library now, Mr Shiwak."

"Please, I-"

"I will thank you. To leave."

The ice enveloping her every word, and a glance at the stern expressions on the two security guards, apparently convinced the man that further argument would do nobody any good. With a stiff nod, he made for the doors, the guards falling into step behind him.

Daisy spun, her heel digging a divot into the thin foyer carpet. "This is still a library," she announced firmly to staff and student alike, "not a theatre."

Faces swiftly turned back to books or notes or regular tasks. Head high, the librarian swept through the main room, making her way back toward her office.

Elliot alone continued to stare at the doors, contemplating

the fellow who'd disappeared beyond. For it was only now that the damnable phrase returned to its accustomed volume in the back of his mind, that he realized it had briefly quieted, if only slightly.

Quieted in the presence of the peculiar Billy Shiwak.

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