

In the chapter titled "??," we witness the tension-filled atmosphere in Ned's Night Spot, where Charles Halloway sits, fatigued from sleeplessness and overthinking, absorbing the eerie quietude that follows a nearby parade. His discomfort rises when he senses unusual happenings outside, and he hesitates to pay for his coffee. The door swings open, revealing a stranger with a tattooed hand adorned with an eye on each finger. This unsettling figure captures Halloway's attention, leading him to witness a parade of shadows, notably a skeletal figure known as Mr. Skull, who plays a chilling xylophone in the street below.

As Halloway processes this peculiar scene, a boy's innocent call brings attention to the emerging character of the Dwarf, marked by his jingle bells and torn persona, reflecting a lost soul searching for something incomprehensible. The Dwarf's gaze meets that of the young boy, which fills Will and his friend Jim with dread. They instinctively try to render themselves invisible, fearing the implications of the Dwarf's presence. Amidst this anxiety, Will's father unknowingly approaches danger while buying a cigar, which eventually draws him closer to the unsettling events transpiring beneath him.

A conversation unfolds between Charles Halloway and the Illustrated Man, characterized by eerie exchanges regarding two boys who have seemingly been chosen as special guests for the Cooger-Dark Combined Shows. Amid hints of recognition, Will's heart races as his father fails to constrain the emerging truth. The father remains unaware of the imminent peril the boys face, especially when the Illustrated Man reveals that their faces are tattooed in his palms.

The tension escalates when Mr. Dark lashes at Mr. Halloway's uncertainty, demanding information about Will and Jim. In a moment fraught with danger, Jim braces himself as Will grapples with the revelation that their names have been exposed. The climactic scene sees Mr. Dark's struggle to conceal a sinister intent, revealing a shocking depth of manipulation and fear connected to the carnival. The chapter concludes with a rallying plea from Halloway, urging the boys to remain hidden until nightfall while he devises a plan to confront the lurking dread they've encountered.