Danny O'Brien sat behind an expensive-looking wooden desk with a green marble top thumbing through his ledger. The finely appointed, if not grossly ostentatious, office was his second home. He spent more time here than he did anywhere else. The dark wood wainscot topped with a gaudy dark green and gold wallpaper made the room look more like a gambling den than an office. An overstuffed leather couch and chairs were arranged around the font of the large desk Danny sat behind all atop rich burgundy carpeting. O'Brien was a large man stuffed into an uncomfortable-looking grey pinstriped suit. He had the appearance of a man on the verge of physical collapse. His labored breathing and red face told the tale of a man whose indulgence was taking its toll. Big Danny O'Brien stared at his ledger, chewing the stub of a cigar in the side of his mouth. Standing at attention in the corner was a giant man who seemed as wide as he was tall and sporting a large scar down his right cheek from the top of his ear to his chin. Both men wore expensive suits though Danny's was considerably more so than the mountain standing in the corner. The large man was utterly silent as Danny looked over his books.

"Another fucking shipment pinched by the coppers. How am I supposed to do business with these teetotalers breathing down my neck? We need some new routes. They know we're coming. Sitting and waiting until they see one of our..." Danny abruptly stopped talking aloud to himself as a knock on the door interrupted him.

"I told you I was busy, no interruptions," Danny shouted at the closed door.

The door opened, and two men walked into the office, closing the door behind themselves. The first man through the door was tall, thin, and wore an expensive, finely tailored suit. He carried with him a brown leather briefcase. The other was shorter and stalkier with a cheap wrinkled brown suit that looked like he'd been wearing it for days. Both men entered as if they'd been here a thousand times before, the stalky one standing by the side of the door and the expensive one walking over to the chair in front of Danny's desk and sitting down.

"And who the fuck are you?" Danny asked with shock on his face. "Moony, what the hell are these guys doing back here?" He shouted to the closed door.

"I apologize for showing up unannounced. Don't beat your man up over it. I can be extremely convincing." The tall man said with a prominent English accent.

"I don't give a shit if you're the fucking Pope. You don't come into my office unless I say so." Danny turned to say something to the man in the corner, but the tall man cut him off.

"Trust me. You are going to want to hear what I have to say." The tall man waited for a sign that Danny was listening. Danny turned back to the man sitting in front of him. "My name is Thomas Edgerton. I deal in antiques, or more to the point, connecting people with items for which they are looking and finding buyers for those who are selling. At times the items I sell fall under the not strictly legal classification. I am..." Danny cut Thomas off.

"So your a fence, right?" Danny got right to the point. Thomas noticed that he was calming down and was no longer looking toward his colossal bodyguard.

"No. I provide a service for those who wish to acquire certain rare items that are not readily available. If that means I need to bypass customs or grease a few local authorities to get the item to its buyer, so be it. I deal mainly in artwork, rare books, and artifacts." Thomas could see that he had Danny's attention for better or worse.

"Well, seeing as I am not looking for any rare artifacts at the moment, you can get the hell out." Danny was beginning to get angry again.

"You and I have a mutual acquaintance. I came here to speak with you on his behalf." Thomas could tell that he needed to start talking fast to keep Big Danny from calling on his guard dog in the corner. "I have a proposition that will be mutually beneficial for all of us."

"Beneficial for me is all I care about." Danny still seemed angry, but at least he wasn't calling for his man to bash Thomas's head in.

"I am here on behalf of Isaiah Cage. You know him, yes?" Thomas was circling in on the point.

"Cage, yeah. Own's the garage on Sentinal Street. What about him." Danny closed the ledger and put it down on the desk.

"I brought the car you had at his garage," Thomas said.

"The boys were supposed to pick it up tonight. You don't wanna know what's gonna happen if they get there and the car is gone." Danny put the stump of cigar he was chewing on out in the ashtray on the desk to emphasize the logical outcome.

"Oh, I spoke with them. I told them I would be delivering the car to you personally." Thomas took a glance at the man in the corner. He hadn't reacted to any of the conversation taking place. Thomas could tell, though, that he was poised to respond at a single word from Big Danny.

"It seems Mr. Cage has a debt to settle with you. I am prepared to pay that debt in full here tonight. With an additional sum for the work that was not done on the car." Thomas paused, waiting for Danny's reaction.

"What? You bring that fucking car back here, and Cage didn't even do the work. That little bastard, his old man would never have..." Danny bellowed until Thomas cut him short.

"You murdered his father." Thomas stared at Danny.

"I didn't do anything," Danny responded with a smirk.

"Your men did. Do you not take responsibility for the actions of your subordinates?" Thomas shot back with venom in his voice.

"I don't like your tone, Mr. Edgerton. You'd do well to remember you are in my office." Danny calmly replied as the man in the corner shifted slightly.

Thomas lifted the leather case and slid it onto the desk. "In this case, you will find the money Mr. Cage owes you and the extra for the car. I'd like you to tell your men to stay clear of Mr. Cage and his garage from now on."

"Who the hell do you think you are coming into my office and making demands like that?" Danny's face was getting redder every moment.

"I am a businessman like yourself. I offer you the opportunity to close an account. It is a simple transaction." Thomas stayed calm but noticed that Dr. Norris, who stood by the door, had slid his hands into his coat pockets. "Mr. Cage is more than just an acquaintance of mine. He is a colleague as well as a friend. If you knew me, you would know that I have a fierce devotion to my friends."

"Well, I have a fierce devotion to the interest that I am making off of your friend's debt, and these cars don't fix themselves. I don't know how they do things in merry old England, but in Arkham, we do it my way. I think I will continue to collect on our friend's debt, and you can take that car back to the garage and tell Cage that he's gonna fix it for free now, thanks to you." A large vein in Big Danny's forehead had rased and was pulsing with his anger.

"You don't scare me, Mr. O'Brien, or excuse me, Big Danny." Thomas mockingly emphasized the word big. "I deal in worlds you couldn't imagine in your wildest dreams. I have faced the likes of which would have you pissing in your ill-fitting suit, you sloppy fuck. Take the money and leave Isaiah Cage alone. I'll offer you this one last chance."

"You piece of shit, kill 'em, Graddy," Danny shouted as he reached to open a drawer to his desk.

In an instant, Dr. Norris moved toward the gigantic man in the corner. The giant produced a .45 from beneath his coat and fired four shots into Daniel's chest, which exited through his back, leaving four large holes in his shabby brown suit jacket. Graddy's eyes widened as he realized that Daniel kept moving toward him, pulling his hands from his pockets, both of which were adorned by polished silver knuckle dusters. One swift punch crashed into the huge man's cheek, collapsing the entire side of his head inward. The giant man flew backward like a ragdoll, wholly lifted off his feet, and slammed into the wall causing several paintings to fall with him. He landed on the floor in a heap and laid there motionless.

Big Danny stared in horror as he watched his man be dispatched with one punch. He turned to Thomas, who was standing on the other side of his desk holding a silver-plated .45 at the end of his outstretched arm. Big Danny let his hand fall from the drawer from which he was trying to liberate his gun.

"What the fuck are you." He said as Daniel turned from the hulking man on the floor and returned his hands to his pocket as if nothing had happened. Big Danny could clearly see the four bullet holes in his chest, which had no apparent effect.

"I'm the last man you'll ever see if you interfere in Mr. Cage or any of his friend's lives again." Dr. Norris stared deeply into Big Danny's eyes until Big Danny turned his head to avoid his gaze.

"It could have been simple, Danny," Edgerton said. "The money is yours, I respect a deal, and Isaiah's father entered into it knowing the consequences. I'd wager that he didn't think it would end up in his death, but he had to have thought it was a possibility. In any case, Mr. Cage's debt is paid in full. You will leave him alone now. Your men in the other room will come to in an hour or so. Oh, and as for the two that killed Isaiah's father, you'll find them in the boot of the car. You may want to do something with them. The bodies will start to smell awful after a while."

Daniel opened the door to the office, turning to give Big Danny one more menacing look, then left. Thomas backed out of the room with his gun still pointed at Big Danny. "That's how we do it in merry old England," he said with a smile leaving Big Danny shaking behind his desk.

Cynthia sat in a cushioned chair in the room where they regularly met on the second floor of the Oak and Dagger. The contrast between the dusty first floor and the elegant second no longer seemed strange to her. This place now had a welcoming, safe feeling to it. As if passage through the entry gave her license to speak freely without judgment or fear of the consequences. So few places offered that to her. Even the gruff innkeeper whose name she had found was Mick was now welcoming to her and the others when they arrived. She considered everyone in the Society, which they had all started calling SEKT, a friend as well as a peer. Tonight, however, she was on edge.

Anita had not yet arrived and had not reached out earlier in the day to arrange a meeting before heading to the Oak and Dagger. She had moved into her new apartment the weekend prior, and Cynthia hadn't seen much of her all week. Cynthia knew that Anita had moved her things and was getting herself settled but had hoped that Anita would reach out and offer an address or phone number by this time. The fact that Anita was late to the meeting after telling Cynthia she was incredibly excited due to something she was working on, which she intended to present to the group, had Cynthia feeling nervous. Something felt off.

Mr. Edgerton and Dr. Norris were also late, which Cynthia felt was odd, but she didn't know enough about the two men to have any opinion if that was unusual or not. The rest of her friends had met in the downstairs common room before the meeting as they had done previously. Professors Berlioux and Templeton were waiting in the upstairs room as usual, but the lack of Edgerton and Norris flanking the wet bar was new.

Evelyn and Anthony were busy getting drinks as usual while Isaiah sat quietly by Cynthia, thumbing through a volume he had pulled from one of the shelves laden with books that adorned all four walls of the room. He seemed worried, more so than he usually did, and Cynthia knew that something was afoot regarding his dealings with Big Danny O'Brien. How Isaiah juggled this predicament, the garage, and a residency at the teaching hospital, she could never guess. He looked tired.

James sat quietly in one of the leather stuffed chairs just far enough from the rest of the group not to seem rude but to generally be excluded from the conversation. Something was up with James. Cynthia worried for him. He had not even taken time to shower Evelyn with flattery as he had always done before that night they entered the Witch House.

Cynthia scanned the group, waiting for Professor Berlioux to begin the meeting as usual. She felt a rush of anticipation as the door to the room opened. Cynthia tried not to let the disappointment show on her face as she realized it was Mr. Edgerton and Dr. Norris. Mr. Edgerton offered a cheery smile to everyone as they entered and gave Isaiah a wink. Cynthia thought that was a bit strange but could see Isaiah's posture relax, which she took as a good sign. Dr. Norris looked awkward in his tight expensive-looking black suit coat and mismatched brown shabby slacks. Cynthia could only imagine that he had soiled his regular jacket and had to borrow one from Mr. Edgerton. The result was a bit comical, but the solemn look on his face gave Cynthia the impression that it wasn't something he wanted to divulge to the rest of the group. Worry began to intensify in her as she realized Anita was not accompanying them.

It was Professor Tempelton who spoke first. "I see we have some late comers" she gave a disapproving look to Thomas and Daniel. "Does anyone know if Anita will be coming tonight?"

"I haven't heard from her in a couple of days. She doesn't have a phone in her new apartment. When I saw her Tuesday, she was excited about showing the group something she was working on. I saw her again briefly on Thursday morning, but she didn't mention that she would not be at the meeting." Cynthia said, trying not to sound as concerned as she felt.

To Cynthia's surprise, it was Thomas who spoke up next. "I saw her Thursday afternoon. She wanted to borrow some money for a bus ticket. Boston, I think. Something about a family matter."

"Family in Boston? She doesn't have any family in Boston." Anthony now had a look that mirrored Cynthia's. He was worried too.

"Oh, I didn't know. I may have the destination wrong, but I do believe it was Boston that she said. Nevertheless, I gave her the money for the ticket and bid her a happy journey." Thomas replied.

"So you were the last to see her," Cynthia said to Thomas.

"No, actually," Evelyn chimed in, "I saw her at the dinner on Main Street by the bus station. It was in the evening, around five or so. We barely spoke. I was coming in, and she was leaving. She did seem to be in a hurry, though come to think of it."

"It seems she has left town, is there any reason to think otherwise, Cynthia?" Professor Templeton had a slightly worried tone.

"I suppose not, though I would think she would let one of us know. She did seem very excited to bring whatever it was she was working on to the group, and as Anthony said, she doesn't have any family in Boston to my knowledge." Cynthia tried to sound calm, but she felt that they needed to get to the bottom of this quickly with the recent rash of missing students.

Cynthia noticed Professor Tempelton give Professor Berlioux a glance that seemed to imply her concern. Did they know something she did not? Maybe she was overreacting. Anita could have gone to see her family. Perhaps it was an emergency. But then why wouldn't she tell Evelyn when they crossed paths. She should have pressed Anita for her address earlier in the week. Anita told Cynthia that she asked her roommate at the dorms to forward her mail. Cynthia could ask for the address from her roommate, but it would be rather late when the meeting was over. No matter, this was more important than someone's beauty sleep.

The meeting proceeded with a gloomy air as the unspoken thought they all had, but none broached, lingered just beyond the general topics of discussion. Was Anita's seemingly mysterious absence somehow connected to the reports of missing students from the last few months? Was there some other less nefarious reason for her to lie about family in Boston? Something was not right, and it seemed that everyone was secretly thinking as much but unwilling to put it to words.

They discussed, as always, Keziah Mason and the strange evening they had spent at the Witch House in French Hill. Professor Templeton was interested in what Evelyn had discovered in the notes of Walter Gilman. Evelyn didn't have much to offer, explaining that the theories put forth in those confused maniacally written pages were revolutionary if the math could prove them, but utter gibberish if not. The notes drifted between solid formulas and wild speculation about his dreams. The study of those notes had taken a toll on Evelyn as well. It was as if the foundation of reality that she believed was beginning to crumble and fall away, leaving only the unwholesome fever-induced suggestions of an unstable and exhausted yet brilliant young man.

The group also discussed the Dark Man that James and Cynthia had seen that night. However, the subject was quickly dropped due to its uncomfortable relations to the possible reasons Anita may have missed the meeting.

Cynthia could not have been happier when the meeting finally came to a close. Isaiah and Thomas spoke briefly in a secluded corner of the room. She made a mental note to ask Isaiah what that was all about. She left the upstairs room in the Oak and Dagger still expecting to see Anita rushing in, offering apologies and relating her humorous tale of how she fell asleep studying. To Cynthia's dismay, they exited into the dark, snow-covered alleyway without any sign of Anita.

"I need to get to the dorms and ask Anita's ex-roommate if she has the address to her new apartment. I've been trying to be reasonable, but I'm worried." Cynthia blurted out as they exited the alley onto the street.

"I'm worried too," Anthony chimed in. "You heard Mr. Edgerton. She told me she didn't have any immediate family. Maybe she has some distant relatives in Boston, but that wasn't the impression I got. With these missing students," Anthony let the thought drift away with the light dusting of snow that had started to fall.

"She's probably just gone to an Aunt or Uncles for a visit before break ends. Now that I think of it, she held her notebook, and something was holding her place in it. It could have been a bus ticket." Evelyn offered, trying to ease the tension everyone was feeling. She tried not to sound as worried as she was for Cynthia's benefit.

"I just wonder why she wouldn't have told you that she was leaving. Don't you find that odd?" Cynthia was agitated now.

"We don't know anything at the moment, so let's try not to get ahead of ourselves. We are all concerned about Anita, but let's try and work through this logically. If you get the address tonight, we can meet up in the morning and head over to her apartment. Maybe one of her neighbors can give us more information." Isaiah tried to be pragmatic but could tell that his logical approach was helping receive the ire of Cynthia.

They made it to the campus in record time. The urgency Cynthia was feeling about getting the address, and the turning weather had sped up their pace through the quiet streets of Arkham. Although some students had started returning, the campus was still quiet and empty, with this being the last weekend of the winter break. When they reached the women's dormitory, the snow had begun to fall more intensely.

"I have to make a graveyard shift at the hospital tonight. I will swing by when I'm off, and we can go to Anita's apartment" Isaiah put his hand on Cynthia's shoulder. "Don't worry. It will all turn out to be nothing. We will have Anita back telling us about the historical significance of that tree over there in no time." He said, pointing to one of the large trees lining the walkway.

Cynthia smiled, trying to allow Isaiah's little joke to ease her mind. "That would be great, Isaiah. Good night."

"We'll come along too. What time are you off, Isaiah?" Anthony asked.

"Let's meet here around seven. Have a good night, everyone." Isaiah smiled, trying to look upbeat, and walked off deeper into the campus toward the teaching hospital.

"Well, ladies. I guess that's our queue. Try not to worry. Tomorrow we will get to the bottom of this." Anthony said.

Cynthia and Evelyn watched as Anthony and James faded into the falling snow and darkness of the night. Both waited until they could no longer see them before turning to head into the building.

"I'm going up to see if I can get the address. I saw Vivian earlier today, so I know she will be in her room." Cynthia was determined to get the address even though it was rather late for a social call.

"OK, are you sure you don't want to wait until morning?" Evelyn inquired.

"I'll feel better if I just get it." Cynthia took the stairs to the second floor, leaving Evelyn on the first-floor landing.

Once Cynthia reached the second floor, she could feel the same oppressive feeling she had when she saw the Dark Man. Chills rand down her spine as she stared down the vacant hallway. She was relieved to see that the lights had been fixed since the last time, offering adequate illumination for the length of the hallway. She peered down the hallway to the other end, where it turned to the right allowing access to the back stairwell. It was where she saw the dark figure the previous night. She couldn't move, paralyzed with fear. Cynthia took a deep breath to steady herself, then, with all the determination she could muster, she began walking toward Anita's room.

Moving at a brisk pace, she reached the door quickly. It was nearly halfway down the hall. Again the lingering smell of burnt hair appeared. Subtle at first, becoming stronger each moment she spent in the hallway. The hair on the back of her neck raised as the overwhelming feeling of being watched struck her. She glanced to the far end of the hallway, and there was nothing there. Cold sweat began to bead on her forehead. She knocked three times on the door.

The seconds seemed like an eternity as she waited for the door to open. Her breath was heavy, and her hands shook uncontrollably. She knocked again, this time more aggressively. Please, she thought, someone, open the door. Relief washed over her as she heard the sound of movement inside the room. There was someone in there. She was not alone. The relief turned to elation when the door creaked open, revealing Vivian, Anita's ex-roommate.

"Can I help you?" Vivian was visibly perturbed at being called upon so late.

"I'm sorry to bother you at this hour, Vivian. I don't know if you remember me. I'm Cynthia. A friend of Anita's" Cynthia tried to sound apologetic and polite.

"Yes, Cynthia. I remember you. What's this about?" Vivian replied.

"I'm sorry. I need Anita's address. She told me you were forwarding her mail, and so I figured you must have it." Cynthia tried to get to the point as quickly as possible. She didn't want to be on this floor any longer than she had to be.

"And that couldn't have waited until the morning?" Vivian looked even more put out now. "I have some mail for her as well. If you are going to see her, can you please take it with you?" She said, moving back into the room and writing the address down on a sheet of paper. She grabbed two envelopes off of her bureau and returned to Cynthia. Handing the envelopes and the paper unceremoniously to Cynthia, she added. "Tell her she still has a few books here that were mixed in with mine. She can come by and get them whenever she likes. Now, if there is nothing else, I'd like to get back to studying before bed."

"Of course, thank you. Again, sorry to bother you at this hour. I'll get these to Anita when I see her." Cynthia could barely contain the urge to run back to the stairs.

"Good night," Vivian said abruptly, then closed the door.

As soon as the door shut, Cynthia was again gripped with fear. Was it possible that the smell had grown stronger? The feeling of being watched was not almost a tangible thing like a blanket of humidity surrounding her. She turned to head back the way she came when suddenly several of the lights in the hallway began to flicker, then, to Cynthia's dread, went out. She resisted the urge to call out as the mind-numbing fear set in. She stood in the only light remaining in the hallway. The lights at either end of the hallway near the front and rear stairs were still functioning as well. Between her island of light and the stairs was a stretch of black hallway. Her breath was coming quicker now as she prepared to make her way to the stairs she had come. She turned to take one glance to the back end of the hall, where to her utter horror, there stood a tall, dark figure.

Stifling a scream, she turned to face the menacing figure. It did not move. It stood staring at her. She reached her hand into her purse and produced a small knife which she quickly hid behind her leg. Mustering every bit of courage she could, she began to walk straight for the figure.

"You there. This building is for women only. You need to leave at once." She said in a loud, shaky voice. "You can't be hanging around here." Cynthia gripped the knife tightly in her sweaty hand. The figure did not move.

"Did you hear me, sir? You can not be here." Cynthia could feel her heart beating within her chest as she drew closer to the dark figure.

She moved through the dark hallway with a single purpose, to confront this man, whoever he was. As she approached, the smell grew stronger, now with a sickly sweet odor, like the smell of a rotting animal. Still, the figure did not move. She was now nearly ten feet from the man but still could not discern any features. It was as if it was a statue carved from pitch black obsidian. She thought that maybe this was just a shadow being case by something caught in the light fixture. The stillness of the thing was so complete. As she inched ever closer, she began to calm herself with the thought that it must be that. She could hear only the blood rushing in her ears and her labored breathing as she was nearly upon the thing now.

Then a flood of icy cold fear slithered through her entire body as the figure walked off around the corner toward the door to the back stairs and out of her view. She yelped at the sudden movement but pressed on toward the figure. She was close, not more than a few feet, when he walked off. She rounded the corner and was surprised to see only the door to the back stairway. She ran to the door and threw it open. The stairs were quiet and empty. She ran down to the first floor and still the man was nowhere to be seen. Cynthia continued out the back door and into the dark snowy night, searching in vain for the man she had seen in the hallway. But there was nothing there but the cold falling snow and the inky blackness of the night beyond.