The Society Of Esoteric Knowledge And Technology

Chapter 1 (Inception)

Professor Claudia Templeton's T-Straps' sharp sound on the polished marble tiles echoed loudly through the Archaeology department's wide hallway. Her air of quiet superiority matched the expertly carved polished wood-paneled walls that stood as approving sentinels to countless student's passage on their way to academic enlightenment. She often reveled in her association with the Miskatonic University's long and honored contributions to the cultivation of young minds, forming budding youth into well-prepared and knowledgable members of society.

Professor Templeton, smartly clad in a well-pressed tweed blazer and plaid skirt, moved like a person of royal lineage striding through the halls of their kin. Her dark hair pulled tightly into a bun, and wire-rimmed glasses gave her the appearance of a strict educator whose presence caused students to scurry out of the way as she passed. However, those who were able to meet her stony gaze would find her quite pretty, and her smile, if she would offer one, spoke of a warm family-centered upbringing.

The hall was vacant, adding volume and resonance to the crack of her strides as she headed toward the last door on the right. Stopping for a moment to collect herself before the conversation she was about to be engaged in. She paused with her hand on the worn brass knob of the wood and frosted glass door whose gold-leafed lettering read, Alexander Berlioux Professor of Archeology and Egyptology. She remembered a time when coming to this office would seem a pleasure, not a burden. Turning the knob, she entered.

A man sitting behind an impossibly cluttered desk piled with open books and sheets of paper of varying ages and deterioration looked up and smiled. Claudia casually scanned the room, taking in the haphazard collection of books, statuary, fetishes, and odd devices that cluttered the shelves and seemingly every spare surface of the office. Her gaze paused on a framed picture of a woman and man proudly holding a young boy in their arms. He wasn't always like this, she thought, not when they first met. Raising an eyebrow, she gave a smile in return.

"Good morning Alex. Have you been here all night?"

Clearing his throat, he responded with a mild French accent. "If I lie, will you hold it against me?"

"You have to rest. You're going to run yourself down. Have you made any progress?" Claudia's southern accent made her sound more like a mother reprimanding her child than a colleague voicing concern.

He shook his head. "No." he exhaled, visibly deflating into his chair. His disheveled brown suit, wild hair, and the tie hanging over the lamp on his desk answered the question before he said a word.

"I see you and Thomas have moved forward without consulting me." she dropped a single sheet of paper onto the mountain of research materials on the desk. Large letters at the top read, The Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology. "The name is awfully long, don't you think?"

"I think it describes the group fairly. Thomas came up with it. You'll have to convince him otherwise. I believe he is quite taken with it." he gazed over the thick-framed glasses pushed down to the end of his nose. Adding a little humor might lighten the mood, he thought.

She didn't bite. "I know I agreed to this, but we are moving too fast. We haven't discussed the criteria we will be drawing on to move them to the next phase." she let that settle in. "I know how you think, Alex. In your mind, we are on the brink at every waking moment. It's been over a year and nothing, don't you think that lends some time to think about what we are entering into?"

"We ARE on the brink, Claudia. I don't think I need to remind you that time is something he has infinite amounts of. We, however, do not." Professor Berlioux said, emphasizing his point by tossing his glasses on the open book in front of him. "We can't maintain forever. We need others to take up the mantel, lest we burn ourselves to the ground. We are the only ones who can prepare them. Once we are gone." he let the thought fade out.

"So we will rush them blindly to their doom. I would hope I wouldn't need to remind you of Dr. Hastings or Dr. Kahfore? We made an agreement not to bring in anyone who has not had a brush with it. We agreed we would not let the unwilling die for our cause without making the decision for themselves." Few on this earth could stand steadfast and face the determined gaze of Claudia Tempelton. Berlioux believed himself to be one among them. He was not.

"They will make their own decisions Claudia, I am not so driven as you think. I regret Hastings and Kahfore as much if not more than any of us. It was to help me that Hastings was brought on if you remember. Do you think that doesn't haunt me? They will be brought up slowly. Informed, and when we all believe the time is right, they will be asked to make a decision." he grabbed for his glasses and returned them to his face.

"And if they decline?" her stare was icy cold.

"They will be shown the exit and asked to be discreet."

"Being discreet would only mean not ending up in the asylum. We'd be opening a door which can't be closed. Forcing them," Claudia waved a hand at the paper she'd deposited on his desk. "study group indeed. Lambs to the slaughter more like it. I'm in Alex, but I am just advising a slow approach. Infinite time remember?"

"I hear you, Claudia. It's why we need you with us. You keep us grounded in reality. It is hard for me to live in the moment any longer." Berlioux grabbed a small leather-bound book from the pile in front of him. Handing it to Claudia, he said. "Cult De' Ghouls. Ask, and you shall receive."

"Wonderful bit of nighttime reading ahead, I suppose. And don't think I didn't notice that clever change of subjects." she took on a warmer tone for the first time since she entered the cramped office. "How is Thomas anyhow?"

"Oh, you know, nothing can stop the fast-paced, high society life of our Mr. Edgerton. Though the last time we spoke, he did have a black eye that I didn't bother to ask him about."

She smiled. "Well, tell Mr. Edgerton that I'll give him a second black eye for that 'bloody awful' name he came up with for the group," Claudia emphasized the expression with a horrible British accent.

Berlioux let out a boisterous laugh as she rose from her seat. "Leaving so soon?"

"I have a class soon, and I need to prepare. Think about what I said, Alex, about the group and yourself. Slowdown, it won't help us if you run yourself into the ground." As she opened the door, she said over her shoulder. "Thanks for the book."

As she headed back down the hallway, she thought it felt like something big was on the horizon. Whether that was a good or bad big was yet to be determined. It still terrified her to her very core that she might again face what they had before. A door that you can't close. Alex had opened one for her back then. What she would never tell him, though, was that she wished he'd have left it closed.

Morning fog still hung in the air. The grimy pavement was shiny and wet. Delivery trucks packed the road heading off on their morning routes. Workers heading to their respective jobs filled the sidewalks. The warehouse district was alive in the morning. Busy before the morning chill had even left the air. Everything was as it should be, like clockwork every morning. This morning, however, something was different. A man in a suit that was dangerously too expensive for this part of town walked with purpose into the only non-industrial business on the block. The sign above the door sported an image of a single leather boxing glove with fading letters below that read "Nick's."

A blast of warm air hit him as he opened the door and stepped inside. A thin sturdy-looking man nodded and motioned, with a tilt of his head, to a man pummeling a heavy bag in the corner of the gym. He was the only other person there. This early in the morning, Nick's wasn't generally full of ambitious youngsters and battle-worn old-timers looking to spar in the ring. The man in the suit stuck out like a sore thumb in the just barely clean enough gym. He walked to the shirtless man in brown slacks and dress shoes, punching the bag. He smiled and got behind it, holding it stationary as the shirtless man continued to pound on it.

"Good morning, doctor." the man in the suit broke the silence. His English accent and chipper demeanor made it seem like he really thought it was a good morning.

"Thomas." the shirtless man mustered without skipping a punch.

"I need a bit of a favor of you, Daniel."

"You couldn't hire someone to help you. That surprises me." Daniel jabbed, his gloveless hands pounding the bag even harder now that Thomas was holding it.

"Well, I suppose I could have hired any old doctor from St. Mary's, but since I know one, I figured I'd ask you first. Ya know, I wouldn't want you to feel like I wasn't fully confident in your skills as a doctor." Thomas winced as a round of punches harder than the last landed.

Daniel stopped punching the bag. "Is someone hurt? Should I get my things?" he said, concern clearly visible on his face.

"Nothing like that. I have a student that I want you to talk to. He needs a bit of a push towards the group. He happens to be one of the top students at Miskatonic's School of Medicine. I figured talking to an alumni would help him feel a bit more inclined..."

"To get into a study group about folklore and religion?" Daniel cut him off. "I don't think I can convince a student of medicine to take time from his likely tedious schedule and sit and read about ancient Sumerian rituals."

"Let's face it, Danny boy, you probably couldn't convince him to show up to his own funeral, but I figured if I talked to him and I had you there to make me look legitimate. We may have something there."

"Don't call me that." Daniel looked like he was gonna start punching the bag again.

"Call you what?" Thomas said absently.

Daniel shook his head. "So you want me to just go with you and sit there?"

"Yes, you can interject and add perspective. From a medical man's point of view, and I will work my incredible powers of persuasion on him." Thomas's confidence could be infectious at times.

"As long as I don't have to convince the kid. You know how I feel about bringing these kids in. I have voiced my opinion to Alex and Claudia as well. I'm not gonna pull the wool over their eyes." the punching started again.

"It's nothing more than a study group doctor. They will make their choices individually, but it will be their choice. We've discussed this at length." Thomas leaned into a particularly intense round of punches.

"I know."

"Well, I hope the new doctor has a sunnier disposition," Thomas smirked. "You need a change of scenery. Go for a walk, ya know, do something besides beat these bags to death.

"When do you want me to do all this sitting." Daniel raised his eyebrows.

"How does around noon sound to you? Also, you'll need to shower and get on a fresh suit, something blue maybe." Thomas knew that Daniel would come. Any chance at shielding these youngsters from the tyranny of Alexander and himself would be lept at by the good doctor.

"Where?" It was evident that Daniel was annoyed but just as apparent that he was in it for the long haul.

"Let's do lunch on campus, shall we?" Thomas's grin was just a hair from being smug. He leaned into the bag wincing from the powerful blows landing in rapid succession. "How are you, Daniel? I worry..."

"I'm fine." Daniel cut him short again.

"We should open some of my private stash tonight, cut loose a little."

"It would be lost on me. Like most things." Daniel stopped throwing blows and grabbed a towel from a stool beside him.

"Bugger, I forgot. I am sorry, Daniel." Thomas's facade of cheery optimism faded.

"Don't let me stop you from tieing one on. I realize that the world still spins." wiping the sweat from his face, Daniel met Thomas's eyes. "You know I do agree with what we are doing. I only ask that we come clean with the consequences. The end result of our gambet is death or madness, likely both. I don't have the good fortune to share in that outcome." He reached for the shirt that hung on the wall. Liberating it from its hook, he dawned it and began buttoning it up. "If I had the choice, I would still have gone. Old friends, like brothers and all that. These kids should have the opportunity, though, to decline. To pursue their ambitions in blissful ignorance. To not become monsters like me."

"Or scoundrels, like me." Thomas's sly smile was back. "We can't combat the persuasive powers of Professor Berlioux, however. For all their youthful arrogance, they stand no chance."

"It has to be the accent. You European mugs have it baked right in." Daniel pulled up his suspenders and threw on his brown tweed jacket.

"Fresh suit, remember. I can't have you looking like you just rolled out of the bushes when we talk to the lad."

"I heard you. I need to head home and freshen up. I assure you that when next we meet, I will be the picture of an upstanding medical professional." now it was Daniel's turn for a smug smile.

"I have no doubt, my friend. We need this one. He is genuinely one of Miskatonic's finest. It would be tragic to let him slip through our fingers." Thomas grabbed a brown fedora with a black band off a shelf near the heavy bag and handed it to Daniel. "It might be nice for you to not have to do all the doctoring all the time."

"It's not the doctoring that concerns me," Daniel replied as he put his hat on. "Nick, I'll be back tonight around seven. Keep a bag open for me, will ya."

The man seated by the door barely looked up from his morning paper, nodding and grunting affirmatively. Thomas wondered if it wouldn't be an opportune time for Nick to get at the floor with a broom or at least open some windows and air the place out a bit. The man's almost statue-like posture said that wasn't happening anytime soon. He figured Nick's clientele didn't care much, brawlers and thugs most of them. With the exception of Dr. Daniel Norris, of course.

"You'll always be my favorite, though, Daniel," Thomas said as he pulled on his overcoat and began slipping on his gloves.

"Favorite what?" Daniel said as he wrapped his scarf around his neck.

"Monster," Thomas said with a smile.

At that, they both started laughing heartily, Daniel shaking his head.

Chapter 2 (Seeds)

A dusting of snow covered the Miskatonic University's manicured grounds as students began to bustle across the newly cleared walkways sparkling as the sun reflected off the wet stone. These early birds were hoping to catch the proverbial worm before classes started. Heads down and coats pulled tight as they made their way to unknown destinations with a yawn. The university was especially lovely in the winter, with the stark contrast of red brick buildings against the pristine white snow. The immaculately kept grounds were now covered in a blanket of white, and the sun shown brightly on this unseasonably clear morning. Still, as always, the Miskatonic held an air of hidden mystery, of degenerate loathsome darkness hiding around corners, in dark shadows, and curtained windows. The promise of exceptional discovery and horrible truths were the bedrock upon which the school was laid. Most of the student body blissfully unaware, chalking the ever-present rumors up to student pranks and exaggerated legend. The school kept its secrets well hidden, but there was no mistaking the tangible weight of mysteries unsolved, persons gone missing, and rationalized explanations of things that escaped from particular departments. This morning at least, things seemed in order, just another early morning in the halls of higher education.

Two young women walked along the path towards the Science Hall, both clad in thick grey wool overcoats and bulky ear muffs. The taller of the two was adamantly trying to convince the other of something judging from her facial expressions and her dramatically waving hands. She carried herself with a confidence that stemmed from her obvious beauty. She looked as though she was used to getting her way. Pushing a string of light brown hair back behind her white earmuff, she pulled a small sheet of paper from her pocket and motioned for the other girl to inspect it. The tall women's friend seemed uninterested, her curly black hair barely contained by her red earmuffs. She had a darker complexion and a serious look about her. She did not seem convinced of whatever her friend was going on about.

"Why not? You study folklore and history, is that not your entire focus? The taller girl asked, her pale face nearly as white as the steam created by her breath.

"It's just that I was hoping to take a real break before the start of the spring semester." replied the shorter girl.

"But, Cynthia, you're not going home for the holidays. It's a way to keep sharp until we return next semester. It couldn't be more perfect for you. I thought you'd be the one trying to convince me." They reached the Science Hall and pushed open the heavy ornate wooden door. The welcoming rush of warm air enveloped them as they made their way down the wide hallway of dark wood-paneled walls and polished stone floors. The halls were empty this early in the morning but for an occasional student or professor groggily meandering to their destination. Their voices echoed in the vacant high ceilinged hallway.

"Why do you want to join this study group so badly in the first place? You have no interest in folklore or religion. Don't tell me that you want to keep sharp because this group has nothing to offer you by way of your major or your other avenues of study." Cynthia emphasized the word other and raised her eyebrows in playful accusation. "Am I to believe the lovely Evelyn Chance has once again dashed her parent's wishes and changed her academic focus for a second time? What is it..." she grabbed the paper Evelyn had been waiving in front of her. "The Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology sounds right up your alley." Cynthia handed the paper back to Evelyn.

"OK, maybe you got me now. The study group will provide some much-needed credit in the social sciences, you know, what I am supposed to be here for. I can't study physics and mathematics without completing some of the curricula my parents want me to." Evelyn's mood darkened.

"I suppose it couldn't hurt. It is interesting, I will say that, although the name is a bit over winded." Cynthia tried not to sound too interested though she was. The group promised to delve into folklore, primitive culture, and ritual, as well as ancient religions and cults. In fact, it was in lockstep with her interests and areas of study.

"Then you'll do it? You'll join the group with me?" Evelyn's blue eyes brightened. She was nearly jumping up and down. "This is great. Did you know they are holding meetings off-campus at the Oak and Dagger? I have always wanted to see what's in there." a mischievous grin crossed her face.

"Isn't that a speakeasy or some kind of den for gangsters and undesirables?" Cynthia looked worried.

"No, no. It's got a reputation, but that is just part of the place's mystery. It is just a place where people can go to speak in private. Apparently, you can acquire private rooms where you can meet and be sure there are no prying ears. Businessmen discuss plans and new ideas, graduate students do research there to keep their work from being plagiarized by others, and yes, the occasional clandestine meeting between criminals. However, it is completely above board, and they don't serve alcohol."

"I honestly don't know how I let you talk me into these things, Evelyn. Yes, I will join your oddly named study group, and I will probably even enjoy it. Talk to you after class?" Cynthia smiled as they stopped at the door to the Mathematics department.

"Yes, meet me in the cafeteria. Thanks, Cynthia. I wouldn't have done it if you weren't going with me. I need those credits."

"Have you ever thought of just telling your parents that you want to study Math?" Cynthia attempted to smooth out her mass of curly dark hair.

"You've never met my parents. You do much less telling and much more listening and agreeing. What they don't know can't hurt them." Evelyn removed her heavy coat turned the knob on the door.

Cynthia laughed. "See you later, my dear."

Evelyn blew Cynthia a kiss and backed into the door, opening it as she waved goodbye.

The cafeteria was less populated than usual, being that it was the last week before winter break, and many of the students had already left to be home for the holidays. The ones who remained either lived in Arkham or missed finals or both. The tone was quiet and somber, not the usual lively din you would expect when school was in full swing. You could hear the clinking of plates and shuffle of chairs over any conversation. At a table near the east entrance, a young man in an expensive-looking burgundy sweater and grey slacks stood next to another lad in a much less expensive-looking brown tweed jacket with a red tie pointing adamantly at a sheet of paper on that table.

"It's free credit, Anthony. It doesn't have to fall into your area of study, and it will be fun. Just think of it, off-campus once a week at the Oak and Dagger. We will be men of mystery and intrigue. What do you say?"

"I don't know if they'll take kindly to me," Anthony said flatly. "This sounds like a club for rich big shots."

"If that's the case, we both walk. It's a university-sponsored study group with professors endorsing and running it. You're a member of this school, the same as me. I don't think coming from money has anything to do with it. If it did, they would be asking specific people to join, not taking open enrollment." anger visible on James's face.

"It's strange though, James. Folklore? Religion? That is not what I call a good time. And the Oak and Dagger, that place is dry. I hear it's full of stuffy businessmen and graduate students." Anthony picked the paper up off the table and inspected it. "And what's with the name? Sounds like a bunch of stuffed shirt teetotalers to me."

James sat down across from his clearly unconvinced friend. "What could it hurt? We join the group, go to a few meetings, and see if we like it. Nothing says we have to make a commitment." James's attention was drawn away from the paper Anthony returned to the table by two men entering the cafeteria. One dressed in an expensive suit and striding into the room like he owned the building. The other man, in a neatly pressed blue suit, lumbered along as if a dark cloud hung above his head. They headed to a table where Isaiah Cage sat. James had a class or two with Isaiah as a sophomore, but everyone knew of him. Being one of a handful of black students at the university tended to bring unwanted attention. Top of his class at the Miskatonic School of Medicine was also hard to keep under one's hat. James liked Isaiah. He was always very humble and generous, even with the treatment he received from many elite bastards who thought they ran the school. These two men looked important somehow. James wondered what that could be about.

"You with me, James?" Anthony said, waving his hand in front of James's face. "I'm up for the credits, but I don't know how long I will be able to stomach all that fairy tale nonsense. I'm a man of science, ya know, and I..."

"Science? You play around in the dirt all day Tony. Maybe it will give you a chance to catch up on some sleep." James turned back to Anthony, giving him a sly smile.

"Geology is science, you numbskull. I take my field of study very seriously. I will have plenty of profitable employment opportunities, or maybe I will become a professor and teach here one day. We can't all have a family fortune thrown in our lap."

"If I could give it to you, I would, my friend. Just lend me enough to travel the world and see what's out there. The thought of taking over the family business keeps me awake at night." James's outward appearance was jovial, but the downward cast of his eyes betrayed that he was truthful in his disdain for taking over the family business. "So, you'll do it? You'll join up with this Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology?"

"I'm in. I hope they don't make us recite the name. I don't know if I can make it through the whole thing." they both laughed. James folded and returned the paper they were discussing to his shirt pocket. "Now, let's talk about making it into the speakeasy over the winter break."

Isaiah Cage sat eating his lunch reading an article about the electrocardiogram when two men approached his table. As they reached him, he looked up from his article and took in the pair. One man was rather unremarkable if a bit morose looking, while the other looked as if he'd come from a charity ball. The expensive-looking man introduced himself with a prominent English accent.

"Hello sir, my name is Thomas Edgerton, and this is my colleague doctor Daniel Norris. I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Cage." Thomas reached out to shake Isaiah's hand. "Do you mind if we sit and discuss a proposition with you?"

"Feel free to sit down, Mr. Edgerton, doctor." Isaiah motioned to the available chairs. "What's this about?" the apprehension in his eyes was visibly apparent.

"Doctor Norris and I represent a group who are eager to obtain the best of the best in regards to our new members, and we would like to extend a formal offer for you to join. I understand that you are top of your class at the medical school here at Miskatonic University." Daniel tried to look interested as Thomas laid it on thick.

"Is this some kinda prank? Did the guys at Kappa Sigma put you up to this?" Isaiah was smiling but looked worried.

"No, I assure you we are not affiliated with any fraternities. We are looking to put together a study group of sorts. A society here at the Miskatonic that would hope to explore the mysteries of this and the ancient world. The Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology." Somehow when Thomas said it, the name sounded powerful and authoritative.

"You mean that study group from the flyers I have seen all over the campus?" Isaiah's eyebrows raised as he began to relax.

"Yes, that is the one." Thomas smiled broadly. "Doctor Norris here is an alumn of the university and a member of the society as well." Obviously, Thomas was hoping for a favorable reaction that he was not getting from Isaiah.

"Not interested." Isaiah smiled politely and picked up the article he was reading.

"The society is not just about study Mr. Cage. It's a family of sorts, a group that supports one another academically, professionally, monetarily. We hope that our members will continue to be active even when they have left the Miskatonic's hallowed halls and ventured into their professional lives." Isaiah reacted ever so slightly to the word monetarily, precisely Thomas's intention.

"Why would you want me in your group? I am studying medicine, I have no interest in spiritualism and ancient religions. In fact, it's all a bunch of malarky to me." though Isaiah was still dismissive, Thomas could see that he'd set the hook.

"Your skepticism is exactly what we are looking for as a counterweight to others in the group who might lean the other way. Our group seeks to explore and discover from a purely academic point of view. We seek to learn and teach, preserving the history for future generations." Thomas was counting on that infectious enthusiasm.

"You get free credit in the social sciences, which I assume you have no time for, but I know you need them to shore up your degree." It was the first thing Daniel said, but it seemed to cut right to the core of what Mr. Cage needed to hear.

"That I can understand. I need those credits, and I don't have a lot of free time between school and working at the garage. I just don't see myself finding the time to go to these meetings." the look in Isaiah's eyes told Thomas that he was legitimately thinking about it now.

"The meetings are after-hours and off-campus. We would be starting in the evenings so it shouldn't interfere with your work schedule. We could use a man like you, Isaiah. What do you say." Thomas had laid the groundwork. Isaiah didn't have to say yes right now, but he would eventually. Knowing that Isaiah's father's garage was underwater financially helped Thomas's subtle suggestion take root in Isaiah's mind. He would pay off Isaiah's debts if he had to. This man was too important to pass up. Oddly enough, it seemed like Daniel's one contribution was the straw that broke the camel's back.

"Well, I will certainly think about it, Mr. Edgerton. I can't commit now, but some aspects sound interesting. And doctor Norris makes a compelling point as well. Is there a way I can get back to you on the matter?"

"Of course, Isaiah, please take your time and make an informed decision. We are in no rush. Though the first meeting is this Friday, that should be plenty of time to think it over. If you are interested, you can also discuss it with Professor Berlioux in the Archeology department or Professor Tempelton in Linguistics. They are both members as well. As I said, we are a highly distinguished group. Your professional trajectory could benefit immensely from a group such as ours." Thomas again gave a broad smile. "Think on it and let Professors Berlioux or Templeton know. I would also recommend talking with them. Both of them are a delight."

"I will, Mr. Edgerton. Thank you for thinking of me." Isaiah put out his hand to shake.

Thomas extended his hand and gave him a firm handshake as he rose from his seat. Daniel did the same and added, "We could really use another doctor in the group. If only for me to have someone to talk to." he smiled and winked at Isaiah.

"You are the best and brightest, Isaiah. Never forget that. We certainly haven't." Thomas gave him a pat on the shoulder then walked away. Daniel nodded and followed Thomas out.

Isaiah tried to continue reading his article but simply stared at the page. Was this a blessing in disguise or some kind of trap? It was hard to make out. With the suit this Edgerton was wearing and his not-so-subtle mention of monetary help, it could go either way. He needed money, and he needed it fast. Those O'Brien crooks were not just gonna let another payment on that money his father borrowed slide. They were already fixing cars used for bootlegging for free, but it wasn't enough to cover the debt, the bastards said. Maybe this Edgerton character was working for them. Somehow he didn't see him as the criminal type, but something about him. He was dangerous, to be sure. Isaiah had seen enough dangerous men in his time to know one when he saw one. However, this man seemed genuine in his desire to have Isaiah join his group. This was no simple study group, that was for sure. He had a feeling in his gut about this, though. It felt right like somehow this was going to get his father out from under Big Danny's thumb once and for all. Go back to honest work in the garage. He knew his father had borrowed that money to pay for the garage after spending everything for him to go to medical school. The guilt he felt over everything his father had done after his mother died weighed heavy on him. He was gonna fix this, and this man Edgerton and his doctor friend had to be the key.

Chapter 3(Crossroads)

The snow crunched under Isaiah's feet, his breath visible in the frozen evening air as he clutched his long overcoat tightly and made his way home with the sun sinking behind the gambreled rooftops of Arkham. It wasn't a long walk from the university, but in the cold December air, it seemed like forever. The garage his father owned was tucked between a secondhand store and an abandoned lot at the end of North Sentinel Street. The building consisted of a large rectangle ground floor split between the garage and a small office on the right side. Above the garage, there was a two-bedroom apartment with a bathroom, a small living room, and a kitchen. It wasn't much, but it was home. It was all he had ever known, truth be told, but for a few fleeting memories of his mother and the house they had lived in before she died. After her death, his father couldn't bear to live in the house that they had bought together after they married.

He put everything he had into this garage, and that is where they remained through Isaiah's childhood. The business was not what it used to be, but his father had managed to keep things afloat by taking a loan from a local bootlegger that turned into a burden impossible to get out from under. He tried to get a loan from the bank but was turned away. They said that he did not have the collateral to cover the loan, but his father and Isaiah knew that it had more to do with the color of his skin than anything else. So his father found another way, and between the loan money and the scholarship he had received, he could continue at the university. Isaiah swore to work hard and graduate, become a doctor, and leave this place behind. His father was so proud of him, he couldn't let him down.

The light was on in the office to the garage. The dim yellow light spilled across the evening snow, partially illuminating an unfamiliar car parked outside the office entrance. New customers generally didn't come in at this hour. His father hadn't told him about any company coming by tonight. He picked up his pace. There was something off about this, and he wanted to find out who that car belonged to. Isaiah's feet slipping slightly in the snow as he began to move quickly to the side entrance of the garage. He opened the door and slipped inside. The old beat-up green Harvester was still in the garage, along with the grey Chrysler that came in yesterday. It looked like his father hadn't made much progress on either of them. The sound of voices coming from the office made him pause midway through the workspace near the tool bench. He couldn't hear what was being said, but he did notice the distinct sound of an Irish accent. It was Big Danny's boys. He picked up a tire iron from the bench and moved slowly towards the office door.

The light shining upon the garage floor told Isaiah that the office door was open most of the way. He crept up with his back against the wall inching closer to the opening. He could hear the voices clearly now. There were two men and his father. There were several crashes and the sound of broken glass scattering across the floor. His father pleaded for the men to stop. This was enough for Isaiah. He raised the tire iron above his head and rushed into the open office door.

When he entered the room, he saw his father on the floor behind the desk. His back was against the wall and his arm across his forehead. Isaiah saw blood trickling down from his father's quivering bottom lip. Without thinking, he slammed the tire iron down on the first of the two men he found standing over his father, striking him across the side of the head. The man went down in a heap beside his friend, who Isaiah just now noticed was holding a revolver.

The man on the floor groaned and began to get back up. The other man directed the gun at Isaiah. "You're gonna pay for that boy!" the man screamed. Isaiah's father began to rise, pleading with the man to spare his son.

"Stay down, dad!" Isaiah shouted.

His father didn't listen and moved toward the man with the gun. Sensing the movement, the man turned quickly and fired two shots. "No!" Isaiah screamed as his father jerked back, slammed against the wall, and slumped sideways. The man Isaiah had hit was now getting to his feet, holding a gun of his own.

"Jesus Nicky, you killed the old bastard. We gotta get the hell outta here." he turned to Isaiah, blood gushing from a wicked-looking wound on the side of his head. "This ain't over, you say a word, and you got a bullet coming for you too. Don't think we forgot about the payment either. Guess we'll be dealing with you from now on." he took another glance at Isaiah's father lying on the floor. "Let's go, Nick." The other man backed out of the office's front door, the wounded man following closely after. Isaiah could hear them get into their car and fire up the engine.

He quickly knelt down by his father and checked his pulse. It was weak, but it was still there. Tears streamed down his face as he turned his father over to find a large pool of blood on the floor. His medical training overpowered his emotions, and he quickly ripped open his father's shirt buttons flying in every direction. He ripped off his own shirt and held it against the two gaping gunshot wounds in his father's chest. Quickly he pulled the cord from the desk lamp and tied it around the old man's torso to hold the increasingly bloodied shirt on his chest. His father gasped weakly as he picked him up. Nearly slipping on the blood, he rushed his father to the backseat of their old Packard. Jumping in the front seat, he threw it in gear and gunned it, sending gravel tinking off the tin siding of the garage as they sped off down the road.

"Don't you die on me, Pop, don't you fucking die, old man!" Isaiah could barely keep the car on the road with the tears in his eyes. He had to get to the medical school. Someone there could help him. He didn't dare go to the hospital and risk having to tell the police who did this. "Keep fighting, Pop, keep fighting. We never finished that chess game, and I'm gonna win, you know, I'm gonna win. You're not gonna beat me this time... just fight Pop..." his words trailed off into loud sobbing.

He pulled up to the back entrance to the university medical school. It sat adjacent to St. Mary's teaching hospital but being a student, Isaiah knew how to get in without waltzing in through the front doors. He made his way to a teaching theater that was rarely used and set his father down on the operating table. "I'll be right back, Pop. You just hang on." Isaiah flew down the halls hoping he would run into someone he knew. It was not a stretch to think he could find one of his fellow students or a teacher that could assist him with his father and keep it discreet. Like a man possessed, covered in his father's blood, Isaiah searched. Rounding a corner, he almost ran headlong into Professor Wallace. He could not believe his luck. This was his mentor of sorts, a man who had encouraged him since his first days at the school. A man who did not look down his nose at him or ignore him entirely as some of the other professors did.

"Doctor Wallace, I need your help." The desperation was coming off Isaiah in waves.

"My God, man, are you alright?" The doctor's shock at almost being run down was now morphing into concern for the student covered in blood standing before him.

"It's not me. It's my father. Please come with me. He needs help. He is in terrible shape." Isaiah motioned for Wallace to follow him.

Doctor Wallace followed Isaiah to the operating theater without hesitation, inquiring along the way what this was all about. "Isaiah, what is going on?"

"I need your help, medical help. My father was shot, and he is..." Isaiah trailed off as he entered the room where his father lay groaning on the table.

Doctor Wallace quickly sprang into action, heading to the sink and preparing himself. Both men moved through the operating theater with precision. It was as if something clicked in both of them. A man's life was at stake. The training and experience had them running on instinct. The rest of the room was dark but for the light above Isaiah's father. They worked as quickly as they could, but it was too late. Too much blood had been lost, and one of the bullets was lodged in his father's heart. Try as they might, it was a forgone conclusion. Doctor Wallace took a step back from the table. "I'm sorry, son, there is nothing more we can do."

Isaiah looked up at the doctor, tears welling in his eyes. "I know. Thank you." he leaned down closer to his father's face. The ragged breathing was getting more shallow with each passing moment. "I love you, Pop. I want you to know that I recognize and appreciate everything you've done for me. I could never have made it without all you've taught me. I hope that one day I can be half the man that you are." the damn broke, and the tears flowed freely now. He rested his forehead on his father's.

Then he heard something faintly coming from the man on the table. Isaiah moved so that his ear was closer to his father's mouth. "I love you, my boy. You keep it up. You were always so bright. Your mother would be so proud..." the last gasp came, warm against his ear. He raised his head and stared into his father's eyes. He kissed his father on the forehead and, with his palm, closed the lids on his father's lifeless eyes. There was nothing more he could do.

Wallace stood watching Isaiah break down with his head on his father's chest, tears flowing freely. Isaiah was shattered, it was hard to imagine him pulling himself back together, but he had to. He had brought a dying man with bullet wounds into the hospital's educational portion and attempted to operate on him without the hospital's knowledge or approval. Doctor Wallace wasn't about to interfere in the young man's grief. He stood with tears welling in his own eyes. Isaiah was a fine man and an incredibly gifted student. He hoped this tragedy would not hamstring Isaiah's upward trajectory. Wallace began to clean up the operating theatre and collect the evidence of what had transpired there. Collecting all of the bloody clothing and surgical gauze into a laundry bag that was present, he then began wiping down as much of the area as he could. He avoided Isaiah and his father, giving him time. After several minutes, Isaiah raised his head.

"You can't tell anyone. I can't get the police involved." the tears were coming less frequently now. "I need to take him to the crematorium."

"I, I can't be part of that Isaiah, I could lose my job." Doctor Wallace handed Isaiah the bag of bloody linens and reassured him. "You'll have to do that on your own. I won't say anything. I will keep people from the furnace room as best as possible. Isaiah, I am so sorry. I know how close you were. I wish I'd known him." Wallace removed the covering gown he was wearing and added it to the bag in Isaiah's hands. He placed his hand on Isaiah's shoulder, "It is the trials of life that build our character, that make us who we are. The lessons we learn from those we love and lessons they teach us when they pass mold us into the men we become. The pain will pass with time, son. You did everything you could. Your father was proud of you. I could see it in his eyes in those last moments." he squeezed Isaiah's shoulder. He hoped that he could provide a tiny bit of comfort to the grieving young man. "The ones who did this..."

"Are untouchable." Isaiah spat the words out. "Don't worry, I have no plans to get myself killed as well. Thank you for your help. Go. I will handle the rest." Doctor Wallace wanted to remain to comfort Isaiah, but he could see that the grief-stricken young man had regained his composure. A cold determination was evident on Isaiah's blood and tear-stained face. Isaiah watched as the doctor nodded and quietly left the room. As his mentor walked down the corridor, Isaiah felt like a lifeboat was drifting away from him in a dark and endless sea.

He had to pull himself together. Isaiah grabbed a lab coat and sheet from the theater's small closet. He threw the sheet over his father, taking one final glance at the man's face. It took everything he had to not break down on the spot. The table that his father lay on was fitted with wheels that groaned in protest when he began to move it. It had been a long while since there was any need to move the table from the operating theater. He pushed hard and got the table moving at a walking pace out the door and into the long hallway. He needed to make it to the service elevator. He tried to hide the blood covering his shirt, tucking the lab coat closed in front of him. From a distance, there was no telling him from some other student or orderly taking a body to the morgue, but up close, there would be questions. The empty hallway seemed miles long. The intermittent squeak of the table's wheel sounded like an alarm in his head. The elevator was halfway down the hall.

At any moment, a person could round the corner up ahead or exit one of the many doors along the silent corridor. Blood was beginning to pool on the sheet. His breathing was steady but strained. He reached the elevator without any incident and pulled the handle to call up the lift. He could hear the machinery coming alive as he carefully eyed the corner up ahead. The fatigue was beginning to wear on him, his eyes staring transfixed to the corner of the hall. As the elevator reached his floor, the loud clang startled him out of his grief-weary reverie. He quickly opened the door and pushed the table inside, closing the door abruptly behind him.

When the elevator reached the basement, Isaiah winced and waited to see if anyone was on the other side of the door. The door remained closed for only a few heartbeats before Isaiah opened them himself. The basement was clear. He pushed the table as quickly as he could toward the cremation furnace. The fire in the furnace was on. He needed to do this quickly. If anyone caught him, he could go to jail or, at a minimum, get expelled from the university. The tears welled up in him again as he removed the sheet from his father's face. "I love you pop. I'm sorry I don't have time to give you a proper funeral. I don't know what I'm gonna do without you. I know God will take you in. And I know you'll watch over me. I can't..." Isaiah broke down in tears, weeping loudly.

After the gruesome business of getting his father into the furnace, he searched that basement for some sort of container. He managed to find a flat bottle with a cork about the size of a flask. He crouched down against a shadowed wall rocking back and forth, the bottle in the hand that was resting on his knee. He quietly wept as he waited for the furnace to finish its morbid business. Once it did, he filled the bottle with as much of his father's ashes as he could. He couldn't get everything, yet another indignity that his father would have to bear. Nothing could be done. Isaiah needed to get out of there. He quickly pushed the table into the corner and tossed the sheet and the bag of bloody linen into the furnace. The elevator reached the ground floor as quickly as he had come down. Waiting again to be sure no one was on the other side of the elevator door when he opened it. Isaiah promptly moved down the hallway toward the back service entrance where he had left the car. Ten paces from the door, he could hear the sound of someone rounding the corner behind him. Fear shot through his body as he realized the footsteps' sound was coming in his direction. Nearly about to panic, his own footsteps in unison with the unknown person behind him, he moved toward the double doors just in front of him. Keeping himself as steady as possible, Isaiah glided quickly to the door and opened the one to the right. Once outside, he ran to his car and hastily started the engine. Not waiting to see if that person behind him was heading out, he put the car in gear and sped off.

Isaiah managed to keep the car on the road for the entire journey back to the garage. With tears filling his eyes, he made the trek from the university hospital to his home without incident. It seemed all of his senses were heightened in the cold silence of the winter night. The crunch of snow under his foot as he stepped out of the driver's seat seemed deafening. Snow began to fall, obscuring the tire tracks left by his father's murderers. They would be back. Killing his father wouldn't be enough for Big Danny. He wanted his payments down to the last dime. It took everything within him to not drive down to the Riverside docks and burn down the warehouse he knew Big Danny's gang used as a front for their bootlegging business. It wouldn't bring his father back. Nothing would. Isaiah opened the door to the office. Obvious signs of the struggle that took place were everywhere. The toppled coat rack, paperwork scattered around the desk, and most notably the smear of crimson where his father had slid down the wall after being shot, told the tale.

He began the loathsome task of putting the office back in order. All the while, his father's voice in the back of his mind explaining how a person needed order in his home and place of work, it was central to a civilized society. Civilized, Isaiah could not reconcile that in his mind. Nothing about this world seemed civilized to him at the moment. Even so, he could not leave the place in such a state. The recollection of the events that transpired would crush him under their weight. It was after midnight when Isaiah finally finished scrubbing his father's blood from the floor and wall. He stood up, staring into the bucket of blood-red water. Civilized indeed, he would have to force down the desire to be very, very uncivilized the next time those men came to collect.

He went upstairs to try and sleep but stopped in the doorway of his father's room. Everything in its place, the man was meticulous to a fault. Crossing the threshold was like stepping back in time. It smelled like his father, the smell of hard work, sacrifice, and strong morality with a hint of aftershave and motor oil. He sat down at the foot of the neatly made bed, looking straight ahead into the wall mirror above the worn wooden dresser. Taking in each of his father's treasured keepsakes placed lovingly on top of the dresser, the yellowing photographs of his mother and himself as a child, he noticed something. In the mirror reflection, he could see the small closet in the corner of the room. The closet door was open just enough that Isaiah could see a box that had fallen on the floor. Its contents spilled out. It was unlike his father to leave a mess like that. The box must have fallen before those men showed up, or maybe his father was looking for something. He didn't own a gun to Isaiah's knowledge. Was he trying to find something to ward off Big Danny's henchmen, or was he looking for something he could use as payment?

Getting up from the bed, he walked over to the closet and opened the door. The box was about the size of a shoeshine kit and made of finely stained wood. There were carvings around the lid and central portion of the box that Isaiah could not decipher. This was no language he had ever seen and looked less like writing than it did of pictograms or hieroglyphics of some sort. The lid was ajar, but only a small amount of the contents had spilled out onto the closet floor. What did looked like sand; however it was jet black. He righted the box taking care not to spill any more of the strange black sand.

He opened the lid and was surprised to find that the box was almost entirely filled with this strange sand. Resting atop the sand was a medium-sized leather-bound book whose cover was adorned with symbols similar to those on the box. There were also five carefully folded sheets of paper and a picture of his mother when she was around his age. She was beautiful. He turned the picture over and found a few words written in his mother's handwriting. "Leo, you bring light to the darkness, sunshine to a rainy day. Love Ema." It was a note for his father. It must have been around the time when they first met. He opened a few of the paper sheets and found them to be letters from his mother to his father. He tucked them aside. He would read them later or at least until he felt like he was invading his father's privacy too much.

There was something offputting about the book. The symbols were strange enough, but the book seemed ancient. Not as if it was an old book that Isaiah's father kept from his childhood but ancient. The leather was stiff and cracking in areas, and it looked as though it had been repaired several times. When he picked it up, it felt cold to the touch. Not just cold because it had been sitting in his father's closet for God knows how long but as if it was emanating a chill of its own. His father was not a collector of books. He began to think this must have been his mother's. A memento that his father kept to remind him of her. He opened the book somewhere near the middle. A rush of cold swept over him, he began to feel nauseous, and his vision began to blur. The page he opened revealed more of the symbols that adorned the front cover and the outside of the box it came from. In addition to the symbols, there were several cramped notes written in English in the margins.

As he flipped through the fragile yellowing pages, he found more notes along with various diagrams and drawings. He continued to flip through the book until he pulled back a page and found an illustration that looked to be from the original text. The ink was the same crusted reddish ink that the symbols were written in. The image itself was horrible to behold. It depicted some three-legged being whose torso ended in a sizeable vertical maw half-opened revealing rows of wicked-looking teeth. There was something about the incredible detail that caused Isaiah to drop the book and recoil from it. After the night's events, this was more than he had the will to pursue. Isaiah tucked the book and the other contents of the box back inside and closed the box. Scooping up the sand that had spilled out and returning it, he stared at the strange hieroglyphs on the box. As Isaiah stared at them, he could almost imagine that they began to move in a rhythmic way that was lulling him into a sort of trance. He shook his head to break from the hypnotic embrace. He was tired. He needed to sleep. Closing the closet, he turned to his father's bed and lay down. His mind was racing with thoughts of the events of the night and the discovery of the strange box. In the end, his exhaustion took over, and Isaiah cried himself to sleep.

Chapter 4 (An Alliance)

"Well, I would say that the biggest contributing factors to the mass executions of witch-hunts in Europe were simply the Catholic and Protestant churches. It is clear that the Protestant's were the emerging challenger to the rule of Catholicism during this time. Both looking to increase their numbers, and what do they offer? Salvation. Salvation from what? Why, Satan and his minions, the witches. Whichever could present itself as the staunchest defenders of souls against the devil could bring in flocks of new followers. The more of Satan's chosen you could eliminate, the stronger it would appear that your power to protect the virtuous would be. Anyone would do. We all know the barbaric methods of obtaining confessions that were employed. If you needed someone to be a witch, it was simply a matter of naming the person and putting them to the question. Truth, as it sadly is most times, was irrelevant." The young woman spoke confidently to a room full of aghast faces. There were at least a few audible intakes of breath as she concluded. A satisfied smile crossed her face as she sat back down. Anita Saltonstall was never one to hold back. Besides, making these smug undergrads squirm gave her more gratification than their approval would. Either way, she was right. She brushed a stray strand of raven black hair that had managed to escape from its neatly tight bun aside and focused on the open books in front of her.

Being one of three female students in the class did not allow for the casual acceptance of unpopular opinions. Especially with a room full of young men who believe the sun rises and falls on their precious wisdom. It felt good to watch them all fall off balance. She was not a religious person. Her parents were, and they'd tell you that she was too, but for her, it just didn't fit.

"Interesting, Ms. Saltonstall. Maybe it is something we can all ponder over the break. That's it for today. I will see you all in two weeks." The professor seemed to want the break to begin as much as the students.

Anita began gathering her books. She was excited, less because of the break and more because of the study group that she would be meeting with over the holiday and beyond. It was an odd group with a strange name that was far too long, but they would be studying folklore, religion, and ritual from all over the world. Nothing could be a better fit. She knew Professor Templeton would be one of the group's heads. What could be better than a study group with your favorite professor dealing with a collection of topics that you absolutely love? It was odd that the first meeting would be off-campus. She hoped that it would eventually be moved to one of the study rooms in the Oren Library.

The room was thinning out by the time she had got all of her things together. Everyone was in a festive mood with the holidays coming up. The seats were empty as soon as the professor finished his last word. By the time she reached the stairs down, she spotted Cynthia still packing her things up just a few rows below.

"You must have gotten here early to get a seat so low. I was running late." Anita said as she let a few of the other students pass her on the way down the stairs. "Need help carrying anything?" she frowned at the two bags in Cynthia's chair, each with several bulky books in them.

"I fine, but thank you," Cynthia said, slinging a bag over each arm.

"You have any plans for the break? Going to see family?"

"No, I'm staying here." Cynthia made her way to the stairs where Anita stood. "How bout you?"

"I'm staying here too, are you signed up for the study group Professor Templeton is heading?" Anita said with maybe a bit too much excitement.

"Evelyn and I are signing up today. It should be good." Cynthia replied as they both began walking down the steps to exit the classroom.

"Oh, I'm so glad you two will be the group. I was a bit worried about going to the Oak and Dagger alone. Would you mind if I tag along with you this Friday?" Anita hoped she'd say yes. She really didn't want to go alone but would if she had to.

"Of course, Anita. Do you think I want to be the only historian in the room?" Cynthia laughed.

Anita raised her eyebrows. "Historians, are we?"

"Well, yes. You just answered a question and managed to be more interesting than the entire lecture." Cynthia was glad to have made it through the classroom door and out into the spacious double hallway. Most students were rushing to catch rides off campus or hurry back to dorm rooms to pack. It would be nice to have the campus to herself, so to speak. Without the general populace, it could be positively a dream to be on campus.

"It is quite amusing to watch their mouths drop open like that, isn't it?" Anita grinned.

They continued down the long hallway, which by now was nearly clear of the mass of students rushing around. Evelyn was standing by the double doors that led outside to the quad waving the two of them down. Her narrow dark green dress and high-end T-strap heals were the pinnacles of fashion, along with her fringed shawl and cloche hat. Cynthia spotted her and waved back.

"How was your day?" Cynthia asked as they approached Evelyn.

"Slightly infuriating, actually. It seems the men in the mathematics department do not like being shown up by a woman in the least. I was only correcting some glaring mistakes in the professor's explanation of the Krull-Schmidt theorem, which being that it is fairly new, I do understand his lack of comprehension. However, Miller and Wedderburn's work should be sufficiently established enough that a professor of his caliber should have no trouble... I am rambling, aren't I?" Evelyn gave a sheepish smile.

"Just a bit," Cynthia replied.

"I just can't help it. A clear and pointed discussion is not too much to ask, is it? If I had a penis, I am sure I would have received a gold star. Excuse me, Anita, I don't mean to be crude." She put a hand on Anita's shoulder.

"By all means, be as crude as you like. We are modern women are we not?" Anita had an amused smile on her face.

"Anyhow, Cynthia, I wanted to let you know that I signed us up for the study group we spoke about this morning. Professor Berlioux seemed rather pleased that you decided to join. I was a bit disappointed that he did not have the same enthusiasm for my entry. I will chalk that up to him not being a man of practical science. At any rate, we were accepted." Evelyn's warm smile indicated her pleasure at achieving her goal of getting into the group.

"I was accepted as well." Anita chimed in.

"I would expect nothing less, a student of history with your acumen. It is a wonder they weren't actively recruiting you. They weren't, were they?" The inquiry seemed genuine. Why was Evelyn so interested in this group.

"Sadly, no. I signed up like the rest of you. However, I submitted my request to Professor Templeton. I am excited to hear her points of view on various subjects." Anita was beaming again.

"How about we continue this discussion in the cafeteria? I am starving." Cynthia broke in, looking slightly more slumped from carrying what amounted to a small library in two bags slung over her shoulders. She pushed on her earmuffs over her mass of curly hair and pushed the door open. A gust of wind blew flakes of new snow at them, causing them each to pull their coats together tightly. It was going to be a cold and isolating winter break. It seemed none of them were going home to see family. They would be holed up in their dorm rooms, waiting for occasional windows of opportunity in which the weather would be favorable enough to venture out. The lightly falling snow muffled the bustle of students clamoring to make their way off-campus. The ones who still had class the next two days would be rushing to study for finals or makeup anything they missed before this Friday. Once the weekend hit, the University would be a ghost town. Only the unfortunate few with no holiday plans would be left to roam the empty halls of the Miskatonic.

The warmth of the cafeteria settled into their cold bones as they found an empty table and sat down. Cynthia's dark complexion was even more pronounced now as she sat beside Anita who's pale cheeks were rosy from the cold.

"Well, ladies, soup for everyone?" Cynthia removed her long coat and hung it on an empty chair beside her.

The other women nodded in agreement.

Cynthia made her way to the buffet line, grabbing a tray and bowls for each of them. She spotted her friend Isaiah entering the cafeteria. He looked horrible. His clothes were disheveled, and he looked like he hadn't slept well. His eyes were puffy and red. He seemed in a daze as he began to pass her in the line.

"Isaiah," she said to him, reaching out to grab his arm.

Isaiah looked up as if startled out of a dream. "Cynthia, hello, I..." he smiled.

"Are you getting food? You can sit with us." Cynthia motioned to the table where Evelyn and Anita sat, engaged in humorous conversation judging from the boisterous laugh that Evelyn let loose.

"I was on my way to the administration building to work out some things for next semester. I would love to sit with you, but I have to get this taken care of before break starts." Isaiah's mood had dramatically changed once he started talking with Cynthia.

"Are you OK? I don't mean to sound rude, but you look like something the cat dragged in." Concern was clearly visible on her face.

"It's my father. He passed away last night. It was... sudden." His gaze fell to the floor as he spoke.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Isaiah. I know you were very close. Is there anything I can do?" It was heartbreaking to see him this way. Isaiah was always such a confident and jovial man. They had become close over the years. The few black students at the university kept tabs on each other, giving encouragement when needed and commiseration when ugliness reared its inevitable head. Over time they became friends. Cynthia thought that it could blossom into something more, but Isaiah was so driven by his studies that there never seemed to be anytime. She put a hand on his cheek. "I am so sorry."

Isaiah smiled at her warmly. "I have to go now, but maybe we can have lunch tomorrow? Are you leaving for winter break?"

"No, I'll be here. Evelyn and Anita will be as well, so I will have company at least. We have all joined an interesting study group which should keep us busy through the holidays. The Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology, quite a name, don't you think."

"Interesting, I was asked by two men to join that group just yesterday. It isn't really in my field of study, but they seemed to want me to join nonetheless." He had a perplexed look on his face. There seemed to be a million things running through his mind at once.

"Are you joining?" Cynthia asked a bit too excitedly.

"I was thinking about it. I do need the credits it will provide. But alas, I need to take care of my issues with next semester first. Lunch tomorrow?" Isaiah gave her another big smile.

"Of course." She returned an equally bright smile.

"Until tomorrow then." He bowed exaggeratedly, taking her hand and kissing it. Then gave a little laugh and nodded as he left.

She watched him go. He was a tough nut to crack. Sometimes it seemed like he felt the same way she did, but other times his studies seemed to be the only thing on his mind. It was terrible what happened to his father. She had met him before on campus. He appeared to be an extremely healthy man for his age. It was odd that he would die so suddenly. When it's your time, it's your time, she thought. The Lord has his plan for us all.

Anita and Evelyn both stated at her eyebrows raised as she returned to the table with 3 steaming soup bowls. Cynthia sat without saying a word and distributed the bowls. With an emerging grin, she grabbed a roll and broke off a piece.

"Oh no, you don't, Cynthia. Give us the skinny on that conversation you just had with our handsome doctor to be." Evelyn was laying it on thick.

"It was nothing. We are having lunch tomorrow," Cynthia said as she dipped her piece of roll into her soup.

"Is that all? Well, I guess it is no big deal. You probably don't want to talk about it at all since it is such a trivial thing." Evelyn knew how Cynthia felt about Isaiah. She would not hear the end of this one.

"It's just lunch. Besides, his father just passed. He looked like he hadn't slept all night. Poor thing." Concern was evident on her face.

"That's terrible. Was his father in poor health?" Anita asked, looking concerned as well. She didn't know Isaiah, but she knew the feeling of losing a parent. It is never easy.

"No, he was strong as an ox as far as I knew. He wasn't that old either. He didn't mention how he died." Cynthia stared into her soup as if she would find the answer there. "I mean, I am happy about having lunch with Isaiah. I only wish the circumstances were less grim."

"Where was he off to?" Evelyn was looking in the direction that Isaiah had left.

"He said he needed to clear up some issues about next semester at the administration building. I assume it has something to do with his father's death." Cynthia now looked worried.

"It is probably monetary. I wouldn't worry about it. Unfortunately, when loved ones die, the survivors have to pick up the pieces even when they would rather just sit in a dark room for a month." Anita had lost her mother two years ago and her father three years before that. The fact that she had to deal with her mother's finances and secure funding for her education within days of her mother's death provided empathy for Isaiah's current situation. The gears of the world do not stop, unfortunately, when tragedy invades our lives.

"I wish I could help." Cynthia looked up in the direction Evelyn was staring.

"You can provide comfort and a shoulder to cry on. If things go really well, you can provide other things as well." Evelyn gave a wicked grin.

"You have no soul, Eve." Cynthia threw the rest of her roll at Evelyn.

"I feel bad for the man, make no mistake, but what could be a better remedy for such sorrow than the open arms of our beautiful Cynthia Cohen. You know I am kidding. I have a hard time dealing with such painful subjects. It's how I cope with the tragedy. Laughter is the best medicine or something like that. Anyhow, I think it's been high time you two got together. I don't know how many more months of you two making puppy eyes at each other I can take." Evelyn caught the roll and took a bite.

"He also said that he might be joining our little study group. He said that two men asked him to join." Cynthia began eating her soup.

"He was asked? When the rest of us have to submit our request like we are auditioning for a Broadway show. Well, it must be nice to be at the top of your class, I guess." Evelyn took an aggressive bite of the roll.

"You are the top of your class, Evelyn," Anita said.

"The top of my class in Mathematics and Physics, but those are not part of my major. I am sorely lacking in standing in that regard, I am afraid." Evelyn smiled again. She may have been irked that she was not asked to join the group, but the feeling didn't last long.

The three women finished their meal on a somber note. Cynthia was obviously distracted by Isaiah's news while Evelyn and Anita were their plans for the break.

Evelyn seemed to be most interested in the study group's choice of venue for their meetings. The Oak and Dagger was an out-of-the-way oddity of Arkham. It was not a cafe or diner though it did serve food and drinks. It was not a library though it did provide access to books and research material that it had in its personal collection. It was not a meeting hall though it did allow customers to rent out private rooms of varying sizes for meetings. It was a bit of an enigma. Most people knew of the place but had never been there. Those who had weren't especially forthcoming about the place and why they had gone there. There was an unspoken rule about revealing anything one might hear or witness at the Oak and Dagger. Simply put, you didn't. Evelyn was itching to see what was inside that secretive back ally establishment, but of course, she wouldn't tell a soul what she saw there.

Anita was more interested in the substance of the group itself. She was a history and folklore student, so there couldn't be a more fitting study group for her. Professor Claudia Templeton, a linguistics professor, was one of the faculty sponsors of the group. Anita was excited to hear her opinions on local folklore subjects, religions, and the ritual practices of obscure cultures worldwide. She knew Professor Tempelton had translated many obscure books for the Oren Library that were locked away in the restricted collection. Anita would love to bend her ear about what the contents of some of those might be. Cynthia and Evelyn's addition to the group removed any reservations she had had previously when she thought she would be going it alone. She was excited for the first time this year over her academic endeavors. She desperately needed the infusion of enthusiasm to get her through this final year and refocus her for the graduate studies ahead.

Chapter 5 (The Deal)

James ran along the slippery wet walkway between the archeology museum and the Liberal Studies building, sliding around the corner and righting himself just in time to avoid trampling a wild-eyed freshman looking for his next class. "Sorry!" he called as he continued running towards the entrance to the Archeology Department. It was nestled in the unseen corridors of the Miskatonic Universities Museum of Archeology. If he was late, Professor Berlioux would not allow him entry, and he would miss his final for the class. He needed these last social science credits so that he'd never have to show his face around the Liberal Studies building ever again. Not that he didn't enjoy the social sciences, it was just that his business focus kept him from enjoying them. He slipped on a small patch of ice that had formed on the set of four stairs leading to the museum's wide double doors. Catching himself before falling to the ground scattering his class materials which were tucked haphazardly under his left arm, he lept through the door that another student had just opened. With another apology cast into the air, he ran as fast as he could down the corridor, making his way to his class. Surprised students made way for the scrambling young man as he plowed forward toward his singular destination. Skidding to a stop in front of a set of dark wooden doors, he heard the sharp metallic click of the doors locking and forever sealing his fate to have to retake the class next session. The professor was very clear about missing any finals. The final constituted seventy percent of your grade, and without it, James would not pass. His heart sank as he stood before the doors staring as if somehow they would open by the sheer will of his desire, no need, to take that final.

He tried the handle hoping beyond hope that what he heard was not the professor locking the door. The handle held fast. It was too late. He let out a defeated breath and closed his eyes. He had studied hard for this final. Harder than he had for any other portion of the class. James could not believe that he would have to go through the entire course again. Perhaps there was a way he could convince Professor Berlioux that he had a good reason for being late. A better reason than stopping to say good morning to Evelyn Chance and losing track of time.

James turned from the door, making his way slowly back down the hallway he had just rushed through. The good news was that Evelyn would be a part of the study group he and Anthony signed up for. James wasn't about to tell Anthony that his ulterior motive for joining the group was the possibility of more opportunities to speak with Evelyn. Now he could add the possibility of convincing Professor Berlioux that he was worthy of a second chance on this final to that list.

He was please that the professor was one of the heads of the group. James liked Professor Berlioux. The man had a casual style to his teaching that made one feel comfortable asking questions. The professor's knowledge was unsurpassed at the university. There was something about Professor Berlioux that commanded attention. James had never paid much mind to the classes he needed to take that were not directly part of his major, but somehow, Professor Berlioux had made him excited about archeology. In a different world, maybe he would have studied archeology as his major. It was certainly more interesting than working with numbers and learning to extract profits while lowering the bottom line. Business was his father's passion, not his. He had managed to prolong his degree as long as he possibly could. Supplementing his core curriculum with any fancy that struck him in a given semester. He was undoubtedly becoming a renaissance man.

Once outside, James spotted the freshman he had almost trampled earlier, still looking like a lost puppy. James headed over and helped the poor fellow out. Pointing him in the right direction and gave him a firm pat on the back. At least he could do some good while he was here. Since he would not be filling the next hour taking his archeology final, James decided to take a stroll to the Ancient History Department and see if he could catch Anthony after class.

It was a short walk to the history building. The sun was out for the first time in days. James was happy to soak up as much as he could before the clouds invaded again. There was bound to be another snowfall soon, but for now, the sun was bright overhead. The crisp winter air smelled fresh, and if he could stop thinking so hard about his missing the final, this could be a good day.

It wasn't too long after James made it to the history building that students began filing out. Leaning on a tree not far from the entrance, James scanned the scrambling crowd for his friend. It was hard to miss the young man in an ill-fitting blazer and slacks burdened with more books than could possibly be needed for his class moving purposefully through the crowd, apologizing much too frequently as he passed fellow students.

"Anthony! Over here!" James shouted over the din of students hurrying to get to their next class.

Anthony looked in his direction and gave an affirmative nod of his head. He started moving across the current of scurrying students, politely asking for the pardon of each whos path he crossed.

"What are you doing here, James? I thought you had a final today." Anthony said once he reached James.

"I did. I missed it." James shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll fail the class." Anthony's concern was enough for one to believe it was him who had missed the final and not James.

"I was seconds late at most. You know how Professor Berlioux is. The door is locked at precisely nine, and anyone who is late is out of luck. I literally heard the door lock as I approached." James shook his head.

"Tough break James, I'm sorry."

"You apologize too much. Let's get some coffee, shall we?" James exclaimed, reaching to take some of Anthony's books from him. "You starting a book store that I don't know about?"

"Research, I wanted to get a jump on learning local folklore if we are going to be attending that study group tomorrow night," Anthony said, straightening his glasses.

"Yes, about that. I wanted to let you know that I put our names in, and we were both accepted. I had no doubt about you but was a bit worried that I might have to sit this one out. Apparently, they are not letting just anyone in. It must be the fact that I keep such steller company." James smiled and gave Anthony a playful punch on the shoulder.

"Well, if you made it in, I am beginning to question the integrity of this group. I am sure that Professor Berlioux will be expecting you to show up at least ten seconds early to each meeting." They both laughed as they rejoined the river of students making their way across campus.

"So, I have a bit of a plan for tomorrow night. It is gonna take a bit of persuasive charm and likely a decent amount of money, but I think it will be worth it." James had that look in his eye. Anthony could tell that he was cooking up one of his half-baked schemes. "Trust me, you're gonna love this one."

Isaiah sat in the Oren Library, trying as he might to study the ridiculous pile of medical journals, white papers, and reference volumes he had before him. He kept playing the scene of his father's murder again and again in his head. Thinking of every small detail that could have gone differently. Anything that would put his father at home tonight when he returned. Isaiah was a logical man. He realized that dwelling on the things he didn't do was as close to digging his own grave as Isaiah ever imagined he could be.

He tried to clear his mind. On the brink of breaking down, Isaiah floated through the last two days since his father's death. The bright spot being his chance encounter with Cynthia. He needed a shoulder to cry on. Cynthia was the only person he trusted enough to be completely honest with.

Isaiah knew the trouble he was in for with Big Danny. He had visited the administration building the day before to tell them he could not pay the tuition for the following semester. To Isaiah's surprise, it was already accounted for in full. It seems a man with an English accent came and paid on his behalf. It was a further complication to all of this. Mr. Edgerton, it would seem, paid his tuition for him after hinting that he knew something about Isaiah's financial issues. Whatever this Thomas Edgerton fellows angle was, didn't matter at the moment. He had bought him another month's payment for Danny's thugs, who would be back soon looking for money or blood.

Begrudgingly, he put in his name with Professor Templeton to join this Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology. If Mr. Edgerton had gone as far as to pay his tuition, the least he could do was to participate in this oddly benign study group. If it wasn't for Cynthia's joining, he might have just thanked Mr. Edgerton and attempted to pay him back. This would give him a chance to connect with Cynthia. She was the only person at school who had ever met his father. He had known her since her first day at Miskatonic University. He was a second-year student. She had that look in her eye that all freshmen have, like a deer in headlights. Leaving home for the first time, being totally on your own, was a lot to take in. They had become friends quickly. Cynthia was a wise individual, more intelligent than him by a mile, and kind. Unfortunately, their studies demanded their time so significantly that they rarely meet on a personal level. Having lunch with her today would be a break in the storm clouds surrounding him now.

Isaia looked up to see James Shaw and his friend Anthony walking towards his table in the library's furthest corner. What was James doing this deep in enemy territory? He seemed to revile every notion of studying. Isaiah had seen his friend Anthony here often, and with the number of books he was lugging around, it must have been him that dragged James in here. It was clear within a moment that these two were heading his way. James was a nice guy, which Isaiah found unique. Rich and white, with a family steeped in Arkham's upper class. Not any of the other pedigreed men at the university could be said the same of. Most openly hostile, and others quietly so, James was an oddity. Isaiah would go as far as to say he liked the man.

His friend Anthony was another story. Isaiah had met him briefly once or twice but didn't know him well. He was a slender man with a slightly dark complexion. His disheveled and often mismatched attire betrayed him as a genuine academic with no time to be bothered by his outward appearance.

"Isaiah, my friend, I have a proposition for you." James was ever the showman. He reached out and shook Isaiah's hand.

"Hello." Anthony mustered as he began unburdening himself of books onto the table.

"James, I'm kind of in the middle of something," Isaiah said flatly, motioning to the pile of books and papers in front of him.

"We won't take up much of your time. I just need to ask a favor." James replied, holding up his hands in surrender.

"I'll just lay it out there that I have no idea what James has planed. So please don't blame me for any of the nonsense that he is about to subject you to." Anthony exclaimed as he set his final book down and pulled up a chair.

"Thanks for the support, Anthony. I told you that it was on the up and up, well sort of, and that you were gonna love it." James put his hand on Anthony's shoulder.

"By all means, Mr. Shaw, make your request. Then Isaiah can refuse, and we can get back to figuring out what we will be doing stuck in Arkham over the holidays." Anthony rand his hand through his dark hair.

"OK, James. What is it?" Isaiah asked.

"I spoke with Evelyn Chance this morning, and she told me that you have signed up for this Esoteric Technology of Society or whatever it's called."

Anthony interrupted "Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology,"

"Yeah, that. Well, it just so happens that Anthony and I are in the group as well." James began again.

This time it was Isaiah who interrupted. "They let you in? And here I thought that I was something special being asked by Mr. Edgerton and his doctor friend. Why would you want to be in a folklore and religion study group anyhow?"

James played at being hurt. "Now that hurts. Can I not have layers."

"Yeah, you've got layers all right. Layers of bullshit. Just come out with it." Isaiah jested. It almost hurt to crack a smile after his father's death.

"OK, so we are all going to go to this study group tomorrow night. And I'm sure you've heard that it will be off-campus at that Oak and Dagger dive. Well, I got to thinking. The group starts at six, and it can't go on for more than an hour or two, so afterward, the night is ours." James raised his eyebrows.

"I don't like where this is going," Anthony added.

"As you all know, I am sure. Evelyn, Cynthia, and Anita will be going together, and I thought that."

"I knew it. It had to be something. Why the hell would you join up for this or any study group unless there was an angle. You're just trying to get in good with Evelyn, aren't you?" Anthony said, raising his eyes to the sky.

"That is a benefit to the group certainly, but no, I am genuinely interested in the field of study." James defended himself.

"After how many years here and you finally sound like a student. Field of study indeed. I don't blame you, but you dragged me into this and.."

It was James's turn to interrupt. "You said you were genuinely interested in this group. Don't start acting like I was forcing you to go."

"Guys, you can argue this another time. What do you need from me?" Isaiah chimed in.

"We need a car. I thought that since your dad owns a garage, you might have a few around that we could use. For a price, of course." James put on foot up on a chair he pulled over and rested on his knee with one elbow.

"Are you crazy? The cars in the garage are not ours. We are fixing them up for paying customers. What would make me wanna break their trust?" Isaiah knew that there was a Chrysler in the garage that Danny's boys had dropped off. They would be back to pick it up when they came to collect. What could it hurt to try and pull a little extra cash out of it before then?

"How does ten dollars sound?" James beamed a triumphant smile.

"It sounds faint like it's coming from the basement." Isaiah squinted his eyes as if he was straining to listen to something.

James's eyes widened as he picked up on the fact that Isaiah didn't simply dismiss the idea out of hand. "Well, I am sure that fifteen would clear your ears enough to listen to reason. I think that after the study group we should take everyone out for some nightlife. Ya know, go blow off some steam."

"OK, now I see where you're going with all of this, and I have to tell ya. I like it." Anthony said, closing the book he had open.

"But how much does Isaiah like it?" James turned to Isaiah with a questioning look.

"I can hear you now, but I would hate for something to happen to one of our customer's cars. It isn't a great way to keep business, is it? You should at least know something about that." Isaiah retorted.

"No one has to know. It's just a night out. Drive a few blocks around town and right back to the garage safe and sound. How about twenty? Does that ease your guilty conscience?" James pulled his wallet from his pocket.

"I think I might be able to live with myself for twenty. You have a deal. But I am the only one who is driving that car." Isaiah agreed. He was surprised at the amount of money James was willing to put up for a night on the town. He supposed to James that amount of money was nothing. The confirmation of that thought came next as James opened his wallet and pulled the twenty-dollar bill out, handing it to Isaiah.

"A pleasure doing business with you, sir," James said, stretching out his hand to shake on it.

Isaiah took his hand and gave a firm handshake. He was halfway to paying for next month's payment to Big Danny with that. This group seemed to be paying off more than Isaiah had expected. Still in the back of his mind, he could hear his father's words. "Don't paint the devil on the wall Isaiah. You play with fire, and you're sure to get burned." He figured he was sure to get burned either way. By Big Danny or Tomas Edgerton, it was only a matter of time.

Chapter 6 (The Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology)

Anthony put on his worn but smartly polished brown Oxfords and stood up straight in front of the mirror, brushing lint off his pleated grey slacks. He straightened his tie and notice the slight discoloration of a stain on his left sleeve. No matter, he thought, he'd have his jacket on most of the night, and if he did take it off, rolling up the sleeves of his white button-up shirt should hide it. Anthoney's jet black hair was parted on the left and slicked back. Sliding on his grey vest and watching himself in the mirror button it up, he noticed a loose thread on the right side seam. Why the hell was James so adamant about them dressing up for the evening's engagement. It was a study group, not a high-class charity ball. With any luck, they would be going out on the town afterward, which meant the possibility of getting into Arkham's only speakeasy. He supposed that a jacket and tie would get him in without a second look, but from what he'd heard, the proprietors were not too discerning about their clientele. He turned in a full circle scooping up his pressed grey jacket from the chair behind him and throwing it on in one motion. He took one last glance at himself in the mirror, smiled, and put on a grey fedora with the black band. Pinching the brim, he winked at himself and headed for the door of his dorm room.

James was in the hallway waiting for him. The tall, lean, and perfectly quaffed fellow was leaning against the wall staring at his sliver pocket watch, looking every inch the pampered dilettant. James wore a perfectly pressed expensive black suit, a white fedora with a black band, and white and black wingtips. He looked out of place, standing in the hallway of a dormitory with students rushing to and fro, dragging large trunks of presumably dirty laundry with them as they made their way off to visit family for the holiday break. Looking up, Mr. Shaw caught Anthony in his steely blue-eyed gaze and smiled. Slipping the pocket watch back where it came from, he pushed himself off the wall to stand in front of Anthony. "I am truly worried for the defenseless young ladies who will be swept up in the intoxicating spell of your bewitching handsomeness. Honestly, they don't stand a chance."

"Don't worry, James. I will be sure to put in a good word for you with any of the less particular ones. Ya know. The ones who aren't turned off by charm, good looks, and money." Anthony laughed. "What's with all the fancy clothes anyhow. You looking to impress Professor Berlioux? Maybe he will let you take that final again if he knows what a snappy dresser you are."

"Not likely. I just thought that we could make a night of this. Go out after the meeting and paint the town red. We have the car from Isaiah and look at us. I told Isaiah to dress in his finest as well. I wanted to ask Evelyn and her friends along as well. If we look like proper gentlemen, there is a much better chance of them coming along for the ride." James answered as he tossed his arm around Anthony's shoulders and began walking him down the hall.

"You are a piece of work, James. Do you really think Evelyn is going to fall head over heels for you just because you show up in a car and a nice suit? She's a smart one, I'd venture to say one of the smartest at this university. She doesn't seem like the type to go doe-eyed over a guy in flashy duds. You're gonna need to speak eventually, and I don't think she speaks gorilla." Anthony playfully pushed James off of him.

"Gorilla? Oh, come on, Anthony. That's not fair." James retorted, holding the door to the quad open for his friend.

"You're right. I'd be giving you too much credit." Anthony shivered as the cold night air hit him. "I should have grabbed my overcoat."

"It's a quick walk to Church street. Isaiah said he would meet us in front of the school. I hope that whatever was in his garage isn't a rusted old wagon." James pulled his coat together against the cold. "We have no time to get your overcoat. Come on, live a little."

It was a quarter past six. The last remnants of students who'd procrastinated long enough were hurriedly making their way to various modes of transportation. Ladened with luggage, weary from grueling finals, they rushed off to spend the holiday with family and friends. The Miskatonic campus was all but deserted as James and Anthony strolled through the grounds like any other day. Neither would be going home for the holidays, both for their own very different reasons. They joked and laughed nonetheless. The campus was theirs for the entire break. Not James nor Anthony could think of a person they would rather spend it with.

Exiting the university beneath the iron-wrought archway with the time-honored name of the Miskatonic. They spotted Isaiah standing next to a grey Chrysler B-70, dressed as if he were going to church on Sunday. Both men waved to Isaiah and headed down the sidewalk to where the car was parked.

"Isaiah, how could I have ever doubted you. I mean, she's a beauty." James said, pulling out his handkerchief and making a show of shinning the fender.

"And needs to stay that way," Isaiah added, giving James a stern look.

"You have my word as a gentleman." James held up his right hand flat next to his face. "I swear it."

"Gentleman is a bit of a stretch, don't ya think. How was your last day, Isaiah?" Anthony cut in.

"It was busy at the teaching hospital today. I almost tried to skip out on you guys. It's a good thing you gave me money for this, or I may have just gone home to rest. I have an early shift tomorrow also, so." Isaiah trailed off, obviously with something else on his mind. He had been in a grief-stricken haze for the last few days. His lunch with Cynthia had been a massive weight off of his shoulders. Just to tell someone. Not only that his father had died but the complete account of the circumstances that led to his death. Yet another reason he didn't skip this inane study group tonight. She would be there, and she was counting on him coming. It helped somehow to surround himself with people he knew. None but Cynthia really knew him, though. For now, any chance for him to not be alone with his thoughts was a godsend.

"You OK, Isaiah? I mean, shit isn't a word I would use to describe you in that suit that is obviously so much better maintained than my own but seriously when was the last time you slept.?" Anthony joked, but there was genuine concern in his eyes.

"I'm fine. Just get in and don't get anything dirty." Isaiah seemed to break out of his fog.

The three men jumped in the car, James in the passenger seat, Anthony in the back, and Isaiah driving, of course. Each had a different reason for attending this study group with the odd name. Isaiah had promised Cynthia, but more concerningly was monetarily obligated to attend as far as he could see it due to Mr. Edgerton's kind gesture. James was a hopeless romantic who had managed to find himself in the position to speak with Ms. Chance, in some capacity, on a weekly basis. Anthony was genuinely interested in the study group's content, but his primary motivation was to stick with his best friend. A silence broke over the three men after some quip or another. They all looked out into the Arkham night, each with their own list of possibilities.

Evelyn Chance and Cynthia Cohen walked proudly through the women's dormitory. Both women striding side by side down the hallway, their long coats still fully buttoned, and neither had taken off her hat. Evelyn found the room they were looking for and knocked. Snow still on her tan overcoat. She seemed a bit impatient, tapping her foot as she waited.

Cynthia stood behind Evelyn, waiting for the door to open. The hallway was empty. All the other girls had already cleared out for holiday break. Anita was the only person left on the second floor. The dorm had an eerie quality when it was empty, especially at night. As if something in the last remnants of lighted space, one could see before the blackness beyond, waited, ready to pounce from the shadows.

Cynthia was still feeling shocked by Isaiah's revelation of the events that took place the night of John Cage's death. Isaiah's father was a kind man. She had met him once, which confirmed the hundreds of stories Isaiah had told her about him. To be gunned down in your own residents. It wasn't right. Their lunch wasn't what she had hoped it would be. Isaiah was understandably grief-stricken, which left him disconnected. She tried to find the right words to console him but knew that it was only time that could mend those wounds. She tried to shake it off. Tonight was about this study group and picking Professor Templeton's brain about any number of things.

The door slowly opened to reveal Anita. Her hair was up into her wide-brimmed white hat. She wore a long coat buttoned up to the chin.

"Hey, thanks for letting me tag along with you. I'm ready to go when you are." She glanced back and forth at the two in front of her.

"I was hoping you'd say that." Evelyn let out a breath and moved aside to let Anita out into the hallway.

"Did you think I was gonna invite you in for tea? I wanna get out of this dorm as quickly as I can. This place gives me the creeps. Now that everyone is gone, it's unsettling. I've always gone back to Boston over the winter break. This is new to me." Anita moved quickly down the dim hallway. It seemed there was always at least one light that was out in the hall. She wondered if anyone would come and replace it during the break. Or would a new light go out each day until the hallway was in total darkness? The thought made her move even faster.

"Wait up." Evelyn's footsteps echoed in the empty hallway. "These new shoes aren't broken in yet. I'd prefer not to run all the way to the meeting."

"We couldn't let you go alone, Anita." Cynthia added, "Not with the reports of missing students that have been cropping up the last two months." Cynthia inspected the hallway as they moved quickly toward the stairwell. "Our floor has only one other girl who is remaining over the break. At least Evelyn and I share a room. I can't imagine what it must be like to be alone."

"It's not too bad once I am in my room. In fact, it's better than having my chattering roommate here. This hallway, though, if I could jump out of the window, I would." Anita laughed. "Then again, when Beverly begins to go on about the decline of modern literature, I find myself wanting to jump out the window for other reasons."

Evelyn laughed. "How many missing students have been reported, Cynthia? I'm ashamed to admit that I haven't been following the stories much."

"Four since October, there may be others, but those four were all students." Cynthia sped up her pace as well before reaching the stairs. The light in the stairwell flickered and dimmed slightly. All three women descended the stairs at a rate that none would admit was two-fold the speed of their usual gate.

Once they were out of the dorm and on to the quad, Anita began to calm down. A dusting of snow had fallen across the cleared paths. It was not so much as to obscure the cobblestone walkways from view but enough to reveal that coming home might be troublesome. The snow provided a blanket of muffled silence across the Miskatonic University. Even out of the dormitory in the open air, the silence of the place was unsettling.

"Maybe they just left for break early and didn't inform anyone. Or dropped out completely." Anita adjusted her red and green argyle scarf then began walking.

"None of them told any of their professors nor the administration staff. It seems unlikely. The police have confirmed at least two of them had not made any contact with their families." Cynthia had been following the disappearances closely since the first, Johnathan Cole. He was a horrible brute who had never missed an opportunity to target Cynthia with hurtful slurs. Telling her that "her kind" shouldn't be allowed in a respectable school like the Miskatonic. She'd initially been glad that he was no longer showing up to any of the classes they shared. However, when others started going missing, it seemed that something more than shirking academic responsibility was a play.

"Can we talk about something less dismal?" Evelyn chimed in. "Walking at night talking about missing persons is not my idea of stimulating conversation."

They walked three abreast down the snow-covered path towards Church Street. From the entrance of the school, it was only five blocks to the Oak and Dagger. The silence of the campus felt like a living thing. Everyone had heard at least one rumor of unexplainable disappearances or vaguely remembered, miss-identified animals getting loose of their respective departments. The entire town of Arkham had so many shadowed corners and legend-shrowded buildings that walking alone, especially at night, was not a wise activity.

"You do know where you're going, right, Eve?" Cynthia asked, folding her arms across her chest as she walked.

"Yeah. I have only wanted to see what's inside this place since I heard about it two years ago. I have even walked down to that alley and stood right outside the door. But before tonight, I have never gone in." Evelyn led the way into the streets of Arkham. The dimly lit sidewalks and shuttered windows lent to the feeling of isolation as they moved further from the campus's familiarity. Saging gambreled roofs whose black windows concealed unknown abominations watching and waiting. Shadows seemed to stretch out closer to them as they made a series of turns down smaller streets until both Cynthia and Anita were utterly lost. They would have to rely on Evelyn to get them back to campus.

It began to snow lightly as they plodded along in relative silence, each woman scanning the dark alleyways they passed for any sign of sudden movement. They avoided the darker sections of the streets and tried to keep to the lighted sidewalks when they could. It was as if the entire town had closed itself away from some sinister entity that had descended on the town with the coming snow.

"It's not far now. Just at the end of this street. Well then down a dark alley and..."

Cynthia cut her off. "Another dark alley? I thought this was the dark alley."

"Where's your sense of adventure?" Evelyn tried to sound upbeat.

"I think I left it in our dorm room." Cynthia move in closer to the other two. The street they were on was narrow and without any light besides the occasional orange rays seeping through cracks in a window's shutters. The scurrying of rats and other nocturnal things could be heard in dark corners of the quiet lane. Irrational fear began to build in Cynthia. Her eyes darted to each shadow. Suddenly Evelyn stopped.

"Here we are, ladies. The Oak and Dagger." Evelyn waved a hand at the dim alley in front of them.

The alley's one light source was about fifty yards down the alley from where they stood. It was dim and sputtering. It hung over an old worn wooden sign with a carving of a dagger protruding from a tree. In faded and cracked white lettering below, it read Oak and Dagger.

The three women nearly pushed each other over in a rush to get out of the dark forboding alley and into the warmth of the Oak and Daggers common room. None of the four solitary men seated at what seemed the greatest possible distance from one another looked up upon their entrance. A man with greasy black and grey shoulder-length hair and a long scraggly beard stood behind a counter drying a glass with a less than clean towel. He wore a stained apron that at one time must have been white. His piercing grey eyes fixed on them as they began removing their coats and hanging them on the rack beside the door. There was a fire in a large hearth to the right. Tables were scattered haphazardly throughout the room. A set of stairs on the left ascended to a closed door. Directly in front of them, across from the now-closed entrance, was a thick wooden counter with stools in front of it that covered the room wall to wall. The man behind the counter looked at them but made no other acknowledgment of their presence.

"Well, you finally made it, Evelyn. Is it everything you hoped it would be?" Cynthia's words dripped with sarcasm.

"We are a bit early. Perhaps the professors have not yet arrived." Anita sounded excited and fearful at the same time.

"Take a seat ladies, how bout over here?" Evelyn moved to a table in the dead center of the room, giving them as much space as possible from the other men seated at various tables around the room. She pulled out a chair and sat down, trying to ack as if she was a regular patron of this out-of-the-way establishment. The other two women took seats at the table without comment.

"What time is it?" Cynthia asked.

"Ten to seven." Anita offered.

"Well, this is going to be the most comfortable ten minutes I have spent in the last, oh let's say, twenty-four years." Evelyn joked under her breath.

"I suppose we order at the counter. The maitre d' doesn't seem to have noticed us." Cynthia said, instigating a laugh from Anita.

"What do you girls want? I'll go order something." Anita stood from her seat.

"Coffee for me," Evelyn answered.

"I'll take some water," Cynthia said, prompting Aanita to head toward the man behind the counter.

Anita stood at the counter, waiting for the man to acknowledge her. He continued cleaning glasses one by one but made no effort to ask her what she wanted. "Can I get two coffees and a water for my friends and me over there?" She smiled brightly.

The man stopped cleaning glasses and turned to get the coffees from a tin coffee pot on an old stove behind him. He poured two cups and put them on the counter in front of her, then filled one of the glasses he had just cleaned with water and placed it next to the coffees.

"How much do I owe you, sir?" Anita opened her beaded purse.

"I assume you are with the group from the university." He said in a thick Scottish accent.

"Ah, yes, we are," Anita replied.

"It's all on Thomas Edgerton's tab." He stared at her without continuing.

Anita grabbed the coffees in one hand and the water in the other. "Thank you." She made her way back to the table and handed everyone their drinks. "That man is a fountain of pleasantries." Anita made an exaggerated show of rolling her eyes.

Just then, the door opened, letting in a swirl of snow and a chill wind. The three women turned to look at the newcomers while the other men continued to ignore everyone around them. The three young men that entered stuck out like a sore thumb. Each dressed in neatly pressed suits faces cleanly shaven, and every hair on their heads was in its proper place. Isaiah Cage, Anthony Christopher, and James Shaw stood in the entryway shaking snow off their unexpectedly dapper attire.

Cynthia waved them over. The men began to grab empty chairs for themselves and took seats around the table the three women were occupying. Anthony looked cold and slightly miserable. Isaiah, who seemed to be the only one of the three who had brought an overcoat, seemed content if a little distracted. James was positively beaming as he pulled his chair near Evelyn and sat down.

"Have you been here long?" James asked, addressing all three women.

"Just long enough for Anita to make a new friend and get some coffee," Evelyn said, nodding her head toward the stoic man behind the counter.

"Have any of the professors shown up yet?" Anthony inquired.

"Not yet, but the man behind the counter seemed to know what we are here for. He said our drinks were on a Thomas Edgerton's tab. Anyone know who that is?" Anita said after taking a sip of her coffee.

"He has something to do with the group, but what that could be, I have no idea." Isaiah looked concerned at the first mention of Mr. Edgerton's name.

"Well, I think we all know each other from one point or another, but I don't believe I have ever had the pleasure Ms..." James addressed Anita.

"Anita Saltonstall pleased to meet you, Mr..."

"Shaw, James Shaw. It's a pleasure to meet you, Anita." James gave her one of his winning smiles.

The door opened again, this time producing a single figure. It was a woman in a wide-brimmed red hat and long black overcoat. She stamped her feet and removed her hat, revealing her shoulder-length wavy black hair. Hanging her hat on the rack beside the door, she proceeded to remove her overcoat, which was dusted with snow. She wore a black dress with white trim and fashionable T-strap shoes. At her entrance, the man behind the counter smiled and lit up like a Christmas tree. "Ms. Templeton, so glad to see you again. Is there anything I can get for you?"

Everyone at the table exchanged amazed glances with each other at the sudden change in the stone-faced man's demeanor. Anita could barely contain herself at the appearance of Professor Claudia Templeton. They all stood and turned toward the professor, waiting for her to address them.

"Nothing for the moment, Mick. I presume you are all here for the study group? Follow me," she said, moving toward the stairs without turning to see if any of them were coming or not. "Mick, if anyone else shows up, just send them upstairs, please."

The Oak and Dagger's second story was a stark contrast from the gritty common room on the first floor. The hallway at the top of the stairs was paneled with dark wood hand-carved at the top, middle, and bottom with intricate swirling patterns reminiscent of turbulent ocean waters. The dark green carpet was clean and well maintained. Several doors lined the hallway on both sides. They were of the same dark wood as the paneling with even more elaborate carvings. Each entry had its own unique image. They passed impressively life-like depictions of tangled vines with delicate flowers, panoramic scenes with snow-capped mountains, jungles with cascading waterfalls. Every door a work of art. It was hard to believe that they were still in the same building.

Professor Templeton led the way to a door near the end of the hallway. It featured a relief of a man atop a horse staring out over a sprawling valley below him. Without knocking, she opened the door and entered. The rest of the group followed her in.

The room they entered was lined with bookshelves on every wall. The wall opposite the entryway boasted a large hearth with a crackling fire. The mantle was a work of art with carved marble that looked like a river flowing across the top of the fireplace. There were several comfortable-looking cushioned leather chairs around the room with side tables and reading lamps. The room's main focus was a large table to the right side, which all of the chairs were seemingly turned to focus on. Behind the table stood Professor Alexander Berlioux staring intently at a sheet of paper he was holding. Seated in the room's far left corner were two other men, one dressed in an expensive black suit and highly polished wingtips, the other in a nondescript brown suit and oxfords. All three men looked up and smiled as Professor Claudia Templeton entered the room.

"Good evening Claudia." Professor Berlioux exclaimed in a distinct French accent. Noticing the others funneling into the room, he added. "Welcome, welcome everyone, please take a seat where ever you feel comfortable. We have coffee, tea, and water if anyone is inclined. Also, something with a little more kick if that suits you." He motioned to a tray table near the two other men. The expensively suited gentleman raised what appeared to be a glass of brandy and gave a devilish grin.

Anthony raised an eyebrow at James and headed to the drink table. James seemed to barely notice as he took in the room. Evelyn followed Anthony without missing a beat as Anita inched ever closer to Professor Templeton, who had taken a seat near the other two men in the corner. Cynthia and Isaiah looked awkwardly around but eventually found seats next to one another closest to the door.

As everyone settled in, several other students entered the room after knocking, looking confused and amazed scanning the handsomely appointed room. The first was Johnathan Mills, an anthropology student whose squeaking shoes sounded louder than a brass band in the room's uncomfortable quiet. Next was Jeffery Smith, an insufferable snob who James gave a sour look to when he entered. Jeffery wrinkled his nose at Cynthia and Isaiah sitting quietly talking to each other, then turned and left the room. A few moments later, a young woman that no one seemed to know entered, looking frightened and holding a notebook close to her chest. Finally, another young man entered. Anthony had several classed with him but couldn't quite remember his name. He was a geology major like himself but didn't speak up much in class.

After a few more minutes of getting settled in, it was evident that no further students would trickle in. Claudia walked over behind the large table and whispered something into Professor Berlioux's ear. She then made her way to the drink table and fixed herself some tea.

"I believe everyone is accounted for." Berlioux began, "Welcome to the first official meeting of The Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology. We are proud to have you all joined us." The professor made a grand flourish with his arms, knocking over a candle holder on the table, causing a loud clatter in the nearly silent room. Awkwardly righting the fallen candlestick and replacing the half-burned candle, he resumed. "Excuse my excitement. You all represent the best of the best in your respective fields of study."

"Then why are you here, James?" Anthony jokingly whispered to James, who threw back a look of crestfallen look.

"The best minds that the Miskatonic University has to offer. We are embarking on a journey of exploration and enlightenment with endless possibilities." Professor Berlioux began walking back and forth behind the large table in front of the seated students. "I know for some of you this presents an opportunity to attain some extra credits that may round out your final session before graduation. My hope is that this will become less a mear study group and more of a society of great minds striving for a united purpose. The society hopes to build lasting connections between its members that will extend beyond the hallowed halls of the Miskatonic. We will pledge to help one another in our personal and professional lives for years to come."

Anthony tapped James on the shoulder and motioned down with his head. He held an open notebook where he had written each word in the group's name vertically with a large capital letter for each. The effect was the word S E K T written horizontally across the top of the page. He gave James a sly smile causing both men to quietly chuckle.

"I want to introduce you all to the other heads of the Society, some of whom you already know. Of course, there is myself, Alexandar Berlioux. I am a professor of archeology specializing in Egyptology at the Miskatonic. I am sure many of you know Claudia Templeton, professor of linguistics specializing in ancient and lost languages." Berlioux bowed his head toward Claudia. "My oldest and dearest friend Doctor Daniel Norris, also an alum of the Miskatonic." The man in the plain brown suit raised his hand half-heartedly. "And of course, Mr. Thomas Edgerton." The professor smiled and motioned with an outstretched arm to the expensive-looking man sipping brandy in the corner.

"I must remind you all that you may leave the group at any time, and you will still receive full credit for attending. Our aim is not the hold you against your will. If you find that the Society is not for you, please bow out graciously. There will be no hard feelings. However, if you stay, my hope is to form strong bonds and discover the ancient world's hidden secrets and the meanings behind local and foreign folklore and myth. There could possibly be some published papers that come from our research here at the Society." Professor Berlioux paused, smiling with pride in his eyes, taking a moment to gaze upon the young talent they had assembled.

"Well, everyone seems situated, so let's begin, shall we?" Berlioux reached behind him into a leather satchel and pulled from it an old book bound with wood and leather straps. He held up the book for everyone to see. The words on the front read Malleus Maleficarum. "Can anyone tell me what this is?"

Anita spoke first. "The Malleus Maleficarum."

Before she could continue, Cynthia added, "The hammer of witches."

"Good, can anyone tell me how one might identify a witch?" the professor said as he laid the book on the table in front of him.

There were quiet murmurs from the students, but none gave an answer to the question. "This book," Berlioux went on, "is responsible for the torture, imprisonment, and deaths of thousands of innocent women, men, and children from the late fourteen hundreds when it was first published all the way up to our own shameful witch trials in sixteen ninety-three. It describes the concept of witchcraft theoretically, describes alleged witchcraft cases, and finally, the legal technicalities of prosecuting a witch. For those of you who have knowledge of this book, how does one identify a witch?" he directed the question to Anita and Cynthia.

"Pardon my saying, Professor, but the whole thing is bull shit." Anita plainly stated. "The book's author Heinrich Kramer was a man seeking power and revenge. There is nothing in that book that can tell you one way or another if a person is a witch or not. What is a witch, for that matter? I have read the detestable thing cover to cover, and I can say without a doubt that it is nothing but rubbish."

"Ms. Saltonstall makes a good point." Berlioux began again. Anita was surprised that he knew her name. "This book is not worth the paper it is written on. It has caused so much suffering and death. It describes ways to identify a witch that are so absurd that any sane person must discount it immediately. The conclusion from the first section of the book is that witchcraft must be real because the Devil is real. The notions of witchcraft put forth in this book are rooted so profoundly in Catholic mythology that one has to ask oneself, what of the other religions of the world? Millions of people worldwide do not even practice any form of Christianity. To believe in the devil and by proxy witches, one must believe in the Christian God. We know that not everyone is Christian, so then how can the Devil exist? Logic dictates that we must consider this book to be, as Ms. Saltonstall so eloquently put it, bull shit." at that, Berlioux grabbed the book of of the table and walked to the fireplace, and unceremoniously tossed it onto the burning logs.

"So what is evil?" He began again, moving slowly between the seated members. "Evil is not a concept created by one religion. It is a universal idea that takes many forms and many names. It is referenced in every civilization, ancient to modern. Evil can not be defined. It can not be named. It just is. Were the accused witches evil, or was it the accusers who proceeded to torture and execute thousands that were truly evil?"

Professor Berlioux made his way back to the table in front of everyone. This time leaning on the font side closest to the others. "There is one tale that I think you may all know. Just before the witch trials in Salem, a group of women and men, thirteen of them were accused of witchcraft. This was before the hysteria that caused so many innocent young women to be executed in Salem. There were no trials for these people. Some of them were killed, but most of them escaped to other towns. One of these thirteen came to Arkham. Keziah Mason. It was said that she escaped from a cell in Salem, just disappeared, leaving behind only strange symbols of odd angles scrawled on the cell walls. She came here to Arkham, the house where she lived is still standing. Keziah did not attribute her powers to the devil, however. She told of lines and curves that could point to other spaces beyond. It was within these spaces that she learned to wield her power. Keziah and others of her coven were said to dance wildly on Walpurgis and Candlemas at the unnamed island in the Miskatonic River by blazing bonfires. To what end, no one knows. So was she a witch? Or something else entirely?" the professor paused for dramatic effect.

The young woman with the notebook clutched to her chest looked around the room with obvious shock on her face. She got up from her seat and briskly left the room.

"Our discussions are not for everyone." Professor Berlioux commented as the door closed behind her.

"So I would like you all to do some research on Keziah Mason, and we can discuss her and your thoughts on what is evil when we next meet. For the remainder of our time, I think we should mingle and get to know each other. Please enjoy yourselves." Berlioux then moved to that corner of the room where Claudia, Thomas, and Daniel sat.

The last thirty minutes of the meeting were a more relaxed affair as everyone began to mingle and talk. James tried to engage Evelyn in conversation, but she seemed more interested in refilling her glass with brandy and poking fun at Anthony. Anthony seemed content to take her jabs with an equal desire to keep his brandy glass full. Anita had cornered Professor Templeton and was having an in-depth discussion about women's demonization through the ages. Isaiah and Cynthia remained seated, having what looked like an emotional discussion. The first meeting of the Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology went off without a hitch. It appeared that they lost two potential members, but James was glad at least that Jeffery had left early. He could not abide by having that intolerable bastard in the group. He smiled as he looked around the room. This was going to be a great winter break. He was glad to be with good friends and become closer with others. He had plans for the rest of the evening, which would hopefully bring them all even closer together. If he could convince them all to go along with his plan.

Chapter 7 (The Plan)

It was half-past eight when the meeting started winding down. There was some casual discussion after Professor Berlioux finished, but most left the subject of Keziah Mason alone for the remainder of the evening. The conversation centered around personal questions about interests, areas of study, and predominantly why people were not leaving for the winter break. As expected, Anita kept Professor Templeton busy with questions about the translations she performed of ancient texts for the Oren Library's restricted section. James bounced around the room, stopping to have brief conversations with each of the assembled group. Cynthia and Isaiah mingled some but, for the most part, talked amongst themselves. While Evelyn and Anthony kept the mood light with well-timed jests and several trips to the drink table to refill their brandy glasses.

As people began to say their goodbyes for the evening, Isaiah moved across the room to where Mr. Edgerton stood. Thomas Edgerton was engaged in a jovial-looking conversation with his doctor friend Mr. Norris.

"Good evening, Mr. Edgerton. I wanted to take this opportunity to thank you for your generosity. I was surprised to find that someone had paid for my tuition for the next session. I was told a charming man with an English accent was my beneficiary. I presume that was you?" Isaiah inquired, reaching out his hand to shake Mr. Edgerton's.

"Why, yes it was, Mr. Cage. I thought it a proper motivation to urge you to join our little society. It appears to have done the trick." Edgerton offered a sly smile.

I want you to know that I intend to pay you back in full. I was not looking for charity. Though you were correct in your not-so-subtle hints that I might be experiencing some monetary difficulty at the moment. I do thank you, however." Isaiah was a proud man. He would pay back the money. He had to admit, though, that Mr. Edgerton's timely contribution was precisely what he needed.

"Think nothing of it, Isaiah. You had a need, and I found myself in a position to fulfill that need. It is what we do for each other in this society." Thomas replied, making a sweeping motion toward the rest of the members, toasting the air with his glass of brandy. "We help each other."

"Well, that was more than just a little help." Isaiah looked out across the room at the assembled members.

"Listen, Isaiah. I am a man of means. There are many trivial things in the world that I could spend my money on. I am also a businessman. I do not make investments unless I am sure of their worth. I made an investment in you, Mr. Cage, and I genuinely believe that my investment is sound. Your joining the group is my payment. There is no need for you to worry about paying me back. We have secured your tuition for the year's remaining session, and that is the investment that I made. You will be a great doctor Isaiah. I make it a habit to know people who are titans in their field. I see a bright future for both of us in this relationship." Thomas smiled.

"Thank you, Mr. Edgerton. I don't ask for help often, and I rarely take it when it's offered. This was a big load off my shoulders." Isaiah said, looking more relaxed now.

"I know about your father, Isaiah," Edgerton said, lowering his voice. "I know how it happened, and I know that you were going to leave school because of it. I could not let that happen."

"You know..." Isaiah started.

"About Big Danny?" Edgerton cut him off. "Yes, I know. I am sure you are not eager for the rest of your friends to learn that bit of information, however."

"But how?" Isaiah looked stunned.

"I make it my business to know what goes on in this town. Information you see, my dear Mr. Cage, is the means by which one escapes the noose or by which one hangs themselves for lack thereof." Mr. Edgerton put a hand on Isaiah's shoulder. "Go, get back to your friends. Just know that you have someone looking out for his investment."

"Speaking of investment. Are books like the one Professor Berlioux burned tonight worth anything? Isaiah was fishing.

"It depends. The right book could be worth a fortune. You just have to find the right buyer. That is my stock and trade. Pairing sought-after items to the right seeker. For a price." Thomas took the bait.

"How bout that one?" Isaiah motioned to the burning book in the fireplace.

"It has worth, but primarily to scholars and theologists. Not really the spending type of crowd. Why do you ask?" Thomas seemed genuinely interested.

"I have a book. I think it was my mother's. She died when I was young. If it could be worth something, I'd love to know." Isaiah's eyes betrayed the desperation he was feeling.

"If it is your mother's, why don't you keep it?" Thomas knew why Isaiah would want to sell what could amount to an expensive family heirloom.

"It's old, and in a language, I have never seen before. My mother has been gone a long time. I don't suspect she'll miss it. I think she'd want to see it sold." It pained Isaiah to sell something that came from his mother. He had so few. He needed the money to pay off Big Danny and get the garage out from under him.

"I can look into it for you, but do me a favor. Take the book to Claudia or Alex, oh sorry, Professor Templeton or Professor Berlioux. Have them take a look at it. That's their department. If they say it's safe, we can sell it. If not, I can buy it from you." Thomas became very serious all of a sudden.

"Safe? Why would it be dangerous?" Isaiah's expression changed.

"Like I said, not my department. Drop it off with one of the professors. Or if your feeling especially gluttonous for punishment, you can have Dr. Norris have a look. Any of them gives you the golden seal of approval, and I will sell the book for you. We'll get top dollar for it, whatever that turns out to be." Thomas smiled an honest smile this time.

"Hey, Isaiah. Are you ready to go?" James called from across the room.

"Yeah, just a second." Isaiah turned back to Mr. Edgerton. "Thanks again, Mr. Edgerton. You really got me out of a bind. I hope that I won't let you down."

"You showed up. That's all I asked." Edgerton gave a little laugh. "Go, be with your companions. You will need to trust them with your life if we are to become a true society."

Isaiah gave Thomas a perplexed look and headed off to join the group congregating around James. It was a strange thing for Mr. Edgerton to say. Trust them with your life. Isaiah couldn't imagine any life-threatening situation that might come about during a study group. Edgerton was nothing if not a bit dramatic. He tried to let that last comment go as he joined his friends who were collecting their things and getting ready to leave.

The students exited together, leaving the professors, Mr. Edgerton and Doctor Norris conversing quietly. They made their way downstairs to the rustic common room whose dusty wood floors, barely serviceable furniture, and unusual nautical decor would never betray the lavish upstairs rooms they had come from. Johnathan Mills and the man whose name had escaped Anthony, Charles Whitebridge, were with them as well.

"Well, that was interesting," Johnathan spoke first. "And this place. Equally so."

"I don't know about you all, but I think I will be bowing out of any further meetings. This witch talk is a bit too much for me." Charles added.

"No stomach for learning the truth about religious persecution of innocent women, is it?" Evelyn prodded ever the pot-stirrer.

"It's not that. I agree that the witch panics in Europe and Salem were just another example of religious tyranny. It's the Keziah Mason stuff. Listen, I grew up here in Arkham. I know the stories. That is just one of those things that you don't mess with. That's it for me. I hope you all enjoy the rest of, whatever it is. I'll be taking my credit and bidding you all a fine evening." Charles looked legitimately shaken by the mention of Keziah Mason.

"Yeah, it's not for me either." Johnathan broke in. "I was looking for in-depth anthropological study, not children's fairy tales. Are the rest of you staying on?" he questioned the group, who all nodded affirmatively. "Suit yourselves."

With that, the two young men collected their jackets and hats from the coatrack and opened the door to the bitter cold night. A fresh swirl of snow entered the room as they did. The two other patrons of the Oak and Dagger didn't so much as raised an eyebrow when the outside chill pierced the warmth provided by the well-fed fire in the hearth.

"I guess that leaves just the six of us," James stated as the door closed behind the two disinterested young men. "We are all staying on, right?"

"How else are we going to keep you from saying something stupid, James." Anthony quipped with a smile.

"Small chance of succeeding in that lofty endeavor, my man. So I had a thought. I hope you are all with me on this. The night is young, and so are we. It's Friday night, the first night of winter break, we are all together, and Isaiah has procured us a car for the night." James let Anthony's little jab slide as he segued into his plan for the night.

"Oh no, James. What are you cooking up? That car needs to be returned in pristine condition, mind you. We are not gonna be taking it for some hair-brained joy ride." Isaiah objected.

I thought we could head over to the speakeasy for some drinks and dancing. Make the most of an already momentous evening." James laid it on thick.

"Now that sounds like a fantastic idea," Evelyn added cheerfully.

"I'm with her. I think that brandy they had upstairs was watered down." Anthony added.

"I don't know. I've never been to a place like that, and I was hoping to get some sleep tonight so that I can start researching in the morning. I want to be prepared for next week's meeting." Anita said sheepishly.

"Oh, come on, Anita, live a little. Those musty old books will be waiting for you, I promise." Evelyn gave a sly smile. "Besides, you are sleeping in our dorm room tonight. We are not going to let you sleep all alone on the creepy second story. I won't hear any objections on the matter."

"Well, in that case, I am in too." Anita smiled, obviously relieved to not return to her room on the abandoned second story of the girl's dormitory.

"Cynthia?" Evelyn inquired.

Cynthia smiled and raised her eyebrows at Isaiah.

"OK fine, but no messing around with the car afterward. I mean it." Isaiah was trying to sound firm but was smiling ear to ear.

The car ride to the speakeasy was short, and the conversation was light and jovial. It was a cold night, but it hadn't started fully snowing yet, so the streets were clear. Isaiah drove the modified Chrysler carefully, hoping not to have anything go wrong. The car was one of Big Danny's bootlegging runners, modified for higher speeds and better handling. It also had a hidden compartment in the boot to allow for its intended contraband. The quiet Arkham streets were mainly devoid of traffic. James indicated the location of the small Italian restaurant that served as a front for the speakeasy. Isaiah pulled the car over and parked half a block away.

Anthony got out of the car and looked around. "Not a lot of light on this street. I guess that's the perfect place for a place like this."

Isaiah surveyed the area. "I hope we don't get any more snow tonight."

"I love the snow. It makes everything so quiet and peaceful." Anita added, looking down the street to the restaurant. Office entrances for various trades with larger shops or warehouses in the back were the predominant establishments in the area. The restaurant was a bit out of place on this block, but its actual function was well known in Arkham. The police were paid handsomely to turn a blind eye, so as long as there was no funny business, the place was left to its own devices.

"Let's get out of this cold, shall we?" Evelyn said, pulling her coat closed.

The quiet street was dark, with only a single light above the restaurant's door providing a beacon to patrons hoping to find a bit of illicit evening entertainment. The other businesses were closed at this time of night, leaving the sidewalk deserted. Cynthia couldn't help but think how isolated one would be if they ran into any trouble coming or going. As they approached, she read the sign above the door. "Peccati Di Gola."

"Sin of gluttony." Anthony translated. He gave Cynthia a wicked smile and laughed.

Once inside, they found themselves in a dimly lit hallway with gaudy green and gold wallpaper and deep burgundy carpet. At the end of the hall was another door. The faint sound of music could be heard from behind it. A large, cleanly shaved bald man with a crooked nose sat on a stool to the left of the door.

James moved his way to the front of the group and confidently said. "Clementine."

"Try again, dandy." The huge man responded.

James leaned in a bit closer and whispered. "I was told that was the password."

"You shoulda been here last week then." a look of unconcerned disregard on the crooked nosed man's face told James that he needed to do some fast talking.

"I brought my friends. They are sort of following my lead. Can you make an exception? I mean." James motioned slightly with his head towards Evelyn and raised his eyebrows. "Don't make me look the fool. If you knew what it has taken me to get this night together."

The bald man stared silently at James. Then took a glance at the group behind him.

"I will be spending liberally once we are inside. Do you think someone like her is going to give me the time of day without a significant show of extravagance?" James looked for a soft spot in the man's stony expression.

The doorman took another glance at Jame's companions. Specifically at Evelyn. Now that her coat was off, her fashionable blue evening gown and expensive heals marked her as a woman who had no trouble getting what she wanted. He looked back at James, whose suit made it clear that money was no object. The huge man cleared his throat and stared one last time at James, then turned slightly and knocked on the door three times. The door opened inward slightly. "Have a nice evening, and next time get the right password."

James straightened and smiled, then pushed open the door and motioned for his friends to enter. Once the last of them had walked in, he handed the doorman a five-dollar bill. "Thanks. What do you think of my chances?"

The large man finally smiled. "Slim," he said, then let out a loud laugh that James could still hear after he entered and closed the door behind him.

On the other side of the door was an equally large man sitting to the side. Beyond him was a room full of empty tables all set up in a fashion one would expect from an elegant sit-down dining establishment. Upon closer inspection, the dried-out flowers in dusty vases and even dustier table cloths made it evident that no one has actually dinned here in a long time, if ever. The man beside the door motioned toward a set of stairs leading down directly across the room. Without a word, the group continued through the dining room and down the stairs.

As they descended the stairs, the sound of upbeat jazz grew louder. Once they pushed open the double doors at the bottom of the stairs, they entered a room of packed tables, an equally backed bar, and a dance floor full of exhilarated patrons moving to the infectious beat of the music. James quickly moved to a table recently vacated by a group of flappers who seemed to be done for the evening and motioned for everyone to grab a seat. The mood was such that it was impossible to keep from smiling. They all took their seats, giving James their coats and hats, which he took to the coat check counter as if he was a regular.

"The place is jumpin!" Anthony said with a grin on his face.

"Yeah, I don't know what I expected, but this is great," Evelyn replied, eyeing the dance floor.

"Have any of you ever been here before?" Anita asked.

Everyone shook their heads no but tried not to let anyone notice. James came back from the coat check and threw the ticket on the table. "OK, everything is on me tonight. It was my ill-advised idea, so I'll cover the bill." He caught a passing waitress by the arm and said something no one could hear over the music.

"I can't let you pay for everything, James. I brought some money." Cynthia moved her purse from her lap to the table.

"It's OK. James loves it. He's been paying for me since we met in our first year at the Miskatonic." Anthony joked. "I mean, why else would I hang around with the guy."

"You're cut off," James added.

It didn't take long for the waitress to come back with their drinks. James grabbed his glass and raised it. "To the Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology. I am glad to be with you all tonight, and I hope this is the beginning of a long friendship between us. I can think of no other people I would rather embark on such a journey with." Everyone raised their glasses and smiled. It was a festive night. For just a moment, they were all able to forget their troubles and fears. Even Isaiah allowed himself a moment of peace from the tortured thoughts that had been plagued his mind. For a brief moment, they were all genuinely happy.

Anita's eyes widened when she took a sip from her glass. "My goodness, did you order us turpentine?"

"Only the finest bathtub gin for the Society. Though I do believe that it will strip paint effectively." James laughed, and everyone joined him.

"So why isn't anyone going home for the holidays?" Anthony asked the group.

"My parents are moving to New Jersey, so they will be settling in and putting the house in order. They said I could come if I wanted, but I took that as an easy opportunity to not visit and have to avoid questions about school." Evelyn replied.

"What kind of questions?" James asked.

"Oh, the usual. When are you going to graduate? How far along are you?" She played at sounding aloof.

"You should just tell them that your major has changed and deal with the blowback," Cynthia added, taking a sip of her drink and wincing. "How can they not be proud of the Miskatonic's top rising star in mathematics and physics. You could be the next Einstein."

"You don't know my parents. They won't have any deviation from the plan. I am to be someone's secretary or bookkeeper. You know a lady-like job." Evelyn shook her head. "I'll just keep avoiding them until school is over. Then they will just have to accept it."

"I feel your pain, Evelyn. Though I don't think my parents would notice if I continued on at the university for the rest of my life. I am already two years past when I should have gotten my degree. But lucky me, my father is away on business and my mother is somewhere spending money. I think she is in Paris. It's better with all of you, though. My family holidays usually consist of my father throwing a grand party for his business associates and clients. Introducing me as the heir apparent. I don't even think there is a word that describes the monotony." James looked oddly pained.

"My father passed away when I was young, and my mother passed three years ago. Grandparents are gone too. I always stay here for the holidays since my mother died. This will be the first year that I have people to spend the holidays with." Anita chimed in. Everyone gave her an empathetic look, but her tone was more matter-of-fact than sorrowful.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Anthony interjected. "My folks are gone too. They died in a fire when I was a kid. I was raised by my grandparents. I lost them a few years back. My grandmother when I was eighteen and then my grandfather when I started at the Miskatonic. I have some aunts and uncles, but once my grandparents died, we all kinda parted ways. I gotta be the only Italian in the country who doesn't have a huge family holiday to go to."

"What about you, Cynthia?" Anita inquired.

"I have a big family, but they are all down south. I don't have the money to travel down there so, here I am." She gave an awkward smile.

"I have family in Chicago, but like Cynthia, I don't have the money to visit. I live here in Arkham, so I stay here during the holidays anyhow. After my dad, I..." Isaiah trailed off.

"Well, we've got each other now. I, for one, am glad for it." Anthony tried to brighten the mood.

"So are you studying business like James, Anthony?" Cynthia asked, trying to change the subject. She could see that Isaiah was lost in his thoughts again.

"No. I am studying geology. I have always been fascinated by the stories this old rock we call Earth can tell us. It's beautiful, nurturing, and deadly all rolled into one." Anthony answered.

"Yeah, and this is why our dorm room looks like a rock quarry." James laughed.

"Well, not all of us can have charm, good looks, and money. If you had any brains, you would be a real threat." Anthony shot back.

James played at looking hurt. "That brings up a good point. I am not dim-witted as my poor and ugly friend would have you think," He winked at Anthony. "but I am definitely not the top of my class. In fact, I don't even have a class. I have been drifting around taking whatever suits my fancy for the last few years. Why would they accept me into SEKT? The rest of you are the best of the best."

"SEKT?" Evelyn looked puzzled.

"It's an acronym. Society of Esoteric Knowledge and Technology. SEKT. The way Professor Berlioux was going on, it sounds like a religious sect to me." Anthony explained.

"It's certainly easier to say," Evelyn observed.

"I'm sure they have their reasons. I wouldn't worry about it, James." Isaiah said distractedly as he got up. "I'll be right back."

Isaiah made his way across the room to a table with two rough-looking men who were giving the waitress a hard time. The two brutes were laughing and trying to get the waitress to sit with them. Both of them wore expensive suits, and with the bulge under their jackets, it was not a stretch to assume they were local mod thugs. This place had to get its booze somewhere. Everyone knew that Big Danny's gang ran the liquor in town.

Evelyn tipped her glass back, drinking the entire contents at once. She slammed the glass down on the table and said excitedly. "Who's ready to dance?"

"I'm game," James answered, also tipping back his drink. He stood grabbing Evelyn by the hand, and whisked her off to the dance floor.

Anthony and Anita continued to talk while Cynthia kept an eye on the table Isaiah had just approached. She knew about what happened to Isaiah's father. Those must be some of Big Danny's thugs. She hoped that Isaiah hadn't picked now of all times to settle the score.

Isaiah cautiously approached the table with two men having little luck getting the waitress to sit with them. When they looked up to find Isaiah standing there, they stopped pawing the nervous doe-eyed young woman and turned to him. The thankful waitress took the opportunity to vacate the area.

"Isaiah, how's your daddy doing?" The larger of the two laughed. The other one, the man who shot his father, snickered under his breath.

Isaiah didn't show any reaction to the sick joke. He reached in his pocket, which prompted the men to quickly slide their hands into their jackets. "I'm not looking for trouble." he took his hand from his pocket, revealing a wad of money, and threw it on the table. "That's for this month and next. I'll get the rest to you when the next payment is due. I'll get you all of it. Then you can take your cars from the garage, and we're done." Isaiah didn't blink, just stared coldly into the man who killed his father's eyes.

"It doesn't work that way, my friend." The larger man said.

"I'm not your friend." Isaiah was sweating now. It took everything he had not to attack the smaller man who pulled the trigger. The larger man was doing the talking, but Isaiah kept his eyes trained on the smaller one.

"You see, Big Danny likes having you fix up his cars. He's gonna need you to keep doing that. That little arrangement is what has kept you alive." He turned to the other man, and Isaiah could see the bandage on the man's face where he had hit him with the tire iron. "You can make your payments in advance like this if you like, but there are gonna be more cars coming your way soon. He owns you boy, the sooner you realize that, the better it will be for you."

"I will pay our debt in full, and then it's over. I'm gonna sell the garage." Isaiah turned to leave.

"I noticed you and your friends over there. That little lady your with is quite a looker. I'd hate to see something happen to that pretty little face." The large man said to Isaiah's back as he walked away.

Isaiah stopped for a moment, rage filling his every fiber. He pushed it down. It would only get him killed or get someone Isaiah cared about hurt. He started walking again.

"Good boy. We'll drop off the cars next week." Isaiah did not acknowledge the last, but the man knew he heard him.

Isaiah, Evelyn, and James all returned to the table at the same time. James and Evelyn were breathing heavily from giving it all they had on the dance floor. There was a fresh round of drinks on the table when they returned. Everyone could feel the foul energy that Isaiah was giving off.

"You OK, Isaiah?" James asked between deep breaths.

"I'm fine." The look on Isaiah's face said otherwise.

"Why don't we finish up our drinks and get outta here." James looked concerned for Isaiah. He had noticed Isaiah talking to the two men from the dance floor.

They continued conversing while everyone finished their drinks. Anita was going very slowly. Evelyn suspected this might be her first drink and second. Anthony and Anita were having a conversation between themselves while Cynthia, Evelyn, and James tried to lighten Isaiah's mood. The deeper they got into their drinks, the longer it took them all to get ready to go. It was almost an hour before Anita finally finished her drink, and James headed to the coat check to gather everyone's things. Everyone seemed to be having a good time except Isaiah, who barely spoke a word. Once James returned with their belongings, they left.

Chapter 8 (The Witch House)

It was beginning to snow when they got back out onto the sidewalk in front of Peccati Di Gola. Isaiah was in a hurry to get back to the car and get away from the speakeasy before one of Big Danny's boys notice that he'd taken one of their cars for a joy ride. The street was dark and quiet. His eyes darted from shadow to shadow, expecting to see someone lurching, waiting to pounce. The rest of the group moved slowly up the street as Isaiah tried to hurry them along without seeming too pushy.

They made it to the car without incident. Isaiah quickly fired up the engine and drove away, taking a glance in the mirror to ensure no one had noticed them leaving. Once they had made a few turns, the tension in his shoulders eased.

"Where's the fire, Isaiah?" Anthony commented on the speed at which they left.

"Sorry, I was just trying to get us out of this snow." Isaiah tried to cover his nervousness.

"OK, I have a great idea. Professor Berlioux wanted us to research Keziah Mason for the next meeting. I happen to know that the house she lived in during her time is currently vacant. What if we went in to take a look?" Evelyn nudged. She was generally excited and more intoxicated than she was letting on.

"How do you know it's vacant?" Anthony questioned, sounding as excited but not hiding his intoxication as well.

"I had a classmate, brilliant mathematician, Walter Gilman, who lived there. He, unfortunately, died earlier this year in April. I guess he was bitten by rats in the house while he slept and got very sick. There was some mystery around his death; however, all of the other tenents of the house moved out. The landlord took the rental off the market after that. It has stood vacant since." Evelyn explained.

"That's the infamous Witch House of Arkham. I heard about Mr. Gilman. It's so awful. I never knew him, though." Cynthia said, looking excited herself.

"He was one of the top students. Interestingly enough, some of his most exciting theories came to him while he lived at the Witch House. I didn't know him past being in some classes together. He wasn't very social and became less so once he started living there." Evelyn gave a wicked smile. "I overheard him talking with one of his friends once. He was describing a dream in which he was approached by Keziah Mason's familiar Brown Jenkin. He woke up with a bite on his ankle."

"And you want to go there? At night no less?" Anthony looked terrified.

"Let's do it. How better to study the woman than to be in the very place she lived." James chimed in.

"You people are crazy. We are gonna go break into some house that a witch lived in. Not to mention that Evelyn just told us that Gilman died after being bitten by a rat there. This does not make my list of ways to spend the evening." Anthony protested.

"What's the matter. Are you scared? If anything we learned tonight, it's that witches are just a fabrication used by religious types to keep the masses in line. Keziah is no different. She was probably just an odd woman. All it takes is for one person to claim a person is strange, and the legend grows from there." Anita said, sounding very matter-of-fact.

"I would love to go check it out. Even if we just look at the outside." Cynthia was excited by the idea.

Isaiah took one look at the excitement on Cynthia's face. "So, how do I get us there?"

Cynthia smiled brightly. "Turn right at the next street."

When the Chrysler pulled up to the forbidding dark weather-worn dwelling with its sagging gambreled roofs that kept centuries-old secrets inside stained mold-covered walls, the snow had begun to fall in earnest. The headlights faded as the car's engine sputtered to a halt. In the new darkness, the house was a pitch-black silhouette against the dark grey sky. Silent and waiting, the old building looked as if it would leap out of the shadows and devour unsuspecting trespassers of its desecrated grounds. Twisted trees devoid of leaves stood sentry on either side of a weed-infested cobblestone path leading to the deteriorating steps of a questionably sound front porch. The lightless street coupled with the muffled silence of newly falling snow increased the sense of isolation. As if the rest of the houses and the whole of Arkham were actively shunning this one infamous house.

The Witch House, as it had become known in Arkham, was a more than two-hundred-year-old victorian whose cracked paint, broken and missing shutters, and moss-covered rooftop would be enough to send children running without it being the former residence of one of Arkhams most detested historical figures, Keziah Mason. She was said to be a witch who fled from Salem before the witch trials were in full swing. Even after Judge Sewall publicly recanted his guilty verdicts and begged forgiveness for the executions, he and others still maintained their positions on a particular group of thirteen individuals who were accused before Bridget Bishop. A group that included Keziah Mason. Could this old house still hold Keziah's secrets within its crumbling walls? And what of her familiar Brown Jenken, who passers-by to this day still say can be seen scurrying between dark shadows around the grounds. It was not a wholesome place to visit, especially not in the dead of night.

"That's the place," Cynthia said, looking out the passenger side window to the crumbling dwelling before them. She pointed to a window just below one of the oddly peaked rooftops. "That was where her room was."

"Wheres the sign that says, welcome, this is where you will die?" Anthony said in a nervous voice.

"Oh, come now. A few coats of paint, a few hundred coats of paint, and the place could be downright cozy." Evelyn joked.

"Some people say that Keziah Mason was able to enter alternate dimensions through angles and symbols that she learned from a mysterious dark man." Cynthia was still staring at the house as she spoke.

"Sure, blame it all on a black man as if we haven't had enough to deal with." Isaiah scoffed.

"Not a black man as in an African man. As in pitch black. It's said that his features could not be discerned because all of his features, skin, eyes, even teeth were pitch black." Cynthia explained.

"So the devil?" Anthony asked.

"There are references to the dark man in several books that Professor Armitage keeps locked up in the restricted section of the Oren Library. Most refer to him as The Messenger, but other names seem to be associated with him. The Dark Man, The Crawling Chaos, and probably others." Cynthia was in her element explaining the local folklore.

"How do you know this, Cynthia?" Anita asked. "I had heard of The Dark Man from the account of Keziah Mason but the other names. Where did you find those?"

"I had the opportunity to scan one of the restricted books in the Oren when I was doing research on locale folklore a year back. It was an English translation of the German Unaussprechlichen Kulten by Friedrick von Junzt. There was mention of The Dark Man in there." Cynthia was obviously excited to get out and take a look at the house.

"Well, I guess we should get a closer look," James said, opening the car door.

"I'll stay with the car. The last thing I need is to be caught breaking into some old haunted house." Isaiah said. He wanted to make sure that they got the car back to the garage in one piece.

"Lucky you," Anthony said as he slid across the seat to the open door.

The lack of street lamps helped them make it up to the rickety porch without being noticed. At this late hour, none of the neighbors would be peaking out their windows anyhow. The porch's wood planks groaned in protest as they moved to the cracked, warped front door. Evelyn tried the knob and was surprised to find it unlocked.

"It looks like someone was expecting us," Evelyn stated as she pushed open the old crumbling door whose hinges creaked loudly.

James produced a flashlight that he had procured from the boot of the Chrysler and switched it on. The yellow beam cut through the wall of inky blackness beyond the entrance revealing a narrow hall leading to the back of the house with arched openings on either side and a few closed doors towards the end. "Here goes nothin."

The rest of the group followed closely as James entered the house. It was so dark inside that even straying slightly from the light of the torch would leave you in almost complete darkness. Once inside the house, it seemed to be almost colder than it was outside in the snow. As if the place radiated its own source of foul cold air. Dust swirled around their feet as they move deeper into the stifling blackness.

"We need to go upstairs. To Keziah's room." Cynthia directed James.

"Walter, the classmate I told you all about, said that his room was constructed with odd angles that could not be ascertained from inspecting the outside of the house. He said he believed that something was boarded up inside the walls." Evelyn said almost to herself as they walked deeper into the house toward a flight of dust-covered stairs.

The sound of scurrying could be heard in the darkness beyond the beam of the flashlight. Several holes in the walls and floorboards indicated an evident rat infestation. Cynthia noticed movement in the dark as shapes in various shades of black and grey moved quickly at their approach. The stairs creaked with each step as they climbed toward their sinister destination. As the light passed sections of the wall, furry brown and grey shapes could be seen moving between holes in the water-damaged plaster.

They reached the second story landing and looked in both directions. It was apparent from the outside that the third story was where the room they sought waited. They all tensed as creaking sounds above them moved from their right along a path that ended somewhere to their left.

"That sounds like footsteps. Do you think someone is living in here?" Anita whispered.

"The place has been vacant since the incident with Mr. Gilman. That front door was open, though, so anyone could be in here. It's only been eight months. This place looks like it hasn't been lived in for years." Evelyn replied quietly.

Cynthia pointed to the left beneath, where the footsteps seemed to stop. "There's the stairs."

"You gotta be kidding me. Are we really going to go up there? There could be some transient living up there. They may try and attack us for disturbing them." Anthony looked terrified.

"There are five of us. If it is someone sleeping up there, they are probably more terrified than.. well you." Anita said with a harsh whisper.

James moved to the second set of stairs and shined the flashlight up them. They were more narrow than the first set but were equally as dusty. The stairs ended in a closed door. A foul odder permeated the area of the stairs. The smell began to get more intense as they climbed the mold-covered and creaking steps toward the sealed entrance to the third story. James paused with his hand on the doorknob and turned to face the rest of the group.

Evelyn nodded her head affirmatively, indicating he should proceed. The knob was difficult to turn as if it had been rusted solid. James put two hands on the knob and strained to rotate it. With a sharp metallic protest, the doorknob finally gave way. James cautiously pushed the door open.

The torch's light revealed a room that covered about a third of the second story's size. It was set up as a bedroom with an iron bed frame supporting a moldy rat-eaten mattress, a wardrobe with splintered doors in the corner, and a dusty cracking writing desk along the wall to their right. The room would be spacious if not for the odd angles that the walls and ceiling converged on one another. The slopes seemed to be impossible in their formation. Looking at them caused James's eyes to blur. The stench that had assaulted them on the stairs was potent in this room. There must be hundreds of dead rats in these walls, James thought.

"This must be the room," Evelyn observed, looking at the odd angles of the walls and ceiling.

"Where is this smell coming from?" Anita wrinkled her nose.

"Do you hear that?" James held up his hand, indicating everyone should listen. There was a scratching sound inside the wall to the far corner, where the odd angles converged unnaturally.

The group stood motionless, quietly listening for the sound James heard. Suddenly a creaking sound began below them as if someone was walking around the second story.

Anthony moved to the open door and called down the stairs. "Isaiah? Is that you?" silence was the response.

Cynthia began inspecting other parts of the room, testing the walls as if looking for some secret compartment. It was either the smell in the room or the odd angles causing her to feel dizzy as she moved closer to the cracked plaster walls. Upon closer inspection, she spied a bizarre section of the wall that looked as if it had been patched where a large broken area had been. The repaired portion had a different color than the rest of the wall. It was a pale grey color that looked smooth and almost wet. Cynthia touched the section of the wall and pulled back with a sharp intake of air. She wiped her hands off on her coat. The patched portion of the wall she had touched was damp and spongy. It felt almost like flesh, and it was slick with some sort of liquid. She could feel the wet substance on her fingers when she pulled back from the wall.

"Isaiah?" Anthony called again.

A sound came from below them. This time it sounded like the scurrying of a giant rat. The sudden sound made Anthony jump. He turned and looked to the rest of the group. They all heard it. Everyone stopped what they were doing to listen closer. The sound did not repeat.

"I'm starting to feel sick," Cynthia said. "I don't know if it's this smell or that bathtub gin we had, but it seems to be getting worse."

Evelyn had a small pocket notepad and pencil that she had produced from god knows where. She was drawing representations of the odd angles of the walls and ceiling. She continued inspecting the slopes as if she hadn't heard Cynthia.

James was shining the light in the various shadowed corners of the room. He could swear that he saw movement in the darkness beyond the light of the torch, but each time he shined the beam in its direction, there was nothing there. A loud thump suddenly rang out below them.

"What was that?" Anita exclaimed.

"I don't know, but I think we should get out of here." Anthony looked worried.

James caught more movement out of the corner of his eye. He quickly shined the flashlight in that direction, only to find nothing there. The others all looked in the direction of the light, startled expressions on each of their faces. There was a swirl of dust in the yellow glow of the flashlight's beam.

"Did you all see that?" James's voice sounded panicked.

"I only saw you move the light. What did you see?" Evelyn asked, tucking her notepad and pencil into her coat pocket.

"I don't know. I saw something move." James scanned the rest of the room with the light.

"I feel like I am going to faint," Cynthia said, moving away from the strange section of wall she was inspecting.

"Let's go. We can say we investigated the place and found it as creepy as we expected it to be." Anthony pleaded.

"Wait." Evelyn was looking at some yellowing papers that were on the writing desk. She leafed through them quickly and, to everyone's surprise, folded them up and stuffed them into her coat pocket. "OK, we can go."

Cynthia moved to the door, where Anthony offered her a hand to keep her upright as she started down the stairs to the second story. Anita followed Cynthia and Anthony down, seeming a bit annoyed to be leaving so soon. Evelyn took another look around the room and started moving toward the stairs. James shined the light at the doorway, giving everyone some light as they descended. Once Evelyn was through the opening, he moved to the door himself, keeping the light trained on the others so they did not miss a step.

The hair raised on the back of James's neck as he felt a cold stream of air coming from behind him. He had the overwhelming feeling that there was someone behind him. Turning quickly and panning the light across the room as he began descending the stairs, he was gripped with a sudden flash of terror. As the beam passed across the room, James could swear that it passed over the figure of a tall person standing in the corner of the room where he had heard the scratching sound before. He almost fell down the stairs as the shock of what he had seen hit him. He quickly trained the light to the corner where he had seen the person. There was nothing there. James promptly rushed down the stairs as the others complained that he was not providing light for them. Once he made it down, he quickly ushered the others to the stairs leading to the ground floor.

The rest of the group could feel the urgency in James's actions. Without question, they quickly moved down to the first floor. Ahead of them was the open door. The darkness behind them seemed to be closing in. There was a feeling as if something was following them as they made their way out of the house. They rushed to the door, and as they reached it, all of them heard the sound of a door slamming shut above them. A bolt of fear shot through them all at the sound. They rushed outside and quickly shut the front door behind them. All of them rushed off the creaking porch and ran down the overgrown path leading to the sidewalk and the safety of the street. They all turned to look up to the small window at the peak of the roof. There was nothing there but blackness.

As they climbed quickly into the car, Isaiah noticed the looks on everyone's faces. "What happened in there? You all look like you've seen a ghost." he had a concerned look on his face that softened into a smile. "You all worked yourselves up so much about this witch business that you got yourself jumping at every little thing."

"Just drive," James said flatly.

"OK, OK, but you know you gotta fill me in on what happened in there." Isaiah seemed amused.

"It was nothing, just some rats," Anita said.

"I think I saw something in that room. As we were leaving." James was not his usual jovial self. He seemed serious and shaken. Isaiah's smile faded.

"Well, I can say that place gave me the creeps. Rats or no, that house is just not right." Anthony said. He was obviously frightened.

Isaiah fired up the Chrysler and started off down the street. "What did you see, James?" he asked.

"Cynthia was feeling sick, and we decided to go. I was shining the light for everyone as they made it down the stairs. I got this feeling. You know, like when you know there is someone behind you. I turned and panned the flashlight across the room, and in that corner where the angles converged, where we heard the scratching sound, I saw someone standing there. At first, I thought it was my eyes deceiving me, but I saw it when the light moved across that area. It was a tall figure standing in that corner. When the light passed over it, I could see it was a jet-black figure. When I moved the light back to the spot I had seen it in, it was gone." The look in James's eyes was proof enough that he was telling the truth.

"When we got downstairs, we heard the door slam shut," Cynthia added. "Someone was in that house."

"Listen, I heard that too, and I definitely felt strange in there, but I think we were getting ourselves worked up like Isaiah said." Anita tried to rationalize what they had just experienced.

"That room, the angles. There is something about that, but I just can't put my finger on it." Evelyn said to no one in particular.

"Well, I think that we should all get home. It's late. After a good night's sleep, I'm sure you will all have a good laugh about it." Isaiah tried to be comforting.

They drove slowly through the silent, snow-covered streets of Arkham toward the University. Everyone except for Isaiah lived in the campus dorms. He tried to take the most direct route but had to make some detours because some streets had not been cleared from the previous snow earlier in the day. They headed down Church Street until they came to the Old Arkham Cemetary. Isaiah was stopped at an intersection when Evelyn got everyone's attention.

"Hey, look there. Isn't that Professor Berlioux?" She pointed out the window up the street. The man she pointed at was far enough down the road that they couldn't get a good look at his face, but he wore the same long coat and hat that the professor was wearing when they'd seen him that evening. He was also carrying the same cane that Berlioux always had with him, even though he did not have any apparent need for it. "What is he doing out this late?"

They all watched him cross the street to the south side where the cemetery was. The snow obscured him as he got closer to the cemetery entrance. They could not see him behind some of the shrubs that decorated the high iron gate. The car moved up the street closer to where they had last seen Professor Berlioux. When they passed the entrance, he was no longer there.

"Where did he go?" Cynthia asked.

Isaiah slowed the car as they passed in case the professor needed a ride, but he was nowhere to be seen. "Did he go inside?"

"Why would Professor Berlioux go into a cemetery in the dead of night while it's snowing, for Christ's sake." Anthony wondered aloud.

As the car moved past the cemetery, Cynthia looked intently out the window, trying to catch a glimpse of where the professor might be. "That's a good question."