

THE HORROR AT MISKATONIC UNIVERSITY

Jack hurried down the crooked back alley off of Crane Street for the third time, as he'd promised. *That'll shake 'em*, he thought to himself. If there *was* anyone to shake, that was. However, each time he completed a loop, the aging buildings seemed to slump further forward, stealing any view of the night sky. Even the oil lamps scattered through the route seemed to twist and warp slightly more each time he saw them. The dark can play awful tricks on the mind. He shook off the thought like a chill and picked up the pace.

He skidded onto West College Street and there it was – Miskatonic University – in all of its decrepit glory – bathed in the pale glow of the moon. And there she was – Jenny Burnette, leant against a telephone box across from the Science Hall, the section of the university facing this side of the street. Jack jogged over to her, trying to hide his heavy breaths. She'd swapped out her signature cloche hat and blue velvet dress for a stiff winter jacket. Only sensible, he supposed, though he wished he'd had as much foresight – his light leather jacket was doing little to keep the cold at bay.

'There you are,' she said, lighting a cigarette. Judging from the amount of ends on the sidewalk around her, it wasn't the first of the evening.

'I told you to stay in the damn box,' Jack replied, catching his breath. She rolled her eyes.

'I was in the *damn* box. For half a *damn* hour. If anyone was watching they'd be suspicious anyhow. Who has that many quarters on them?' She didn't look up from her cigarette. Jack wrinkled his nose, a twinge of regret arcing through his mind.

'Okay, okay, sorry I'm late.' He suddenly came to his senses and shot her a look. 'Hang on, you're the one that insisted I loop around that damn alley three times.'

‘Yeah, well ya should have run a bit faster then, huh?’ She took a long drag, as though it was giving her the will to keep up the conversation. Jack shrugged off the spark of anger he felt in his chest.

‘That’s not--’

‘Besides, this was your idea, and you’ve *still* not told me why we’re out here at two in the morning. You’re lucky I came at all, Jack.’

He opened his mouth to retaliate, but bit his tongue.

‘Alright, sorry,’ he murmured. ‘I’m worried about Walters is all.’

A wry smile curled around the cigarette. ‘Is this what this is all about? Walters? Harvey Walters? Your pet professor?’

‘Oh come on, he’s not my pet, we just have a...mutually beneficial agreement—’

‘Right. So you lift junk from digs and send it his way for a fee? Is that it?’

Jack was stunned into silence for a second. How’d she know? Jack assumed it was a lucky guess, more of a snide remark than anything, but something in the back of his head wondered if she’d done some digging of her own, just in case their professional relationship didn’t work out. *Don’t think about that now.*

‘Well, I suppose that’s one way to put it,’ he admitted sheepishly. She let out a thin chuckle.

‘Goodness, you are quite the noble archaeologist aren’t you?’ She locked eyes and dug her claws in. ‘So much for ‘Jack Rossini, international man of science and progress. I guess even the best of us can’t resist a quick buck--’

He grabbed her arm. A little harder than he’d meant to.

‘Listen here, Jenny Burnette, *international layabout dilettante*, this is serious.’

Her face settled into a scowl. She yanked her arm out of his grip.

‘Alright, what is it?’ she said softly, the sweet scent of tobacco on her breath.

He instinctively looked around for potential eavesdroppers. Not a soul in sight, just the cold, plain facades of Arkham's Merchant District.

'I've not heard from him in a week,' He whispered.

'And that's not normal?'

'Well, I normally wouldn't think anything of it, except I visited his house last night, and he wasn't there.'

'So what? Maybe he's gone on holiday or something—'

'He's 80 and has two bad legs. The only holiday making he's doing is in his garden.'

'Okay, so why not leave it to the police?'

'It's just that... the last time I saw him, I gave him something, from a dig.'

'Right. So you're worried he's run off without paying you?'

Silence hung between them as Jack considered his choice of words.

'Well, yes and no,' he admitted. 'Mainly no. It's...I just don't want to be the one responsible if something has happened okay?'

Jenny looked at her cigarette again, nearly a stub now.

'Alright. I better be getting paid for this, you're the one that owes *me* a favour, remember?'

'You will never let that go will you? Yeah, fine, have your money.'

'How kind of you,' she said, mock-bowing, and extending her palm – ever gracious in victory.

Jack huffed, pulled out his wallet and pushed a wad of bills into her hand.

'Can we go now?'

Jenny signalled for him to lead on.

They crept over to the wall of the Science Hall that faced the street. Jack pointed at the window above them.

‘This is his office, I’ll give you a leg up.’

‘Don’t try anything funny down there,’ she said, only half joking.

‘I would never,’ he blustered, ‘noble archaeologist remember?’

Jack knelt down and boosted Jenny up, who scrambled against the wall, finding purchase on the window sill. Jack let go of her legs and she planted them on his shoulders. He inhaled sharply as her heels dug in.

‘You could’ve worn flats!’

‘I don’t see anything,’ she responded, oblivious to his pain, ‘looks empty.’

‘Well can you get the window-’

‘It’s half open, hang on,’ she said, reaching her arm up and under and released the latch.

‘Got it.’ She lifted herself through the window and off of Jack’s shoulders, much to his relief. Then he jumped, just catching the window sill, and hauled himself up and through.

‘Thanks for the help,’ he said flatly.

‘Look at this place,’ Jenny replied, absorbed by the walls of trinkets, oddities, ancient scrolls and books. Jack quietly shut the window behind them, and scanned the shelves himself. There was some serious treasures in here, Sumerian idols of tentacle-covered gods, fragments of Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Roman tablets detailing supernatural encounters. *Very* valuable, the less scrupulous side of Jack thought.

Stop that.

‘What’s this?’ Jenny had moved around, and was looking at the desk now. She tapped him on the shoulder. ‘It’s got your name on it.’

He swung around to face Walter’s large mahogany desk. On it lay a clearly unfinished letter, pen resting on top, ink bleeding into the paper. He gently removed the pen, picked it up, and started reading:

Friday 17th November 1922

Jack,

Burn this letter after reading it, along with all our previous correspondence. It's too late for me, but you still have a chance. By the time you receive this letter I may be dead, but whatever the case may be, DO NOT try and find me. Please, leave Arkham. Massachusetts even, and never return. They are looking for me and it is only a matter of time before they find you too.

The artefact you acquired at the dig site on Plum Island is the root of all this. At first, it seemed a harmless curiosity. You were correct in your assumption - it is a mathematically perfect sphere, carved from something like obsidian, eight inches in diameter and about five pounds in weight. The archaeology department marvelled at it for days – no one could believe that it had been found at an English settler's grave, let alone made by human hands. However, it can't be a natural formation either. We reached out to every museum and university that we could. Over half thought we were frauds and the rest had seen nothing like it.

If only we—

The last line trails off, pen marks skidding down the rest of the page.

'Well, shit.'

'How bad?' Jenny said.

'Ah... Damn!' He slammed the desk, sending pens and pencils rattling onto the floor.

'This is way, way worse than I thought it was.' Jack rubbed his temples. 'Why didn't I come sooner?' he muttered, mainly to himself. Dread prickled at the nape of his neck.

At that moment, the Professors' office took on a different feeling. The awe and intrigue melted away from the room, leaving only discomfort, alienation, isolation. The various statuettes and totems looked on at them, their many eyes unblinking. Jenny started wringing her hands.

'Don't say that. You're freakin' me out, Jack,' Jenny finally said.

'I'm sorry Jen. I just wanted to check up on the old man, I didn't know that—'

'What did it say – the letter?' She said, trying to regain composure.

'Basically, that this is my fault, but I knew that already. What worries me is this section,' he pointed to the end of the first paragraph. 'Who the hell are *'they'*?'

Before Jenny could reply, there was a heavy thud outside the door, down the hallway. Then another. And another. Slow, lopsided footsteps, coming towards them. Jack's heart thumped in his stomach.

'I thought you said this place was empty?' Jenny whispered.

'As far as I was aware – must be a night guard. Just don't move.' They crouched down behind the desk, being as still as possible, listening intently. As the thudding got closer they heard something else – something heavy being dragged across the gnarled wooden floor, behind the footsteps.

Jack struggled to keep his hands from shaking, bunching them into fists. The footsteps continued until they were just outside the door, where they stopped. Heavy, ragged breaths bled through the wooden doorframe. Jenny opened up her jacket and whipped out a snub-nose revolver. Jack's eyes went wide and he went to say something, but caught himself. She cocked the hammer, as gently as she could, and took aim at the door.

Floorboards creaked again, and the footsteps continued down the corridor, closely followed by whatever was being hauled behind. Jack waited until they were faint before daring to utter a word.

‘Where the hell did you get that?’

‘Does it matter? Are you telling me you didn’t bring a weapon?’ She stood up, lowering the revolver.

‘I didn’t think we’d need one—’

‘Then quit complaining. Let’s just get out of here – now.’

Jack grabbed her arm.

‘We gotta find Walters, Jen.’ She pulled away from his grip.

‘Are you out of your mind? We don’t know what the hell that was, and I’m not sticking around to find out.’ Jenny made for the window.

‘Double. I’ll give you double. Please, just don’t, don’t go.’ Jack admitted.

‘You care that much about this guy?’

‘Yes.’

Jenny rolled her eyes, and stepped back from the window.

‘Alright. But I’m never working with you again.’

‘Thank you.’ Jack gestured for her to lead the way.

‘What a gentleman.’ She said as she crossed the room.

The footsteps had completely disappeared now. They crept over to the door, and Jenny gently turned the handle. She winced as it creaked. Jack peered into the corridor. Whatever had been dragged across the hallway had left a slick greyish substance, glimmering in the moonlit corridor like a snail trail, but thicker, more syrupy. The smell of ammonia and crabs rotting in the sun hit Jack in the face. His vision dimmed, and he reeled backwards, lightheaded. He felt Jenny’s hand cushion his head from smashing into the floor.

The smell sent him back to the dig on Plum Island, the centuries old bodies of New England settlers that were still decaying when they dug them up. They had to send half the archaeology team back home with sick pay. The bodies’ features got clearer in his mind - the

bulging eye sockets, the wide, flat jaws, the bones. The damn bones, with spiked serrations running up and down them. They refused to believe it was human, but it couldn't be anything else either. Then the final piece – green uniforms, rifles - the National Guard appearing and shutting the operation down, swearing them all to secrecy on pain of life imprisonment.

‘What is it? You okay?’

‘C-cover your nose!’ he stammered, pushing back the memories and sitting up. Jenny pulled a handkerchief from her top pocket and held it to her nostrils. She peeked round the door.

‘Jesus Christ,’ she said, scrunching up her face, ‘what is that stuff?’

‘I don't know. Just don't touch it. And get that pistol of yours ready.’ Jack said as he got back onto his feet.

‘Where are we going?’

‘To the Exhibition Hall. This is my mess and I'm going to fix it.’ Jack surprised himself at how confident he sounded. Better play it cool – don't look startled. They set off down the corridor, in the direction they heard the footsteps going.

The trail of slime continued down the dark corridor. Jack and Jenny passed dozens of professors' offices as they snuck their way to the Exhibition Hall, lining each side of the hallway. All empty. All dark. Surely one of them could be working late? Or fell asleep at their desk? Why was it so deadly silent?

‘Ya know, I'm not complaining, but surely if night guards were on duty, there'd be lights on somewhere?’ Jenny whispered. Jack looked back up the way they came. Nothing.

‘You'd think.’ He replied. ‘Let's just count it as a blessing and carry on.’

They came to a fork in the hallway. The sign to the Exhibition Hall pointed to the left, the same way the trail lead.

‘Jack, are you sure we have to go that way?’

‘Sorry, but yes. If it’s anywhere, it’s in there.’ He squeezed Jenny’s hand and gave her a smile. As genuine as he could make it. She seemed to appreciate it. ‘Double, remember?’

‘Ah, shit, what the hell. Alright, let’s go.’ She readied the revolver.

Before they could take another step, they were blown off their feet by a wave of force erupting from down the hallway. Papers and books on the shelves around them flew onto the floor. It blasted through them like a thunderclap. A voice, carried through the hallway on the gust of air. It creaked like rusted hinges, so close to Jack’s ear it felt physical.

Join us. Hand over your flesh. We will improve you. Make you more.

Then it was gone. Like a pulse. Ears ringing, Jack scrambled to his feet, completely disoriented. The words lingered in his head, repeating over and over. He came to, and helped pull Jenny upright. She was wide eyed, trembling.

‘Jack,’ she couldn’t stop her voice warbling. ‘What *was* that?’

‘I...I... Jen, you can go. If you want. I, I shouldn’t have got you involved in... whatever the hell this is.’