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THE CASE OF LESLIE OWENS

by

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New York City

“It isn’t for sale, sir.”

“Not my concern. I’m just here to verify its authenticity.” I hated these kinds of cases. Hunting down antiques was bad enough but add the stress of insuring they are what the owner claims is a headache all its own. The research takes weeks of dry, academic reading at the best of times. And when the piece is steeped in mythology and ghost stories, verification can be tricky, if not damned near impossible.

“What does it matter if it is or isn’t authentic?”

Lying isn’t something I enjoy either. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth and just complicates everything. Probably shouldn’t have become a private detective when being a cop didn’t sit well. I’ve never been a fan of bureaucracy or chains of command. Give me a case and get out of the way. In this situation, protecting my client, no matter how weird, was part of the job, so lying became necessary.

“I’m compiling a book about strange sea stories: Bermuda Triangle, *The Flying Dutchman*, *The Vigilant*, and *The Alert*.”

The man winced at the mention of the last two.

“It that idol is authentic,” I continued, “I’d love to take a photo of it for my book.” The camera hung from my neck to emphasis my innocent intentions. I’d already confirmed the provenance of the idol and the man’s grimace at the name of those last two ships further confirmed my suspicions. Getting the picture would just grease the wheels of getting me paid. I placed my hands on the camera as if I expected his consent.

“No, sorry, it’s just an oddity I purchased years ago on a whim. I thought it would give the place a touch of mystery.” He grasped the bulbous idol before I could “accidentally’ snap a photo and tucked it into drawer.

“Too bad. Thanks, anyway.” Walking out of the bookshop, I cast a sideways glance through the front window and watched the proprietor pace back and forth. He worried at his fingernails like a hunted man. In my Hornet, I revved the engine and glided out into New York City traffic.

Cruising along the streets, the city throbbed around me, always alive and forever in motion. Lights flashed all-day and all-night. Everyone tried to catch someone’s attention while I worked to avoid it. It didn’t take long to reach Red Hook. A lot of crazy stories floated in and out of the neighborhood, but that wasn’t all that different than any other New York borough. Crazy bred in this city almost as fast as rats and roaches. Only crazy was willing to run around in board daylight and expect everyone to treat it as normal.

Everyone had a story about every street in the city. Some of those stories went back decades. Some went back two days. All of them ended with the comment lament, “Well, what do you expect when you live in NYC?” That didn’t stop people from telling them year after year.

A parking spot in front of the shop stood empty so I pulled in. The street void of the casual flow of pedestrians that marked the city at a near constant basis. Only a handful of locals

camped out on their stoops peppered the area. They watched nothing, staring into nothing, counting down the seconds until the next meal or next fix.

An old, hand-painted, wooden sign swung above the doorway of his clients shop. A jagged crack down the center resembled a child's drawing of a lightning bolt and threatened to slip the sign once and for all. Keziah's Curiosities stood in-between two rundown tenements. Somehow, it survived without trouble from the developers scavenging the depressed city for cheap properties to snatch up and reimagine into high-rises no one could afford.

Inside the dusty shop, everything in the exact spit it always was, I saved through the clutter of esoteric artifacts, searching for the old woman who owned the place. "Madam Bina?" The place could feel like an endless maze. I hated searching for the old woman every time I came here and the path to her back office always seemed to change in small, annoying ways. She was a good client, however, so I managed.

"Right here, Travis."

I whirled around to find Madam Bina stand right behind me, as usual. The old woman could be quiet when she wanted to.

"I found the idol. The owner of Pickman's Pages has it. Not for sale, he says. Tried to get a photo, but he tucked it into a drawer before I got a chance."

Her eyes glittered about her long, crooked nose. "Oh, what a pity. Well, I only asked you to find it for me. You've done your job so I guess I should pay you."

"That would be great, Madam Bina."

"Always so polite. That's why I like you, Travis."

"Glad to hear it."

She paused and turned just enough to peer over her shoulder at me. "As well you should

be,” she said in her raspy, croaking voice. A high-pitched titter followed as she continued down the aisle toward the back office. As we passed through the store, I heard the skittering of little feet behind the cabinets and shelves clogging the room to the point of bursting.

“I think you have rats.”

“Who doesn’t around here?”

I couldn’t argue with that, though it always surprised me how unflappable Madam Bina could be. The office was stuffed with more oddities than the main store, if that was possible. Bina rifled around her desk, searching for her money.

I noticed a small pile of bloody bandages in the waste can. “You hurt yourself?” She looked up in confusion until I pointed.

“Oh! That?” A wide smile stretched across her lips. “Just feeding the rats.” She returned to searching through her piles of old manuscripts, totems, dolls, and bones while laughing at her joke. I could only shake my head. The woman was a sweet old lady one second and very weird or unsettling the next. She cackled with delight when she produced an envelope with my name scrawled on it. She handed it over and the thickness felt right. Weird, but paid well.

Trusting enough to forgo counting it, (she always paid what she owed) the envelope went into the inside pocket of my jacket. “You have a good day, Madam Bina.” She guided me toward the front of the store, as always, shuffling along, pointing out some new acquisition along the way. She gave my arm a friendly squeeze and sent me on my way. Once the door snapped shut, I hopped into my car and headed back to the office to tie up the paperwork. No matter the job, everyone had you slogging through paperwork.

My office consisted of a rented room in a squat building near Five Points. I had a parking spot in a secure garage a few blocks away in a better area. The rent on the garage was higher than

the office. Thing was the office didn't have anything worth stealing more days. The information never stopped a few desperate souls from checking and leaving empty handed. The walk a few blocks down Canal to Mulberry, despite the shouts and gunfire popping in the distance, helped clear my mind after every job. Even so, my hand shifted to the S&W Model 24 revolver in my shoulder holster, ready for anyone stupid enough to jump out of the shadows.

As I closed the last block to my building, I searched the area. The normal drunks and homeless haunted the streets. Up the steps and at the door, I released my gun and fished out the key to the front door. Just as the key touched the lock, the door swung open and two block-faced thugs stepped up and flanked me before I could react. I dropped my hand to the side, the key still clenched in my fist.

“How you doing, Daniels?”

“Fine, Tweedle-dee. Have you figured out why a raven is like a writing desk, yet?”

Frances Rossi, the street tough on my left, squinted at me, unsure if I was mocking him. “Noticed the poor security on your building. Thought we'd stand here and protect the place 'til you got back.”

“Thanks. I'll let the super know. That all?”

Rossi, who I would never call Frances, stepped closer. Hot breath warmed my face. “You know why we're here, Daniels. Don't mess around.”

“Can't get blood from a rock.”

“You'd be surprised, Daniels.”

The silent thug on my right, Anton Brambilla, reached into my jacket and withdrew the envelope like he could smell it. “My apologies, Anton. *You* must be Tweedle-dee.”

Frances snapped out a quick punch to the gut. I tensed my abs, knowing it was coming,

but those hits still hurt. Apparently, he understood some of my children's fiction insults. "Keep it up, Daniels. Mr. Castaigne may like your wise ass comments, but I don't." He glanced at Anton. "They're enough there?"

Anton shook his head as he tucked the envelope into his own inner pocket.

"The boss is gonna need some collateral until you pay the rest, Daniels. Too bad that car of yours isn't here. Long walk back to the house." Frances reached into my jacket. "I always did like that piece of yours, though."

In a flash, I had the key jammed up into his throat, forcing Frances to his toes and snapped a kick into Anton's inner thigh. A little lower and the bones and cartilage would have been destroyed, but I liked and respected Anton. He tumbled down the steps as I pushed the key a little deeper into Frances' throat. "Keep it up, Tweedle-dum."

"Agostino will kill you."

"I doubt it. He likes me."

"I'm his nephew!"

"Still, he likes me more."

I shoved Frances down the steps into a staggering Anton's arms. With my revolver in hand, I unlocked the door. "Agostino'll get his money, but no one touches my car or my gun. No one."

Frances glared, twitched to reach for own gun, but Anton leaned against him. Anton offered a half-smile and nod while brushing the dirt from his suit. When they had disappeared around the corner about a block away, I headed upstairs.

The filthy, yellow walls glowed under the flickering lights hanging from the ceiling by a single wire. Chips of paint lay scattered across the rough, wooden floorboards. The door to my

office was open a crack. The frame busted at the lock. I stepped into my office and sighed.

Everything was in shambles. They not only broke it, but they also searched the place like a pack of rabid neanderthals. Was it too much to ask for a little mutual professionalism? Anton knew how to not make a mess of it while still letting the target know he'd been there. God damned Frances...



### Daniels Investigation

Life at private detective was never simple, especially in the 1920s with Prohibition and all that entailed in effect. Deal with enough philandering spouses, stole “family heirlooms,” and mob turf wars, you develop eyes on the back and side of your head and flint skin. I slammed the file closed on the tracked idol. Madam Bina was a kook, but a well-paying kook and I had bills. The jobs she offered were always simple if not easy. Track this or that down, make sure it’s real, see if they’ll sell. More often than not, they ended up selling or trading to Bina if not to me. Either way, I got paid.

The file slipped into my cabinet alongside all the other files or artifact Bina has wanted tracked down. The bottle of malt whiskey I withdrew was for me at the end of any day that ended with “Y.” Shocking how often that occurred.

I found a clean glass in my top right drawer and poured out a triple. Only savages and alcoholics drink straight from the bottle with something this good. The bottle disappeared back into the cabinet to prevent me from drinking more than one. Who knew when I’d come across another good bottle again? I sipped at my drink while listening to the traffic outside. A cacophony of engines, brakes, and angry voices rattled the thin glass windows. I took another sip

and considered the mess strewn across my office. Where to start?

Before a decision could be made, a tap, thump, thump approached. The steady rhythm somehow remained at the same volume the entire time like someone was standing outside my office door, tapping out the metronome-esque beat. Still, I somehow knew whoever it was was walking along the hallway and getting closer. Waiting, I eased back into my chair to look casual and found the sawed-off mounted on a swivel under my desk. After running into Frances and Anton, this wasn't a time to take chances.

A shadow stepped into view behind the frosted glass of my door. Three heavy, sharp knocks shook the flimsy wooden frame.

Without waited for a response, invitation or warning, the door creaked open. A skeletal old man strode into the room dressed in a suit made of the blackest fabric I'd even seen. It shimmered a dim purple as he moved. Tiny pinpricks of light flickered in and out like stars being born and dying at the same time. The suit fitted his slim frame as if tailored for him by the greatest, most exclusive tailor in all creation. He surveyed the room with deep set, gleaming eyes.

“Can I help you?”

The man focused on me. A scoffing laugh escaped as if coughed out. He stepped forward to take the seat opposite me and withdrew a top hat I was only now noticing and set it atop his cane. I glimpsed the multifaceted gemstone affixed to the top of the cane for only a second before the hat hid it from view. Even with that short exposure, I felt an otherworldly palette of colors swarm my mind, threatening to unbalance me to the depths of my soul. The old man coughed and my attention was snapped back to those hungry, building eyes and almost translucent skin with blue veins pulsing within.

### The Armitage Memorial Library

The town of Arkham rivaled Boston in age, but little else. Few men and women bustled along the streets going about their day. None of the buildings stood over three stories throughout the entire city. It looked more like a great, sprawling village that had chosen to grow out rather than up. The buildings were packed tight against each other eliminated alleys. Everyone leaned a few inches over the street as if designed to blot out the sun. Not a single one looked to have been built any later than 1890. A city frozen in time, unwilling and incapable of moving forward.

Driving around, trying to understand the strange town, I passed a building made of flat, slate grey with windows dotting its face. The Derleth Hotel was the first location I'd seen since entering Arkham that wasn't some small, ramshackle boarding house. After securing a parking spot up the road, I grabbed my bag and headed for the hotel hoping for a room. The lobby was little more than ugly carpeting connected to worse wallpaper. A wooden desk at the base of two curving steps leading to a second floor was attended by an ancient looking man. There were two hallways stretching out behind the stairs. I suspected I would find the same mirrored up the stairs.

“You have any rooms?”

The attendant pointed to a wall full of room keys. I swore I saw dust fall from his stiff uniform and heard creaking joints when he moved.

“One bed, attached bathroom, if you have it.”

He shuffled over to the wall and ran a finger over the keys setting off a series of clicks and tings until finding the key he wanted and pulled it down. “Five dollars a night,” the attendant said with the graveled voice of a heavy smoker. The key clattered onto the desk to punctuate the cost.

I handed over a twenty hoping I wouldn’t need to be in town even that long. The tab on the key stated 217. The room was about halfway down the hallway on the second floor. More ugly carpeting and wallpaper greeted me when I entered the room. Tossing my bag on the bed, I used the bathroom to freshen up after the long. I retrieved my gun and some ammo from the bag. With the gun loaded and holstered, it was time to check out the college.

Back at the front desk, I asked, “You got any maps of the town?”

The attendant reached out a palsied hand, pointing behind me. A small stand, almost empty, covered in shadows and cobwebs, hid in the corner. There were faded flyers for event, museums, and some menus. The only pile of clean paper was the stack of maps arranged down the middle in a neat line. One in hand, I waved and set out. The map showed the college wasn’t too far, so I decided to walk it and get a feel for Arkham. No one was around to eye my car too closely, so I felt secure in keeping it where it was.

Strolling along the red brick sidewalks, weeds poking out from the cracks between the bricks, Arkham loomed darker and ominous. Perhaps it was the quiet way people rushed along the streets contrasting the uproarious din of New York. Or how the subtle slant of the buildings blocked the light. Or the unsettling fog than fell over everything.

A building made up of splintered wood and impossible angles towered over a wide intersection, arching and stretching over the space like a plant determined to follow the sun. Along the walk, I felt the urge to pause under the few beams of unfiltered sunlight that cut through the ever-present gloom. None of the beam lasted long as a cloud soon glided over to steal away both the light and heat.

As Miskatonic University appeared in the distance, I hoped for a sun dappled campus full of happy students and befuddled professors. Closer, I found cold, stone buildings, austere and solemn, like great mausoleums dedicated to the commemorations and preservation of hoarded knowledge rather than a place dedicated to the higher purpose of teaching and learning. Serious looking young men and women hurried from building to building, huddled together, hugging books and supplies close to their chests.

None of the student paid me any attention when I tried to wave one closer hoping to get directions to the library. I eventually found a large, long-faded sign displaying a map of the university. The library appeared to be deep in the center of the campus along a circuitous path. Along the way, the student body continued to ignore my attempts to talk with any of them. It was odd how all of them took great care to remain on the brick paths and avoid cutting across the grounds. The lawn, though tinted yellow, appeared well-groomed, but when did college students avoid the fastest route to their classes?

The pathway to the library connected to a large fountain set in the center of a wide-open area outlined by a circle of massive constructs of boulders. Paths branched out from the fountain in various directions, some paths passed under thresholds created by the stone constructs, and swirled around forming random, nonsensical triangles and circles within the grass the filled the space. On the fountain stood a man reading from an open book with a childish drawing of a

branch barren of leaves on the cover.

Off to the right, I spotted my destination. An ornate building with great columns climbing up to a vaulted dome raised over the entrance had the words The Armitage Memorial Library chiseled in its bone white marble. Two wooden doors mounted in a heavy metal frame towered above me. Pulling one of the large metal handles, one door swung open on silent, well-oiled hinges. Inside the domed ceiling showed a massive mosaic showing some kind of battle between enormous nightmare gods and barrel shaped, star headed creatures with wings. Tearing my attention away from the disturbing scene, I scanned the empty second floor balcony and headed for the main desk. A young man offered a confused glance my way before closing whatever book he was going through and started to come around to the front of the desk to meet me.

“Can I help you?”

“Hopefully,” I said closing the distance trying to ignore the sensation of having entered a private museum rather than a university library. “I’m trying to track down a student whose family believes has gone missing. Her name is Leslie Owens.”

The boy shrugged. “Doesn’t ring a bell, but we get a lot of students in and out.”

A quick glance around showed that to be a lie. I flashed the picture in front of him. An involuntary smile flickered over his lips. “You remember her now, though?” My own smile in response to his obvious crush.

“Yeah, she’s a hard one to miss, I guess.” He shrugged, embarrassed by his inadvertent admission.

Though known as a place for quiet, none of the ambient sound one might hear in a library were present. It was like a tomb with books. “Could I get a look at her library card, maybe? She what she was working on?”

“Well, I’m not...”

A couple bills materialized in my hand and silenced the kid. He stepped behind the desk to a long filing cabinet. “Owens, you said?” As if he didn’t know her name.

“Yeah, Leslie Owens.” Funny what the promise of a few extra dollars can do.

The kid found the card and pulled it out. A long list of books was recorded along its length. “Looks like she was doing research in the Rare Books section.”

“You know which books?”

“No. This desk only records people going in there. There’s a record of requests back there, however, if she ever asked for assistance.”

I added a few more bills to his pocket and off we went through the cold, lonely library. Every book was bound in dark, aged leather. I didn’t see any of the popular pulp novels, colorful book spines, or classic literature I could pick up at The Strand on Fourth. It was reminiscent of Pickman’s Pages with the same aura of sterility. “This whole place looks like a rare books section.”

“Yeah, Dr. Armitage, the previous Head Librarian, felt that this library should only curate books useful to scholars and serious students. Arkham has a town library for more ‘frivolous pursuits.’ His words.”

“What makes the Rare Books section so special?”

“No idea. Dr. Armitage set it up and personally curated those books. He set up several of the restrictions we have for the section before his passing. Dr. Llanfer oversees it now, though not as closely as Dr. Armitage was said to.”

At the back of the library, we come to a wooden door painted black and etched with silver. A small plaque named the area as the Rare Books section. Anyone not searching for it

would pass it by without notice. The door gave off a kind of purple sheen under the limited light available. The kid fished out a set of keys from his pocket, unlocked the door, and crossed through the threshold into a well-lit room lined with lanterns and mirrors set to reflect the light to maximum effect. I got the impression that whoever set up the lighting system was determined to never be alone, in the dark or near a shadow, while in the space.

The kid slipped behind a small desk and set to rifling through the files, searching for the catalogue of requested books. He pulled it out and scanned the entries.

“You want a list of titles, or you want to see the books?”

“Are they available?”

“Of course. No one is allowed to remove any of the volumes from this room for any reason.”

“What about in case of a fire?” I chuckled until I saw the shadow pass over the kid’s face.

“Not even then. That’s how...” He shook off whatever he was going to say. “Nevermind. You want to see those books?”

“Yeah, sure.” After the kid disappeared into the stacks, I wondered about what he was about to say. I’d let that line of questioning go for now. I doubt an old fire had any bearing on my current case and would only muddy the investigation. When the kid returned, he carried a pile of dusty, fragile tomes in his arms. He placed them on a nearby table.

“Be careful, please. Some of these books are one of a kind, I’m told.”

He disappeared into the stack again to search for more of the volumes Leslie had been researching. As a rough, forceful guy due to my job, I was never comfortable in museums. I always put my meaty hands into my pockets to prevent touching anything, scared I’d break history itself. Now, in the presence of one-of-a-kind books, I was terrified. I took seat and read



over the titles I could understand. Leslie had been researching books like the *Necronomicon*, *The Pnakotic Manuscripts*, *Cryptomenyisis Patefacta*, *The King in Yellow*, *The Parchments of Pnom*, and the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*. I was able to flip through some of the pages of the *Necronomicon* before the kid brought back another pile of books, most of which were written in a language foreign and unreadable. Even without being able to read the additional titles or cross check the list in front of me, I could see the pictures and diagrams illustrated through most of the books. It appeared Leslie had dedicated a great deal of time to investigating many old and dark traditions.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” I whispered to myself running a hand over the cover of one of the thicker tomes. The leather felt odd. It was different than the old books I’d been hired to track down in the past for Madam Bina and other wealthy clients.

“No doubt,” the kid replied with pride. “Miskatonic University maintains the largest collection of arcane writings and occult knowledge in the US. Possibly the largest in the world. Take that book for instance. One of only two suspected remaining original copies of the *Necronomicon*. The other is supposedly hidden away in the Middle East.”

Old habits forced the question out of my mouth. “What makes you sure it’s authentic.” I drew closer, determined to know why the cover felt too peculiar.

“Oh, that’s easy. The binding is human skin.”

My hand froze. I pulled my hand away and took several deep breaths. I had heard of the practice, but never encountered it during any of my searches for antiquities. “Remarkable.” I choked the word out past my rising revulsion.

“If you slip it over, I swear you can see a spot where the binder used part of a face and stitched an eyelid closed.”

I forced a smile and waved off his enthusiasm. “Thanks, but no. I’ll take your word for it.”

He shrugged. “Are you ok? Need anything else?”

“Actually, yeah. You wouldn’t know who her advisor might have been.”

“Depends on her major.”

I withdrew a notepad and flipped through it. “Anthropological Folklore?”

“That makes sense considering the books. Give me a few minutes. I’ll look into it for you.”

After the kid left, I glanced over the books, reluctant to touch any of the leather-bound ones. I used the eraser of a pencil to some more of the covers and peek at the paper and writing. Most of the texts appeared hand-written, produced well before the invention of the printing press. One book stood as having a paper cover and appeared to a recent printing. *The King in Yellow* appeared to be a modern paperback with a black cover with yellow lettering and a yellow hooded figure staring out. I pulled the book closer. There were no markings on it naming a publisher or author, only the black cover and yellow art. I flipped the book open to random page.

“Sorry about the delay, mister! Took me a while to track down a name for you.”

The sudden statement caused me to flinch. The book slapped closed as it fell to the table.

“Delay? You just left.”

“What? I’ve been gone for twenty minutes. You get caught up in reading? This stuff is spooky but interesting.” The kid held out a slip of paper, smiling at me.

“I guess.” I took the paper and read the name. “Professor Harold Whitmore?”

“Yeah, he’s the head of the AnthroLore department. I couldn’t track down her specific advisor. No one seemed to be able to remember, but he said to come talk to him and he’d help in

any way he could.”

“Great, thanks.” I closed my eyes. A sudden burning stung me all the way to my brain. Flashes of yellow fabric and a black, rotting hand appeared behind my eyelids, but faded.

“You, ok?”

“Yeah, been a long day. Just tired.” I pulled out another ten and handed it to the kid.

“Thanks for the help.”

He smiled at the ten and smiled. “You bet, mister. Hope you find the girl.”

Me too, I thought.