

CHAPTER ONE

Dark clouds hung over Arkham Asylum, a brooding reflection of Oliver Grayson's mood as he drove up the rough gravel drive to the main entrance. Situated beneath the central tower of the building, the doors to the asylum were heavy dark wood, more akin to something found in the wall of a Colonial-era fort. Every angle and every element of the asylum's design appeared specifically crafted to intimidate approaching mortals, reminding them that but for the slenderest margins of sanity, they too might become an inmate.

But Oliver had learned too much of the world and its secrets to fear any man-made architecture or be intimidated by its brutal geometry. He had traveled to grim underworlds and realms where dreams and reality were one and the same. The work of human architects no longer held any awe for him.

Yet even Oliver's newfound indifference to the works of Man could not fail to recall the terrible times he had visited this abode of the damned with fear in his heart. Its shadowed corridors, hung with feverish artwork of madmen and staffed by warders who had become little better than jailers, were still places that spoke to the fearful parts of Oliver's psyche.

He shook off such grim thoughts as he guided his wheezing car to the main entrance. Its wheels crunched to a halt and he engaged the

hand brake, pausing to retrieve his hat and briefcase from the back seat. He buttoned up his coat before opening the car's door. Autumn had well and truly broken, and a Massachusetts winter had closed on Arkham with a vengeance. Temperatures had plummeted and cold winds borne from the Atlantic blew through the town like cold whips on flesh.

Oliver stepped from his car and hurried to the asylum's entrance, pressing down on his hat as the wind threatened to tear it from his head. His face was wet by the time he reached the door, and he took a moment to peer through the rain to look for any sign that he was observed. It seemed reasonable that Alexander might expect him to make an approach to Henry Cartwright, but if any of the treacherous bastard's allies were watching, Oliver couldn't see them.

"Where's Gabriel Stone when you need him?" muttered Oliver. He would have dearly liked the tough, no-nonsense Pinkerton man at his side. Handy with his fists and a gun, Gabriel would be welcome company right about now.

Realizing he was prevaricating, Oliver planted an authoritative knock on the door. The sound echoed within like a peal of thunder in a cave, and moments later the click of footsteps across a tiled floor came from the other side. He stepped back as the door opened, and a tall nurse with pale skin, dark eyes and hair worn in a tight bun opened the door. Despite his earlier conviction, Oliver was thrown off balance by the sight of this nurse. She had, at one and the same time, a dreadful familiarity and a sense of otherworldliness that made Oliver just a little uneasy. It felt as though he had seen her many times in many places, but could remember none of them precisely.

"Professor Grayson," she said, and Oliver's sense of unease was dispelled by her husky tones. "This way. Dr. Hardstrom's been expecting you."

"I should say so," said Oliver, harsher than he intended.

He followed the nurse into the building, its interior scarcely less gloomy than its exterior. The lights were dim in the heart of the asylum, but here they were stark and bright, as if to deliberately contrast with its bleak purpose. The nurse took up position behind a reception desk and lifted the mouthpiece of a telephone to her ruby-red lips. She spoke softly and nodded in response to whatever she was hearing from the earpiece pressed tightly to the side of her head.

She smiled at Oliver and said, "Dr. Hardstrom will be along directly."

"Thank you," said Oliver.

The nurse nodded and set the earpiece back on its cradle before turning her attention to an opened file on the desk. Oliver caught a glimpse of a name written on the evaluation sheet. Thomas Olney. The name meant nothing to Oliver, but he wondered what terrible sights he might have seen to have been brought to Arkham for an evaluation.

Oliver made a slow circuit of the vestibule as the nurse placed another call. The floor's herringbone pattern of black and white tiles, combined with the iron bars and sepulchral paintings on the walls appeared designed to sap the willpower of any visitor. He paused by one striking painting, a depiction of a liveried biplane taking off from a long runway. Emblazoned with the emblem of Varney Air Lines, Oliver realized it was an airmail plane, one of the new developments in transcontinental mail.

A letter could travel from New York to San Francisco in less than a day and a half, and the speed of such communication astounded Oliver. How long, he wondered, would it take for even that swiftness to be superseded?

"The patients often unwittingly give us a glimpse into their troubled minds with their paintings," said a voice behind Oliver, and he turned to see Dr. Hardstrom. Monroe, the sullen orderly Oliver had long suspected of being no more than a bully, stood at Hardstrom's shoulder, but he avoided Oliver's gaze.

Hardstrom nodded toward the painting of the biplane. "For example, it's not hard to read the symbolism of this one."

"Freedom? The desire to take flight?" said Oliver. "Not surprising, really."

"Very good," replied Hardstrom, his tone ever so slightly patronizing.

Hardstrom was the head of Arkham Asylum, a somewhat unctuous man who might once have viewed his lofty position as one of a crusading healer, but who had since found himself reduced to the level of caretaker. The madresses of the inmates were too strange and too deep-rooted to ever be cured, and thus Arkham had become a repository of very peculiar strains of insanity, ones that would confound even the scandalous Austrian.

Yet it was the *restored* sanity of one inmate in particular that had brought Oliver to the asylum.

"Dr. Hardstrom," said Oliver. "I have been more than patient, but I demand that you allow me to see Henry."

"I understand," said Hardstrom, gesturing in the direction of his office, "but perhaps we might discuss Henry's apparent lucidity in private?"

Oliver heard the doctor's emphasis on the word *apparent*, and was not about to allow Hardstrom the home turf advantage.

He shook his head. "No, I want you to take me to him right now."

"Please, Professor Grayson, you must understand that while it's true that Henry is no longer in a catatonic state, he is still highly agitated."

"I'm not surprised," retorted Oliver. "If I awoke and found I had been kept in this dungeon for three years, I would be pretty damn agitated."

"You misunderstand, what I mean is—"

"Trust me," interrupted Oliver. "I believe I know more of the true nature of Henry's condition than you. Just as I know that the madness that afflicted him has now passed."

Oliver took a step toward Hardstrom, his limited stock of patience now worn thin.

"I want to see Henry, and you're going to get your goddamn jailer here to take me to him. This isn't a request."

Hardstrom looked Oliver in the eye, and he saw the good doctor register the wealth of hideous experience and damnable knowledge in his gaze. Hardstrom was no stranger to the demented and the bizarre, but his learning was limited to observation of those afflicted by the kinds of things Oliver had witnessed firsthand. That knowledge was writ large in Oliver's face, his features wearing his years before their time.

Hardstrom nodded and turned to the orderly at his side.

"Monroe, take Professor Grayson to Henry Cartwright's room, if you please."

* * *

Henry Cartwright had been a patient at Arkham Asylum for three years, following a series of senseless arson attacks around the town. A professor of previously unimpeachable credentials, Henry had been found raving in Arkham's streets, his body scorched and smeared with ash. It had taken the judge no time at all to decide he was a lunatic and confine him to the bleak walls of the asylum.

And for those three years, Henry had languished in states ranging from vegetative to raving, from apathetic to comatose. Oliver had sat

by his bed and read to him every week: *The Great Gatsby*, the Thorn-dyke mysteries and, of course, the fantastic adventures of his beloved Jules Verne. He had no idea whether those words had helped his friend in his madness, but it was not in him to do less.

Monroe silently led Oliver through the corridors of the asylum, unlocking its iron-barred doors and locking them again in their wake. They passed no one else en route, and Oliver paid no mind to the paintings on the walls or the lingering scent of disinfectant soap scrubbed into the walls and floor.

At length they arrived at a heavy door marked with Henry's name and Monroe opened it with a key from a jangling ring at his belt. He pulled the door and stood aside.

Oliver stepped into the room—it was difficult not to think of it as anything other than a cell—to see Henry Cartwright sitting on the edge of his bed with a book in his lap. Oliver smiled to see it was Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and the Damned*. Henry's left hand held the book open, while his right turned a glassy blue figurine depicting a familiar star-shaped symbol around like a good luck talisman. Oliver remembered seeing Henry clutching it tight while seated at Luke Robinson's table in the Dreamlands. It surprised him that it had returned with Henry, but then what did he really know of that wondrous realm?

Henry looked up as the door closed, and his face broke out in a beaming smile of welcome that made everything Oliver had endured to bring his friend back to the world worthwhile.

"Oliver, good God, but you are a sight for sore eyes," said Henry.

Oliver extended his hand, but Henry threw down his book and rose to meet him with his arms open. The two men embraced, and Oliver felt tears prick at the corners of his eyes. Oliver stepped back and the two men regarded one another with a look that spoke of shared experiences and a heartfelt friendship.

"You look well," said Oliver, and Henry laughed.

"I'm as skinny as a hobo's dog, and just as hungry," said Henry, patting the concave arch of his stomach. "The slop they serve here isn't fit for pigs."

"Don't worry about the food," replied Oliver. "I'll take you for a prime rib steak at Aunt Lucy's as soon as we get you out of here. I've spoken to some legal fellows at the university, and now that you're completely lucid again, they seem to think there's an excellent chance we can get Hardstrom to end this ridiculous incarceration forthwith."

"Thank heavens for that," said Henry, his ebullient manner turning abruptly serious. "I've spent altogether far too long here already, though I suspect Hardstrom will not easily be persuaded to see me released."

"Damn Hardstrom," said Oliver. "You can't stay here, and come hell or high water, I'll see you're freed."

Henry sat back on his bed and placed the blue figurine in the breast pocket of his shirt as he gestured Oliver to take a seat on the stool opposite.

"My release will be most welcome," said Henry. "But I believe we have graver concerns than my liberty, yes?"

"Debatable," said Oliver. "Alexander has betrayed us and we need you out of here."

"Dash it all," snapped Henry. "If only I'd been coherent enough in the Dreamlands to realize what you were telling me, I could have warned you there and then. How bad is it?"

"It's worse than you can imagine, my dear friend," said Oliver.

And Oliver reacquainted Henry with all that had befallen him since being drawn into the web of Alexander's deception—the ghoul murders in Arkham and the strange silver sphere Finn Edwards had obtained from the insectoid monstrosities. He told Henry of how Gabriel Stone, Rex Murphy, and Minnie Klein had each in their own way become part of the horror that had ended with the mysterious burning down of the AQA Frat House.

"I think I can shed some light on that," said Henry. "I believe I may have inadvertently called that fire down from the heavens."

"You? How is that possible?"

Henry's fingers laced together, as though wringing his hands in guilt. His breath came in shallow hikes and he wouldn't look Oliver in the eye.

"You must understand that I remember little of my time here, just horrible fragments of nightmares stitched together in ways that make no sense. I...I think...that night...a dreadful apparition appeared to me and forced me to speak the words I had been deceived into saying so many years ago...the words that saw me brought to this place as a prisoner."

"You weren't yourself, Henry," said Oliver. "You mustn't hold yourself responsible. In any case, that fire wiped out the nest of the damned ghoulish creatures."

"And destroyed any evidence of Alexander's involvement," spat Henry.

Oliver reached out and placed a hand on Henry's shoulder. There was no meat to the man, and his bones felt like sharp-edged kindling.

"Perhaps that was his intent, but it destroyed the last of the monsters."

"Don't be so certain, Oliver," said Henry. "What did Alexander tell you of Château-Thierry? Did he tell you how he and I found that damnable catacomb chamber the German shelling had unearthed? Did he tell you of the books belonging to the Comte D'Erlette?"

"He did, but his account of what happened there must now be called into question. He told us that some of the men went mad with what they read. He told me that you delved too deeply and called the fire of the Old Ones down upon the enemy. God forgive me, but he said you were the one who became obsessed with bringing the knowledge back to the States. I'm sorry, Henry, but we took him at his word..."

"Perfectly understandable, Oliver," said Henry with a kindly smile. "Given Alexander's devilish charisma and my abode in an asylum, it would be hard not to take the veracity of his tale at face value. Swap his and my names around and, for the most part, the story is true."

"The best lies are those built around a kernel of truth, I suppose."

Henry nodded. "It was a bad business at that Frenchy's castle, and I wish I'd had the gumption to stop Alexander, but we were set to be overrun and the Kaiser's men weren't about to give quarter to the men who'd bloodied them so many times over the past few days. The things we saw in that cellar..."

Henry lapsed into silence, but Oliver did not press him to continue. From his talks with William Hillshore, he understood enough of soldiers' traumatic memories to know that the horrors of war could only be drawn out slowly. His English psychiatrist friend taught at the Jesuit College in San Francisco, but also worked at the Presidio in the treatment of American soldiers who had returned from the war suffering from shell-shock.

Henry took a deep breath and his fists were clenched in his lap.

"Alexander brought fire from the sky and burned the German soldiers to death without mercy. I can still picture him, standing on the battlements and laughing as he brought columns of flame down on the enemy. Battalions of men burned to ash, tanks reduced to molten slag, and an entire landscape burned black as far as the eye could see.

I understand war, Oliver, I've been there and I've seen friends die. I've killed men too, but I took no pleasure in it. For a long time after I came home I would see some of their faces when I slept. But Alexander...? He reveled in the slaughter. He couldn't wait to wield that power again."

"At Belleau Wood?" asked Oliver.

"Just so, my dear friend, just so," agreed Henry. "But it didn't end there. I began to hear stories circulating about him and his men. Tales of butchery and mutilations. His unit gained a terrible reputation, one that bore all the hallmarks of the books belonging to the damned Comte. Before I could investigate the truth of the stories, I was wounded and sent back to the States. And that was the last I heard of Alexander Templeton until he sought a position at Miskatonic."

"Do you think he knew you held tenure there?"

"He must have done," said Henry. "Alexander was never one to chose a course of action without due consideration of every outcome."

"But why come here when he knew you would certainly oppose his appointment?"

"It is this place, Oliver," said Henry. "You must have felt it? There is cosmological significance to Arkham, a confluence of alignments that draw the mystical, the unholy and the macabre. In such a place, it was a matter of utmost simplicity for Alexander to remove me from his schemes."

Oliver nodded in agreement. He still felt foolish at having failed to recognize that the very enemy he sought to defeat was at his side all along. But Alexander had fooled everyone from the students on up to the Dean of the University. A moment of silence fell between the two old friends, until Henry sat up straight.

"Continue with your tale, Oliver," he said. "Tell me everything."

So Oliver told Henry how their researches had uncovered evidence of a terrible artifact known as the Eye of Infinite Stars. Oliver shuddered as he recounted how he had read passages from the dread *Necronomicon*, a damned book rightly kept under lock and key by Miskatonic's head librarian, that told how the Eye could twist the light of the heavens into a blasphemous alignment of stars that would herald the awakening of the Great Old One himself.

Further researches had led Oliver and Alexander to believe that the crystal lay forgotten in the hold of a merchantman sunk in Kingsport Bay during the Revolutionary War. Already preparing to travel, Oliver

had been called upon by the Kingsport authorities to aid in the identification of a host of bones washed up on the shoreline. Henry's eyes widened as Oliver told him that these bones belonged to the missing Yopasi, the selfsame tribal group that Oliver had been researching in the South Pacific and who had been presumed dead in the wake of their island's virtual destruction.

Professor George Gammell Angell entered proceedings at this point, and Henry smiled at the mention of that venerable scholar, a man whose expertise he himself had sought on more than one occasion over the years. From here, the tale grew ever more fantastical, as Oliver recounted how Luke Robinson had arrived in Kingsport seeking his help to reunite Henry's dreaming mind with his body. Oliver, Rex Murphy, and Luke had climbed the titanic crag of Kingsport Head and journeyed into a realm of dreams beyond the wall of sleep, the realm in which Henry had been kept prisoner.

"Luke is a good man, one of the best," said Henry. "He took me in and crossed worlds to help me. I don't know many individuals who would have done that for a stranger."

"I spent only a short time in the Dreamlands, but I believe that land brings out the best in most of us," said Oliver, remembering how he and Rex had appeared to one another in that miraculous place. "Or perhaps it brings how we *wish* we were to the fore."

"I think you might be right, Oliver, and it saddens me that I shall never see Luke again. I fear he will not venture back to the waking world and I am forever denied entry to the Dreamlands."

Though it had been the only way to extricate Henry from the Dreamlands, Oliver still felt a flush of guilt at thrusting the dream knife into his friend's chest. To die in the Dreamlands was to hurl a drifting soul back to its body, but ensured it could never again breach the walls between the waking world and the realm of dreams.

"When you plunged that dagger home I opened my eyes in this room," said Henry. "I remembered everything in an instant. The fog that had kept me wrapped in its confounded amnesiac hold dissipated, and I knew all that you had spoken of, everything that had transpired in my time here. I tried to warn you, to get these damned fools keeping me here to send word to you of Alexander's true colors."

"It wouldn't have mattered," said Oliver. "No sooner had we returned from the Dreamlands than we put to sea in an attempt to retrieve the Eye of Infinite Stars."

That fateful voyage out to the decaying, waterlogged hulk of the *Persephone* still made Oliver shudder as he recalled the moment he understood that Alexander had betrayed them. Worse even than the undersea beasts sent to murder them, worse than the nightmarish sight of the winged horror that carried Alexander to safety, and worse than the thought of drowning in the freezing waters of the bay—betrayal left the deepest scar.

Just as the *Persephone* had been on the verge of sinking for the second time, a celestial White Ship, crewed by the keeper of the North Point Lighthouse and a silent steersman had hove to out of the mist and borne them to safety atop Kingsport Head.

Here, the last of Oliver's tale unfolded as he spoke of the brief, but violent encounter with Charles Warren, a dying man who sought to storm the Dreamlands. Oliver did not know what transformations that miraculous place would have worked on such a debased creature, but knew it could only have brought terror to a land that had its own fair share of monsters.

"Good God, man!" cried Henry. "Charles Warren? He was the worst of Alexander's cronies during the war. The vile things that man was capable of do not bear repeating, but let me assure you that you were lucky to have survived that encounter, for he was a man of savage rages and unnatural hungers."

"Cannibalism?" said Oliver, disturbed that such a notion was no longer as surprising to him as it would have been only a few scant weeks ago.

"He devoured the living and the dead," said Henry with a shudder. "Charles was always a violent, unstable man, but when Alexander showed him what was in those books it opened a door that unleashed the very worst of Humankind's bestial nature."

"Well, there's no need to worry about him now," said Oliver. "He is dead."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," said Oliver. "He fell from Kingsport Head, beset by all manner of horrors conjured by the man who lives at its summit."

"But you're sure he's dead?" pressed Henry, and Oliver saw Henry was close to panic at the thought of Charles Warren's continued existence.

"Without a doubt," Oliver assured him.

“Get up,” said the voice, imperious and impossible to disobey.

He wanted to make the voice happy, because there was something in the way the words were said that made it clear its being unhappy would result in dire consequences. He wanted to move, he really did, but no part of his body seemed able to respond.

Where was he?

Who was he?

He remembered nothing before the voice had spoken to him, or whether there had even been a before. Had the voice brought him into existence? It seemed preposterous that a voice could achieve such miracles, but this was no ordinary voice. It had the echoing cadences of sounds no mortal tongue ever ought to form, of blasphemous words not meant for the ears of Man.

If any voice could bring life from lifelessness, it was this one.

His body felt as if it was folded up, concertinaed like a doll whose limbs were twisted underneath it. He felt broken up inside. He could actually *feel* splintered nubs of bone piercing his rotten-meat organs and the fragments of splintered ribs within his chest. His perforated lungs billowed and flapped with fetid air as a dead heart pumped sluggish fluid around his body that wasn't blood, but something oily and caustic.

He heard the cries of circling sea birds.

Their cries were hungry; they were angry at being denied their decaying banquet.

He tried to speak, but all that came out was wet, sopping gurgle. His jaw flapped loose and his vocal chords felt like swollen ropes in his throat. He tried to open his eyes, but the lids were gummed shut, sticky with coppery residue. Even through closed eyes, the brightness of a pale light was painful, lancing into his skull like hot knives. It felt as though he were looking right at the sun. Milky tears oozed over his cheeks, adding another layer of sedimentary gunk on his eyelids.

“Come on, get up,” said the voice again. “West’s fluids aren’t perfect, but they’re good enough for the likes of you.”

The voice was familiar. He knew it. He knew the speaker, and he had once loved him.

He felt reluctant hands on his body, straightening legs and unfolding arms from the misshapen angles in which they had been lying. Neither his arms nor his legs could move, but he sensed that was about to change. Whatever dark elixir had been pumped into his body was

even now filling his limbs with strength. The darkest creation of forbidden alchemy, distilled by a lunatic visionary whose life-giving arts had ultimately doomed him.

Flesh consigned to the carrion creatures by the natural order of the world was re-energized and invigorated. Electrochemical reactions that no earthly scientist would recognize were taking place in the pulped matter of his brain. Sense returned and with it a heaving gulp of rebirth as an obscene parody of life was exhaled into him.

He sat upright, jagged rocks still embedded in his spine and scapula. Stagnant matter drooled from the base of his cracked skull. He reached up and wiped his hands across his eyes, scraping away a reservoir of whitish mucus, layers of dirt and pools of sticky blood. His eyelids came loose, flapping over his cheeks. He tore them off like flaking scabs.

His vision was blurred in one eye, non-existent in the other.

He tried to communicate this, but only ragged grunts emerged from his mouth.

With one hand, less an extremity capable of manipulation, more a broken, useless feeler, he touched his face. The skin was swollen and torn by a ferocious impact, coated in a sticky residue. He probed the edges of his eye sockets, finding one empty and glutinous, the other bulging and distended with fluid buildup.

He pushed himself to his feet as the black ichor continued to circulate, sustaining what should be descending into decay. His body felt strong, powerful, and he reveled in the sensation of having cheated the eaters of the dead from their feast.

His one eye still hurt, though he saw it was night. Light from the low-slung crescent of a mist-shawled moon shone down upon him. A poor illumination, but enough to see the man who stood before him.

Tall and broad-shouldered, the man wore a long robe of red with a hood pushed back over his shoulders. One arm seemed twisted at an unnatural angle, but his vision was too indistinct and the sepulchral gloom too complete for him to be sure. The man's hair was dark, and though everything else was blurred, he saw the power in his eyes.

This was a man who could keep the dissolution of flesh at bay, a man who could drown the world. This was a man whose very existence demanded unquestioning service. He nodded, though no question had been asked, and looked up at the wheeling sea birds as they returned to nests on the sheer rock behind him. The cliff thrust to the

clouds, its summit lost in the mist, but what he could see was surely thousands of feet high.

The brittle cracking of bone shards gradually re-knitting in his battered flesh told him that he'd fallen from that cliff. The scavenged meat of his body was black and blue, red and raw, but in defiance of all natural laws, he was...*alive?*

Strange, iridescent powder coated his body and rivulets of black fluid dribbled from the gashes and tears in his skin. Despite the ruination of his form, he felt powerful and lethal, as though all mortal frailties were behind him and he had evolved to a new plateau of existence.

The man saw this understanding and nodded, satisfied at his perversion of nature.

"Welcome back, Charles," said Alexander Templeton.