

Trial By Numbers

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

"No real library has books in order," Carolyn grumbled to herself.

Dressed in blue jeans and a red Henley shirt, the city librarian pushed her braided hair back over her shoulders. Doing so caused a few beads in her hair to knock against each other as she glared at the lowest shelf of books. "Two masters degrees," she grumbled, beginning to pull books off the lowest of the metal shelves. "More years of college than I care to admit. All so I can play clean-up to a city library that's become the baby-sitting center of the city."

She glared up at the poster than hung from the white-tiled ceiling of the library, with the mayor proudly holding a book, his giant toothy smile hanging next to the simple word 'READ'. She went back to collecting the books.

With a stack almost as tall as her torso, she cupped her hands beneath the precarious group. With precision lacking from many professional dancers, she carefully rose, the tower of books in her hands teetering but not falling. She leaned back, the books settling against her body and she carried them across the stained carpeting of the library to the main circulation desk.

The big glass windows let in the last of the daylight, the city lights outside beginning to turn on. The office buildings that dominated the downtown area were beginning to dot with the offices of late-night workers while stars were appearing in the burnt umber heavens. Inside the library, the shelves were askew. Meant to create a dynamic and inviting layout, it instead provided a multitude of hiding places for young boys to giggle at nude illustrations and even the occasional drug user to engage in their preferred vice.

Carolyn dropped the chin-high load of books down onto the reference desk, having to step back from them as she flexed her back, trying to work the kink out. "Carolyn," came a grating, high-pitched voice. The librarian turned around, not wanting to see who she knew she was going to see.

It's not that Mary-Anne was a bad person. Not at all. She was very sweet. But she was also annoying. Very annoying. Obscenely annoying. If she wasn't so sweet, Carolyn would have wrung her neck many times for her incompetence or her inability to get to work on time or for her nasal voice or for any number of other transgressions

that weren't enough to write her up for but more than warranted her immediate death.

"Yes," Carolyn said, rubbing her lower back. She heard boys snickering from the teens section which was never a good sound.

"There was a call from the district manager," Mary-Anne said, coming over to the books. "Oh, looks likes we've got more books to shelve," she said cheerfully. Carolyn considered strangling her then and there. Sadly, self-control won out.

As she turned to head off to her office, Dave strolled up. The high-school-minded college student looked at the books, then walked by. Carolyn watched him get almost past the desk, then tapped his shoulder. "Dave," she said, pointing at the books. "Books."

He turned to the books, then stepped back. "Oh, wow, man. More books?"

"Yeah," she said sarcastically. "This is a library. Books are what we do."

"Yeah, but I just put a bunch of books away yesterday, man."

"Dave, that's your job," Carolyn said. "You're the library page; you're supposed to put the books away."

"Yeah, man, but every day?" Dave asked. "That's like, I don't know man, a lot of work."

"That's why they call it a job," Carolyn said, her eyes closed. "Just put them away."

"Like in order, man?" he asked, looking back at the stack.

Carolyn's eyebrow began to twitch. She knew that a homicide wasn't far away, so she simply turned away and started walking. "What did the distract manager have to say?" she asked Mary-Anne.

The older woman paused, as if taken by surprise. "What?" she asked in a steep southern tone.

"The district manager," said Carolyn. "You said he called. What about?"

"He said he needed to talk to you about something," she said.

"What about?" Carolyn insisted.

"He didn't say," she said disinterestedly. "He asked if he could speak to you but I said you were busy."

"Mary-Anne, if the district manager wants to talk to me, come and get me," Carolyn exclaimed. "Did he say when he would call back?"

"No," she said, like she didn't process why this was a big deal.

"So he needed to talk to me, but didn't say when he would call back?" Carolyn summed up. "Am I supposed to call him or is he going to just drop by out of the blue?" As soon as she asked the question, she heard the sliding doors of the library swish open. "Of course," she told herself with a sigh.

Dillion Haufferman walked in stomach first. He wasn't an obese man. He was actually a bit on the skinny side, with simply a great bowl of a stomach that bulged out in front of him like some sort of bowling ball stuffed into his pants. He wore enigmatic octagonal glasses which clashed with his mundane light brown suit and unremarkable blue tie. Everything about him screamed man of intelligence but of far greater intellectual laziness. He was the living embodiment of wasted potential.

"Hey, Carol," he said.

She sighed, unwilling to correct him yet again. "Hey, Dillion. Sorry we didn't connect earlier. There was some confusion as to the schedule." She glowered at Mary-Anne but it was lost on the woman behind the circulation desk. "Do you want to go into my office?"

"No, I just..." He looked around the mostly empty library and stepped away from the desk. Carolyn followed. "The thing is," rambled the district manager. Carolyn looked at the clock on her desk as he spoke, rolling her eyes at the mere sound of his voice. "Parents have been complaining that their children are getting turned away from the library. Now, I know that's not possible."

"Well, sir," she said, as she rubbed her closed eyes. "If these are the parents I think they are, it's because their sons were looking at pornography. And not just the usual porno, but like the bad stuff. The kind of stuff that's illegal in most civilized countries."

"Did you get the addresses?" he joked. Carolyn didn't laugh. It wasn't funny the first time; it wasn't funny the fifth time; it wasn't funny this time.

"Dillion, we've got a real problem here," she said. "This library is becoming a day-care. I can't keep up with my responsibilities with all these--"

"Your responsibilities are to the patrons," said the distract manager.

"My responsibilities are to the library," she countered.

"The patrons are the library," he made clear with a patronizingly paternal tone. "You think it's the books?" he scoffed. "You have patrons and they need to be encouraged to come back, but they can't be encouraged to come back if they're getting ejected from the library."

"They're breaking library rules," Carolyn protested.

"Then stop them, but not so that they leave," he argued. "You have an obligation, under the new plan by the mayor, to make sure that you get as many kids in those library doors as you possibly can."

"They're not kids; they're monsters!" Carolyn shouted. Her voice carried and she did not care. "They tear up the books, kick the bookshelves, hack and abuse the computers, and start fights."

"And you need to make sure that they don't do any of that," said the district manager. "You are the manager. You can control it, can't you?" Carolyn was about to bite his head off, but stopped herself. Knowing it futile, she surrendered to the bureaucratic perspective. "Keep the kids in, keep the patrons in, and keep the trouble-makers out. It's not hard is it?" he summarized, checking his watch.

Carolyn just fumed.

With each click of the light switches, whole sections of the library fell dark. Like a cascading waterfall of shadow, the darkness fell over the library in systematic order. When the last of the lights went out, the whole place was cloaked in the deep purple of the urban nighttime. Without the electric buzz of the lights, without the wordless din of

patrons, without the buzz of computers and elevators and all manner of other electric devices, the library was finally at peace.

Carolyn stepped out of the back room of the library and took a moment for herself. With a cup of peach-flavored fat-free yogurt, she walked to the desk to look out over the library. Her library. In the darkness at the end of the day, the space was finally as it should be. In order and at peace. Carolyn had to work to ignore the stacks of book that should have been reshelved and weren't. She had to work to ignore the stains in the roof and the patches of threadbare carpeting. She had to work to ignore the tattered spines and missing volumes from her shelves. Many flaws she couldn't see but knew were there. She refused to let them nag at her. For the brief surcease, in the dark and the quiet, the library was at peace.

Carolyn took a long breath and felt a certain sense of renewal, just being alone with the shelves of books. Ten million pages self rom the world and gathered close like chicks beneath a mother hen. She felt like the intruders had finally been cast out and her library was free from invasion. At least until they reopened again in the morning. Until then, the library was finally at peace.

With an angry grumble, Carolyn finished her yogurt, scraping the spoon along the edges of the plastic container to get every last bit of the peachy goodness. The thought of those doors opening and letting in more invaders caused her heart to skip a beat and her breath to catch in her lungs. She shuddered to think of one more day dealing with these people, as she did every night, and then again every morning.

The empty field of asphalt was Carolyn's only companion as she left the library. The parking field next to the library was full during the day, the spaces commanding a premium price. With dusk passed and the streetlamps and concrete all that remained of the vibrant city, the spaces were empty. Only a handful of cars sat alone in the field, the air still hot from the sun of the day. The nighttime breezes smelled of gasoline and fumes, like the energy Carolyn had left after her workday. Like the energy she had left after each work day.

There were three things Carolyn always left work with. Her keys in hands, a pile of books that she needed to repair, and a bad attitude usually tempered with a general hatred for humanity. She stumbled towards her car, today's pile of books reaching up to her chin. Carrying them with one hand, she jangled her keys to get access to the door key. She almost made it to the lock.

"Carolyn Chow?"

She stopped and glanced off to her left. In the Columbia nighttime, the world was only lit by the street lamps and the out-of-sync street lights that sat above the empty intersections. Standing down the sidewalk from her was a man dressed in dark blue robes. With a long bushy white beard and a pointy hat, he smiled at her patiently.

Obviously the source of the question, she decided to proceed with her evening and unlocked her car door. She tossed her books into the passenger seat, then looked at him, a bad attitude brewing already. "What do you need?"

"So you are Carolyn Chow?" confirmed the man, approaching her harmlessly with a few casual, unobtrusive steps towards her. "The director of the main branch of the Columbia City Library?"

"Yeah," she said, pulling her leather jacket around her.

"Excellent," he smiled, holding his hands in front of him. "I would like to offer you a job."

Her eyebrow went up. "Do what now?"

"Working as a librarian, of course," he assured her, his scholarly tone reminding her of a bad professor she had back in college. "We are in need of a librarian of your magnificent qualifications."

"What makes you think I'm magnificently qualified?"

"Why your library of course," the man smiled. "It is positively infested with gremlins."

Carolyn stared for a second. "You say that like that's a normal thing normal people normally say." She looked him up and down and realized his robe was the most expensive costume she'd ever seen.

The elderly man didn't seem troubled by her disbelief. "Did you really think children and unconscionable patrons can make a library so disorderly? Oh dear me, no. You've gremlins everywhere. Agents of entropy, they are. If it's a system, a gremlin exists to muck it all up. And that you manage it so well..." He shook his head, in sympathetic awe.

"Explains a thing or two," Carolyn nodded. "So, are you crazy or just trying to take up more of my time than most people?"

"I am here to offer you a job to help us salvage our library," said the man with a pleasant enough smile.

"We? Who's we and who's you?" she pressed.

"We are the Institute of Higher Arcane and Occult Studies," he said. With a bow, he added, "And I am Merlin."

Carolyn nodded. "Riiiiight."

"Don't believe me?" he asked with a smile. "Then perhaps this will persuade you to consider my offer a bit more seriously."

And with a whisk of his hand, the world transformed.

The stars became reflections in a lake and the asphalt beneath her feet became clouds. The street lamps dripped away to become moss hanging loosely from ancient trees. The world swirled and twisted, not like a roller coaster but like a wrung-out sponge returning to its original shape. It wasn't so much disorienting as clarifying, like her ears had popped but for all her senses.

Carolyn spun around and looked out over the forest primeval. She saw a raven take off from a tree branch and go flying into the bright night sky. She heard twigs snap and things older than humanity move within the shadows of the forest. She gulped and turned back to the castle. It stood alone atop a great cliff, overlooking a huge, placid lake that reflected a silver moon far larger than any she could recall having seen. A winding stone path led up the hill, guiding the way towards the nighttime castle. Before it were rolling hills and perfect grounds while in the distance, ice-capped spires of far-off cliffs created the horizon. All of this against the velvety backdrop of the moon and the stars, while the light windows revealed the massive, incalculable size of the place.

Carolyn stared with wide eyes, unable to perceive what she saw. "This is the Central Office of the Institute of Higher Arcane and Occult Studies," said the wizard, turning to the librarian next to him. "And I'm but one of many faculty here who help oversee this fine institution."

"And you are?" Carolyn asked, staring at the wizard, struggling to break her gaze upon the castle. "Merlin. Right."

"My dear, you will come to learn many things," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder, leading her down the path towards the castle. "One key truth is that many of the great icons that you hold dear are in fact far more than singular fixtures of someone's imagination. We are in actuality manifested ambitions personified as individuals."

"Huh?" Carolyn bugged.

"To put it simply," the wizard smiled, a twinkle in his eye, "those who created us, were inspired to create us, by us."

"Huh? That doesn't make any sense."

Merlin glanced at her, puzzled. "It doesn't?" he said, somewhat startled. He thought about what he had said for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, quite right. It doesn't." He kept walking.

The castle they approached grew, broadening from a simple storybook construct to a sweeping marvel of engineering. It was a wide expanse, like an entire complex of buildings slapped together and surrounded by stone walls that appeared more decorative than tactical. Like some fairy tale construct brought to life, the castle was made of gray stone with red roofs. Towers and spires rose chaotically into the sky. Lights burned within arched windows and behind stained-glass panes.

Carolyn glanced back and saw the winding path of stone steps they were walking up. She expected to see only a short route but instead saw an entire road that headed to a staircase that descended a steep mountain. "Where did..." She looked again and realized she was looking out over a wild world far beneath her, along a path she hadn't walked. "What happened?"

Merlin stopped and looked back the way they'd come. "Oh, yes. I do so love mountains but they are a bit rough on the knees so I tend to skip them when I can." He resumed walking, the bewildered Carolyn unable to do anything but follow.

Merlin and Carolyn arrived at the castle, coming to stand before a giant pair of doors. The wizard reached into his pocket, pulling out jangling set of keys. He singled out what looked like a Hyundai door key and unlocked the castle doors with it.

Carolyn watched with an unimpressed look.

The old wizard pushed open the doors, revealing a large stone entranceway. Directly ahead of them, a flight of stone steps rose up. At the mouth of those steps were three gryphons who sat as ill-tempered guards at the entrance of the castle.

The gryphons eyeballed Carolyn, but to her surprise, they more vehemently scowled at Merlin. He smiled cheerfully back at them and began to ascend the stairs with the speed of a man defined by arthritis. "The Academy was established in..." He realized Carolyn wasn't following. He looked back at her, then followed her gaze to the gryphons. "Oh, think nothing of them. They are fine, charming beasts." He looked back at the trio of magical animals that scowled back at them.

"Are they the security?" Carolyn asked, staying close to the wizard.

"Oh no. Hat check," he said jovially. "But I'm afraid that beads in your hair are against their political affiliation so they don't really like you." As Carolyn touched the cheap beads in her hair, nervous they'd even been noticed, Merlin instead scowled at the beasts and kept walking.

"So this place is a magic academy?" Carolyn asked as they started up the story-tall flight of steps.

"Yes but think of it more as a magical laboratory for experiments than anything else," the wizard said. "Now, would you like the grand tour or to see the library?"

"Oh, I definitely want to see this place," she said. "The grand tour, please."

"Well, I'm afraid we're closed for the evening, I'm going to have to show you that tomorrow." He turned down to the right, heading off down a stone hallway. "Come along. To the library," he announced intrepidly.

Carolyn watched, feeling her blood pressure rising.

The doors parted ways, exposing a shadowy realm of chaos and disorder. Entropy was in full-effect in this singular space as cobwebs and dust floated across the lighted entranceway.

Merlin walked in first, his calm demeanor preceding him. Behind him, Carolyn walked in, her left eye twitching as she took in the sight of the utter devastation. They stepped into the circular landing from which the library spread out like sound waves from a speaker driven insane by mediocre cover bands. To either side of the doors were desks that sat unattended as they apparently had been for years.

A spacious landing was a step down from the doors. From there spread a positively massive library. Of a scale only approached in dreams, the library was several stories tall, with platforms and landings scattered among the towering stacks of endless books. Ladders of different heights dotted the space as did cobweb-encrusted candelabras, torch holders, and other hallmarks of a bygone era. Stone walls and slate floors were covered in a layer of dust. Huge bay windows dotted the far walls. The glass looked frosted, however and Carolyn realized it was from the dust that had accumulated across the panes.

To her right was a winding desk like an illustrator's French curve. The desk wound along the right side of the library and included several offices too dark to see into. Shelves and cabinets filled the underspace and Carolyn could see the layers of dust and cobwebs along the floor. "This is your library?" she whispered in horrified awe.

"Yes," Merlin nodded, looking around, his hands tucked in the sleeves of his robes. "I'm afraid no one comes in here anymore because of the disorder."

"This place doesn't look like it's been used in years," Carolyn said, looking over the side of the desk on the left.

"Well, we've just now freed up the funds to do something about that, ergo you're being here," he explained.

"Freed up funds?" asked Carolyn. "You just said I could name my salary." Merlin nodded, his bushy beard shaking a bit as he did. "What kind of funds got freed up?"

"My dear, you really must understand that our budget is not financial or monetary. It is far more...celestial." Merlin removed his pointed hat and brushed back a head mostly bereft of hair. "I'm afraid

that if you are still accustomed to monetary compensation, then any explanation of the finances and budgetary systems of this establishment will take more than a mere conversation.”

“So I’m too dumb to get what you use for money,” Carolyn rephrased sharply as she neared a bookstack. She touched a heavy tome whose cover was heavy leather, bound tight with metal clasps. She pulled the book halfway off the shelf before the spine gave out in her hands. She stumbled back half-a-step, astonished to see the book’s wooden spine still in her hand. She looked with horror at the shelf as the book slowly disintegrated before her eyes, pages falling out all over the slate floor.

Carolyn turned back to the wizard, mortified. “Yes, well, like I said: disuse and misuse. Once, long ago, this library was a place of some repute. It’s knowledge and lore was unrivaled in all of known time and space.”

“What happened?” asked Carolyn. Merlin didn’t seem to follow. “To the library, what happened to it? You said at one time, it was known, it was unrivaled in all of known time and space.”

“Nothing happened,” he said with a bit of a scoff. “It’s still well-known. Well-known, well-regarded, well-respected. Regrettably, well-known and well-respected is not the same as well-maintained. Well-regarded is not the same as well-traveled. A resource many rely on and trust in quickly becomes one that many take for granted. And a sterling reputation of excellence slowly becomes less a blanket authorization to continue to do good work and more a rationale for a perfectly harmless budget cut.” His sarcasm was obvious. “This library was the seat of learning. Now it is a repository of knowledge that is known, but the knowledge it holds is not.” Merlin looked over the grand library like he was looking a lost love who had fallen on hard times. “This library has become as much a mystery as the mysteries this library knows the answers to.”

“Yeah, well, this ain’t the only place,” Carolyn concurred. She began collecting the pages, but then just put an armful back on the shelf. She looked out at the great library, seeing still more beyond the door they had entered through.

She stepped down from the landing onto the floor of the library. She tried to take a second and grasp the sheer size. The smell of aged paper and dusty volumes was mixed with the acrid scent of candle

smoke. The library was tall enough and wide enough to have its own circulation of air. "This place is huge," marveled Carolyn.

"Yes," Marlin nodded. He turned around. "Well, I leave you to it."

Carolyn's eye bugged out. She whirled around, staring up at the wizard. "Wait, now?!"

He stopped and turned back to her, brushing his bushy beard. "Well, I assumed you wanted to be left to work."

"It's like," she looked down at her watch. She stopped and held it up to her ear. "Late!" she suddenly exploded. "Is there a place I can sleep and tackle this in the morning?"

"So you accept the position?" Marlin exclaimed. "Excellent. Wonderful. That's terrific news." He turned to leave.

"Merlin," she called after him. "Me. Bed. Sleep."

"Yes, what of it?" he asked.

"Where do I do that?" she pressed.

"Why in your room of course." he answered simply.

"And that's where?" she asked.

He blinked at her. "The same place it's always been," he responded absently.

"You didn't tell me where that same place is," she said with an accommodating smile.

He straightened up. "Oh. Dear me, I do believe you're probably right. Well then." He turned. "Follow me." She shook her head as she followed him out.

It was a small room, roughly the size of a dorm room, or a cell as she liked to think of it. Rectangular, the bed was against the fall wall, with a short table across from it. A set of dead flowers sat on the table. There was a bedside table next to the bed, one which was a good six inches taller than comfortable.

At the foot of the bed was a trundle case, while a chest of drawers sat right in front of the door, sticking out just enough for the door to not be able to open quite all the way. "I'm afraid most of your furniture was bought at a yard sale," Merlin explained politely. "Bit of a mish-mash of styles, really."

Carolyn stood in the door for a moment and just whimpered in surrender. She looked back at Merlin and asked, "How much do I get paid?" He blinked at her. "I do get paid, right?" she pressed.

"Of course, of course," he insisted with false-seeming confidence.

Carolyn looked wary of his assurances. "In money, right?"

"If you wish," he said, as though it was of no matter. "What would you care for your salary to be?"

Certain he was pulling her leg, she asked deadpan, "A million dollars a month."

He didn't bat an eye. "That seems rather unambitious, but I am certain we can make that happen. Though I think you will quickly find that monetary compensation to be of little interest." He smiled paternally, patting her on the shoulder.

"Then why would I want to do this?" she asked in astonishment.

"Why, the goodness of your heart." He smiled.

She stared at him for a moment. "I think I hate you," she finally decided out loud.

"Oh come now, there's no reason to hate me," he said, turning from her, closing the door behind him. "In time, you'll come to appreciate the charm of this place." He pulled the door closed. "Good night," he said as he pulled the door shut.

"Wait, wait!" she exclaimed. "Wh-what about my family? What about my stuff? My apartment! My car! I don't want to just leave it there. I'll have to pay for the overnight parking."

"You needn't worry about any of that," Merlin assured her, just barely leaning inside. "It is late and the dawn will be upon us. Trivial affairs like your belongings, your loved ones, and your personal life

can all wait until you've had a nice rest." With that, he pulled the door shut, leaving her alone.

Carolyn looked back at her room, sighing. The stain-glass window across from her seemed to stare at her, while all the furniture seemed to not approve of her. Slowly, something registered with her. "How is this room being lit?" she asked, looking up at the ceiling. She saw no lights. In fact, she didn't see any lights anywhere. She held her hand against the wall, staring at it, not seeing a shadow. One eyebrow went up as she pulled away from the wall. "Okay, dimmer," she said to the room.

The lights dimmed noticeably.

"Okay," she said. "Dark."

The lights went out.

"On."

The lights appeared.

Carolyn scratched her chin. "Off," she called, making the room dark. "On." The lights came on. "Off. On. Off. On," she said in rhythm. She smiled. "Off. On. Off. On," she said really fast as the lights rushed to catch up. "Off. On. Off. Off," she said rapidly again, grinning as the room got bright a second time. "Ah ha!" she exclaimed. "Got ya!"

The lights went out.

The chirp of songbirds awoke Carolyn, as did the gentle light of the dawn. She pulled herself off the pillow and looked into the window over her bed. Drool had laced the side of her mouth and her hair was a nest of tangles. She struggled to see, then reached around to the bedside table. She hit her hand and swore, remembering in her blindness how tall the table was. She fished around a moment more until she found her glasses.

With her vision restored, she sat up in her bed and looked out the window. The stained-glass window of abstract shapes was half-opened, letting in a sweet dawn. A gorgeous sunrise was on full display. The endless radiant beams of light were captured not only in the rich blue sky but also the silvery waves of the endless lake the

castle overlooked. The far shores held trees that she could barely tell were swaying in the morning breeze.

For a long moment, Carolyn stared out the window at the beauty unmatched by anything she could recall having seen in her life. A strange melancholy came over her, like she had wasted so many days being anywhere else.

Realizing she didn't understand where 'here' was, she looked at her new bedroom. It looked no different from the night before, though perhaps a bit homier and inviting without the shadows of nighttime in its corners. She shuffled to the edge of the bed and hopped off, landing on the hard stone floor. She rubbed her heels and grimaced, then yawned as she looked around the room. She scratched her stomach as she looked at her surroundings, then shuffled to the door.

Still in her clothes from the night before, she shuffled out into the hallway. The castle corridor was warm, with candles and torches at regular intervals in both directions. Carolyn turned to pull her door shut, but found no indication of what room she was hers or how to differentiate it from any other room she might find. Two similar doors were within sight to the right, three more to the left.

She turned back to her door, only to find no manner of locking it or even securing it. She opened the door and looked back inside, and finally just sighed. Resolved there was nothing worth taking that she felt responsible for, she left the door ajar and headed down the hall. Trying to retrace her steps from the previous night, she backtracked along the way she recalled Merlin leading her.

As she reached an intersection that felt only halfway familiar, Carolyn yawned again. She smelled cinnamon and sugar, so she followed her nose. Down a different hall she went, padding along, wavering a bit as she walked. She yawned often, bumped the wall occasionally with her shoulder, barely processing anything except the growl of her own stomach.

Carolyn followed the scent of cinnamon and fresh-baked bread into a large cafeteria. Several wooden benches ran along the near wall while on the far side were wooden tables of a mismatched sort. Baskets of fruit and pastries were arranged in a haphazard pattern on the tables. Passed them were several carving boards covered in generous portions of bacon and sausage.

Between the entrance and the food were an array of seats around a variety of tables every bit as eclectic as the buffet. And just like the chairs and tables were a mishmash of every possible version of the word 'wizard'. Two older women in dark blue robes spoke over croissants and tea as they stroked the black cats in their laps. A young boy in a school uniform carried a wand and a bowl of cereal. A man in furs with a bone through his septum sat with a large full of sausages across from a man in vaguely oriental robes and a goatee that extended to his neck.

Carolyn spotted Merlin but made no acknowledgment of him. She instead crossed the dining hall for the serving tables. Coming before the counter, she barely opened one eye enough to stare at the large frog-like creature with a hairnet that stared back at her. "Coffee," she groaned.

"Rippit," the thing croaked. "We don't have—"

Like lightning, her hand shot across the counter, grabbing the frog's collar. Her eyes flared open as she stared into the frog's giant bulbous eyes. "Coffee," she repeated clearly through clinched teeth.

"Just, just, just a minute. Ribbit," it squeaked. She shoved it back, then stood still, fuming.

"I see you're getting used to the place," Merlin said, coming up next to Carolyn.

"Do you have coffee?" she asked without turning, her closed eyes locked forward.

"Well...no," he said slowly, considering the answer.

"Then don't talk to me for at least an hour after I get some," she said, her eyes flickering up just a bit.

Merlin considered her for a moment, then nodded acceptingly as he turned and walked away.

"That was...interesting," Carolyn said as she walked down the hall with several scrolls stuffed under her arm. Merlin walked with her, the tapping of his staff like a metronome. "I've never had an HR meeting quite like that."

"HR?" asked Merlin. "Ah." He put it together. "Human Resources. Yes, well, even for magical denizens of the realms beyond reality, we still must endeavor to optimize management."

"I guess," Carolyn agreed absently. "I find the lack of sick days troubling."

"You are not here to fill a position," Merlin told her. "You are here to perform a feat, and then to oversee the task of maintaining it. We don't care how your time is used to see the job done; simply that it is done. If you feel under the weather, well, rest until you feel right. A task is best confronted at your best, not when compromised from within. And if you are disinclined to work on a given day, it would be barbaric to ask you to do so."

She slowed to a stop. "So what if I just take every day off?" she asked of him.

He stopped as well, though seemed untroubled by the question. "Would you?"

"No, but..." She wasn't sure what point she was trying to make. She resumed walking.

"Vacation time, sick leave, all such are incentives and allowances for someone who would prefer to not perform a task but are required to do so," explained Merlin. "If yours is a task you would perform under your own delight without any insistence, then we can put our faith in you to do that."

"Huh," was all Carolyn could say.

"If your heart belongs to the library, we needn't ensure you return in a timely fashion," Merlin told her. "More likely, we will need to monitor you to take breaks and vacations when needed. With the right task, the right responsibilities, the right employment, one's work ethic will handle all the relevant matters. It is only with misplaced talents that one must be bribed and goaded."

Carolyn repeated herself. "Huh."

Merlin continued to guide her along, following down a winding path that passed through an enclosed breezeway. A gust of wind buffeted the trees in the small orchard within the castle walls but the breezeway itself felt scarcely a breeze. Carolyn was still focusing mostly on the scroll laying out her benefits. "What is this bit about

funeral expenses?" Before she could get an answer, they arrived at the doors into the library. "This isn't the way we came yesterday—" She realized Merlin was gone and she was standing alone in the hallway before the library doors. She rolled up the scroll and stuck it under her arm with the others, then pushed through the doors.

Midday found Carolyn on the floor of the library, seated on a cushion she'd stolen from a chair behind the circulation desk. On the slate floor, she had a stack of books laid out around her as she tried to reason just what they were in order to construct an order to place them.

"How goes it?" Merlin asked from out of nowhere, startling Carolyn. The librarian jumped up and whirled around. When she saw it was Merlin, she just rolled her eyes and went back to her stack of books. "Finding everything in working order?"

"Not in the slightest," she grumbled, turning to glare at him. "And first up, I don't like wearing the same clothes two days in a row. I'm going to have to get some stuff from my house. And I need to let my parents know that I didn't get kidnapped. Well, that I did get kidnapped but it's cool. Apparently. Maybe."

"To be dealt with this evening, I assure you," the wizard pushed aside without worry. "How's the condition of the library? In times past, this library has been described alongside the word 'disaster'."

"Merlin, this isn't a disaster," Carolyn said, her eyes fuming alongside her breath. "This..." she said, her hands shaking as she held the pages of what had once been a book. She looked around at the shelves that spread out as far as the eye could see. "This isn't a library. This can't be your library. Libraries have some system of organization. They have structure and reason. They have books that hold together!"

"Well, yes," Merlin said, nodding his head. "You see, we've been having some trouble with book keeping since the academy opened."

"Trouble?" the librarian said. She snickered with a sick, almost maniacal tone. "Trouble is people not returning the occasional book on time. Trouble is a book shelf falling over. This isn't trouble." She pointed to the vast wasteland of magical texts. "This is a catastrophe. This is an insult to the very concept of organization."

"Well, there's no need to get snooty about it," said the elder wizard, a bit miffed.

"Haven't you ever heard of labeling?" Carolyn asked, getting red-faced in irritation. "Cataloging? Alphabetizing? The Dewey Decimal System?! I mean, come on. You're wizards. WI-ZA-RDS!" she yelled, slapping her palm with the back of her hand.

"Well," the wizard said, with a hint of embarrassment in his voice. "We did attempt an organization effort in the past." He looked away, his words coming with difficulty. "We tried to organize the library alphabetically. And as I'm sure you can appreciate, that becomes difficult when you have to work with multiple lettering and phonetic systems. And then there was the time we tried organizing it by author. I don't even want to talk about that."

"Look, Merlin," Carolyn offered up. "I don't even know most of these languages. Like, I can't even identify them. And I don't understand magic. And I can't organize anything if I don't have at least some idea as to how the subject matter works."

"My dear, magic is not science," Merlin returned. "It is, by nature, variable and argumentative against classification."

Carolyn sat back for a moment and thought. Then she looked up at Merlin, her eyebrow raising. "Is there a council of wizards here? Like the assorted heads of departments or something?"

"Of course," he nodded.

"What do you think they're up to right now?"

Like everything else in the castle, the group of magicians that stared back at Carolyn were strange and mismatched. On the far right of the semi-circular table was a middle-aged woman who was showing the wear of the years. Dressed in earthly green tones, she carried a tamed plant in a terra cotta pot along with a silver knife and a strand of golden rope. Next to the woman was a dangerous looking man dressed in black leather, a large and overly-wicked sword strapped to his back while a pair of futuristic guns sat on his hips. In the middle of the group was a wizardly-looking man not dissimilar from Merlin.

Dressed in colorful rainbow robes, he stroked his bushy white beard occasionally.

Next to the wizard was a soothsayer if Carolyn had ever seen one. Dressed in a black cape with a red interior, the man had dark, striking hair with a few white stripes, while his captivating eyes seemed to blink just a bit too often. And lastly, at the far end was a polite-looking Korean woman sitting pleasantly with a bowl of cookies, her gray hair done up in a bun. Her cream-colored pantsuit had the brooch of a kitty playing with yarn pinned to her lapel.

"Hi," Carolyn said to the group, glancing back at Merlin. "Um, so like how does magic work?"

The gathered figures of magical lore looked at one another with various glances. "I'm sorry," said the woman with the knife and rope. "Could you be a bit more specific, please?"

"I'm Carolyn Chow," she told them, stepping towards the panel of wizards. "Merlin here..." She looked back at the man who seemed to be beaming, as though it was a rare delight to be mentioned in conversation. "He, uh, contracted me to fix the library."

"We are aware," said the wizard in the center of the group, long fingers with knotty joints templed as he stared. His voice was deep, at the same time abrasive and strangely smooth like sweet-smelling cigar smoke.

Carolyn looked between the two wizards, certain there was a backstory here. "Yeah, okay," she dismissed it. "Well, in order to organize the library, I need to understand magic. I need to have some grasp of the subject matter that I am cataloging. I don't need to be a true expert but I need to have a basic grasp on what the library is meant to showcase."

"You ask after the very heart of all that is, was, was not, and ever shall be," said the central wizard in rainbowed robes.

Carolyn blinked and then gestured frantically right at the wizard. "Okay, see, right there. That's a categorization system: is, was, was not, ever will have not been or whatever you said." She looked to the council to get some notion that they followed. "You don't need to teach me magic, but I have to have some kind of an idea of how it works so that I can...I can...do my, my thing. Put the books in order make them available."

"Oh, she seems very lovely," deemed the Korean woman at the far end. She bit into an oatmeal-raisin cookie and smiled happily like a cat in a sunbeam.

"Child," said the lead wizard, "the magical arts are at best divided among the ten disciplines of the Ein Sof."

"Ten disciplines," Carolyn accepted without hesitation. "Okay, great. Cool. What are those?"

"The Ten Disciplines are an illusion," said the soothsayer with his black cape. "They are a diversion! From the true form of magic!" He seemed incapable of speaking without dramatically moving his hands.

"Childish boys," said the green-dressed woman. To Carolyn she began to speak when the central wizard snapped back at her. The pair began to argue with far more familiarity than seemed professional.

The din of conflicting voices washed over her like the surf. She chewed on their words for a moment, then put her fingers to her lips, whistling loudly and stopping all conversation. "Let's try this again," she demanded. She pointed at the Korean woman. "You. Fifty words or less. How does magic work?"

"Magic is a matter of inspiration," the woman said with a polite smile and a bow of the head, like she was proud to invoke her schoolgirl etiquette once again. "Magic is when the universe manifests it's will through the actions of those within the universe. It's--"

"And that's enough," Carolyn interrupted. She pointed at the man in black. "You. Magic. Go."

The man stood, his hand reaching back to his sword. "No one," he said with a harsh, raspy voice, "tells me what to do."

"Sit do-own, you fool!" called the soothsayer, his eyes wide as he pointed at the street samurai. "For lo, this woman is endeavoring to achieve, to excel, to accomplish the impossible!" He spoke in a pulsating tone, his volume and timbre fluctuating at every word and even syllable. "She seeks to complete the events which no act of magic could ever hope to achieve! She is trying to--"

"Thank you, thank you," Carolyn said, silencing the charlatan. She breathed out, then looked at the wizard. "In order for magic to be studied," she said almost rhetorically, "it must be broken down into simpler parts. What are those simpler parts?"

"They are broken down into five fundamentals," the man said with a grandfatherly smile. "And each of those five fundamentals are broken down into five elements."

Carolyn waited for them to expound. When they didn't she prompted with a slight roll of her hands, asking, "And they are...?"

"The core of magic," said the green woman at the far end, "is made up of the study of growth, decay, violence, static, and love."

"The elements that supersede all," explained the samurai in a crisp, clipped tone, "are the fundamentals which science claim to be motion and distance and time, as well as matter and balance."

"There are internal elements to be considered as we-ell!" dramatically exclaimed the charlatan. "For within, you have the mind and the body, along with the spirit and the soul, and one cannot forget that which defines the you that you are, what is known as..." He pulled his cape over his face, his eyes flashing with emotion. "The ego."

Carolyn looked over at Merlin. The wizard politely rolled his finger around his ear.

"Of course," came the kindly Korean woman, "the universe is made up of things far less tangible than that. The universe is governed by things like wisdom and courage and memory, as well as power and the ever-purveying sense of mystery."

"And then," said the wizard, "there are the elements that govern over all. Such forces as chaos and order. Truth as well, along with eternity and fate."

"Okay," Carolyn said, her mind reeling. "Um, what about neutrality?" she asked.

"There is no such thing," Merlin whispered. "Even if you do nothing, at some level, you are doing something. It is impossible to sit and not think. Even if you drive away all your thoughts, you are actively controlling them. Even if you do not move, you are existing. And no matter how much you may wish to remain neutral, if you are for something, you are against something else."

"So neutrality doesn't exist?" she asked with a deadpan expression.

"It's not a matter of neutrality not existing. It's a matter of neutrality being a misdirected perspective," Merlin offered. "Consider a three-dimensional object looking on at a two-dimensional object. The three-dimensional object may see the two-dimensional object as not being there, as being neutral to existence if you will, but that doesn't mean the two-dimensional object is not present. It's simply facing a different direction."

"So neutrality is just facing a different direction?" Carolyn asked.

"Yes. Whether morally or existentially, when you believe something to be neutral, you just don't understand what it's really in favor of."

"Okay," She said. She looked up at the council, then smiled. "Okay. I think I've got an idea." Carolyn turned and began to depart. She paused at the door and told Merlin, "Thanks," with a tight smile. Out she went.

Once the newest member of the staff had departed, the council turned and faced Merlin. He looked at them and gave them all a pleasant bow of his head. "If your pet project is attended to, we have more pressing matters at hand," said the central wizard. "The immediate future hangs in the balance."

Merlin straightened a bit. He brushed down his robes and made himself as presentable as he could for the task. The central wizard gave him a bit of a sneer of disapproval and then held up a cardboard menu. "We are under strife yet again over which lunch platter to order."

"I'll not have anything with meat," said the green-clad woman.

"Oh, I would so enjoy a salad," said the Korean woman with a smile. "And maybe a treat."

"Meat is the essence of life," said the samurai. "We cannot consider it a meal without sustenance for—" The arguing resumed.

Carolyn returned to her room late in the evening. With a plate of fruit and two cookies, she nudged open her door with her toe to find a laptop on the bed. She froze when she saw the computer, then looked back out the hall. She saw no one nor heard anything from the endless ring of stone passageways.

Carolyn approached the bed slowly, as if certain the slim computer was a trap of some kind. She said cautiously, "Lights up, please." The room gently illuminated.

She set the plate down on the bed-side table and turned the laptop towards her. The model and style was unfamiliar to her, but it seemed very new and very stylish. Curiosity got the better of her and she opened the top. A picturesque desktop awaited her but a program went immediately into action. Carolyn began to panic until a telecom program opened up and a simulated phone began to ring. "Uh...uh..." Carolyn stammered, looking for the cancel button.

The screen changed abruptly, showing a static image as an audio channel opened up. "Hello?" came a familiar voice over the laptop's rich speakers. It was the tough voice of an avid sports fan, a woman who owned more football jerseys than blouses.

Carolyn's jaw dropped open. "Mom?"

"Carol, honey, why are you calling right now? It's two minutes to half-time!" her mother exclaimed. "Is everything alright? The Panthers are 2nd and 8."

Carolyn's heart soared at the sound of her mother's voice. "Hey, mom, I just wanted to tell you I'm—"

"Hang on, hang on, they're going for it," she said. There was a pause and then Carolyn could hear the rush of cheers through the TV's speakers. "WHOO! Yes! Yes! YEEES!" She could practically feel her mom turn the other way. "Did you see that, Daryl?! Did! You! See! THAT!" Carolyn sighed and sat down on her bed. "I'm sorry, babe, what's that?" asked her mom, settling down.

Carolyn was equal parts mad, irritated, hurt, and delighted. "Nothing, mom. I'm just calling to check in."

"Well, aren't you watching the game?" she pestered out of the corner of a mouth that sounded full of chips. Her demeanor suddenly changed. "You aren't out on a date, are you babe?"

Even alone, Carolyn blushed. "No, mom." She kicked her shoes off and looked around her room. "I, uh, I actually got a new job. It's super, super-weird."

"Good for you, babe!" her mom cheered.

"Yeah, I think..." Carolyn shook her head and swished her feet in the air. "I think I like it? I'm not sure. It's weird."

"Where's it at?" asked her mom. "Is it another library in the system? Did you get that position at the university that you wanted?"

"No, not that one," Carolyn said. She wiggled back on her bed, her back to her wall. "I just...it just sort of fell into my lap, I guess. I didn't even know I was in the running for it and then it just...like..." She stared into the distance, gawking with incredulity at it all. "Just sort of happened."

The silence of the line was brief. "Well...if you like it. Do you have any coworkers you like?" asked her mother. "How's your boss?"

Carolyn scoffed abruptly. "My boss? My boss is an airhead." She reached over and grabbed the plate. "Oh my god, he's like the most scatter-brained guy ever..." The call went on for some time.

Unlike before, the library was lit and alive. Four people stood at the counter, waiting patiently. None of them seemed particularly engaged, only present and waiting. Carolyn ventured slowly into the library at first, still getting used to not only seeing other people in the castle academy but the types of people she would see. "Good morning," she told the four. She set down her plate of cookies from the breakfast cafeteria. "I'm guessing you guys are my staff," she said, getting their attention.

The crowd of four turned to her. Standing closest was fairly normal-looking woman with blonde hair that came down to her waist. Dressed in a long flowery skirt and a red leather vest, she smiled at the librarian. Behind her, at the circulation desk, a witch stood. Carolyn had to look twice to make sure she was seeing the stereotype correctly, but even the mole was present.

Standing next to the witch was a large, gray-skinned giant that had to be at least ten feet tall. With broad shoulders and thick, muscular limbs, he stared at Carolyn, making no sound. Lastly was a grinning fool dressed in a red bandana and tattoos. Nothing else.

Carolyn looked down below the grinning man's waist, then up at him. "Is there a religious reason for that?" she asked, with a demonstrative swirl of her finger at him.

"My magic flows from my body," the man said with a deep voice, his grin getting wider as he thrust his body forward a bit. The blonde woman and the witch both looked away, disgusted. "I'm not about to restrict my magic, now am I?"

"I wasn't referring to the lack of clothes," Carolyn said, one eyebrow going up. "I was referring to the pencil with the chewed-on eraser. It looks depressed." The grinning man looked down, his ego shrinking with company. "I'm Carolyn," the librarian announced. "I've been tasked by Merlin to get this place into order. Now, who amongst you has any library experience?"

All four raised their hands.

"How about in a library that made sense?" she asked.

All four hands dropped.

"How about in a library other than this one?" she asked.

All four hands stayed down.

"Oh boy," she sighed, rubbing her eyes. She took a cookie off the plate, broke it in half, and ate it quickly as she tried to get focused. "Okay." She rubbed her hands vigorously. With a clap, she smiled at the four. "I'm Carolyn Chow. I'm the..." She turned and looked at the door, more to process what she was about to say. The others looked over her shoulder, trying to figure out if she'd heard something. "I'm the, the head librarian of the academy." Having said that aloud, she smirked, then smiled. "Cool." With some renewed enthusiasm, she asked them, "And who are you?"

The fool spoke immediately. "I'm Rathbone. Mathematician and astrono-medium."

Carol nodded and shook his hand. "I'm going to assume that makes sense to you. Now, go put on some pants."

"But I—"

"Nope. No. Uh-uh." She didn't give him the chance. She pointed at the door and repeated, "Go." Like a sulking child angry his

prank had failed, Rathbone went stomping up the stairs and through the door. "And come right back," Carolyn yelled after him before the door closed. "We've got lots to do." As the door shut, she turned to the remaining three. "Alright, who's next?"

"I'm Magpie Ravenwood," said the witch. Complete with green skin and a black dress made of discarded remains of many fabrics, the cackling old woman approached the table to Carolyn's complete apathy. She carried an ugly broom and an evil scowl in her eyes of unequal size. "Knowing and seer, am I."

"Terrific," Carolyn told her. "Blessed be. I'm going to call you Maggie. Is that okay?"

Magpie shrugged. "Suit yourself, lady."

The sharp contrasting tone jarred Carolyn and she turned to the other woman. "I'm Rael Knotting." The woman bowed her head a bit and smiled. "I'm a student of the organizational arts."

"Getting college credit then?" asked Carolyn.

Rael did a good job of hiding her panicked uncertainty. "I'm...not aware of any?" She seemed uncertain if that was the correct answer.

"Okay," Carolyn nodded. To the big, gray-skinned giant, she asked, "And you are?"

"Groth," said the giant.

Carolyn nodded. "And you want to work in the library?"

"Groth like books," said the giant with a nod.

Carolyn nodded. "Okay," she said again. She rubbed her hands deliberately and exhaled. "So here's the plan," Carolyn started, looking at her small staff. "I want each of you to go into the library and get an armful of books." Carolyn looked at Groth for a second and said, "For you, maybe a third of an armful. Bring those books back—" She stopped when the library door opened and Rathbone returned, wearing his pants wrapped around his arm. "No. Put them on properly."

She didn't wait for him to get dressed. "Bring them back here," she told the others, "and we'll go from there. Got it?" Magpie's hand rose. "Yes?"

"Any topic?" asked the old crone with a cackle.

"Don't overthink this," Carolyn warned her. "We're working, not reading." She gestured to the library and let them break for the books. She turned back to Rathbone as he cinched up his pants. "Go grab some books and bring them back." He nodded obediently, almost exuberantly, and then went rushing down the long line of the library stacks.

Carolyn returned to her plate, had another cookie and some coffee, when Rael returned with some books. The others followed, with Groth the last to bring his collection of books to the circulation desk.

In Merlin's office, the great bushy-bearded wizard had a dozen wind-up toys set out upon his large wooden desk. Gnarled like it had been grown from a tree rather than carved, the desk had a smooth top with rings like the inside of a tree, but also living branches with leaves jutting off it from the sides. Upon this desk, several of the wind-up toys were bopping and sliding, kicking out and flipping forward. The wizard grabbed toy after toy, frantically turning the crank and setting the toy back down before moving on to the next.

The door to his office opened rather abruptly and Carolyn came in, pushing a metal cart whose wheels squeaked. The cart was stacked high with books as she rolled it right up to the wizard's workspace. "I need you to review these," she told Merlin. She took one look at his desk, then leveled a deadpan look of disappointment at him.

The wizard looked up at her and smiled sweetly. "It's magic."

Carolyn stared for a moment longer before allowing, "Sure." She laid down two large tomes. "My staff and I looked through these...all of these," she added, waving her hand at the whole tray, "and we couldn't figure out what school of magic they belonged to."

Merlin picked up one book and opened it towards the middle. He held the book away from him as eyes more ancient than mountains squinted. He turned the book a bit at angles and then set it down between the windup toys that had all fallen silent. He looked about his desk for a moment, then padded it with his hands. From above, a vine descended with a hand made of human bone. Pinched between the

fingers were a pair of zany 60s-era reading glasses. "Ah, thank you," said the wizard, accepting the glasses.

Her hand on her hip that was cocked out to one side, Carolyn looked at the vine. She lamented how her life had come to be one where such a thing didn't just not phase her, it didn't even elicit any questions.

"Yes," Merlin said to the book as he turned a few more pages. "I can see the confusion." He turned the book around and faced the pages towards her. "In what form or format at your categorizing the library?"

"Five schools; Supra, Core, all of those," she told him. She swished her mouth to one side, ready for him to question her reasoning.

"Ah," he said, nodding, approving. She was a bit surprised. "This would likely be one of your Supra books. Time, I should suspect." He handed it over to her. He took the next book as she applied a sticky note to the front of the book older than any country Carolyn knew the name of. "And how many books have you identified needing categorization?" asked Merlin as he flipped the ancient pages.

"This is just from one shelf," Carolyn told him.

The wizard looked astonished. "One shelf?"

Carolyn faced him, ready to argue. "It's a big library."

"Yes," he agreed. "That you've made such progress is quite admirable." He opened the book and looked down his nose, through the glasses, at its pages. "I knew we were right to recruit you."

"Kidnapped is a bit more accurate," Carolyn charged unspitefully. Merlin smirked and nodded. She couldn't tell if he thought she was joking or that she was right. "I still want to talk about pay. And days off."

"Yes, of course," he said in the most dismissive tone she'd ever heard in her adult life. He closed the book. "Supra as well. Distance, I would think, although a case can certainly be made for Motion."

"We're getting a lot of that," Carolyn said, accepting the book and applying the sticky note.

"Distance books?" Merlin asked.

"No, books that 'could be this, but a case could be made for that'," she expounded. She looked at the wizard and he at her. She gestured with both hands at the cart, drawing attention to the dozens more books that waited.

"Oh," he said, rising, as if he had expected her to keep handing him one book at a time. He crossed the big desk, petting a leaf as he passed it. Doing so drew from the leaf a chime like a silver bell. "And how do you plan to remedy that?" he asked as he set about the task she'd assigned.

"I don't right now," she said, putting one hand on the desk and leaning on it. "We'll get the library in AN order, and then figure out afterwards if it is in the right order."

Merlin nodded. He smirked, turning the book to Carolyn. "Mencius' Treatise on Morality." The grand wizard tapped the bottom of the page. "He drew a comic. It is about hating the sun being in your eyes." He turned the book back to himself and re-read the comic. "I do so enjoy comic strips."

"You should have let me bring over some of the graphic novels from my old library," Carolyn lamented. The realization that she'd accepted her previous job as truly in her past gave her pause.

Merlin nodded and shut the book. He handed it towards Carolyn but just as she went to take it, he pulled it back. She thought it a joke but he had a very earnest look in his eyes. "Graphic...novels?" His left eyebrow went up.

Carolyn matched the expression sarcastically. "Yes," she nodded. She took the book from him. "Comic books?" she said, applying the sticky note and assigning the book a section. Merlin stood up, the idea seeming novel and increasingly revolutionary to him. Carolyn gave him a moment to figure things out, then soft-rebooted his mind by saying, "Just write the designation on each one and bring them to the library." She padded out with a million more things to do.

Under the soft glow of moonlight, Carolyn worked quietly.

A long piece of paper was laid out before her on the counter of her library desk. Carolyn had drawn a long line with the five major breaks of schools of magic. From there, she'd marked a series of three-digit numbers. To this, she'd added a host of other words, all scribbled through. An oil lamp burned next to her and on the counter by her side, nearest the door, Mesmaid snored. One paw in the air, it twitched occasionally as the cat dreamed.

The library doors opened and in strode Merlin. He had a happy smile on his face and carried a brown paper bag that smelled of apple cinnamon. Spotting Carolyn, he asked, "How are you finding matters, my dear?"

"Chaotic," she said, disappointed. She pointed at a stack of books that lay obviously yet to be addressed. "Two of your wizards came in here and made quite the ruckus."

"The twins, I presume," Merlin said, looking at the books. He picked one up and nodded. "Yes, I should imagine so." He set it back down and then appraised the great silent and dark space with approval. "The library appears to be slowly gaining the shape you envision."

Carolyn looked up from her page and considered the library. The scent of musty air remained, as did the slight air of antiquity. Given its dark shadows and aged features, she was confident it would never lose that appeal. The thought of that made her smile. "I hope so," she decided.

Merlin tilted his head, coming around the counter, the floorboards or his knees creaking as he did. "And what is this that you toil at?" He craned his head further to see. "What are these numbers?"

"Divisions in subject matter," said Carolyn. "I'm trying for something similar to the Dewey Decimal System, but since this is all totally new and bizarre to me, I'm having to make it up as I go."

"The best kind of magic," Merlin grinned paternally.

"What?" asked Carolyn, not sure she'd heard him.

He waved it off. "Nothing but trivial mutterings of an old man," he assured her. With a sweet smile, he told her, "I am delighted that the task is yours, and that you are in command of the task."

She wasn't sure how to take that. She waggled her pen at the shelves. "My staff and me will keep at it, but I think we're mostly going to be categorizing the books as they're checked out." Merlin just nodded confidently. Turning back to him, Carolyn asked, "Sound good?"

His smile slowly widened with great approval. "Sounds excellent." With an affectionate scratch to Mesmaid's big belly, the wizard saw himself out, leaving the librarian to work her magic.

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