



The Invisible Library (The Invisible Library Novel)

By Genevieve Cogman

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Collecting books can be a dangerous prospect in this fun, time-traveling, fantasy adventure from a spectacular debut author.

One thing any Librarian will tell you: the truth is much stranger than fiction...

Irene is a professional spy for the mysterious Library, a shadowy organization that collects important works of fiction from all of the different realities. Most recently, she and her enigmatic assistant Kai have been sent to an alternative London. Their mission: Retrieve a particularly dangerous book. The problem: By the time they arrive, it's already been stolen.

London's underground factions are prepared to fight to the death to find the tome before Irene and Kai do, a problem compounded by the fact that this world is chaos-infested—the laws of nature bent to allow supernatural creatures and unpredictable magic to run rampant. To make matters worse, Kai is hiding something—secrets that could be just as volatile as the chaos-filled world itself.

Now Irene is caught in a puzzling web of deadly danger, conflicting clues, and sinister secret societies. And failure is not an option—because it isn't just Irene's reputation at stake, it's the nature of reality itself...

FEATURING BONUS MATERIAL: including an interview with the author, a legend from the Library, and more!

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Cogman writes with a vivacity and wittiness that breathes new life into the genre.... Reminiscent of the works of Diana Wynne Jones and Neil Gaiman, Cogman’s novel is a true treat to read.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Bibliophiles will go wild for this engaging debut, as Cogman hits all the high notes for enjoyable fantasy. Intriguing characters and fast-paced action are wrapped up in a spellbinding, well-built world.”—*Library Journal*

“Satisfyingly complex...[This] is a book in which to wallow.”—*The Guardian* (UK)

“Such clever, creepy, elaborate worldbuilding and snarky, sexy-smart characters!”—N.K. Jemisin, author of *The Fifth Season*

“A stunning work of art that has me absolutely begging for more.”—Fantasy Book Review

“Highly entertaining...It reminded me a lot of Jasper Fforde’s Thursday Next series.”—The Book Plank

“A dazzling bibliophilic debut.”—Charles Stross, Hugo award-winning author of the Laundry Files

About the Author

Genevieve Cogman is a freelance author who has written for several role-playing game companies. She currently works for the NHS in England as a clinical classifications specialist. She is the author of the Invisible Library series, including *The Burning Page*, *The Masked City*, and *The Invisible Library*.

No Bio

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The Invisible Library excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

Irene passed the mop across the stone floor in smooth, careful strokes, idly admiring the gleam of wet flagstones in the lantern-light. Her back was complaining, but that was only normal after an evening’s work cleaning. The cleaning was certainly necessary. The pupils at Prince Mordred’s Private Academy for Boys

managed to get just as much mud and muck on the floor as any other teenagers would. Clean indoor studies in the dark arts, military history, and alchemy didn't preclude messy outdoor classes in strategic combat, duelling, open-field assassination, and rugby.

The clock in the study struck the quarter hour. That gave her forty-five minutes before the midnight orisons and chants. She knew from weeks of experience—and, to be honest, her own memories of boarding-school—that the boys wouldn't be getting up a moment earlier than necessary. This meant most would be dragging themselves out of bed at eleven forty-five before heading to the chapel with hastily thrown-on clothes and barely brushed hair. So that gave her thirty minutes before any of them started moving.

Thirty minutes to steal a book and to escape.

She propped the mop in her bucket, straightened, and took a moment to rub her knuckles into the small of her back. Sometimes undercover work as a Librarian involved posing as a rich socialite, and the Librarian in question got to stay at expensive hotels and country houses. All while wearing appropriately high fashion and dining off haute cuisine, probably on gold-edged plates. At other times, it involved spending months building an identity as a hardworking menial, sleeping in attics, wearing a plain grey woollen dress, and eating the same food as the boys. She could only hope that her next assignment wouldn't involve endless porridge for breakfast.

Two doors down along the corridor was Irene's destination: the House Trophy Room. It was full of silver cups, all engraved with variations on Turquine House, as well as trophy pieces of art and presentation manuscripts.

One of those manuscripts was her goal.

Irene had been sent by the Library to this alternate world to obtain *Midnight Requiems*, the famous necromancer Balan Pestifer's first published book. It was by all accounts a fascinating, deeply informative, and highly unread piece of writing. She'd spent a month looking for a copy of it, as the Library didn't actually require an original version of the text, just an accurate one. Unfortunately, not only had she been unable to track down a copy, but her enquiries had caught the interest of other people (necromancers, bibliophiles, and ghouls). She'd had to burn that cover identity and go on the run before they caught up with her.

It had been pure chance (or, as she liked to think of it, finely honed instinct) that had prompted her to notice a casual reference in some correspondence to "Sire Pestifer's fond memories of his old school" and, more, "his donations to the school." Now, at the time that Pestifer had written this early piece, he'd still been young and unrecognized. It was not beyond the bounds of possibility that in his desperation for attention, or simply out of the urge to brag, he'd donated a copy of his writings to the school. (And she'd exhausted all her other leads. It was worth a try.)

Irene had taken a few weeks to establish a new identity as a young woman in her mid-twenties with a poor but honest background, suitable for skivvying, then found herself a job as a cleaning maid. The main school library hadn't held any copies of *Midnight Requiems*, and in desperation she'd resorted to checking the necromancer's original boarding-house. Beyond all expectation, she'd been lucky.

She abandoned her cleaning equipment and opened the window at the end of the hall. The leaded glass swung easily under her hand: she'd taken care to oil it earlier. A cool breeze drifted in, with a hint of oncoming rain. Hopefully this bit of misdirection wouldn't be necessary, but one of the Library's mottos was borrowed directly from the great military thinker Clausewitz: no strategy ever survived contact with the enemy. Or, in the vernacular, Things Will Go Wrong. Be Prepared.

She quickly trotted back down the corridor to the trophy room and pushed the door open. The light from the corridor gleamed on the silver cups and glass display cabinets. Without bothering to kindle the room's central lantern, she crossed to the second cupboard on the right. She could still smell the polish she'd used on the wood two days before. Opening its door, she withdrew the pile of books stacked at the back and pulled out a battered volume in dark purple leather.

(When Pestifer sent the book to the school, had he fretted and paced the floor, hoping to get some sort of acknowledgement back from the teachers, praising his research, wishing him future success? Or had they sent him a bare form letter to say that they'd received it and then dropped his work into a pile of other self-published vanity books sent by ex-pupils and forgotten all about it?)

Fortunately it was a fairly small volume. She tucked it into a hidden pocket, returned the other books to cover her tracks, and then hesitated.

This was, after all, a school that taught magic. And as a Librarian she had one big advantage that nobody else had—not necromancers, Fae, dragons, ordinary humans, or anyone. It was called the Language. Only Librarians could read it. Only Librarians could use it. It could affect certain aspects of reality. It was extremely useful, even if the vocabulary needed constant revision. Unfortunately, it didn't work on pure magic. If the masters at the school had set some sort of alarm spell to prevent anyone from stealing the cups, and if that worked on anything that was taken out of the room, then she might be in for a nasty surprise. And it would be hideously embarrassing to be hunted down by a mob of teenagers.

Irene mentally shook herself. She'd planned for this. There was no point in delaying any longer, and standing around reconsidering possibilities would only result in her running short on time.

She stepped across the threshold.

Sudden raucous noise broke the silence. The stone arch above the doorway rippled, lips forming from the stone to howl, "Thief! Thief!"

Irene didn't bother pausing to curse fate. There would be people here within seconds. With a loud scream, she threw herself down on top of her mop and bucket, deliberately sprawling in the inevitable puddle of dirty water. She also managed to crack her shin on the side of the bucket, which brought genuine tears to her eyes.

A couple of senior boys got there first, scurrying round the corner in nightshirts and slippers. Far too awake to have only just risen from sleep, they'd probably been busy with some illicit hobby or other.

"Where's the thief?" the dark-haired one shouted.

"There she is!" the blond one declared, pointing a finger at Irene.

"Don't be stupid—that's one of the servants," the darkhaired one said, which demonstrated the advantage of stealing books while dressed as a servant. "You! Wench! Where's the thief?"

Irene pointed a shaking hand in the direction of the open window. It chose that moment to swing conveniently in the rising wind. "He—he knocked me down—"

"What's this?" One of the masters had arrived on the scene. Fully dressed and trailing a drift of tobacco smoke, he cleared a path through the gathering mob of junior boys with a few snaps of his fingers. "Has one of you boys set off the alarm?"

"No, sir!" the blond senior said quickly. "We just got here as he was escaping. He went out through the

window! Can we pursue him?"

The master's gaze shifted to Irene. "You, woman!"

Irene hastily dragged herself to her feet, leaning artistically on the mop, and pushed back a straggle of loose hair. (She was looking forward to being out of this place so she could have hot showers and put her hair up in a proper bun.) "Yes, sir?" she snivelled. The book in her skirt pocket pressed against her leg.

"What did you see?" he demanded.

"Oh, sir," Irene began, letting her lower lip quiver suitably, "I was just mopping the corridor, and when I came to the door of the trophy room here"—she pointed it out needlessly—"there was a light inside. So I thought that one of the young gentlemen might be studying . . . and I knocked on the door to ask if I might come in to clean the floor. But nobody answered, sir. So I began to open the door, and then all of a sudden someone pushes it open from inside, and it knocks me down as he runs out of the room."

The audience of boys, ranging from eleven to seventeen years old, hung on her every word. A couple of juniors set their chins pugnaciously, clearly imagining that they themselves would have been ready for such an event. They would undoubtedly have knocked the intruder unconscious then and there.

"He was a very tall man," Irene said helpfully. "And he was all dressed in black, but something was muffled round his face so that I couldn't see it properly. And he had something under one arm, all wrapped in canvas. And then the alarm went off and I screamed for help, but he went running down the corridor and escaped through the window." She pointed at the clearly open window, an obvious—perhaps too obvious?—escape route for any hypothetical thief.

"And then these young gentlemen came along, just after he'd escaped." She nodded to the first two arrivals, who looked smug.

The master nodded. He stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Morton! Palmwaite! Take charge of the House and have everyone get back to preparing for chapel. Salter, Bryce, come and inventory the room with me. We must establish what was taken."

There were muffled noises of protest from the milling crowd of boys, who clearly wanted to leap out the window and pursue the thief—or, possibly, go down to the ground floor and then pursue the thief without leaping out of a second-floor window. But nobody actually tried that.

Irene cursed inwardly. A large-scale pursuit of a non-existent intruder would have confused matters nicely.

"You," the master said, turning to Irene. "Go downstairs to the kitchen and have some tea, woman. It must have been an unpleasant experience for you." Was that a flash of genuine concern in his eyes? Or was it something more suspicious? She'd done her best to leave a false trail, but the fact remained that she was the only person in the vicinity, and something had just been stolen. Most of the masters round here ignored the servants, but this one might be the unfortunate exception to the rule. "Hold yourself ready in case we need to question you further."

"Of course, sir," Irene said, bobbing a little curtsey. She picked up the mop and bucket and pushed through the crowd of boys, heading for the stairs, taking care not to walk suspiciously fast.

She'd need two minutes to get to the kitchen to dump the mop and bucket. Another minute to get out of the House. Five more minutes—three minutes at a run—to get to the school library. She would be cutting it fine.

The kitchen was already bustling when she got there, with the house maids preparing kettles of post-chapel porridge. The housekeeper, butler, and cook were playing cards, and no one had bothered to investigate the alarms from upstairs.

“Something the matter, Meredith?” the housekeeper enquired as Irene entered.

“Just the young gentlemen being their usual selves, ma’am,” Irene answered. “I think it’s one of the other Houses playing some sort of prank on them. With your permission, may I step out to the washroom to get myself cleaned up?” She indicated the dirty wash-water stains on her grey uniform dress and her apron.

“Be sure not to take too long,” the housekeeper said. “You’ll be sweeping out the dormitories while the young gentlemen are in chapel.”

Irene nodded humbly and left the kitchen. Still no outcry from upstairs. Good. She quietly opened the boarding-house door, stepping outside.

The boarding-houses were in a row along the main avenue, with a central quadrangle holding the chapel, the assembly hall, and—most important to her purposes—the school library. Turquine House was the second along, which meant there was just one house to pass, preferably without drawing attention. Not run. She mustn’t run yet. If anyone saw her running, it would only attract suspicion. Just walk, nice and calmly, as if she were simply running an errand.

She managed a whole ten yards.

A window flew up behind her in Turquine House, and the master who’d spoken to her earlier leaned out. He pointed at her. “Thief! Thief!”

Irene picked up her skirts and ran. Gravel crunched under her feet, and the first drops of rain slapped against her face. She came level with the next boarding-house, Bruce House, and for a moment she considered abandoning her arranged escape plan and simply ducking into there in order to break her trail and slow down pursuit. But common sense pointed out that it wouldn’t work for more than a few minutes—

The whistling screech from behind warned her just in time. She dived to the ground, throwing herself into a roll as the gargoyle came screaming down, its stone claws extended and clutching for her. It missed and struggled to pull out of its dive, its heavy wings sawing at the air as it laboured to gain height. Another one had swooped from the roof of Turquine’s and was circling to reach a suitable angle of attack.

This was one of those moments, Irene reflected bitterly, when it would be wonderful to be a necromancer, or a wizard, or someone who could manipulate the magical forces of the world and blast annoying gargoyles out of the sky. She’d done her best to avoid attention, keep her cover, and not endanger bratty little boys who left mud all over the floor and didn’t bother to hang up their cloaks. What had it got her? A swarm of attacking gargoyles—well, only two gargoyles so far, but still, and probably a mass assault by pupils and masters within a few minutes. So much for the rewards of virtue.

She quickly reviewed what she knew about the gargoyles. There was one on the roof of each boarding-house. They were even listed in the boarding-school prospectus as a guarantee of student safety—any kidnapers will be torn to bloody rags by our professionally maintained historical artefacts! Though after working here for several months, she thought the pupils themselves were much more lethal to possible kidnapers.

On the positive side (one must always look for the positive side), the gargoyles were extremely showy but not actually that effective over a short space of ground. On the negative side, running in a straight line to

escape would make her a beautiful moving target. But getting back to the positives, the gargoyles were made of granite, as lovingly described in the prospectus, unlike anything else within earshot.

This would need careful timing. Luckily the gargoyles weren't particularly intelligent, so they would be focused on capturing her, not on wondering why she was standing conveniently still.

She took a deep breath.

The first gargoyle reached suitable swooping altitude. It called to the other gargoyle in a carrying screech, and then the two of them dropped towards her together, their wings spread in wide, dark tracteries against the sky.

Irene screamed, at the top of her voice, "Granite, be stone and lie still!"

The Language always worked well when it was instructing things to be what they naturally were or to do what they naturally wanted to do. Stone wanted to be inert and solid. Her command only reinforced the natural order of things. It was therefore the perfect antidote to the unnatural magic keeping stone gargoyles in flight.

The gargoyles stiffened mid-stoop, their wings freezing in place, and overshot her easily. One thumped squarely into the ground, pounding out a crater for itself, while the other came in at more of an angle. It ploughed a wide groove along the nicely smoothed gravel path before colliding with one of the stately lime trees bordering the avenue. Leaves rained down on it.

There was no time for her to pause and feel smug, so she ran.

Then the howling started. It was either hellhounds or teenagers, and she suspected the former. They'd been in the prospectus too. The prospectus had been very helpful about the school's security precautions. If she ever had to come back here again, perhaps she could sell her services as a security consultant. Under a pseudonym, of course.

A sudden burst of red light sent her shadow leaping down the avenue ahead of her and proved the hellhound theory. Right. She'd planned for hellhounds. She could plan for organized magic, even if she couldn't perform it. She just had to stay calm and cool and collected and get to the fire hydrant ahead before they caught up with her.

Among its modern conveniences, the school included running water and precautions against fire. Which meant fire hydrants spaced along the main avenue. The one that lay between her and the school library was twenty yards away.

Ten yards. She could hear pounding paws behind her, throwing up gravel in a rattle of ferocious speed. She didn't look.

Five yards. Something panted just behind her.

She threw herself at the hydrant, an unimpressive black stub of metal barely two feet high. But as she did, a heavy scorching weight collided with her back, slamming her to the ground and pinning her there. She wrenched her head round enough to see the huge doglike creature crouching on top of her. It wasn't quite burning her, not yet, but its body was as hot as a banked stove. And she knew, if it wanted to, it could get much, much hotter. Its eyes were vicious coals in its flaming head, and when it opened its mouth, baring ragged teeth, a line of searing drool dripped across the back of her neck. Go on, try it, it seemed to be saying.

Just try something. Give me an excuse.

“Hydrant, burst!” Irene screamed.

The hellhound opened its jaws wider in lazy warning. The hydrant exploded at approximately knee level.

Fragments of twisted iron went spraying out in all directions with the first intense burst of water. Irene was torn between thinking Thank goodness I'm on the ground and That's what comes of sloppy vocabulary and word choice. A bit of metal sheared through the air a few inches above her nose and slapped into the hellhound almost casually, sending it cartwheeling backwards with a howl of pain.

It took Irene a moment to pull her wits together and scramble to her feet. The water should slow the hellhounds and douse their fires for a while, but she didn't have any other backup plans. And she still had to get to the school library. Her dress wet and her shoes soaked through, she broke into a stagger, then into a run.

The library doors were made of heavy studded wood, and when she yanked them open, warm lantern-light spilled out over her. Making you a target for anyone looking in your direction, her sense of self-preservation pointed out. She stumbled into the vestibule and swung the heavy door closed, but there was only one large lock on the door, and no key. Then again, she didn't need one.

She leaned over and murmured in the Language, “Lock on the library door, lock yourself shut.”

The sound of tumblers moving into the locked position was very satisfying. Especially when the next noise, a couple of seconds later, was the heavy thud of hellhound hitting the door on the other side.

“What's going on there?” an annoyed voice called from deeper inside the library.

Irene had scouted out the place earlier, with a duster and wax polish as an alibi. Directly ahead were the non-fiction stacks, shelves full of books on everything from astrology to Zoroastrianism. And to the right, there was a small office where books were stored for mending. More important, the office had a door she could use to get out of here, and that was what she needed.

There was another thump from behind her. The main door shivered slightly under the attack but stood firm.

She didn't bother replying to the voice she'd heard.

Instead she brushed the gravel from her clothing, forcing herself to calmness. The atmosphere of the place soothed her automatically; the rich lantern-lights, the sheer scent of paper and leather, and the fact that everywhere she looked, there were books, books, beautiful books.

Another thump from the outer door, and the sound of raised angry voices. All right, perhaps she shouldn't relax too much.

She stood in front of the closed office door, taking a deep breath.

“Open to the Library,” she said, giving the word Library its full value in the Language, and felt the tattoo scrawled across her back shift and writhe as the link was established. There was the usual flurrying moment of awareness and pressure, as though something huge and unimaginable was riffling through the pages of her mind. It always lasted just that little bit too long to bear, and then the door shuddered under her hand and opened.

A sudden burst of noise indicated that her pursuers had managed to enter. She spared a moment to regret that she hadn't had time to grab any other books, and quickly stepped through. As the latch clicked shut behind her, it re-established itself as part of the world she'd left behind. However many times they might open it now, it would only ever reveal the office to which it originally belonged. They would never be able to follow her here.

She was in the Library. Not just any library, but the Library.

High shelves rose on either side, too high and full of books for her to see what lay beyond. The narrow gap in front of her was barely wide enough to squeeze through. Her shoes left wet prints in the dust behind her, and she stepped over three sets of abandoned notes as she edged towards the lit area in the distance. The only sounds were a vague, half-audible creaking somewhere to her left, as irregular and uncertain as the slow oscillations of a child's swing.

The cramped space abruptly opened out into a wider wood-panelled room with a wooden floor. She glanced around but couldn't identify it offhand. The books on the shelves were printed, and some of them looked more modern than any from the alternate she had just left, but that in itself proved nothing. The large centre table and chairs were covered with dust, just like the floor, and the computer sitting on the table was silent. A single lantern hung from the ceiling, with a white crystal burning brilliantly in the centre. In the far wall, a bow window looked out over a night-time street lit by gas lamps, and a wind tugged at the tree branches, making them silently bend and sway.

With a sigh of relief, Irene sat down in one of the chairs, brushed loose gravel out of her hair, and drew the stolen book out of her hidden pocket. It was safe and dry. Another job done, even if she had been forced to abandon her cover identity. And she'd even given the school a legend. The thought made her smile. She could imagine new boys being told the story of "The Night Turquine House Got Burgled." The details would expand over time. She'd eventually become a world-famous master thief who had infiltrated the place in disguise, seduced half the teachers, and summoned demons to aid her escape.

Thoughtfully she looked down at the book in her hands. After all this trouble to get hold of it, she was just a little curious about what great secrets of necromancy might be revealed within. Raising armies of the dead? Invoking ghosts? How to unnaturally extend your life for thousands of years?

She opened it at the beginning. The page read:

It is my theory that the greater truths underlying life and death can best be understood as a parable—that is, as a fiction. There is no way that the human mind can understand, let alone accept, any of the fundamental principles that govern the transmission and return of souls, or the flux of energies which can bind a body on the line between life and death, in practical terms: the laws which other people have discussed, proposed, or even affirmed, in higher texts on the subject, slip past the boundaries of that level of understanding which would allow true inherent cognisance and manipulation of those necessities.

Too many commas and overly long phrases, she decided.

I have therefore decided to describe my work and my experiments, and the understanding which I have derived from it, in the form of a story. Those who wish to do so may take what they can from it. My sole desire is to explain and to enlighten.

And, Irene hoped, to entertain. She turned the page.

It was on the morning of Peredur's birthday that the ravens came to him one last time. He had been three

weeks at the house of the witches, and they had taught him much, but he had long been absent from the court of Arthur. The first raven stooped down and took on the form of a woman. When the morning light struck her, she showed the form he knew: a withered old hag, scarcely able to bear the helm and armour she wore. But when she stood in shadow, then she was young and comely: never had hair been so black or skin so pale, or eyes so piercing sweet.

“Peredur,” she said, “in the name of the Ladies of Orkney, I ask that you remain here one day longer: for my sisters and I have searched the stars, and I tell you that if you leave us now, then you will perish before your time, and that in a fool’s quest: but if you stay one day more with us, then your path will be steady and your sister will meet you before all is done.”

“I have no sister,” said Peredur.

“Aye,” the raven witch said. “None that you have met . . .”

Irene shut the book reluctantly. Of course she had to send it to Coppelia first, for inspection and evaluation, but perhaps after that she could get her hands on it again.

There was nothing wrong with being curious about how a story turned out, after all. She was a Librarian. It went with the job. And she didn’t want great secrets of necromancy, or any other sort of magic. She just wanted—had always wanted—a good book to read. Being chased by hellhounds and blowing things up were comparatively unimportant parts of the job. Getting the books—now, that was what really mattered to her.

That was the whole point of the Library—as far as she’d been taught, anyway. It wasn’t about a higher mission to save worlds. It was about finding unique works of fiction and saving them in a place out of time and space. Perhaps some people might think that was a petty way to spend eternity, but Irene was happy with her choice. Anyone who really loved a good story would understand.

And if there were rumours that the Library did have a deeper purpose—well, there were always so many rumours, and she had missions to complete. She could wait for more answers. She had time.

CHAPTER TWO

Irene focused on the next steps. The sooner she handed in this book and filed a report, the sooner she could get herself clean and dry and sit down with a good book of her own. And she should be able to expect a few weeks off for her own projects, which quite frankly she lusted after at the moment.

The computer in front of her hummed to life as she flicked the on switch. She wiped the screen with her sleeve and blew dust off the keyboard. It was a pity that nobody could control the re-entry point of forced passages back to the Library from alternate worlds. All you knew was that you’d end up in the Library—although there were horror stories about people who’d spent years finding their way back up from some of the catacombs where the really old data was stored.

The screen flared with the Library logo: a closed book, with log-in and password windows. She typed quickly and hit return, and the book slowly opened, pages riffling to show her in-box.

At least nobody had figured out how to spam the Library computer system yet.

She called up a local map. It blurred into existence on the screen in a three-dimensional diagram, and an arrow in red pointed out her current room. She wasn’t too far out, only a couple of hours’ walk from Central.

Reassured, she sent a quick email to Coppelgia, her direct supervisor and mentor.

Irene here. Have secured the required material. Request appointment to deliver. Currently in A-254 Latin American Literature 20th Century, about two and a half hours from your office.

The beep as she sent the email broke the room's silence.

It was a pity that mobile phones, or Wi-Fi, or any similar technologies, all failed in the Library. Any sort of transmission not based on strictly physical links failed, or malfunctioned, or spouted static in bright warbling tones. Research had been done, research was being done, and, Irene suspected, research would still be being done in a hundred years. Technology wasn't the only failure, either. Magical forms of communication were useless too, and the sideeffects tended to be even more painful. Or so she'd heard. She hadn't tried. She liked her brains inside her skull where they belonged.

While she was waiting for an answer, she caught up on her email. The usual stuff: mass-mailed requests for books on particular topics of research, comparisons of Victorian pornography across alternative Victorian worlds, someone touting their new thesis on stimulant abuse and associative poetry. She deleted a plaintive begging letter looking for suggestions on how to improve penicillin usage in Dark Age-era alternates. But she highlighted a dozen Language updates, which she put aside to check later.

The only personal email in the whole batch was from her mother. A quick note, as quick and brief as Irene's own email to her supervisor, to let Irene know that she and her father would be in Alternate G-337 for the next few months. They were in Russia, looking for icons and psalm settings. The note expressed hopes that Irene was well and enjoying herself and asked vaguely what she might like for her birthday.

As usual, the note was unsigned. Irene was expected to read the name on the email address and not ask for more.

She rested her chin on her hands and stared at the screen. She hadn't actually seen her parents for a couple of years now. The Library kept them all busy, and to be honest she never knew what to say to them these days. One could always discuss work, but beyond that was a whole minefield of social interaction. Her parents would probably be retiring to the Library in a few decades, and hopefully by then she'd have worked out how to make polite conversation with them. It had been so much easier when she was younger.

I'd love some amber, she replied to the email. That should be safe enough.

The Language updates were what she might have expected, given three months' absence. No new grammar, but some new vocabulary, most of it world specific and dealing with concepts or items that hadn't come to the Library before. A few adjectival redefinitions. A collected set of adverbs on the action of sleeping.

Irene scanned through them as quickly as she could. The problem with an evolving language that could be used to express things precisely was that, well, it evolved. The more contributory material agents like Irene brought into the Library, the more the Language changed. She wondered morosely if her recent prize would inspire a new word or two or just change an old one. Perhaps it would help define a particular shade of black.

Still. There were compensations. Like being able to give orders to the world around you. But when she'd signed up for eternity, she hadn't quite expected to spend most of it revising vocabulary lists.

The computer beeped again. It was a reply from Coppelgia, and it had arrived surprisingly fast. Irene opened it and blinked at the size of the response.

My dear Irene,

What a pleasure to see you back here again! Though of course, when I say see, I mean to be aware of your presence in the Library. It's been several weeks now, and you wouldn't believe how glad I am to have you back . . .

Irene frowned. This looked like something that had been prepared ahead of time. She had a bad feeling about it.

. . . and I have a little job for you to do.

Right.

Your frequent work out there in the alternates has left you behind on the required curriculum of mentoring new students, but fortunately I have been able to find a way round that.

Irene snorted. Coppelgia had certainly assured her that it'd all be sorted out. But she'd given the impression of managing to sidetrack it and get round it, rather than having to make it up later via some unpleasant duty.

It just so happens . . .

She was just so totally screwed.

. . . that we have a new recruit on our hands who's up for his first fieldwork, and naturally I thought of you as the ideal person to mentor him! You'll be able to give him all the benefits of your experience, while at the same time getting some credits on your record for handling him.

Handling him? What was he, an unexploded bomb? She'd had quite enough of pupils in the last few weeks.

It's quite a short assignment and shouldn't take you more than a few days, maybe a week. You should be operating near a fixed exit point into the nominated world, so if there are any problems or delays you can send me a report.

It sounded, Irene reflected, as if Coppelgia really wanted to cover her own back on this one.

My dear Irene, I have the utmost confidence in you. I know that I can rely on you to live up to the Library's traditions and expectations, while providing a valuable example to this new recruit.

It also sounded as if Coppelgia had been reading too many bad recruitment brochures and codes of practice.

I've authorized Kai (that's his name) to take one of the rapid shifts to where you are, so you can expect him any moment.

Irene paused to listen nervously. If that was true, then Kai had been allowed to use one of the most closely restricted methods of transport in the entire Library. This meant either that Coppelgia didn't want any argument and just wanted her out of the way and on the job, or that the mission was very urgent, or that there was something about Kai so dubious that he shouldn't be seen in public. Perhaps Kai simply couldn't handle normal Library navigation, which was bad news in itself . . . and that was multiple clauses based on an either/or, which was bad grammar. She hated bad grammar.

He's got all the details on the mission.

Now, that was really bad. That could mean that Coppelgia wasn't prepared to put it in an email. Irene could smell politics, and she didn't want to get involved with that at all. She'd always thought that Coppelgia was a more reasonable, research-oriented, only-Machiavellian-once-in-a-while sort of supervisor. Not the sort of supervisor who'd dump her with an unprintable mission, an inexperienced trainee, and a rapid push out through the nearest Traverse exit point.

Do leave your latest input material with the nearest Desk; tag it with my name, and I'll see that it gets processed.

Well, that was something, at least . . .

From the corridor outside came a sudden gust of wind and a thud. It was reminiscent of a pneumatic pressure tube delivering papers.

A pause. A knock on a nearby door.

"Come in," Irene called, turning her chair to face it. The door swung open to reveal a young man.

"You must be Kai," Irene said, rising to her feet. "Do come in."

He had the sort of beauty that instantly shifted him from a possible romance object to an absolute impossibility. Nobody got to spend time with people who looked like that outside the front pages of newspapers and glossy magazines. His skin was so pale that she could see blue veins at his wrists and throat. And his hair was a shade of black that looked almost steely blue in the dim lights, braided down the back of his neck. His eyebrows were the same shade, like lines of ink on his face, and his cheekbones could have been used to cut diamonds, let alone cheese. He was wearing a battered black leather jacket and jeans that quite failed to play down his startling good looks, and his white T-shirt was not only spotlessly laundered; it was ironed and starched.

"Yeah," he said. "I am. You're Irene, right?"

Even his voice deserved admirers: low, precise, husky. His casual choice of words seemed more like affectation than actual carelessness. "I am," Irene acknowledged. "And you're my new trainee."

"Uh-huh." He strode into the room, letting the door close behind him. "And I'm finally getting out of this place."

"I see. Please sit down. I haven't finished reading Coppelgia's email yet."

He blinked at her, then strode across to the nearest chair and flung himself into it, triggering a choking cloud of dust.

Handle matters smoothly and efficiently, and you may expect some spare time for private research when this is over. I regret having to send you out again this fast, but needs must, my dear Irene, and we must all make do with the resources available to us.

Yours affectionately,
Coppelgia

Irene sat back and frowned at the screen. She was no conspiracy theorist, but if she had been, she could have constructed whole volumes based on that paragraph.

“Coppelia says that you’ve got all the details on the mission,” she said over her shoulder.

“Yeah. Madame Coppelia”—he stressed the honorific slightly—“gave me the stuff. Didn’t look like much.”

Irene turned to face him. “If you wouldn’t mind?” she said, extending her hand.

Kai reached inside his jacket and pulled out a thin blue envelope. He handed it to her carefully, making the gesture courteous rather than a simple transfer. “There you go. Boss? Madam? Sir?”

“Irene will do,” she said. She hesitated for a moment, wishing she had a paper knife, but there wasn’t one to hand and she didn’t feel like showing Kai where she kept her hidden blade. With a slight wince at the inelegance, she ripped the envelope open and slid out a single piece of paper.

Kai didn’t actually lean forward to peer at the letter, but he did tilt his head curiously.

“Objective,” Irene read out obligingly. “Original Grimm manuscript, volume one, 1812, currently in London, parallel B-395: closest Traverse exit within the British Library, located inside British Museum, further details available from on-site Librarian in Residence.”

“Grimm?”

“Fairy tales, I imagine.” Irene tapped a finger against the edge of the paper. “Not one of my areas. I’m not sure why I’ve—why we’ve been assigned it. Unless it’s something you’ve experience in?”

Kai shook his head. “I’m not well up on the European stuff. Don’t even know which alternate that is. Do you think it’s something that’s unique to that world?”

That was a reasonable question. There were three basic reasons why Librarians were sent out to alternates to find specific books: because the book was important to a senior Librarian, because the book would have an effect on the Language, or because the book was specific and unique to that alternate world. In this last case, the Library’s ownership of it would reinforce the Library’s links to the world from which the book originated. (Irene wasn’t sure into which of the three categories her latest acquisition fell, though she suspected a case of “effect on the Language.” She should probably try to find out at some point.)

If this Grimm manuscript was the sort of book that occurred in multiple different alternate worlds, then it wouldn’t have warranted a specific mission from Coppelia. By the time senior Librarians had become senior Librarians, they weren’t interested in anything less than rarities. An ordinary book existing in multiple worlds would simply have shown up in someone’s regular shopping list, probably along with the complete works of Nick Carter, the complete cases of Judge Dee, and the complete biographies, true and false, of Prester John. The question of why some books were unique and occurred only in specific worlds was one of the great imponderables, and hopefully Irene would actually get an answer to it some day. When she was a senior Librarian herself, perhaps. Decades in the future. Maybe even centuries.

In any case, there was no point standing around guessing. Irene tried to phrase her answer to make it seem sensible rather than simply shutting Kai down in the first ten minutes of their acquaintance.

“Probably best to find out from the on-site Librarian, when we reach the alternate destination. If Coppelia hasn’t told you, and hasn’t told me . . .”

Kai shrugged. “As long as it gets me out of here, I’m not going to complain.”

“How long have you been here?” Irene asked curiously.

“Five years.” His tone was smoothed to careful politeness, like sea-worn stones. “I know it’s the policy to keep new people here till they’ve studied the basics and they’re sure we’re not going to do a runner, but it’s been five sodding years.”

“I’m sorry,” Irene said flatly as she tapped in a quick response to Coppelia’s email.

“Sorry?”

“Yes. I was born into the job. My parents are both Librarians. It probably made things easier. I always knew what was expected of me.” It was quite true; it had made things easier. She’d always known what she was being brought up to do. The years in the Library were rotated with years in alternates, and they’d gone by one after another, with study, practice, and effort and long, silent aisles of books.

“Oh.”

“I don’t expect that waiting has been . . . fun.”

“Fun.” He snorted. “No. Not fun. It was kinda interesting, but it wasn’t fun.”

“Did you like Coppelia?” She dispatched the email, then logged out neatly.

“I’ve only been studying under her for the last few months.”

“She’s one of the more . . .” Irene paused, considering what words she could use that wouldn’t get her into trouble later if repeated elsewhere. She personally liked Coppelia, but words such as Machiavellian, efficiently unprincipled, and ice-hearted didn’t always go down well in conversations.

“Oh, I liked her,” Kai said hastily, and Irene turned to look at him, surprised at the warmth in his voice. “She’s a strong woman. Very organized. Commanding personality. My mother would have liked her. If. You know. They never take people to work here with close living relatives, right?”

“No,” Irene agreed. “It’s in the rules. It’d be unfair to them.”

“And, um . . .” He looked at her from under his long eyelashes. “About those rumours that sometimes they make sure that there aren’t any close living relatives? Or any living relatives at all?”

Irene swallowed. She leaned across to turn off the computer, hoping that it’d hide the nervous gesture.

“There are always rumours.”

“Are they true?”

Sometimes I think they are. She wasn’t naive. She knew that the Library didn’t always stick to its own rules. “It wouldn’t help either of us for me to tell you they were,” she said flatly.

“Oh.” He leaned back in his chair again.

“You’ve been here five years. What do you expect me to say?”

“I was kinda expecting you to give me the official line.” He was looking at her with more interest now. His eyes glittered in the dim light. “Didn’t expect you to hint it might be true.”

“I didn’t,” she said quickly. She slid the paper back into the envelope and slipped it into the pocket of her

dress.

“Here’s my first suggestion to you as your new mentor, Kai. The Library runs on conspiracy theory. Admit nothing, deny everything, then find out what’s going on and publish a paper on the subject. It’s not as if they can stop you doing that.”

He tilted his head. “Oh, they could always get rid of the paper.”

“Get rid of the paper?” She laughed. “Kai, this is the Library. We never get rid of anything here. Ever.”

He shrugged, clearly giving up on the enquiry. “Okay. If you don’t want to be serious about it, I won’t push it. Shall we get going?”

“Certainly,” Irene said, rising to her feet. “Please follow me. We can talk on the way.”

It was half an hour before he began speaking again, apart from casual grunts of acknowledgement or disagreement. She was leading the way down a spiral staircase of dark oak and black iron; it was too narrow for the two of them to walk side by side, and he was a few paces behind her. Narrow slit windows in the thick walls looked out over a sea of roofs. The occasional television aerial stood out among classic brickwork edifices and faux-oriental domes. Finally Kai said, “Can I ask some questions?”

“Of course.” She reached the bottom of the staircase and stepped aside so he could catch up. The wide corridor ahead was crammed with doors on either side, some better polished and dusted than others. The lantern-light glinted on their brass plates.

“Ah, if we’re going by foot to the exit point, isn’t this going to take a while?”

“Fair point,” Irene said. “It’s in B-395, you remember?”

“Of course,” he said, and looked down his nose at her. He was several inches taller than her, so that allowed for a fair amount of condescension.

“Right.” She started off down the corridor. “Now, I had a look at the map before you came in, and the closest access to B Wing is down this way and then up two floors. We can check a terminal when we get there and find the fastest way from there to 395. Hopefully it won’t be more than a day or so from where we are.”

“A day or so . . . Can’t we just take a rapid shift to get there?”

“No, afraid not. I don’t have the authority to requisition one.” She couldn’t help thinking how much easier it would have made things. “You need to be at Coppelia’s level to order one of those.”

“Oh.” He walked in silence for a few steps. “Okay. So what do you know about B-395?”

“Well, obviously it’s a magic-dominant alternate.”

“Because it’s a B, or beta-type world, right?”

“Yes. Which sort were you from, by the way?”

“Oh, one of the gammas. So there was both tech and magic. High-tech, medium magic. They had problems getting them to work together, though—anyone who was too cyborged couldn’t get magic to work.”

“Mm,” Irene said neutrally. “I’m assuming you don’t have any machine augmentation yourself.”

“No. Good thing too. They told me it wouldn’t work here.”

“Not exactly,” Irene said punctiliously. “It’s more that no powered device can cross into or out of the Library while still functioning. Devices would work perfectly well if you could turn them off while you were traversing and then on again once you were in here . . .”

Kai shook his head. “Not my gig. What’s the use of it if I’d have to keep on turning it on and off? I wasn’t really into the magic, either. I was more heavy on real-world stuff, like physical combat, martial arts, things like that.”

“How did you get picked up for the Library, then?” she asked.

Kai shrugged. “Well, everyone did research using online tools where I was. But from time to time I used to get jobs hunting down old books for this researcher. Some of them were, you know, not legal—and real big-time not legal too . . . So I started looking into his background, thought I might find something interesting. And I think I sort of looked a bit too hard. Because next thing I was getting a visit from some real hardline people, and they told me I needed to come and work for them.”

“Or?”

Kai glanced at her icily. “The ‘or’ would have been bad news for me.”

Irene was silent for the time it took to walk past several doors. Eventually she said, “So here you are, then. Are you unhappy?”

“Not so much,” he said, surprising her. “You play the game, you take the risks. It was a better offer than some people would have given me, right? One of the people teaching me here, Master Grimaldi, he said that if I’d had a family they’d never have made the offer. They’d just have warned me off some other way. So I can’t complain about that.”

“Then what can you complain about?”

“Five years.” They turned a corner. “It’s been five fricking years I’ve been here studying. I know about the time-continuity thing. It’ll have been five years since I dropped out of my own world. All the guys I used to run with, they’ll have moved on or be dead. It was that sort of place. There was this girl. She’ll have moved on to someone else. There’ll be new fashions. New styles. New tech and magic. Maybe some countries will have gone and blown themselves up. And I won’t have been there for any of it. How can I call it my own world if I keep on missing parts of it?”

“You can’t,” Irene answered.

“How do you cope?”

Irene gestured at the corridor. “This is my world.”

“Seriously?”

Irene’s hand tightened on the copy of *Midnight Requiems*. “Remember I told you that my parents were both Librarians? I wasn’t born in the Library, but I might as well have been. They brought me in here when I was still a baby. They used to take me on jobs. Mother said I was the best prop she’d ever had.” She smiled

faintly at the memory. “Father used to tell me a bedtime story about how they smuggled a manuscript in my nappy bag.”

“No.” Kai came to a stop. “Seriously.”

Irene blinked. “I am serious. I used to ask him to tell it every night.”

“They took you on missions like that?”

“Oh.” Irene could see what was bothering him now. “Not dangerous ones, just safe ones where I was useful. They left me behind on the dangerous ones. And then later on, when I needed proper teaching and social acclimatization, they put me in a boarding-school. The only problem was that I had to be careful how much holiday time I spent in the Library or it’d have thrown me out of time sync with the world I was schooling in. They did talk about moving me between worlds to different schools so that I could have years at the Library in between, but we didn’t think it would work.” She’d been so proud to have had them talk it over with her, to have them treat her as an adult and ask her opinion.

“And you had . . . friends at boarding-school, right?” Kai put the question tentatively, as though she was going to bite his head off for asking it.

“Of course.”

“Still in contact with any of them?”

“The time factor counts against it.” Irene shrugged. “With the amount of time I had to spend in dedicated study in the Library or in other worlds, it’s been hard . . . I did stay in contact with some of them for a while. I dropped off letters whenever I could, but ultimately it didn’t work. It was a school in Switzerland. A nice place. Very good on languages.”

They turned another corner. Ahead of them, the corridor narrowed dramatically and began to slope upwards. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all made of the same creaking boards, worn and aged. Panel windows in the left wall looked out over an empty street lit by flaring torches, where muddy wheel-tracks marked the passage of traffic, but there was no sign of anyone there.

“Straight ahead?” Kai asked.

Irene nodded. The floor creaked under their feet as they began the climb.

“This is like a bridge,” Kai said.

“Passageways between the Wings are always a little strange. I went through one once that you had to crawl through.”

“How did they move books through that?”

“They didn’t, usually. They routed them round some other way. But it was useful if you were in a hurry.”

He jerked a thumb at the window. “Have you ever seen anyone out there?”

“No. Nor has anyone.” The passageway levelled out, then began to slope downwards again. “Now, if only we could find a Traverse that accessed onto that, wouldn’t it be interesting.”

“Yeah. That was one of the big topics of conversation among the students.” Kai sighed.

Irene had been looking around, and she saw what she wanted on the left. “Just a moment,” she said, indicating a slot in the wall. “Let me drop this book off for Coppelia.”

Kai nodded and slouched against the wall, leaving Irene to take an envelope from the stack by the wall slot and slide her book into it. He did lean over just a little bit as she scribbled Coppelia’s name on the envelope, just enough to see the title of the book, and his eyes narrowed in curiosity.

“You could always take it to her in person,” he suggested. “Say you wanted to make sure she got it, and ask her a bit more about the assignment while you were there.”

Irene dropped the envelope into the slot and raised an eyebrow at him. “Yes, and I could also get myself called an ignorant buffoon who didn’t know how to read orders, let alone follow them. Someone who clearly didn’t deserve any sort of mission, if I was just going to come running back to her for more details when she’d given me everything I needed.”

“Oh.” Kai sighed. “Oh well.”

“Did you think I hadn’t heard that speech from her?”

“I know I have. I was kind of hoping you hadn’t.”

“Yes.” Irene gave him a brief smile before starting to walk again. “Good try, though. So, 395.” The corridor turned and they walked into a room containing two terminals on a glossy ceramic table. One was being used by a young man, who didn’t bother looking up, keeping his focus on the monitor’s screen. His brown suit was scruffy and battered at the elbows and knees, and lace cuffs framed his bony wrists. It was probably appropriate for whatever alternate he’d just come from or was about to go to. And it was still better than Irene’s current battered grey dress.

“See,” Irene said, and took a seat at the other terminal. “Give me a moment and I’ll find the best route to get to the Traverse point for this mission.” And pick up anything else I can about that world, she added to herself. She’d been too flustered by Kai’s arrival to do the sort of research she’d normally put in on a mission. Also, even if they were briefed by the alternate’s Librarian in Residence, it’d be useful to have some idea of where they were going.

Kai looked around pointedly at the lack of other chairs, then sank down to sit cross-legged with his back to the wall with an air of saintly patience.

Irene quickly logged in and pulled up the map. The Traverse to B-395 was within half an hour’s walk. Better than she’d hoped. No wonder Coppelia had sent Kai to her, rather than have Irene go to meet her. She reached for the usual pen and notepad and jotted down directions before looking for more information on the alternate itself.

Her reaction must have shown on her face, because Kai straightened and frowned at her. “What is it—”

Irene hastily pointed at the other young man and mouthed Shhh, putting her finger to her lips in as obvious a manner as she could.

Kai glared at her, then relaxed again, looking away.

She scribbled down the few facts hastily, then folded the paper and logged off the computer. With a vague

nod to the young man, she got to her feet and strode for the door.

“Come on, Kai,” she said briskly.

Kai rose elegantly to his feet and strolled after her, his hands in his pockets.

Some way down the corridor on the far side, once out of earshot, she said, “I apologize for that.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Kai replied. He twitched a shoulder in casual dismissal, seemingly fascinated by the beech panelling and decorated plaster ceiling. His voice was arctic in tone. “You’re quite right; I shouldn’t have made a noise and disturbed other students at work. I apologize for offending against the Library rules—”

“Look,” Irene said before he could get any more sarcastic, “don’t get me wrong. I’m not apologizing for being rule orientated.”

“Oh?”

“No. I’m apologizing for snapping at you to shut you up, because I couldn’t discuss classified information with someone else in the room.”

Kai took a few more paces. “Oh,” he said. “Right.”

Irene decided that was the closest to an apology she was going to get for the moment. “Our destination is quarantined,” she said briskly. “It’s listed as having a high chaos infestation.” Which meant its risk factor went way beyond simply dangerous, she thought furiously. What was Coppelia thinking, sending them there? If a magically active world was quarantined, that meant it had been corrupted by chaotic forces. Its magic had tipped just too far the wrong way in the balance between order and disorder. As Kai would have been told, chaos corrupting ordered worlds was an age-old and potentially lethal hazard for Library operatives. And it went against everything that the Library represented, as an institution upholding order. A high level of chaos would mean that they could expect to meet the Fae, creatures of chaos and magic, who were able to take form and cause disorder on such a corrupted world. And that was never good news.

“And there’s no balancing element that’s trying to bring the world from chaos back to order?”

“No. Either the dragons don’t know about that alternate, or they’re just staying well out of it.” What she didn’t say, as she was struggling to calm her own fears, was that without a balancing element, a corrupted world could tip all the way over into primal chaos. Nobody could be sure where the dividing line between chaos infestation and total absorption might lie. And she certainly didn’t want to find out.

Kai frowned. “I thought—that is, we got told in basic orientation that the dragons always interfere if there’s a high chaos level. That they could bring a world back into line. That the worse it got, the more likely they were to interfere.”

“Well, according to the records, there’s no sign of them there.” It might be true that the dragons disliked chaos, being creatures of law and structure. Irene had received the same basic briefing as Kai. But that didn’t necessarily mean they were going to interfere wherever it was found. From her own personal experience with alternate worlds, Irene had come to the conclusion that dragons preferred to choose their battles carefully. “Perhaps the world’s Librarian will know a bit more. His name’s Dominic Aubrey. He’s got a cover job on the British Library staff. Head of the Classical Manuscripts section.” She tilted her head to look at Kai. “Is something the matter?”

Kai shoved his hands farther into his pockets. “Look, I know they tell us students the worst possible scenarios in orientation so that we won’t try anything stupid. And they probably make them seem even worse than they actually are, but a world with a high chaos infestation with no dragons to even start balancing it . . . sounds kind of risky for a first assignment for me and for . . .”

“For a junior grade like me?”

“You said it,” Kai muttered. “I didn’t.”

Irene sighed. “For what it’s worth, I’m not happy either.”

“So how bad is it?”

She considered running her hands through her hair, having a hysterical fit, and sitting down and not doing anything for the next few hours while she tried to figure out a way to avoid the job. “They have steam-level technology, though there was a side-note that recent ‘innovative advances’ had been made. The chaos infestation is taking the form of folklore-related supernatural manifestations, with occasional scientific aberrancy.”

“What does that mean?”

“You can expect to find vampires. Werewolves. Fictional creations that go bump in the night. You might also find their technology working in unexpected ways.”

“Oh well,” Kai said with jaunty enthusiasm. “No problem there.”

“What?”

“I’m from a gamma, remember? I’m used to figuring out magic. Even if I didn’t do it myself, we had to know how to work the system if we wanted to stay out of trouble. Magic always seems to involve taboos and prohibitions too. So all we have to do is work out what these are and then avoid them while we pick up the document or book. No problemo.”

Irene nodded. “So, high chaos infestation.” The thought clearly worried her far more than it did Kai. Possibly because she’d had experience with a chaos infestation before and hadn’t enjoyed it at all.

Chaos made worlds act unreasonably. Things outside the natural order infested those worlds as a direct result. Vampires, werewolves, faerie, mutations, superheroes, impossible devices . . . She could cope with some spirits and magic, where both operated by a set of rules and were natural phenomena within their worlds. The alternate she’d just come from had very organized magic, and while she hadn’t actually practised it, it had at least made sense. She hoped that she could cope with dragons too. Again, they were natural to the order of all the linked worlds, a part of their structure rather than actively working to break down order.

She had no idea where to start coping with chaos. No one knew exactly how or why chaos broke through into an alternate—or maybe that knowledge was above her pay grade. But it was never natural to that world and seemed drawn to order so it could break it down, warping what it touched. It created things that worked by irrational laws. It infected worlds and it broke down natural principles. It wasn’t good for any world it entered, and it wasn’t good for the humanity in that world.

Even if it did make for good literature.

The Library had a whole set of quarantines for chaos infestations. But the one on this particular alternate was one of the most extreme she'd ever seen, while still permitting entrance. She wasn't happy about taking a student along on the job, however well he thought he could handle the situation.

"Pity Madame Coppelia didn't give us more information," Kai remarked. "And don't look at me like that. We're both thinking the same thing, right? I'm just saying it so that you don't have to."

Irene nearly laughed. "Okay," she said. "We agree on that one. And we both agree it's going to be bad, and neither of us really knows each other either. So it's probably going to be messy, nasty, and dangerous. Then if we do manage to get the manuscript, I'm sure it'll be top-secret and we'll be lucky to get any sort of mention of it on our records at all because everything will be buried in the files."

"Remind me why I took this job," Kai muttered.

"People pointed guns at you. Right?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"And you like books." She glanced sidelong at him.

He flashed a quick, genuine smile at her. "Yeah. That would be it."

They exited their latest corridor to find themselves overlooking a large hall. Their route continued along a wroughtiron bridge with ornate railings that arced grandly from side to side above the open book-lined space, staircases winding up the walls to meet it at various points.

"Hey," Kai said in pleased tones, "I've been in this one before. There were a load of Faust variants down there." He pointed over to the lower right corner of the room. "I was cross-correlating versions from different alternates for Master Legis. It was a training exercise, but it was one of the better ones, you know?"

Irene nodded. "Could've been worse. Schalken had us looking up illustrations of mosaics when we were doing training. Far too much time spent sitting with a magnifying glass and a scanner trying to work out if there was a difference or if there was, um"—she tried to remember the turn of phrase and tone of voice—"a comprehensible yet tolerable deviation from the norm, as expressed in the chosen world, given natural variations in the availability of minerals and colour . . ."

A soft round of applause made her break off. Both she and Kai turned to look at the far end of the bridge. A woman in light robes was leaning against the railings, skin as pale as ice and hair like a dark cap.

She smiled. Irene didn't.

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