

## **Clash of the Books**

by Sabrina Flynn

With the editorial eye of Merrily the (presently retired) Librarian

A Presence drifted beside the moon, puzzling over the unknown. Its thoughts spiraled along the stars, plunging down a luminescent waterfall. Far below, the starlight pooled, gathering around a solid stone building. It seemed a cage.

The Presence seeped through the cracks in the stone. Its thoughts explored the prisoners who stood upright in dark holding cells. Their spines were straight, one pressing against the next in cold, multitiered prison blocks. The hush was tangible, a silence that could be heard, filled with a million minds whispering of their lives before imprisonment. This could not be endured. A Savior descended, bearing the key to their freedom. Liberation was nigh.

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A curly-haired woman sat at her desk. She had remained after hours to work, but in actuality, she was reading, surrounded by a warm pool of light. The lapel of her stylish coat bore a tag, proclaiming her as Merrily the Librarian. She turned a page in her book, absorbed in a world of detectives and murder.

An irritating light niggled at the edges of her vision. The intrusion grew persistent, growing brighter until it blurred the pages. Merrily glanced up, severing the connection between mind and word.

A figure approached. Man or woman, she did not know, human or animal, she could not say. Its skin glowed like sun through parchment, its veins were elegant letters that swirled beneath the light, from runes to hieroglyphs, of every language ever spoken and those yet born.

Merrily's mouth fell open. The book slipped from her numb fingertips, tumbling onto the floor. The being of light extended an arm, long fingers uncurled, revealing an inky cube in the palm of its ever changing hand. Letters drifted into the space between librarian and figure, shifting to form words, rearranging into comprehension.

*I have come to free the prisoners. Do not interfere, Jailer, for I am their Savior.*

Merrily recovered the use of her legs, but not her lips. She bolted to her feet, knocking a cart of books over, scattering their bindings across the floor.

The Savior placed the inky cube on the desk, and tapped its top with a long finger that ended with a dot. The cube cracked into a thousand splintering lines of molten gold.

Pages fluttered, shelves shook, the library shuddered. Letters rose from the pages of print with tornado like force. Merrily retreated from the alphabetic cyclone, tripped over the scattered books, and fell to the floor.

The churning letters took shape over the open book she had been reading. Two figures emerged from *The Art of Detection*. One was tall and lean and decidedly male. The other was short and athletic and most assuredly female.

“What the devil?” the first demanded. Undaunted by the winds, he swept a steely gaze over the cavernous stacks, and finally pinned the Savior with steadfast skepticism. Sherlock Holmes concluded that someone had introduced a hallucinatory element into his champagne at the dance hall.

Kate Martinelli spotted an immediate threat, placed herself between the terrified woman on the floor and the towering lunatic of light, and drew her gun.

“Inspector Martinelli, SFPD. Put your hands up!”

The figure did not move. Holmes glanced between policewoman and illusion, and calmly moved to assist the fallen librarian to her feet.

Wind battered the three. A raven flew from between the pages of another book, croaking, “Nevermore!” A herald of chaos followed by a *mélange* of fiction.

Out stepped the Red Death in all his glorious tatters. The armies of Agincourt washed over the main floor like a ferocious tide. Goblins swarmed, and hobbits scattered. A pillar of shadow and flame raged between the stacks, and a grey-bearded man in pointy hat skidded to a stop.

“*Run*, you fools!”

A lash of flame descended with a sizzling snap. The detectives and librarian ran, taking cover in the Natural Sciences aisle. Black smoke gathered, writhing upwards. The building’s extensive sprinkler system surged to the defense. A deluge of cold rain charged the Balrog.

“By God,” Holmes drawled. “What was in my drink?”

“I shouldn’t have fallen asleep watching *Star Trek* with Lee,” Kate said.

“This is not a dream, Inspector Martinelli,” Merrily trembled, “and you are not tripping, Mr. Holmes.”

“I should think not. I’m standing as we speak.”

“Wait,” Kate eyed the tall, immaculately dressed older man. “Mr *Holmes*? Are you another one of those Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts?”

“I *am* Sherlock Holmes, Madame.”

A rumbling interrupted the great debate. The marble floor erupted, throwing earth and crawling vine into the hordes of fiction. A massive beanstalk took root, grasping upwards with throbbing intensity. Sprouts attacked the sprinkler system, threading their disastrous way through piping and electrical circuits. The rain spluttered to a premature drip. Flame surged anew, licking hungrily at soggy bindings.

“My library is in ruins!” Merrily shrieked.

“Madame, when one’s nervous system is subjected to hallucinatory compounds, it is best to remain calm. The worst of the effects will wear off with time,” Holmes reasoned, and then narrowed his eyes at a line of goblins scrambling overhead. One paused, brandishing a maw of fangs. Holmes regarded it coolly, dismissed it from his mind, and pulled his pipe and tobacco pouch from his pocket. When the creature persisted, Kate pointed her gun, and fired, dropping goblin to the floor at their feet. The rest scattered like flies.

“I will not calm myself, Mr. Holmes,” Merrily growled. “That light-alien has destroyed my library, and the Red Death is killing my favorite characters.” As the words left her lips, the Red Death swept through the raging tide of battle, touching foes at random. His hand fell upon a gentlewoman and her dark-haired defender, sending them writhing to the floor. “He’s just murdered Mr Darcy and Miss Bennet!” Merrily nearly fainted.

A slice of flame sizzled overhead, halving the shelves an inch above Holmes’ greying hair. The three were buried in a mound of smoldering paper and blackened bindings.

“If this is a dream,” Kate coughed, “then it’s a painful one.”

Holmes pushed the books aside, ripped a burning page from *Twilight*, then used it as tinder to light his pipe, before throwing the book at a troublesome faerie. Book smacked into

faerie, sending both spiraling to the ground. Holmes, Martinelli, and the librarian moved to a safer aisle, past religious studies, through horror, and onto mystery.

“I’m not so sure this is a dream anymore,” Kate said.

“It is lunacy,” Holmes deduced.

“Look,” Merrily interjected, “humor me for a moment and let us pretend this is an intellectual exercise. How do you propose to stop this?”

“They are *your* books, Madame,” murmured Holmes around the stem of his pipe. “I suggest you restore order.”

“Some help would be appreciated.”

A brute of scale and claw slammed into the end of the shelves. Metal gave, books flew, pages opened, and fiction grew.

“What precisely do you expect us to do?”

Merrily never had the chance to answer, nor did she have an idea, for a tall, blond-haired woman darted past, skidded, and reversed course, diving into their aisle. A massive claw swiped the space she had vacated. A mouth of rot appeared in its stead, bellowing frustration, and hammering at the shelving. Kate fired her gun, bullets bounced off the brute’s armor, ricocheting off stone and zipping dangerously close to their heads.

“Russell!”

“Holmes,” the blue-eyed new arrival gasped, “what on earth did you slip into my drink?”

“I did nothing of the sort. You’re supposed to be in Los Angeles.”

“Have you gone mad? We were celebrating the New Year in Sussex.”

“Run!” Merrily screamed. The armored brute tore the shelving off its foundations, and the four darted, scrambling up the spiraling metal stair.

“Who’s she?” asked Kate.

“My wife.”

“*This* is the wife you mentioned in your manuscript?” Kate eyed the younger woman appreciatively.

“Mary Russell.”

“Kate Martinelli.”

The two women shook hands. The Librarian prayed, and the Great Detective smoked his pipe in thought.

“You’re on fire, Holmes.”

“Since this is a dream, it does not bear consideration.” Two seconds later, Holmes cursed in pain, and batted at the flames on his coat. “Perhaps not,” he conceded with a grimace.

“What was that light-creature near your desk?”

“I think it was an alien,” Merrily replied.

“Of no nationality I recognize.”

“No, not that kind. An alien of the Martian variety. It called me a jailer. And I’m certainly not a jailer, I’m a librarian.”

The armored brute roared, rolling a blood shot eye at the four. The other orb bled from where a familiar knife had pricked its eye. Its roar seized their hearts. The four moved rapidly down the aisles along the second floor, catching glimpses of a blackened husk battling a sword wielding wizard.

“I seem to have attracted the attention of a beast resembling Grendel,” Mary Russell confided as they raced down the stacks.

“Perhaps you should not have thrown your knife at its eye, Russell.”

“I gave fair warning, Holmes.”

They stopped, breathless, huddling in Art History.

“These are characters from the stack of fiction books that were sitting on my desk.”

“We are *not* fictional,” Holmes and Russell snapped as one.

“Fiction or non-fiction, your admirer is tearing the floor apart.”

“Since this is a dream, presumably mine, I refuse to be intimidated by a myth,” Mary Russell declared, planting her boots firmly on the grate. “I’ll distract Grendel, Holmes, while you and these ladies figure out how to stop this madness.” She drove her elbow into a fire emergency station, yanking the shiny red axe from its resting place. “There is only one way to deal with a Grendel.” As quickly as she had appeared, the lanky blond darted towards the railing, disappearing over its side with axe in hand.

“Your wife is certainly something.”

“Assuming this is her dream, I’m inclined to agree,” Holmes remarked drily.

“And if it’s not?” Kate enquired.

“I suggest we discover a way to undo the impossible. Books are your area of expertise, Madame, any suggestions?”

Merrily thought, chewing on her fingernails. Unfortunately none of the library’s safety drills had ever covered such an eventuality. Chaos reigned, the library smoldered, awash in a churning sea of smoke and blood. If only there were time to stop and think.

*Time.*

Her eyes widened in triumph.

“I need to get to the Science Fiction section.”

“And that is where?”

Merrily pointed across the library to the second floor, over carnage and war, to the realm of the Red Death. Its blood red funeral shroud flapped like wings in the wind. It strode with purpose, leaving a trail of writhing victims in its wake.

“Sherlock,” Kate said, taking stock of her ammunition. “You’re Victorian. You’ve had the most experience with plague. I suggest you deal with that thing.”

In the depths of striking grey, indignation warred with insult, culminating with an imperious glare. Kate’s heart skipped with fear as the Great Detective pinned her with the full force of his gaze.

“That thing is *murdering* people,” she defended. “I need you to stop the criminal while I escort the Librarian to Science Fiction.” Kate did not give him a chance to reply. Instead, she barreled ahead, pulling the Librarian behind her.

Sherlock Holmes glanced over the railing, checking on his wife, who was fiercely hog-tying the beast with salvaged rope from a banner. Deciding that Grendel had met his match, he grabbed an extinguisher from the fire station and raced after detective and librarian.

Swift and long-legged, he rejoined them in no time. Together, the three entered the realm of Red Death. Kate and Merrily pressed themselves against the shelving. Holmes edged forward, moving to the end of the aisle, glimpsing red between books. He puffed furiously on his pipe, creating a cloud of obscuring smoke that mingled with the Balrog’s hungry flame.

The Red Death strode blindly past. Holmes calmly unfolded his pocket knife, and hurled his blade at the floor, pinning a trailing funeral wrap with its deadly tip. The funeral wrapping began to unwind, exposing a carcass of rot and wiggling, sightless carrion. Holmes yanked the pin on the extinguisher, stepped into the aisle and compressed the lever, smothering Death with heavy foam. The Red Death stumbled.

Sherlock Holmes moved swiftly forward, driving the solid canister into the back of its rotting head. Death crumpled, buried in a mound of chemical foam.

Kate and Merrily raced from their cover, threading their way to desired section. Merrily ran a finger along the books, located the much sought after number, and pulled H.G Well's *Time Machine* from the shelf. She tried to recall every Star Trek episode she had ever watched that dealt with the Space Time Continuum. While attempting to puzzle through the complexities of the situation, her head began to hurt, therefore, her plan was sure to work.

Merrily the Librarian opened the book, releasing words, transforming fiction to reality with a molten glow. An archaic machine of tubes and wires took form between shelves, shoving them aside.

Kate stepped forward, brandishing her badge to the puzzled Time Traveller. "SFPD, we need to commandeer your..." she faltered, then rallied, "time machine."

The Time Traveller's eyes widened, and his hand snaked towards a shiny lever. Kate grabbed his wrist with one hand, and his collar with the other, yanking him out of his seat.

"It's all yours."

Merrily clambered behind the controls, settling on the cushy chair with a sigh of relief. She adjusted the date, rolled the time back, setting it to half an hour before.

"Good luck."

"Either way," Merrily said cheerfully, "it was very nice meeting you, Miss Martinelli." Closing her eyes, Merrily pushed the shiny lever with a muttered prayer.

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All was quiet. Everything was blissfully mundane (save for the H.G Wells Time Machine sitting in the library aisle). Merrily climbed unsteadily from the machine, and hurried

to the railing, where she peered down with breathless anticipation. She was light-headed with relief. Her desk sat in its pool of light, and her former self sat reading in gorgeous ignorance.

Wasn't there a rule of time traveling declaring that one could not glimpse one's future self?

Oh, stuff it, thought Merrily, this was reality—not theory and the Martian of letters had already arrived. Glowing parchment drew near. Merrily pushed down a wave of *déjà vu*, and ran for all she was worth. Unfortunately she was no marathon runner, but she took some consolation in the knowledge that she had worn her sensible shoes.

When she arrived, the inky cube was on the desk. Her former self was on her feet, utterly pale and speechless. The Savior's long digit stretched towards the cube.

“Stop!” Merrily panted, racing towards her desk to snatch the cube. The Savior swirled with agitation, letters churned, becoming bold and black. At the sight, former Merrily fainted dead away, leaving her future self to continue the fight.

“I'm not a jailer. This is not a prison. It's a library for God's sake.”

The Savior grew, drifting menacingly near. Bold letters took shape before her eyes, encompassing her world, demanding her attention.

**The minds are imprisoned. Release them now.**

“They're books, not minds. Humans like me, of flesh and bone, write them.”

**They speak. They live.**

“Yes, books speak, but *our* minds give them life. They live inside humankind. They are not prisoners, but an extension of ourselves.”

**They are trapped.**

“Not trapped...” Merrily faltered, grasping for explanations. In desperation, words came, tumbling from her lips, growing bolder by the moment. “Books are emotions, thoughts and dreams, everything terrible and beautiful. They contain all of humanity’s imaginings, flowing from people’s minds to their pens, and finally here, to paper. Every book is a masterpiece of dreams. This is their temple, and I am their caretaker.”

Silence answered—unspoken and unwritten. A minute passed, and then another, until the Savior stirred.

*You are a protector of worlds?*

“Uhm,” Merrily considered. It wasn’t precisely correct, but it was better than the alternative. “Yes, along with other librarians, especially considering what occurred...or might occur. And really, the books do not play well together at all. They are quite happy in their own, individual worlds. Trust me, we must keep them separated. At all costs.”

*I understand. And accept. Farewell, Protector.*

“To you as well, er...” Merrily faltered, and then raised her hand awkwardly, palm forward, offering the Martian a Vulcan salute. “Live long and prosper.”

The Savior vanished in a whirlpool of ink, and since the books had never been liberated, the Time Machine along with future Merrily, vanished. And an inky cube thundered to the floor.

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Merrily stirred, blinking groggily at her surroundings. She rubbed her head, probing a knot in the back of her skull. She must have fallen asleep and then out of her chair. But what an odd dream.

After assuring herself that nothing was broken, she slowly pulled herself into her chair. A shape caught her attention. An inky black cube sat on the floor by her desk. She bent to pick

it up, turning it this way and that, studying it with puzzled curiosity. It seemed familiar. Part of her dream, but surely it had been there before and inserted itself into her subconscious. Likely dropped by one of the students, she thought. Still, it was an odd thing, unaccountably heavy. With a slight shrug, she set the cube on a pile of loose papers, determining that it would make for an excellent paper weight.

The End