

‘Beware, librarian!’ the raconteur cried, eyes wide. ‘We are not alone.’

Simeon grabbed Oliver by the arm, pointing further down the aisle. On the floor lay an open book. The pages were aglow with an unnaturally green, vibrant light that spilled into the library.

‘What did you do?’ Oliver said, trying to pull his arm free from the man’s vice-like grip.

‘I heard a sound – an awful, rasping sound, like a blade on a whetstone – and went to investigate,’ Simeon replied, breath coming in ragged gasps. ‘One of the shelves was glowing. As I approached, a book fell to the floor and flipped open.’

At that moment, the light shining from the book split and shifted. Something grey and mottled rose from the pages. Heart racing, Oliver went to dart towards the book. Simeon’s grip remained, pulling him up short.

‘Let go!’ Oliver cried, unable to prise the man’s fingers off. ‘I have to close the book!’

The magical light was reduced to mere slivers as the book continued to birth the thing. Whatever it was, it was much, much bigger than it had any right to be. As the mass rose from the pages, it *blossomed*, like a mushroom growing at an incredible rate.

*It’s a hand*, Oliver realised, barely keeping a lid on his panic. *A really big one.*

The arm followed, thick as a tree trunk, then the elbow was free. Too late, Oliver realised he forgot to grab his bandolier on the way out of the office.

‘I think we should run,’ Simeon said, trying to pull him back towards the office.

‘No,’ Oliver said firmly. He couldn’t leave Agatha, and he wasn’t strong enough to carry her. He turned to Simeon and spoke in a tone that brooked no excuses. ‘Let go of my arm.’

Shocked, Simeon let go.

‘I’m going to slip past it, lead it away from Agatha,’ Oliver explained. ‘You get her to safety.’

‘Yes. Certainly,’ Simeon said.

Oliver ran towards the danger, skirting around the giant arm and shoulder that were erupting from the book.

*I’ll lead it on a chase through the library*, he thought, *climb a bookcase and then escape through the returns window.*

If he circled back around and entered the library from the front, he could meet Simeon and Agatha at the office, retrieve his bandolier and then be better equipped to tackle whatever it was.

*Assuming that Simeon will be true to his word and help Agatha.*

Oliver stopped, suddenly concerned that the raconteur might be more interested in saving his own skin than that of a girl he'd never even met. As he spun around to check on them, the giant hand grabbed him by the ankle. Screaming, Oliver was pulled towards whatever was rising from the book. His fingernails scabbled at the floorboards, trying to gain purchase, only to be rewarded with splinters.

A head erupted from the book. An asymmetrical, lumpy head with patches of moss.

*What in the gods is that thing?!*

Being dragged closer and closer, Oliver tried to grab onto a nearby shelf. He missed, accidentally pulling out the nearest book. The cover flipped open and four pink bunnies hopped from the pages. They took one look at the half-revealed beast before letting out disturbingly human shrieks of terror.

Throwing caution to the wind, Oliver grabbed another book. Pointing it away from himself, he opened it in the direction of the creature, desperately hoping for something more fearsome than bunnies.

A triple-decker strawberry mousse cake slid from the pages to plop on the floor. It landed on its side, the sweet, creamy filling dribbling onto the wood.

*'Where are all the dangerous books when you need them?!'* Oliver howled.

The creature's other arm was free. It put a palm down on the floor, pulling itself from the pages, swelling like an octopus spilling out of a keyhole. It was massive, almost as tall as the stacks, even with the bottom half of its body still within the book. Two orange eyes locked onto Oliver, and for the first time the creature realised that it was holding onto his leg. With a grunt of annoyance, it cast Oliver aside.

Shooting through the air, Oliver collided with a bookcase before slumping to the ground. Books rained down on him. Covering his head with his arms, he waited for the literary downpour to end. The very last book opened as it hit the floor, and a wart-ridden, hook-nosed face peeked from the pages, spotted the monster nearby, then reached out with a bony hand to slam itself shut.

One leg suddenly free from its bookish prison, the monster bellowed. Like a giant, malformed approximation of a human, the creature was brownish-grey with patches of dirt and moss clinging to its body.

*Like a troll from a storybook*, Oliver realised in a brief moment of scientific curiosity.

He got to his feet, shucking off hardbacks, as the troll detached from its own book and looked about in confusion. Not seeing its forested home, it let out a horrid cry. Its breath reached Oliver a moment later, smelling of toadstools and mouldy soil.

The troll threw its arms about in panic, bashing the nearest shelf. Oliver watched in horror as the bookcase began to tip. As it went past the point of no return, there was a *THUNK* as it hit the next bookcase along. Then another *THUNK*. And another and another, as the bookcases fell like dominoes.

‘No!’ Oliver cried, then quickly shut his mouth because the troll had turned its attention to him. ‘Hello there,’ he said in a small voice, giving it a nervous wave.

*‘HUMAN MEAT FOR MY BELLY!’* the troll roared.

One of the bunnies was beside Oliver, thumping the floor with its foot and looking at him with a sense of urgency.

*Do as the bunny says, Oliver.*

He turned and ran.