

Secrets of the Greatest Age

It was a peaceful day at Mallet's Creek library. Snow sprinkled softly to the Michigan ground, covering the earth and waging constant war on the salted sidewalk. Margo and Charlie strolled through the glass double-doors into the warm embrace of the entryway. The aroma of old books greeted them kindly. They continued in a leisurely fashion until they reached the fiction section, and each selected a book and sauntered to the café area. Choosing books was serious business to them; they struggled to find books they had not yet read.

Margo, full name Margaret Eloise Johnson, was sixteen, and wore broad-rimmed glasses and braces. Her frizzy, unmanageable hair, the color of milk chocolate, was pulled back in a bun. Her eyes resembled small emeralds embedded in peach skin. Her nose was too large for her heart-shaped face, and freckles covered her cheeks. She wore a loose fitting t-shirt that read *Stratford Festival*.

Charlie was eighteen, and greatly displeased by his full name, Rupert Charles Minski. Shoulder-length, slate colored hair framed his pale face. His build resembled that of a small donkey. His jaw was strong, doubtlessly strengthened by his inability to keep his mouth closed. He had lazy posture and thoughtful brown eyes. He wore a Red-wings jersey, torn jeans, high-tops, and a leather jacket.

They plopped into black padded metal chairs as Margo extracted two packages of gummy bears from her World War II rucksack and passed one to Charlie. She turned to the first page of *Little Women* and emitted a horrified gasp, "Someone spilled a *red drink* on this!"

"Yeah... That happens to library books, Margo," Charlie teased.

"That doesn't make it okay," she snapped petulantly.

In walked a girl with golden hair, blue eyes, and lightly tanned skin. She was dressed in pink from head to toe. She pranced through the library looking slightly secretive. She was the most popular girl at their school, and seemed to care about nothing but popularity and looks.

"I'm not saying it does," He paused, distracted, "What's Trisha Hough doing here without her posse?" he wondered aloud.

Margo gasped over-dramatically, "Maybe she loves books secretly, but doesn't want her friends to know," she said sarcastically. Charlie laughed loudly.

“This. Is. A. Library,” A woman with graying black hair, deep green eyes, and olive colored skin barked strictly, “It is a place of silence and *solitude*. You two have just disrupted the entire library. I plan never to have to mention this to you again. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Miss Crawford,” they droned to the librarian standing up to lessen the effect of her glare.

“Good.” She stalked away, leaving that word ringing in their ears.

“That woman,” Charlie moaned, sitting again, “What's the matter with her anyway? I mean, neither of us have ever been loud here before or anything. Why doesn't she ever yell at Hough and her gang? They're always loud and obnoxious.”

“I know. It's totally unfair,” Margo agreed, unaware that Trisha was just around the corner hearing their hurtful words.

They saw a well groomed man wearing a black suit and red tie enter, rubbing his hands together to warm them. He had hair the color of a healthy pumpkin, eyes that resembled molasses, and skin like fresh brown sugar. He marched into the cafe and sat near the pair. Next thing Margo knew, her phone, which had been on the table in front of her, was in his hand. She yelped, managing not to draw Miss Crawford's attention, as Charlie launched himself across the table and grabbed the man's hand. The man looked down at the mass of hands on the table, bewildered. “What the-?” he muttered.

“What do you mean 'What the-'?” Charlie demanded, wrenching the cell phone from the man's hand and giving it to Margo, “You just tried to steal her phone!”

“Oh...” the man muttered, “Oh, did I? I must apologize, Miss,” the man continued kindly, “You see; I'm a diagnosed kleptomaniac,” Charlie attempted to interrupt, but his words were plowed over, “I can prove it! I have the doctor's papers right here.” He withdrew a bundle of papers from his jacket pocket and laid it before them. Sure enough, the papers were signed, dated, and very real. “I didn't know I was doing it,” the man pleaded. “I'm so very sorry.”

“Fine,” Margo said, “We won't press charges this time. But keep it under control.”

“Thank you very much, ma'am,” he said, smiling warmly. After about a minute he continued, “I suppose you should know a bit more about me. You deserve it after I...Well, you know. Anyway, my name is Joseph Albert Williamson, I am thirty-seven years old, and I live in Ypsilanti. Here is my business card.” He passed them a small paper. He was an IT manager for a

large business in Detroit.

Suddenly, Trisha was walking toward them purposefully, a frown marring her would be perfect appearance. "I heard you two talking about me and my 'gang,'" she said, "And I just thought you should know....that's not the real me."

Charlie scoffed, "*Sure* it isn't. You keep on telling yourself that, Hough."

"It isn't!" she whispered harshly, "I come here every day, and read as much as I can. Sometimes I wish I could quit my job at *Sephora* and work with you at the bookstore, Margo." Honesty choked her voice.

"I believe you," Margo said, meaning it.

"You do?" Charlie and Trisha asked at the same moment.

"Yes," At that moment there came a sound like nails on a chalkboard from across the library.

Charlie, Margo, Trisha and Joseph ran toward the noise, with Miss Crawford speed walking behind them, stage whispering, "No running in the library!"

What is wrong with that woman? Margo wondered. And what is that obnoxious noise?

They reached the aisle the scraping noise was coming from, yet there was no one there. On the ground sat an ancient, dirty, leather-bound book. Margo bent down to pick it up, and the moment her fingers touched its weathered leather cover, the screeching was replaced by an odd *tip-a-tap-tapping* sound. "It's called *Secrets of the Greatest Age*," she said.

"By who?" Charlie inquired.

"It doesn't say."

"I have never seen *that* here before," Miss Crawford said.

"It doesn't have any indication that the library owns it," Trisha noted aloud.

"Someone may have brought it here and forgotten it," Joseph suggested, his fingers twitching slightly.

"Why don't we look it up?" Charlie suggested. They proceeded to the nearest computer and checked every database they could imagine.

"It is not here," Miss Crawford announced, "According to all the book search sites, this book does not exist."

"Let's go back to where we found it and see what we can find," Trisha suggested. They

hurried to the aisle in the history section and looked around.

“Well,” Margo said, “I guess we'll never know unless we read it.”

She began to open the book, but Charlie half yelled, “Don't! Margo, according to the internet, this book doesn't exist. Who knows what it could be?”

“Don't be so paranoid,” she said, but she meant, *Would you stop telling me what to do? I've finally got a chance for adventure, like I've always dreamed.* She flipped the old book open defiantly.

The clicking ceased. Wind whipped their hair about their heads. It tore out Miss Crawford's and Margo's buns, wrecked Trisha's perfect style, and caused Charlie's hair to stand almost on end. Joseph did not have much hair, yet still the wind blew it about. Colorful lights enveloped them--red, green, blue, yellow, and orange. Wind hammered at their ear drums, blocking out all other sound. Their feet were lifted from the ground.

Suddenly, they touched down, the lights dissipated, and the last gust of wind abated. They looked around, their ears ringing. They were standing in a large, old building filled to bursting with row upon row of books greatly resembling *Secrets of the Greatest Age*. Margo dropped the ancient tome, causing what seemed a great ruckus in the silence.

They were standing on old, stone floors. The space smelled of old books and drying ink, and a light breeze blew at their skin. The building was lit by hundreds of candles, though it appeared devoid of life. After a few minutes, Charlie voiced the question they all wanted to ask, “Where are we?”

A handsome, young man wearing navy blue robes stepped out from behind a bookshelf and began walking toward them, “You, my friends, are in the Library of Alexandria,” he informed them. His hair was the color of fresh roasted chestnuts, his eyes like the sky on a cloudless summer morning, and his skin pale like the pages he immersed himself in daily.

“Who are you, young man?” Joseph inquired.

“Oh, me? Why they call me Merlin.” A small, cotton-top tamarin monkey leaped onto his shoulder, squawking indignantly. “Oh, and this is Gomo,” he turned to the monkey, “There, are you happy now?” Gomo chattered insistently.

“Fine...” Merlin sighed, and continued unenthusiastically, “He's a cotton-top tamarin monkey, seven years old, and he lives here in the library with me, his official title being the

Library Monkey.”

“Pticka!” Gomo yelped.

“Does this really all have to be about you? Honestly! The fire is coming, and I have to explain to these five.”

“Ptiiiiickaaaaa....” The monkey sang, snapping his tiny fingers.

“Ugh!” Merlin cried, “Fine, Gomo is the *Monkey of the Library, first class*.... Or so he calls himself.”

“Pticktckadatch!” Gomo squealed.

“Where'd you get him?” Trisha inquired.

“Picked him up on a trip to Columbia. He insisted on coming with me when he saw me.”

Gomo continued squawking, “We don't have time for this!” Merlin yelled, with a snap of his fingers. Gomo seemed incapable of saying anything more, but leaped to the top of Merlin's head grumpily. “Now, I suppose you're all wondering how you got here?” Charlie was about to ask who Merlin *really* was, but thought better of it, as the young man had just magicked a monkey's mouth shut. “The book brought you here.”

“But that's impossible!” Charlie insisted.

“More commonly known as *magic*,” Merlin said pointedly, “Now then. That book.” He indicated the book on the floor, “Brought you through time and space on my command. It brought you all the way from Ann Arbor, Michigan, in America. Correct?” He did not wait for a reply. “So that... Well, you'll just have to wait and find out why. That is... If we find out.....”

“But why today?” Margo inquired.

“I was getting to that,” was Merlin's impatient reply. “Now, today is the day that this library will be set aflame.”

“How do you know?” Miss Crawford inquired.

“Hmmm... I don't know,” he said sarcastically, “I'm only the most powerful wizard ever! If you can time travel, I think I can, too...” At that moment, Gomo grabbed hold of Merlin's shoulder-length hair with his nimble feet, leaned his white tuft of a head down so his eyes were level with Merlin's, and began pointing at his mouth hopefully. “Not until I've finished explaining, Gomo.”

“We need to leave.” Charlie went for the book, but magic travels faster than man, and

Secrets of the Greatest Age was in Merlin's hand before Charlie hit the ground. Margo scurried forward to help him to his feet.

"It seems to me you're done explaining," Joseph chuckled.

"Why I am, aren't I?" Merlin snapped his fingers again and Gomo immediately began chattering angrily at him.

"I'm *sorry*. I had to explain."

"Eeeeh... Tcktocka," Gomo chattered amiably. He rode down Merlin's hair, leaped onto Margo's shoulder and began sniffing her curiously. "Eeech....M-M-M-Mer-tecka," he attempted to say Merlin's name, "Ertck ootecka ika oo chcka antcksxtck tckoo?"

"That doesn't matter right now, Gomo. The fire should start any minute. We need to get to a better vantage point. Follow me." They fell in line behind him. Charlie planned to take the book at the first opportunity. Margo wished she could read the ancient runes that filled all the books before they were destroyed.

"Where are we going, young man?" Miss Crawford demanded.

"The North Tower," was Merlin's brief reply.

"Where is that?"

"Where we're going." They were nearing a window, and could see fire blazing in the distance.

They reached the North Tower and stared out the window. They could see the fire growing nearer and nearer. Trisha went pale. Charlie watched the book constantly, hungry for opportunity.

"M-M-Mertecka?" Gomo inquired, "Teck i-i-it tecka tere?"

"When it does," Merlin told him.

"What did he say?" Miss Crawford inquired.

"He asked when the fire will get here."

"Where'd he learn to talk like that?" Margo asked.

"I tried a speech spell on him, but it went wrong. I've learned to understand his 'language' over the years. He's trying to learn how to speak like we do. He's had quite a bit of trouble with my name, though."

"So," Trisha began, "Why did we need to be here the day the library was burned down?"

“Why, for dramatic effect, of course!” Merlin chuckled.

Suddenly, *Secrets of the Greatest Age* was no longer in Merlin's hand. “Which one of you took it from me?”

“Took what?” Charlie, Joseph, Margo, Miss Crawford, and Trisha chimed.

“The book,” Merlin said, “Who has the book?”

“Not me,” the five persisted.

Gomo leaped from Margo's shoulder to Charlie's, then Trisha's, then Miss Crawford's sniffing all the while. Miss Crawford smiled for the first time in a year. Finally, Gomo hopped to Joseph's shoulder, still sniffing. “EE! Ee ook i-i-it!”

Joseph looked down at his hand, saw the book, and laughed. “I did it again,” he chuckled, “Sorry about that, lad, I'm a kleptomaniac, you see. I try to keep it in check, but sometimes it escapes me. My sincerest apologies.”

“Of course, of course... Just give it here,” Merlin began to take the book.

“Don't give it to him, it brought us here, it must be able to take us back!” Charlie cried.

“Yes,” Merlin agreed pleasantly, then continued, “You will need it to get home. But only when I tell it to re-open the portal. And I will not let you back until the appropriate time.”

Charlie started to cut in, but Merlin said, “You, my friend, seem to forget that you are in Egypt, not America. Not only that, but you are in a completely different century. The laws of your time are completely irrelevant here. I can keep you here as long as I want. Now I suggest you watch.”

The fire was advancing about a foot a minute now, and soon the base of the library was on fire. Suddenly, Merlin turned to Margo, “You look very familiar,” he told her, “Like an Anglo-Saxon girl I met in the last century.”

“Well thanks,” Margo said, turning away, “Good to know I look like an Anglo-Saxon.”

“She was beautiful, and intelligent,” Merlin continued, “And even if she hadn't been beautiful, that isn't what matters,” he glanced at Trisha, “It's what's in your heart that counts. I miss that girl more than anyone I've ever known. Margo, I want you to stay with me. Will you?”

Margo hesitated, confused. The life she had, or the adventure she'd always dreamed of? Then she made her decision, “No, Merlin. I'm meant to live in the twenty-first century. That's where I belong. I wouldn't trade my life for the world, old or new.” A light crossed her face, “Wait. That's why you brought us here, isn't it? To learn to be happy with who we are.”

“Yes. *That* is the secret of the greatest age. Be content with who you are, but never stop trying to improve yourself. Now you are ready to go home.” He passed Margo the book, then turned to Miss Crawford, “Chase your dream. It's never too late. Don't give up. Charlie, do the world a favor, be a writer. Patricia, be yourself. And finally, Joseph, fight the kleptomania, you'll do more for the world if you are outside of prison. And me, I suppose I'll try to save some of the books,” he paused, “On second thought, if I'm found with the books, they'll think I destroyed the library. Well, the world has survived without them so far, if not too well.” He nodded to Margo, who opened the book.

This time none of them screamed, but waited for the ground to reappear beneath their feet. When it did, they stood exactly where they had been before Margo had first opened the book. But something was different: there on Trisha's shoulder was Gomo, who had leaped to join them at the last minute. Miss Crawford looked down at the book, “There's nothing written in it,” she noted, confused.

“Looks like it's time for me to start 'doing the world a favor',” Charlie grinned and took the book from her. Joseph resisted the urge to snatch it from him.

“So, Miss Crawford,” Trisha said, “What is your dream?”

“I've always wanted to be on Broadway,” she grinned, “do call me Genevieve,”

“Well, what now?” Margo wondered.

Two years later, Charlie (studying hard at college), Margo, and Trisha visited the library each afternoon, Trisha was working at the book store with Margo. Both girls were to join Charlie at college in the fall, where they would grow even closer in their friendship. Joseph was seeing a therapist three times a week, and was mostly over his kleptomania Miss Crawford had an audition in New York. Lastly *Secrets of the Greatest Age* was published. This is the ending to Charlie and Margo's first masterpiece:

“They had each learned a unique and valuable lesson. Charlie and Miss Crawford had learned to follow their dreams. Trisha and Margo knew that to be one's self is to be one's best, but never to stop bettering oneself. Joseph knew that if you stop trying, you will never succeed. And Gomo had learned that, as much as he loved Trisha, monkeys and cats are simply not meant to live together.”