

The Last Librarian

Tancred's patience waned with the remaining drops of dew. His muscles whined having spent the last hour prone watching the house not twenty yards from him. Nature had been ruthless in its vengeance on the abandoned monuments to mankind's legacy, concealing the neighborhood so well he almost missed it. It was a hidden blessing, being so deep in Inquisition territory. Ranks of trees had marched in and surrounded the homes of the neighborhood. Thick undergrowth had swarmed over the house, slowly devouring it to return it to the earth from whence it was made. That bought him time. Time with which he had already spent too much of watching hungry vines further envelop the long faded blue house. Holding his breath, he glanced cautiously around and listened deeply to the heartbeat of the forest around him, its natural thrumming peaceful.

"Come on, follow me, and stay low." He whispered, to his assistant, Ashland.

Heaving himself from the ground with the hushed grace of a cat, bō in hand, he slinked to the corner of the house and approached the front door. Ashland swooped up right behind him, silent as an afternoon breeze. Tancred nodded his satisfaction. The heavy wooden door, interlaced with gilded glass paneling, hung desperately to the frame with the help of dead vines and blooming flowers. Peering discretely through the closest window, Tancred tried to wipe clean the untold decades of grime to ascertain any initial risk, but to no avail. They had to risk it.

Slipping carefully into the gap left by the door, they immediately headed to the stairs through the once lavish foyer. The house had fought valiantly against nature and time, but like love, time endures all things and

the house could not, leaving vestiges of the previous owner's attempt to first impress guests rotting on the walls.

The teacher turned expectantly to hear his assistant explain the next step. "What do we do now?" Ashland instead asked aloud, breaking the silence and immediately regretting it.

Suppressing a rebuke from escaping his lips, Tancred took a breath and replied in a rehearsed whisper coated with admonition. "We clear the upstairs. Then we search the rest of the house. Try to remember, Ashland."

The assistant turned puppy drooped his shoulders and cast his eyes to the floor. "I'm sorry."

Tancred patted him reassuringly on the shoulder, bringing his spirits back up, then gestured towards the stairs.

Tancred took the lead, climbing the stairs slowly, bō at the ready, his hawkish eyes on the landing above. It was a rule of his: always search the upper floors first and work your way down. Clear the top floor and then search the bottom. Safer that way.

Silence was not their ally in this house, though. The decayed framing permeated every inch of it, and each step was a cautious dance around creaking boards and the persistent fear of falling through them. He quickened his pace, vowing to finish the second floor before the house punished him for violating its sleep.

They cleared bedrooms quickly, each taking one side of the house. In a more civilized time, he determined, it had been an affluent house, with four bedrooms and a large master. Sadly, he discovered, it all amounted to nothing though, finding the family's skeletal remains clutching each other in what must have been a final grasp at the signs of life. Polychromatic food

wrappers, stubbornly resisting the decay of time, littered the floor around them. There would be no food for them there.

He met back with Ashland at the landing that led downstairs. "Did you find anything, sir."

Tancred stared past him for a moment before answering. *Let the dead rest.* "No, let's keep moving."

With the second floor cleared, they turned to the first floor, Tancred sending Ashland to check the front. Nature reconquered it for the most part, trees in their passive aggressive way jutted through walls once covered with siding, insulation and sheetrock, allowing light from the midday sun to filter in. Distorted in the dusty air, it cast everything in a grainy gray tint. He sauntered through the back of the house, careful not to kick up more dust and stepping around the foliage that had taken up residence, running his hand over the dilapidated and rotting furniture fondly. His mind tried to imagine the family sitting at the large, stained oak dining table, or sitting on their nearly room encompassing couch, around the coffee table playing board games laughing, not a care in the world.

Ashland called from the front, and Tancred rolled his eyes. *That boy just does not understand the virtue of silence.* Caution would win the day, and he did not want to be caught by the Inquisition, the smoldering piles of charred books on the roads warning enough. He found his apprentice standing outside a door frame covered in untamed growth. Casting an eager glance at him, Tancred began tearing down the vines like a child on their name day, which sent a small animal scurrying for cover. A smile bloomed on his face as he set foot into an office, walls covered in shelves stocked to the ceiling with books.

Excitement flowed over him like the forest floor did the house, pulling him in. Even in the darkness of the times, books provided an escape, a new world, a feeling he sensed many once shared. Claspings a triumphant hand on Ashland's shoulder, they set to the hunt when he dropped his bag on the floor, scouring the shelves for any tomes that eluded his archive.

A gap-tooth smile of spines stared back at Tancred as he removed a small book from the shelf. Cupping the paperback in his hands gingerly for fear of dropping it or creasing its fragile cover, Tancred carefully brushed the dust off and admired the cover art. Intricately flowered gilding surrounded a masked swashbuckler, foretelling a story of adventure and love. Tancred opened it and brought the browning pages to his face, inhaling deeply, the fragrance of old ink and must melting tension from his shoulders. Fond memories slipped into his thoughts of Jana and he making that into a game played on their forays into the abandoned shells of civilization, challenging each other to guess the age of the book. Ashland didn't get it, nor wanted to try it. So he kept the game solo, vainly holding on to the fading past.

A bird's cry and a flutter of wings brought him from his reverie and he closed the book softly, along with his nostalgia. Taking the book to his bag, he was greeted with the sandwiched overhead of hardcover books filling it. There was just enough room at the top for the paperback. Smiling, satisfied at a successful hunt, he carefully inserted the copy of the book and closed the pack back up. Tancred hefted it onto his back again, adjusting the straps to keep it tight against his body and stretched, ready to head out.

The ominous bass of drums thumped through the ravaged house. Drums were a bad sign and it was time to leave. Blood throbbed frantically through his veins, experienced tracker though he was, at the thought of Inquisition

soldiers nearby. If caught with the haul they had, death was all but a guarantee. Not a word passed between the two hunters, both knew it was time to go.

He considered burying the remains found, but whispers of his grandmother's tales about those who disturbed the dead rose from the depths of his memories; hushed fragments of voices with warnings of letting the dead rest and returning to the dust from whence they came. The house was their grave, and the earth laid claim. In a fractured world, humanity tested since the darkness of its fall to extremes that, like the petrifying remnants above, some overcome and some succumb. Tancred chose to overcome and left as silently as he entered, leaving the rest for the family like the kings of old.

Outside, judging as best he could amidst the collective of trees and thick foliage, Tancred figured there had to be more houses like it. Though nature had long ago reconquered this neighborhood like most others, signs of a past civilization remained. Patches of what was once called asphalt peaked through the grass and small hills of foliage swallowed long abandoned vehicles, distinguished only as small, green ravines amongst the wooden pillars.

He produced a compass and his map, marking the house quickly before getting their bearings. Tancred signaled Ashland to mark the house, and they slid back into the woods, leaving the concealed neighborhood to slumber.

Tancred smelled the smoke before he saw it, triggering that primitive warning in his brain.

His brain put together the signs from the day and immediately thought, *the library!*

His feet pounded the beaten trail further into recognition. Drawing his bō within sight of the walls of DeKalb, Tancred slowed slightly at the sight of something on the road leading up to the gate, hoping it was not what he thought. Ashland wisely followed suit instead of asking what was wrong, as he was wont to do. Tancred kept low, his head on a swivel, fight or flight response on "fight" overdrive.

He approached the gates to the town, a wide stretch of grass spanning the gap between the forest and the walls formed of a combination of steel pylons and corrugated metal. Nearing the gate, he realized what the object on the road was, silently cursing at the sight of a cross jutting out of the ground draped in a white and red cloth.

Shit, Tancred thought, crouching next to it and staring off towards the west with fear, his mind racing, immediately trying to come up with plans and contingencies. *Inquisition. Damn, and I thought we had more time. Tell me they didn't find the library.*

Looking up, he caught Ashland's terrified face and steeled his own to try and calm the boy. He found the gate splintered and broken, the ground around it littered with some signs of a struggle, and chunks of wood. Expecting to find the town in a similar state, they discovered it was instead left unscathed. They walked cautiously down Any Road, surrounded by an eerie silence, broken only by the hissing of the leaves in the light breeze. Tancred's hand tight on the bō, eyes watching for movement. Ashland glanced around with increasing nervousness. Homes reclaimed from nature for the current residents spread out from them and down adjacent streets. A second doorway, this one leading to the Commons, loomed ahead of them, a pair of

small ponds straddling the road up to it. No damage presented itself on that gate.

"Everyone must have fled to the town square." He thought out loud, partly to reassure Ashland. It also contained the source of the charcoal black smoke snaking into the sky and fading into the blue. A quick, self-assuring look back down the street, and the pair slipped through the gate and into the Commons.

The town opened before them into expansive green plazas dotted with small plots for small farming that rolled up to a large central building that used to be a hospital in a time long past, now known as Commons Administration. Tancred and Ashland turned onto a side road that led up towards the CA. A gleaming white spire shot up from the middle of the building. Atop, a beacon was lit for all in town to see, meant as a signal for the safety condition both within and without. Despite the light of the day, the beacon was lit a harsh red against the otherwise calming, baby blue sky.

Danger.

Tancred glimpsed a thrumming crowd gathered around the large grassy rotunda that served as the town's focal point in front of the CA. One by one, people in the crowd began to turn as they noticed the two men approaching, those still on edge brandishing whatever weapon they had on hand, but none for longer than the moment it took them to realize it was Tancred and Ashland. The crowd parted ways like a wheel through mud as someone made their way towards him. Their faces were solemn as the figure parted them, as if the person was an angel of death.

A cold sweat suddenly coated his skin. It was the town magistrate and her face bore that hollow coloring of loss.

"Tancred, you...you're back." She said, uncertainty dripping from her words.

"Job's not done, ma'am." He replied simply, a hint of impatience on his wavering voice.

"Right." She looked to the ground, off to the side, anywhere but Tancred's eyes, hands rubbing and twisting together. Finally, she found the courage to speak. "Look, Tancred, while you were gone, we had some...trouble."

His eyes flashed to the column of smoke after and he knew. Glaring at everyone unjustly, he took off at a unsteady run, skirting around the crowd towards the source of the smoke on rubber legs. Ashland called after him, but it fell on deaf ears. Tancred caught sight of the smoldering pile that gave it birth, and his legs could hold him no more as he fell to his knees, rage building inside him. His eyes filled with the glowing red embers of books, his books, and his hard work to fulfill Jana's wish charred and lost, some of it breaking off and fluttering away on a small breeze. His fists clenched tighter and tighter, fingernails threatening to break through the leather of his gloves. Muscles tightening in despair, a roar of anguish threatening to erupt from his throat.

Nothing came, just overpowering despair, and the librarian fell back on his heels and sobbed. An image of Jana burning atop a pile akin, her initial sobs to him to keep going cut short with agonizing screams, melted into the charred remains of her dream that lay in front of him. His disappointment of an assistant, the constant fear of the outside world, it all finally drove home the fact that he had let her down, and not just her, but the village

too. A year of work, and only ash to show for it. Without her by his side, giving him purpose and telling him every book saved was a village fortified against the night, he wasn't able to see past the ruins every day; wasn't able to see what the world may be again. *In the end, all I'm doing is fanning the ashes.*

Tancred stayed, numb and unmoving, kneeling for some time. The village agreed to call an emergency meeting later that night and moved on. He knew it an attempt to give him space, but it was a wasted gesture. He would be gone before sundown. Alone, Ashland having left some time before, his feet carried him to the library. There was just one thing he had to get before he left, and he had to move quick, as he moved towards the shelf he needed.

"Mr. Librarian..." *Damn.* It was Yvette, a young girl apt at frequenting the library, and getting into trouble.

"What is it, Yvette?" He asked pointedly, knowing she did not deserve it, but lacking the will to care at the moment.

"Did they hurt your books?" She asked innocently, eyeing the condition of the library.

Tancred sighed. *I don't have time to entertain children.* Without turning to face her, he said, "Yvette, I really ca--"

"Yvette, what are you doing?" Another voice, older than Yvette's, yet refined, interrupted. *Damn it.* "You know better than to wander off like that. Come away now." It was Jillian, the town's teacher. She stopped short when she saw Tancred standing over the discarded books and desks. "Oh, Mr. Tancred. I didn't see you there. I'm sorry for little Yvette's curiosity. I swear, she needs a bell put on her or something." Light-hearted laughter

battered against the silence between them, fading away into the pages around them when he did not respond to her. Waving her hands at Yvette, the little girl frowned for a moment and then skittered off. Jillian took a step forward, taking care to avoid further disruption.

"I'm sorry about your library." She offered kindly.

"Me too." He averted her gaze, tromping through the discarded piles towards a shelf that remained relatively untouched. Tancred shoved its few remaining books out of the way. Once it was clear, he pushed down on the shelf. A "click" followed and slowly a small panel rose, revealing a small bundle wrapped in cloth. Jillian cocked her head slightly to see what was in it as he unwrapped it, revealing two small books in a pristine condition she had not seen before.

"Those books, what are they?" Jillian asked quietly.

Tancred stood silent, staring at his wife's favorite books, remembering her talk of them like they were the hope of the world. Their titles, *The Rights of Man* and *The Republic*, stared back at him. He would carry the planetary weight of their unshared message like a sinner bore scars.

Tancred hesitated a moment, debating answering her. Finally, he sighed heavily and replied, "Just a dream."

He heard her sigh and turn to leave. She stopped on her way to the door, stooping to pick up a chair and righting it next to the small reading table. The school teacher stared at it a moment before turning back to him.

"Where is Ashland?" Jillian asked, hoping that would open him to conversation.

He offered her a quick glance. "I sent him away."

"Why? He could help you clean this up." She gestured towards the floor around her.

"He's not needed. It's over," Tancred, frustrated in her inability to see the gravity of the situation, stalked over towards a window, jabbing an accusatory finger at the pile smoldering outside. "You see that? That is *nothing!* They will destroy *everything* if you continue to defy them." Tancred saw her recoil at his outburst and hoped that was the end of it. Yet, for some reason, he found himself saying, "Ashland will be fine, as long as he finds something else to do. The same goes for the rest of you. Heed my advice: let it go."

Nothing further was said between them so he moved to his bag, his shoulders sagged and his chest rose and fell with a deep sigh of resolve, covering the books again before putting them carefully in his bag.

"You're not leaving us, are you?" She asked as it dawned on her, genuine concern on her voice, and hoping to be wrong. He looked at her as he brought the bag to his shoulders and adjusted for comfort.

"I can't stay. I've done no good here. Besides, winter is coming and the last time I spent one in the wild, I almost died."

"But you have shelter here. Why would you leave?"

"They'll be back, sure as the wind blows, and if they find the library rebuilt, they'll do more than just burn some books." The last words sickened him so that he struggled to speak them.

"We can fight them, or...or hide our books. They don't have to know." Jillian pleaded, her voice betraying the lies. "You've done so much for us, how can you just leave like this?"

He knew her words to be a lie. The sight and smell of the smoldering ash outside flooded his conscience, providing all the proof of his failure that he needed.

"I..." Tancred sighed and stepped towards a pair of back doors. "I'm sorry. Burn everything after I leave." He let his words fill the air between them as he grabbed his bō and disappeared out the back exit.

Tancred headed for the gate he entered through earlier, stopping first along the way for provisions for what he expected to be a long trek. He hoped to make it south and over the Great River before the first snows. *Maybe, he considered, I can offer up my services as a tracker somewhere.*

The storehouse was his first stop. Alone with the food and medicine, it didn't prevent a slight hesitation of guilt before he grabbed an apple. It lasted only a moment and he resumed grabbing supplies. Never really visiting the storehouse before or a communal meal, he admired the variety of produce they managed to cultivate.

Something stirred at the bottom of his mind. Unable to draw it out, he shook his head and moved on to gather some medical provisions. Snagging a first-aid kit and some essential medications, Tancred adjusted the numbers on the inventory, signing his name. Somehow the weight of taking medical supplies was greater than that of food. They deserved that much.

Satisfied with his supplies, he ducked back out. Keeping out of sight, he slipped by a myriad of buildings on his right, broken by glimpses of the small pastures and fields that supplied his "stolen" food. Along the way, he passed a makeshift gym they used to train in defense, a house serving as a doctor's office, and the school. His path took him by some classrooms, and he

caught a glimpse of Jillian reading to her class, the students leaning forward with eager attention. The last he saw of the classroom was a small globe on her desk.

Pressing on and focusing on the route to the gate. Yet, the stirring from before had turned into a rumble. It was the right decision, he told himself; he refused to have his library be the proverbial sword of Damocles over good people. He had seen it too many times before. The Servants of the Second Ark to the southeast indoctrinating their conquests into murderous idolatry. The River Lords preying on the fishing villages of the Great River. Even the Heritage Reclaimed, as they swept across the plains atop their painted horses. It did not matter. They all foolishly pursue more territory, their zealous ideology, and their vengeance in the façade of a vacuum for a craving that few can truly stomach: power.

The Inquisition was no different.

Through the gate the clearing was devoid of anyone, friendly or hostile, giving him an unhindered exit. A deer patrolled the forest floor at the edge of the clearing, ears twitching as it rummaged through the undergrowth. Tancred took one last look behind him at the town he had spent the last thirteen months in. They were a good people, and his failure should not be theirs to bear. Resigned to his decision with a heavy sigh, he hefted his bag as comfortably as possible, and stepped out through the gate into the unforgiving outer world.

Right into Yvette.

Tancred backpedaled into the gate in surprise. Heavy breathing accompanied a racing heart for a moment before settling down again. Yvette was startled only for a blink before she giggled at Tancred's surprise.

"Sorry, Mr. Librarian." She said innocently.

Catching his breath, he tried not to yell at her. *Someone needs to put a bell on her.* "It's alright, Yvette. You need to be careful. If it were someone else, they might have hurt you."

Her smile faded and he immediately cringed, fearing he would make her cry. "I'm...I'm sorry Mr. Librarian. I didn't mean to scare you."

A small smile spread over his lips at that. "It's ok Yvette, I'm not mad." He paused a minute and remembered where they were. "Yvette, what are you doing out here? You know it's too dangerous."

"I forgot my unicorn's brush by the rocks from when I was playing hide-and-seek before, I just came out to get it." Her hand shot up with a tiny pink brush in it, standing on her toes like she wanted the whole damn world to see it.

Tancred nodded and recovered himself, ready to leave. "Well, you best be getting back inside, it's not safe out here."

She seemed to notice his traveling equipment. "Are you going to find more books, Mr. Librarian?"

He opened his mouth to tell her he was leaving for good. It occurred to him suddenly that was probably not the best decision with Yvette. "I am, I need to find more books for the library."

"That's nice of you, Mr. Librarian." Yvette smiled, and damn it all if it was not one of those sweet, dimpled smiles children have that melt hearts.

"Thank you, Yvette." The drifter stepped towards her and knelt to her level. "Now, back inside, ok?"

"Ok, Mr. Librarian." She nodded eagerly, and turned to run inside. He stood up and watched her run back through the gate. That was his cue to go. Spinning on his heels, he stepped towards the woods on the other side of the clearing around the walls, his bō thudding on the ground as he walked.

"Mr. Librarian?" Yvette's soft, curious voice reached his ears before he made it ten feet. He turned to find her standing hesitantly in the open ruin of the gates.

"Yes, Yvette?" His voice carrying just a slight tone of irritation at stopping, again, to talk to the little girl.

"When you get back, will you read to me?" She asked nervously.

"What?"

"My mommy and daddy read to me every night. They borrow books from your library and read to me." She smiled. "They get really happy when I try to read with them."

"That's...that's good, Yvette."

"But they aren't mommy's and daddy's books. They're your books, Mr. Librarian. I want to hear you tell the stories." Her eyes met his and froze him in place.

Tancred was at a complete loss for words. Considering that he was not one of the more verbose denizens of DeKalb, that was not a surprise. But the man found books and read them for a living, and at that moment, he could not find the words in all the language he had learned to respond to her, except for a simple, "Sure, Yvette." He blinked several times, unsure where that acknowledgement came from.

Her smile beamed, gaps highlighted in the missing teeth that had fallen out. "Thank you, Mr. Librarian!" Without another word, she turned and ran back into town.

Waiting a moment for her to return, when it didn't come Tancred looked to the woods and the escape they provided, then back to the walls of the community he was about to abandon.

He took a step towards the tree line. The rumbling in his head a howl.

Thoughts of his wife swarmed his brain. Tears welled in his eyes as the images of their time together flew by and became the embers of the fire she died on.

One step closer.

The years he spent after that, alone, replaced her funeral pyre, washed away by the tide of darkness he fought with a book in hand. Town after town and face after face washed away, joining the other innumerable ruins and skeletons that covered the world.

Another step, halfway to the edge. Suddenly, the howling faded.

Then, he saw Ashland. He saw him back at the house, realizing how hard he tried, seeing it in his face when he screwed up.

Apples and vegetables replaced Ashland, and images of the livestock in their pens and the wheat swaying in the breeze in the Commons. They faded in to the cover of a book about farming, one he found months before.

More images flooded his eyes, the darkness struggling but falling back. The medicine in the storehouse, organized, just the way someone who had read the pharmacy book he found would know to do. People practicing defense

drills, like the ones he found in the dilapidated home of a long dead soldier. Jillian in her classroom, reading to her students.

Then Yvette, in her fashion, barged into his thoughts with her question, and he knew. There was life here, life worth protecting, if not for his wife's dream, but because they cared for him. They learned from him.

It was then he realized stopped moving.

In the depths of his mind, a wave crashed and his wife's screams died out.

Their march had been scouted since they were ten miles from the town. Tancred stood vigilant atop the ash pile that remained from the approaching soldiers' last visit to DeKalb. Explicit instructions were given to leave it unspoiled. He looked over the determined faces and white knuckled grips holding their weapons. Terrance stood just off to his right, eyes set forward but chest rising and falling rapidly. Tancred knew the boy was proud to have him back, and he was proud to be standing next to his replacement. All of them were, he realized. They were ready to fight for their home. Their lives.

He turned back to the column of soldiers, cassocked inquisitor leading the vanguard astride a gleaming bay. Their eyes locked for the remaining moments of their approach, one's intense and resolved, the other's curious. Hand signals flashed, and verbal acknowledgement descended through the ranks. The column fanned out, soldiers taking up position to either side of the inquisitor. A halt was ordered by the inquisitor. In complete unison, the soldiers stopped and planted themselves where they stood. The two sides eyed each other, nerves ready to ignite like ember to fuel.

"Turn around and leave these people be!" Tancred shouted as the priest opened his mouth. "Turn around, there is no need for bloodshed here."

"What is the meaning of this?" The inquisitor asked. His eyes looked through Tancred to the open doors to the library, shelves upright and stocked with books. He cast his eyes over the townsfolk arrayed before them, fire burning in his eyes.

"You will not harm these people." Tancred stated.

"And who are you, blasphemer?" The inquisitor barked at him, innate self-righteousness abound. "Their guard dog?"

"In a manner of speaking," Tancred stated, "though I prefer Mr. Librarian myself."