

The Librarian of Humanity

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The orange yolk of the sun hangs low and heavy in the sky, and I picture reaching up to pluck it from the air, like a piece of fruit ripe for the picking. The skin of my hands and face is burning, left uncovered by the loose layers I wear over my entire body, and I wonder if my skin might melt right off my bones. The tangible heat of the sun seems to compress everything, weighing down on my shoulders like a physical weight. Baking earth fills my nostrils. The thumping of my heartbeat is an incessant rhythm in my ear drums. I walk at a crawling pace. Every footfall is an effort that resounds through my fatigued body. *Just a few more steps* I repeat to myself over and over again. I squint into the distance, hoping to see the outline of the settlement I am traveling to. Alongside me rolls my solar powered library, creaking and rattling with each turn of the wheels, as if it too is protesting the heat with its steel bones. The cart is weathered and tired looking, coated in sand. Once the letters across the side reading “The Library of Humanity” were a vibrant green, but they have now faded to a dull gray, the life stripped from them by the sun like everything in the desert. But, it is the contents that matters. Inside lie 37 books, three paintings, five poems, and a child's crayon drawing, all drawn into being by authors, poets, and artists, from all across the world, from all different times, written in several different languages. Inside lie some of the last of humanity's achievements.

Today is the third day of one of the worst heat waves I've seen in my lifetime, the temperature in the wasteland I'm crossing reaching a scorching 120 degrees Fahrenheit. The heatwave has coincided with my longest stretch of travel between settlements this month. I left the last settlement nearly two weeks ago, leaving behind *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a book of poems from a 21st century Japanese author translated into French, a collection of Marvel

comics, and a clipping from something called a newspaper known as the the New York Times. I left them with the few families residing in the settlement, allowing each child and the curious adults to choose their own selection from my library. As I had prepared to depart from the settlement, an older man approached me. He walked slowly and deliberately with the help of a cane, but his face was filled with a childlike hope. When he spoke, I could hear the echoes of youthful curiosity in his voice.

“When I was a boy I loved to read about dragons. Do you have anything with dragons?” The request brought a smile to my face.

“I do,” I turned to my card and rummaged through my shelves, withdrawing a well-worn copy of *The Hobbit*. This is the joy that what I do brings me, to be able to give others the gift of stories.

In return the settlement gave me an incredibly battered copy of *The Odyssey*, its pages worn with generations of readers, the occasional word faded away to nothing, swallowed, like so many things, into the abyss of time. Every night on my lonesome voyage I pour over the sentences, each word like a candy on my tongue, feeding my hunger until it dissolves and I am left with just the memory of the taste, my longing for more words like an insatiable hunger in my soul. I devour the book once, twice, three times, until I find myself reciting the words in my mind while I walk, and then speaking them aloud. They keep me company through the long days and nights alone in the wasteland that was once a thriving planet.

As I walk, my mind seeks sanctuary in thought of my mother and father. My parents were traveling dancers, vessels of art like me. I was born twenty years after the collapse, and I grew up on stories of a time before humanity became such a fragile thing, scattered into pockets around the world, surrounded by almost impassable barren stretches. Stories of when the world was

connected, billions of people living in almost harmony. Stories of the beauty of our planet before our actions wreaked havoc on it, destroying the balance of nature. We were our own ruination. First, a series of hurricanes hit the coast of South America one after another, leaving much of the continent ravaged and without connection to the rest of the world. Then a heat wave hit India, killing millions. Disasters kept coming, tearing civilization apart until all that remained was settlements of survivors, and those are few and far between.

I, like my parents, am what is known as a voyager. Voyagers are those daring enough to leave the safety of settlements and travel. We are the vessels of art and culture, the carriers of humanity in a world now hostile to our survival. My parents did this through motion, telling stories and evoking emotion through dance. Driven by my love for words and the unwavering belief in the power of art instilled in me by my parents I took up the mantle of voyager when they could no longer. Even my name, 'Hope,' given to me by my parents, echoes my mission. I collect words of all kinds, from all time periods. They are stored in my cart, my "Library of Humanity", and I spread these words far and wide. When I began on my lonely mission, I felt isolated, but I have grown used to my role. Not many can carry the weight of humanity on their shoulders like we do as Voyagers. My work brings me peace in my existence as a member of the slowly dwindling human race, and it brings me purpose by pushing away the despondency otherwise eating away at my soul. We Voyagers work in an effort to prolong the existence of human culture, and to share the power of art and words with whichever survivors will listen, before the voices of generations are lost into the void of time's destruction.

The sun has almost fallen behind the curve of the earth when at last I glimpse a settlement in the distance. Relief floods through my body as my feet quicken along with my pounding heart. A collection of small structures stands out against the stark backdrop of barren

desert sand. I imagine that I can almost hear the whirl of a generator, and I close my eyes briefly to imagine the sensation of cool air against my burnt skin. As I draw closer the settlement does not fade out of view like a mirage, but grows in size, and I can now see that it is a group of several homes, built haphazardly from the remains of what must have once been a thriving city before The Collapse.

It is almost dark by the time my cart rolls into the settlement, with me stumbling alongside it. There are about a dozen steel structures that make up the settlement, crammed together, walls almost touching. A twinge of uneasiness settles inside me as my cart and I finally come to a stop between what were once homes. I cannot hear a generator at all now, and no lights shine through the windows. The door of the second house rests open, sagging forlornly on its hinges.

“Hello?” I call out, my voice echoing off the steel walls surrounding me before it is drowned by the sweltering heat. I can feel that I am the only living soul here, and I feel a shiver run down my spine despite the heat.

To my relief, I find the home empty, no bodies with life sucked out of them by the heat, just mundane objects. A child's pacifier under a wooden chair, a hair brush still full of blond strands, a water flask with a few swallows left inside, and in one of the last homes a journal. When I open the journal, I find it full of inky scrawls, each writing dated. I flip to the end and find the last entry, dated just a month before.

August 9th 2325

Elana's daughter died in the night. I can still hear her little cries, still see her little hands curled tight. It won't leave my mind. The generator isn't coming back on. I commanded we burn the dead in the desert before their bodies can rot, I can not stand for any further desecration to come to them by the torturous heat. John wants us to leave, he thinks it is the only way forward. I know he may be right but either way we face death. I am too old to travel. I know the time before the collapse. Our greed, our bickering, it has killed us all. When I was born the Earth was bruised, but not yet broken. I have watched the cracks spread, I have watched the collapse of humanity, and I have lived with the fallout. Once we commanded nature with an iron fist of domination. We were filled with greed, and now we live the consequence, living under nature's fickle grasp, nothing but scurrying rats shying away from a flame.

The last lines of the entry ring like a bell in my mind. I have lived with the weight of a dying world pressing on my soul. But standing here, among the remnants of civilization's collapse, I feel how immensely fleeting humanity is.

When I leave the settlement I take the Journal with me. I walk into the unknown of the desert with a new addition to my library.