

Chronicle of a Doomed Librarian **by Toiya Kristen Finley**

Perhaps it was best the old librarian did not know the ultimate plan for the Library, for someone would have had to explain the crane with its silent and mammoth ball, sitting outside waiting to break down the Library walls in the morning. Attendance had waned until even the handful of regulars found other habits to divert their attention. There was no one left to lament the passing of the Library. Many of the younger librarians had already found new jobs. They would no longer oversee the care of books. For them, a Library had become obsolete.

Many floors above the old librarian, the younger librarians and receptionists had already packed away all of the books they'd managed to find. No one knew what to do with these books—not that anyone cared, not even these younger librarians themselves—now that a mall of arcades and virtual cafés was to be erected in its place.

Alma drove past the dying Library late in the night, the wrecking ball standing high. Once she'd helped confused and inquisitive visitors, walking the silent aisles and identifying texts by tracing her finger along the numbers glued to their spines, imagining what it might be like to brush her hand over the surface of a man's skin.

As a child she'd played hide-and-go-seek between the bookcases with wide-eyed boys. Boys who captured her imagination, provoked emotions stronger than crushes, but who never suspected the

longing waiting in her lips when they ferreted her out amongst the stacks. These boys were replaced year after year with new wide-eyed faces until Alma understood she had to settle for vicarious love stories sewn to cardboard spines. Passing the old Library tonight, unfulfilled cravings leapt at her from her memories, desires the books couldn't fix.

When the city officials came to announce the Library's closing, Alma and the other librarians did not mourn it or prepare a proper memorial. Nor did they care that passerby after passerby now threw their debris onto the old premises, the very property they'd once labored to keep immaculately clean. The ghosts of forgotten ideas moaned in the Library's corners, powerless to seduce the imaginations of these strangers.

Alma's blood quickened as she passed the old building, anticipating what was to come in its place: the answer to all of those desires absent in books. Alma thought of him, of watching him from the great, front Library windows as he walked to work each day. A mysterious man, as mysterious as any stranger with a pleasing face. The straightness of his back, the confidence in the stride of his lean, long legs—Alma recognized his type from the pages of romances and erotic fantasies. She'd never met him, never dared to venture outside of the windows and call out to him, but now she could build someone better.

The building replacing the Library, the city had decided, would be state-of-the-art. Each store inside was to feature lounge chairs with crowns plugging into a mainframe, four tentacles massaging the temples and connecting into the brain through the ears. Alma gripped the wheel, anticipated electrical fingers caressing pleasure centers she didn't know she had, awaiting the surge through her nerves, arousing the feeling in muscle and joint and soul. She would not have the man she saw every day in waking life, but she would have exactly what she needed him to be. Someone with the same confidence in his gait, who

looked just like him but acted the way Alma wanted him to, a man of her design and architecture. He would not leave her or forget her. He would protect her and avenge her against any ill she could conceive.

Everyone in the city, except for the old librarian, shared Alma's need. They grew tired of each other, of sickness and crime. Of tending to each other's failing children and minding each other's feelings while invading personal space in crowded offices. Or appeasing dissatisfying lovers and spouses.

The Library was noble, and that was all. It held philosophies and studies and religious beliefs on how to live life with a world full of intruders, but there were no solutions. Once jacked into new the world of the mind, anyone could accomplish the unattainable in their daydreams. Soon, they would experience spaces uninhabitable in the black-and-white of books. The thrill of killing without killing and dying without dying, only to start the game again. Sex in secret without the guilt, as tawdry and violent as the imagination could build it. Anyone and everyone, sitting at their terminal, authoring their own world without any disturbance.

The old librarian, in his vast corridors amongst his piles of books, would not have understood. He never knew of any kind of electronic terminal, not even when the great texts became available online.

And the younger librarians never saw him either. He tended the forgotten floors at the heart of the Library, where the original works were found. Nor did the librarian realize that no one had visited his Special Stacks in quite some time.

Every night he awoke at eight to make his rounds. He did not take time to eat—he drew energy from the

books themselves. The big grey cat—for every good librarian must have a cat or parakeet—perched himself atop the librarian's cart. Every night the librarian catalogued newly printed leather volumes and wheeled them to their resting place in the Special Stacks. The big grey cat, almost as old as the librarian himself, hopped onto the shelves as the librarian made his rounds, flicking his thunderous tail back and forth, dusting off the books.

And so tonight was no different, even with the Library awaiting death under the silent crane. The whirring of the great printing press next to his small bedroom awoke him. The machines creaked day and night, huge templates stamping the pages of each book with a unique font. By eight, when the librarian stirred from his bedroom, the next batch was ready to be catalogued, the ink mixed with blood completely dry. The old librarian loaded these books on his cart and headed for their new place in the stacks. His eyes were dimmed to the point where he could not even sense the shadows crossing his face, but the smell of rotting ink was his ever-present guide.

It took years for the librarian to develop his cataloguing system. He'd first devised it when he taught the *libarii a bibliotheca* to have respect for their work even though they were slaves. He'd mentored Nicolas Clément and taken pride in his pupil when Nicolas perfected a variation of this classification system. But the old librarian did not remember when he'd taken the position in this Library. Nor did he wish to remember why he'd left the others. He'd learned to stop reading the books. He only knew when he was no longer needed.

If he'd had the desire and the eyes to read, he would have seen the silent crane swaying in the night, waiting to tear down the walls. He would have felt the slow drugging of hedonism curdling the blood and addling the mind of this city. He sensed the whirring of the press flipping furiously through pages,

but he would never know the binding of Alma's story was just beginning. The old librarian finished his rounds and returned to his room with the cat. In the morning he would soon learn it was time to move on.

For a brief moment, Alma and the rest of the city roused from sleep as the ball came crashing into the Library walls. Alma gasped when the floors caved in and collapsed on top of the printing press, the pages of unformed books tearing from their spines. Alma's own flesh tore away from her bones, the blood from her body ready for the final pages, if only the whirring of the machines had not quieted.

The old librarian had learned not to read the books. In Babylon he'd learned not to read the tablets, and in Pompeii not to read the scrolls. Every Library ended, and the old librarian came to hate reading the prophetic pages of the lives catalogued in the stacks. He refused to understand why this Library came to an end, but there was always pain for the stories not-quite-finished.

The librarian gathered the old grey cat onto his cart, for every good librarian must have a cat or a parakeet. He traversed rubble and set out on his heavy, blind journey to the heart of another Library. He would order and catalogue the Special Stacks until that heart refused to beat.