

The Other Library

“Your Grace? Sorry to intrude, but do you have a moment?”

“Of course, Singh, come in.” Singh walked to face Gavin, who sat near the fireplace. Gavin closed his book and looked up; Athena and Minerva did as well. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, sir, as you know, I grew up in a poor village in India. There weren’t many books around, but I learned to love them. Then in the army, the camp library was larger, but the books were not varied. Now I find myself here, and I see this wonderful library every day. Umm, I was wondering if I might borrow a book to read now and again.”

Athena and Minerva smiled and almost laughed at the expression which came over Gavin’s face. The only way to describe it was—absolute shock. Gavin opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, then finally found his voice. “What?! Gray, come over here, please.” Gray came from his station by the bar. “Am I to understand that the staff does not read from this library?”

Gray shook his head. “Oh, no, sir, we do not. This is the duke’s library.”

“Fracking hell!” Gavin exploded. “This is not ‘The Duke’s Library,’ it is ‘The Craignish Library!’ As everyone living in this house is Craignish, it is their library as much as it is mine. I know there are quite a number in Latin, but almost every genre of writing is in here. Effective immediately, any time anyone wants to come take out a book, they shall do so, except in the evenings when we are in here. Get some sort of ledger; they can enter the title of the book, their name, the date they take it out, and the date they return it. Singh, I am eager to hear what title shall be your first choice.”

Singh bowed. “I thank Your Grace most heartily. I should like to read of the Myrmidons, sir.”

“Outstanding, the *Iliad*! Excellent choice. I am almost horrified to think that all the time I have been here, I did not know that none of you were reading from it.”

“The subject really never arose, sir,” rumbled Gray. “And frankly, most of the books are rather difficult to handle.”

“Bosh. All manner of history and literature are in here. Why, there’s a complete collection of Conan Doyle, and not just the Sherlock Holmes stories; a complete set of Agatha Christie

mysteries; a large number of other mystery writers, such as Poe; not to mention all the Shakespeare, Longfellow, Stevenson, Kipling, and so on. How many books are in here, Gray?”

“I have no idea, sir.”

“About 20 books per shelf, 10 shelves per bookcase, that’s 200 per case. There are 20 bookcases, so 4000. Four thousand books, waiting to be read by someone. I can only read one or two at a time; hell, if I read a different book in its entirety every single day, it would take me almost 10 years to get through them all. So you all must assist.”

“As you wish, sir. Four thousand, of course, that’s just this room.”

“*This* room? What on earth do you mean, *just this room*?”

“I mean the other library, of course, sir.”

This time, Athena and Minerva joined Gavin in slack-jawed shock. The other library? Gavin’s mouth flapped like a fish out of water; then he leapt to his feet. “Other library?! There is another library in this house? Where? How is this possible?”

Gray rocked back in surprise. “Sir, I thought certain you knew, from your explorations of the castle. It is on the other end, of the house, I mean. Just off the ballroom.”

“Great Horny Toads! Take me there, at once!”

“As you command, sir. This way.” Gray led the way; Gavin, Athena, and Minerva followed, and Singh brought up the rear. The party made its way to the far south end of the house, where the ballroom lay. Gray continued down a short hall and stopped in front of a large painting. Gavin had seen the painting many times and studied it some with Dubonais during the art inventory. It was enormous; the figures on it were almost life-sized. It had been painted in the late 19th century but depicted a scene much earlier of the first Duke of Craignish rallying his men to battle, waving a sword over his head; the sword was almost certainly Myrmidon. The frame was massive and ornately carved; Gray went to the left side. “You tilt this large candleholder, like so.” He moved a six-foot brass candleholder forward. A click and a groan came from inside the wall. “Then you reach back here, there’s a metal handle, and you pull, hard—the door is very heavy. You must do so within 10 seconds or the mechanism re-sets.” He pulled, and slowly the painting, and part of the wall, swung outward. A dark opening yawned. “Here, sir, I’ll go first and turn on the lights; don’t suppose but half the bulbs work.” Gray entered and fumbled for the light switch. He found it, and old bulbs flickered slowly to life; indeed, only about half functioned.

Gavin stepped forward; he made it about three feet inside and stopped. Athena and Minerva ran into him from behind; he did not notice. He and the two women goggled; the room was larger by far than the library where they had recently been sitting. Tall bookcases lined the room; the far ones could barely be seen in the dim light. Gavin instantly calculated—there must be eight or ten thousand volumes; his brain almost overloaded. He jerked forward, head swiveling. He could only speak in a whisper. “Shades of my ancestors, it’s like stumbling on The Library of Alexandria, in my own house. Gray, how is this possible? How long has this library, have these books, been here?”

“I am not certain, sir. The late duke rarely came here, said most of them were written in such an old style it was difficult to enjoy them. From what I gathered, most of these were collected by Alistair MacMunro, in the 1800s. Apparently, he had a man whom he sent roving all over Scotland, England, Wales, and Ireland, and all over the Continent as well. His Grace said there were books in almost every language in here; I recall he laughed and said there were one or two which were in a language not even scholars could read.”

As Gray spoke, Gavin, Athena, and Minerva wandered around the room. “Does anyone come in here, Gray?”

“Yes, sir; the maids come in twice a year, to dust and vacuum. I do need to get James in here to change the burnt-out bulbs.”

Athena and Minerva were wandering around, perusing the books they could reach. Athena stopped at one and pulled it out; she took it to a table and opened it. Suddenly, she screamed; she stepped back, eyes wide, and her hands flew to her mouth. The others jumped in surprise.

“What the hell, girl?” exclaimed Gavin. “A spider?”

Athena could only point at the book on the table. Minerva reached her first and almost instantly reacted the same way at what she saw.

Gavin strode to the table. “Great Jupiter, what the fuck has gotten into you two? They may be old, but they’re just books; what have you found?” He pushed the women aside and bent over the book. He pulled out and donned his glasses, and peered closer. He carefully turned one or two pages, then stood up straight; his face was ashen.

“Grandpère,” whispered Athena. “Is that what I think it is?”

“My girl, somehow you have managed to stumble on the find of a lifetime; no, several lifetimes. What made you pull it out?”

“It was standing on a shelf, between two bookends, all by itself. I thought that was unusual, so I picked it up.”

“I see. Well, if proven authentic, we have here a copy of the First Folio of Shakespeare.” Gavin shook his head in wonder. “My God. There are only 235 known to exist, and some of those may be forgeries. And this one has just been quietly sitting on a shelf the last 200-odd years. Gray, where is the list or card catalog?”

“Ah, what list, sir?”

“The list of all the books, of course. What did they use: a record book, a box of notecards, what?”

Gray shook his head slowly. “I do not recall ever seeing a list, sir. Of course, I’ve only been here 30 years.”

Gavin went to a nearby chair and sat heavily. No list. Probably 15,000 books in the house, and no list. Time for another call to Elizabeth to ask for help.