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The Last Library

Episode One. The Courier Who Hated Books.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Crate

Juno Arden had three rules for courier work, and the first one was never ask what's in the box.

The second rule was get paid before you undock. The third rule changed depending on how much she'd had to drink the night before, but that morning it was something like never take a job from a man who smiles too much.

The man at the Port Tessaly loading dock was smiling a lot.

"It's just paper," he said, patting the crate. It was about the size of a coffin for a large dog, made of dark wood with brass corners, and it had a label on the side written by hand. Juno didn't trust handwriting. Handwriting meant someone cared, and caring meant trouble.

"Paper," she said.

"Books. Old ones. A collector out on the Rim wants them delivered to a library."

"There aren't any libraries on the Rim."

"There's one." He kept smiling. "The Last Library. You've heard of it?"

She had, the way you hear about ghost ships and lucky asteroids. Space stories. Things old pilots said in bars after the fourth round. A library at the edge of the galaxy, past the last fuel station, past the last beacon, where every book that had ever been written was kept on shelves that went on forever.

"I've heard of it," she said. "I've also heard about the moon that sings. Neither of them are real."

The man pulled a payment chip out of his coat and held it up so she could read the number. Juno read it twice, because the first time she thought she'd counted the zeros wrong.

"Coordinates are on the chip," he said. "Half now, half when you deliver. The librarian will sign for it."

Rule two said get paid before you undock. Technically, half was paid. Juno decided that counted.

She looked at the crate. She looked at the number again. She thought about the payment on her ship, which was three months late, and the strange noise the left engine made when she pushed it past seventy percent.

"Fine," she said. "But if it's full of anything that bites, I'm opening the airlock."

"It's books," the man said. "Books don't bite."

He was wrong about that, but Juno wouldn't find out for another eleven days.

CHAPTER TWO

The Comma Problem

Her ship was called the *Paper Moon*, which was funny, considering.

She hadn't named it. It came with the name when she bought it at an auction on Delphi Station six years ago, along with a broken coffee machine and a navigation computer that talked too much. She'd fixed the coffee machine. She'd never managed to fix the computer.

"You've taken a cargo of reading material," the computer said, while she was strapping the crate into the hold. "How unusual for you."

"It's not reading material. It's cargo."

"It's books, Juno. The manifest says so. Forty two volumes, bound in leather and cloth. Some of them are over three hundred years old."

"Then they'll survive another two weeks."

She'd always hated books. Not in an angry way. More the way you hate a food that made you sick once as a kid. Her mother had read constantly, curled up in the corner of their tiny apartment on Hesper, turning pages while the rent went unpaid and the fridge went empty. Every time Juno needed something, her mother was somewhere else, inside a story about other people with better problems.

When her mother left for good, she took the books with her and left Juno behind. Juno was eleven. She'd never read a book for fun since.

She finished with the straps and turned to go. That's when the crate coughed.

It was a small sound. Mechanical. Like a tiny engine clearing its throat. Juno stopped in the doorway and looked back.

"Computer. Did you hear that?"

"I heard something, yes."

"Scan the crate."

"The crate is made of old wood and contains paper. Also, it seems, a small power source."

Juno sighed, took the crowbar off the wall and opened the lid.

The books were packed in straw, tight together, their spines facing up. Brown, green, deep red. Gold letters, most of them faded. Between two of the thickest books, wedged in tight, was something round and silver, about the size of a grapefruit.

It opened one eye. A single blue light, blinking slowly, like it was waking up from a long nap.

"Oh," it said, in a voice like a small bell. "We've started moving. Good."

Juno pointed the crowbar at it. "What are you?"

The silver ball rose out of the straw, very slowly, on a soft hum. It had two tiny arms folded against its body like a beetle's wings. It looked at the crowbar, then at her face.

"I'm Comma," it said. "I'm the escort."

"Nobody said anything about an escort."

"Nobody ever does. People get so nervous about drones." It floated a little higher and looked around the hold. "This is a very dirty ship."

"It's a working ship."

"It's a very dirty working ship." Comma turned back to her. "You can put the crowbar down. I'm not here to hurt anyone. I'm here to make sure the books arrive. Some of them are the last copies."

"The last copies of what?"

"Of themselves."

Juno lowered the crowbar, mostly because her arm was getting tired. "Why are you called Comma?"

"Because I make people pause," the drone said. It sounded pleased with itself, like it had been waiting years to say that. "Also, the Archivist has a sense of humor. You'll see."

CHAPTER THREE

Eleven Days

The trip to the Rim took eleven days, which was about ten more days than Juno wanted to spend with a talking drone.

Comma didn't sleep. It didn't eat. It didn't seem to need anything except to float around the ship asking questions, most of which Juno didn't want to answer.

"Why don't you have any books on board?"

"Because I don't read."

"Everyone reads."

"I read manifests. Fuel reports. The menu at Lorry's on Tessaly."

"That's not reading. That's information."

"Same thing."

"It is absolutely not the same thing," Comma said, and floated off in a way that felt like a slammed door.

On the fourth day, the left engine did its strange noise again and Juno spent six hours in the maintenance crawlspace with a wrench and a lot of bad words. When she crawled out, covered in grease, Comma was waiting for her with a cup of coffee held carefully in its little arms.

"I fixed the coffee machine," it said. "It was making it wrong."

Juno took the coffee. It was the best coffee she'd ever had on that ship. She didn't say thank you, but she didn't say anything rude either, and Comma seemed to understand that was the same thing.

On the sixth day, they passed the last fuel station. It was a rusty ring of metal with one tired attendant and a sign that said NOTHING PAST HERE in three languages. The attendant stared at Juno's coordinates for a long time.

"You're going out there?" he said. "To the Library?"

"You know it?"

"Everyone out here knows it." He looked over her shoulder at Comma, who was floating in the doorway. "You've got one of those. So I guess it's real for you."

"What do you mean, real for me?"

He shrugged and handed back her chip. "It's only there if they want you there. That's what they say."

On the eighth day, the nav computer stopped talking. Not broken. Just quiet. Juno checked it three times and every system was working. It simply had nothing to say, which in six years had never happened once.

"It's the Rim," Comma said. "Things are quieter out here. Even machines."

On the ninth day, Juno asked her first question.

She didn't mean to. She was sitting in the cockpit, watching the stars thin out, and Comma was floating next to her, and the words came out before she could stop them.

"What happens when you get there? To the books?"

Comma turned its blue eye toward her. "They go on the shelves."

"And then what?"

"And then they wait for someone to remember them."

"What if nobody does?"

The drone was quiet for a while. Its light pulsed slowly.

"Then they fade," it said.

Juno didn't know what that meant. She decided she didn't want to know. She went back to watching the stars.

On the tenth day, there were almost no stars left.

On the eleventh day, they found the Library.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Story Comma Told

The night before they arrived, Juno couldn't sleep.

That wasn't unusual. She hadn't slept properly in years. Usually she sat in the cockpit and watched the dark until her eyes gave up. But out here, with no stars, the dark had nothing to watch. It was just dark. It pressed against the windows like it wanted to come in.

Comma found her there at three in the morning, ship time.

"You should rest," it said.

"Can't."

The drone floated down and settled on the console next to her, its little arms folded. It didn't say anything for a while. Juno was grateful for that.

"Do you want a story?" it asked eventually.

"No."

"It's a short one."

"I said no."

"It's about a pilot."

Juno closed her eyes. "Fine. Short."

Comma's light dimmed to a soft blue, like a night lamp.

"There was once a pilot who flew mail between two moons," it began. "Every day, the same route. Out in the morning, back in the evening. She knew every rock and every shadow on the way. One day, a little boy on the first moon gave her a letter. It was addressed to his father on the second moon. The pilot delivered it, like always. But the father wasn't there. He'd moved away years before. Nobody knew where."

"So she sent it back," Juno said.

"No. She kept it. She didn't know why. She put it in her jacket pocket, and the next day, and every day after, she asked at every stop if anyone knew the man. For years. She asked everywhere she flew."

"Did she find him?"

"She did. Very old, on a station far away. She gave him the letter. He read it and cried, and then he told her the little boy who wrote it had been him, writing to his own father a very long time ago. He'd forgotten all about it. He thanked her for remembering when he couldn't."

Juno was quiet for a long time.

"That doesn't make sense," she said finally. "He couldn't write a letter to himself."

"Stories don't always make sense," Comma said. "They just have to be true."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Probably," the drone agreed, and floated off to the galley, leaving her alone in the dark. But the dark felt a little smaller now, and after a while, Juno slept.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Edge

It didn't look like a library. It looked like a lighthouse built by someone who had never seen the sea.

A tall tower of white stone floated in the dark, alone, with no planet beneath it and no sun above it. It was lit from the inside. Thousands of tall windows ran up its sides in a spiral, and every one of them glowed a warm, soft gold, the color of a lamp in a kitchen late at night.

At the very top, there was a dome made of glass, and inside the dome Juno could see something turning. Slow. Huge. Like the hands of a clock, if the clock was measuring something other than time.

"Well," Juno said. "That's not possible."

"Lots of things aren't possible," Comma said. "That never stops them."

There was a docking ring at the base of the tower. No traffic control, no beacon, no fees. Juno brought the *Paper Moon* in slowly and the clamps closed around her ship so gently she barely felt it.

The airlock opened onto a hallway made of dark wood. It smelled like dust and rain and something sweet that she couldn't name. Somewhere far off, a clock was ticking.

Standing at the end of the hallway was a woman.

She was older than Juno, maybe sixty, maybe a hundred, it was hard to tell. She wore a long gray coat with too many pockets, and round glasses on a chain, and her white hair was tied up in a knot held with two pencils. She was holding a clipboard. Actual paper. Juno hadn't seen a clipboard since flight school.

"You're late," the woman said.

"I'm early. The contract said twelve days."

"The contract was written by an optimist." The woman looked past her, at the crate floating behind them on a cargo sled, and her whole face changed. The hardness went out of it. She walked forward and laid one hand flat on the wood, like you'd touch a horse to calm it down.

"Hello," she said quietly. Not to Juno. To the books. "Welcome home."

Then she looked up. "I'm Odile. The Archivist. Thank you for bringing them."

"I need a signature."

"Of course you do." Odile signed the clipboard without looking at it, tore off the page and handed it to her. "Comma, take them to the sorting room. Gently."

The drone hummed, attached itself to the cargo sled with a small click, and floated away down the hall, pulling the crate behind it.

Juno looked at the signed paper. She looked at Odile.

"That's it? I can go?"

"You can go," Odile said. "Or you can stay for tea. I'd recommend the tea. The engine on your ship makes a terrible sound, by the way. Third coupling on the left side. It'll fail in about four hundred hours."

Juno stared at her. "How do you know that?"

"I read the manual," Odile said, and walked away down the hall, as if there were no question at all that Juno would follow.

Juno followed.

CHAPTER SIX

The Shelves

The inside of the Library was bigger than the outside.

Juno noticed this the way you notice a stair that isn't there. Her body knew before her head did. She walked through a doorway behind Odile and the space opened up around her so fast that she grabbed the frame to keep her balance.

Shelves. Shelves going up and up into a golden haze, too high to see the top. Shelves going left and right in long curved rows until they disappeared around the bend of the tower. Ladders on brass rails. Narrow walkways connecting one level to another like bridges. Little reading lamps everywhere, glowing green and gold.

And books. More books than Juno had seen in her whole life put together. More than she had known existed.

Some of the books glowed.

Not all of them. Most of them were normal, dull leather and cloth. But here and there, scattered across the shelves like stars, some spines shone with a soft light. Some were bright as candles. Some only faintly, like a coal at the end of a fire.

"Why are some of them lit up?" Juno asked.

Odile was pouring tea at a small table near the entrance. Two cups. She'd known.

"They're being read," she said. "Somewhere out there, right now, someone has that book open. Or remembers it. Or is telling someone else about it. As long as somebody holds a story in their mind, its light reaches here."

"And the dark ones?"

Odile handed her a cup. "Nobody's thinking about them at the moment. That's all right. Books can wait a long time. Some of them sleep for centuries and then wake up because one child in one school finds them on a shelf."

"And if nobody ever finds them?"

Odile sat down and looked at her over her glasses. "You've been talking to Comma."

"It said they fade."

"They do." Odile sipped her tea. "When a book is completely forgotten. When there's no copy left anywhere, and nobody who ever read it is still alive to remember it, the light goes out for good. And then the book fades. First the cover, then the words, and then it's just a blank, and then it's just a space on the shelf."

Juno looked at the shelves again. Now she noticed the gaps. Small ones, here and there, like missing teeth. Dark spaces where something used to be.

"That's what I do," Odile said. "I collect the last copies before they disappear. People send them to me. Collectors, families, sometimes thieves with guilty consciences. And the books wait here, safe, until someone remembers them again."

"How often does that happen?"

"Not often enough."

Juno drank her tea. It was very good tea. She didn't want to say that either.

"Why does it matter?" she said instead. "If nobody reads them anyway."

Odile didn't answer right away. She looked at Juno for a long moment, the way a mechanic looks at an engine that's making a noise it shouldn't.

"Because every book is somebody saying I was here," Odile said finally. "I saw this. I felt this. I want you to know. When a book fades, it's like that person never spoke at all."

Juno set her cup down. Something in her chest felt tight and she didn't like it.

"I should go," she said.

"You should," Odile agreed. "But your ship won't be ready until morning. Comma's already started on that coupling."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Night Shift

Juno didn't remember agreeing to stay. But somehow, two hours later, she was sitting on a rolling ladder in a long dark aisle with a lamp in one hand and a box of books in the other.

"It's easy," Comma said, floating beside her. "You read the number on the spine, you find the matching number on the shelf, you put the book in the gap."

"I'm not a librarian."

"You're not doing anything else."

"I'm a guest."

"Guests help." Comma's eye blinked. "That's what makes them guests and not cargo."

So she shelved books. It turned out to be weirdly satisfying, like loading cargo in exactly the right order. The numbers made sense once you understood the system. Each section had its own color of lamp. Each book had its own place. When she slid one into its gap, the shelf seemed to sigh a little, like it had been waiting.

Around midnight, or whatever passed for midnight at the edge of the galaxy, she found a book on the floor.

It was small. Blue cloth cover. No title on the spine, just a little drawing of a ship, worn almost away. It was dark. Not even a flicker.

"This one fell," she said.

Comma floated down to look. "Ah. That one's very old. Very tired."

Juno turned it over in her hands. Without really meaning to, she opened it.

The first page said, in plain neat letters, *For anyone who has ever felt left behind.*

She closed it fast, like it had burned her.

"You can read it, you know," Comma said softly.

"I don't read."

"I know. But you could."

Juno put the book back on the shelf where it belonged. She told herself she wasn't going to think about it. She thought about it for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hesper

In the morning, the *Paper Moon* was fixed and there was no reason to stay.

Juno ate breakfast at the little table by the entrance anyway. Odile had made eggs, which seemed impossible at the edge of the universe, and toast, which seemed even more impossible. Comma floated nearby, polishing a brass lamp with a cloth it held in both arms.

"Where are you from?" Odile asked.

"Nowhere."

"Nobody's from nowhere."

"Hesper," Juno said. "Outer ring. Block nine."

Odile nodded like that meant something to her. Maybe it did. "And your family?"

Juno put her fork down. "Why do you care?"

"Because you flinch every time you look at a shelf," Odile said simply. "And I've been doing this for a very long time. People who hate books usually have a reason."

Juno almost got up and left. She almost said something rude. Instead, she looked at her plate and heard herself talking.

"My mother read all the time. Every day, every night. She'd sit in the corner with a book and the whole world could be on fire. I'd be hungry, I'd be sick, I'd be crying, and she'd just turn the page. Like we weren't real and the people in the books were." She shrugged, trying to make it smaller than it was. "One day she left. Took her books. Didn't take me."

Odile didn't say she was sorry. Juno liked her more for that.

"Do you know what she was reading?" Odile asked. "Any of the titles?"

"Why would I?"

"Children remember more than they think."

Juno started to say no. Then a picture came to her, sharp and sudden. Her mother's hands. A small book with a blue cloth cover. A little drawing of a ship on the spine.

She felt cold all over.

"No," she lied. "I don't remember anything."

Odile looked at her for a long time. Then she nodded and poured more tea, and they didn't talk about it again.

But on her way back to the ship, Juno took a different route through the stacks. She told herself it was a shortcut. She stopped at the shelf where she had put the blue book the night before, and she stood there, looking at it, for a long time.

It was still dark. But maybe, just maybe, it was a little less dark than before.

She didn't take it. She walked on. She was almost at the airlock when the bells started.

CHAPTER NINE

The Dark Shelf

It wasn't a nice bell. Not a dinner bell. A sharp, fast, repeating sound that echoed down every aisle at once and made her heart jump.

Juno turned around and ran back the way she came.

She found Odile in the main hall, standing very still in front of a section of shelves. Comma was floating beside her, its light flashing red.

"What's happening?" Juno asked.

Odile didn't turn around. "Look."

Juno looked.

An entire shelf was going dark.

Not one book. A whole shelf, maybe fifty books long. As Juno watched, the last few glowing spines flickered, dimmed and went out, one after another, like someone was walking down the row blowing out candles.

"That's not normal," Juno said.

"No." Odile's voice was very quiet. "Books fade one at a time. Slowly. Over years. Not like this."

The last light went out.

And then the books started to fade.

Juno watched the cover of the nearest one turn gray, then pale, then almost see through. She could read the title for a second. Then she couldn't. Then the shape of the book was there, like a shadow, and then it wasn't.

Fifty books. Gone in less than a minute. A long, clean, empty shelf.

Comma made a sound Juno had never heard a machine make. It was very small and very sad.

"Someone is doing this," Odile said. "Somewhere out there, someone is making people forget."

"How do you make people forget a book?"

Odile finally turned to look at her, and for the first time, the Archivist looked frightened.

"I don't know," she said. "But it's getting closer."

CHAPTER TEN

The Catalog

Odile spent the next hour at the catalog, a huge wooden cabinet with thousands of tiny drawers, each one full of handwritten cards. She pulled drawer after drawer, checking, muttering, writing notes on her clipboard.

"Every book in the Library has a card," Comma explained, while Juno hovered uselessly nearby. "Title, author, where it came from, who brought it in. When a book fades, the card goes blank too."

"So she's checking which ones are gone."

"She's checking if there's a pattern."

Juno didn't know what to do with her hands. She was a pilot. When things went wrong, she flew away from them. She'd never stood still and watched something disappear before. She didn't like how it felt.

"Can I help?" she heard herself say.

Odile looked up, surprised. Then she pointed to a drawer at the end of the row.

"Courier records," she said. "Every person who's ever brought a book here gets a card too. We keep track of who carried what. Check if any of the faded books came in with the same courier."

Juno pulled the drawer open. It was full of cards, packed tight, yellowed at the edges. Names she didn't know. Dates going back hundreds of years. Some written in languages she couldn't read.

She flipped through them quickly, looking for anything that matched Odile's list. Her fingers moved fast. She was good at manifests. This was just a manifest that had gotten old.

Then she stopped.

Because there, in the middle of the drawer, between a courier called Bastian Rook and a courier called Ilse Marrow, was a card with her name on it.

Juno Arden.

Not new. Not today's date. The card was old. The edges were soft and brown. The ink had faded to the color of weak tea.

Underneath her name, in the same neat handwriting she had seen in the blue book last night, someone had written a single line.

Delivered the last copy. Did not come back.

Juno stared at the card. Her hands were shaking.

"Odile," she said. Her voice came out wrong. "Odile, why is my name in here?"

The Archivist walked over slowly. She took the card from Juno's fingers, held it up to the lamp and read it twice.

When she looked up, her face was very pale.

"That," she said, "is a very good question."

Behind them, somewhere deep in the Library, another bell began to ring.

EPISODE TWO

Next Time

Who wrote Juno's card, and when? What is the last copy she's supposed to have delivered? Who is making the galaxy forget, and why are the dark shelves getting closer to the heart of the Library?

And the small blue book with the drawing of a ship. Why does it feel like it was written for her?

Juno Arden hates books. But it looks like one of them has been waiting for her for a very long time.

The Last Library continues in Episode Two. The Forgetting.

Coming soon to Booktronaut.com.



Thank you for reading

Juno's story continues in Episode Two. Until then, go read something nobody else remembers. Somewhere, a shelf just got a little brighter.

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