

Lyubochka's Library on Legs

Lyubochka's library only received one visitor every five years and that was the way she liked it. If she had wanted more frequent patronship, she would not have given her library legs.

There were several ways her library could be entered. Several proven methods included chasing the library through the blizzard that surrounded it, luring it in with tasty atlases or simply harpooning it. The latter was Lyubochka's least favourite method.

This morning, amidst a particularly white snowstorm, Lyubochka's library had been chased about for hours by a young prince. When Lyubochka eventually realised that the prince just would not die in the snowstorm, she bade her library to stop running. Someone so persistently unkillable must be after something useful, she decided.

The library creaked to a halt.

Its towering jumble of shack-like protrusions and patchwork onion domes swayed to a stop and seventeen chimneys puffed. The front door swung open.

"Good morning," greeted the prince, taking off his cap as he stepped inside.

The door shut behind him. The howling winds muted.

Lyubochka hobbled to the door, wrapping her shawl tighter around her shoulders. "Is it morning?" she asked. All the day looked the same. There was nothing outside her windows but snow.

"Yes," said the prince, dusting the snow off his jacket with a gloved hand. It spattered onto the dusty floor. "I have been chasing

your library all night. I have come here looking for something very specific.”

She hummed. “Alright.”

Lyubochka was a very old woman and she had spent very many decades in her library. Each of those decades was, on occasion, rudely interrupted by a choice selection of young men who were all looking for something very specific. Princes, generals, captains, tsars and sultans all came riding through the blizzard and, for each of them persistent enough to warrant it, the door had opened.

And they had each wanted the same thing.

There were countless books in Lyubochka’s library. There were books that could teach you how to spin cloaks from rays of moonlight and books that could teach you where to sail to find a flower whose milk caused grey hair to turn black again. There were books telling stories of heroes long dead and heroes never born. There was a recipe book that had Lyubochka’s favourite herring soup recipe. It was a good library.

Yet all these men wanted the same thing.

It was an important book, bound in thick leather the way all important books seem to be. It was too heavy for a man to carry, yet light enough for a child. A warm glow pulsed from the keyhole, turning frostier with each millimetre closer to the touch of human hands.

This book was called *The Book of All Knowledge*.

Lyubochka had read it once and found it to be a little trite. The content was decent but the style was too hackneyed for her liking. She preferred the soup book.

Every man who rode here had his own reasons for pursuing the Book of All Knowledge. Some sought to win wars, wanting the knowledge to slaughter armies and besiege cities. Some sought fortune and treasures—gypsum statues, opium, chalcedonies, spices, and silks. Some sought the knowledge needed to win their hearts’ desires, insisting that love was better than all these things.

Again, Lyubochka preferred the soup book.

“I have seen many like you,” she warned, her lantern creaking as she sighed. “All looking for the same thing.”

The prince’s eyes grew wide as he looked past her into the library,

and he strode in through the wooden arches.

"I know what you want, young man."

He beamed, surveying the soaring wooden shelves. The library was endless. Bookshelves spiralled up into turrets, sheltered by domed ceilings of porphyry and lapis lazuli. There was a ladder at every shelf, whose rungs shifted like snakes.

"Do you?" he asked, distracted. He ran his hand across a wooden carving of a rabbit, which skittered away at his touch. It was dark enough in the library for him to have imagined this.

"Yes," she groaned. "I am a very old woman. I've lived long enough to see a hundred men like you. You are all the same. You all seek the same thing."

"Really?" His eyebrows rose just a little and he turned to her. "A hundred?"

"A hundred."

"And they all wanted the same thing from your library?"

"They did."

"And what did they all want?"

She exhaled, and with her sigh her bones creaked the way her library did. "What do you want?" she asked, hoping he would answer his own question.

"I want to burn it down," the prince announced proudly.

Lyubochka paused. "What?"

"I want to burn down your library," he repeated with a gallant grin.

It was a famous grin, soon to be reproduced on every coin in the country once his aging father died. It was a famous grin on a famous face. Citizens fawned over the etchings of it, distributed in town squares of prominent towns. A well-known artist had once used it as a model for a tapestry of Bogatyr Alyosha, the most handsome folk hero in his country's myth.

It took a great deal of effort for Lyubochka not to hurl her lantern directly at this famous face. "Why in the world would you want to burn down my library, young man?"

He gestured outside the window where the blizzard raged. "It's cold."

Her jaw fell open. "Burn some coals!"

"We have mined our caves dry," he told her. "And cut our forests bare. The only thing we have left are books so I would quite like to take them from you and use them as firewood for my people. The blizzard blocks out the sun and the citizens of my country need fire to light their trades."

Lyubochka hesitated. That did not sound *violently* unreasonable. "Could you perhaps take one book and burn that? There is one that really annoys me. You could have that."

He chuckled such a hearty laugh that Lyubochka suspected it of being fake. "If we had only one citizen in our country, who had only one night to live, then perhaps," he said. "But our country is vast, and in dire need of firewood."

"There you go," she said. "You've sorted your own problem. Get some firewood." She took his arm and began to usher him to the door. "What a clever young man. Thank you for visiting!"

But the prince stood his ground. "As I have said, the forests are bare. We have no more trees for wood."

"The fantastic thing about trees is that new ones grow all the time."

"Not in this blizzard," he argued.

"Then you should have been more careful with your old ones."

The snowy spruce trees in the tapestry above them rustled in indignation. As the inhabitants of a tapestry, they were at no risk of being cut down but it was the idea that they took offense to. It was a matter of principle.

The prince slipped free from Lyubochka's brittle grip. "For what do we need so many books anyway? What else are we supposed to do with them?"

"Read them!" she cried, gesturing to the library with an open hand.

He snorted. "And be like one of those old men who live to about five hundred and seven?"

"Do you ever wonder how they live to about five hundred and seven?"

He nodded to the lantern in Lyubochka's hand. "Should you have that?" he asked. "Paper is very flammable. In fact, that is what I like about it so much."

"Shut up," said Lyubochka.

He did.

She snorted and began to walk away, shaking her head. The library's door swung open and the blizzard screamed. "This blizzard has been raging for five hundred years," she grumbled. "And in five hundred years they never ran out of coal or kindling. They respected the country whose land they live on. Why has your father, the king, been so stupid?"

The prince stayed silent.

Lyubochka and her library could sense him getting angrier. The monsters painted onto the library's celestial maps glided down the walls in the hopes of seeing a confrontation. The giant who held up the sky put it down for a moment so he could get a better view.

The prince clenched his gloved fists and stepped back. He vowed, controlling his tone, "My father is kind and he is wise."

She said, "A wise king cares for his country, not just rules it."

"But he hasn't been able to rule it," said the prince over the sounds of the blizzard. "My father has been very sick. I have been ruling in his place for the last three years when the forests were cut to stumps and the mines were hewed bare."

She stopped and the lantern swayed. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen years."

Lyubochka sighed and the door closed again. The last remnants of snow dropped to the ground by the rug and the library was quiet again.

She turned back around and the prince was watching her.

Most men who came here wanted glory in war or victory in love or the conquest of great spaces. This young prince wanted to keep his small country alive in a blizzard.

"Nineteen years is too young," said Lyubochka finally. "Boys of nineteen know nothing."

"We know some things."

"Nothing good," she said and he conceded. She went on, "Boys as wealthy and as irritating as you often have tutors."

"I have no time. I am ruling my father's country."

She snorted. "Yes, and doing a fine job of it. What else have you managed to spoil other than every forest and mine in your country? Have the deer and boars died out? Are the wolves plaguing the

remote villages? Have the woodcutters revolted?"

"Not this week," he said and the bad joke was not lost on Lyubochka.

She groaned. "Yes, yes, ha ha, provincial suffering is very funny."

He grimaced. "I apologise."

"Apologise to the woodcutters."

The prince nodded reluctantly. "I suppose I shall have to. There is no more wood left for them to cut."

And Lyubochka decided, "I shall give you my library."

His eyebrows shot up.

Before he could get too excited, she added, "With me in it."

He hesitated. "Thank you for the offer but I don't think I could, with good conscience, use a human as kindling."

Lyubochka was briefly horrified. "Idiot boy! What will you do when you burn every book?"

"Hopefully not burn a human woman, if that was what you were offering—"

"There will be no burning of books! Nor of humans," she added, although she felt like she really oughtn't have had to. "I will be your tutor." Catching the look on his face, she explained to him what she meant. "I will let you read every book in this library until you learn to take care of your land the same way that you take care of your people."

"But I have no time! I have to oversee every aspect of my country—taxes, the church, the law itself..."

"There will be no country if you do not learn how to rule it."

He considered this. "And what will I learn under your tutelage?"

Lyubochka sniffed for this ought to be obvious. "Everything."

"And how will this save my father's country?"

"It might not. But it shall certainly stop things from becoming much worse. And perhaps you might learn a way to mend the country you have managed to break."

And the prince agreed.

"Is it true," he asked, "that this library houses a book that contains *all knowledge*?"

"Yes."

"And may I read it?"

She grumbled. "I think that perhaps we ought to introduce you to *some* knowledge before we lead you to all of it."

The prince agreed too much to be particularly offended. "Do you have any other conditions?" asked the prince.

"Of course," said Lyubochka. "You must read *every* book in this library."

And it was agreed.

The fires in the library's furnaces roared to life and the gearwheels and the rotors creaked to life. The library pulled itself to its feet, chimneys wobbling. It began its journey.

Through the blizzard, as the sun set, the library walked towards the dark country without fire. Although nobody could see who was inside, everybody felt as though they must be terribly important people to be in command of such a vast library. And they were correct. Inside the library sat the new royal tutor and a prince who would soon be very good at making herring soup.

He would live to about five hundred and seven.