

# **And Other Duties as Assigned**

*by Spencer Jordan*

In the desolate wasteland that was once a thriving riverfront city, Maud wandered through the ruins, clutching a sturdy walking stick in one hand and a meager satchel in the other. In their satchel was a utility knife, a bulging journal filled with tales of their travels, some prized matches, and a printed picture of them and some friends at their college graduation. They were a librarian, or at least, they had been in a world long gone by. Now, they were just a survivor, scrounging for scraps and struggling to find meaning in the ashes of civilization.

Maud was like every other survivor. They had a life before, filled with joys and flaws and loves. Maud was able to find solace in the fragmented world through holding onto the familiar. They had always been a bit of a recluse, finding peace between the pages of books and the quiet of the library. But in a world torn apart by wars and chaos, libraries had become relics of a forgotten era. Most had been reduced to smoldering rubble, their knowledge lost to the flames. Maud spent their time roaming, collecting books abandoned in houses, reading them as they could, and then using the pages to warm especially cold nights.

As they followed ruptured streets, through a maze of crumbling buildings, they heard a soft meow. Turning, Maud saw their faithful feline companion, Poe, trotting toward them. The scrappy black cat had been their constant companion since the world had fallen apart, and together, they had survived countless dangers. Poe was an especially ugly cat, the kind of ugly that had a certain charm to it. His right eye was missing, the skin that laid over it was sunk into the socket. His short, inky black fur, despite the hours of grooming both he and Maud had put in, was always sticking up in a million different directions. His legs were too long for his skinny

body, and his feet were too tiny against his already small frame. Maud often thought that he'd make a great Tim Burton film cat, in another world.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the landscape, a subtle change in the atmosphere signaled the impending arrival of a storm. The winds whipping at Maud's ankles, kicking up their duster coat. Maud bent down and scooped up Poe, scared he may blow away. The air grew heavy with anticipation, a palpable tension that seemed to linger in every gust of wind.

"Come on, Poe," Maud whispered, their voice hoarse from days of silent wandering. "We're almost to the river." They both were hungry and thirsty, but the river could provide enough fish and water to sustain the pair for the foreseeable future. They had to make it, shelter can be figured out later.

At first, the sky took on a muted, foreboding hue, as if a dark curtain were being drawn across the heavens. The vibrant colors of sunset gave way to shades of gray and indigo, peeking out over the collapsed skyscrapers and into the streets. The first omen of the impending storm was the distant rumble of thunder, a low and ominous growl that echoed across the jagged horizon.

Maud could hear crashing waves in the distance, screeching seagulls warned of the tumultuous storm. They were close. The temperature dropped, a sudden chill sweeping over the land as dark clouds gathered overhead. Lightning began to streak across the sky, illuminating the roiling mass of vapor in shades of electric white and violet.

As Maud and Poe ventured through the relentless storm, they saw a sign ahead. ***Beach Parking*** with an arrow pointing down a road that was hidden behind an especially large grouping

of buildings. A shred of hope ran down Maud's spine and into their legs as they took off in a sprint.

And, finally, they stumbled upon the river, the churning waters agitated by the gale. Rain lashed at their faces, and the wind whipped their clothing as they reached the water's edge. The river, normally calm and serene, now surged with a wild energy, its waves crashing onto the sandy shore.

Poe clung tightly to Maud's shoulder, his fur bristling with unease. The beach, which had once been a place of leisure and tranquility, now felt like a desolate and inhospitable landscape. Maud's clothes were drenched, and their skin felt chilled to the bone. Yet relief swirled in their chest.

Desperate for shelter from the relentless storm, Maud spotted an abandoned building not far from the river's edge. Its facade scarred by time and neglect, windows covered with wooden beams, but it offered the promise of respite from the elements. Maud only hoped that no one was inside.

Clutching Poe to their chest, Maud dashed towards the building, their footsteps sinking into the rain-soaked sand. The door creaked open reluctantly, revealing a pitch black interior that smelled of dampness and decay. With a sense of trepidation, Maud and Poe entered, the door slamming shut behind them with a resounding thud, sealing them off from the fury of the storm outside.

It took a moment for Maud's eyes to adjust to the sheer darkness that loomed around them, but once they had, their heart skipped a beat. Rows upon rows of books filled the room, their spines faded but still standing tall, defiant against the ravages of time. Maud's eyes welled

with tears, and they couldn't help but smile as they knelt down and ran their fingers over the dust-covered volumes.

For hours, Maud pored over the books, their fingers trembling as they turned pages filled with knowledge that had been lost to the world. They found science, art, history, and literature - all the things that had once defined culture and progress. It was a treasure trove of wisdom and stories, preserved against all odds. Against all of humanities might.

But as Maud read, a heavy weight settled in their chest. They thought of the small communities of survivors that are nearby. How useful this haven, this knowledge, could be for them. Maud thought of the conflicts that exist between them. They couldn't ignore the truth that this knowledge could be the key to building a safe and harmonious society, to providing a glimmer of hope to the struggling survivors outside. And yet, it could also be the catalyst for new conflicts and power struggles.

Maud's heart ached with the weight of the decision they had to make. They glanced at Poe, who was curled up on a dusty old armchair, his tail flicking lazily. The cat was a symbol of their own survival, a constant reminder of the bond they shared in this harsh new world.

"I don't know what to do, Poe," Maud whispered, reaching out to stroke the cat's chaotic fur. "If I share this, it could change everything. But it could also destroy what little is left."

Outside the library, the world was a dangerous place. Factions fought for control over meager resources, and the desperate cries of the suffering echoed through the ruins. Maud had witnessed cruelty and brutality that made them question whether humanity deserved the knowledge they held in their hands.

Days turned into weeks as Maud agonized over their decision. They knew they couldn't keep the library's existence a secret forever, but they needed to be careful about how they shared

it. They started by transcribing essential knowledge into journals, carefully choosing what to reveal and what to protect. It was a painstaking process, but Maud hoped that it would ensure the wisdom of the past was used responsibly.

One evening, as Maud was adding the finishing touches to one of their transcriptions, they heard a commotion outside the library. Poe perked up, his ears twitching.

Maud cautiously made their way to an exposed window and peered outside. A group of survivors had stumbled upon the building. They looked hungry, weary, and desperate. They were drawn by the faint glow of candlelight filtering through the library's cracked windows.

Tears welled up in Maud's eyes as they realized they couldn't turn them away. It was time to share the knowledge, to offer a glimmer of hope to those who had survived the horrors of the apocalypse.

With trembling hands, Maud opened the door to the library, and the survivors cautiously entered, their eyes widening in wonder at the sight of the books. Maud knew that it was a risk, but it was a risk worth taking. For in the pages of those books lay the hope of a better future, a future where knowledge could guide humanity back from the brink of annihilation.

As the survivors began to explore the library, Maud looked at Poe, and for the first time in a long while, they felt a sense of purpose. They may have lost the world they once knew, but in the flickering candlelight of the library, they had found a new one - one filled with stories, wisdom, and the potential for a brighter tomorrow.