

## The last library

Words to the wise. By Brian Trent

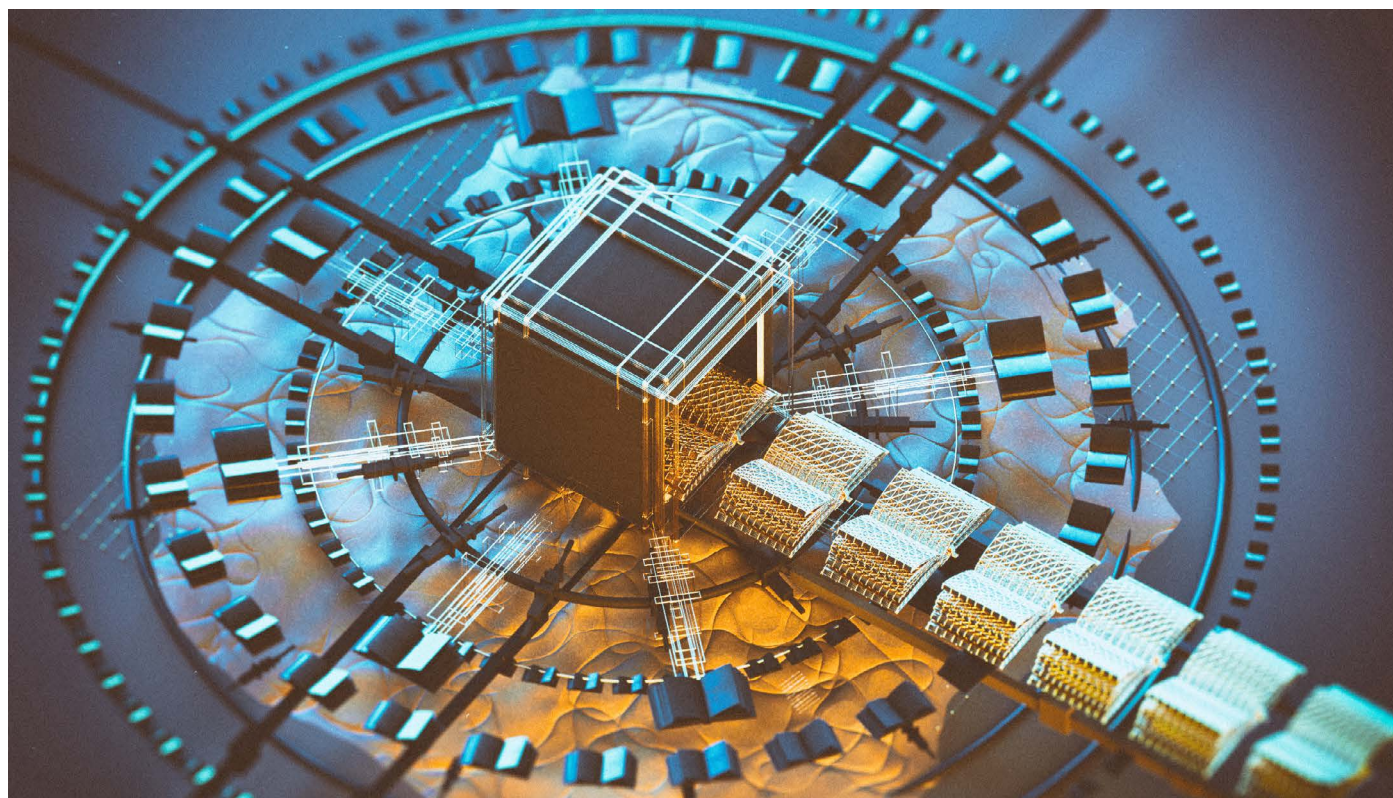


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

It was best to work at night – they could see in the dark, after all.

By day, libraries were too populated. It didn't matter if they showed up in third-century Delphi wearing the correct toga. Didn't matter if their Tongues program fed the proper words in the perfect dialect. They were strangers in a bygone year, and the One Hundred Libraries society didn't want to attract attention.

"It's not about changing history," Victor told her in 213 BC, unrolling the Warring States scroll so his optics chip could record the calligraphy. "We don't worry about that."

Field rookie Monica Garcia raised an eyebrow, prying her gaze from the parchment. "Seems we *should* worry about that, no?"

Victor scanned the scroll and sheathed it in its red lacquered case. "All this is getting burned tomorrow. Qin Shi Huang will decree legalism to be the only acceptable philosophy in China. This library will be a smouldering ash-heap by nightfall."

"God Almighty," Monica muttered, regarding the scrolls in their counted thousands. The pending loss – all the poetry and astronomy and philosophy – brought tears to her eyes. If every book was a mind, she thought, then burning a library was a form of genocide.

Victor looked at her expectantly. "Your turn now. You've got an entire bin of political theory."

"Wouldn't it be faster to work simultaneously?"

"Department mandate is that we scan in shifts."

"Why?"

"Because someone has to play lookout." As he said it, a light floated behind the rice-paper walls; a lantern on a guard's carrying-stick. Victor watched it pass, hand tense on the time-toggle at his wrist. "It's awkward," he whispered, "when you're discovered."

Monica unrolled one of the scrolls from her bin to prepare for eye-scanning. At his comment, she gave him a curious look. "Have you

ever been discovered?"

"In Alexandria. Fifth century AD. There was an old scholar there – my lookout hadn't noticed him. I was scanning one of Hypatia's books on neoplatonism when this bearded fellow came over to engage me in conversation."

"What did you do?"

Victor gave a weary smile that suggested unspoken sorrows. "I used my cover story, that I was visiting from Parthia. Not that it mattered – a Christian mob burnt that wing of the Great Library a week later."

"What happened?"

"He tried to befriend me. He was an interesting fellow. I might have liked him."

"*Might* have?"

"We can't let ourselves get attached to people in the past. I dismissed him, a little coldly, I'm afraid. A week later he was murdered by the same mob that burnt the books."

She heard the emotional undercurrent in his voice. "So *that's* the danger? Getting to know people from the past?"

“Hurry up, now. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Their next assignment was the library at Alamut in AD 1276 – a two-month job. A repository of Middle Eastern knowledge in a mountaintop fortress, destined to be burnt by invading Mongols under Hulagu Khan.

Victor was pacing the stone vaults when he discovered Monica crying silently at a scholar’s reading table.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Her hand trembled as it stroked a Sanskrit parchment. “This is the most beautiful poetry I’ve ever read. The Mongols are going to destroy all this?”

“They destroyed the House of Wisdom in Baghdad 18 years ago. Classics of Persian and Arabic literature thrown into the Euphrates. The river ran black with ink.”

She wiped her eyes bitterly. “Civilization keeps collapsing! Every time knowledge advances, it takes two steps backwards!”

He nodded gravely, lines of grief creasing his face like cuneiform in clay. “It doesn’t get better, I’m afraid. I worked a library 600 years from now, in Berlin of ’33. The Nazi bonfires were on every street corner.”

“How many libraries have we done so far?”

“Forty-seven.”

She shook her head. “I wish we could talk

to the scholars here. To hear about their lives, their own stories –”

“Don’t get attached to people in the past,” he warned.

She returned to the book at hand, and the ones after that.

1562, Yucatán.

The Mayan library, a collection of illustrated records on woven tree fibres. In two days, they’d be gathered by inquisitors of Franciscan friar Diego de Landa and burnt, as natives looked on and wept at the destruction of their history.

Monica cradled the single-page canvases, marvelling at the paired columns of characters. “What happens when we’re done? When we’ve rescued one hundred libraries?”

Victor shrugged. “Knowledge of the past helps the future.”

“We’ve done 71 now.”

“So we have more to do.”

After that they went to Pompeii to scan a patrician library before the volcano burnt it, and to Persepolis before the Macedonians burnt it, and to Athens before the Persians burnt it. Monica felt herself growing numb to the tragedy of it all.

“Ninety-nine!” she announced in relief as they toggled back to headquarters. She placed

her datacube in the scanning tray, listening to the gentle purr as its contents were read and saved to the local drive. A local drive that was now the most precious library in history. “Where to next?”

Victor looked to the floor. “I go home.”

“You said we had one more. Where is it? When’s the next tragedy?”

He said nothing.

She sighed. “I really like you, Victor. I was thinking ... I don’t know ... maybe we could read some of these books together?”

The datacube finished uploading. To her surprise, he lifted the entire drive – the entire digital library – and held it to his chest. Then he looked at her and his eyes filled with tears.

She felt a burst of dread like electricity along her spine. “This is just another moment in history, isn’t it? You’re not from –”

“I’m so sorry, Monica.”

Then he activated his time-toggle and vanished, taking 99 libraries with him.

*Not ninety-nine*, she realized in horror. *We made the hundredth together. If he’s taking it away, then ... then ...*

Then the asteroid struck.

**Brian Trent’s** speculative fiction has recently appeared in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *The Year’s Best Military and Adventure SF*. His website is [www.briantrent.com](http://www.briantrent.com).

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

**Brian Trent reveals the inspiration behind *The last library*.**

I was young when I first learnt that there had been a magnificent library in the ancient past that had burnt to the ground. The very thought sickened me. As a lifelong haunter of libraries, I shuddered to imagine all those books vanishing from Earth: books on history, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, poetry, mathematics and engineering reduced to ash, the knowledge (and therefore the minds behind it) lost for all time. I used to fantasize about visiting Alexandria before the terrible event transpired.

Then I learnt that it hadn’t been the only exquisite library to be destroyed.

The loss from these tragedies is incalculable. The sobering thought is that they can still occur. Every generation produces its own class of book-burning advocates, with their own political or ideological justifications. Knowledge, free expression and literary inquiry is never far from the fire. Even without human meddling, there are serious concerns over the modern reliance on digital media, as a global collapse would extinguish the very ability to access data that we take for granted today.

I wrote *The last library* as part wish-fulfilment: imagining a group of preservationists who rescue information from oblivion. I also wrote it as a reminder that what we consider to be the ‘present’ is merely the latest – and always transitory – moment of history.

